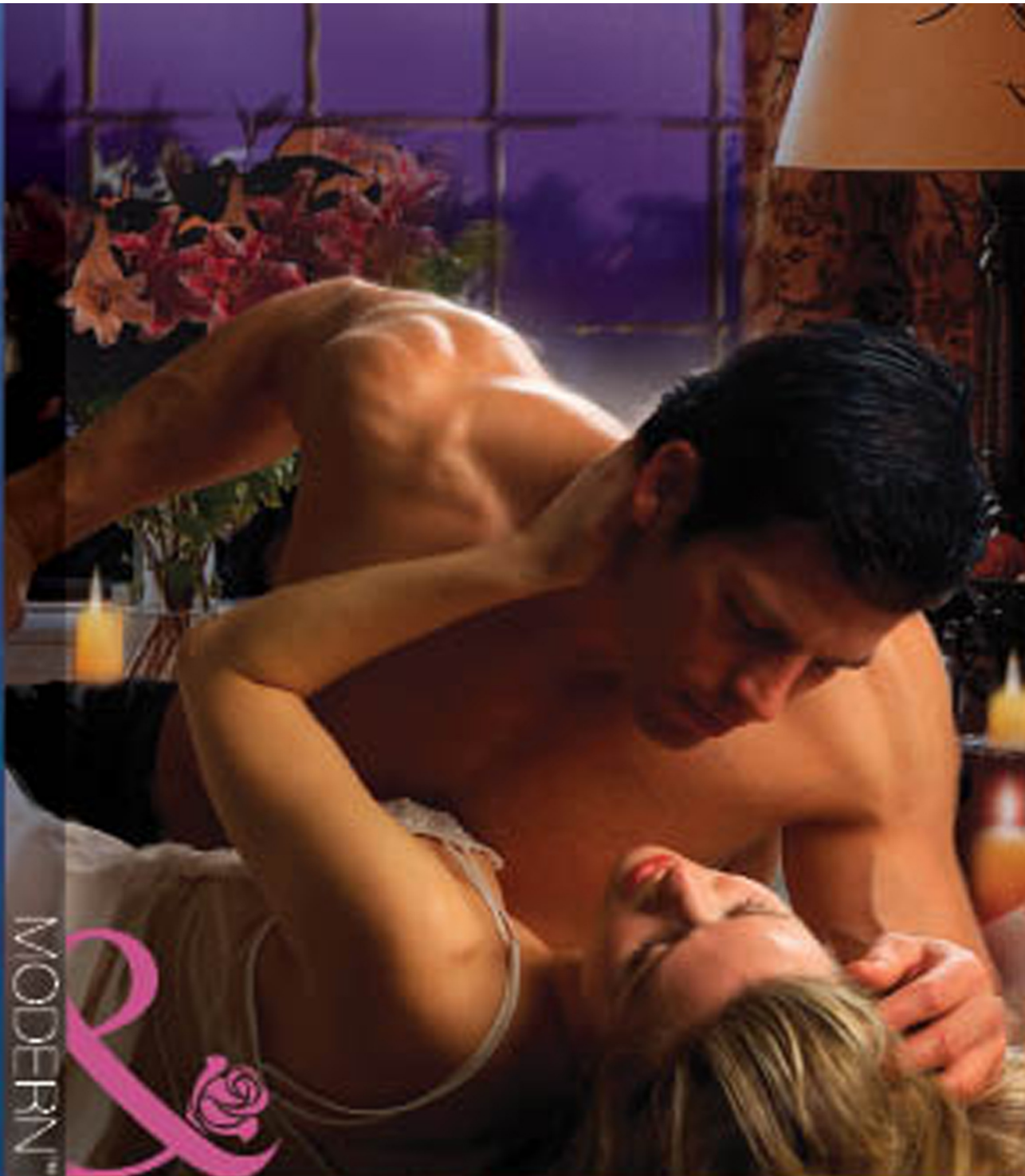




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FIONA HOOD-STEWART
At the French Baron's Bidding



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At The French Baron's Bidding

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He was born to rule—but could he learn to love? Baron Raoul d'Argentan—darkly handsome, extremely arrogant. His family had feuded with Natasha's for centuries, and he wasn't about to forgive.... Natasha de Saugure—the unexpected heir to her French grandmother's ch?teau, she was unaware of the grudge Raoul still nurtured.... Raoul knew how to deal with Mademoiselle de Saugure—seduce and then set loose. But would Natasha really place herself at this French baron's bidding?

Содержание

“Natasha, let me tell you something.”	6
At the French Baron’s Bidding	7
CONTENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	13
CHAPTER THREE	17
CHAPTER FOUR	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

“Natasha, let me tell you something.”

“What’s that?” she asked warily.

“To want is not a sin. It is a natural, healthy reaction. And don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean, because you do. Very well. Last night proved that to me.”

“Last night was—was an aberration,” she muttered, trying to resist the delicious sensation of his finger caressing the inside of her bare forearm in what was turning into a dangerously erotic motion.

“Last night was the proof that you want to make love with me,” he murmured huskily. “In fact, I have already made love to you. Only not fully. The rest is still to come.”

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
CHAPTER NINETEEN
CHAPTER TWENTY
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER ONE

IT WASN'T that she didn't want to go back to France, for in truth she did. But as the chauffeur-driven car drove sedately through the gates of the Manoir that she remembered only vaguely from early childhood, Natasha de Saugure experienced a rush of mixed emotions: she really should have responded to her grandmother's summons sooner.

Yet the past hung between them, and had impeded her from doing so. Now, Natasha hoped that it wouldn't be too late. Her grandmother had sounded so frail over the phone. But taking leave from her job with a humanitarian organisation in Africa wasn't easy. She had, in the short space of time she'd been employed, acquired a post of much responsibility. She owed it to the starving mothers and children they were so desperately trying to save to be there.

Still, after the car had crunched across the gravel driveway and come to a stop, Natasha stepped out and breathed a unique fragrance that she recognized as fresh lavender and thyme; she knew she'd been right to come.

'Voilà, mademoiselle.' The driver smiled at her over his shoulder before jumping out and solicitously opening the car door.

'Merci.' Natasha smiled back. In a quick movement she straightened her long ash-blond hair and glanced up at the ancient stone façade of the Manoir: its rounded turrets at each corner, the lead-tiled roof, the ivy that weaved over its centuries-old stone walls. Making her way towards the stately front door past grand stone pots filled with well-trimmed shrubs, Natasha sighed. It was many years since she'd last seen her grandmother—after the irreparable rift between the old lady and Natasha's father when he'd married out of his set.

All at once the ancient front door creaked, opened, and an old, white-haired man in uniform appeared on the steps.

'Bienvenue, mademoiselle,' he said, his face breaking into a wrinkled smile. 'Madame will be so pleased.'

'Bonjour, Henri,' she said; she'd heard her mother talk about the old retainer. She stepped inside the flagstoned hall and gazed about her at the high ceilings and doorways leading this way and that into the warren of passages and rooms beyond. Little by little vague memories unfurled as long-forgotten images jumped forth to greet her.

But the question that still tugged at her as she entered the Manoir was why, after all these years of silence, had her grandmother insisted she come? There had been little in the letter she'd received to indicate her reasons; little in her imperative tone on the phone to suggest she'd unbent after all this time.

Yet insist she had.

And, despite her first inclination to refuse, Natasha had known she had to come. After all, notwithstanding the past, now that both her parents were dead Natasha was the old lady's only living relative.

After Henri had exclaimed, with a tear in his eye, at seeing her again, all grown up, thrilled that she'd remembered his name, Natasha followed him up the stone staircase, amazed at how much she recognized. Over twenty years had elapsed since her last visit to Normandy, but so much felt familiar: the scents, the light pouring through the tall windows and bathing the muted walls, the echo of her heels resonating on the well-trodden steps. And something else that she couldn't quite identify.

'Madame is waiting for you upstairs in the small salon,' Henri pronounced in stentorian tones.

'Then I had better go to her at once.' Natasha smiled again, her green eyes sparkling with amusement. The situation was so dreadfully formal, as though she'd walked into another time and place.

With a small bow the butler led the way slowly up the wide staircase. Natasha realized that he suffered from arthritis and found the climb difficult. She was about to suggest that he simply tell her where the salon was and she would find it herself when she realized that would be a grave breach of etiquette. Henri, who had worked here all his life, would not take kindly to any deviation from the rigorous habits her grandmother kept.

Soon they stopped before a white and gold door. Henri knocked, then gently opened it. 'She awaits you,' he pronounced in a hushed tone.

Natasha swallowed. Suddenly this didn't seem quite as simple as she'd imagined it would when she was back in Khartoum. She was a compassionate person by nature, but the drastic way her grandmother had cut her own son out of her life had made Natasha distrustful of the older woman, whom she barely recalled.

Then, knowing she must get on with it, Natasha gathered up her courage and stepped through the door that Henri was holding open and into the high-ceilinged, shaded room. It took a moment or two for her eyes to adjust to the half-light. Then she gazed over at the tiny white-haired figure shrouded under a silk coverlet on an antique pink-velvet day-bed under the window.

'Ah, mon enfant, finally you have arrived.'

The voice was a thin whisper and, despite her initial instinctive desire to hold back, Natasha's natural empathy asserted itself. Instead of the grandmother who'd rejected her and her family for most of her life, she saw instead a feeble old lady in need of help. Quickly she approached.

'Yes, Grandmère. I am here.'

'At last.' The old lady turned her once beautiful, fine-boned features towards Natasha, the pale blue eyes searching. 'Come here, child, and sit next to me. I have waited so long for you to come.'

'I know. But I couldn't get away before. We have a humanitarian crisis on our hands right now,' she explained, perching her tall, slim figure gingerly on the edge of a spindly gilded chair.

'Never mind. The main thing is that you are here now. Henri.' The querulous voice had not lost its authoritarian tone. 'Le thé, s'il-vous-plaît.'

'Tout de suite, madame.'

With another little bow Henri retired, closing the door behind him.

'Are you sure he can manage?' Natasha asked, glancing doubtfully at the closed door.

'Manage? Of course Henri can manage,' the old lady responded peremptorily, straightening herself against the cushions with determination. 'He has been managing since before the war, when he came here as assistant aide de cuisine. But enough of that.' The old lady waved a delicate white bejewelled hand. 'Tell me about yourself, child. It has been too long. Far too long.' She let out a tremulous sigh. 'I am to blame for that, I know. But it is too late for regrets.' Her eyes rested on Natasha as though assessing her. Even though she was physically fragile, there was nothing weak about the old lady. Clearly she had all her faculties about her.

'Well, there's nothing much to tell. When I finished school I went to university. But when my parents died three years ago in the car crash, I just wanted to get away as far as I could, so I dropped out. That's when the job in Africa came up.' She shrugged, bit her lip. 'It seemed the right thing to do.'

'And are you happy in your work?' Her grandmother eyed her piercingly.

'Yes. I am. It's very exhausting, and emotionally harrowing, but it's also terribly rewarding.'

The old lady nodded. 'You are a good and compassionate person. Unlike me,' she added with a bitter laugh. 'I was always more concerned about my own well-being than that of others. Now I've paid the price for my selfish behaviour.' She let out another long sigh and closed her eyes.

Natasha hesitated. Part of her was still reticent, remembering her father's sorrow and her mother's sense of guilt at having estranged the man she loved from his family. There was no denying that it was hard to shove a lifetime's grievances under the carpet and pretend that all was well. Still, she didn't want the past to affect the future.

'Grandmère, we all make mistakes in life.'

‘That we do.’ The old lady nodded. ‘I wonder, is it possible for you to forgive me for all the harm I have done to your family, Natasha? I wish so deeply now that I had been more enlightened, that I had not estranged my dearest Hubert as I did.’

Natasha hesitated, saw the flicker of hope in the elderly woman’s eyes, and her heart went out to her. ‘Of course, Grandmère. Let’s look towards the future, and not into the past.’

‘Ah.’ The old lady rested her hand on Natasha’s and smiled a frail yet gentle smile. ‘I was right to have you come. Very right indeed.’ She laid her fingers over Natasha’s and two women sat thus for several minutes, a new bond forming between them.

Then a knock at the door announced Henri with the tea, and the spell was broken. Natasha jumped up to open the door while her grandmother issued imperative orders regarding the placement of the tea tray. She might be old, Natasha realized, a smile hovering, but she had all her wits about her and her authority still stood strong.

An hour later they had sipped tea, exchanged stories, and the old lady was obviously very tired.

‘I’ll leave you and unpack,’ Natasha said, rising.

‘Yes, mon enfant. That is a good idea. I’m afraid I won’t join you for dinner, but Henri will see to you. Come and say goodnight, won’t you?’

‘Very well.’ Natasha bent down and dropped a light kiss on her grandmother’s withered cheek. ‘I’ll see you later.’

‘Yes, my child. I shall be waiting.’

After undoing her case and placing her clothes inside the beautiful lavender-scented armoire in the faded yet elegant blue satin-draped bedroom she had been allotted, Natasha moved to the window and gazed out over the lush green countryside. In the distance she could see a medieval castle, its ramparts etched against the translucent sky. Shading her eyes, she distinguished a pennant flying from the turret. She thought of William the Conqueror, of the Norman invasion. Perhaps it was a historical monument that she could visit.

It was late spring. Flowers bloomed as though they’d constantly burst forth from one day to the next, their rich hues framing a weathered stone fountain; flowerbeds dotted with lupins and roses surrounded the velvet-smooth lawn. It was peaceful and lovely, as though caught in a time warp. Natasha glanced at her watch and wondered if she’d have time for a wander before dinner.

Deciding that she did, she slipped on a pair of sneakers and went downstairs. There was no one in the hall so she stepped out of the front door and began walking, tilting her face up towards the fast-moving cloud, enjoying the wind mussing her hair.

Soon she had wandered well beyond the lawn and the garden perimeter, and was walking across a field, enjoying the fresh breeze and the exercise. Suddenly she heard the sound of hooves. Stopping abruptly, she turned to find out who it might be, surprised to see a tall dark man in jeans and riding boots astride a nervous chestnut horse. The stranger reined in abruptly. He did not, Natasha realized, somewhat taken aback, look too pleased.

‘Who are you?’ he threw at her in French, in the tone of one unused to being thwarted.

Natasha glanced up at him, stiffening. ‘I don’t see what it has to do with you who I am,’ she retorted in fluent French.

‘It has everything to do with me as I am the owner of this land.’

‘Well, if you are, I’m sorry I trespassed. I had no ill intention,’ she replied in a haughty tone, damned if she was going to be ordered about by this obnoxious man.

‘Very well,’ he snapped. ‘See that it doesn’t happen again.’

On that peremptory note he swung the horse around and galloped off, leaving Natasha fuming, her fists balled in anger.

The nerve of the man. Why, he was the rudest creature she’d ever encountered.

It was later than she’d thought and deciding that if she really had stepped onto someone else’s land she’d better make her way back to the Manoir, she walked fast. As she approached the stately

building she stopped and gazed at it, bathed now in the glow of the setting sun, copper drain-pipes glinting on the roof. Natasha drank in the sight, determined to banish the image of the dark and odious horseman. Still, as she entered the hall and made her way quickly up to her room, she couldn't help wondering who the ignominious rider could be.

Obviously a neighbour if he owned the land. Come to think of it, if he'd had a pleasanter expression she might even have thought him good-looking, she conceded, remembering the dark scowling features and the black hair swept back from his autocratic brow. Not that it was any of her business, she reminded herself. Still, she'd ask her grandmother who he was.

At eight o'clock sharp Natasha, dressed in a dark blue silk dress she thought her grandmother would approve of, glided gracefully down the main stairway and was met by Henri, who immediately guided her into the formal dinning room. Natasha sighed. She had no desire to sit alone at a table big enough to seat sixteen. But she said nothing. This was the way things were—she'd heard it often enough from her father's stories about his boyhood. There was little use saying she'd rather have a tray in the sitting room, as it wasn't going to happen.

After the meal she got up, relieved to have finished, and made her way upstairs to her grandmother's bedroom. She'd say goodnight before it was too late, then go to her room, have a bath in the huge antique tub, and curl up in the blue satin-swathed four-poster and read.

After three unanswered knocks she decided to open the door and peer inside. She smiled when she saw the old lady sleeping. Perhaps she shouldn't disturb her. Yet something pushed her to stay, and she moved towards the bed and gazed down at her grandmother. The Comtesse de Saugure lay perfectly still, her expression peaceful. Then all at once Natasha gasped, leaned forward, and felt for the older woman's pulse.

But there was none.

Heart trembling, Natasha tried to wake her.

'Grandmère,' she murmured, gently touching her shoulder. 'Please wake up.' But she met with only silence. Horrified, her hands shaking, Natasha stood straighter and allowed the truth to sink in.

Her grandmother was dead.

CHAPTER TWO

THE early Norman chapel was filled with mourners, both local and foreign. Old retainers who had worked for the Comtesse for most of their lives lined the narrow road as the hearse made its way through the countryside. Natasha followed in the ancient Rolls, driven by Henri.

Now, as she stood alone in the front pew, dressed in black, listening to the priest read the funeral service, Natasha felt both sad and bewildered. She knew no one except for Henri and his wife Mathilde, standing respectfully in the pew behind her. Part of her shock was caused by the meeting she'd had this morning with the local notary who'd come to read her grandmother's will. To her astonishment Natasha had learned that she was her grandmother's sole beneficiary. She had inherited not only the château in Normandy, but the Comtesse's sumptuous flat in the 16ième arrondissement in Paris, and her villa on the Côte d'Azur.

Natasha had gathered her thoughts and prepared to follow the coffin down the aisle when all at once she looked up and saw the man she'd encountered in the field, seated in the opposite pew. He looked different dressed in a dark suit and tie, with his hair groomed. Their eyes met and once more Natasha wondered who he was.

Then, turning away, she followed the pallbearers out of the church to the graveyard where the Comtesse would end her life's journey, laid to rest among the ancient crooked headstones, many of which bore the name of Saugure upon them. As the coffin was lowered into the earth and the priest spoke the words she'd heard not that long ago when her parents were buried, Natasha experienced a moment of deep sadness and solitude.

Now she had no one left. Not even the estranged grandmother whom she'd hoped to get to know. Now she had only herself to count on.

Raoul d'Argentan stood a few steps away from the mourners, eyes fixed on the young woman standing next to the grave. Who was this granddaughter of the Comtesse de Saugure who had appeared out of nowhere on the day of her death? He knew, of course, that Marie Louise de Saugure had been estranged from her only son. But that all went back a long way. This, he supposed, must be his daughter. But what a strange coincidence that she should have returned only for her grandmother to die. Well, it was none of his business. The Saugures and the Argentans had been neighbours for several centuries and knew each other well. But their history had not always been pleasant. There were instances dating back a few hundred years, grievances that still rankled. Not that he cared. He had his own affairs to contend with: his auction house in Paris, which dealt in some of Europe's finest art, and, of course, the estate to run.

As he walked back to his car Raoul supposed that he should pay his respects before his departure for Paris the next morning. It was only polite, after all, to offer his condolences. Though it seemed cynical when the girl obviously barely knew the woman who had left her a fortune.

As he drove off down the hill Raoul cast a quick glance in the rearview mirror. The mourners were leaving the graveyard and he glimpsed the woman once more. Whatever else she was, she was damn lovely, that was for sure.

Telling himself to stop being ridiculous—the last thing he needed was to find himself attracted to a Saugure—he pressed his foot on the accelerator and made his way back to his estate, determined not to think about the lovely wan face and that pair of limpid green eyes, which, despite every instinct, he'd felt strangely attracted to. He consoled himself with the fact that she was unattractively dressed, had no chic at all. In fact, he would go as far as saying she looked frumpy. With a shake of his head he headed back to his château and thought about the upcoming telephone call to New York that he needed to make.

'Mademoiselle?'

‘Yes, Henri?’ Natasha looked up from the desk where she was going through some of her grandmother’s papers and smiled.

‘The Baron d’Argentan is here to offer his condolences.’

‘Right.’ She sighed, laying down the missive. Rising, she straightened her one black dress, realizing she simply must go into Deauville and acquire some suitable clothes. This was not the first neighbour come to pay their respects and satisfy their curiosity regarding the new owner of the Manoir, and she needed to dress accordingly. Better get used to it, she realized, following Henri across the hall to the formal drawing room where the butler liked to install the guests.

But, on stepping inside the room, Natasha felt her pulse leap when she recognized the tall figure silhouetted against the window. She was about to speak, then stopped, and swallowed.

‘I come to present my condolences,’ he said, in a haughty, rich baritone that seemed to resonate through the elegant room. Then he stepped forward and, raising Natasha’s fingers to his lips, bent his head towards them.

‘Thank you,’ she murmured, feeling her pulse pick up speed. His fingers felt strangely vibrant, as though an electric current were coursing through them. ‘Uh, do sit down,’ she said hurriedly, taking a step back and indicating the Louis Quinze chair opposite.

‘Thank you.’ He waited for her to sit, then followed suit. Natasha was relieved when the door opened and Henri entered with a bottle of champagne, which he proceeded to open.

‘I have not had the pleasure of your acquaintance,’ the Baron remarked, placing one leg over the other. ‘I wasn’t aware that the Comtesse had a granddaughter.’ He raised a quizzical black brow at her, as though questioning her authenticity. ‘I don’t seem to recall meeting you in the past.’

Natasha bristled and felt her cheeks flush, a flash of anger take hold. ‘That is because I haven’t been here for many years,’ she said coldly.

‘Aha. That would explain it.’

‘Yes.’

Natasha felt irritated with herself. Why was she allowing this stranger to make her feel ill at ease? She was, after all, in her own house now, for whatever that was worth.

They each accepted a glass of champagne from Henri and the Baron raised his. ‘To a very great lady. The Comtesse will be sorely missed in the region—won’t she, Henri?’ he said, addressing the butler.

‘Ah, oui, Monsieur le Baron, she most certainly will.’ Henri nodded in agreement. ‘But of course we are blessed to have mademoiselle,’ he added quickly.

‘Very true. This has come as rather a surprise to the community.’ The Baron twiddled his flute and studied her lazily.

‘I hope not an unwelcome one?’ Natasha retorted, her chin tilting upwards, anger at his high-handed manners and the idle way his eyes coursed over her increasing by the moment.

‘Unwelcome? Not at all. In fact, quite the opposite. You will be a breath of fresh air. That is if you plan to stay here?’ Again the brow flew up. It was as though he were searching for something amiss, something untoward.

‘It is far too soon for me to decide what to do. I haven’t made up my mind yet,’ she responded, hoping her tone would dampen any other questions. Yet part of her wanted him to believe her, resented that he should find anything suspicious about her. For it was true. She hadn’t decided what to do with her new inheritance. Part of her wanted to run back to Africa, to the safety of her job. Yet another part, a part she hadn’t known existed before, was struck by a new sense of loyalty to her lineage and the duties that came with the inheritance. It was her grandmother’s personal letter to her that had struck a chord. You are the only Saugure left to continue the line... Incredibly, the old lady had expected her to assume all her responsibilities.

The Baron stayed for several more minutes, making polite small talk, then rose. 'If there is anything I can help you with, Henri has my numbers. As you've probably gathered,' he said, a sudden wicked smile curving his well-defined lips, 'I am your neighbour.'

'That much became pretty obvious the other day,' she muttered dryly, smiling despite her initial desire to dislike him.

'Yes, well, I'm sorry for the way I greeted you that day. It was rude and bad-mannered. I'm hoping that, to make up for it, you might come and dine with me one day. Perhaps I can bring you up to speed on the area.' He took her hand and squeezed it in his, holding it slightly longer than necessary, and again Natasha experienced that same pulsating tingle.

'That would be very nice,' she accepted, surprising herself as she extricated her fingers from his.

'Good. Then I'll expect you tomorrow.' He gave a satisfied nod.

'I—I haven't got my schedule here,' she mumbled.

'Oh? Your timetable is already very booked up?' He smiled down at her, his dark eyes brimming with mirth.

Natasha blushed once more. 'That's not what I meant.'

'Then in that case I'll expect you at eight tomorrow evening. Henri will drive you.' With a quick nod he turned on his heel and left the room.

'Well,' Natasha exclaimed under her breath as she walked to the window and let out a long huff. The man certainly didn't lack nerve. Why, he was impossibly authoritarian. And, since she hadn't refused, she was now stuck with having dinner with him. Which reminded her of her desperate need to buy some clothes. Not that it mattered what she looked like, she qualified hastily; he was just a neighbour, and quite a rude one at that. But still, for some inexplicable reason she wanted to look her best. Perhaps it was part of her new-found duty to her name. After all, she must keep up the family reputation.

What on earth had caused him to invite this dowdy-looking Englishwoman to dinner when he'd had every intention of leaving for Paris immediately? Raoul wondered as he drove down the driveway and out onto the country road beyond. It was nonsensical and stupid to delay his return to town. Particularly to dine with someone as un-chic as his new neighbour. The woman's hair looked as if it hadn't seen a hairdresser in years, and her clothes didn't bear mentioning!

Perhaps, he concluded, shaking his head as he entered the castle gates, it was because he didn't want to go back to Paris, where he would have to deal with another of Clothilde's jealous rages.

Slowing the car to a halt in front of his massive oak front door, Raoul glanced at his mobile. Just as he'd thought, there were several missed calls from her. He rolled his eyes and huffed, passing a hand thoughtfully over his bronzed chin. He really must bring this relationship to an end. Apparently staying away for longer periods of time than he usually did wasn't doing the trick. Raoul sighed and alighted from the car. Like most men, he hated facing disagreeable situations. And Clothilde was certainly that, with her hysterical scenes and childish moods. Why, he wondered, had he got involved with her in the first place?

Stepping into the morning breeze, Raoul watched as the stable boys led two of his favourite horses across the cobblestoned yard, then stood for a moment on the edge of the well, dropping a pebble inside. Why not admit to himself that he'd succumbed to Clothilde's charm for the same reason he had all the others: because it was easier to date top models who shimmied in and out of his life than commit to anything more serious. At thirty-six he was a confirmed bachelor, and had no intention of changing his single status. Much to the disappointment of several mothers of suitable candidates to become the future Baroness d'Argentan.

His mouth took on a cynical twist. Women were ambitious gold-diggers, as he'd found out to his cost several years earlier. He would not repeat the mistake of falling for one again. And, speaking of gold-diggers, he reflected, making his way towards the medieval castle that had been in his family for centuries, perhaps Natasha de Saugure was yet another one. After all, this sudden arrival of hers

was too damned coincidental to be mere fluke. He just hoped she hadn't frightened her grandmother into having a heart attack.

But as he walked through the great hall Raoul realized with a smile that this was probably a foolish thought. He had known Marie Louise de Saugure since he was a child. If anyone had done the terrifying it could have been her. Still, he felt wary of Natasha. As he would be of any Saugure. Which was obviously why he'd felt the need to ask her to dine: to delve deeper into her motives for coming here in the first place. The more he could glean about her, the better; for the past had taught every member of his family to be wary of Saugure women.

And he was no exception.

CHAPTER THREE

NATASHA tilted her head and took another satisfied look at herself in the gilded three-way mirror. It was a long time since she'd bothered about clothes and looking nice. The last few years, tucked away in the African bush with two pairs of jeans and a few faded T-shirts, had not helped her improve her fashion skills. Still, she'd spent time in Deauville that afternoon and taken the advice of a charming shop assistant who, seeing her in doubt, had helped her select a number of items, discarding others with a disparaging wave of her well-manicured hands, saying that beige did not favour mademoiselle.

Now, as she looked at her reflection, Natasha had to admit that the woman had been right. Everything she'd chosen—from the pretty pink tweed Chanel suit to the sleek trousers and the attractive cream dress she now wore—spelled chic, smart, and made her look very different from the girl who'd stepped off the plane a few days before. Suddenly she'd been transformed from average to head-turning, thanks to the make-over that Martine, the shop assistant, had insisted on. Upon her excellent advice, Natasha had gone to the top hairdresser in town and had her long hair shaped, washed and blow-dried. The effect, combined with the new outrageously expensive outfit, was staring her right in the face, and she was finding it hard to reconcile the woman in the mirror with who she was inside.

Oh, well, she conceded with a shrug, surely she could get used to improvement? Plus, she was damned if she was going to dine at Raoul d'Argentan's castle looking like something the cat had brought in on a bad day. Which made her wonder uncomfortably, as she turned away from the mirror and stepped into the bathroom to put on some makeup, why he'd asked her over in the first place. Perhaps it was curiosity. After all, everyone must be wondering who she was and why she was here. Although no doubt Monsieur Dubois, the notary, had dropped hints in his various clients' ears. She could imagine just how intriguing it must be for a small community such as this to have her as the new châtelaine.

Which in turn brought her back to the problem of what she was going to do. Was she really prepared to turn her life around one hundred and eighty degrees and come and live in Normandy, away from the world she knew, to pick up a legacy left to her by a woman who'd denied her that same legacy all her life?

Glancing at the ormolu clock on the pink marble mantelpiece, Natasha realized it was getting late and wasn't the moment for soul-searching. She'd think about her life later. Right now she needed to get downstairs, where Henri would be waiting to drive her over to the Baron's.

After a last peek in the mirror, she picked up a smart evening purse and stepped into her new, amazingly comfortable high heels. She took a few tentative steps. Not bad, considering she'd only worn sandals and sneakers for the past three years.

Hoping she wouldn't totter too badly, Natasha made her way to the grand stairway and accomplished her descent without mishap, glad to see Henri waiting for her in the hall.

As the car drew up at the floodlit drawbridge Natasha caught her breath. The Baron's château was amazing. Her grandmother's Manoir was beautiful, but it was also stiff and formal. This place, in contrast, was a maze of twelfth-century turrets, built of heavy stone and obviously impregnable. The men who'd built it were not to be tampered with, was the message it conveyed. All at once she shuddered and wondered about its present owner.

'It is very impressionnant, is it not?' Henri said, seeing her gaze up at the ramparts.

'It certainly is. It must be very old.'

'The Argentan family has lived here since before William departed to conquer England,' he relayed proudly. 'The Baron is a descendant of a long line of warriors. They fought many battles and have made many friends and not a few enemies. The first Baron was also named Raoul.'

He drove the car slowly across the drawbridge, which creaked ominously.

‘Enemies?’ Natasha asked, her brows knitting.

‘Yes. There are many tales in the region of the Baron’s ancestors, in particular one Regis d’Argentan.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. But I must not go on. All that is in the past and better left buried there. Here we are, mademoiselle.’ He drew up in the courtyard and quickly stepped out of the car to help her alight before she could ask any further questions.

Minutes later Natasha was being conducted by a wizened butler up an ancient stone stairway illuminated by torches. Had he put on the full show for her, she wondered, or was there no electricity? The place felt strangely eerie, and an odd sense of déjà vu assailed her. But she shrugged it off and, holding her head high as she passed ancient tapestries, braced herself for the evening ahead.

Just as she was wondering where he’d got to, Raoul stepped out of the shadows.

‘Good evening,’ he said, once more raising her hand to his lips. A curious gleam lit his eyes and he took a step back. ‘Excuse me if I seem rude, but I barely recognize you.’

‘Is that a compliment?’ she asked suspiciously, a laugh hovering.

‘I would like to think of it as one,’ he confirmed, gallantly steering her into a huge hall with an imposing stone hearth, around which several high-backed velvet chairs were arranged. The fire was burning. Here the lighting seemed at least to be improved. In fact, she realized, it was terribly subtle, with ultra-modern halogens slipped behind the heavy oak beams, pinpointing tapestries and coats of arms which adorned the stone walls.

‘Your home is quite amazing,’ she said sincerely, aware of his hand at her elbow.

‘Thank you, mademoiselle—it is mademoiselle and not madame, I take it?’ he enquired smoothly.

‘Yes. Of course. I’m not married,’ she returned, surprised.

‘You object to marriage?’

‘It’s not something I think about.’

‘Really? Well, that is surprising. I thought most women did. How old are you?’

‘Twenty-three.’

‘Well, that is not a very great age, I admit, but I know a number of girls your age who have several children already.’

‘Really?’ Natasha tossed her head defiantly. ‘I thought women were marrying much later nowadays, and having children in their mid-thirties.’

‘Is that what you plan to do?’ he asked, that same quizzical brow shooting up, this time with an air of disapproval.

‘I have no idea,’ she responded tartly. This was not a subject she wished to enlarge upon.

‘Ah, so no fiancé dying to drag you to the altar?’ he quizzed, motioning to one of the chairs.

‘Don’t be silly,’ she replied with an embarrassed laugh. Thank God he couldn’t possibly know about Paul, and all the shame and embarrassment she’d been through at the age of barely nineteen, when he’d dumped her a week before their wedding.

‘Very well. Enough about marriage. How about champagne instead?’

‘Please.’ She sat demurely in the high-backed chair and crossed her legs elegantly. It felt strange to feel so beautifully dressed and feminine, to feel Raoul’s eyes devouring her not with the mere curiosity of a neighbour but with patent admiration. And all at once Natasha realized that for the past few years, since her disastrous engagement, she’d been afraid of looking attractive, of facing another relationship, in case she was faced with another misadventure. Well, she was older now, and more mature, she reflected, taking the champagne flute with a smile. She could deal with a little attraction without getting burned or involved.

Raoul settled in the chair opposite. He looked devastatingly handsome tonight, in black pants and a burgundy jacket, his raven hair swept back, his profile caught in the firelight. For an instant Natasha thought he looked just as she would have imagined a Norman Baron must look in his lair.

‘So, you are Mademoiselle de Saugure,’ he murmured thoughtfully. ‘At the risk of sounding nosy, were you expecting to become Marie Louise’s heir?’

‘Actually, I had no idea. It never occurred to me. I hadn’t seen my grandmother in ages. She—she and my father had a falling-out a few years ago,’ she finished, not prepared to get into intimate details regarding her family.

‘I remember. The Comtesse didn’t accept his marriage to your mother. Very foolish, since it made her into a lonely old lady. But understandable.’

‘You think so?’ Natasha’s hackles rose immediately. Her mother’s background was something she defended tooth and nail.

‘Yes. Your father would have had problems whoever he married. Unless, of course, it had been someone of the Comtesse’s own choosing. She was nothing if not authoritative. Liked getting her own way. We had a few tussles ourselves.’ He smiled wryly and their eyes met, locking in the candlelight for a few interminable seconds.

‘You and my grandmother?’

‘Yes. Ever since my parents’ demise several years ago I have been Lord of the Manor, so to speak. The Comtesse deemed it her duty to tell me how to run my estate. When I didn’t follow her advice to the letter we had a few tiffs. But we got over them and remained fast friends. Strange that you should have arrived so suddenly and that her death should have ensued in such a precipitate manner.’

‘If you think it was my fault I can assure you it wasn’t,’ Natasha replied coolly, hating herself for justifying something she’d had nothing to do with.

‘Of course it wasn’t. Perhaps she was waiting for you to come before she let go. She’s been fairly ill for a while. Did she tell you about the will?’

‘No. I only found out when the notary—look, I really don’t see what business it is of yours,’ she said, suddenly clamming up.

‘Pardon,’ he said, with a smile that was anything but apologetic. ‘You must excuse my curiosity. But you must admit that the circumstances are somewhat unexpected.’

‘They are. Which is why I haven’t taken any decisions regarding the future, and don’t plan to for a while.’

‘Very wise.’ He nodded, aware that he’d pushed her too far. So the little English girl had fangs under that smooth bland exterior. Interesting. Raoul felt an inner stirring which he immediately recognized as lust. Banishing it at once, aware that a quick hot affair with this woman would hardly be conducive to good neighbourly relations, he rose and extended his hand. ‘Let us proceed to dinner,’ he said, taking her arm in his. ‘I hope you will like what’s on the menu.’

‘And what is that?’ Natasha asked archly. She was finding her feet in this game of light flirtation more easily than she would have believed.

‘Oh, ris de veau. A speciality my chef loves to prepare.’ His eyes sparkled with laughter.

Natasha hesitated, swallowed. ‘Isn’t that brain?’ she asked warily.

‘When it is prepared by Alphonse you will not think at all about its origin,’ he assured her, leading the way into a vast baronial dining room, where liveried footmen stood behind two chairs at the long table.

‘Is everything always so formal?’ she asked impulsively as they stood in the entrance. ‘I don’t think I could live as you do and Grandmère did on an everyday basis. I think it would drive me mad.’

‘You prefer a more casual lifestyle?’ he asked, looking down at her from his six foot two.

‘Yes. I’ve lived in Africa with refugees in the desert for the past three years. It makes one focus on the essentials in life.’

'I can believe that,' he said as they sat down, and he watched her, intrigued. So she was not some dull little secretary from a provincial backwater but rather a woman who sought adventure in her life. The thought was alluring, gave her an extra aura, and as the candlelight flickered and she unfolded her napkin he took a good look at her face, aware now of just how perfect her features were, and how lithe and attractive her body. Would it be pliant and lithe in bed? he wondered, a sudden image of her lying naked among the sheets causing him to divert his thoughts quickly to avoid any embarrassing consequences.

'Tell me about Africa,' he requested, truly interested in learning more about his intriguing neighbour. Perhaps he'd underestimated her.

Dinner went smoothly. Comfortable talking about a place she was familiar with, a culture which she'd taken the trouble to study, and the humanitarian crisis that she felt so strongly about, Natasha relaxed and became her true self. By the time they'd had coffee and after-dinner drinks, it was close to midnight.

'Gosh, it's getting awfully late. I'd better go home...to the Manoir, I mean. Could I call a taxi?' she enquired, glancing at him across the fireplace.

'Out of the question. I'll drive you.'

'That's very kind, but I don't want to be a nuisance.'

'A beautiful woman is never a nuisance. In fact, *ma chère*, it is a pleasure,' Raoul replied smoothly, executing a small formal bow, his lips curved in a half-smile.

Despite her new desire to be cool and sophisticated, Natasha swallowed. The man was positively devastating when he smiled, she realized, and she was still unused to compliments. To her annoyance the earlier flush returned to her cheeks. Still, letting him drive her home was hardly a big deal.

Once downstairs, they stepped outside into the courtyard and Raoul opened the door of his sleek red Ferrari, clearly amused.

A woman who blushed.

That was an interesting concept—one he hadn't come across in a while. For an instant Clothilde flashed across his mind. He doubted she'd blushed at twelve, let alone now. The thought of the other woman reminded him that tomorrow he would have to go back to Paris and deal with her. For some strange reason it all seemed rather further away than it had earlier in the day, as though his evening with Natasha had somehow obliterated any vestiges of feeling he might have had.

Soon they were driving down dark country lanes before heading into the drive of the Manoir.

'I suppose our families have been neighbours for ever,' Natasha remarked as the wheels crunched the gravel and the vehicle drew up at the front door.

'We have, in effect, been neighbours for going on approximately six hundred years.'

'Who was your ancestor—Regis?' she asked suddenly, remembering Henri's words and turning to try and distinguish his expression in the half-light coming from the outside lamps.

She saw him stiffen. 'Who told you about Regis?' he asked warily.

'Oh, somebody mentioned him. I can't remember who,' she lied, sensing there was more to this story than met the eye. More that she definitely planned to find out.

'Regis was a rather flamboyant character. All families have them, I suppose—a sort of black sheep, in a way. I'll tell you about him some time. It would take too long tonight, *ma chère*.'

'All right.' Natasha pretended not to be intrigued by the story. Someone else could surely tell it. Which made her suddenly determined to become better acquainted with the people on the estate and in the village. Perhaps she could glean some interesting details from them, learn all sorts of things about the past.

Then, when she least expected it, Raoul leaned over and in one smooth, swift movement slipped his hand under her chin and drew her mouth to his.

She should protest, should stop him, should do something, Natasha realized. But it was impossible. For the next thing she knew Raoul's firm lips were parting hers, forcing them to surrender

to his will. His arms came about her and her breast cleaved to his hard chest. It was crazy, but all she could do was succumb, allow his probing tongue to wander, seek, explore, and try to ignore the delicious tautness of her nipples, to control the myriad sensations coursing through her body from head to toe. When finally he withdrew his mouth, and stayed staring down at her, she pulled out of his arms, breathless, her pulse racing.

'I'll be back at the end of the week,' he murmured, his voice husky with undisguised desire, 'then we can pick up where we've left off, ma belle. I look forward to it already.'

'We will do nothing of the sort,' she retorted, regaining some measure of composure. 'And I'll thank you to leave me alone. I have no need or desire for your attentions. Keep your kisses for your own kind. I have no wish for them.' With that she flung out of the car and, stumbling on the gravel in her high heels, reached the front door.

Henri had given her a heavy key before dinner. Now she inserted it in the lock, her fingers struggling nervously to undo it. 'Oh, bother,' she exclaimed, when it wouldn't turn.

'May I?' Raoul, composed and gentlemanly once more, stepped forward.

'Oh, just go away and leave me alone,' Natasha exclaimed crossly, her nerves still jangling from their unexpected encounter.

'But you'll be stuck out here in the night,' he remarked matter-of-factly. 'Let's be reasonable about this, ma chère, after all it was only a kiss.'

With an annoyed huff Natasha stepped back and let Raoul take over. After one expert twist the key turned. 'Voilà,' he said, smiling down at her with that same mischievous twinkle which had the effect of making her melt inside. 'Bonne nuit, lovely lady. May you have sweet dreams.' Then he turned abruptly, just as he had the other day. And the next thing she knew he was driving off down the drive as she let herself into the dimly lit hall.

Sleep was impossible. She simply must pull herself together. Instinctively Natasha walked to the library and switched on a lamp. Perhaps another drink would do her good—a nightcap. Or maybe that was the problem. She wasn't used to much alcohol, and, although it hadn't seemed much at the time, over the course of the evening she must have consumed quite a bit. Perhaps a book might do the trick—distract her from the evening's adventure.

But, as she skimmed the packed shelves of classics, Natasha could still feel the touch of Raoul's lips on hers, the tingling sensation that caused her breasts to peak even now, and a strange delicious throbbing travelling through her. It was ridiculous, she reasoned. Outrageous that a man she barely knew could cause such havoc. Why, she hadn't had a boyfriend since Paul, and even then she'd been hesitant to sleep with him, as though something deep down inside had warned her of his future behaviour. But she had. And it hadn't been a success. She'd been afraid, unexcited, but determined to do what she had to. Never in the two years they'd gone out together had she felt anything close to the extreme rush of pleasure she'd derived in those few minutes with Raoul in the car.

'Absurd,' she muttered, glancing at the rows of titles, determined to find something to distract her. All at once her eyes fell upon a large leatherbound volume. A Concise History of the Famille d'Argentan, she read. Extracting the large volume from its slot, where it had obviously remained for many years, she brushed off some dust. There was nothing concise about it, she reflected with a grimace, carrying the enormous book over to the sofa.

Wrapping herself in a rug, Natasha opened the stiff cover and began curiously to turn the pages. There was a long detailed family tree. Suddenly her eye fell upon Regis. His dates were interesting. 1768 to 1832. So he had been a young man during the French Revolution. Then, to her amazement, she read a name that was all too familiar: Natasha de Saugure.

The name was not printed, in the manner of a wife's, but inscribed as a handwritten side-note. A shiver ran down her spine. So she had been named after an ancestor. Her father had never mentioned the fact. Avidly she glanced at Natasha's dates. 1775 to 1860. The woman had lived to a ripe old age. But what had been her relationship to Regis? There were no details. Just the scribbled note. How

strange, she thought, flicking through the pages, that her namesake should be inscribed next to the name of the man nobody seemed to want to talk about.

After a while perusing the book, she felt sleep begin to press upon her, and, laying the volume down on an ornate table, she rose and yawned. Time to go upstairs and rest. Tomorrow she would seek further information.

As she wandered up the grand stairway Natasha glanced up at the portraits on the wall. A lovely grey-eyed girl in a stiff brocade dress with a revealing décolleté—as had been the fashion in the late eighteenth century—stared down at her from one of them. Natasha held her breath as her eyes went to the tiny bronze plaque on the frame. As she'd supposed, it was Natasha de Saugure. Who had she married and had she been happy? she wondered suddenly. Her eyes in the portrait looked bright and filled with hope. But there was something else, a mysterious melancholic twist to the smile.

Natasha glanced at the painting a moment longer, then, letting out a sigh, she climbed the rest of the stairs and headed to her room.

CHAPTER FOUR

A WEEK passed and still Natasha hadn't taken any definite decision regarding her future. To her annoyance she experienced a moment's disappointment when there was no sign of Raoul at the end of the week. But she shook it off, reminding herself that it was for the best. He'd obviously seen the light, realized how embarrassing any involvement would be. After all, they might be neighbours for the next half-century for all she knew.

Neither had she had time to further her investigation into the lives of Regis d'Argentan and her ancestor Natasha, for Monsieur Dubois had appeared at the château the morning following her evening with Raoul, armed with heavy manila files overflowing with documents needing to be signed and filed, and others she needed to read to become familiar with her grandmother's estate.

'And you should visit your grandmother's apartment in Paris immediately,' the notaire had admonished in his precise legal tone.

So now here she was, a week later, sitting on a train headed to Paris.

Except for an old schoolfriend, she knew no one in that city. But, despite this somewhat daunting fact, Natasha was excited. Here she was, going to Paris to stay in her very own apartment. It seemed incredible. It was a long time since she'd visited the city with her parents, and the thought of rediscovering such exciting places as the Louvre and the Centre Pompidou, and ambling down the Champs Elysées, stopped her being anxious for long. Perhaps she would even hit Avenue Montaigne, now that she'd discovered the novel and intriguing delight of creating a new wardrobe.

As the train drew up to the platform at the Gare du Nord, Natasha stepped down with her practical roll-on case. She was about to follow the crowd down the platform towards the main station entrance when she heard her name called.

'Oh, my God,' she exclaimed as Raoul stood looming over her, his dark features stark in the afternoon sun. 'You gave me such a fright.'

'Forgive me. It was not my intention.'

'How did you know I was here?' she asked haughtily, hastily regaining her composure.

'I rang the Manoir to talk to you and Henri told me you'd be on the four-fifty, so I came to pick you up,' he replied matter-of-factly.

'Well, that's very nice of you,' she said, hoping her tone was dampening enough, and willing her pulse not to beat quite so hard, 'but Henri had no business telling you my whereabouts.' Another time she'd leave specific instructions not to reveal her plans.

'I think he assumed you would like to be picked up,' he said mildly, taking her case and slipping his hand protectively about her shoulders as two heavily laden backpackers nearly collided with her on the crowded platform. 'I believe you are not very familiar with Paris?'

'No, I'm not,' she acknowledged crossly, wishing she could calm the agitation that being next to him caused. Then, as they began walking down the platform, she saw Raoul signal to an older man in a grey suit and tie.

'May I introduce Pierre?' Raoul said smoothly, as they reached him. 'He drives for me. We shall be taking mademoiselle to the Saugure apartment in the Place François Premier, Pierre.' His tone was polite, yet there was no doubt that the words were an order. Natasha felt strangely exhilarated and annoyed. How dared he swan into her life and simply take over? What if she'd wanted to go somewhere else rather than the apartment?

She was about to protest when by chance her eyes fell on the large queue waiting for taxis. It went against the grain, but she swallowed her words. It was really much simpler and more agreeable to be driven, even though Raoul's manner was intolerably high-handed. Of course she'd have to make it very plain indeed that she was not going to be herded around Paris at his pleasure, she reflected,

climbing into the Bentley that had materialized as though by magic. She had her own plans for her Parisian stay, and they did not include Raoul d'Argentan.

Or at least they hadn't up until now.

'I thought you'd enjoy dining here,' Raoul said a few hours later as they glanced at their menus over the candlelit dinner table.

Natasha wasn't quite certain how she'd ended up at Laurent's with Raoul. It had all happened in such a natural manner that she'd barely noticed the time go by. First she'd been enchanted by the apartment, situated in one of Paris's loveliest squares. It was ample, elegant, and beautifully decorated. Very different from the stiff formality of the Manoir, as though another hand had been at work here. The housekeeper, Madame Duvallier, a large middle-aged woman with a warm smile and an efficient manner, who had worked with the old Comtesse for many years, had made her most welcome. She'd also greeted Raoul warmly, and it had been plain to Natasha that he was an habitué.

Now, as they sat at the candlelit table, she decided to question him. 'Have you come often to Grandmère's apartment?' she asked, after they'd ordered and the menus had been removed.

'Quite frequently. My parents and she were friends. So, yes, I've been in and out over the years. Lately the Comtesse had asked me for some advice about her affairs. In fact, I'm quite surprised she never told me that you were to be her heir,' he added, with that same critical stare that left her feeling as though he was suspicious of her.

Natasha bristled. 'I don't see why she should have. After all, I didn't know myself.'

'No, but—' He cut off his words, shook his head and smiled. 'It is of no importance. Do not let us spoil such a pleasant evening by conjecturing over things which we cannot alter in any case.'

The logic of his argument struck home. There was little use in trying to figure out the old Comtesse's motives. She might as well do as he said, and enjoy the lovely atmosphere of the restaurant.

'Do you plan to make a long stay in Paris?' Raoul enquired as they sipped champagne, and Natasha felt a delicious headiness take hold of her.

'I really don't know. But very soon I'll have to decide whether or not I'm returning to my job. I took two months off. But after that I'll need to make a definite decision as to the future.'

'Do you enjoy your job?' he asked curiously, his eyes boring into hers.

'I do enjoy it, yes. It has been very fulfilling. But...' She hesitated, something stopping her from confiding in him.

'But?' He prodded gently, determined to get her to tell him what was on her mind.

'Well, it's just that all this has been so unexpected. I mean, how could I have imagined when I left Khartoum that my life would take such a strange turn?'

'No, you couldn't, could you?' he murmured, still sizing her up while accepting the caviar the waiter had placed before them. 'Now things seem very different?'

'Yes.' She hesitated, then decided to risk it and tell him how she felt. Expressing it might help her understand better herself. 'Now it's as though I have a new path that I must follow. Not that I'm certain yet,' she added hastily. 'It's too soon for me to take such a radical decision. The thing is that if I don't remain here—or at least at the Manoir—I'll probably have to sell it.'

'Sell the Manoir?' Raoul's cup hit the saucer with a crack. 'You can't sell the Manoir. It has been in the Saugure family for almost three centuries. The original house much longer than that. It's unthinkable.' His voice cut the air like a knife and his dark eyes flashed with anger.

'I know that. But all things have to move on at some point,' she reasoned thoughtfully.

'That is a ridiculous statement,' he bit back. 'Selling the Manoir is out of the question.'

'Might I remind you,' she said, drawing herself up, 'that it really is none of your business what I do with my property.'

'You can remind me as much as you like,' he answered, his burning eyes meeting hers full on in a clash of wills, 'but I assure you, mademoiselle, that I will personally make your life as difficult as possible should you even contemplate such an action. Mon Dieu. What would Marie Louise do if

she could hear you? She must be turning in her grave at this very instant.' He sent her a withering look across the table and signalled the waiter for the bill.

'I don't see how you can stop me if I do decide to sell,' Natasha challenged, furious at his meddling. 'I have every right to do whatever I like with all three properties. Neither you nor anyone can stop me.'

'Technically I may not be able to stop you,' he replied in a low, menacing voice as the waiter approached, 'but I assure you that you would regret it if you so much as thought about selling the Manoir.'

'Are you threatening me?' Her chin jutted out and she faced him head on.

'Merely warning you that you are on shaky ground when it comes to selling. You have inherited a duty to your name and your lineage,' he threw, his tone as biting as it was derisive. 'Surely even an Englishwoman like you can understand that? Doesn't your bloodline mean anything to you?'

'You are insupportable,' Natasha hissed, throwing down her napkin on the table and getting up while the waiter hovered anxiously. 'I'll do whatever I like with my property, and I'll thank you to leave me alone. I need neither your assistance nor your advice. Goodnight.' On that dramatic note she swept regally from the table and made her way to the entrance of the restaurant.

When the doorman asked her if she wanted a cab she acquiesced gladly, still fuming from the altercation while desperately trying to ignore the needling truth that Raoul's words had brought home: she did feel a link to the past, and to her name and to all she owed it. But she was damned if she would admit that to him, she reflected savagely, letting out a cross huff as she waited impatiently for the cab.

So she had a temper. Well, he liked her all the better for it. But he was damned if he was going to let her get all sorts of ridiculous ideas into that pretty head of hers. Sell the Manoir indeed. Absurd. Plus, that might lead to the divulging of past history much better left buried.

Having settled the bill, Raoul made his way to the entrance of the restaurant, where he could see Natasha's back stiffly etched in the doorway. A smile hovered about his lips. She was turning out to be quite a handful, the drab little English miss. Not only had she been transformed into a raving beauty, but her character was proving more and more intriguing by the moment.

Signalling the doorman, he murmured to him to cancel the cab and approached Natasha.

'Excusez-moi, mademoiselle, if I said anything to offend you,' he murmured in a conciliatory tone, 'but the truth must be faced.'

She whirled around, eyes blazing. 'I've had just about enough of you for one evening, Raoul d'Argentan. Now, please leave me alone. I've ordered a cab and I can find my way back to the apartment perfectly well on my own.'

'But the doorman has just indicated to me that there are no taxis available in Paris at this hour,' he said, sounding much more French than he had before, and raising his hand in a very Gallic manner while shaking his head, eyes twinkling.

'Really? That wasn't the case five minutes ago,' she replied coldly.

'No? Well, things can change very fast in Paris. Transport is unreliable.' He slipped an arm into hers and began walking. 'Much better to let me accompany you—which, I might add, I do with pleasure.' The slight lilt of a French accent thickened and his eyes sparkled. 'Really, Natasha, there is no need to be upset. It is only a ride home, après tout, and you are only cross because I pointed out something that I have a funny feeling you already know deep down inside yourself.'

Natasha swallowed, bereft of words. How did he know? And how could she deny the truth? She glanced back at the doorman, who sent her an apologetic look. Anger still seethed inside her at the way she'd been so accurately read and cleverly manipulated. But, she realized, letting out a sigh, it was unlikely that the doorman would order her a cab now that the Baron had imposed his wretched will, and the best she could do, without causing an embarrassing scene, was to concede gracefully.

Several minutes later they drove alongside the Seine, past famous bridges, with the lights from the barges and bateaux mouches shimmering. On the Isle Saint-Louis she heard the chime of the

bells at Nôtre Dame. It was impossible to be here, in this the loveliest of cities, and not surrender to its charm and enchantment.

'How about a drink before we turn in?' Raoul asked, taking a sidelong glance at her as he kept the car steady in the flow of traffic. She looked calmer, more composed. And he had no intention of letting her go home right now. She looked too beautiful in that silk dress, her hair flowing like golden wheat over her shoulders. Plus, he'd finally dispatched Clothilde and was therefore free as the wind. Added to all these valid reasons was the fact that the kiss they'd shared the other night in the car had remained strangely imprinted in his mind.

'I suggest we pop over to the bar of the Plaza Athénée. If you haven't been there before you'll find the decoration amusing.' He pulled his mobile out of his pocket, and before Natasha had a chance to agree or refuse he was reserving a table in quick French.

'Raoul, I never said I was going,' she said when he'd finished.

'Do you always have to protest against every good idea?' he countered with a shrug, a wicked smile breaking on his handsome face. 'Just relax—voyons—and go with the flow, as they say in America. After all, you're in Paris. Enjoy it.'

She sighed, realizing she was beaten and that actually she rather wanted to go for a drink. Plus, there really could be no possible harm in joining him in the bar of one of Paris's best hotels, she justified.

Soon they were seated in the corner of the dimly lit bar and Raoul ordered a bottle of Dom Perignon. The atmosphere was fun and young, and Natasha eyed the bar counter—a replica of a huge slab of ice, internally illuminated—intrigued.

'Like it?' Raoul asked, following her gaze. 'It's fun, isn't it? I like coming here.'

It was only then that he saw a slim familiar figure silhouetted across the room, seated with friends by the window, and his heart sank. Clothilde sat, sylphlike and languorously elegant, dressed as always in the latest Dior fashions. Her dark-eyed gaze fulminated as it rested upon him. Raoul glanced away. Why hadn't he remembered that she'd probably be here tonight? Hopefully she would be too proud to make a scene.

But his hopes were dashed when two minutes later Clothilde snaked between the tables, her slim hips swaying, then stood before him, her long black hair shrouding her face, a cigarette waving in her nervous fingers.

'Monsieur le Baron,' she threw sarcastically, 'to what do we owe the pleasure of your presence here tonight? I thought you were ruralizing for a while.'

'Good evening, Clothilde. May I introduce an English friend of mine, Natasha de Saugure?'

'Non!' Clothilde exclaimed. 'I'm not interested in your friends or your lies,' she spat venomously, sending Natasha a scathing look. 'You're a liar and a cheat, Raoul d'Argentan, and I'll make sure all of Paris knows it. Be careful of him,' she added, addressing Natasha, 'he's the biggest bastard in town.' Then, tossing her head, she turned on her spiky high heels and stalked back to her table, where her cohorts sat watching approvingly.

Raoul sighed and shook his head. 'Sorry about that,' he murmured. 'I'm afraid Clothilde is rather theatrical.'

'Who is she? Your girlfriend?'

'Ex-girlfriend. If you can call her that. I dated her for a while and she thought it was more serious than it ever was. Why is it that women always fall into that trap?' he enquired, brows knit. 'I don't understand why they can't just accept the status quo and enjoy it. It always amazes me how they complicate life.' He shook his head and let out a sigh.

'Perhaps the women you run into have a deeper sense of commitment than you do,' she replied, tongue in cheek, before taking a sip of chilled champagne.

'Maybe. But no commitment ever existed in the first place. Not on my side anyway. I made that abundantly plain from the outset.'

‘But things can start out as casual in life and then become deeper as time goes on,’ Natasha argued.

He shrugged in what she considered to be a very French gesture. ‘I never make promises that I might break. And I never offered marriage or even an in-house living arrangement to Clothilde. I really don’t see why she’s so upset.’

‘Well, she seems to think she has a ton of reasons,’ Natasha remarked tartly.

‘You see?’ He turned and threw his hands up. ‘That is exactly what I mean. Women are all the same—always filling in the blanks with all sorts of reasons and justifications for getting their own way. I will never understand them.’

Natasha smothered a smile and decided there was little point in pursuing the subject. But Clothilde’s burst of anger had left her thinking. It was clear that Raoul was a seasoned playboy, used to getting his own way. Perhaps she should take the other woman’s warning seriously. After all, she knew nothing about him except that he was her neighbour in Normandy.

Later, as they drove back to the apartment through the quiet streets of the city, she determined to keep her distance from this man. She’d learned her lesson with Paul, hadn’t she? The minute you trusted you could also be betrayed. And, frankly, she had very few reasons to trust Raoul.

When they reached the imposing building he stopped the car and parked. ‘How about inviting me in for a nightcap?’ he said with a grin.

‘I don’t think so. I’m quite tired tonight. I have a long day tomorrow—meetings with my grandmother’s lawyers and so on.’

‘Ah, you’re meeting with Perret, I take it.’ He nodded. ‘He’s quite a good man on the whole, but I told Marie Louise she might want to consider a change of legal counsel.’

‘And why is that?’

‘Oh, I’ll tell you some other time, when you have more time on your hands,’ he answered affably.

Natasha could have kicked herself for falling into the trap.

‘Right—well, I’d better be going.’ She began opening the door, but he leaned quickly across her and held it closed.

‘Not so fast, ma belle,’ he murmured, his voice turning husky. ‘You can’t be in that much of a hurry.’

‘I—’ Natasha felt her body click into overdrive. What was it about this man that left her mesmerized, unable to react as she should? When his hand slipped behind her neck and he drew her close, his lips dropping a trail of deliciously feathery kisses on her cheek, down past her lips, her throat, then slipped to her breast, instead of repulsing him she let out a pent-up sigh of longing.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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