

# THE NIGHT GATE

Also by Peter May

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# PETER MAY

## THE NIGHT GATE

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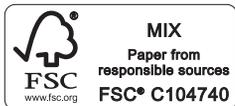
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This book is dedicated to the memory of Maud Taillard



‘Art is the lie that enables us to realise the truth.’

*Pablo Picasso*



## PROLOGUE

*Emile Narcisse is pleased by his appearance. Vanity has always been a weakness. Where, perhaps, others see him as just another old man, he still perceives himself as the young Emile whose smile won hearts, whose blue-eyed looks turned heads. And after all, sixty-five is not so old. Vintage. Like a good wine, some men just get better with age. Were he not so focused on his reflection in the mirror as he adjusts his tie and straightens his collar, he might have been able to look beyond it and see the certainty of death that lies in wait. But pride and greed blind him to his fate.*

*He has chosen a room at the back of the hotel with a view of the river. Or, rather, its black slow-moving backwater broken only by the reflection of trees on the sliver of island beyond. On the far side of the island the River Dordogne, swollen by recent rains, makes a stately but more rapid progress towards the Atlantic two hundred and fifty kilometres to the west. But it is dark now, and he can see nothing beyond the glass.*

*He glances at his watch. Time to go. He feels a tiny, excited frisson of anticipation. But also doubt. Is it really possible that fate could have sent such good fortune his way? It is hard to believe. And, yet, here he is.*

*Floorboards creak softly beneath his shoes as he descends lightly to*

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reception. The hotel is quiet, the tourist season a distant memory. A notice on the counter reminds customers that the hotel will be closed in just a few weeks for a full month. The annual congés. It will reopen in December in time for Christmas and la nouvelle année, if indeed Covid will allow for a celebration of either.

Narcisse glances through double French windows that open into the restaurant. Empty tables beneath cold yellow light, the chill October night pressing darkly against windows all along the far side. Not yet seven-thirty. Too early for the French to dine. But on his return he expects to eat, and crack open a celebratory bottle of Bordeaux. A car passes in the street outside. He drops his key on the counter, pleased that there is no one around requiring him to wear his mask. He fingers it in his pocket, glad to keep it there. He detests the damn thing, stuffy and claustrophobic. Yet, he knows, it is a significant barrier against the virus. And at his age he cannot afford to take any risks.

He does not see the man sitting in the bar, face obscured by a local newspaper, a half-drunk beer on the table in front of him. But as Narcisse steps out into the frosted air, the solitary drinker lowers his paper, rising to cross quickly to a door that leads to the terrace. From here he watches the art dealer make his way towards the palisade, breath billowing in the street lights. Anger burgeons in this man's breast, a seething rage close to boiling point. The duplicitous peacock has no idea that Bauer is even here. Bauer knows he is not expected for another thirty minutes. But he knows, too, that beyond the gate opposite, a path will lead him through a garden straight to the top of the hill, where another gate will provide direct access to the terrace at the side of her house.

Narcisse turns left at the post office, before he reaches the palisade.

*Above it, the château cuts a shadow against the starlit sky, and Narcisse shivers, pulling his collar closer to his neck. Medieval shuttered stone dwellings crowd him on either side, reducing the sky to a ribbon of black overhead. The icy air is almost heady with the sweet-smoke smell of autumn oak, the cold of it burning his nostrils.*

*Where the road opens out left and right, the gate to the small park at the top of the hill lies open. Some work in progress near the war monument has been taped off, and Narcisse sees the thin strip of plastic catch light from the street lamps as it flutters gently in the cold air that snakes through these fifteenth-century streets. But before he reaches the park he turns off to climb the long flight of stone steps to the house that overlooks it. A small covered landing at the door lies in shadow. He pauses and takes a deep breath before slipping on his mask, as if to hide his identity. This is the moment of truth, perhaps the moment to which his entire career has led him. The window shutters to the left of the door stand open, but only darkness lies beyond. There is not a light to be seen anywhere in the house, and Narcisse experiences his first sense of apprehension. He lifts the cast-iron knocker and sharply raps it twice against the wood. Inside he hears the echo of it smothered by the dark. Apprehension gives way to irritation as he knocks again, louder this time. Irritation burgeoning to anger, and then frustration. Is it all just some elaborate hoax? He tries the door handle and to his surprise feels it yield to his hand. The door swings into darkness.*

*‘Hello?’ His voice seems strangely disconnected from his body.*

*There is no reply. He steps into the doorway and reaches around the wall, searching for a light switch with his fingers. He finds it. But*

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*it brings no light to this world. He curses softly behind his mask and calls again.*

*'Hello?'*

*Still nothing. He takes another step forward. He knows that he is in the kitchen because he was here earlier. A door at the far end, beyond a long table, leads to a short hallway, and then the grand salon. But he can see almost nothing, his eyes made blind by the streets lights he has just left behind. The house feels cold and empty, and his anger becomes incandescent, as if that might light the way ahead. He takes less cautious steps further into the kitchen, his fingertips finding the tabletop to guide him. Shapes are starting to take form around him now.*

*A sound that whispers like the smooth passage of silk on silk startles him. Movement in the darkness ahead morphs into silhouette. Momentary light catches polished steel, before he feels the razor-like tip of it slash across his neck. There is no real pain, just an oddly invasive sensation of burning, and suddenly he cannot breathe. His hands fly to his neck, warm blood coursing between cold fingers. He presses both palms against the wound as if somehow they might keep the blood from spilling out of him. He hears it gurgling in his severed windpipe. Just moments earlier he had been consumed by anger. Now he understands that he is going to die, but somehow cannot accept it. It is simply not possible. Consciousness rapidly ebbs to darkness and he drops to his knees. The last thing he sees, before falling face-first to the floor, is his killer. Caught in a fleeting moment of moonlight. And he simply cannot believe it.*