

[OPENING PARAGRAPHS]

I love French women, and at that moment I had two all to myself — one naked, one not. In two months I'd be eighteen, and my loins ruled supreme. Need I say more?

Before me on the weed-choked grass stood Mireille. From her fingers dangled those slivers of buttercup yellow that passed for her bikini. Unexpected but not surprising. That was the norm with her, for she stirred pots that weren't even on the stove. Being with her was like tumbling in the high surf.

On a director's chair next to me sat Teresa, black swimsuit exposing only the slim gold cross on a neck chain. She rarely stirred pots, even on the stove. Being with her was like floating on a summer pond.

She turned. "Daniel, what's going on?"

Teresa had the beauty I'd have wanted in a sister — there for the right guy to savor, too subtle for the wolves to sniff out. Down to her shoulders, midnight hair framed an oval of creamy skin. Caramel freckles overran her nose to sprinkle her cheeks. A tiny crook on the bridge of that nose kept perfection at bay. But nothing diminished the eyes powered by irises of imperial jade. When a girl's eyes spoke, I listened. Teresa's had fallen silent.

"It's one puzzle after another," I said.

We sat in the shade of the covered back patio at the sprawling farmhouse owned by Mireille's father and his five siblings. Before us, a scarred white table held two sweaty lemonade glasses, a pair of fancy binoculars, and a mauve ribbon. To our right, a crowded hedgerow of Lombardy poplars hid us from the neighboring field. To our left, the waist-high boundary wall hid the edge of the cliff. Visible further out, a rusty orange buoy clanged a lethargic warning.

I loved the place. It burst with childhood memories of summer bedlam, of French cousins and uncles and aunts and grandparents, official and honorary. Memories of my luminous Portuguese mother.

The girls and I had grown up together in Lisbon. Teresa and I lived there still. I had not one drop of French blood but, with French mothers, both girls were legally French. Mireille had been adopted at six months by my aunt Isabel and her French husband. They had all moved to Bordeaux when Mireille was fifteen. Teresa was in the city visiting her maternal grandparents. I had timed my Europass to drop in for Mireille's eighteenth birthday two weeks before. More on that later. I went on to join my compadre Alberto in Paris and was now on the way home. In two weeks the girls would follow with their parents, for my aunt Livia's birthday. Meanwhile, with Mireille busy at her day-camp job and Teresa leaving for her Paris music academy, no point in me sticking around.