

THE HOUSE OF THE CORSAIR

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1. THE CORSAIR CITY

When I reached St. Malo, it was just after noon. The ferry slid through the rocks towards the harbour. A bright June breeze rippled across the water. Over to my right, I could see the rocky coves of Dinard, and to my left rose the austere grey houses of St. Malo, shuttered behind their ramparts.

Standing on the foredeck of the ferry, I eyed the corsair city with mixed feelings. I wasn't meant to be in France right now, I was meant to be in London. In the past ten days, my life had been turned on its head. I wasn't sure if I was glad to be here or not.

The ferry was about to land, and I had to get back to the car. Turning away from the rail, I headed for the heavy doors that led to the inner deck. The last of the passengers, a tall man in a navy blue anorak, was just shuffling through. I quickened my pace so he wouldn't have to hold the doors for me. I needn't have bothered. The doors slammed shut in my face just as I reached them. One second later and they would have trapped my hand.

The near-miss rattled me. I swore out loud. I heaved the doors open and nearly walked into the man in the anorak, who was standing just on the other side. His back was towards me, and he was talking into his mobile. He was so absorbed that he didn't even notice.

I was suddenly so angry that I didn't stop to think. The mix of rage and misery and humiliation that had been simmering inside me for days came to the boil. Desertion, betrayal, abandonment – and now homicidal morons on the cross-Channel ferry? I caught up with the man and tapped him on the shoulder.

"You slammed those doors in my face, you stupid fool!"

Startled, he swung round. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes I am! Those doors are heavy, and you let them slam right in my face! I could have been injured! They only just missed my hand!"

He stared at me disbelievingly. I didn't altogether blame him. I could hear the hysterical note in my voice, and I belatedly realized I was over-reacting.

He snapped shut his mobile. "I apologise," he said tersely. "My mind was elsewhere." The tone was that of a cool social brush-off.

"You'd do better to pay attention to what's going on around you," I snapped.

"Next time I certainly will."

He looked me over in a way that left no doubt as to his meaning. His eyes were a very deep blue. To my annoyance, I felt myself beginning to blush. He was extremely good-looking, with dark, intelligent features and a slightly arrogant air. The kind of man who was used to getting what he wanted.

I was about to snarl something back at him, when another voice sounded behind us.

"Darling, who's *this*? Whatever's going on?"

The woman who appeared by his side looked as though she had stepped straight from the pages of *Vogue*. White T-shirt, navy trousers, and a navy and white striped blazer: it could have been a feature on the latest season's cruise-wear. Her dark hair fell softly to her shoulders, and her make-up was flawless.

She was his girlfriend, not his wife, I could see that at once. It was clear from their choice of clothes. His anorak, though expensive, had seen better days, while she looked as though she had just breezed out of Emporio Armani. My anger collapsed. I was suddenly conscious of my flushed face and tangled hair, and of the old black T-

shirt and shabby jeans I had worn to travel in.

"This is a lady in whose face I let the door slam," said the man. I detected a faint note of mockery in his voice, and even more in his syntax. Miss Armani paid no attention.

"Gilles, what on *earth* are you talking about? *Do* hurry up, we need to get off this boat. I *must* get to the gallery as soon as possible."

She took his arm and swept him down the gangway towards the stairs to the lower deck. I watched them go. As they turned the corner, the man looked back over his shoulder. He was too far away for me to distinguish his expression, but I guessed he was savouring the pleasure of cutting me down to size.

Well, what did it matter? I would never see him again. And it was true I had mainly myself to blame for the whole disgraceful little episode. I should never have let myself get so worked up. My nerves were still on edge since the scene with Roger.

I noticed the couple again ten minutes later, as I was driving out of the ferry terminal. Their car, of course, was a Jeep. Pushy, chic and expensive, just like them. The woman was sitting in the passenger seat, rummaging for something in her bag. She didn't see me. The man was leaning against the wing of the car, with his telephone glued to his ear. As I drove past, he caught sight of me, and gave me an odd little salute. I did not respond.

I turned out of the terminal towards the town, and instantly forgot him. The sight of the pirate citadel rearing up before me wiped the incident out of my mind. I caught my breath. It was exactly as I remembered.

For centuries, St. Malo had been an island. Even when it was finally linked to the continent by a causeway, it remained the lair of corsairs authorized by the French king to prey on passing traffic. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Channel was not a safe place to sail. But time after time, the corsairs had escaped retribution, protected by the guns of the fortress, the rocks of the bay and, in some cases, sheer good luck.

I parked at the foot of the ramparts and entered the town on foot. The sun was warm on the back of my neck and my doubts had vanished. I hadn't been here for years, and it was good to be back. When I was fifteen I had stayed for a month with a friend whose family owned a holiday flat inside the old walled city, and I retained fond memories of walking on the ramparts, sunbathing on the beach, and tentatively checking out the local talent. But that was eight years ago. It was a long time since I had heard from Virginie, and it was unlikely she would be here now.

The hotel my grandmother had recommended was near the Grande Plage. Bonne-Maman made regular excursions to France, to visit her cousins in southern Brittany, and she always stayed at the same hotel when she got off the ferry. It was called the Hotel Saint Maclou. The receptionist took me up to the top of the building to a small white-painted room with a view of the ramparts. There was something plain and monastic about it that pleased me at once. Saint Maclou was the Irish monk who had founded St. Malo back in the sixth century. Even though he and his kind were outnumbered by souvenir sellers these days, up here away from the crowds it felt as though I had found one of the few monachal vestiges that remained. A white monk's cell was perfect for my needs. It corresponded to my celibate state of mind, and my single status.

I set off back to the car to collect my luggage. Since the hotel had no parking lot, I left the car where it was. The bags were a struggle in the narrow streets, and when I got back to my room, I was hot and tired. I lay down to rest, and promptly fell

asleep.

When I awoke, the sun had moved round into the room, and I could tell it was late afternoon. I lay unmoving in a shaft of sunlight, listening to the gulls shriek overhead. I had slept more deeply than I had done for days, and it had done me good. Roger seemed suddenly very far away. Our last meeting was blurred and unreal. I could no longer remember clearly the meeting in the pub, nor the interminable walk home, nor the sleepless night I had spent pacing up and down the flat. There was nothing in my mind but the square of blue sky framed by the open window, the curtains shivering in the clean sea breeze, the swoop of birds above the pirate city.

I took a shower, and went out. I left the city through the Porte St. Vincent, the main gate, and walked along the old causeway that united the former island with the continent. After a few hundred yards I came to the Digue, a dyke which ran for several miles along the beach. It was edged by grand old villas that had been built by wealthy families at the turn of the century. Most of them had now been turned into hotels or holiday flats, but a hint of their former grandeur still remained.

I walked the whole length of the Digue, past the flats and the pensions de famille and the great Hôtel des Thermes, all the way down to Rochebonne, at the far end of the beach, where the headland jutted out into the sea. The tide was out. I sat for a while in a café overlooking the beach, and drank a beer. Then I took off my shoes and walked back along the edge of the sea, letting the little waves lap against my ankles. When I got back to the town, I wiped the sand off my feet as best I could and headed into the walled city in search of dinner. I had not eaten since breakfast at my grandmother's in St. Peter Port that morning, and I was starving.

I was wandering down the Rue de Dinan, sizing up the restaurants and crêperies that beckoned from either side of the street, when I suddenly caught sight of a familiar face. I stood still and stared. Older, yes, thinner and taller than I remembered, but with her dark hair pulled back from her face in exactly the same style, and the same way of walking fast and shouldering her way obliviously through the crowd. It was eight years since I had seen her.

"Virginie?" I said, as she came abreast of me.

It took her a second or two to place me.

"Amanda?" she said disbelievingly. "It can't be. Yes it is! How amazing! Amanda! My God, after all this time. What are you doing here?"

She still talked the same way too, with the speed of a sub-machine gun, firing off questions, too impatient to wait for the answers. She gave me a hug and launched another assault.

"How long have you been here? Where are you staying? How long are you here for? Why didn't you call?"

"I didn't expect you to be here yet. Not for another few weeks. Are you on holiday already?"

"We're all down for the weekend for my father's birthday. He insists on celebrating it here. It's a bit of a nuisance since I have exams next week, but we have the same argument every year. Listen," she glanced at her watch, "I have to get back. It's Papa's birthday tonight, I only came out to get bread. I want you to come to dinner tomorrow night. You'll still be here won't you? They'll all be delighted to see you. We can catch up on everything then. Say about eight. You remember where it is?"

2. CHAMPAGNE AND CUTLASSES

Of course I remembered where it was. It was near the Porte de Dinan, in a seventeenth century building which had been built by one of the original corsairs, and was one of the few buildings in the city to have survived the war. St. Malo had been almost obliterated in 1944 when the German occupiers holed up inside the walls in the face of the advancing American and British armies. After a two-week siege, the town was in ruins. In the years after the war, it had been rebuilt in the original style, but when you entered a house like this, you could see at once that it was the real thing.

The entrance hall was enormous, and the sweep of the staircase would have done credit to Versailles. A door led down to the vast oak-beamed cellar where the pirate had presumably stored his loot. When we were fifteen, Virginie and I had drawn up detailed plans to turn it into a discotheque.

The flat was on the first floor. The walls were fifteen feet high and panelled with wood. Bernard Desbordes, Virginie's father, had painted them all himself, lovingly picking out the panelling in contrasting tones of cream and ochre. He was an eye surgeon in a Paris hospital, and he said that painting walls was a good way to relax after operations.

Mathilde, Virginie's mother, was a painter too, but she stuck to landscapes. Several of her pictures of St. Malo hung in the flat. The rest of the time she wrote detective novels about a Parisian private eye with the unlikely name of Volodia Smith. Volodia exercised his trade from a house in a courtyard at St. Germain des Près that had once been a printer's workshop. His ancestry was complicated, and included White Russian countesses and British bowler-hatted bankers from the City. He was tall and bald and witty, and his wardrobe was all black.

Bernard and Mathilde greeted me with enthusiasm. Bernard brought out a bottle of champagne, while Mathilde hugged me like a long-lost daughter, and presented me with her latest book, *Killing Naked Roses*, which was scheduled to arrive in the bookshops in two weeks' time. I glanced at the cover with some perplexity. It showed a flesh-coloured rose with a few flesh-coloured petals strewn loosely around. It took me a few moments to realize that the rose was shaped like a naked female body.

Over the champagne, we exchanged our news. Bernard had been promoted to department head, and Mathilde had been interviewed on television for her previous book, which was called *Killing Broken Angels*.

"Don't try and make sense of the titles," said Virginie. "She gets them off the Internet."

Simon, Virginie's elder brother, had completed his studies at the prestigious École des Sciences Politiques and found himself a job as a journalist on one of the major French television channels. Virginie herself was studying medicine, and was thinking of specializing in ophthalmology.

"And you, Amanda?" she said.

"I'm studying architecture," I said. "I've just finished my fifth year. Two more years to go."

"An architect!" said Mathilde. "What a pity Gilles isn't here. He'd have been interested to meet you. Do you remember our upstairs neighbours, the de Kerguidans?"

I shook my head.

"Maybe they weren't here when Amanda came," said Bernard.

"Eight years ago? No, I think they were here already. Jonathan is nine. Maybe you never met them, Amanda. Monsieur de Kerguidan redid the whole of the second floor when he got married. His apartment is twice the size of ours. Of course his family used to own the whole of this building."

"Do you mean his ancestor was the original corsair?"

"That's right," said Bernard. "François Souville de Kerguidan. Not as well known as Surcouf or Duguay-Trouin, but notorious in his time. He had a daredevil reputation, even by their standards. He took a lot of risks, and it made him immensely rich."

"How exciting!"

I tried to remember whether I had met the corsair's descendant, but I didn't think I had. I could vaguely recall seeing a couple with a baby on the stairs once or twice. The wife, I seemed to remember, was young and flustered. The baby cried a lot. But I could not put a face to the man at all.

"So what brings you here now?" said Bernard, but before I could answer the bell rang.

"That must be Simon," said Virginie, "and about time too."

She went out into the hall to let him in. The conversation broke off as we waited for him to appear. But it wasn't Simon who had rung the bell. The front door was out of sight of the sitting room, and all we could hear was Virginie's voice, "Oh, Gilles, it's you!"

And then a man's voice, deep and pleasant. "Virginie, how are you? Just the person I wanted to see."

"Gilles," called Bernard from the depths of his armchair, "don't stand there in the hall! Come and have a glass of champagne with a beautiful English girl!"

"That might not be a good idea," said the man in the hall.

There was something faintly familiar about his voice. I wondered if maybe I had met him eight years ago after all.

"Look what happened the last time I did that."

He got as far as the doorway, saw me, and stopped dead. It was the man from the boat. I remembered now, his girlfriend had called him Gilles. He was wearing an old navy pullover and dilapidated jeans, but it was definitely the same man. The aura of arrogance hadn't changed one bit.

We stared at each other. I felt a blush spreading over my face. I had put on my best black linen dress to go out to dinner, and my hair was loose on my shoulders and tidier than the last time he had seen me, but even so he could hardly fail to recognize me as the harpy who had attacked him and called him a stupid fool.

Bernard made the introductions, Mr. de Kerguidan came across the room to shake my hand, I clambered awkwardly out of my chair to greet him, spilling half my champagne in the process, and he retreated to the doorway again as fast as he could. His hair was cut in a style that was short in front, and slightly too long at the back. It was not at all in tune with current fashion. I wondered if it came from his seafaring forebears.

"I can't stay, I'm afraid," he said. "The children are on their own."

"Bring them down too," said Bernard, ever the genial host.

"I can't, they're watching television."

"There's a television here," said Mathilde, but de Kerguidan shook his head.

"No, I can't inflict that on you. What they're actually doing is squabbling over what to watch. Jonathan wants to see some frightful Japanese cartoon about ruling the universe, and Corinne wants a ghastly Victorian melodrama about a princess

being brought up in an orphanage, so they fight for the remote control and change the channel every three minutes."

"They sound as though they won't miss you," said Bernard, getting a glass out of a rather moth-eaten cupboard. In contrast to the walls he had worked on so carefully, the furniture in the room was an odd collection of pieces picked up in junk shops: ancient sofas, rickety oak bookshelves, a Victorian plant stand, a battered chest of drawers. It was a question of principle: this was a holiday home. The effect was shabby but charming.

"Sit down, Gilles, for heaven's sake, do! Amanda was just telling us she's studying to be an architect."

Mr. de Kerguidan sat down as though being offered a bed of nails, tasted the champagne as though it were arsenic, and asked me with icy courtesy where I was studying.

"Kingston-on-Thames," I said.

"That's near London, isn't it? So you're English, Bernard says?"

I did not want to explain about Bonne-Maman and my father and my mother and the French cousins and all the rest of my convoluted family history to this man. I was saved by the sound of the front door slamming open. Simon burst into the room.

"Sorry I'm late, I lost track of the time. You've left me some champagne, I hope."

He was lively and dark like his sister, with a quick smile and, from what I remembered, a high opinion of himself. He was wearing jeans and a white linen shirt. Absurdly, my stomach contracted. He was much handsomer than I remembered.

His eyes roved around the room.

"Why, Gilles, good evening." His tone went suddenly flat.

And then he saw me.

"Amanda, how nice to see you! You are Amanda? You must be! Well, what a surprise! I don't think I've ever seen an ugly duckling transformed into a swan quite so thoroughly before."

He strode across the room and kissed me on both cheeks, managing a caress on my bare arm as I did so.

"And you've gone so blonde."

"I was always blonde," I said.

"Not blonde like that," said Simon.

He sat down on the sofa next to me and looked me over. I suddenly felt much more cheerful. I was glad I had dressed up. On my last visit, Simon, then seventeen, had made it absolutely clear that he considered his sister's spotty little friends beneath his notice.

He accepted a glass of champagne from his father and ignored the rest of the room.

"So tell me what you've been getting up to all these years, Amanda."

My vague monastic fancies had been forgotten. I smiled back at him.

"Well, you know, school, exams. The same as everyone else."

"And what are you doing now? No, let me guess!" He gazed at me appraisingly. "Actress? Model?"

"Knock it off, Simon," said Virginie.

"She has the looks for it," said Simon.

"Nonsense," I said.

Glancing across the room, I caught Gilles de Kerguidan staring at us disapprovingly.

"Am I being too frivolous? Let's try something else. Maybe you're an expert on mediaeval Sweden? No? Well what then? Deep sea diver? Arms dealer? Costume designer? Yes, a designer! That's it, a designer of some kind."

His eyes narrowed, and he stared at me thoughtfully.

"I remember now. You were always drawing last time you were here. You drew the Porte de Dinan, and a plan of the harbour, and part of the ramparts. But you never drew people. I asked you to draw me, and you turned me down flat."

"I still don't draw people, it's not my thing."

"You're an architect, aren't you, like our neighbour here?"

He jerked a head across the room in de Kerguidan's direction, and I became aware of several things at once. One, that the two men didn't like each other. Two, that Simon's family, who had been watching our exchange with amusement, were suddenly looking very nervous. Bernard was fidgeting in his seat, Mathilde had tensed, and Virginie was frowning. Three, that Gilles de Kerguidan's air of disapproval had deepened into something much stronger and more intense. All at once I could visualize him with a cutlass on the quarter-deck – but who was the enemy? I had been plunged into a morass of obscure cross-currents that I didn't understand.

The feeling can't have lasted more than thirty seconds. Then Mr. de Kerguidan stood up.

"I must get back to the children. Virginie, I need to ask you a favour."

Virginie stood up too. "Of course," she said.

"I need a babysitter for tomorrow. I have a deadline to meet for Monday. My mother's busy with the shop, and I can't ask Madame Leclerc on a Sunday. Could you possibly look after them for just a few hours?"

I looked up, mildly puzzled. What had the corsair done with his harrassed little wife?

"Of course I will," said Virginie, with the barest hesitation. "I'll take them to the beach. Don't worry, they'll be fine."

"Thank you so much." He gave her a smile of unexpected warmth. "I really do appreciate it."

"You work too hard, Gilles," drawled Simon from the sofa.

The look de Kerguidan gave him would have stopped enemy ships in their tracks.

"Yes, Simon, perhaps I do."

"Pity about your choice of profession, Amanda. But at least make sure you never marry another architect."

"Simon!" said Virginie.

"Don't worry," said de Kerguidan, "she said people weren't her thing. No doubt she'll spend her life designing doors that don't slam. Good night, Amanda, really delightful to meet you. Good night, Bernard, Mathilde, and thank you for the champagne. Virginie, I'll see you tomorrow, and thank you again."

"Always a pleasure to see you, Gilles," said Bernard. "Drop in any time."

3. THE SANDCASTLE

Virginie told me the whole story on the beach the following day.

Ten years earlier, Gilles de Kerguidan had married an English girl he had met when she came to St. Malo on holiday. He had been twenty-five, and she had been just eighteen. They were quite wrong for each other, said Virginie. Susie, for a start, was much too young. She had married Gilles on impulse, and had never settled well in St. Malo.

"She's a nice person," said Virginie, "but not very bright. Gilles got bored with her fairly fast, and spent more and more time at the office. He neglected her, and of course he neglected the children. Since she walked out, he's been catching up a bit. I doubt he knew three months ago what they watched on television!"

We were lying in the sun on the Plage de Bon Secours. It was Sunday, and the beach was crowded. Above us the gulls wheeled and dived, and the hum of multiple conversations droned in our ears.

"So Susie's been gone three months?" I said, not really caring.

"Something like that," agreed Virginie. "She left Gilles a note saying she was missing out on life, and she had gone to St. Brieuc to live with someone who really appreciated her."

I propped myself up on an elbow. "St. Brieuc?"

It was a town further down the coast, not normally reputed as a place for glamorous living.

"With an estate agent," said Virginie.

I began to giggle.

"She left Gilles a note saying that he had taken her youth away, and it was time she had some fun."

We both burst out laughing, and then I said, "But what about the children? Why didn't she take them with her?"

"She said she would send for them when she was settled in her new life, and that meanwhile it would do them good to see something of their father for a change."

"Have you actually seen this note, or are you making it up?"

"I haven't seen it, but my mother has. Gilles showed it to her. He couldn't believe what was happening to him." Virginie stopped laughing and shook her head pityingly. "Poor Gilles. He doesn't deserve to be dumped like this."

I looked at her thoughtfully. "You like him, don't you?"

"We all do," she said simply, and then she caught my look. "Not in that way, Amanda, don't be silly! He's much too old for me! I've always liked him as a person, though it's true he wasn't very nice to Susie."

"Simon doesn't like him," I said, remembering the scene of the previous night.

"No, he doesn't. Simon takes Susie's side. He always has." She paused for a moment. "If you really want to know, Simon and Susie had something going on for a while."

"Really? And Gilles knew about it?"

"Oh yes. Neither of them bothered to hide it. Susie can be very insensitive – as I said, she's stupid – and Simon, well...."

In the past, Virginie had not got on well with her brother, and it looked as though nothing had changed. I thought about Simon. It was probably as well he was leaving St. Malo today. I would have to be careful if I saw any more of Simon.

He was undoubtedly attractive, and he would be difficult to resist, but his charm had always had a callous edge.

"So when did the estate agent come on the scene?"

"During the winter, when Simon was in Paris. That was when she took off. That's why Gilles isn't very fond of the English at the moment. I noticed he wasn't very nice to you last night."

To my relief, no one had commented on de Kerguidan's parting shot about designing doors the night before. I was not anxious to relate our previous encounter. They seemed to assume that it was some retort to Simon. As soon as he had gone, the conversation had switched into other channels, and no one had mentioned his name for the rest of the evening.

I lay back on my towel and turned my face to the sun, and then it occurred to me that Virginie was supposed to be babysitting. Since I had joined her half-an-hour ago, there had been no sign of any children.

"They're down in the rocks near the swimming pool," said Virginie. "No, look, here they are coming now!"

I sat up and looked at them. There were two children, a boy and a girl. Jonathan was nine, I knew, and Corinne was five. Jonathan was dark like his father, while Corinne had light-coloured hair and a pale skin that presumably came from her mother. They marched purposefully up to Virginie, ignoring me. It was clear they had something in mind.

"We want to build a sandcastle," said Jonathan.

"We need you to help us," said Corinne.

"A sandcastle?" said Virginie without enthusiasm.

Her eyes strayed to the textbook she had been reading when I joined her. She had exams in a few days' time, and the children were interrupting her revision.

"I'll help you, if you like," I said, and got to my feet.

They regarded me warily.

"This is Amanda," said Virginie. "She's a friend of mine. She's very good at building. She's an architect, like your father."

They were clearly not impressed.

"Only better than him, because she's specialized in sandcastles."

"I haven't built a sandcastle for ages," I said, smiling at them. "I'd love to help you build yours."

Jonathan considered. "Well, all right," he said, "but we'd better get a move on. The tide will be coming in soon."

"So let's get started," I said, and then my eye fell on Corinne's pale skin. "But maybe we should put some sun cream on first. The sun's quite strong, and we don't want you getting burnt."

I had spent enough holidays with my young step-brothers to know about things like that.

"My mummy never made me put sun cream on," said Corinne.

"Of course she did," said Virginie.

"But I put some on already."

"That was hours ago, and you've been in the sea since then. It will all have washed off. I think Amanda's right." She picked up the cream and held it out to me. Corinne snatched it away.

"You put it on, Virginie. I don't want her to do it."

She sat down on Virginie's towel and scowled at me.

"Don't make such a fuss!" said Jonathan. "Come on, Amanda, let's get

started. The tide's going to start coming in soon. High tide is at 19.57 today."

It was only half-past four. As far as I could see, that gave us plenty of time, but I followed him obediently down the beach.

"Wait for me," wailed Corinne.

We found a good patch of sand that was wet, but not too wet, and I drew them a plan of what we were going to build, because that was the way a proper architect would do it, I told them, and then we got down to work. It took us over two hours to complete it, working hard. Corinne whined and dragged her feet to begin with, but when it began to take shape, and Jonathan had scolded her once or twice, she started to get interested and ran round with a will providing wet sand and water as necessary.

I was quite pleased with the result. I hadn't seen Sixtings in years, but I found I could still remember every detail of the shape, every window, every tower. Just as we were finishing, with the sea only yards away, an older woman in beautifully-cut white corsair pants and a striped T-shirt came up beside us to admire our work. Her skin was tanned, her body was taut, and she obviously put a lot of time and energy into keeping herself in shape.

"Grandma!" said Jonathan. "Look what we've been doing!"

"Isn't that wonderful!" She bent down to examine it.

"I thought you were busy in the shop today," said Corinne.

"Sweetheart, I was, but I've finished now. The shop's closed. Do you know it's nearly seven o'clock?"

She straightened and held out her hand to me.

"You must be Amanda? I found Virginia up there, and she told me where you were. I'm Lucienne de Kerguidan, Gilles' mother."

"Grandma, look what we've built," insisted Jonathan, impatient of these social niceties. "Amanda drew it and we built it."

"All by ourselves," said Corinne.

"All of us together," corrected Jonathan.

Lucienne obediently bent to admire the building site once more. Jonathan led her round it, pointing out various salient features. "That's the North Turret, and those are the servants' quarters. That's the big drawing room, and that's the conservatory, but we had to do it without glass, of course."

"Why, isn't that Sixtings?"

Virginia had come up behind us unnoticed.

"That's your grandparents' house, isn't it? The place in Sussex you took me to? I'd recognize it anywhere. Even without the Tudor beams."

"This house belongs to you?" Lucienne's jaw had dropped.

"It's not a house, it's a castle," said Corinne.

"To my mother's family," I corrected. Who had turned it over to the National Trust several years previously when the upkeep became too much for them to manage, though I wasn't going to tell that to Lucienne. It was a sore subject in the family. My grandparents had regretted the decision for the rest of their lives, and my mother had never been reconciled to the loss of her childhood home.

"Look, it has a moat now too," said Jonathan. We all looked.

Sixtings had never had a moat: it had been built too recently for that, but the tide was no respecter of history, and the water was already lapping at the front door. We watched for a while as the sea rose around our afternoon's labours, and then began to straggle back up the beach.

"We'll make it again tomorrow," said Corinne, sliding her hand into mine.

"We've got school, tomorrow, silly," said her brother.

"The day after then," she said.

"We'll make it again one day," I promised, which was rash, since I had no idea how long I was going to stay in St. Malo.

"Come on, Corinne, your father will be waiting!"

Virginie was already gathering up towels and buckets and pullovers. I guessed she was anxious to get back to her textbooks.

Lucienne and I followed more slowly. Lucienne stayed with me while I got dressed, asking questions the whole time about my family antecedents. She was so curious that I had to give her more details than I really wanted. I was glad when we went up the steps from the beach and I could leave her to catch up with the others while I took the other direction back to my hotel.

4. GIN AND TONIC

I should not have been in St. Malo that summer: I should have been in London. I had planned to spend two months working for a firm of architects in the City, along with Roger, my boyfriend, and Alison, another student from our year.

A week before we were due to start, Roger had suggested that he and I meet for a drink in the pub by Kingston Bridge. It was a Sunday in June, a soft, warm, summer evening. The sun was setting over the river, and the swans glided distantly past. We found a table on the outdoor terrace beside the towpath. Roger went inside to get the drinks, and I waited for him to return feeling more relaxed than I had for weeks. With studio projects and other work assignments to complete, we had not seen much of each other lately. But now the term had ended, the summer stretched before us, and I was ready to unwind.

Roger returned with two gins and tonics. It seemed he had anticipated my mood.

"Darling, how lovely! Is this to celebrate the end of term?"

Roger didn't answer directly. He sat down and lifted his glass. "Cheers."

"Cheers," I echoed. We drank.

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. He was wearing a pink short-sleeved shirt and uncreasable grey slacks from Marks and Spencers. Unlike most of our fellow students, Roger liked to look neat.

"Amanda," he said, "I've been doing some thinking lately."

I had no inkling what was coming. His tone was composed and rational.

"Yes?" I said.

"I've come to the conclusion that it's time for us to go our separate ways."

I put my glass down. "What?"

"Don't look so stunned," he said. "I grant you it's a bit of a shock to hear it out loud for the first time but, you know, deep down, I'm pretty sure that you've been expecting it too."

I stared at him. "What did you say?"

"Really, it was just a question of which one of us would come out and say it first."

"Roger, what the *hell* are you talking about?" He didn't answer. "What are you trying to say?"

"This can't be a surprise to you. We've been drifting apart for months."

"Have we?"

"Of course we have."

"And you want us to *break up*?"

My voice rose at the end of the sentence. People looked round.

Roger hunched prudently closer.

"In a sense," he informed me, "we already have."

I stared at him wordlessly.

"Amanda, think about it! It's been weeks since we've even had sex."

That at least was true. I couldn't dispute that our sex life had fallen off lately, due to pressure of work and lack of time. I had recently spent several nights in a row working late on an overdue project on an opera house. I tried to calculate. As far as I could remember, it was about ten days since we had last slept together.

For various reasons, Roger and I had never shared an apartment. As an undergraduate, he had preferred to live in a hall of residence. After that, we had done a year of job training in different towns. Currently, we were both living in flats with other people at opposite ends of Kingston, which meant that sex, at the best of times, required forward planning.

"Roger, are you saying you want to break up with me because we've been busy and short of time?"

"Well of course it's not just that."

"What is it then?"

"You mean you haven't guessed?"

"Guessed what?"

He shook his head, half-exasperated, half-indulgent. "Amanda, you really are cut off from reality in that little world of yours, aren't you?"

"Tell me what I'm supposed to have guessed."

He smiled patronizingly. "You must have realized there's someone else."

Someone else? Roger had someone else?

It was like a blow to the stomach. For a moment, I couldn't breathe.

"Aren't you going to ask who it is?"

"Who is it?" I said obediently.

"It's Alison!" he said triumphantly. "Surely you guessed?"

"Alison?"

I gaped at him. Alison was a member of our studio group. The three of us had spent a lot of time together in the past few months working on a group project on urban renovation. I had her down as a dull, hard-working girl. Her clothes were dowdy, and so was her conversation. She had not come up with a single original idea for our project.

I had to admit that I tended to block Alison out. Her grating laugh got on my nerves, and so did her flat northern accent. Perhaps it was that which had stifled my suspicions. It was true, now I came to think of it, that she had a nice figure and good legs. But I had never noticed her showing signs of interest in Roger, let alone the other way round.

"For God's sake, why *Alison*?"

Roger smiled complacently. "Oh just one of those things," he said. "I know it doesn't make sense. I can't really explain it. It's just what you call a coup de foudre, I suppose."

By that, I assumed, he meant more and better sex. I sat there numbly and watched the water flowing. I couldn't think of anything to say.

Roger and I had met in the first week of our first year at university, and we had done everything together ever since. He had been to stay at my mother's house in Sussex, and I had visited his family in Surrey. We had backpacked round Andalusia and Tuscany, endured days of heat in dusty trains to see the palaces of Rajasthan, plodded round Vienna and Amsterdam – anywhere there were interesting buildings to see. I had thought I knew Roger as well as I knew myself - but apparently I had been wrong.

Roger seemed to be finding my silence unnerving.

"I must say," he said reproachfully, "I never imagined you were going to take it like this."

"Really?" I said acidly. "How did you think I was going to take it?"

"Well I never thought you were the kind of person who would go in for histrionics."

Histrionics? I stared at him. "It's amazing the mistakes one makes about people sometimes."

Roger had always been slow about picking up on sarcasm. "It certainly is," he agreed.

"So how long have you been sleeping with Alison?"

"Oh I'd say since about March."

"March!"

"We got to talking when you were laid up with the flu."

"But when did you- ? How did you- ?"

"It wasn't all that hard. You were remarkably unobservant, up there on Planet Amanda. Every time I told you I was working late in the library, you swallowed it whole."

I gazed at him, dumbfounded. He smiled indulgently, and gave me examples. He cited unexplained absences I had never queried, and weak excuses I had not bothered to examine.

"Roger, it's called trust," I said, but no words came out.

I was beginning to believe what he was saying. I was beginning to understand not just the mechanism of how he had betrayed me, but the egotism and duplicity that had prompted him to do so.

I had never known what Roger was like at all. I was sitting on this terrace with a stranger.

"And you really want to split up?" I asked him again.

"In the circumstances, yes, I think it's best, don't you?"

"Do you and Alison have plans for the summer?"

He frowned. I was being slow.

"Of course we do. Two months at Whittell Architects, you know that already."

I looked at him thoughtfully. It had temporarily escaped my mind that Alison and I and Roger had all been accepted by a well-known firm of architects in the City for job training during the summer. It had been Roger who set up that, through a friend of his father. It had always struck me as slightly odd that the same company should have agreed to take on three students from the same university, but now I began to wonder how much of it was due to coincidence, and how much to planning.

"Right. Whittell Architects. And what about our trip to New York?"

"Well, I don't suppose you'll want to come with me, will you? In the circumstances?"

"Maybe Alison will go instead?" I suggested.

"Actually, yes, she's very excited about it."

I was beginning to feel sick. My drink was sitting almost untouched on the table. I pushed it towards him.

"Why don't you drink this? It seems a pity to waste it."

"Oh don't you want it? I thought it would be nice for our last drink together."

It suddenly became clear to me why several of my friends were not fond of Roger.

"Darling, it was perfect." I got up to go.

"Amanda?" There was a sudden tentative note in his voice.

"Yes?"

"Just one thing before you go. The ring I gave you?"

"Yes?"

It was a rather nice aquamarine that he had given me as a present the previous

year. I wore it a lot. I was wearing it tonight.

"I'd appreciate it if you could let me have it back."

"*What?*"

"It's the usual thing, you know."

"But it's not an engagement ring. It was a birthday present."

"Technically, yes, but it has a symbolic value. I'm sure you know what I mean. And it's not as if you needed it, with all your family's money."

I had to get out of there at once. I was finding it hard to breathe. I slipped the ring off my finger, leaned over the table, and dropped it neatly into the gin and tonic.

"All my congratulations, Roger. Have a nice summer."

5. PLANET AMANDA

The last thing I saw as I walked out of Roger's life was Roger scrabbling frantically in the gin and tonic to redeem his property.

I was greatly cheered by my futile gesture of defiance. I had seen the original some time back in an old Hollywood movie, with Bette Davis or Joan Crawford as the spurned femme fatale. It was the perfect parting shot. Some swishy taffeta skirts would have been good to flounce out with, but I did the best I could in my old Gap jeans. The look on Roger's face as I left the pub kept me afloat for at least part of the way home.

Home was a rundown flat on the top floor of what must once have been an impressive Victorian house. I shared it with three other students. Two of my flatmates, Alastair and Stephen, were gone for the weekend. When I got in, Diana, the third, was just about to go out to spend the night with her lover, a married man, whose wife had left earlier in the evening on a business trip to Frankfurt.

"I don't believe it!" she said, when I told her my tale of woe. "You broke up with Roger! You of all people! You seemed so ... permanent!"

"Well I thought so," I said sadly.

"What a jerk!"

"You've met Alison, haven't you?" I said. "What did you think of her?"

"Is she the beige one who came here to work sometimes? Smug little grin, and barely opened her mouth? Do you really want to know what I thought of her? I thought, There's a sly baggage who plays her cards close to her chest."

"Do you mean you suspected something?"

"Not with Roger. It never occurred to me there was anything going on there. But one night when you'd finished work and we were all sitting round having a drink, she batted her little beige eyelashes at Alastair, and the next time I looked they were as thick as thieves. Then they went off to his room, and then I bumped into her in the kitchen when I got up next morning."

"Really? When was this?"

"I don't know. A couple of months ago."

"But where was I while all this was happening?"

"You and Roger had gone back to his place."

"So in other words she was having it off with both Alastair and Roger at the same time?"

"Looks like it."

"My God."

"Once Roger figures out what she's up to, he'll come back. Just be patient."

I brightened a bit. "Do you really think so?"

"I give it a month at most," said Diana confidently. She looked at her watch. "I'm really sorry, Amanda, I have to go. Duncan will be waiting for me. I'll be back by ten at the latest tomorrow morning."

She paused, and said unconvincingly, "Try and get some sleep."

But sleep, as she very well knew, was out of the question. My glorious exit was not enough to console me very long, and I spent most of the night pacing round the flat. Around three, succumbing to exhaustion, I lay down and closed my eyes, but the images of Roger in his pink shirt accusing me of self-absorption and sexual neglect were too strong, and within half an hour I was up and walking the floor again.

Why had I suspected nothing? Granted, Alison had something that women couldn't see and men could, but was I really as divorced from reality as Roger said? Was I really so wrapped up in myself that I paid no attention to other people?

By five o'clock, I had decided what to do. I hauled my suitcases down from the top of the wardrobe and started to pack. I was feeling too rejected and battered to stay in the same town as Roger any longer. I would go down to my mother's for a few days to lick my wounds, and reconcile myself to the notion that I was a third-rate human being. At seven, I made coffee and took a shower. By eight, the car was packed and I was ready to leave.

First, however, I had to make some phone calls. I left a message on Diana's mobile to tell her where I was going. Then I called my mother to warn her of my arrival. At nine, I phoned Whittell Architects and informed them that I would be unable to work for them because of a family emergency. Finally, I called my father to tell him Roger and I would not be staying with him in Kensington during the summer. My mother sounded harrassed, the architects' receptionist sounded baffled, and my father sounded mildly relieved. He was late for an appointment, he said, and he had to run. He didn't ask any questions.

I locked the door of the flat and went down to the car. Shortly after eleven, I was turning through the ancient brick gateposts of my mother's house. My mother lived in a village on the Downs near Eastbourne. She ran her own small catering business out of home. Parts of the house dated back to the sixteenth century, and the kitchen had been built to cope with Tudor banqueting needs. It gave her the perfect working environment with which to impress her clients.

She came out of the house to greet me wearing jeans and one of my stepfather's shirts. She had flour on her face and a preoccupied expression. Summer was her busiest period. The garden-party season was in full swing. As soon as I got out of the car, I was roped in to help with the petit fours for some rustic lunch tomorrow. Two temporary assistants were slaving away at the other end of the kitchen.

"Weren't you supposed to be going to Kensington with Roger?" she asked after about half an hour.

"Roger broke up with me," I informed her baldly.

"Did he really?" She peered at me over her glasses. "How amazing."

"Is it?"

"Well you're quite a catch for someone like Roger, darling. How's that sauce coming on, Daphne?"

I bit back the retort which sprang to my lips. Growing up in a stately home, my mother had acquired the outlook that went with the territory. Roger's father was a suburban bank manager, and his mother a social worker. He had never been "our sort", and she had never liked him.

"So who did he find to take your place?" she asked.

I stopped icing my éclair. "How did you know he had someone new?"

"Darling, they always do. Stir harder, Daphne, or it's going to curdle. Lower the heat just a teeny bit, Lucinda."

"But Clare, I *am* stirring hard!"

"It won't *go* any lower!"

Despite the lack of sympathy, I stayed for a week. Once the first shock was past, I realized I was exhausted. Roger's little bombshell had come on top of several weeks of overwork and late nights. Emotional stress and physical fatigue were a lethal combination.

I subsided into a state of lethargy. I slept late, and watched re-runs of reality shows on television. In between periods of intense activity with Daphne and Lucinda in the kitchen, my mother was out a lot, and the house was quiet. Conrad, my stepfather, was abroad on business, and Jeremy and David, my younger half-brothers, were away at school. Diana called once or twice to discuss strategies to win back Roger, but I was too demoralized to want to fight, and in the face of my half-heartedness, she soon gave up.

After a few days, my energy returned, though not my spirits. I called up a few architects' practices about summer traineeships, but it was much too late to organize such things, and I drew a blank everywhere. I tried to look up old schoolfriends, but nobody seemed to be at home. I made more petit fours, and stirred some sauces. I considered driving into Eastbourne to go shopping or see a film, but there was nothing I wanted to buy, and no films I wanted to see.

In the end, I decided to move on. I used my mother's computer to look up the boats to Guernsey. It was two years since I had seen Bonne-Maman. It was time I paid her a visit.

My mother came out of the house to see me off.

"I've neglected you, darling, haven't I? Come back in August, it'll be quieter then. They'll all have gone on their holidays, and we'll get some peace."

She did not ask what I would do until August. She was back in her kitchen before I was out of the gate.

*

My grandmother lived on the hill overlooking the harbour in St. Peter Port. Her house was two doors down from Victor Hugo, who had lived on Guernsey in exile in the nineteenth century, building himself a grotesque, over-decorated, megalomaniac's lair, and communicating with his mistress further down the hill by means of handkerchiefs hung from the balcony.

St. Peter Port was a quiet, white town overlooking the sea, and I had spent several holidays there when I was young. I had been hoping that I could stay with Bonne-Maman for a bit while I got my bearings, but it became plain almost at once that I could not.

My grandmother was nearly eighty, and her vitality was fading. Nothing seemed to be seriously wrong, but she was finding life more of an effort. Although she made me welcome, it was clear that my presence was a strain. She was far more frail than the last time I had seen her. She had developed her own, slow ways of doing things. She seemed to prefer her dogs and her solitude to human society. For someone as sociable as my grandmother, it was a big change.

After a day or two, I began to consider what to do next. My options seemed to be limited. I was contemplating, with no great enthusiasm, returning to my mother's, when Bonne-Maman solved the problem for me.

"Amanda, I have a little errand I want you to run. Will you do that for me?"

"Of course, I will. What is it you want me to do?"

"I need you to go on a mission to St. Malo."

"A mission? What kind of mission?"

She began to tell me. And so it was that I found myself in France.

6. THE SHIP OF STONE

I discharged my grandmother's "mission" the following day.

Virginie had announced that she was going to spend all day revising for her exams. The rest of the family had gone back to Paris. I decided to steer clear of the House of the Corsair. I had no desire to encounter Gilles de Kerguidan again - though my grandmother's assignment might have interested him.

Bonne-Maman had sent me in search of another corsair - or, more precisely, another corsair's descendant. St. Malo, by the look of it, was full of them.

Corsairs had been one of my grandmother's hobbies for years. My grandfather's family had had links to one of the pirates - I wasn't sure which one - and she had spent a lot of time trying to trace his lineage. My grandfather had regarded her activities with amused tolerance. The subject didn't interest him in the slightest.

In the course of her investigations, Bonne-Maman had picked up a fair amount of information about the corsairs. She had acquired a sizeable collection of books, as well as some pictures and engravings. It was one of the latter I had in my suitcase now. It depicted a dashing, three-masted sailing ship called *Le Revenant*, once the property of a gentleman called Jean Miniac de la Moinerie, who had been the scourge of the English in the late seventeenth century.

It was the only known engraving of *Le Revenant* in existence. Even though it was only a nineteenth-century copy of the original, Bonne-Maman had no intention of entrusting it to the post office. The great-great-great-great-something of Jean Miniac was still alive in a village near St. Malo, and I had been instructed to convey *Le Revenant* into his very own hands.

Mr. Benjamin Miniac was a frail, white-haired old gentleman who lived on the outskirts of a village called St. Jouan. His neat concrete bungalow was totally lacking in piratical splendour, though it did have a magnificent view of the River Rance.

Mr. Miniac was clearly overwhelmed by the sight of *Le Revenant*. His hands shook as he undid the brown paper Bonne-Maman had used to wrap it up, and tears came to his eyes as he looked at it. He offered me coffee, and managed with some difficulty to make it, and we sat in his conservatory overlooking the river while he told me tales of the exploits of Jean Miniac, breaking off every so often to look at the picture of *Le Revenant*, and touch the paper it was printed on.

His conservatory was a magical place. The vast watery expanse of the Rance and its valley unfolded at our feet. There were very few houses in sight. It felt as though nothing had changed since the age of Jean Miniac. Behind us, up the hill, lay supermarkets and housing estates and a four-lane highway, but there was something untouched and mystical about the land before us. It felt as though we had fallen out of time. I wouldn't have been surprised to see *Le Revenant*, with the wind in its sails, come gliding silently past on its way to the sea. I could understand why this very old man, who must have been close to ninety, had chosen to retreat from the noise and crowds of St. Malo to a place like this.

In the afternoon, I returned to the beach and spent a lazy afternoon in the sun. At seven, I called Virginie and persuaded her to come out for dinner in a crêperie I had found tucked away in a curve of the ramparts. We sat outside, despite the evening chill, and ate galettes stuffed with ham and cheese, followed by crêpes au chocolat, the whole of it washed down by local cider. Galettes were a particular kind

of pancake used for savoury fillings, while crêpes were used for sweet fillings. The sun set over the Plage de Bon Secours, and Virginie pointed out the tiny islet of Le Grand Bé where the writer Chateaubriand was buried looking out to sea.

"Go over to see his tomb," she said, "but make sure the tide is out because if you get cut off you'll have to wait for six hours for it to go down again."

Virginie was due to return to Paris the next morning. With my grandmother's engraving safely in the hands of Mr. Miniac, I had no reason to stay on in St. Malo, but for the time being I had no desire to leave.

I spent the next few days exploring. The first day I took the ferry across the bay to Dinard. It was a stylish seaside resort, much more decorous than its war-waging neighbour, with refined Edwardian architecture and elegant fin-de-siècle villas. I wandered past the Casino and the old-fashioned striped canvas bathing huts, and followed a cliff path round the coast, admiring the charming rocky coves and the villas perched on the cliff's edge above me, with their private stairs down to the beach.

On my way back into town, I ran into Lucienne coming out of an elegant-looking boutique.

"Why, Amanda," she said, catching sight of me. "How do you like my shop?"

This was her shop? I looked it more closely. Crisp blue and white paint, and an array of expensive-looking children's clothes in the window.

"It's very chic," I said. It was the right choice of adjective. She smoothed back her perfectly-coiffed hair and smiled complacently.

"People come from all over the region to shop here."

"Including Corinne?" I said.

"Oh Corinne loves my shop! She'd spend all her time here if she could. But, of course, I can't let her do that. She comes in here with her sticky fingers - once she even came in with an ice-cream. She touches everything, she wants to try everything on, and then of course I'm left with all the mess to clean up. Susie was never very good at keeping an eye on her when they came into the shop," she added, and the sudden tightness about her mouth made me guess that there was no love lost between Lucienne and her errant daughter-in-law.

The following day, I stayed in St. Malo. It was a long time since I had explored the town properly. I wandered round the cobbled streets, peeped into hidden courtyards, inspected towers and turrets, climbed stone stairways. There were few trees, I noticed, and even flowers were rare. St. Malo was a ship of stone, surrounded by the sea.

I concentrated on the architecture, and tried not to think about Roger. He would be in London by now, working at Whittell Architects with Alison. I tried not to wonder what they were doing there. I visited the castle, and then I walked up to the cathedral. The sky was a deep cloudless blue, the sun was shining. I was better off here, I told myself, than in London.

And then, coming out of the cathedral, I saw Roger. He was standing just a few yards away, in his pale pink shirt, looking in a shop window. He had his back to me. My heart stood still. What was he doing here? Had he come after me? Then he moved from the shadow into the sun, and I realized it wasn't Roger at all. The man was much shorter than Roger, and not even very like him. He walked away across the square with his hands in his pockets. I stared after him with a curious feeling of disappointment, even though I knew I was being stupid. Roger didn't know where I was - how did I think he was going to come after me?

I turned my back on the man in the pink shirt and plunged into the labyrinth of little streets that led to the Porte St. Vincent.

A few minutes later, I saw someone else I knew. This time I was not imagining things. It was the woman who had been on the ferry with Gilles de Kerguidan, coming out of an art gallery on one of the narrow streets. She was wearing an exquisite red dress which looked as though it came from the same supplier as her previous outfit. As before, she was perfectly groomed, with not a hair out of place. She looked poised, glamorous and in control. She didn't see me standing in the shadows. She called something over her shoulder to someone in the shop and set off down the street.

When she had rounded the corner, I went to inspect the shop. The paintings on display featured a lot of white canvas enlivened with occasional slabs of primary colour. I caught sight of one of the titles. "Ostracism", it said. I had no idea how a misshapen orange rectangle in the upper left-hand corner and a sprawling dark grey blob in the lower left-hand corner could be supposed to represent ostracism, but I supposed it didn't much matter. Customers with the means to meet the price tag would have the discernment to appreciate the subject.

A mousy-looking girl sitting behind a desk looked up and watched my progress past the display windows, but I didn't linger. Instead I turned on my heel and retraced my steps. I had no desire to encounter Miss Armani again.

The next day I drove to Cap Fréhel, a few miles away, walked on the beach, admired the lighthouse, and thought about Roger. By now, the shock had worn off, and I was beginning to accept the new situation. Roger didn't want me any more. And slowly I was beginning to think that I didn't want him.

For the first few days after the scene in the pub, I had been convinced I had failed him so badly that I did not deserve him. It was my grandmother who had helped me see that Roger's version of events was not the only one. Sitting in her garden, surrounded by agapanthus and tamarisks, watching the ferry from Jersey steam past the castle and into the port below, she made me tell her why I was upset.

When I had finished my sad little tale, she nodded sagely.

"Isn't it odd the way some men can't accept that they're in the wrong?"

I wasn't sure what she was getting at. "Um."

My grandmother peered at me.

"Amanda," she said severely, "don't tell me you don't see what's happening here! He's been wilfully deceiving you, and now he claims it was your fault."

"Oh but- "

"He can't bear the idea that he's the guilty party. Some men can't, you see. I knew someone once - well, never mind! He doesn't want to take the blame himself, so he's doing his best to shift it on to you."

"Oh but- Do you really think so?"

"Well, dear, of course I do. Some things are just so clear they hit you over the head. You know, Amanda, I'm sorry to have to say this, but your Roger doesn't sound to me like an honourable young man."

"Oh but- " I stopped.

"I do hope you're not planning to try and get him back?"

"Well I er- "

"I don't think that's a good idea," said my grandmother.

After that conversation, I began to see more clearly. The more I thought about it, the more obvious it became that Bonne-Maman was right. Roger had behaved dishonourably. The word might be old-fashioned, but the concept was still valid. Roger was a betrayer and a deceiver - and on top of that he was mean! How could I return to him after the business with the ring? Even if he gave it back to me, it would

serve as a constant reminder of what he was capable.

Sitting in the dunes of Cap Fréhel, I felt incredibly sad. Not for the loss of Roger himself, but for the loss of the things we had done together, and would never do again. A part of my life was gone forever. I would never wake up with him beside me again. We would never sit together over Sunday breakfast in the sunny kitchen of my flat in Kingston, arguing amicably over plans for the day - which friends to visit, what film to see - with the Sunday papers strewn around us and the third pot of coffee perking in the background. We would never walk hand in hand along the towpath, never feed the swans again, never share an apple on the river bank, biting into the fruit one after the other, passing it back and forth until there was nothing left but a few pips and the core.

The memories surged up, one after the other, until I felt as though I was drowning in sadness and loss. The way he had of pushing my hair back from my face before he kissed me. The way he would let out a little sigh and brush my neck with his lips after making love. I wondered if he did that with Alison too. Did he kiss her the way he had me? Did he say the same things? I pressed myself into the sand where no one could see me, and wept.

Afterwards, I felt better. The crying fit had calmed me down. Roger was out of my life for good, and I didn't regret him. But now what was I to do? I was in Brittany, with the summer stretching interminably before me, and I had nowhere to go.

I sat in the dunes with my knees drawn up to my chin, and pondered my plight. At least money was not a problem for the time being. As Roger had obligingly pointed out, my family was well-off. Conrad, my stepfather, was a wealthy and generous man who insisted on making me an allowance, which I tried on principle not to touch. That money was sitting in the bank if I needed it.

My own father was also not ungenerous when he remembered my existence, which he did at irregular intervals. Last year, he had bought me the car. This year, he had called me in Sussex, after several days had elapsed, to find out what had happened, and promptly sent me a "little something" to tide me over until I found a job. His cheque had paid my passage on the ferry, and it would pay my bill at the Hotel Saint Maclou for quite a few weeks more.

That said, I couldn't stay in St. Malo forever. But what should I do instead? Look up Bonne-Maman's cousins in Vannes that I barely knew? Go back to Kingston, and get a summer job? Or just get in the car and drive, and see where I ended up. Nothing appealed to me. I had no ideas.

The breeze was beginning to freshen, and the sun was starting on its downward curve. I drove back to St. Malo, parked by the ramparts, and made my way to the hotel.

Passing the Plage de Bon Secours, I met Jonathan and Corinne coming up from the beach with some other children and their mothers. They spotted me immediately and came to say hello. Jonathan gave me a broad grin, and Corinne put her hand confidingly in mine. When were we going to make another sandcastle? they asked. None of their friends had ever made one as good as mine.

How about Saturday? I said, but on Saturday they were invited to a birthday party, so we settled on Sunday. I didn't mind. There was something so forlorn about the way they had come trudging up from the beach at the back of the little group, that I hadn't the heart to say no. In any case, it gave me an excuse to stay on here another couple of days, and work out my next move.

When I got back to the hotel, Magali, the chambermaid, was just finishing up

my room. She was about my own age, and she was a student too. She apologised for her lateness: it was the end of the week, a lot of guests had left, and rooms had to be prepared for tomorrow's new arrivals. It sounded as though she was on her own to do the whole hotel. That gave me an idea.

I went back downstairs to the reception desk. Paulette, who was one half of the husband-and-wife team that owned the hotel, was typing carefully on a computer keyboard, but she looked up and smiled as I approached. She was a nice woman, and we had had several chats already. I asked her if she could use an extra chambermaid.

She shook her head. "Unfortunately, I can't. We have a new girl coming next week to help Magali. I wish I'd known. Are you looking for a job?"

"Yes," I said. "I've decided to stay here for the summer. Do you know of anywhere that might need help?"

Paulette looked dubious. "I think you'll find the hotels are fully staffed. It's late, you see, the season's already begun. What about a job in a restaurant? I think the crêperie across the road is looking for someone."

It didn't sound very encouraging, but the more I thought about staying, the more I liked it. The following morning, I set out to make inquiries. I worked my way through all the hotels in the town. Paulette was right: they were all fully staffed. It looked as though I would have to start on the restaurants.

This was a prospect that I found a lot less attractive. I had worked in McDonalds in Kingston for several months, and hated it. As for the crêperie Paulette had mentioned, I had eaten there one night and found it noisy, and none too clean.

The sun was high in the sky and it was getting hot. It was well past twelve. Clients were beginning to arrive in the restaurants for lunch. It didn't seem a good time to go asking for a job. Deciding to spend a couple of hours at the beach and continue my quest later, I went back to the hotel to collect my things.

Paulette was at the reception desk again. She looked up when I came in.

"Amanda! No luck with the hotels? Well, I might have something for you. Would you be interested in a job looking after children?"

"Of course. I'd love to do that."

"My mother-in-law mentioned it when she came in this morning. The family lives not far from here. She's worked for them for years, and she says they're very nice. Two boys, both under ten, I think it is. Would that appeal to you?"

"That would be perfect. Can I go and see them?"

"Wait just a minute, I'll call my mother-in-law."

She dialled the number and a brief conversation ensued. Yes, she would be interested. What, he's there now? All right, that would be fine. I'll give her the address. Can you go over there right now? she added to me. Yes, of course, I said.

The address she gave me was just a few streets away. It wasn't the family's own flat. It belonged to Paulette's mother-in-law, Madame Leclerc. By a fortunate coincidence, the children's father had just stopped by to pay her – she cleaned for them, I gathered – and he was anxious to meet me right away.

The flat was in one of the apartment blocks that had been rebuilt after the war. It overlooked a big square, with the Post Office at one end. There was no lift and I had to climb to the fourth floor. I rang the bell and the door was opened by a cheerful-looking lady in a flowered overall.

"You're the girl for the job? Come in, come in. He's in here. I put him in the sitting room to wait."

She led me down a short corridor stuffed with furniture into an even more crowded sitting room. I made out a bulky three-piece suite, an enormous sideboard, a

glass-fronted cabinet crammed with knick-knacks. And then the man who was sitting with his back to me in one of the armchairs got to his feet and turned round, and the decor faded into a blur.

"Here she is, Mr. de Kerguidan," said Mme Leclerc chirpily. "She made good time, I must say. Not that it's very far from the hotel, mind you."

She ushered me into the room.

"Do you know, mademoiselle, Paulette didn't tell me your name."

"Amanda," I said faintly. "Amanda le Marchant."

There was a short, shocked instant in which no one spoke. Then Gilles de Kerguidan squeezed through the gap between the chair and the sofa, and held out his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Amanda."

He gave no sign that we had met before. I took my cue from him, and shook his hand.

"Sit down, sit down," said Mme Leclerc. "I'll leave you to talk. You'll have coffee, won't you? It'll only be a minute."

7. AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PIRATE

For a few moments, nothing could be heard but the sound of Mme Leclerc's slippers shuffling down the corridor. Gilles de Kerguidan and I stared at each other. He was in a business suit today, but with his long hair and piercing blue eyes, he still looked every inch the pirate. For a moment, I wondered if I would be made to walk the plank from the height of the fourth-floor window. Then, unexpectedly, he laughed.

"It's hard not to get the impression that someone somewhere is determined to throw us together."

I tried to imitate his nonchalant tone. "You think it's fate?"

"I'm beginning to think it must be." He gestured towards the other armchair. "Sit down, make yourself comfortable. We'll have to stay for coffee anyway."

I sat down in silence, and he looked me over with a mixture of amusement and exasperation. "Nobody told me it was an English girl who was coming."

"Didn't they?" I snapped. "Well, I was told the job was with a family with two boys under ten!"

"That sounds like the Vincents - the other family Mme Leclerc works for. Her daughter-in-law must have got us confused." He sighed, and shook his head. "So tell me, Amanda le Marchant, are you really English?"

"My grand-mother is French," I told him curtly. "She lives in Guernsey, but the family was from Brittany before that. She always speaks French to me, and so does my father."

"When I saw you on the ferry, it never occurred to me that you were English."

"I've spent quite a bit of time in France, what with one thing and another."

"Here we are." Mme Leclerc bustled back in with a tray. She set it down on the low table in front of us.

De Kerguidan stopped scowling and bent towards her.

"This is very kind of you, Madame Leclerc. We'll try not to stay too long. It's this afternoon you're going to the doctor, isn't it? Is the arthritis any better? No? Not even with the new tablets?"

His concern seemed to be genuine. Mme Leclerc evidently thought it was. They went on chatting for a moment or two. Then Mme Leclerc said she would leave us to it, I mumbled something grateful about the coffee, and she shuffled out. I wondered how long I would have to stay before I could make my excuses and go.

"Why do you want to look after children?" said the corsair, as the door closed behind her. "I thought you were training to be an architect. Wouldn't a summer job in an architect's office be more in your line?"

"I had a job with an architect's office in London," I said tersely. "I had to turn it down for personal reasons. And then I came here because I wanted to get away."

"Boyfriend trouble?"

"Yes."

"So you're stuck without a job?"

I had not expected him to grasp my predicament so fast. His matter-of-factness reassured me. I found myself explaining that I had messed up my summer and had nowhere to go.

"I thought I'd look for a job in a crêperie or something, and just stay here."

He nodded and sipped his coffee. I did the same. The silence thickened. I

gazed round the room, while he stared into his cup. The windows were barricaded with heavy net curtains that fenced out the light, and the serried rows of ornaments were giving me claustrophobia.

It was time, I decided, to leave. He could give Mme Leclerc whatever excuse he wanted, and I would tell Paulette that it hadn't worked out.

I set down my cup and picked up my bag off the floor.

"Wait," said de Kerguidan, "there's something I want to say. When you spoke to me on the ferry, I was on the phone to the hospital. The woman I'd hired to look after the children for the summer had just called to tell me she'd broken her leg. I'm afraid you caught me at a bad moment. I'm not usually as rude as that to perfect strangers."

I stared at him, caught off balance. I didn't know what to say.

"By telling you this, I'm trying to explain what happened, not to excuse it. I deeply regret the incident, and I hope you'll accept my apologies."

"Yes, I ... I, of course, naturally- "

"And then when I ran into you again at the Desbordes, it was so unexpected - I hadn't imagined I would ever see you again." He paused for a moment. "I wasn't very proud of what had happened, so I'm afraid I didn't behave very well there either."

"Oh, well, I, er, yes..."

He was watching me closely. For a moment I had the impression that there was something he wasn't telling me, but I was too busy struggling for composure to wonder what it might be.

"Please don't worry about it," I said firmly. "It wasn't entirely your fault: I was upset by something else and I over-reacted."

He gave me a cautious smile. "So am I forgiven?"

"Oh, why, I, er, yes- "

"Then I wonder if you might consider taking the job anyway?"

Rather than lurch into another bout of stuttering, I kept my mouth firmly closed.

"I have to be away a lot this summer, and I desperately need someone to be with the children. You and I got off on the wrong foot, but if we can agree to let bygones be bygones, I would be very happy if you would consider being that person."

I shook my head in bemusement. "Why do you want me?"

"Partly because it's very difficult to find someone reliable at this late stage, and partly because my children haven't stopped talking about you and your sandcastles for days. As you see, I'm reduced to interviewing potential child-minders away from the house, so they won't find out. They know I'm trying to find someone to look after them, and they keep asking why it can't be you."

"Oh," I said faintly.

"Let me explain the situation. My wife, as Virginie probably told you, has left me, and she refuses to take the children to live with her. This leaves me in something of a bind. School is going to break up in a couple of weeks, Marie-Jeanne just broke her ankle, Mme Leclerc is willing to look after them for a few hours a day, and occasional evenings, but that's all. Meanwhile, I have to be in Rennes several times a week, there's a project in Dinan where I have to be on site constantly, I'm working on a malouinière near here for a prominent and very demanding industrialist, and on top of everything I'm supposed to be giving a paper at a congress in Montreal next week. What I need is someone to live in and look after them full time. All day and every day. I will give you time off when I can, but it won't be regular, and it may not be very much."

He glanced at me: I said nothing.

"I realize this sounds like a tall order, but since it's for a fairly short period, I would hope that we can compensate for the lack of time off by appropriate financial arrangements."

"How much would you pay me?" I said.

He named a sum. I blinked. It was more than generous.

"So what do you think?" he said.

I looked at him, but he wasn't looking at me. He had pulled into himself and was concentrating on the carpet. He had said what he had to say. He wasn't going to get out his cutlass, and he wasn't going to plead. I liked him the better for that. Still, I didn't know how to respond. I knew that Virginie liked him, and so did Madame Leclerc. Nevertheless, my instinct was to say no. After the incident on the boat, I didn't trust him. If the truth be told, I found him slightly alarming. It didn't seem like a good idea to go and work for him.

But then I remembered Jonathan and Corinne, and how lost they had looked on the beach the day before. Into my mind crept the image of myself at ten, the summer my parents had split up. My father had left on assignment for the bank in Hong Kong, and my mother had had a nervous breakdown. They had both effectively disappeared from my life at the same time, and I had been passed from one set of relatives to another for several weeks.

I recalled my childish self, in a dress that was too small, skulking in a corner of a strange garden, while the grown-ups drank cocktails and held long, dull conversations. It came to me that I could not refuse this job with a clear conscience.

I eyed Gilles de Kerguidan cautiously. By the sound of it, he wouldn't be around much. Maybe I wouldn't have to see a lot of him.

"There's one other thing I should mention," he said.

"Yes?"

"If you come to work for me, I want you to speak only French to the children. No English at all. Can you do that, do you think?"

"Yes, of course."

"My wife is English, you see."

He paused for a moment: he seemed to be searching for words.

"I'd like to make a clean break. I don't want them reminded of her."

Yeah, right, I thought. You mean *you* don't want to be reminded of her.

"All right," I said, "I'll do it. When do you want me to start?"

8. THE HOUSE OF THE CORSAIR

I moved into the House of the Corsair the next morning.

Jonathan and Corinne were waiting for me eagerly. The beach bag was packed in the hallway, ready to go. Corinne told me that she was glad I was coming to look after them, and Jonathan told me the time of the next high tide. Then Corinne gave me a tour of the apartment, while Jonathan hauled my bags into my new bedroom, seemingly anxious to get them stowed away before I could change my mind. Their father hovered in the background. When I looked round after about half an hour, he had disappeared. I was already in sole charge.

The flat boasted the same vast high-ceilinged living room as that of the Desbordes, one floor below, but there the resemblance ended. Mr. de Kerguidan owned the whole of the second floor, and his flat was bigger and far more opulent than theirs. It was furnished throughout with comfortable modern furniture, which went surprisingly well with the beams and panelled walls.

The master bedroom and bathroom, together with the pirate's study, opened off one side of the living room. ("This is my daddy's bedroom and this is where he works.") Three other bedrooms plus a second bathroom led off the other side, while the kitchen was at the back of the house, overlooking the courtyard. ("This is my room. Do you like it? I have lots of Barbies. You're going to sleep in here. My grandma from England slept here when she came last year.")

Propriety, it belatedly occurred to me, was going to be totally respected. The master of the house slept at one end of the apartment, with the au pair and the children at the other. The flat was so huge that we could probably go for days without seeing each other. There was certainly no risk of my employer and I stumbling into each other in the corridor in the middle of the night - and nor would I encounter any nocturnal visitors he might have. If the truth be told, the prospect of colliding with Miss Armani in her black silk negligée alarmed me considerably more than the prospect of colliding with Mr. de Kerguidan.

But for the first few days of my stay, there was no sign of her. De Kerguidan made no mention of her, and neither did the children. After several days, I realized that I still didn't know her name. If I hadn't seen her on the street outside the art gallery, I would have started to wonder if she really existed, or if I had somehow managed to conjure her out of thin air.

In any case, after a day or two, I was too exhausted to notice who I ran into in the corridor. My day began at six thirty. I had just time to take a shower and get dressed before it was time to wake the children, help Corinne to dress, inspect Jonathan's satchel, get some breakfast down them, and make sure we were all out of the house by eight fifteen. Fortunately, their schools were both close at hand. It was five minutes walk to Corinne's kindergarten, and another five minutes to the primary school.

By the time I had dropped them both off, it was eight thirty, and theoretically I had the morning free. I picked them up for lunch at half past eleven and took them back to school at half past one. They finished for the day at four thirty. When I went to collect them, I took the bathing things and a small snack, and we went straight to the beach for a couple of hours.

About half past six, we came up from the beach and went home. I put Corinne into the bath, and sat Jonathan down to do his homework. There were only ten days

till the end of term, but his teacher was unrelenting. After supper, they were allowed to watch an hour or so of television. Corinne was generally in bed by eight thirty, and Jonathan by nine.

By then I did not have the energy to do anything but collapse in my room with a book. I generally put the lights out about ten. I did not know how full-time parents stood it. It wasn't just having to listen to the children's incessant chatter, and needing to remain constantly vigilant to prevent them from burning themselves on the stove, or stepping off the pavement under a car. Because of the school timetable, I had hardly any time to myself. By the time I got home after dropping them off at school, it seemed I had no time for anything but the briefest of errands before I had to go and fetch them again. Especially once I took over the cooking.

Since Susie had left, Madame Leclerc, who normally came in twice a week to clean and iron, had been doing extra hours to deal with the shopping and cooking. It soon became clear that she wasn't coping well with either.

The first day I was there, she gave us overcooked spaghetti for lunch and burnt shepherd's pie for supper. When Jonathan asked for a yoghurt, there were none in the fridge. Corinne wanted an apple, but there were no apples either.

The second day, there was no milk for breakfast, and neither of them could eat the tough and gristly boeuf bourguignon that had been provided for lunch. I found it hard going myself.

"When's my mummy coming back?" demanded Corinne. "We used to have nice food when she was here."

"Sometimes we did," said Jonathan, his need for accuracy winning out as usual.

"Mummy made pizza."

"No she didn't, it was frozen pizza that she heated up," said Jonathan, glancing apologetically at me.

I deduced that cooking had not been one of Susie's skills.

Mr. de Kerguidan had not been present for any of those meals. I had hardly seen him since I arrived. He kept irregular hours. Since he had what amounted to a separate suite of rooms at the end of the flat, it was difficult to keep track of his comings and goings. There was never any sign of him in the morning: I had no idea where or if he slept. The children seemed to take his absence for granted.

I had not yet worked out if he ate at his office, or if he came home late and took his chances with the leftovers. He had taken my arrival as a licence to hole up in his office and catch up on his work before leaving for Montreal. He was behind on his malouinière (this turned out to be some kind of pirate's manor house: the corsairs had all built themselves summer residences outside the city), and on all his other projects too.

I looked at the children toying gloomily with their beef. Corinne seemed about to cry.

"Right," I said, "that's enough. Leave that stuff on your plates, we're going out."

"Out?" said Corinne, in tones of wonder.

"Where are we going?" said Jonathan.

We went to the nearest crêperie and ate galettes. I ordered them each a Coke, and drank cider to cheer myself up.

When they were back in school, I looked up the address of de Kerguidan's office, and went to beard the pirate in his den. The office was in the courtyard of a charming old building. The sun slanted through a slit in the outer walls and bounced

off the uneven cobbled surfaces. It looked like a pleasant place to work, though the office itself was in all kinds of chaos. He had an associate, I knew, and a secretary, but both of them were out, and he was there on his own.

I had been nervous as to how my request would be received, but I could tell as soon as I saw him that there was no need to worry. He was hunched over his desk, hirsute and red-eyed, poring over some plans. He peered at me as if he was not quite sure who I was.

"I'm sorry to bother you, monsieur, but I've got a problem."

He looked at me in silence.

"There's no food to eat in the house. I don't know when Madame Leclerc is due to go shopping, but the fridge is practically empty."

He ran a hand through his hair and made it stick up in spikes. "Shopping is difficult here. There aren't many shops that sell food inside the city. I'll try to get over to Continent before I leave."

Continent was the name of the local supermarket. It was outside the walled city, about a ten-minute drive away.

"I'll go to Continent myself," I told him. "I'll go today. I'll drive my own car and I'll take the children with me. That way they can choose what they like. That's another thing: they don't like what Madame Leclerc cooks."

"Why not?"

"Because it's inedible. Have you ever tried one of her meals?"

"No, I can't say I have. Is it really that bad?"

"I had to take them to a crêperie at lunchtime."

He shrugged helplessly. "I don't know what to say. Quite honestly, I really don't know what I can do about that. I can't cook either, you see, and even if I could..." His voice trailed off and he waved a hand at the mounds of paper awaiting his attention.

"I can cook," I said crisply.

"Can you?" He sounded sceptical. My suspicions about Susie were confirmed.

"My mother taught me."

"Oh, I see. Then I'm sure that will be fine."

I don't think he believed me, but he didn't really care. His eyes were already wandering back to his plans, but he recollected himself, dug into his pocket, and handed me a wad of notes.

"Buy what you need. I'm really very grateful."

"You're welcome," I said. "I'll go and tell Madame Leclerc."

Madame Leclerc greeted the news as if she was being given a reprieve from Death Row. She had been finding it a bit much, she confided, cooking for me and the children and then having to come home and cook for her husband too. As for the shopping, you used to find all kinds of nice little shops intra-muros, but now they'd all been taken over by fashion designers and art galleries, a real shame it was. You had to go out to the shopping mall, and since Mr. Leclerc had had his accident he didn't drive any more, and as for her she had never taken her test and she was too old to start now, and so her son took them to Continent once a week, but she didn't like to impose, and it was hard to do the shopping for Mr. de Kerguidan as well...

When I went to pick the children up at four thirty, I took the car keys instead of the beach towels.

"Where's our stuff?" said Jonathan suspiciously. "Aren't we going to the beach?"

"No beach today, we're going shopping."

"Shopping?"

"What about our goûter?"

Goûter was a snack French children had in the late afternoon when they came out of school, and in the three days I had been looking after Jonathan and Corinne I had discovered that it was a matter of life and death. Dispensing with le goûter was out of the question.

"That's what we're going to buy. We're going to Continent to load up the car with food."

They exchanged glances.

"What sort of food?" said Jonathan cautiously.

"The kind you like. You tell me what you want to eat, and we'll buy it and I'll cook it."

"Can't we just go to the crêperie again?" said Corinne.

"Not every day," I said.

*

Mr. de Kerguidan left for Canada the following Friday. I had been working for him for just six days. The children were tearful when he left to drive to Paris for his flight to Montreal. They were both very quiet all day, though they liked the ravioli I gave them for supper, and the apple crumble I had made as a special treat.

The following day, Jonathan stayed silent, and Corinne asked repeatedly when her mother was coming back. It seemed to have dawned on them that both their parents had disappeared, and they were left with a minder whom they hardly knew. They had both been invited out for the afternoon, which cheered them up, but Corinne woke up crying from a nightmare in the middle of the night.

"I dreamed that my mummy- " she gasped, but was unable to tell me exactly what had happened. She clutched at me and wept bitterly and refused to be left alone, so I took her into the kitchen to get her some milk, and that seemed to calm her down.

Maybe Susie had done the same, or maybe the old wives' wisdom which made me think milk was a good idea had truth underlying it. We put on all the lights on in her bedroom and in the corridor, and I looked under the bed to check for monsters, and lay down beside her and stayed till she fell asleep.

On Sunday, Lucienne took us all out to lunch at a restaurant in the harbour called the Teddy Bear, which they both enjoyed. Afterwards, as it was raining, we went on to the latest Disney children's summer film which was playing at the local cinema. Their father called that evening to ask how things were going. Corinne seemed reassured to hear his voice (though she had another nightmare that night anyway), and Jonathan talked to him for a long time.

On Monday, I took them to school as usual at eight fifteen. There were three more days of term. I didn't know how I was going to manage after that. Jonathan was signed up for sailing classes and Corinne for something called a "mini-club", but that was only three hours out of each day. How was I going to fill the rest of the time?

My mother, consulted by phone, said briskly that children needed to learn to occupy themselves, and Madame Leclerc assured me that children were never bored in St. Malo. It wasn't very helpful.

On Tuesday morning, I was making pizza for lunch when the phone rang.

"Allo," I said.

There was silence at the other end. "Madame Leclerc?" said a voice, sounding

very puzzled.

"Non, c'est la jeune fille au pair. Puis-je vous aider?"

There was another silence, and then the voice said, with a strong English accent, "Je suis la maman de Jonathan et Corinne."

I should have guessed. I switched at once to English. "Mrs. de Kerguidan? My name is Amanda le Marchant. Your husband has hired me for the summer to look after the children."

"What? But I thought he- What about Marie-Jeanne?"

"I'm afraid she broke her ankle. I'm a friend of Virginie Desbordes, your downstairs neighbour."

"Oh. Oh I see. Is my husband there now? I'd like to speak to him."

"Unfortunately he's out of the country. He's gone to Montreal."

"He's gone to Canada and left you alone with the children?" Her voice rose several octaves.

"Don't worry, we're managing fine. Your children are very well."

"The bastard, I really thought this time he- " She broke off abruptly. "You know, I really miss them."

"I'm sure you do."

"I'm working at an estate agent's, you see. It's a busy time of year. Otherwise, I- " She stopped again. I didn't try to answer. "What did you say your name was?"

I told her.

"How old are you Amanda? Twenty-three? You sound very competent, I must say. I suppose you're one of those trained nannies. Did Gilles find you through an agency?"

I was momentarily speechless. "I told you, I'm a friend of Virginie Desbordes."

"Yes so you did. Well, I'm sure it'll all work out fine. Virginie's a nice girl. How's Simon, have you seen him?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Look after my children for me, Amanda. Tell them I'll see them soon."

9. NIGHTMARES AND PUMPKINS

After due reflection, I did not pass on the message. I did not want to upset the children, and nor did I want to have to answer endless questions about when, exactly, their mother was coming to see them.. I would wait till de Kerguidan came back, I decided, tell him what Susie had said, and leave it to him to pass it on to the children if he wanted to.

As it happened, he called that afternoon shortly before I went to fetch them from school. When I explained that they weren't at home, he sounded put out, and said he had miscalculated the time difference. I told him about Susie's call, and he dismissed my scruples at once.

"If she misses them, she can damn well come and see them."

He sounded irritated. I could imagine the look on his face. I could picture him sitting in his Montreal hotel room surrounded by plans and papers, taking time out of his busy schedule to check up on things at home.

"How are *you*?" he went on instead, and I blinked in surprise. "Are you coping all right? Not lonely?"

"I'm fine. No problems at all," I assured him.

"Good. I'm going to try and leave the conference early. I'll catch an earlier plane home if I can."

He was as good as his word. He walked in on Saturday at lunchtime, three days ahead of schedule. We hadn't expected him until Tuesday. His plane had got in early that morning, and he had driven straight down from Paris. He was rumpled and unshaven, and he looked exhausted. The children were overjoyed to see him. They both jumped on him at once, and almost knocked him over.

"You're not going away again?" asked Corinne anxiously.

"Will you stay here with us now?" said Jonathan.

"Will Mummy come back too?" said Corinne.

"Would you like some lunch?" I cut in hastily.

"Not now," he said, disengaging himself gently from the children. "I think I'm going to bed. I'm so tired I can hardly stand. But first, I've got something for you," he added to the children.

"What did you bring us?" said Corinne excitedly.

He had brought a Barbie to add to the collection in the bedroom, and for Jonathan a computer game. The children retired to separate corners of the kitchen to admire them. Then he produced a third package.

"This is for you," he said, and held it out to me.

"Oh. I didn't expect- You shouldn't-" Good manners reasserted themselves. "Thank you, that's very kind of you."

It was a bottle of perfume. *Tendre Poison* by Dior. The scent I always wore.

"How did you know I liked this?"

"I noticed the bottle in the bathroom." He eyed me maliciously. "And I already knew it smelt nice."

"Thank you," I said demurely, "that's very kind."

"Right, I'm going to bed. Wake me up for dinner."

The afternoon was rainy and chilly. Not a beach day. The children stayed at home, played with their new toys and watched some television. Their father woke up about five and joined them in front of the TV set.

Meanwhile, I stuffed a chicken and made a chocolate mousse. It was the first time the master of the house had had dinner with me and his children. I was anxious for things to go well. It was also a kind of thank you for the perfume.

I laid the table in the dining room, got out the best china, and opened a bottle of red wine from the small stock I had found in the cupboard off the kitchen. When I summoned the family to table, they looked mildly surprised to see the new arrangements, but took to them with enthusiasm.

"Did *you* cook all this?" said de Kerguidan with undisguised amazement, as I served the chicken.

"Of course she did," said Jonathan, with proprietorial pride. "Amanda's a very good cook."

"She makes real pizza," confided Corinne, "and it doesn't come out of a packet."

"The other day she made Chinese food."

"We eat everything she cooks," said Corinne. "Well so far we have, anyway," she added prudently. "I don't want any of those green things, Amanda."

"Yes you do," I said. "They're real ones and they taste nicer than you think. They don't come out of a packet."

"This is delicious," said de Kerguidan, tasting his chicken.

"I told you, Dad," said Jonathan.

I had assumed that the corsair's return would make no difference to our usual domestic arrangements. Once he was over his jet lag, he would disappear to his office or his malouinière, and that our lives would carry on without him as before. But I was wrong. On Sunday morning he slept late, but on Sunday afternoon he took the children to the beach himself, and insisted on my taking the afternoon off.

"You've been working hard, you need some time to yourself," he announced, and firmly overrode the children's mutterings about goûter and sandcastles. "No, Amanda doesn't have to come. She needs some time off from you two. She will give me the goûter to take to the beach, and I will help you build a sandcastle."

"But. Dad, you- "

"Or if you don't think I'm clever enough to do that you can wait for your sandcastle till I go back to work next week."

"You never built sandcastles with us before," said Corinne.

He was slightly startled by that, but recovered fast. "No, but today I have an urgent need to build one, so make the most of it."

It was a clear sunny afternoon. I walked over to Saint Servan, the town on the next bay. Sitting on a bench overlooking the sea, I phoned Bonne-Maman in Guernsey. She sounded better than when I had called the week before, and she said she was feeling stronger. She asked a lot of questions about my new job and the children and St. Malo, and then requested my phone number so she could call me. I gave her the number of the mobile, which she already had.

"You know, Amanda dear, that's not a French number."

"I know," I said patiently, "it's my mobile."

"You mean that little thing you had when you came to stay? No, I don't want that, I want a proper number."

My grandmother was not someone you could argue with. Resignedly, I gave her the number of the flat. I hoped Mr. de Kerguidan wouldn't mind.

Then I walked on to the Tour Solidor, which had been built in an attempt to subjugate St. Malo at the end of the fourteenth century. It was now a naval museum. I considered going in, but decided against it. The sun and the solitude were too good

to waste.

The pirate had been right: I needed time to myself. It was an enormous relief to be on my own, with no one chattering beside me, no one wanting things, and above all no timetable to respect. They would eat up the chicken leftovers that evening, my employer had told me firmly. I was on no account to cook, and not to feel obliged to come back before I wanted to.

"But she can't stay outside all night," Corinne had protested. "It's dark and besides there are bad characters."

"There are what?" said her father.

"Bad characters. Nasty people. Madame Leclerc says so."

"If Madame Leclerc says so, then I'm sure she's right. We don't want Amanda to meet any bad characters, so if we tell her she has to be home by midnight, will that be all right?"

"Like Cinderella?"

"Exactly. That way she won't get changed into a pumpkin."

"It isn't Cinderella who gets changed into a pumpkin, it's- "

"Yes, I know, Corinne, I know. I was just making a joke."

Mr. de Kerguidan was better with the children than I had expected. More patient and less aloof. He listened to them, and he talked to them. The problem, from what I had seen, and what I had heard from Virginie, was that he rarely took the trouble to spend time with them. I was glad that they would get at least one afternoon in his company before he retired to his office again and shut out the world.

I found a restaurant overlooking the port of Saint Servan and the estuary of the Rance, and had dinner there on my own, enjoying the view. The sun went down slowly, and the night closed in. I was far from discontented. The summer was passing better than I had hoped. I was too busy to brood about Roger, and my growing affection for the children was enough to counter any emotional vacuum I might feel.

Mr. de Kerguidan had asked if I was lonely. Finishing up my half-bottle of wine, I realized that I was not. De Kerguidan, though distant, was a more congenial employer than I had expected. In any case, I had so little to do with him that the state of our relations hardly mattered. Tomorrow he would no doubt go back to work, and the children and I would return to our routine.

Once again I turned out to be wrong. On Monday morning, he again slept late, surfacing only as the children returned from their morning activities. We all ate lunch together in the kitchen – pasta salad, which everyone seemed to like – and then he retired to the sitting room with his coffee to read the paper. The children and I looked at each other in faint perplexity as they helped me clear away. No one said anything. When we had finished, Jonathan followed his father into the sitting room. The kitchen was close enough for me to overhear their voices.

"Aren't you going to the office, Dad?"

"No, I'm not. No one knows I'm here, so I thought I might as well take a couple of days off. Keep an eye on you two for a change. Unless I'm in your way?" he aded, with a touch of acerbity.

"No, Dad, but do you mind if I turn on the television? Masters of the Universe is starting in three minutes."

"My God," said his father.

There was a great rustling of paper, and a moment later he appeared in the kitchen doorway, with the newspaper in one hand and his coffee cup in the other.

"I've been driven out of the sitting room by Japanese supermen. Am I

allowed to come in here?"

"Of course," I said.

"You could read in your study," said Corinne, who had been listening intently to the whole exchange.

"I don't want to read in my study."

"It would be quieter in there."

"I don't feel like quiet just now."

"You always used to."

"Maybe I don't any more."

Baffled, Corinne wandered off to her pink-papered bedroom to play with her Barbies. The corsair and I were left in the kitchen together. I wondered if it was the absence of Susie that had altered his habits. He poured himself another cup of coffee, offering me one as an afterthought, and settled himself in a chair by the window to read. I got on with the pastry for the rhubarb tart I planned to make that evening. From time to time he made some comment on what he was reading, but I didn't know much about French politics, so I don't think he found me a very satisfactory conversationalist.

After a while, he folded up the paper, poured a third cup of coffee, and watched what I was doing. By then the pastry was baking blind in the oven, and I was engaged in chopping vegetables for lasagne.

"Where did you learn to cook?" he asked abruptly.

"My mother taught me. She's a caterer. To be perfectly honest, she didn't even teach me. I just picked it up watching her when I was at home. She makes much more elaborate things than this, of course, for her clients, but the basics are always the same."

"I've never seen anyone chop vegetables so fast."

"It's just a question of practice."

"Aptitude too, I would say."

I suspected he was thinking of his wife and her frozen pizzas.

"Maybe it's in the genes," I said lightly.

"You never thought of turning professional yourself?"

"No. It's back-breaking work, you know. My mother works very hard. And when I see some of the people she has to deal with..."

"You might find as an architect that some of your clients won't be easy either," he said morosely.

I guessed he was thinking of the malouinière. "Yes, I've heard that one's clients occasionally have ideas of their own. That must be a frightful nuisance."

He grinned reluctantly. "It's inconvenient."

"Who owns the malouinière?"

"Pierre-Antoine Caradec."

"No, really?"

Even I had heard of Pierre-Antoine Caradec. He was a prominent industrialist, with a talent for taking over foundering companies, adding them to his empire, and making them prosperous again. He owned France's biggest mail order company, Paris' biggest department store, a newspaper or two, and untold minor companies as well.

"He's a local boy made good. He grew up in Saint Servan. And now he wants to show all the people he grew up with just how much they underestimated him. Restoring the malouinière is basically an exercise in rubbing noses in the mud."

"He can't be easy to work with."

"He's very demanding, but it's stimulating too. He has all kinds of ideas, and some of them are quite interesting, but of course we're restricted by the need to preserve historical character. It's a huge challenge to reconcile what he wants with what he's allowed to have. I have some good contacts with the Historical Monuments people, but even so, it's a bit like walking a tightrope."

"Is this the reason you can't take any time off?"

"Basically, yes. If this commission goes well, it could lead to a lot of others. Word of mouth is important in this line of business – well, you'll find that out."

"Yes," I said, "I'm sure I will."

His words reminded me that I still had my final year of studies to complete in Kingston. A year of sitting in workshops and seminars with Roger and Alison. I was not looking forward to the new term.

I swept the leeks I had been chopping into the frying pan with unnecessary vehemence. I looked up to find de Kerguidan watching me, but he made no comment.

"Amanda," said Corinne, trailing in in her nightdress, "can you put Barbie's nightie on?"

"Are you and Barbie going to bed?" I said, taking the nightie.

"No, we're just playing at going to bed."

"Maybe it would be a good idea if you both went to sleep. That way you won't be too tired to go to the beach later."

"It's too wet to go to the beach," she said, echoing what she had heard me say earlier to her father, "so we don't need to go to sleep today."

"It's clearing up. Look out of the window, can't you see the blue sky? We may be able to go down later, but if you haven't had your sleep, we won't be able to."

Corinne gave me a look. "We'll see, then," she said with dignity and trailed out again.

"You handle them very well," said de Kerguidan.

"I'm used to children. My mother remarried when I was thirteen, and I have two little brothers."

"So your parents are divorced?"

"Yes. My father works in an investment bank. He has a very small flat in London. Just big enough for him and a lady guest overnight. I hardly ever stay there, but he takes me out for nice lunches now and then."

Jonathan appeared in the doorway. "Is it time for goûter yet?"

"No, Jonathan, it isn't. It's only an hour since lunch."

"Oh, is that all? Well what's for dinner, then?"

*

That night, Corinne had another nightmare and woke up crying. I was so sound asleep that it took me a few minutes to stagger out of bed and reach her bedside. I found de Kerguidan already there, wrapped in a dressing gown, with his arms around her.

I stared at him stupidly. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm her father," he said. That woke me up.

"I'm sorry, I didn't- What I meant was, was she crying loudly enough to wake you up at the other end of the flat?"

"No, I was watching a video in the sitting room. I couldn't sleep."

I suddenly became aware that I was wearing only a skimpy T-shirt which barely covered my bottom.

"I'll get her a glass of milk. It usually helps."

I fled to my own room to get a dressing-gown and then went into the kitchen to get the milk. Corinne drank it obediently and lay down again clutching her teddy bear. The crisis was wearing off. Her father stayed stroking her hair and holding her hand. I left them to it. I went back to the kitchen with the empty glass. I rinsed it out and filled it with water for myself. I was standing there drinking it, staring absently out at the blackness, when he came in and sat down at the table.

"Tell me, has this happened often?"

"Two or three times when you were in Canada."

"I'm going to have to call Susie. She has to come and see them. I can understand she doesn't want to see me, but for God's sake they're her children. I don't understand how she can treat them like that. Just bugger off and leave them."

I didn't say anything.

"Yes, I know what you're thinking, that's exactly what I did." He paused, and stared at his hands. "You know, it's an odd thing... I had a godawful time in Montreal. All those people, all those seminars. I couldn't work out what I was doing there."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's my own fault. I should never- " He stopped and shook his head. "You'd better go to bed. I have to go to the office in the morning, and you'll have to cope with the children on your own."

"I don't mind coping with them. I'm having a good time."

"Are you really?" he said sceptically. "Have you heard from your boyfriend?"

I straightened abruptly. "No, and I don't expect to. He dumped me for someone else."

"He must be very stupid then. Good night, Amanda."

10. ARMANI IN THE KITCHEN

I didn't find out what had happened in Montreal, but in the days that followed, I saw considerably more of the corsair than I expected. He appeared regularly at breakfast, shaved and showered, in a fresh Ralph Lauren shirt impeccably ironed by Madame Leclerc. He showed up again more often than not at lunchtime, the shirt a little creased and rumpled, and his air mildly harrassed by then, and he was always there in the evenings, changed into jeans and a T-shirt, and apparently avid to hear what his children had to tell him about their day.

"We did trampoline this morning, and Mélanie fell off, and so did Pierre, and Pierre cried a lot, but Mélanie only a little bit."

I found that having an hour of adult back-up from time to time made an enormous difference. It allowed me to switch off from the conversation, and relieved me of the need to pay constant attention to what was going on. I was less tired in the evenings, and sometimes managed to read a book or take a walk round the ramparts after dinner.

Gilles – I was managing at last to think of him by his first name, though I still avoided using it to his face - had taken to bringing his laptop home from the office and finishing up the day's work in his study, or sometimes even in the kitchen. One night I came in from the ramparts and found him sitting at the kitchen table cursing the machine.

"What's the matter?" I said.

The flat was quiet and dark, and the children were in bed. Gilles had switched off the overhead lights, and the room was lit only by a table lamp.

"I can't get the browser to open. It keeps crashing on me."

"Why don't you restart? Sometimes you just need to clear the circuits a bit."

"Restart? You think so?"

"Try it."

He shrugged and pressed the on/off switch. We waited for the machine to re-boot.

"How were the ramparts?" he said.

"They're getting crowded. The town is filling up."

"Yes, it gets busy around this time. Between the fourteenth of July and the fifteenth of August, there are always a lot of visitors. After that, things calm down."

The machine finished loading, he clicked on the browser, and the application opened.

"Well, you were right," he said, sounding impressed.

"My mother has a Mac."

"I'll remember that in future. Amanda, listen. I wanted to thank you."

"Think nothing of it." I picked up the kettle. "Want a cup of tea?"

"I don't mean just for the computer, I mean for the children. They seem much happier, and that's entirely thanks to you. No thank you, no tea."

"No, it's thanks to you too," I said.

He raised an eyebrow. I hesitated a second. He wasn't going to like this, but I had to say it.

"I think they like it having you around."

For a moment, he was silent. I waited for him to tell me I was being impertinent.

"Oddly enough, I'm beginning to like being around."

"Did you get in touch with their mother?"

He sighed. "Yes I did. We had a rather acrimonious conversation. She told me she was busy in the estate agency but she would try and come when she could."

I looked at him. "Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all. Susie ... doesn't always realize the effects of what she does on other people - I mean the children. She has a very ... unworldly side. A bit like a child herself. I think the main reason she's refusing to come and see them is that it's me asking her to come. I don't think she grasps how upset they are by her absence."

"I see."

"Won't you sit down? Maybe I will have a cup of tea after all."

I put a tea-bag in the teapot, and got two mugs out of the cupboard. It looked as though I was in for a long evening hearing about Susie. And then the doorbell rang.

"Who the hell is that?" said Gilles, but before he could get up to answer it, Jonathan shot past. His father looked after him in alarm. "I thought he was in bed. Has he been listening all this time?"

Jonathan appeared in the kitchen with a strange look on his face.

"Dad? It's a lady for you."

"Why aren't you in bed? Who is it?"

"I don't know."

Sighing, his father got up. The visitor had got as far as the darkened sitting room.

"Gilles! Darling! So you *are* home! I saw the car in the street! I didn't expect you so soon, why didn't you call me?"

"Viviane. What a surprise."

"Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

"Oh. Yes. If you like. Come through then. We're in here."

My heart sank. He ushered her into the kitchen. Of course, it was Miss Armani.

She glanced around and took in the situation. The dim lighting, the laptop open on the table, the two mugs side by side. Me with the teapot at the ready. Jonathan in his pyjamas. Gilles in the ancient cardigan he wore around the house, looking not very pleased to see her.

"My, isn't this cosy," she trilled. She walked over to me and held out her hand, "I'm Viviane Duchaussoy. And who are *you*?"

"Amanda le Marchant. I'm working here as an au pair for the summer. Mr. de Kerguidan has hired me to look after the children." It was as well to get that clear right away. I shook her hand. "Would you like a cup of tea? It's just been made."

"Oh you're the au pair." She peered at me more closely. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

My eyes met Gilles' over her shoulder. "You have an art gallery, don't you?" I said. "I saw you in there one day. You must have noticed me too."

"Oh, that's it, of course. I remember you now. I never forget a face."

Gilles was looking half-amused and half-relieved. Viviane turned her attention to Jonathan. He took a step towards the doorway.

"And you must be, er..."

"Jonathan," I supplied, since no one else seemed inclined to help her. "Say hello to Madame Duchaussoy, Jonathan."

"Bonjour, Madame Duchaussoy. I have to go to bed now."

"I'll come and tuck you in," I said, grabbing at the chance to escape.

"Amanda, for God's sake, I'm nine." He stomped out, leaving me stranded.

"Well," said Viviane, "maybe I will have a cup of tea. Lemon, no milk."

She took the chair where I had been sitting. Gilles sat down again too. I poured the tea into the two mugs I had set out, cut some slices of lemon, and put them on a saucer beside her. Then I got the sugar basin out of the cupboard and gave them each a teaspoon.

Neither of them said a word. Viviane followed my every movement with a speculative gaze, and Gilles seemed frankly uncomfortable. The sugar basin had last been used by Corinne and was encrusted with *petit suisse*. Viviane eyed it with amused distaste and said she didn't take sugar. Gilles shovelled a couple of spoonfuls into his mug without appearing to notice.

"Well," said Viviane, crossing her legs, "all this domesticity! Darling, I'm very impressed. This is a side of you that I've never seen before."

"There are many sides of me that you've never seen."

Gilles' tone was less than encouraging, but Viviane was not deterred.

"Then I'll just have to hope that I'll see them all in time."

She smiled at him meaningfully across the laptop. She was wearing a tight black skirt, and heels so high that I was surprised she could manage the St. Malo cobbles.

I got a third mug out of the cupboard, filled it with tea, and prepared to escape to my room, but she was too quick for me.

"Amanda! Come and sit down, and tell me *all* about yourself."

There was nothing for it but to accept her invitation. I recited the standard elements of my biography, taking care to keep them as unthreatening as possible. Viviane was the type to consider any other woman as a possible rival, and I guessed she could be a dangerous enemy. The risk of losing my job was probably small, but until I knew how my employer felt about her, there was no point in taking chances. For that reason, I didn't mention that I was studying architecture.

Gilles watched us, saying nothing. Viviane's presence in his kitchen clearly made him uneasy.

Fortunately, domesticity was not her scene. Concluding fairly rapidly that a naïve young thing like me, who dressed at Gap, did not merit further attention, she uncrossed her legs and got to her feet.

"Well, darling, lovely to see you, but I must fly."

"Really?" said Gilles with alacrity. "I'll show you out."

"Nice to meet you, Amanda." She had left her tea untouched.

"Dinner tomorrow night?" she said to him as they left the room. I saw her run her fingers across his chest.

"No, I don't think so," said Gilles. "I've only just got back. I need to spend some time with the children. I'll call you in a few days."

"Spend time with the *children*?"

"Viviane- "

"All right, I understand. But later I expect you to make up for it by spending a *lot* of time with me."

They turned the corner into the hall, out of sight of the sitting room. Instead of the sound of the door opening, there was a protracted silence. Then came a low murmur of voices, at last the sound of the door, and then Gilles reappeared in the kitchen with a smirk on his face and lipstick on his cheek.

Before either of us had a chance to say anything, Jonathan shot back in from

wherever he had been lurking.

"Who was that?"

Gilles surveyed his son cautiously. "That was a friend of mine."

"I've never seen her before."

"That's because I haven't known her very long."

"What's that on your face?"

"What?"

"Lipstick," I mouthed, and pointed to my cheek.

He hastily wiped it off.

"What did she want you to do tomorrow night?"

"She wanted me to go out to dinner with her."

"And are you going to go?"

"Since you seem to have been listening to everything, you must have heard me say no."

"Are you going to go another night?"

"Probably, yes. What are all these questions for? I'm allowed to have friends, you know."

"She's not a friend," yelled Jonathan. "You're going to go out with her on a date!"

Gilles looked at him hard. "And I'm not allowed to do that?"

I put down the cups I'd been clearing up, and headed straight for the door. This time I wasn't going to get trapped in a conversation I didn't want to hear.

"What if Mummy comes back? What are you going to do then? If you want to go out to dinner you should take Amanda!"

I stopped dead in my tracks. It was really not my night. I turned round to look at Jonathan.

"He can't do that. Who would look after you? You'd have to come too, you and Corinne, and then it wouldn't be a date any more."

"Yes but- "

"Come on, it's late, it's time you were in bed. Say good night to your father."

11. PRINCESS SUSIE

Fortunately, Susie turned up the next day, and gave us all something else to think about.

At lunchtime, Gilles did not appear, and the children and I ate without him. Afterwards, we settled on the sofa in front of the television to watch Corinne's favourite programme, *Princess Sarah*. Corinne had made me come and watch, and Jonathan had tagged along, more in the hope of snatching the remote away from his sister than for any other reason.

The programme seemed to be about a bunch of little girls being ill-treated in a Victorian orphanage. Corinne was watching raptly, Jonathan was fidgeting, and I was on the point of falling asleep, when suddenly the front door opened, and we heard Gilles' voice saying, "After you."

All three of us tensed. Was this Viviane back again? But the woman Gilles was ushering into the flat was smaller and plumper, with long, tousled strawberry-blonde hair and a round, freckled, unmistakably English face.

The children shrieked "Mummy," in unison and flung themselves across the room. Gilles stood to one side and watched her hug them with a peculiar expression on his face. I got slowly to my feet and switched off the television. I had the feeling that there was quite enough melodrama brewing right here.

"Mummy!"

"Oh my darlings!"

"Mummy, you're back!"

She clutched them to her. She was wearing a tight purple off-the-shoulder top, and a rose-patterned skirt in some slithery material that spread most becomingly across the floor.

"Susie," said Gilles, when he felt the scene had gone on long enough, "may I introduce Amanda, who has been looking after the children in your absence. Amanda, this is my wife."

The whole of the preceding scene had taken place in English, and Gilles used the same language too. It was the first sign I had had that he spoke any English. I looked at him with interest. He was quite good.

Susie stood up and came across the room, with the children tagging behind her, smiling warmly. She had an extraordinarily pretty face.

"Amanda, it's so lovely to meet you. I can't thank you enough for looking after the kiddies. It's so kind of you to take the trouble."

"I'm paying her, naturally," said Gilles, rather nastily, but no one paid any attention.

"Do you come back to live with Daddy now?" said Corinne, grasping hold of her mother's skirt.

She too, to my surprise, spoke quite good, though accented English.

"No, darling, but you're coming to stay with me for a few days. I went to Daddy's office and sorted it out. Daddy doesn't mind at all, so we can all leave right away."

Daddy folded his arms and held his tongue. The children thought about it.

"We're going to where you ... live?" said Jonathan doubtfully.

"Yes, we're going to St. Briec. We're going to see my new house. You'll need to pack a suitcase, we'll be gone for several days."

Corinne's lower lip began to quiver. Jonathan was the picture of consternation. Gilles shut his eyes in despair.

"B-but, Mummy, your house is here."

"What do you need a new house for?"

"Susie, for once in your life, for heaven's sake, think what you're saying!"

It dawned on Susie that she was being tactless. She bent down to hug them both again.

"Oh, darlings, I've missed you so much. I'm so glad you're coming with me. You must bring all your Barbies, Corinne. There's room for all of them!"

"Shall I help you pack, Corinne?" I said.

"Yes, please, Amanda." Corinne was easily diverted. "I'm going to need lots of things. I need my pink dress, and my party dress, and my blue T-shirt and my nightie."

Gilles scowled at me, and I remembered I was supposed to speak French.

"Right, then, come on. You can get the things out, and I'll put them in the bag."

"That's so kind of you," said Susie, smiling radiantly. She flopped down on the sofa and looked around. "It's so odd to be back here. It hasn't changed a bit."

I packed a bag for Corinne, and then, since there was no sign of Susie, I packed another one for Jonathan. While I was doing that, Gilles put his head round the door and informed me curtly that he was going back to the office, and he wouldn't be in for dinner.

Susie didn't reappear until some time later. She had had a mooch round the apartment, by the look of it, and packed a bag or two of her own. She came and sat on Jonathan's bed and watched me sort his things. She had changed into a broderie anglaise blouse and pink shorts. I later found her discarded skirt and top on the floor of Gilles' bathroom.

"It's so kind of you to do this," she said again. "Gérard's given me a few days off, but it's the busiest time of year, and he really needs me. He has lots of English people, you know, come to look for country places. So seeing as I'm bilingual, I come in handy!"

She laughed gaily.

"Do you speak French, Amanda? It's so useful knowing two languages, I tell the children. Helps you get on in life. There are some very nice properties for sale in the area, and so cheap of course when you're used to English prices. Gérard works awfully hard at this time of year."

She rattled on. I stopped listening. As Virginie had said, she was nice but not very bright. Hadn't she heard me speaking French to Gilles and Corinne? Next door, Corinne was busy selecting and discarding Barbies to take. Jonathan had gone off to the sitting room and put on the television very loud. From what I could hear, he was tuned to the racing results. Poor Jonathan! With his father's dinner dates and his mother's new house, he had a lot to think about.

"I'm really so glad you're here to help Gilles cope. It's such a load off my mind."

"Well, actually- " I began.

"If I thought the children were unhappy, I'd come back like a shot. I made that quite clear to Gilles. They're not unhappy, are they, Amanda? Gilles seems to think they are, but what does he know? When I think of how he treated me all these years! You can't imagine all I had to put up with. Working till all hours, never there when I needed him, complaining about the food, complaining about the housekeeping, never

giving me enough money to run the house properly. I couldn't even buy new clothes!"

"Oh," I said.

"He never let my mother come and see me - of course she doesn't like France, but there you are - and he was nasty to all my friends. When I think how he used to treat poor Simon! Ten years in hell, Amanda, that's what I endured. When I think of everything I could have done with my life. I was going to go in for flower arranging if I hadn't met him. I had this course all set up. You aren't going to tell me I should come back, are you, Amanda?"

I certainly wasn't.

"Well, I think it's your decision," I said, and that seemed to satisfy her.

"Are you nearly ready?" she said, glancing at her watch. "I have to be back to see a client at five."

I looked at her. "I thought you said you were taking a few days off."

"Well yes, of course I am, but you know how it is."

I was beginning to share Gilles' irritation. "Corinne's been having nightmares lately. No doubt they'll stop now she's with you, but just in case, a glass of milk seems to help."

"Yes, so Gilles said. She never had them before, I must say."

"There," I said, zipping the bag shut, "I think that's everything."

"Great," said Susie. "Can you give me a hand with this lot to the car? I'm parked by the Porte St. Vincent."

The Porte St. Vincent was a good ten-minute walk. I carried both the children's bags to the car and stowed them in the boot. Susie wandered behind us and window-shopped. I settled Corinne on the back seat with her Barbies, and I gave Jonathan an extra-big hug, and told him I would be waiting when he came back. As the car drew away, I heaved a sigh of relief.

12. PIRATE GOLD

When I got up next morning, there was no sign of the corsair. Nothing in the kitchen seemed to have been touched. When I reconnoitred cautiously down his end of the apartment, the bed didn't look as though it had been slept in.

I decided to take the day off.

I took the car and drove down the coast. I wanted to get out of St. Malo. I stopped in Val-André, a nice little seaside town on the far side of Cap Fréhel, and spent a lazy afternoon in the sun. By now, I was beginning to get a creditable tan.

I watched the families on the beach, and wondered if they had as many problems as the de Kerguidans. I worried for a while over what would happen to the children if Susie stayed in St. Brieuc and Gilles married Viviane, and then I told myself firmly that they would survive somehow, and anyway it would probably never happen, and anyway it was none of my business.

I went for a walk on the beach, and had a glass of wine in a café, and then I drove slowly home. Gilles was still absent. Making up for lost time with Viviane, no doubt. The children's rooms looked sad and abandoned, strewn with headless Barbies and broken trucks. I would sort them out tomorrow, I decided.

The next morning, I was having breakfast on the balcony in my bikini when Gilles walked in. It was nearly eleven o'clock.

I heaved my feet off the rail and swung round to face him. My mouth was full of bread, and I was covered in crumbs. I had put my coffee cup on the ground beside me, and I just missed knocking it over.

The corsair looked me over sardonically. "Amanda, good to see you. What are your plans for the day?"

"I thought I'd tidy up the children's rooms."

"That doesn't sound very exciting. Come out with me instead."

"Come out with *you*?"

"I have to go to Dinan to look at a site. I could use some company."

I looked at him sceptically.

"Other than Viviane's, that is," he added blandly.

"Do you mean she's coming too?"

"No, she has to work. Will you come?"

"All right, if you want," I said.

It took three-quarters of an hour to drive to Dinan. I spent most of the journey wishing I hadn't accepted. Gilles, no doubt, was thinking the same thing. Without the children to act as catalyst, we seemed to have nothing to say to each other. I had been finding him less intimidating of late, but once outside the flat, we were back to square one.

We had a laborious conversation about the scenery, and then he asked me one or two questions about studying architecture in England, so I told him that I had got my BA two years earlier, and then I had done a year's job experience, and now I was part-way through the course for a diploma entitling me to practice as an architect. What would I do after that? I didn't know, I hadn't thought about it yet.

He sighed and switched on the radio. He was a zapper, like his son. We had two minutes of current affairs, two minutes of Beethoven, two minutes of Madonna, and then he picked up Jacques Brel singing *Ne Me Quitte Pas*, heaved a particularly exasperated sigh and snapped it off. Fortunately, we were only a couple of kilometres

from Dinan by then.

Dinan was an enchanting walled city with buildings dating back to the Middle Ages. The house Gilles was working on was in the Rue de Jerzual, a steep cobbled street that led down to the old port on the River Rance. The street was lined with sixteenth-century houses, many of them now occupied by artists of one kind or another. Gilles' client was a sculptor, and his meeting today was with a man from the company that was going to put in the windows. They needed to work out how to get as much natural light as possible into the rooms for the sculptor to work, without altering the façade of the building.

I listened for a while to the discussion and then went on a tour of the house, inhaling the dusty atmosphere of the old, beamed rooms.

When I reached the top floor, I opened a window and leaned out to admire the geraniums suspended in pots from a rail on the opposite house. The sun glittered on the cobbles. For the moment, the street was empty. The tourists' voices were hushed. Suddenly, I had a feeling of déjà vu. I had been here before.

For a moment, I was disoriented, and then I remembered what it was. Not Dinan in a previous existence, but Amsterdam, the year before, with Roger, leaning out of a narrow window to admire the houses opposite. We had been in the hotel, with the canal below and a hump-backed bridge a little further down the street. God knows what had suddenly brought the memory back. It wasn't the same style of architecture here, it wasn't even the same period, but for a moment I could see the sun glinting on the canal and feel Roger's body pressed against mine and his arm gripping my shoulder, and I could sense that I was happy.

And then the image dissolved and I was back in Dinan, and a young man in khaki shorts and huge white Nike trainers came panting up the hill and past the window, and the feeling of being secure and wanted that I had known with Roger burst like a bubble, and I was left on my own.

The sound of Gilles calling brought me back to earth. I realized there were tears on my lashes. I closed the window, dashed the tears away, and went downstairs. Gilles looked at me rather oddly, but said nothing. The meeting was finished and it was time to go. I assumed we were going to drive straight back to St. Malo, but instead he took me on a tour of the town, pointing out the most interesting features of the ancient buildings. He was a good guide, and he knew what he was talking about.

After a while, I put Roger out of my mind. I saw a lot of things I might otherwise not have noticed. With something to talk about, the tension eased on both sides. I began to enjoy myself.

In due course, we came to a halt outside an elegant-looking restaurant with starched white tablecloths. He looked at me quizzically.

"My son seems to think I should take you out to dinner. That might not be possible, so will you accept lunch instead?"

"Oh, I'll take anything," I said cheerfully.

"Good," he said. "I'm starving."

He steered me into the restaurant, and the waiter found us a table by the window with a view over the square. Inside, it was even smarter than I had realized. I wondered why Gilles should go to the trouble of giving me lunch in a restaurant like this. But then why had he brought me to Dinan in the first place? Just company? Surely not.

Under cover of the menus, I eyed him covertly. The corsair was an enigma to me. I had no idea what lurked behind that absorbed profile. All I knew was that he was not the high-handed, arrogant man he had seemed at our first meeting. The bad

impression he had made on me on the ferry had been erased. I was still not at ease with him, and I doubted I ever would be, but I no longer disliked him. I was even coming to think that it would be worthwhile getting to know him.

He looked up and caught me watching him. "What are you having?"

"I'm not sure," I said, to hide my confusion. "What would you recommend?"

Gilles chose a first course of carpaccio de St. Jacques, and I took the salade de langoustines. While we were waiting, we talked idly about Dinan. It wasn't until we had started eating that he asked me what I was going to do until the children returned.

"Nothing in particular. I thought I'd just stick around."

"You don't want to go down to Vannes to see your cousins?"

I gazed at him in surprise. I had told him about my cousins one evening in the kitchen, but I thought I had made it clear that I hardly knew them. My grandmother was in contact with them, but I was not. The younger cousins that I had known in my childhood were scattered all over the place, and only the old ones were left. Why on earth had he thought of them now?

I was beginning to explain that I had no particular desire to look them up, when it occurred to me that he probably wanted the house to himself for a few days, the better to pursue matters with Viviane.

"But, yes, why not, that's a good idea, I can go and look them up, you can always reach me on the mobile if the children come back- "

I was gabbling much too fast. He put a hand on my arm to stop me.

"I'm not throwing you out, you know. It was just an idea. You don't have to go anywhere if you don't want to."

I hesitated.

"I mean that."

"Then, if it's all right with you, I'd rather stay here. The Desbordes will be coming down soon. I'd like to spend some time with Virginie."

"Ah yes, the Desbordes." The shadow of something flitted across his face. "Are they all coming?"

I supposed he meant Simon. I had been wondering that myself.

"I don't really know," I said.

For a moment, he was silent. "Well, if you have no plans, that's fine. In fact, it's a relief. Susie can be unpredictable. She said she'd bring the children back next week, but she didn't say when. Knowing her, she's likely to call up just as she's setting out to say she's arriving in a couple of hours. So if you're going to be around, that's just as well. But don't feel you have to do anything, you've earned some time off. I'll be eating out most of the time, so you don't have to cook."

"Fine," I said, and as an afterthought, "Thank you."

The waiter cruised past. "Tout va bien, monsieur?"

"C'est parfait," said Gilles.

"C'est très bien," I said.

"Merci, monsieur, merci, madame," he said, and slid off again.

"I hate it when they do that," said Gilles.

"They're creators. Flattery is what they live on. Don't you like it when people admire your buildings?"

"Nobody ever does," he said morosely. "All they ever do is bitch about how much it's costing and how they would really have liked the fireplace another ten centimetres to the left."

I grinned: I had heard this before. "My mother once had a client who said how much better things would have been if she had polished all the silverware herself

before the party. He said he would have felt she really cared."

"Oh, life would be fine if it wasn't for the clients."

"You should have been a pirate like your ancestor, and then it wouldn't have mattered."

Gilles grinned reminiscently. "My ancestor once threw the barrels of gold he'd captured from an English ship into the sea to stop the Admiralty getting its hands on them."

"When the client complains about the chimney, you could send in the bulldozer."

I had never heard him laugh properly before.

"What a good idea! I should have thought of that myself."

"But why was the Admiralty entitled to the gold? I thought the corsairs were allowed to keep their plunder."

"Not all of it. They were authorized to prey on foreign vessels, but they had to share the booty with the Crown. As far as I remember, one-third of the plunder went to the crew, one-tenth to the Admiralty, and the corsairs kept the rest. They were very rich men, but they were greedy too."

"So tell me about your famous ancestor."

"The notorious François? A very reckless man. He made a speciality out of no-hope actions. He didn't like easy victories. Legend has it that he actually refrained from attack when things looked too easy. Once he attacked a convoy bound for Virginia out of Kinsale, with an escort of warships, using only his own vessel and a couple of frigates. He sank a sixty-gun ship and got away. That was in 1695. The year after that, he captured three vessels of the Dutch East India Company, laden with gold and precious stones. I think it was that which paid for the building on Rue de Dinan."

I looked at him round-eyed. It hadn't quite registered that I was living in a house that had been paid for by pirate plunder.

"Indian jewels?"

"Yes. It's an odd thought, isn't it. Another time he sailed up the Limerick River, seized Clare Castle, and burned two ships that were anchored there. But on the way home, his luck deserted him. In the fog on the English Channel, he came nose to nose with six English warships, he was captured and taken to Plymouth, and sentenced to death."

"So the English hanged him?"

"Not at all. The night before he was due to hang, a local lady who had taken a fancy to him persuaded the jailer to open the door, and he escaped."

"Really? How amazing! So in fact you wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for her?"

"Yes, our family tree would not be the same without the English," he said dryly.

Was that a crack at Susie? I decided to ignore it. "Can you trace your family tree right back to François?"

"Yes, we can. The family never went far from St. Malo, which makes it easier. François' son and grandson were pirates too, then there was a shipowner or two, then things got tight and we moved into ships' supplies. My father was a radio officer. He worked for Shell."

"Was'? Do you mean he's dead?"

"Yes, he died years ago. I don't remember him very well."

"I'm sorry. That must have been hard."

"Yes, it was. Especially for my mother. She had to work very hard to keep the two of us afloat. She's all right now, the shop makes a lot of money, but she had to fight to get where she is now. She was born in a village not far from here, she managed to get away when she married my father, but she's been terrified all her life that she might have to go back." He paused. "Your parents are divorced, I think you said?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what it's like when a family falls apart." Another pause. "That's what I regret most about my break-up with Susie. I don't want my children to grow up with only one parent."

"Is there no chance that Susie might come back?"

He hesitated before answering. "Speaking for myself, quite frankly, I hope she doesn't. But the children- They miss her so much. I suppose it would be best if she did."

"Maybe she'll change her mind and take them with her."

"I don't think I'd accept that any more...."

He hunched thoughtfully over his glass.

"I've spent much more time with them in the past few months than I've ever done before... and it's changed my point of view. I don't want to see them go. When I was in Montreal, I was invited to dinner by someone I went to school with. He emigrated to Quebec a long time ago: his wife is Canadian, and he has two children the same age as mine. They have a nice apartment with a deck outside, and we sat there to drink our beer, and the kids were in and out, and his wife made the salad and Daniel did the barbecue, and then I thought, this is really all I want. Nothing complicated, just a normal family all together."

I watched him with sympathy. I knew how he felt. Sometimes the simplest things in life were the hardest to achieve.

"But if I can't have that, then I can just try to do it on my own."

He fell silent, staring intently into his glass.

After a moment, I ventured, "Maybe your, er, friend, er, the other night...?"

"Viviane? No, I don't think so. That's just a short-term arrangement."

His tone was curt: I had gone too far.

"I'm sorry, it's none of my business."

"No, don't apologise. I shouldn't be telling you this. You're too good a listener: that's what the trouble is." He frowned at me. "It's odd, sometimes I feel I've known you all my life, and I can tell you anything."

I smiled at him. "You've known me a month," I said.

He opened his mouth to answer, and closed it again as the waiter appeared with our main course. Sea-bass for me, and a filet de boeuf for him. The waiter explained what everything was, and hoped we would enjoy our meal. We assured him we would.

"So what happened to François when he escaped from the English? Was he killed in battle?"

"He died in his bed of pneumonia, with his wife and his family around him."

"His wife?" I had not imagined François Souville de Kerguidan with a wife. "What was his wife like?"

"She was the daughter of another corsair. So she knew what she was in for."

"Plymouth jails and English paramours and run-ins with the Admiralty? But at least she got Indian jewels to cheer her up. And a house to impress the neighbours."

He laughed, and for the rest of the meal, we talked of more neutral things.

François and other pirates, Captain Hook and Peter Pan, books and music and clients. We didn't mention Susie or Viviane or Gilles' mother or even the children. By the time we got up to go, I was feeling more comfortable with him than I had ever done.

On the way back to the car, I thanked him for lunch.

"My pleasure," he said, "We must do it again. I'll take you to see the malouinière next week, before the children get back."

13. A DAY ON A DESERT ISLAND

But the children came back the next day.

It was a Sunday, and Gilles had gone out for the day with a friend who had a boat. I had been surprised that a corsair's descendant didn't have his own boat, but it seemed he had sold it fairly recently. Jonathan, my informant, didn't know why. I wondered if it was to pay Susie's alimony.

Gilles had spent the previous evening with Viviane, and I hadn't seen him since the day before. I had got up early to attack the children's rooms, and had just finished loading all the plastic corpses into an outsize bin bag when the doorbell rang.

I opened it and to my delight found Simon on the landing.

"Simon! How nice to see you! When did you get here? Come in!"

He peered past me into the apartment.

"I drove down last night. Is your boss around?"

"No, there's no one here but me."

"Good." He came in, shut the door behind him, and kissed me on both cheeks, and then on the mouth. "You look wonderful. Living with Bluebeard seems to suit you."

"The forbidden room is down there." I pointed down Gilles' end of the apartment. "Go in and take a look if you want."

"I've been there already," said Simon, and then, noticing my expression, he added hastily, "Well, never mind. Where are the children today?"

"They're with their mother right now."

"So you have nothing to do?" He gave me another kiss. "Come for a walk with me. We'll go all the way round the ramparts, then look for some lunch."

Of course, I accepted at once. I knew exactly why Simon had come, and I didn't care. Right now, Simon was exactly what I needed. Just the man to take my mind off Roger.

He waited in the sitting room while I got changed. I took off the old jeans I had worn to do the cleaning, and looked for something suitable to go for a walk. Simon was looking very stylish in a primrose linen shirt and navy linen trousers - a bit too sharp for St. Malo, but no doubt indispensable for an up-and-coming journalist at the seaside. I opted for linen too: a white shirt with a long black skirt I had picked up in a sale in Dinard. I untied my hair from its workaday knot, and let it lie loose upon my shoulders. From the look in Simon's eyes, I could see I had made all the right choices.

"Very nice," he said, and touched my hair. "You've gone even blonder since I saw you last."

"This is a job where I get to sit in the sun every day."

I picked up the bin bag to take downstairs. As we crossed the hall, I noticed that the red light on the telephone was blinking. Someone must have called early that morning, while I was in the shower. I decided not to listen to the message. It was bound to be for Gilles. I had intercepted a message from Viviane a few days earlier, and it had been frankly embarrassing.

"I'm glad there are some compensations," said Simon, as we walked down the stairs. He made no attempt to relieve me of the bin bag. "Frankly, I'm surprised you're managing to stick it out."

I did not want to get involved in a discussion of my employer with his wife's ex-lover. "I don't see much of him," I said, not entirely truthfully. "I spend most of my time with the children."

"Still, I admire your perseverance. I've always found him quite obnoxious myself."

"He's perfectly polite to me."

Simon laughed. "I see you're determined to be discreet."

He waited while I deposited the bin bag in the inner courtyard where the dustbins were.

"Just one more question, then I promise we'll drop the subject. My mother says he's seeing the woman who owns Galérie 2000 by the Porte St. Vincent."

We opened the great oak doors and emerged into the street.

"Simon, I know you don't like him, but you must see I can't discuss his love life with you."

"Just tell me yes or no. Viviane Duchaussoy. Come on, you must have met her."

He gave me his most pleading smile. It occurred to me that he would have a great future in the disaster press, charming the innermost grief out of widows and orphans.

"Yes, Simon, he is. Does your mother know her?"

"Yes, she does. Well, I must say, I find that amazing. What a woman like that can see in a man like him!"

"You think so? Do you *know* her?"

He didn't seem to notice my tone of voice.

"Not very well. We've been introduced, that's all."

We reached the Porte de Dinan and climbed the steps to the ramparts. The sky was a wonderful deep blue, the gulls swooped overhead, and the ferry for Jersey was just steaming out of the port. We stopped for a minute to watch it, and then walked on.

"And does he- " Simon began, but I cut him off.

"Simon, stop it! You promised no more questions! I see Gilles and his children all week. I didn't come out with you to talk about him."

He raised his hands in an admission of surrender. "I'm sorry, you're right. Sunday is the maid's day off."

I didn't care much for the analogy, but I played along. "That's right, it is. And she's allowed to take the air with her gentleman caller."

Simon laughed and offered me his arm in a mock-Victorian gesture. We made our way through the stream of people to the Bastion de la Hollande, a wide grassy space where a statue of the explorer Jacques Cartier overlooked the sea. We leaned on the parapet to admire the view of the bay and the islands and the Plage de Bon Secours. The sea merged with the sky in the midday haze of heat, and the little boats wheeled and glimmered on the surface of the bay.

"Let's go over to Chateaubriand's grave," said Simon, pointing at Grand Bé island on the far side of the beach.

"Have we got time?" I said. "What about the tide?" Thanks to Jonathan, I now paid attention to things like that.

"Oh there's plenty of time," said Simon confidently. "The causeway's still uncovered."

We took the narrow concrete causeway across the beach to the islet, and climbed the rocky path to the writer's grave. As we walked, Simon started telling me

about life on the far side of the television cameras. He was, of course, out to impress, but he was a good talker, and he knew how to be amusing. Occasionally, he even told a joke at his own expense. He told me about the famous people he had interviewed, he told me about his celebrity colleagues, and he told me about his encounter with the glamorous female presenter of the main evening newscast, and what he had said to her, and what she had said to him, and what he had thought of her, and what he thought she had thought of him. It was all mildly scandalous and totally riveting.

Châteaubriand's grave was an unmarked flagstone topped with a granite cross. We sat down beside it to share the great man's eternal view over the sea, and went on talking. There had been a disaster at the Paris airport a few months earlier, when part of a newly-built terminal had collapsed, killing four people. Simon had been a member of the team sent out to cover it.

My curiosity was aroused, and I started asking questions about what he had learned. Public works was not an area I had ever considered specializing in, but Roger had, and we had discussed the affair fairly thoroughly at the time. We were absorbed in a discussion of whether the architect or the builders were responsible, when Simon suddenly broke off in mid-sentence.

"Shit, Amanda, the tide!"

I jerked up in surprise. I had completely forgotten about the tide, but now I realized that it had been some time since anyone had gone past us. We seemed to be alone on the island. I glanced at my watch. We had been here nearly an hour. We scrambled to our feet and ran back down the path to the landward side of the island. Of course, it was much too late. The tide was well past the island, the causeway was invisible under the water, and the beach seemed a long way away. We had waited too long, and we were totally cut off.

"Oh my God," I said, "what do we do now?"

Simon had no suggestions. "Merde," he said again.

"Can we swim for it?" I asked dubiously.

"If you don't mind about your clothes, you can," said Simon, with a protective downward look at his primrose shirt. "But I think you'd need to be a pretty strong swimmer. I don't fancy the look of that current myself."

I looked where he was pointing. It was clear that he was right.

"How long until the tide goes down?"

"About six hours."

"Six hours!"

"Is there somewhere you have to be?"

"No, but- "

"Then the best thing is to wait. Six hours isn't that long. We can find ways of passing the time."

He slid his arms round my waist, and kissed me, first gently, testing my reaction, and then, when I didn't resist, more decisively. I kissed him back. Fifteen-year-old Amanda was getting her revenge on seventeen-year-old Simon, and twenty-three-year-old Amanda was cocking a snook at Roger. If he didn't want me, other people did.

"Marooned on a desert island, with nothing to do but this," crooned Simon in my ear.

"In view of half St. Malo," I said, suddenly realizing that we were probably providing entertainment for everyone on the beach.

"They're too far away to see. But we can go back to the grave if you want."

We climbed back up to the seaward side of the island and did some more

kissing. Simon was inclined to take things further, but I was not, partly because it was strange to be with someone who wasn't Roger, and I needed time to get used to it, and partly because it wasn't particularly private here either, with all the boats bobbing round in the bay.

"Won't they come and get us off if we signal to them?" I said.

"Not a chance," said Simon. "There are too many rocks. It's too dangerous."

By then we were getting hungry, so we foraged in my bag to see what there was and found a small bottle of mineral water, a Mars bar, half a packet of biscuits, and a licorice wheel. Looking after children meant you were always prepared. We divided everything scrupulously between us, except for the licorice wheel, which Simon said was really too disgusting. I picked the bits of fluff off it and ate it anyway.

After that Simon gave me a potted biography of Chateaubriand. Then we talked about Simon's future projects. Simon showed no particular interest in hearing about mine. He took off his shirt, and invited me to do the same, but I declined, less out of modesty than from fear of getting burnt. It was two o'clock by now, and the sun was high in the sky. Sun cream had not been among the items in my bag, and I had forgotten my mobile phone. Simon had his, but there was nobody we could call. The rescue services would never turn out, he said: people got marooned on Le Grand Bé far too often. After a while, we both fell asleep.

When we woke up, the tide had turned, but the water was still too high to regain the mainland. We played I-Spy for a while, and then, taking inspiration from Chateaubriand, discussed where we would like to be buried. After we had exhausted all the cemeteries, islands and beaches we could think of, the conversation dried up. We were both hungry and thirsty. Simon was red from the sun, and, to some extent, so was I. We were tired of each other, and anxious to get home.

But it was after seven when the sea was finally low enough to wade back down the causeway, and by the time we got back to the House of the Corsair it was seven-thirty. Neither of us suggested having dinner. Simon kissed me goodbye at his door, and I climbed the last flight of stairs to the second floor alone. I was tired, dishevelled, and wet practically to the waist where I had stumbled on the causeway. I was looking forward to a shower, a quiet evening, and an early night.

I was fumbling for my key when the door flew open. Gilles must have heard me coming up the stairs. He was standing on the threshold, plainly furious.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

I was too startled to answer. "I .. er...we..."

"The children have been here on their own since three o'clock."

"The children are here?"

"Susie called at nine-thirty and left a message to say she was coming. Don't you sleep here any more? She got here at midday, there was no one here, she waited till three, and then she had to leave. I just got in and found them. They've been on their own for over four hours."

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry- "

He wasn't listening.

"I warned you this might happen. You said you weren't going anywhere. If I'd known you didn't mean it, I wouldn't have gone out with Philippe. I thought I could rely on you. Do you realize what might have happened?"

"Are they all right?"

"Yes - no thanks to you. Where the hell have you been, anyway?"

I thought fast. "I went for a walk and got marooned by the tide on Le Grand Bé."

"How on earth did you manage that?"

"Well, I ... er.. we..."

He pounced. "Who's 'we'?"

"I was with Simon," I said reluctantly, and he hit the roof.

"Simon? My God, I don't believe it! I pay you to stay here and look after my children, not to go fooling around with Simon on Le Grand Bé!"

"I'm very sorry. I didn't- "

"And you say you got marooned? How on earth could you be so stupid?"

I stared at my feet. "We weren't paying attention."

"No, I can guess, you were doing other things! Well, I'd be grateful if you could go and take care of my children – I assume you're at leisure now? – and tomorrow we'll discuss your continuing employment."

I took a deep breath. "Where are they?"

"I put them in the bath. I don't think they've had a bath since they left here."

He turned on his heel and marched off towards his bedroom. I slunk through the sitting room and paused at the bathroom door. I could hear a murmur of voices, and some splashing. Good, so they weren't squabbling and they hadn't drowned. I fled to my room and changed back into my jeans. My new skirt, I suspected, was a write-off. I was depressed to see that the children's bedrooms, that I had left so tidy, looked exactly as they had before.

When I went into the bathroom, they were playing happily enough with boats and a plastic dragon. They looked up accusingly when I came in.

Jonathan got in first.

"You weren't here when I came back, Amanda. You said you would be."

"You should have been here to look after us, Amanda. Mummy had a client. She had to leave us on our own."

"We could have set the house on fire. Dad said so."

"Daddy's very cross with you."

"You look jolly red, Amanda."

"You're not crying, are you?"

"No, no, of course I'm not. Come on, it's time to get out of the bath. Your skin's beginning to wrinkle."

"But we haven't washed our hair. Daddy said we had to wash our hair."

Normally, there were no volunteers for hair-washing. Daddy must have really let them have it.

"Right then, let's wash your hair. Didn't Mummy wash your hair?"

"She didn't have any shampoo."

"She didn't have time. Mummy was awfully busy, and so was Gérard."

Gilles put his head round the door, freshly showered and shaved, wearing a dark green silk shirt and a mammoth scowl.

"Amanda, I'm afraid I have a dinner engagement. May I assume you're free to take care of them tonight?"

"Where are you going?" demanded Jonathan.

"Daddy's got a date," said Corinne, plunging the dragon into the water.

"Of course, Mr. de Kerguidan," I said.

14. WALKING THE PLANK

The evening went on for ever. The children were tired and fretful. For a while, I managed to distract them with an embellished version of my adventures on the desert island, but they were both clearly upset by the afternoon they had spent on their own, and the reactions of their father when he found them. First he had yelled at them for making a mess, then he had called up Susie and told her at length what he thought of her for leaving them on their own. The dinner date didn't help either. I wasn't sure that either of them knew what a date was, but they certainly didn't like it. They whined and sulked and refused to eat their supper. They followed me round the apartment and refused to go to bed.

Finally I settled them one on either side of me on the sofa and turned on the television, hoping they might drop off. It was late by then, and none of the programmes were aimed at the under-tens. We zapped through a programme on cholesterol, a report on Romanian orphanages, a violent-looking gangster movie, and two couples discussing adultery with a psychologist. I suggested we watch a video. They could not agree on what they wanted to watch. I chose for them – I picked *The Lion King* - and they sulked some more. After a while, Corinne dropped off, but when I tried to pick her up to carry her to bed, she woke up and began to cry.

I was at my wits' end. There was no sign of Gilles. I wondered if I dared call him on his mobile, and decided not to. I couldn't have coped with another round of sarcasm - not to mention more threats about terminating my employment. In the end, I put us all to sleep in my own bed. To begin with they clung to me and thrashed around and kicked, but finally they became drowsy and lay still. One by one, we fell asleep.

I was woken by the door opening softly. There was a light in the corridor. Gilles looked in. He moved closer to the bed, apparently checking to make sure everyone was there. I shut my eyes and kept still. For a moment, he stood there looking at us, and then the door closed, the light snapped off, and I heard his footsteps retreating to the other end of the apartment. I looked at the bedside clock: it was five past two. Corinne turned over and sighed, and landed another kick.

I waited a while to make sure the whole household was asleep. Then with precaution I extricated myself from the tangle of arms and legs and bedclothes and relocated to Jonathan's bed. But it took me a long time to get back to sleep. The scene with the corsair had shaken me. Not so much what he had said – it was clear I was to blame – but the way he had said it. After our lunch in Dinan, I had started to think he had accepted me, but this made it clear he hadn't. Was he really going to kick me out? I lay in the dark and went through possible scenarios of what he might say the next day.

The children were up again at the crack of dawn. I sent them to watch television. When I finally dragged myself out of bed, it was half-past eight, and Gilles had already left.

"Daddy will be back for dinner," said Corinne, without taking her eyes off *Princess Sarah*. "He says we should clean up the kitchen."

"Don't touch me!" squealed Princess Sarah to a witch-like old woman who seemed to be the headmistress of the orphanage. I went to see about breakfast.

Gilles was quite right: the kitchen was a disaster. Various layers of mess were superimposed. The cake the children had tried to make on their own (fortunately they

didn't know how to put on the oven) was mixed up with the remains of supper last night, and the debris of breakfast this morning. The table was encrusted with eggs and ketchup and a few other unidentifiable substances, the sink was full of dirty dishes, the hob was covered with abandoned saucepans, and the counters were streaked with sugar and flour and chocolate. To say nothing of the floor.

I gazed at it all in dismay. Madame Leclerc didn't come in on Mondays: I would have to clean it all up myself.

Jonathan wandered in. "Amanda," he said nonchalantly, "if you don't hurry up I'm going to miss my sailing class."

With all that had happened, I had forgotten about their morning activities. I yelled at Jonathan to get dressed at once, I dressed a protesting Corinne in front of the television, I pulled on a pair of jeans and some espadrilles, and prepared to go out in the T-shirt I had slept in.

We were out of the house in fifteen minutes. I was mildly surprised they wanted to go to their clubs and classes after refusing to let me out of their sight the previous night, but they both seemed to think it was the normal thing to do. On the way there, we bought a croissant each for breakfast.

When I got back, I spent an hour and a half cleaning the kitchen, then I had to go and pick them up again, and then it was time to think about lunch. Naturally, there was no food in the house. I had been planning a trip to Continent before they came back.

Cursing Susie out loud, I cobbled together a dish of pasta and bacon bits. I had not had time to take a shower since I got back from Le Grand Bé. I had managed to brush my teeth that morning, but that was all. When Gilles threw me out, I thought grimly, I would at least have time for myself.

After lunch, I made them both take a nap. They complied without too many protests. I climbed in the shower, and stayed under the hot water for twenty minutes. Thalassotherapy - and Gilles could pay the bill.

When I emerged, they were both still quiet. I dried my hair, plucked my eyebrows, and rubbed on sun cream ready for the beach. Continent could go hang: the money Gilles had given me for household expenses had run out, and I was damned if I was going to beard him in his office and ask for more. If he fired me tonight, he could go shopping himself tomorrow.

When the children woke up, we returned to the pâtisserie for pains au chocolat, and then headed for the beach. Several of their friends called greetings as we went by, but they sat down with me to eat their goûter, and showed no signs afterwards of wanting to go off and play.

Instead they started to tell me about what they had done with Mummy, a topic they had refused to discuss the night before. It turned out that Mummy had been too busy to take them anywhere, and they had spent most of their time sitting in the agency or else visiting houses with her clients. As for Mummy's friend Gérard, he had virtually ignored them.

"Did you like Mummy's new house?" I asked cautiously.

"We had to sleep on the sofa," said Corinne.

"There was nowhere to put our stuff," said Jonathan. "Gérard slipped on my truck one day and he shouted at us."

"We had to take our shoes off in the house. Gérard made us wear slippers. Mine were too big for me, and one day I fell over and bumped my head. It still hurts," Corinne added, looking at me meaningfully.

"Does it? Oh dear. Show me where it is, and I'll rub it better."

Her fingers moved uncertainly over her scalp and picked on a spot at random.
"There."

Dutifully, I rubbed.

"Mummy didn't look after us properly," said Jonathan gloomily. "Not like you do. She didn't take us once to the beach."

"Daddy was awfully cross when he came home."

"He said she should have taken proper care of us and she shouldn't have left us alone."

"He was cross with you too, Amanda."

"Yes, I know. He was expecting me to be there."

"But you got marooned on a desert island. Well, Le Grand Bé, at least."

"Tell us about the desert island," demanded Corinne, so I told the story again, inventing some Robinson Crusoe-type activities to make it more exciting.

"If Daddy sends you away, will you go and live on the desert island with Simon?" asked Corinne.

I shuddered inwardly. "No, I don't think so," I said.

"But can we come and see you if you do?"

"You can come for goûter whenever you're on the beach."

"Can we go and see now where you're going to live?"

"No, not today, the tide's too high, Corinne. Let's go for a swim instead."

When we got back to the House of the Corsair, we met Simon coming downstairs.

"Amanda! I've been looking for you everywhere!"

The children regarded him with awe. "Did you really eat worms like Robinson Crusoe?" said Jonathan.

"What?" said Simon.

"I've been telling them about our adventures on the island."

"Really? Worms, huh? When did you two get back? I thought you'd gone to your mother's."

"We came back yesterday."

"Jonathan," I said, "here's the key. Go on upstairs. I'll be there in a minute."

They trailed off obediently up the stairs.

Simon leaned on the wall and drew me against him.

"How about dinner tonight?"

"No, I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"You mean Gilles won't babysit? If you like, I'll ask Madame Leclerc."

"No, that's not the point. They're a bit upset at the moment, it's best if I stay with them. It didn't go too well at their mother's, and she left them alone in the apartment yesterday afternoon for several hours."

"Amanda, it's not your job to stay with them."

"What happened yesterday was partly my fault. I should have been there."

"Gilles wasn't there either," Simon pointed out.

"He was relying on me to be there," I said uncomfortably. "I didn't listen to the message on the machine."

"So he's pissed off at you because the silly bitch left them alone?"

"Simon, shut up. I'm sorry, but not tonight."

"Tomorrow then?"

"If I can. I'll see how they are in the morning and let you know."

"Well, if that's the way you want it. How about a kiss at least?"

I regarded him with exasperation.

"For heaven's sake, not now. I'll see you tomorrow."

He kissed me anyway, and ran whistling down to the street. He didn't seem cast down by my rejection. No doubt there were other candidates to take my place.

I traipsed wearily up the stairs to the second floor. I didn't particularly want to have dinner with Simon, but I wasn't looking forward to the evening ahead of me either. Baths, stories, more damn pasta, and most likely a chilly interview to discuss my "continued employment." What would I do if Gilles really told me to leave? I was surprised how sad I felt at the prospect of not living in this apartment any more, not going to the beach every day, not seeing the children - even not seeing him. I would miss our cosy evenings in the kitchen.

Halfway up the last flight of stairs, I realized that the door to the apartment was wide open, and that the corsair himself was leaning on the bannister. Dear God, he must have heard everything. I forced myself to keep going. When I reached the top, I said coolly, "Bonsoir, monsieur," and turned towards the apartment.

"Wait, Amanda."

I gave him a stony stare.

"I wanted to apologise for last night. I'm afraid I said some things that were rather unjust. I didn't mean them. I'm well aware you have the children's welfare at heart."

I felt weak with relief. "So you're not going to fire me?"

"Of course not, how could I? The children would be bereft."

I looked at my feet. "I'm sorry I didn't listen to the phone message. I thought it might be Madame Duchaussoy. It didn't occur to me it could be your wife."

When I lifted my eyes, his colour had risen. He had heard the message that Viviane had left the other day, of course, and he knew exactly what I meant.

"My wife behaved irresponsibly. I realize that."

I didn't say anything.

"If you want to go out tonight, then of course I'll stay here. I'm staying here anyway, so if you want.... "

"No, that's all right. I need an early night." I moved towards the door of the apartment, and then a thought struck me. "But I might take you up on the offer tomorrow."

He regarded me in silence. "Just as long as you realize you're following in the footsteps of half St. Malo. Simon isn't serious, I hope you understand that."

"The last thing I need right now is a serious relationship," I told him. "Excuse me, monsieur, but I have to start the supper. Oh and by the way, I need to go to Continent tomorrow."

"Of course," he said. "And for God's sake, don't call me monsieur. My name is Gilles."

As I went towards the kitchen, I heard him pick up the phone. Crossing the corridor a few minutes later on my way to the bathroom, I heard him instructing someone never to call him on the house phone, but to use his mobile. A few minutes after that, when I went in the other direction, he was telling someone else that she was totally irresponsible, that the children were very upset, and that he was never going to let them stay with her again.

Gilles was putting some order in his life.

15. COCKTAILS AND CONDOMS

By the end of the evening, Gilles and I were on amicable terms again.

During the meal, by tacit consent, we encouraged the children to talk about what had happened the day before. It seemed to be therapeutic. We sighed about Mummy who was always so busy, we laughed about the chocolate on the floor, we recalled with awe how mad Daddy had been, and we worked out exactly how long it had taken Amanda to get everyone to sleep.

After a while, the children managed to see it as an adventure and not an ordeal. They even began to be proud of themselves for not setting the house on fire. They helped me clear up the meal, and went off to brush their teeth seemingly reassured.

While we were clearing up, the phone rang. Gilles went to answer it. He was gone a long time. I went on loading the dishwasher, and thought nothing of it. But after about ten minutes, he came back into the kitchen and said the call was for me. I eyed him in some bemusement. I didn't think I knew anyone who was on telephone terms with him too. Could it be Virginie?

It was my grandmother on the line. "What a charming man," she enthused. "We've had such a lovely chat."

"Oh really? What about?"

"All kinds of things. I don't know. He's so terribly easy to talk to. From what you said, I was expecting someone much more reserved."

"I hope you didn't tell him that?"

"Of course not," she said, but I wasn't sure I believed her. Bonne-Maman, at eighty, was a chatterbox and a flirt. I dreaded to think what she had been like in her younger days, and I wondered rather apprehensively what she had been saying to Gilles. I didn't care for the idea of my employer and my grandmother having lovely chats on the phone.

"We talked about Benjamin Miniac," she volunteered. "Your Mr. de Kerguidan knows him quite well. He designed his conservatory. It seems poor Benjamin isn't too well, though of course he must be getting on. He must be over ninety, poor old man."

Words failed me, but my grandmother apparently saw nothing incongruous in referring to a man only ten years her senior as a "poor old man." She chattered on.

"I told Mr. de Kerguidan about the engraving that you brought over, and he's going to go and see it. François Souville de Kerguidan and Jean Miniac were contemporaries, you know."

Corsair gossip. I was reassured. It sounded harmless.

When I got back to the kitchen, the dishwasher was whirring away, and Gilles was scouring the saucepans.

"You've done enough for one day," he said, when I tried to object. "It must have taken all morning to clean up the mess they made. Make your cup of tea and go to bed. They seem to have led you quite a dance last night. Nice lady, your grandmother, by the way."

I eyed him carefully. "She liked you too. I gather she told you about the engraving of Le Revenant. I didn't know you knew Mr. Miniac."

"Old Miniac is some kind of cousin. The famous François married a Miniac,

you know."

"Really?"

"Ask your grandmother. She seems to know much more about the corsairs than I do. She's even heard of François. I was impressed."

"The corsairs are a hobby of hers. She has a whole shelf of books about them. She thinks they're romantic."

"That's exactly what she said."

I switched on the kettle. "Does she know you still live in François' house?"

"Of course. I invited her to come and see it."

I looked at him. "Oh really? And is she coming?"

"She says she'll have to see."

Not just a flirt but a secretive one. She hadn't said a word about that to me - but that was maybe because she knew it would never happen. Given how frail she had been a few weeks earlier, I couldn't imagine that Bonne-Maman was seriously considering a visit to St. Malo.

I dismissed her conversation with Gilles, and his invitation to visit, as mere social pleasantries - especially as Virginie and her parents arrived the next day, and drove the corsairs out of my head.

*

When the Desbordes family migrated for the summer, they could have done with a mule train. The children and I found them in the street when we came up from the beach, milling round unloading their car with a great deal of noise and confusion. We gave them a hand getting their assorted bags, baskets, packages and boxes up the stairs.

Mathilde had brought a laptop, a printer and a boxful of notes to work on her next book, which was entitled *Killing Diamond Witches*. I had read enough of her books by now to know that the plot was unlikely to include either diamonds or witches. Bernard had brought a stack of medical journals, another laptop, and several boxes of correspondence relating to a humanitarian association specialized in Africa, of which he was chairman.

Virginie, announcing that she had come here to relax, produced her knitting, six novels, and two tennis rackets.

"One's for you, " she informed me. "I take it you can still play?"

Virginie had spent a year at boarding school in England, which was where we had met, and we had both been on the house team.

"Good idea," I said.

"What about me?" said Simon, who was carrying, I had noticed, as little as possible.

"Amanda will trounce you six love, and so will I," said his sister. "But you can play with Jonathan if you want."

Gilles came home in the middle of this, and lent a hand as well. When we had got everything stowed away in the Desbordes' apartment, he invited them up for a drink. Bernard and Mathilde accepted with alacrity, and so did Virginie. Simon agreed more reluctantly - but then the invitation had been extended reluctantly too. I suspected that Gilles would not have invited Simon at all if he hadn't known that he and I were going out to dinner later on.

We all trooped upstairs to the second floor, Gilles served the drinks, and I searched the kitchen for something to eat.

There was little that was suitable in the way of amuse-bouches. The corsair and I had not served cocktails before. I found some peanuts and some pizza-like biscuits that had been intended for the children's goûter, put them in small glass bowls, and gave them to the the children to take into the sitting-room. They were delighted by the break in the routine of bath and bed, and scurried willingly back and forth, helping themselves, I suspected, to peanuts as they went.

"Have we any ice?" Gilles appeared in the doorway as I was cutting some cheese into cubes.

"I think so. Jonathan, look in the freezer and get the trays out. Gilles, I made a quiche for you for tonight. All you have to do is heat it up."

"Why can't *you* heat it up?" said Jonathan, putting the trays of ice on the counter.

"Because I won't be here." I got the ice bucket out of the cupboard. "I'm going out to dinner with Simon."

Jonathan thought about this. "Do you mean you're going on a date with Simon?"

I picked up the trays of ice and smiled uneasily at Gilles.

"You could say that, I suppose."

"Are you going to sleep in his bed?" said Jonathan.

The trays of ice crashed to the floor. I looked at Jonathan in horror.

"Well," said Gilles, "your turn now! Jonathan, pick all that up, there's a good chap. Run it under the tap to get off the dust. We should let Amanda get changed for her big night out."

I fled to the bathroom without arguing. I hadn't thought Jonathan was so worldly wise. What else did he know? What else had he half-grasped? Just before I got into the shower, I thought I heard the bell ring, and wondered who it was. Had Gilles asked Madame Leclerc to babysit tonight?

But when I got back to the sitting room in my all-purpose black linen dress, I found Viviane sitting next to Simon on the sofa. She was all in white, and so was he, and they were engaged in an intense discussion from which the rest of the party seemed to be excluded.

No one had noticed me arrive. I stood in the doorway and surveyed the room. Gilles and the other three were exchanging idle chatter about the weather and the traffic and the tourists and the parking problems. Corinne had settled herself on her father's lap, which was something she rarely did. Staking out her territory, I surmised. Both father and daughter cast occasional brief glares in Viviane's direction. Corinne seemed merely suspicious, but I could tell that Gilles was furious.

I glanced at my watch. Quarter to eight. Time to break up the tête-à-tête, for everyone's sake.

I picked my way across the room, and sat down on the arm of the sofa next to Simon, who ignored me.

"I've always thought that way he explores colour, light and space in search of an ultimate unity is totally fascinating," he was saying.

"But don't you think that the duty of the artist is to provide the implications of infinity in any situation?" countered Viviane.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mathilde make a face.

"Simon, I'm starving?" I said. "Are we going soon?"

"Bonsoir, Amelia," said Viviane coolly.

"Amanda. Bonsoir, madame."

"Already?" said Simon.

"Yes, please," I said.

"Simon, don't let *me* detain you," said Viviane sweetly.

She was beautifully dressed as usual, but she looked tired tonight, and I noticed for the first time that there were wrinkles round her eyes and on her neck. It occurred to me that she was older than I had thought.

"I'm giving a small party for one of my artists at the gallery next week," she went on. "Maybe you'd like to come? In fact, I hope you'll all come," she added, bestowing a dazzling smile on the room at large. "Tuesday at six. Mathilde, you have a card already. And Gilles of course. You too, Amelia, you must come too. It'll be interesting for someone your age to meet a well-known artist."

"Thank you," I said.

An opportunity to go out with the grown-ups at last. I stood up.

"Then we're off, if that's all right."

"Have a nice time," said Gilles to me.

"Where are you taking her?" said Bernard to Simon.

"Will you use a condom?" said Jonathan, suddenly appearing beside me. There was a dreadful silence.

"It's safer, you know," he added.

Someone giggled nervously. I didn't dare look at Simon. I didn't dare look at anyone. It was Gilles who rescued me.

"Do you know why it's safer?" he asked his son.

Jonathan looked abashed. "Not exactly," he said.

"I thought not. Come and sit down here and stop drawing attention to yourself, and later you and I will have a little talk and I'll explain it to you. In the meantime, leave Amanda alone. She's a big girl, and she knows what she's doing."

16. A NIGHT ON THE RAMPARTS

Virginie came up next morning while I was making another quiche. The one from the previous evening, which was supposed to have provided leftovers for lunch, had disappeared. Gilles and his son must have needed sustenance for their man-to-man chat. Aside from us, the flat was empty, with the children out at their activities, and Gilles at his office.

"Nice evening?" she asked.

"Sedate," I said. "Jonathan took the wind out of our sails a bit."

"Poor you," said Virginie unsympathetically. I had already gathered that she did not look with favour on my association with her brother, but then she rarely approved of anything Simon did.

"What are you making for the children's lunch?"

"Mushroom quiche."

"Lucky them."

I sprinkled flour on the table top, ready to roll out the pastry.

"Drop in, if you want."

"I'm tempted. Just you and the children?"

"Gilles sometimes come home for lunch, but I'm sure he won't mind."

"Does he really? He never came home for lunch in Susie's time!"

"In Susie's time, I gather there was no lunch."

"So how are you getting on, you and Gilles?"

I took the lump of pastry out of the bowl and began to roll it flat on the table.

"Better than I expected, I have to say."

"You see, I told you Gilles was all right. What he really needs is the love of a good woman."

"Does he? I don't think he knows any. What did you think of Viviane?"

"Susie all over again. A real disaster!"

I stopped with the rolling pin poised in mid-air.

"What on earth do you mean by that? She's nothing like Susie."

"Oh yes she is," said Virginie. "They're two peas in a pod. Both totally self-absorbed. Neither of them cares about anyone but herself, and they definitely don't care about Gilles."

I stared at her thoughtfully. "That's very perceptive of you, doctor."

She smirked complacently. "I've thought once or twice about psychiatry too. The trouble is you have to deal with crazy people all day."

"Stick to the blind. You're doing pretty well already."

"What I think Gilles really needs is someone to talk to."

"You know, you could be right. He's talked to me once or twice."

"*Has* he? What about?"

"Susie. The children." I thought for a moment, then added, "He talks to the children, you know."

"I've noticed that, yes. I imagine that's the reason they're still fairly normal. Even with Susie as a mother. He's not around much, but he keeps them anchored."

"Then maybe they'll survive their new stepmother too."

"Surely he's not going to *marry* Viviane?"

"I don't know. I'm pretty sure that *she* wants to marry *him*. The biological

clock is ticking away. She must be coming up to forty."

"According to my mother, she's thirty-eight. Two divorces, and getting desperate."

"That's what I thought. But Gilles says she's just short-term, so we'll have to see."

"Gilles told you she was short-term?"

I draped the rolled pastry over the rolling pin and transferred it gently to the baking tin. "A short-term arrangement'. That was what he said."

"So he really does confide in you," she said.

"Everyone needs someone to confide in," I said blithely.

"Everyone needs someone to care about them. Maybe *you're* the good woman he needs."

"Yeah, right," I said.

With the arrival of the Desbordes, our quiet daily routine became more lively. There were a lot of comings and goings between the two flats. Virginie and I played tennis a lot, and she often came to the beach with me and the children. Corinne and Jonathan ran up and down all the time, returning laden with sweets. Bernard came up in the evenings to ask Gilles' advice about drains and gutters and windows for the dispensary his association was planning to build in Senegal. Mathilde came in the mornings when I was cooking to tell me about the progress of her plot, and ask my advice on how to get Volodia out of his latest predicament.

"He's in the church of Saint Germain des Près listening to a concert, and he sees the killer prowling up the aisle with a gun. What do you think he should do? Do you think it's all right to have gunfire in a church?"

I never had any ideas, but it didn't matter. All she needed was a sounding board. After ten or fifteen minutes, she would find the solution on her own and go off to transfer it to the computer, nibbling a handful of raw vegetables or cookie dough as she went, leaving me with the uplifting sense that I was contributing to literary creation.

The only person absent from our gatherings was Simon.

He had left for La Baule the day after we went out to dinner. He came up to see me after lunch to make his pitch. He had friends with a villa, and they were counting on him. He couldn't refuse - but if I wanted I could go with him.

He lifted an eyebrow and gave me his most irresistible smile.

"I'm working," I said. "Can I bring the children too?"

The smile disappeared at once. He did not try to change my mind. "Really? Well, that's too bad. Then I'll see you next week."

"Will you be back for the party?"

"Yes, of course. Be ready at six, and I'll come and pick you up."

In many ways, his absence was a relief. Without Simon there to stir things up, I got on much better with Gilles. In fact, Gilles and I were getting on very well these days. Since the explosion over Susie, he had been going out of his way to be nice to me. In between discussions with Bernard and dates with Viviane, he spent a lot of time in the kitchen. I found that Bonne-Maman was right. He was easy to talk to. He was well informed, and he had an open mind. Our conversations ranged from democracy in Iraq to cures for nightmares, via bird flu, children's cartoon shows, and global warming.

Meanwhile, my grandmother had taken to calling regularly to exchange corsair gossip. She had had several more chats with Gilles, and one with Jonathan. She was trying to track down the name of François' wife. Could it be Ségolène

Legonidec? Or Armande Gauthier? Gilles maintained it was one of the Miniacs, but he didn't know which one.

One evening Bernard and Mathilde invited us all to dinner. Corinne fell asleep on the sofa around ten, and Jonathan joined her soon after, but the rest of us stayed talking around the table. The mix of ages and generations had a peculiar charm for me. It felt like the family I had never had. Bernard was gracious, Mathilde sparkled, and Gilles was more relaxed than I had ever seen him. Watching him arguing with Mathilde, with an eye on his sleeping children, it occurred to me that this was what he had been talking about the day we had gone to Dinan. Family life.

"You're looking much better, Amanda," said Bernard. "I'm glad to see that. You didn't look well at all when you got here in June."

"It's true I feel much better," I agreed.

"It must be the air in St. Malo," said Gilles. "It can't be my children."

"Your children have never been so well looked after," said Mathilde.

"France suits you, Amanda," said Bernard. "Why don't you come back here to work when you've finished your training?"

"Good idea," said Gilles, smiling at me. "I'll give you a job."

"Will you?" I said. "I might take you up on that."

Mathilde sighed happily. "Isn't this nice with all of us here together? What a pity Simon isn't here too."

A wave of incredulity ran round the table. Gilles raised his eyebrows, Virginie scowled, and Bernard looked down at his plate.

Mathilde was blind to Simon's faults, I had noticed that already. It seemed not to occur to her that if Simon had been here, her dinner would have been ruined. He would have spent the evening flirting with me, annoying his sister, and provoking Gilles. The party would have broken up long ago.

Mathilde didn't notice our silence. Her mind was already elsewhere.

"Amanda, I wanted to ask your opinion. Volodia is sitting in the Café Flore and he sees the witch go into Emporio Armani across the road, so he follows her in, but she's in the changing room."

"So there really is a witch?" I said.

"Of course there is. Floriane, you remember, the principal suspect. Would he go in after her, or wait till she comes out? Do you think one can have sex in the changing room at Emporio Armani?"

"I don't know," I said diplomatically, "I've never been there."

"Simon has," said Virginie. "Why don't you ask him?"

*

Simon came to pick me up at six, as promised, on the night of Viviane's party. He gave me a kiss, and told me how much he'd missed me. He had a very nice beige silk jacket, and he smelled of expensive cologne.

I was wearing a new dress that I had bought on impulse. I was tired of my sober black linen. It was fuschia pink, short and backless. Corinne admired it deeply - I had a nasty feeling it was the kind of thing Barbie might wear. Since it was a grown-up evening, I had twisted my hair carefully into a chignon.

When we arrived at the gallery, the reception was well under way. Simon threaded his way confidently through the room towards Viviane. She greeted him with enthusiasm, though she frowned when she saw me, and introduced us to the painter in whose honour the party was being held with some reluctance.

The painter himself was interested in no one's appearance but his own. He tossed his black silk cape over one shoulder, hitting the woman behind him and spilling her drink, and proceeded to explain in a low tense whisper the creative vision that underlay his pictures. Simon took one look and left me to it.

There were so many people all talking at the tops of their voices that I could hardly hear him. I caught something about a "confluence of ideology and poetry" and something else about a "symbol of philosophical unity." I smiled and nodded and kept an eye on Simon, who had drawn Viviane familiarly aside and was murmuring something in her ear.

The paintings were huge and heavy and smudgy, and looked like something Corinne might have done - though of course on a larger scale. Here and there one could make out the outlines of a jetty or a tower or the ramparts. The artist liked to set up his easel in various public positions all over town, Mathilde had told me, flinging paint on the canvas and flashing his cape around in front of an admiring crowd, while Beethoven pounded away on the cassette player.

I was relieved when some new arrivals pushed their way through the crowd to Viviane, and she reclaimed the artist to present to them. Left alone, I drank Viviane's sparkling white wine, and ate a canapé, and looked around. The gallery was bigger than I had realized. Viviane had a whole maze of small white rooms, artfully lit to show the paintings to their best advantage.

I could see no one I knew. Virginie wasn't here. She had left to go camping with some friends from Paris. Simon had disappeared. I spotted Gilles some way off, with his back to me. He was talking to an older man with a white mane of hair and a nautical look. St. Malo was a seafaring town, but I doubted there were many real sailors here. Some of the guests were artists, that was plain. There was a kind of stylish disreputability about their clothes that left no doubt. The others, presumably, would be local bigwigs: town councillors, maybe the mayor, as well as wealthy industrialists and professional people with the money and the ambition to afford Viviane's prices.

Someone called my name, and I saw Bernard waving to me from across the room. I pushed my way through the crush to join him. He was standing in front of a painting entitled *Rush Hour in Paris*, and he wanted to tell me why developed countries should respect the environment and do something for Africa before it was too late.

After that, Mathilde took me aside to assure me that most modern paintings were grossly overrated by ignorant consumers pandering to the spirit of the times. According to Simon, Mathilde had sounded out Viviane about an exhibition of her landscapes, and been turned down.

Finally I ran into Lucienne, who said she didn't understand any of this, but it was nice wine, wasn't it?

At last, the rooms began to empty. Mathilde and Bernard left. There was no sign of Simon. I set out to look for him. I wandered through the labyrinth of rooms, lingering in front of the paintings as I went. I was inclined to agree with Mathilde's assessment of them.

I rounded a corner and ran slap into Gilles, who was leaning on the wall, glass in hand, next to a painting entitled *Rejection*, looking disgruntled.

"Amanda! You look very nice tonight."

He pushed himself off the wall and examined me.

"Thank you," I said, mildly surprised. He had never made any comment on my appearance before.

"But you shouldn't wear your hair like that."

He reached up adroitly and yanked the clip out of my hair, so that it fell down to my shoulders. I stared at him in amazement.

"Ah, yes," he said. "Much better."

He reached out to touch my hair and fluff it up. It crossed my mind that he had had too much to drink. He put his head on one side to admire the effect.

"Much better," he repeated, and then he kissed me.

I was too startled to react. When he let me go, I did my best to play it cool.

"Well! Whatever was that for?"

"I thought it was a good idea," he said, and kissed me again.

The kiss lasted quite a while. This time, I kissed him back.

"Gilles?" I said shakily.

He drew a finger down my cheek, and bent towards me once more. I don't know what would have happened after that, but I saw his eyes flicker at something past my shoulder.

Impelled by some sixth sense, I turned around.

Simon and Viviane were standing in a corner of the adjoining room watching us. They were much too close together. Simon's hand rested on the wall above Viviane's shoulder, and her head was tilted towards him. But whatever they had been doing, or were about to do, had been interrupted. Gilles had found the perfect way to distract them.

For several seconds, all four of us were frozen, staring at each other. Then Simon straightened up.

"So, Gilles," he said. "Sexual harrassment in the workplace now?"

At that, something snapped. I wasn't going to be drawn into their little games. I spun on my heel, and walked rapidly to the door. The party was nearly over, and most of the guests had gone. Once in the street, I instinctively started to run. Someone came after me and shouted my name, but I took no notice.

I dived into the first side-street I came to, then into another one. I didn't want them to find me, any of them. But whoever had pursued me didn't go far. I got to the ramparts unchallenged.

Even though it was dark by now, the ramparts were far from empty. It was well into August, and the crowds were at their height. I let myself be carried along to the Bastion de la Hollande, then I found an empty bench and sat down. There was a chill breeze blowing, and my skimpy pink dress was no protection at all. I had taken a jacket with me, but left it, along with my bag, at the gallery. Still, I went on sitting there. I had nowhere else to go. I sat on the bench and wrapped my arms around myself in a vain attempt to keep warm, and tried to get my thoughts in order.

Out of the jumble of ideas churning in my mind came something Virginie had said a week earlier. Something about everyone needing someone to care for them. Well no one cared much for me, that was for sure. Not Simon, who came looking for me when he had nothing better to do, and who had just spent a whole evening demonstrating his lack of regard for me. Not Gilles, who had used me to score points off his girlfriend. And not, of course, Roger, who had set the whole train of events in motion in the first place.

What was it Simon had said, I was just the maid? That wasn't a bad description of my role around here. Viviane used me to make her tea, and Susie to pack her bags. Well, the sooner I got out of domestic service, the better. In three weeks, the children would be back at school, and I would be out of St. Malo on the first boat.

I sat there for nearly an hour in a haze of self-pity. At last I was so cold that I had no choice but to get to my feet and stumble back to the House of the Corsair.

I already knew what I was going to find there. Not Simon waiting penitently on the stairs, not Gilles intent on more sexual harrassment - just Madame Leclerc asleep in front of the television. I steeled myself to pretend that everything was normal, that I had had a lovely evening, and that she could go home.

But Gilles himself was waiting for me in the sitting room.

He was sitting in an armchair staring at nothing. My jacket and my bag were lying on the table. When he saw me he sprang to his feet.

"Amanda, I'm very sorry. I do apologise. I had too much to drink."

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"Yes, it does. It was totally inappropriate behaviour, and I want you to be absolutely clear that it won't happen again."

I looked at him. His face gave nothing away.

I adopted my mother's most regal manner, the one she saved for her very worst clients. "Thank you. Please don't worry about it. I think we should just let it drop."

"Yes, but I- "

"Gilles," I said. "Please! After all, it was just a kiss."

He looked at me uncertainly for a minute. "Well, I, er, I'm, er, relieved that you can take it like that."

I gave him my worldliest smile. "Well, of course. What other way is there to take it?"

There was something wrong with that, but I couldn't work out what. I picked up the jacket and the bag.

"Thank you so much for bringing my things back."

He started to say something, then stopped. He looked thoroughly confused.

I couldn't meet his eyes. I moved towards the door that led to the children's and my quarters. For once, it was firmly shut. He had not wanted anyone eavesdropping tonight.

"Wait," he said, as I was about to open it. "Where have you been all this time?"

He peered at me more closely. "For God's sake, girl, you're freezing!"

I didn't look back. I didn't want him to see my face.

"Yes, I know. I'm going to bed."

My voice sounded muffled: I hoped he hadn't noticed.

I had just realized what was wrong with what I had just said.

What had happened that evening was a lot more than just a kiss. A door had opened on to another world. I had been moving towards it for weeks, without knowing where I was going.

I had fallen head over heels in love with the corsair.

17. SCOTCH ON THE ROCKS

"I was expecting something like this," said Virginie.

I stared at her in outrage. "Were you? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you were old enough to work it out for yourself. You arrive here on the rebound, it's all new and exotic, you find yourself living with a glamorous older man- "

"A bad-tempered workoholic with two children, a neglected wife, and a mistress who's armed and dangerous?"

"Inaccessible, yes, that's very glamorous."

"Right then, doctor, so tell me what happens next."

Virginie cast a glance at the door. The children were watching a video in the sitting room, we had closed the kitchen door, allegedly to keep out the noise, and we had Radio Nostalgie turned up loud to mask the conversation.

"With Jonathan on the prowl, I should watch your step. Wait for a bit to see what Gilles does next."

"He won't do anything. He said it would never happen again."

"Oh he doesn't mean that," she said airily. "He likes you. I can see from the way he behaves."

I blinked. "How on earth can you see that?"

"Oh I don't know. The way he speaks to you, the way he looks at you. Don't be obtuse, Amanda, it's perfectly clear. He comes home for meals, he hangs around the house. He complains to you about Susie, he says Viviane's short-term. What more do you want?"

"I can think of a thing or two."

"Of course, if you really mean to leave when the children go back to school, he needs to get a move on." She paused. "What are we aiming for, incidentally? A night of passion or a lifetime commitment?"

I flinched. "You have a way with words, Virginie."

"So which is it?"

"Both. Either. How the hell do I know?"

"Quite right," said Virginie approvingly. "You should give the matter some thought before you decide. In the meantime, let's play tennis. I booked the court for five."

"What about the children?"

"They can be ballboys."

"Are you sure they're going to like that?"

"If we bribe them, yes."

I left Gilles a note explaining that we had gone to play tennis, and that Virginie was taking us all to a crêperie afterwards. Since the furore over Susie, I wasn't taking any chances. I left a message on his mobile, and I made sure my own phone was in my bag, recharged and switched on, so he could check on us if he wanted - though I doubted that he would. Since the incident in the gallery two days ago, we had kept our distance. That suited me fine. I didn't trust myself in his presence.

Virginie had returned from her camping trip that morning, and it was a relief to pour out the whole tale to her. Where she was wrong was in her diagnosis of the

situation. The truth was much simpler. Gilles had kissed me under provocation from the man who had slept with his wife, and seemed bent on repeating the experience with his girlfriend.

Even if Gilles did 'like' me, as Virginie put it, I could not ignore the fact that he had two formidable women in his life already. One of them was bound to him by ten years of marriage and two children. The other offered escape and seduction in a way I never could. Kissing the au pair was simply a passing temptation he hadn't resisted. What was more, I was forced to admit that I should have seen it coming. Gilles was not as aloof as he sometimes seemed. Living alone with me and the children in the apartment for two months had fostered the illusion of intimacy and excited his curiosity. His son's precocious interest in dates and condoms hadn't helped. It was a wonder he hadn't tried anything before.

My one consolation in all of this was that Simon had disappeared. He had gone back to La Baule. He had left the day after the incident at the gallery, and Virginie said he would not be back in St. Malo that summer. He had not bothered to say goodbye to me, and I was not sure why he had left. Had he planned it that way all along - or had the corsair warned him off?

I was too relieved that he had gone to want to find out more.

*

Playing tennis did me good, though it was hard to concentrate. Virginie won easily: 6-3, 6-2.

After the game, we adjourned to a crêperie in Saint Servan. We were finishing our crêpes au chocolat when my phone rang. It was Gilles.

"Yes?" I said cautiously.

"Amanda! At last! What time will you be back?"

His voice sounded odd. I wondered what was wrong.

"We're in the crêperie. Didn't you see my note?"

"I know where you are. What time will you be back?"

I gritted my teeth. What the hell had I done now?

"We're about to leave. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

He broke the connection.

"What was that?" said Virginie.

"He didn't say."

"Daddy's cross again," said Corinne fatalistically.

"It sounds like it," I said.

We drove back to St. Malo in silence, chastened by the prospect of the corsair's forthcoming wrath. Virginie volunteered to come up with us to explain that she had led us astray, and to abase herself for the crimes of tennis and crêpes.

But when we got back to the House of the Corsair, it was clear that things were not what we thought. For a start, there was the music, which we could hear all the way up the stairs.

"That's loud," said Virginie.

"If I did that, he'd tell me off," said Jonathan.

"Maybe Daddy's gone deaf," said Corinne.

It was plain as soon as we opened the door that some kind of disaster had occurred.

Gilles was sunk in an armchair with a glass in his hand, his feet on the coffee table, and a half-empty bottle of whisky next to them. He looked awful. He had put

Jacques Brel on the CD player.

*Ay Marieke Marieke je t'aimais tant,
Entre les tours de Bruges et Gand,
Ay Marieke Marieke il y a longtemps,
Entre les tours de Bruges et Gand.*

The desperation of lost love filled the whole of the room. I guessed right away what had happened. The only thing I didn't know was which of them he had lost.

Virginie turned down the music. "Gilles, what's wrong?"

"Daddy, that music was very loud."

"Have you been drinking, Dad?"

I knelt down by his chair. "Gilles, tell me what's happened!"

"You want to know what's happened? Well, I'll tell you. What's happened is that-

He caught sight of the children, standing there wide-eyed, and broke off abruptly. "Never mind. I'll tell you some other time."

He reached for the bottle. I moved it out of his grasp. "I think it might be better to tell us now."

"No, I can't do that."

Virginie came to stand on the other side of the chair. "You really should tell us, Gilles."

He shook his head.

I looked at Virginie. "What shall we do?"

Virginie was at her best in times of crisis. "I'll stay here with the children and get them to bed while he takes you for a walk and tells you what's happened."

"That sounds like a good idea," I said, looking at Gilles.

Gilles didn't object. He got promptly to his feet and picked up his jacket. He seemed to be less drunk than I had thought. "All right," he said briskly, "let's go."

Exchanging a glance with Virginie, I followed him out.

When we got outside, instead of turning right for the ramparts, he turned left into town.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The Café de l'Univers. I need a drink."

I doubted that, but I wasn't going to argue. We walked in silence down to the Porte St. Vincent. A breeze had got up, and the evening had turned cold.

The Café de l'Univers was one of the landmarks of St. Malo. The walls were covered with paintings and photographs of the seafaring life, and the cosy atmosphere resembled an English pub. At this hour, the bar was half-empty. It was too late for an apéritif, and too early for an after-dinner drink. Most people would still be eating. Gilles ordered two whiskies without consulting me. Whisky was not my usual drink, but I didn't protest. I sensed I might need it before the night was out.

"So what's going on?" I asked.

I was prepared for more obfuscation, but he was ready to talk.

"I got a letter from Susie's lawyer. She wants a divorce."

"A divorce! But when did she tell you?"

"I told you, I got a letter- "

"Yes, I know, but- You mean she didn't tell you herself?"

It sounded churlish, even by Susie's standards. I wasn't surprised he was upset.

"Have you spoken to her directly?" I asked.

"I couldn't reach her. She wasn't in the agency, and she's lost her mobile. At least, that's what the man I spoke to said."

That would be Gérard, presumably. "Oh. I see."

"Amanda, I need to talk to her. I can't let her do this."

I chose my words carefully. "I was under the impression that you didn't want her back."

"It's the last thing I want. But the children.... They'll be devastated."

"Is she asking for custody?"

"No, she isn't. She doesn't want them. How can I tell them that?"

"Gilles," I said gently, "you're not being logical. She's already gone off without them, she's living with somebody else, and it's you that's looking after them. They know all that for a fact. They're living with it already."

"But now she wants to legalize the situation!"

"Do you think they're old enough to understand the difference?"

"Corinne, no, but Jonathan- " Gilles broke off.

I made a face. "If he knows what a condom is, then, yes, he's probably an authority on divorce."

"Actually, he did not know what a condom was," said Gilles. "Didn't I tell you about that? We had quite a conversation."

His face lightened and he looked as though he was about to describe it. I cut him off. This was not the time to get side-tracked.

"Is there a reason the children need to know about the divorce petition now?"

He thought about it. "No, I don't think so."

"Then why do you need to tell them?"

He stared into his whisky. "Maybe I don't. I guess I'm not seeing straight."

"Why don't you just wait a day or two? It must have been a shock getting that letter. Wait till you get used to the idea, and then you'll see more clearly what to do."

"I still think I should try and persuade her to come back," he said obstinately.

"If you and Susie aren't happy together, then the children won't be either."

"Maybe if we both made an effort... God knows, I treated her very badly."

I didn't say anything.

He shot me a sharp look across the table. "You think it wouldn't work?"

I said carefully, "I don't think I know either of you well enough to be the judge of that. That's a decision that the two of you must make. First, you need to talk to her and see what she really wants."

"But if she won't take my calls?"

"Then you'll have to go to St. Brieuc and see her in person."

He stood up.

I looked up in alarm. "Gilles, you can't go now!"

"Don't worry, I'm not stupid enough to drive. I'm going for a walk on the Digue to clear my head. Do you mind if I leave you to go home on your own?"

"No, but will you be all right on the Digue?"

"Yes."

He put a couple of notes on the table.

I eyed him dubiously. "Don't fall in the water."

"Amanda," he said. "What would I do without you?"

I watched him walk away across the room. Yes, Gilles, I thought, what will you do without me? How will you manage your women when I go home? Who's going to take on the job when I'm not here? Who's going to mollify Susie, keep Viviane straight - and provide home comfort as necessary?

I went soberly home to the House of the Corsair.

The children were asleep, and the flat was quiet. Virginie was watching a film

on television. Julia Roberts and Richard Gere were taking a bath together. We watched silently for a moment, and then she turned it off.

"So what was all that about?"

I closed the door to the corridor, and told her.

"Excellent!" she said. "Susie wants out, and it's you he decides to confide in."

I looked at her doubtfully. She spelled it out.

"Not Viviane, but you, you idiot! You've got it made!"

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course I do! Viviane is toast! You're home and dry!"

"No, I don't think I am. I think he wants Susie back."

"Nonsense," she said dismissively, "of course he doesn't!"

"I think he must. If he's so upset, it can only mean one thing."

"He doesn't like being turned down. It's just hurt pride."

"Maybe."

"He'll see things more clearly when he sobers up. Wait and see what he says in the morning."

She got up to go.

"Is it tomorrow the kids are going to Mont St. Michel? Are we going to play tennis?"

"Sure," I said, "why not?"

When she had gone, the flat was very silent. It was nearly eleven o'clock. I got ready for bed. I tidied the kitchen, and emptied the dishwasher. There was no sign of Gilles.

I was too tense to sleep. I switched Virginie's film back on. Julia was in a car on the way back to her apartment after saying goodbye to Richard. She looked much the way I felt, but she was lucky. She lived in Hollywood, the land of happy endings. By the time her prince came climbing up the fire escape to get her back, Gilles had still not returned.

I didn't know what to do next. After some hesitation, I tried his mobile. It was switched off. I didn't leave a message. I zapped idly round the television channels, and then looked for a video. The phone rang, but when I answered, the caller hung up. Susie? Or Viviane?

I made some tea and tried to drink it. I went out on the balcony and squinted down at the street, I paced up and down the corridor, and wondered if I ought to go out and look for him. Was he out there walking the streets wondering what to do? Or drinking himself insensible in a bar?

He finally got back home about half-past one. I had been dozing in a chair. He blinked as he came in and saw me there.

"What God's name you doing up?" His voice was slurred.

"I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"No need for that." He grabbed at the door frame.

"You ought to go to bed. Hold on to me."

We shuffled towards his bedroom. When we reached the bathroom door, he stopped. "Need to pee."

"Fine," I said, "go ahead."

I steered him into the bathroom, closed the door, and waited. In the state he was in, he would probably pee all over the floor. But after a minute, I heard the toilet flushing.

He came out and said sardonically, "You going to undress me too?"

"No, I am not. I'm just going to take off your shoes."

I sat him down on the bed, removed his shoes and his jacket, pushed him gently into a recumbent position, and pulled the duvet over him.
He sighed and lapsed immediately into unconsciousness.
I switched off the light and left him alone.

18. LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Gilles surfaced earlier than I expected the morning after, but that was because he was woken by the doorbell at half-past eight. Pierre and Marie's mother came to collect the children to go to the Mont St. Michel, and Pierre pressed the bell at far greater length than Gilles considered acceptable. He appeared swaying in the corridor demanding, "What the fuck is that?" only to retreat hastily, slamming the connecting door, when he spotted the invaders in his living room.

"He's been working very hard," I explained diplomatically. "I expect he got to bed late."

No one, to my relief, commented on the fact that he had been fully dressed. The children were too excited to notice such things, and the mother too harrassed. Delphine, the mother, asked me hopefully if I wanted to come with them, but I said I really couldn't, I had far too much to do.

"She needs a day off from us," said Corinne complacently. "Daddy says so."

"Will you be here when I get back this time?" asked Jonathan.

"Yes."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

When the door shut behind them, I returned to the sitting room and dropped into a chair. The door to Gilles' part of the house remained shut. I assumed he had gone back to bed. I leant my head on the back of the chair and closed my eyes. I had barely slept last night, and I could hardly see straight.

What was more, Jonathan's leave-taking had made me realize that I was going to have to start preparing the ground for my imminent departure. I was not going to be here when he came home for very much longer. I didn't know what arrangements Gilles was planning to make when school started. I didn't even know if he realized that I would soon be leaving. We had talked about a "summer" job that first day at Mme Leclerc's house, and the subject had not been evoked since.

But the summer was nearly over. What was going to happen next?

The door opened and Gilles came in. He saw me sprawling there and took the chair opposite. His hair was on end, his face was lined. He looked about a hundred years old.

"I feel terrible," he said. "What the hell happened last night?"

"You came home about half-past one and I put you to bed."

"Oh."

He looked down at himself and seemed to take in the fact that he was fully dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

"And before that?"

"I don't know."

"Did I talk to you about Susie?"

I raised my eyebrows. He really was in a bad way.

"You did. We went to the Café de l'Univers, you left me there about ten, and I don't know what you did after that."

He was silent for a while, and then he said, "Oh God, I remember now. Oh Christ, my head."

"I'll get you some Alka-Seltzer."

I went into the kitchen and came back with the tablets fizzing in a glass. I held it out. "Drink this, it might help a bit."

He drank it, eyeing me obediently over the rim of the glass. "Thank you for looking after me, Amanda."

He sounded just like Jonathan. I was unable to answer. Fortunately something else occurred to him, and he didn't notice my disarray.

"There's something I have to do," he announced, frowning.

"What?"

"That's the trouble, I can't remember."

"Is it marked in your diary?"

"My diary's at the office."

"Oh."

He groaned and lay back in his chair. "I think it was important."

"The malouinière?" I suggested at random, and he sat up and opened his eyes.

"Yes, that's it! Amanda, you're a genius. I've got to be at the malouinière at ten o'clock to see the carpenter."

"Then you'd better get a move on. I think the coffee's still hot."

"And you can come with me. They've gone to the Mont St. Michel?"

I stared at him in horror. Me go with him? We had been avoiding each other so nicely until last night. But he seemed to have forgotten all about the incident at the gallery. Amnesia must have got it, along with the rest. He swept aside my protests about food and cleaning and tennis, informed me he'd been meaning to take me to the malouinière for weeks, and went off to take a shower.

I called Virginie to cancel our tennis date.

"You see!" she said. "All he needs is someone to love and understand him."

Gilles appeared in the kitchen twenty minutes later, shaved and revigorated, wearing grey flannel trousers and a rather elegant navy-blue blazer. He had brushed his hair, and got rid of his haggard expression. He looked superb.

I eyed him speculatively. He hadn't got dressed up like this to see a carpenter. He must have a lunch date with Viviane. I was about to propose we travelled in separate cars, when he said,

"Are you going like that? There's a chance that Caradec might show up."

I looked down at my attire. I was wearing what I had put on first thing that morning: jeans with a hole in the knee and a scruffy T-shirt. Groaning, I turned on my heel and went to review my wardrobe.

"Very nice," said Gilles, when I came back in a long linen skirt and round-necked shirt in different shades of écru. "You look like something out of Chekhov."

"Of course," I said, though in fact the resemblance hadn't occurred to me. "A malouinière is some kind of dacha, right?"

But the malouinière was not what I had anticipated. I had expected a cosy little manor house, built in the local stone, a larger version of the local style. Instead, we turned in at a long gravel drive and drew to a halt in front of a graceful building with a perfect classical façade. It had been built, said Gilles, in 1734. Although the walls were of granite, the effect was surprisingly light. Long rows of crisp white windows broke up the façade, and two tall chimneys at either end of the roof drew the house upwards towards the clouds.

We went inside. The ground-floor rooms were lofty and elegant, with marble floors, high ceilings, and the same wood panelling as in the House of the Corsair. I couldn't get over it. I paced from room to room, marvelling at it all. Gilles and the carpenter were amused by my surprise. The corsairs had had money, they told me, a

lot of it. They had thought nothing of bringing artisans and materials up from Italy, and of course there had been a certain amount of competition as to who would manage to create the most desirable house.

But three hundred years later, the house was in decay. It had not been lived in for a century. The marble floors were stained, and the panelling was rotting. I left the two men discussing what to retain and what to replace and went off to explore. The place was vast. Reception rooms on the ground floor, bedrooms on the first floor, and servants' rooms in the attic.

Up in the attic was where I would have slept. I amused myself for a few minutes with a fantasy about me in my attic and Gilles creeping upstairs to ravish me. That kind of thing would have been much easier back then. Susie would have stayed at home and had lovers, nursemaids would have looked after the children, and the master of the house would have had his pick of fine ladies in town by day, and skivvies at home by night.

When I got back downstairs, they were still deep in discussion. I went out to the garden. It was very rundown, but you could still distinguish pathways here and there. I wandered through the wilderness, pausing to examine overgrown fountains and the occasional statue, until a man in a blazer and flannels just like Gilles' appeared from behind a bush and scowled at me.

"Mademoiselle, bonjour. May I ask who exactly you are?"

He had a florid complexion and a self-important air. He must have been about sixty. This was clearly the owner himself. Pierre-Antoine Caradec, man of property, sure of his rights, confronting Amanda, the trespasser.

I told him my name.

"Yes, and?" he snapped at me.

"I came with the architect," I stuttered.

"De Kerguidan?"

"Yes."

"He's here, is he? Good."

His tone softened slightly. He gave me another inspection.

"He's in the house," I said.

Caradec paused, and for a moment I hoped he would go and look for Gilles and leave me alone. Instead, he said, "Then let's go and find him, shall we?"

He gestured in the direction of the house. We walked up the path together. I could feel him re-evaluating me and drawing all the wrong conclusions. I shouldn't have said I had "come with" Gilles: it was far too vague. I opened my mouth to tell him I looked after Gilles' children, and then shut it again. I didn't want Gilles to get his knuckles rapped for bringing the riff-raff. A man like this would understand the architect bringing his girlfriend, but not anyone else.

"You have a wonderful house," I ventured.

"And a talented architect," he returned. "I think it's going to be a felicitous combination, mademoiselle. I hope you'll come and see it when it's restored."

I murmured something vague. We mounted the steps to the entrance. The carpenter was just leaving. He and Gilles were shaking hands in the hall. Gilles glanced from me to Caradec, slightly startled.

"Monsieur Caradec, how nice to see you."

"Kerguidan, good morning. How's it coming along?"

"Very well indeed." He glanced again at me. "This is Miss le Marchant, my- "

"I know, I know, we introduced ourselves already." Caradec turned and leered at me. "Very nice, if I may say so." He made an odd little bow in my direction. "Just

confirms what I always thought, you have excellent taste."

I went bright red. Gilles seemed slightly bemused.

"Thank you," he said in the end. "Now, let me show you what we've decided. All these panels here will have to go, but we think those in the East Room can stay."

He shepherded Caradec around, pointing out the dry rot in the panels that had to be replaced, explaining his plans. I trailed two paces behind.

"How much will all this cost?" said Caradec when they had finished.

Gilles told him.

"Seems a bit steep," he said.

"I'm waiting for a quote from another firm. It might be slightly lower. But I've worked with these people before on a similar project. They're conscientious, they're reliable. They'll do a good job, and they won't make you wait too long. But of course the decision is up to you. I'll let you know when I get the final figures."

Caradec turned back to me. "You see how he bullies me?"

I smiled at them. "But he has talent!" I said. "You said so yourself."

"Indeed he does," said Caradec. "And now I see why. With a muse like you to inspire him, it would be surprising if he didn't."

I went bright red again. Gilles began to cough.

"Do let's get out of here. There's far too much dust," I said.

"Good idea," said Caradec, looking at his watch. "Why don't we all go and have lunch?"

I looked at Gilles. He seemed incapable of responding. The hell with it, I thought.

"Lunch? I'd love to," I said.

"If you don't already have plans?"

"I was supposed to be lunching with friends. But they've gone to the Mont St. Michel."

"So you've been stood up? Can't have that! All right with you, Kerguidan?"

"Fine," said Gilles faintly.

Caradec took us to the Cap Horn in the Hôtel des Thermes. It was the most expensive restaurant in St. Malo. We travelled all together in his Mercedes. During the ride the conversation veered between terse instructions to Gilles and heavy-handed compliments to me.

When we got to the restaurant, the maître d'hôtel took one look at Caradec and led us straight across the room and down some steps to a table overlooking the sea. The Cap Horn was the sort of restaurant where the waiters outnumbered the diners. They fluttered round us for a good fifteen minutes, offering us six different types of bread, and filling our glasses, and explaining the nature of the free amuse-bouches.

"So why haven't I met you before?" asked Caradec, when they had subsided. "He must keep you hidden away."

I smiled demurely.

"How long have you two known each other?"

"Oh, about three months," I said.

"I see, yes. And where did you meet?"

"On a boat. On the ferry coming over from Guernsey. He slammed a door in my face."

"Is that so? Not very gentlemanly of him!"

"No, it wasn't," I said. "So I told him off, we got talking, and I suppose you could say things just went on from there."

Gilles took my hand across the table. "You might even say it was love at first

sight."

Startled, I looked at him. He gave me a smile of such unconcealed affection that it made me go weak at the knees. Then he raised my hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Wouldn't have thought you were such a romantic, Kerguidan," said Pierre-Antoine Caradec approvingly.

The waiter arrived with our first course. Gilles let go of my hand. I looked up as the waiter placed my plate in front of me, and my eyes met Viviane's. She was sitting at a table just above us, and to judge by the look on her face, she had seen everything.

19. AN EVENING WITH JACQUES BREL

The storm was not long in breaking.

Gilles' mobile rang twice during lunch, with an interval of about ten minutes between the two calls. The first time, he checked the caller's identity and put the phone back in his pocket. The second time, he frowned and switched it off. I managed to glance surreptitiously over his shoulder as he did so. Both times the caller was Viviane. Gilles still had no idea she was there: his back was turned towards her, and I had no means of warning him.

At the end of the meal, we got up to leave the restaurant. Caradec led the way, and went right past Viviane's table. She was lunching with a grey-haired man whom I vaguely remembered seeing in the gallery.

Gilles saw her and stopped dead. I slid past discreetly, out of the line of fire.

I was braced for an explosion, but that wasn't Viviane's style.

"Why Gilles, how nice to see you," she cooed. "Won't you join us for coffee? And your friends too, of course."

Gilles recovered his wits. "Viviane, how are you? I'll call you later."

He caught up with me, put his arm round my shoulders, and hissed furiously in my ear, "Did you *know* she was there?"

"Yes. I couldn't warn you."

"How much did she see?"

"Oh, pretty well everything."

"Jesus," said Gilles, and then a curious expression came over his face. "Well, never mind. It might be for the best."

A wave of exasperation swept through me. Was this the man who had spent the night drinking because he wanted his wife back? I tried to shake off his hand, but Caradec was looking back to see where we'd got to. Gilles gripped my shoulder hard, and dropped a kiss tenderly on my cheek.

I had had enough of playing the love-at-first-sight victim. With Viviane joining in the game, it was a lot less fun. We came out of the restaurant, and Caradec turned in the direction of his car. Gilles followed. We were supposed to be going back to the malouinière to discuss more carpentry and pick up the Jeep.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you here," I said.

They both turned and looked at me.

"What?" said Gilles.

"Really?" said Caradec.

"I promised to meet my friends when they get back from the Mont St. Michel. They're leaving tomorrow, and I really don't want to miss them. Mr Caradec, it was a pleasure meeting you, and thank you so much for lunch. Darling, I'll see you later at the apartment."

"Fine," said Gilles.

Before I had time to move away, he stepped forward and kissed me very thoroughly, under Caradec's approving eye.

"Have a lovely afternoon," he said, as he turned away.

As I walked back along the Digue to St. Malo, my exasperation vanished, and I felt remarkably pleased with myself. The kiss had cheered me up. I decided that all in all, things were really going quite well. Not only had I not heard a word about

Susie all morning, I had had a very nice lunch, *and* I had managed to put Viviane's nose out of joint. It wasn't bad for one day.

Gilles was playing with me, of course, still using me, but since crumbs from his table were all I would ever get, then, what the hell, I might as well snap them up! A kiss on false pretences was better than none. It wasn't as if he had been obliged to do it. Virginie was right: he liked me. That look he had given me - that hadn't come out of nowhere. Even the night of passion might be forthcoming, if I played my cards right.

As for the lifetime of commitment, it might be more prudent to pass. Gilles was committed to far too many women already, and he didn't seem prepared to grant exclusive rights to any of them. I was starting to wonder if Susie was the only one to have had affairs.

It was a brilliant day, although the wind was fresh. My skirt whirled in the breeze, and my hair spun everywhere. Buoyed by a few hours basking in the admiration of one of the most powerful men in France - even if he did have the manners of a jumped-up country bumpkin - I felt ready for anything. I would seduce Gilles, make the most of my one-night stand, book my passage on the ferry to Portsmouth, leave domestic service forever, and become - why not? - a famous architect! I began to run along the Digue from sheer joie de vivre.

The children got back from the Mont St. Michel almost as full of themselves as I was. They had been right to the top of the hill (Jonathan), they had looked in all the shops (Corinne), they had thrown coins in the wishing well, and they had had an ice-cream each. I asked them what had they wished for, and Corinne said she had wished for an ice cream, and it had come true. Jonathan, more versed in the ways of wishing wells, declined to tell me. When Gilles came home, they were in the bath.

I took one look at his face, and my good mood vanished. Without being told, I shut the corridor door.

Gilles dropped into a chair and reached for the whisky.

"Did you talk to Viviane?" I asked nervously.

"Yes."

"How... er... how did it go?"

"Not very well. She wanted me to sack you on the spot. I have to take her to dinner tomorrow night to discuss the subject."

I looked at him in alarm. He saw my face.

"Don't look like that! You know it's not going to happen."

Reassured, I sat down.

"Where are you going for dinner?"

"Le Chalut."

I raised my eyebrows. "Expensive."

"It's her favourite."

"Does she make a lot of money with that gallery of hers?"

The question was out before I could stop myself.

"Not as much as she'd like," said Gilles dryly. "That's where I come in."

Corinne called from the bathroom, and the conversation went no further. But the more I thought about what he had said, the more encouraging I found it. If he knew that Viviane was only out for what she could get, then maybe I stood a chance.

Not until I saw him leaving for Le Chalut the following evening, in his navy blazer and a crisp white shirt, did I realize I was quite wrong. The look in his eye made it perfectly clear that, even if he suspected the reason for Viviane's interest in him, her company had other attractions. There was a spring in his step as he crossed

the sitting room, and he strode down the stairs like a man with a purpose. Gilles was looking forward to the night ahead.

When the children were in bed, I poured myself a glass of wine, and resorted to Jacques Brel.

*Ay Marieke Marieke I loved you so
Between the towers of Bruges and Gand
Ay Marieke Marieke so long ago
Between the towers of Bruges and Gand.*

After several glasses of wine, I stopped thinking and lost myself entirely in the music, and the warm, wise, desperate voice. I knew exactly how Brel had felt when he wrote the song, and he knew exactly how I was feeling listening to it now.

Outside the window, the night came down, and the shadows closed in. I was lying full-length on the sofa in the dark when the front door opened, and the hall light went on.

Gilles appeared in the doorway of the sitting room. He surveyed the scene. To my relief, he made no attempt to put on the light. I raised my head and we looked at each other. Then he crossed to the CD player and silenced the music.

"Forgive me, I can't listen to this. I save it for when I'm- " He broke off.

"Me too," I said.

He stared at me. "Have you heard from, what was it, Roger?"

"No."

"I see."

I doubted he did, but I wasn't going to set him right. "What are you doing home so early?"

"We had a row."

There was an odd note in his voice that I couldn't place. I strained to see his face, but the light was too dim.

"What about?"

"About you."

"Me? Why about me?" I sat up in agitation. "Didn't you tell her what happened? That it was all Caradec's fault?"

"Actually, no, I didn't."

"Why not?"

He didn't answer.

I didn't really understand what was going on, but I could not allow him to break up with his girlfriend because of a silly misunderstanding in the Cap Horn. The fact that I didn't like Viviane, and I didn't think she was good for him, was beside the point. It was his life, not mine, and I would not be part of it for much longer. I wanted him for one night, that was all. After that, she could have him back.

"Gilles, you do realize that when the children go back to school, I- "

"Yes," he said, "I know."

"Did you tell her that? That I'm leaving?"

"I didn't get a chance. It seems she heard what I said about love at first sight."

That curious note was back in his voice again.

"But she must know that it wasn't true!"

He opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. "The truth is, Amanda, I've had enough of Viviane. Whether we break up over you or over something else doesn't really matter."

I was taken by surprise. "You're not going to break up with her, are you?"

"I certainly am. I was hoping to do it tonight, but she's remarkably deaf when it suits her."

I stared at him in shock. I had not expected such radical action. I had completely misread his air of resolve. He had gone out to dinner with a specific purpose in mind, but it had not been the one I thought.

And then I realized what he was intending.

"So ... you mean ... you've decided ... you want Susie back?"

It was hard to get the words out. I felt as though I had a band of iron round my heart and it was squeezing me tighter and tighter.

"No, I didn't say that."

"But what-?" I began, but then the phone rang.

We both gazed at it as if it was about to burst into flames.

"Should I-?" I made as if to get to my feet, but Gilles waved me back.

"Let's wait for the answering machine."

We sat in silence and waited.

After a minute, the machine took over. "Gilles, c'est maman. I wanted to ask- "

He got to his feet, snapped on the lights, and picked up.

"Yes, maman, I'm here. Fine, fine, and you? Good, and the shop? Saturday? No, I'm sorry, I'm not going to that. No. You say you don't want to go – all right then you *can't* go - and I'm not going on my own. No, there are no children their age, they'd be bored to death. No, she refused. Maman, I don't think so. Frankly, can you see Viviane at a party like that? What? Take who?"

He turned round to stare at me.

I looked at him inquiringly. He rolled his eyes.

"All right, I'll tell you what. She's right here, I'll ask her, and call you back. Yes, in about ten minutes. No, I won't forget."

He hung up. "That was my mother." He stopped and scratched his head. "Hold on, I need a drink."

He got a glass out of the cupboard, and poured a hefty dose of whisky into it.

"Ah, that's better. Right. Some cousins of ours who live in the country near Dinan are giving a birthday party for their daughter on Saturday. It's the village where my mother was born: I think I told you. My mother has been invited, and so have I, and so have the children. My mother says it's impossible for her to go because some other cousins will be there that she doesn't get on with. Jonathan and Corinne don't want to go because there are no other children of their age: everyone is either much older or much younger. I don't want to go either, but my mother says I have to. She says someone from our side of the family ought to be there. Susie was invited too, they don't know we're separated, but of course she isn't here. I asked Viviane to come some time ago, and she turned me down flat. I refuse to go on my own, so my mother thinks I should ask you to come with me. I don't know where she got this idea from. Don't feel you have to say yes. I only said I'd ask you."

"Who'll look after the children?" I asked doubtfully.

Madame Leclerc had made it clear more than once that she didn't care to babysit on a Saturday night, and I knew that Virginie had friends coming down from Paris for the weekend.

"My mother will. She's offered to have them to stay for the night."

I was surprised. This was unusual. Lucienne was not in the front line of volunteers when it came to babysitting. The occasion must be important to her.

I considered the idea. An evening with Gilles, whatever the venue, was not to be lightly discarded.

"What is it exactly?"

"It's a twentieth birthday party. It's traditionally important, I don't really know why. It doesn't correspond to the legal majority, which used to be twenty-one, and is now eighteen, but for some reason they do it that way. What goes on is you sit round a table all night - they last for hours these big country do's - you eat, you drink, you dance, you try and think of things to say to your cousins that you haven't seen for years...."

His voice tailed off gloomily, and he took another gulp of whisky.

"I think it might be rather fun," I said. "I haven't been to a thing like that for years."

"Really? You want to come?"

"Yes. Of course I do."

20. MY NIGHT OF PASSION

My night of passion was being handed to me on a plate. With the children in Dinard, Viviane sidelined, and Susie in Saint-Brieuc, I was home and dry. Virginie was sure of it.

"What are you going to wear?" she said.

"I don't know. What does one wear for a country birthday party?"

"I don't know. Not a very romantic occasion, is it?"

"You can't have everything."

"Maybe you should ask Gilles."

"I already did. He says I always look very nice."

"That's helpful," said Virginie. "We'd better take a look at what you've got."

While we were examining the fairly meagre contents of my cupboard, Corinne arrived. Virginie and I had been debating black linen versus jeans and a see-through blouse, but Corinne made a beeline for the pink dress I had worn to Viviane's party, and said I ought to wear that because it was the only really pretty thing I had. Virginie grimaced and said it would be too cold, Jonathan, wandering past, asked if they had run out of material when they were making it, and I was far from sure that it was suitable for a country birthday party - but Corinne was adamant.

After a day or two of dithering, I remembered the dress had definitely had an impact last time, and decided to take her advice.

"Nice dress," said Gilles, when I appeared in the sitting room on the night of the party.

He was wearing jeans and a heavy navy blue sweater. No doubt much more practical for where we were going.

"You've seen it before," I said.

"Yes," he agreed impassively.

"But this time I let my hair down."

"You'd better take a sweater. It could be chilly later on."

Not a promising start. In the car, he didn't speak as we picked our way through St. Malo's Saturday-evening rush hour. I wondered if he was regretting Viviane.

After we had crossed the Rance and were heading towards Dinan, he said, "I looked at the calendar today, and I saw that the children go back to school in two weeks time."

"Yes, I know."

"I hadn't realized it was so soon. When are you planning on leaving?"

I looked at him sideways. His eyes were fixed on the road.

"Well, as soon as I can after that, I suppose. Have you found someone to replace me?"

"No, not yet. I'm still thinking what's best to do."

Gilles' cousins lived in a village a few kilometres outside Dinan. They had a large, modern house that they had built themselves. It had a well-kept lawn and beautifully tended flower beds, plus a large vegetable garden, a chicken run, and an orchard at the back. Rémy, the husband, owned a garage in Dinan, and Françoise, his wife, did the accounting for the firm.

Gilles and I were among the last of the guests to arrive. I was introduced to a

bewildering array of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and neighbours, all of whom had to be kissed four times on the cheek. There were too many of them to be properly introduced. Gilles was clearly impatient with all the ritual greetings, and I was soon overwhelmed.

I rapidly lost track of who was who, and then realized that some of the older relatives had mistaken me for Susie, who they had plainly not seen for some time, or, in some cases, possibly never. They asked after my children, and told me my French had improved. Gilles saw what was going on, but made no attempt to correct them. When I caught his eye questioningly, he merely shrugged. In the car he had told me that he hadn't seen most of these people for several years, and expressed the hope that he wouldn't see them again for several more.

I decided there was no point worrying. It was his family, not mine. I accepted a glass of sangria, and went on kissing cheeks.

Rémy and Françoise, of course, knew who I was. So did Sandrine, their daughter, in whose honour the party was being held. Sandrine had a job as a cashier in a supermarket in Dinan. To my relief, her skirt was even shorter than mine. She bore me off to meet her friends: Didier, who worked as a mechanic in her father's garage, Céline, who was a hairdresser, Grégoire, who was an electrician, and several others, whose names I promptly forgot. Sandrine had a lot of friends. None of them seemed to have travelled further afield than Rennes, and none seemed to have any desire to do so. They were clearly intrigued by the idea of an English girl working as an au pair in St. Malo, and asked me a lot of questions I couldn't answer about London and rock stars and the royal family.

Gilles had stayed on the other side of the garden with the rest of the family, and was making laborious conversation with various elderly relatives he had presumably not seen for some time. Each time I looked up, he was watching me.

At last we were asked to sit down. The tables had been set up in a tent in the orchard. There must have been at least seventy guests, divided between three long tables. One was reserved for the younger set, and it was here that I was invited to sit, between Didier and Grégoire.

Gilles was at a table on the other side of the tent. He caught my eye and made a gesture of resignation. We took our seats. I noticed that one end of the tent was occupied by a kind of wooden dance floor. There was a CD player and a stack of CDs on a table. Sandrine put a slice of melon in front of me, and I smiled up at her.

The meal, as Gilles had prophesied, went on for hours. After the melon, there was salmon, and then we got down to the serious business of the evening, which was the barbecue, presented in installments. First the chipolatas, then the merguez, and finally slices of lamb.

By then I was hardly able to eat, but everyone else was still stolidly tucking in. We had been sitting there for nearly three hours. I had run out of things to say a long time ago. Didier was discussing the opening of the duck-shooting season with the man sitting opposite him, and Grégoire was telling the girl on his other side about the week he had just spent camping at the Pointe du Raz.

"I could go to England if I wanted to," Grégoire had assured me earlier, "but I don't see the point. I'm happy here, so why go somewhere else?"

So young, and so incurious. I found it depressing. I picked at my food, and drank my way steadily through everything that was put before me: cider, white wine, red wine, more red wine. Sandrine and her friends were in charge of serving and clearing plates, which meant that things took even longer. I caught Gilles' eye across the room.

"All right?" he mouthed, and flashed me a sudden smile. I began to feel slightly better.

Sandrine's friends began to distribute the salad, and Sandrine put on some music. She and her boyfriend began to dance, and some of the others promptly followed suit. Didier tapped me on the shoulder and jerked his head towards the floor. I got up without protest. After that, I danced with Grégoire, and then with Julien, and then Sandrine made us sit down again to eat our salad and cheese.

There was another round of dancing before the dessert, then at last the meal was over. At least the part that involved food. I guessed there was still coffee and liqueurs to come.

The older people looked as though they could happily sit there all night, but the younger ones were getting restive, and I was relieved when I could get up and dance again. The pink dress was attracting a lot of attention, and I had no lack of partners. I danced with Michel, and Claude, and someone else, whose name I didn't know. Then the music changed, Sandrine put on a slow, and with a sense of dread I saw all three of them converging on me. That was when Gilles cut in.

"My turn, I think." He took my hand in his and put his other hand on my waist. "So how's it going, Amanda?" he asked, in English. "Are you having a good time?"

"Of course I am. And I'm sure you are too."

"Well, now I am," said Gilles.

"I didn't know you spoke such good English."

He eyed me sardonically. "How do you suppose I managed to communicate with Susie?"

"I didn't know you did communicate with Susie." The words were out before I could stop them. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"Why not?" He shrugged. "It's true."

"Do you really want her back?"

"Do you think I'd do better with Viviane?"

I had drunk far too much wine by then.

"You know, Gilles, if I were in your position, I think I'd just ditch them both, and leave sex to the next generation."

He burst out laughing. "So you think I ought to take a vow of chastity like Saint Maclou?"

"I didn't say that," I said.

For a moment, our eyes met. Gilles pulled me against him. His arms went round my waist and I slid my arms round his neck. Some of the older couples had got up too, the dance floor was filling up, and we blended into the crowd. My head was against his shoulder, and he buried his face in my hair. *Oh my love, my darling, I hunger for your touch.*

I couldn't imagine where Sandrine had got hold of the Righteous Brothers, but it was perfect. I felt a sense of peace I had never felt before. As though I had found something I had been looking for for a long, long time. *And time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much.* I could have stayed like that with his arms around me forever, but as the music rose towards its climax, he started to kiss me, and that was even better. The song ended, and we went on kissing.

From close by I heard a disapproving elderly voice, "How long did you say they'd been married? Ten years. Doesn't look like that to me."

Gilles heard it too, and hustled me out of the tent. We rounded a corner into

the darkness and his arms went round me again.

After a long while, he said rather breathlessly, "I think we should go."

"Can we do that?"

"I think we'd better. Did you leave anything in there? Where's your sweater?"

"I left it in the car."

"Weren't you cold?"

"Yes, but I'm not any more."

He kissed me again. "Come on then."

"Shouldn't we say goodbye?"

"Yes, but we're not going to. I'll give Rémy a call tomorrow."

We went cautiously round the back of the tent and started to pick our way towards the next field, where the cars were parked. Halfway to the car, Gilles' mobile rang. He looked to see who was calling, sighed, and switched off the phone.

"Gilles?" said Rémy's voice behind us. "Not leaving already?"

"I'm afraid we have to."

Gilles kept the phone in his hand.

"My mother just called to say that Corinne isn't well. We have to get back. Tell Françoise and Sandrine how sorry we are."

"Aren't you going to say goodbye?"

"She sounded rather urgent. Those earaches, you know, at that age."

Rémy stood with a tray of bottles and watched us walk away.

"Was that really your mother calling?" I asked, when we were out of earshot.

"No," said Gilles. I didn't ask further questions.

We got into the Jeep and bumped slowly towards the road. At the gate, Gilles put on the brake, leaving the engine running, and looked at me.

"Is this all right?"

"Of course it is. What do you mean?"

"I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do."

"You're not making me do anything, Gilles. I want it too."

He edged the car through the gateposts and out on to the road. When we reached the main highway to St. Malo, he took my hand.

"Amanda, listen. I don't know how to say this, and in any case I don't suppose you'll believe me. I know there's Susie, and Viviane too... I know how this must look, but it isn't just... Oh God. What I'm trying to say is that, contrary to appearances, this isn't just the employer making a pass at the au pair girl."

My heart began to beat faster.

"Gilles, what did you mean the other day about love at first sight?"

He glanced at me. "What I said. The first time I saw you- "

"On the ferry?"

"Yes."

"When I was being a hysterical bitch?"

"Yes."

"Why did you never tell me that?"

"When would have been a good time?" he said dryly. "When I was hiring you to look after the kids, or when you moved into the flat?"

"But what were you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"With Susie and Viviane around, I didn't know what I could do. In any case, every time we started to talk, some damn fool came and interrupted!"

"Then it's just as well it happened on its own."

"On its own?" said Gilles. I couldn't see his face, but could hear the undertone of amusement in his voice. "I wouldn't say that exactly. What about that sexy little dress you went out and bought yourself?"

"What? My dress? Oh, but that wasn't- I didn't mean- "

"Never mind," said Gilles. "At least it broke the ice."

"You could say that."

"I wanted to ask you something else."

"Yes?"

"What about Roger?"

"I told you already, Roger's finished. He dumped me for someone else."

I recounted the episode in the pub. When I got to the bit about the ring, he began to laugh.

"Now I see why the children do as they're told!"

"Don't cross me, that's all. In any case, he deserved it."

"He sounds like a bastard."

"He was."

"Why did you stay with him so long?"

I had been wondering that myself.

"Because I think ... what it was ... he gave me a kind of security that I didn't have when I was younger. I don't know. I found it reassuring to do the same things, meet in the same places, talk about work..."

"But you're students! Wasn't it boring?"

"Yes, but I didn't realize that until I met you."

When we got to St. Malo, we parked the Jeep on the Rue de Toulouse, the side street next to the house, and walked back to the Rue de Dinan, hand in hand. Even though it was late, the street was still full of people.

We entered the house. François' heavy oak door swung shut behind us.

Gilles pushed me gently back against the wall. Time slowed to a stop. I don't know how long we stayed there. It was completely dark in the hall. I was conscious of nothing but his mouth, his hands, and his body pressed against mine. The building was silent. I don't know which of us finally broke away and moved towards the stairs. It took us a long time to get up them.

When we opened the door of the apartment, the first thing we saw was the flashing red light of the answering machine. There were four messages waiting. We eyed the light apprehensively.

"Damn," said Gilles. "I hope that's not my mother."

Keeping one arm around me, he pressed the button with his other hand.

The messages were all from Viviane.

The first one had been left at half-past twelve. It would have come in just as we were leaving Remy's house.

"Darling, I couldn't reach you on your mobile. I suppose you've gone to the party at your cousins'. Call me when you get in. I've been missing you so much since our silly little squabble the other day." Her voice dropped seductively. "Have *you* been missing me too?"

The second was five to one.

"It's me again. I'd been hoping you'd call. I'm so lonely tonight. It's been a *hellish* week without you. I can see I'm not going to get a *wink* of sleep if I don't get a call from you soon."

Quarter past one. "Gilles, where on *earth* have you got to? Why haven't you

called. Aren't you even missing me a *tiny* bit? You must be! Admit it, we were *so* good together! I've never had a man who made me feel like you. Don't tell me you've forgotten the last time, how good it was?"

I gasped and tried to pull away, but Gilles tightened his grasp.

Half-past one. "Gilles, what the *hell* are you doing? I saw you go into your building ten minutes ago. She's *much* too young for you, you must realize that. Darling, you *have* to stop exploiting these poor young English girls who don't know any better. Let the child go to bed and come down to me. I'm parked on Rue de Toulouse" – seductive pause – "and I'm ready to go."

This time, Gilles let me go. He was white with fury. He grabbed the phone and stabbed out a number.

"Viviane? Where the fuck are you? You're really on Rue de Toulouse? So you're spying on me now? Are you completely crazy? Listen, it's over! Finished! I don't want to see you any more. I don't want anything more to do with you. Go home and go to bed. No, you aren't going to see me tonight! Or any other night. You've done what? Oh no, don't give me that! I don't believe you. You've taken what? Are you sure of that? How many? My God, you stupid bitch! Right, where are you parked? Fine, stay there. I'll be down right away and I'll drive you to hospital."

He slammed down the phone and turned to me.

"She claims she's swallowed a whole box of sleeping pills. It may or may not be true, but I can't just leave her."

"No," I agreed, "you can't."

"Don't be angry with me."

"I'm not angry."

"I'm sorry."

He took a step towards me, but then thought better of it. We gazed at each other across the hall.

"You'd better go," I said.

He sighed, and turned on his heel.

"Go to bed, don't wait up. I'll see you tomorrow."

The door slammed behind him. I realized I was trembling. I shuffled into the sitting room, and dropped in the nearest chair. After a few minutes, I heard a car start up at the foot of the building. That would be Viviane's. She must have parked at the intersection of Rue de Toulouse and Rue de Dinan, where she could see everyone who entered the House of the Corsair. Not long afterwards, I heard a band of youths go by, shouting at the tops of their voices. And then there was silence. Nothing but silence. Even the gulls were asleep.

After a long while, I clambered to my feet, took off my futile pink dress, dropped it in the waste bin, and went to bed. I lay there in the dark and stared at the ceiling. Much later on, I heard the front door closing softly. I tensed, waiting to see what would happen. But all I heard was the sound of soft footsteps padding swiftly through the other end of the flat, and a click as the bedroom door shut.

I lay awake until dawn.

21. VIVIANE'S LAST STAND

I was woken by the phone at five past ten. It was Lucienne calling to say she would be arriving with the children in half an hour. She wanted, she said merrily, a full report on the party. I showered and threw on some clothes. My face in the mirror stared sallowly back at me. I looked a mess.

I was drinking a cup of very hot black coffee when the bell rang ten minutes early. I went to open the door, barefoot, with dripping hair. Lucienne and the children seemed delighted to see me. All three looked fresh and rested and pleased with themselves. None of them seemed to notice the state I was in. The children beamed up at me, but Lucienne avoided my eyes.

I suddenly wondered if Lucienne had planned the whole evening deliberately. No one else to go with Gilles - and she would babysit.

I stared at her speculatively. She was wearing a pale pink knit dress and white canvas shoes, and she looked the picture of the dynamic young grandmother. I told myself I was getting paranoid. What purpose could it possibly serve Lucienne to push her son into the arms of his au pair?

"I'm sorry we're so early," she carolled. "I'm having lunch with a friend in Rennes."

"Grandma took us to a pizzeria," said Corinne. "They gave us paper hats."

"We stayed up till ten o'clock."

"We slept in Grandma's spare room. There's a table with a lovely flowered tablecloth and a lamp with a chain that you pull."

"Where's my son?" chirped Lucienne. "Don't say he's still in bed! Shall I go and see?"

She waltzed off down the corridor without waiting for an answer.

I turned to the children. "Have you had your breakfast?"

"Yes, but we brought you some croissants."

Jonathan produced a battered paper bag. I had never felt less like eating in my life.

"Good," I said. "The coffee's just ready. Let's take Daddy his breakfast, and then we can go for a walk."

"A walk? What for?"

I looked at him. What for? Because, Jonathan, after last night, I have no desire to confront your father in the presence of his children and his mother.

"Because it's ages since we've been round the ramparts on a Sunday morning," I said weakly, and then inspiration struck.

"You know what? The tide is out. I still haven't shown you where Simon and I got shipwrecked."

The idea appealed to them. At last something new and different. Jonathan disappeared to double-check the tides, though he knew them backwards already, and Corinne ran off to decide which Barbie was to be included in the excursion. I put the coffee, the croissants and two cups on a tray for Gilles and Lucienne. They were still in the bedroom. As I went down the corridor, I could hear their voices, or more precisely Lucienne's.

"I grant you, she's a little young, but she's very mature for her age, and as I told you before, Gilles, she comes from a very good family. I told you about the

castle on the beach."

I froze in horror, halfway down the corridor. Luckily, neither of them could see me.

I waited for Gilles to respond, but the answer when it came was an undistinguishable mumble. I guessed she had woken him up.

"Germaine said you were getting on very well last night. She said the pair of you left early."

"Germaine should get a life," snapped Gilles, by now fully awake. "Does the whole of St. Malo know what time we left already?"

"It would be a real step up for you. I don't want to say anything against Susie, but- "

Gilles, by the sound of it, tried to interrupt.

"And that Viviane woman's certainly not for you."

"I'm finished with Viviane."

"Well, that's a good job. I never liked those paintings of hers."

"But I have to tell you, you've got the wrong idea about Amanda."

"Nonsense, Gilles. That's not what I see this morning. You're still in bed, and it's as plain as a pikestaff that Amanda hasn't slept all night."

I went softly back to the sitting room and put the tray on the table. Jonathan and Corinne were already waiting.

"Aren't you going to give the tray to Daddy?" said Corinne.

"No, not just now. He and Grandma have things to talk about. Let's go out, before the tide turns."

I would quite liked to have been cut off by the tide a second time, but with Jonathan along, such a thing was impossible. I was beginning to worry about Jonathan. Had he always been such an anxious, vigilant child? Or was this something that had developed since his mother had left?

I did what I could to delay our return - inventing Robinson Crusoe stories on the islet, lingering as long as possible on the ramparts - to be sure that Lucienne was out of the way when we got back. The thought of her made me cringe. She must have been assessing me all these weeks like a breeder in a cattle market. A girl of good family, with a castle to boot, appearing on the scene just as her son happened to be in need of a new wife. What more could one ask?

The ferry was leaving for Portsmouth. For a moment, I wished I was on it. I felt as though everyone in St. Malo was trying to manipulate me into their little schemes. The ship of stone was beginning to feel like a nest of intrigue. Given a choice, I would have preferred the more high-handed methods of François and his companions. With a fighting man, at least you knew where you were.

What frightened me most, of course, was Gilles' outright denial that there was anything between him and me. In the light of what he had said last night, I didn't know what to make of it. I tried to convince myself that he would admit nothing to his mother, knowing that it would immediately make the rounds of St. Malo. Still, there had been something in his voice that I hadn't liked at all.

I wondered when he and I would get a chance to talk. The children would be around all afternoon. Since it was Sunday, sports of some description would have ousted the princesses and the masters of the universe from the television screen. As he had observed last night, every time we started to talk, we got interrupted. Maybe we could take the children to the beach and talk there.

But when we got back to the House of the Corsair, there was nobody there. Lucienne must have left for Rennes. As for Gilles, he had left a laconic note on the

kitchen table saying that Caradec had called, and he had gone to the malouinière.

The day seemed endless. I forced myself to behave normally for the children's sake, but it was an effort. As the hours dragged on, my fears increased. Why hadn't Gilles come to my room last night? Why had he dismissed Lucienne's insinuations so categorically this morning? Why had he rushed off to the malouinière on a Sunday - and why on earth was he spending so long there?

He didn't get home until nearly half past nine. He looked exhausted. He had been in the office until now, he said, working on plans. Reminding myself grimly that I was only his employee, I did not ask why the hell he hadn't called.

The children and I had already eaten, and they were on their way to bed. Gilles waved away my offers of warmed-up shepherd's pie. He wasn't hungry, he said. He got himself a glass of whisky and sat down with the paper at the kitchen table. When the children tried to talk to him, he told them to go to bed.

Sensing perhaps that something was in the air, they were both reluctant to do so. Corinne wanted to tell him about the lamp at Grandma's. Jonathan asked for a drink of water. Corinne needed to go to the bathroom. Jonathan wanted to know why they couldn't stay up till ten o'clock like they had at Grandma's.

In the end, Gilles lost his temper. I was finishing the washing up, he was sitting at the kitchen table drumming his fingers, and they had both come back into the kitchen on some pretext or other. Abruptly, his patience snapped. They were both to go to bed this instant! They would never be allowed to go to Grandma's again, and what's more Grandma would not be allowed to come and see them here! They were never like this except when they'd been to her house, she had no notion how to deal with children, or anyone else for that matter, she got things completely out of proportion-

Corinne scurried out in a hurry, but Jonathan stood his ground.

"What did Grandma say to you to make you so cross?"

"Grandma is a meddler who never stops interfering in other people's business, and what's more she's getting senile!"

"Grandma says you should get a new wife."

It was suddenly very quiet. Leaving my hands in the soapsuds, I rested my forehead on the front of the kitchen cabinet, and closed my eyes, and wished with all my might for Jonathan to shut up.

"Does she?" said Gilles dangerously. "And what's wrong with the one I've got?"

"She says Mummy doesn't look after us properly. Not like Amanda. Grandma thinks you should marry Amanda."

I prayed for God to strike me dead right now, or else for the floor to swallow me up. Neither wish was granted.

"And what do *you* think?" said Gilles.

There was a long, long silence. Cautiously, I turned round to look at Jonathan. He had gone bright red and was shuffling his feet on the floor. Gilles hadn't moved. I didn't dare to interfere.

"Mummy's not here," he blurted out in the end. "But maybe she'll come back, and if she doesn't then maybe...." He hung his head in confusion.

"Go to bed," said Gilles. Jonathan fled. His bedroom door closed. Gilles loosed off a stream of swear words, some of which I had never heard before.

"Go and talk to him," I said, and he glared at me.

"Later. That child has to learn to think before he speaks. First, I want to talk to *you*. We'll go in the study, I think."

He marched out of the kitchen, and I followed him to the other end of the flat. He slammed all the doors behind us. In the study, he waved me to a chair and sat behind his desk. A chill went down my spine. This was far too formal: what was he going to say?

"I suspect you may have heard part of a conversation between my mother and myself this morning."

He looked at me inquiringly. I nodded.

"I'm sorry, I was in the corridor, I happened to- "

He wasn't even listening to my feeble excuses.

"My mother, as I just told Jonathan, is a senile meddler! Pay *no* attention at all to what she said! I assure you I had *no* notion of what she was planning last night, and if I had I would *certainly* not have gone along with it!"

Each of these declarations was punctuated with a bang of his fist on the desktop.

"I am *not* in the habit of asking my mother's advice on who to marry, and you can be totally sure I have *no* intention of marrying you!"

I stared at him dumbly.

He realized what he had said, and started to backtrack.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that quite the way it sounded. I'm just sick to death of all these people interfering in my life."

"Gilles," I said, "calm down. I don't know what you've been thinking, but let me assure you, I had no idea about your mother's little schemes."

"No, I didn't think you did."

He stared for a moment at the desktop, and his tone when he spoke was much cooler.

"Listen, about last night."

My heart sank. I guessed what was coming. Lucienne and her scheming had made him think again. With a vague idea of gaining time, I tried to head him off.

"Tell me about Viviane first. What happened when you got to the hospital?"

"We didn't go to the hospital. When I got down to her car, she decided she'd miscounted the tablets. And then she said that in any case they were only over-the-counter tranquillizers. So I drove her home, and took a look around. There were no tablets of any description in the bathroom cupboard, and no empty boxes in the bin. So then we had a little talk. She said that she suspected I was trying to replace her, and that if you were the best I could do, I might want to rethink. Sit down, for God's sake – I'm telling you what *she* said! So I told her that I thought I was doing a lot better than I had been previously, and she didn't like that at all."

He looked up, but avoided my eyes.

"What did she say?" I prompted.

There was a long pause. He had to force the words out.

"She said, 'My poor Gilles. They just get younger and younger. First Susie, and now this one. You'll be poaching Jonathan's girlfriends next.'"

"Oh my God."

"So then I got up and left."

A wave of relief ran through me. "Then she won't be calling again."

"No," said Gilles.

He met my gaze. A stab of fear ran through me. There was something else.

"The thing is, Amanda, she's perfectly right. You're only twenty-three. I've been tending to forget that. I'm thirty-five, with two children and a failed marriage. What could you possibly want with someone like me? My life is already half over,

and yours is just starting out."

I gazed at him in disbelief.

"But Gilles, I, you, that's not true, it doesn't matter, I don't care, your life isn't over, don't be ridiculous- "

"It wouldn't be fair. Amanda, don't look like that! You need to go back to England, find someone your own age. If not Roger, then someone like him, someone with all his chances still before him."

I couldn't say a word. I just sat and stared at him.

"Caradec this afternoon was just the same. He asked where you were. It was clear he thought you were some bimbo and I was just having a good time. You're too young for me, Amanda. That had never occurred to me."

I forced myself to speak. "What ... does it matter? What's wrong with just... having a good time?"

He shook his head. "That's not what I want, Amanda. Not from you."

22. A MAN OF HONOUR

Virginie thought it was terribly romantic. Her already high opinion of Gilles went up by several notches. I had found myself, she said, a man of honour. I failed to see why she thought this a good thing. In the space of one summer, I had been rejected twice. First by a dishonourable man, and now by a man of honour. Maybe the motives involved had nothing in common, but from my point of view the end result was the same.

Virginie waved all my complaints aside.

"He'll change his mind," she said, "just give him time."

But time was the one thing I didn't have. There were only two weeks of August left. The children were due to start school on September 3rd, and I had booked a passage home on September 4th.

When I informed Gilles of this, he simply nodded. When I told the children, they began to worry.

"Is Mummy coming home when Amanda goes?" asked Corinne.

"I doubt it," said Gilles.

"Will we get another au pair girl?" asked Jonathan.

"Definitely not," said Gilles.

"What will we do instead?" said Jonathan.

"I haven't decided," said Gilles, and withdrew to his study.

He was spending nearly all of his time in the study, or else at his office. A lot of the time he seemed to be making phone calls. The atmosphere in the flat had come full circle. We were back to the way it had been when I first arrived - only worse.

Gilles and I no longer spoke directly to each other. We communicated only if it was absolutely unavoidable. We left each other notes that said "Gone to the beach, back at seven," or "Gone to Rennes, back late." Occasionally I would tell the children in his hearing that we needed to go to Continent tomorrow, and I would find a little stack of banknotes in the kitchen the following day.

He rarely came home for meals any more. To judge from his appearance, he wasn't eating. I noticed one day a mark on his belt where he had taken it in by a notch. Serves him right, I thought sulkily. I suspected that he was as miserable as he was making me.

The day after our last conversation, he had presented me with a sheet of paper detailing his itinerary for the next two weeks.

"I'll be travelling a lot," he said, "so I won't be around."

I took it without comment. He had to make several visits to Rennes, and he was planning to go to Paris for two days. I was relieved. I was finding it hard to be in the same room with him. There was a wariness about him now that was unbearable. If it hadn't been for the children, I would have walked out there and then.

I was unhappier than I had ever been in my life. What I had felt when Roger had left me was a pale shadow of what I was feeling now. The idea that I would soon be back in England and I would never see Gilles again tormented me day and night. The children had made me promise to come back and visit them, but I knew I would never come. They were too young to remember me for long. Someone else would move in to look after them, and in a few months they would have forgotten me. But I would remember them, and their father, all my life.

As the days passed, I began to realize that I had underestimated the strength of my feelings for Gilles. The "night of passion" I had frivolously sought would not have been enough. There was more between us than that - or there could have been. Gilles was a man I could have spent the rest of my life with. In the space of three months, I had come to look on his house as my home, and his family as mine.

But my season in love was drawing to a close. The summer was ending. The crowds had thinned out on the ramparts of St. Malo. The shops were quieter, and the beaches emptier. Bernard and Mathilde went back to Paris, and the flat on the first floor was shut up for the winter. Virginie left to join friends in the South of France. When she had gone, I had no one left to talk to. The wind seemed a little cooler each night, and the sun less strong.

Passing the Porte St. Vincent one day, I noticed that Viviane's gallery was closed. A few days later a For Sale notice appeared. Either Viviane was cutting her losses, or maybe, without the hoped-for income of a successful architect to support her, she did not have the means to stay afloat. Good riddance, I thought. It was Viviane who had won in the end, though she might not know it. Even though she was off the scene, she had taken me down with her.

One morning, when the children were out, and Gilles had gone to Rennes, the phone rang. It was Susie.

"Oh I'm so glad it's you," she said. "Gilles is always so hard to deal with on the phone. Tell me, Amanda, do you happen to know if he's signed the divorce papers yet? My lawyer hasn't heard, and we need to get moving."

"I don't know what he's done," I said politely.

"He did get them, didn't he? They didn't get lost in the post?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. I believe he talked to your lawyer."

"I did wonder later if I should have called him myself."

I didn't say anything.

"So how did he react when he heard the news?"

"He wasn't very pleased," I told her curtly.

"Really?" said Susie. "Do you think he still wants me back? It's not easy for me, you know. Sometimes I wonder if I shouldn't come back for the sake of the children. Do they still miss me, Amanda?"

"Of course they do."

"It's so hard on them, poor mites." Something seemed to strike her. "So you're still there too, are you?"

"Only till they go back to school."

"And then you're going back to England? Well, that's nice. Don't I just envy you! Heart whole and fancy free, able to go where you want. You're so lucky, Amanda!"

"Oh, I know," I said.

"So maybe the best thing would be for me to come back in September. When they start school again. What do you think?"

My patience snapped. If this self-centred, empty-headed woman was too stupid to know what she wanted, it was not part of my job to help her work it out.

"Susie, I don't think anything. Personally, I can't wait to get on the boat in two weeks' time and leave your family to sort out its problems on its own. And now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

I slammed down the phone. It rang again two minutes later.

"Yes?" I snapped.

"That's not very welcoming," said Diana.

"Oh Di, it's you. Sorry, I'm having a bad morning. How are you?"

"When are you coming home?" said Diana purposefully.

"September 4th."

"Can't you leave before that?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Guess!"

Sighing, I looked round at the messy kitchen and the half-made lasagne. I was in no mood for guessing games.

"Diana."

"Roger broke up with Alison."

"No-o!"

The lasagne was forgotten. I swept a pile of newspapers from the chair to the floor and sat down.

"When? How long ago? What happened?"

"They went to New York together at the beginning of August, and when they came back they weren't speaking. Nobody knows why. Alison's moved out of his flat and gone home to Sheffield."

"Are you sure it's finished?"

"I ran into Roger in Waitrose yesterday. He told me the news himself, and then- " she paused dramatically " -he asked for your number!"

"He has my number already. It hasn't changed."

"He said it was too expensive to call France on a mobile. We had a lovely long chat over the frozen food. He wants the number of the place you're staying. He said he realizes he's been a fool. He wants to pick up where you left off, get a flat together, finish the course, get married, buy a house...."

Her voice trailed off.

There was a pause.

"You've got someone else," said Diana, "haven't you?"

"Um, well.... Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"I've fallen in love with someone who doesn't want me."

"Married?"

"Kind of. Not exactly."

"Ducky, there's no such thing as 'not exactly' married. They always go back to their wives - well, I should know."

"So how is Duncan?" I asked.

"The same as always. He still loves us both. Is this guy French?"

"Yes. He's the father of the kids I'm looking after."

"Oh my God! How old is he?"

"Thirty-five."

"Thirty-five! That's even older than Duncan."

"I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

"Then you are coming back?"

"Oh yes. I have no choice."

"But what about Roger?"

"Do *you* think I should go back to Roger, Diana?"

"Since you ask, I would say no."

"Then why are you going to all this trouble to help me get him back."

"I thought it was what you wanted."

"I don't want it any more."

"Good," said Diana. "If you want to know the truth, I never liked him."

"Tell him that if *he* wants *me*, he can call France on a mobile. But that, in any case, the answer is thanks, but no thanks."

I rang off with an aplomb that surprised even me. It was true what I said: I was really over Roger. Five minutes later, I had forgotten all about him. The message I had left with Diana seemed sufficiently clear to me. I didn't expect to hear from him again.

But he called two days later, when I was making supper.

"Amanda?"

"Roger?"

"How are you?"

Jonathan wandered in.

"What are we having for supper?" he said.

"Cheese soufflé," I said, and switched the oven on.

"Who's that with you?" said Roger.

"A friend," I said.

"Amanda, we need to talk," said Roger.

"We have nothing to say," I said.

"Of course we do," said Roger. "We made a mistake. It wasn't a good idea to separate. It hasn't worked out for either of us. When you come back to England, I want to get back together."

Jonathan wandered back out. I heard the front door slam, and the sound of Gilles greeting the children. I glanced at my watch. It was quarter to eight. Damn! Was he going to be here for supper?

"Amanda?" said Roger.

"Yes, I heard. What does Alison think of that?"

I wedged the phone under my chin, and began to separate the eggs.

"Amanda, I told you. Alison was a mistake."

"Was she? That's too bad."

"I found out things about Alison you wouldn't believe."

"Next time you'll choose more wisely."

"There isn't going to be a next time. I want you back."

"Oh really?"

"When are you coming home?"

"That doesn't concern you."

"What do you mean?"

"You may have made a mistake, but I don't think I did."

"You didn't want to break up."

"Yes, but now I do." I plugged the electric beater into the wall socket.

"Diana says you've got someone else."

I wondered how much Diana had told him. "Yes."

"Older. Married."

"Yes."

"Amanda," said Roger patiently, "I don't understand. Why would a girl like you - beautiful, talented, intelligent - throw herself away on a married man with two children?"

I put down the beater.

"Roger," I said very nastily, "tell me this. Why would a girl like me - beautiful, talented, intelligent - throw herself away on an fuckwit like you?"

I clicked the phone shut.

"Dad says to tell you he'll be here for supper," said Jonathan.

I burst into tears.

Jonathan gaped. He took a step towards me, stopped, changed his mind, and ran for the corridor.

"Dad," he called, "come here! Amanda's crying!"

I made a desperate attempt to pull myself together.

"I'm not crying, Jonathan! I'm just chopping onions! I'm not really crying."

Jonathan looked silently past me at the kitchen counter. I followed his gaze. There was nothing but eggs and cheese. Not an onion in sight.

Gilles appeared in the doorway and took in the scene.

"Amanda? Is something wrong?"

"She was talking on the phone, and then she started to cry," said Jonathan.

Gilles looked at me hard. "Has something happened?"

Corinne arrived too. "What's the matter, Amanda?"

"Nothing at all. I'm sorry, it's nothing, I'm fine."

"She was talking to someone called Roger," said Jonathan.

"He made you sad," said Corinne.

"Yes, that's right. Something he said upset me, but I'm fine now."

I wiped my eyes, and mustered a smile to prove it.

Gilles gave me another look. I avoided his eyes.

"Amanda's sad because she has to go back to England," said Corinne. "Why can't she stay here with us?"

"Amanda has to go back to England to finish her studies," said Gilles.

"Pierre's mother studies things too," said Jonathan. "She goes to the university in Rennes, and she looks after Pierre and Marie. Why can't you do that, Amanda?"

I stared at him hopelessly.

"Because I can't," I said.

23. THE CORSAIR'S BRIDE

After that I kept my mobile turned off, and avoided answering the landline in the flat. I would deal with Roger when I got back to Kingston, if I had to. I was not going to let myself be hassled here. But he made no attempt to call me back, and left no messages. I began to congratulate myself on my obnoxiousness. My last remark must have convinced him we were through.

The children continued to ask why I couldn't stay whenever they saw their father, which was not often. He had redoubled his efforts to avoid me, and was rarely seen in the flat. My misery grew like an animal stifling me. I thought again about walking out. One night I even got out my case intending to pack it, but after about ten minutes I put it away again. When it came to the crunch, I was incapable of making the break. Once I had left St. Malo, I would have lost Gilles for ever. I wanted to put off that moment as long as I could. I drew up a makeshift calendar and started to cross off the days. August 26th, August 27th, August 28th.

The 28th was the day Bonne-Maman called. When the call came through, I had crossed off the day already. It was nearly ten o'clock, and I was closeted in my room. Gilles was in his study at the other end of the apartment. I didn't expect to see him again that day. And then he came and tapped on my door, and told me Bonne-Maman was on the line. I was sitting on the floor working on a maquette of the apartment that I was making as a surprise goodbye present for the children, when Gilles came to tell me that my grandmother wanted to speak to me. I put the maquette aside and scrambled to my feet. He didn't move from the doorway.

"She's coming to St. Malo the day after tomorrow. Arriving off the ferry at four o'clock. She'll be staying here overnight, we can all have dinner, and on Monday she wants you to drive her down to Vannes. So you'll get to see your cousins after all."

For a moment, I was too surprised to speak.

"How can I drive her to Vannes? I thought you were going to Paris on Monday."

"You're taking the children with you, it's all arranged. There are other kids of their age that they can play with."

"Really?"

"Yes. Valérie's children."

I wondered sourly who Valérie was. It was the first I had heard of her.

"She's waiting to talk to you," he prompted me. "Take the call in the study."

I did as I was told. He lingered to look at the model.

"Bonne-Maman! You're coming to France!"

"Yes, dear, isn't it wonderful, I feel so much better, much stronger than I was in June when you came, and so I thought, wouldn't it be a good idea to go down to Vannes before the end of the summer, and then I thought, yes, but my goodness all that driving, and my eyes really aren't what they used to be, and do you know, some young man was quite rude to me in town the other day, and then I thought of you, and I remembered you were still in St. Malo and I thought, my goodness, it's a sign from Fate, I ought to go to Vannes just once more before I die."

"You'll be in Vannes dozens of times again before you die," I assured her.

"How long are you planning to stay?"

"A week or two, dear, I should think. At my age you don't go away for the weekend any more."

"But I'm going back to England next week. How will you get home?"

"Jérôme will drive me back to St. Malo. Or else that nice Mr. de Kerguidan of yours said he would be happy to come and fetch me if I get stuck."

Nice Mr. de Kerguidan had just followed me into the room. I gazed at him over my shoulder.

"Should I book you your usual hotel for Sunday night?"

"No, dear, that won't be necessary, I've been invited to stay with you. He says there's plenty of room. That is so very kind."

This was getting weirder and weirder. Gilles hadn't spoken to me for days. Why would he put himself out to accommodate my grandmother?

I forced myself to concentrate on the material side of things. The children could double up for one night, I could take one of their rooms, and she could have mine. The bathroom would be no problem – but what about the stairs?

"Did he tell you that the apartment is on the second floor and there's no lift?"

"Oh, stairs aren't a problem, dear, I'm trotting up and down stairs all day. You know what this house is like. He asked me about the stairs already, in any case."

Did he, indeed? I was reminded of that day at Madame Leclerc's, and the concern he had shown for her arthritis. Gilles was good at being solicitous to old ladies, I thought crossly. It was the young ones he wasn't very nice to.

"He's such a charming man," my grandmother gushed. "I look forward to meeting him."

"Ask her if she likes sea-food," said Gilles.

I covered the receiver with my hand. "I can't cook sea-food, Gilles. I don't know how."

"I can," he said, and grinned maliciously. "It's the only thing I can do."

My grandmother said she loved sea-food. So that was settled.

"I'll go shopping in the market to buy what we need," he said, when she had rung off. "And then, if you like, I'll give you a cookery lesson."

We surveyed each other carefully over the telephone.

"Why are you doing this?" I demanded.

"Why shouldn't I?" he said blandly. "She sounds like a charming lady. I look forward to meeting her. That's a great maquette, by the way."

*

With all this charm floating around, it was not surprising that the evening was a rip-roaring success.

Bonne-Maman was in fine fettle, invigorated by being on French soil again, sporting her best pale pink twinset and pearls. She and Gilles had decided to invite old Mr. Miniac too. He arrived wearing an ancient dinner jacket, chauffeured by his grandson. He hadn't been out in the evening for over ten years, he said, but since it was nearly twenty years since he had seen his dear Emmeline, he just had to come.

He patted her arm affectionately. My grandmother preened like a peacock.

Most of the talk, of course, was about the corsairs. Bonne-Maman had brought Gilles a book she had found on her shelves about François. It was an old out-of-print edition, and Gilles was plainly delighted. In spite of myself, I was touched by his delight. He had put on a jacket, for the benefit of the older generation, and I was back in black. It suited my mood.

For dinner, he had cooked crab and made mayonnaise to go with it, and I had prepared a lemon tart for dessert. The meal went well. Mr. Miniac announced that crab in the evening was hard to digest at his age, and tucked in heartily. The children were on their best behaviour. Gilles and I, by dint of considerable effort, managed to resuscitate a semblance of our old camaraderie. I didn't think anyone noticed the subsisting coolness - not even Lucienne, who had dropped in unexpectedly, eyed the guests and the food, and decided to stay.

When she discovered that the address of the cousins in Vannes was the Château Donville, she was too overwhelmed to notice that her son and I were no longer on the kind of terms that had precipitated our abrupt departure from Sandrine's birthday party.

"The *Château* Donville?" she said.

"Another castle," said Gilles nastily.

"A little pretentious, I've always thought," said Bonne-Maman. "Really, it's nothing but an overgrown manor house."

Over the crab, Bonne-Maman and Mr. Miniac discussed relations between François Souville and Jean Miniac, which had not been good.

"Apparently they couldn't stand each other," said Bonne-Maman.

"There was professional respect, but no liking at all," agreed Mr. Miniac.

"When they were recruiting crew members, they used to top each other's bids," Bonne Maman went on. "François announced that the crew would be given the same rations as the officers, so Jean increased their money by fifty piastres."

"Did you hear about the time Jean made a present of wine to François?" Mr. Miniac asked. "François didn't want to be outdone, so he gave him a coat in return, but Jean took offence and shouted that he didn't sell his presents, he gave them! He threw the coat in the sea. François was so incensed that he threw the wine after it!"

"François had a history of throwing things in the sea," said Gilles, and told them the story of the Admiralty and the gold.

After that, he and my grandmother launched into a long, rambling discussion of François' exploits, and speculated at length about the lady who had got him out of Plymouth jail. Bonne-Maman sighed romantically and insisted he must have taken her back to France.

"How could he?" said Gilles. "He already had a wife. He and his friends might have gone out killing and plundering on the high seas, but when they came back to port they were respectable family men."

"But after all she'd done for him!" said Bonne-Maman.

"He probably left her behind and she languished away," I said tartly. "That's even more romantic."

"Oh no, Amanda, I like happy endings. Don't you think so, Gilles?"

He looked deeply uncomfortable.

"Yes, of course."

"In any case," said Mr. Miniac, "François married for love."

"Really?" said Bonne-Maman, putting down her knife. "But in that case who was his wife?"

"He married Jean Miniac's daughter. Didn't you know? Jean was dead set against it, partly because he and Souville were at daggers drawn, and partly because François was so much older than Louise. He and Jean Miniac were the same age. Well, I suppose they wouldn't have seen that as an obstacle in those days. Anyway, Louise was Jean's favourite daughter, and she was as stubborn as he was, so she got her own way in the end."

"Louise Miniac de la Moinerie!" said Bonne-Maman. "So that's who it was! I've been trying to work it out all summer. The book I've been consulting got it wrong. It puts her a century later. So she married François! You're right, there would have been twenty or thirty years between them."

"But they were very happy," said Benjamin Miniac.

I found myself staring at Gilles across the table. He felt my gaze and looked up. For one long moment our eyes met, and then he looked away.

I went out to the kitchen to fetch the salad. When I got back, Bonne-Maman had launched into a series of mildly scandalous stories about her girlhood in Brittany. None of them was at all romantic, and each was more outrageous than the last. She kept us laughing for most of the rest of the meal.

After Mr. Miniac's grandson came to take him home, Bonne-Maman expressed the desire to take an evening stroll. Maybe not on the ramparts, she said, but along the jetty would be delightful. Gilles offered with alacrity to accompany her. The two of them were getting on like a house on fire. What a pity Bonne-Maman was no longer of an age to look after children, I thought crossly. He could have hired her as a replacement for me.

When they came back from their walk, both looking like the cat that had got the cream, my grandmother announced that she was going to bed. Gilles was leaving for Paris early next morning. He kissed her on both cheeks, wished her a pleasant holiday, and offered once more to collect her in Vannes and drive her to the ferry.

I settled Bonne-Maman in my room and made sure she had everything she needed. Returning to the sitting room to fetch my book, I found Gilles reading the newspaper.

"Thank you for tonight," I said formally.

He looked at me over the top of the paper. "It's been a pleasure."

"Have a good trip to Paris. I'll see you on Wednesday."

It had been decided that the children and I would stay two nights in Vannes and return to St. Malo on Wednesday morning. School was due to start on Thursday.

"Wednesday, yes. And then on Friday you're leaving?"

I glanced at him sharply, then looked away again.

"Oh I think so, yes. There's nothing to stay for, is there?"

24. ON THE BEACH

Two days in Vannes did me good.

I made the acquaintance of Valérie, who turned out to be married to the son of one of my grandmother's cousins, and got reacquainted with her husband Jérôme, whom I had met a long time ago, and who remembered me when I was Corinne's age. I had no memory of the encounter, which allowed him to invent a stream of outrageous acts that Amanda had allegedly perpetrated when she was small, and which kept Corinne entertained throughout our stay. Jonathan, meanwhile, took to the woods with Bertrand, Valérie's son. They were barely seen for two days except at mealtimes.

The atmosphere of the Château Donville was relaxed and hospitable. We sat in the kitchen or the garden, and drank coffee or cider or wine. A constant stream of visitors came and went. Listening to the thread of the conversations, I let myself be drawn into the warp and weft of their lives. Choosing a secondary school for Bertrand, what to wear to so-and-so's wedding, whether it was time to change the car, what colour to paint the bathroom. It was deliciously mundane, and required no effort. Because they were so absorbed in it, it absorbed me too. At the end of two days, I was beginning to relax.

But I didn't fool my grandmother.

"You're not happy, Amanda," she observed, when we were briefly alone in the garden one day before dinner.

"No," I agreed.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No. But thank you for asking."

"Is there anything *you* can do?"

"Not really, no. It doesn't depend on me."

"If something's meant to be, it will sort itself out. Try not to worry, dear."

I glanced at her, amused. Bonne-Maman was a firm believer in the power of Fate. "But how do you know if something is meant to be?"

"Well, dear, of course you know. Some things are just so clear they hit you over the head."

Corinne arrived to summon us to dinner and the conversation went no further. In any case, I wasn't going to burden Bonne-Maman with my troubles. She was enjoying herself. I didn't want her to spoil her trip with worrying about me.

On Wednesday morning, the children and I drove back to St. Malo. My anguish grew with every mile that passed. The children were restive, and spent most of the journey squabbling in the back seat. They undid their seat belts, they spilled their orange juice, they pinched and poked each other. I found it impossible to drive and distract them at the same time. My attempts to get a game of I-Spy going rapidly came to grief on the fact that Corinne couldn't spell.

"I spy with my little eye something beginning with R," said Jonathan.

"Teapot," said Corinne.

Jonathan sneered at her, Corinne scratched him, he pulled her hair, she bit him, he slapped her face. Attempting to separate them, I nearly crashed into the side of a lorry. In the end, I stopped by the side of the road and threatened to turn both of them out of the car unless they quietened down. To my surprise, it worked. We

drove back to St. Malo in sulky silence.

As we drew in under the ramparts, the knot of apprehension in my stomach tightened. The ferry was due to leave for Portsmouth on Friday morning. That left nearly forty-eight hours in the House of the Corsair. I couldn't see how I was going to get through them without breaking down.

The flat was empty. Gilles must be at the office. We ate lunch in silence, Corinne had a sleep, Jonathan read Harry Potter, and then we went out. On the beach, things were slightly better. My oppression lifted slightly. A lot of their friends were there, the tide was out, and there was plenty of room to play. We made a final sandcastle.

Then I discovered that I had forgotten the goûter. A crisis seemed imminent. Valérie had given us slices of her special chocolate cake, and any kind of substitute was out of the question. Delphine, Pierre's mother, offered us cookies instead. The children accepted one each, and then looked at me reproachfully. Fortunately, we were on the Plage de la Mole today: the one closest to the house. I asked Delphine to keep an eye on them for a few minutes, and rushed back to the flat along Rue de Toulouse to get the precious cake.

Rounding the corner on to the Rue de Dinan, I found myself nose to nose with Susie. She was emerging from the House of the Corsair, laden with packages. I surveyed her with some alarm. She was carrying a fake Vuitton holdall, three bulging plastic bags, and a cardboard box full of CDs. Had she decided to loot the house while Gilles was out?

She saw me, and a wide smile broke over her face.

"Amanda, how great to see you. Can you give me a hand to get this lot to the car? I've got another two boxes inside." She gestured towards the hall.

"I'm afraid not. Not right now. The children are on the beach, and I've got to get back."

"Really? Oh, that's too bad. I can't believe all I've got to carry."

"You look as though you're moving out," I said, wondering what to do. Should I let her go, or try to warn Gilles, or what?

"Moving out?" said Susie. "Thrown out more like!"

"What?"

"I offered to come back, and he turned me down. He signed the papers for the divorce, and I've got them right here."

She tapped her handbag, a lurid green suede affair that exactly matched her T-shirt. "He says he doesn't want me any more."

"Really?" I said.

"He told me to leave, you know. Just like that, he told me to leave. Well, who does he think he is? I don't have to do what he says. I've wasted ten years of my life with him, and I'm not going to waste any more. It's time I saw a bit of life, believe me. Stuck in this hole with only him and the children! I can't believe I managed to last so long. Of course, I only did it for the children. And now he wants them too, can you believe it? He says he's damned if he'll let me have custody, and he'll fight me for it if he has to."

She sniffed in outrage.

"Imagine that! He never paid any attention to them for years and years, and now he wants custody! My poor darlings! I can't imagine what will become of them!"

"Don't worry, he'll look after them. They'll be fine."

She looked at me carefully. "Do you really think so, Amanda?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then maybe I won't contest it. Gérard doesn't like children all that much. When they came for the weekend, it wasn't really a success. Anyway, I must be off. I've got a client coming later. You're sure you can't help me with this, Amanda? Well, never mind."

She flounced off with her bags. I stared after her in disbelief. Then I remembered the children waiting for their cake, and ran all the way up the stairs to the second floor. Too bad about the stuff she was taking, I decided. Gilles was well rid of her, even if she had cleaned him out.

But as I opened the door, I heard his voice. He was sitting on the sofa with his feet on the table talking on the phone. He looked very pleased with himself. I looked from him to the shelves of CDs. They were two-thirds empty. I pointed to the shelves and raised my eyebrows.

He said, "Cheap at the price," and went back to his phone call. It sounded as though he was talking to a client. Something about keys and movers: I didn't listen. I got the box of cake from the kitchen and prepared to go back to the beach.

As I went through the sitting room, he said, "Just a minute" into the phone, and put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Amanda, where are you going?"

"Back to the beach. The children are waiting for me."

"Which beach? The Plage de la Mole? I'll come down and join you."

I was taken aback. Join us at the beach? That was entirely unprecedented. He had not done that once all summer, although he sometimes took the children to the beach at the weekend, and gave me the afternoon off.

I decided I must have misheard.

Yet sure enough Gilles turned up at the beach about half-an-hour later, picking his way through prostrate reddening bodies and capering children to where I was sitting alone, at a slight distance from Delphine and two of the other mothers.

My status with the mothers was delicate. They acknowledged me to some extent as a substitute parent, but they were older than me, their concerns were not the same, and we did not have a lot to say to each other. Nor were they about to lose sight of my single, unattached, supposedly carefree status. Heart whole and fancy free, as Susie had said. I could seduce their husbands one day and pick up and leave the next. I was to a large extent an object of suspicion.

Gilles nodded to them courteously, spread out a towel, and sat down beside me. They had been busy discussing the new school term, but now the conversation tapered off, and they peered at us curiously. Husbands on the beach on weekdays were a rarity. Husbands who had been deserted by their wives coming to fraternize with the au pair girl during working hours were unheard of.

Their scrutiny disconcerted me nearly as much as Gilles' presence next to me. I had never been to the beach with him before. I was very conscious of the fact that we were both half-naked. The fact that everyone around us was in a similar state of déshabille did nothing to reassure me. I wriggled discreetly into a sitting position and pulled my knees up to my chest. I would have liked to put on a shirt over my bikini, but it would have looked too obvious.

I was relieved when Corinne spotted her father and ran up to us.

"What are you doing here, Daddy?" she said accusingly.

"Trying to get a tan."

"What for? It's school tomorrow."

"Go and play with Marie. I have to talk to Amanda."

"You're always talking to Amanda."

"Not for much longer," said Gilles.

Hearing those words, I suddenly wanted to cry. I groped for my sunglasses and put them on. I wondered what he wanted to talk to me about. Divorcing Susie? Arrangements for school? Or – worst of all – had he finally found someone to replace me and wanted me to show her the ropes?

Corinne ran off down the beach.

"So what did you want to talk about?" I said brightly.

He reached out and took my hand.

"Amanda, I'm very sorry. I've made you unhappy, I didn't mean what I said, I've been very stupid. Can we try to forget the whole of the past two weeks and go back where we were before?"

I twisted my head round to look at him. It was nearly a full minute before I could answer. I didn't quite understand what he was saying. I shook my head.

"No- No, Gilles, we can't. No, I don't think we can. It's too late now, you see."

He tightened his grip on my hand.

"Why is it too late?"

"Because I'm going to leave. The ferry on Friday morning- "

He leaned forward and gently removed my sunglasses.

I grabbed vainly after them. "What are you doing?"

"I can't see you with those on. Do you really have to go?"

"Well, yes, I do. I've already booked the ferry."

"Are you going because of Roger?"

"Of course not, no. It has nothing to do with Roger."

"Jonathan said it was Roger who called the other day."

"Yes, but that was nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then stay. Amanda, I love you. I want you to stay with me."

I gazed at him blankly. "What?"

He leaned closer towards me.

"Don't make me say it again. We have half the beach tuned in."

I cast a glance round. Delphine and the others were riveted. My wits began to return. He was still holding my hand. I snatched it away.

"Let's go for a walk," I said.

We got to our feet and ambled towards the jetty. Conscious of the eyes boring into our back, I made sure we kept a respectable distance between us. I tried to focus on what Gilles had just said, but it didn't make sense. It wasn't possible.

"I mean it, you know," he said.

"D-do you?"

"Yes, I do. And that's not all. I have something else to tell you. I've decided to move to Rennes."

"What?" I said stupidly.

"I've been offered a job in an architect's office there. It's a big office with ten to twelve architects, the work is much more varied, the money's good. I like the idea of working with other architects, and I wouldn't have to work such long hours as I do here. The main advantage is that I'd be able to spend more time with the children." He paused. "I assume you saw Susie just now?"

"Yes."

"I've decided to let her go ahead with the divorce, and I'm going to ask for custody of the children. I've just been to see a lawyer friend in Paris, and he says I

have a good chance."

It was too much to take in. "This is all very sudden."

"Not really, no. I've been thinking about it for some time. I've had enough of St. Malo. It's too small, everybody knows each other, and everybody interferes in everyone else's business. I'm tired of my mother setting me up with suitable prospects, and my aunt Germaine telling everyone what time I leave a party, and Viviane threatening to commit suicide at inopportune moments, and Susie barging in all the time and wondering whether she wants me to beg her to come back. By the way, there's a man coming tomorrow to change the locks."

We had reached the jetty. This end of the beach was less crowded. We sat down on the sand and leaned on the wall.

"So you're not going to sell the flat?"

"No, I'd never do that. I'm going to keep it for holidays and weekends. I've rented a flat in Rennes temporarily, and I'll look round for something permanent once we're settled."

"When are you moving?"

"Saturday."

I sat up in surprise. "Saturday? This Saturday? Do the children know?"

"No. I haven't told them yet."

"But Gilles- When are you planning to break it to them?"

"Tonight at dinner. I wanted to wait until I'd arranged things with you."

He looked at me searchingly. I avoided his gaze.

"But they're going back to school tomorrow."

"They'll start on Monday in Rennes instead. They're both signed up already."

"What did Susie say?"

"I haven't told her."

"Oh? Are you going to tell her?"

"Not right away. She's been badgering me for years to move to Rennes. I don't want her to change her mind about the divorce."

I began to smile. "So you just signed the papers and kept quiet about the rest?"

"I let her take the CDs. She seemed to think she was getting a good bargain."

I giggled. The atmosphere relaxed. I met his eyes. He reached out a hand and ran a finger down my thigh. My stomach turned over.

"Look over there," he said.

I looked where he was pointing. Jonathan was squatting on his haunches, beside a rock pool, deep in conversation with a little girl of his own age. I had seen her before: she was in his class at school.

"The next generation is taking over sex," said Gilles.

"At least we know they know how to do it safely."

"Amanda, I want you to come to Rennes with me. If your degree is the only reason you want to go home, there's a university there. You can transfer to France and finish your studies here. I know someone at the university who could fix it for you. I talked to him last week."

I looked at him closely. This was all going much too fast.

"But you don't seem very excited," he added more coolly. "Maybe I've been taking too much for granted. It's true you once said a serious relationship was the last thing you needed."

"Gilles, I said that about Simon, not about you."

He looked me squarely in the eye. "That's true, you did. So what do you want

from me?"

"I want ... whatever you want to give. Two weeks ago, it's true, that might not have been very much. But now, I- I've had two weeks to think. I want more. I want everything."

He drew in his breath and pulled me roughly against him. I had never been kissed like that before, not even by him.

When I could speak again, I said shakily, "Why did you change your mind?"

"Your grandmother changed it for me."

"My grandmother? What do you mean?"

"She said age made no difference, and I shouldn't let it stop me. She said there was fifteen years' difference between her and your grandfather, and they were very happy together."

"You talked to Bonne-Maman?"

"She lured me out on the jetty and made me tell her the whole story."

"How on earth did she know there was anything to tell?"

"She said it was obvious."

"Really? She didn't say a word about it to me."

"She said she wasn't going to. She told me I'd made the mess myself, so I must get myself out of it too. I'm to go and fetch her in Vannes and give an account of myself."

"We'll both go."

I was half laughing and half crying by now. Gilles kissed me again.

"I think that's what she expects."

A shadow fell across us. We started guiltily apart. Jonathan was standing two feet away arms akimbo, watching us.

"Pierre's mother says you're going to sell the flat and marry Amanda and move to Rennes," he announced.

"Pierre's mother has ears on stalks," said Gilles disgustedly.

"What?" said a voice behind us. "You're moving to Rennes!"

We all looked round. Susie had come up without anyone noticing. I had the sun in my eyes and I couldn't see her distinctly, but I recognized her voice and her cardboard box.

"Maman!" said Jonathan.

"Susie!" said Gilles.

"What are you doing here?" said Jonathan.

"Who's this?" said Gilles.

It was then that I realized she was not alone. There was a man I had not at first noticed standing behind her.

"Hello, Amanda," he said.

"Roger," I said. "What on earth are you doing here?"

25. THE RING

Beside me, Gilles stiffened. His arm dropped from my shoulder.

"I found him on the doorstep waiting for you," said Susie to me. "It's lucky I guessed where you were."

I got unsteadily to my feet. Gilles followed suit.

"What are you doing here, Roger?" I demanded.

"I've come to take you out of France and get you home," said Roger.

"For years I've been begging you to move to Rennes- " said Susie.

"Let's go and get your things. There's a ferry at eight," said Roger.

"Then as soon as my back's turned, that's exactly what you do!" said Susie.

"Shut up, Susie," said Gilles.

"Come on, Amanda," said Roger. "It's time to go."

Corinne came prancing up to our tense little group, took in the atmosphere, and began to cry.

Gilles picked her up. In a voice of steel, he said, "I suggest we all go back to the house and sort this out."

"There's nothing to sort out. It's perfectly clear," said Roger. "Amanda's coming with me."

He sounded as though he was my knight in shining armour come to save me. He was wearing the same pink shirt and grey trousers that he had been wearing the last time I saw him. Here on the beach in St. Malo, they looked even more incongruous than they had in Kingston.

"I certainly am not," I said.

"That doesn't sound clear to me," said Gilles.

"As for you, Amanda, I don't know what you've been up to with my husband behind my back- " said Susie.

"You were the one who left," I said.

"Be quiet, Susie," said Gilles again. "Let's go."

The corsair marched off with Corinne in his arms. We trailed in his wake. Roger tried to pull me aside, but Jonathan grabbed hold of my hand, and I held on to it for dear life.

We went all the way along Rue de Toulouse in silence, Gilles and Corinne leading the way, Susie right behind, then Jonathan and me, and Roger bringing up the rear. The tension must have been visible. One or two people turned to stare.

When we turned the corner on to Rue de Dinan, Roger took my arm.

"Let's go to one of those cafés and talk this through in private."

"May I at least get dressed?" I snapped, and he subsided.

Once we were upstairs, Gilles took charge. Roger and Susie were instructed to sit down. The children were dispatched to get in the bath. On the pretext of running the water, I went with them.

Gilles followed me into the bathroom two minutes later, and shut the door.

"Would you please tell me what the fuck's going on?"

"I have no idea. I don't know what he's doing here."

"He told us that. He's come to take you out of France."

"And I'm not going."

He leaned on the bathroom door and glared at me.

"If I made a total fool of myself on the beach, then tell me now."

I crossed the room, put my hands on his shoulders, and kissed him.

"Gilles, I love *you*. It's *you* I want, not him. As soon as I'm dressed, I'll get him out of here."

"The ferry leaves at eight," said Gilles.

I turned off the taps. "And he'll be on it, don't worry."

Leaving Gilles to deal with the bath, I threw on the first pair of jeans that came to hand, and looked around for a T-shirt.

Then I changed my mind.

I went into Corinne's room and groped under her bed. There, as I suspected, was my pink dress. I had spotted it when I was packing her clothes to take to Vannes. She had retrieved it from the wastepaper basket where I had dropped it on the night of the party, and hidden it.

I smoothed it out as best I could, and put it on. I brushed my hair, and made my way to the sitting room.

Susie and Roger were sitting in silence, as far away from each other as the room allowed. Gilles had offered neither of them a drink. Roger stood up as I came into the room. Gilles appeared from the corridor that led to his bedroom holding a towel. He saw me, took in my dress, and a shutter came over his face.

I walked the length of the room, and kissed him on the mouth.

"I'm wearing this for you when the ferry's gone." I spoke in French, too low for them to hear. "We're going to do what you said; we're going back two weeks in time."

His expression softened, and he smiled at me.

"To a freezing cold field with the Righteous Brothers?"

"Yes."

He kissed me back.

"Amanda," said Roger, "what do you think you're doing?"

"Amanda," said Susie, "you should be ashamed of yourself!"

I turned on her.

"Me? And what about you? What about Simon? And Gérard? You're the one who abandoned her children, not me!"

"What are you saying?" said Roger querulously.

"So you do speak French!" said Susie. "Why didn't you tell me?"

With a last look at Gilles, I motioned Roger out of the door.

"What are you trying to do to me?" he said, as we walked down the stairs.

"Nothing at all."

"Well, I suppose I can understand that you might want to get your own back. I know I shouldn't have dumped you the way I did."

He talked on, explaining his position, telling me why he had been justified in acting the way he did, and why I was totally wrong to refuse to take him back. I looked at him in exasperation. I had sent a message through Diana to say we were finished, I had told him the same thing myself, and yet he turned up, still full of himself, still bent on taking over my life.

And this was the man who had accused *me* of self-absorption! How was it possible to be so insensitive?

"So how was the summer on Planet Roger?" I inquired.

He didn't know quite what to make of that. He opted for self-pity.

"Do you know, she was sleeping with other men the whole time she was with me?"

"Oh yes? Like Alastair?"

He stopped in shock.

"You knew about Alastair! Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask," I said.

"And he wasn't the only one. She's a bit of a nymphomaniac, you know."

"Is she really?"

I steered him towards the Porte de Dinan and out of the city. He still hadn't asked a single question about me.

"And how was New York?"

He gazed at me soulfully.

"It wasn't like the trips I made with you. She wanted to take taxis and go shopping all the time. Drinks in the Plaza when you're on a budget! That's when I really started missing you."

"Ah yes, New York on the cheap. That would have been fun."

We crossed the road and walked along the port.

"I would really have liked to see New York with you. It would have been special."

"Yes, New York is great."

"You mean you've been there already? You never told me that!"

"My father took me when I was at school. You should have gone to the Plaza - it's very nice."

A faintly covetous look came into Roger's eyes. I smiled to myself. I had always known he was intrigued by my family's wealth. He would have got on well with Lucienne. I eased him round the corner towards the ferry.

He put his hand into the pocket of his shirt, and brought something out. If he couldn't enlist my sympathy, he would buy me.

"Look, Amanda, I brought you back your ring."

He held out his hand. The ring nestled in his palm. I took it and looked at it. My lovely aquamarine.

"I thought you meant to give it to Alison."

"She didn't like it. She didn't like the stone."

My fingers closed round it. I had been missing it all summer.

"So you're giving it back to me. Until the next time you see someone who takes your fancy- "

"There won't be a next time, Amanda. I've learned my lesson."

"Have you? I'm glad to hear that."

He looked at his watch.

"Listen, it's not too late. We can still make the ferry. Why don't we go back up and get your things?"

I looked at him. He was placid, unworried, exuding self-confidence.

"Roger, what makes you so sure I want to go with you?"

He frowned. I was being unreasonable. This was not in the script. When the knight charges in to rescue the damsel in distress, the damsel is supposed to cooperate. It's the least she can do.

"Amanda, you're not going to be difficult, are you? Diana told me what you've got yourself into. A married man with two children - and a tough bastard too, by the look of it!"

"Yes, he's not always easy. Did Diana give you my address?"

"Yes."

"That's what I thought. So you decided to come and bring me back?"

"Well, you can't stay here!" said Roger piously. "I came as a foot passenger. You've got your car, haven't you? We can drive straight up to Kingston and start looking for a place to live. We'll have to move in together after this, we ought to get things absolutely straight between us, so we'll both need to give notice..."

He went on talking. I stopped listening, and stared at him in fascination. He had it all planned out. For the second time that day, I was being presented with a road map for my future. The only difference was that the first one had been offered to me, and this one was being imposed.

"Roger, " I said, holding up the ring to the light, "did you have a lot of trouble getting this out of the gin and tonic?"

"Well, yes, I did rather. It was a very odd shape of glass. In the end I had to pour most of the gin away. You rather outdid yourself there."

"It was maybe a little histrionic?" I suggested.

"Actually, yes, it was rather." He forced a smile. "I hope you're not going to do that kind of thing too often."

"Just once more," I said.

I took a last look at my aquamarine, and hurled it with all the strength I could muster into the port.

"It'll be even harder to get it out of there."

Roger went white. He took a step towards the edge of the port, and then a step back towards me. For a moment I really thought that he was going to hit me. He stopped himself just in time.

"Well," he said, in a high, brittle voice, "that does make things rather clear."

I remembered Jean Miniac and François Souville.

"Yes, I thought it would."

He went to the railing and looked over the edge. Naturally, there was nothing to see. When he came back, he was grinning, but not with mirth.

"You little cunt, you really screwed me this time."

I had never heard Roger use language like that before. For a second, I was stunned, but I held his gaze.

"The last time you screwed me. It's only fair."

"Just tell me one thing. What do you see in him?"

"I love him," I said.

I could feel the smile spreading over my face. Roger saw it too.

"You said you loved *me*," he said aggrievedly.

"I know, and so did you."

"You've changed, Amanda. You're not like you used to be."

"We were both wrong, Roger. Let's call it quits, and agree to leave it at that."

I held out my hand, but he looked at it disgustedly, and turned on his heel. I watched him stomp away across the car park towards the terminal entrance for foot passengers.

Then I remembered Gilles, and began to run.

I ran all the way back along the port to the House of the Corsair. As I started up the stairs, I passed Susie coming down. She opened her mouth to speak, but I didn't wait. I leapt up the two flights as though I had wings.

On the landing, I paused. I straightened my dress and paused to catch my breath. For the first time since moving in, I rang the bell.

The door opened at once. Gilles had been waiting for me. The light from the sitting room fell across the hall. As soon as he saw me, he began to smile.

I took a step forward and went into his arms.



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