

# THE SNOW KING

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## PART ONE

### 1. LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

The first time I saw the house was on a cold dismal evening towards the end of February. Claude had heard about it from an estate agent he knew, and sent me to take a look at it.

I stood in the street and stared. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was not a house at all. It looked like some kind of workshop. The word Claude had used was "atelier". It had narrow industrial-looking window panes and a rolling steel garage-like door. The outside walls were brick, and the paintwork was black.

It was tough and sexy and infinitely desirable. I had never seen anything like it. I wanted it right away.

I stood and gaped at it in the winter dusk. It was cold and raining, and there was no one about. No people, and no cars. I was standing in a street lined with small houses, the kind you sometimes find in unlikely corners of Paris, left over from one of the city's previous incarnations.

This area had once been an artists' quarter. The roadway was cobbled and uneven, the houses were odd-shaped and scruffy. The street ended in a cul-de-sac. The atelier was wedged between a tall grey house with cast-iron balconies that seemed to have come straight from New Orleans, and a smaller building whose inspiration was harder to decipher because it was smothered with ivy.

I went on staring. I was a hundred yards away from a four-lane boulevard, but it felt as though I was in another world. I had fallen out of time. The name of the street was the Impasse du Moulin Vert. It was getting too dark to see, but I had an idea that the house at the end of the impasse might well be what was left of the Green Windmill itself.

When I tore myself away and walked off down the hill, I could hardly feel the stones beneath my feet.

Claude lived only a few streets away, but the rain was coming down harder, and I was soaked by the time I got there. The euphoria I had felt in the impasse was beginning to evaporate, and I was cold and cross. My temper was not improved when I rang the doorbell and found Denis standing there, looking irritatingly handsome in a tight black polo-necked sweater.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, pushing past him into the hall.

"Alice said you were coming, so I invited myself to dinner. I haven't seen you in weeks."

"You don't have to see me, Denis. We're divorced."

"Not quite."

"Any day now," I said, hanging up my wet coat.

"Yes, but what does that really mean, a divorce?"

I was not about to get involved in one of Denis' philosophical discussions.

"Where's Isabelle?" I demanded.

Denis looked shifty. "She had a late class."

Isabelle, his current girlfriend, was one of his students. No one had met her, and Denis was parsimonious with information about her, but as far as I could tell, she was in the last year of her degree course. That made her twenty-two at most. Denis had just turned thirty. He had got older since I married him, and so had I, but his girlfriends stayed the same age.

Denis subsided. I had made my point.

We went into the living room where Claude and Alice were waiting for us. After the rain outside, the room was a haven. The curtains were drawn against the dark, and the fire was crackling. The room smelt of pine logs and home-made bread. Claude and Alice were ensconced by the fire with a bottle of wine, while their teenage sons, Joseph and Benjamin, were engaged in rolling a joint at the kitchen table.

Claude was an architect and Alice wrote cookery books. They had lived in this house for five years. When they bought it, it had been in much the same state of disrepair as the atelier. Claude had redesigned the space and turned most of the ground floor into a vast kitchen cum living room, which opened on to a small garden.

This room was the hub of the household. Alice spent most of her time in here, either cooking or writing. Claude, though he had a separate office on an upper floor, kept a desk permanently festooned with plans and models in a corner near the window, where he sat, making notes and adjustments, deep in thought, stroking his beard, tasting couscous or Mughal chicken as required. The boys too spent a lot of time in here, doing their homework, talking on the phone, or watching television. There was a bigger television in another room upstairs, but the family seemed to like hanging out together.

"Come and sit down, Olivia, you look frozen," said Alice.

Although the room was warm, she was wearing a long skirt and boots, several layers of T-shirts and pullovers, and a padded waistcoat, all in shades of yellow and orange that should have clashed, but went wonderfully well together. With her dark hair piled untidily on her head, her comfortably rounded form, and her ethnic earrings, she was the epitome of nineteen-seventies nurturing cool.

"Have you seen the house?" said Claude.

"What house?" said Denis, taking a seat on the teenage side of the room.

Alice made room for me beside the fire. Claude poured me a glass of wine.

"So what did you think?" said Claude.

"Isn't it wonderful?" said Alice.

I opened my mouth to tell them I was in love, and then shut it again. For one thing, it was going to sound silly. For another, I needed someone to temper my enthusiasm, not condone it. I had fallen in love before, and it had ended badly.

"It has potential," I said.

"Of course, you need to see inside," said Alice.

"I'll call the estate agent tomorrow," said Claude.

"What house?" said Denis.

No one answered. He passed the joint to Benjamin and came to join us in front of the fire. Denis hated to miss things. I looked at him with a mixture of exasperation and affection. We had been living apart for over a year, and I was beginning to see Denis as he really was: an odd, semi-adolescent mixture of the intellectual and the trendsetter. Denis spent his life in pursuit of the latest books, the latest films, the latest fashions. For a lecturer in history, it was bizarre, to say the least. When pressed, he loftily pointed out that today's fashions were tomorrow's social history.

What had caused our marriage to break up was not his pursuit of fads and gadgets, but his pursuit of girls. Denis hated to miss out on a promising girl. He had had his first affair when we had been married fifteen months. He told me all about it after three days. He was very, very upset. He needed us both, he said. He couldn't bear to think of losing me, but he loved her too. He knew he was hurting me, but he was falling in love, and he couldn't stop himself. Would I wait for him? he asked me

desperately. We were in a café on the boulevard St. Germain, the chestnut trees were in bloom, and his eyes were bright with tears.

How could I refuse him? Especially as it was all over three months later. I congratulated myself on my far-sightedness. This was the way to run a modern marriage. What I had not foreseen was that the problem would not stop there.

Denis, I realized belatedly, was not a monogamist. Nor, it turned out, was he a philanderer. He was not looking for one-night stands. What he liked was falling in love. Sex without love was apparently not an option. Nor was love without confession. His conscience required him to fall in love, and then to tell me everything. So the same thing happened again a year or so later. Another amorous student, more heart-rending scenes, more midnight despair, more dawn post-mortems. In the end, I went along with it, though with a lot more reluctance.

But the third time, I did not. By then we had been married for nearly four years, and we were both twenty-eight. I was beginning to think I would like to have a baby, but how could I start a family with someone who was being seduced by other women all the time? So when he arrived home late one night and announced that he had met a doctoral student called Sylvie and he thought he was falling in love with her, and he knew it was going to hurt me, but he couldn't stop himself, I decided to leave. I had been in Paris long enough to know my way around. I was a qualified translator and interpreter: I knew four languages: I was starting to get work. I didn't need Denis, or his apartment, or his bank account.

Denis was stunned. He wept while I packed my bags, and swore he would talk to Sylvie and break it off, but I didn't listen. All I took with me when I moved out were some of his books, and the only thing I kept were some of his friends. If the truth be told, it would have upset me considerably more to break up with Claude and Alice and their cosy living room than to break up with Denis. They were the first people he had taken me to meet when he brought me to Paris, probably because Alice was Canadian, like me. It brought us closer, despite the gap in age.

She and Claude were in their mid-forties, good-humoured, sociable people, at ease with themselves and their lives. I had taken to hanging out with them when my marriage was in its final throes. I never confided in anyone, and no one asked questions, but I found it was comforting simply being there, smoking a joint or drinking a glass of wine, listening to them talk, or watching Alice cook.

It had been Alice's idea that I should buy an apartment. It would ground me, she said; it would help me find myself. I saw at once that she was right. A place of my own was exactly what I needed. My marriage was over. I was nearly thirty. It was time to put down roots and sort out my life. Only then could I move forward.

When Denis opened his mouth for the third time to say What house? I said, "It's a place I'm thinking of buying."

Denis' mouth fell open. "You're thinking of buying a *house*?"

"Yes."

"May I ask what with?"

"My grandmother died and left me quite a lot of money."

"When did your grandmother die? You didn't tell me!"

"About nine months ago. I think it was when we weren't speaking."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I liked your grandmother. How much did she leave you?"

I gave him the amount in Canadian dollars. He worked it out and his eyes widened incredulously. "You never told me she was a millionairess!"

"We don't actually know where the money came from," I admitted. "My father thinks she must have been running guns to Cuba all those winters she spent in Florida."

"No, really?" said Alice, wide-eyed.

"I wouldn't put it past her," said Denis, grinning. My grandmother was the only member of my family he had got along with. "And you're going to use her money to buy a *house*?"

"Yes."

He regarded me with a mixture of disbelief and disapproval. Denis preferred to avoid the more sophisticated uses of money, such as savings accounts, investments, and the acquisition of property. He had grown up with a grandfather who went out every Sunday morning to sell the Communist Party newspaper *L'Humanité*, and a father who had taken to heart the 1968 student-rebellion slogan *Sous Les Pavés La Plage*. Under The Cobbles, The Beach. Denis regarded property as a crime against the people, and life as an experience that should not be taken seriously.

"I thought you had a place to live," he said.

"That's only temporary," I said. "Luc's going to sell it as soon as he can. He made that quite clear when I moved in."

"She needs to invest her money," said Claude soothingly.

"But why here? What if she goes back to Canada?"

Alice rolled her eyes. "Then she'll sell it and buy a house there!"

She got to her feet and went to stir the saucepan that was simmering on the hob. "Right, the soup's hot. I think we ought to eat. Would you guys please set the table?" she said to her sons.

"The property market here is better than Canada," I explained, as we moved towards the table. "If I buy a place in a good location and do it up, I'm bound to make a profit on the sale."

"A *profit*?" said Denis, scandalized.

"It's only good business sense," said Claude.

"Oh business!" said Denis.

"*À table!*" said Alice.

For the rest of the evening, we kept off the subject of capitalism. Claude talked about an apartment in the Marais that he was renovating for a pair of very demanding art critics from New York. Alice complained about the difficulty of making the perfect cheesecake. Joseph discussed a school history project with Denis. I contributed a few choice anecdotes about the indignities of life at Celia Temple Inc.

"I don't know how you stand that job," said Denis later, when we had left the house, and were walking to the métro. "That woman you work for sounds perfectly appalling."

"It's only a stopgap. And it pays good money."

"Yes, but *cosmetics* for heaven's sake! You should be concentrating on translation work."

I didn't answer. He knew as well as I did that I didn't make enough to live on as a freelance translator. We had had this discussion before. Denis had pointed out several times that when I was living with him I had not needed to earn my living. He seemed unable to understand that I was not prepared to trade fidelity for financial security. He had been hinting more and more clearly of late that he wanted me to go back, but that was something I had no intention of doing. Denis was charming, entertaining, unfaithful and unreliable. Marrying him was a mistake I should never have made.

What I wanted now was independence, stability, a house, and a career. If I stayed with Denis, I would never get any of them.

We reached the métro. I considered walking home to curtail the conversation, but the rain had turned to sleet and I couldn't face it. I followed Denis down the steps and on to the platform. To my relief, the train arrived almost immediately.

For the first couple of stations, Denis said nothing. I watched him plot his move. Claude lived in the south of Paris, and so did I. He lived in the north. I had three stops to go, and he had twenty. He had little hope of luring me up to the other end of the line.

Instead he said, "So how about offering me a cup of coffee? Do you realize I've never seen the inside of your apartment?"

"Not tonight, Denis," I said. The train was slowing for my station and I moved towards the door. "I've got to get up early tomorrow morning."

"But it's Saturday!"

"And Claude and I are meeting the estate agent."

I gave him a brisk farewell kiss, and stepped out on to the platform. He made no attempt to detain me. As I walked towards the exit, the train accelerated past me, and I saw his face through the glass. He was talking on his mobile. Having failed to make headway with me, he was no doubt calling Isabelle. Denis had never been one to waste time on regrets.

I came out of the métro and walked down Rue Campagne Première. The sleet was thickening. Snowflakes swirled in the light of the streetlamps. I reached my building, and walked down the passage to the inner courtyard. A fine layer of snow covered the cobbles. I picked my way cautiously past the fountain towards Escalier B, one of the four staircases that led up from each corner of the courtyard.

My flat was on the ground floor. I had been living here since I walked out on Denis. For the past few months I had been very comfortable. I had a dining room which doubled as a study, and a sitting room which doubled as a bedroom. I had low beamed ceilings, and the original flagstones, and the cobbled courtyard outside. As a port in a storm, it was all that I could ask for.

I turned the key in the lock and snapped on the light. The red light was blinking on the phone. I pressed the button and listened to the messages.

The first one was Nadine snappily demanding my presence in the office at eight-thirty sharp on Monday morning. The second was Francesca requesting the same thing in more courteous tones. The third was my sister Miranda.

"Hey, Olly, it's me. Well it's four o'clock in the afternoon here, but I guess it must be later than that in Paris. Ten? Eleven? I can never remember? Well I just wondered how things were going but I guess it's Friday night and you're out painting the town red. Well why don't you give me a call anyway when you get in if you're not too tired. We're all fine, the kids are just great and so is Jim, but I went into town to do some shopping this afternoon and I stopped in to see Prospero - he's fine, don't worry, he has some new tablets and they seem to be working well - but he's getting old, you know, and there are a couple of things we need to talk about- "

I deleted the message without waiting to hear the rest. I already knew what she was going to say. Now that I was no longer married, it made no sense for me to stay in France, why was I so determined to stay in a foreign country, now I wasn't to get upset, she wasn't saying I should settle in Halifax, but I could at least get a job in Montreal, it would be so much meaningful for me to spend my life within easy reach of my loved ones. And so on, and so on. She had been saying the same thing for

months. I decided that I was too tired to call back and deal with this yet again. I turned off the lights and went to bed and dreamed about run-down houses.

## 2. ROUGH TRADE

Claude called the next morning to say that we had an appointment with the estate agent in the impasse at three o'clock. The estate agent was an old acquaintance with whom he regularly traded clients. Her name was Véronique.

As it happened, I knew her already. We had met the previous summer, when I was working for an agency that rented out "fixers" to escort visiting celebrities round town.

I had been assigned to Miss Sonia Temple for two weeks. Miss Temple was the niece of the late cosmetics tycoon Celia Temple, and the eponymous company's current figurehead. In between Haute Couture showings, cocktails at the Ritz, and shopping on Place Vendôme for what she called "everyday" diamonds, Sonia had expressed the desire to purchase a little Parisian pied-à-terre.

Assisted by Véronique, she had snapped up two hundred square metres in a prime location on the Ile Saint-Louis. Next, she demanded an architect. Véronique had recommended Claude, and he had redesigned the seventeenth-century mansion according to Sonia's specifications. It had to conform in every detail to her existing second homes in London and St. Moritz. Sonia liked to have her bathroom and her clothes closet and her telephone and her whisky bottle in exactly the same place in all her apartments. She did not like to be disoriented.

Both Véronique and Claude had made a packet out of Sonia, which explained, I suppose, why they were going out of their way for me.

By then I had been looking at flats for three or four weeks. I had seen noisy ones overlooking major boulevards, and quiet ones overlooking dank courtyards. I had seen a ground-floor apartment with rising damp, and a fifth-floor apartment with no lift. I had seen flats cut in two by the lift shaft, I had seen kitchens fitting neatly into cubbyholes nine metres square, and I had seen bathrooms which just plain astounded me. Two days previously, I had visited a first-floor apartment with the overhead métro rattling past on one side and an indescribably sordid courtyard on the other. I was getting ready to abandon the whole project. And then Véronique called Claude and told him about the atelier.

Véronique was waiting for us outside the house, wearing a sharp red coat and some very nice black boots. I was wearing my atelier-visiting garb of old jeans and run-down parka, and so was Claude. It had stopped snowing during the night, but the sky was leaden and cold.

By day, the atelier looked just as it had the night before: as exquisite a piece of architectural rough trade as you could ever hope to see. Véronique unlocked the steel door and rolled it up. We followed her inside.

On first sight, it was daunting. The ground floor was vast and grim and gloomy, with a high, beamed ceiling, and a row of extremely filthy windows, all with those long narrow panes. There was a pit in the floor for tinkering about with motor engines and changing oil. I had hoped there might be a garden at the back, but there was only a kind of glassed-in veranda. The glass roof sloped in and down instead of out and up, and the view was blocked by a brick wall several feet high.

Observing my bewilderment, Claude took charge. He had been here before, and he had worked out some ideas. We could reverse the roof, he said, put in flagstones and turn it into a winter garden. Pictures on the back wall - get Luc to give you something. The kitchen could go in this corner back here, where it would get natural light from the glass roof. It would have to be small, but if it was well



designed that wouldn't matter. A counter here to separate it from the dining room. He led me back across the concrete floor to the impasse. At this end, we would get rid of the steel door, replace the windows, put in double glazing. I could put a couch here, and a table there. There was plenty of room for a fireplace if I wanted one. Built-in bookshelves on each side of the chimney, parquet floors, or tiles if I preferred.

Slowly my vision cleared, and I began to see it. My winter garden full of light and greenery, leading into the living room. White walls to reflect the light. Wood floors, plants. Some of my grandmother's old pieces that were now in Miranda's basement, that I could have shipped over. The fragments of the dream fell into place. I could see myself cooking in my kitchen that I had still to fit out, and listening to music on my sofa that I still had to buy.

Claude was still pacing around muttering about light and volume, with a feverish glint in his eye. I suddenly realized why he was here today. His motives were more sinister than I had thought. He wasn't just being friendly, and nor was he looking for work. Financial gain was the last thing on his mind. He had already told me that he would reduce his fee. What he wanted was to get his hands on this atelier and transform it. It had been five years since he re-did his own house. Most of his time was spent renovating city apartments. What Claude was after was Creativity.

Véronique gestured towards a rickety wooden staircase and we went upstairs. The first floor was divided into dingy offices furnished with old green metal desks and faded calendars. We wandered from room to room, eyeing the leftover bric-à-brac of a failed blue-collar firm.

"We'll take out all these partitions and remodel the space," said Claude. "You can get a bedroom and bathroom in here, and there's room for a study too. Look out of the window here, you can see the park. The house at the back seems to be an artist's studio."

"And these stairs here lead up to the attic," said Véronique.

The second flight of stairs was in an even worse state than the first. Parts of some of the steps were missing, and the rest looked as though they might give way at any moment. I stood at the top of the stairs and looked around dubiously. Light filtered into the attic from a solitary skylight. It was barely possible to stand upright. The floor was so cluttered with forgotten plumbers' supplies -- pipes, toilet bowls, wash basins, even a couple of bath tubs -- that it was impossible to take more than a step or two into the room. What would I do with this?

Claude was perched halfway down the stairs with a tape measure. "We can drop the floor. There's room to do it, there's a false ceiling above these first-floor offices. That way you'll have room to move around. You can put a guest bedroom up here, there'll be plenty of storage under the eaves, we can put in dormer windows to give you some light. We'll create a well of light that goes right down to the ground floor. With a window here it would fall right in your sitting room."

I couldn't visualise it. I went back to the office floor. I could certainly see that there were possibilities here. It was lighter than the ground floor and, as Claude had said, there was a wonderful view of the park across the road. I went over to the back window and peered down at the artist's studio. Canvases were stacked in every corner of the room, but the artist was not in sight, and the room had a neglected look. I would put the bedroom on this side where it was quieter, I decided, and set up the computer where I could see the park. Claude was right, I could put guests on the floor above, with a separate bathroom. And downstairs....

I went back down the death-trap staircase.

The space was vast. The living room sprang into shape, the elements slotted into the kitchen space, and the plants in the winter garden flowered in my mind. After all those cubbyholes and courtyards, this was like paradise.

Obviously, it was crazy to take on a project like this. Miranda would have a fit, but my father might understand, and I was fairly sure that my grandmother the gun-runner would have approved. She had never been one to do things by halves herself. It was no more unreasonable than leaving Ormskirk for Halifax in 1946 to marry a Canadian airman she barely knew. Atta girl. Go on, Olivia, you can do it.

I wondered again how she had really made her money.

Véronique had been following me round silently at a discreet distance, keeping her red coat well away from the filthy walls, and letting Claude do the work for her. I asked her what the price was. She gave me a sum in euros. I converted it into Canadian dollars. It was more than I could afford.

I gazed at her thoughtfully. Sonia had paid the asking price for her pied-à-terre, but I wasn't going to do that.

"How long has it been on the market?"

"Five months," said Véronique.

"Has the price come down in that time?"

"Yes, he came down once. I don't think he'll come down again."

"I'd like to make an offer anyway." I named my price.

Her eyebrows went up. "I don't think he'll go down that far, Olivia."

"It's all I can afford."

"But it's much lower than what he's asking. Oh dear, what shall we do?"

She gazed at me in apparent perplexity. I could never tell if Véronique's air of life-is-too-much-for-a-delicate-soul-like-me was genuine, or some kind of strategy that gave her room to manoeuvre. Given the excellence of her reputation for finding good properties, and the thickness of the pile of her office carpet, I suspected it was the latter. I hardened my heart.

"Why don't we just let him decide? Pass on the offer to - what's his name, by the way?"

"Mr. Cazalis."

"Right. Tell Mr. Cazalis about the offer, and let me know what he says."

### 3. MAGIC

Mr. Cazalis said "no" right away.

Véronique called me at the office at ten thirty on Monday morning. "He says it's out of the question," she reported.

I had been in the office for two hours, having arrived at eight thirty sharp as requested, and it was already feeling like a very long day. Nadine was leaving for New York, and the atmosphere was one of barely controlled hysteria. Francesca and I had been preparing for the trip for days, and everything was in its place, right down to the last memo. All Nadine had to do was pick up her files and leave for the airport. But Nadine was not given to inconspicuous exits.

"Olivia!" she screamed from the next room. "You haven't given me the press release on Skin Analysis night cream!"

"It's in the folder with the rest, Madame," I called back. "Does he have any other offers?" I hissed down the phone at Véronique.

"Not yet, but I have someone who wants to see it this week."

"Olivia, it is not in the folder! If it was, I would not be asking you for it! *Mon Dieu, ce n'est pas vrai!* I have a plane to catch in three hours' time, the papers I will need for my meetings are not even ready, and I am surrounded by imbeciles who cannot even give me what I want!"

"I'll get back to you," I told Véronique, and hung up fast.

Nadine Sant'Angelo was the Director of Public Relations for Celia Temple (Europe). With her ample figure, couture suits, and august stare, she was an imposing presence. She had been born to money and privilege in the Sixteenth Arrondissement of Paris some fifty years ago, and she had a finely developed understanding of the nuances of social status. Nadine knew precisely where the dividing line fell between the Haves and the Have Nots.

Francesca and I, in our role as her two assistants, were definitely Have Nots, though not quite to the same extent. As a foreigner of no known genealogy, I was several degrees lower on the Have Not scale than Francesca (a girl of good family from the wealthy Seventh Arrondissement), and Nadine took care to make the distinction plain. It was me who got the really humiliating jobs (taking Madame's clothes to the dry-cleaners, writing her personal cheques), and me who endured the worst of her insults.

The truth was that Nadine needed to show more respect to Francesca than to me. For one thing, Francesca was half-Italian, like Nadine's husband, and came in handy for providing impromptu conversation classes and resolving grammatical conundrums. For another, there was the risk that Nadine might run into Francesca (or a member of her family) socially, which was not the case with me.

But other than that, Nadine was a democrat, and treated us both as a cross between slaves and schoolgirls.

An hour later, Madame was on her way to the airport, and the chaos in the office was beginning to subside. Francesca and I sat weakly behind our desks, recovering. When we judged she would have checked in for the flight, we went out to lunch. Once Nadine had left the office, she rarely called. She was as glad to get away from us as we were to get away from her. We spent the afternoon tidying up, and we both left early. I didn't have the strength to call Véronique.

In the end, I waited a week before I called her back. During that time I made three separate excursions to the impasse, and discussed the matter endlessly with

Claude. He was as nervous as I was. If I couldn't buy the atelier, he was back to designing closets and choosing bathroom tiles, both perfectly satisfactory occupations in their way, but requiring little in the way of creative vision.

Nadine came back from New York all sweetness and light, having received a vote of confidence from the directors there, and been summoned to lunch with Miss Sonia Temple herself. For a day and a half, there was not a single tantrum. Not one insult escaped her lips. Francesca and I waited nervously for her to return to normal.

On the second day, she went out to lunch with the marketing manager to brief him on her trip, and I took advantage of her absence to call Véronique at her office. As I had hoped, there had been no other offers. The people who had been due to visit had found something else, and no one else had been.

"Maybe I could meet Mr. Cazalis myself to see if we can work something out. What do you think?"

Véronique hesitated. "I doubt he's going to negotiate over a price as low as yours."

"Well, I might be prepared to go up a bit," I said, which wasn't actually true. With the estimate for the renovation work that Claude had given me, I could not go up one cent.

"I'd just like to find out whether there might be a possibility of reaching an agreement at some point - unless he gets a better offer, naturally."

Véronique hesitated some more. After nearly six months, he was unlikely to get a better offer, and she knew it. Maybe, I suggested, she could sound Mr. Cazalis out to see if he was prepared to meet me at a time and place convenient to him, and let me know what he said. Reluctantly, she agreed.

She called back the following day to say that Mr. Cazalis was prepared to see me at quarter to seven that evening in her office on boulevard Raspail. He was sorry, but he didn't have much time, so it would have to be very short.

"Quite frankly," said Véronique, "I don't think he's going to say yes. But at least I've persuaded him to talk to you."

I got to her office five minutes early. It was bitterly cold again, and starting to snow. Véronique had the harrassed look of someone who had had a bad day, but she was wearing a very chic dark green suit with a velvet collar, so maybe she had better things planned for the evening.

She showed me into a small bare room containing a table and three chairs, and not much else. For twenty minutes I sat and watched the snow falling in the tiny courtyard outside the window. From time to time, I checked my reflection in the window pane. I was in sober grey that day. I had swept up my hair in a chignon before leaving the office, and Francesca had lent me her pearls. My nice-girl-from-Halifax look. Just right for Mr. Cazalis.

Except that there was no sign of Mr. Cazalis. As the hands of my watch drew closer to seven, I got progressively more nervous. The agency closed at seven. If Véronique had a hot date, she was unlikely to want to linger. Had the wretched man decided to stand me up?

But at two minutes to seven, there was the sound of voices in the outer office: a brief exchange too muffled for me to catch. The door of my cubbyhole opened, and a man appeared on the threshold.

Startled, I got to my feet. Was this Mr. Cazalis? He looked nothing like I expected. My imagination had misled me. What I had been expecting was the owner of all those pipes and washbasins: the plumber in person, complete with overalls and spanners and middle-aged girth. Mr. Cazalis did not look as though he had ever seen

a spanner in his life. He wore not overalls, but a navy cashmere coat. He was tall and lean and several decades younger than I expected - about my own age, in fact. Standing in the doorway, he looked cold and cross. There was snow on the shoulders of his coat and in his hair.

I stared at him in dismay. All my plans for winning over some kindly, ruddy-faced father figure evaporated. How was I going to sway this cold and colourless man? He had grey-blond hair, a chill pale face, and the coldest grey eyes that I had ever seen. He looked like the Snow King himself, and I wouldn't have been at all surprised to learn that he had an icicle instead of a heart.

"Miss Hammond?" he said, glancing irritably at his watch, as if it was me that was late. "Mathieu Cazalis."

He pulled off his expensive leather gloves, and held out a hand. I took it. It was, despite the gloves, extremely cold, which might account for some of his ill temper.

"Nice to meet you," I mumbled.

He did not respond. Nor did he apologise for his lateness. Instead, he looked fastidiously around, selected a chair, examined it, and brushed off some imaginary specks of dust before sitting down. He did not take off his coat.

"So, Miss Hammond, I gather you're interested in the property in the Impasse du Moulin Vert?"

His voice was cold, and his lack of interest was plain. He was addressing his words not to me but to the table.

"Yes, I am."

"And you want to know if I'm prepared to drop the price?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid the answer to that is no. It's not unreasonably priced in the current market."

"But I- "

"I gather you are unwilling, or unable, to meet this asking price?"

"Yes, but I- "

"Véronique should have made it clear to you that I'm not prepared to negotiate at the present time. I'm afraid you've come here for nothing."

He regarded me with a faint air of exasperation. What was really annoying him, of course, was not that I had come here for nothing, but that I had obliged him to do so. He seemed to be waiting for me to apologise for the inconvenience and shuffle out.

I folded my arms and looked him in the eye.

"I think you're being over-confident," I said.

His eyes narrowed and he focused on me properly for the first time since he had entered the room.

"Do you? And why's that?"

"That house has been on the market for nearly six months. In all that time, you haven't had one serious buyer. The industrial look is original, I grant you that, but it doesn't appeal to everyone."

"It's a house," he pointed out. "That's very sought-after in Paris."

"But it doesn't have a garden. All the other houses in the street have gardens. It's the only one that opens directly on to the impasse."

"Well, yes, but- "

"But the main drawback is that it needs a huge amount of work. A lot of buyers are going to find that dissuasive. You have to find an architect, you need to

get planning permission, you must be prepared to wait. Above all, you have to be absolutely certain that you want it."

He sighed in exasperation. "And you are?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

I wasn't sure what to say. I could hardly tell a man like him that I had fallen in love with his house. Nor was I brave enough, faced with that daunting stare, to point out that my motives were none of his business.

He listened to the silence for a while. Then he said, not unpleasantly, "Why do you want to saddle yourself with a place like that? It's far too big for one person, it's expensive to run. I don't know what your circumstances are, but.... There's something here that I don't quite understand."

"I'm not proposing to set up a sweatshop for illegal Afghans, if that's what you think," I said tartly.

He looked half-shocked and half-amused.

"Of course not, I wouldn't dream... I wasn't suggesting..."

I had no desire to tell the Snow King about my private life, but it seemed I had no choice.

"My father lives in Canada, and he's on his own. I'm hoping he might be persuaded to come for extended stays if I can make the attic comfortable for him."

He raised his eyebrows. "The attic?"

"My architect is recommending that I lower the floor."

"That's not a bad idea." He sounded intrigued. "With skylights in the roof to let in natural light?"

"Of course," I said.

"And your father would spend, what, half the year with you?"

"Probably not as much as that. I'm hoping two to three months."

"And the other nine months?"

"What?"

"All the rest of the year. When your father's not there, and you're all alone. What do you think you'll do with it then?"

I thought about me all alone in my house with my winter garden and my view of the park and my uneven little impasse to step outside into and my windmill at the end of the street, and I smiled to myself.

"It's magic."

The words were out before I realized it. His head jerked back, and he looked at me in amazement.

"What did you say?"

There was nothing for it but to continue. I ploughed on as best I could.

"There's something magical about it. The house, the impasse, the neighbourhood, the whole thing. It's as if it was enchanted. It's like being in another world. Those houses, the street, the cobbles.... Don't you feel that? No, well, I don't suppose you do, or you wouldn't be selling it. I felt it the minute I saw it."

It was a stupid thing to say, especially to someone like that. I knew it as soon as the words were out of my mouth. Monsieur, your house is magic. Oh dear God.

But, to my amazement, he smiled. His face softened, the coldness vanished from his eyes, and I could have sworn the temperature in the room rose by several degrees. Maybe the icicle in his heart melted slightly too. I hadn't convinced him, but I had got through to him.

And then a sudden inspiration took hold of me. If the fact that I was single deterred him, why then, I would become a couple.

"Actually," I said demurely, not meeting his eyes, "I do plan on getting married at some point in the near future."

"Oh really?" The change in his voice was immediately apparent.

I tried not to grind my teeth. What was it about unattached women that scared them so much?

"I didn't mention it before because I'm not sure when we're getting married, but of course we'll be living in the house together at some point."

He thought about this.

"Has your fiancé seen the house?"

"No," I said, looking him straight in the eye, "he's in Canada right now. He can't get over for a while. But he doesn't care much about where he lives. He's happy to leave it to me."

"I see," said Mr. Cazalis.

"I've sent him photos, of course, and a description of the location."

He went on looking at me. "Does he know Paris well?"

"Oh yes. He's French himself."

"When does he expect to come over?"

"He doesn't know. He's being transferred by the company, but he doesn't know when."

"Who does he work for?"

"Unicef," I said.

It was the first thing that came into my head. It was where my father had worked before he retired.

"Unicef," repeated Mr. Cazalis. "And you're the advance guard looking for a house for the two of you."

"Yes. Well I have a job here actually."

"Oh really? What do you do?"

"I work in public relations," I said airily.

"Freelance?"

"No. I work at Celia Temple."

"The cosmetics company?"

"Yes."

For a moment, he was silent, looking down at his hands. I watched the snow spiralling down in shafts in the narrow courtyard, and hoped he wasn't going to ask any more awkward questions about my mythical fiancé.

In the end he said, "Mademoiselle, I can't give you an answer right now. I'll have to think about it. You understand, that's quite a cut you're suggesting. I'll have to go over the figures with my accountant. Leave me your phone number, and I'll be in touch."

#### 4. THE WICKED BROTHER

Celia Temple had opened her first Beauty Salon in Bond Street in 1912. Born Yekaterina Tumanova in Riga in 1885, she had left for London with her family around 1892. How she had spent the next twenty years was a closely guarded secret, but by 1912, she was calling herself Mrs. Temple and implying she was a widow. Respectability was important in the beauty business back then. Skin creams were not yet in common use, and cosmetics were still considered a trifle fast.

The products on offer in her salon included a Complexion-Improving Day Cream, a Skin-Nourishing Night Cream and a Mildly Astringent Herbal Tonic. They were based on family skin-care recipes passed down from her grandmother, and developed by Celia herself in makeshift premises in the East End. Where she got the capital to open the salon was invariably glossed over. Company legend favoured a wealthy lover, but no one really knew.

Celia had gone a long way in a short time. Soon after the salon opened, she had a stroke of luck. A heavily veiled lady, sneaking into the shop as dusk fell, turned out to be a duchess with an acne problem. Celia cured the condition with her Truly Revolutionary Skin-Peeling Technique, the duchess told all her friends about the charming Mrs. Temple, and Celia was taken up by fashionable London almost immediately. There was nothing like beauty care to break down social barriers. Celia made a lot of money very quickly.

When the war broke out, she became a patriot. She made up special beauty kits for her society friends who volunteered as Angels of Mercy in London hospitals. She even turned up once or twice at one of the ladies' Sewing Groups which made uniforms for the soldiers. But sewing was not her forte, and she didn't stay long.

Instead, she travelled to America to investigate the possibility of extending her business over there. In 1917 she married an impoverished English aristocrat she met on the crossing. True Love, said the official version. They cut a deal, said the unauthorized biographer who set out to dish the dirt after her death. In exchange for her paying to renovate his stately home, his lordship agreed to introduce her into the higher spheres of society.

By the early 1920's, Celia had become the epitome of chic. She was renowned for her ethereal appearance, her perfect complexion, and her pale blue clothes (a colour allegedly chosen to remind her of the pale blue skies above her native Riga). The same shade of blue was used for the packaging of her products, and the décor of her salons.

But Celia's social triumph did not last long. His lordship died of a heart attack in the arms of his latest underage male fancy, and the resulting scandal was too much for even her to withstand. Keeping the stately home and the title, she fled to New York. For the rest of her career, she divided her time between New York and Paris, and rarely set foot in London again.

But she had got what she wanted. Managing to blend her title with her pseudonym, she was henceforth known to the world as Lady Temple. In her later years, presiding over New York society from a mansion on Park Avenue, still wearing the same pale blue, still using the same packaging, her ladyship began to attribute its provenance to the pale blue skies above her native Hertfordshire. Nobody seemed to notice.

By the time I arrived at the company, Celia was long dead, but the company she had founded was still under family management. On her death, her fourth



husband Max, thirty years younger than she was, had taken over the company under the name Max Temple. (It was sometimes assumed that he was Celia's son.)

Meanwhile, Celia's figurehead role as Empress of Beauty had devolved to a lady called Sonia Temple, who was said to be Celia's niece. In fact, she was not related to Celia at all. From what I gathered, she was actually Max's niece. Sonia's role was to fly round the world, pop up as needed to represent the company, and make pronouncements about women and beauty.

When I met Sonia, she was in her sixties, and dressed in pale blue like Celia. She had the same blonde bouffant hairdo, and she spoke pretty much the same lines. It had never occurred to her to update the routine since Celia's day, and since Max was ninety and pretty much out of it by then (the company was run by a board of directors), it had never occurred to him either.

Sonia was one of the most profoundly stupid people I have ever met, but she did not have a malicious bone in her body, and we got on well. I provided her with hairdressers, masseurs, bagels, tights and whisky. I got her to her engagements on time, took her to look at apartments, translated her declarations into French. We spent an agreeable two weeks together. After some of the Hollywood stars and company directors I had had to deal with, Sonia was a holiday. From time to time, on taxi rides across the city, she would shoot questions at me.

"Are you happy, Olivia? Are you learning? Are you growing stronger?"

I didn't know what to make of these questions, nor what inspired them. New Age philosophy? Buddhism? The Torah? I answered as best I could, but I don't think she listened to the answers. Sonia functioned on automatic pilot, helped along by Glenmorangie.

The person who had hired me to look after her was Nadine Sant'Angelo, the Director of Public Relations. One day in Nadine's office, Sonia announced that I was learning and growing stronger every day, and that I was looking after her beautifully.

"Such a clever girl," she said affectionately, patting my hand.

Nadine took this testimonial as a tribute to her own flair in knowing whom to hire, but the recommendation stood me in good stead when I walked out of my job at the agency not long after. The celebs had been getting steadily worse all summer. The last straw was being asked by a Hollywood star I had admired on the screen for years to find him a callgirl. Not one, but two. One black, one Asiatic. My disillusion was complete. I quit on the spot.

Two weeks later, when I was still out of work, and wondering how to make the rent, I ran into Nadine's assistant in the street. I had met Francesca when I was looking after Sonia, and we had got on well together. Francesca was well-scrubbed and friendly, with expensive, badly-cut clothes and a slightly horse-like face. I had had more to do with her than with Nadine, whom I had encountered only briefly. When she told me that Nadine was looking for a second assistant, and encouraged me to apply for the job, I did so at once, and got it. I had been regretting it ever since.

\*

Nadine was at the hairdresser when I got in next morning, which gave Francesca and I the luxury of a non-hysterical start to the day. Sonia was so sweetly archaic that I had imagined the company would be the same. We sat in our Baltic-blue office adjoining Nadine's, Francesca did a little filing, I wrote an e-mail to my father, and we discussed my chances of acquiring the atelier.

"What did you say the seller's name was?" said Francesca. She took it for granted she would know him, and so did I.

Francesca had long ceased to amaze me. She had friends and relations everywhere, and she seemed to know half Paris. She never used the Yellow Pages: she worked exclusively on personal recommendations. If one needed an acupuncturist, she would call her sister's friend Salomé, who went every week to a wonderful Cambodian lady near the Jardin des Plantes. If one needed a gardener she would call so-and-so's brother-in-law Thibaut, who had a wonderful little man out in La Celle Saint Cloud. With one phone call, Francesca could conjure up wonderful florists, plumbers, dermatologists, and of course estate agents. It was she who had sent Sonia to Véronique the previous year.

"Cazalis," I said.

"Really?" she said. "Patrick or Mathieu?"

I tried to remember what the Snow King had said his name was.

"Mathieu, I think."

"Dark-blond hair? Early thirties?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"The other brother's several years younger. Better-looking, and his hair's much lighter. Patrick has a terrible reputation. My brother was at HEC with him."

HEC stood for Hautes Études Commerciales. It was the best business school in France. According to Denis, it was a place for people with money to meet each other, compile their address books, and begin their professional ascent.

"I think it must have been Mathieu. Based on the hair."

"You can't possibly mistake them. Patrick never stops looking you up and down, undressing you, you know. Mathieu just stares straight through you in a terribly sexy way."

I blinked. Sexy? Where did she get that from? The rest of it sounded right though.

"Mathieu, then," I said. They sounded like a charming pair. I wondered idly if things might have gone better if I had been dealing with Patrick last night.

"Have you met my friend Caroline, the one who works for Dior? No? She used to be married to Mathieu. That's when I met him, though I haven't seen him for ages. They broke up a couple of years ago."

"Really?" I said. Life was full of surprises this morning. I would not have thought the Snow King would go in for things like wives.

Abandoning her filing, Francesca began to tell me about the Cazalis family. Good bourgeois origins, bulging bank accounts, real estate in all the right places. The father had died a few years earlier, and the mother lived in seclusion in Biarritz. Mathieu and Patrick ran the family company, which had a finger in every pie, said Francesca admiringly: buying, selling, investing, dismantling -- and always, she insisted, making a profit.

"I really doubt he'll let you have the atelier at the price you're offering. The firm has a reputation for never losing money. Caroline used to complain that it was all they ever thought of."

I stared gloomily out of the window. Last night's snow had already melted. It was going to be another iron-hard grey day. "You're probably right," I said.

"Cheer up," said Francesca. "There are plenty more houses in Paris. Véronique will find you something lovely. By the way, I wanted to ask what you're doing on Saturday night?"

"I don't know," I said absently. "Working, I expect. Why?"

"A group of us are going out to dinner. There's a wonderful little bistro just opened near the Bastille. Why don't you come along? It'll cheer you up. Geoffroy is coming, and so is Clothilde."

I pulled myself together. I did not like Francesca's friends, most of whom were expensive little snobs with not a brain between them, and I had no desire to spend an evening with them in the latest noisy, overpriced restaurant à la mode.

"It sounds lovely, Francesca, but I really don't think I can. I have eighty pages on air pollution to translate by Monday morning. It's going to take me all weekend."

"You're mad," said Francesca. "When I think of what's in store for us next week - you haven't forgotten the Conference, have you? - surely you can take one evening off?"

"Believe me, I would if I could. Some other time."

"You'll never meet people if you work so hard," said Francesca disapprovingly.

What she meant by that was that I would never find myself a new husband to replace the one I had mystifyingly thrown overboard. Francesca was twenty-four. She had been working for Nadine for three years, and she spent her weekends looking for Mr. Right. Her aim in life was to get married, and shake the dust of the salaried world off her feet. Her idea of a well-filled existence was children and cocktail parties.

I found her ambitions amazing in this day and age. She reminded me of my sister - minus the cocktail parties. Both of them, of course, thought that the way I lived was highly eccentric. Especially Francesca. Buying a house, she could understand. Leaving a solvent husband and working for a living, she could not. As for spending the weekend on a translation, that was beyond her comprehension.

\*

Despite her reproaches, I spent the weekend at home with Paris air pollution levels. If I wanted to make my niche as a translator, I had to take all the work I was offered, and do it whenever I could.

At seven on Sunday evening, the text was finished. I was sitting in a stupor in front of the computer wondering whether to get up and cook myself some supper or just go straight to bed, when there was a knock on the door.

It was Luc, my landlord. It was the Lord's Day, he informed me, and I had no right to be working. I was to abandon what I was doing, and come out for a drink with him.

I was happy to oblige. A drink was just what I needed. I had taken to drink in a big way since I had been working for Nadine. I shook my hair out of its knot and brushed it over my shoulders, rubbed a hefty dose of Celia Temple Hydro-Revitalizing Tinted Foundation Cream into my pallid skin, and removed two of the three sweaters I had been wearing round the house. It had been snowing on and off all weekend, and the heating in the apartment left a lot to be desired. I put on my fur-lined boots and the parka I had bought ten years ago in Montreal in a shop specializing in cold weather gear for the Canadian climate. It was just the thing for February in Paris. I zipped it up, and Luc and I set off.

Luc was a friend of my father. They had spent their boyhood together in Nova Scotia before going their separate ways: my father to Montreal for an uneventful career as an international civil servant, and Luc to Toronto for stardom in advertising, and lesser fame as a painter. He had moved to Paris fifteen years earlier.

Advertising was beginning to bore him, and he had just lost his partner to AIDS. The money he had made during his years as a graphic designer paid for a decrepit two-room apartment on the edge of Montparnasse, and an equally run-down studio a few streets away. Luc did them both up himself, and then got down to work.

A decade and a half later, he had a solid reputation as a painter and was making money. Not a fortune, but enough. He had recently decided to sell both the apartment and the studio, and look for a larger place which combined both living and working quarters. He was tired, he said, of having to get up and get dressed and walk through the Cemetery to work on winter mornings. He had earned the right to work in his dressing gown. While he looked round, he had moved into the studio, and was renting the apartment to me. How long our arrangement would last was uncertain. It depended how long it took him to find the studio of his dreams.

He took me to the Closerie des Lilas, as he always did. It was his local: he had been going there for fifteen years. It was cosy and warm inside, with muted lights and a piano player. Luc walked ahead of me, looking round to see if there was anyone he knew. Montparnasse was no longer the artistic Mecca it had been in the 1930's, but plenty of writers and artists still lived in the quartier, and it wasn't uncommon for Luc to bump into one of his cronies here. I wasn't surprised when a man with a head of white hair called his name and waved us over. Luc greeted him enthusiastically, and introduced him to me as "my friend Armand." There was another, younger man there, who Armand introduced as his nephew. We all shook hands, Luc and I sat down, Luc ordered Canadian whisky and I asked for a glass of wine.

Armand, it turned out, was the gallery owner who was organizing an exhibition of Luc's paintings in a few months time. The two of them promptly began to discuss the technicalities of the operation. Which day of the week to hold the opening, how far apart to hang the pictures. I was left to talk to the nephew, whose name was Patrick. He was looking me over avidly. I disliked him on sight. He was good looking in a dissolute kind of way, but there was something invasive about his hot blue eyes that made me distinctly uncomfortable.

I launched nervously into some chit-chat about the cold weather. He didn't bother to respond, just smiled at me: a slow, knowing, infinitely arrogant smile. My drink arrived. I downed half of it at one gulp.

Patrick raised an eyebrow. "Is it me that's making you so nervous?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I just had a very bad day."

"Really? What were you doing?"

"Translating."

He raised another eyebrow. "What a strange pastime. Never mind. We still have the evening for us."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Would you like to go out to dinner?"

For a moment, I was too astonished to respond.

"Don't look so stunned!" said Patrick. "Don't tell me no one's ever asked you out to dinner before? Especially with looks like yours."

"Actually, no they haven't. Not on five minutes' acquaintance."

"We work fast over here in Old Europe."

"Your time is running out," I snapped.

"And also we've had more practice."

I thought of Denis, and laughed in spite of myself.

"So what about it?" he said.

"I don't know. I'll tell you when I've known you a bit longer."

"Ten minutes?"

"Half an hour."

"I'd better buy you another drink then."

"Yes," I said. "I think you better had."

While he tried to catch the waiter's eye, I looked round at the other drinkers, and let my mind drift. I was tired, and I had no desire to spend the evening engaged in verbal fencing with this extraordinarily pushy man. The French usually hit on you in rather more subtle ways. If it hadn't been Luc who had brought me here, I would have got up and left.

Suddenly, my gaze alighted on the sloping glass roof above our heads, and my mind clicked back into gear. That roof was the same shape at the one I was going to put into the atelier. If I remembered rightly, the whole of the lower part slid upwards in summer, so that the restaurant was open to the outside. Could I could install the same system in the atelier? I made a mental note to ask Claude about it.

"Thinking of me?" said Patrick.

"The answer's still no," I said. "I was thinking about a house I'm hoping to buy. I want to put in a glass roof just like this, and I was wondering if I could make it open like they do here."

I hadn't expected him to be listening, but apparently he was, because the effect of my words was amazing. The dissolute lines of his face disappeared, his gaze hardened, and his look changed into something cold and appraising and calculating. The languid seducer of a moment ago had turned into an opponent preparing for battle. I was taken by surprise.

And then it occurred to me that there was something faintly familiar about him. Had I seen him somewhere before?

"A glass roof," he repeated. "For a conservatory?"

"Not exactly, no. It's more like a winter garden."

"A winter garden, yes, that rings a bell. And this house of yours is where?"

"Impasse du M-moulin Vert."

He glared at me with icy grey eyes.

Too late, I realized who I was talking to.

"So you're the one who made an offer on the atelier! Well, listen to me. You might have managed to twist my brother round your little finger, but you won't succeed with me. I'm warning you now: if you want that house, you're going to have to make us a decent offer. Entreprises Cazalis is not a charity, and as long as I have anything to do with it, that house is going for the asking price, not a centime less, so you'd better watch your step!"

## 5. PUBLIC RELATIONS

So now I was acquainted with both the brothers Cazalis. The most eligible bachelors in Paris, Francesca had assured me. I could only assume she had never seen them in action.

At the end of his little outburst, Patrick got up and left. Armand apologised for his nephew's behaviour. Luc apologised for the failure of his attempt to cheer me up. I tried to laugh it off and reassure them both that it didn't matter, but I don't think I made a very convincing job of it.

The truth was that Patrick's tirade had shaken me, all the more so as I didn't understand it. It sounded as though there was more than money going on between the two brothers - what was the stuff about me twisting Mathieu round my little finger supposed to mean? - but of course I had no idea what. I seemed to have got myself unwittingly mixed up in a crocodile fight. I was even a little frightened. Watch your step, Patrick had said. Just what did he mean by that?

Not only did I not sleep well, I forgot to set the alarm. When I woke up it was nearly eight o'clock. I had been instructed by Nadine to get to the office by half past eight. Today was the first day of the Celia Temple (Europe) Public Relations Conference, attended by PR managers from all over Europe. It was Nadine's annual moment of glory. Fifteen acolytes to subjugate, two assistants to humiliate, vassals from half Europe paying tribute, a whole public relations empire awaiting her decrees. Francesca and I had been instructed to get to the office early to hang up coats, serve coffee, point out the cloakrooms, and generally act as parlour maids.

And now I had spoiled it all. I could smell disaster.

I arrived at work half an hour late, to find the office full of people I didn't know, and Nadine in a towering rage.

"Olivia, how good of you to grace us with your presence at last! Your colleagues and I have been waiting for over an hour. Now perhaps we can finally get started."

She swept off down the corridor in her new Givenchy suit, and everyone trod obediently in her wake. Gloomily, I followed. There was no point trying to explain. Nadine was going to make my life a misery for the rest of the week.

I trailed into the conference room behind Peter from Germany and Elise from Austria, and opened my notepad. Nadine had decided that, as the more junior of her two assistants, I would be responsible for the minutes of the meeting, while Francesca would act as interpreter, translating into French for the few people who did not speak English, and into English for the majority who did not speak French.

When she had given us our assignments the previous week, we had stared at her, dumbfounded. She had smiled complacently. From her point of view, the arrangement could not have been bettered. Francesca's English was shaky, which meant there would be plenty of opportunities for pointing out her mistakes. I was a qualified interpreter who would have to sit for two days in humiliated silence.

I had to hand it to her, she had surpassed herself.

The main item on the conference agenda was Skin Analysis. Skin Analysis was the name of a so-called "revolutionary" new range of products which, the company chemists claimed, had the power to analyse a woman's skin and dispense active ingredients accordingly. Not unsurprisingly, this claim had run into difficulties in several European countries, and Brussels too was rumoured to be taking an interest. Advertising and packaging copy had both had to be rewritten several times. Now that

the legal claims had finally been satisfied, and the launch date was approaching, the PR Conference had to consider how best to present the product to the press in terms that were sufficiently anodyne to satisfy the authorities, and sufficiently seismic to arouse public attention.

Nadine ran the meeting according to the principles of what Lenin would have called democratic centralism. Everyone (more or less) was allowed to have their say, but she alone made the decisions.

For the first hour, I wrote everything down conscientiously, but then I realized there was no point noting the more idiotic suggestions that Nadine was going to pour scorn on anyway, nor the differences of opinion that teetered on inconclusively until she resolved the issue. I noted only the decisions, and spent the rest of the time observing Nadine's technique.

Peter from Germany outlined his plans with admirable clarity and concision, Francesca struggled to keep up with the translation into French, Nadine rebuked Francesca, smirked at Peter, and approved everything he said. Maria from Spain made a counter proposition, Francesca got stuck halfway through the translation into English and asked me for help, I started to translate in her place, and Nadine at once cut me off.

"Olivia, there is no need for you to interfere with the translation. Francesca is managing perfectly. Your job is to take notes. I want copious notes, Olivia, but I do not see you writing very much down. As for you, Maria, that won't do at all. I advise you to rethink your project from start to finish. You aren't going to convince the press with an approach like that. I'm surprised you can't see that yourself."

Maria went a deep shade of red, the others averted their eyes, and I decided that I was going to look for another job, starting that very lunchtime.

But I had no chance to sneak off to my office and surf the Internet. A buffet lunch had been provided, and Nadine needed me to hand round the canapés. Wine was provided, fortunately, which lightened the atmosphere.

Peter drank steadily. Maria stayed by herself in a corner and ate nothing. I didn't get a chance to eat anything either, since I was too busy serving other people, but Peter handed me a large glass of wine when Nadine wasn't looking, and that got me through the afternoon.

The company's chief chemist was coming to talk to them about the wonders of Skin Analysis. I had a copy of what he was going to say, and I didn't need to take notes. Just to make sure I didn't get ideas above my station, Nadine provided the translation from French to English herself, sitting beside the chemist on a raised platform at one end of the room and rendering his remarks with great aplomb. Everyone was so smitten by her air of self-confidence that no one seemed to notice that what she said was so confused that it was incomprehensible.

"*Cara, quel talent!*" said Franco, who spoke no English.

"Nadine, that was wonderful," said Elise, the only one on first-name terms with her.

"Oh translation isn't difficult, anyone can do it," said Nadine modestly. "Look at Olivia here, and she's a professional!"

Still, the next morning, Nadine announced that my performance the previous day had shown that I was congenitally incapable of taking adequate notes, and so Francesca was instructed to take the minutes and I was requested, none too politely, to take over the interpreting. It was made clear that, had there been any choice, this would not be happening, but we both knew she was admitting defeat. She did her best

to improve her position by interrupting all the time, but I had had enough experience to deal with that, and in the end she stopped trying to sabotage the translation.

Our subjects of discussion today were the forthcoming royal wedding in Madrid, where the bride was to be made up by Celia Temple's star make-up artist, Vadim Cléry; tie-ins with fashion collections in various countries; and Miss Sonia Temple's next visit to Paris in July.

At the end of the morning there was another buffet lunch. Several people congratulated me on my translation as I passed the plates, first looking round to ensure that Nadine was out of earshot.

After lunch, they all split up into smaller groups. The official programme was a visit to the factory, escorted by Nadine, for more Skin Analysis briefings, but I noticed that only those already in favour with Nadine, or those hoping to become so, had signed up for this. Some of the others went off to catch the end of the prêt-à-porter showings, and the rest wandered off to inspect the beauty sections in the big department stores Le Printemps and Galeries Lafayette.

Maria changed her air ticket with my assistance, and went home early to Madrid without informing Nadine. "I've never been so humiliated in my life," she said bitterly.

Francesca and I were left to clear up the buffet table and the conference room. We started by eating up the things which wouldn't keep (as on the previous day, neither of us had had any lunch), and transferred the rest to the drawers of our desks for later consumption. A couple of bottles of wine remained: after some discussion, we smuggled them down the corridor and hid them in the stationery cupboard behind a stack of printer paper.

Just as we were finishing up, Peter appeared, back from Le Printemps, and sat down on the visitor's chair, with apparently nothing better to do than to talk to us. So we got out one of the wine bottles, Francesca sneaked back to the conference room to steal some paper cups, Peter opened the bottle with the corkscrew on his Swiss knife, and we huddled together like conspirators, holding our breath every time someone walked down the corridor outside. If Nadine had caught us, she would have fired both Francesca and me on the spot - and possibly Peter too.

We discussed the meeting, and the other PR people, and of course Nadine. Francesca said it felt like the end of term, and Peter flirted mildly with both of us. We finished our glasses of wine, and poured some more.

"Olivia, I forgot to tell you!" said Francesca suddenly. "Guess who I saw in the restaurant on Saturday night?"

"Nadine and Enrico dining *en tête-à-tête*," I suggested flippantly.

"God no!" said Francesca. "Mathieu Cazalis!"

"Did you?"

"Yes, isn't that weird? With a terribly glamorous girlfriend. He seems to be doing very well for himself."

"One eligible bachelor less in Paris," I said. "Guess who I met on Sunday? Patrick Cazalis!"

"Really? That's even weirder."

"It was more than weird, it was nasty."

"Why? What happened?"

I was about to tell her about it when my phone rang.

"Mademoiselle Hammond? Mathieu Cazalis."

I sat up straight.

"Oh. Right. Yes. Hello."



"I wanted to tell you that if you're still interested in the atelier, I'm prepared to sell it for the price you offered."

"Oh. Will you? Really?"

"Are you still interested?"

"Oh. Yes. Thank you. I- I wasn't expecting this."

"Neither was I."

I didn't know what to make of that. "But what about your brother?" I blurted out.

There was a short silence. "Excuse me?"

"I, um, I thought, that is, I met your brother, um, and he, er- "

"My brother," said Mathieu Cazalis very coldly, "has nothing whatsoever to do with this. Are you interested or not?"

There was a sudden commotion in the corridor: the twitter of voices, the click of high heels, the rustle of coats, and, cutting through it all, the jangle of bracelets. Francesca and I looked at each other in horror.

Nadine always wore three or four gold bracelets which clinked together when she moved. The sound of the bracelets in the corridor was our early warning system.

"It's her," hissed Francesca, snatching the half filled glass out of Peter's hand and shoving it in the cupboard. "Get some papers out."

"Hello?" said Mathieu Cazalis. "Are you still there?"

"Yes. Yes, I am," I said, putting my own glass adroitly into a drawer.

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry. A slight upheaval- "

I put the bottle out of sight under my desk and switched on the computer.

He sounded nonplussed, as well he might. "Do you wish to buy the atelier or not?"

"Oh yes," I said. "Definitely."

The door opened and Nadine appeared in a splendid black fur hat that she had bought in Moscow, with two or three of the acolytes fluttering in her wake. Her eyes swept over the room, took in me talking on the phone, Francesca sitting calmly at a perfectly empty desk, and Peter ensconced in the visitors' chair with a file upside down in his hands.

She knew at once that subversion was in the air.

"What's this? A tea party?"

"Then I'll give the instructions to my solicitor," said Cazalis, "and she'll contact you shortly. And don't worry about my brother, it's none of his business."

"All right, I won't. Goodbye Mr. Cazalis, and thank you again."

"Who on earth are you talking to, Olivia? Haven't you started typing up the minutes yet? They have to go out as soon as possible, you know. You too, Francesca. I don't want any delay."

"Madame," said Peter, stepping forward, "I'm so glad you're here. I was anxious to say goodbye before I left for the airport, and I was worried you wouldn't be back in time. Your assistants were kind enough to allow me to wait in here. I hope you don't mind."

"It's not the best idea, Peter. They have work to do. I don't encourage them to sit around and chat. Anyway, do come in." She ushered him into her office, and turned to me. "I'm sure Olivia will bring us some tea when she has time."

"Of course, Madame,"

We waited until the door closed.

"Well?" said Francesca urgently.

"He's going to sell it!"

"At that price? I don't believe you!"

"His solicitor's going to call me."

"His solicitor's going to tell you what the catch is."

"What do you mean, the catch? There is no catch!"

"Oh yes there is," said Francesca. "At that price, there has to be."

## 6. ENTER THE WITCH

It turned out she was right. There was a catch. But it was several days before we found out what.

During that time, Claude and I pored over plans, and made estimates of cost. Claude had already started work on the plans, it turned out, while we were waiting to hear if the sale was going to go forward. He said he hadn't been able to resist. For several days, I thought of nothing but where to put the cupboards and the light switches, what colour to paint the bedroom, and what kind of counters I wanted in the kitchen. Claude advised me, Alice provided counter-advice, and the boys made endless off-the-wall suggestions.

While I was supposed to be transcribing Nadine's minutes, I looked at colour samples under the desk, and as soon as she left the office, I made phone calls. I called the solicitor whose name Claude had given me to represent me at the sale. I called my bank in Canada to discuss money transfers, I called my father, who sounded cautious but interested, and I called Miranda, who said I had taken leave of my senses.

Claude made me a model of what the house would look like, and I poked around endlessly in the tiny rooms, and thought about what I would put where, and what kind of plants I would put in the winter garden.

Maître Bérenger, Cazalis' solicitor, contacted me as promised, and said nothing to alarm me. She was not exactly pleasant, but that seemed to be her manner. Yes, said Francesca, who knew all about her through Caroline, she was a little brusque but extremely competent.

And then Véronique intervened.

She called me mid-morning in the office. As usual, it was not a good time. Nadine was due to leave the following day for Madrid, for the royal wedding. Vadim Cléry, the make-up artist, who was leaving that afternoon, was having a last-minute attack of nerves in Nadine's office. What if the airport was closed by snow - how would he get there? What if he was invited to attend the wedding - what would he wear? What if the bride was allergic to one of the products - what would he do? What if the colours he was taking turned out to be wrong?

Nadine was doing her best to calm him down when my phone rang.

"I'm afraid there's been a setback," said Véronique. "Mr. Cazalis has had a better offer."

"But he's accepted my offer," I said.

"Well I know, but nothing's been signed yet."

"How much is the other offer?"

"I don't exactly know. I only heard about it last night."

"But who made the offer?"

"I don't know that either. I only heard about it indirectly, you understand."

I was mystified. "Has he talked to you about it?"

"No, he's out of town right now."

"If he's out of town, how can this other person have made him an offer?"

"Well I suppose it would have been by phone."

"But who showed the house to the other buyer? I thought you had exclusive rights."

"Yes, but I think that's expired by now."

"Olivia, when you've finished your private conversation, I would be grateful if you could come in for a moment."

"Just a moment, Madame, I'm coming right away."

"So I was wondering, do you maybe want to rethink your offer? Otherwise, we may simply lose the deal."

"How can I rethink my offer until I know what the other people are offering?"

"Well maybe I can try to find out how much it was."

"Thank you, Véronique. If you could do that and call me back, then I can think about it over the weekend."

"Over the weekend? But that may be too late."

"Look, Mr. Cazalis called me himself to tell me he accepted my offer. Surely he'll call to tell me that he's changed his mind?"

"One would think so.... But on the other hand... And in any case, he's not here right now."

"Do you know where he is?"

"OLIVIA! The company doesn't pay you to chat on the phone, you know."

"No."

"Or how long he's gone?"

"No."

"This is all very strange. I can't see him changing his mind."

"The other buyers seemed very confident."

"I thought you hadn't met them."

"Well, no, but- "

"OLIVIA!"

"Look, I can't talk now, Véronique. Find out the price, if you can, and we'll talk then."

I took my tale of woe to Claude's after work. We chewed over the matter for several hours, sustained by red wine and *hachis parmentier*, and finally came to the conclusion that the other buyers did not exist. Véronique had invented them, in an attempt to frighten me into offering more money, and thereby raising the amount of her own commission. An old trick, said Claude. But of course, we couldn't be sure.

The following day, Claude called Véronique to try and clarify matters, but came away even more confused than before. Véronique claimed to be trying to support my cause, but felt that there was nothing she could do if the still-unidentified other buyers were offering more money.

I didn't know what to do. It was true that my offer had been extremely low. Maybe I had gone down too far, and Cazalis was now regretting that he had accepted it, and was trying via Véronique to make up lost ground. Or maybe Patrick had taken a hand in matters, as he had threatened, and was trying to screw up the deal.

"Can't you call this Cazalis yourself?" said Alice, and I shook my head.

"No. I don't have his number. I don't know where he works, I don't know where he lives. I can only contact him through Véronique."

"Maybe he's in the directory," said Benjamin, but he wasn't.

"Did he call on your mobile?" said Claude. "Is the number still in it?"

"No, he called on the office number."

I stopped short.

"Now that I think of it, that's very odd. I didn't give it him. He must have looked it up."

"So there's no trace?" said Alice.

"None at all."

We looked at each other blankly. What did it mean? Benjamin said he didn't really exist, Joseph said he was on the run from the law, and Denis, who was there too

that day, said that he was a zombie who only had a human form during the hours of darkness and de-materialized into a wraith during the day.

After a day or two of hesitation, during which I heard nothing from Veronique, I called her back.

"Is he still out of town?" I asked.

"He hasn't called," said Veronique obliquely.

"Can't his company tell you?"

"Oh I never call him at his office. I use his mobile number. Anyway, I went past his apartment last night, and I didn't see any lights."

"Where does he live?" I asked.

"Rue Guynemer - oh dear, I shouldn't have told you that."

I paused to assess this remark. Véronique was far too experienced in the art of discretion to make a mistake like that. Could this be a sign that she really was on my side? But if so, who was behind her? Mathieu, trying to renege on the deal? Or Patrick, trying to scupper it?

"Let me know when he gets back," I said.

I made a detour down Rue Guynemer on my way home. It wasn't far from where I lived. The street overlooked the Luxembourg Gardens. Mathieu Cazalis, I admitted grudgingly, had good taste. It was another frigid grey day, unseasonably cold for mid-March. The sky was iron-hard. A few snowflakes fell. Across the road, the park was an uninviting mass of frozen vegetation. The street was deserted. No one came in or out of any of the buildings. I inspected the doorways for nameplates, but I didn't find one with his name on it. A bitter little wind blew down Rue d'Assas. I pulled my scarf over my face, and went home.

Claude called me later that night. I was slumped in front of the television watching a show about people who had undergone some humiliating life experience, and felt impelled to tell the whole of France about it on television. Nadine was back from Spain, and it had been a bad day.

"Olivia, I just had a brainwave. Call Cazalis' solicitor and ask her for his number."

"Will she give it to me?" I said dubiously. Maître Bérenger struck me as the kind of person who did not give information away for free.

"I don't see why not," said Claude.

I called the next day. Maître Bérenger was no more agreeable than previously. When I asked after the date for exchanging contracts, she was evasive, but after some palaver, she gave me Cazalis' office number.

I called at once.

"Entreprises Cazalis, Marie, bonjour," said the person who answered the phone.

I asked for Mathieu Cazalis, gave my name, and she put me through immediately.

"Cazalis," he said unwelcomingly into the phone.

"Mr. Cazalis, good morning, it's Olivia Hammond."

There was a dead silence. Clearly he had no idea who I was. The silence lasted several seconds, until I fell into place.

"Yes, Miss Hammond." Another pause. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to talk to you," I said firmly.

Silence. "Why is that necessary?"

"I'd like to know what's going on with the atelier. Your estate agent says you have another buyer, your solicitor won't give me a date for exchanging contracts. I want to know exactly what you're doing."

Silence. Then a sigh. "Yes, I see. I'm afraid this will have to wait a few days. I'm extremely busy right now."

"So am I," I snapped. I could hear Nadine's bracelets in the corridor. "I want to know where I stand. If you plan to go back on our deal, you might at least have the courtesy to tell me about it."

"I'm expected in a meeting. I don't have time for this right now. Marie shouldn't have put you through."

"So fire her! And then tell me when you can see me."

Silence. I could feel the icy blasts coming down the telephone line.

"Not this week. Maybe towards the end of next week."

"I'm afraid that won't do. What about the weekend?"

I could feel him starting to object, but before he could tell me he was off to Mégève or somewhere, I swept on. "Mr. Cazalis, if you have half an hour's free time on Saturday evening, maybe you'd like to come and have a drink at my apartment and we can discuss this sale. I live ten minutes walk away from you, and I won't take up much of your time."

The silence this time lasted even longer.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

I told him.

"All right. I'll be there at six."

"Thank you. I look forward to seeing you."

"So do I," he said unexpectedly, and rang off.

## 7. DAFFODILS IN THE BOUDOIR

Over the next two days, that "So do I" gave me considerable pause for thought. What had he meant by that? After all the fuss he had made about how busy he was, why on earth would he be looking forward to seeing me? For the pleasure of blowing me out of the water? Making legal mincemeat out of me? Doubling the price of the atelier and watching my face?

Of course, it could be something else entirely. Had I inadvertently invited a rapist into my home? An axe murderer? Francesca had gone ski-ing and was not available for consultation. In the end, my nerves got the better of me, and I asked Claude and Alice to come along too. Alice declined, on the grounds that Claude's parents were coming to dinner and she needed to tend to her roast chicken, but Claude agreed to come for an hour to provide moral support and act as bodyguard.

I began to feel better. One hour should be plenty. If Cazalis had stipulated six o'clock, which was early by Paris standards, that probably meant he had dinner plans, and he would be out by seven. Maybe even earlier. How long would it take him to tell me he had found a Saudi oil millionaire slash Russian mafia boss slash American software megastar who was prepared to double his asking price and throw in a bonus too?

"Yes, that occurred to me," said Claude, when I passed on this observation. "Did he say anything to you about a payment in cash?"

"You mean under the table? No."

"Then that could be what he wants. It's common practice. Less to declare for tax."

We were in my sitting room, waiting for the Snow King. The weather had changed in the last few days, and the temperature had soared. Maybe that was a good omen. The sun had shone into the apartment all afternoon, and the lady across the courtyard had planted crocuses round the fountain. I had laid out a bottle of wine and three glasses on the big Edwardian trunk that served as a coffee table.

"Music?" suggested Claude, so I pressed the button on the CD player and the disk I had been listening to the previous night came on. It was Maria Callas singing highlights from *Madame Butterfly*. Claude made a face, but said nothing.

We were debating whether to open the bottle, or wait till Cazalis arrived, when the bell rang. It was five to six. He was early.

I leapt to my feet in a panic.

"Oh my God, he's here already. How do I look?"

I had given a lot of thought to my appearance that evening. The nice-girl-from-Halifax look was definitely out. I wanted to appear both serious and determined. The kind of person who expected to get what she wanted. Black seemed like a good idea, but not just any black. I did not want Cazalis to think I had dressed up for him. In the end I opted for anthracite trousers and a chunky black sweater, both expensive Italian brands that I had picked up in the sales. After half an hour's dithering in front of the mirror, I completed the ensemble with enamelled earrings in black and ochre and gilt that came from a chic jewellery boutique in St. Germain des Près, and left my hair loose on my shoulders.

"What do you care how you look if he's thrown you over for a Russian mafioso and is coming here with his axe to finish you off?" said Claude.

So much for power and confidence. I started to giggle.

When I opened the door, I was still smiling. I found the Snow King standing on my doorstep with his arms full of daffodils.

"*Bonsoir*. These are for you." He held out the flowers.

I was so astonished I couldn't think of anything to say. I stood there clutching them. Ignoring my disarray, he stepped past me into the apartment. He had discarded his cashmere overcoat in favour of jeans and a leather jacket. Now that the snow had gone, he seemed less forbidding. His hair, which I had thought was grey, looked several shades lighter, and his face was less pale and cold. In fact, when I looked more closely, he had a tan. Maybe he had been skiing too.

"This is charming," he announced, looking around at the beams and the red flagged floor.

"Thank you," I said.

His eyes came back to me, and he looked me over with an air of slight bemusement. My new look must be having an effect. I smiled at him. He must be wondering where the mouse from Halifax had gone. He advanced as far as the second room, looking curiously at the pile of dictionaries beside the computer, and spotted Claude.

He tensed. "*Bonsoir, monsieur*."

Belatedly remembering my mythical fiancé, I introduced them. I didn't want Cazalis to draw the wrong conclusions, and nor had I told Claude about my impending re-marriage.

"This is Claude Barouin, my architect. Claude, Mr. Cazalis."

"Mathieu," said Cazalis, moving forward to shake Claude's hand.

My mouth fell open. I had never seen a French person offer a first name in a business context so fast before. It had been weeks before Véronique and I advanced that far. I caught Claude's eye over his shoulder. What was going on?

Cazalis turned back to me, and I hastily clamped my mouth shut.

"Do sit down," I gabbled. I wondered whether to turn off Callas: in the end I just lowered the sound. "Would you like a drink? I'll just put these in water. Claude, could you give Mr. Cazalis, er, Mathieu..."

I waved a hand at the bottle, and fled to the kitchen. I found a vase for the daffodils and took my time arranging them. When I returned to the sitting room with the vase, Callas was singing about the ship that would one day appear in the harbour, Claude was describing his plans to lower the attic floor, and Cazalis was sitting on my sofa, glass in hand, perfectly at ease, listening with apparent interest and asking questions.

They broke off as I came in. Both of them looked at me. I put the vase down on the nearest convenient surface.

"They're lovely. Thank you so much."

"They're a peace offering," said Cazalis. "I gather we've all been giving you a bit of a runaround."

I exchanged glances with Claude. "Yes, you have."

Claude took over. "Why don't we get this settled right away? Are you going to sell this garage to Olivia or not?"

"Garage?" I said indignantly.

"Garage?" echoed Cazalis.

"Let's face it, that's all it is," said Claude calmly. "A garage with an office on top, plus some rather inconvenient storage space."

"And you want to know if I'm going to sell it to her?"

"Yes."



"I'm surprised you should ask the question," he said coolly. "I said I was going to sell it, and I will. You need have no doubt about that."

He looked at Claude with an air of injured innocence, and then turned to me.

"I gave you my word," he said.

His eyes shone with sincerity. I gazed at him, entranced. Not a crocodile after all, but a man of honour. For a moment, I almost believed him. I caught myself just in time. The icy aura that had intimidated me at our last meeting was much less in evidence today, but his white polo-necked sweater served as a useful reminder that what I was dealing with here was the eternal snows. This man knew how to manipulate people, that was all.

"Good," said Claude. "So we don't need to worry about being pipped at the post by another buyer?"

The Snow King shrugged. "I don't believe so."

He took a swallow of wine and looked at us.

"And the price is still the same?"

"Well, yes. The price."

He stared meditatively at his glass. Claude and I exchanged glances. He kept us waiting for a full thirty seconds. The man was a master of his craft.

"The thing is," he said, and paused reflectively. "Yes. The thing is, I would appreciate getting part of the sum in cash." Another pause. "It would be more convenient."

Claude gave me an I-told-you-so-look.

"How much?" I said.

He named a sum, adding that the official selling price would have to be lowered by that amount.

"That's going to look very low," said Claude, grimacing. "The tax people will smell a rat."

"Not necessarily. It's a garage. You said so yourself."

Claude shook his head. "It's in a good area, right opposite the park. You're both letting yourself in for a tax inspection."

The Snow King smiled the world-weary smile of one who has the tax inspectors poking through his affairs year-in year-out.

"One more, one less," he said airily.

"It doesn't bother me," I said, hoping I was right.

"Good," said Cazalis, "then we're agreed. I'll inform Maître Bérenger of the change on Monday, and we can exchange contracts as soon as possible."

"Here's to a successful signing," said Claude, raising his glass. "And to your new house, Olivia."

"Yes, congratulations, Olivia," said the Snow King.

We drank.

"And now," said Claude, "I'm afraid I have to leave you. We're expecting guests for dinner," he explained to Cazalis.

"Nice meeting you," said Cazalis. "Good luck with the attic."

He showed no inclination to follow Claude out. The door slammed and we looked at each other across my great-grandmother's trunk.

"Olivia," he said reflectively. "Is your fiancé called Sebastian?"

Not just omertà, but Shakespeare too.

"No he's not," I said. "But my sister's name is Miranda, and my father is Prospero."

"Prospero? Surely not!"

"It's a nickname my mother gave him when Miranda was born. My mother taught English literature. *The Tempest* was her favourite play."

He looked amused. "So magic runs in the family?"

"I'm sorry about that. It was a silly thing to say."

"Not at all. It was charming. Much more appealing than the promoter who said he wanted to knock the whole thing down and build three modern studio flats."

"Do you always judge your buyers on their motives?"

He grinned. "No, almost never. The reason I turned down the other guy was that he was offering even less than you."

I stared at him, puzzled. "I thought the other buyer was offering more than me."

"What? Oh no, not that. This was a while ago." He paused for a moment, scowling at his glass. "Well, to cut a long story short, there was no other buyer. My brother, as I think you guessed, has been meddling in affairs that don't concern him."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. "More wine?" I said.

"Thank you, yes. What are all the dictionaries for?"

"I need them for my work. I'm a translator."

"I thought you said you worked at Celia Temple."

"Oh that's just my day job," I said frivolously. "I don't make enough to survive from translations alone. Lady Temple pays the rent, I take a day off when an interpreting job comes up, and I do what translations I can get in my spare time."

"So you spend your evenings translating?"

"Yes, and my weekends too."

"How many languages do you know?"

"Four. English, French, Russian and Spanish."

"You know you surprise me?" he said.

"And why's that? Were you expecting a boudoir full of beauty creams?"

"No, of course not! Well..." he shrugged disarmingly, "maybe I was. I've met people who worked in fashion and beauty before. I suppose I expected you to be like them."

I assumed he meant his ex-wife. I wondered what she was like.

"So why did you choose Russian?" he went on.

"Because I'm part Russian myself, on my mother's side. Her father was Russian and her mother Ukrainian."

He laughed. "Baba Yaga to *The Tempest* in three generations? So that's where the magic comes from!"

"Right," I said. He was beginning to surprise me too. Not many people were on first-name terms with Russian witches.

He went on with the interrogation.

"And your father's family?"

"One English parent and one Scottish."

He eyed me sceptically. I laughed at him.

"I know, I don't look the part. With forbears like that, I should have sandy hair and freckles. My sister has that colouring, but I'm a genetic freak."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be impertinent."

"It's all right. My theory is that one of my Ukrainian ancestors was ravished by a Georgian pirate from the Black Sea."

He went on staring. "Georgian, well... So that's why you're so dark."

I didn't answer.

He lowered his gaze, and said, "But your fiancé's French?"

Damn. Back to the fiancé. "Yes, isn't it odd? We're a very cosmopolitan family!"

"Indeed you are. Has he seen the house yet, by the way?"

"Who, my fiancé? No."

"I was wondering if he planned to visit soon?"

I stared at him, mildly annoyed. What did he care if my "fiancé" had seen the house or not? Did he think I was going to back out of the deal if the man in my life didn't like it? Was he one of those men who were convinced that women were weak, easily-influenced creatures who never knew their own minds?

I was tempted to tell him the truth there and then but, now that we had come to an agreement, it seemed silly to risk screwing up the deal by revealing that the fiancé was a myth.

"Yes, I believe he's planning a trip," I heard myself saying.

"When?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure."

"The thing is - and you would of course be perfectly justified in telling me that it's none of my business - but I just have this feeling that it would be better for him to see it first. Before we exchange contracts, I mean. But there's no legal obligation."

My blood was beginning to boil, at the same time that a shiver was going down my spine. It was a very odd sensation.

"He hasn't confirmed his dates," I said cautiously. "Maybe in a week or so."

"Perfect," said Cazalis. "I'll tell Maître Bérenger to hold off on the contracts for the time being. Let me know when he gets here, and we'll take him to see the house."

## 8. THE FAKE FIANCÉ

It was warm enough to sit outside in Claude and Alice's garden the following day. The trees were covered in soft green buds, and the flowering cherry had suddenly burst into bloom. Spring had exploded. From time to time we could hear the twittering of birds, but most of the time they were drowned out by the conversation.

"You told him what?!" said Claude.

"Why on earth did you do that?!" said Alice.

"I don't know," I wailed. "He was so awful the first time I met him, I thought it would help persuade him to sell."

Claude frowned in puzzlement. "He seemed all right last night. In fact, I found him quite pleasant. From what you'd been saying, I was expecting a monster with three heads."

"He wasn't the same last night. He was much friendlier. The first time he treated me like some ditsy little girl who was playing at buying a house. I thought if he knew there was a man around he would take me more seriously."

"On behalf of the Sisterhood," said Alice, "I condemn this utterly."

"So you invented a man, and now you're stuck with it?" said Claude.

He stroked his beard nervously, a sure sign of tension.

"Can't you tell him the trip's off and the fiancé's not coming?" said Alice.

"I have a nasty feeling that if I did that, he'd delay the sale till the fiancé turns up."

There was a baffled silence. The birds burst into chorus. Joseph turned the pages of *Libération*. Alice poured more coffee, and we all took more carrot cake.

"Why is he so anxious to meet the fiancé?" said Claude.

"I don't know," I said, through a mouthful of cake. "The only thing I can think of is that he's worried he won't get paid."

"It doesn't make sense. If you don't pay him, he repossesses the house."

"I know, I know. The whole thing's very bizarre."

"Why don't you just tell him the truth?" said Alice.

"I don't want to risk losing the house."

"It's very odd behaviour. So capricious. He didn't strike me as that kind of person last night."

"He was fine until you left. And then he asked me a lot of questions about myself, and then he came out with this."

Another silence.

"So what are we going to do?"

Claude, always so even-tempered, had a steely note in his voice. The project of his dreams was about to be snatched from his grasp. If I didn't get it back, he would never forgive me.

"She'll have to find a fiancé, that's all," said Alice calmly.

"What?" I said. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. It seems to be the only solution."

"But how do I do that?"

"Try the personals," said Claude, rather nastily, nodding towards *Libération*.

"I'll be your fiancé," said Joseph, looking up from the paper.

"You're a bit too young," I said. He had turned seventeen last birthday. "But I appreciate the offer."

"No problem. What about Dad?"

"He knows me already," said Claude.

"What about Luc?" said Alice.

"Luc is my father's age! And besides, he knows Cazalis' uncle."

"Does he?" said Claude.

"Everyone knows them. It's terrifying."

I was in the middle of recounting the evening at La Closerie des Lilas when Denis arrived. Since he had discovered that I was spending most of my time here discussing plans with Claude, he had taken to dropping in. Claude and Alice didn't seem to mind, and I was beginning to get used to his constant presence. To some extent, I found that I enjoyed it. Denis annoyed me, but I missed him too. I had had a good time when I was married to him. When he wasn't being unfaithful, he had always been entertaining.

We explained my predicament to Denis, he took a large piece of cake, and I finished my story.

"Do you think all this might be something to do with the brother?" suggested Alice.

"It could be, I suppose."

"That's a very odd family you're dealing with," said Denis. "Are you sure you want to go through with buying this house?"

"Yes, Denis, I'm sure."

"How about someone at work?" said Claude, stroking his beard.

I thought about it, and shook my head. "There's no one I know well enough. In any case, it's too risky. Francesca would be bound to find out, and I'm not sure I trust her to keep her mouth shut. She's friends with his ex-wife."

"Oh God," said Denis, "Paris is such a village! Why don't you hire someone from that escort agency you used to work for? They have men too, don't they?"

"It wasn't an escort agency," I said through gritted teeth.

"That's enough," said Claude.

We batted some more suggestions around. Luc's friends, Claude's friends, Joseph's friends. I had to face it, people with the right profile who were crazy enough to accept a proposition like this, and who had the aptitude to play it convincingly, were hard to find.

"Well," said Denis, when we had relapsed yet again into silence, "I can see I'm going to have to volunteer."

"You?" I said incredulously.

"Why not?" he countered.

"You know," said Claude, "that's not a bad idea."

"Over my dead body!" I snapped.

"What else are you going to do?" Claude snapped back.

I met his gaze, and recoiled. He really wanted that atelier. I had better not be the one to do him out of it.

"You know, Olivia," said Alice, "it really does seem like quite a good solution."

I looked at her. She was in green today, a whole spectrum of greens, which went very nicely with her garden. She was wearing the regretful but firm expression that she employed to tell the boys that it was they who had got themselves into a mess, and now they had to get themselves out of it. Making them face up to their responsibilities, she called it. And now she was making me face up to mine. My heart sank. If Alice did not support me, then I knew I would have to do it.

"Where's the problem?" said Denis breezily. "I'm supposed to be working for Unicef, am I? I can do Unicef."

"I doubt that very much," I said crossly.

"Cazalis isn't going to cross-question the fiancé about his job," said Claude. "All he wants to know is whether he likes the atelier."

"What if he wants to discuss the fiancé's career prospects and financial situation?"

"My career prospects are none of his damn business," said Denis. "This guy is invading our privacy, Olivia. I think we should withdraw as a matter of principle."

"If you tell him he's invading your privacy, Denis, I'll kill you!"

"All right, I won't. So you'll let me do it then?" His eyes gleamed like a child bent on some new escapade.

"I don't know. I don't want to. I think it would be weird."

"Of course it wouldn't," said Denis. "It's just pretend."

Before I had the time to explain that it was the pretending that was the problem, Alice said, "I think it would work quite well. You know each other well enough to be convincing. If you really want the house, Olivia, it might be the best thing to do."

I looked round at them all, and they looked back at me: Denis hopeful, Claude desperate, Alice gravely maternal.

"All right," I said, "I'll do it."

## 9. PHONE CALLS TO INDONESIA

I waited a week to call Mathieu Cazalis. Claude insisted on that. He said I couldn't announce my fiancé's arrival the day after I had said I didn't know when he was coming. It had to be plausible. Reluctantly, I agreed. I wanted to get the encounter over with as soon as possible, but I could see that Claude was right. We had to be convincing.

When I finally called him, the Snow King had reverted to his usual chilly self. But at least he seemed to know who I was, and why I was calling. He made no attempt to brush me off: on the contrary, he appeared eager to hold the meeting. We made an appointment for the following Tuesday, when I knew Nadine would be at the factory. I phoned Denis, who began by objecting that he had a vitally important meeting to attend, but finally decided he could make it.

We agreed to meet at Claude's half an hour before the appointment. I got there early, and paced nervously up and down. Alice and Claude exchanged indulgent glances.

"You look as though you were about to be interrogated by the KGB," said Claude.

Since I had agreed to let Denis masquerade as my fiancé, Claude's nervousness had evaporated. He said he could not understand why I persisted in regarding Cazalis as the Big Bad Wolf, when he was clearly a reasonable fellow. He didn't tell me that I had got everything out of proportion, but I could see that was what he was thinking.

Even Alice thought I was overreacting. "There's nothing to worry about," she assured me. "Cazalis isn't going to ask questions about your relationship. He just wants to make sure that Denis likes the house."

That was where she was wrong. There was more to it than that, I was almost sure. But since I didn't know what it was, I couldn't contradict her.

"I don't trust Denis," I said instead. "He doesn't understand that I want that house. He isn't taking this seriously." I glanced at my watch. "For a start, he's ten minutes late."

"Denis won't let you down," said Alice.

"Not intentionally, no. But Denis doesn't always realize that acts have consequences."

Denis arrived a few minutes later, and we set off for the atelier. On the way there, I discovered that he was late because he had been at a demo. The high-school students were up in arms about a proposed new school reform, and he had been out showing solidarity with the *lycéens*.

"And that's the meeting you're missing?" I said in disbelief.

"Olivia, if that bill goes through, the educational system in this country will never be the same again."

"Is that such a bad thing?" I retorted.

Every two or three years, the Ministry of Education came up with a proposal to reform the cumbersome school system, and every single time the students or the teachers or the high-school students, and sometimes all of them at once, went out on the streets to protest. I found all this knee-jerk negativity mildly annoying. The French hated change, and Denis was no exception. He was still explaining to me the dangerous impact the reforms would have on democracy, equality, and freedom of

opportunity when we turned the corner into the impasse and I saw Mathieu Cazalis waiting outside the atelier.

I put a hand on his arm to stem the flow. "There's Mr. Cazalis."

Denis paid no attention. "Where you went to school is going to count against you for the rest of your life. It's going to split the country in two."

"Denis," I said through gritted teeth, "shut up, you're out of character."

Cazalis came forward to meet us. He was wearing a grey pinstripe suit with a pale yellow shirt. His tan had faded, and his ash-blond hair was back to its normal colour. He looked cool and remote, and every inch the Snow King. My heart sank. This was never going to work. But he greeted us politely, looked Denis over, and announced he was glad to meet him.

"I hope you don't mind me asking for this meeting."

"Of course not," Denis purred. "It gives me the chance to see my future home."

I looked at him sharply. He smiled at Cazalis.

"When do you expect to move back from Montreal?" the Snow King asked.

"I have no idea," said Denis airily. "One never really knows with bureaucrats, does one?"

Cazalis eyed him speculatively. I suddenly realized that Denis did not look in the least like a bureaucrat. In his jeans and leather jacket, with his long white scarf wound round his neck, he looked exactly like what he was: a trendy Parisian intellectual. I had briefed him extensively on what to say, but we had forgotten to work out a costume for the role. My heart sank even further.

"It must be interesting, working for Unicef," said Cazalis.

"Humanitarian work is always gratifying," said Denis suavely. "It's good to think we might be making a difference to at least some of the world's children."

"Are you responsible for any particular area?"

Denis hesitated visibly. "Indonesia." It came out sounding like a question.

"Indonesia? Really? You must have your hands full since the tsunami. Are conditions out there as bad as one hears on television?"

"It's improving slowly," said Denis, who fortunately also watched television, "but it's going to take a long time to get things back to normal."

Cazalis waited for further insights, but there were none. "Have you spent much time out there?"

"None at all," said Denis. "I'm a desk man myself. But of course we're in constant touch. In fact," he went on, as inspiration struck him, "I have to get back to the office to take a phone call in an hour."

He glanced at his watch. So did Cazalis.

"Surely it's the middle of the night in Indonesia?"

"Our rescue teams are in operation round the clock," Denis assured him. "So this is the atelier? How impressive! You've outdone yourself, chérie!"

"Shall we take a look inside?" said Cazalis.

The shutter was rolled up already. We all trooped in.

Denis stopped dead on the threshold. I looked at him anxiously. I had warned him what to expect but, to judge by his face, my description had not done justice to the reality.

"Oh my God," he said.

I steered him hastily down to the far end of the room, and began to explain about the kitchen and the winter garden and reversing the slope of the roof. He peered abstractedly upwards. I wasn't sure if he was listening. But Cazalis was. He



had wandered after us, and was drinking in every word. I turned my back to him and kept talking.

After I had been through every architectural permutation I had discussed with Claude, I asked Denis brightly, "So what do you think?"

There was a pause of several seconds. Then Denis said, "You know, we should think about putting a real garden out in the back here. A kind of patio, open to the air. That glass roof of yours is going to be expensive."

I stared at him wordlessly. This was not in the script.

"And if we did that, it would make more sense to put the sitting room down this end of the room, opening on to the garden, with the kitchen and dining room on the impasse side instead."

"Oh," I said.

"Well," said Denis, "we can discuss it later. Let's see what's upstairs."

He bounded up the staircase. Nervously, I followed.

Upstairs, the real problems started. It turned out that the participants in our mythical marriage were going to have to share not just a bedroom, but a study. When he moved back to Paris, Denis announced, he was going to need a home office. That way he wouldn't have to go to work every day, and he could spend more time with me.

"Better get in a separate phone line for calls to Indonesia," said Cazalis, hard on our heels.

"Denis, I need an office too," I protested gaily.

"Of course you do, darling. All those dictionaries! Maybe we could divide up the space so we have a cubicle each. Or one of us could work in the bedroom. We'll have to see."

He put his arm round my shoulders and kissed my cheek. I managed to stop myself from shaking him off.

"Well now, what else is there? Where does this staircase lead?"

"There's another floor," I said. "Pop up and take a look. I'll wait for you down here."

"Right-o," he said, and started to mount the stairs.

I could have wept with rage. He was spoiling it all for me, and he knew it too. Dividing up my house into cubicles! He was provoking me on purpose, safe in the knowledge that I couldn't shut him up. I turned my back on him, and then recoiled as I found Cazalis two steps behind me, leaning nonchalantly on one of the partition walls of the old offices. Standing there, between me and the stairs, he was cutting off my exit to the ground floor.

I was about to yell at him to get out of my way, but then I saw his face, and stopped in surprise. He was smiling like the cat that had got the cream.

I said, with as much dignity as I could muster, "Denis and I have a few things still to discuss. But I'm sure we can work it out."

"I once had friends who bought a house to renovate and ended up getting divorced," he informed me.

"Denis and I aren't married," I retorted.

"Then it might not cost you as much," he said, still smiling. "They found it very expensive. I see you don't wear a ring."

Taken by surprise, I looked down at my hands. He was absolutely right: there was not a ring in sight. I no longer even wore my wedding ring. More costume deficiencies, I thought wearily. I would never be a success as a wardrobe mistress. I should have bought something in paste and glass to flash around - though even that

might not have worked. For one thing, he had already seen me ringless twice. For another, he struck me as the kind of man who would be able to spot fake diamonds at twenty paces.

I summoned my fake dignity again. "My fiancé and I decided it was more sensible to save the money we would have spent on an engagement ring for something more practical."

"Like cubicles for your computers?"

"Well, exactly."

For a moment, there was silence, except for Denis banging about overhead. I stared at the floor. I could feel him watching me.

"Olivia," he said, in a much softer tone.

I looked up at him in surprise.

"Surely you aren't really going to- ?"

"It's great up here!" Denis came clomping noisily back down the stairs. "It'll be perfect for the children, don't you think?"

I flinched. And now children too.

"Yes, of course it will, and a guest room. When my father comes to stay- "

"It would be a shame to cut the space in two. And don't forget it's one less wall to pay for. We could always put a sofa bed in the sitting room."

"Right," I said brusquely. I had had enough. It was time to put an end to this charade. I turned to the Snow King.

"Well, Mr. Cazalis, you've met my fiancé. I hope you're satisfied now!"

My voice broke on the final word. I was on the verge of tears. Damn Denis, with his flashy white scarf and his insensitivity, carving up my house and economizing my money. I waited for Cazalis to ask who we thought we were fooling, and to throw us out on the street as the impostors we were.

Instead, he said blandly, "Absolutely, yes. I expect you'd like to exchange contracts as soon as possible?"

"What?" I said.

"My solicitor suggests ten o'clock on Friday. Is that convenient to, er, both of you?"

"I'll be dealing with this on my own," I said, before Denis could get a word in. "The house will be in my name."

Cazalis raised his eyebrows.

"At least for the time being," I added reluctantly.

"So, Friday at ten?"

I hesitated. Friday was invariably chaos in the office. If I disappeared for the morning, Nadine would not be pleased.

"It's the only appointment Maître Bérenger has available. Next week she's going on holiday."

"Fine, I'll be there." Nadine would have to lump it.

"Perfect," he said, and led the way downstairs. "By the way," he added to Denis, as he ushered us out, "I was telling Miss Hammond I agree with her on the winter garden. The weather's not good enough here for an open-air patio. It might work well in Montreal, of course."

Denis eyed him. "In Montreal, it would be under snow for six months of the year. I take it you've never been there?"

"Not in winter."

"Then that explains it."

"I expect it does. Goodbye, Mr. Lambert, I enjoyed meeting you."

He shook Denis' hand, and turned to me.

"Goodbye, Miss Hammond. I'll see you on Friday."

"Thank you very much," I said, holding out my hand.

"Not at all."

He held my hand a moment longer than was necessary, and smiled at me.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy in this house."

## 10. A HOUSE OF ONE'S OWN

It took me a long time to get to sleep that night. I was thinking about the Snow King. I couldn't understand what Cazalis was up to. He had seen through Denis and me, that was perfectly clear. Denis knew nothing about Indonesia, I wore no engagement ring. We did not behave like people who were preparing to get married and spend the rest of their lives together. Cazalis had grasped that my fiancé was a sham, and yet he had agreed to sell me the atelier. Why? Was he using me for some purpose that I didn't understand? Were he and his brother playing some odd little game?

I did not confide my doubts to anyone else. Claude was nervous enough already, and I didn't want to worry him without good cause, while Denis was enchanted with his own performance.

"I thought that went very well," he had said, as we were walking away.

"Denis, you creep, you bastard, how could you say those things!"

"I said what you told me to say. Aren't you pleased? He's going to sell you the house."

I was too annoyed to answer.

"Well, Claude will be pleased, even if you aren't. And so will Cazalis. I can't believe you're going to pay him all that money for a dump like that."

There was no point trying to explain to Denis about Paris house prices. I maintained my silence.

"Come on," he said, putting an arm round me, "don't sulk. I'm sorry if some of the things I said went a bit too far. I admit I couldn't resist, and anyway it convinced him. He thinks we're going to live happily ever after with our computers and our children. Come on, let's walk across the park and I'll buy you an ice-cream."

I allowed myself to be mollified. "All right, but I want two flavours." Denis was no more generous with ice cream than with other people's walls.

"All right, but you have to promise to invite me to dinner."

"All right, but only once."

We wandered towards the ice-cream seller's cart.

"And you'll make spaghetti bolognaise?"

"Denis, the house won't be ready for months. You might have outgrown spaghetti bolognaise by then."

"I will never outgrow spaghetti bolognaise," said Denis indignantly.

We got in line behind a mother with a pushchair to wait our turn. I found myself wondering if Mathieu Cazalis would ever come to dinner, and what I would cook for him if he did. I couldn't picture the fastidious Snow King gobbling up spaghetti. Chilled caviar instead, perhaps, and I could pick up dessert right here.

"So what do you want?" said Denis.

"Vanilla and lemon, please."

I admit I chose the coldest-looking flavours on offer. Maybe I thought they would keep the Snow King with me. Maybe I thought they would help me understand that smile. It bothered me all evening. No one seemed to notice.

Alice glanced at me once or twice while we were listening to the Heroic Tale of the Talented Fake Fiancé, but she asked no questions, and I volunteered no information. The storyteller omitted the crack about the phone line to Indonesia. I did not set the record straight. Why spoil his fun? We would see what happened on Friday at the solicitor's.

On Friday, to my amazement, everything went perfectly. Cazalis was more affable than I had ever seen him, though Véronique was slightly subdued. The three of us met ahead of time in the café next door to the solicitor's office to deal with matters Maître Béranger preferred not to know about.

Cazalis and Véronique were already waiting when I got to the café. They had chosen an isolated table at the back of the room. The Snow King was elegant as usual in a charcoal business suit with a soft pink shirt. Véronique was very done up in a primrose-yellow jacket and a short black skirt, but the skirt was a bit too short, the heels were a bit too high, and the overall effect was slightly tarty.

When I came in, they had their heads together talking, but as I went towards them, they looked up. Véronique eyed my best black MaxMara trouser suit. Cazalis eyed me. Watching him watch me walk across the room, I suddenly understood why Francesca thought he was sexy. There was definitely something in the way he was staring at me. But then it was gone, and we all became business acquaintances again.

We shook hands. We ordered coffee. I wrote a cheque and gave it to Cazalis. He passed it to Véronique without looking at it. She produced an envelope from her briefcase, placed the cheque inside, sealed the envelope, wrote both our names on it, and put the envelope away. After the meeting with the solicitor, she explained, the envelope would be locked in her office safe. When the sale was completed, I would make a cash payment to Mr. Cazalis. Once that was done, the cheque would be returned to me. If everything went as planned, it would never be cashed.

It was my first encounter with high finance. I was impressed by the down-to-earth way they both behaved. In the realm of real estate, illicit transactions were no doubt a way of life. Véronique, mindful perhaps of her attempt at betrayal, avoided my eyes, but the Snow King smiled at me, and insisted on paying for coffee. We left for our meeting with the solicitor.

Maître Béranger was small and dumpy, and fearsomely efficient. She sat us round the table, read through the text we had to sign, which was called a *promesse de vente*, answered our questions, and resolved our problems. Slowly, I began to relax. Whatever Mathieu Cazalis was planning, it was not going to happen here. Not unless it was totally legal. There would be no demands for more money, and no unforeseen conditions. My solicitor, Maître Lorient, raised a couple of minor points, and Béranger set him straight at once. She knew what she was doing. Nothing came up to delay the signing.

In the course of the reading, I discovered that the Snow King was aged 32, had been born in Paris, and was a French citizen, and he found out that I was 29, had been born in Halifax, Canada, and was also a French citizen. He looked at me across the table when we got to that bit: I smiled blandly back.

The whole process took about an hour and a half. At the end of that time, we had signed the papers and I had handed over another cheque to Cazalis, representing ten percent of the purchase price of the house. This one was legal. It would be cashed by the solicitor and put into an escrow account pending completion of the sale. Cazalis was now legally bound to sell me the atelier. I was still entitled to change my mind, but if I did, I would forfeit my ten percent. The sale would be voided if the Ville de Paris declined to grant me a building permit. I could not believe that the gods would be so cruel. I managed to restrain myself from doing a little dance right there on the conference table. Independence was on the horizon! I had a house of my own!

The two solicitors got their papers together, stood up and prepared to leave. I did the same. Only Cazalis and Véronique were still in a huddle together at the table.

Seeing them so absorbed, I suddenly wondered if they had something going on besides real estate. Could Véronique be the glamorous girlfriend Francesca had told me about?

I eyed her thoughtfully. I would not have described her as glamorous myself, but to plain, unstylish, twenty-four-year old Francesca, I supposed she might be the seductive older woman.

With a final word to Véronique, Cazalis got up to say goodbye. "I'll see you at completion, Miss Hammond." He paused, and added, "Unless we run into each other at the opera before then."

The opera? "Well, yes. Who knows?" I wasn't sure what he meant.

The sale would be completed in about three months, when the building permit came through. I had no plans to go to the opera between now and then - and it was just as well. Even though I no longer had any reason to hide the fact that Denis was really my husband, and that I was a French citizen by marriage, I had no desire to admit to Cazalis that I had misled him.

By the look of it, we had arrived at a *modus vivendi*. He seemed to have decided he liked me, and I thought that, given a chance, I could like him. It was unlikely that our acquaintance would go any further, but I was reluctant to spoil it. Especially as I didn't know exactly what I would be spoiling. I still hadn't figured out why he had agreed to sell when I hadn't met his conditions.

In the metro on the way back to the office, I forgot about Mathieu Cazalis. I was torn between euphoria over having signed for the atelier, and apprehension over what Nadine was going to say when I got to work three hours late.

It was quarter past twelve by the time I got off the metro. I walked up Rue Royale with a quaking heart. Nadine was in the office with Francesca, bending over some papers. She straightened up, regarded me in silence, took in my black suit, and then let fly.

"What is the meaning of THIS, Olivia? Is THIS your idea of a suitable time to arrive at the office?"

"I'm sorry, Madame, I- "

"I knew as soon as I saw you that you were not the type to welcome a hard day's work, and now I see that my opinion has been VINDICATED."

"I'm sorry I'm late. I had to buy a house."

"You signed?" said Francesca, agog.

"I signed! I bought the house!"

"You bought a HOUSE?" said Nadine, arrested in mid-tirade.

"*Madame, je suis désolée*," I said in a rush, "I had to exchange contracts this morning, I had no choice, the solicitor is going on holiday, and I've had such a terrible time with the seller I didn't want to wait any longer, but I'll stay late tonight till everything is done."

"But where is this house?" said Nadine, sitting down in the visitor's chair.

From the way she hitched up her Chanel skirt and crossed her legs, I could see that all thought of work had gone out of her mind. Real estate, like skin care, flattened all social barriers. If I had bought a two-room apartment in an unsuitable suburb, it might have been different, but a plumber's workshop in a semi-respectable *arrondissement* was acceptable, even intriguing. Nadine would never have dreamt of making such a purchase herself, but she was capable of taking an enlightened interest, now and then, in how the other half lived.

By the time I had finished telling her all about it, I could see I had risen in her estimation. I was still a long way from being one of the Haves, but I had graduated to one of the upper layers of the Have-Nots.

## PART TWO

### 11. RUE VAVIN

My social promotion, of course, did not last long. Nadine soon realized she had been caught off balance. I had trapped her into engaging for a full half-hour in civilized discussion. She lost no time in seeking her revenge. For a week after I bought the atelier, she critized everything I did. Too short, too long, too slow, too fast. Too messy, too clean. Too complex, too simple. Nothing was ever right.

One day, she complained that I had streamlined office procedures to the extent that she didn't know how anything worked any more, and accused me of being too efficient. The next morning, discovering I had spent a few minutes chatting on the phone to Peter while I waited for her to finish a conversation on the other line, she charged me with inefficiency and idleness, and then, as inspiration suddenly struck her, accused me of making a play for every man I saw.

"Don't think I haven't noticed you in the corridor with Benoît from the art department," she spat.

I gazed at her wordlessly, too shaken to react. I had spoken to Benoît from the art department precisely once in my life, a few days earlier, but that of course was the one time she had chosen to sail past, locks newly tinted, bracelets rising to a crescendo, nose out of joint because her hairdresser Alexandre had given her to a minion to finish blow-drying her hair. The fact that Benoît was gay did not deter her. She had been passed over for a duchess, and it was hard to take.

"Why does she hate me so much?" I said miserably to Francesca.

Francesca stopped typing.

"Do you really want to know? You remind her of herself when she was young. You're dark like she is, you have similar colouring. Nadine must have been stunning thirty years ago. And now she's fifty-five and putting on weight. She's very well-preserved, and she's still quite striking, but she doesn't turn heads like she used to. And you do. You're thirty years younger than she is, and it rankles."

"Oh," I said feebly. I had not expected Francesca to be so frank.

"Whereas I'm blonde, not brunette, so she leaves me alone. And of course I don't have your looks."

"Francesca- "

"It's true."

"What am I supposed to do about it? Dye my hair?"

Francesca grinned, and shook her head. "It wouldn't help," she said, and went back to her screen.

After a moment, I did the same. It was an explanation that had not occurred to me, and it made sense. It would account for the vindictive tone of some of the comments that came my way.

But it made me wonder how much longer I was going to keep my job. If sexual jealousy was the problem, it was not going to go away. If things went on like this, I doubted I would be able to put up with her much longer, and then what would I do? I had rent to pay, and an atelier to renovate. I was unlikely to find a job that paid as well as this.

Happily, I was only in the office eight hours a day. Outside the Baltic-blue portals of Celia Temple, there were other things to distract me - the plans for the



atelier, for one thing. I had to decide on the shape of the windows, the slope of the roof, where the front door was going to go.

All the changes I wanted to make to the outside of the building had to be approved by the City of Paris. When Claude and I had worked everything out, he submitted the request for the building permit to the Direction de l'Urbanisme.

Then we moved on to the inside of the house. For several days, Claude marched me round Paris inspecting parquet flooring, bathroom tiles, and electrical appliances. A whole new world opened up. Was it better to have a microwave or a steam oven? A fridge-freezer that defrosted automatically, or one that kept vegetables fresh for several weeks? I had never had to buy household appliances before. I was awed and intrigued by all the things they could do.

My other main source of entertainment was Denis. Masquerading as my fiancé seemed to have persuaded him that he was entitled to a bigger role in my life than that of separated husband, and he had taken to phoning me regularly. So far, he was behaving very nicely. He inquired how I was, he urged me to quit my job, he asked my advice on his career. Or sometimes we just chatted. Our discussions took in anything and everything: the size of ministerial apartments, the disadvantages of democracy, the state of the Catholic church, the latest Woody Allen. Denis had always been an excellent conversationalist: I found myself looking forward to his calls.

Why he was making them was another matter. After some discussion with Alice, I concluded that Isabelle must be out of the picture, that her successor had not yet appeared, and that Denis was trying his luck. Nothing more was said about us getting back together, but I could see the idea was still at the back of his mind.

We took to going to the movies together. I made a point of choosing cinemas away from Montparnasse. One, because there was less chance of Denis inviting himself over for a drink afterwards. Two, because I had no desire to run across Mathieu Cazalis taking in the latest releases at his local cinema. I had no idea if the Snow King went to the movies - I knew he was an opera man, and that was all - but I did not want to risk another meeting between him and Denis. Fortunately, Denis had a penchant for obscure Argentinian or Turkish films that were projected at odd times in dingy art houses off the boulevard St. Michel in the students' quarter - a neighbourhood the Snow King was unlikely to frequent.

Aside from the risk of social embarrassment, I had stopped worrying about Mathieu Cazalis. Claude was right: I had let my fears run away with me. Why Cazalis had agreed to sell the atelier was unimportant. What mattered was that he had done so. His motives were not my problem, and nor were his Cheshire Cat smiles.

April turned into May, and May into June. Summer was in the air. Canopies of horse-chestnuts hung over the boulevards, café tables sprawled across the pavements, and the *lycéens* played ball games in the park.

Denis was invited to a conference in Montreal in July. Luc hesitated over pictures for his exhibition. Alice started a quest for the perfect apple tart. Mathieu Cazalis did whatever he did when he wasn't selling houses. Francesca went out to lunch with his ex-wife.

I looked forward to this. I was curious to meet her. When she came to pick up Francesca, I made sure I was in the office. Francesca introduced us, and I stared at her, intrigued. She was small and anorexically thin and frighteningly chic. Oddly enough, she had the same ash-blond hair as Cazalis, cut nearly as short as his. The Snow King had chosen well: she was the perfect consort. Her eyes glittered, and so did her fingernails. She was dressed all in white: a low-cut white cashmere pullover

and an ivory-coloured skirt with an uneven hem, in a style that was currently fashionable.

I wondered why she and Cazalis had broken up. Money perhaps? It was clearly not aesthetics.

Francesca explained my connection to the Snow King. Caroline eyed me with what seemed to be contempt.

"So you're the one who bought Mathieu's little shed! I know all about you, Patrick told me everything. Don't you think you've been just a tiny bit unwise?"

The Snow King intimidated me, but the Queen did not.

"I'm very happy with my purchase," I assured her.

"Good heavens." She sniffed. Our eyes met. End of conversation.

Francesca bore her tactfully off to lunch.

\*

In the middle of June, my father came to visit. Since I had no spare room, he stayed with Luc, who had no spare room either, but a lot more space. Luc set up a niche for him at the far end of the studio, surrounded by discarded canvases, and Prospero professed himself content. In fact, they both seemed very pleased with the arrangement. I suspected they chattered half the night like schoolgirls after lights out.

While I was at the office and Luc was working, Prospero took himself for walks round Paris, and paid visits to the Musée d'Orsay. Once for the architecture, once for the Impressionists, once for the views across the Seine. Luc and I tried to get him to branch out, but he refused. He liked to have a routine. When he was at home in Halifax, he did the same thing every day. He read the newspaper, did the crossword puzzle, tidied the house. In the afternoons, he took a walk. Sometimes he went along the waterfront, and greeted the regulars; sometimes he went to browse in his favourite bookstore, and chatted with Jeff, the owner.

It was the same when he came to Paris. He had his favourite café, he had his favourite walks. He always had been like that, but this year, it was more marked. Miranda was right: he was older and tired than when I had seen him last. He was more careful of his strength. He worried me.

I took him to see the atelier, to which I now had a key. We walked over there from my flat on Rue Campagne Première, inspecting the park, noting the bus routes, checking the shops. When we reached the impasse, there was no one there but us. I had yet to see anyone enter or leave the other houses. My neighbours were sylphs and sprites and possibly ghosts. Their houses were half-hidden behind screens of laurel and bamboo. The trees drooped over the street and obscured the windmill. The air was fragrant with roses. The bees hummed. It felt as though the whole of the impasse was about to fall into a hundred-year sleep.

"It's amazing," said Prospero. "It's like a fairy tale."

"It's magic."

"Of course it is. And this must be your atelier?"

He had chosen right, just as I knew he would. The atelier glowered silently at us, unkempt and unloved, in the midst of the fairy tale. I rolled up the shutter and we went inside.

Prospero took one look and began to smile. "It's perfect," he said. "It's exactly the place for you."

I looked at him in surprise. I had been counting on understanding; I had not dared hope for enthusiasm. But it turned out that he and my mother had looked at a

place like this when they moved to Montreal. They had considered buying it and doing it up, but since I was two and Miranda was six at the time, they had dropped the idea. Lofts were not as fashionable back then. My mother, less impressed than Prospero with the aesthetics of the place, had been daunted by the practical problems, and had finally convinced him to give it up.

I eyed my father with interest. I had never suspected him of such non-conformist tastes. The house where I had grown up in Montreal was entirely conventional, and the house where he now lived in Halifax was even more so. The Halifax house had in fact belonged to his parents. When he retired and returned there five years ago, he had taken it over because it was convenient.

His father, the wartime airman, who in civilian life had been an engineer, had died some years earlier, and his mother, the suspected smuggler, spent most of her time in Florida, where she too had died the year before. At her request, she had been buried in Key West, next to a grave whose headstone said: "I Told You I Was Sick."

"It's good to know I'm fulfilling your ambitions," I told him.

"Why else does one have children?" said Prospero smugly.

"So you don't think I'm dilapidating Grandma's inheritance?"

"No, of course I don't. And she wouldn't think so either."

"That's a relief," I said. "It's been worrying me. Every time Miranda calls, she tells me I'm mad."

"Has she? I'll talk to her."

"It won't do any good. You know Miranda."

"I'll tell her your mother would have liked it."

Abruptly my eyes misted over. "Would she? Is that true?"

"She might not have liked it for herself, but I think she'd have liked it for you. It feels right for you here somehow."

I couldn't answer. My mother had been dead for thirteen years. It broke my heart that she would never see this house.

"But I have to warn you, it may not be Miranda's cup of tea." He took in the high cobwebby beams, and the broken glass of the veranda. "Even when it has proper plumbing."

I smiled shakily. "Not enough chintz, you mean?"

With her share of my grandmother's inheritance, my sister had bought an elegant Victorian house on the outskirts of Halifax, renovated it in period style, and turned it into a bed-and-breakfast.

"I believe she might think it not quite ladylike."

I looked at the atelier, tough and brooding, with its grimy brick, and laughed. Prospero was right: it was not Miranda's style. And her husband Jim would be even more unnerved.

\*

On the Saturday before my father was due to leave, Luc commandeered our help ferrying the pictures from his studio to Armand's gallery. The exhibition was opening soon. Prospero had considered staying on for the vernissage, but the cost of changing his ticket was too expensive.

Luc and I carried the pictures down to his Peugeot estate car and loaded it up. Prospero supervised. His heart condition prevented him from doing much more. When the car was full, we prepared to drive down to the gallery. Not until Luc got

into the driver's seat, and Prospero into the passenger seat, did we realize there was no room for me.

"Don't worry," I said, "I'll walk. I'll catch you up."

The gallery was on Rue Vavin, on the other side of the Cimetière Montparnasse. The prospect of a walk across the cemetery was not unpleasant. Luc said there would be someone at the gallery to help unload, so I took my time, dawdling in the sun between the graves, admiring the flowers and reading the inscriptions. I paid my respects to Baudelaire and Jean Seberg. The Tour Montparnasse glittered like an ugly black diamond in the distance.

The light and the air and the warmth, and perhaps the intimations of mortality, cleared out the sombre corners of my mind. I was suddenly able to put things in perspective. Unlike the rest of the people here, I was alive, and I should make the most of it. So, for a while, I did. I made a detour to visit Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. I stopped brooding about Nadine, I stopped worrying about Prospero. My father was getting older, and there was nothing to be done about it. As for Nadine, one of these days I would tell her to go to hell, and there was nothing to be done about that either. It would all work out the way it was meant in the end.

I emerged from the graveyard reconciled with myself, and sauntered down Rue Delambre in the sun. By the time I reached Rue Vavin, I felt fine.

I had no trouble finding Galeries Cazalis. It was tastefully decorated with dark green paint and gold lettering. I stepped inside, and stopped dead. Right before me, at the desk opposite the door, was Mathieu Cazalis. He had been in the act of replacing the phone: he caught sight of me and stopped with the phone in mid-air. I was dimly conscious of Luc and Armand hauling pictures at the back of the room, and of Prospero standing off to one side.

I stared at Mathieu Cazalis, and he stared at me. It had not occurred to me that I might find him there - though it had crossed my mind that I might run into Patrick - and he had plainly not been expecting me either. Maybe no one had told him that I knew Luc. I was wearing my oldest jeans with a faded pink T-shirt that had seen better days, and he was similarly attired. His navy polo-shirt was so washed out it was almost grey, and he had a smudge on his forehead. The effect was odd. It was as if we were seeing each other out of costume and social role for the first time.

Then he smiled, and put the phone in its cradle, and said casually, "Olivia! How are you?"

The tone went with the clothes. I was instantly at ease. It felt as though we were old friends who had known each other a long time, and who were just picking up again where they had left off.

"Fine." I was able to move again, so I walked towards him.

"How's the house? Any news of the permit yet?"

He stayed where he was, propped up on the wall behind the desk, making no move to greet me. I understood why. He had left the handshakes at home with his cashmere suits and his other persona. But since our long and affectionate past was strictly business, a kiss on the cheek was out of order too.

"No," I said, "it's too early. I'm looking at fridges though."

"Really? Well how exciting!"

"It's very exciting," I said. "Do I want my salad kept fresh for three weeks, or do I want never to defrost the freezer? But I suppose I can't expect a man to appreciate that kind of dilemma."

"I'm afraid we're very limited in some ways."

He smiled at me. I smiled back.

"So where's your fiancé today? Back in Montreal?"

"No, he's in Indonesia."

"Is that right?"

"Because of the second earthquake."

"Well of course. A terrible thing, and so much more work for him. So he's left you all alone?"

"Yes, he's abandoned me."

"At least you can get on with the plans the way you want."

"I certainly can," I said.

He hid a smile. I dropped my gaze to the floor. I couldn't believe this conversation was taking place.

"You know," said Cazalis, "I was going to call you. I have seats for *Madame Butterfly* next week. It won't be Callas, but would you like to come?"

"That's not a good idea," said a voice behind us. My father had sneaked up on us unnoticed. "She cries like a fountain all through *Butterfly*. It's a bit embarrassing, to be perfectly honest."

The Snow King stared at him.

"Prospero, really! Mathieu, this is my father, Gilbert Hammond."

His face cleared. "Prospero! How do you do? I'm delighted to meet you."

"Mathieu is the owner of the atelier," I explained. I had never used his name before. I was amazed by the way it came tripping off my tongue.

"Is he really?" My father looked from Cazalis to me and back. "Well, Mathieu, as I was saying, you'd do better with Wagner, quite frankly. Wagner leaves her cold."

"But is it the point of an opera to leave one cold?"

"I daresay it isn't, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"Consider me warned," said Mathieu. "So will you come?"

I looked at him. On this sunny afternoon, in his uncle's shop, with my father and Luc to protect me, I could say anything. I could joke and flirt and exchange innuendo about my fake fiancé. I could even agree to go to the opera.

I was far from sure that an evening with Mathieu Cazalis was a good idea. But I had never seen *Butterfly* on stage in Paris, and I couldn't resist. To be perfectly honest, I couldn't resist him either. I was tired of sitting at home translating. Summer was here, the evenings were long and light, and there was nothing I wanted more than to go out with an eligible bachelor to the opera.

"Of course I will. I'd love to."

"Take a box of Kleenex," said my father.

## 12. MADAME BUTTERFLY

My evening out with the Snow King was not a success.

I met him the following Tuesday outside the Bastille opera house. I was five minutes early, but he was already there. We had both come straight from the office. He was wearing the same charcoal grey suit he had worn to visit the solicitor, and I was wearing the same black trouser suit. We were back in costume again. The situation, however, was not the same. We were meeting from choice, not necessity. We had elected to spend an evening in the company of each other and Butterfly. A social barrier had been crossed. I got a kiss on the cheek this time.

The seats were good ones. We were closer to the stage than I could usually afford to be, and the surtitles were easily visible. I liked the Bastille because it had been built at a period when people went to the opera to watch the stage, and not to watch each other. The seats were comfortable, there was room for one's legs, and there were no bizarrely placed columns to block one's view.

As we took our seats, Mathieu delved into his briefcase and solemnly handed me a small cellophane-wrapped pack of Kleenex.

"This is for you. I took your father's advice."

I looked at him: he was smiling.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll try not to be too embarrassing."

"Did your father get off all right?"

"Yes, he did. I took him to the airport yesterday morning."

And nearly got fired in the process, I might have added. Nadine did not appreciate the need to look after elderly relatives. "One has to admire the variety of excuses you produce for your absences, Olivia."

"Is he all right?" said Mathieu. "He seemed a little frail the other day."

"Yes, he is a bit. I think it was tiring for him, staying with Luc. Next year, I hope the house will be ready and he'll be able to stay with me."

"Yes, I dare say," said Mathieu rather coolly.

I glanced at him, but he was studying his programme. The frost had returned, and he was back in Snow King mode. Of course, the subject of my father was of limited interest. He was only being polite.

The lights dimmed. I put Prospero out of my mind, and Mathieu too. I concentrated my attention on the stage.

It was an excellent production. The décor consisted of Japanese screens that could be opened and closed and moved around at will to convey the fragile atmosphere of Butterfly's house. They had found a Japanese singer to play Madame Butterfly, and a young American to play her lover, Lieutenant Pinkerton. The physical resemblance of the singers to their characters made it seem more real. I watched enthralled as the plot unfolded: Pinkerton making it clear that he did not take marriage to a Japanese geisha seriously, Butterfly disowned by her own community, then left without news when Pinkerton's ship sailed away. The tragedy drew closer. The music tore at the heartstrings. I was thankful for the Kleenex.

Beside me, the Snow King seemed unmoved. When the lights went up for the interval, he took my arm and steered me outside with the air of a man bent on beating the queue for the bar.

"What would you like to drink?" he asked, as we walked through the lobby.

My head was full of music. I was hardly able to answer.

"I don't- What- Whatever you like."

He looked at me, and stopped dead.

"Why, Olivia! Your father was right. Here, give me a tissue."

I had the pack in my hand. I gave it him. He took out a tissue and dabbed gently at my eyes. It was an unexpectedly intimate gesture, and it took me completely aback. My eyes met his. Our gaze held. The lobby faded away. All sound went still. The crowd parted and re-formed around us, their voices unheard. I was conscious of no one but him.

I don't know what would have happened next if I had not suddenly heard a familiar voice screeching my name.

"Olivia-a-a! There you are!"

The bubble broke, the noise rushed back. It was like a nightmare. A few feet away I saw Nadine fending her way through the crush towards us, hair upswept, bosom encased in black velvet, neck encrusted with diamonds. And of course the damn bracelets, jangling away as usual, except that there was too much noise to hear them.

"Olivia!" she shrieked. "Thank goodness I found you! I was looking for the file on Skin Analysis. I couldn't find it anywhere. You must have misfiled it."

I stared at her in disbelief. What did she think she was doing? We weren't in the office, we weren't even on the street, we were at the opera, I was accompanied by a man she didn't know, she was presumably escorted by her husband, and yet she felt herself authorized to come screeching up to me to complain about some petty piece of office business. Who did she think she was? Why did I stand this woman?

A flush crept up from my shoulders to my face, and I began to tremble with rage. I was on the point of screaming back at her, but Mathieu put his hand on my shoulder, and that brought me back to earth.

"Madame," I said instead, "allow me to introduce you to Mathieu Cazalis. Mathieu, this is Nadine Sant'Angelo."

"Enchanté, Madame," said Mathieu, and raised her hand to his lips.

The gesture defused the situation, as he must have known it would. Nadine saw at once that she was dealing with the Haves. The venom drained away. Bestowing a gracious smile on Mathieu, she introduced us to her husband, who had been lurking two steps behind, out of harm's way.

I had never met Enrico Sant'Angelo, though we had spoken on the phone, and I eyed him curiously. He was small and distinguished, quite a bit older than Nadine. He was a merchant banker and, according to Francesca, some kind of prince. He didn't use his title, which meant he had Nadine sufficiently in check to prevent her using it either. Certainly there was nothing she would have liked more than to be addressed as Principessa. For a start, it would have solved her problems of precedence at the hairdressers.

Il Principe di Sant'Angelo bowed distantly to Mathieu and to me, and murmured something to his wife about "Manfred who was waiting just over there." Docilely, Nadine allowed herself to be led away.

"What on earth was that?" said Mathieu.

I wished the earth would open and swallow me up.

"That was my boss."

"Your boss?" he said incredulously. "You work for that madwoman?"

"I'm so sorry. I- She- "

Words failed me. I gestured helplessly. I had never felt so humiliated in my life.

"Is she like that all the time?"

"Quite often, yes," I said miserably.

"Why on earth do you put up with it?"

"I don't know."

My rage had ebbed. I just wanted to curl up and die. Mathieu glanced at me.

"Let me get you a drink," he said. "Wait over there where it's quieter, I won't be long."

I hid behind a column until he came back with two glasses of champagne and a chocolate macaroon.

"Here, this should cheer you up," he said, giving me one of the glasses and the macaroon.

I managed to smile. "How did you know I liked these? And chocolate too!"

"Telepathy. Eat it quickly, the bell's going to go any minute."

The second half of the opera passed me by. Nadine had ruined the evening. I was unable to concentrate. Driving home in Mathieu's silver-grey BMW, I was barely able to respond to his comments on the performance. When he started asking questions about Nadine, it was even harder to answer. I would have to face my employer again in the morning. I had no desire to talk about her now.

To his credit, he sensed this fairly rapidly.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be bothering you with all these questions. It hasn't been a very good evening, has it?"

"Of course it has. Thank you for asking me. I enjoyed the opera."

He eyed me sideways over the steering wheel.

"No you didn't. You didn't use the Kleenex once in the second half. Next time, I'll take you to lunch. I know a good workmen's café near the Gare du Nord. I doubt your Principessa will show up there."

I giggled in spite of myself. "Not with all those diamonds."

"Actually," said Mathieu, "I think they were fake."

Amazingly, there was room for him to park in front of my building. He got out of the car and announced that he would escort me to my door.

"Just in case she's lying in wait for you in the courtyard."

I didn't object. I had a nasty feeling that as soon as I was alone, I was going to use up all the remaining Kleenex. We crossed the courtyard and went through the door to the staircase. I got out my keys.

"It seems I'm safe. Will you come in for a drink?"

"No, I don't think so. Not this evening. You're tired."

He bent his head and kissed me once on each cheek, as he had done at the beginning of the evening. "Just don't fall into bed and cry yourself to sleep."

He kissed me again, a third time, on the mouth.

I don't know what impelled me to take a step forward and kiss him back. Partly exhaustion, partly unhappiness, partly curiosity. Partly because I hadn't forgotten the moment just before Nadine came barging in, partly because I was miserable that night and I wanted someone to hold me. There had been things going on under the surface for weeks. This seemed as good a time as any to find out if they were real.

Right now, I didn't give a damn about houses and independence. All I wanted was for him to kiss me. And he did. His mouth opened under mine, and his arms went round me. For a moment, I lost track of time and place. Behind us, the hall light went on. A door slammed above us, footsteps came down the stairs. Neither of us took any notice. It was the slamming of the courtyard door directly behind us that brought us back to earth.



Mathieu stopped kissing me. "Who was that?"

"I don't know. I didn't see."

We looked at each other in the dim light. I moved back against him and slid my arms round his neck. I liked the feel of his lips, I liked being near him. I wanted to go on kissing him.

"I don't think this is a good idea," he said.

"Why not?"

"For all kinds of reasons."

"Oh." I withdrew my hands, feeling silly.

"I don't mean you. It's not a good time, that's all."

I looked at him more closely. "Are you seeing Véronique?"

"Véronique? Of course not! Why do you ask that?"

"A friend of mine saw you dining together one evening."

"It's true, I took her out to dinner once. But that was weeks ago." He looked at me thoughtfully. "Who's your spy?"

"Francesca Gauthier."

"Ah yes, Caroline's friend. I remember now, Celia Temple. Does she work for that woman too?"

"Yes."

"My God. Well, Véronique is my estate agent, not my girlfriend. This has nothing to do with her. Olivia, listen."

He picked up my hand and held it. "Tomorrow I have to go on a trip for a few days."

"Oh really? Anywhere nice?"

"No." He said it in a way that precluded further questioning. "I'll call you when I get back. Around the middle of next week. If I may?" he concluded with a sudden Snow King lurch into chilly politeness.

"That would be very nice," I said. "Don't forget!"

"Goodnight, Olivia. Sleep well."

He gave me a brief kiss on the cheek, turned on his heel and went out. I heard his steps retreating across the courtyard. I let myself into the apartment, and prepared for bed. I had quite forgotten Nadine. The only person in my mind was Mathieu. I drifted off to sleep in a mood of vague hopefulness.

## 13. THE LITTLE GINGERBREAD HOUSE

I did not take the trouble to examine what I was feeling. I drifted through the next few days in a kind of daze. Who would have thought it? Mathieu Cazalis! The last man on earth I would have expected to find attractive!

Claude got annoyed with me, Francesca eyed me suspiciously, and Nadine berated me for my forgetfulness.

"I hope you're not daydreaming about that young man I saw you with at the opera, Olivia. A person like that won't do for you at all."

Too good for me, I supposed was what she meant. Too rich, too well-connected, too sought-after. I smiled at her. I didn't care what she thought.

"What's this?" said Francesca, when the door closed behind her. "You've been going to the opera with young men and you haven't told me!"

"Mathieu Cazalis took me to *Madame Butterfly*," I said reluctantly.

I had no desire to share the information with Francesca, but it would do no good to lie. Mathieu had greeted several people by name the other night. In that select little world of theirs, she would only hear about the excursion from someone else.

But the news, to my surprise, killed Francesca's interest stone dead. She returned to her screen.

"He must have been stood up. That's the trouble with those subscription tickets. If someone drops out on you, it's too late to cancel."

Clearly she shared Nadine's opinion that Mathieu would not have bothered with me unless he was desperate for a warm body to fill a seat. Taken aback, I wondered if she was right.

"How do you know he has a subscription?"

"He must have. It's the only way to get tickets for something like *Butterfly*. The really popular operas sell out right away. The only way to get a place during the season is to go and queue up at the box office for three hours, and I don't see Mathieu Cazalis doing that."

Nor did I. This reminder of the practicalities of opera-going dented my confidence for a couple of hours, but then I remembered what else had happened that night, and the way he had kissed me. I smiled to myself. Dynastically speaking I might not be up to scratch, but founding a dynasty was not part of my plans just now. I went on day-dreaming.

I had kept my weekend clear for translation, refusing an invitation to the cinema from Denis, and an invitation for dinner from Alice, but by Sunday afternoon I had had enough of the comparative merits of St. Petersburg hotels. "*The Hotel Astoria has an excellent location in the heart of the city across from St. Isaac's Cathedral. However, the Grand Hotel Europe occupies a prime location in the heart of the main shopping and business district.*" In any case, it was too hot to work.

I took my camera, and went down to the impasse. I unlocked the shutter, and began by taking a few shots of the inside of the atelier, all gloomy beams and tacky partitions and plumber's cast-offs, so that I could look back fondly in years to come, and capture the distance travelled from workshop to winter garden.

Then I went out into the street again. I wanted to see if I could capture that mysterious atmosphere on film. I took a few pictures of the grey New Orleans house next door, and some of the little house across the road which had wisteria cascading down from the roof, and a charming walled courtyard in front. Then I turned my

attention to the house on the other side of the atelier. They had trimmed the ivy a bit since my first visit, revealing Germanic-looking wooden beams and pale pink plaster. It was straight out of Hansel and Gretel.

As I was lining up the camera, the door opened and an elderly lady came out with a watering-can. I stared at her curiously. At last, a human being. Despite the heat, she was wearing a tweed skirt and a woolly twinset. She didn't look much like the wicked witch. She reminded me more of Miss Marple.

I lowered the camera and introduced myself as her future next-door neighbour.

"Oh yes," she said, "we heard it had been sold. So you're going to be living here? I'm Madame Pevsner. My husband was the painter Laurent Pevsner."

"Really?" I said. I had never heard of him. "How long have you lived here?"

"Thirty years," she said.

"Then you must know all about the history of the impasse?"

Her face lit up. "Why not come in and have a cup of tea?"

Madame Pevsner, it turned out, was from Gloucestershire. Miss Marple was not far wrong. We detected each other's accents fairly fast, identified ourselves, and switched into English. She had been living in France for fifty years, and she said she would never go back. Her husband had passed away nine years ago, and she had been on her own since then. Her son came to visit every so often from London. So I was buying the atelier? Well, it would be nice to have someone living there after all this time. It was never good to have a place stand empty. Yes, she had met Mr. Cazalis, he seemed pleasant enough. It was a shame he had never lived there. He came to the meetings of the residents' association, though. They would look forward to seeing me there from now on. The people in the impasse were very nice on the whole, but of course it wasn't like it used to be. They were all journalists or architects or they worked in the cinema now. It was a pity I hadn't been here thirty years ago when most of the houses were still occupied by artists. There was Paul Frégeac three doors down, and young what's-his-name the sculptor, and Simon the landscape painter and his wife Roselyne. Oh, the conversations they had about art and artists! the parties they gave!

She paused for breath, poured us more tea and started off again. I guessed she got so few opportunities to speak English that when she did she made the most of it.

Of course it was all so built-up now, all those new buildings they had put up on the other side of the park, it was such a pity. At weekends, the park was mobbed, and it used to be so peaceful. Old Madame Henry, who used to live in the windmill at the end of the street, remembered the area from before the war, when you could walk across the fields to the church that now stood on the edge of the Boulevard Périphérique. There had been a lot of craftsmen and workers living here then, alongside the artists. The *petite maison* across the road had once been occupied by a major-domo who worked for a wealthy family in the Seventh Arrondissement, and before that by a pair of prostitutes (she called them *filles de joie*).

I listened with fascination. This was just the kind of thing I wanted to know.

"And your house, dear," she said, "you know it's one of the oldest in the street? It was built about the beginning of the century. From what Madame Henry said, it was something to do with the Army. You know there was a military barracks on the other side of the boulevard before World War I? I believe the atelier was used to service their motor vehicles."

I gazed at her wide-eyed.

"But of course I don't know for sure. When we first came, it belonged to a plumber, a very nice man, but then he went bankrupt and sold it to Mr. Cazalis." She

looked at me with her bright, unmalicious gaze. "I must say you've got nerve, dear, taking it on. There's a lot of work needs doing in there. I went inside one day when the builders were there, and I was quite surprised to see what it was like."

"Builders?" I said. "What builders?"

"Well I don't know, dear, the builders who were there. They came to make an estimate, I dare say."

Slowly I put down my cup. "How long ago was this?"

"Well, I couldn't say for sure. It would be a few weeks. They weren't your builders, then?"

"I don't have any builders yet. Were they with Mr. Cazalis?"

"He wasn't there. There was another man with them. Very good-looking. Though I can't say I cared for his manners very much."

"I know who you mean," I said. What was Patrick doing poking round here with builders? Did Mathieu know about that?

"But now I come to think about it, I don't think they were there for the renovation work. I think I heard them say something about the quarries."

"Quarries? What quarries?"

"Oh, didn't you know? There used to be quarries under this part of Paris. The whole of the park is built on a former quarry. And now everyone who buys a house has to fill in the galleries under their property." Her attention sharpened. "You mean you didn't know?"

A sliver of ice was sliding down my back. "No, I had no idea."

"Oh dear. That's going to cost you a pretty penny, you know!"

"Yes, I expect it is."

"Oh dear. The thing is, they won't give you a building permit otherwise. They've been tightening up a lot. There's a man in the next street who tried to get away without doing the work, but they made him do it anyway, and he'd finished renovating by then, and it cost him a fortune."

I left soon after that. When Madame Pevsner had shut the door behind me, I stood in her garden to gather my scattered wits. The ivy which had gone from the house still swathed the railing in front, and I was hidden from the street. Three people walked past, a man and two women. One of the women wore a bright purple jacket. With a sudden shock, I recognized Véronique. As I watched, she walked up to the atelier – my atelier! – took out a key and went in. The others followed. She rolled down the shutter behind them. For a moment, I was mesmerized, and then the implications of what I had seen hit me, and I began to shake.

Somehow I got myself as far as the park. I slumped on a bench and watched the ducks on the lake that had been made where the quarries used to be. So now I knew. This was what he had been planning. This was the reason for that Cheshire Cat smile. I could see the whole thing now. I had been right to suspect him. Accept the offer, sign the contract, conceal the fact that the quarries under the house will have to be filled in. Wait for our naïve little Canadian to discover the situation, do her sums, realize she's over budget, and back out of the sale. Line up new buyers to step in when she's out of the picture. Take her to the opera and kiss her goodnight.

I could not stop shaking. Just as I was starting to like him, he had betrayed me. And not just him. They had all deceived me: Mathieu and Patrick and Véronique. Between them, they had set the trap and I had walked into it. And there was nothing I could do. It wasn't their responsibility to warn me about the quarries. They were beyond reproach. Mathieu was entitled to keep the ten percent I had paid

when we signed the contracts, Véronique would take her cut, and no doubt Patrick too. It was all perfectly legal.

And then I remembered the cheque in Véronique's safe. What was to stop them from cashing that too? Who was I going to complain to if they did?

I remembered how impressed I had been by the nonchalant way Mathieu and Véronique had behaved at that meeting in the café. I had known already that I was out of my depth, and now it was plain just how deep the waters were. I was in right over my head. I didn't see how I was going to get back to dry land again.

The next day was Monday. After a sleepless night, I called the office and told Francesca I had food poisoning. I could not have stood a day at work, with Nadine harrasing me, Francesca pitying me, and both of them telling me I was out of my league. I didn't go out. I stayed at home, and forced myself to translate. I had been unable to get any work done the previous evening. Halfway through the afternoon, in a deliberately casual tone, I called Claude and asked him what he knew about filling in quarries. He said he knew nothing, but agreed to look into it. I didn't mention the implications for our project. When he found out the cost, he would work them out for himself.

On Tuesday, I called Francesca again and said I was still sick. She didn't sound as though she believed me, though she did ask if I was all right. I finished the translation, e-mailed it to the agency, and called Entreprises Cazalis to enquire when Mr. Cazalis was expected back.

"He's here now. Who's calling? I'll put you through."

I was taken aback, I hadn't expected this. But when, a moment later, I heard him saying "Cazalis" into the phone in his usual cool way, the pent-up rage of the past two days surged through me, and I was galvanized into action.

"Mathieu? Hello, it's Olivia. Welcome back! How was your trip?"

I made a big effort to sound normal, and it must have worked.

He answered in a much warmer tone, "It was fine. How are you?"

"I had an interesting weekend," I said. "I went down to the impasse and met one of my new neighbours and learned a few things."

"Oh yes?" he said.

"I learned that when I buy the atelier, before I'm allowed to renovate, I have to pay to fill in the quarries."

A pause. "Yes, I believe there are some restrictions concerning the quarries."

"On top of that, I understand that your brother has been visiting the house with builders."

"What?"

"And on Sunday, I saw Véronique showing the place to a couple of potential buyers. Would you mind telling me, Mathieu, exactly what's going on?"

There was a short silence. Then he said, "I can't talk now. May I stop by your apartment later tonight?"

I had no desire to see him in the flesh. "I suppose so."

"What time would be convenient?"

"How about nine?"

"Excellent." He hung up.

I should have guessed, of course, that he would come early. He had been early the time I had invited him for a drink, and early for the opera. All the better to catch one off one's guard. When the bell rang, I was cleaning the apartment. Housework was comforting in times of stress, as I had found out when I lived with Denis. I had tidied up the clothes and books and papers that were strewn all over the flat, taken the

empty coffee cups and abandoned plates into the kitchen, and run the Hoover. I was busy cleaning the bath when I heard the bell.

I pushed the hair out of my eyes and opened the door. Mathieu was standing there, very cool and collected in a dark green linen suit and a navy polo shirt. I gaped at him. It was only seven o'clock.

"I called to warn you," he said, "but your answering machine picked up."

"I was Hoovering. I didn't hear the phone."

"May I come in?"

"Yes, of course."

I stood aside to let him pass. A wave of aftershave went past me from another, cleaner world. I was suddenly very conscious of how I must look: grubby and sweaty, in old T-shirt and sweat pants, with a sponge in one hand, and my hair all over the place. The Hoover was parked in the middle of the room, there were stacks of unwashed dishes in the kitchen, and a pile of dirty laundry against the wall.

"I'm so sorry, I seem to have arrived at a bad time," said the Snow King distantly. "I find I have commitments tonight after all. But I just left Véronique's office, and I wanted to give you this."

He took something out of his breast pocket and dropped it on the table. It was the envelope with my cheque. I looked at it without touching it.

"Why are you giving me this?"

"I thought you might prefer to regain possession of it, considering what you found out this weekend. I also think it's better that we should not be under any obligation to each other."

"What do you mean by that?"

He didn't answer. His mobile rang, but he ignored it.

I became aware that my legs were not going to go on supporting me much longer. I gestured towards the table.

"Why don't we sit down?"

We sat on opposite sides of the table, and regarded each other across a pile of dictionaries. When I could stand the silence no longer, I said, "So you knew about the quarries?"

"Yes, I did."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm afraid it didn't occur to me. I assumed you were aware of the problem."

Frigidity was contagious. I was getting colder and colder.

"How much is it going to cost?"

"I can't tell you that exactly. Ten or fifteen thousand euros, maybe?"

"I see."

I didn't know what else to say. I realized I was still holding my sponge. I put it down gently on the table.

"I think you'd better go now, Mr. Cazalis. I need to think about what you've told me."

He flinched a bit at that, but stood his ground.

"We should talk about this," he said. "I might be willing to participate in the cost of the work."

I looked at him blankly. "Why would you do that?"

He looked down at his hands. I had the odd feeling that he didn't know what to say. The mobile rang. Again he let it ring.

"Because I ... feel ... responsible. Having let things get this far. I should have warned you."

I frowned in perplexity. What was going on now?

"It wasn't your responsibility to warn me."

"No, maybe, but..."

"So you're still prepared to go through with the sale?"

He looked up and met my eyes. "Of course I am. I told you that before."

"Then why are you lining up builders and fallback buyers?"

He said carefully, "I had nothing to do with any of that. I didn't know it was happening. It certainly wasn't my idea."

"Then whose idea was it?"

The mobile rang. This time, he answered it.

"Yes. No. Yes. I'm on my way. Yes, right now. Ten minutes."

His voice was glacial. Taking my cue, I stood up.

"I gather you have to leave. Thank you so much for stopping by."

The Snow King got up too. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Why is that necessary?"

"Olivia, I'm not trying to cheat you. I would like you to believe that."

"I'd like to believe it too. But the evidence isn't in your favour."

"For God's sake, is it so hard to understand?"

"Frankly, yes, it is."

"Then how about this?"

He grabbed me by the shoulders, and kissed me hard on the mouth. For a moment, I was too startled to react. Then I tried to push him away. His arms went round me, and he pulled me against him. My stomach flipped over. I stopped wanting to fight him. I leaned into his body and kissed him back. I forgot about the quarries, I forgot he was a crook. His hands slid down my back, he began to tug down my sweatpants.

And then his bloody phone rang again.

At once, he stopped kissing me. His hands stopped moving. For what felt like an eternity, neither of us moved. And then he sighed, and swore under his breath, and pulled my sweatpants back up, and rested his cheek against mine.

I pushed him away with both hands, and moved as far away from him as I could, which in that undersized room was not very far.

"I'm sorry," said Mathieu. "I really am. I shouldn't have done that."

I wasn't sure what he was referring to. Molesting me in the first place? Or leaving me dangling? I folded my arms across my chest.

"I suppose you're going to tell me this time too that it isn't a good idea!"

"Olivia- "

"Who was that anyway? Your wife or your girlfriend?"

"Neither!" he said sharply. "It's nothing like that."

"But you're not going to tell me what it is!"

"It's too complicated to explain now. I'll call you tomorrow, and maybe we- "

"No, please don't! Don't come back here again! I don't want to see you any more before the sale is completed."

For a moment he was silent. "What will you do about the quarries?"

"I'll figure something out. Don't worry about it."

"Olivia."

He took a step towards me. I glared at him, and he thought better of it.

"I'll call you anyway," he said.

## 14. SPRING ON THE PLATEAU

But of course he didn't. The rest of the week went by with no news from him. I didn't know what to do. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

After he left, I had collapsed on my unmade bed, reflecting that, if it hadn't been for that phone call, I would at that moment have been using it for completely different purposes - assuming we had got as far as the bedroom, which was uncertain. What on earth had happened to me? Why had I let him touch me like that? Why hadn't I stopped it? And what the hell did *he* think he was playing at, getting me all fired up, and then walking out on me?

By the end of the week, my anger had died down, and I had started to think things through. I was beginning to sense that what had happened was not quite as primal as it seemed. If I had been prepared to have sex with Mathieu on my dining room floor, or whatever other convenient surface had presented itself, it was not just unbridled lust, it was because on some level I felt that he was not a crook and a seducer, but a decent man.

What I was basing my conclusions on, I had no idea. Maybe I was just trying to rationalize my irrational conduct after the event. All my attempts to understand what had happened foundered on the same obstacle: Mathieu's silence. How could I reconcile my belief in his integrity with his outwardly frosty manner? Why was he so reluctant to account for the dubious behaviour of himself and his entourage with regard to the atelier? Why had he offered to help pay for the quarries in the same breath as he declared that we were under no obligation to each other?

The more I thought, the more confused I got. My mind see-sawed back and forth, for and against. I needed to talk to someone, but I didn't know who. Alice was unlikely to look kindly upon inappropriate sexual cravings that might mess up her husband's pet project. Francesca would tell me it served me right for my social presumption.

Should I discuss my problems with a psychiatrist? A banker? A lawyer? Or should I write a letter to the agony column in one of the women's magazines?

"Dear *Elle*, I am buying a house off a man who seems to be trying to defraud me. But as soon as he touches me, my brain cells dissolve, my self-control vanishes, and I am reduced to a quivering jelly of mindless lust. Do you think I can trust him? Please help!"

In the end, I confided in Luc, on the grounds that he was older, if not necessarily wiser, and had provided some good advice when I was trying to extricate myself from Denis.

I went over to the studio on Saturday afternoon and found him sitting on a stool contemplating his current canvas. I drew up a battered chair and sat down beside him. He was painting the view from the window over the cemetery. I admired the riotous green of the trees cascading down the left hand side of the canvas, behind the rectangular grey of a solitary tombstone. The right-hand side was still blank. I knew better than to ask what was going to go there.

"What do you think of Mathieu Cazalis?" I said.

"He seems all right," said Luc, without taking his eyes off the canvas. "Though I can't say I know him very well. Why do you ask?"

"Because I've got a thing for him."

His interest was aroused sufficiently to drag his eyes off the painting and turn towards me. "Well, that's all right, isn't it? Or is it? What about him?"



"Oh he's got it too," I said.

"Then where's the problem?"

"I think he's a crook," I said, and told him all about Véronique and the quarries and the cheque, throwing in Francesca's evaluation of Entreprises Cazalis and Caroline's complaints about her ex-husband for good measure.

"Hearsay and speculation," said Luc, when I had finished. "You can't tell from that what his intentions were."

"Wait," I said, "there's more," and I told him the tale of the fake fiancé, which amused him greatly.

"You're sure he wasn't taken in by it?"

"Not for a minute," I said.

"And yet he agreed to sell? It's true, it sounds a bit strange. But he may have his reasons, you know."

"You like him," I said crossly, "don't you?"

"I told you, I don't know him very well. I've seen him a few times at the gallery, that's all. He seems honest enough to me. Armand likes him, I can tell you that."

"Armand's his uncle," I pointed out.

"He likes him better than the other nephew. Doesn't care much for Patrick, I'm not sure why. I've got an idea he doesn't trust him."

"But he trusts Mathieu?"

"Yes, of course. Otherwise he wouldn't- " He broke off abruptly.

"Wouldn't what?" I prompted.

"Wouldn't let him hang round the gallery. Patrick never does that."

I looked at him. I had the feeling he had been going to say something else. But I was too focused on my own problems to want to follow it up.

"So what should I do?" I said.

"Keep a low profile, and wait for the dust to settle. It'll sort itself out in time."

"Mm," I said dubiously.

Luc seemed to sense what I was thinking.

"Olivia, it's really quite simple," he said, with a touch of impatience. "Open your legs, if you must, but keep your purse-strings closed."

"Right," I said meekly.

"My guess is that all these manoeuvres have nothing to do with Mathieu. It sounds as though Patrick and the estate agent have got something going on behind his back."

"That might be true. But he's up to something too."

"He gave you back your cheque."

"That's part of what he's up to. I just don't know what it is."

Luc shrugged. "Time will tell."

His eyes wandered back to the canvas. I had lost his interest.

"How's your own house-hunting going?" I asked.

"No luck so far. But there's a place I'm seeing next week that sounds promising."

"Let me know how it goes," I said, and rose to leave.

I was nearly at the door, when I remembered something.

"By the way, my divorce came through. I got the final papers this week."

"Congratulations," said Luc. "Try to do better next time."

"There's not going to be a next time. Marriage is not for me."

Luc looked at me quizzically. "So what's the plan instead?"

"First I'm going to buy the atelier. Then I'm going to get a proper job."

"Ah yes, independence. Is that all?"

I remembered Madame Pevsner and her *filles de joie*.

"I might receive gentlemen callers from time to time."

"With Mathieu Cazalis at the head of the line?"

Back at the flat, I checked the answering machine. There were no new messages from Mathieu. I had kept the one he had left a few days before, just to hear his voice. It was cool and controlled.

"Olivia, it's Mathieu. I can't make it at nine after all. I'll be passing by your flat in about ten minutes, so I'll stop in the hope that you're in."

I listened to it over again. It didn't worry me too much that he hadn't called. After all, I had told him not to. Luc's exhibition was opening next week. I would see him then.

\*

Meanwhile, Claude and Alice were giving a party. Every June, they invited their friends and their sons' friends, and their colleagues and neighbours and family, in an alarmingly heterogeneous mix that only the very socially confident could pull off.

When I got there, people were spilling out of the house on to the lawn, ABBA was pounding away in the background, and the empty wine bottles were stacking up in a corner of the kitchen. Alice, dressed in layers of violet and lavender, was organizing the food, the boys were handing round canapés, and Claude, looking very suave in a black velvet jacket, was circulating round the room with a bottle in each hand, mingling with his guests and refilling their glasses.

I talked to Alice's editor, whom I knew slightly, and to an old friend of Claude's I had met once or twice at the house, and then I found myself grabbed by the shoulder and propelled into a group of intense-looking people, none of whom I knew.

"Olivia!" said Denis. "We were talking about the Novel."

"Really?"

"I was at the Fnac this afternoon" – he named a well-known store that sold books and records – "and do you know what I found?" He gestured dramatically. "Shelf upon shelf of Anglo-Saxon authors! Hardly any novels by French writers. It's a scandal!"

"Americans flooding the market," said a man in a denim shirt.

"Just like they did with the movies," said a man in a white T-shirt.

"Globalization," said a harrassed-looking woman in a tight black dress.

"Maybe they write the kind of novels people want to read?" I suggested.

A stony silence greeted this remark.

"Don't you think that's a little arrogant?" said White T-shirt.

"No, I don't. American writers tell stories, and stories are what readers want. It's perfectly simple."

"Stories?" said Black Dress incredulously.

I spelled it out for her. "Love, death, betrayal, revenge. Characters they can believe in. A story with a plot."

"Well I suppose there's nothing wrong with a *plot*," said Denim Shirt dubiously.

"It depends on how your plot interacts with reality," said White T-shirt.

"But why should reality be regarded as the basis of the novel?" said Denis passionately. "Why should it be regarded as the basis for anything, come to that?"

"Absolutely right. It's just a question of perception," said Black Dress.

"A writer's duty is to consider how things *might* have been, or how they *could* be, not how they really *are*," said Denis.

"So much more *interesting*," said Black Dress.

I left them to it, and went looking for a refill.

"Everything all right?" asked Claude.

"Terrific," I said. "I've just discovered that Denis doesn't believe in reality."

"Does that really surprise you?"

"No."

I went out into the garden to get some air. After a few minutes, Denis followed. ABBA was singing about dancing queens, young and sweet, only seventeen. We wandered down to the end of the garden, where the music was fainter.

"So we're divorced," he said, taking my arm.

"Yes," I said, "this is it."

"Isn't it awful? It's like cutting the umbilical cord or something."

"Not quite, Denis. I'm not your mother."

"I certainly hope not. It would be very Oedipal if you were."

He put his arm round my shoulders. I didn't resist.

"Oh God, Olivia, six years. Do you remember how we met?"

"Of course I do. How could I forget?"

The garden was nearly empty. Alice was serving pasta, and most of the guests had drifted back indoors. Lights shone across the lawn, and the music floated towards us. The tempo had changed and slowed, and the words spoke of regret and drums and bugles from afar. The trees above our heads were heavy with summer. The air was full of the faint sweet scent of seringa.

Denis sighed. "I wish we could go back in time and do it again. I've been such a fool. I should never have let you go."

"Don't think about it. It's finished. We have to move on."

"I hate moving on," grumbled Denis.

"What else can we do? We're divorced now. We're grown up."

"Divorce is just a piece of paper, Olivia. It's not because we're divorced that I love you any the less."

"But we can't live together, can we? You know that."

"I need to look for another place to live! In that apartment, I think of you all the time. How's your house coming on? Is it finished yet?"

"Of course not. It isn't even started. We're waiting for the building permit to complete the sale."

"Oh," said Denis, brought up short by this unexpected glimpse of Reality.

"Well that's a bit of a pain. And how's the crook?"

"Who?"

"Your seller, what's his name, Cazalis? Alice said he took you to the opera."

"Yes, that's right, he did. I think he was stuck with a spare seat at the last minute. We went to see *Madame Butterfly*. It was very nice."

Denis viewed opera as an old-fashioned pastime for the capitalist classes. Expensive, elitist, and not nearly trendy enough. He sniffed in disapproval.

"And you haven't seen him since?"

"No," I lied.

"You mean he still hasn't made his move?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Olivia. The way he behaved that day, it was obvious."

I was startled by Denis' perspicacity. Especially as he had apparently seen things which I had not, or at least had not wanted to acknowledge at the time.

"You're imagining it," I told him.

"No I'm not. The only reason he agreed to sell that shed was because he wanted to fuck you."

The conversation was beginning to alarm me.

"Denis, he's not going to sell me a house just so he can fuck me."

"Rich, good-looking, good prospects. You could do worse."

"Well, he probably has a savings account-"

"But does he have a mind?"

Claude came out of the house and saw us standing there.

"There's food in the house, you know."

"We're just coming."

"Suit yourselves." He topped up our glasses and left.

"So here's to us," said Denis.

Our eyes met. I suddenly felt very sad.

I had met Denis six years earlier, in a café in Montreal. He was a lecturer from the University of Paris who was doing an exchange with the University of Montreal. I was a student of languages. He was sitting behind me at a terrace on the Plateau, on one of the first spring days it was warm enough to sit outside. He sent me a note via the waiter to say that I was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, and if he let me walk out of his life, I would haunt him for ever.

I turned round to stare at him. From where I was sitting, he looked like something out of a crystal ball: tall and dark and handsome. (Later I discovered that he was actually quite short. Crystal balls can lie.) He smiled at me. I stood up, and went to join him. He bought me a drink, and he quoted Baudelaire. I was entranced. We had a brief affair that was spent partly in bed and partly drinking beer on the deck of his borrowed apartment, and then, since he was going back to France, we decided to get married.

And now, here we were, six years later, and it was all over.

"Here's to us as we should have been," I said.

"As we still can be."

"As I only wish we could."

Denis drew me round the side of the seringa, out of sight of the house, and kissed me. It was odd, it felt just the same. It had been over a year since he touched me, but nothing had changed. It felt strange and yet familiar all at once.

"Olivia. Come back with me tonight. Just one last night, for old times' sake."

I stared at him. I didn't know what to say.

The kiss had awakened queer old resonances in me of the way things used to be. All those evenings spent sitting in cafés and restaurants and round dinner tables, discussing the End of History and the Future of the Novel. I had missed them more than I thought. It struck me that I had never had a serious conversation with Mathieu. I didn't know whether, as Denis said, he had a mind. Was it true that, as Caroline claimed, he thought only of money?

The fact was I knew practically nothing about Mathieu. Champagne at the Opera, sex on the floor – how far would I get with that? Standing in Denis' arms in the shadow of the seringa, breathing in the familiar smell of his skin, kissing him the way I had always done, I began to wonder if I wouldn't do better to give in to his persistent attempts to get me back, instead of letting my mind fill with sexual chimeras about a man I barely knew.

I was relieved to hear Alice calling us from the house.

"Olivia, there you are!" she said, when we went inside. "Susan was looking for you. Have some pasta."

"Thank you, I'd love some," I said.

"This is a really great party," said Denis.

"Thanks - would you pass me those plates? How's that - is that enough? When are you off to Canada, by the way?"

"Next week," said Denis.

"Really?" I said. "I thought your conference wasn't till July."

"I'm taking a trip up to Newfoundland first."

"Olivia!" said a voice behind me. I turned to greet Susan, another Canadian.

"Newfoundland?" said Alice, ladling pasta. "Who are you travelling with?"

There was a pause before Denis answered. "Isabelle."

My eyes widened. Isabelle!

"That'll be fun," said Alice. "So when are we going to meet your friend Isabelle? I thought she might have come with you tonight."

"How's the job?" said Susan.

"Frightful. How about you?"

"She had a family dinner in Clermont-Ferrand. She wanted me to go with her, but I couldn't let you down."

I grinned to myself. Family dinners in Clermont-Ferrand didn't sound like Denis' style. I pictured provincial notables round a polished table, and Denis in his black T-shirt trying to stir up a discussion of the Novel.

"I hope she'll come next time," said Alice. "So what about you?" she went on, drawing Susan and me into the conversation. "What are you doing this summer? Are you going to Canada, Olivia?"

"No, I don't think so. In July, the Haute Couture collections are coming up, and there's going to be a panic in the office. I could go in August, I suppose, but with the house to pay for, I don't think I can afford it."

The discussion moved on to houses and how much they cost. Denis got bored and moved away, in search of something more intellectually stimulating. I spotted him later with Denim Shirt and Black Dress in a huddle over something.

But he must have been keeping an eye on me all the time. As I was getting ready to leave, he materialized by my side.

"So will you come?" he said, putting a hand on my arm.

I kissed his cheek. "Denis, this is a big step. I need to think about it. Why don't you call me when you get back from Newfoundland."

Walking home alone through the quiet streets, I congratulated myself on my narrow escape. ABBA and the seringa had addled my brain. I had not come all this way in the past eighteen months just to find myself back in the same place as I began.

When Denis came back from Canada, I was going to keep my distance. No more movies, no more phone calls. He could make do with dinner in Clermont-Ferrand.

And I would make do with the atelier and Mathieu.

## 15. THE BROTHERS CROCODILE

Luc's opening changed my mind.

It took place a few days later, on Thursday evening at six. I went straight from work. I was wearing a red linen dress with a fitted bodice and a long flowing skirt that I had bought on impulse the day before. I had seen it in the window of a shop I did not normally patronize, and paid roughly twice the price I would normally pay.

Of course, I had had Mathieu in mind. I was anxious to wipe out the cleaning lady image that must have been festering in his mind since he had last seen me.

Nadine had been eyeing me balefully all day. Red was not my usual colour: it was hers. Strong colours were for the star. The supporting cast was meant to stay drab and in the background. Most of the time, this worked. Francesca had been brought up to dress in neutrals (pastels in summer), while I favoured black and dark colours. Most of the time, we provided a suitably undramatic background for Nadine's bright greens and reds and yellows. Today, unfortunately, she had been wearing orange.

It was half-past six when I got to the gallery. It was already half full. I took in the room at a glance. The Cazalis family was out in force. Both Mathieu and Patrick were there. Armand greeted me like a long-lost daughter, gave me a big kiss on each cheek, and thanked me for coming. Patrick slid up beside him and kissed me too. He ran his eyes over every inch of me, and told me how pleased he was to see me again. At the far end of the room, Mathieu went on talking, and made no move to greet me. I wasn't sure if he had seen me arrive or not.

I took a glass of wine off a tray that somebody offered me and circulated in Mathieu's direction, studying the paintings as I went. They were very good. I hadn't realized before just how good they were. It made a big difference to see them properly hung and framed, with adequate lighting. A lot of them were views of the Cimetière Montparnasse, like the one I had seen the other day. I was fascinated by the different angles, and the light that changed with the time of day and the season.

I was immersed in one of the paintings when Luc came up. He gave me a hug, and told me I looked lovely.

"So do you," I said. He was looking very debonair in a white linen suit. "These are really great paintings, Luc. If these don't make you rich and famous, I don't know what will. Are there any journalists here?"

"Two or three. The man in the green jacket over there, for one. And you see the tall guy with the grey hair? He's very influential. I must go and schmooze. But first I've got something to tell you. I've found myself an apartment."

"Luc, that's great. With a studio too? Where is it?"

"On the other side of the cemetery. I'll be able to go on with the same series, but I'll be twice as prolific since I won't have to commute."

"That's marvellous. I'm so pleased!"

"But you know what it means for you?"

"You'll be putting the flat on the market? Yes, I know that. I'll miss it, but that's all right. You warned me all along that this would happen."

"I wanted to give you first refusal if you'd like to buy it."

I stared at him. "How can I buy it? I'm going to buy the atelier."

"Yes," said Luc, "I know. Quite frankly, I was thinking you might want to change your mind. You've had nothing but problems with this atelier, and they aren't

over yet. Only the other day you were saying that it would cost more than you thought because of the expense of filling in the quarries."

"But, Luc, I can't change my mind. I've signed the contract. If I back out now, I'll lose several thousand euros. I'll get a loan from the bank to pay for the quarries. There's nothing else I can do."

"That might not be the case. I was talking to Patrick yesterday. I get the feeling that if you want to back out, you could come to some arrangement."

"You mean he would refund the money I paid already?"

"Something like that. Olivia, I want you to think about it. I've been worrying about that atelier. I have a feeling you've bitten off more than you can chew. You might do better to accept Patrick's offer and let the atelier go."

I didn't answer.

He cast a glance over his shoulder. "Look, I can't talk now. I'll come and see you tomorrow. But I really think you should give this some consideration."

I was shaken. Luc never told me what to do, unless asked specifically for advice.

"All right, I will."

"Good," he said, and was gone.

I turned away from the painting and looked around. While we had been talking, the gallery had been filling up. With too many people crowded into too small a space, it was beginning to get stuffy. I couldn't locate Mathieu in the crowd. Suddenly, I saw him in a corner of the room, standing in front of one of the pictures talking intently to someone I couldn't see. I wondered who it was. A group broke up, people shifted. I was shocked to see Caroline. I had somehow never expected to see them together. But I hung out with my ex, so why shouldn't he?

I went on watching. They were absorbed in their discussion. Physically, as I had thought, they were a perfect match. Same hair, same coolness, same clothes. She was wearing white again, and he had a white shirt. As I watched, he smiled at her.

Something about that smile made me understand what Nadine and Francesca had been hinting at for weeks. I was not just playing out of my league, but out of my planet. We were not made of the same element, them and me. In my stupid red dress, I did not belong in their pure cold flawless world. They were ice and I was fire.

"They do this every six months," said a voice beside me. It was Patrick. He sounded amused. "First they split up, then they get back together, split up, back together. Well, they'll work it out in the end."

"I thought they were divorced."

"Not even separated. They just come and go."

"Oh."

The discussion was over. They were moving towards the door. Mathieu put his hand on Caroline's shoulder to steer her through the crowd. I watched in frozen silence. Patrick stood motionless, half a pace behind me.

"We have to talk," he said.

I turned towards him. Mathieu caught sight of us.

His gaze flickered from me to his brother and back. He gave me his chilliest smile, and shook my hand.

"Olivia, nice to see you," he said, and kept on moving. Caroline ignored me. They went out on to the street, and I lost them from view.

"I saw you with Luc just now," said Patrick. "This is a great show, isn't it?"

"It's the best he's ever done."

"I gather he's made a couple of sales already."

"That's good news. It'll help him pay for the new studio."

"He told me he was moving." He paused a moment. "He also told me how it was going to affect you."

"Yes, I've been living in his apartment. If it sells fast, I'm going to be out on the street."

"I gather he thinks that you might like to buy it."

"In other circumstances, I might have. As things stand now, I can't."

"Well, you know, Olivia, there's no such word as 'can't'. If you wanted to change your mind about the atelier, I daresay we could come to an arrangement."

"Oh?"

"We would see that you didn't lose out. I quite understand that you don't want to lose the money you put down."

"Yes?"

"I assume you've already put in for a building permit. I'd be happy to buy that too when it comes through."

I didn't answer. I was too confused. Why was I discussing this with Patrick, not Mathieu? Why had Mathieu greeted me so coldly? Why hadn't I heard from him? As usual with these two, nothing was clear. Why was Patrick, who had warned me to watch my step, now going out of his way to accommodate me? Why was Mathieu, who had sold me the house, now letting his brother try to buy it back? Who was I to believe? What was I to do? Luc was right: I was biting off more than I could chew. The Brothers Crocodile were too much for me to handle. Maybe I should take the chance Patrick was offering to extricate myself from the deal, and settle for the little courtyard apartment instead. For a first apartment, it was perfectly adequate. I would be as independent there as anywhere else. Why complicate my life for the sake of magic?

"I'll have to think about it," I said.

"I'm sorry for springing this on you so suddenly," said Patrick. "I know it must be confusing. Maybe you'd like to have dinner later on, and we can talk it through?"

He smiled at me. It was a thoroughly charming smile. For a moment, I considered accepting his invitation. Maybe he would tell me what this was really about. But then I remembered the way he had threatened me on our previous meeting. If he was being nice to me now, it was because he wanted something.

Patrick was waiting for my reply. I forced myself to return his smile.

"I'm afraid I can't tonight. I'm dining with friends. But dinner another night would be very nice."

He ran a finger down my bare arm. "Can't you change your plans?"

"Not now, it's too late, I don't think I can."

"Oh, come on, surely it's possible?"

"No, they're expecting me."

He withdrew his hand abruptly. The smile vanished.

"The offer isn't open indefinitely, you know."

"Just for tonight, is that it?" I retorted.

"You've wasted enough of my time already."

"Is that a threat?"

"You have half an hour to change your mind. After that, it's too late."

He turned on his heel and walked away. The room was hot and airless. My head was spinning. I put down my glass, and pushed my way to the door. The



Luxembourg Gardens were only a few steps away. I stumbled past the great iron gates, and sat down on the nearest bench.

A few minutes later, when the faintness was gone, I moved to another bench, further away. I didn't want Patrick to find me. I wondered uneasily if he knew where I lived. I sat for a long time without moving. The day had been hot, and the evening was still warm. At last the sun set, the sky began to darken, and the cries of the tennis players grew fainter. I was about to start walking home, taking the long way round, avoiding Rue Vavin, when my mobile rang.

I checked to see who was calling. To my relief, it was Miranda. I was surprised. She usually called on the landline in my apartment.

"Miranda?" I said. "What's up?"

I knew perfectly well she wasn't going to tell me. At least, not right away. My sister was not a partisan of the direct approach. There was all the social palaver to get through first. I waited patiently while she worked through where I was, and why I wasn't at home, and how Luc was, and how the weather was.

At last she said, "Okay, Olly, I don't want to alarm you, I can see you have a lot going on, and I know you're a long way away, but I just thought you should know that Prospero had to have the doctor over this morning."

"Really? What was wrong?"

"Well it's his heart, of course."

"I know it's his heart. What precisely was wrong with his heart?"

Precision was another thing my sister didn't go in for. I waited some more while she rambled on about palpitations and nausea and dizziness and chest pains, and how the doctor had considered hospitalization, but decided in the end that it wasn't necessary, and how she, Miranda, wasn't sure that he was right, and she had looked on the Internet and checked the symptoms, and in her opinion a heart attack might be imminent, and how she really thought I should come home as soon as possible and we should all have a family conference and see whether we thought we should insist on him going into hospital to have some tests.

I cut her short. "Is he at home now?"

"Yes, he is, and that nice neighbour lady from number fifteen is going to stay with him tonight because we don't think he should be alone, and as luck would have it we're full up here, and I can't ask Jim to cope with them all on his own, especially the breakfasts-"

"I'll call him and see how he is."

"Oh well he's fine now, but this morning he gave me a scare. I think you ought to plan to come pretty soon, Olly, I'm not saying tomorrow, and I know it might be hard to get on a plane at this time of year, but I was thinking maybe next week- "

"Miranda, I can't go anywhere next week. Next week is the Haute Couture collections. Miss Sonia Temple is flying in from New York. We have a bunch of people coming from all over Europe. It's going to be a lot of work. Nadine is very nervous. We've been preparing for this for weeks. There is absolutely no way I can take any time off from work."

"Well I know that," said Miranda, "but this is your father."

"I'll call him now," I snapped. "If he wants me to come, then I'll be back in touch."

## 16. HAUTE COUTURE

I cut off the call, and clicked through the address book to Prospero's number. But when I found it, I changed my mind. Before I talked to my father, I had to calm down. If he was really sick, it wasn't going to help him to have to talk to an upset, overwrought daughter on the end of the long-distance phone.

I took the shortest route home, too preoccupied to worry about avoiding Rue Vavin. There were lights still on in the gallery, but I encountered no one on the street.

Prospero had had crises like this before. Miranda tended to blow them out of proportion, but he always played them down. It was hard to know whom to believe. So far, these alerts had never led to anything serious, but one day they probably would. I remembered how fragile he had seemed when he was in Paris, and quickened my pace.

When I got home, I drank a glass of water, sat down on the sofa, and calmly dialled the number with shaking hands.

Prospero answered on the first ring.

"Miranda told me she phoned you. I was just about to call."

"I hear you had the doctor. How are things?"

"Just a little problem, but it's all straightened out. I'm feeling much better. I'm to step up the medication for a few days."

His voice sounded normal. I breathed out again.

"And what's this tale about nearly going into hospital?"

He sighed. "That was Miranda. It was her who brought it up. Josh said right away that it wasn't necessary."

I should have guessed. That was another thing that had happened before.

"You're sure you're all right?"

"Never better. I'm sorry Miranda's been bothering you. I told her not to."

"What did Josh say exactly?"

My father giggled like a naughty child. "He says I've been overdoing it. Next time I go to Paris I'm to get a proper hotel, and not sleep on people's floors."

"I think he's right. Do you want me to come and see you?"

"Of course I do. You know you're always welcome. But only when it suits you. Haven't you got those, er, dress, er, collections coming up soon?"

"Next week."

"Then you certainly shouldn't come before they're finished. Miranda never seems to grasp that people have jobs to do."

"She's lucky with her own job. She doesn't look on it as work."

We discussed Miranda and her business for a minute or two, and then he remembered the exhibition.

"Wasn't it Luc's opening today?"

"Yes, I've just come from there. It went very well."

I gave him a censored version of the event.

"And how's my friend Mathieu? I take it he was there?"

I paused before answering. My friend Mathieu?

"Yes, he was there. He was busy, though. We didn't get time to talk."

"Pity," said my father. I was even more perplexed.

And then it hit me: Luc had been gossiping. He must have passed on everything I had said. Probably the pair of them were already sizing up Mathieu as a successor to Denis.

I wondered if I should tell my father who Mathieu had been busy with, but decided against it. Luc could do that. I would leave the Gentlemen's Central to run their own shop. I said good night to my father and hung up the phone.

Only then did I realize that the red light on the answering machine was blinking. My heart began to beat faster. Maybe Mathieu had called. Maybe I had it all wrong, and there was some kind of mistake. I pressed the button to play back the messages.

There were two of them: both from Nadine. The first one registered around eight on the Richter hysteria scale, and the second was even worse. I closed my eyes in despair. For the next several days, I wasn't going to have a minute to myself. Before I could think about Mathieu, I had to get through the Collections.

On Friday, the office was chaos, and Saturday was even worse. Nadine made us work all day. She screamed down the phone at everyone who called, she screamed in the corridors at everyone who passed. Most of all, she screamed at us. Francesca started to shake when she came into the room. I walked round like a zombie, and tried to avoid her eye.

On Sunday, Miss Sonia Temple flew in from New York, and at her request, I went to the airport to meet her. Nadine was furious, but there was nothing she could do. There was plenty she could say, of course, and I heard it all.

Sonia arrived at the relatively respectable hour of half-past eight. We stacked her numerous matching suitcases into the waiting car, drove to the Ile St. Louis, and had a cosy breakfast together. Then Claude arrived, and we all went round the apartment, and he and Sonia discussed the work he had done since her last visit, while I admired the views of Notre Dame. After that, Sonia decided she was going to rest, and told me to come back at six o'clock to escort her to the Ritz for cocktails and dinner.

The rest of the week went on like that. Nadine and Sonia competed gently for my services. At least, Sonia was gentle, since she knew she was going to win: Nadine, when Sonia's back was turned, was frankly vicious.

"When you've finished showing yourself off at the Ritz, Olivia, I have some urgent memos for you, and please don't forget the clothes you were meant to have picked up yesterday at the dry-cleaners."

*"Oui, Madame."*

"I'd like the memos to be on my desk by half-past five so I can sign them. It's vital that they go out in the post tonight."

Why couldn't she send e-mails like a normal human being? "I'm sorry, Madame, but Miss Temple wants me to go with her to Dior this afternoon."

"Then you'd better make a start on the memos right away."

"I'm sorry, Madame, but Miss Temple is waiting downstairs in the car."

"Olivia, if there's one thing I can't stand, it's people who apologise all the time."

"I'm sorry, Mad- "

"Especially when they don't mean it."

The weather didn't help. The heatwave that had begun on the night of Luc's opening continued. The temperatures were well over thirty, rising to thirty-five. Even at night, it didn't drop much below twenty. There was no air in the city. At night in my ground-floor apartment, it was too hot to sleep. It was hard even to breathe. I took a cold shower before I went to bed, and another a few hours later, but it didn't help. By mid-week, I was exhausted. I had been getting home after midnight every night after escorting Sonia back from wherever she was having dinner, and

getting up at the crack of dawn to type memos in the office before picking Sonia up at ten for the day's events. I had barely eaten all week: partly because of the heat, and partly because the knot in my stomach was too big to let food pass. When I looked in the mirror, I barely recognized myself. The dark rings under my eyes made me look as though I was dying of an interesting disease. Sonia was starting to ask concerned questions about my health, and recommend obscure vitamins. Nadine had taken to eyeing me with grim satisfaction. She herself thrived on tension. Her bosom heaved more imperiously than ever. Her bracelets jangled on a rising note of triumph. The PR managers who had come for the collections fawned with increasing obsequiousness. The one exception was the new Spanish manager, Pilar, who was too young and bewildered to know how to play the game. (Maria, her predecessor, had quit when she got back to Madrid after the PR meeting in March.) Peter, to my regret, was not there. Francesca gritted her teeth and hung in quietly, encouraged by fawning friends who called up to buy beauty creams on her employee discount, and the thought of vacation coming up at the end of the month.

On Thursday, I got up feeling fairly optimistic. For one thing, the week was nearly at an end. Sonia was leaving the next day for Switzerland. She and I were going to Christian Lacroix that morning, but she was planning to spend the afternoon with Claude, discussing how to renovate the renovations already made. That gave me time to sit visibly in the office, suck up to Nadine, and type memos. With luck, I would even get a chance to go to the dry cleaners. Nadine might be mollified.

As soon as I examined my wardrobe, I knew my plans were doomed. I had fallen behind on the laundry these past few days, and I had nothing to wear to Lacroix but the red linen dress. Nadine was not going to like it.

"You look like a gypsy, Olivia," she snapped, when I got to the office. "All you need is a pack of cards." She flounced off down the corridor towards the lift. She was in black today, of course.

In our pale blue office, Francesca was on the verge of tears.

"My God, what a week. I can't stand much more of this. She's going to Givenchy this afternoon. I'm supposed to take Pilar to Le Printemps, type about two dozen memos, call the maid in Tuscany to say what time she's arriving on Sunday, call the gardener to make sure the swimming pool is ready, call some restaurant in Siena to make reservations for Saturday night, and I've got the most awful stomach cramps, I don't know how I'm going to manage."

"Here," I said, "take these." I dug two pills out of my bag and handed them to her. "Very effective for period pain. I can't help you with the phone calls in Italian, but give me the memos to type. I was supposed to do them anyway. Sonia's with her architect, I'll be here all afternoon."

"In that case, I'd just as soon you took Pilar to Le Printemps if you don't mind. I really feel too sick to traipse up there."

"Fine, where is she? We can go now, it shouldn't take long, and then I'll give you a hand with the memos when I get back."

"Thank you, Olivia, that's so kind. I'm really grateful."

Pilar was waiting docilely in Nadine's office. She was a nice girl. I doubted she would survive in the company very long. Nadine would eat her for breakfast some day soon.

We took the lift down to the ground floor and turned into the narrow cobbled passageway that led from the street to the inner courtyard. When the building had been constructed, it had been meant for horses and carriages. Today it was used by the cars of those privileged members of management who had parking rights in the

courtyard. One of these was Nadine, whom we now encountered surging through the passage like a ship in sail. In her hand was a map of Paris that she must have gone to collect from her car.

She stopped dead when she saw us. Her bosom swelled in outrage.

"What is the meaning of THIS, Olivia? Where are you sneaking off to NOW? And you, Pilar?"

Pilar and I glanced guiltily at each other like schoolgirls caught by the headmistress cutting class. I explained where we were going.

"That is NOT your job, Olivia. I asked Francesca to do that."

"Francesca doesn't feel well. I offered to replace her."

"It is NOT your place to offer to do things, Olivia. Francesca should have informed me of her difficulty, and I would have decided what to do. What impression do you think we're making on Pilar with this anarchic conduct? Do you really think that behaviour like this enhances the image of Celia Temple? Return to the office immediately."

I stared at her.

She added, "And make sure that my dry cleaning is picked up before five o'clock. I've been waiting all week for my clothes. Don't you realize I'm leaving on vacation the day after tomorrow? What am I supposed to wear in Italy? There are days when I ask myself if you have a brain, Olivia."

Something snapped inside me. That was it. I opened my bag. I took the three dry cleaning tickets out of my purse. I took a step forward. I dropped them at her feet.

"What is the meaning of THIS, Olivia? How dare you-?"

"Madame, how dare *you* treat me as a servant! I'm not your maid, I'm your assistant, and I'm not here to fetch your dry cleaning. Fetch it yourself!"

I paused for breath. A wave of euphoria was sweeping through me.

"Miss Temple has a dinner engagement at the Tour d'Argent at eight, and her plane for Zurich is at ten forty-five tomorrow. I will escort her to both appointments. After that, I'm finished. Goodbye, Madame, I won't be seeing you again."

Nadine was looking as though a comet had hit her.

"Goodbye, Pilar."

"Olivia, you can't just- "

"Oh yes I can. I should have done this months ago."

I left them both staring after me, and walked towards the big wrought-iron doors that gave on to the Rue Royale. I pressed the buzzer, opened the door, and went out on to the street. I did not look back. My life with Celia Temple was at an end.

Giddily I threw my bag up in the air and caught it. The passers-by gaped at me. I paid no attention. Instead I began to run. Down the Rue Royale, across the Place de la Concorde, on to the bridge that led to the Left Bank, and home.

On my way across the Pont de la Concorde, I groped in my bag for the Celia Temple handcream and moisturiser that I had been carrying round with me, and I threw them both in the Seine.

## 17. RUE GUYNEMER

My elation lasted until midday the next day. That was when I got home after taking Sonia to the airport. I had not told Sonia about my row with Nadine: I didn't want to upset her. She shook my hand, told me she would see me next year, and admonished me not to forget the vitamins. I would miss Sonia.

The air in my apartment was heavy and stale. When I opened the windows, it was worse. The sky was overcast, there was no wind. All the air had drained out of the city. From time to time a roll of thunder was heard. Soon there would be a storm. I did not know what to do next. It was too hot to read, and too hot to eat. I lay down on my bed, but it was too hot to sleep. There was nothing I needed to do, and nowhere I needed to be. In the end, I went out and walked down to the impasse.

Just as I got there, my mobile started to ring. It was Francesca. I turned into the park, and sat on a bench.

"I heard what happened yesterday," she said.

"What did she say?"

"Nadine hasn't mentioned it. It was Pilar who told me. She said you quite frightened her."

"It wouldn't take much to frighten Pilar."

"I think you frightened Nadine too. She didn't go to Givenchy yesterday, and she's very subdued this morning."

"Good," I said.

"That's all very well," said Francesca, "but what about me? It's me that gets stuck with all the work to do."

"She'll hire someone to replace me."

"Yes, but until then? You wouldn't consider coming in next week, would you, when she's on vacation? Just to finish things up?"

"Not a chance," I said. I was damned if I was going to ruin my grand exit. "I'm sorry, Francesca, but that's out of the question. Call me whenever you need something, but I've had it with Celia Temple."

I hung up, and paused for thought, as it occurred to me that I would have to straighten out my situation with Human Resources at some point. Maybe I should get it over with right away. But before I could dial the number, the mobile rang in my hand. It turned out to be Human Resources calling me. The Director was another of Nadine's slaves, but a willing one. He made it clear that I was never to darken Lady Temple's doors again, except for next Wednesday at three, to sign some papers and collect my cheque.

The conversation brought it home to me that I was now without means of subsistence. For the first time, I began to feel slightly uneasy. I had rent to pay, an atelier to renovate, and a loan to negotiate. The end of July was approaching, and in August France shut down. I had no chance of finding a permanent job until September. On Monday, I would have to look for temp work to tide me over.

I was considering my prospects, when the phone rang again. I was relieved to see it was only Claude. I was settling down for a chat, when I realized how gloomy he sounded.

"Claude, what's wrong?"

"I got a call from the building permit people just now."

"Yes?"

"They've turned us down."

"What?" I said. "They can't have!"

"I'm afraid they have."

"But why? What's the problem?"

"There are several problems. First of all, as you already know, they will not grant a permit unless you agree to fill in the quarries. Second, they won't accept the type of windows we wanted. They have to stay in the current style. The outside of the house can't be painted white, or any other colour. We have to keep the existing red brick. The skylights in the roof can't be done the way I planned, we'll have to rethink them. You can't have a balcony. The problem is that the atelier is in an area that's historically preserved. There are far more restrictions than I'd realized. This is going to be much tougher than I thought."

"Oh my God. What am I going to do?"

"We can sort it out. What I'm going to do is go and see them and talk to them about it. Unfortunately, I can't do that right away. They won't let me make an appointment until September."

"September? Oh my God. And then we have to wait another three months?"

"Probably."

"So I won't get the permit till the end of the year?"

"No."

"Then the quarries have to be filled in before we can start on the renovations?"

"Yes."

"How long will that take?"

"It's not clear. Several months."

I took a deep breath. "And the renovation work?"

"Maybe six months," said Claude, but he sounded doubtful.

"Give me realistic, Claude."

"Let's say a year."

Another breath. "In other words, what you're saying is that I can't move into this place for another two years?"

There was a very long silence.

"Claude?"

"Yes. It could be that."

I tried to fight back the rising wave of panic.

"Is there no way we can sort out the permit any faster? Before everyone goes on holiday, I mean?"

"I rather doubt it." He hesitated. "It's going to be complicated. I learned today that several requests have been made for building permits in the past few years, and they've all been refused."

My heart began to thud painfully in my chest. "Who made them?"

"One was a property developer. One was an architect. The third was Mathieu Cazalis."

"The bastard," I said. "He knew, and he didn't tell me."

"You were right about him, it seems."

I couldn't sit still. I had to move. I set off round the park. I tried to walk fast, but walking in that humid heat was like pushing my way through water. The sweat began to drip off me. I slowed down. What was I going to do? I had manoeuvred myself on to the edge of a precipice, and I was about to fall off. The atelier was turning out to be a total catastrophe. The lack of permit was going to push back the sale, the quarries were going to eat up all my money, Claude's fees, reduced or not, were going to quadruple. I had no job, and no income. What was more, I had

nowhere to live. Luc had called during the week and left a message to say that if I wasn't interested in buying the apartment, he knew someone who was. Assuming that his sale went better than mine, I would have to move out of the apartment by October. And then, for the next two years, I would be on the street.

Unless I contacted Patrick Cazalis and took him up on his offer to buy me out.

I flopped on to the nearest bench, and sat with my head in my hands. Contacting Patrick Cazalis was the last thing I wanted to do. Accepting his offer was the next to last. But it seemed to be the only solution. If I sold the atelier to Patrick, all my problems would disappear. I would still have a place to live. I would be less desperate for a job.

But what about Mathieu? It was he who had signed the contract.

Never mind Mathieu. To all intents and purposes, Mathieu had bowed out. It was Patrick doing the talking, and it was he who would cancel the sale.

The thunder was drawing closer. The storm was not far off.

I got to my feet. My decision was made. I was going to the impasse to take a final look at the atelier. After that, I was going home to make some calls. First, I would try and get hold of Patrick Cazalis. Then I would inform Luc that I had decided to buy the apartment.

I walked across the park towards the impasse. The skies were darkening. I would just have time.

The impasse was quiet as usual. No one was about. No faces appeared at the windows, no doors opened or closed. The houses were silent behind their screens of leaves. I stared at them in frustration. Who knew what lives were being played out behind those hidden facades? Who knew what secrets were concealed behind the wisteria and the ivy? And now I was going to sell the atelier without ever moving in. I would never get to the root of the mystery, I would never pierce its secrets. The magic today was thicker than ever, but I would never find out where it came from.

I went as far as the windmill at the end of the impasse, and then I turned and made my way back to the main road. I would not come here again. From now on, I would stay away. I had come close to something special, but it was not for me. When I went past the atelier, I didn't even turn my head.

The thunder rumbled louder. I saw a crack of lightning over the park. I was nearly back at the road when I heard the sound of voices. Disbelieving, I stopped. Had the ghosts come to life at last?

I swung round to look. No, it wasn't ghosts. It was the brothers Cazalis. They had just emerged from the atelier. Mathieu was locking the shutter, Patrick was standing a few feet away. Mathieu was frowning, Patrick was gesturing. I was too far away to hear what they were saying, but it absorbed them entirely. And then, at the same moment, they saw me. Mathieu moved away from the house, and stopped beside his brother. They gazed at me, the two blond crocodiles. What the hell were they doing in my atelier?

For several seconds, we stared at each other. Standing side by side, they were formidable. Mathieu was impassive. Patrick sneered. I realized then just how foolish I had been. How blind I had been to think I could play off one against the other. They must have been working in tandem all the time. There was no point asking them if they would like to buy back their atelier. If they wanted it, they would take it. It was as simple as that.

The first drops of rain began to fall. I turned my back on them and walked away.



I heard my name being called. I didn't answer. There was the sound of steps on the cobbles. I quickened my pace. I reached the corner, and glanced back over my shoulder. Mathieu was coming after me. He called my name again. It was lost in a tremendous roll of thunder overhead. I began to run, and so did he. I crossed the road and entered the park. By now it was raining in earnest. Everyone else was leaving, scurrying for the gate, running for cover.

Mathieu caught up with me and grabbed my arm.

"Olivia, you're crazy! You're going to get us both drowned!"

He sounded annoyed, but at the same time he was laughing. The heavens opened, and he pulled me under a tree.

"What are you running away for? Why didn't you wait?"

I jerked my arm away and turned to face him. "What were you doing in the atelier?" He opened his mouth to answer, but I didn't give him a chance.

"Don't think I don't know what you're doing!" I screamed. "You've been deceiving me from the start! You never had any intention of selling me that atelier! You knew I didn't know about the quarries. You knew I'd never get a building permit. You and your brother, you've been manipulating me for months. Coming on to me one after the other, telling me all kinds of tales about each other. And not just that! You'd have slept with me, wouldn't you, if you'd had the chance, and so would he!"

By now I was shouting, but I didn't care. The rain was getting harder. Mathieu was gazing at me with a strange expression.

"And all that charade about wanting to meet my fiancé, what was that? What do you think you're doing, fucking around with people's lives? What do you want from me! Well, you've got it all! I have nothing left! I have no job, no house, no money, you've got it all!"

I was getting more and more incoherent. I ground to a halt. It suddenly struck me that we were both soaked to the skin. Mathieu had a jacket, but it wasn't much protection. As for me, my thin linen shirt and trousers were plastered to my body, and my hair was dripping in rivulets down my shoulders.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll go now."

"Over here," said Mathieu, taking my arm again. "I've got the car."

He was gripping my arm like steel. I was in no state to resist. He ushered me into the BMW, and closed the door. He got in the other side, but made no move to start the engine. Instead, he leaned back against the door and looked at me. The rain drummed like bullets on the roof of the car and slid like a flood down the windows.

"So, let me get this straight. I agreed to sell you the atelier with the intention of deceiving you, defrauding you, and, er, bankrupting you."

Put like that, it sounded ridiculous. I went red.

"And sleeping with you," he added. "Well, that much is true." I went even redder.

"Though it's not the reason I agreed to sell. What I don't understand is exactly how I was supposed to achieve all this."

I met his eyes. His ironic tone was making me doubt myself. I strove to keep my composure.

"You were calculating that my finances were very tight and that I would back out of the sale either when I found out about the quarries, or when I failed to get the building permit."

"They've refused the building permit?"

I nodded. He looked at me more closely.

"What else has been happening to you? You look terrible."

"I lost my job."

"Monster lady threw you out?"

"No, I quit. I dropped her dry cleaning tickets at her feet and told her to fetch her clothes herself."

"Good for you. What else?"

"Luc wants to sell my apartment, he has a buyer, and Claude says it might be two years before I can move into the atelier, and- " I broke off, and bit my lip.

"There are other apartments in Paris," said Mathieu quite gently.

"I know, I know. I've just had a very bad week."

He started the ignition. "Do up your seatbelt please."

"Where are we going?"

"Rue Guynemer. To my flat. There are things we need to talk about, and I'm tired of sitting here. I'm also tired of being wet."

He glanced in the rearview mirror and pulled out into the traffic.

"We can't go to your flat," I said.

"Why not?"

"What about your wife?"

"Wife? What wife?"

"Caroline, of course."

"Caroline is my ex-wife," he said patiently.

"But you're not divorced."

"Oh yes, I assure you I am."

"But Patrick said- " I broke off in confusion.

"Did he?" said Mathieu, glancing at me. "What else has Patrick has been saying?"

"He offered to buy back the atelier."

"*What?*" He nearly missed a red light, and pulled up cursing. "Meaning what?"

"He said he would pay back my ten percent and buy the building permit too."

"Jesus Christ!" He ran a hand through his hair. It was longer than when I had first seen him. It suited him better.

"Look, Olivia, that building does not belong to my brother. It's not company property. It belongs to me. As you would know if you'd bothered to read the contract you signed," he added pointedly. "Patrick has no say at all in who buys it, who sells it, or anything else about it."

"Oh," I said.

For the rest of the way to Rue Guynemer, we did not speak. It was still pouring with rain, and visibility was bad. Mathieu concentrated on the road. I thought about Patrick. Halfway there, I began to shiver. Mathieu glanced at me without comment and put the heater on. I wondered apprehensively what we were going to talk about. I seemed to have misjudged him rather badly.

The rain did not let up. We got another soaking on the way from the car to the apartment, and by the time we ascended to the fourth floor in an antiquated elevator we were like two drowned rats.

His apartment was enormous. A spacious hall led into a vast living room with three double windows overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens. I looked round in awe. It was bigger than my whole flat. At each end of the room was a marble chimney piece surmounted by a vast mirror. It was the only concession to the room's nineteenth-century origins. The rest of the furnishings were resolutely modern. There were shelf units and a large octagonal dining table in some kind of dark wood, and

huge white linen couches at the other end of the room. The walls were a subtle shade of grey, and the doors were painted *taupe*.

Mathieu hustled me across the room, through a connecting bedroom, and into the bathroom.

"Get out of those wet things and take a shower. I don't want pneumonia on my conscience as well as bankruptcy." He gave me a tight little smile. "I can't offer you any clothes since I have no wives in residence, but there's a bathrobe behind the door. Make yourself at home. I'm going to do the same in the other bathroom, and then we can have a chat."

He left, closing the door behind him. I did as I was told. It was a relief to get out of the wet clinging fabric and under a jet of hot water. Mathieu's shower worked a lot better than Luc's. I took my time. As he had said, there was a white towelling robe on a hook behind the door. I supposed it was his. I wrapped it modestly around me and tied the belt. My underwear was sodden, so I didn't put it on. I spread everything out to dry as best I could.

As I rubbed my hair dry, I looked around me. The floor tiles were black slate, the cabinets dark wood, and the sink was white. I found myself thinking that some of this would go quite well in the atelier. I doubted I could afford his decorator, but I could maybe steal some ideas.

When I emerged into the bedroom, the door to the living room was open. I could hear Mathieu talking on the phone in the adjoining room. I hesitated for a moment, then sat down on the bed so as not to intrude.

Here in his bedroom, I felt oddly at home. It had the same pale grey walls and dark wood furniture as the rest of the apartment. The duvet on the bed was white, and so were the curtains. The effect was simple but striking. The rain was still streaming down the windows. I went on sitting there. The monochrome colours were surprisingly peaceful. I felt more relaxed than I had done in days. The rain cut me off from the outside world, Mathieu was in the next room. The room was like a cocoon where nothing could harm me. I suddenly realized how tired I was. Mathieu was still talking on the telephone. I decided to lie down for a minute or two while he finished his conversation. I swung my feet up on the bed and laid my head on the pillow.

When I woke up, the rain had stopped. It took me a moment or two to remember where I was. Then my eye fell on the clock on the bedside table. It said half-past seven. I jerked bolt upright in horror. It couldn't have been more than five when we arrived here: I must have been asleep for at least two hours.

Mathieu appeared in the doorway. He was barefoot, in jeans and a T-shirt. He had a newspaper in his hand.

"Ah, you're awake."

"I'm so sorry. I must have dropped off. You should have woken me up."

"You looked so peaceful I thought I'd just let you sleep. It's done you good," he added, eyeing me critically. "You look much better. Come and have a drink."

In the sitting room, he waved me to a seat on one of the white sofas and gave me a glass of whisky without asking what I wanted. He sat down opposite me, on the far side of a vast dark-wood coffee table, keeping his distance. His tone was friendly, but no more than that. I wasn't sure if, when we had had our chat, I would be invited back to the big white bed for the night, or given my wet clothes and sent home. On the table were an orchid, a large bowl of ostrich eggs, an untidy heap of newspapers, and a pile of books. I stole a look at the titles. Lacan, le Carré, and Akhmatova. The man had read everything.

"Right," said Mathieu, and stopped. "There's a lot I need to tell you. I'm just wondering where to begin. Well, let's start with the house. I bought the atelier about eight years ago, as a wedding present for my wife. I was like you, I fell for it on sight. Caroline, unfortunately, didn't care for it. She didn't like the area. Everyone she knew lived in Neuilly, and she wanted to live there too. So we went to live in Neuilly."

He paused, sifting through his life with Caroline in the wealthy residential suburb of Neuilly, considering what to tell me, and what not.

"Some years later, we broke up. At that point, I considered moving into the atelier myself. That was when I put in a request for a building permit. But it's complicated in that area, as you seem to have found out. It's because of the Villa Braque a few streets away. It's considered a historical monument, which means that everything within a certain radius comes under a preservation order. It's impossible to change things."

I nodded, understanding better what had happened to Claude and me.

"In the end, I let it drop. I didn't really see myself living there on my own. Considering the circumstances in which I had bought it, it was too sad. So then I decided to sell. That was when the trouble started with my brother. Patrick has always had his eye on it, with a view to redeveloping. He has some idea of raising the roof by a level or two, and selling it as studios."

"Would he get permission to do that?"

"No, of course not. But that's not the kind of thing that would stop my brother. He tends to forge ahead with his plans and deal with the legal side later."

"But you said it doesn't belong to him."

"He insists on regarding the atelier as company property. He refuses to accept that it belongs to me personally. He claims that I used company money to buy it, which is not the case. When I wouldn't let him take it over and do what he wanted with it, he started trying to push up the selling price, with the idea of forcing me to give him a commission. But then you came along, and I sold it for less than I paid for it, and he was furious."

"You sold it for less than you- ? Why did you do that?"

He looked straight at me.

"Because you said it was magic. I thought you were the kind of person who would appreciate it. I guess I liked the thought of you living there."

"Oh." I felt myself blushing, as I remembered the wide variety of nefarious intentions I had been imputing to him.

He seemed to divine my thought. "As for all these dark schemes I seem to have had about making you withdraw from the sale, may I point out that it sounds like a time-consuming and not very efficient way of making a few thousand euros."

I looked down at his polished parquet floor. "I'm sorry about that."

"Though it *is* the kind of thing Patrick would do. He enjoys that kind of game."

"I thought you were in it together," I said shamefacedly. "How was I to know?"

"You might have- " He stopped.

"Yes, I might have." I met his eyes. "With anyone else, I probably would have. But there was so much you weren't telling me, I didn't know if I could trust you or not. You behaved so oddly the time you came to my apartment, you wouldn't tell me what Patrick and Véronique were up to- "

"I know, I should have explained, but I couldn't think how. I was so furious with Patrick, I didn't know what to say."

"Both times something started up, you stopped it dead. I didn't know what to make of that. Especially as you didn't call."

"After what had happened, I didn't dare."

"And then I saw you with Caroline at the gallery, and Patrick told me you were getting back together."

"We were only talking."

"You looked very..." I hesitated, "absorbed in each other. And then you left together."

"We were discussing alimony," said Mathieu. "And then I walked her to her car."

"You hardly spoke to me."

"You were with my brother. I didn't want him to know how I felt about you. Then when I came back, you'd gone, and so had he."

"I didn't know that. I'm sorry."

I got up from my sofa and went to sit next to him. I took his hand. He let me hold it, but he made no move towards me.

"I didn't leave with Patrick. He offered to buy back the atelier, I said I had to think about it, he invited me out to dinner, I refused, and then he threatened me. I left right after that, and hid in the Luxembourg Gardens, so he couldn't find me."

Mathieu grinned. "Did you really? He doesn't actually slit people's throats - as far as I know."

For a moment, there was silence. Mathieu still didn't move. It seemed to be time to leave.

"I should be going. I think the rain has stopped."

He held on to my hand.

"Don't go."

He leaned forward and kissed me.

"Stay with me."

"All right."

"Though there is one more thing we need to get straight."

"What?"

"Before this goes any further, I need to ask some questions about your marital status."

"Yes," I said furiously, "what was all that about?"

"I wanted to find out if you were really engaged."

"But it was none of your business, Mathieu!"

"Yes it was. Are you really engaged to that guy?"

"Of course not! You know that already. You knew right from the beginning that I was making him up."

"People don't usually say they want a house to live in on their own, and then suddenly remember that their spouse will be resident too."

"So when you decided you liked me, you thought you'd check it out."

He grinned at me. "That's right."

"And when I produced him, you saw through him straight away."

"When he started talking about where to put the children, and you went green, that pretty much clinched it. Who is he, anyway?"

"My husband," I said without thinking.

"What?"

"Well, ex-husband. The divorce came through last month."

"So what's the deal?" His tone had cooled. "Do you still live with him?"

"Of course I don't! You've been to my apartment, you know what it's like. I was stupid enough to invent a fiancé to get you to take me more seriously, then you insisted on meeting him so I had to find someone to play the role, and I couldn't think of anyone, so Denis volunteered."

"So his name really is Denis."

"Of course it is. Did you think I hired him for the afternoon?"

"At one point I wondered."

Our eyes met. Mathieu untied my bathrobe and pulled it open. He leaned towards me.

I removed his hand, and pulled the bathrobe shut.

"Before this goes any further, we need to switch off your phone."

"Yes, all right." He took the mobile obediently off the table and switched it off.

"Who was it calling last time, anyway?"

"My mother. I'll tell you why later. Now let's switch off yours."

So we switched mine off too. I looked around to check for other possible sources of interruption. Mathieu got to his feet.

"The landline doesn't ring in the bedroom. We'll close the door."

He held out his hand. I took it. We went into the bedroom, and closed the door.

## PART THREE

## 18. FATE FOR BREAKFAST

"You see this was a good idea," I said later, towards midnight, when we were lying dazed and sated on his white sheets, with the breeze from the open window cooling our sweat-soaked bodies. The room was in darkness, except for the light from the street lamps. We lay on our sides, facing each other, but not touching, a few centimetres apart.

"I always knew that. It was just a question of timing."

"Third time lucky?"

He laughed softly. "I'm sorry about the other two. Especially the second time."

"You were going to tell me why your mother called."

"We were supposed to be having a meeting. About the future of the company. I didn't want to tell her where I was, and who I was with. My life has been very complicated lately. I wanted to keep you separate from all that."

"So why did you ask me out?"

"I meant to wait till after the sale. And then you showed up in the gallery looking so beautiful that I couldn't resist."

"Who would you have taken to *Butterfly* if I hadn't shown up?"

"Armand likes opera." He paused a moment. "Did Luc tell you that I'm taking over the gallery?"

"No, though come to think of it, he hinted at something. I didn't know you were interested in art."

"Yes, I always have been."

"Do you paint yourself?"

"No, but I decorate."

"Was it you who did this place? It's fabulous. I was wondering just now if I could hire you for the atelier."

Mathieu pulled me against him. "I'm not sure. I hear you run a tight ship."

I kissed his chest. The night was turning out far better than I had expected.

"What will you do with your company when you take over the gallery?"

"I'm getting out. I've had enough of working with Patrick."

"I was wondering about that."

"Family pressure. It was expected of both of us that we would go into the company. In Patrick's case, it was the obvious thing to do. He went to business school - though I doubt that was where he learned his methods - but I didn't. I was never interested in the company, and now I've had enough. Patrick is very ambitious, and my mother tends to support him. I'm tired of fighting them. I just want to get out."

"Where did you study?"

"Sciences Po."

"Really?"

I was impressed. The *École des Sciences Politiques* had an excellent reputation, even though it was the kind of establishment that Denis would term elitist.

"That's how I know what the time is in Indonesia."

I bit him gently.

"Well I don't suppose you're any loss to the company, if you sell everything for less than you paid for it."

"Yes, indeed. I'll have to watch that in the gallery."

"When are you taking over?"

"I'm not sure. First I have to get the money to pay for it out of the company. Patrick isn't very pleased with this, so he's doing what he can to block it, but I'll get there in the end. That reminds me, there's something I have to tell you."

I glanced at him apprehensively. "What?"

"My brother, taking his desires for reality as usual, has been doing a little preliminary work on the atelier."

I sat up in bed. "Oh God, what has he done?"

"He got in the demolition men and they've taken out the whole of the inside. Walls, floors, staircases, everything. That's what we were looking at just now. There's nothing left but the structure." He watched my face in the dim light from the street lamps. "It actually looks a lot better."

"Oh," I said, "I see."

"I'll take you to see it tomorrow."

"All right."

"And on Monday, I'll get the locks changed. Just in case."

He pulled me back down beside him, and began to kiss me. My mind went blank, and my bones turned to water. I forgot about Patrick. I didn't ask any more questions.

Towards dawn we finally fell asleep. I woke a few hours later to find him bending over me with a cup of coffee. He was fully dressed, looking handsome, though a little haggard, in a natural linen suit and black shirt. He smiled as I opened my eyes.

"Good morning. How are you?" He put down the coffee, and sat on the bed beside me.

"You're dressed already!" I grumbled. "Where are you going?"

"I have to go to the office for an hour. There's a meeting I can't put off."

I put my arms round his neck, and tugged him down toward me. "Can't you?"

"Not really, no. I postponed it last night already."

"Oh."

"I thought maybe you could stay here till I come back, and then we'll go out to lunch." He kissed me. "Or not, as the case may be."

"All right."

"Good." He kissed me again, and stood up. "In that case I'll see you in about an hour and a half. I'll call your mobile if I get held up. Make yourself at home. There's food in the fridge."

I did as I was instructed. I drank my coffee and drowsed in bed for a little while longer, thinking idly about the night that had just gone by and the day that was to come. I couldn't stop smiling. Last night had not been the end of a series of missed encounters, it was the beginning of something much more important, though I didn't yet know what. Mathieu was going to count in my life: I was sure of that.

The windows were open, and the noise of the traffic drifted up from Rue Guynemer. The storm had cleared the air, and the sun was shining. From where I was sprawled in his big white bed, it looked like a perfect summer day. I wondered vaguely where he would take me for lunch.

That reminded me that I was hungry. I had skipped both lunch and dinner the day before. The clock on the bedside table said quarter to ten. I got up, put on the



bathrobe, and went in search of the kitchen. Like the rest of the apartment, it was decorated with flair. It had cabinets in an interesting aubergine colour and a lot of stainless steel, but it didn't look very lived in. I guessed he didn't cook much. The array of frozen food in the freezer confirmed my suspicions.

I found bread and eggs and orange juice and cooked myself a big, restorative breakfast. After that I took a shower. My clothes from yesterday were dry but crumpled, so I kept on the bathrobe. For a while, I wandered round the apartment admiring the décor and wondering what I could plagiarize, and then I realized I ought to switch on my mobile in case Mathieu needed to phone me. It was still on the coffee table where I had left it last night. I pressed the on/off key and punched in my code. The screen came up with an irritating little jingle welcoming me back into the cosy expensive world of Communication, and I saw I had a message. I was expecting Mathieu's clipped Parisian tones, but instead I heard the flat Canadian voice of Miranda's husband, Jim.

"Hey Olly, this is Jim. Well, um, the reason I'm calling is to say that your father has had another heart attack. Um. I'm real sorry to have to tell you that like this in a message and all. Anyway, thing is, it's a bit more serious this time, and right now he's in the hospital. Um. We've been trying to call you all evening. I've left a message on your home phone, and now I'm leaving this one on your cell. Um. Mirry wants you to call as soon as you get this, it doesn't matter what time it is. She's going to be at the hospital for a while, so you can either call her there, or else call me at home. The number at the hospital is- "

I scrabbled frantically for a pen and paper, listened to the message a second time, and noted the number. As I pressed the keys for the Halifax Infirmary, my hands shook. The night nurse answered right away, and went to fetch Miranda. For once our conversation was brief and to the point. The situation was much worse than Jim had suggested. As a result of his heart attack, Prospero was in a coma. They didn't know which way it would go, said Miranda with uncharacteristic brevity, but it could be fatal.

More than anything else, it was her terseness that frightened me. Right, I said, I would call Air Canada right away and then get back to her. Fortunately, the number of Air Canada was in my mobile. They had room on a flight at 1430 that afternoon. There was nothing later on. I looked at my watch. It was five to eleven. It would be very tight, but I would just have time to get back to my apartment, pick up my passport and some clothes and get out to the airport in time. Yes, I said, I'll take it.

As soon as they had taken down my credit card details and given me the reference number I would need to pick up my ticket, I clicked the phone shut. I tore the sheet with the number off Mathieu's pad, put it into my bag, and ran to the bathroom for my clothes. Oh God, don't let him die, don't let him die. Two minutes later I was dressed and out the door. Too impatient to wait for the lift, I started down the stairs, reached in my bag for the phone to call Mathieu, and realized I had left the damn thing lying on the coffee table in his apartment.

I stopped dead, halfway down the stairs, and stood there stricken, staring at the apartment door that I had just closed behind me. I had no way of getting back in. I had no way of contacting Mathieu. His mobile number was in my phone, and so was his office number. I had never written either of them down. As for the number of his flat, I had never had that in the first place.

What was I going to do? How was I going to warn him? Leave a note. I rummaged in my bag. The only paper in there was the one where I had written down the Air Canada reference. What was more, I had nothing to write with. I had left the

pen in his apartment too. I wondered if I could knock on the door of one of his neighbours, explain my predicament and ask them to warn him, but on a Saturday morning in July I might have to knock on several doors. In any case, it was already ten past eleven. I simply had no time. I needed to be at the airport by one at the latest, it would take me at least an hour to get there, and I still had to go home and pack.

I ran all the way home, got out my passport, found a travelling bag, and tried to sort through my clothes. Most of them were dirty. I had literally nothing to wear. In the end I stuffed a bunch of dirty laundry into my bag. I would worry about washing it when I got to Halifax. Don't let him die, don't let him die.

I closed the shutters, turned off the gas, and called Luc. He was leaving for Brittany for a week, but not till this afternoon. He might have Mathieu's number, and if he didn't he would know how to get a message to him. Luc's number was engaged. I hung up and dialled a cab firm to order a taxi for the airport. They kept me waiting so long that I almost hung up and made a run for the metro. Finally, they confirmed that a cab would arrive in ten minutes. It was ten to twelve. Please God, don't let the traffic be bad. Please God, don't let him die.

I tried Luc again. His number was still engaged. He couldn't still be talking. Had he taken it off the hook? I tried to call Miranda, but the line at the hospital was engaged, and at her home no one answered. I didn't dare let it ring too long in case they had overnight guests at the B&B. It was early in the morning in Halifax. Miranda didn't matter too much. She knew I was coming. I could call her from the airport, or even from Montreal.

But what was I going to do about Mathieu? He was going to get home expecting to find me, and find an empty apartment. He would walk round looking for a message or a note, and find none. He was going to check his mobile for messages, and find none. He was going to think I had run out on him. Maybe he would even think I was getting my own back for the times he had run out on me. It would be like a slap in the face. When I remembered the passion and closeness of the night, I felt literally sick. I picked up my things and went out to wait for the taxi. There was nothing else to be done.

## 19. DOUBT FOR DESSERT

The trip to the airport was mercifully swift. The airport, however, was crowded. It was the middle of July, and everyone was leaving on holiday. There were long lines for everything. By the time I had waited to collect my ticket, waited to check in, waited to have my passport checked, and waited to be searched, there was no time to find a phone. The loudspeaker was already announcing the final call for Air Canada flight 706 to Montreal. Don't let him die, don't let him die.

The flight was full. I had an aisle seat at the back of the aircraft next to an elderly couple who seemed to be wondering what they were doing in this plane, and where they were going. Neither of them spoke to me, and they barely spoke to each other. There were several groups of noisy young people, off to camp and hike and kayak and Discover Quebec.

I was unable to read, and it was hopeless to try to sleep. There was far too much noise. People tramped up and down the aisle the whole time. I tried to watch the movie, but I couldn't concentrate. In the end, I spent much of the time staring at the back of the seat in front of me reciting my litany in my head. About halfway across the Atlantic, I found that to "Don't let him die" I had added "Don't let him hate me."

The worst of it was, I had no idea how I was going to find Mathieu once I got to dry land. By the time the plane landed, it would be eight in the evening in Paris. Luc would have left for Brittany. Armand's gallery would be closed. Entreprises Cazalis would be closed. The apartment on Rue Guynemer had a good chance of being ex-directory.

Suddenly, I had a brainwave. What if I called Claude and asked him to go round there? If Mathieu wasn't there, he could leave a note. For about three minutes, I breathed more easily. And then I realized that I didn't know the street number of Mathieu's apartment. Last night it had been raining so hard, that I hadn't paid attention, and this morning it had been the last thing I had thought of. Don't let him hate me, don't let him die. After a while, the tears began to slide silently down my face. The elderly couple pretended not to see.

During the stopover in Montreal, I finally got to a phone and called Miranda with my time of arrival. Jim was at the airport in Halifax to meet me. It was six in the evening in Nova Scotia: midnight in Paris. We drove straight to the hospital. On the way there, Jim told me what had happened. Prospero had been in a lot of pain the previous day. He had called his doctor, who had immediately summoned an ambulance, but he had lapsed into a coma on the way to the hospital. Miranda had been at his bedside since six the previous evening. They had called me at once, but my mobile was switched off, and even at midnight I wasn't at home, said Jim reproachfully.

Remembering where I had been at midnight the previous night, I was submerged by a wave of guilt. I should have come home a week ago when Miranda first called. I shouldn't have listened to Prospero, I should have done as Miranda told me. I should have left Nadine to rot. Miranda had warned me that I needed to come, but I hadn't listened, and so she had had to cope with everything while I was in bed with Mathieu. I had been too greedy, I had wanted too much. I had been a bad daughter and a bad sister and now Prospero was going to die and it served me right.

"Cheer up, Olly, it'll be all right. He'll pull through, you'll see."

I didn't bother to respond. For the rest of the way to the hospital, we didn't speak. When we got there, Jim led me across the lobby and into the lift with the assurance of one who had already spent a lifetime in this place. My father was in a little room on his own at the end of a corridor. He lay in a hospital bed in a hospital nightgown with tubes emerging from what seemed to be every aperture in his body, surrounded by machines and flashing lights. Miranda sat in a chair in the corner, staring into space.

I took one look at them both and burst into tears. Miranda came out of her trance and sailed into action. Jim was delegated to continue the bedside vigil, while she bore me off to the cafeteria to get something to eat. I assured her I wasn't hungry, but she made me eat an overcooked steak and some stewed green beans, and amazingly they made me feel better. Miranda told me everything that Jim had already told me, and mercifully refrained from asking where I had been the previous night.

Crises brought out the best in my sister. All the fussiness and worrying that made her unbearable under normal conditions vanished, and she met the crisis head-on with calm and fortitude. Her presence, combined with whatever was left in the way of protein and vitamins in the cafeteria food, calmed me down. When she started talking about sending me back to Prospero's house to get some sleep, I stopped her at once.

"No, I'm staying here. You're the one who needs to sleep. You've been here since yesterday evening. Go home, see the kids, get a normal night's sleep and come back tomorrow. If anything happens, I'll call you."

"Yes, but- "

"What?"

"Will you be all right?"

"Of course I will. I got some sleep on the plane. I'm sorry about the hysterical fit just now, it was just the shock. It's so awful to see him like that with all those tubes. But now that I'm here, I want to stay with him."

She didn't argue. I could see she was exhausted. We went back upstairs to intensive care, Jim and Miranda left, and I settled down in the chair in the corner to keep vigil. It was surprisingly peaceful there. The nurses came and went, the machines hummed, my father went on breathing. He was not in pain, the nurses assured me. Nor was the coma irreversible. Provided, of course, that it didn't last too long. How long was too long? I asked, but they wouldn't tell me. They said it depended on the patient, and told me to ask the doctor.

I stared at the machines, I talked to the nurses. From time to time I dozed. After a while, I noticed I had stopped worrying. I was where I needed to be. I was in the right place. There was nothing to do but wait. I felt almost serene. Prospero was here, he was being looked after as well as he could be, everything possible was being done. Far away in Paris, Mathieu was asleep. There was nothing more I could do for either of them. It was now in the hands of Fate.

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Twelve hours later, I wasn't feeling so sanguine. Miranda had come back to the hospital shortly before noon, and we had spent the afternoon together. I had never confided in my sister before, but the inhabitual circumstances drew us together, and I found myself telling her about everything that had happened in the past week: Patrick's threats, the row with Nadine, Luc's decision to sell my apartment, the problems with the building permit, the cost of the quarries, the duration of the

building work. The only person I didn't mention was Mathieu. But Miranda had always had an eye for detail.

"What about the owner of this house? Prospero told me his name, but I've forgotten it. You haven't mentioned him. What does he think of all this?"

"Mathieu. Well. I had some doubts about him, but that's all straightened out."

Given the long, convoluted, and not very clear accounts I had provided of my dealings with everyone else, this remark stood out, I realized too late, for its concision.

"I ran into him at the house two days ago, and we had a long talk, and I think we cleared everything up."

Miranda regarded me speculatively. I shot her a shifty sidelong glance. She began to grin.

"So that's the way the wind is blowing! Prospero said he liked you."

"He might have done," I said wearily, "but he probably doesn't any more," and I told her the whole story.

To my relief, she didn't seem too shocked to discover where I had been on Friday night. When I was younger, I had always taken care not to let Miranda find out about any of my dabblings in sex or drugs or alcohol, but she was more sympathetic to my plight than I expected, and made several suggestions on how to contact Mathieu which would have been quite helpful if I hadn't thought of them already - or most of them.

I had, as it turned out, overlooked the fact that tomorrow was Monday and a working day, and that I could try to contact Mathieu through his company, or else through Armand, or even Véronique, all of whom would be listed in the phone book. I cheered up slightly. Better late than never.

But by late afternoon, the conversation had petered out. We were both too anxious to talk. Prospero had been in a coma for two full days. The doctor had stopped by in the morning and again in the afternoon. Though he had assured us that there was still hope, he didn't hide the fact that he was worried. The longer the coma lasted, the greater the danger of brain damage.

At five o'clock, Jim came to drive me to Prospero's house on Morris Street to get some sleep, I didn't argue. I was so spaced out that I could barely stand upright. Jim dropped me at the house and offered to stay a while, but I refused. I had only one idea: to fall straight into bed.

I let myself into the house using Prospero's keys. I dropped my bag in the hall and looked around. After only forty-eight hours, the house had a closed-in smell. It was heavy with silence. It was odd being there on my own. I felt like an intruder. I considered opening the windows and letting in some air, but I couldn't be bothered. I got a glass of water in the kitchen, and then came back into the hall and picked up my bag and prepared to go upstairs to bed.

And then the telephone rang.

I dropped my bag and grabbed the receiver. It must be the hospital. Something had happened. It was Miranda calling to tell me that Prospero was dead.

"Yes? Hello?"

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line. "Olivia? So you are there."

"Mathieu?" I said incredulously. "Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me." His voice was cold. "What the hell do you mean taking off like that without telling me? I've been looking for you everywhere!"

"I'm sorry, it was an emergency- "

"You could have left a note!"

"I know, I'm so sorry, I had to run to catch the plane, and I forgot my mobile, and I didn't have your number, and I had no paper. Mathieu, I'm so glad you called, it's been driving me crazy! How did you find me here?"

"I took the liberty of listening to the messages on your mobile. I gathered your father is sick - how is he, by the way?"

"Not great."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the Snow King coolly. "Anyway, I concluded you must be in Canada. It seemed to be the only explanation. I couldn't get through to the number that call was made from, so I called your architect, and I called Francesca, and I called Armand, and finally I got hold of Luc, and he gave me this number, and I've been trying to call all day. I trust I'm not intruding?"

"Oh my God, Mathieu- "

The grandfather clock in the hall struck the quarter hour. Quarter to six. A quarter to twelve in Paris. He must have been calling for hours. No wonder he was furious. I had vanished without trace, and he had promptly set about looking for me, calling people he barely knew in an effort to find me. Something twisted inside me.

"Anyway, what about your father? I assume it was an infarctus? How is he feeling?"

I thought of Prospero lying silently in his hospital bed with his tubes, being carried further and further away from us by the silent currents of death. I burst into tears.

"Olivia? Olivia?"

I could hear Mathieu's voice on the other end of the phone, but I couldn't answer. I couldn't stop crying. All the pent-up misery and guilt and exhaustion of the past few days came pouring out in one uncontrollable flood. I was crying not just for Mathieu and my father and Miranda and myself, but because of Patrick and Nadine and the permit and the atelier, and all my wonderful hopes that had fallen so flat. It was all mixed up together, and it was far too much to hold back. I had been standing beside the telephone table in the hall, but now my body doubled up and my legs refused to hold me. I slid down the wall to the floor, still clutching the receiver, and I wept and wept.

When the worst of it was over, I put the receiver back to my ear, expecting to hear the repetitive beep that meant that the caller had hung up. Instead there was the subdued murmur of the airwaves. "Mathieu?" I stuttered.

"Yes, I'm still here."

"I'm sorry, I can't talk, I'll call you back."

"Stay on the line. I had enough trouble getting hold of you. Take your time, I'll wait. Don't hang up, Olivia, you don't have my number."

I took several deep breaths and blew my nose. Then I picked up the receiver again.

"He's in a coma. He's been like that for two days. If he stays like that much longer, he might not come out of it at all, or else there's going to be brain damage."

I collapsed into another flood of weeping. This time, thank God, it didn't last as long.

I picked up the phone again. "Look," I said to Mathieu, "I can't talk now. I really can't. I'm so tired I can't think straight. I don't even know what I'm saying. Give me your number, I'll write it down, and I'll call you in the morning."

"All right." He dictated his number, and made me read it back. "You mean in all this time you haven't slept?"

"Last night I was at the hospital. And all day too. I haven't slept properly since Thursday night. Friday I was ... with you."

"Yes," said Mathieu, "I know where you were on Friday." From the way he said it, I couldn't tell if that was good or bad. "I hope it turns out all right. Keep me posted, won't you?"

"Yes, I certainly will," I said. "Thank you for calling."

## 20. MORRIS STREET

"He called?" said Miranda. "Oh I'm so pleased. Did you get it all sorted out?"

"I don't know. Some of it." I told her what had happened.

"And did you talk again this morning?"

"I called, but he wasn't there. It was the middle of the afternoon in Paris. He was probably at work. I left a message on his machine."

"Oh then I'm sure it'll all be fine," she said comfortably.

"Maybe," I said, and we both glanced at our father. Mathieu and I were washed up, I was pretty sure of that. But I would have to wait till I got back to Paris to see what could be salvaged. The main problem was Prospero.

There had been no change in his state since the previous day. According to the machines, everything was still functioning normally, but he was still unconscious. If it lasted much longer, he would be gravely at risk. When I arrived in the morning, Miranda made no move to leave. I didn't push her to go home. We both knew that the end might be coming soon. She dozed sporadically in her chair. Jim was at work, the children were being looked after by a neighbour, and the B&B was temporarily closed. At twelve, she went down to the cafeteria for lunch alone, and I followed half an hour later. We were too scared to leave him on his own.

Towards the end of the afternoon, Miranda showed signs of flagging.

"Go home," I told her. "This might go on for days. You need to keep your strength up. We don't know how long this will last."

"You'll be all right staying?"

"Of course I will. I got to bed last night."

I hadn't slept much when I got there, but I didn't tell her that. Mathieu's call had disturbed me. I had spent a long time thinking of him, wishing he was there with me, wanting him. The coolness of our exchange nagged at my mind. If only I hadn't been so tired, if only I had found the words to get through to him! If it hadn't been so late in Paris, I would have called him back. By the time I got to sleep, it was close to midnight in Halifax, and I had woken again at four because of the jet-lag.

"Well, then, I guess..."

She cast a last glance at Prospero, and prepared to heave herself up out of the chair. And then she tensed. "Look, Olly! His eyes are open!"

I looked. She was right. His eyes were open, and he seemed to be looking at us. A sudden beeping from one of the machines confirmed that something had changed. We rushed over to the bedside. A few moments later a nurse arrived, and shooed us away. Another nurse appeared, and then the doctor. We were relegated without ceremony to the corridor.

And there, for the next half-hour, they left us. We had no idea what was going on. We didn't know if he had really regained consciousness, or if he was dying. There was a waiting area at the end of the corridor. We sat there, frozen on the edge of our seats, too scared to speak. One of the nurses came out of his room, another doctor went in, a third nurse appeared, the first doctor came out. No one would tell us what was happening. We sat immobile in the waiting area until finally the senior doctor emerged, and came towards us. We rose simultaneously to our feet. We could tell by the smile on his face that it was good news. Our father had regained consciousness, he told us. His vital functions were not impaired. We could see him for five minutes, but no more, and we were not to tire him. After that, he suggested,



we should both go home to bed. There was little chance of anything new happening that night.

Prospero was conscious, but very weak. His eyes flickered as we came in, but he was unable to speak. The machines made it difficult to approach him. We lurked at the end of the bed and made various reassuring and congratulatory remarks until a nurse came to chase us away. We told him we would be back in the morning. His eyes flickered again, and he tried to smile. We went out into the corridor. They shut the door behind us.

Relief made me light-headed, and I swayed on my feet. There was a rail running the whole length of the corridor for the weak-kneed to hold on to. Instinctively, I took hold of it, to wait till the dizziness passed.

"Are you all right?" said Miranda.

"Yes, I'm fine. All I need is some sleep. Oh God, I'll sleep better tonight!"

"So will I. I'll drop you off at Prospero's, if that's all right, you could come home with me if you want, but it's not a bad idea to have someone in the house, you just never know what- " She stopped.

"Olivia, what's the matter? Are you all right? You look as though you'd seen a ghost."

She turned to look over her shoulder, in the direction in which I was staring.

"No," I said, "it's not a ghost," and I started to run.

For a moment, I had thought I must be seeing things, but it was no ghost that had appeared at the end of the corridor, it was Mathieu in the flesh, dressed down for ocean-crossing and hospital visiting in jeans and a polo shirt and his best Snow King stare, but unmistakably him nonetheless.

I rushed down the corridor, narrowly evading trolleys and drips and startled nurses, and I threw myself in his arms. He hugged me so tight I thought he was going to break me.

"Mathieu!" I said into his neck. "Is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me."

"I can't believe you've come all this way."

"I wanted to see you," he said.

"I'm so glad you're here."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Miranda who had caught up with us, and was standing discreetly to one side, exhaling waves of curiosity.

"This is my sister Miranda."

"It's very nice to meet you, er..." She looked at me inquiringly.

"Mathieu," I supplied.

Her eyes widened. "You're Mathieu? Oh my goodness! I've heard so much about you. We were so worried that Olly had had to leave without telling you where she was going. I was so glad she finally spoke to you last night. And now you- "

She broke off. For the first time I could remember in my twenty-nine years, words failed my sister.

"And now you're here," she said.

"Now I'm here," agreed Mathieu. I could see him taking her in, with her frumpy clothes and her overweight body and her round, plain, good-natured face. His gaze flicked to me and back to her.

"How's your father?"

"Much better," said Miranda. "He's out of his coma. He came round half an hour ago."

"That's wonderful!" said Mathieu.

She filled him in on the details. I let her talk. This new rush of emotion had done me in. It was all I could do to stay upright. I felt myself swaying, and held on to Mathieu for balance. He peered at me.

"Olivia, are you all right?"

"She's fine," said Miranda. "Now that you're here, she'll be fine. She just needs to get some rest."

"Where is she staying? I rented a car at the airport."

"She's staying at my father's on Morris Street. It's not far from here. I'll give you directions."

Miranda was good at directions, which was just as well. By the time we got to Prospero's house, I was more or less in a coma of my own, and quite unable to work out which way to go. Mathieu got me out of the car, into the house, and put me to bed. The last thing I remember is him pulling the sheets around me. I must have gone out like a light. I didn't wake till eleven the following morning.

When I finally awoke, I had slept for sixteen hours straight. It took me several minutes to remember where I was. For the past two nights, I had used my father's room. None of the other beds were made up, and I had been too tired to look for sheets.

A ray of sunlight filtered through a gap in the curtains. I lay without moving and watched it. Slowly the furniture came into focus, and I remembered what had happened. Prospero had regained consciousness, and Mathieu had arrived. I felt an amazing sense of well-being. After the nightmare of the past few weeks, it was like being re-born.

Before I had time to think any further, Mathieu put his head round the door.

"You woke up! How do you feel?"

"Much better."

"I just made coffee. Do you want some?"

"Yes please, that would be lovely."

He withdrew his head. I sat up slowly. He returned with the coffee, opened the curtains, and sat on the bed beside me. Blinking in the sudden light, I regarded him. He was wearing jeans again, with another polo shirt. The transatlantic crossing had not fazed him, and nor had the new country. He seemed relaxed and entirely at home amid the plaids and mahogany of my father's house.

"Mathieu, I- I'm so glad to see you. But what are you doing here?"

"I told you, I wanted to see you."

"Yes, but- How did you get here?"

He laughed at me. "On a plane. You sounded so awful the other night that I just got up in the morning and went to the airport and got a seat on the first plane to Montreal."

"Yes, but- Why?"

"Olivia. You're a big girl. You can figure it out yourself."

He gave me a minute to let that sink in, and then went on, "But that doesn't matter just now. The important thing is your father. I called the hospital just now, and they said he was doing as well as could be expected, and he had a good night. You can see him for a few minutes this afternoon."

I looked at him uncertainly over the coffee cup. "They told you all that?"

"I said I was your fiancé. They believed me."

He eyed me maliciously. I nearly spilled the coffee.

"Careful," said Mathieu.

It occurred to me that my last fiancé had not once in his life brought me coffee in bed. With this one, I was on my second cup in five days.

"Thank you for looking after me," I said.

"My pleasure."

"Where did you sleep last night?"

"In the room next door."

"But the bed wasn't made up."

"I found what I needed in the linen cupboard."

"Oh good. And the fridge, the bathroom? Did you find everything you wanted?"

"Nearly everything," said Mathieu.

There was a new note in his voice. My eyes met his.

I put down the coffee cup and held out my arms.

## 21. SWINGS AND BARBECUES

Mathieu stayed in Halifax for the rest of the week. We took over my father's elegant Victorian house in Morris Street. We drove round town in the immense four-wheel drive that the rental company had deemed appropriate to his needs. He took me to the hospital, he took me to buy groceries, he organized laundry and garbage.

While I was sitting with my father, he kept himself busy, inspecting the ornate Victorian buildings of the town centre, and the renovated wharves of the waterfront. He took in the Citadel, the Old Town Clock, and the Art Gallery. Once or twice, when I needed to run errands, he went and sat with Prospero for an hour himself.

Visiting was supposed to be restricted to the immediate family but, after witnessing our emotional reunion in the corridor, the nursing staff had granted him full visiting rights. It was plain that Prospero enjoyed his company. My father was talking again, and continued to thrive, though the doctors warned us that he wasn't out of the woods yet. They were going to want to operate, they said, but they weren't sure when.

When visiting hours were over, Mathieu and I went home and mostly we stayed there. I cooked something simple, pasta or steak, then we opted for early bed. I was not in the mood for bars and restaurants, and I was relieved that Mathieu showed no craving for night life. Nor did he seem to require much in the way of day life. Occasionally, I pointed out landmarks of interest as we drove around town, but that was as far as it went. He seemed content to limit his observations to the comings and goings of the denizens of Halifax. He paid attention to the way they did things here. He was more open-minded than Denis, I noticed, and less prone to criticize. Maybe there was something to be said for an elite education.

Towards the end of the week, at Miranda's insistence, we drove down to Peggy's Cove to see the lighthouse. Miranda was used to managing the leisure activities of her guests, and she couldn't bear the idea that Mathieu should go home without having seen anything of Nova Scotia.

Mathieu himself didn't appear to mind whether he saw Nova Scotia or not. He liked the lighthouse, even though we couldn't see much of it because of the fog, which was bad that day, but it wouldn't have bothered him if we hadn't gone. Why was it always foggy here, he asked, so I explained about the warm waters of the Gulf Stream meeting the Arctic currents coming down from the north, and he nodded, satisfied. Denis had made me drive him all over the map on his visits here, but Mathieu needed a lot less entertaining. He had come here to see me, he said, and that seemed to be true. He stayed with me, and we did what I had to do. When he got a chance, he dipped into Prospero's library, sampling outmoded novels and forgotten philosophers.

Since I was afraid he was finding the days a trifle boring, despite his denials, I did my best to be distracting at night. We took over my father's room, which had been my grandparents' room before that, and most likely my great-grandparents' too. Lying in my father's big brass bed with Mathieu during those long Atlantic twilights, I sometimes had the odd sensation of a link I had never felt before to those generations gone by. In some way I couldn't describe, I was connected to them. I felt obscurely that they approved of what I was doing, and that part of their approval was bound up with Mathieu. I had never liked making love to Denis in this house.

Despite the hospital visits which punctuated our days, and the continuing worry over Prospero's medical future, I was happier than I would have thought

possible that week. Doing humdrum things with Mathieu, I felt secure. It was like I had imagined being married would be, in the days before I met Denis. We cooked, we talked, we did the washing up. After a day or two, it felt as if we had been doing this forever. Arranging to meet on the corner of South Park and Clyde, stopping off at the store to pick up bread and tomatoes.

I was so absorbed with Mathieu and my father and our quiet little daily routine that I failed to ask myself what the rest of the world was thinking. But on Friday evening, Miranda invited us over for a barbecue.

My sister was very smitten with Mathieu. She thought his unheralded arrival in Halifax was "just so romantic." Surmising that the purpose of the barbecue was to check out Prince Charming's credentials, I warned Mathieu to be on his best behaviour. I did not want my sister pestering me with anxious phone calls when I was back in Paris. In the meantime, she bombarded me with questions on his culinary tastes, most of which, on such short acquaintance, I was unable to answer.

"Will he eat carrot cake, do you think? Oh, you don't know. Well, what kind of dressing should I use? I was thinking Thousand Island - "

"Vinaigrette," I said.

For once, the weather was perfect for a cook-out. While Jim grilled the steaks, Miranda gave us a guided tour of the house, which had been built in 1860. She had created a perfect neo-Victorian décor down to the last antimacassar, and had printed up leaflets for her guests to tell them they were staying in a "heritage home." It was a bit overdone for my taste, and I could tell that Mathieu was disconcerted by all the flounces and chintz and period bric-à-brac, but he admired everything, and asked a lot of questions about the house. I could see that he was going to sail home with Miranda's Seal of Approval. Denis, of course, had never qualified.

I felt obscurely proud of Mathieu for taking the trouble to be nice to this earnest provincial matron, even though she was my sister, and he had been warned. In fact, he had been nice to everyone since he arrived in Canada. The Snow King routine had not been seen for days, except now and then during phone calls to his office. The foggy Atlantic summer had thawed the ice.

We went out into the yard. Miranda showed me the pond they had put in since I was there last, and Mathieu got involved in a discussion of property prices with Jim. That was when I realized how much I had underestimated Mathieu's social skills. To me, Jim was unfathomable. He was a solid citizen with outdoor values who had not seen a movie in ten years, let alone a play or a concert. He owned a small construction company. He had never got on with Denis, who couldn't believe that people like him existed. He would never be best friends with Mathieu either, but the two of them seemed to find each other perfectly acceptable.

So we sat around in the backyard and ate sausages and steaks, and Jim drank beer, and Mathieu and I drank the red Australian wine I had prudently brought with me, and Miranda produced her special brownies that she had made earlier in the day ("Will he eat brownies, do you think?") and the kids came and went, and climbed a tree, and played on the swing.

Miranda's kids were named Sebastian and Viola. Mathieu raised an eyebrow at me when they were introduced. I smiled demurely. In deference to our mother, Miranda tried to call her children by their full Shakespearean names, but Jim called them Seb and Vi. Jim always said that if there was one thing he detested, it was pretentiousness. Miranda had tactfully taken to using my full name since Mathieu had appeared on the scene, but Jim wasn't giving an inch.

"So, Olly, how's it feel to be back in Halifax?" "Hey, Olly, pass the ketchup."

Mathieu winced slightly each time he said it, but I don't think Jim even noticed. I wondered how long it would be before Mathieu got shortened to Matt.

Viola, a flirtatious six-year-old, who was going to give her momma a lot of trouble in a few years' time when the hormones kicked in and she ditched her current wardrobe of frilly little pink and mauve dresses, sidled up to Mathieu and asked him to push her on the swing. To my surprise, he agreed.

"Don't let her annoy you, now," said Miranda.

"It's no problem. I have a niece of about her age," said Mathieu, taking Viola's hand.

"Well that's nice," said Miranda, stacking plates. "You didn't tell me that, Olivia."

"First I've heard of it," I said. "He must have another brother I haven't met. Or maybe a sister, who knows?"

"Is that right? Oh my."

She picked up the pile of plates and headed towards the kitchen.

"Well, how about that!" said Jim. "Another brother? How long have you two known each other exactly?"

"We met in February."

"Yeah, right, he's selling you your house. Mirry told me about that. Well, what I really meant was, how long you been going out?"

I counted the days. "Oh about a week."

"What! Well... Oh my lord."

Something incoherent having to do with Frenchified sex maniacs and depraved Europeans flitted through Jim's mind. I could hear it as clearly as if he had said it. He stared at me in confusion.

"Well, I didn't... That is.... It seemed longer than that. I mean, you seem to know each other pretty well. I mean, you seem to get on real well together. Miranda and me, we reckoned you were going to get married."

"Married? God forbid!"

"Olly, are you going to marry Mathieu?"

Viola appeared beside me, with Mathieu a few steps behind.

"Well I, er, I don't know." Under the child's expectant gaze, I panicked. How much had Mathieu heard? "Right now, I can't, you see, I'm still married to Denis."

I felt Mathieu glance at me. I avoided his eyes.

"I think you should marry Mathieu," announced Viola. "I like him better than Denis."

"Now, Vi, mind your manners," said Jim, too late to do any good.

"Come and see the sunset," said Mathieu, taking my arm and whisking me off to the far end of the garden. Miranda's new pond had water lilies and a stone nymph and a sub-Victorian pavilion that was mercifully out of sight of the patio where we were having the barbecue.

"You don't have to marry me," he informed me. "For a start, I haven't asked you."

"Are you going to?" I snapped.

"Nope. I'm just using you for sex. Can't get any on the other side of the Atlantic, so I had to come over here."

I laughed. The tension dropped a notch or two.

"I'm sorry, Mathieu. I didn't see that coming."

He shrugged. "Don't let it upset you," but I was too annoyed to keep quiet.

"I don't know what they're thinking about! As if we were going to get married!"

He looked at me ironically. "Especially as you still are."

"Forgive me, I shouldn't have said that. She took me by surprise."

He put a hand on my knee. "Look, I know how you must feel about marriage after what happened with Denis- "

He stopped. I stared at him. "How do *you* know what happened with Denis?"

"Oh. Well. Yes. Your father told me about it the other day."

I drew in my breath. "My God, you men are such gossips! I tell stuff to Luc, he tells it to Prospero, and Prospero tells you!"

"And now I'm going back over there to pass it all on to Jim."

I laughed, but only half in amusement.

"I think you should. Tell the Gentlemen's Central that what I need right now is not a husband, but a building permit. Plus a job and an apartment."

"Are you making love?" Viola popped up beside us.

"Not exactly," said Mathieu. "Do you want to go on the swings again, Viola?"

"Why do you call me Vee-ola and not Vy-ola?"

"Because he's French," I said.

"Denis is French," said Viola. "Why do you always marry French people, Olly?"

I dropped my head in my hands.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?"

"She's tired," said Mathieu, stroking my arm.

"Is she having a baby?" said Viola. My head jerked up.

"I don't think so," said Mathieu. "Why?"

"Momma's having a baby, and she's tired too."

"Come on, Vy-ola," said Mathieu, "let's see how high you can go."

I wandered after them across the grass. Miranda and Jim were sitting together at the plastic garden table, talking quietly. They fell silent as I drew near, and Miranda smiled. Now that I looked at her more closely, I could see Viola was right. It wasn't just her normal ten kilos too much. Under her pink shorts and her pink-and-white striped T-shirt, she was definitely thickening around the waist.

"Hey, I hope Viola didn't upset you, Olivia. She didn't mean anything by what she said."

"I'm not upset," I said, dropping into a chair. "Congratulations."

They stared at me blankly.

"Viola says there's a baby on the way."

They glanced at each other, and then they looked at me.

"She wasn't supposed to know!" said Miranda. "We haven't told her!"

"It's been a lovely evening," said Mathieu, coming up behind us, and putting his hands on my shoulders, "but now I think we really have to go."

"Yes, we've had quite a time," said Miranda, standing up promptly.

"We certainly have," said Jim. "Olly, good to see you. Matt, take care."

I had never known such abbreviated farewells. Of course, we all had a lot to digest. Olivia's whirlwind courtship, Miranda's pregnancy, Viola's superior information-processing skills - and we hadn't even got as far as Mathieu's niece.

"I'm sorry about that," I said in the car, when we were driving back into town.

"They didn't mean any harm. Let's just forget it."

"Thank you for being so nice to them."

"They're nice people."

"Oh I know they are. The salt of the bloody earth. They drive me crazy."

"Now, Olly," he said.

"Shut up."

"So what shall we call our children?"

"Caliban and Malvolio," I said crossly.

"Sounds like an interesting mix. And if they're girls?"

"Then it had better be Goneril and Regan."

"As their father, I have to protest."

"You'll be just fine if you don't give stuff away."

"What if we put closed circuit television in the attic?"

"The attic?"

"Yes, of course. I thought we'd decided that."

I began to giggle, partly with relief.

"All right, the attic. But you're not having a cubicle for your computer. That office is mine!"

"I know, and no garden either. I know where the lines are drawn. How about Cordelia and, let's see, Ophelia?"

"No."

"Desdemona?"

"No. How come you know Shakespeare so well?"

"I read the collected works one summer in Biarritz when I was bored to death."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"And why were you bored?"

"One is always bored at sixteen. Too young for most things, and too old for the rest. The only thing you can do is read, to see what life might be like when it finally starts. Weren't you bored at sixteen?"

"No," I said.

Mathieu grinned. "Then I can only conclude you had discovered sex."

"No. When I was sixteen, my mother died."

"Oh. I didn't know. I'm sorry. What happened to her."

"She had a very rare heart condition. She died in her sleep at the age of forty-eight. We all woke up one morning and she was dead."

"My God. That must have been dreadful."

"It was awful. Especially for my father. He woke up next to her, and she was- He hardly spoke for a week. He moved into the spare room, and then later he sold the bed. Or maybe he gave it away. I don't remember. It was then that Miranda took to mothering me."

Mathieu didn't answer. We drove in silence along old, tree-lined streets. It was nearly dark, and the street lamps were coming on.

"I'm beginning to realize that I should never have come here."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"It never occurred to me to wonder how your family would react when I showed up out of the blue like that."

I began to laugh. "I never thought of it either. By the sound of it they've been waiting all week for you to produce a ring!"

"I'm afraid I may have put you in an awkward position. I want to apologise. It was thoughtless of me."



"Mathieu, please! Don't go all snowy on me! I hate it when you do that."

"Don't go what?"

"Snowy."

"*Snowy*?"

I looked at him uneasily. He wasn't going to like this.

"The first time I saw you, there was snow all over your hair and your coat, and I thought you had an icicle in your heart. You were so nasty to me that I thought you were the Snow King."

"I was *nasty* to you?"

"You certainly were. And the time you came to return the cheque you were even worse."

We had reached Morris Street. He parked the car in front of my father's house, and switched off the engine.

"But that's all right," I said, "I like a challenge. Some of my men are unfaithful, and some of them freeze me out. Why find someone to treat you well if you don't have to?"

"Your father said infidelity was the reason you got a divorce from Denis."

"Yes. He had a lot of affairs."

He stared at me hard.

"I don't do that."

"I know you don't. Neither do I."

We gazed at each other across the gear lever. Mathieu took my hand, and grinned at me slyly.

"I'm not leaving till Sunday. We still have time. We can look for the ring tomorrow, if you want."

## 22. THE VICTORIAN BANDSTAND

The following morning, Miranda and I had an appointment at the infirmary to see Prospero's cardiologist. I was surprised that doctors deigned to receive relatives on Saturday mornings, but apparently my sister had pulled strings. She had explained that my fiancé was returning to France on Sunday night and we needed to know beforehand how the land lay. I sighed inwardly. All this fiancé stuff would be my undoing. If Mathieu hadn't made an honest woman of me the next time I came here, then half of Halifax was going to want to know the reason why.

While we waited, Miranda told me about the baby. It hadn't been planned, she explained, which I had guessed already. Miranda took motherhood too seriously to envisage a six-year gap between siblings. Sebastian and Viola were almost exactly two years apart.

The new baby was due in November. They were thinking of Antony for a boy and Octavia for a girl, but they didn't yet know which sex it was. They had intended to wait till they found out to tell Sebastian and Viola. They were worrying about how to deal with the awkward questions about how had it got into Momma's tummy, and the like. When Viola was born, Sebastian was too young, and the problem hadn't arisen. What did I think they should do? she asked, but to my relief we were summoned by the cardiologist, and I was not required to answer.

The cardiologist was called Doctor Radnor. He was slim and white-haired, and a trifle cool. He reminded me of Mathieu at his worst. He tapped with his silver pencil on his desk and told us that our father was doing fine. He would be discharged in the next few days.

"So soon?" I said, surprised.

"He's out of danger at this point. His condition is stabilized."

"Then you're not going to operate?"

The silver pencil tapped a little harder.

"We may still consider operating. The question is still open. But an operation is not deemed necessary at the present time. We're going to wait and see. Maybe a few months down the road. We'll just see how it goes."

Meaning, presumably, that there was a waiting list for operations, and that only the most urgent cases were being accepted.

"Of course, he'll need monitoring. I believe he lives alone?"

"Yes," said Miranda.

"It might be a little imprudent to continue that arrangement."

"I'm going to be with him for the next three weeks," I said.

"That's good, of course, but it's not enough. I gather you live abroad, Miss Hammond. He needs someone with him on a long-term basis. Mrs. Simmons, I see you live locally, maybe you could organize something more satisfactory?"

"Oh, well yes, I see. Well, I, we, my husband- "

"I leave it up to you. But you see what I'm saying?"

Miranda and I exchanged glances. "Yes," I said.

We didn't get a chance to talk about it right away. Miranda had to rush off to some picnic to do with Sebastian's swim team. She urged me to come too and bring Mathieu, but I refused. Mathieu was leaving tomorrow. I was damned if we were going to spend our last day picknicking with a bunch of little boys. After she left, I sat on in the hospital lobby on my own. The cardiologist had dispatched us faster than

we expected, and Mathieu wasn't picking me up for another half hour. That was good. It gave me time to think.

What I had just heard had shaken me. It had jolted me right out of the bubble I had been living in for the past few days, and dropped me down to the ground with a thud. I had taken it for granted that they would operate right away. I had thought it would be next week. That would have suited me fine. When I had bought my ticket from Air Canada, I had been required to schedule my return flight, and I had chosen a date in mid-August. The ticket was non-modifiable, non-refundable. I had allowed myself a month in Halifax. Up until now, that had seemed quite reasonable. I would be here for the operation and its aftermath, and by the time I had to go home, Prospero would be well on the road to recovery.

But of course, I had forgotten that this was Canada, not France, and that there were waiting lists. By the sound of it, they were in no hurry to operate. It might be months before they got around to it. Meanwhile, Miranda was pregnant, and she had a family to look after, not to mention a husband and a business. I on the other hand was single and jobless and homeless, and I had no responsibilities.

Clearly, there was no question of going back to Paris. I was going to have to stay here and look after Prospero.

Someone was standing in front of me. I looked up. It was Mathieu. He held out a hand.

"Sorry I'm late. Have you been waiting long?"

"No, not long. It's all right."

"I didn't bring the car. I thought we could walk."

I took his hand, and we went out into the sunlight. It was a fine warm day, without a shred of mist.

"So what did the doctor say?"

"They're going to let him out next week."

"What about the operation?"

"Some time in the next few months."

We turned down Summer Street in the direction of the town centre. I held tightly to Mathieu's hand.

"Will he be all right until they operate?"

"They seem to think so, yes, but they don't want him to live on his own."

"That makes sense. What will you do? Find him a lodger or something?"

"A lodger?" I hadn't even thought of that. "Well, maybe, I don't know. It would have to be a lodger who knows first aid."

"If he knows how to use the telephone, that's enough. You'll have time to look around before you come back. When *are* you coming back, incidentally?"

I didn't answer.

"Olivia?"

"I don't know."

He stopped in the middle of the street. "You are coming back, aren't you?"

I stared at the dust. It took me a long time to answer.

"Mathieu, I don't know. I don't know if it's the sensible thing to do. I have no job, and no apartment."

He answered me patiently. "You know you can move in with me for as long as you want. I might even be able to help you find a job."

I looked at him. "Receptionist at Galeries Cazalis?"

"No. My sister is a conference interpreter. She may be able to give you some introductions."

For a moment, I was distracted. "You have a sister? So that's why you have a niece!"

"Two nieces, actually."

"Well, anyway, my job is not the issue. My father is sick. I don't know how much longer he has to live. He needs to have someone with him all the time. My sister is pregnant. She has a business to run. The doctor hinted that she should have him to live with her. I cannot, in all good conscience, allow her to take him in when I have no job, no home, no commitments, and I could easily move into his house and look after him."

Mathieu was silent. We started walking again.

"It's not right for me to go back to Paris and leave her to cope."

"But if you stay here, what are you going to do? You'll have a place to live, but you'll still need a job."

"I'll find a job."

"Using French and Russian and Spanish?"

"If not, then something else."

Mathieu sighed. "What about the atelier? What are you going to do about that?"

"It might be better to forfeit the money I paid you, chalk it up to experience, and simply stay here."

"What about me? Are you going to chalk me up to experience too?"

"No!"

"What then?"

"I don't know."

We had reached the Public Gardens, a tidily-kept relic of the town's Victorian past. It had well-tended flower beds and winding paths. We walked slowly towards the red-roofed bandstand in the centre of the park. Neither of us spoke. We didn't touch. We found a bench in the shade of a tree and sat down.

"Olivia, I want you to come back."

I waited a moment, and then I said, "Why?"

He put his arm round my shoulders. "You know why."

I looked at him. "What are you saying?"

"Nothing yet. I don't want to scare you off. But I want you to come back so that I can say it later."

"It isn't that I don't want to come back. I do. I thought we-" I could feel the tears beginning to roll down my cheeks. "I would just feel so guilty. I've left Miranda to cope with everything all these years. All the time I was studying in Montreal, and then married to Denis. But now it's too much for her. I can't do that any more."

"You can't stay here either. You don't fit in."

"If this is where my father lives, I'll just have to fit in."

"You're talking nonsense. You need to think this through."

"There's nothing to think about. My father is sick, he needs looking after, and there's no more to say."

For a few moments, we were silent. The ducks swam across the pond, the fountains sparkled in the sunlight. A bridal couple were having their photo taken. Mathieu watched them posing.

"Does this have anything to do with what we were talking about last night?"

"Marriage? Of course not. It's a separate issue. I don't want to get married, it's true, but I do want you."

"It doesn't make sense that we should just give each other up."

"Mathieu, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'll come back if I can, I really will."

He thought about that, and then he said detachedly, "Will you come back to collect your stuff and wind up your affairs?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Have you got a plane reservation?"

"Yes, for August 16th."

"Will you promise me you'll come then?"

"Yes."

"Good," said the Snow King. "I'll meet you at the airport, and you can tell me what you've decided. In the meantime, you don't call me, and I don't call you. That gives us both a chance to think about what we want."

## 23. PROSPERO'S CELL

Miranda was furious with me, and so was Prospero. I was taken aback. They were both quite vehement.

Miranda told me that she had been coping perfectly all these years, that one more child wasn't going to make any difference, that she had discussed it with Jim, and he had agreed that Prospero could move into one of the guest rooms if he needed to, and it would just mean they had one less room to rent, which was certainly not a problem, especially in the winter months when there were very few visitors anyway, but that they thought he would be happier if he could stay in his own home as long as possible, and they were thinking maybe he would agree to rent a room to a student, or if they could find a nursing student, that would be even better, and the room at the end of the landing that nobody used much would be perfect, and there was even the little bathroom next to it, and Prospero would hardly know there was anyone there-

The doctors were damned fools, said Prospero, who never swore, they were scared of lawsuits and that was all, and he had no need to have anyone living with him, and Mrs. Travis next door always dropped in every day, and he was damned if he was going to have some student living under his roof and inviting friends in and playing that damned music all day and taking baths in the middle of the night, and it was quite unnecessary, he had a telephone, didn't he, and he'd managed to call help last time, hadn't he, and what were we fussing about, I could just go back to Paris and not worry about a thing, and he'd be over to see me next year as usual, only next time he was coming to stay with me in my new house-

Fat chance, I said, and told him about the imbroglio with the building permit, which I had not thought to mention before.

My father was horrified. How could I even be thinking of staying in Halifax when I had all that to clear up. To say nothing of my callous abandonment of his friend Mathieu.

"I hardly know Mathieu," I snapped. "It's all going much too fast!"

Prospero shook his head sadly. "I told him you'd say that."

"You told him- ? Oh my God! Prospero, have you forgotten what happened last time? Do you want me to make the same mistake again?"

"You won't make the same mistake. He's not the same kind of man. He has his feet on the ground, whereas Denis did not."

"That's beside the point! This is not about Mathieu, it's about you. You need someone to look after you - the doctors say so, even if you don't think so, and Miranda agrees with me, don't you, Miranda? - and I want to look after you, and therefore I'm going to stay, and that's all there is to it. Mathieu understands."

My father opened his mouth, and then shut it again. "She gets these bees in her bonnet," he said to Miranda, "and you can't get them out again."

"She's always been stubborn," agreed Miranda proudly. "Do you remember when she was little and she wanted to be a boy and she refused to wear dresses and she made us call her Graham?"

"She takes after her mother. Obstinate. You were never like that."

"I remember sometimes Momma used to smack her and she always just glared and said, 'That didn't hurt!'"

"Hello," I said. "I'm here."

"She's a Leo, that's the trouble. You can't tell them what to do. And the Capricorn ascendant doesn't help."

"She's right about one thing, though. No students, Miranda. Nor anyone else, come to that. I won't have people I don't know getting under my feet in my own house."

And there, for the time being, the matter rested. The conversation had taken place on Sunday, after Mathieu had left. He had refused to let me go with him to the airport. We had said goodbye in the street beside the SUV. He had hugged me even more tightly than the day he had arrived.

"Come back, Olivia. I don't want you to turn into Olly."

I had stayed in the street, biting my lip and waving, until the car was out of sight. Despite my instructions, he had turned left at the top of the street, though the way to the airport was right. Habit, I supposed. Left was the way to the hospital. Well, he would end up finding his way. Mathieu was nothing if not resourceful.

I went back into the house with the tears sliding down my cheeks and stripped the sheets off the bed and moved my things into the spare room and tidied away all trace of Mathieu. I cried all the time I was doing it. My father wasn't due back for another few days, but I did not have the strength to sleep alone in the bed I had slept in with Mathieu.

On our last day, we had gone to a beach in the sand dunes, and we had talked. Up until then, we had shared bits and pieces of our lives in no particular order, depending on what came up. I had told him about Miranda and Jim and Prospero, and he had talked about Patrick and his mother.

Faced abruptly with the prospect of separation, we both felt an urgent need to fill in the gaps. I told him about my mother's death, and how adrift it had left me. He told me about growing up in a family that expected you to marry certain people and live in a certain way; how he had ended up living in Neuilly with Caroline and working for the family firm; and how he had gradually come to see that none of it was right for him; how he had started to disentangle himself, and how, with Armand's help, he was at last on the brink of succeeding. I told him how I had met Denis, how I had put up with his affairs, and how I had left because I wanted children-

And then we stopped talking and went back to Halifax because it was becoming rather too clear how well we would have fitted into each other's puzzles. Since there was nothing more to be said, we went to bed, and that was different from the other times too. It turned into an odd mixture of nostalgia and ferocity, longing for what had been, and anger over what would not be. We ended up silent and miserable on opposite sides of the bed.

\*

Prospero came home three days after Mathieu left. He was shakier and weaker than any of us had expected, and he seemed relieved that there was someone there to help him up the stairs, and ask how he felt, and remind him to take his pills. The first few days, he stayed in his room and slept a lot, but as his strength returned he began to come downstairs. The weather stayed fine and warm, the fog wasn't too bad, and we spent a lot of time in the garden.

Gradually he grew more animated, and the colour returned to his cheeks. Neighbours, friends and relatives dropped in daily, a former colleague from Montreal who was on holiday in Nova Scotia came to see him, and my godmother announced that she was coming down from Prince Edward Island for a visit. We read the newspapers, listened to music, and talked. We dissected the visitors, we discussed

Shakespeare and Stendhal and Jane Austen, we talked about Miranda and the new baby. To my relief, there were no more references to "my friend Mathieu."

Mathieu was never mentioned. I missed him constantly. He was there in my heart all the time, like a dull ache. Everything in the house reminded me of him. I couldn't believe that we had been so happy here, and that it had lasted so short a time.

One afternoon, when I could stand it no longer, I picked up the phone, despite the interdiction, and called him. It was nine o'clock in Paris. I got the answering machine. I did not leave a message. He must have gone out for dinner. Or maybe he was away. I tried to imagine him in Biarritz, where I had never been. I wondered if he had already written me off, though I didn't think so. I still had a chance, at least until August 16.

But after that, I didn't know what would happen. I still saw no alternative to coming back to Halifax. I had it planned out in my head. I would travel on August 16, as I had promised, and stay in Paris for the rest of the month. That should give me ample time to clear out the apartment, sort out things with Celia Temple, talk to Claude about the building permit, talk to Mathieu...

"Will you be able to manage on your own for a couple of weeks?" I asked Miranda. "I should be back around the beginning of September."

We were in the laundry room at the back of the house. I was folding the clothes that were in the dryer. Miranda was ironing. I had offered to do it, but she didn't trust me to produce creaseless shirts for our father. Prospero was upstairs, taking a nap.

"Olly, you know perfectly well you don't have to come back at all." She tweaked a shirt sleeve flat on the ironing board. "I keep telling you, I can cope."

"For months you've been telling me I should come back home," I snapped, "and now I've decided to stay, you're telling me not to."

She ran the iron skilfully over the sleeve. "I've been concerned about you these past few months, because you were on your own. But that's different now."

"Why is it different? Because of Mathieu?"

"Of course it is. If I know you're with him, then I won't have to worry. He's someone you can count on. Don't you feel that?"

I remembered falling asleep on Mathieu's bed with the rain on the window outside. My anger died.

"Yes, of course I do. But what about Prospero?"

"We'll manage. We always have."

She put the iron down, and regarded me with exasperation.

"Look, Olivia, I don't know what's got into you all of a sudden, I suppose it's the coma that frightened you, it's true there's never been anything as bad as that, but there have been problems for years. I don't know if you ever realized just how bad it is. This isn't the first time the doctors have said he shouldn't live on his own. You didn't know that? Well it's true. He's always insisted they didn't know what they were talking about, and he's always refused to have anyone here with him, and I've always given in, but this time he's just going to have to agree to have someone here and that's that. Or else he's going to have to come and live with us, but he'd hate that, it's too far out of town, he'd miss his friends, and his walks along the waterfront, and he'd miss his independence. He's exactly like you: he can't bear to be dependent on anyone. Momma suffered a lot from that, you were too young to see that, but I saw it, and now I see that you're doing exactly the same to Mathieu, and he's a nice man, Olly, and he doesn't deserve to be treated like that. You can be very thoughtless sometimes. You have to get ahold of yourself and understand once and for all that not



everyone is like Denis. I can cope with Prospero, I always have, and I don't mind doing it, and Jim is always willing to help too, and I don't mind that you're not here, and all I ask is that you listen a bit harder when I talk to you on the telephone and return my calls a bit more often, or at least send me an e-mail like you do to Prospero, but there's absolutely no point in you making a grand gesture and staying here and ruining your life because you're having an attack of guilt. What you have to face up to is that your father is going to die one of these days, but that's going to happen whether you're here or in Paris or in Timbuktu, so you may as well get used to the idea!"

She twitched ferociously at the shirt and went on ironing. I stood quite still by the dryer. My face was burning. After a long time, I managed to say, "My God, Miranda."

"Yes, well," she said. "Go back to Paris, Olly. Your life is there now. You'd be like a fish out of water here with us."

"What if I stayed until after the operation?"

"If we had a date for the operation, that would be fine. But we don't know when they're going to operate. It could be months. You can't put your life on hold indefinitely."

I glanced at her. "You mean Mathieu, I suppose?"

"Of course I mean Mathieu!"

I played my ace.

"What if I go back to Mathieu and leave Prospero here on his own and he has another attack and this time it's fatal? How am I going to live with that for the rest of my life?"

"Oh Olly," said my sister, "don't be such a drama queen! If he has another attack, it's not going to be sudden. We're going to have some warning. They seemed pretty sure of that. Look, we'll just see how it goes when you leave. If he can't manage on his own, I'll find someone to move in with him. It's as simple as that."

As far as I could see, it wasn't simple at all. Prospero was not one to allow himself to be coerced into doing things he didn't want to do. A week before I was due to leave, we were still at deadlock. Miranda was threatening to put an ad in the paper, and Prospero was flatly refusing to meet any potential roommates she turned up.

It was a good job my godmother was coming down from the Island. It would take our minds off things.

Evelyn had been a friend of my mother. They had trained as teachers together. Marriage had taken them to different parts of the country, but they had always stayed in touch and visited regularly. After my mother died, Evelyn and her husband had kept up the visits, and when Evelyn's husband died too, she came visiting on her own.

Occasionally, my father drove up to Prince Edward Island, but more often it was Evelyn who came down to Halifax. She liked to drive, and her own company bored her. Since she had retired, she spent a lot of time visiting. My father liked her, and so did I. She was thin and wiry and energetic. She wore sweatsuits and trainers, and she was ready for anything. Unlike the rest of our visitors, she didn't wade straight into medical details. Instead she wanted to know what books we had read. Miranda didn't think this was entirely proper, but Prospero and I both found it a welcome change.

When she arrived, I made a fresh pot of coffee, and we went into the garden to drink it. Miranda had just come over with the remains of a batch of fresh scones which she had baked that morning for her guests' breakfast. She arranged them on a plate, and brought it outside. I was beginning to get fat on Miranda's leftovers. I had

had trouble lately doing up the button of my jeans. I would be better off in Paris, in Mathieu's big white bed, forgetting to eat.

Mathieu, oh, Mathieu. Tears stung at my eyes, and I almost dropped a cup. By the time I got myself under control, they were eating scones and discussing the latest bestseller, which nobody had read, which Evelyn and Prospero would rather die than read, but which Miranda said a lady from Toronto who had stayed two nights last week had said she enjoyed.

"Hm," said Evelyn sceptically. "What about you, Olivia? What are you reading these days?"

I told her. "John Grisham. Agatha Christie. P.D. James."

"Oh dear," said Evelyn.

"She's been raiding the bathroom," said Prospero, who refused to keep thrillers with his serious books, and had relegated them to a set of shelves in the downstairs lavatory.

"It's the stress," I said.

"Talking of stress," said Evelyn, "I sold my house. And now I have to pack up all the books. It's going to take days."

"Oh no," said Miranda, "your lovely house! Oh what a pity!"

"I'm going to move down here instead."

"To Halifax?" said my father, brightening visibly at the thought of a little literary discourse to spice up the medication and the relatives.

"I thought I'd have a look. See what the prices are like."

"But it's so nice up in the Island," said Miranda.

"In the summer, yes, but it's pretty dull in the winter. More going on down here. I thought I'd rent a small apartment and look around. I don't suppose any of you know of something I could rent on a short-term lease? In a central location, of course. I don't want to be too far out, at least not to start with."

None of us answered. I caught Miranda's eye. We looked at each other, and then we looked at Prospero.

My father could see he had met his match. He would have probably offered to let her stay in any case, but the terrain that day was particularly propitious. Miranda, along with her scones, had brought the text of her ad. He could see the game was up, and that he might as well go quietly. Evelyn, in any case, was not a compromise. She was a known quantity, and a welcome one. He nodded at Miranda.

"Well," she said, "we don't know of an apartment, but we do have a suggestion."

Evelyn agreed at once. It was convenient for her, and she was happy to be of service, particularly when she understood how her decision affected me. She saw it as an opportunity to wean me promptly from Agatha Christie. I was told to come back for Christmas and bring my young man, and given a list of books to read before I got on the plane.

"Will you be all right?" I asked Prospero, the night before I left.

"Of course I will. We'll have a wonderful time. She'll take me out, and make me go to concerts. Much better than having a student around the place."

"You wouldn't really have had to have a student. I'd have come back."

"You certainly wouldn't," he said. "I wouldn't have let you. Good heavens, I'm not that selfish. I'd have let Miranda have her way in the end."

"You would?"

"Having you moping round the house all winter would have sent me into a decline."

He paused, and added slyly, "Besides, I promised my friend Mathieu I'd send you back."

I looked at him blankly. "When did you promise that?"

"When he came to say goodbye on his way to the plane. He said he might not see me again, so I told him not to worry. I told him to be at the airport to take you home."

## 24. RUE CAMPAGNE PREMIÈRE

On my way back across the Atlantic, I was no more inclined to sleep than when I had come. Last time, I had been in the depths of despair; this time I was too excited. I had contemplated calling Mathieu to say I was coming, but a kind of pride held me back. I had resisted calling him all this time. I would hold out till the end. He already knew the day and he knew the time. He had written them down in his diary before he left. As Miranda said, he was someone you could count on.

The plane landed at half past eight in the morning. It was twenty minutes ahead of schedule, but we had to wait half an hour on the tarmac for a gate to become available. When we finally reached the terminal, I was trembling with impatience. It seemed to take forever to get off the plane, tramp down the corridors, stand in line for immigration, wait for the luggage to appear on the carousel. At last, I made my way out of the customs area, pushing my luggage cart.

I looked eagerly over the faces of the crowd waiting to greet friends and relatives, searching for Mathieu. I couldn't see him. I looked again, more slowly. There was still no sign of him. I went to see if he was waiting further off, but I couldn't spot him. I looked to see if there was another exit from the customs area, but I couldn't find one. So then I just walked haphazardly round the terminal pushing the cart, staring anxiously at everyone I passed. Finally, I found myself back among the greeters.

There was no doubt about it: Mathieu was not there.

I checked the arrivals screen to see if he might have got the wrong terminal. But all the flights from Montreal, both Air Canada and Air France, arrived in the terminal where I was now. There was no way he could have got confused. I found myself a seat and sat down to wait. Perhaps he had been held up. It was well past my scheduled arrival time, but with the traffic in Paris, you never knew what might happen. I waited half an hour, but he didn't come. I had to resign myself to leaving without him. I walked towards the taxi stand, and then stopped short. I had hardly any euros on me: I hadn't expected to need them. I didn't have enough for a taxi, that was certain. I got my luggage together, abandoned the cart, and went downstairs to the train.

The journey into Paris took forever. The train crawled through ugly working-class suburbs, stopping at every station. It was a grey, airless August day. The carriage filled up with large African matrons in brightly coloured dresses, sharp black youths with baggy jeans and discmans, sad Arab workers with their hands full of plastic bags. What was I doing here? Where was Mathieu? Had he taken me at my word, and changed his mind?

It was nearly noon by the time I got to Rue Campagne Première. Six a.m. in Canada. I felt dirty and exhausted. The apartment was stuffy and dusty. After my father's house, it seemed grubby and cramped.

I dropped my luggage on the floor, opened the shutters, and checked the answering machine. If he had been held up and missed me, he would surely have left a message. I worked my way through the contents of the machine. The very first message was from Mathieu himself, on the morning I had left, asking where I was. He had called fifteen minutes after I left for the airport, and he had left two other messages in the course of that afternoon. Claude had called the following day to inform me that Mathieu Cazalis was looking for me. Luc had said much the same thing. I deleted their messages: I had called them both from Halifax to explain.

The next one was from Canadian friends who had passed through Paris at the end of July. Then Denis, a few days later, announcing his return from Canada and asking me to call. Francesca saying that she had a box of my personal possessions that I had left behind at the office, and what did I want her to do with it? Brigitte from the translation agency, two days ago, asking if I was available to work on another text for the air pollution people. Claude, the same day, reminding me that I had agreed to keep an eye on his house until the end of the month, and telling me where to find the keys. Denis again, saying what on earth was I doing and why hadn't I called him?

There was nothing from Mathieu.

I couldn't understand it. But this time, at least, I was able to contact him. I dug out his apartment number from the bottom of my suitcase, called him, and left a message. That was the best I could do. I still didn't have the number of his mobile, and my own mobile phone was still in his apartment.

Since I had nothing else to do, I set about returning my other calls. I phoned Claude in Brittany to say that I was back in Paris and would go over to his house later. I had a circumspect conversation with Francesca, who did not want Nadine to guess who she was talking to. And then, with some misgivings, I called Denis.

"Oh, so you're home," he said. "I'm in your neighbourhood now. I'll come right over."

He hung up before I had a chance to ask why he wanted to see me. I took a shower and got changed. He turned up two hours later, took one look at the mess in the apartment, and hustled me out for a beer. I turned automatically right in the direction of Montparnasse.

"This way," said Denis, steering me to the left. "It's far too expensive down there."

It was too hot to argue. Since there was no edible food in the apartment, I had had no lunch, and the prospect of a cold beer anywhere was incredibly enticing. So we went the other way where it was cheaper and ended up in a cramped workmen's café in a side street behind the cemetery. We were the only clients. The *patronne* lolled behind the counter in a grubby blouse, and read a newspaper.

Denis didn't ask where I had been. He told me about his trip and Newfoundland and the conference, and then he said,

"And guess who I ran into on the plane coming home?"

"I don't know, Denis."

"Mathieu Cazalis."

"What?"

"Amazing thing. I ran into him in the check-in queue and we sat together on the plane."

I looked at him hard. He was focused on his beer. Despite the heat, I suddenly felt cold.

"Really?" I said. "So what did you talk about?"

"A lot of things. He's not such a fool as I thought. Did you know he did Sciences Po? Anyway, he was asking questions about Unicef, so I had to come clean about that. In the end, I told him straight out that I didn't work for Unicef, and that I wasn't your fiancé."

I clenched my hands together under the table.

"What did you tell him instead?"

"Well he asked who I was, so I said I was your husband."

"My *husband*!"

"Yes, of course."

"And where was Isabelle when you were telling him this?"

"Isabelle? She wasn't there. She left the week before."

"How fortunate. Go on."

"Well, I explained that you had got a bit upset at one point, and we had started divorce proceedings, but that we were going to drop them and live together in the atelier when you've finished doing it up."

"But, Denis, that's not true!"

"Yes, but it *could* be true. All we have to do is get married again."

I was speechless. I couldn't think of a single thing to say. It was a nightmare. It was Fatal Attraction. Was he going to lurk around me for the rest of my life telling everyone he met that we were still married?

"Didn't Mathieu tell you what he was doing in Canada?"

"Do you know," said Denis, "I never thought to ask."

"Right, then I'll tell you. He was with me. My father's been very ill, I've been in Halifax for the last month, and he came over there to be with me."

Denis' mouth fell open.

"Listen to me, Denis. I want to tell you something. I'm in love with Mathieu Cazalis. Do you understand what that means? I love him, and I want to spend the rest of my life with him. If you've screwed that up by telling him all this nonsense, I will never, ever forgive you. Do I make myself clear?"

Denis mumbled something. My voice was rising. The *patronne* looked up with interest.

"In the meantime, Denis, I want you out of my life. I want nothing more to do with you and your distorted way of looking at reality and the stories you tell yourself. You are NOT going to live with me in that atelier. You are NOT going to live with me anywhere ever again. We are NOT going to re-marry. Our divorce is FINAL."

Denis drew back in his seat and took refuge behind his beer. The *patronne* had heaved one sagging breast off the bar and was staring openly.

"Have I finally got through to you? Am I making sense?"

"Sure. I understand. It doesn't matter. I just thought I'd see how you felt."

He grinned at me. He was already bouncing back. "Tomorrow I'm going to stay with Isabelle in Clermont-Ferrand. When I come back, she wants to move in with me. So if you aren't interested, maybe that's what we'll do."

I got up and walked out of the bar and left him there. There was no point talking to Denis. He filtered out what he didn't want to hear. I walked home shaking with rage. In his self-absorbed, thoughtless way, Denis had done his best to sabotage my relations with Mathieu. No wonder Mathieu wasn't at the airport! Who would be, after an encounter like that? As soon as I got home, I called his apartment and left another message. He was still out. If only I had the number of his mobile!

I was considering going over to Rue Guynemer to see if I could locate his building, when the doorbell rang. I ran to answer. Could it possibly be him?

It wasn't. It was Francesca, half hidden behind a cardboard box. I had forgotten she was coming over to bring me my stuff.

"Thank God you're so close to the metro. This box is a pain. God, what a day. It's been awful since you left, and she hasn't even started looking for someone to replace you. She says no one's here in August and she wants to wait. Meanwhile, I have to do everything, she won't even hire a temp. I'm up to my eyes, I can tell you!"

I opened a bottle of wine - the only thing in the fridge still fit for human consumption - and she began to cheer up. She filled me in the office news, which

consisted mainly of who had vacationed where, and how tanned they were, and then she said, "And how about you? How's the atelier coming along?"

"We've been held up by the building permit." I told her what had happened.

"Did you know Mathieu Cazalis was looking for you? He called about a month ago wanting to know where you were. Did he get hold of you? He sounded quite upset."

"I was in Canada," I said obliquely. "My father had a heart attack, but he's all right now."

"Oh good," said Francesca. "I'm so glad. But he wasn't calling because of that, was he?"

"Who? Oh you mean Mathieu. No, he, er ..."

I hesitated. I didn't know how much Francesca knew about me and Mathieu.

"What happened was that his brother demolished the inside of the atelier."

"Patrick? Really? Why did he do that?"

"He seems to be having trouble getting used to the idea that it's mine, not his."

"I told you Patrick was unscupulous," said Francesca. "Did you get it sorted it out? I saw Mathieu at Caroline's the other day, and he didn't mention it."

I suddenly felt sick.

"You saw Mathieu at Caroline's?"

"Yes, she had a garden party. She has an apartment in Neuilly with a garden, and she thought she might as well use it. It was a marvellous idea. There aren't many people around at this time of year, and she invited everyone she knew who was stuck in town. One got to meet some people one doesn't usually see." She went pink. "In fact, I met someone."

"Francesca," I said, "that's marvellous! Who is it?"

I waited until she had told me all about him. His name was Guillaume de Something, he worked in the Banque de Something Else, and he had known her brother at Somewhere. Right now he was at Deauville, but next week they were having dinner.

I expressed all the proper sentiments, and then asked casually, "So Mathieu was there too?"

"Yes, Caroline invited him on purpose. I think she threw the party on purpose too."

"On purpose for what?" I asked.

"Oh she's decided she wants him back. She doesn't like being on her own. He's paid all the alimony he owes her, and she doesn't earn enough at Dior. In any case, she wants children."

She drank her wine.

"Are you all right, Olivia? You've gone terribly pale."

"It's nothing, just the jet lag. You know how one gets spacey from time to time?"

Francesca went home soon afterwards. I was left alone with my thoughts. It was worse than Fatal Attraction, it was one of the circles of hell. The one where everything stays the same for ever and ever. Me with Denis, Mathieu with Caroline. I remembered the picture the two of them had made at the gallery, and the absorbed look on his face as he bent towards her. He had denied that there was anything between them, and that might have been true at the time. But since then I had pretty much turned him down, and Denis had informed him that we were still pretty much married. Had he decided to cut his losses and go back to someone who really wanted him? If he had, I could hardly blame him. I imagined the children he would have

with Caroline: blond and aloof and beautiful. And I had fobbed him off with Goneril and Regan!

But was it true? After what had happened in Halifax, I couldn't quite believe it. I remembered his parting words. "Come back, Olivia. I don't want you to turn into Olly." Since then, of course, Denis the wrecker had been through, and that had maybe been enough to scare him off. Maybe he had second thoughts about what he was getting into: barbecues and swing-pushing with the in-laws, a limpet-like first husband, and a distinctly reluctant bride.

Thinking about how I had treated him, I shrivelled up with shame. He had crossed the Atlantic for me, and in return I had informed him that I preferred a building permit to a husband. I had never once told him that I loved him, but I had said more than enough to convince him of the contrary. I cringed when I thought of all the things I had said. I had been thoughtless and unfeeling, just as Miranda had told me. I had lost my chance of happiness, and it was no one's fault but my own.

There was no one I could talk to about Mathieu. Everyone was gone. None of our mutual acquaintances were in town. Armand was in Provence, and Luc in Tuscany. Even Francesca had left for the weekend. I abandoned the idea of visiting Rue Guynemer, in case Caroline was there. I considered trying to reach Mathieu at his office, but it was too late. It was well past six, and everyone would have gone home.

In the end, I repacked my bags and moved my things despondently over to Claude and Alice's. Since I had the run of their house, I decided I might as well make the most of it. My own apartment depressed me. I had neglected it for too long. Mathieu had not returned my calls: there was no reason to think he would. I phoned Brigitte and asked her to e-mail me the translation. I had nothing to do all weekend. I would sit in the garden and work.

Claude and Alice's house was a haven, even without its owners. It was a relief to be in someone else's territory, with someone else's things. I wandered round touching the cookery books, the rows of CDs, the maquettes. As Denis would have said, I *could* be an architect. I fed the cat, and watered the plants, and slept in Benjamin's bed. I borrowed Alice's bathrobe, and somebody's sleeping pills, and finally fell asleep.

The next day was as hot and grey as the day before, and the air was heavy and damp. I made some coffee, and took it into the garden. I still couldn't quite believe that Mathieu was back with Caroline, but after a while, I realized it didn't matter. The facts were plain: he had not come to the airport, and he had not tried to get in touch. The silence made his feelings abundantly clear.

I made up my mind not to try and contact him during the weekend. If he didn't want to see me, I would respect his privacy. But on Monday morning, I would call his office and insist on getting a number where I could reach him. Even if we were finished, there were things that had to be said. I had a right to know what had changed his mind, and why he was not at the airport. He had a right to know that Denis had lied, and that I had not deceived him.

With that resolved, I turned my attention to the translation. It was tedious work, but it gave me something to do. I didn't venture out all day, except to buy groceries. The atmosphere outside the house gave me no desire to go further. The streets were quiet, and there was very little traffic. A lot of people were away, and half the shops were shut. I had to walk a long way to find a *boulangerie* that was open.

When I had what I needed for the next few days, I went straight back to the house. I didn't even go home to check for messages. I was too scared. One, that I



would find no message from Mathieu. Two, that my father or Miranda might have called. I had sent both of them a brief e-mail saying I had arrived safely, but giving no details. I hoped they would infer from my terseness that Mathieu and I were busy celebrating our reunion. It was beyond my strength to tell them what had happened. I would call them on Monday, once I had talked to him.

When it got too dark to work, I stayed out in the garden. I lay back in Alice's chaise-longue and stared up at the sky. At first, it was too cloudy to see much, but around eleven the wind got up, the air freshened, the sky cleared, and I could see the stars. The cat came and sat beside me, and purred with touching enthusiasm. We were both glad of company in the dark.

It was August 18. In two days I would be thirty. I had always thought of thirty as a watershed. My route would be traced, and I would know where I was going. In that, as in so much else, I had been wrong.

## 25. IMPASSE DU MOULIN VERT

It was Sunday afternoon before it occurred to me to go and look at the atelier.

Towards five o'clock, I needed a break from translation. My eyes felt like sandpaper, my brain was mush, and the computer needed recharging. I decided to take a walk to clear my head. Hesitating on the pavement outside Claude's house, wondering which way to go, I suddenly remembered that I too had a house.

It struck me how much my priorities had changed. Once I had wanted a house and nothing else. Now what I wanted was Mathieu. The house didn't count any more.

The impasse was as enigmatic as ever. The atelier glowered at me with its usual silent challenge. But today I felt too tired and sad to respond. I had forgotten to bring the key, so I couldn't go in. In any case, Mathieu had said something about changing the locks. I leaned on the wall of the little house across the road, and contemplated my tough red brick and my sexy black paintwork and my long narrow window panes. I would never live there. Mathieu had been right the first time I met him. It was not a house for one person on their own.

I was preparing to drag myself back to Claude's when the shutter suddenly opened and Patrick came out. He saw me standing there, let out a shout, bounded across the road and grabbed me. I started to scream.

"Where the hell have you been, he's been looking for you everywhere! Mathieu!" he yelled in the direction of the atelier. "Why weren't you at home?"

"Let me go! I haven't been in my apartment."

"Why not?" he demanded. "Have you been with Denis?"

"If it's any of your business, no I haven't."

And then Mathieu appeared in the doorway of the atelier. So he really was here. He looked terrible. He was unshaven, his clothes were rumpled, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He stared at me as if he wasn't quite sure who I was. Patrick was still holding on to me with a ferocious grip.

"Mathieu! Where've you been? Why weren't you at the airport? Let me go!"

"I got the day wrong."

"What?" I stopped struggling.

"I got the day wrong. You said August 16th. I thought that meant you were arriving in Paris on August 16th. I went to the airport. You weren't there."

"With a fucking great bunch of red roses," added Patrick. I barely heard him.

"I left Canada on August 16th. I got here on the 17th in the morning."

"I know. It took me two days to work out what had happened. I thought you'd decided not to come. I didn't understand till I got home on Friday night and found your messages on the machine."

I looked at him. No one moved. I couldn't believe it. He had got the day wrong. It was the one thing I would never ever have thought of.

"So you came back," he said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I love you."

"It took you long enough to work that out," said Patrick, and let me go.

I took a step towards Mathieu, and then stopped. Red roses or no, I wasn't too sure of my welcome.

He went on staring at me. "Where have you *been*? You left two messages on my answering machine, and then you disappeared. How can I call you back if you don't answer the phone?"

"I didn't think you'd call. Francesca said you might be with Caroline."

"Oh God, not that again!" said Mathieu.

"And you fell for it!" said Patrick.

I turned on him furiously. "It was you who told me that the last time!"

He looked at me contemptuously. "Well, exactly. I would have thought you would have the sense not to believe it the second time round!"

I tensed, getting ready to spring at him, and hopefully scratch his eyes out.

Mathieu took two strides towards me and grabbed my arm. "Patrick, why don't you get going? We can sort out the rest ourselves."

Patrick looked from one of us to the other, and then shrugged.

"If you say so. Will you be in the office tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure," said Mathieu, with his eyes on me.

Patrick gave a laugh that was on the verge of a sneer, but then he turned on his heel and walked off. I was alone with the Snow King. He let go of me. I rubbed my arm.

"Very protective all of a sudden, isn't he?"

"He thinks I can't be trusted to look out for myself."

"He's right," I said. "You should let him keep your diary."

"Maybe I will. How's Prospero, by the way?"

"He's fine, we found him a lodger. I'm here for good. At least, if you still want me."

He looked at me intently.

"What about you, Olivia? Who do you want?"

"If you mean Denis, I certainly don't want him. Our divorce is FINAL, we are NOT going to live together, and we are definitely NOT getting re-married."

Something relaxed in Mathieu's face. The frost began to thaw. "That seems fairly clear. Have you told him that?"

"Yes, I saw him on Friday. I told him I loved YOU, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with YOU, and that if he had screwed it up I would NEVER forgive him."

I realized what I had said and stopped dead. Our eyes met. Mathieu smiled.

"Does that mean you might agree to marry me after all?"

"Yes!" I said, and stopped again, surprised by my own audacity.

"Will you?"

"Yes."

My mind was totally clear, I had no doubts at all.

"What about the atelier? You wanted it for your own."

"Not any longer. I want to live there with you. And Goneril and Regan too, when we've wired the attic."

He pushed me back against Madame Pevsner's ivy and kissed me.

"Mathieu," I said, "oh, Mathieu. I thought I'd frightened you off. All those awful things I said about building permits and snow kings and never getting married."

"That didn't frighten me. I like a challenge."

He grinned at me maliciously.

"But Denis scared me stiff. For six hours in the plane, I had to listen to him talking about what you were going to do to the house, and how you were going to live happily ever after- "

"Denis doesn't believe in reality."

"When we got to Roissy, he shook my hand, and said he would see me at the sale. He seemed so sure of himself, I didn't know what to think. Then after a day or two I realized it couldn't be true, or it would have been him with you in Halifax, not me."

"Well, exactly."

"The thing was, it seemed to me that, if he could make claims like that, he had something to base it on. I figured you must have said something to make him think you might go back. I'd noticed several times that you didn't seem to know if you were still married or not. So, I don't know if you're still in love with him- "

"No!"

"-or if you were just using him as an alibi- "

"Well, sometimes, perhaps- "

"- but I began to think you might not be ready for another relationship yet."

"If you think that, then what are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd have a shot at changing your mind."

"It doesn't need changing. I want to marry you."

"Flouting all your principles of independence?"

"Every damned one of them."

He enfolded me in his arms. "But where've you *been* all this time? I thought you were with him."

"I've been house-sitting for Claude. Just round the corner."

"Why didn't you come here sooner?"

"Have you been here all weekend?"

"I hung round outside your apartment for a while, and then I came here. It's much cooler than my flat. Come and see Patrick's wedding present."

"Patrick's what?"

"He decided the demolition work was our wedding present."

"Oh really? That's big of him. What if I hadn't said yes?"

"Then he swore he was going to put it back the way it was."

He led me inside. I gasped. There was nothing left. The walls and doors and floors had all disappeared. There was nothing left but the structure of beams and rafters. And space, amazing space, right up to the roof.

"Sit down," said Mathieu, "make yourself at home."

He gestured to the back of the house, where the workers had left behind a plastic table and chairs. Everything was filthy. I sat down cautiously. Mathieu handed me a can of beer. I began to laugh.

"My God, this is so white trash! Can we keep it like this till Jim and Miranda visit?"

"We could always have the wedding reception here."

"When are we getting married?"

"As soon as we can. We need to get Denis and Caroline off our backs."

"Good idea. Where shall we go for the honeymoon?"

"Tahiti? Bali? Your ancestral homeland?"

I looked at him over the can of beer.

"Which of my ancestral homelands did you have in mind? Scotland? Ukraine?"

"Definitely Georgia."

"Out of the question. You might meet someone who's even more of a challenge than me."

"Olivia, I've missed you! Let's go home."

"This is home!"

"I meant my flat. I think we should wait a while to move in here."

"All right, but we'll have to go to Claude's first to feed the cat."

But when we got to Claude's, a surprise awaited us. Claude's car was parked in front of the house, and the family was busy unloading it. They had come home early. The house they had rented in Brittany had turned out to be a disaster. It had a leak in the roof, the hot water didn't work, and it was next to a busy main road. For most of the four days they had been there, it had rained. The boys missed their weed and their friends, Claude missed his plans, and Alice missed her kitchen. They had decided to cut their losses and come back home.

"What a disappointment," said Mathieu briskly. "Olivia, grab your stuff, and we'll leave you to settle back in. I'll be round to see you tomorrow morning," he added to Claude, "no, make that the afternoon. I know one of the people in the building permit office, and you have an appointment with him on September 1st. He agreed to give you the go-ahead the same day, provided everything's in order, so I lined up a firm to start filling in the quarries on the 2nd. My brother has a contact at the Quarry Administration, which oversees the work, so that should move things along."

Claude stroked his beard. It was going too fast for him.

"But the sale hasn't been completed," he pointed out.

"There is no sale any more. We'll cancel it as soon as my solicitor gets back from vacation, and put it in our joint names instead."

"Oh," said Claude, as light finally dawned.

"So tomorrow we should discuss what you'll need to do to the plans."

"Am I invited to this meeting?" I asked.

"Of course you are," said Mathieu. "I wouldn't dare do anything behind your back, and in any case I'm not letting you out of my sight. The last time I took my eyes off you for a morning, you skipped off to Canada."

"Congratulations," said Claude. "I'm very pleased for you both."

"Thank you," said Mathieu. "We'd like to move in next summer."

"With such a vast net of acquaintance, I'm sure you will. Can we offer you some champagne to celebrate?"

"Not right now," said Mathieu, "but tomorrow would be nice. Especially as it's Olivia's birthday too. Right now, I'm afraid we have to be getting back. Olivia has e-mail to send."

"How did you know when my birthday is?" I asked when we were in the street.

"I read the contracts I sign. You're going to be thirty tomorrow."

"Are you going to give me a present?"

"I gave you one already. You're getting me."

\*

The message that I sent from my laptop later that evening, sitting in Mathieu's great white bed, with Mathieu sprawled beside me, and a glass of champagne at my elbow, read as follows:

Dear Prospero and Miranda,

Mathieu and I are getting married here next month. It will be a small civil ceremony, with just a few close friends. We will come for a delayed honeymoon in Halifax as soon as renovation work allows.

Love to you both,  
Olivia