

Hugo Duchamp stepped through the electric doors and raised his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. Like the detective he was he scoped the immediate area, assessing it as a potential crime scene before realising he was not entirely sure what he was looking for or who he was expecting to see. He was not here for that. Or was he? All he knew for certain was he was a stranger in a strange place and the only person he knew there was far out of his reach.

He shook his head, trying to dislodge the weariness that had descended on him during the long flight from Nantes. It was five hours of his life that felt much longer as he struggled to squeeze his six foot four inch frame into a cramped seat, all the while struggling to compose himself for what he knew lay ahead. He pushed his mop of unruly blond hair out of his eyes, tucking it behind his ear, and narrowed his piercing emerald green eyes that felt dry and weary.

For the last few months he had done little but go through the motions. He had known this day was coming. Each night as he climbed into his empty bed after a long, troublesome day as Captain of Police in Montgenoux he closed his eyes hoping he would sleep well. Each night as he fell into a fitful sleep he prayed that when he woke he would turn his head, push his hair off his face, wipe the sleep out of his eyes and smile at the person he had come to love more than life itself. But each morning as he turned his head all he saw was the white pillow with no head shaped dip, no curl on a forehead, no pursed, full lips that begged to be kissed, and he was returned to the moment as it all came flooding back to him, the remembrance of why he was sleeping alone. He would drop his feet to the floor, light a cigarette, pour a café and pad towards the bathroom to get dressed and then the day would begin again like a warped, twisted *Groundhog Day*.

Hugo looked around the bustling airport entrance and lit a cigarette, his hand shaking slightly as he moved the lighter towards the tip. The cigarette flashed red as he sucked the nicotine into his body, feeling the familiar calmness overcome him. His left hand rose to the scar below his left eye and he rubbed his fingers across it, as he did whenever his mind was troubled. The scar was a reminder to him that without it he would probably be dead. It was his reminder that no matter what was happening, things could always be worse. At that moment, however, Hugo was not sure it was true anymore.

He pressed his head against the wall, pulled the glasses from his windswept hair and looked around the busy concourse. People were rushing to and fro, running for a flight or stepping out into the fresh Irish air, their faces happy and light, full of anticipation for what their journeys promised.

He smiled as he saw an excited girl standing on her tiptoes, a bucket and spade swinging in her hand. Her father bent to kiss her head, his hand reaching around and pulling her close to him, as they moved towards a waiting taxi. The swing in their steps was unmistakable as that of those off to enjoy an adventure, their hearts light and their minds untroubled, their eyes dancing with the promise of adventure and laughter.

Just then, Hugo envied them more than he cared to admit. He had never been a man jealous of others but now he found he was and it filled him with the kind of disappointment in life he thought he had gotten over. He had let his guard down since he returned from a self-imposed exile in London to France, the place of his birth and where he lived out his formative years. In London he had lived life on his own terms, finding comfort in relative solitude, choosing friends or lovers only if he felt he needed them, which he did infrequently. However, since being forced to return to France the previous year he had opened his heart to the possibility of a life he thought out of his reach, to dare to love and to dare to imagine living a life he once considered himself incapable of. His own family had robbed him of that hope, but in Montgenoux, despite his reluctance, he had seen the welcoming arms of a modern, nuclear family and he had allowed himself to be enveloped.

However, on this warm early summer day, as he placed his feet on Irish soil for the first time, he wished that he could, once again, be the man who needed no-one. He knew what he was

about to face would be one of the most painful experiences of his thirty-five year existence. It was time to say goodbye.