



Loose Id

WHITE FLAG

THOM LANE

WHITE FLAG

Thom Lane

LooseId^(R)
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

*** * * * ***

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

White Flag

Thom Lane

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
870 Market St, Suite 1201
San Francisco CA 94102-2907
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © July 2009 by Thom Lane

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

ISBN 978-1-59632-974-4
Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Irene D. Williams
Cover Artist: April Martinez

White Flag

Some days, I can almost feel too lucky to live. *What have I ever done, to deserve this?* – the words might as well be painted in great white sky-letters above my head, like clouds that follow me around and never rain on me.

This particular day there were no clouds, no hint of a cloud: only a heat-haze to smudge the pale sky, deep shadows from the trees that bordered the canal. And me on deck, perched on the stern rail with a rod in my hands and nothing in my head, watching the slow drift of the water, utterly content. Best job in the world, bar none...

Occasional people passed by on the towpath—an elderly man whose moustache was bigger than his dog, two middle-aged women with baguettes and leafy greens thrusting out of their shopping bags, a whistling boy on a bicycle. They only underscored the privacy, the freedom of my solitary state. They had homes, families, possessions, schedules: everything that fixes a person, everything that ties them down. Me, I was just passing through, alone and unencumbered. Best life in the world, bar none...

It was late afternoon, late summer, and I had two weeks of this to come. No troubles, no hurry: just a slow cruise, a few photos, an article to write up at the end of it. Perfect.

Tonight's supper was already in the keepnet. I was only fishing on because I could, because I wanted to. If I caught nothing more, it really wouldn't matter. Today was all about the idleness, catching the mood that I intended to keep all fortnight long.

Movement again on the towpath, someone in about as much hurry as I was, drifting along barely faster than the water. I glanced up, and –

Perfect.

I couldn't look away. I suppose I should be embarrassed about that, ogling a stranger, but hey. He was beautiful. And there's a separation between boat and land, a different kind of distance: almost like a window – you can see but not touch; it doesn't seem to matter so much if you look.

If you look and look.

He was a young man, a little younger than me: early twenties at a guess, where I was just turning late. His hair was floppy blond, almost a match to the gold of his skin. I could see quite a lot of his skin, as he was wearing an unbleached linen suit and nothing else except a pair of sandals. No shirt. His jacket hung open, to show off exactly how thoroughly tanned he was, how fit, how...

Well.

Hands in pockets, he idled down the path towards me like a Greek god on a day away from Olympus. If he was looking for maidens to ravish, he certainly wasn't in any rush about it. After a while, I realised that I was trying to see just what colour his eyes might be – which meant, of course, that his eyes were very much turned in my direction. He was looking at me, in fact, with almost as much attention as I was giving him.

Oops. Even through a window, it's rude to get caught staring.

Even so. He wasn't turning his eyes away, as strangers do when they snag glances unexpectedly; so neither did I. I'm not sure that I could have without a better reason. He was just such a pleasure to watch, with that easy grace and total self-assurance, a young man who knew just exactly where he stood in the world, and what he was worth.

By the time he reached my stern rope where it was tied off to a peg in the bank, we obviously had to exchange something more than looks. I tried a smile – which was not hard at all, he was delightfully easy to smile at – and said, "Bonjour."

I got the smile back in full measure, and a cheerful "good afternoon."

"Ouch," I said, laughing. "Is it that my French accent is so bad, or just that my Englishness is obvious?"

He shrugged and couldn't have been more obviously French if he'd tried. His English was near-perfect, though, enhanced – I thought – rather than marred by a soft, liquid slur, as though the canal ran through it. "The accent is...unusual, but one word is not enough to say about the French. Your clothes are English, though, and so is your fishing rod."

"My jeans are American," I protested. "I got the shirt in Kuala Lumpur and the shoes in Beijing –"

"And the Blue Jays cap in Canada, yes. That's what I mean. Only the English would do this."

He was teasing, of course. It was the rod that was the giveaway, to anyone who knew. I said, "You fish?" though I knew the answer already; I just wanted to hear him talk some more. His voice was as charmingly seductive as the rest of him.

"When I can. Where I'm allowed to," with emphasis.

I frowned; that was more than a hint, it was an accusation. "I have a licence." It had come with the hire of the boat: two weeks' unlimited rights on this canal and the river that fed it.

He shook his head. "Not for this stretch. From the bridge above to the bridge below" – his arm pointed, upstream and down – "this is all private water. It belongs to the vineyard." Beyond the trees, both steep sides of the valley were staked out with heavy vines in neat array.

"And, what? You're the warden, are you, patrolling to catch culprits?"

"Something like that." He was firm but seemingly quite unworried. I wasn't quite sure what game we were playing here, but I thought both sides were having fun. "I'm afraid you must pay a fine. How many fish have you caught so far?"

"Just the one." I lifted the keepnet out of the water to show him: a fine brown trout, fat supper for one.

"That's unfortunate. The fine is two trouts, payable at sunset. You'd better go on fishing, until you have enough to meet your debt. Do you have fresh bread?"

"Yes, actually." The women on the towpath earlier weren't the only ones who had been to market. "But —"

"Good." He interrupted me ruthlessly, voice and smile still working good magic together. "I'll see you later, then. Don't worry about the wine, I'll bring that."

"You will?"

"Of course. That will be my fine, for impersonating a warden of the canal."

One last flash of white teeth and he was going, was gone, long loping strides carrying him away from me, leaving me startled, bewildered, enchanted —

At a stretch, one fat brown trout would probably feed two. It just seemed a shame to stretch on such a day; and besides, I rise to a challenge as fish rise to the bait. I like mystery, I like being teased, I rather like to be goaded. I liked him, I thought, very much indeed.

And I really didn't want to give him the chance to mock my failure, as I was sure he would; so I was suddenly much more serious about the fishing. I changed to my lucky fly, because all fishermen are superstitious, no matter how scientific we may be about the art of fishing. I turned my back to the distracting towpath and concentrated entirely on the water and the slippery shadows I could see gliding beneath the surface.

If sometimes that surface seemed more like a mirror to my imagination, if I did keep seeing a very particular blond head, a deeply attractive face, a wonderfully open

smile – well, that was like the gold at the rainbow's end, you know it's not really there, but it draws you on regardless. He was my reward for a landed fish. Strictly in my imagination, of course. I didn't expect ever to find him in my bed. Still, I allowed myself to dream just a little, while my hands went through all the familiar motions, casting the fly across the water to a particularly tempting stretch in the shadow of a poplar, where I had already seen all the telltales of a trout rising for his supper.

At last I struck lucky, felt him bite and struck hard. He was a big, strong fish, and I was only using a light line; my heart was in my mouth as I played him. It would be all too easy to lose him now and be left with nothing.

He fought as strenuously, as determinedly, as I did. It was touch-and-go, but I won in the end; I reeled him aboard, took the hook out, and slipped him into the keepnet to join his unfortunate brother.

I heard a light applause at my back and turned around to see my dinner guest leaning in a tree's shadow, lithe and lovely in the evening light.

"Have you been there long?"

"Long enough."

"You should have said."

A little shrug and, "You were busy. And I like to watch a thing done well."

He stretched a long leg across the water before I was ready, before I could offer him a hand; he found a foothold and stepped neatly over the rail, doing that thing very well indeed, the epitome of grace. "Permission to come aboard, captain?"

He already had, but I forbore to point that out. "Of course, and welcome. Make yourself comfortable." *Take your shirt off*, I'd have liked to say, but he'd only just put it on: for the sake of good manners, presumably, being properly dressed for dinner. "What's your name, anyway? I'm Charlie."

"Matthieu. Matt."

Now he held out his hand, and I shook it.

Took it, at any rate.

Really didn't want to let it go.

It always lingers in my memory, that first time of touching. Sometimes there's a tingle, a promise, as though the body knows what the mind hasn't quite caught up with yet. This time it was more, almost a shock of recognition: his warm fingers enfolding mine as we stood palm to palm, saying nothing, letting skin and flesh and bone do all the talking.

It had to end, of course. It had to be him who broke contact, because I couldn't move.

He slipped his hand out of mine, his mouth giving a little twist that was almost an apology; for excuse, he swung forward the satchel he was carrying over his shoulder.

"I brought olives, to nibble while we talk; good butter and almonds and watercress for the trout, which I will clean and cook because you are English —"

"Hey, I can cook!"

"Of course you can. Or you can stand and watch with a glass of wine in your hand, while I cook. That would be better, I think."

I tried to glare at him, but it dissolved into a giveaway giggle, no dignity left to stand on. "All right, then. I have been working hard, after all, to catch our supper. While you just moseyed along the towpath causing trouble. Wine. You mentioned wine?"

"Of course." He reached into his satchel again and produced a bottle.

For a moment, I was almost disappointed in him.

Some French supermarkets will sell you a plastic litre bottle that only identifies itself as *vin*—whether it's red or white or rosé, you have to judge for yourself, by looking. Don't ask me what it tastes like; I've never been that desperate.

Just for that little moment, Matt's bottle reminded me of those. It was clear glass, and the wine was white—or at least a pale green-gold, that colour that we traduce by calling it white—and there was no label at all.

At least it was real glass, though. And there might be no capsule over the neck, neither traditional lead nor modern plastic, but that did allow me to see the long traditional cork that stoppered it, with a chateau's name and crest stamped around its length.

"I'll get a corkscrew."

"No need."

He had one in his pocket and used it with the simple grace of long familiarity. For a moment, the summer's breeze seemed full of flowers.

"That smells...extraordinary."

He beamed at me, and I gathered I had said the exact right thing for once. I tried to be twice lucky – "I'll find us some glasses" – but he smiled, shook his head, stopped me with his hand against my chest.

Stopped me dead, almost; he almost stopped my heart.

One thing for sure, he was safe to break it. Before the night was out, most likely.

"No need," he said again.

"Oh, you didn't..."

But of course he did; from the other pocket of his jacket, he produced two fine long-stemmed glasses wrapped in silk for the journey.

"This wine," he said, "deserves better than rented tumblers. At least, I hope it does."

I was sure of it. I felt hopelessly out of my depth here, out-thought all down the line, floundering in the wake of his elegant manoeuvres. The game was still fun, but I didn't stand a chance.

Grasping at straws, I said, "I checked my fishing licence. It doesn't say anything about this stretch of water being excluded."

This time, his shrug was a confession. "Of course not. I am a bad, dishonest person, telling lies for the sake of a free supper."

"Hardly free," I said, with a gesture towards all the treats he'd brought.

"The butter and the almonds and the olives come all from our own land. The watercress I picked myself an hour ago, from the stream below the kitchen garden; and the fish you caught, of course. It could hardly be more free."

"And the wine?" Just the perfume of it rising from the glass caught at my throat like a promise of wonder.

"Ah," he said. "Well, I made the wine."

"Damn it, Matt, who *are* you?"

"Oh, I belong to the vineyard," he said casually, as though I should believe he was just another worker. As though he really wanted me to believe that.

I'm not so easily fooled. "Or the vineyard belongs to you, perhaps?" I could just see him as the favoured son of the family, privileged from birth, wandering around his vast estates and practising droit de seigneur among the peasantry.

Or, these days, among the tourists.

I reminded myself again not to get my hopes up.

Meantime, he was laughing at me, dismissing my fancies with a gesture. "Oh, I wish," he went on, suddenly more earnest than either of us expected. "I do wish that it was mine, or due to come to me; but no. The vineyard belongs to my uncle Maurice, who has three children of his own who will inherit, though I hope not for many years yet. Me, I am just a hired hand."

My turn to laugh, or at least to snort: in part at his lugubrious expression, which he did very well, but mostly at the absurdity of what he said. So he was a favoured nephew, rather than a son; that only reinforced my suspicions. He could enjoy the fruits of the vineyard—literal and metaphorical—without any of the anxieties of ownership. Poor little rich boy, pampered and indulged.

"So do your parents live here too? In the chateau?" There must surely be a chateau, though I hadn't seen it yet. "Did you grow up here, is that why you belong?"

"No, I'm Parisian, born and bred. My parents live there still. We used to come for holidays, though, when I was small. I always loved this valley. We ran wild every summer, my cousins and I," he said with a quiet, nostalgic smile for the boy he'd been, sophisticated city boy transformed by the season. "Then when I was a teenager, I came to help with the harvest—and since then I've never really left. It's the only work I've ever wanted. And I do work," he added, flicking an olive stone at me, reading my mind in a most disconcerting fashion, given that we'd only just met. "I'm not an idle rich, not a playboy. None of us is. Well, except perhaps my cousin Juliette. She's a playgirl. Her father indulges her. We all do, I think. She's the youngest, so..."

Never mind his cousin Juliette, Matt was the one who interested me. He'd got that tan and the well-cut muscles working in the fields, had he, rather than lounging on the beach and sweating in the gym? Well, perhaps, but he was still no simple labourer. A complicated labourer, that I could believe. I said, "You didn't go to university?"

"Oh, yes. Viticulture at the Sorbonne, with a study year in the Napa Valley; and then an MBA at the London School of Economics, so that I could help with the business too. But really, I only want to make wine. This is my first," he said, touching the bottle protectively, almost tenderly. I wondered how it might feel to have him touch me that same way—but no, he was saying that wine was his first love, his true love. Not in so many words, perhaps, but his every gesture said it. "Uncle Maurice let me take a percentage of last year's harvest and make my own blend of grapes, my own wine. He was...quite shocked, I think, by some of my choices; it's not a traditional blend at all, for this region. Very Californian, my uncle said, trying to sound disapproving. But it works, I think..."

I smiled at him across my glass. He knew full well how well it worked. Even so, I let the silence sit for a minute, we both did, while we touched glasses in tribute to his first wine, while we sipped and tasted. That first perfumed promise was followed by a

lingering aftertaste that was somehow toast and butter and honey all together, rich and full and golden, and dry as a bone beneath.

I didn't have the words to tell him how good it was, but I did try. When I faltered, he shook his head dismissively and said, "Thank you, but never mind. It's for drinking, for enjoying, not for talking about. Tell me about you. Why are you out here on your own, stealing our fish?"

We'd already established that they were not his fish; I had a better claim to them than he did. That wasn't important, though, and I wouldn't let myself be distracted. "I should be able to talk about it; it's my job. I'm a journalist, a travel writer. I'm here to write a piece for a Sunday paper, exactly about stuff like this," I said, waving my glass — carefully — at him in frustration. That was treasure, that sweet golden liquid, and it was eluding all my skills.

He was treasure too, that sweet golden man, but I wasn't even going to reach for him, for fear that he'd prove just as elusive.

"Ah," he said, "do I need to be careful what I say, will you write about me too?"

"Not if you don't want me to." Though he was the kind of local contact that I would usually seize on joyously. "My commission is to write about the boating, life on the canal. You'd be a whole other article." Which one part of my mind was planning already: the young revolutionary, importing New World methods and ideas into a traditional French vineyard, turning old notions upside down in his pursuit of the perfect wine.

The twist of his mouth said he'd think about it, perhaps. Aloud, he said, "Is that why you came alone, to write your article in peace?"

"Not really, no. Except that it is why I live alone, so yes, I suppose." It was none of his business, really, but — Well, I was drinking his wine. And lusting after his body. And I'd probably asked a few impertinent questions of my own, come to think. Certainly I'd had some impertinent thoughts, which he had mind-read all too easily. I probably owed him this. "This is what I do, I travel all the time and write about it, and then I go

somewhere else. None of that makes for easy relationships. A month ago I was in China; next month I'm in Brazil. I did try taking a friend with me, a time or two, but it never really worked."

"Did you want it to?" he asked quietly.

Ouch. That was uncomfortably sharp. My turn to shrug. "Perhaps not. A holiday together is fine, but I'm never on holiday when I'm travelling; this is my work. And other people have their own lives that they're reluctant to leave; I never met anyone who was free to come with me long-term. Or willing to, perhaps that's it." My turn to bid for the sympathy vote. "It can sound wonderful, being always on the move, but it doesn't really suit most people."

"No," Matt agreed. "It would not suit me. Where's your home, Charlie? Where do you belong?"

I shook my head. "I don't have a home. There's a flat in London, but it doesn't belong to me. I rented it to have a base, somewhere to come back to, but honestly? I'm almost never there. And there's nothing in it anyway. I don't keep things; I don't like being tied down. A mailing address is useful, but I'd do just as well with a box number. I could probably let the flat go and just live out of my backpack. I pretty much do that already anyway." And then, "You look...baffled."

"Yes. I found where I belonged and seized hold of it. I was lucky, I suppose. I found it young and it made a place for me; not everyone gets that. But I can't imagine not looking, not wanting to settle somewhere."

We gazed at each other in a sort of cheerful and mutual bewilderment, two young men meeting across a great divide, this boat the bridge between us. Then he hefted the bottle and said, "Show me the kitchen, then. The galley, yes? I'll bring the wine, you bring the fish."

In some ways we weren't so different after all, he and I. For a start, we both liked to watch things done well. Those fine, elegant fingers made a swift and delicious supper

for two, frying the freshest fish imaginable in nut brown butter, tossing in a handful of actual nuts to make *truite aux amandes*, wilting the watercress briefly in the pan juices.

Every time I lifted my gaze from his hands, it went instinctively to his fine, subtle face; every time, I swear, I found his eyes waiting to meet mine. Soon I was blushing every time it happened. I was older than him, vastly more travelled, vastly more experienced, and he still made me feel like a gauche adolescent. I might have felt resentful, except... Well. He was beautiful and charming, fascinating, the best company imaginable, and aboard my boat and cooking dinner. What's to resent?

We went back on deck to eat, perching on the cabin roof with our feet overhanging the side, while brightly lit tourist barges chugged past. In the intervals between, our eyes adjusted to the dark and we could look up at the Milky Way, listen to the nightlife in and around the water. We could do but mostly didn't. Mostly we looked at each other and told our life stories.

At least, I told stories I'd picked up in my travels, and he talked about life in the valley here. We hardly actually mentioned ourselves at all. They were stories about chance-met strangers and close neighbours, always other people, other lives; but they served well enough for self-portraits. *This is how I live, who I live among; the only person missing from this narrative is myself. See that gap I left, the absence in the story? That's where I fit, exactly.* Like portraits drawn in silhouette and shadow. We gave ourselves away with every word.

When his bottle was empty, I fetched one of my own: nothing like so classy, but he affected not to care. I pretended it was too dark to see the expression on his face as he tasted it, and not to notice that he only sipped his way through one glass while I not-so-gallantly drank the rest.

"If we leave the dishes out here on the roof," I said, "perhaps the rain will wash them for us. If it rains."

"It won't rain," he said.

"No, I suppose not. Still a good idea, though. Just in case. We can wash them in the morning."

And then I blinked, playing back my own voice to hear what I'd said. "I can wash them, I mean, *I* can..."

"I know what you meant."

His arm came round my shoulders and drew me close, his mouth quested for mine, and the next tourist boat that passed had a fine view in the wash of light from its windows: two young men tangled together, tongues and hands exploring where their minds had gone already, deep into each other...

Cheers, wolf whistles, applause. And we earned it all, I thought. Afterwards, I thought that. At the time I was barely thinking at all, barely holding on to anything remotely resembling thought.

Mostly, what I held on to was Matthieu.

This was my boat, my life, I was host here; I didn't stumble as I led him down to the cabin. I had too much dignity for that, and not enough wine aboard. There would be no stumbling. I was deliberately careful where I put my feet, to make sure of it.

Even so I clung to that willowy, graceful body, as we squeezed through narrow doorways to the bed. Every trip throws up an unexpected find, but he was more than that, almost a miracle. I was not letting him go, no. I wanted to be sure of him.

Just for tonight, obviously. Tomorrow I'd be moving on, leaving him behind; but tomorrow was nothing, a dream in the mind of a jealous god. Not here yet, that was the important thing, what mattered. Tomorrow wasn't here, and he was.

My boat was meant for two, for romantic couples stealing a week away. There was a double bed, but only just room for it. We both had to undress on the same side, constantly knocking elbows and getting in each other's way. It didn't matter; it never does, those first hectic nights together; every accidental collision was a giggle and an

excuse to tangle more purposefully, to murmur endearments as we kissed, as we toyed, as we tried to help each other out of those awkward, encumbering clothes...

Neither of us was actually wearing very much, but it seemed to take forever to be rid of what there was, to be skin on skin at last.

Honey to look at, salt on the tongue, and then a lingering aftertaste, a spicy eau de cologne laid down over the taste of him, the man himself: he was as complex as his wine. And that was only the skin of him, and only what my mouth could discover there.

Touch was something else, something more, a silky-smooth resilience with the firm shift of muscle beneath, like fish in water, like great whales rising in Vancouver Bay, like...

Like nothing, truly, except himself. Like his wine, there weren't the words to describe him.

My fingers found his cock, stiff already. For a moment, I was almost disappointed. I'd been looking forward to coaxing it into life, and he'd forestalled me.

Another moment, and I told myself not to be a fool. We had all night; there'd be time enough to start again. Again and again, with any luck. And meantime, I was hardly in any position to complain. My own greedy little tyrant was pushing at his thigh, questing on a mission of its own.

It could wait. Just.

I concentrated on his cock and tried to forget mine, just for now. You learn not to be selfish when you live alone; you have to do that, or your friends all fall away.

His was as slim and elegant as he was himself, a long contrast to my stout and stubborn thing. Even in our nakedness, it seemed we had nothing in common.

Except the desire to be there, of course, to be doing this. Neither one of us could hide that or deny it.

I bent down to kiss the baby-soft skin of his shaft, to enclose the head of it in my mouth, to feel it thrust over my tongue, as deep as I could take it.

Dimly, distantly, I heard him grunt; I felt him grip my shoulders and lift me away. I wanted to protest, I wanted to wrap my arms around his waist and hold on tight, unshiftable. I was still being good, though; I could still do that, just about. I looked up at him enquiringly; he murmured, "Not yet, or I'll come too soon."

It couldn't be too soon for me. I told him that, and then what I'd told myself a minute sooner, "We've got all night. We can hurry now and linger later."

He smiled then, with a sort of slow urgency that makes no sense unless you were there, unless you saw it: like saying his wine was honey-dry, the words work against each other, but the moment itself was absolute. Then his long hands folded over my head and pushed me gently down again. I engulfed his waiting, straining cock, and it hardly waited any time at all before it spasmed against the roof of my mouth and I was suddenly swallowing again, the thick, dense, salty cum of him, a whole new flavour of Matthieu.

Me, I came into his hand a minute later, as he ruthlessly milked me.

The boat rocked us gently in the lazy current, but there was no question of being rocked to sleep. It was hard to imagine sleeping at all, with him: why would I ever want to? Being awake with him was so much better; it offered so many rewards. And he was only a passing delight, necessarily. I didn't want to waste a moment. Dreams had their compensations, but this was reality that lay lively in the bed next to me. Why dream of heaven, when you could have joy in your arms?

The night was almost too warm to sleep anyway, even under a single sheet. Nevertheless I nestled close into his heat, skin on sticky skin, every square inch I could achieve. His head found a place to rest, heavy on my shoulder; I kissed his hair and felt

his responsive smile, heard it in his voice as he murmured, "There is nothing, absolutely nothing half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats."

"*Wind in the Willows*," I said. "Did you study that at the LSE?"

"My mother read it to me. She refused to read in French anymore, as soon as I was old enough to read for myself; so she switched to English. At first she had to explain half the words, but I was fluent soon enough. Long before I came to England. That was good, I found; it's so much easier to pick up English boyfriends." He stroked his fingers idly, wickedly down over my ribs. "You English are so arrogant, expecting us all to speak your clumsy, foolish language."

"Hey," I protested softly, "I can speak French."

"I know; I heard you. Brrr." He shuddered theatrically, all the length of him where it lay tucked close against all the length of me. I swallowed my laughter and struggled to sound wounded.

"You only let me say one word!"

"It was enough. Where did you find that accent? Not in your English school, I think. And not in Canada either. I know some Québécois: they sound strange, but not strange like that."

"Indo-China," I said, perhaps a little smugly, forgetting that this man wasn't impressed by distance; he was all about roots. "Laos, mostly. I spent a year there, teaching English; then I backpacked through Vietnam and Cambodia. That was how I got started with the writing. I met a man who worked for one of the travel guides and he offered me a commission, updating their entry on Vientiane. I was, what, twenty-three? I knew the city backwards by then: where was cheap to eat, where you could dance all night, where you shouldn't go on your own. Everything they needed, pretty much. The publisher liked my work and offered me more. Then I started meeting travel editors from the press, and..." A gesture in the darkness, *this is where it leads to*: a boat, a canal, a young man in my bed. As though the whole story of my life had conspired to bring me exactly here, this night and this place, him.

He said, "I'm twenty-four, and this valley is the only place I know that well."

"Yes, but the thing is, you don't care."

"I celebrate it," he said. "Why would I need to go away, when I can find everything I need right here?"

Then he started kissing those same ribs that his fingers had played upon, as though to say, *Whatever I don't have already, the canal will bring me, sooner or later.* As though he thought that it was his life, his story, that had brought the two of us together.

It was a lovely idea, our two separate stories conspiring together to make this night happen; but mine would take me away in the morning, where his would hold him here. All we had was this one night, two random strangers flung together in the grip of a mutual passion. So yes, of course we should celebrate it. What else was there?

He teased and tormented me with lips and teeth and fingers, until I was achingly stiff again and so was he. I reached to the bedside cabinet, which I'd stocked up with lube and condoms because I always did, even if it was more in hope than expectation. "Roll over, then..."

And he did: he rolled over and spread his legs in open invitation. I squeezed lube onto my fingers and slid them between his butt cheeks, feeling for his ring and pressing lightly at first—announcing myself politely, in case he hadn't noticed—and then more determinedly, until one finger and then another squeezed through.

Once they were in, of course, it would have been rude to pull them out again before I was ready otherwise; you can't take a man up on his invitation and then leave him in the lurch. Which left me with the tricky challenge of fitting a condom one-handed, while the other kept Matt interested.

Happily my teeth were free, for—carefully!—tearing the packet open. After that it was easy. Comparatively easy. When you've had the practice. When keeping him happy actually matters more than seeing to your own satisfaction, so that your one hand stays rhythmical and busy inside him while the other fusses around with protection and another squirt of lube before you can ease your fingers out because your

cock is dressed and ready to thrust in where it belongs to be, where he is hot and lifting ready for it, where the two of you together can suddenly find a rhythm that will take you both to somewhere new and private and utterly, urgently important.

We did doze, of course: eventually, inevitably, our bodies too weary to keep our minds awake. I remember stirring drowsily, every time he shifted; half waking, just far enough to recover where I was and whom I was with. Just his name was enough — *oh, yes... Matthieu* — before I slipped down again into the ultimate comforts of warmth and wonder.

I woke properly into the pale light of morning, when he tried to slip away and leave me sleeping.

No chance. I tangled my legs around his, to hold him still. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Where do *you* think I'm going?" came back on a chuckle. "Charlie, I need a pee."

I grunted. So did I, now he came to mention it. Reluctantly, I peeled myself away from him. Every movement was a loss this morning, a last time for everything: the last time we'd wake this way, the last time I'd allow him to go for a pee. That it was the first time too only added to the piquancy, the building sense of sorrow.

"Don't be long," I said. There must still be time for one more bout at least; it must be early out there; there was no weight of sunshine beating against the windows, only the night's residual heat still clinging to the bed.

"Actually," he said, "I thought I'd shower too, while I was there."

"Matt, no..." I knew what that meant; he wasn't planning to come back to bed.

"I must. I have meetings today, and I need to prepare. You be good, go back to sleep."

"Yeah, right. Like that's going to happen."

I must have sounded bitter, almost as bitter as I felt; I'm not good at being diplomatic, first thing. My friends would tell you I'm not good at being diplomatic any time of day, but that's just friends who never get to see me working. I can charm anyone, once I'm warmed up to it. Just, early mornings are not my best time, and disappointment is not my best mood.

Matthieu seemed to find even my grouchiness charming, but a long, sweet night together will do that when you're young, when you're new to each other, when you've been surprised by company and sudden passion.

He laughed and touched his lips to his fingers and his fingers to my lips. I tasted salt, which seemed appropriate. He said, "Lie still, then, and think what you want to do today, all on your own."

I already had my plans for the day. I had an itinerary all worked out. It wasn't kind of him to remind me. I scowled and said, "I could come in and wash your back for you...?"

"Charlie, there's hardly going to be room in that shower for me alone. Two of us would not fit into the bathroom, even."

It was true. I'd been clutching at straws to keep myself from clutching at him, from giving myself away altogether.

I lay still then and watched his lean nakedness disappear beyond the bedroom door. First time, last time. I was all in favour of one-night stands, brief flings, a kiss hullo and a kiss goodbye; it was the story of my life, the story I'd written myself, deliberately. I couldn't afford to get tied down.

Just, today it seemed such a waste.

I listened to him shower—first time, last time—and heard him knock his head, knock his elbow. Heard him curse. Grinned to myself despite my mood and almost giggled aloud when I heard it happen again, and yet again. Young men do not fit under

tour-boat showers; even graceful, elegant young men take time to learn that, apparently.

He came back in with his hair still dripping, patting a towel against his sore scalp, trying to blot up the water. I snorted, took the towel from him, and rubbed vigorously.

He yelped. I laughed and kissed the back of his neck.

"Revenge is sweet. That'll teach you to leave me before I'm ready. My turn for the bathroom; you get dressed, if you're serious about going."

He'd taken his own revenge in advance; I discovered that when I folded myself in under the shower and found that he'd used all the hot water.

I showered cold and briefly, then, and towelled vigorously in an empty bedroom; scrambled into the first clothes I could seize and tumbled up on deck, wondering if he might have left me already.

Found him leaning on the stern rail, watching a swan on the water with two cygnets in tow.

"In England," I said, "half the swans belong to the queen."

"Only half?"

"Yup. The rest belong to some old medieval guilds or something, I can't remember. They tag the young ones every year, swan upping it's called, to say who they belong to. It's a criminal offence to kill one."

"In France," he said, "I think they belong to themselves." And then, "It's good that you speak French, even if your accent is barbaric. Grandmère will like that."

"Grandmère?"

"Of course. Tonight" — sternly, scowling, touching his still-damp head again — "we will sleep up in the house, where the shower will not try to assassinate us in the morning. It will be polite if you come to dinner first, meet the family, and appal Grandmère with your so-strange accent."

And then he smiled, with all the triumph of a young man who has arranged another night with his new lover.

I groaned inside and had to steel myself against his disappointment as well as my own. "Matt, I can't. Truly. I have to be away today. I'm on a schedule."

"You said you had the boat for two weeks."

"Yes, that's true, but —"

"*Eh bien*. It only needs a week to boat the length of this canal. I know this. My uncle has a motor launch, and he used to let us take it for our reward when the harvest was in, my cousins and I. Four teenagers" — he grinned reminiscently — "and no adults; we had a riot. But however slow we went, we never managed to stay away as long as two weeks."

"No, but I need to explore the towns as well, where the canal passes through them; I have to find good restaurants, places to amuse the kids on a wet Thursday..."

"This is France," he said dogmatically. "Thursdays are always dry. It only rains in England, didn't you know? Say that, in your article. But I can show you everything you need to see." And he was suddenly serious again. "We can go in the car; it's much quicker. So you can have one week here with me, and we can sleep in the chateau and you can tell all your adventures to Grandmère; and there will still be time to go all down the canal and take your photos and write your article and return your boat at the far end like all the tourists do. And perhaps I will be free then to come with you, if you would like that."

If I would like that?

If I would *like* it...?

He had a knack, this boy, for stealing all my words.

I swallowed dryly, nodded mutely. He beamed.

"Good, then. All that remains is to decide what you will do today, while I am busy, before you get nicely showered and shaved" — he stroked a light hand over the

three days' worth of stubble on my cheek, shaking his head scoldingly – "before you come up to the house for dinner."

"Oh," I said, "that's easy. Does your Grandmère like trout, at all?"

That evening I locked the boat up and made my way along the towpath with a bag that bulged with the results of a long day's fishing. Matt had given me the skimpiest instructions, how to find the chateau: I was to look for a gate in an old stone wall and follow the path behind it. That was all. "If you get lost, ask anyone," he said, "but you can't get lost."

In England, such a gate would have bristled with unfriendly notices – PRIVATE, NO ENTRY, KEEP OUT – in several languages. Here there was nothing, only peeling whitewash and a blank face.

That didn't stop me feeling foolishly nervous as I tested it gently, found it unlocked, slipped through. It's never easy, meeting the family of a man you mean to sleep with. Under their roof, yet. Especially when you only met him the night before and everything seems to be happening in a hurry, at his urgency. Left to myself, I'd go slow, as slow as a boat on a canal: but left to myself, of course, I'd have nowhere to go except away from him and adieu.

I comforted myself with the thought that at least it wasn't his parents I had to meet tonight. An aunt and uncle might be easier. Perhaps. Though he was clearly an adopted son, and a much-loved one, in all but name. And then there was Grandmère...

Behind the gate was a path, as promised, winding its way upslope between regimented rows of vines. Fruit hung ripe among the leaves, almost ready for harvest; heavy, dark bunches, almost black in the shadows. I picked a single grape out of curiosity and burst it with my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

And made a face and nearly spat it out again: there was sweetness, yes, but it was sour too, with a long, mouth-puckering aftertaste. Not meant for eating, not at all.

Well, everything's material, when you're a writer. And when you're a lover, perhaps, too. I walked on, wondering how I could use this in the article and how I could tell Matthieu, reaching for the perfect phrase that would make him smile and my readers too.

I came all the way to the crest of the valley's rise with no sign of any chateau, only the endless vines basking in the eternal sun. By the time I reached the top I was anxious and fretful. Had I found the wrong gate, come by the wrong path? And why hadn't Matt come down to fetch me, was that really so much to ask, after he'd left me alone all day? But I had no need to worry. The path took me over the brow, and there suddenly was the house, nesting in a hollow below me, in the welcome shade.

Chateau was a courtesy title, perhaps. It was a big house, a country house we'd call it in England, but not a grand house all the same. No turrets, no glamour. A working house for sure, with tractors in the stable yard.

Horses in the stables too; I knew that before I got there, before I saw inquisitive heads poke out over half doors to examine me. That path took me straight past the muck heap.

I might never have lived on this scale, but I knew how this kind of house would work. I didn't even think of going around to find the front door.

Across the cobbles and in at the back, through the kitchen, that was my route. Two stone steps led me up into a cool corridor, sculleries and stillrooms; I called out, "Hullo?" and walked on towards the sound of chopping.

"Ah! Charles, *oui*?"

An elderly woman stood at a long deal table, scooping cut vegetables into a pot that might have been older than she was.

I smiled and confessed my name, in my fluent, foreign French that had so scandalised Matt. She held out a bony hand and introduced herself as Bettine. Such a

house should surely have such a housekeeper, I thought: all her life on the estate, no doubt, and tough as a vine root, still all day on her feet on these stone flag floors...

I took the fish to the ancient sink in the corner of the kitchen and offered to clean them for her. She nodded her gratitude and handed me a knife. The handle really was a vine root, I thought, gnarled and twisted and iron-hard. The blade was hollow with long years of sharpening, sharp enough to nick me the moment that I tested it.

Bettine rolled her eyes and snorted softly at the idiocy of young men. I sucked my thumb and said nothing, got to work gutting and scaling the fish.

I might have been in there forty minutes, sipping a glass of Pineau des Charentes and telling Bettine about the Far East, the beauty and the strangeness of it, landscapes and cities and people all together.

Then, in burst Matthieu, all in a hurry, in a silk suit with his shirt untucked. He saw me and startled delightfully, and recovered quickly, of course. He matched my smile with his own, said, "Oh, you're here already! Good, I don't need to come out searching for you." He kissed me casually, slid his wicked tongue across my teeth, and said, "You've been drinking. Grandmère, how come you've given him a drink and not me?"

"He's been helping," she said equably, "not fussing about like a mad thing, changing his clothes three times in an hour and asking us all what we think. Put your shirt straight and take a tray of glasses up to the library. You can take Charles too, when he's washed his hands."

Grandmère. Of course. For an allegedly bright young man, I could be really slow sometimes.

I was still right, I thought, that such a house would demand a housekeeper, and she was perfect for the task. It only made her more perfect still, if the housekeeper was the matriarch also. Grandpère was dead, and it would make no difference to her

whether the house was technically hers now or her son's. She had possession, authority, command.

Commanded, Matthieu and I were both meekly obedient until we were out of her domain, out from under her eagle eye. Then he stopped me in a corridor, set his tray down on a table that was certainly older than my parents' house and probably worth rather more, drew me close, and kissed me again, kissed me properly, a kiss that was all about the two of us rather than laying down a challenge to a domineering old lady.

Then he set me at arm's length, looked me up and down, and said, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being brave, for being here."

"She's not that scary. Nor's the house."

"Liar. Two times liar. She is terrifying, and so is all of this. I've seen grown men turn pale and run away. Before dinner, sometimes."

"I won't run away," I said, smiling.

"No," he said, "I don't think you will, will you? But thank you for this too." He slid a finger down my lapel. "For dressing nicely on a hot night. Grandmère will appreciate this."

I shrugged. "It's no trouble. I always bring one good suit, because you never know where you might find yourself, and it always seems a shame to go home without wearing it at least once. Besides, it's just good manners to dress for dinner. It'd be disrespectful to turn up in sandals and a T-shirt."

"Yes. That's what I said. Thank you, for the respect."

My turn to kiss him then, to slip my hand inside his jacket and slide my palm over the soft silk of his shirt, to whisper, "I may be disrespectful later. To her favourite grandson."

"That would be my cousin Paul," he said, blatantly dishonest. "I might get upset, if you were...disrespectful...with Paul. And he would be startled out of his skin."

And then his hand slipped between my legs to cup my balls in a manner that was highly disrespectful, not to say suggestive; and if it didn't actually startle me out of my skin, it did leave me doubly glad that my suit was loosely cut, not to be giving myself away at a glance.

It may have been quite a few minutes later that two decorous young men made their way to the chateau library, where the rest of the family had assembled.

As decorous as we could manage, at any rate. We may still have been a little breathless, a little ruffled. We did our best, and I don't think anyone noticed. Grandmère would have known at once, but she was still down in the kitchens.

"Charlie, this is my Uncle Maurice...Aunt Hélène...Cousin Paul..." With a wicked laughing glance at me, a demure lift of the eyebrow, "Cousin Henri." The cousins were our own age, more or less; their parents were the epitome of French sophistication, elegantly grey and slender, classically dressed. "Where's Juliette?"

"She's late, of course," his uncle said, long-suffering. "What did you expect? Charlie, welcome to my house. Has Matthieu shown you around at all?"

When I denied it, he took me to the tall windows so that I could at least see the grounds in the last of the light. Formal gardens, woodland, farms beyond; he said, "Feel free to come and go as you will, explore where you like; nothing is private here from Matthieu's friends."

"That's very kind."

Matt's hand closed on the back of my neck; his voice murmured, "He's only saying that because he knows I won't be letting you out of my sight."

"Not at all," his uncle said. "I'm saying that because I know I can trust your judgement. These days. It wasn't always so, Charlie. Hélène, do you remember...?"

And then they were off, vying with each other for the worst stories from poor Matt's adolescence, competing to see who could embarrass him more. He might have

died, I thought, from excessive blushing, except that their own children were in the room and half the stories included them too. Paul and Henri came in for their share of humiliation, which took at least some of the heat off Matt.

I was drinking it all in, of course, storing it up for later. And then the door burst open and a girl tumbled in, all hair and hurry, gabbling apologies in rapid French: she was so sorry to be late, she'd been down the valley with her girlfriends and they none of them had realised the time; Marianne had this new colt they'd simply had to see, he was utterly adorable, and was Matthieu's friend really as gorgeous as all that and...ah...?

I stepped out of the bay window, where she hadn't quite thought to look for me, and smiled into her blushing silence. "I think you must be Juliette?"

She nodded, redundantly. Of course she was Juliette, the youngster, the spoiled daughter. Late teens and suitably embarrassed, but recovering quickly: even now she was looking me up and down, making up her own mind about my gorgeousness, laughing at her own gaucherie, shaking my hand as she started to tell me about the colt.

"In English, please, Juliette. Out of respect to our guest."

That sharp instruction came from behind her, from Grandmère.

"Oh, but Charlie speaks excellent French. Matthieu told us that —"

"Nevertheless." The old woman knew it; she and I had used French in the kitchen, but nevertheless. She had her own ideas of what was proper when, and she, at least, was not going to bow to her granddaughter's whims.

Juliette sighed and yielded to the inevitable, knowing an iron resolution when she met it, as she clearly did on a daily basis. Grandmère told us all to come down for dinner; Juliette claimed me immediately, sliding her arm through mine as she slipped into an easy English. Matthieu shrugged at me ruefully behind her head, *no point resisting the inevitable*, and fell into conversation with his male cousins.

"So, how much has he told you," she asked sweetly, "about his other boyfriends?"

"Nowhere near enough."

More tales to embarrass Matt, then, if he could have overheard her confidential murmur: more intimate tales, a teenage girl watching her beloved cousin discover himself. Nothing coarse, though, and nothing cruel. If she knew things that would actually disgrace him, she wasn't telling.

Even before we reached the dining room, I'd decided that I liked this girl. She was indulged, perhaps, but not ruined; and she had that same charm that oozed out of Matthieu, that goes with confidence, that often goes with money.

I felt utterly out of place among this family, and utterly welcome. I was suddenly loving it.

Grandmère might have charge of the cooking, but she recruited the younger generation to fetch and carry from the kitchen. Juliette sat me down, next to what was obviously her place, and went to do her part, indignantly refusing my own offer to help. Matthieu was excused tonight, because he had a guest, but was stranded on the other side of the table, next to his aunt, out of my reach; we couldn't even play footsie.

Lamenting cheerfully, I turned to his uncle for conversation and found him taking a bottle from an ice bucket. Unlabelled bottle, golden wine: I'd identified it with a degree of confidence even before he poured and passed me a glass, before I'd inhaled that already-familiar floral scent.

"This is Matt's wine, isn't it? The one he made himself?"

"Ah, you've encountered it already. Of course you have; he's very proud."

"With reason," I said, knowing that my words would reach him even if my foot couldn't. "It's very good."

"We think so, certainly. We have a hundred cases ready for market, and I'll be delighted to put the chateau's label on them. All it lacks now is a name."

"A name?"

"It's...very distinctive. Very different, from the wines that we are known for. The chateau label, certainly, but not our name; it needs its own, to distinguish it."

"It's about deniability, Charlie," Matt called up the table.

"It is not," his uncle riposted. "It's about giving credit where it's due. Matthieu must choose a name, so that people will know this is his wine and not ours. The start of his reputation. It will be a privilege to bring his first wine to market, but we must have the right name for it."

"Matthieu says you are a writer, Charlie?" That was his aunt.

"Only a journalist," I demurred.

"Nevertheless. You work with words, which we do not. Perhaps you will have an idea, a suggestion? Especially as it will be a wine for export mostly, not intended for our home market, so a name in English would be perfect."

I thought it would be perfect if I could indeed produce the ideal name, there and then; so of course my brain dried altogether, and I had nothing at all to offer.

I was relieved by the arrival of fresh troops: a long parade of dishes and their bearers. A sideboard that I would have taken as original to the chateau turned out to conceal professional-quality dish warmers, so Grandmère could abandon the kitchen and everything could come through at once, soup and fish and an old-fashioned savoury in lieu of a dessert.

The soup was chestnut, creamy and sweet, the nuts of course from their own farm again. Matthieu made a point of telling me that, calling it down the table. Juliette looked a little blank, wondering why it needed saying. I said, "In England, chestnuts come from the greengrocer in little string bags, or else peeled and vacuum-packed from the supermarket. We sort of forget that other people are lucky enough to grow their own and harvest them fresh. Almonds too, and olives. It's a different world."

In many ways it was a different world, but it was apparently the only world that Juliette knew, and one she took for granted. Her baffled little shrug said so. Then her face brightened hopefully. "Do you ride?"

"Of course. It's the best way to see a country."

"Excellent! We will ride around the estate tomorrow, and I will show you the chestnut trees and the almonds and the olives and all the rest. Matthieu will be busy anyway, being serious about the harvest and his wine—I said he should call it First Communion, because it is his first and it is white like the little dresses, but no one listens to me—so you won't see him and you will need a way to amuse yourself all day, so we can amuse ourselves together."

Like Matt, she just assumed that I was staying, that I could stay, that I would want to stay, that I was welcome. My cautious soul reached instantly for arguments against, all the many reasons why I shouldn't. But all those arguments crumbled in the face of her assumptions when I worked my way back through them in reverse order. I was, all too obviously, welcome here. His family was as charming as Matt himself, and as irresistible; I really did want to stay. I could certainly afford a few days at the chateau, especially if they were willing to take me up and down the valley by car or on horseback, both, so that I could gather the photos and the background, the local knowledge that I needed...

So, yes, apparently I was staying.

Juliette was full of plans for tomorrow: how far we should ride in the morning, where we would stop to rest the horses and find some lunch, who she might phone to meet up with us, because I was sure to like her friends. There was nothing I needed to contribute, so I pretty much stopped listening.

For a while I just watched Matt as he ate, as he neatly detached and discarded the skeleton of his trout, as he talked to his aunt and his male cousins. Every few mouthfuls, every few sentences, he would glance my way, just to be sure of me. Like many quiet men, he had a way of saying a lot with very little: the flick of an eye, the quirk of a smile; they were whole conversations, private and delightful.

Soon enough I realised that the old woman was paying me as much attention as I did her grandson. That degree of scrutiny was impossible to overlook, dangerous to ignore; I turned to her with a question about how she had cooked the fish—that aniseed

flavour, was it fennel in the sauce or a splash of Pernod? – and danced attendance on her for the rest of the meal, cheerfully ingratiating myself with the *éminence grise*. She wasn't fooled for a moment; she knew exactly what I was doing and why, and accepted it entirely as her due. We understood each other exactly, and I think liked each other very much right from that first evening.

At last – after the fish had been replaced with angels and devils on horseback and other savoury treats wrapped in bacon that I didn't know the old names for, smoked mussels and chicken livers and such, when those were gone too and there was nothing left to pick at but a cheeseboard and a heaped bowl of fruit – Matthieu pushed back his chair and came boldly down to our end of the table.

"Grandmère," he said, kissing her on both cheeks, "I am going to take Charlie away from you. You may have him again in the morning."

"No, she can't," said Juliette. "I want him tomorrow."

"Yes, I gathered that, but you never get out of bed before midday."

She pulled a face at him. He laughed and kissed her too. Then it was my turn to say goodnight. The women clearly expected the same salute; indeed, Juliette twined her arms around my neck to make certain of it. The men settled for a handshake each and a promise to talk more tomorrow, if the females of the family could be persuaded not to monopolise me further.

It was a slow business, making our escape: slow and blushworthy, given that everyone around that table knew exactly why we were peeling ourselves away so early, what we had in mind to do. What I was here for, I supposed...

At last we made it out into the corridor, and Matt closed the dining room door at our backs.

I sighed dramatically and sagged against the wall. "Phew. Thank God that's over!"

He snorted at me. "You enjoyed every little minute of it."

"Well, I did." But I enjoyed this more, the way his arm slipped around my waist, the way his shoulder was right there for me to lean my head against, his eyes to smile into from this close, this dangerously close, where I needed to move only a little inch to find his lips with my own.

"Can you wait till I get you to my room?"

"Dunno. Can we hurry?"

Hurry we did, then: stairs and passageways, a maze that would have lost me in a minute without him to cling to, his neck to nuzzle at, his firm hand on the small of my back.

Then one more high-panelled door, and here we were at last in his room, his little suite of rooms, almost an apartment of his own: bedroom and dressing room and bathroom all connected, private and apart.

We shed clothes on the bedroom floor, tumbled haphazardly onto the broad old bed where generations must have slept before him, tangled arms and legs in an awkward wrestling urgency, belly to belly and cock to cock. There was no time for anything clever or subtle or new, no time to introduce each other to new positions or favourite tricks. Just his body and mine, in an age-old conversation: sweating skin and working bodies, mouths that met and melded, tongues that touched and tasted, hands that gripped, and hips that thrust until we both came together in a rough and mutual eruption of need and desire and impatience.

Then we just lay there for a while, recovering, not moving a muscle. I, for one, was a little bewildered: where had it come from, this sudden infatuation, this reckless yearning? I didn't do this; my sex life was careful and organised and occasional. I didn't get overtaken by sudden passions; it wasn't my way.

I stared at the ornamented ceiling and felt him try to slip away, and my arm tightened to prevent him.

I heard his laugh, felt his lips brush my shaven cheek. "Wait here," he said, as though I might dream of leaving if he left me. "I'll only be a minute."

I lay still and heard the sounds of water, of spitting. He came back almost within the promised minute, with a soft towel which he used to wipe me carefully clean. Then he lay down again beside me and kissed me slowly.

"You cleaned your teeth," I grumbled, tasting spearmint. "That's cheating."

"There's a new toothbrush in there, ready for you."

"It can wait till morning. Do you take this good care of all your boyfriends?"

"Of course," he said easily; and then, "Actually, there have not been so many who I would want to introduce to Grandmère."

I burned to say, *So what makes me different, then?* But that way lay traps and temptations, a conversation I didn't want to have. I despise fishing for compliments; it's an open door to dishonesty on both sides, and sometimes truth is just better left unsaid. Often and often, questions are better left unasked.

I thought he was just as glad as I was to find a distraction, some way not to go there. It wasn't only a towel that he'd brought in from the bathroom. He laid out other bounty on my belly, carefully: various condoms, ribbed and flavoured and exotically shaped; a jar of cocoa butter; a jar of perfumed oil. A bottle and two glasses, refreshment as and when needed.

"When you're ready," he murmured, dropping kisses between each of them, lightly onto my skin. "There really isn't any hurry."

"Oh, and what is it exactly that makes you think I might not be ready right now?"

"Well, this." And his mouth went exploring farther down, finding my cock and lapping at it. "This might not... Oh. Ah. Well, then..."

Shutters closed out the night, or else they closed us in. Even my thoughts had nowhere else to go, no hint of wanderlust. There was just him and me and the long,

slow hours, all the space there is in darkness, all of space and time together folded down into two hot, weary, insatiable bodies.

Eventually, reluctantly, there was sleep of a sort, though I was still totally aware of his presence even in my thin and broken dreaming. I knew it when he moved, I knew it when he woke; I felt his arms come round me and knew that I didn't need to wake myself, not yet.

So I drowsed on in his arms, comforted and content, until he moved more purposefully. Until he deliberately set out to wake me with lips and fingers, with liberties.

"That's nice," I murmured. "Don't stop..."

"Well, I won't, then. But we do need to be getting up soon. At least, I do."

"And I promised Grandmère a chance to interrogate me, before your wicked little cousin takes me riding."

"You did. But nobody would say anything if you wanted to stay in bed. All day if you wanted to, until I'm free..."

"They wouldn't say anything, no, but they'd think things." True things, mostly: that he and I had fucked each other stupid all night long, and that I was hiding in here, afraid to face the family.

I would have loved to hide. Matthieu had books and music, a refrigerator stuffed with snacks; I could have lived in there for a week and never needed to venture past the door. And plain daylight was intimidating, in a way that lamplight and evening air were not. His family was a daunting prospect that morning.

But I am nothing if not stubborn, and I'd travelled the world on my own, with nowhere to hide and no one, nothing to fall back on when I hit trouble. Why would I let myself be daunted by one civilised and pleasant family who had already welcomed me into their home?

Because their good opinion mattered to me, suddenly and crucially and quite beyond all reason: but chasing down the real reason was a part of that conversation that I really didn't want to have, even with myself.

So no, no hiding. I would rise up and face the curious and demanding old lady, and then the curious and demanding kid. I would do my best to satisfy them both and do my own work too; and...

"What time is it, anyway?" No sunlight came in through the shutters, and there was nothing in this room so inelegant as an alarm clock.

"Early," he said reassuringly.

"We don't need to be getting up just yet, then?"

"No, not yet."

"Oh, good." I snuggled into his shoulder. "So why did you wake me?"

"Because we don't need to be getting up just yet."

We couldn't quite remember, or at least we couldn't agree, whose turn it was for a condom, so we took one each. And then of course we tried to find a way that we could justify them both at once. That was...rumbustious. And not altogether successful. And more athletic than I was used to, and noisier, what with all the laughter and the sudden yelps and eventually the falling out of bed together; and what with one thing and another it was probably just as well that he did have the privacy of these rooms, at a distance from the rest of the family.

Just as well that he fell first too. He gave me a softer landing. And clung on to me, still laughing, and then rolled me over, rolled us both over on the floor there, and pinned me down by force of personality while I felt his fingers introduce themselves to my ass. By then, I was more than ready. I might even have groaned aloud, half pleasure and half relief. Oh, and half impatience, that too.

His fingers tickled my sphincter and then pressed in, pressed through. And lingered, working at it, until suddenly his cock was there instead – broader, blunter, less subtle, and more demanding – and they withdrew.

He pushed himself inside me, deeper and deeper with every thrust. I caught his rhythm and pushed back, to draw him deeper yet. That won a gasp from both of us, together. And then...well, did he come first, or did I? Don't ask me; I couldn't tell. It was as near as made no difference, a triumphant, yelling climax.

And when we were quiet at last, there were sounds of life to be heard from the stable yard below his windows, car motors and car doors, vineyard staff, and secretaries turning up for work.

Time to stop playing, then. Time to tackle that bathroom of his, easily big enough for two to share. We cleaned our teeth companionably together, and then he said, "Would you rather take the bath" – a huge, ancient, claw-footed, cast-iron beauty – "or the shower?" That was ultramodern, with a space-age console to control it.

"Can we try both?" I asked, grinning frothily at him.

So we did that, shower first. He took charge of the controls, surprising me with sudden jets from unexpected directions; then we settled into the bath together for a long, sensuous soak in water like hot, perfumed, oiled silk.

I leaned back against his chest, felt his arms settle around me, and murmured, "You know, I could get used to this."

"Do," he suggested gently, into my ear.

Which was almost that whole conversation I'd been avoiding so assiduously. I felt myself tense internally and thought I'd managed to hide it, but I guess not, or not too successfully. After a minute he eased me gently away from him and said, "We really should get dressed now. Take any of my clothes you like; anything that fits me will fit you too."

Was there even a secret message in that; was he really saying, *We're a perfect fit?*

Or was I just being hypersensitive, neurotically anxious? I couldn't tell. We dried and dressed in silence, more or less; neither of us was really interested in discussing how soft and huge his towels were, and besides I was sorry again the moment that I raised it, one more reminder of how different his life was from mine, and how attractive.

Confused and disturbed, I followed him downstairs to coffee and croissants in the kitchen. Coffee and croissants and Grandmère, who knew it all, I think: the long night of indulgence and the awkwardness this morning; those black eyes of hers missed nothing and commented on nothing.

Instead she said, "The infant is up already, *incroyable*; she is in the stables, choosing you a mount, Charles. If you don't go soon to interrupt her, she will put you on whatever pleases her whimsy this morning, a great fat cow of a mare or the sharpest, most wicked little stallion we have."

Bless her, she was sparing me the third degree—for now—and letting me run away from both of them together, the old lady and her seductive grandson. I almost did run, still swallowing coffee from one hand and snatching an extra croissant with the other. If Matthieu called anything after me, I didn't hear it.

Perhaps a day's separation would mend fences for us. I could hope, at least. I hated being awkward with him, but...

It was impossible, at least, to be awkward with Juliette. She greeted me with a beaming smile and more kisses. "Come, see, I have chosen you such a horse! He is Papa's truly, but Papa will not mind; he hardly finds the time to ride with me these days. Nor does Matthieu, now he is grown to be such a serious winemaker," she said with a little scowl that was only half pretence. She legitimately loved her cousin, I thought, and wanted his company and couldn't have as much as she was used to. I was his substitute for the day: the unexpected boyfriend, the interesting stranger. Of course she would put me on the horse he used to ride.

The horse he used to ride was called Dodo, apparently. At least, that's what she called him. No doubt there was a breeding record in the stable archive which would give him a rather more dignified name. He was a tall bay gelding with a proud arch to his neck and an inquisitive glint in his eye: friendly enough, and not exactly promising trouble, but even so I did open my mouth to say that the last horse I rode had been a little Argentinian pampas pony too shy for polo, and did she perhaps have anything, um, a little *smaller*?

Then I saw the glint in her own eye, in the shadows of the stable there, and I knew I was being tested. So I closed my mouth again, swallowed dryly, and reached for the bridle on the wall.

Juliette's own horse was a mirror match for herself: a spoiled little beauty named Mariette, a dainty grey princess with lovely manners and an outrageous ego, totally selfish and totally charming.

Once Dodo and I had come to an agreement—basically, he agreed to carry me around for the day, so long as I sat quiet and let him drive—I settled down to enjoy myself. If I couldn't have Matt, then Juliette made the perfect companion: light and easy and not quite as superficial as she liked to pretend, curious and demanding but easily diverted. And wonderfully informative. She knew the estate intimately, of course, and everyone who worked on it; even better—when I set my writerly self aside, when I stopped working—she knew Matthieu intimately also and was entirely happy to betray all the secrets of his early years.

Sometimes a day just melts away, time lost and indistinct. Maybe it's a wet Sunday where you lie late in bed and never put a foot out of doors, where the day's consumed in food and wine and sex, a drift from bed to the kitchen to the couch and back to bed again, and it's dark again before you can believe it.

That day was all heat and light; we lived it in the sunshine and never went indoors. The horses were as idle as we were, utterly unhurried; they ambled through

hot, dusty farmyards and the welcome shade of chestnut trees, along the canal for a while and then up to the ridge again, to what might have been a cattle barn once but was a little restaurant now. There was pasture behind, where we could hang the horses' saddles on the fence and watch them kick their heels and canter for a minute, whicker at each other and then go off down to the stream for a drink and a doze, a good scratch against a tree trunk.

There were tables on our side of the fence, where we could sit over a bowl of olives, bread and olive oil, and a cool bottle of white—local but not their own, Juliette said, nothing like as good as Matt's, but welcome nonetheless—and take our time with the menu, agreeing to try a little plate of this and a plate of that, share everything, gossip included. And if she ordered more food than seemed reasonable for two people, perhaps she was only anxious to be sure I wouldn't go hungry; but in fact I wasn't at all surprised when there was a clatter and a call behind me and here came a boy on a bicycle, swooping around the barn to join us.

Hot and breathless, he kissed Juliette with a careful formality under the stranger's gaze. That made me grin privately, seeing how he took firm possession of her hand, how she leaned a little into his shoulder as she turned to me.

"Charlie, this is Lucien; we call him Luc. His English is...difficult, so would you mind...?"

I didn't mind in the least. I was glad to let my French out for a run again. Luc puzzled a little over the accent, as they all did, but he soon got the hang of it; Juliette cocked an eyebrow at me and said, "You've been listening to Matthieu."

"Well, yes—he does speak to me occasionally. When you're not there to monopolise me."

She made a rude gesture and said, "I can hear it; you're starting to collect his intonation. Just a little, here and there. Stay awhile longer, and we'll have you speaking well enough to satisfy Grandmère. Which you will need to do, if you want to keep with

Matthieu. She says your colonial accent—that's what she calls it, colonial—is the only thing she disapproves about you."

"You've been talking about me, have you?"

"Of course," she replied with that little shrug that she might have borrowed from her cousin, except that he couldn't conceivably manage a whole day without it. I doubted he could manage a whole conversation.

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, Juliette—you and Grandmère both—but I can't stay long. Even for the chance to improve the way I talk."

She looked at me thoughtfully for a moment. All teasing slipped away; then she said, "Matthieu is the one who will be disappointed."

"I know. I do know. But..." My turn to shrug, in a crude Anglo-Saxon imitation of their elegance. I didn't do long-term relationships, not if they meant I'd have to stop moving. I thought Matt knew that. I was desperately hoping I wouldn't need to spell it out for him; I thought it was inherent. And I certainly wasn't going to explain it to a teenager. A couple of teenagers, who were holding hands beneath the table and entirely baffled by me, no hope of bringing them to understand.

So we talked about them instead. I forced them to it and was intrigued to discover that Luc was not one of her idle rich pals. I suppose the bike might have told me that; a playboy would have turned up in the car that Daddy bought him.

Luc was as local as the wine we were drinking, the postmaster's son from the village at the head of the valley. He and Juliette had grown up together; apparently he was the childhood sweetheart that she refused to let go. I liked that in her, almost more than anything else, and I'd already found a lot to like.

I liked the boy too. He could only stay long enough to fill up on bread and omelette and cheese, as much as he could eat one-handed while he talked. He was off to college in the autumn, saving money for it by working all summer in the vineyard. As Matt had before him, as apparently every teenager did. Except Juliette, clearly. She kissed him scrupulously and let him go, watched till he was out of sight, then turned

back to me and suggested that if we rode on a way, there was a long view of the canal that I might like to photograph before we headed home.

"No college for you, Juliette?"

She shrugged. "I am not...academic. Like Paul"—her elder brother, one of the cousins I hadn't really talked to yet. "These others can go off and get their degrees. Matthieu came back; so will Luc. I'm not sure about Henri"—the other brother: long hair and leather jacket, the one who'd looked out of place at dinner last night. "I think he will go away and make another life in the city, with his guitar and his artist friends and his impossible vegetarian girlfriend. But Paul and me, we will just stay here while the others come and go. Matthieu and Luc can learn all the science of the vineyard and how to run a business and all that; we will keep the heart of it alive, the house and the family in our proper place. Paul will marry soon—probably Christianne, I think, though I'm not sure if he knows that yet—and then, when it is decent, I will marry Luc."

"Will you? You're sure about that?"

"Oh, yes," she said, cheerfully determined.

"Does he know?"

"Yes, indeed. I have explained it," she said with a firm nod, not a doubt in the world.

I thought I envied Luc, a little, unless I pitied him. Both, perhaps. Such certainty, so young.

Perhaps in reaction to that—perhaps just to stress that I was equally certain of my own place in the world, which was alas not here—I was all professional again after lunch, hunting down the photographs I needed, taking notes as we rode. Where else was good to eat; where people could buy wine and olive oil directly from the producers, with perhaps a tour or a tasting on the side; where they could find rooms for a night or a few nights or a week.

Juliette was the perfect source of information, except that she did keep wanting to take me to those places she recommended, so that I could try the rillettes or the goats' cheese or the cassoulet. I kept having to remind her that I really wasn't staying long enough, couldn't afford to stay, had to move on in just a day or two. And Matt had promised to free himself up after today, so she should probably just write out a list for him and we'd see how many we could fit in, but there were only so many lunches even two hungry young men could eat in a day.

She pulled a face at me and turned her pretty Mariette onto a path too narrow for two to ride abreast, so that I had to tail her all the way home. If it had been cooler, I had the impression that she might have cantered off and left me to find my own way back. She wouldn't do that to a horse in this heat, so she just presented me with her sulky back view instead.

I redeemed myself at the stables, at least a little, by insisting on seeing to Dodo myself, curry and groom and hay net, water and fresh straw in his stall. When I fetched out his tack and asked for the saddle soap, she laughed and shook her head. "Jean-Marie will see to that. Come."

"Um, I should shower, change my clothes..." *Look for Matthieu*, but I didn't need to say so.

She frowned and seized my hand. "Come."

I didn't want to fall out with her any more than I already had, by my stubborn refusal to be another in her collection of young men who were not allowed to leave. So I went with her, hot and grubby as I was, and she led me around the side of the house, through a walled kitchen garden, to an open stretch of lawn overlooked by another wing of the house, with a swimming pool on the terrace between the two.

I blinked; I may have gaped a little. I may possibly have groaned in anticipation. "I didn't know you had a pool!"

"But yes," she said, all shrug and smile, entirely gratified by my response. "It would be a pity not to, don't you think? If you go in there" – with a little push towards an outhouse on this side – "you will find trunks and towels and such. That's the boys' cabin. There is always spare for guests. Go, go. And don't worry," she added with a wicked little grin, another shove, "Matthieu will find you when he is free. He will know exactly where to come."

The family might gather politely in the library before dinner, but I was remembering now that both boy cousins had had wet hair last night. This, I was guessing, was where the younger generation gathered first.

There was more to be found in that outhouse than trunks and towels. There were robes and rubber sandals that I decided I didn't need; there was a fridge, and an array of bottles that I thought I should probably not investigate, at least not until I was invited; there was a shower at the far end, with a choice of shampoos and liquid soaps and more.

I stripped off happily and took a quick shower, just to get the smell of horse off me before I carried it into their pool. Then I picked out a pair of black trunks that were decent if not exactly modest, padded barefoot out onto the suddenly shocking heat of the stone terrace, and dived blissfully into the still, cool water.

I guess Juliette took a shower too, in the annex that she no doubt called the girls' cabin. At any rate, I had time to practice my vigorous crawl and get used to the pool's length before she came out to join me in a one-piece that was anything but modest, so cutaway it was practically a bikini.

I rolled over, switching to an unhurried backstroke. She applauded briefly – as though she had learned from her cousin to enjoy watching a thing done well – and then ran the few short paces to the pool's edge and took a long, low dive with her hair streaming out behind her.

She caught up with me quickly, paced me to the end of the pool, executed a quick tumbling turn, and began to pull ahead.

After a bit she glanced back, and I understood that we were racing.

So much for doing something well. I was a strong swimmer — or at least I'd always thought I was — but she outpaced me every which way, backstroke and breaststroke and crawl.

I was gasping for breath and about ready to cry surrender, when blessedly I didn't need to. Here came her brothers leaping in to join us, too many bodies in the pool suddenly and the newcomers loud and brash, cheerfully intent on drowning their kicking, laughing sister.

I leaned on my elbows on the side and watched them fooling, while I got my breath back; and then there was a tap on the top of my wet head, and I looked up to find Matt crouching down with a glass in his hand, offering it to me.

A champagne cocktail, bright with fizz and chill, sharp with brandy. I could have drained it at a gulp. Instead I sipped decorously, smiled at him, lifted my face up into his kiss.

"Are you coming in to join us?"

"Of course." He went off to get changed; I gave him a minute — just long enough, I thought, to get undressed — and followed him into the cabin.

Found him under the shower, as I'd expected. Left my glass on a handy shelf and stepped under the warm spray to join him.

"Hullo," he said, a little startled, almost the first time I'd managed to startle him.

"Hullo, yourself," I said, running my tongue down over his breastbone, dropping to my knees and kissing his flat belly, working my way farther down...

"No, wait, Charlie..."

He was half laughing, half appalled, turning back and forth between me and the door.

His cock betrayed him, stiffening as I nuzzled at it. I grinned up at him and said, "The boys have only just got here. They won't be getting out of the water for a while, and who else is there? Your uncle won't come and swim with the kids."

"No, but..."

"Don't worry," I said, "I'll be quick. I've been waiting for this all day."

So had he, I was sure. Again his body gave him away while his mind was still anxious, his attention still divided between me and the sounds of splashing, voices, shrieks.

I wasn't having that. When I give a man a blowjob, I do expect his full concentration. I think that's the least that I can ask.

I let him feel my teeth, then: nothing drastic, not even a nip; I just closed them very gently about his shaft and slid the tips across that tender skin. Just to let him know.

That brought his mind back to me, with a commendable swiftness. His hands closed around my wet head, and I think he might have pushed me away, pure instinct cutting in, if I didn't still have his cock's elegant head in my mouth, in my grip.

I grinned up at him loosely and let my tongue slowly circle his tip. I saw his throat work as he swallowed, felt the shudder that ran all through him, dropped my eyes and my own attention back to the task in hand.

In my mouth, but we really didn't have time to linger, and I had promised to be quick. Besides, he'd brought his hands into play first. That made it fair game.

Mine, then: I used one of mine to cup his balls, where they were already drawn up tight against his body.

The other I slid up his thigh and over the firm roundel of his buttock, till my fingers found his cleft and slid within, probing. There was his ring, wet and warm from the shower, wet and yielding as I pressed with one fingertip, then two.

I slowly, slowly worked on it, pressing and circling and stretching the puckered flesh, while my mouth worked his cock in the same rhythm, while he gasped and swayed under the shower there...

Gasped and swayed and came, in a jerky, stubborn rhythm of his own.

I swallowed, kissed his belly, licked the tip of his cock one last time, and then reached for the soap and washed him carefully, still on my knees.

Out of the shower at last, I snatched up a towel and dried him roughly, just because I could, just to have the feel of that body still in my arms, and then finally I let him find his trunks and pull them on.

I was just testing the fit—in that sense that requires at least one finger slipped beneath the waistband—when the door banged open, and in walked Luc.

He caught the two of us like that, me with my hand inside Matt's trunks, and the boy blushed furiously scarlet. I might have gone redder yet, thinking what he would have seen if he'd been just two minutes earlier, but Matt just pushed me casually away.

"Never mind, Luc," he said, seeing the boy still hesitating, half ready to flee. "You have a shower, get changed; it's all yours. We're done here."

Then he flung his arm around my shoulders and steered me out into the sun again, laughing with simple relief, I thought, at the nearness of calamity averted.

Then he pushed me into the pool.

We swam a few lengths together, but I was reaching that stage where a cold drink in warm sunlight was actually more appealing than any more effort, hauling a tired body through stiff and unyielding water. By the time Luc came out, I was sitting at the far end with my feet in the pool, watching Matt swim lengths and trying to snare him with my legs every time he turned between them.

Luc must have been eighteen, but he was still adolescent-skinny. He might have been embarrassed about it, exposed in his trunks in this company where every man else was older and bulkier. I didn't need to worry on his account, though. He was clearly a

regular here, known and welcome. Juliette paused in her metronomic lengths, trod water, waved at him; he jumped in to join her, and they set off again side by side. Not racing at all, I noticed: he was slower and splashier, and she tempered her speed to his.

Which was one more reason to like Juliette, I decided, watching them.

Matt bobbed up again between my legs and hung there, following the line of my gaze.

"Is that Luc you're eyeing? Give it up. He's far too young for you."

"He is," I agreed. "And he's all twigs still." Though not for long, I thought, under Juliette's regime: all this cycling and swimming in chase of her, she'd soon build him up. "Besides, he's spoken for."

"And so are you," Matt said quietly, resting his cheek on my thigh. "Swim with me?"

I might have pleaded tiredness. I might have said, *Come out, and drink with me*. I should have said, *Don't speak for me. Don't even think about it; you're not entitled*.

Should have done and didn't. I just slid off the side into the silky embrace of the water, the firm arms of my lover.

We swam slow lengths until I really was tired, until even Luc was overtaking me. Then I laughed and pulled myself out, with arms that were suddenly weak and barely able for it, squeezed the water out of my hair, and that was it, I was done. Matt had to fetch a towel and use it on me, heedless of his audience. He fetched a robe too and wrapped me in it, pushed me into a chair, pressed a drink into my hand, and dropped down onto the warm stone flags, leaned against my legs, and said, "Tell me about your day."

"Uh, shouldn't we be dressing?" I glanced anxiously at the sky, at the lowering sun. "I don't know what the time is, but I don't want to make you late for dinner."

"Relax. Grandmère's out tonight; my aunt and uncle have taken her to friends across the valley. We don't need to dress. We'll just raid the kitchen when we're ready."

Tell me about your day. I saw you leave on Dodo"—*I was watching*, he meant, *till you were out of sight*—"so I know you had a good ride, but where did Juliette take you?"

While I talked, my fingers played with his damp hair, while my eyes followed the kids who were still in the water, seemingly inexhaustible. Juliette had apparently decided to see if she could ride the width of the pool on Luc's shoulders, while he swam. Apparently not: there was desperate splashing and sinking going on out there, and spluttering laughter, some all-too-deliberate duckings.

I watched and smiled as I talked, and felt Matt's warmth nestled against me and felt enfolded, welcomed, absorbed, as though I'd quite suddenly and unexpectedly found myself a second family where I really hadn't been looking for any such thing, or for anything at all.

When Matt said we wouldn't dress for dinner, he turned out to mean that literally. When even adolescent energy was overcome by adolescent hunger, everyone pulled bathrobes on over their swimming things and we padded barefoot to the kitchen. Patés and cheeses, cold chicken, pickles, fresh bread; Henri went down into the cellar and came up with an armful of bottles.

I thought we'd probably parade back out to the poolside, but I was wrong. They led me another way, through a discreet door and up what must have been a servants' stair, narrow and twisting, up and up.

It led us out at last onto a flat roof, with a broad view of the estate in the last of the light. Obviously this was another regular haunt, an eyrie; there were cushions and blankets all over.

Matt made me comfortable in a corner, with a heaped plate and a full glass, warm stone at my back, warm him at my side. Oddly I wasn't much hungry, or at least not for food. I nibbled a little, sipped a little, leaned against his shoulder, and closed my eyes and just let it all wash over me.

"...shouldn't you be taking him to bed, Matthieu?"

"Oh, I intend to. Just, not till he wakes up a bit. He's too big to carry down all those stairs, and I don't want to break his skull for him just when he's finally found his way to us."

"I am not," I said with dignity, "asleep. Just resting my eyes. And the way I remember it, Matthieu, it was you who found your way to me."

"Camped on our doorstep," he observed, with some justice. "Stealing our fish." That was not just at all, nor even true, and so I told him.

"Yes, sweet. Just as you say. If I help you up, do you think you can manage the stairs?"

"If the alternative is having my skull broken, I think I might."

Opening my eyes was a good first step. The sun was gone entirely, but there was moon enough to show me the two male cousins posed on the parapet, Juliette sprawled intimately content between Luc's lanky legs while he plaited her long hair with a careful concentration.

I leaned on Matt perhaps more than I needed to as we made our way across the roof, as we harvested a chorus of goodnights.

Halfway down the stairs, it occurred to me to ask if Luc was allowed to stay the night, or if he'd have to go cycling home eventually on one of those late, lonely, exhilarating rides that I remembered from my own first romances, when we were too young to have a place of our own and too shy to ask permission of our parents.

"Oh, Luc's had his own room here for years. As far as we know, he still uses it. They're both eighteen, but—Well, Juliette will grow up when she's ready. She's not in any hurry; at the moment, she's still having too much fun being a girl. Riding horses and holding hands. Luc talks to me or to Paul when he needs to, and settles for what she gives him; he always has. He's a sensible kid."

"And lucky," I said.

"Lucky?"

"Not just sensible, lucky too. Both of them. Having you guys to watch over them." He was younger than me, but just for a moment there I was imagining him as a big brother, keeping an eye on the excesses of my adolescence, on hand to sort out the problems when they got too big for me. Who knows? If I'd had such a brother, maybe I wouldn't have grown up such a fly-by-night, always on the run, moving on. Maybe I'd be able to settle, as my friends had. Maybe I'd have a partner, a lover, not just an endless sequence of brief passions and one-night stands. Someone like him, maybe.

Oh, wait, hadn't I just appointed him my brother? He couldn't be both brother and lover.

I was arguing myself in circles and getting nowhere, by definition. Also, I thought he was listening in, reading my mind. I really wished he wouldn't do that, when I was making no sense even to myself.

He laughed softly, and his hand closed on the back of my neck. "Ask Juliette in the morning, see if she feels lucky. Or ask Luc. He's a nice boy, but we make him work for his privileges. Then she makes him work harder. And it'll be worse once they're married. I keep telling him that."

"Will they really marry, d'you think? They're awfully young. And he's still got college to come, all those possibilities, and her not there..."

"Oh, I think she'll be there. I think she'll follow him, whatever she says now. Not for distrust, just to be with him. And then, yes, I think they'll marry. She's quite determined on it. Always has been. It would take a stronger man than Luc to stand against her. I think she will marry him and manipulate him without mercy, and they will both be very happy. And why" — as we came to his rooms at last, as he steered me through the door — "why are we talking about the kids, exactly? You've spent all day with Juliette, and I've hardly seen you at all, except when you fell asleep and drooled on my shoulder."

"I did not drool," I said, though I was afraid that I probably had. "And maybe that's why, because I've spent all day with her; she fascinates me."

And maybe it was because I didn't want to talk about him and me, because that scared me. It was a path that led to a precipice and one of us had to go over. Maybe I was running away again.

Maybe he was reading my mind again; maybe he just knew. Maybe I give myself away every time.

He snorted and pushed me down onto the bed. Very quickly thereafter we were both naked, and he had pulled a sheet up over our shoulders and wrapped his arms around me, kissed me lightly, and let me just burrow into the warmth of him, until I had left my own body behind altogether.

Sex is fabulous, don't get me wrong; it's one of the best reasons for sharing a bed. Sometimes simple sleep is almost better, though; that's all I'm saying. Falling asleep like that in someone's arms; drifting awake again in the dead of night, remembering where you are and who you're with, snuggling closer and dropping off again, entirely secure and content.

Waking again in the early morning, when the sun says you've still got time; when you remember again where you are and who you're with; and remember also that sex is fabulous, that simple sleep may be almost better but only almost, and he's guaranteed to wake if you nuzzle at him, if you nip just a little, and there are condoms in the cabinet and so many things you haven't tried yet, and so little time left to try them all...

We took the cousins' poor-little-rich-kids cabriolet and spent the next day driving with the wind in our hair or else strolling through medieval marketplaces and high, ruined castles, hand in hand or shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye all the time. No secrets. Each of us had things we weren't saying, but we didn't need to. They were all too obvious, in every touch and glance.

Dinner that night was formal again, more formal, with guests this time and not just family. It said enough, I thought, that already I ranked myself with the family. Perhaps it said too much.

Still, guests made it easier to say what I had to, to announce to the table that I really should be moving on next day.

There was a delicate murmur of disapproval, all around. Henri said, "Matthieu, can't you stop him?"

"I don't know," Matt said, looking directly at me. "Can I?"

I shook my head, absolutely not. He shrugged.

It was Juliette who said, "Go with him, then. And bring him back when he's done whatever it is he has to do, wherever it is that he's going. I'm not finished with him yet," while scowling at me ferociously, trying to terrify me into submission.

I said, "Juliette, one of the things I have to do is go home. And then go to Brazil. And no, I can't take Matthieu with me. I do have my own life to live, and so does he."

She made an irreverent noise and a gesture so shockingly rude that she was blushing at herself even before Grandmère spoke a word of sharp reproof.

I had nothing to pack the next morning. I'd brought nothing with me from the boat. It was Matthieu who walked into the kitchen with a bag, set it purposefully on the table.

"What's that?" I asked, wary of gifts, of obligation, of complications. It had clinked suggestively when he set it down, and a couple of bottles of wine would be fine, I could take those with a light heart and an easy conscience; but the bag looked fatter than that, and anything more generous would only make this harder.

"That's mine. Toothbrush and a change of clothes. What Juliette said: I'm coming with you."

My heart sang. As it sank. "Matt..."

"What?" he demanded. "Are you going to say you don't want me?"

"No." No, I wasn't going to say that; he'd smell out the lie in a moment. "Only, it won't make any difference, you know. Not in the end." And the end was next week and inescapable.

"It'll be days together," he said defiantly. "Days we won't have if I don't come. Every day is a difference."

He was right, in more ways than I could count. I hugged him and buried my face in his neck and feared the future just a little too much to say "thank you"; and then, yearning for him already and suddenly afraid of the other thing, losing him too soon, I said, "Are you sure you can leave here, so close to harvest?"

"I'm sure I can come down to the end of the valley and back. It's not exactly far."

"No, indeed. Still home ground, isn't it, for you?" Still safe. Whereas I felt suddenly as though I trod on nothing safe at all, but I went ahead regardless. "Come to Brazil with me?"

"Charlie, I can't. There is the harvest here, and everything that that implies: crushing and blending the grapes, making the wine, barrelling, and bottling. And last year's vintage to market—This is our busiest time. The family can do without me now, just for a few days; in a month's time, no. They need me here."

I knew it. I did know. I'd had to ask him anyway. It was the closest I could come to saying something else that mattered more; but I'd known before the words were out of my mouth that he would turn me down.

Which was why I should really turn him down now, not take him with me even to the end of the canal. Just a few days—a few pleasant, joyful days in his company, the two of us alone together the way we hadn't been yet—but they would only make the parting worse when it came, when it had to come. A clean break is always better than letting things linger, dragging them out. That's one reason I keep moving on.

Knowing what you should do is not the same as acting on it. This boy made me weak, he made me hot and hungry, he made me cling to him when I knew I shouldn't,

but I was suddenly afraid to let him go. "Come on, then," I said. "I'll take whatever I can have. As much time as you can spare me." And then, trying to lighten that just a little, for my own pride's sake because I did sound so very desperate, even to my own ears, "Are you not bringing a fishing rod?"

He shook his head, smiling more thinly than I was used to. "I think perhaps there will not be time for fishing. If I am wrong, if I need one, I can borrow yours."

He was right, of course. We didn't fish.

Sometimes I thought those few days were like the water that we navigated. On the bright, sun-warm surface they were all glitter and idleness, an ideal time, two young men in no hurry at all to get where they were going. Matt slept beside me every night and woke me in the morning, tender and demanding: sometimes an ambassador with gifts, sometimes a fortress to be stormed. During the days he was just there, shirtless and beautiful, bringing coffee or demanding his turn on the tiller, lying sprawled on the cabin roof asleep or reading or sometimes reading aloud when he found something he wanted to share, talking or listening or interrupting, trying to correct my accent. Taking me away from the canal to show me a market, a citadel, a view. Opening a bottle of wine while he criticised my cooking. A constant presence, charming and desirable and maddening sometimes, always a delight and a promise and a sense of impending loss.

Under the surface, that inescapable loss drove darker currents through our days and our nights too. We never argued—there was no point, fighting could change nothing, and why waste what little time we had?—but there was a bitter edge sometimes to our talking. Sometimes in the dark, we clung to each other hard enough to hurt; sometimes we rolled right away to the distant edges of the bed, made as much space between us as we could, as if we were practising for later.

Once I thought I heard him sob, just once. In an instant I had turned and wrapped my arms around him and my legs too, holding on to him every way I could, wishing

my skin could melt away and my body meld with his entirely so that we could never be separated at all.

He twisted around in my arms, rubbed his face against my chest, and whispered, "I love you, Charlie."

"Oh, hush. Hush..."

"And you, you love me too," he went on stubbornly, determinedly, "but you will never say it. Will you? It makes things too complicated."

"Things are too complicated already," I murmured, kissing his wet eyes, but that wasn't true. In honesty it was all very simple, this thing that tore at us both. Everything in him said, *Stay*, and everything in me said, *Come*, and neither of us could bear to listen to the other.

The sex that night was almost cruel in its intensity. I've always been playful, even at my most passionate, but suddenly this was nothing to do with play. It was all too real, too painfully real.

Neither of us could talk, apparently. We had to let our bodies speak for us, and they couldn't find anything kind to say to each other. We were both of us urgent and demanding, but we weren't making love by any measure. This was something darker, almost animal. We wrestled on the bed there, all sweat-slick skin and greedy mouths, hard, grunting breaths, bone and muscle straining against each other; when I rolled him onto his belly and pinned him there, it felt like victory, as if that's what we'd been fighting for.

This was my reward, then. He lay quiescent for a minute, gasping beneath me, while I reached across him to the nightstand for a condom and lube. I slathered up my fingers and probed between his butt cheeks, straight in there, no teasing. His sphincter resisted me, but only for a moment; then I was through, my hand working roughly inside him, making him gasp again while I tore the condom packet open with my teeth.

I was stiff as a root, so I got myself protected – unless I was protecting him – and then tugged my fingers out of him. He groaned in relief or in protest, maybe both. I didn't give him the chance to draw breath again before it was my cock that went pushing in between his cheeks.

His butt came rising up in response. This time his ring yielded as soon as it felt the pressure, hot and tight.

I thrust myself inside him as if I could pierce his stubborn, home-loving heart: thrust and thrust, as hard and deep as ever I could. This wasn't about anybody's pleasure, his or mine. I was furious and desperate and helpless, trying to bury myself in him like a hook, so deep he couldn't dig me out, knowing it was hopeless even as I tried.

I came at last, too soon, whichever: like an explosion of grief, loss turned physical. So did he, I felt him spasm beneath me. Then he pulled away from me, but only for a moment, only to turn over and wrap himself around me, arms and legs together.

I thought his hands were claws, trying to grapple and snare me here, never let me go.

In the morning, we both knew we couldn't go on together any longer. It hurt too much, it cost too much. He slung his few things into his backpack, kissed me a rough, wordless farewell, and leaped ashore. We'd come no more than thirty miles as the crow flies; he'd find a bus, or more likely phone a friend, phone home perhaps. One way or another, he'd be back at the chateau for lunch. I didn't need to worry. This was his home turf, where he belonged and I did not, where I could not hope to settle. It was for the best, every which way, that we should part swiftly and conclusively.

I didn't need to watch him out of sight along the towpath, but I did. He didn't need to look back just at the last moment before he passed out of sight, so that our last memory of each other would be two young men staring at each other across a gulf of

distance, but he did. It was probably appropriate; I thought that gulf had always been there between us, however close we clung.

I didn't need to be weeping as I drove the boat onward, but I did that too.

That evening, moored up to the bank, I was making a desultory supper of stale bread and cold meat, wondering if I could drink myself into a painless oblivion, when I heard a clatter and rattle coming down the path.

I looked around, and there was Juliette, hurtling towards me on Luc's bicycle. She slewed the machine to a halt, leaped off it, and let it fall, stared at me across a metre's width of water.

She said, "I don't understand. How can you...how can you make him so unhappy...?"

"Juliette... We're both unhappy. This is killing me too."

"Well, then. Come home."

"It's not my home, sweetheart. That's the problem."

"It could be. We would have made it so. All of us together. The grandmère, my parents, my brothers, everybody. We would have welcomed you and loved you as Matthieu does..." There were tears streaming down her cheeks now, but she wasn't just distressed, I saw; she was angry with it. Angry with me.

I might cry myself—again!—if this went on. I said, "I don't—I can't live the way you do. The way he needs to, in one place with all his family around him."

"You could have learned to live with us. We would have made it easy."

I shook my head regretfully, inconsolably. "Not for me. I'm a rolling stone, pet. I have to keep moving. I'd always be trying to uproot Matt; he'd always be trying to tie me down. It couldn't ever work. We'd only end up hurting each other more. I'd hurt all of you, and I can't let myself do that. Better to go now." One clean break. Which wasn't supposed to include teenagers yelling at me from the towpath.

"Better for who?" she snarled, dashing the tears from her face, wanting to be nothing but furious now.

"For all of us. Truly."

"No. No, that's not true. Just for you. You think so. You're a coward; you like to run away. You won't even *try* to make it work."

"Juliette, I have tried. Believe me."

"Not with us. You have not tried with us. I wanted so much for you to stay, and make Matt so happy as he was, and be a part of us; and now... Oh, you've ruined everything! I...I cannot talk to you."

And then she was snatching up the bike again and scrambling frantically aboard it, pedalling away into the dusk, and for the second time that day I stood on deck and watched someone leave me, and felt my heart break inside my chest.

I didn't sleep that night, at all. I didn't drink myself into oblivion, either. I did kick my shoes off and lie down for a while in the dark, but it did no good; I did drink, but there wasn't enough alcohol on the boat. I didn't think there was enough alcohol in the valley to touch me, to change my mood or carry me off into blessed unconsciousness.

My thoughts turned and turned around the same few simple facts: Matt's absence, Juliette's tears, my own bleak and savage sorrow.

By morning it seemed that I had made some kind of decision, but I didn't trust it. Luckily there wasn't anything immediate I could do about it anyway. The boat was the company's property and my responsibility; I couldn't just abandon it on the bank there. And the canal was too narrow to turn it around and head back upstream.

I had to go on, then, down to the end of the canal, where I was supposed to deliver the boat and catch a plane back to England with my article written, job done. Put it all behind me and move on.

Instead, I negotiated an extra week's rental and another tank of diesel, enough to take me back to the head of the valley. I could return the boat there, no problem.

Well, plenty of problems, but they were all in my head or else in my hands to settle. Far more tricky negotiations, with myself first of all and then with other people, over things that mattered far, far more to each of us.

I was glad, truly glad, to have those extra days of slow travelling. You can't hurry a canal boat; I couldn't hurry this decision. I had to test it again and again, against everything I knew about myself and everything I hoped to find in Matthieu.

Juliette was right. I was a coward; or at least, I was very afraid of this. In the end, though, there was no other choice.

In the end I moored that boat where I had before, on the path below the vineyard. In bright afternoon sunlight I took down the company flag that hung from a staff at the stern and replaced it with one of my own T-shirts, sacrificed for the occasion: a bright, clean, uncluttered white, fluttering boldly in the warm breeze, a message to be read if only his eyes would see it, if only he was willing to accept.

Then I had nothing to do but wait.

I suppose I might have fished, to pass the time. The thought did cross my mind. But I didn't want him to think I was taking the piss, not taking this seriously, not offering everything I had.

Besides, I could never have settled to fishing. I couldn't have given my proper attention to the rod, the fly, the water. The trout would have laughed at me.

As it turned out, I couldn't settle to anything. I paced restlessly up and down the boat, sometimes up and down the towpath beside. A hundred times I thought I should just abandon this dramatic gesture and go up to the house like a normal person, knock on the door, ask to see Matthieu.

A hundred times my nerve failed me — *Coward*, Juliette sneered, somewhere in the back of my head there — and I crept back aboard, crept down into the cabin, hugged my knees close and my misery closer, waited for him to find me. Surely he would see, or someone would. Everyone knew about us. They might not read the message in the white flag, but surely they would think to say, *Matthieu, that boat is back, your boyfriend...?*

Surely, they would...

At last, at long, long last, someone did.

I heard footsteps on the path—but people had been coming and going all afternoon, and none of them were Matthieu.

I felt the boat rock beneath his weight as he stepped aboard—but that still might not have been Matt. Maybe Juliette had come to shout at me again, or his uncle had come to ask me gravely to go away, or...

I heard his voice, and then of course he could never have been anyone else.

He called my name, and it was suddenly almost impossibly hard to respond to it. I had no breath to answer; it was all I could do to push myself to my feet, to blunder out from the cabin into the hard, scrupulous glare of the sunlight, the dark block of his shadow.

Not his arms, his tender grip, his kiss. Not yet.

He had something in his hands, a bottle. I didn't care.

He wanted to say something, but I didn't want to hear it. Not yet.

I said, "Forgive me, Matthieu."

I said, "I'm a fool. I hurt you, and Juliette, your family, everyone who cares about you." And myself, of course, among that number, but that didn't matter. I was about to hurt myself more, maybe. That didn't matter either.

I gestured at the white flag and said, "I surrender." Wholeheartedly, uncomplicatedly, unconditionally. "I will stay, if you will let me. If you'll still have me." At whatever cost to myself, my life, my work. I could learn to stay still, to live another kind of life. As long as I was loved, as long as he would love me, I could learn.

Astonishingly, he laughed before he spoke. For a moment I thought he was mocking me, I thought he was going to send me away. Tears pricked at my eyes as I squinted into the sun; but all he said was, "Look."

It was a bottle of wine that he thrust into my hands, of course it was. Of course it was his own precious wine, that too—but now it had a label stuck to the glass. Just a quick hand-sketch and a few words, a design. A name, at last.

He had called it *White Flag*.

He said, "Wherever you were, I thought sooner or later you would see this, you would understand. I thought, if I surrendered, you would let me know how to find you, where I should come. I should never have let you go; I should never have imagined that I could stay without you. Everything I have here, I will give it all up if you only let me come with you. I have talked with the family, and there will still be a job for me, on the road. I can sell our wines overseas, manage the export business, expand our markets. It'll be good, useful; and I can work by phone and Internet and make new contacts wherever we go. And I'll be with you."

I shook my head, helpless in the face of this. "You can't," I stammered. "You can't surrender to me. You're too late. I've already surrendered to you."

And then it seemed that nothing was too late after all, because his arms swept around me and he carried me off into the cabin where we could be private. Where somehow our clothes did all melt away and our skins did their best to follow, sweating hotly and sticking together.

Afterwards, sooner than try to share the cramped and impossible shower, we shocked whoever was passing by skinny-dipping in the canal; and then, when we were halfway dry and halfway decent again, he was the wise one, young though he is. He said, "A white flag doesn't have to mean surrender."

"Does it not?"

"No. When we both come bearing white flags, they can be flags of truce. We can parley together."

"How, though? One of us has to give up. We can't live two lives at once."

"Of course we can. Idiot. Most people travel and then come home. We'll just have to do it more extremely. Months away and then months back here. We can make it work. We'll find a job for you in the business. Marketing manager, you can write all our sales material; we all hate that. And when I absolutely can't go away, if you absolutely have to, we can live apart for a while, so long as we both know you will be coming back. Or I can come out to find you, as soon as I'm free. Brazil. Brazil can be the test; it'll be good for us both. You go and I stay, but we can still both be happy because it won't be forever. And you can phone me, every night you can phone home and talk to us all..."

I was breathless suddenly, with hope and yearning and that kind of fear that is half a thrill, worth seeking out.

"You think we can make that work? Honestly?"

"I think we have to," he said, pulling me close again, his fingers tracing the outline of my ribs. "How else can we live?"

He was right, of course. There was no other way, no choice at all. I took one deep, shuddering breath and surrendered privately to hope and yearning and fear all together, a lifetime of them, the only kind of life worth living.

Then, over his shoulder, I saw two figures on the towpath: Juliette and Luc, hand in hand, waiting to fetch us home.

 THE END 

Thom Lane

Author Thom Lane is an English writer who has published romances and erotica as well as fantasies and other books under other names. In his tales of Amaranth, he is combining as many of those genres as possible...