

An Uncertain Age --

Chapter One

by Ulrica Hume

I had been blessed. But I was not what you would call a believer. “God is dead,” I remember babbling to the French police. *God is dead.* It was a grey time.

Inspector Quillard wanted to know how I had met Miles Peabody, the “disappeared” man. He was also curious why a middle-aged American woman would willingly expose herself to the unknown, would welcome folly. It was made tacitly clear that one doesn't do what I did and expect no consequences.

“It began at Waterloo,” I said.

“The train station?”

“Yes,” I managed.

He scribbled *la gare* in his notebook. “Then you met in *Londres?*”

“Well, yes and no,” I said. “We had left London and were on our way to Paris. We were on the train.”

“Your first encounter was on the Eurostar?”

“It was all so swift—.” Then I started sobbing. The police station seemed to expand and contract, all at once. I was beyond embarrassment. Detective Daudet hovered nearby, offering tissues and bitter coffee. Finally my storm of tears passed. It was the opposite of the cold, dry mistrals common to certain parts of France—those wicked, blowing winds, which had made painting such a challenge for Vincent Van Gogh.

“*Maintenant.* We are continuing with the interrogation?”

I nodded in a relieved and trusting way.

Inspector Quillard then asked about the commotion I had caused, and which had doubtless been captured by the Eurostar's surveillance videotape.

“Just as the train was about to leave Waterloo, I realized that the blue bow was missing from my nephew's birthday gift,” I said. “*Bleu?*” he clarified.

“Yes,” I said. “So I turned, that's all.” I described for Inspector Quillard the sensation of many firm hands impatiently pushing me on. “I could see something blue on the platform. But my sister had warned me that the Eurostar runs on time—that when the pneumatic doors close, they do so irrevocably. I didn't want to miss the train,” I said.

To which Quillard replied, “We all wish to arrive where we are going.”

Daudet seemed confused by his superior's words. He wanted to know if I smoked, if I wanted a cigarette. Then, to Quillard, he asked, “*Avez-vous une allumette?*”

I began to wonder if there really had been a train, a man, a journey. Then I heard again the swishing sound of the doors, and I felt myself stumbling through that narrow space so ungraciously—and swiftly.

The train was already moving as I hurried to seat 12B. The passenger in the window seat opposite mine leapt up and we both danced incongruously for a moment. To keep myself from falling, I took hold of his rigid arm. Then he helped me stow my coat, suitcase, and a bouquet of milky-white chrysanthemums—as well as the battered box, minus the bow.

Breathlessly I settled into the slick, Art Deco-ish environment. The man who had helped me was reading *The Times*, folding it one way, then methodically unfolding it. The twinkling signet ring on his pinky finger, with its gold serpent encircling a constellation of gem stones, was like something an alchemist might wear; it was a ring with powers. The way he calmly turned the pages put me at ease—perhaps too much so. Here was a man who (I assumed) wanted nothing from me. Perhaps he might even provide perspective on the debacle that was my life. He had kind eyes, I'd noticed that right off. And he was exceedingly polite. Yet (as I was quick to point

out to Quillard and Daudet), I have never been attracted to older men. Certainly not to jowly, circumspect ones with grasshopper legs.

He surveyed the world news, lingering over an ad for a men's shoe sale at Harrods. He then lowered *The Times*. "You won't be needing that umbrella in Paris," he advised.

"I hate rain," I said. "When I left California it was sunny."

"Cal-i-for-nia," he repeated. "I've not been."

There was a lull, during which we each pretended to ignore the other's presence.

"Do you know Paris?" he asked.

I said that I didn't.

"Ah." He smiled to himself, content with the mystery that was about to reveal itself to me. He said he was on his way to an Old Boy's Fête, adding that, when he wasn't "out and about", he enjoyed taking cold plunges in the Men's Bathing Pond on Hampstead Heath, and visiting Louis in the Finchley Road in Swiss Cottage, where they have a live pianist with the tea. "I am a retired librarian," he said, and shrugged.

"That's wonderful," I said. "But what's an Old Boy's Fête?"

His explosive laugh caused some of the other passengers to turn their heads. Each year, he told me, he and his Oxford university chums met in a different European city. Last year it was Amsterdam, and the year before that, Prague.

"I'll rendezvous with my mate, Sean, who was a holy terror in his time. The pranks we got up to! Sean has also booked a room at *Cujas Panthéon* in the Latin Quarter."

"I'm Justine," I said.

"Miles Peabody."

The steward came by just then with a choice of wines. Miles inspected all the Lilliputian bottles, selecting a "reasonable Syrah" for himself, and watching with interest as I chose a slender amber one.

As we sped past dull fields and the occasional warehouse, I fanned myself. I was suffering a hot flash. Next all vanity was gone and I was patting my face and neck with the saving white "serviette"

dunked in ice water that Miles had produced. There followed a pleasant and comfortable—an almost *married*—silence between us.

He wanted to know what my plans were in Paris. When I said that I was keeping my options open, he gave me a look of empathy.

“Right.” Then the man called Miles Peabody began working a crossword. “Six-letter word for a blue dye obtained from plants. Not cobalt, unless I've got ‘sovereignty’ wrong. Woad, wot? No, that's only four....”

“Could it be indigo?” I said, seeing a shade of midnight in my mind's eye.

“Ahhh—yes, I-N-D-I-G-O. Well done.” He continued filling in squares.

I squirmed, fighting off sleep and an undercurrent of uneasiness, as the green of spring and the grey of industry flickered by. More seemed promised as the here and now were promptly withdrawn. And more, and more—which meant that there were no static points, no places of rest. No constancy but the change itself. My life was a mess. I was feeling the irrelevance of my forty-eight years, and I was stressed, as well, by a bad break-up. That would be Graham, my estranged fiancé, subject of scathing emails, and the reason why hundreds of wedding invitations, embossed with unfortunate roses resembling female genitalia, had, at the last minute, been recanted. Where was my real soul mate, I wanted to know, and why were there no twitchy children on my lap, and how had I been so dumb to believe that beauty's currency would never run out? So, Paris. There I would reinvent myself: I would sit in cafés, filling the intimidating white of my new sketchbook with—what? I wanted to see and experience everything, to fully unfurl. This was my tenuous plan. *All shall be well*, I reminded myself. Saint Julian of Norwich's words usually helped. The English mystic had lived in a cell attached to a church, giving advice to passersby who were afflicted by matters of heart or spirit, or even by the plague. *All shall be well*. One day, it would be all right, but it wasn't now.

“R-N-A-F-O-L. These last two lacunae do trouble me,” Miles sighed. Then, sensing my confusion, “You know, the gaps, the missing bits.”

I liked the way he attacked his crossword with such fervor. Restlessly smoothing the page, pen at the ready—he was not an unappealing man. He had a tired, friendly face, yet intelligence flared behind those tortoiseshell spectacles. His hooked nose, silver hair, and fleshy earlobes gave him a noble vibe.

As the train swayed, I fantasized having sex with him: sweet, archaic, purposeful... I had been struggling through a period of celibacy and often lapsed into such agitating daydreams. Then the body that was supposed to be his morphed into that of a much younger man. I felt drawn to the seed of something ineffable—

“Run afoul! That's it.”

I reached into my sequined purse, uncapped a tube of red lipstick, put some on. I was sneaking a look at myself, when I became aware that Miles was looking at me also. I was more than a little startled when, in his gloomy, well-modulated baritone, he said, “Did you know, Justine, that the blood of the female cochineal beetle is responsible for your lipstick's marvelous shade?”

I bit my lip. Miles knew all about the cochineal. The bug fed on a certain type of cactus—the prickly pear—in Chile. Clusters of them clung to the succulent stalks. He said he had just been reading that followers of Jainism will go out of their way not to perpetuate violence—here he demonstrated, with the damp table napkin, how a *yati* might cover his mouth to prevent an insect from accidentally flying into it. Somehow from there we got on the topic of dualism, and Ryle's theory of a “ghost in the machine”, and the Cathars (it was a subject that he would return to, and would therefore haunt me in months to come). We agreed that the world was in a lousy state—“These are benighted times, indeed,” he grumbled—what with global warming and the subsequent shifting waters. To lighten things up, he then declared that, while red was not his favorite color (green was), he “adored” red for its passionate properties. Red, the color of Christ's blood, the grace of which sustained the martyrs—

I capped my lipstick and put it away.

Lunch arrived. We had buttered our rolls with florets of butter, I was starting on the Mediterranean vegetables and new potatoes, and he was spearing his peppered plaice fillet, when my mobile phone rang. It was a brand new Nokia pay-as-you-go, and only one person had my number.

"I'm on the Eurostar!" I shouted, as Miles cringed. "...Rue de what?...Yes, I'll find it..."

It was my sister, Bethany, calling from Paris. Bruno this, Étienne that, she kept saying. Her voice was light and sure and effervescent. Finally I ended the call. It was amazing how sapped I felt, having listened to her for just a few minutes.

Although Bethany and I had been raised in the same house by the same parents, she had blossomed under the spell of mediocrity, while I had not. Instead, I had misinterpreted feminism and was now shocked to find myself the sole survivor of an interesting life. Apparently if one pushes away love, even in the name of liberation, one is left loveless in the end.

"She has this one fault: she's too nice," I said.

"Sorry?"

Was he that dense? "Little Bethany always was a people magnet," I explained.

"Families are strange. Our older brother was antisocial. He now lives in a cabin in the Oregon woods, and is a worry to everyone, including himself."

"And you?" he asked.

"I was the pretty one." I then arranged myself so the light didn't accentuate the fact that I wasn't quite so pretty anymore.

"She's sinfully fit," I said. "Bethany does pilates in the Marais, that is, when she isn't running marathons. Basically she has it all: trendy TV job, a house-husband, *and* a new baby." I lifted my bare left hand. "No ring," I said, in case he hadn't noticed.

"Its absence both cheers and intrigues me," said Miles kindly.

Soon I was dropping names that were charged with meaning for me, but of no significance to him. Names like Lucas and Billy and Gentleman_59.

"These would be...suitors? Or, I daresay, lovers?"

"All failed relationships," I said, as though I were boasting.

"Yet you strike me as a strong and intelligent woman. You may be on your own now, but you won't be forever. I'm sure you'll sort it all out."

I guess neither of us cared that the other passengers were listening, since it was unlikely that we would see them (or even each other) again.

"O.K., so tell me this," I said, in between bites of cheesecake.

"Why do they—men, that is—seem to find it so difficult to commit?"

For all his earlier proselytizing, Miles now went silent. He frowned and set about straightening his cravat, which was of a muddy gold silk.

I waited.

"When you say 'commit', I presume you're referring to a classic pledge of devotion. From the Latin *committere*, to send, give over. Alternatively, one can commit a murder, or commit oneself to a cause, or one can be committed—but those are something else. What concerns us here is the gentler form of the word. Which involves a sense of duty." He thought for a moment. "Yet there is something primal, is there not, about the underlying desire to mate? Birth! Procreation! Death!" He smacked the table.

"All I ever wanted was good chemistry, compatibility, emotional availability, attractiveness, and financial solvency," I said, feeling sorry for myself.

"My dear, isn't love less about what one *wants*, and more about what one is prepared to *give*?"

I set down my spoon. "That's true," I said.

"I was once inflamed by a flaxen-haired woman, name of Sally Wetherall," he said, leaning toward me. He told of backstage chats and anonymous bouquets. He gave no moral. However his warble indicated that not even the passage of decades had cured him of the

comely ice dancer from Bristol, whose bearing on the blue ice was like that of the Romantic era ballerina, Marie Taglioni. So be it, I thought. I excused myself to go to the ladies' room. I mention this because it is just the type of detail that the French inspector regularly demanded. Notebooks of Quillard's were filled with such things. It was imperative that he know where we went, when and what we ate and saw and did, whom we met, if any packages were exchanged, but with no regard for the impetus behind our activities, which, as it turned out, would have been much more useful to him.

When I returned, Miles was staring in a troubled way at the imprint my body had made on my coat lining. In just five minutes, he had become a changed man.

I brought up my sabbatical. I said that I was giving myself a year to decide what to do next. "I need a new life," was how I put it.

"Don't we all," he chuckled. I was relieved to hear that chuckle, but I didn't buy it. Some people have a way of appearing even sadder when feigning gaiety and Miles was one of those.

"So...Paris," I said.

"Right you are: Paris!" He tilted his glass.

As we approached the tunnel, Miles made an itinerary for me. It included Île de la Cité, the 250 BCE settlement of islands, from which Paris proper sprang up, and with it, Notre-Dame Cathedral; also the Mémorial de la Déportation, which honors the 200,000 French who died in concentration camps. This last "must-see" was alarming. Why not the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre? He described the Mémorial's claustrophobic hall of crystals. Which led, inevitably, to talk of the gas chambers. His eyes were turning the color of tragedy. He said that locks of hair had been shorn from the prisoners' heads to make socks for the U-boat crews, and to stuff furniture with. Why was he telling me this? It was horrible, more than I wanted to know. It was the cochineal beetle all over again, only worse. I didn't want to believe that this man across from me on the Eurostar was possibly mad, unbalanced—"crackers", as the British say. I wanted to believe that his morbid tales were simply those of a retired

librarian, whose concern for the larger world was academic, and only slightly skewed.

He paused to take a long, thoughtful sip of his Syrah.

“Of course, you must also visit La Sorbonne....” On and on he went, until he came to his final entry: Musée d'Orsay, the art museum, which was built on the site of a former railway station.

He tore off the list and gave it to me. I asked him to pronounce again the word “d'Orsay”, more out of politeness than anything else. Then, since journeys have a way of eliciting odd confidences between strangers, I confessed that I had always wanted to be an artist.

“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” He was quoting the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*. It was a habit of Miles's, this back-paddling into history.

“What shall your medium be?” he asked.

I said I didn't know. That, though I liked the graceful, organic sculptures of Barbara Hepworth, I just couldn't see myself with a chisel in hand.

We spoke of the tragic sculptress Camille Claudel, and her affair with Auguste Rodin. Unfortunately she had died in an asylum.

Then Miles announced, “We're passing underwater now.”

I must have paled as I glanced at the darkened window, then at the words beneath the green arrow—*Emergency Exit Issue de secours Nooduitgang*—for, in a soothing voice, he said, “Fear not, my angel! You're safer here than you would be on the M5.”

At Gare du Nord, Miles took my bag, porter-like. Escorting me through the crowded Métro, he suggested that I take the horseshoe route from the 4 Porte de Clignancourt, changing to the number 12 Mairie d'Issy.

He waited with me on the platform. When the number 4 arrived, I found a seat and then there I was, on the other side of the glass, looking out at him. He's right, I thought: I am strong. I am also alone.

