

French Coast

by Anita Hughes

This excerpt is from chapter three of *French Coast* by Anita Hughes.

Serena walked through the lobby and thought her legs would collapse. Her throat was dry and her head pounded. She stumbled to the bar and sank onto a leather stool, holding the marble counter to stop the room from spinning.

"Can I help you?" the bartender asked.

"Just a glass of water," Serena replied, touching her hand to her forehead.

"You look like you could use something stronger," said a young woman with thick bangs and bouncy brown hair perched on the stool next to her. She ordered two gin and tonics and scooped up a handful of pistachios.

"I'm sorry," Serena said, and shook her head. "Have we met?"

"I saw you arguing with reception," the girl replied. "It's true what people say about the French, they're cold as icicles and just as sharp. I expect they have blue blood running through their veins."

"My reservation is for next week," Serena sighed. "I tried everything, but the man wouldn't budge; I'm going to have to sleep in a fishing boat."

"Hardly." The girl raised her eyebrow. She had hazel eyes and creamy white skin. She wore a cotton sundress and had a silver necklace around her neck. "The fishermen would charge a hundred euros to step foot in a boat. It's the Cannes Film Festival; even the pigeons know how to gouge the tourists."

"I'm here to write a story for *Vogue*," Serena replied. "If I don't have a room I'm going to lose the most important assignment of my career."

"I came to get that *je ne sais quoi*, but so far I've gotten a haircut that makes me look like a third grader and spent a hundred and fifty euros

on a dress you could buy at Woolworth's."

"What do you mean?" Serena asked.

"You know, that air that French women have, like some impossibly expensive perfume. I grew up watching old movies with Catherine Deneuve and Brigitte Bardot. I've always wanted to be one of those women with dark hooded eyes who looks sexy blowing smoke rings."

"No one thinks smoking is sexy anymore," Serena argued.

"Have you been to the nightclubs?" the girl asked, laughing.

"You could get cancer standing at the door. I just want to learn how to hold a cigarette and wear my hair and talk with a French accent."

"Why?" Serena asked, suddenly intrigued. The girl looked vaguely familiar, as if she'd seen her face in a magazine. But she didn't have a model's figure and Serena couldn't remember seeing her on a movie screen.

"It's a long story, perhaps another time," the girl said slowly.

"On you that jumpsuit belongs on the catwalk; on me it would look like I just finished finger painting. Some people have 'it,' others don't. I may as well give up and go home."

"If you're giving up your room, I'll take it," Serena finished her drink, feeling a little light-headed. "My editor in chief will kill me if I miss this story."

"How exciting that you work at *Vogue*; you must know everything about fashion," the girl mused. "I bet you know exactly what to wear without going through your closet and deciding your whole wardrobe is hopeless and should be donated to the HOPE Foundation."

"I mainly write celebrity interviews and features," Serena sighed, flashing on Yvette. "I'm here to interview Yvette Renault; she's staying in a suite on the seventh floor."

"I'm staying in the Cary Grant Suite on the seventh floor!" the girl

exclaimed. "Six rooms of pink marble floors and ivory silk sofas and a view of the whole coast." She gazed at Serena and suddenly her eyes sparkled. "You can stay with me, I've got an extra bedroom."

"I couldn't do that." Serena shook her head.

"You can share all your wisdom," the girl continued enthusiastically. "You can teach me to be one of those women salesgirls fight over instead of someone they snicker about when I'm in the dressing room."

"Why would you want to share your suite with a complete stranger?" Serena asked curiously. She searched the girl's face to see if she was hiding something. Maybe she ran a drug ring or was the madame for a house of high-class call girls.

"I grew up in British boarding schools and I never learned to wear anything except a field hockey skirt," the girl replied. "I can pick your brain and learn how to coordinate an outfit. You can teach me how to accessorize and which styles flatter my shape."

"Your shape is lovely," Serena said, and smiled, glancing at her rounded arms and small waist.

"I have a fondness for fish and chips and Cadbury chocolate."

The girl ate another handful of pistachios. "You can teach me to like spinach salads with tofu."

"I hate tofu," Serena said, grinning. Suddenly the jet lag washed over her like a wave and she longed to rest her head on a feathery pillow. "Okay, I accept. I'm Serena Woods."

"Zoe," the girl replied, glancing at the marble bar. "Zoe Pistachio."

"Pistachio?" Serena raised her eyebrow.

"It's an old family name," the girl said, and she strode toward the concierge. "Let's get you a key."

Serena opened her eyes and gazed at the scalloped light fixture above the bed. She turned her head and saw beige silk drapes pulled back to reveal white sailboats on a pale blue ocean. Serena sat against the ivory satin headboard, trying to remember where she was. She recalled taking the private elevator to the seventh floor and entering double white doors. She remembered Zoe ushering her into the second bedroom, showing her towels, robes, and an array of lotions. She vaguely remembered hanging up her jumpsuit, turning back the covers, and climbing under Egyptian cotton sheets.

Now Serena glanced at the canopied bed, at the gold velvet love seat, at the crystal vase of birds of paradise, and thought she was crazy. How could she have accepted the invitation to stay in a suite with a complete stranger? Serena pulled on a white velour Carlton robe and padded into the living room. She was going to tell Zoe she appreciated her kindness but she couldn't accept her offer any longer. She'd go down to reception and demand the manager call Chelsea's assistant and sort out her room.

The living room had beige marble floors and ivory sofas and a round glass table resting on a stone pedestal. French doors opened onto a marble balcony with chaise lounges and wicker chairs. Serena smelled freshly cut pineapple and

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Synopsis

Serena has the job she's always dreamed of and Chase, the man her heart never dared to. As a new editor at Vogue, she bags the biggest interview of the year with Yvette Renault, the infamous former editor of French Vogue, in The Carlton-InterContinental Hotel during the Cannes Film Festival. She eagerly jets off to France while Chase stays home, working with her father, a former senator, on his upcoming mayoral campaign.

Everything feels unbelievably perfect...until it doesn't. The hotel loses her reservation hours

before her big interview. Serena fears that she'll have to go home without her story, but then she meets Zoe, a quirky young woman staying in the suite below Yvette's who invites Serena to stay with her. Serena is grateful for her mysterious roommate's generosity, but it seems that there's more to her story than meets the eye. To make matters worse, soon after arriving in Cannes, Serena learns a shocking secret about her parents' marriage, and it isn't long before she begins to question her own relationship. With her deadline looming and pressure mounting, Serena will

have to use her investigative journalism skills, new friendships, and a little luck to get her life and love back on track. Fast paced and impeccably written, French Coast will draw readers in to the intoxicating world of the Cote D'Azur. Hughes' beautiful prose and sense imagery bring the food, fashion, and feel of the ocean to life in this audacious new novel.

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dark roasted coffee and saw a sideboard heaped with platters of watermelon, grapes, minicroissants, and pots of raspberry jam.

Serena suddenly realized she was starving. She piled a plate with English muffins, strips of bacon, and fluffy scrambled eggs. Then she poured a demitasse of rich black coffee and sat in a Louis XVI chair.

"Jet lag is a killer," Zoe said as she entered the living room. She wore a navy one-piece bathing suit and a large straw hat. Her cheeks were smeared with suntan lotion and a pair of sunglasses were propped on her forehead. "The first few days I was here I wanted porridge and toast and marmalade for dinner."

"I didn't mean to eat your food," Serena said, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "It smelled so good and I was starving."

"They refill the sideboard every four hours," Zoe shrugged.

"Herb omelets, soufflés, mini-éclairs, and cheesecakes. I keep telling them I'm on a diet and they keep bringing crustless sandwiches and creamy desserts."

"You don't need to be on a diet," Serena shook her head.

"According to fashion magazines ninety percent of women are on a diet their whole lives," Zoe spread a piece of toast with strawberry jam. "I'd stay and eat but I'm late for a waterskiing lesson."

"What time is it?" Serena gazed outside, suddenly noticing that the beach was full of sunbathers lying on white lounges.

"Two p.m.," Zoe replied. "I have a waterskiing lesson followed by a bicycle tour of Cannes and a trip to the outdoor markets. Maybe we can

go to a nightclub to night, and you can teach me to say sexy things in French?"

"Two o'clock!" Serena jumped up. "My appointment with Yvette is at three and my hair looks like it's been attacked by hornets."

"If you need to borrow any clothes or makeup it's all in my closet," Zoe said, grabbing her room key and walking to the door.

"I really can't stay here," Serena replied. "We don't know each other and this suite must cost a fortune."

"You have to stay, you're going to turn me into Katie Holmes. Think of all the delicious fruit and pastries going to waste if you don't." Zoe surveyed the sideboard. "We'll trade our personal information tonight, by morning we'll be BFFs."

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