

BRETON SPECIALTIES

COMMISSAIRE DUPIN'S NINTH CASE

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Day 1

‘A piece of the Brillat-Savarin, please.’ Commissaire Georges Dupin of the Concarneau police had hesitated for a fraction of a second - but he simply couldn’t resist the temptation. He was already salivating. Brillat-Savarin was one of his favourite cheeses. A heavenly, truly special soft cheese. *Triple-crème*. Best enjoyed on a fresh, crusty baguette, still warm from the oven.

Cheese was one of Dupin’s must-have foods. He could do without a lot of things if he had to - but not cheese. It was probably second only to coffee on his list of life’s essentials. There were other things he couldn’t do without, such as wine and baguettes; fine charcuterie; entrecôtes; langoustines. To be honest, though: the more he thought about it, the list was so long that the designation ‘life’s essentials’ began to seem absurdly inadequate.

Faced with all the splendours of the cheese stall in the fabulous market halls of Saint-Servan on the western side of Saint-Malo, Dupin paced to and fro. ‘And a piece of Langres as well, please.’

There was a lot of activity in the market halls - nothing hectic, just businesslike bustle. That very special start-of-the-week atmosphere was palpably evident: people were full of renewed energy, the tasks that lay ahead seemed readily achievable. Langres was another of Dupin’s favourite cheeses - an orangey-red soft cheese produced in the Champagne-Ardenne area from raw cows’ milk. It had a sharpish fruity taste and was matured with calvados for a period of several weeks.

‘And I’ll also have some - er...’ - Dupin pretended to hesitate - ‘... some of that Rouelle du Tarn, please.’ Goat’s cheese from the south, well-balanced aroma, with a hint of hazelnut.

Dozens of different cheeses were on display, side by side and piled on top of each another. Cheeses made from the milk of goats, sheep and cows, in a stunning variety of different sizes, shapes, colours, outward appearance. Sheer bliss.

Les Fromages de Sophie, said a sign above the stall. The air was laden with the various aromas of the cheeses, mingling with the inviting smells from the stalls all around: fresh herbs, spices both familiar and exotic, patés and cured sausages, plump beef tomatoes, strawberries and raspberries, dried and crystallised fruit, irresistible cakes. A symphony of smells, sweet and savoury. You couldn’t help feeling peckish - and peckish for everything on offer.

‘Try some of this, Monsieur, it’s a Breton version of Tomme, produced by the Ferme de la Moltais in the Rennes area. This one’s made of cow’s milk, too, with amazingly fruity nuances; a touch firmer, with a dreamy texture. You’ll see.’

The pleasant young woman - short dark hair, spectacles, a sky-blue wrap around her neck - stretched out her hand without further ado and offered him a sliver. Even before she started singing the cheese’s praises Dupin’s nostrils had flared at the mere sight of it, and her description made it all the more enticing.

‘Take it, go on!’ The instruction came from an elderly, impressively white-haired lady standing behind him in the queue, and was delivered in an admonitory tone backed up by steeply arched eyebrows.

‘You are standing here at one of the best cheese stalls in the city, young man! And we have plenty of those! You’re not from around here, by the looks of it.’ It sounded like a reproach.

The woman had unerringly identified Dupin as an ‘outsider’, though the Commissaire didn’t have the faintest idea how. It’s true that he was right up in the ‘remote north’, at the easternmost edge of the part of Brittany that faces the Channel, close to the border with Normandy. But even so: Saint-Malo did belong in all conceivable respects to Brittany. Nonetheless, when he’d mentioned to Nolwenn and Riwal that he would be going to Saint-Malo for a few days to attend a police seminar, their reaction had told him that the situation was apparently rather more complicated than that. The city seemed to have a distinctly special status: his wonderful PA and his senior Inspector had both only ever visited it once, whereas Dupin’s impression was that they had been everywhere else in Brittany any number of times. Furthermore - and this had also given him grounds for suspicion - there had been a conspicuous absence of the deluge of information about every last corner of Brittany that Dupin was usually subjected to whenever he travelled away from Concarneau. Instead, Nolwenn and Riwal had immediately made mention of the Saint-Malo credo that had characterised the proud city for centuries: ‘*Ni français, ni breton, malouin suis!*’ - ‘I’m neither French nor Breton, I’m from Saint-Malo!’ As Riwal had cursorily explained, the city had become fabulously rich between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, partly because of the textile trade, but thanks above all to privateering, the form of piracy legalised by the kings of France; rich, but powerful and independent as well. A small city had become a swashbuckling sea power, fully on a par with the other sea powers of the period. It was this that had shaped the spirit of Saint-Malo: proud, self-confident, sure of success - though others, such as Nolwenn and

Riwal, saw it as arrogant, conceited and supercilious. The wanton, not to say outrageous claim not to be Breton was also intensely irritating - though the other part of the credo, the claim not to be French, met with the warmest possible approval amongst the Breton population. The rebellion against ‘alien’ rule, the absolute dedication to freedom, and the defiant determination to attain and protect it even unto death, were of course all profoundly Breton characteristics, and this led Riwal to conclude his unusually brief disquisition with the boldly paradoxical assertion that Saint-Malo’s claim not to be Breton meant that the city was in fact ‘exceptionally Breton, indeed encapsulated the very essence of the Breton spirit’. On top of this, Riwal had bestowed a supreme accolade on the place, declaring that ‘in all fairness’ he had to admit that it was the culinary heart of Brittany. ‘A veritable paradise for gourmets! And not just Saint-Malo, but the entire area, including Dinard and Cancale.’

The cheese lady’s voice broke into Dupin’s thoughts. ‘This Tomme is enhanced with secret ingredients for a period of more than ten weeks’, she declared. ‘Breton cheeses have come on enormously over the last few years, Monsieur. It’s especially the younger makers who’ve created some fantastic new products.’

Dupin was a great fan of sampling the wares displayed on market stalls. It was an essential part of the experience. By the time he left the Concarneau market on Saturday mornings he always felt positively sated. Dupin simply adored markets: with their multitude of delicacies, the abundance, not to say superabundance of things on display, they were a culinary heaven that could make the beholder dizzy with delight. Any market truly worthy of the name also invariably included stalls offering kitchen utensils, especially saucepans and knives - and Dupin had a weakness for fine knives.

Saint-Malo's Marché de Saint-Servan was a particularly noteworthy market - partly because of its location in the very heart of an atmospheric part of the town, but also on account of the exceptionally fine building it occupied. Dupin guessed it had been built in the 1920s. The floor was laid out with large beige tiles, along the walkways were rust-coloured clinker pillars. The most impressive element of all was the liberal use of glass, so that light streamed down in every conceivable direction. The door and window frames were all painted in a marine shade of turquoise green, and the walkways boasted decorative metal arches, one of them above Sophie's cheese stall.

‘I'll have quite a big piece’, said Dupin, completely hooked.

‘Anything else, Monsieur?’ The woman smiled expectantly. ‘I do have something rather...’

But it was high time for the voice of reason to make itself heard. ‘No thanks. That's it for today.’ She weighed out his purchases with impressive alacrity and packed them just as smartly into a pale-blue paper bag labelled ‘Les Fromages de Sophie’, which she duly handed to her delighted customer.

Dupin was well aware that it wasn't a good idea to have bought so much cheese, or indeed to have bought any at all. They would doubtless get plenty to eat over the next few days. The seriously overloaded timetable for the seminar - four whole pages in landscape format - included a restaurant meal every evening.

Dupin's mood had improved greatly in the course of his visit to the market. He had started off with a couple of *petits cafés* in the Café du Théâtre right on the corner of the tree-fringed square in front of the market building. When he'd arrived at the Police Staff College campus at 7.58 that morning he had felt seriously down in the dumps, and his mood had worsened further as the

morning dragged on towards the lunch break. On the other hand, though, it was a splendidly sunny summer's day: everyone back in Concarneau had warned him how cold and wet it would be up there in the 'far north', even at the start of June - but it was now 28 degrees, the sun was burning hot, and the sky was a mighty, cloudless blue.

His current exalted state of mind was unfortunately doomed to be short-lived: he was due back at the Staff College in twenty minutes' time. All such events were a nightmare for Dupin, but this one was bound to be even worse than any of its predecessors. A month earlier the *Préfet* had turned up unannounced in Concarneau and planted himself in front of Dupin with a beaming smile on his face. 'I have some exciting news, and it's a huge honour for you, my dear Commissaire!' Dupin hadn't had the faintest idea what the Prefect might have in mind, or any desire to find out - but he had feared the worst. And of course he had been right to do so. A 'very special seminar' was going to take place in the first week of June at the *Ecole de Police* in Saint-Malo, one of the foremost police staff colleges in the entire country. Each Prefect in Brittany's four *départements* - one a man and the rest of them women - was invited to choose one of their commissaires to attend the seminar alongside them. It couldn't really be any worse, the very thought of it was unbearable: to be cooped up with Locmariaquer for hours on end for four days in a row, from first thing on Monday until last thing on Thursday! An unprecedented length of time. Dupin usually contrived to drastically curtail his encounters with the Prefect. The cosy special status that Dupin had enjoyed for a considerable period thanks to the offer of an attractive posting in Paris had come to an end once he had finally declined the offer the previous autumn - and had left him wholly at the Prefect's mercy. Their war of mutual attrition had long since sparked back

into life. Locmariaquer's closing words had been the final blow: 'You need to realise that this exceptional event also reflects our profound appreciation of the tireless commitment of all of you here, and our colleagues in Saint-Malo have accordingly put together an extremely attractive social programme, as you will see.'

In order to facilitate 'intensive team-building', all participants were to be accommodated together within the Staff College itself. A terrifying vision had instantly flashed through Dupin's mind: Prefects and commissaires together in double- or twin-bedded rooms, no doubt sharing the same bathroom facilities. He had initially decided to fall victim the following month to a serious bout of flu - but that would have been tantamount to putting himself under house arrest, so instead he had leapt into action and searched online for a nice little hotel. He had quickly found one, the Villa Saint Raphaël, a charming-looking guest house in the centre of Saint-Servan. Locmariaquer had been none too pleased when he got wind of it, but that was a price Dupin was more than happy to pay.

He had arrived in Saint-Malo the previous evening after a leisurely drive through the splendid solitude of inland Brittany to find that his choice of accommodation could not have been better. His room beneath the eaves was wonderful, as was the entire Villa Saint Raphaël together with its spacious garden. It was still quite unclear to Dupin what this 'very special seminar' was going to be about. Neither the pre-circulated documentation nor the genuinely passionate-sounding introductory speech delivered that morning by the Ille-et-Vilaine Prefect hosting the event had thrown any light on the matter. She had burred something about 'improving the operative practical working relationships' between the four *départements*, before adding with a smirk that the 'most important thing of all' was to 'get to

know one another better in the relaxed atmosphere of Saint-Malo' and 'spend a few pleasant and constructive days together.' She had said this in all seriousness. And it chimed with the truly impressive 'social programme', which Nolwenn and Riwal had suspected was aimed by the uppity folk of Saint-Malo not least at burnishing their own image. 'They won't hesitate to turn a police seminar into a PR show.' An unkind interpretation, Dupin had thought: if Concarneau had been the venue, they too would have done everything they could to show their region in the best possible light. It was the eternal contest between Brittany's tribes: 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most Breton of us all?' It was a tradition dating from the remote mists of time.

All the same, it was a strange thing to contemplate: all these Prefects and police commissaires gathered together in a single place. Dupin couldn't help thinking of the meeting of the druids in *Astérix & Obélix*.

Dupin headed towards the exit from the market with a deep sigh. 'We start again at 2 o'clock on the dot', Locmariaquer had told him sternly as they left the seminar room. At least it was only a short walk to the Staff College. It occupied a sizeable area, rather like a small village. Four hectares, so the Prefect had declared; superbly situated, close to Saint-Malo's world-famous walled city, the ancient *Ville Close*, and to its equally famous beach.

Dupin's eye was caught by a stall festooned with delicious-looking charcuterie: Breton sausages, entire hams - raw, cooked, smoked.

'Can I help you?' a tall salesman asked.

'I ...' - Dupin was suddenly interrupted by shrill, high-pitched screams. They came from somewhere nearby, it could only be a matter of metres. Appalling screams. Screams of pain. Dupin

jerked around to one side. To his right was an impressive-looking spice stall.

Something was afoot at the far end of the stall, near one of the pillars.

The screams of pain stopped abruptly, only to be replaced by the panic-stricken cries and agitated voices of others.

Dupin rushed towards the scene, ready for action, muscles taut.

The cries of panic came from two women, their faces etched with terror. Bystanders were retreating in horror, some were already rushing away. Chaos was breaking out.

All of a sudden the screaming stopped.

Only now was Dupin able to see that a woman was lying hunched up and motionless on her right-hand side on the polished floor-tiles. Her white linen shirt was a garish red at chest level and bore gashes in several places. Most macabre of all: a knife was sticking out from the area of her heart.

Dupin reached her in a flash, squatted down, put his ear to her mouth, checked her wrist for a pulse, then her neck.

He pulled his phone from his jeans pocket. ‘Commissaire Dupin. I need an ambulance. Right now. Marché de Saint-Servan, next to the big spice stall near the exit. A woman’s been stabbed; no response to my voice.’ He spoke in a professional staccato. ‘Stab wounds in the heart area.’ Taking a quick glance around, he noticed the knife stall he had passed earlier, right next to the spice stall. ‘Kitchen knife. Still in the body. And ...’ - a brief moment of hesitation - ‘get the police here.’

Dupin found a pulse, but only with great difficulty - it was almost imperceptible.

‘A doctor? Is there a doctor here?’ shouted Dupin as loud as he could. He was still kneeling beside the woman. ‘I’m a police officer. This woman is badly injured.’ A few curious bystanders had begun gathering around him, but no one made any attempt to help.

Dupin didn’t hold out much hope. The woman was in an extremely bad way. She wasn’t emitting the slightest sound.

‘She ran that way. The woman who did it.’ A girl of perhaps twelve or thirteen had come up to Dupin and was pointing towards the exit. ‘She ran off that way just now. Then she turned left.’

Dupin stood up quickly.

‘She’s right.’ A short-haired woman of about forty had suddenly appeared by the girl’s side - her mother presumably. ‘Two women were shouting at each other, then one of them started stabbing the other. It happened so fast. She just grabbed a knife from the stall next-door. They were standing right here by the pillar, I saw it all out of the corner of my eye. - Well, go on then, get after her!’

Dupin hesitated: he couldn’t just leave the victim lying there.

‘I’ll take care of her. I’m a teacher, and the first-aider at our school.’ She was already bending over the woman.

Dupin set off in hot pursuit, confident that the police and paramedics would be arriving any minute.

He didn’t have a gun. Big mistake. But he carried on running all the same.

He had reached the exit by now, and turned left onto Rue Georges Clemenceau. And sure enough: he could see a woman running away at breakneck speed.

He increased his pace, and by the time he reached the end of the street he had caught up a few metres. The woman turned left again: Rue de Siam.

Stupidly enough, Dupin still only had a very rough idea of the city's layout, but his instincts told him that they couldn't be very far from the sea; the marina had to be nearby - he had driven past it the previous evening.

The fleeing woman crossed to the other side of the street. She had noticed her pursuer and glanced back at him every now and again, but without slowing down.

She turned into a long straight street.

The gap between them was diminishing: Dupin was in with a real chance. He was straining every muscle. A view of the sea and the marina suddenly opened up between the rows of houses.

Dupin could now see that she was heading for a car-park where the road divided, leaving a long strip down the middle with space for two rows of cars.

The woman ran a few more metres, then squeezed into the gap between two cars. The rear lights of one of the cars flashed a couple of times.

Another twenty metres to go: Dupin needed to speed up.

She was already in the car, the motor was revving furiously.

Only ten more metres.

The car reversed with a jerk, the driver steered sharply to the right, then stamped on the brake. Another moment, and she would be in first gear.

Dupin had now reached the car, a Land Rover, one of the smaller versions, dark blue. He knew he only had a fraction of a second and made a determined grab for the rear offside door-handle, but at that very moment the car lurched forward, he lost his balance and had to let go, the surge in speed threw him to the ground. As he rolled away to his left the Land Rover raced away along the line of parked cars.

Dupin was back on his feet in a flash and immediately gave chase.

Once she reached the end of the parking area the fugitive would be turning left into the stream of traffic, and Dupin hoped she would be forced to slow down.

But he hoped in vain: the blue Land Rover accelerated and shot straight out into the street regardless. Dupin's view was now obscured by the parked vehicles. He heard the roar of the car's engine and then, a split second later, the loud burst of a car horn and the deafening bang of metal against metal, immediately followed by another.

Reaching the end of the car park, Dupin ran out onto the road.

All he could now see of the Land Rover was its rear lights as it took a sharp left at the end of the street.

He took a quick look around. There had been a serious collision. A car appeared to have tried to avoid the Land Rover and had smashed sideways into the parked cars, and then been hit from behind by another vehicle - though this secondary collision appeared to have been much less severe.

Dupin ran to the first car. The driver, a man in his mid thirties, opened the car door.

‘Are you injured?’

‘I - er - I don’t think so, no. Not injured.’

The man looked to be all in one piece. A passer-by who appeared to have witnessed the whole thing came rushing up and produced his mobile. ‘I’ll call an ambulance.’

Various cars going in the opposite direction had also stopped, and some of the drivers had climbed out to offer their help.

Dupin headed straight for a small Peugeot bearing a promising set of rally stripes along its side. A young man with crew-cut hair who had stayed in the car with his window down gazed at him as he approached.

‘Commissaire Georges Dupin’, he declared without further explanation. ‘I need to borrow your car for a while.’

It took the man a moment or two to grasp what Dupin meant. The commissaire’s facial expression, tone of voice and body language all showed beyond doubt that this was no joke.

‘I ...’

‘Get out!’ This was plainly an order, not a request. After a moment’s uncertainty the man complied. Dupin pushed past him and started to get in. ‘And how do I get my car back?’

Dupin was already at the wheel. ‘Collect it later from the Police College.’

He closed the door, started the engine and immediately pushed the accelerator to the floor. The deafening squeal from beneath the bonnet nearly burst his ear drums; no wonder the police called these cars ‘screamers’.

Dupin shot down the road and turned left at the end, only to find himself faced with a maze of streets and alleyways. There was no sign of the Land Rover. Dupin reckoned the fleeing woman would probably stick to main roads. He followed the widest one he could see. After a hundred metres or so it veered to the left and then stayed straight for a while. Two other cars were now in front of him, but making a lightning decision he shot past both of them in a single spurt - the light, compact Peugeot was unbelievably nimble. He soon came to one of the city's main boulevards and decided on the spur of the moment to head away from town rather than towards it.

Dupin knew that what he was doing was probably completely pointless, but reckoned that stopping now would be tantamount to surrendering without a fight.

Heading for a large roundabout with tall trees in the middle he was forced into further hair-raising attempts at overtaking, one of which only just came off.

After the roundabout the road became even wider. Dupin had to brake hard: there was a traffic jam. 'Oh, great!' he exclaimed. There was still no sign of a dark blue Land Rover - though that might have been because of the large school bus a few vehicles ahead of him. Progress was slow; then there was a second roundabout, and after that a large sign pointing the way to the N 176 - the 4-lane Brittany motorway.

All of a sudden, and for no apparent reason, the traffic jam had melted away. In a trice the Peugeot's speedometer was showing 120. Within a matter of seconds Dupin was going to have to decide whether to go east, towards Mont Saint-Michel and Normandy, or west, towards Saint-Brieuc.

'Damn!'

He had only just spat the word out when he thought he could see a largish dark-coloured car a good way ahead of him in the process of joining the N 176 in the direction of Saint-Brieuc. Dupin stayed in the right-hand lane to follow suit. Suddenly his phone rang. Not good timing.

Dupin accelerated hard, provoking a mighty howl from the engine.

A slight curve in the road enabled Dupin to get a better look at the car ahead of him. That was it. No doubt about it. It was a Land Rover. He wasn't going to lose the woman this time.

Or was he? No matter how hard he trod on the accelerator, the needle wouldn't go beyond 170. Little by little the gap between the cars increased, and there was nothing Dupin could do about it. All he could do was watch the woman in the Land Rover draw further and further ahead. 'I don't believe it!' Dupin slammed his fist against the steering wheel.

The game was over. She'd got away from him yet again.

'Fuck!'

The shrill sound of his mobile made itself heard again. He extricated it from his pocket with his right hand. He was still driving at top speed in the overtaking lane, as if determined not to accept defeat.

'Yes?!' he shouted angrily.

'Locmariaquer here.' His tone was decidedly sharp. 'We've now been waiting for you for eighteen minutes. We're supposed to be working in pairs this afternoon: when can we expect to be enjoying your illustrious company?'

‘I’m just ...’ Dupin was tempted to hang up, but that wouldn’t be a good idea. There was no way around it: he was going to have to explain what had happened.

‘Dupin, your behaviour is simply outrageous! You ...’

‘There’s been a serious knife attack. At the Marché de Saint-Servan. Just a short while ago. I ...’ - Dupin had to make it absolutely clear that he’d had no choice but to intervene - ‘I more or less witnessed the attack’; at the same time, though, he obviously had to avoid giving any impression that his involvement had somehow been pre-planned. ‘Needless to say, I was there purely by chance. One woman stabbed another. She fled the scene, and I was obliged to give chase, as per ...’

The Prefect interrupted him, now in a very different tone of voice. ‘Ah! That must be why our host and her commissaire suddenly went rushing off. So what exactly happened, Dupin?’

Dupin’s answer was perfectly honest: ‘That’s all I know, Monsieur le Préfet.’ It was always helpful to address the Prefect by his title: even after nine years he still couldn’t get his tongue around the man’s name.

‘Where are you now?’

‘I’m on the N 176 heading towards Saint-Brieuc, Monsieur le Préfet. I took up the chase, but unfortunately’ - he had to come out with it - ‘I lost her.’

‘You *lost* her? How the hell did that happen?’

Dupin had switched back to the inside lane and was keeping an eye out for the next exit. Like it or not, his only option now was to turn back.

‘I’m in a very small car. 170 is all it can manage.’

‘What d’you mean?! Why are you driving a very small ...’

‘I’ll explain later, Monsieur le Préfet. I don’t have a hands-free set-up here, and I need to concentrate on the road.’

‘Fair enough. I’ll see you here later on, then. I ...’

Dupin hung up.

Feeling deeply frustrated, he dumped his phone on the passenger seat - but it immediately started ringing again.

It was an unknown number.

‘Yes?’

‘Commissaire Louane Huppert here.’ Her tone of voice was pointedly matter-of-fact. ‘Your colleague from the seminar.’

The Saint-Malo commissaire.

‘I’m listening.’

‘I’m at the crime scene, Commissaire. Where the murder occurred that you ...’

‘So she’s dead?!’

‘Yes. Blanche Trouin died at the scene. A school teacher reported that a commissaire from Concarneau had left her to look after the badly injured victim and ...’

‘Was she already dead when the paramedics arrived?’
Commissaire Huppert ignored his question.

‘... and gone in pursuit of the murderer, thereby provoking a collision involving two vehicles. Witnesses told my officers it looked like something from an action movie. That whole part of town is in complete chaos. It ...’

‘So you already know who the victim is?’

‘Yes, we do. And not only that - we also know who killed her.’

Dupin was completely baffled. ‘You mean you know who’s driving the dark blue Land Rover I’ve just been pursuing on the N 176?!’

‘You’ve been doing *what?*’

‘Who was it?’

‘So the story about the “borrowed” car is true as well? A Peugeot 208?’

‘There was a real chance I could catch the woman ...’ Dupin clearly had to come up with a compelling justification for commandeering the car - but the stupid part was that he’d find himself in even deeper water if he put too much emphasis on his chances of catching her. ‘But she managed to get away all the same. - So who was she?’

‘You let her get away?!’

‘This car I’m in does 170 max. - You know the names of the victim *and* the murderer, is that right?’

‘Which direction - Saint-Brieuc or Normandy?’

‘Saint-Brieuc.’

‘Approximately where did you lose her?’

‘Near the Quévert exit.’

‘Good’, said Commissaire Huppert, before responding at long last to Dupin’s questions: ‘The victim, Blanche Trouin, is a well-

known chef. She runs a restaurant in Dinard, ‘Le Désir’.
Michelin star. Forty-four years old.’

‘And the perpetrator?’

‘Lucille Trouin.’

Dupin must have misheard.

‘What?!’

‘Her sister. Two years younger, also a chef, and just as
successful. She has a restaurant in Saint-Malo. No star as yet, but
on the verge of getting one.’

Dupin fell silent. The story was just too weird. Meanwhile he had
exited from the N 176.

‘You are presumably aware that you had absolutely no authority
to proceed as you did.’

This wasn’t a question, not even a rhetorical one - it was a plain
statement of fact.

‘I’m very well aware of that’ - a show of marked friendliness
would clearly not go amiss in this situation - ‘but I wanted to
help. I just happened to be on the spot. And anyway’ - this
argument had only just occurred to him - ‘isn’t our seminar all
about enhancing the co-operation between us? That’s what was
in my mind when I decided to give chase.’

This was a bit over the top, so he quickly changed the subject.

‘So do you already know what actually happened at the market-
place? Are there any pointers yet as to why the younger sister did
this?’

‘Dupin,’ - no ‘Commissaire’, no ‘Monsieur’ - ‘I want you to return to the market right now. To Blanche Trouin’s spice stall. I’ll see you there in a few minutes.’

‘The stall where it happened belonged to the victim?!’

Commissaire Huppert had already hung up.

At least the conversation had turned out reasonably well as regards his ‘unauthorised activity’.

He had reached a large roundabout - there seemed to be hundreds of them around here - and he needed to get his bearings. He had to get back to Saint-Servan by the fastest possible route.

The best thing would be to park where the woman’s Land Rover had been. Lucille Trouin. The woman who had stabbed her elder sister to death amidst the bustle of the market. What kind of a story was this, for heaven’s sake? Statistically speaking, the majority of murders did indeed occur in a domestic context. But what had happened between these two sisters? What terrible tragedy lurked behind all of this?

Barely ten minutes later Dupin had already parked the car in the parking area near the marina. The dark blue Land Rover had stood only a short distance away. On the road into town he had counted five police cars rushing in the opposite direction at breakneck speed and with their blue lights flashing in the hope of catching up with the younger sister, though she was probably already way too far ahead of them.

Dupin could see the market building now.

He reached the spice stall. There was a powerful smell of coriander, ginger, cardamom, caraway seeds - a bit like a particularly exotic curry. The entire area had been cordoned off and the stall-holders ordered to leave.

An impressively large number of people had gathered at the crime scene. At least a dozen police officers, CSI people, paramedics from the two ambulances parked immediately outside the market entrance, and a somewhat forlorn-looking forensic pathologist standing by the corpse, apparently just waiting. Dupin caught sight of the first-aider and her daughter, who were being looked after by a policewoman at the edge of the group.

Commissaire Huppert was standing a little apart, talking to one of the paramedics. She was very tall, almost as tall as Dupin himself, slender, light brown hair fastened into a pigtail, green eyes, alert and watchful.

‘Ok then, go ahead, take the body to the mortuary for the PM.’

The paramedic went across to the pathologist, and Huppert turned to Dupin. ‘There’s not much for the forensics people to do. We’re already fully in the picture: name of the victim, cause of death, time of death. We even know who the perpetrator is. All we need to do now’ - her tone was completely unruffled and matter-of-fact - ‘is to establish the motive and arrest the fugitive. Everyone knows the sisters couldn’t stand each other. But ...’ She paused, and gazed earnestly at Dupin. ‘Right then, Dupin, what exactly did you see? What did you hear? How much of what happened did you witness?’

‘I just heard the screams. I didn’t see anything of the row or the actual stabbing.’ He gave a brief rundown of events, from the victim’s first screams through to his pursuit of the suspect, first on foot and then by car. Commissaire Huppert listened attentively.

‘The first-aider was on the spot and immediately took over.’ Dupin nodded towards the woman.

‘I know. There was nothing she could do. By the time the paramedics arrived Blanche Trouin was already dead.’

The words were barely out of her mouth when Dupin’s phone rang. He yanked it from his trouser pocket. Not exactly an opportune moment - but it was Nolwenn.

‘One moment - I’ll be right back.’

Before Commissaire Huppert could respond he had moved aside a few paces. He lowered his voice. ‘This isn’t a good ...’

‘Was it you?’

‘What?!’

‘This car chase on the N 176?’

‘I simply ...’ She had presumably heard about it via the police radio network: the Land Rover would have been put on the Alert list, the entire Breton police force would know about it by now.

‘You let her get away?!’ Nolwenn was never slow to criticise Dupin’s actions - but this particular challenge had sounded unusually sharp. ‘There’s just one thing I want to say to you’, she continued with asperity. ‘Stay out of it, Monsieur le Commissaire! It’s Saint-Malo’s business. And they’re a cocksure bunch anyway. What’s more, they do things very differently up there.’

His marvellous assistant had never before demanded that he stay out of an investigation: her ambivalent feelings about Saint-Malo appeared to be taking on a curious form.

‘I’m talking to Commissaire Huppert at this particular moment, Nolwenn. At the crime scene.’

‘Don’t get involved, Monsieur le Commissaire. You risk getting into serious bother. Concentrate on the seminar, then just get

back here.’ Her voice took on a more conciliatory tone. ‘Or concentrate on the culinary side of things: some fabulous dinners are included in the social programme.’

‘I need to get on with things here, Nolwenn.’ He paused for a moment rather than hang up straightaway: he didn’t want to come across as too harsh.

‘Goodbye for now, Monsieur le Commissaire.’ Dupin tucked his phone back in his trouser pocket. Nolwenn was quite right, of course. Getting involved could indeed bring him a lot of trouble.

During the call he’d taken a surreptitious look around to see if he could spot the pale-blue paper bag containing his cheese, which he must have put down somewhere. But there was no sign of it.

He went back to Huppert, who had not taken her eyes off him the whole time.

‘My PA in Concarneau ...’

‘Nolwenn.’

A look of pride flitted across Dupin’s face: Nolwenn’s renown appeared to have spread throughout the whole of Brittany.

‘What did you mean just now when you said that everyone knew the sisters couldn’t stand each other?’ he asked.

‘Put it this way: they were in bitter competition with each other, publicly as well as privately. They were sworn rivals, and made no attempt to conceal it.’

‘But it must have gone well beyond any common-or-garden rivalry. All siblings try to outdo each other. Something really big must have happened to cause things to come to a head so dramatically.’

‘No doubt’, retorted Huppert in a dry tone that seemed to imply that what she actually meant was ‘How banal!’

‘Do they both have families? Relationships, children?’

‘No children, either of them. Both their parents are dead. The older sister was married; I’ll be calling on her husband pretty well straightaway. The younger one’s in a long-term relationship. I’ll visit her partner afterwards. - And *you* are to drive the car you “borrowed” to the Police Staff College, as per your promise to its owner.’ Huppert was clearly intent on doing things on her own. ‘And then it’s back to the classroom.’

She didn’t seem to be saying this to provoke him; there was no ironic undertone, at any rate.

‘To my regret I won’t be able to take any further part in the seminar’, she continued, turning away from Dupin. ‘To my very great regret.’

Dupin had been on the verge of making a vigorous protest as soon as she told him that he should return to the ‘classroom’ - but tough though it was, he simply had to accept that the case belonged to his Saint-Malo colleague; she was now free of the seminar, and he was firmly stuck with it.

Dupin had entered Seminar Room B12 in the Staff College’s main building at 3.15pm precisely with a mixture of reluctance and resignation.

With Commissaire Huppert and the host Prefect from Rennes now gone, there were only five of them left. The Morbihan commissaire had had to pull out at the last minute because of a

boat accident - and it was she that Dupin had been most curious about. She had replaced Commissaire Sylvaine Rose following the latter's appointment the previous year as Prefect of Loire-Atlantique, a *département* that was actually part of Brittany but had been snatched away in the 1980s in the course of administrative reforms.

No one had said a word about the events at the market when Dupin entered the room - the day's group-work had immediately started up again. Dupin had been paired with the commissaire from Côtes d'Armoire, who seemed pleasant enough. Their task had been to jot down on small cards of various different colours those areas where they felt that co-operation between the four *départements* could be improved, and those areas of interaction between commissaire and Prefect that exhibited 'optimisation potential'. Dupin had been torn between filling in none of the cards, and filling in dozens of them. His thoughts had in any case constantly strayed to the appalling murder and to the two sisters.

Hiding his smartphone under his desk he had done some research on the Trouin sisters and their restaurants. It all seemed enormously impressive. Blanche especially, the murdered older sister, seemed to have been a genuine top dog. Not least thanks to the Michelin star she had been awarded two years earlier, she had clearly been well on the way to joining the élite group of *Grands Chefs* who were as popular and highly esteemed in France as rock stars and major artists - and which still included very few women. He had come across an astonishing number of articles and interviews in well-known national and international newspapers and magazines. There were numerous articles on the younger sister too: Lucille Trouin appeared to be not very far behind Blanche. Both had clearly been inspired by their father, who had also been a chef, albeit in a simple but extremely popular bistro. Utterances by both sisters, but mainly by Lucille,

making no secret of their intense rivalry were much quoted and commented on. They really had made no attempt to hide it. No sooner had the elder sister been awarded her Michelin star than the younger one had trumpeted from the rooftops that she would soon be getting one too. In one interview Lucille Trouin had spoken of her older sister's 'unfair advantage' in being able to draw on a collection of recipes bequeathed to her by their father. It appeared that Blanche had already discovered her passion for cooking in her teens, whereas it had taken Lucille until her mid-twenties. Dupin hadn't found out much about the father. And he had discovered nothing beyond the sisters' open rivalry that looked to have any bearing on the drastic escalation that had taken place. Needless to say, he had also checked to see whether there was any further news regarding the hunt for Lucille Trouin, which was now getting massive coverage everywhere, but the police appeared to have had no success as yet.

The first day of the seminar had come to a close at 5.15 with a few words of 'positive motivation' from the group leader.

'Come on, Dupin, spill the beans', his seminar partner Commissaire Gaston Nedellec had urged him as soon as the team leader had left the room, 'give use the full story.' All the other participants had stayed in their seats, agog with curiosity, and Dupin had been quite happy to recount the details yet again, whereupon all had gone their separate ways.

The whole team - everyone now spoke solely in terms of 'the team' - was scheduled to meet at 6.30 at the Porte Saint-Louis in the Old Town for the opening event of the Social Programme, a guided tour. Dupin had been tempted to give it a miss, of course, but had decided that it would be unwise to absent himself on the very first evening.

Getting to the rendezvous a couple of minutes late, he set off at a fast pace in the direction of the southernmost gateway, one of the eight mighty gates that afforded passage through the towering ramparts and gave access to the Old Town.

Heavy squalls were coming in from the open sea, heavy with salt and iodine, and you could see how they were lashing the Atlantic into a frenzy and driving the colossal waves towards the shore. The sky was still an immaculate blue. To the left was a gigantic mole stretching in an elegant curve from the corner of the city wall far out into the broad estuary of the Rance towards Dinard.

The peak season hadn't yet begun, but there were already visitors from far and wide: Saint-Malo was a popular holiday destination all year round, especially for short stays. On the moles it was easy to distinguish between locals and visitors. It was the same spectacle all over Brittany. People not in the know would venture to the very end of the moles to catch spectacular views of the raging sea - and then it would happen: every now and again, driven by the incoming tide and the fierce winds, a breaker would smash against the mole with such violence that it would gush right over the top of it in swirling torrents accompanied by gigantic clouds of spray. Anyone standing on that part of the mole experienced nature in the raw - they might just as well have gone swimming in the actual sea. No matter what you were wearing you were immediately drenched through and through, right down to your socks and underwear. Dupin watched as a couple let out a loud scream and ran back in panic.

He reached the gateway. The 'team' had taken refuge within it as it offered a measure of protection from the wind. Locmariaquer, who looked unduly puffed up in his extravagantly decorated uniform, could't resist a rebuke: 'Once again, Commissaire, the only person we've had to wait for is you! - And this kind

gentleman’, he continued, pointing to a smallish man with narrow shoulders, scattered remnants of hair, round glasses and clad in an old tweed jacket, ‘will conduct us around the city walls - the famous *tour des remparts* - and tell us something about Saint-Malo. Also ...’

A wiry-looking woman who wasn’t one of the ‘team’, and whom Dupin hadn’t yet noticed, cleared her throat noisily. ‘This is Étienne Monnier, the widely renowned historian of Saint-Malo’ - the man nodded by way of confirmation - ‘and it’s a real privilege for us that he is here in person to guide us through the glorious history of our city.’

‘She’s one of Commissaire Huppert’s assistants’, Nedellec whispered to Dupin, ‘she’s standing in for our hosts. No news about Lucille Trouin as yet, by the way: I’ve just asked. If there were, I’m sure this woman would have known.’

Dupin gave him a friendly nod.

‘If we’re finally all here,’ the woman continued, ‘let’s go through this evening’s programme. Following the guided tour we’ll be visiting the “Maison du Beurre” belonging to Yves Bordier, the world-renowned and multi-award-winning butter producer. We’ll take in the exhibition there on the cultural history of butter, then we’ll take supper in his bistro, “Autour du Beurre”.’

Dupin was absolutely starving: the wonderful home-baked confection he had enjoyed for breakfast that morning at the Villa Saint Raphaël was the only thing he had eaten all day. Needless to say, he already knew all about Yves Bordier’s butter - it had a legendary reputation. And in any case, butter was universally recognised as a veritable emblem of Brittany, far above and beyond its status as a major foodstuff.

‘I should like to emphasise’, she added, pausing to create a suitably dramatic effect, ‘that we have managed to devise a social programme perfectly attuned to the occasion. And I must tell you that this is very largely thanks to our Prefect. It’s a programme that will give you a better idea of some of the extraordinary attractions and achievements that we have to offer here, especially in the gastronomic field. I’m referring here to the culinary skills of some of the region’s most important chefs - important not only for this region, but for Brittany as a whole, indeed for the entire nation. They will all be opening their doors to us.’ She broke off in embarrassment. ‘Well, not quite all of them, of course. Blanche Trouin’s doors will unfortunately remain permanently closed, and we decided at once to cancel our booking at ‘La Noblesse’, the restaurant belonging to Lucille Trouin.’ She was now clearly in a state of considerable discomfort. ‘Be that as it may, quite apart from our restaurant visits you will have ample opportunity to experience other Saint-Malo specialities. Many of them are to be found in the Rue de l’Orme, where we’ll be heading in a moment or two - not least Bertrand Larcher’s Japanese-Breton restaurant, where we’ll be eating tomorrow. The Rue de l’Orme counts more or less as the culinary centre of the city.’

Dupin had to admit that, whatever one might think about the seminar itself, the ‘social programme’ was certainly impressive - at least, the gastronomic part was.

‘Our cuisine, a shining light throughout the entire world, has a motto: *Voyages et aventures* - “Journeys and adventures”. It was coined by the chef at “La Placide”, where we’ll be eating on the final evening. Journeying and bold adventure have always been at the heart of our city’s history, too - daring ventures and their successful conclusion.’

Dupin liked the motto despite the accompanying overblown pathos. It could well serve for life as a whole: a journey, an adventure - that's what it was all about.

‘Off we go then’, said the woman, making a move herself. ‘This way, please. We’re going up onto the ramparts. It’s a bit of a climb!’

Steep steps - lots of them. Dupin was the last to mount them.

The historian leading the group alongside Commissaire Huppert’s assistant now took over, speaking in a sonorous tone and with a studied air of dignified scholarliness. ‘Well now - a brief comment, if I may, regarding the murder that is currently so much on our minds. I imagine you are all aware of the fact that from earliest antiquity human history positively teems with dramatic conflicts between siblings.’

He had come to a halt to make this superfluous observation.

‘But to come to the real matter in hand,’ he continued, setting off once again, ‘in contrast to the city centre, the ramparts - which date in part from the twelfth century -survived the terrible destruction of the Second World War largely unscathed. The classic mansions of the eighteenth-century shipowners that characterise the cityscape’ - he made a well-practised flourish in the direction of the town centre and its church - ‘were all meticulously reconstructed after the war. - But no enemy has *ever* succeeded in breaching our city walls! Saint-Malo has resisted every onslaught!’

Commissaire Nedellec had dropped back to join Dupin, while Locmariaquer and the other two Prefects had moved closer to the small group at the front.

‘Chateaubriand - one of the city’s most illustrious sons and one of the most remarkable French authors of all time - pointed out that Saint-Malo’s *Ville Close*, although no larger in surface area than the Tuileries garden in Paris, had given the world a greater number of famous personalities than many other, much larger cities.’

Their guide’s ability to lend impressive emphasis to his pronouncements despite the steepness of the steps was extraordinary.

‘In addition to the privateers who ruled the world’s oceans for more than three hundred years, many world-famous explorers, physicists, doctors and writers were born here. Jacques Cartier, for instance, who discovered Canada - a country with which we still have the closest possible links. Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis explored the Arctic, René Duguay-Trouin captured Rio de Janeiro. - The entire world’s at your finger-tips here in Saint-Malo!’

‘Trouin’, murmured Commissaire Nedellec. ‘Like the two sisters.’

[END OF SAMPLE]