The book cover features a woman with long, wavy brown hair and red lipstick, wearing a red, strapless, floor-length gown. She is looking back over her shoulder towards the camera. The background is a blue sky with white clouds. The text is overlaid on the image. The author's name 'SUSAN LEWIS' is at the top in large, white, serif capital letters. Below it, 'HER HOT NEW BESTSELLER' is written in smaller, white, serif capital letters. The title 'DARKEST LONGINGS' is at the bottom in large, green, serif capital letters with a white outline and a decorative flourish at the end of the word 'LONGINGS'.

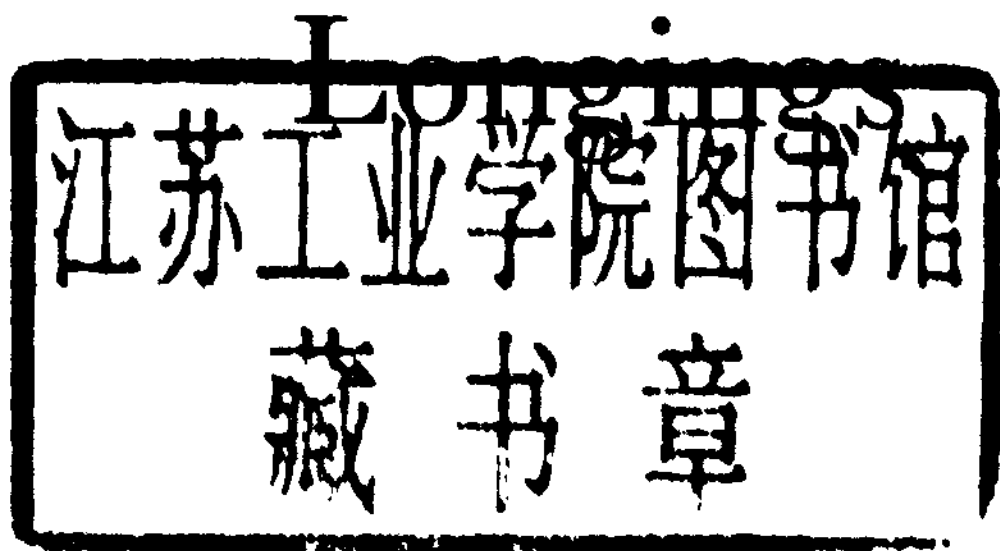
SUSAN
LEWIS

HER HOT NEW BESTSELLER

DARKEST
LONGINGS

SUSAN LEWIS

Darkest



Mandarin

A Mandarin Paperback

DARKEST LONGINGS

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‘Are you feeling nervous, *chérie*?’

Claudine’s gaze moved slowly from the passing French countryside to rest upon her father. It was over an hour since they had boarded the train in Paris, but this was the first time either of them had spoken. As their eyes met, Claudine’s full mouth curved into a secretive, almost self-mocking smile, and Beavis smiled too as he watched his extraordinary daughter sweep a hand through the tumbling raven hair that bounced unfashionably around her shoulders, and stretch out her long legs to settle them on the seat beside him.

She didn’t answer his question, but leaned her head back against the cushion and returned her attention to the passing fields.

Yes, she was nervous. Who wouldn’t be, in her shoes? But apart from the occasional tug she gave to the feather which curled over the brim of the hat lying in her lap, there was nothing in her manner to indicate either the unease or the excitement that randomly coasted between her heart and her stomach. She looked up ahead and saw the front of the train as it rounded a curve in the track, steam billowing from the funnel in a chain of ephemeral white clouds. Again she smiled, then looking back to her father, who was still watching her, she started to laugh.

‘Are you surprised that we’ve come this far?’ she asked.

‘If I am, I shouldn’t be.’

‘Meaning?’

He arched his brows comically and pulled at his moustache. ‘You know perfectly well what I mean.’

‘That nothing is more irresistible to your hare-brained daughter than territory where angels – perhaps even fools – fear to tread?’

‘Precisely.’

‘But, Papa, it was your idea,’ she reminded him.

‘So it was. I’d almost forgotten,’ he chuckled. Then, more seriously, he added, ‘But we don’t have to be here, *chérie*.’ He often used the French term of endearment, even when they were speaking English – it was a habit he had fallen into during twenty-seven years of marriage to a Frenchwoman. ‘It’s not too late,’ he continued, ‘we can turn back to England, you have only to say the word.’ For all sorts of reasons, that would now be extremely difficult, but he felt obliged to say it all the same.

‘Oh, Papa! To have come all this way and then not actually see him! I should die of curiosity.’

Satisfied with her answer, Beavis returned to his newspaper. But it took only a few minutes for him to realize that he was reading the same paragraph over and over again. His mind was full of his daughter and the meeting that would take place two days from now at the Château de Lorvoire.

He took out a cigarette and lit it, filling their first-class compartment with the bitter-sweet smell of Turkish tobacco. As Claudine inhaled the aroma she closed her eyes, reminding him of her mother, and for the first time since her death Beavis was grateful that Antoinette wasn’t there to express her thoughts on what he was doing. Not that he harboured any doubts about bringing Claudine to France – on the contrary, he firmly believed that his plans for his daughter were in her own best interest – but he couldn’t help feeling that Antoinette might have handled things with a little more subtlety.

But what was he supposed to do? As a man, he had no experience in handling these matters; all he knew was that, at twenty-two, it was high time Claudine was married.

Everyone told him so, particularly his sister-in-law, Céline. During Claudine's debutante year in London Céline had, of course, done her best to introduce Claudine to as many eligible young men as possible – and no doubt several ineligible ones too, if he knew Céline, but at the time Claudine had had other ideas, and she and Dissy, her best friend, had taken themselves off to New York to stay with a girl they had shared a room with at finishing school, Melissa von Merity. Beavis knew the von Merity family, so he had agreed to the plan. He hadn't been prepared for Claudine to spend almost three years in New York, and he most certainly hadn't been prepared for the fierce independence she had acquired during her stay there – which, together with her inherent sense of humour and her undeniable beauty, had turned her into a force even he found difficult to reckon with.

She had returned to London six months ago, in time to see in the New Year – 1937. In that time Dissy had married Lord Poppleton, and Claudine, as Céline had told him in no uncertain terms, had been left to run wild. He knew that Claudine had received several proposals of marriage, both in New York and in London, but for reasons known only to herself she had refused them all. So, not unnaturally, he had been more than surprised when she seemed to welcome the suggestion first put to him by his old friends the Comte and Comtesse de Rassey de Lorvoire, that their two families should unite.

Céline's response, on the other hand, had come as no surprise at all. She had never, she told him, in her worst nightmares, imagined he would be capable of even considering marrying his precious daughter to a man like François de Lorvoire. Beavis, who was well aware of Parisian society's views on the Lorvoires' eldest son, had listened patiently to everything Céline had to say and then told her, quite calmly, that his mind was made up. After

which he had extracted her promise that, should Claudine raise no objection to the marriage, she, Céline, would do nothing to dissuade her.

Yet now, with the hurdle of Claudine's agreement so easily surmounted, he couldn't help wondering why his daughter had shown such readiness to accept the proposal. She knew nothing about François de Lorvoire, yet she appeared almost eager to marry him. He was intrigued to know why. She had a will of iron, and he wouldn't have relished the prospect of fighting her if she had set her mind against the idea. He wondered, too, about the shattering of her illusions yet to come . . . But Claudine would handle it; he was quite resolved that François was the right husband for her, he admired the man – no matter what Céline might say. Though how Antoinette would have felt about the match did, in truth, unsettle him somewhat.

Able to read her father's face only too well, Claudine put aside her hat and leaned forward to take his hand. Her blue eyes were dancing, but her voice was gentle as she said, 'Papa, I know you're thinking about *Maman* and what she would say if she knew what we were about. But try to remember, darling, that I am a grown woman now, I can – and do – make decisions for myself. You know I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be.'

Beavis' face clouded for a moment. Then, with a touch of irony, he said, 'That is precisely what baffles me, *chérie*. Why, when you've had so many offers from men who are eminently suitable, are you so willing to give yourself to a man you've never even met?'

'Because it is what *you* want, Papa,' she answered, her eyes gravely wide.

His answering look told her that he didn't believe a word of it, and laughing, she threw back her head, curled her feet under her, and resting an elbow on the window ledge, was once again intent upon the passing landscape.

She was amused by her father's bewilderment, knowing that he had been fully prepared to assert his parental authority on this matter had it proved necessary. Of course, had she not wanted the marriage herself, she'd have fought, and won . . . She knew he was surprised by her compliance, but thankfully he hadn't questioned her too closely, so she had not found herself compelled to lie. And lie she would have done, rather than tell him why she was willing to marry François de Lorvoire – a man whom, as Beavis had quite rightly pointed out, she had never met.

Of course, she had heard a great deal about the de Rassey de Lorvoire family as she grew up. Her father and the old Comte had been firm friends ever since they served together in the Great War, and Antoinette Rafferty and Solange de Lorvoire, François' mother, had corresponded for many years and had frequently spent time together in Paris. But Claudine had never met the de Lorvoires; she had been at school, or too busy with her horses at Rafferty Lodge to accompany her mother on her shopping sprees. And, curiously, she didn't recollect any mention ever being made of François, who was fourteen years older than she was, and would surely have been cutting a figure in society long before her mother died. That fact rather amused her now, for what little she had managed to learn about François during the last few weeks suggested that whatever there was to say about him had probably been considered too shocking for her young ears.

In fact, his reputation was proving to be thoroughly intriguing. Just this past week she had discovered that one had only to mention his name in polite Parisian circles to set the conversation alight with any kind of unsavoury rumour. Take the other night, at the home of Constance and Charles Delaforge. She had gone alone, since Beavis had business to attend to, and had casually mentioned that she was looking forward to meeting the Lorvoire family at the

weekend, their eldest son François in particular, because she had heard so much about him. From the look on the faces around her, she might just have let forth a stream of profanities. Constance had glared, Charles had started muttering under his breath, then suddenly the old duchess sitting beside her had drawn herself up, and cried in a voice pinched with distress, 'I forgive you, Claudine, but only because you cannot know what anguish it causes me to hear that man's name spoken. If you knew what he has done . . . *Mon Dieu!*' And she had covered her face with her hands.

Constance had flown to her side to comfort her, but the duchess had continued to quake. 'Why poor Solange should be cursed with such a son is beyond me,' she had sobbed. 'I'm sure it's why she never comes to Paris now. How could she hold her head up after after what happened . . . Oh, Constance! Not a day passes but I think of dear Hortense. Poor, poor, Hortense, how we all still miss her.' And with that, she had swept from the room.

The duchess's performance had thoroughly amused Claudine, but she had tactfully hidden her smiles, as she had her curiosity regarding 'poor, poor, Hortense' until just the night before, when she had met her friend Henriette at the Hungarian Embassy ball. At first it had proved impossible to get Henriette to speak of anything other than her recent engagement to Claude, the dashing young vicomte she'd arrived with. Claudine had listened with mounting impatience, waiting her chance, until Henriette babbled excitedly 'And now we've to find *you* a husband, Claudine. Oh, you must marry a Frenchman, please, please. Don't throw yourself away on one of those stuffy old English, I couldn't bear it. I want you to live here, in Paris, so I can see you all the time.'

Claudine's lovely slanting eyes sparkled with humour. 'I don't think that should present too much of a problem, *chérie*. Now, tell me, what has François de Lorvoire been up to?'

‘François de Lorvoire?’ Henriette repeated, clearly surprised by such an abrupt change of subject.

‘Henriette, you must have heard. Something to do with . . .’

‘Oh!’ Henriette gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. ‘You mean you’ve heard about Aimée de Garenaux?’ Claudine hadn’t, but was not about to interrupt. ‘Well, I can’t say I’m surprised,’ Henriette rushed on. ‘I should think the whole world knows by now. Such a silly creature she is. Really, Claudine, this time I think one can hardly say it was François’ fault. Except that he might have behaved with a little more chivalry. But then everyone knows that François . . .’

‘Henriette!’ Claudine cried. ‘What happened?’

Henriette’s pretty green eyes widened with surprise at the impatience in Claudine’s voice. ‘Why this sudden interest in François de Lorvoire?’ she asked, eyeing her friend suspiciously. ‘I wasn’t aware you even knew him.’

‘I’ll tell you later. Now, what happened with Aimée?’

Henriette shrugged, and fluffing out the taffeta folds of her ball gown, she sank into the sumptuous leather sofa behind her. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘the stupid girl took it into her head not only to fall in love with him, but to follow him to Lyon. You know, Claudine, why everyone makes such a fuss about him is quite beyond me, it gives me the shivers just to look at him. Have you ever seen him? It’s like coming face to face with the devil . . . Anyway, as I said, Aimée followed him to Lyon. Everyone is trying to say now that François abducted her, but it’s not true. I’m not saying he’s not capable of such an outrage, but in this instance Aimée confessed to me before she went that she intended to make him marry her. I warned her what he was like, but she wouldn’t listen. Maybe I should have told her mother, but she’d sworn me to secrecy, and how was I to know it would end the way it did?’

‘How did it end?’ Claudine asked, enjoying the story immensely.

‘She went to his hotel late at night, and told the people on the desk that she was his wife, so they let her into his room. When he came back, she was there, waiting for him. She then informed him that if he didn’t agree to marry her she would tell the whole world he had forced himself upon her – raped her! At least, that’s what she told me she was going to do. I can only assume she went ahead with her plan, but what François said – or did – in response I have no idea, Aimée refuses to talk about it now. All I know is that he left her there, alone, in the middle of the night, and returned to Paris. Whether he actually ravished her before he left, none of us knows, but I imagine he did. Anyway, he went straight to her home, got her father out of bed to inform him of his daughter’s whereabouts, and told him that if the girl was no longer a virgin he had no doubt the blame would be laid at his door, but that Monsieur de Garenaux was to understand he had no intention of marrying her. And now poor Aimée, stupid Aimée, has been shipped off to Morocco to stay with her grandparents. You may well laugh, Claudine,’ Henriette said, her own lips beginning to twitch, ‘but what if poor Aimée is pregnant?’

‘Somehow I rather doubt it,’ Claudine answered. ‘Don’t you?’

‘If it were anyone but him, I would. But, *oh là*, she was so stupid. If only she had listened to me. The man is not only a philanderer but a confirmed bachelor, everyone knows so. As he told my papa once, there is not a woman alive who could change his mind on that point. Though if you ask me, he flatters himself to think that anyone would want to. The only reason why women throw themselves at him the way they do – and usually they’re given a hefty push by their mothers – is because he is so rich and will inherit the de Lorvoire title when his father dies. It certainly has nothing

to do with looks or charm. But now you are to tell me, why are you asking about him?’

A light gleamed in Claudine’s eyes, and in a rustle of skirts she sat down beside Henriette. ‘Because,’ she said, taking Henriette’s fragile white hands between her own, ‘I’m going to marry him.’

She watched Henriette’s angelic face as her friend blinked several times before her mouth actually fell open. Until that moment Claudine had not intended to tell Henriette, or indeed anyone, about her arranged marriage, but as she listened to Henriette an idea had crystallized in her mind – though whether it was a good one or not, it was now too late to decide, for the words were already spoken. There would be repercussions, naturally. Her father might be angry that she had revealed her secret, Tante Céline most certainly would be; and how François and his family might view the indiscretion she had no idea. But one thing she was sure of: telling Henriette about the proposed marriage was tantamount to telling all of Paris, and once Parisian society expected the match, no one in her family would now try to dissuade her from it.

At last Henriette recovered the power of speech. ‘Claudine, you are teasing me,’ she breathed. ‘You aren’t serious, I know you’re not. But what a strange joke.’

‘It isn’t a joke, Henriette. I shall meet him for the first time on Sunday, and soon after that we shall be married.’

Henriette’s face puckered with confusion as she searched her friend’s beautiful blue eyes. ‘I don’t want to believe you, Claudine,’ she said finally. ‘Common sense tells me this can’t be true, but I have a horrible feeling that for once you aren’t teasing.’

Claudine was trying not to laugh. ‘No, Henriette,’ she said softly, ‘I’m not teasing. I am going to marry François de Lorvoire.’

Henriette started to shake her head. ‘No, Claudine,’ she

said, 'no. I can't let you do this. I should have stopped Aimée and I feel dreadful that I didn't, but she's hardly my responsibility. With you it's different. With you I am going to put my foot down. You are not to go near that man, do you hear? You are to promise me that you will never have anything to do with him.'

'I'm afraid it's too late,' Claudine grinned.

'Too late! But no, if you've not met him yet it can't be too late. And if you insist on going to the rendezvous, Claudine, I shall inform your father. But how has this come about? If you don't know him, how can you have an assignation with him on Sunday? Oh Claudine, no,' she cried, tightening her grip on her friend's hands, 'you can't do this. You don't know him, he's a monster. He's wicked, he's evil. He won't marry you, he'll use you, just like all the . . .'

'He *will* marry me, Henriette.'

'No! No! Claudine, you're not listening to me. If it were anyone else I know you would succeed. You're so beautiful, what man wouldn't want to marry you? But you'll never succeed with François de Lorvoire. He'll never marry you, Claudine, *never!*

Henriette was near to tears by now, and her hands were gripping Claudine's so fiercely that Claudine almost winced with the pain. But as she began to explain the arrangement her father had made with the Comte de Rasse de Lorvoire and his son, the hands around hers slowly relaxed their hold.

'But he swore he would never marry,' Henriette breathed, hardly able to take it all in. 'What has happened to change his mind?'

Claudine shrugged, unable to enlighten her friend – except to say that she believed the Comte, who had saved her father's life during the Battle of Verdun, probably wanted to ensure that the name of de Rasse de Lorvoire would continue. Henriette immediately pointed out that

François had a younger brother, Lucien – and this was something that rather confused Claudine too, since the de Lorvoire line could obviously be continued by Lucien, and Lucien’s children. But as she had no explanation to offer on that score, Claudine simply hugged her friend and said, ‘What does it matter why he has changed his mind? He has, and so we will be married. As I said, it is all arranged.’

Henriette suddenly drew her hands away, and the expression that came over her face saddened Claudine. ‘I don’t know you any more, Claudine,’ she said. ‘I don’t understand you. You have the pick of men in London and Paris, New York too, yet you are allowing yourself to be given away in marriage to a man who . . . Oh no, I can’t bear to think of it. Do you need me to tell you that marriage is not an adventure? It isn’t one of your games, Claudine. You and the Lorvoires are Catholics: once you are married to François not all the money in the world, not even your father, will be able to rescue you.’

‘You are assuming that I will want to be “rescued”,’ Claudine replied with a smile.

‘I’m not assuming, I know. For heaven’s sake, Claudine, I told you, the man is . . . You must have heard about Hortense de Bourchain. How can you even contemplate this marriage, knowing what he did to her?’

‘Ah, yes, Hortense,’ Claudine said – but at that moment, to her unutterable frustration, Claude de la Chevasse arrived to whisk his fiancée into the next waltz.

And now, here she was on a train taking her through the Loire Valley to a new life that was beginning to conjure up such fantastic images in her mind, she was beginning to question her own sanity. Even so, she knew that nothing, simply nothing, was going to stop her from meeting François de Lorvoire now. And knowing Henriette as she did, the news of her arranged marriage would be all over Paris by now, so that not even Tante Céline would try to talk

her out of it – the scandal if the marriage didn't go ahead would be too much for her to bear. And as for the sudden bouts of nervousness she was experiencing? Well, that was because François was, indisputably, an experienced lover, whereas she . . . But she would talk to Tante Céline about that, at the earliest possible opportunity.

Élise Pascale's blouse was hanging from her shoulders, the top of her silk camisole was hooked beneath her breasts. She looked down at the big dark hands as they caressed her abundant milky white flesh, then sucked in her breath as his fingers closed around her painfully aroused nipples. Her head fell back against the wall and his lips crushed hers, parting them to make way for his tongue.

They were standing on the landing outside her apartment; the key was in her right hand, and with her left she was stroking him through his trousers. For a moment he stood back to look at her, then, as a door slammed somewhere downstairs, he slowly lowered his mouth to her breasts, holding her about the waist as he sucked. Her hand tightened around him, and as he bit harder she started to moan. Then his hands were lifting her skirt, pushing it up to her waist, and she heard him chuckle quietly as he saw she was wearing no knickers. There was both tenderness and savagery in his touch, and an almost sadistic pleasure in the way he was teasing her. She had never in her life experienced anything to match the eroticism of François de Lorvoire's love-making.

As he stood straight, she looked up into his face and saw that he was laughing. He could sense her mounting frustration, he knew only too well how he affected her, but she simply let him look at her, knowing that he would take her when he was ready.

Five minutes later they were lying naked on her bed. For a long time he lay still as she kissed and caressed him, then

finally he pushed her onto her back and stood up. As she watched him, every pulse in her body throbbing, he walked to the foot of the bed, took her ankles in his hands and dragged her to the edge. Then he hooked her feet around the two posts, caught her hips between his hands and lifted her to meet him. She could feel the tip of his penis brushing against her, and almost choking on the intensity of her longing, she looked down as slowly he eased himself into her.

Within minutes she was writhing, gasping, sobbing as he pounded his body against hers; his fingers dug into her buttocks, then caught her breasts and pulled hard on her nipples. He watched her face, waiting until she had lost all sense of everything beyond what he was doing to her. Then, knowing his own control was about to break, he quickly pulled her up and pressed his lips brutally over hers.

Her legs gripped his waist, her nails clawed his shoulders, then she was crying out his name, and he was shooting his semen into her with rapid, excruciating strokes.

When it was over he lay down on the bed beside her, and she snuggled against him, resting her head on his chest and curling a leg over his. He didn't speak for a long time, and she knew that his thoughts had long since moved from the confines of that room. If she was lucky, though, they would make love again before he left.

And probably they would have, had she not made the grave mistake of telling him something she had overheard when she had dropped in at the Hungarian Embassy ball in the early hours of that morning.

An ominous silence followed her words. Then he asked her to repeat them.

'It would appear,' she said, smiling to cover her unease, 'that *l'Anglaise* has seen fit to reveal the secret of your forthcoming nuptials. All of Paris is talking about it.'

Still he didn't move, but as she reached up to pull his face

round to hers, he swung his legs to the floor. She started to protest, to ask where he was going, but one glimpse of his expression was enough to tell her that she would be wise to keep silent.

– 2 –

Céline du Verdon stretched her long legs across the window seat, allowing her pastel cotton dress to fall open almost to mid-thigh. Her dark blonde hair was loose, falling in natural waves around her shoulders, and her delicately lined face was for once free of make-up. The tall windows beside her were open, and she inhaled deeply the rich, earthy aroma that seeped up from the rain-spattered lawns. Now the sun was shining again, scorching the gardens with an intensity unusual in early June. At the end of the wide, sloping lawns the doves were poking their faces warily out of the dovecote, and somewhere out of sight she could hear the gardeners beginning work again.

She was sitting in the spacious airy drawing-room she had favoured since her arrival at the Château de Montvisse. With its faded oriental rugs, matching pair of japanned sofas, three giltwood armchairs and *secrétaire-cabinet* behind the door, it was a pleasant change from the over-furnished salons and parlours of Paris. Of course, she was a Parisienne at heart, and nothing would ever change that, but though it hurt her to admit it, the strain of being one of the city's great society hostesses was becoming a little too much – Céline du Verdon was getting older. With the exception of her brother-in-law, Beavis Rafferty, there wasn't a soul in the world who now knew her true age. Even she became confused on the rare occasions when she put herself to the task of remembering, something she did only when Beavis