

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

---



# Diving into Light

Natasha Farrant

## About the Book

Every summer throughout her childhood, Florence would return to her family home on the west coast of France, where she would be joined by her exotic, hopelessly glamorous cousins. Here life as she knew it would begin under the benevolent eye of her grandmother Mimi. It was a heady existence of illicit drinking, stolen kisses and the bittersweet pains of first love.

But now Florence is living completely alone with her new baby. Haunted by nightmares, she cannot open the letters from her grandmother accumulating on her mantelpiece. What devastating truth do these letters hold? Why has Florence turned her back on her past? And will she and Mimi ever be able to escape the guilt that is tearing them apart and has shaken their family to its very core?

## **Contents**

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Family Tree

### **Part 1**

London, 2005

La Rochelle, 1995

London, 2005

La Rochelle, 2005

London, 2005

La Rochelle, 1995

London, 2005

### **Part 2**

London, 2005

New York, 2004

London, 2005

New York, 2004

London, 2005

La Rochelle, 1999

London, 2005

La Rochelle, 1999

London, 2005

La Rochelle, 1999

### **Part 3**

Florence Found Out . . .  
Epilogue  
La Rochelle, May 2005

About the Author  
Copyright

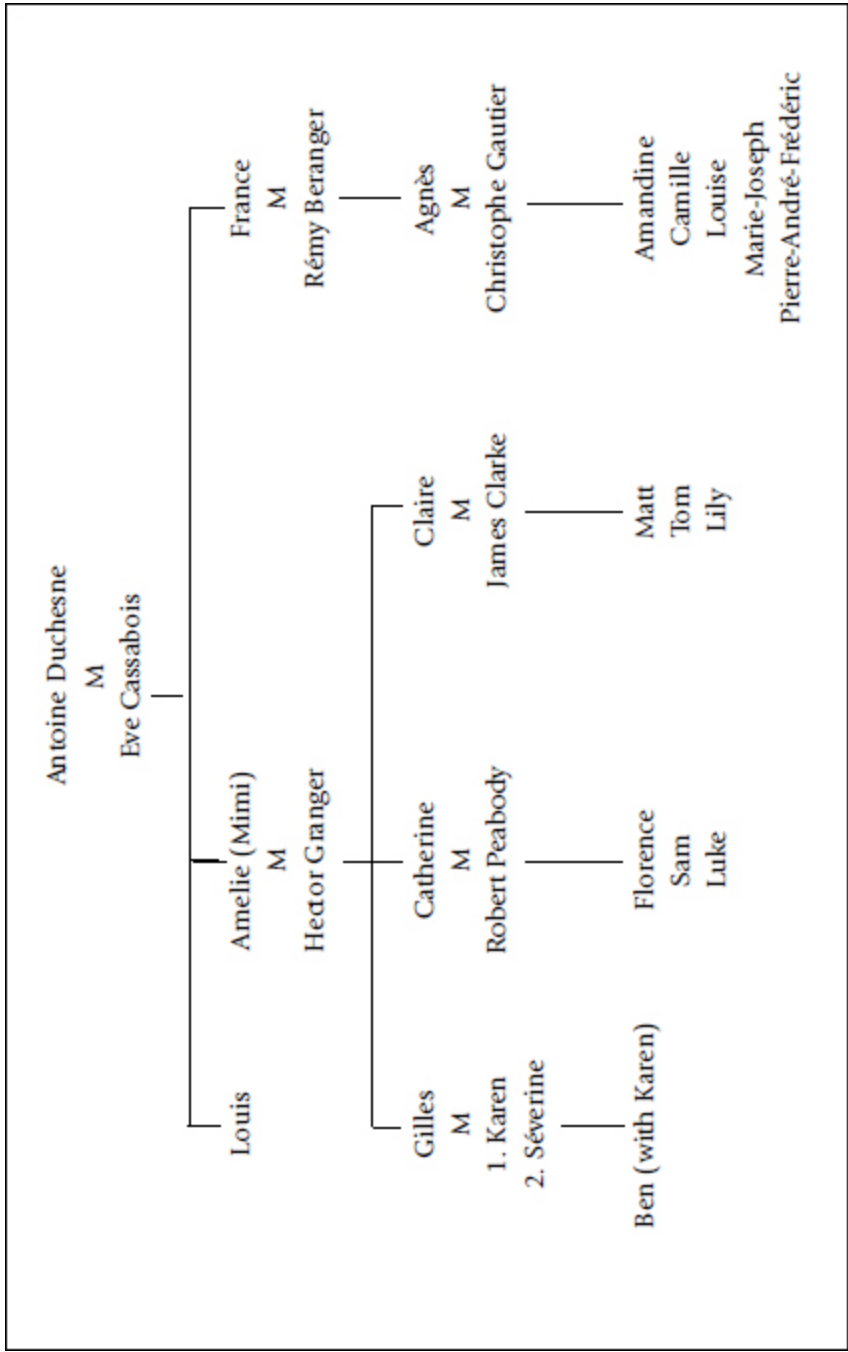
# Diving into Light

Natasha Farrant

For Amée, in loving memory  
And for Steve

## Acknowledgements

Writing is by definition a solitary exercise, but I owe a particular debt of thanks to the following for helping to make this book possible: Jean-Luc Labour, who committed an act of selfless charity when he bought the German underground bunker beneath the Hôtel des Etrangers in La Rochelle, and turned it into the Musée de la Dernière Guerre. A born storyteller, he was incredibly generous with his time when I was researching the Occupation in La Rochelle, and the insight and information he gave me were invaluable. My grandmother Jeanne Moorsom, and family friends Edith Rheims and Didier Béraud for sharing stories about La Rochelle before and during the war. My agent Laura Longrigg, for her consistently wise advice and unflinching enthusiasm. And most of all my family, for their continuing patience and support.





# PART I

## London, 2005

FLORENCE IS DREAMING.

In her dream, she rests her head against the window of the train, hoping for a better view. 'Not long now,' she thinks happily, and at that moment, as if to prove her right, the coast suddenly appears. Eyes half shut against the light, concentrating hard, she can just make out *their* beach on the far western tip of Ré, the lighthouse dominating the curving sweep of pale sand, waves rushing in from the Atlantic pounding the shore. The train accelerates around a bend and they are treated to a full, glorious view of the old harbour, its ancient towers standing proudly to attention, yachts and pleasure-boats sailing gaily in and out, people waving madly as they race past. The train screeches through the station, picking up speed, and Florence's mood swings from excitement to fear. In a dim recess of her mind she realizes that even the view is all wrong, that the sea and the harbour should be no more than a glimpse, the island invisible. And now they are racing towards the fortifications of the old town. There is no sound, except for a baby crying. No feeling, except for overwhelming sadness. A sense of loss, and a baby crying. A baby crying . . .

'Darling, you're going to have to feed her, you know. I can't do it for you.'

Florence wakes weeping, drenched in sweat. The large West Indian agency midwife, the one called Cassandra, is looking down at her kindly.

'I was dreaming . . .'

'Dream all you want, darling, but your baby's hungry.' Cassandra smiles, a broad flash of sunlight in the plain

hospital room. 'I'll bring you tea. Then you and me can talk about your dream.'

Since the baby's birth, Florence's normally creamy complexion has acquired the grey pallor of anaemia, and dark purple shadows underline her green eyes. Though she is still slim, there is no denying the post-partal sag of her formerly washboard stomach, nor the gravitational pull on her breasts, always heavy and now swollen with milk, barely supported by her soft maternity bra. But her thick mane of tawny hair is held back by a scrap of vivid scarlet silk, her dressing-gown is made of thick old-rose linen, her slippers are soft embroidered leather. She looks incongruously elegant, and her glamour is compounded by her solitude. None of the staff on this private ward can remember a new mother being so completely alone. Not one friend has visited, not a single relative, let alone a husband or boyfriend, and yet she does not seem to mind, even to notice. She fits no stereotype. Even her voice, soft and educated, defies classification with its occasional inflections, sometimes American, sometimes foreign. The hospital staff, whom she fascinates, have cast her as a widow and an orphan. Florence gossip is rife on the midwives' station, though she herself is utterly unaware of this.

The baby, Zélie, does not feed for long. Florence rubs her back gently. Zélie lets out a gentle burp, yawns delicately, and falls asleep again with the ease of a kitten. Florence waits a moment, then rises with difficulty and places her back in her transparent hospital cot, her fish-tank. She gazes at her, her expression wistful.

'I wish you could talk,' she says. She kisses the fingertips of her own right hand, and carefully brushes the kiss on to the cheek of the sleeping child. Her baby is so new, hunched together like a bud still waiting to uncurl, tight fists, screwed-shut eyes, knees folded to her chest. They measured her in bits to check her length, all twenty-three

centimetres of her. Florence still does not think that it is possible to be so small and live, yet the baby, even fast asleep, radiates life. The room seems to pulse with energy emanating from her, this minuscule child who does not move, who appears not even to breathe. Florence, despite her discomfort and her exhaustion, is beginning to understand what it could mean to be religious.

She is still sitting, watching her baby, when Cassandra returns to her room with two cups of tea. 'So quiet out there,' she beams. 'So different from the public wards. A nice break.' She settles comfortably in the armchair next to Florence's bed. 'I said to myself, I'll take my tea with that sweet girl. Then maybe she'll tell me why she cries so much when she dreams.' She drinks her tea, closes her eyes and sighs. 'That's better. Now darling. I'm listening.'

Florence is baffled by Cassandra. She would like to tell her to mind her own business and leave, but somehow that is impossible. Cassandra is too large, too determined. Too sure, really, that Florence will comply. And also . . . Florence wants to talk. She has managed to hold herself together so well, for so long, but over the last few weeks of her pregnancy she has felt herself coming apart, almost literally unravelling, seam by seam. Her nightmares have returned, different each night but all linked by this terrible, choking sense of loss and the memories she once hoped she had escaped. She takes a sip of tea, and begins.

## La Rochelle, 1995

SHE WAS NOT always alone.

When Florence was twelve years old, her mother gave birth to twin boys. Their conception had been an accident, but her parents rose to their new challenge with gusto. Not so, however, Florence who, try as she might – and she did try, a little – could not muster any enthusiasm for the new brothers who had robbed her of her single child status. Her role had been assigned to her prior to the birth: she was to be a Great Help, a Little Mother, a Big Sister – everything, it seemed, but herself. And as life with its challenges – superfluous siblings, puberty, secondary school – gradually ate away at her grasp on what exactly that self was, she grew grumpy and recalcitrant. *A problem*, sighed her mother, Catherine, viewing the end of term with trepidation. She had been looking forward to a restful summer at home in London, but soon realized that this would not be possible with a bored and angry Florence in the house. ‘Send her to me,’ declared Mimi, her own mother, from her airy home in La Rochelle, that medieval jewel of a town on the south-west coast of France. ‘I’ll look after her.’

And so it was that Florence – gangly legged, bushy haired and not yet remotely glamorous – arrived for lunch at the old family property of La Pommeraie one sunny August day, accompanied by her grandmother but missing the protection of her parents, to find her Great-Uncle Rémy, grey haired and bewhiskered, standing on the porch in a pink terry-cloth dressing-gown, brandishing a hunting rifle and shouting orders at his grandson across his extensive front lawn.

Three of his granddaughters, all blond and blue-eyed, were on the porch with him, the smallest on the floor with her arms tightly wrapped around a squirming cocker spaniel.

‘Let me guess,’ sighed Mimi. ‘The coypu again.’

‘Between the Canadian maple and the sycamore!’ yelled Rémy. ‘What’s wrong with the boy? The maple and the sycamore, I say!’

‘Tell him the sweet tree and the old swing,’ suggested Marie-Jo, the youngest granddaughter, from the floor. ‘Yuk, Oscar, stop licking me.’

‘THE SWEET TREE AND THE OLD SWING!’ bellowed Rémy. ‘Ridiculous!’ he added. He turned to Mimi, and his face lit up. ‘You’re here! Look, everybody, Mimi’s here. With little Florence!’

Five pairs of eyes – three girls, one old man, one small dog – turned towards them.

‘What’s happening?’ Tante France, Rémy’s wife and Mimi’s younger sister, walked towards them from the vegetable garden, a wooden gardening basket over her arm, her usual serene smile playing over her fine-boned face. ‘I heard a gunshot. Mimi, *chérie*, you’ve arrived. And little Flo! Come and give me a kiss.’ Florence embraced her obediently. ‘Even prettier than your mother,’ whispered Tante France, and winked.

‘Never mind all that,’ interrupted Mimi, who was as tall and thin as her sister, but rather more imperious. ‘Why the hell is Rémy shooting coypu in the middle of the day?’

‘What’s a coypu?’ asked Florence, only just off the plane from England and feeling rather lost.

‘Paf saw one!’ Everybody knew Rémy’s six-year-old grandson by the acronym of his full name, Pierre-André-Frédéric, an impossible mouthful bestowed on him by over-enthusiastic parents delighted to finally produce a boy after an uninterrupted run of girls. ‘I’ve been waiting up for it every night for a week, and blow me if it doesn’t turn up

bold as brass in the middle of the day while the boy's playing down by the river!' Rémy turned to Florence. 'A *coypu* is a semi-aquatic rodent, not dissimilar to a large rat, *allegedly* herbivorous, and *allegedly* crepuscular. Except for the ones in Pommeraie, which eat my chickens, and come out to sunbathe when they ought to be asleep. *Alors?*' he hollered at Paf, who was rooting around in the woodland bordering the river, aided by an enthusiastic chocolate Labrador. 'Have you found it yet?'

'Nothing!' called Paf in a small, reedy voice. 'Can I come back now?'

'*Chéri*, I don't understand why you're wearing my dressing-gown.'

'I was in the bath,' answered Rémy simply.

'Oh for God's sake!' said Mimi.

'You do look awfully odd,' smiled Tante France fondly.

'I think he looks gorgeous.' Another blond granddaughter, older than the others, slipped on to the terrace, wearing a very short tennis dress, trainers and a conker brown tan. 'You should wear it always, Papi,' she drawled.

'It was perfectly safe,' insisted Rémy, turning to Mimi. 'I knew where everyone was. I made sure of it, before I took my shot. There was nobody in the garden. Except you, my dear,' he added to his wife, 'but I knew that you were out of range.'

'Oh look,' said Mimi sarcastically. She pointed down the path past the vegetable garden, where a small slim woman was hurrying towards them. 'Here comes Agnès.'

Rémy turned pale. '*Merde!*' he muttered. 'I'd forgotten about Agnès.'

Agnès, France and Rémy's daughter, was quite unharmed. She appeared not to have noticed the gunshot, and nobody chose to mention it to her. She was prone to twitter, and it was an unwritten law among her family to keep as much from her as possible.

‘Little Flo!’ she exclaimed. Florence gritted her teeth, and tried to look older. ‘Has everybody said hello? Lunch is ready. Amandine, do get changed, you can’t possibly have lunch in a tennis dress.’

‘I don’t see why not,’ said Amandine.

Agnès ignored her. ‘We’re having lunch at mine,’ she said graciously. ‘Are we waiting for Claire?’

Claire was Florence’s aunt, Mimi’s other daughter, due to arrive with her family that afternoon.

‘They won’t get here till later,’ answered Mimi. ‘They called from Tours to say they were stuck in traffic.’

‘What about Gilles?’ Gilles was Mimi and Hector’s son.

‘He’s on the afternoon train, he said he’d come here from the station.’

‘Then it’s all ready. Papa, why on earth are you wearing *maman’s* dressing-gown?’

Camille and Louise, her two middle daughters, seized her by the arm and marched her firmly away. The others followed in dribs and drabs, Florence keeping close to Mimi.

‘I think you’ll find,’ whispered her grandmother, ‘that it helps to think of them as individuals, rather than as a pack. Less *overwhelming*, somehow.’

‘I’m not over . . .’ But Mimi had already turned towards France, and engaged her in a detailed conversation about gardening which was to go on for most of lunch.

La Pommeraie was Mimi’s childhood home. Here she had been born. Here she had grown up with her sister France and her brother Louis. And here she had lived until the end of the war, when she had left La Rochelle for Paris and met an Englishman called Hector who swept her off her feet, married her and took her off to live in Hove before returning ten years later to build the light modern house on the avenue Carnot where they still lived now. La Pommeraie in contrast was ancient and a little gloomy, built in 1826, all pale grey *pierre de taille* and slanting blue slate roofs,



casement windows and tall white shutters, wide stone steps leading up to a vine-clad terrace and the glass panels of the front door. Its kitchen dated back almost to the last war, and the smell of nearly two centuries of wood fires burned in the marble fireplaces lingered throughout the entire house. Inside, a creaking wooden staircase led upstairs to a maze of interconnecting rooms and antediluvian bathrooms. Outside, in the acres of parkland, dark oak woods once dotted with manicured clearings were now thickly carpeted with ivy. The grounds boasted a fish-pond full of frogs, two disused gardener's cottages, a stagnant river, a bursting vegetable garden, two dogs, three cats, and innumerable geese, ducks and hens.

Ten years previously, when Agnès and her husband Christophe's reproductive zeal showed no sign of abating, Tante France had realized that even her large and rambling house could not accommodate her tribe of grandchildren comfortably every summer. She had offered them the old stable block instead, which they had converted into a pretty, low-lying summer house, with their bedroom in the old grain store under the eaves, and the children in two long dormitory-style rooms below. Agnès referred to it as her Petit Trianon, but the rest of the family knew it as the Warren.

'Because,' explained Matt, Auntie Claire's eldest son, who had first coined the name, 'they breed like rabbits.'

Lunch was served in the grassy courtyard in front of the house, in the overlapping shade of a walnut and a fig tree. Even out of the sun, the air temperature was in the low thirties. People, animals and plants wilted. With an unspoken but complete conversational ban on the great coypu hunt, the children retreated into silence, solidly working their way through their potato omelette with glazed expressions, with the exception of Amandine, who ate nothing but left the table periodically, returning a few minutes later trailing a scent of cigarette smoke and

perfume. Of all the sisters, only she was at all intimidating when considered outside her pack. Still in her tennis dress but now barefoot, with her lithe figure and sheet of white-blond hair, she exuded eighteen-year-old cool and sexiness and confidence. The others were dressed like miniature versions of their parents, Paf in Bermuda shorts and polo shirt, the girls in traditional summer dresses. Nine-year-old Marie-Jo looked sweet enough in her cap-sleeved flowery print, but it was a strange choice for Louise and Camille, aged thirteen and fourteen respectively, both sporting budding curves and long legs and eyeing Florence's denim cut-offs with envy. Mimi's advice worked, thought Florence as she started to relax. Taken one by one, the cousins weren't scary at all.

'Dear, how are the twins?' Agnès brought her back to earth. Florence, lost in thought, choked guiltily on a piece of potato, and coughed loudly.

'OK,' she hiccuped eventually. 'Sort of . . . twinnish, really.' Camille and Louise giggled.

'Do you hate them?' asked Marie-Jo. 'I *really* hated Paf when he was born.'

The cousins perked up.

'You were *awful* to him,' said Camille.

'A terror,' agreed Louise.

'She tried to drown me,' confided Paf.

'In the bathtub,' confirmed Marie-Jo.

'We felt *so* sorry for you, when we heard they were born,' added Camille.

'We thought how *tragic* it was, after being an only child for so long,' sighed Louise. 'We all *long* to be an only child.'

'They're not *that* bad,' said Florence, surprised at her own new-found loyalty. She turned to Agnès, who sat with one elbow on the table, her hand gently massaging her temple. 'I mean, when they're asleep and everything.'

Agnès smiled faintly. 'I bought some apple tarts for dessert,' she said. 'Why don't you all go and eat them in the

garden?’

They took their cakes into the woods, and ate them sitting on the low branches of an old holm oak.

‘You *are* so lucky not to have to wear stupid dresses,’ said Camille.

‘*Maman* still buys all our clothes, except for Amandine who’s got a job and can buy her own,’ grumbled Louise. ‘I swear she just goes into a shop and buys the same thing in all our sizes. That’s if we’re lucky and don’t wear hand-me-downs. It’s hell being in a big family. I mean *look* at us.’

‘I think your dresses are pretty,’ lied Florence.

Marie-Jo snorted. ‘They’re *babyish*.’

‘I can’t wait for Matt to get here,’ said Camille dreamily. ‘You are *so* lucky that he’s your first cousin, and you get to share a house with him and everything. He’s *so* gorgeous.’

‘Not *that* lucky,’ said Louise. ‘You can’t snog your first cousin. Ooh, talk of the devil . . .’

Through the trees, they made out a battered Mercedes estate driving up to the house. It stopped, the back door opened, and a small girl shot out, followed at a more leisurely pace by two teenage boys.

‘They’re here!’ yelled the cousins. They slid out of the tree in one lithe, coordinated movement, and ran towards the car.

Florence had dreaded and longed for this moment.

When Catherine had first raised the question of going to La Rochelle for the summer, Florence had resisted. She had protested that she did not want to go, that they could not make her go. In short, that she *would* not go. She loved La Rochelle, the house and her grandparents, but she was not a chattel, she announced to her startled mother, to be used and disposed of. She had feelings. She had rights. She intended to exercise those rights, and stay. She had protested all the more because she knew that Catherine would hold firm, and that chattel or no chattel, there was a

very compelling reason for her to go to La Rochelle, that reason being her gorgeous, apparently unsnoggable, totally delectable first cousin Matt, at this very moment spilling out of the back of his parents' ancient car along with the rest of his family, who were collectively referred to with great affection as 'Claire's lot'.

Like her mother and her sister, Auntie Claire had married an Englishman. She now lived in Cambridge, but remained very attached to her childhood home. She and her husband were both teachers, and they took advantage of their long summer vacations to descend on La Rochelle *en masse* for a good month every summer, filling every nook and cranny of Mimi and Hector's pristine house. And here they stood now, Claire's lot, on the lawn which earlier today had seen such excitement, watching the children approach. Auntie Claire herself, all long brown hair and soft smiles and vaguely hippie clothes. Uncle James, looking fat and jolly, with thirteen-year-old Tom, pale and bookish, his glasses slipping down his nose. Lily, six years old, golden ringlets and a face like an angel. And Matt.

The Pommeraie cousins crowded round, jostling for prime position, while Florence held back diffidently. Lily flung her arms adoringly around her waist.

'I'm sharing a room with you!' she announced.

'Only if Flo doesn't mind,' warned her mother.

'She doesn't mind,' said Lily firmly. 'Do you, Flo?' She dropped her voice. 'If you say you mind, I'll cry.'

'I don't mind,' said Florence quickly. Lily beamed.

'Ahoy there!' They all turned to see a taxi making its way slowly round the gravel drive, a large bearded man in a garish shirt hanging perilously out of the open window.

'Perfect timing as usual,' murmured Auntie Claire as she greeted her brother Gilles. 'We've just arrived as well.'

'Darling Claire,' answered Oncle Gilles, kissing her fondly on both cheeks. 'Lend us the money for the cab fare, will you?'

Claire complied, grumbling. Gilles stretched, grinned, and prepared to engage with his family. 'How's my favourite niece?' he boomed, seizing Florence by the waist.

Florence laughed. It was impossible to be timid around Gilles. Would-be artist, enthusiastic supporter of doomed business projects, leader of adventures and expeditions, he was a big, over-sensitive bear of a man, adored by everyone except his two ex-wives and his only son, Ben.

'Oncle Gilles,' reminded Lily darkly, '*I'm* your favourite niece.'

'You, young lady, are my favourite *little* niece. Flo is my favourite big niece.'

'What about us?' demanded Marie-Jo.

'Strictly speaking, you lot aren't nieces at all. Where's your mother? Where's *my* mother? Take me to them.'

They moved off together towards the Warren. Florence followed in their wake, and was surprised when Matt fell into step with her.

'So,' he asked easily. 'When did you get here?'

He was even more god-like than she remembered. He was fifteen now, and had grown again since Christmas. He had that look of teenage boys, of a body not quite in chime with its sudden growth spurts, a tangle of long limbs, a face neither adult nor childish. There was nothing gawky about him though, and unlike his brother he carried his adolescence with grace. Matt was an athlete, a swimmer, a sailor. His hair was already turning fair from the summer sun, and his blue eyes were bright in his suntanned face. She tried to speak, but discovered that her tongue had twisted itself into a knot.

'This morning,' she stammered finally.

'I'm glad you're here,' he said, and her stomach flipped.

'Really?'

'We'll have fun. Loads of things we can do.'

*Like what?* she wanted to ask, her imagination running wild, away from the cosy, chaotic family group to a place

inhabited only by Matt and herself.

‘Shall we go and find the others?’ He was smiling, a Matt smile, patient and sympathetic and dazzling all at once.

‘Yeah . . . oh, er . . . sure.’

She would have liked to walk on with him, into the cool dark woods where they could continue as they were, deliciously alone. Surely she must be able to find something to say, something to slow him down. *What, what, what*, she thought desperately. *What can I say?*

The Warren came into view. Lily pounced on them the moment they appeared, dragging an anxious-looking Paf. A duck had nested on the roof of the porch of the big house. Paf had seen it. The ducklings had hatched, they were safe for now, but what would happen when they were ready to leave the nest? Would they not break their necks, falling so far to the ground?

‘They’ll fly, won’t they?’ said Matt.

‘No, but their tiny tiny wings . . .’ Lily held her hands out in front of her to indicate just how small the ducklings’ wings were. ‘We have to build a slide.’

‘For the ducks?’ asked Florence.

‘. . . *lings*. For the ducklings.’

‘But what if the coypu climb up the slide?’

‘They won’t,’ said Paf. He had not spoken until now, but this was not unusual. With four older sisters, he found that there was little point speaking unless he had something really worthwhile to say. ‘Coypu can’t climb.’

‘You’re sure of this?’ asked Matt.

‘Absolutely,’ said Paf with more assurance than he felt. ‘Quick,’ he added, looking over his shoulder. ‘Before the others.’

‘Before the others *what?*’ Marie-Jo bounced up. ‘*What* before the others?’

‘We’re going to build a slide. For the ducklings.’ Paf drew himself up as tall as he could. ‘*We’re* going to. With Matt. Right, Matt?’

‘Right,’ said Matt.

‘And Florence,’ added Lily.

‘What are you talking about? What are you going to build?’ Agnès waved them over, smiling.

‘Oh no,’ muttered Paf. ‘Now we’ll never get it done.’

And indeed the likelihood of the ducklings’ ramp ever being built seemed to grow increasingly remote, as suddenly everybody wanted to express an opinion on the matter. Oncle Rémy pronounced the idea ridiculous, Tante France thought it delightful, Gilles – who had been drinking *pineau* while the others had coffee – actually cried with laughter, Agnès mentioned that the building was listed, and had anyone thought of that, Amandine told her not to be absurd. Marie-Jo, who was rather enterprising, found her father’s address book and telephoned his cousin Régis, who was a vet and quite used to this sort of call and confirmed that a ramp *could do no harm*. ‘Régis says . . .’ reported Marie-Jo, but it took a while to make herself heard. By the time they had all agreed that a temporary ramp was in fact a good idea, and that it would not contravene any city planning laws, Matt, Florence, Lily and Paf were already hard at work on the porch of the old house, with several planks of wood, some gardening twine and an old paddling pool, ‘to put at the bottom’, explained Lily, ‘so they can have a nice splash’.

No, Florence was not alone, in the summer of 1995, when she was twelve years old. The ducklings’ ramp built, the afternoon passed, as so many had before and so many would again, in a lazy haze of games on the lawn and in the woods, of groups lying on the grass to talk and plan. Among the cousins there was little catching up on the months passed since their last meeting. Their common ground was here and now, this garden, this town, the surrounding islands and beaches. The sun began to dip lower in the high August sky, and shadows grew longer. Hector, Florence’s

grandfather, arrived on his bicycle, every inch the English gentleman in his linen shirt and straw boater, and was universally fêted. Tante France brought out iced tea and packets of biscuits, and later a bottle of *pineau*, with a bowl of cocktail crackers. Plans were made for tomorrow's expedition to the nearby island of Ré, shopping lists made, picnic menus drawn up. Florence watched and listened, enjoying herself but too shy still to contribute much to the conversation. With her parents far away, she was dimly aware of a new chapter opening, in which a new self emerged, as yet indistinct and out of focus but clearly separate from them, no longer their little girl nor yet her own young woman but something in between, yet to be discovered.

Matt moved from one group to another. He never stayed long with anyone, she noticed, and yet he seemed to please them all. She knew, at any given moment, where he was, and who he was talking to. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him organize races for Paf, Lily and Marie-Jo; with a pang of jealousy, she saw him lean against Amandine's sun-lounger and talk with her in low voices. She knew when he moved over to the grown-up circle, heard him laughing with Gilles, answering Christophe's questions about school and exams, teasing his grandmother and France. As late afternoon melted into evening, the low-lying light turned the garden and all within it a deep glowing gold, but in Florence's eyes nobody on that first rich evening of the holidays shone more brightly than her cousin Matt.



## London, 2005

A PINCH-FACED MIDWIFE sticks her head around the door of Florence's room.

'There you are,' she says disapprovingly to Cassandra, who sits comfortably installed, cradling her mug of tea. 'I've been looking for you. You're needed.'

Cassandra peels herself out of her armchair. 'I'll be back later, darling,' she smiles at Florence, who smiles dreamily back.

A new mother has been wheeled down from the delivery suite. Two nurses push her bed along the wide corridor to her room as she sits proudly clutching her baby. Her husband walks beside her, weeping openly, clutching a spectacular bouquet of roses. Behind him comes a little girl, solemn face shining, holding her beaming grandmother by the hand. *A normal family*, thinks Cassandra with a pang of pity for Florence.

The pinch-faced midwife keeps her busy for the rest of the afternoon, but is eventually called away. As soon as she has gone, Cassandra tiptoes back to Florence's room. On the way, she stops by the other new mother. Her family have gone home and she lies asleep, pale blond hair splayed out on the pillow, still smiling. Every available surface is crowded with the flowers which have been arriving in a steady stream throughout the afternoon. Cassandra feels no qualms at plucking two dark red roses from their vase.

'One for you,' she tells Florence. 'And one for the baby.'

Florence is sitting up in bed, holding Zélie to her breast. 'You're a very unusual midwife,' she remarks.

'Well that's good,' says Cassandra. 'You're a very unusual patient.'

She finishes putting the flowers in water, then fusses around Florence, checking her pulse and her temperature.

'They sound nice,' she says. 'Your family.'

'Yes,' says Florence flatly. 'Yes, I suppose they do.'

'What happened to them?'

'Oh.' She looks vague. 'We lost touch.'

'Want to talk more?'

*Not really*, thinks Florence. She puts the baby down tenderly and closes her eyes, hoping Cassandra will take the hint and leave.

She opens her eyes again. Cassandra is still here, ensconced back in her armchair, waiting expectantly.

*Oh why not*, thinks Florence. After all, what harm can it do?

## La Rochelle, 2005

'HAVE AN ECLAIR.'

'What, now?'

'Why not?' Mimi, rather overdressed for market in a flowing orange pyjama suit, peered at Florence over the top of enormous sunglasses which gave her the look of an elegant beetle.

'It's like . . . breakfast time.'

'Best time for cakes.'

It was the morning after everyone's arrival. Florence had woken early and lain for a long time in her bunk above a gently snoring Lily, listening to the eerie silence of the sleeping house, until a painful wave of homesickness compelled her to climb quietly out of bed and creep downstairs, armed with a vague plan of calling her mother. Mimi, also rising early to go shopping for the picnic, had found her curled miserably on the stool by the telephone, unable to remember the dialling code for the UK and struggling to overcome her pitiful certainty that even if she did remember it, Catherine would not appreciate a tearful early morning call from the daughter she had so conveniently disposed of. Mimi had taken one look at her, understood the situation perfectly, bid her get dressed, handed her a banana and a large piece of baguette smothered with apricot jam, and swept her off to market. By nine o'clock, they had bought *tartes au gruyère* and cold *rôti de porc*, *clafoutis aux cerises* and mountains of fruit for the picnic, as well as two sea-bass, half a kilo of tiny *crevettes grises*, *moules* and two dozen oysters for dinner. Florence,

unused to such a bustle of activity so early in the morning, was exhausted.

‘With coffee,’ said Mimi, eyeing the *pâtisserie* display lasciviously.

‘I don’t drink coffee,’ said Florence.

‘Best for dunking, though.’

Resistance, in the face of Mimi’s determination, was always futile. Installed at a tiny table on the pavement, their heaving shopping basket at their feet, the pungent smells of the market rising to greet them and the summer throng beginning to press around them, Florence and Mimi sat beneath a green and white striped awning and delicately nibbled at chocolate éclairs dipped in steaming cups of black coffee.

‘You see what I mean,’ sighed Mimi, and Florence, the feather-light pastry melting on her tongue, the creamy chocolate filling sliding down her throat, the bitter heady scent of the coffee intoxicating her senses, nodded in blissful agreement.

‘I always think,’ continued Mimi, ‘that the holidays are a time for excesses. For doing things you wouldn’t normally do. A time of possibilities.’ She took off her sunglasses and leaned forward, the expression in her clear hazel eyes uncharacteristically gentle. ‘I want you to have a splendid summer here, Florence. Do you think you will?’

A recent memory flashed through Florence’s mind. Catherine at the airport, entrusting her to the air hostess, for once ignoring the twins howling in their double buggy, looking very hard as if she was trying not to cry herself. ‘Be brave,’ she had said as she kissed her goodbye, and for the brief moment when they held each other’s eyes it felt to Florence like old times, before the twins and growing up made life complicated, when she and her mother were the best of friends. She felt her way cautiously around the memory, anticipating melancholy, surprised to find instead a sort of courageous resolve. *Be brave.*