

Hugo Duchamp lowered his foot onto the first step and realised he could go no further. Though he deplored the use of the word 'literally' he felt for the first time in his life it was appropriate. He was *literally* frozen to the spot. From behind him he heard an irritated 'tut', and then another, but despite his silent cursing and chastising of himself, he was unable to compel his feet to move. Despite his best intentions, he was, at that point, not convinced he would be able to take a step forward any time soon. Yes, he appeared to be *literally* stuck. He inhaled deeply. The air was intoxicating, filled with hundreds of different scents that flowed around his body, filling his lungs and causing him to hold his breath.

'Excusez-moi monsieur, je suis pressé,' came the first voice behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder at a middle age *grand-dame*. Her lips were pinched tight and her eyes had narrowed into two pins encased in a harsh kohl outline. He opened his mouth poised to offer some response, but as it appeared that his day was now to be a combination of disappointment in himself and blind panic not even a low groan escaped his dry throat. How could he explain it to the coiffured lady when he could not explain it to himself. An English man behind her had the bright idea of nudging her with his shoulder hoping for a domino effect that would surely push Hugo onto the platform. The *grand-dame* spun on her heels and fixed the English man with a look that caused him to recoil and shrink within himself. Obviously unused to the power of such a formidable opponent he mumbled an incoherent apology before both he and the *grand-dame* turned their full attention back to Hugo.

'Est-il un problème de monsieur? Avez-vous besoin d'aide?' she asked in a tone of voice that reminded Hugo of all the French ladies he had grown up with.

It was a unique heavy syllabled tone that was both gentle and forceful at the same time. His Grand-Mère had used that tone on him on more than one occasion and Hugo was momentarily whisked back to that memory and realised when his Grand-Mère used that tone with him he had mere seconds before the next response would be a swift smack around the back of his head. Spurred into action Hugo pushed himself forward and threw himself onto the platform making the bottle-neck behind him flow out like a dam that had been breached. The tuts continued as the train's inhabitants poured onto the platform and pushed past Hugo glaring angrily at him.

Hugo dropped his head causing his mop of blond hair to fall over his face. He exhaled and inhaled again, taking in his first proper gasp of Parisian air for over a decade. Or was it longer? It was true, he believed, that each city, each country, had their own smell. Centuries of history left their imprint on atmospheres. Paris, like London, was old and the pages of its history were littered with sense memories that hung in the air, never able to truly dissipate. The smell of wars. The smell of souls that had come and gone. Ten years may have passed, but his first inhalation of the Parisian air was enough to remind Hugo exactly where he was. Surely Grand-Mère Mairie had not been dead for so long? Forcing himself, Hugo opened his emerald green eyes and took a slow look around the bustling metropolis that was Paris Gare du Nord.

Normally he loved railway stations. He had always felt there was something romantic about them, a mixture of danger, excitement, and the promise of the unknown. Lovers parting. Lovers meeting. Tears. Laughter. Fear. All types of life were visible in stations like Gare du Nord. Young, old, rich, poor. Everyone travelled and until the rich could hide behind the expensive doors that protected them in their executive lounges, they all had to tread the same well-travelled pathways. The enormity of what was happening to him overwhelmed him and he slumped against a

baggage rack. That was when he noticed a station guard watching him, eyes alert with suspicion. Hugo closed his eyes again and held his breath. 'Pull yourself together Hugo, you are being an idiot!' he chastised himself. 'You're a thirty-four year old Detective Superintendent from the London Metropolitan Police! Stop acting like a bumbling idiot!'

He had known this day was coming for a few weeks and had tried to prepare himself as best he could. As was often the case with something not in one's immediate future, he had managed to convince himself that it was so far off it was not even worth thinking about, as if burying it would somehow prevent it from happening. The journey from his flat in London to St. Pancras and then the Eurostar journey seemed to have passed by in a blur, and now he found himself slumped against a baggage rack, having what he could only suppose but could not confirm was a full-blown panic attack.

A loudspeaker announcement of the next Eurostar departure caused Hugo to start, making his eyes twitch involuntarily. Forcing himself to focus he glanced towards the end of the platform knowing that someone would be waiting for him there, someone who had every right to resent Hugo's enforced presence just as much as he resented being there. Regardless of that though, he knew he would be expected to be exactly what it said on paper that he was, namely a high-flying police officer, well respected and well liked, and known to be an exemplary law enforcer.

At that moment though, Hugo would have given anything to be back at his flat in Chelsea, the small but perfectly formed pied-à-terre that he loved dearly. Although he had always wanted to be independent from the Duchamp family who had birthed and raised him, the legacy from his Grand-Mère had meant that the tiny one bedroom Chelsea flat he rented for a ridiculous amount could finally be his own. Yesterday morning he had slept like a baby in his all white bedroom covered in his all white sheets that cocooned him like a shroud.

On the rare occasion Hugo shared that bed with someone there was always the same look when his companion awoke to find Hugo swathed in a white sheet, his barrier between him and the world. Though he was fairly sure he did not suffer from OCD, Hugo was savvy enough to know that when a person was concerned about how creased their sheets were, they were displaying tendencies that could be considered bordering on obsessive.

But now the flat was closed up, sheets covering the shabby chic furniture he had picked up at antique markets. His emotional relationship with the country of his birth may have been fractured, but he had never stopped loving it, finding comfort in the old furniture that spoke silently of lives gone by. A painting of his Grand-Mère hung in the living room, her stern face staring down at Hugo, watching, judging but Hugo took comfort in her gaze. He understood her for what she was, a woman of her class and time, but Hugo knew she loved him the best she could, and for most of his life she had been his only constant. Now, the house was closed and Hugo had no idea when he would be able to return.

He swore at himself, it was no good crying about it now. What was done was done. The meeting with the Chief Constable had taken place less than two weeks ago and had lasted barely ten minutes but left Hugo with little doubt. He was being transferred to France for an undetermined amount of time. A situation had arisen that needed an independent solution and Hugo's 'unique' relationship with France and the fact he was fluent in the language meant he was the 'ideal' candidate to help their French counterparts with the 'delicate situation'. He was, after all, a citizen of both countries and his original police academy training had taken place in France, so on paper he was still, legally at least, a French police officer.

Hugo cursed himself for that too. He had wanted to be a police officer since he was a child, but because he was schooled in England but was not a resident, he was unable to join the police

force there. He had therefore returned to Paris to train. Keeping his head down he graduated top of his class and his first role was part of the international crime department. It took him barely a year to be able to return to his adopted home, obtain dual-citizenship and re-train as part of the Metropolitan Police. It was this exercise in International Politics, Hugo realised, that had now come back to bite him. He did not want to return to France for a holiday, let alone to work there.

He had tried to protest but the Chief Constable did what he did best, and patted Hugo on the back, making sympathetic coos in a similar way that a person would soothe a stressed child or dog. The result was always the same. I am in charge and you are not and this is what you are going to do. It amazed Hugo that so little information had been furnished to him. As he left his boss's office his parting gift was a small manila folder that contained two sheets of neatly typed paper explaining Superintendent Duchamp's assignment. Hugo had read it so many times now that he knew it verbatim but was still hard-pressed to explain why he, let alone anyone else had been drafted in to solve a problem across the English Channel.

As the 11:50 Eurostar from St. Pancras hurtled Hugo under that Channel it had not escaped Hugo's mind that the reason the French wanted an English police office to take over was purely political and that scared Hugo more than anything. Political problems meant nobody would want him and nobody would want to help him. Hugo knew now that his job was to pick up the toxic pieces left in the small town of Montgenoux near the larger town of Nantes on the Atlantic Coast. As a child, Hugo thought he recalled visiting there with his Grand-Mère and cousins but could not be sure.

Hugo had seen enough during his time in the Met Police to know when an officer from another jurisdiction was pulled in to sort out someone else's problems it never ended well. The two page document the Chief Constable gave him was telling, not so much in what it said but in what it did not. A sex scandal. High level corruption. Conspiracies and murders. A town with less than 25,000 inhabitants would not recover from that kind of situation for a long time and that depressed Hugo more than he could bear. Something was telling him that his all white flat in Chelsea would stand empty for too long.

The guard approached him and as their eyes met Hugo felt even more depressed. The guard no longer looked concerned or suspicious. He looked sad.

'Monsieur, is everything well?'

Hugo attempted a smile. The muscles in his face felt weak and he knew the smile looked forced. He flicked his black rimmed glasses onto the top of his head. 'I'm fine, merci. I do not travel well, that is all.'

The guard, a man called Yves, nodded sagely. He had almost forty years of service under his belt, this was not new to him. Yet there was something about the man in front of him that belied his woe. Tall and handsome, with the greenest eyes Yves had ever seen, the hair long and straight and cascading across the forehead and eyes, the sides almost shaved in that way young ones had it these days, Yves could see there was more to this story than mere travel sickness.

'Ah, it happens to the best of us,' he responded kindly.

Hugo smiled again. 'I'll be fine in a moment, but thank you for your concern.'

Yves sucked in his cheeks and bowed his head. Whatever was bothering this young man was not his concern. Probably lady problems, or men problems, who knew? Yves had trouble telling which way was up these days. Men looked like women and women looked like men and who knows what they got up to in their bedrooms. This distressed traveller was not what Yves would describe as handsome, he was more *pretty*. Tall and lithe, dressed in a blue linen suit and long wool coat he could tell Hugo was one of those men who made a great deal of effort looking as if

he had in fact NOT made a great deal of effort. Yves longed for the days when it was all much simpler.

'You have business in Paris, Monsieur?' he asked.

Hugo swallowed deeply. Yves could see the fire in those emerald green eyes ignite. It lasted only a second and then the cool composure was back. "No, I'm just passing through. My business is in Montgenoux.'

Yves eyebrows knotted together as he tried to place this town. 'Ah, it is in Pays-de-la-Loire, no?'

Hugo nodded. 'Oui, near Nantes.'

'Indeed, as a child I had many lovely holidays on the River Loire.'

'Yes, it is a very beautiful department.'

'And your business, Monsieur?'

It was there again, the fire in the emerald. And then it was gone as fast. Hugo realised that he was regaining control of himself. 'Well, as it happens, I am the new Captain of the Police Judiciaire there.'

Yves whistled softly. Obviously this was not what he was expecting. This tres joli homme had an air more befitting a fashion model or designer. 'Ah, but surely you are an Englishman, Monsieur?'

Hugo smiled. 'Well, I am a little of both, I suppose you could say. Ma mère was English and mon père...' he paused, it was difficult to talk about his father. 'My Père was, is, I mean, French. I lived here in Paris for most of life but I went to school in London. But by my passport, I remain a Frenchman. My training for the police was in Paris but my English background meant I was called upon to work for both countries when need be.'

Yves cocked his head to see the clock over Hugo's shoulder. He had so many life stories that by now they held little interest to him. 'Ah, I see. Well, welcome home Monsieur. I hope your homecoming is everything you would wish it to be!" He clicked together his heels in the way he knew tourists liked and bowed his head.

Hugo repaid the compliment, and as Yves passed him he pulled his body from the slump it was in and seemed to gain four or five inches in stature as if he was pulling himself to his full six foot plus height. The time for unease had passed. It was time to pull himself together and remember that he was Superintendent Hugo Duchamp, the youngest Superintendent in the Met and one who, despite having all the qualifications that would have warranted a fast-track promotion, had managed to earn the respect of his colleagues by rising in the ranks the traditional, and some would say, correct way. His serious crime C.I.D division had a ninety-eight percent success rate, one of the highest in the country.

No, Hugo Duchamp was not a failure. No-one, not even his father, could make him believe that. So, it was time to get over himself, take the demons that had been created by the war between his parents and had engulfed his childhood and relegate them to the corner of his mind. Hugo had not seen his father since Grand-Mère's funeral ten years earlier and even then they had barely spoken, and there had been no contact since. Hugo had not seen his mother, Daisy, for even longer. It occurred to him that not only did he have no idea where either of his parents lived, he could not even be sure if they were dead or alive. He presumed somebody would have told him. And now, over twenty years later, and with no photograph of his mother, he was not even sure he would recognise her if she passed him on the street.

He was back in France for the first time in ten years and there was nothing and no-one to be afraid of. He was successful in his own right and the childhood hold his father had over him was

gone. In fact, he no longer even cared if he saw him, or his mother for that matter. He was thirty-four and there was still time for him to have the life he had thought was surely beyond his reach. If he still blamed his parents for his failures in life at the age he was now, he had to accept the problem was no longer theirs, it was his. He must think of this detour as another page on his resume, nothing more, nothing less. His head must be held high and he must exude the authority that the position he had earned called for.

He took a step forward. It was slow and tentative but his next was more assured, the next even more so. As he reached the end of the platform his stride was confident, his head high and his eyes sparkling in the way that, unbeknownst to him, made the few lovers who had shared his bed unable to resist him. Hugo Duchamp was back in France and it was time to show whoever came into his orbit that he meant business.