

The French Aristocrat's Baby
Christina Hollis



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Christina Hollis

The French Aristocrat's Baby

Аннотация

One night, and she's pregnant with the Count's child... Struggling chef Gwen flew to France to fulfil her dreams – she'd rather work herself into the ground than return to her smothering family. But all her determination can't help her resist the intense gaze of Count Etienne Moreau...After an explosive night, Etienne wants Gwen as his mistress – she's the perfect antidote to cold-blooded business deals. But proud Gwen is outraged – in Etienne's world money might buy him anything, but this girl is not for sale! But neither has bargained on an unexpected arrival...

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A tingle of excitement ran along every nerve in her body.

Nice girls like her weren't supposed to have irresistible physical yearnings like this. Nice girls stayed at home, minding the village shop. They didn't dress in midnight-blue velvet and gallivant about in front of foreign aristocracy. Gwen knew her family would be speechless at the mere thought of it. They had made enough fuss when her eldest brother Glyn married a girl from Bristol and moved across the river.

Mrs Williams' sisters had always warned her that Gwen had a wayward streak, and with an unusual surge of devilment Gwen wondered if they might be right...

Christina Hollis was born in Somerset, and now lives in the idyllic Wye valley. She was born reading, and her childhood dream was to become a writer. This was realised when she became a successful journalist and lecturer in organic horticulture. Then she gave it all up to become a full-time mother of two and run half an acre of productive country garden.

Writing Mills & Boon® romances is another ambition realised. It fills most of her time, in between complicated rural school runs. The rest of her life is divided among garden and kitchen, either growing fruit and vegetables or cooking with them. Her daughter's cat always closely supervises everything she does around the home, from typing to picking strawberries!

You can learn more about Christina and her writing at www.christinahollis.com

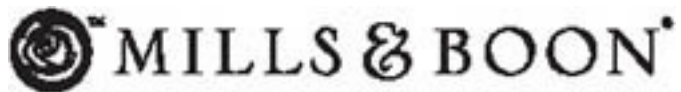
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The French Aristocrat's Baby

By

Christina Hollis



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CHAPTER ONE

AN awful racket bounced Gwen out of bed before she was fully awake. Stumbling around her bedroom in the afternoon heat, she tried to find her clock. When she did, it was silent. The ringing was coming from somewhere else. It must be her mobile. In horror, Gwen realised she had fallen onto the bed too exhausted to switch on her alarm. She had overslept, and was already at least an hour behind schedule. Now it sounded as if one of her few remaining members of staff was phoning about the evening shift. With growing dread, she searched frantically for her phone. Finally she tracked it down. It was in the pocket of her apron, at the bottom of her washing basket.

‘Gwenno! What took you so long to answer the phone, love?’ For once, Gwen was glad her mother rang every day.

‘Mam! It’s great to hear from you, but this time I *really* can’t stop—I’ve got my hands full, getting ready for this big flash party tonight. I was terrified you were one of the kitchen staff, calling in sick!’ She gasped, and then made a face. Blurting out the truth to her mother like that was a big mistake. Everyone back at home had to go on thinking she was making a success of her new life. They *had* to... ‘That is—I mean... I’ve got more than enough people working for me, but each of them has their own speciality. I can’t afford to lose a single person!’ She finished in a rush, her fingers crossed. In reality, Gwen was desperate to cut costs.

Rather than employ enough staff, she was currently doing the work of at least three people. Trying to save money was costing her a lot. She was so exhausted, there had been a real danger she might have dozed off during the party preparations. That was why she had dashed home to snatch a twenty-minute nap in the middle of the day. She checked her watch, and discovered with horror she had been asleep for nearly an hour and a half.

‘My God, I should be at the restaurant! We’ll never open in time! I’ve got so much to do!’

Dashing around the room, she tried to gather together her clothes for the evening with one hand, while the other clamped the mobile to her ear.

Gwen’s mother had an answer for everything. This disaster was no exception.

‘You’ve told us all about your dozens of staff, Gwenno. Let them start earning all that money you pay them!’

‘Dozens of staff? Er...yes, yes, of course I have...it’s just that I like to do as much as I can myself. It’s my own fault for loving the job so much. I’m still not used to being sole owner of the restaurant, and sometimes it gets a bit much,’ Gwen said quickly, the reply sounding horribly false to her own ears. Was that a tinge of suspicion she heard in her mother’s voice?

‘We didn’t lend you all that money to run yourself into the ground, Gwenno. It was supposed to help you become Le Rossignol’s chef-patron.’ Mrs Williams said each foreign word carefully. ‘See? We’re all practising for when we come over to

visit you!'

Gwen's heart hit the floor, but she managed to manufacture a careless laugh.

'Great! I can't wait to see you all again. It's been months!'

'It's been four months, three weeks and five days since you finally managed to buy the restaurant,' Mrs Williams said. She sounded almost as proud as Gwen felt, when she had the energy. 'And there was me and your dad worried to death you'd given up a good steady future with us in the shop to chase some silly dream!'

Gwen wanted to cry, but didn't dare. The thought of her family discovering the truth behind her supposedly successful new life in Malotte was more than her pride could stand. She was adamant she could make a success of the business, but times were hard. Every booking had to be treated with great care. Much to Gwen's disgust, that included tonight's reception for a hideous countess. The horrible woman only wanted to make a good impression on her rich stepson. She wasn't interested in Gwen's skill or the restaurant, merely in her own reputation.

Gwen could only hope the man in question would be more appreciative.

Etienne Moreau's day was equally busy, but his timetable ran according to his own schedule. That was exactly as he liked it. Even his social life now ran like clockwork, but he was increasingly finding socialising to be a sick joke these days. People considered his name a big attraction on a charity

invitation list, so he sometimes felt obliged to give them what they wanted. *If only I weren't always surrounded by apple-polishers*, he thought, scrubbing long, strong fingers irritably through his thatch of dark hair. A proper conversation wasn't so much to ask, was it? He disliked having to be constantly on the lookout for lame-duck projects, or women on the make.

The country's grandest money men had invited Etienne onto their board of directors. Their idea had been to simply use his title to impress their shareholders, nothing more. Within days they had discovered their mistake. Etienne had been born into privilege, but that had never been enough for him. His late father had considered work undignified, but Etienne had never been satisfied to be simply a name on some headed notepaper.

He sighed. In exactly ninety minutes' time, a servant would be ready to step forward as Etienne descended the main staircase of his chateau. The man would insert a freshly picked carnation into his master's buttonhole before opening the front door. It had been the same in his late father's time, and for as far back as anyone could remember, so Etienne, albeit reluctantly, humoured his faithful staff. In one brief, heart-stopping moment a couple of years ago, he had imagined his own son and heir taking over, in his turn.

But that was before Etienne had learned the truth about a lot of things, including human nature. Now he focused only on his work, and his ruthless single-minded approach had resulted in endless successes. In fact, for a man with nothing

to prove, Etienne was proving unstoppable. A shame that even this was beginning to pall. *I need to find a new challenge*, he thought. He had been brought up to slip smoothly into the role of Count of Malotte. Now he was actually in charge, the largely ceremonial role gave him too much time to brood. He wanted distraction. Perhaps this evening's engagement might offer something different?

Gwen showered and dressed in a flash. Unable to face the pile of unopened letters on her dressing table, she stuffed them into a drawer. Lately, they contained nothing but bad news. Her new life was turning out to have some hard, horrible moments, but she was determined not to give up. Opening her wardrobe, she took out the dress she would change into before the guests arrived at Le Rossignol that evening. Gwen's clients at her restaurant expected a total dining experience. That included exchanging small talk with a calm and assured chef-patron. It was the only part of her job Gwen wasn't keen on, but it was turning out to be a very important source of new business. She had to persevere, and it was tough.

Gwen had always dreamed of becoming the chef in a top-class restaurant. She had managed it in record time by going into partnership with her best friend from catering college. Carys had supplied the glamour and business sense. Gwen had done the cooking, and kept her head down. Their system had worked perfectly, until her partner's romantic adventures had thrown the business into chaos. Carys had vanished, leaving Gwen high and

dry. Unable to find another partner, Gwen had been faced with a stark choice. She could sell up and go home. That would mean admitting to her parents that ‘The Le Rossignol affair’, as they called it, was a big mistake. Or she could mortgage herself to the hilt and make her new life work, alone. One path led back to the safety of the village shop where she had been born. The other route disappeared into an unknown future, but at least it was her own. She would be independent, without the need to rely on other people.

Gwen had found it no real choice at all. She had spent sleepless nights trying to talk herself out of the mad idea, but in the end her dream had won. Instead of selling up, she had bought the balance of the business. Her family was convinced she was throwing good money after bad. Gwen had a horrible feeling they were right, but would never have admitted that in a million years. Besides, if she managed to pull it off she would have the satisfaction of saying, *I did it all myself*. She had always known it would be hard but now, all alone in a foreign country, there were times when she ached for a shoulder to cry on. One frantically busy day dissolved into another. Time was passing her by so fast. She sighed. Her greatest pleasure came from cooking the food, but she spent more time nowadays pandering to the people who ate it.

Carrying her dress downstairs, she laid it reverently on the back seat of her car. One eye on the time, she hopped into the driving seat and got another nasty shock. When she switched on the ignition, the car’s petrol gauge barely moved out of the red

zone. She groaned in horror. Not today, of all days! She didn't have time to stop off at the garage. She looked up at the bright cloudless sky, then down the winding country road towards town. It was downhill all the way to Le Rossignol. Maybe it was hot enough for the engine to run on fumes and good luck until she got there.

Five hours later, Gwen poured herself into her stunning dress. It was the only formal gown she had, and it was perfect for an aristocratic party. Cut from midnight-blue velvet, it clung to her generous curves in all the right places. She watched herself in the full-length mirror she had hung in her office to check her appearance at moments like this. Her soft blonde hair coiled like liquid gold over her bare shoulders. The effect was stunning, but Gwen wasn't impressed. All she saw was a girl from the Welsh valleys done up like a dog's dinner in a totally impractical dress that would show every mark.

That was exactly what the snooty countess of Malotte expected to see. With a long-suffering smile, Gwen went out to give her public what they demanded.

The restaurant's bar and lounge area was soon crowded. Girls hired for the evening moved among the glittering guests with trays of tempting titbits. Gwen's eyes darted around the room, looking for her client, the countess. Then her attention was grabbed by something far more interesting. A new arrival stood in the restaurant's entrance. Everything about him made her stop and stare. He surveyed the restaurant's crowded lounge bar with

the haughty look of a general inspecting foot soldiers. It was an imposing sight. The newcomer was one of the tallest there, and his austere good looks singled him out in other ways, too. Everyone—absolutely everyone—turned to watch as the mystery man walked in.

To Gwen's astonishment he headed straight for her. Clusters of people standing around in the reception bar parted to let him through.

'Bonsoir. You must be Gwyneth Williams.'

He dipped his head in greeting. The fact he knew her name surprised her, and that wasn't all. She could feel him penetrating her polite disguise. His gaze seemed to recognise the social misfit within, and it made her nervous. She disguised her true feelings with a professional smile and stepped forward to greet him.

'Bonsoir, monsieur. Yes, I'm chef-patron here. I'm usually shut away in the kitchens, but tonight is a special occasion.'

His dark eyes glittered like jet. 'Indeed. I had no idea how special until a moment ago.' Charm flowed from him as he caught her hand and lifted it to his lips. 'My name is Etienne Moreau. I'm a frequent visitor to this restaurant. I'm sorry we've never met before.'

Gwen was enchanted. Despite the dozens of people surrounding them, he had the ability to make her feel as though they were totally alone. After weeks of work and worry, it felt as though all her Christmases had arrived at once.

'Thank you! Would you care for a drink, Monsieur Moreau?'

One of the waitresses moved forward, but Gwen waved her away. For the first time, socialising was giving her something to enjoy. She swung around to the other side of the bar, glad to have something to do. The sight of a man like Etienne Moreau with his soft dark hair and golden skin was enough to stun anyone into silence. The countess Sophie, who was throwing this reception, had dropped some heavy hints about her stepson's dislike of idle chit-chat. She had warned Gwen to give him a wide berth. If there hadn't been a big balance still outstanding on the party bill, Gwen would have delighted in ignoring the instruction. Now there was only the black marble bar between her and this gorgeous man. It didn't feel like much in the way of protection when Etienne's dark eyes could cut through the crowd like lasers. Gwen swallowed hard, reached for the ice bucket and gripped it tightly. No wonder the countess Sophie was so protective of her stepson. All the women within sight were drooling openly. The object of their desires barely acknowledged them. Gwen tried to behave in an equally offhand manner. She smiled pleasantly at her stellar guest. No one could complain if she was only serving the man. It was her job, after all.

'Excuse me, *monsieur*, what would you like?'

Etienne Moreau had paused to question a nearby guest about a recent business deal. His attention instantly swung back to Gwen. He focused his gaze on her as though she was the very last thing he expected to find at a family party. With warm concentration, his pensive brown eyes took in every detail from her tumble of

honey-blond hair to the curves sculpted by her beautiful blue evening dress. After due deliberation, his inspection returned to her eyes. Then he smiled, and Gwen's world stood still.

'I'd like something you could not possibly offer me over a crowded bar.'

The gentle lilt of his accent should have been relaxing. It had quite the opposite effect on Gwen. The wicked smile lighting his face turned her insides to jelly. She was used to fending off all kinds of trouble from men, but for the first time in her life she felt like meeting it head-on. The sensation made her smile right back at him. Her professional approach might hide the effect he was having on her, but it couldn't steady her voice.

'I—I mean, what would you like to drink, *monsieur*? Le Rossignol has a large selection of fine wines and spirits,' she said, trying to disguise her uncertainty by casually leaning forward against her side of the bar. His dark eyebrows rose in appreciation. Gwen's unspoken reply was to lean back again. He smiled.

'I'll have a *léger Colombien, s'il vous plaît*.'

Coffee was the very last thing Gwen served the sort of people who partied at Le Rossignol, not the first. Despite that, she was ready for anything. At one end of the bar was the best hot drink console she could afford. While she busied herself creating Etienne's coffee, Gwen was aware of him chatting idly with others at the bar, but she didn't hear a word. She was too busy enjoying the sensation of his interest running over her. Although

she had her back to him, it was as tangible as a touch. When she turned around, his eyes were warm with possibilities. As she passed him the cup his glance flicked down to her left hand.

‘*Merci, mademoiselle.* Won’t you have one with me?’

‘No, *monsieur.* I’m working.’

His beautiful white teeth flashed in a wicked smile. ‘I suppose that means Sophie got to you first. She must have threatened to lay a curse on you, if you distracted me for too long.’

One look and those few words almost made Gwen forget everything she had ever known. Only thoughts of her overdraft stopped her melting into a quivering heap, right there in front of him.

‘Not at all, *monsieur.* I’m on duty. To linger with one guest, however charming, would be unprofessional,’ she said with an ease that felt anything but natural. ‘And now, if you would excuse me, I must circulate.’

The smile Gwen gave him faltered as she saw the warmth in his eyes. Unable to meet the silent laughter dancing there, she left him with as much slow dignity as she could muster.

Etienne sipped his coffee. Darkening with thought, his eyes glittered as he watched her walk away. His companions at the bar were still talking, but he took only a polite interest.

‘It didn’t take you long to get over Angela, did it, Etienne?’ One of the guests laughed, tracking his gaze.

The question brought Etienne back to the present with a jolt. His lip curled with a sneer of disdain. ‘Sentiment is for women

and children. I don't waste time on it.' Shrugging his shoulder nonchalantly, he pushed the empty coffee cup aside. 'Excuse me. I should go and have a word with the countess Sophie.'

Leaving the bar, Etienne strode away through the reception area without a backward glance. He wished the past could be ignored as easily as he could sideline people. Work sometimes dulled the edge of his pain, but never for long. It was so much easier to skim over the surface of life, moving on to the next sensation before he had too much time to think about it. He spent his days crowding his troubled mind with other people's money worries. When he was able to use his power and influence to help them, it gave him a sense of satisfaction but left his body restless. For hundreds of years the Moreau family had been warriors. Intellectually gifted, Etienne found balance sheets and bank reports easier to read than people—and far more honest. He preferred to use his mind for work and keep his body for more civilised things than warfare.

Right now he was wondering how quickly Miss Gwyneth Williams would surrender to his charm.

As usual, everyone wanted to talk to Etienne. It took him quite a while to track Gwen across the room. A little glance over her shoulder and a half-smile told him she knew he was watching her. That pleased him. It made up for the fact that his stepmother's niece Emilie was in attendance tonight. A plump, pretty girl dressed in a tight sheath of pink satin, she was standing a respectful distance behind the countess. As Sophie Moreau

realised Etienne was on his way over, she eased Gwen aside and jostled the astonished Emilie forward. Etienne didn't need to wonder why. He shot a conspiratorial look at Gwen. There was a little crease between her brows as she spoke to the countess, but it disappeared as he caught her eye. Her beautiful face lit up with a mischievous smile, but she was playing hard to get. As he drew closer she disappeared into the kitchens. Etienne was left to corner his stepmother alone.

'Are you having trouble with the staff, Sophie? Would you like me to hunt that woman down and have a word with her?' he offered innocently.

The countess scowled. 'Certainly not. You aren't here to work, Etienne. You're here to tell your cousin Emilie what you think of her. Hasn't she grown?'

There were only two things in Sophie Moreau's favour: Etienne could read her like a book, and she always came straight to the point. Arching one dark eyebrow, he hid his distaste behind a pleasant smile. Lifting the young girl's hand to his lips, he gave it a formal kiss.

'You have, Emilie. How old are you now? It must be all of—sixteen, is it?'

'Eighteen! That's why you've agreed to be guest of honour at her birthday party, next month!' his stepmother hissed.

'I would never let a step-relative down.' Etienne inclined his head graciously at Emilie. The girl simpered, the restaurant's discreet lighting bouncing off her orthodontic scaffolding.

‘Emilie will be leaving her boarding school at the end of next term. Unless you can think of a good reason to free her from the dreadful place before then, Etienne?’ Sophie leered at him.

Feigning ignorance, Etienne waited.

‘Unless...’ The countess leaned forward, prompting him. Tiny beads of perspiration were visible on her faint moustache. She stopped squinting and started frowning. ‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, don’t be difficult, Etienne! You need a son and heir to carry on the Moreau family line, and inherit all those beautiful houses of yours!’

Etienne sliced off Sophie’s words with a fearsome glare. After a moment’s alarm, she surged back with added venom. ‘It must be two years since you got your fingers burned by that awful woman—you must think of the future, Etienne.’

‘Why? You seem to be doing enough of that for both of us, *stepmother*.’ Etienne answered with crushing emphasis.

Out in Le Rossignol’s kitchens, preparations for dinner were running exactly on time. Everything was ready to go. It all looked immaculate. Gwen had lost count of the compliments her staff and the restaurant had been given as she moved among the guests. Even so, her nerves were in shreds. It didn’t help to have the waitresses chattering like magpies with all the gossip they picked up as they circulated with drinks and canapés. As Gwen checked the silver salvers before they were carried out one of the regular waitresses passed on a particularly juicy titbit.

‘*Madame* wants to make sure she carries on getting a share of

Etienne's fortune after he marries. That's why she's trying to pair him off with her niece.'

'I've told you before, you mustn't pass on anything you hear, Clemence!' Gwen rebuked her, wiping a drop of champagne from one of the glasses. 'It would be horrible for a nice young girl like Emilie to find out people were talking about her.' However, Clemence's words sent evil thoughts flooding into her heart. Secretly, she turned green with envy at the idea.

'Don't worry, Chef, it'll never happen! You only have to read what they say about Etienne Moreau in the papers to know that —'

The doors leading into the restaurant opened, bringing another collection of empty trays for refilling and cutting off Clemence's shameful but undeniably interesting gossip. Beyond the traffic of waiters and waitresses, Gwen glimpsed the countess Sophie and her niece backing away from the impressive count. Clemence saw it too.

'Look—he's given them the brush-off. Now's your chance, Chef! Count Etienne is worth a fortune. He spends a lot in here, and he's our best tipper. Be nice to him!' Clemence said with a wink.

With alarm, Gwen found her heart thumping at the simple mention of his name. She found it hard enough to talk to clients at the best of times. To walk up to this gorgeous man would be impossible for her, unless she had an excuse, and something to hide behind. She found both at the bar. Keen to get opinions on

a new Bordeaux she was thinking of putting on the wine list, she poured him a glass. As she carried it over she tried to distract herself from the warm, liquid feeling suffusing her body. It was no good. The magnetism of the count's slumberous dark eyes demanded her full attention. His expression made her forget any worries she might have had about her only formal dress. He liked it, she could tell. The classic cast of his features and the resolute line of his jaw marked him out as something really special. As she drew closer to him Gwen's body responded with an urgency she had never known before. She fought against a tide of desire that threatened to escape in a moan of longing. That scared her. This man was a total stranger, and she was a hard-working, down to earth woman. How could anyone sway her with such strong emotions at first sight? That thought alone was a powerful aphrodisiac.

A tingle of excitement ran along every nerve in her body. Nice girls like her weren't supposed to have irresistible physical yearnings like this. Nice girls stayed at home, minding the village shop. They didn't dress in midnight-blue velvet and gallivant about in front of foreign aristocracy. Gwen knew her family would be speechless at the mere thought of it. They had made enough fuss when her eldest brother Glyn married a girl from Bristol and moved across the river. Mrs Williams' sisters had always warned that Gwen had a wayward streak, and, with an unusual surge of devilment, Gwen wondered if they might be right...

Etienne's day had been totally predictable, but his evening was improving by the minute. He had given his stepmother something to think about, and now he was enjoying the sight of Gwyneth Williams bringing him a second drink. Although he visited Le Rossignol often, he'd never been lucky enough to meet her before. He had heard whispers about her, and they were all true. She really was worth watching. Her voluptuous charms were enhanced by the cut of an evening dress so beautiful, no other woman in the room was worthy of it. Its pacific-blue colouring and glorious texture made him want to reach out, to touch and possess. The sinuous way this woman moved through the crowds towards him made Etienne wish they were the only two people in the place...

He brought himself up short for even considering it. That disastrous liaison with Angela Webbington should have put him off ill-considered flings for life. But who wouldn't be tempted by the charms of a woman like this Gwyneth Williams? It was no wonder the gaze of every man in the place followed her. She had the perfect hourglass figure—full, soft breasts and a beautifully defined waist emphasising the smooth curve of her derriere. When she reached him and lifted those long dark lashes to reveal the clear beauty of her azure eyes, Etienne rediscovered the full physical meaning of the words 'sexual chemistry'.

'You've been very generous to my staff in the past, *monsieur*. Allow me to offer you this, with the compliments of Le Rossignol.'

Her words lilted like music. They had an immediate effect on Etienne. A powerful chain reaction coursed through his muscular body, coiling in his groin ready for action. She passed him the glass. Their fingers touched for an instant, but before they could exchange any words Gwen was called away. Etienne watched her go, his unwanted drink forgotten. As she passed by a gaggle of male guests one of them said something to her. Etienne was too far away to hear what it was, but saw her round on the man with icy disdain. Roses flared in her otherwise pale cheeks. Etienne instantly began moving forward. Although Gwen looked to be coping, he knew you could never be sure in situations like this.

Gwen counted to ten silently, thinking of the final demand notices she had at home. She had to pander to these awful people. Their word of mouth recommendations were vital if her business was to survive.

‘You’re wasted in the kitchen!’ The groper smirked. ‘You look like you’re sitting on a fortune, *bonbon*. How about it?’

In one swift movement he stuffed a five-hundred-Euro note into her cleavage.

Gwen’s brittle smile was for public consumption only. She pulled out the banknote and dropped it onto the floor.

‘I’ve got plenty more where that came from,’ the man scoffed.

‘I’m so glad, *monsieur*,’ Gwen managed with dignity. Turning her back on the group, she walked back into the safety of her kitchens. Her head was held high. When she looked like that, the staff went quiet.

‘Ask Eloise to check the guest list,’ she announced into the relative silence. ‘She can put a marker on the names of those men sitting beside the aquarium. In future we’re going to be fully booked whenever they ring for a reservation. I won’t have men who behave like that at Le Rossignol—we don’t need them,’ she stated, with more conviction than she felt. Right now her business was balanced on such a knife-edge she couldn’t afford to turn anyone down. She had to take so much care not to upset her rich clientele. They all knew each other, and word travelled around their clique at the speed of light. The rich stuck together in their own little world. People like her were expected to fetch and carry, and take all the flak. It was so unfair.

It was a relief for Gwen to retreat from the social whirl into the organised chaos backstage. This was the world she knew, and a place where she was in total control. Outside in the restaurant she was expected to be constantly charming and beautiful—something ornamental rather than useful. Here in the noise and movement of the kitchens, she could be herself. She could concentrate on producing the best and most beautiful meals her customers would ever experience. Until that evening, the satisfaction of a job well done had been enough for her. But now something threatened to come between Gwen and her work.

She had been introduced to something—or rather, *someone*—far more potent. Etienne Moreau was already affecting her behaviour. As she’d confronted that drunk she had known the handsome count was watching her. A situation that made her feel

like running for the hills had had to be faced in a way she knew would impress him. She needed him to see her in action as the perfect hostess, and totally in control.

Because whenever she glanced in his direction, control was the last thing on her mind.

Etienne saw Gwen's confrontation with her guests, and how she handled it. It was quite obvious Le Rossignol's chef-patron was a woman who knew her own mind. He admired the cool way she managed to defuse the situation herself. *Defuse but not disarm*, he thought, making a mental note to mention the bad behaviour he had seen to some of his more influential friends. He recognised the villains, and they would find themselves excluded from society's more discerning events from here on in. *Not that it's any of my business*, he warned himself, annoyed that the little drama should have unsettled him so much.

For once, when his stepmother begged to parade him in front of a few more of her friends, he was glad of the distraction. While she was busy showing him off, she couldn't return to her favourite subject of what a superb wife and countess her niece would make. That alone would have been a good enough reason to submit to a tour of the gathering, but Etienne had a darker motive. He wanted to keep an eye on the lovely Gwyneth Williams. A natural at moving through polite society, Etienne could appear perfectly charming while his mind was occupied with something else. Tonight, there was only one thing concerning him. Covertly, he watched Gwen as she went about her work. When the rowdy

group of men summoned her again he stiffened, noticing a subtle change in her attitude. Her beautiful, heart-shaped face was a carefully managed mask of indifference, but tension was obvious in her rigid bearing and hesitant footsteps. The second she got close enough, one of the group reached out as though ready to paw the smooth curve of her rump. Gwen leapt away with a cry but before she could say anything more Etienne was there, confronting her attacker.

‘Leave her alone,’ he commanded.

‘Says who?’ The young man lumbered to his feet. It was obvious he had been drinking before he arrived at the restaurant, and was now well beyond the stage of either good manners or good sense.

‘I do.’ Etienne’s voice was as cold as a blade, and he felt no need to identify himself by the age-old title of Count of Malotte. Tonight, everyone who was anyone knew who he was.

‘Like I care about that!’ The drunk swayed, then without warning took a swing at Etienne. Gwen shouted a warning, desperate to save the handsome stranger who had stepped in on her behalf. It was the worst thing she could have done. Distracted by her cry, Etienne was a split second too slow to avoid catching a glancing blow to the side of his jaw.

The party erupted in a flurry. In one smooth movement Etienne seized the drunk and pinioned his arms behind his back.

‘Let this be a warning to anyone else with a taste for trouble,’ he announced to the crowd as he frogmarched his attacker out of

the building. Everyone stared after him. Gwen could not move. If she took one step she knew she would fly straight to the door, desperate to know what was happening. That would make a bad situation worse for her sophisticated guests. Instead, she had to wait along with everyone else. Minutes passed in silence. Then suddenly Etienne was there among them again. Breathing quickly, his dark curls tousled, he acknowledged the spontaneous applause with a diffident smile.

‘Your cheek is bleeding,’ Gwen said faintly, transfixed by the sight of a thin seam of blood trickling over the otherwise perfect surface of his sun-bronzed skin.

He stopped adjusting his clothes and looked at her.

‘There’s no need to sound so worried, *mademoiselle*,’ he murmured, as though not quite able to believe what she had said.

The strange way he spoke made Gwen think this man wasn’t used to being worried about—not on a personal level, at least. People might bow and scrape before him, but she had a shrewd suspicion they were only out for what they could get, like the countess. A surge of empathy kicked her into action. She knew what it was like to put on a brave show, and she might never get a chance to see such a gorgeous guy at close quarters again.

‘Of course there is, *monsieur*. Health and safety would never forgive me for standing by while one of my clients bled all over the place!’ she rallied. With a smile, she gestured towards the back of the restaurant. ‘Would you mind stepping into my office?’

Her heart was thundering loudly as she spoke. She was amazed he couldn't hear it, and still more amazed at the devastating way he smiled and said, 'Nothing would give me greater pleasure, *mademoiselle*.'

And with that he headed straight for the door marked 'Mlle G Williams—Private.'

CHAPTER TWO

GWEN was busy wondering what she was going to do, now she had persuaded one hundred and eighty pounds of handsome hunk into her office.

The sight of Etienne standing outside on the balcony almost robbed her of the courage to go in. Silhouetted against the setting sun, his broad shoulders and tall, erect frame looked magnificent.

‘*Entrez,*’ he commanded.

Etienne Moreau was unlike any man Gwen had encountered before, but hearing him speak to her like that came as a shock. Her reply was instant and instinctive. ‘I was going to, *monsieur*. It’s my name on the door, isn’t it?’

He whipped around, as fast as her retort. Gwen didn’t have time to be alarmed. Astonishment became amusement as he focused on her face, and laughed.

‘Of course. What was I thinking of?’ he said with a winning smile.

Gwen had no idea. He was filling her mind with so many disturbing thoughts. It was all she could do to stop her legs trembling as she walked through the room towards him.

‘I’ve retrieved your wine, *monsieur*. And can I thank you for dealing with that drunk? It was so brave. You didn’t deserve to get hurt,’ Gwen said as she stepped through the French doors and joined him on the balcony.

‘Ordinarily I wouldn’t have done. He was wearing one of those cameo rings idiot boys have taken to wearing. That’s what did the damage.’

As he took the glass of Bordeaux from her the town below exhaled a warm breath into the evening air. It lifted the curtains behind her. Light flooding out from the office illuminated the ragged cut to his cheek. Gwen was transfixed.

‘Merci,’ he said softly.

‘What about that cut?’ she managed eventually, her mind whirling with the tiniest details of it. ‘I’ll fetch the first-aid kit—’

‘That won’t be necessary.’

The same commanding tone that had summoned her into her own office drew her hand up to his face.

‘Oh, but you must at least let me clean it up for you—’ Unable to resist, she touched the spot lightly. Her fingers came away dark with blood. With a little gasp of dismay she swayed, accidentally brushing against him. ‘I’m sorry, *monsieur,*’ she muttered.

Etienne Moreau knew an advantage when he saw one. A smile spread across his face with all the promise of a new day dawning.

‘Are you, *mademoiselle?* I’m not. It’s brought us together.’

‘H-has it?’

Her eyes were wide and very blue, he noticed. It occurred to him that shock must have thrown the sophisticated chef-patron off her stride. The delicate fragrance of roses shimmering around her aroused something primitive in him. There was only one thing to be done. He decided to make everything all right for her,

in the way he knew best. After months of growing discontent, this evening was turning into something memorable for him. He glanced at the wine in his hand. The last thing he needed now was alcohol. It might bring him back to earth.

He put the glass down.

A furious tide had engulfed him when he saw that lecherous drunk hassling her. Seeing such a man getting so close to this lovely girl was an outrage. She deserved much better. And now he was alone with her. Desire flamed within his body, fuelled by the purity of her clear blue eyes and those soft, slightly glossed lips. He hungered for her with a raw, naked need that would not and could not be denied.

‘Is there anything else you need, *monsieur*?’

Her voice was a whisper, her eyes full of anticipation.

‘Yes,’ he breathed. ‘You.’

She gazed up at him. Her eyes were large and full of questions Etienne could not wait to answer. His body took control, pulling her into his arms and holding her tightly against him. Gwen was in the grip of feelings so powerful that she simply melted against him. His hands went to her hair, his fingers digging through its thick tumble of soft, caramel-coloured curls. Tipping her head back, he feasted his eyes on her face. Uncertainly, she mirrored his movements, raising her hands to the lush darkness of his hair. It was short and silky, tempting her fingers to explore him with the same overpowering need that fuelled his desire. When his beautiful mouth took possession of hers it was with a passion that

powered straight through her body.

Gwen had never experienced anything like it. Etienne Moreau overwhelmed her with such fire and urgency that she felt like a leaf in a hurricane. Her heart pounded, while her mind became a perfect storm of images—his tongue penetrating her mouth, his hands luring her onwards until he withdrew, teasing her. Gwen was left quivering from head to foot, at the mercy of so many sensations her brain could hardly cope. Hungry for his kisses, she rose on tiptoe, desperate not to lose contact with his body for an instant. Teased into peaks of excitement, her nipples thrust against the lacy restraint of her bra until it hurt. He was filling her senses so totally she barely noticed. She no longer knew or cared what was right or wrong.

Suddenly the wail of a police siren tore through the streets below, startling them both, and they jerked apart. Once she was deprived of the hard temptation of him, arousal flooded Gwen's brain until speech was almost beyond her.

She looked up at him, still dazed, as he allowed his hands to drop lightly onto her shoulders and gently eased her away from him. Then he stepped back and looked down at her. His lips were slightly parted. She could see from the quick rise and fall of his chest that he was breathing fast. The arms that had held her so tightly now hung loosely by his sides, his hands and their long, strong fingers slightly curved. Her eyes took in every detail of him, from his hawk-like profile and the glint of perfect white teeth against the pale gold of his skin, to his easy stance. Here was

a man who took women in his stride. As she slowly returned to earth after their paradise of a kiss a sudden increase in the clatter of silver and china from inside the restaurant dealt the final blow to her dreams. Dinner was being served. She had abandoned her staff when they needed her most. Kissing a man when she should have been supervising them was bad enough. When that man was also a guest and probably a friend of her landlord, her guilt became a real wall of worries.

Gwen had brothers. She knew what men were like. The thought that this aloof man with the smouldering eyes might tell Nick, her landlord, about their kiss made her feel sick. Nick and his family had been good to her, letting her buy out the business for a good price. They had taken a loss on the deal, but it had still cost Gwen everything she'd had and hefty loans from her parents and the bank. Nick was still owner of the little *gite* in the hills where she was staying. His rich, influential friends were Le Rossignol's best customers, so she needed to stay on the right side of them. This was not the way to do it.

A breeze sighed over the balcony, but this time it was chill. It reminded Gwen of the groans of 'I told you so' waiting for her back at home if her dream of running a top-class restaurant in France failed.

Etienne's face was expressionless; he seemed to have retreated from her. 'This was an accident. Accidents happen,' he said in a low voice.

Gwen tried to catch her breath. It wouldn't be held, and

escaped as a sigh. His attitude should have come as a relief to her. Instead it left an aching void. She wanted this man to want her, in exactly the same hot, heady way she wanted him. It nearly sent her over a precipice of temptation. Colour flared in her normally pale cheeks. What had possessed her to do a thing like that? With his relentless masculinity close enough to touch, that was an easy question to answer. Etienne's body was a powerful incentive for Gwen to behave in a way she would never have dreamed possible. He roused her to fever pitch, but now he was leaving behind a burning ache for him, deep within her body.

'Tension expresses itself in many ways,' he added. A tiny muscle flinched in his jaw as he spoke.

The tilt of his chin and that macho dismissal told Gwen all she needed to know. Now she understood why Clemence had warned her about this man. He was the sort who took what he wanted, without offering anything in return. He would never feel the need to feign interest in her as a thinking, feeling human being.

'I discovered long ago that money and manners don't often go together, *monsieur*,' she said icily. 'I'm certainly not proud of this little interlude either, I can assure you.'

Picking up his forgotten glass, she started towards the French doors.

'But I am.' Etienne's voice was low with amusement and he seemed to have recovered his wicked smile, as if the odd tension that had covered him a moment ago had been shrugged away. 'It's in my blood, *cherie*. You are irresistible. I succumbed to your

charms. What better reason for pride could there be?' he finished in a throaty whisper.

Gwen gave a huff of disapproval at that, but she was hiding a blush as she hurried away. Those words of his would echo in her head for the rest of her life. *He called me irresistible!* she marvelled. No one had thought to give her such a compliment before. Five feet three with a tumble of unruly honey-blond waves, she felt too short and shapely to turn heads. Her bright blue eyes with their long dark lashes were a good feature, there was no denying it. *But irresistible? Me?* she wondered, wishing she could believe him. There was no doubt she had preened before her bedroom mirror when she had first tried on this stunning dress, but that had been behind a securely locked door. Now the delectable Etienne Moreau had kissed her, and complimented her. Much more of his talk and she might—just *might*—start believing it!

There was no time for Gwen to try out her budding self-confidence. As she left her office the countess Sophie steamed towards her with an evil glint in her eyes.

'I hope you aren't annoying my stepson,' she warned, a purplish stain flushing through her thick layers of face powder and blusher. 'He doesn't take kindly to being manhandled by the lower orders.'

If only you knew! Gwen thought. The lovely Etienne hadn't been showing any signs of prejudice a few moments earlier.

'I took the count a drink, showed him where the first-aid kit

was and thanked him for saving me from unwanted attention. That's all, *madame*,' Gwen said boldly.

The fat, bejewelled countess looked down her fleshy nose at Gwen. 'Good. I hope this sort of thing doesn't happen often. I expect better from a place that charges so much.'

With that, she swept away to the sympathetic company of her grand friends. Gwen felt her eyes filling with furious tears. She pressed her lips together tightly, to stop a vicious retort bursting out. Her bills couldn't be paid until she had banked the balance of this awful woman's invoice. All the loathsome countess had to do in her pampered life was sign cheques and authorise payments. Gwen earned every cent of her money. To get it, she had to smile politely all evening while being bullied and generally treated like dirt by her so-called 'betters'. One of her mother's favourite sayings came back to haunt her: *'The rich get all the pleasure, the poor get all the pain'*.

She bolted into the kitchens. For the rest of the evening she worked behind the scenes, unless it was absolutely vital for her to emerge as the glamorous hostess. She understood cooking and loved it. Socialising was a part of her life she was really beginning to hate.

For the past two years, Etienne had been living under a heavy cloud of memories. His relentless lifestyle of work and partying was a reaction to it. He had been dead to pleasure for so long, something as simple as that reckless moment with Gwen should never have been able to lighten his mood. Yet somehow it had.

There was something about her so unlike the others; it made him smile to think about it. He knew he should be wary, but it was difficult to forget the girl's proud assurance that she wouldn't be boasting of the experience. Etienne had been burned by kiss-and-tell merchants in the past. He knew the way they worked. That, and the fact she kept to her kitchen for most of the rest of the evening, made this little *mademoiselle* very unusual. As he circulated and made polite noises to his friends and acquaintances Etienne kept half an eye on the kitchen doors. Whenever she came out, she would scan the party, but when she made eye contact with him she always blushed and looked away. He wasn't about to put her on the spot by approaching her again. That would only encourage Sophie to get up on her hind legs. He was content to appreciate the divine Mademoiselle Williams from a distance. Her rare appearances made an otherwise dull evening worthwhile. To his surprise he found himself totally unable to take his eyes off her.

It was a long time since any woman had done *that*.

Eventually, the happy racket out in the restaurant died down. Chauffeured limousines queued up outside to collect their glamorous owners. Gwen pasted on her sociable smile, and went out to wish each and every one of them a good night. She looked forward to gazing up at Etienne one last time, but she was to be disappointed. The whisper around the kitchens was that he had left earlier with a few friends. Gwen was quick to stop her staff gossiping, but that didn't prevent her listening to what they said.

Apparently the more restless spirits had gone on to an exclusive casino in town.

A long time later, Gwen said goodbye to the last of her staff. Then she locked the door with a thankful sigh. As usual, she was the last to leave. Checking that everything was spotless after the party and ready for the next opening took a long time. With no money to pay more than a skeleton staff, Gwen always tried to make life as easy as possible for them all. Once she was sure the whole place was perfect, she checked again. Her upbringing had convinced her that you couldn't be too careful when profits were being squeezed like a ripe Jaffa orange. Work absorbed so much of her time that her high standards were allowed to slip a bit once she locked the restaurant door behind her. There was never enough energy left after work for perfection in her everyday life. It didn't usually matter, but tonight it was destined to come back and haunt her.

The downward spiral began when she put the key into the ignition of her little car. The engine had to be coaxed into life, and the reason was easy to remember from earlier that afternoon. The petrol gauge was now well into the danger zone. Gwen dropped her head onto the steering wheel and groaned. She had meant to pop out before the garage closed and fill up, but there hadn't been time. Now it was far too late to try. She wondered briefly about going back into her office and trying to sleep on the floor. Her nice comfy bed called too loudly, so she abandoned that idea. All she wanted to do was get home. She pointed her

tiny Citroen in the right direction and hoped for the best.

It was a bad idea. The car spluttered to a halt halfway up the twisting mountain road leading to her rented cottage. With a sigh, she nosed it up onto the verge. Unlocking its boot, she grabbed the petrol can. There was barely an eggcup full of fuel inside it. A couple of weeks earlier she had given the contents to one of the waiters to top up his moped. She had totally forgotten to refill the can.

Gwen was faced with a long, dark walk home. Locking the Citroen, she started off. With no one to blame for the situation but herself, she tried to make the best of it. During the day, the views from this road over the Mediterranean were spectacular. At night the uphill journey was breath-robbing rather than breathtaking, although there were compensations. A million stars speckled the sky from one horizon to the other. If that wasn't enough to take Gwen's mind off her blistered toes, the nightingales that gave her restaurant its name were in full song. It was the perfect opportunity to let her mind wander back to that breathtaking kiss with the man who had called her irresistible.

Her head was so full of romance she was only dimly aware of a wholly man-made sound attacking the peace and quiet of the hillside. It took the blazing spotlights of a fast car to bring her to her senses. She jumped off the road in panic, but the vehicle slowed dramatically. Drawing level with her, it paused. The driver opened his door and hailed her.

'Ah, *c'est le chef anglais!* Where are you going on such a dark

and lonely night?’

It was him. Etienne Moreau. Gwen was hardly able to believe it. He was behind the wheel of a sleek, low, sports car and with relief she saw he was alone. To have met the gorgeous Etienne with another woman so soon after that wonderful kiss would have been unbearable.

‘I’m on my way home. My car broke down.’ Gwen smiled ruefully, hoping he wouldn’t want details. This was the man who called her irresistible. She didn’t want her fantasy wrecked by hearing him call her an airhead for running out of petrol.

‘The red Citroen C1 with the parking scrapes and missing offside wing mirror, parked half a kilometre back?’

Gwen nodded, trying not to look pained. That was all she needed. A fantasy man so perfect he knew enough about cars to recognise an idiot when he saw one.

‘Get in. I’ll give you a lift.’

Gwen looked over his impressive car as it purred contentedly beside her. And then the look in his eyes. They mirrored his words, after that brief moment of passion... *You are irresistible...*

Panic overwhelmed her. It was one thing to fantasise about a man. With her dream threatening to come true, she felt totally inadequate.

‘N-no—it’s OK. I’m fine. Totally. I’m nearly home. I couldn’t possibly...’

The wider he smiled, the faster her voice dwindled.

‘Nonsense. Get in. How could I let you walk any further on

those stilettos, and still call myself a gentleman?’ he added with perfect logic, casting an appreciative glance at Gwen’s small, shapely feet. They were peeping out from beneath the hem of her dress as she held it up, away from the long grasses of the verge. She let her hands fall, freeing the folds of material to hide her painfully impractical shoes.

‘So—will you accept a lift from me now?’

Gwen sighed. Her feet did hurt, the road was long and dark and Etienne’s warm car, not to mention the man himself, looked wonderfully appealing.

‘Thank you. That’s very kind.’ It was tricky keeping the apprehension out of her voice.

Without a word, Etienne took the magnum of champagne that was propped up on the passenger seat. ‘You’ll be a much more interesting companion than this, *ma chef anglais*. I won it in a charity auction! Perhaps I will donate it as a prize somewhere else.’ He laughed as he got out of the car and walked around to where Gwen stood. Filling her arms with the heavy foil-wrapped bottle, he opened the car door for her. Gwen thanked him with a smile.

Getting into the confined space of the passenger seat was another trial. It sharpened her nerves to the point where she had to say something to cover her embarrassment. ‘Although I should tell you, *monsieur*, I’m Welsh, not English.’

‘Ah, that explains it.’ Etienne nodded sagely, slipping into the driver’s seat beside her. He paused, one hand on top of the

steering wheel.

‘Before we start, give me your keys. I’ll arrange for someone to collect your car, and get it fixed.’

‘Thank you, that’s really kind,’ Gwen muttered, glad he would never see the tell-tale bill. When she was safely belted in, he pushed his sports car into gear and powered on up the hill.

She watched him, her eyes narrowed.

‘Why should the fact that I’m Welsh explain anything, Count?’

Etienne gave her a lazily superior smile. ‘That rebellious streak of yours...the way you chose to try and walk home in those ridiculous little shoes instead of phoning someone for help...I should have guessed. And don’t bother using my title,’ he added casually. ‘In my experience, people who call me by it are only looking to gain some advantage.’

Gwen felt slightly affronted, having never tried to gain anything from anyone in her life. ‘OK, Monsieur Moreau.’

‘It’s Etienne.’ His voice crackled, then softened as he asked, ‘Where do you live?’

‘I’m staying in Nick’s *gite*, right at the top of the hill. You can drop me anywhere that’s convenient for you.’

‘And you are his fiancée’s best friend, Gwyneth.’ Etienne’s accent turned her name into something beautiful and exotic, but his words were an accusation.

Gwen stiffened. No matter how gorgeous he was, she couldn’t stop herself reacting angrily.

‘I was his *ex-fiancée’s ex-best friend*. And, please call me

Gwen!

‘*Dommage!*’ He inhaled sharply. ‘That’s some reaction. What caused the split between you?’

Gwen wondered where to start. She felt like blaming Carys for all her problems, but that wasn’t entirely fair. Nobody had held a gun to Gwen’s head and made her buy out Nick and Carys’ share of the business. ‘Well, she upset Nick *and* eighteen months’ worth of arrangements by running off with another man on the very day of their wedding. She’s cost me a fortune by abandoning our partnership, and I’m so shattered I hardly know what day it is any more.’

She hadn’t meant to sound so resentful, but it was impossible not to warm to her theme. Etienne glanced at her. Despite the darkness, he was clearly shocked.

‘What happened to the unbreakable bonds of sisterhood? All for one, one for all, and take the man for everything he’s got?’

‘I’m old-fashioned,’ Gwen said primly. ‘I expected our business partnership to be like marriage—forever. And an engagement is almost as binding—certainly when it gets all the way to the big day.’

‘Are you saying you would rather see your best friend trapped in marriage to a worthy, predictable man like Nick, rather than let her follow her heart?’

‘I’d rather things were exactly as they were, with Carys still my partner. She knew what Nick was like before she agreed to marry him. Why did she have to take off like that, all of a sudden? She

left me right in the lurch,' Gwen grumbled, heaving another huge sigh. 'I thought she was resigned to life with Nick. I'd always told her not to expect carnivals when he was in town, but she wouldn't listen!'

'That isn't what I told Nick when he asked me to be his best man,' Etienne growled. He was staring straight ahead at the road and gripped the steering wheel with both hands for once.

Gwen was amazed. 'I never saw you at the supposed wedding?' she ventured.

That day, she had hardly seen anyone beyond her crew of catering staff. She had been determined to put on the perfect reception as well as acting as bridesmaid, but one thing was certain. However busy, she could never have missed seeing Etienne. He would have stood head and shoulders over the rest of the guests in every meaning of the phrase.

'Like Carys, I cancelled at the last moment. My father's funeral was held on the same day.'

'Then I'm sorry,' Gwen said quietly.

Etienne made a small gesture of acceptance, but added, 'Thank you, but my father the late count was nearly ninety. He died peacefully, in his sleep.'

'All the same, it must have been a horrible experience for you.' Gwen fell silent. For once, she was wishing her own family weren't so far away.

'And?' He prompted, when she had been lost in thought for some time.

Puzzled by the questioning note in his voice, she looked at him. He pierced the shadowy interior of the car with a sly grin. In reply she frowned and shook her head in a silent appeal for more details.

‘This is where you ask me what he left.’

‘Do I? Why?’ Genuinely confused, Gwen picked up her handbag as Etienne turned his car into the narrow driveway leading to her home.

‘Because that’s what single women always do when they meet me.’

Gwen paused as the cold, hard meaning of his words sank in. They were weighed down by the resignation in his voice. Here was a man who had everything—looks, style, a title, the money to back it all up—and no doubt all the hangers-on that came with such privileges.

‘Oh, dear. You’re almost making me feel sorry for you a second time!’ She chuckled self-consciously. ‘And there was me about to invite you in for coffee, to thank you for running me home. I’ll bet your fan club all do *that*, too!’ She tried to laugh off the confession. To her surprise, he joined in.

‘Yes. Until tonight, I’ve always refused—but for one night only, I might allow myself to be tempted by a chefprepared *café noisette*—and perhaps a little something to go with it?’ he added in a wicked whisper.

The intimacy in his voice stroked a finger of desire all the way down Gwen’s spine. Accepting a lift from a strange man was

right out of character for her. Inviting him into her home was something else again.

It must be the season for taking risks.

She drew in a long, slow breath. The sophisticated tang of his aftershave bolstered her courage until she was able to speak with hardly a tremble in her voice.

‘If you’re sure an invitation wouldn’t be too predictable?’

‘You’re doing the inviting. It’s your call, Gwen.’

Her mouth went dry. He was putting her in the driving seat, but she had never felt so close to losing control. When she spoke, she could only manage a faint whisper.

‘I wanted to thank you for saving me tonight, not only from that...’ she had to choose her words carefully, in case the drunk was one of Etienne’s friends or relatives ‘...guest, but from a long walk home, as well. That’s two rescue missions in one evening. It seems only fair to offer you coffee.’

‘Then the least I can do is to accept.’ He smiled, and the starlight seemed to dance in his eyes. Gwen was overwhelmed. It took a lot of concentration to get out of the car, find her house key and open the door. She was trembling with sheer amazement at what was happening. Etienne Moreau could stop her heart simply by looking at her. She had thought she would never see him again after the party—but here he was, coming into her house to drink coffee!

She groped for the light switch and pressed. Nothing happened. Etienne was following her closely. Although the

thought of him so close behind her was wickedly tempting, she kept moving. The bulb in the hall must have blown, and she had to reach the wall lights before either of them stumbled in the dark. She clicked the second set of switches. There was still nothing. A little breeze followed them into the house and sent a sheet of paper flickering off the telephone table. Gwen clapped a hand to her face in horror as she remembered what it was. The electricity bill. How long had she been promising herself she would get around to paying it? Too long, as far as the electricity company was concerned.

Etienne bent down and picked it up.

‘Is this important?’ It was too dark for him to read inside the house, so he stepped back outside. Gwen darted after him, but she was too slow.

Glancing at the bill, he made sympathetic noises. ‘So this means we’ll be drinking chilled champagne rather than hot coffee!’ He shrugged. ‘I can live with that.’

‘No—I’m sorry, I can’t possibly invite you in when I’ve got no power!’ Gwen peered around helplessly in the gloom for inspiration. ‘But if you were desperate for a drink, I could light a fire in the old range and boil a pan of water on that—’

She stumbled to a halt in the face of his devastating smile. This had been the perfect chance to spend a little while longer basking in it. She had blown it. He wouldn’t want to sit in a dark house. Every second in his company was worth losing a whole night’s sleep, but it was slipping away through her fingers. Gwen

cursed herself silently.

‘I’m such a fool—first the car, and now this!’ she announced, already moving towards the front door again. ‘I’m so sorry I can’t offer you anything, Etienne.’

She was getting ready to close the door behind him when he left, but he stayed where he was.

‘Let me be the judge of that, Gwen. Why don’t we talk about it over champagne at my place instead?’

His voice was as soft as a breeze moving through the pine trees outside.

Gwen had been busily covering her disappointment by fussing with the door. At his words she stopped. Maybe there was a God in heaven after all! She was getting a second chance. For a heartbeat she allowed herself to experience the fierce thrill of anticipation. Then reality supplied a quick cold shower.

‘You don’t know how much I’d really love to, Etienne, but I shouldn’t...’

‘I know,’ he crooned, his voice warm with understanding. ‘So let’s go.’

Reaching out, he caught hold of her hand. His palm was as smooth and warm as his seduction technique. Gwen’s body tried to follow him, but her mind was weighed down with responsibilities.

‘Oh, Etienne, I *can’t*... maybe we should just say goodnight and leave it at that...’ She managed to hang back, but disappointment trailed from her every word. ‘I’m so sorry, but I need to be up

early. It's another really busy day tomorrow and I have to be on top form...'

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