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CINDERELLA ON HIS
DOORSTEP

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**Rebecca Winters
Lucy Gordon
Cinderella on His Doorstep /
Accidentally Expecting!:
Cinderella on His Doorstep**

Аннотация

CINDERELLA ON HIS DOORSTEP Rebecca Winters Once upon a time there lived a girl who felt invisible and shied away from the limelight. Until she arrived on location at Château Belles Fleurs and became the star of her own real-life fairytale. Who will Dana's leading man be? **ACCIDENTALLY EXPECTING!** Lucy Gordon On holiday in Italy, Ferne is dazzled by charming Dante Rinucci and his carpe diem zest for life. She doesn't realise that every day could be his last. But Ferne's surprise pregnancy, and the chance to be a dad, could save Dante...

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Preview

Escape the winter chill for the sunny, beautiful Loire Valley and the drama and excitement of Naples!

CINDERELLA ON HIS DOORSTEP

by Rebecca Winters

Rebecca Winters has taken readers on many wonderful journeys, and this story, her hundredth book, is no exception. She'll capture your imagination with the smells, sounds and flavours of France...and steal your heart with a romance to treasure!

ACCIDENTALLY EXPECTING!

by Lucy Gordon

Tear-jerking and touching—Lucy Gordon brings you a story that will stay with you long after you've turned the last page... On the shores of the Mediterranean, the majesty of Mount Vesuvius and dangerous, dashing Dante will make your senses erupt!

Cinderella on His Doorstep

by

Rebecca Winters
Accidentally Expecting!

by

Lucy Gordon



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Cinderella on His Doorstep

By

Rebecca Winters

Dear Reader

My wonderful editor Kimberley Young informed me that CINDERELLA ON HIS DOORSTEP was my one-hundredth novel for Harlequin Mills & Boon. I was presented with a gorgeous heart on a chain. It was an open heart, beautifully sculptured. As I drew it out of the box I realised those one hundred books had been a labour of love. They've taken me to faraway places where I could lose myself for a time.

In CINDERELLA ON HIS DOORSTEP, I immersed myself in the château country of France, where some of the most beautiful vineyards in the world can be found. Alex and Dana are two people both searching for something that has eluded them all their lives. When fate brings Dana to the doorstep of Alex's dilapidated château, they both sense their lives are going to change. They long to put down roots as deep and lasting as the roots of his vineyard. Together, it's more than possible their broken hearts will mend.

Enjoy their journey!

Rebecca Winters

Rebecca Winters, whose family of four children has now swelled to include five beautiful grandchildren, lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the land of the Rocky Mountains. With canyons and high Alpine meadows full of wildflowers, she never runs out of places to explore. They, plus her favourite vacation spots in Europe, often end up as backgrounds for her Mills & Boon® Romance novels because writing is her passion, along with her family and church.

Rebecca loves to hear from her readers. If you wish to e-mail her, please visit her website at www.cleanromances.com

To my son, Bill, whom I often call Guillaume, because he speaks French too and loved France and the vineyards as much as I did when we traveled there. I called upon him for some of the research for this book. Once again we had a marvelous time discussing one of France's greatest contributions to the world.

Chapter One

Sanur, Bali—June 2

“MARTAN?”

Through the shower of a light rain Alex Martin heard his name being called from clear down the street. He paused in the front doorway with his suitcases. The houseboy whose now-deceased mother had been hired by the Forsten Project years earlier to help clean the employees' houses, had attached himself to Alex. Without fail, he always called him by his last name, giving it a French pronunciation.

“Hey, Sapto—I didn't think I was going to see you again.” He'd been waiting for the taxi that would drive him to the Sanur airport in Bali.

Before the accident that had killed William Martin, Alex's Australian-born father, William would turn on Sapto. “Our last name is *Martin*! Mar-TIN!”

Sapto had stubbornly refused to comply. In recent months he'd lost his mother in a flood and knew Alex had lost his French mother to an aggressive infection several years back. He felt they had a bond. Alex had been rather touched by the boy's sensitivity and never tried to correct him.

“Take me home with you.” His dark eyes begged him. “I've never been to France.”

Home? That was a strange thing for Sapto to say. Though

Alex held dual citizenship and was bilingual, he'd never been to France, either. As for Sapto, he guessed the fifteen-year-old hadn't ventured farther than twenty miles from Sanur in the whole of his life.

Alex's family had moved wherever his father's work as a mechanical engineer had taken him, first in Australia, then Africa and eventually Indonesia. With his parents gone, he didn't consider anywhere home. After flying to Australia to bury his father next to his mother, he was aware of an emptiness that prevented him from feeling an emotional tie to any given spot.

"I wish I could, Sapto, but I don't know what my future's going to be from here on out."

"But you said your French grandfather left you a house when he died! I could live there and clean it for you."

Alex grimaced. "He didn't leave it to *me*, Sapto." The letter meant for his mother had come two years too late. It had finally caught up to Alex through the Forsten company where he worked.

The attorney who'd written it stated there was going to be a probate hearing for the Fleury property on June 5 in Angers, France. This was the last notice. If Genevieve Fleury, the only living member of the Fleury family didn't appear for it, the property located in the Loire Valley would be turned over to the French government.

After making a phone call to the attorney and identifying himself, Alex was told the estate had been neglected for forty

odd years and had dwindled into an old relic beyond salvaging. The back taxes owing were prohibitive.

Be that as it may, Alex had the impression the attorney was downplaying its value for a reason. A piece of ground was always worth something. In fact, the other man hadn't been able to cover his shock when he'd learned it was Genevieve's son on the phone.

Something wasn't right.

At this point the one thing driving Alex was the need to visit the land of his mother's roots and get to the bottom of this mystery before moving on. With no family ties, he was free to set up his own company in the States.

By now the taxi had arrived. Sapto put his bags in the trunk for him. "You will write me, yes?" His eyes glistened with tears.

"I promise to send you a postcard." He slipped a cash bonus into the teen's hand. "Thank you for all your help. I won't forget. Take care."

"Goodbye," Sapto called back, running after the taxi until it rounded the corner.

Hollywood, California—August 2

"Lunch break! Meet back here at one o'clock. No excuses!"

With the strongly accented edict that had been awaited for over an hour, the actors and cameramen left the set in a stampede.

When Jan Lofgren's thick brows met together, Dana knew her genius father was in one of his moods. Most of the time the Swedish-born director was so caught up in the story he wanted

to bring to life, he lived in another realm and lost patience with human weaknesses and imperfections of any kind, especially hers.

As his only offspring, she'd been a big disappointment. He'd wanted a brilliant son. Instead he got a mediocre daughter, whose average brain and looks would never make her fortune. When she was a little girl her mother had cautioned her, "Your father loves you, honey, but don't expect him to be like anyone else. With that ego of his, he's a difficult man to love. You have to take him the way he is, or suffer."

The truth was as hard to take today as it was then. Dana had been through a lot of grief since her mother's death five years ago, but had learned to keep it to herself. Especially lately while he was having problems with his present girlfriend, Saskia Brusse, a Dutch model turned aspiring actress who had a bit part in this film. She wasn't much older than Dana's twenty-six years, the antithesis of Dana's mother in every conceivable way.

Privately his love life pained and embarrassed Dana, but she would never have dared articulate her disapproval. The same couldn't be said of her father who'd been outspoken about her disastrous relationship with Neal Robeson, a young actor looking for an in with the famous director, rather than with her. She'd thought she'd found love. Her mistake. It was a lesson in humiliation she would never forget.

Granted she'd made a gross error in getting involved with anyone in the film industry, but for her father to explode over

that when he never seemed to notice anything else she did for him had caused a serious rift between them. It would never heal if left up to him, not when his anger was over the top. Once again she found herself making overtures to breach the gap.

“I brought you some coffee and sandwiches.”

Deep in thought he took the thermos from her and began drinking the hot liquid. After another long swallow he said, “I’ve decided to shoot the rest of this film on location. Then it will ripen into something worthy.”

Her father needed atmosphere, that ethereal ingredient the studio set couldn’t provide. He flicked her a speculative glance. “Everything’s in place except for the most important segment of the film in France. I’m not happy with any of our old options and want something different.”

Dana already knew that and was ready for him. Since her mother’s funeral, finding the right locations had become Dana’s main job besides being chief cook and general dogsbody to her irascible father. She had to concede he paid her well, but the sense that she was invisible to him inflicted a deep wound.

If he wasn’t directing one of his award-winning films, he had his nose in a biography. She was a voracious reader, too, and had inherited his love of firsthand accounts of World War II in the European theatre. Over the years they’d traipsed from the coast of England to the continent, pinpointing the exact locales to bring his creations to life.

“I’ve come across something on the Internet that sounds

promising, but I'll need to check it out first. Give me a couple of days." If she could solve this problem for him, maybe he'd remember he had a daughter who yearned for a little attention from him. When she was his own flesh and blood, it hurt to be a mere cipher.

"That's too long."

"I can only get to Paris in so many hours, but once I'm there, I'll make up for lost time. Expect to hear from me tomorrow evening."

"What's your final destination?"

"I'd rather not say." She could hope that if she found what he was looking for, it would ease some of the tension between them, but she doubted it because her mother had been the only one who knew how to soothe him. Now that she was gone, no one seemed to exist for him, especially not his only child.

Around the next bend of the Layon river, Dana crossed a stone bridge where she saw the sign for Rablay-sur-Layon. So much greenery made her feel as if she'd driven into a Monet painting done at Giverny and had become a part of it. The string of Anjou region villages nestled against this tributary of the Loire gave off an aura of timeless enchantment.

How shocking it must have been for the French people to see soldiers and tanks silhouetted against gentle slopes of sunflowers as they gouged their way through this peaceful, fertile river valley. Dana cringed to imagine the desecration of a landscape dotted with renaissance chateaux and vineyards of incomparable

beauty.

A loud hunger pain resounded in the rental car. Between her empty stomach and the long shadows cast by a setting sun, it occurred to her she ought to have eaten dinner at the last village she'd passed and waited till morning to reach her destination. However, she wasn't her father's daughter for nothing and tended to ignore sensible restrictions in order to gratify certain impulses for which she often paid a price.

No matter. She wanted to see how the light played against the Château de Belles Fleurs as it faded into darkness. One look and she'd be able to tell if this place had that unique ambience her father demanded.

Following the map she'd printed off, Dana made a right at the second turn from the bridge and passed through an open grillwork gate. From there she proceeded to the bifurcation where she took the right fork. Suddenly she came upon the estate, but unlike the carefully groomed grounds of any number of chateaux she'd glimpsed en route, this was so overgrown she was put in mind of a *bois sauvage*. Without directions she would never have known of its existence, let alone stumbled on to it by accident.

A little farther now and a *tour* of the chateau's bastion with its pointed cone appeared as if it were playing hide-and-seek behind the heavy foliage. Clumps of plum-colored wild roses had run rampant throughout, merging with a tall hedge that had long since grown wild and lost its shape.

She pulled to a stop and got out of the car, compelled to explore this ungovernable wood filled with wild daisies hidden in clumps of brush. Once she'd penetrated deeper on foot, she peeked through the tree leaves, but was unable to glimpse more.

A lonely feeling stole through her. No one had lived here for years. The estate had an untouched quality. Secrets. She knew in her bones these intangible elements would appeal to her father. If she'd combed the entire Loire valley, she couldn't have found a more perfect spot. He demanded perfection.

"Puis-je vous aider, madame?" came the sound of a deep male voice.

Startled out of her wits, Dana spun around. "Oh—" she cried at the sight of the bronzed, dark-haired man who looked to be in his midthirties. "I didn't know anyone was here." Her tourist French was of no help in this situation, but judging by his next remark, she needn't have worried.

"Nor did I." His English sounded as authentic as his French, but she couldn't place the pronunciation. His tone came off borderline aggressive.

His hands were thrust in the back pockets of well-worn, thigh-molding jeans. With those long, powerful legs and cut physique visible beneath a soil-stained white T-shirt, she estimated he was six-three and spent most of his time in the sun.

"The place looks deserted. Are you the caretaker here?"

He flashed her a faintly mocking smile. "In a manner of speaking. Are you lost?" She had the impression he was

impatient to get on with what he'd been doing before she'd trespassed unannounced. Twilight was deepening into night, obscuring the details of his striking features.

“No. I planned to come here in the morning, but my curiosity wouldn't let me wait that long to get a sneak preview.”

His dark-fringed eyes studied her with toe-curling intensity. For once she wished she were a tall, lovely brunette like her mom instead of your average Swedish blonde with generic blue eyes, her legacy from the Lofgren gene pool.

“If you're a Realtor for an American client, I'm afraid the property isn't for sale.”

She frowned. “I'm here for a different reason. This *is* the Château de Belles Fleurs, isn't it?”

He gave an almost imperceptible nod, drawing her attention to his head of overly long dark hair with just enough curl she wagered her balding father would kill for.

“I'm anxious to meet the present owner, Monsieur Alexandre Fleury Martin.”

After an odd silence he said, “You're speaking to him.”

“Oh—I'm sorry. I didn't realize.”

He folded his strong arms, making her acutely aware of his stunning male aura. “How do you know my name?”

“I came across a French link to your advertisement on the Internet.”

At her explanation his hard-muscled body seemed to tauten. “Unfortunately too many tourists have seen it and decided

to include a drop-in visit on their ‘see-France-in-seven-days’ itinerary.”

Uh-oh—Her uninvited presence had touched a nerve. She lifted her oval chin a trifle. “Perhaps you should get a guard dog, or lock the outer gate with a sign that says, No Trespassing.”

“Believe me, I’m considering both.”

She bit her lip. “Look—this has started off all wrong and it’s my fault.” When he didn’t respond she said, “My name is Dana Lofgren. If you’re a movie buff, you may have seen *The Belgian Connection*, one of the films my father directed.”

He rubbed his chest without seeming to be conscious of it. “I didn’t know Jan Lofgren had a daughter.”

Most people didn’t except for those in the industry who worked with her father. Of course if Dana had been born with a face and body to die for...

She smiled, long since resigned to being forgettable. “Why would you? I help my father behind the scenes. The moment I saw your ad, I flew from Los Angeles to check out your estate. He’s working on the film right now, but isn’t happy with the French locations available.”

Dana heard him take a deep breath. “You should have e-mailed me you were coming so I could have met you in Angers. It’s too late to see anything tonight.”

“I didn’t expect to meet you until tomorrow,” she said, aware she’d angered him without meaning to. “Forgive me for scouting around without your permission. I wanted to get a feel for the

place in the fading light.”

“And did you?” he fired. It was no idle question.

“Yes.”

The silly tremor in her voice must have conveyed her emotion over the find because he said, “We’ll talk about it over dinner. I haven’t had mine yet. Where are you staying tonight?”

Considering her major faux pas for intruding on his privacy, she was surprised there was going to be one. “I made a reservation at the Hermitage in Chanzeaux.”

“Good. That’s not far from here. I’ll change my clothes and follow you there in my car. Wait for me in yours and lock the doors.”

The enigmatic owner accompanied her to the rental car. As he opened the door for her, their arms brushed, sending a surprising curl of warmth through her body.

“I won’t be long.”

She watched his tall, well-honed physique disappear around the end of the hedge. Obviously there was a path, but she hadn’t noticed. There’d been too much to take in.

Now an unexpected human element had been added. It troubled her that she was still reacting to the contact. She thought she’d already learned her lesson about men.

Alex signaled the waiter. “Bring us your best house wine, *s’il vous plait*.”

“*Oui, monsieur*.”

When he’d come up with his idea to rent out the estate to film

studios in order to make a lot of money fast, he hadn't expected a Hollywood company featuring a legendary director like Jan Lofgren to take an interest this soon, if ever.

He'd only been advertising the château for six weeks. Not every film company wanted a place this run-down. To make it habitable, he'd had new tubs, showers, toilets and sinks installed in both the bathroom off the second floor vestibule and behind the kitchen.

Alex needed close access to the outside for himself and any workmen he hired, not to mention the film crews and actors. The ancient plumbing in both bathrooms had to be pulled out. He'd spent several days replacing corroded pipes with new ones that met modern code.

Since then, three different studios from Paris had already done some sequence shots along the river using the château in the background, but they were on limited budgets.

It would take several years of that kind of continual traffic to fatten his bank account to the amount he needed. By then the deadline for the taxes owing would have passed and he would forfeit the estate.

So far, at least fifty would-be investors ranging from locals to foreigners were dying to get their hands on it so they could turn it into a hotel. One of them included the attorney who'd sent out the letter, but Alex had no intention of letting his mother's inheritance go if he could help it.

With the natural blonde beauty seated across from him, it was

possible he could shorten the time span for that happening. There was hope yet. She hadn't been turned off by what she'd seen or she wouldn't be eating dinner with him now. Her father was a huge moneymaker for the producers. His films guaranteed a big budget. Alex was prepared to go out on a limb for her.

Dana Lofgren didn't look older than twenty-two, twenty-three, yet age could be deceptive. She might be young, but being the director's only child she'd grown up with him and knew him as no one else did or could. If she thought the estate had promise, her opinion would carry a lot of weight with him. Hopefully word of mouth would spread to other studios.

After spending all day every day clearing away tons of brush and debris built up around the château over four decades, her unexplained presence no matter how feminine or attractive, hadn't helped his foul mood. That was before he realized she had a legitimate reason for looking around, even if she'd wandered in uninvited.

“How did you like your food?”

She lifted flame-blue eyes to him. With all that silky gold hair and a cupid mouth, she reminded him of a cherub, albeit a grown-up one radiating a sensuality of which she seemed totally unaware. “The chateaubriand was delicious.”

“That's good. I've sampled all their entrées and can assure you the meals here will keep any film crew happy.”

His dinner companion wiped the corner of her mouth with her napkin. “I can believe it. One could put on a lot of weight staying

here for any length of time. It's a good thing I'm not a film star."

An underweight actress might look good in front of the camera, but Alex preferred a woman who looked healthy, like this one whose cheeks glowed a soft pink in the candlelight.

"No ambition in that department?"

"None."

He believed her. "What *are* you, when you're not helping your father?"

The bleak expression in her eyes didn't match her low chuckle. "That's a good question."

"Let me rephrase it. What is it you do in your spare time?"

The waiter brought their crème brûlée to the table. She waited until he'd poured them more wine before answering Alex. "Nothing of report. I read and play around with cooking. Otherwise my father forgets to eat."

"You live with him?"

Instead of answering him, she sipped the wine experimentally. Mmm...it was so sweet. She took a bite of custard from the ramekin, then drank more. He could tell she loved it. "This could become addicting."

Alex enjoyed watching her savor her meal. "If I seemed to get too personal just now, it's because the widowed grandfather I never knew threw my mother out of the château when she was about your age. Both of them died without ever seeing each other again."

Her ringless fingers tightened around the stem of her

wineglass. “Since my mother died of cancer five years ago, my father and I have gone the rounds many times, but it hasn’t come to that yet.” She took another sip. “The fact is, whether we’re at home or on location, which is most of the time, he needs a keeper.”

Amused by her last comment he said, “It’s nice to hear of a father-daughter relationship that works. You’re both fortunate.”

A subtle change fell over her. “Your mother’s story is very tragic. If you don’t mind my asking, what caused such a terrible breach?”

Maybe it was his imagination but she sounded sincere in wanting to know.

“Gaston Fleury lost his only son in war, causing both my grandparents to wallow in grief. When my grandmother died, he gave up living, even though he had a daughter who would have done anything for him. The more she tried to love him, the colder he became.

“Obviously he’d experienced some kind of mental breakdown because he turned inward, unable to love anyone. He forgot his daughter existed and became a total recluse, letting everything go including his household staff. When my mother tried to work with him, he told her to get out. He didn’t need anyone.”

In the telling, his dinner companion’s eyes developed a fine sheen. What was going on inside her?

“Horrified by the change in him, she made the decision to marry my father, who’d come to France on vacation. They moved

to Queensland, Australia, where he was born.”

“Is your father still there?”

“No. He died in a fatal car accident seven months ago.”

She stirred restlessly. “You’ve been through a lot of grief.”

“It’s life, as you’ve found out.”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“My father’s animosity toward my grandfather was so great, he didn’t tell me the whole story until after mother died of an infection two years ago. Gaston never wrote or sent for her, so she never went back for a visit, not even after I was born. The pain would have been too great. It explained her lifelong sadness.”

Earnest eyes searched his. “Growing up you must have wondered,” she whispered.

He nodded. “To make a long story short, in May a letter meant for Mother fell into my hands. The attorney for the abandoned Belles Fleurs estate had been trying to find her. When I spoke with him personally he told me my grandfather had died in a government institution and was buried in an unmarked grave.”

She shook her head. “That’s awful.”

“Agreed. If she didn’t fly to France for a probate hearing, the property would be turned over to the government for years of back taxes owing. It consisted of a neglected château and grounds. I discovered very quickly the whole estate is half buried in vegetation like one of those Mayan temples in Central America.”

The corners of her mouth lifted. “A perfect simile.”

“However, something inside me couldn’t let it go without a fight. That meant I needed to make money in a hurry. So I came up with the idea of renting out the property to film studios.”

She eyed him frankly. “That was a brilliant move on your part for which my father will be ecstatic. You’re a very resourceful man. I hope your ad continues to bring you all the business you need in order to hold on to it.”

Dana Lofgren was a refreshing change from most women of his acquaintance who came on to him without provocation. While they’d eaten a meal together, she’d listened to him without giving away much about herself.

Alex couldn’t tell if it was a defense mechanism or simply the way she’d been born, but the fact remained she’d come as a pleasant surprise on many levels. He found he didn’t want the evening to end, but sensed she was ready to say good-night.

When he’d finished his wine, he put some bills on the table. “After your long flight and the drive from Paris, you have to be exhausted. What time would you like to come to the château tomorrow?”

“Early, if that’s all right with you. Maybe 8:00 a.m.?”

An early bird. Alex liked doing business early. “*Bon.*” He pushed himself away from the table and stood up. “I’ll be waiting for you in the drive. *Bonuit, mademoiselle.*”

Monsieur Martin not only intrigued Dana, but he’d left her with a lot to think about. In fact, the tragedy he’d related had shaken her. His mother had become invisible to her own father,

too. There were too many similarities to Dana's life she didn't want to contemplate.

She finished the last of her wine, upset with herself for letting Monsieur Martin's male charisma prompt her to get more personal with him and prod him for details about his family. That was how she'd gotten into trouble with Neal. He'd pretended to be flattered by all her interest. She'd thought they were headed toward something permanent until she realized it was her father who'd brought him around in the first place—that, and his ambition.

Of course there was a big difference here. Neal had used her in the hope of acting in one of her father's films. She on the other hand had flown to France because Monsieur Martin had advertised his property for a specific clientele. Dana wanted a service from *him*. The two situations weren't comparable.

Neither were the two men...

At her first sight of the striking owner, Dana was convinced she'd come upon the château of the sleeping prince, and *that* before the wine had put her in such a mellow mood. But their subsequent conversation soon jerked her out of that fantasy.

He was a tough, intelligent businessman of substance with an aura of authority she would imagine intimidated most men. Maybe even her own scary parent. That would be something to witness.

Disciplining herself not to eat the last few bites of custard, she left the dining room and went to her room. She could phone

her father tonight with the good news. He'd be awake by now expecting her call, unless he'd spent the night with Saskia, which was a strong possibility.

All things considered, she decided to get in touch with him tomorrow after she'd met with Monsieur Martin again.

After getting ready for bed, she set her alarm for 7:00 a.m. She was afraid she'd sleep in otherwise, but to her surprise, Dana awoke before it went off because she was too excited for the day.

She took a shower and washed her hair. Her neck-length layered cut fell into place fast using her blow-dryer. Afterward she put on her favorite Italian blouse. It was a dark blue cotton jersey with a high neck and three-quarter sleeves, casual yet professional.

She teamed it with beige voile pants and Italian bone-colored sandals. Since she was only five foot five, she hoped the straight-leg style gave the illusion of another inch of height. Dana was built curvy like her mother. Being around Monsieur Martin, she could have wished for a few more inches from her father who stood six-one. Barring that, all she could do was keep a straight carriage.

With her bag packed, she headed for the dining room where rolls and coffee were being served. She grabbed a quick breakfast, then walked out to talk to a woman at the front desk Dana hadn't seen yesterday. "*Bonjour, madame.*"

"*Bonjour, madame.* How can I help you?"

"I'm checking out." After she'd handed her back the credit

card, Dana said, “Last night I drank a wonderful white wine in the restaurant and would like to buy a bottle to take home with me.” Her father would love it. “Could you tell me the name of it?”

“*Bien sur*. We only stock one kind. It’s the Domaine Coteaux du Layon Percher made right here in the Anjou.”

“It’s one of the best wines I ever tasted.”

“In my opinion, Percher is better than the other brands from this area. Sadly the most celebrated of them was the Domaine Belles Fleurs, but it stopped being produced eighty years ago.”

Dana’s body quickened. The woman did say Belles Fleurs. “Do you know why?”

She leaned closer. “Bad family blood.” Dana had gathered as much already. There’d been a complete break between Monsieur Martin’s mother and her father, but he hadn’t mentioned anything else. “It’s an ugly business fighting over who had the rights to what.”

“I agree.”

“The present owner has only lived in the vicinity a month or so,” the woman confided. “The château has been deserted for many years.”

So Monsieur Martin had told her. “It’s very sad.”

“*C’est la vie, madame*,” she said with typical Gallic fatalism. “Would you like to buy a bottle of the Percher?”

“I—I’ve changed my mind,” her voice faltered. It would seem a betrayal.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, *merci*.”

Dana turned away and left the hotel. She was in a much more subdued frame of mind as she drove the five or so kilometers to the bridge where the trees cast more shadows across the road. The morning light coming from the opposite side of a pale blue sky created a totally different atmosphere from the night before.

This time as she reached the fork in the road, Monsieur Martin was there to greet her. It sent her pulse racing without her permission. She pulled to a stop.

He walked toward her, dressed in white cargo pants and a burgundy colored crewneck, but it didn't matter what he wore, she found him incredibly appealing. It wasn't just the attractive arrangement of his hard-boned features, or midnight-brown eyes framed by dark brows.

The man had an air of brooding detachment that added to her fascination. Combined with his sophistication, she imagined most women meeting him would have fantasies about him.

Under the influence of the wine, Dana had already entertained a few of her own last night. However, because of her experience with Neal, plus the fact that she was clearheaded this morning, she was determined to conduct business without being distracted.

“*Bonjour*, Monsieur Martin.”

When he put his tanned hands on the door frame, the scent of the soap he'd used in the shower infiltrated below her radar. “My name's Alex. You don't mind if I call you Dana?” His voice sounded lower this morning, adding to his male sensuality.

“I’d prefer it.”

“*Bien.*” He walked around to the passenger side of her car and adjusted the seat to accommodate his long legs before climbing in. His proximity trapped the air in her lungs. “Take the left fork. It will wind around to the front of the château.”

Old leaves built up over time covered the winding driveway. It was flanked on both sides by trees whose unruly tops met overhead like a Gothic arch. Dana followed until it led to a clearing where she got her first look at the small eighteenth-century château built in the classic French style.

Beyond the far end stood an outbuilding made of the same limestone and built in the same design, half camouflaged by more overgrown shrubs and foliage. No doubt it housed the winepress and vats.

She shut off the engine and climbed out to feast her eyes. He followed at a slower pace.

The signs of age and neglect showed up in full force. There were boards covering the grouped stacks of broken windows. Several steps leading to the elegant entry were chipped or cracked. Repairs needed to be done to the high-sloped slate roof. It was difficult to tell where the weed-filled gardens filled with tiny yellow lilies ended and the woods encroached.

Dana took it all in, seeing it through her father’s eyes. She knew what the original script called for. This was so perfect she thought she must be dreaming.

“It’s like seeing a woman of the night on the following morning

when her charms are no longer in evidence,” came his grating voice. Trust a man to come up with that analogy. “Not what you had in mind after all?”

Schooling herself not to react to his cynicism, she turned to her host, having sensed a certain tension emanating from him. “On the contrary. It will do better than you can imagine. Knowing how my father works, he’ll need three weeks here. How soon can you give the studio that much time?”

Chapter Two

FEW things had surprised Alex in life, but twice in the last eighteen hours Dana Lofgren had taken him unawares.

“I have nothing signed and sealed yet. Is the season of vital importance?”

Her nod caused her hair to gleam in the sun like fine gold mesh. “It has to be late summer. Right now if possible,” she said, looking all around, “but maybe that’s asking too much.”

“Don’t worry. It’s available. My next tentative booking so far is with a Paris studio that won’t be needing it until mid-September.”

“Good,” she murmured, almost as if she’d forgotten he was there.

“Are you ready to see the interior?”

“No.” She sounded far away. “I’ll leave that to my father. I’ve seen what’s important to him. The estate possesses that intangible atmosphere he’s striving for. I knew it as I drove in last night.

“Over the years of watching him work I’ve learned he doesn’t like too much information. If I were to paint pictures, he’d see them in his mind. They would interfere with his own creative process.” She suddenly turned and flashed him a quick smile. “His words, not mine.”

Alex couldn’t help smiling back. She had to be made of strong stuff to handle her father whose ego was probably bigger than his reputation. “Such trust in you implies a spiritual connection

I think.”

“I would say it has more to do with our mutual love of history. When I leave, I’ll phone him and let him know what I’ve found. Before the day is out you’ll hear from two people.”

This fast she’d made her decision? Alex couldn’t remember meeting anyone like her before. Did she always function on impulse, or just where her father was concerned? “I’ll be waiting.”

“Sol Arnevit handles the financial arrangements. Paul Soleri is in charge of everything and everyone else when we’re on location. Paul will go over the logistics and has the ability to smooth out any problem. You’ll like *him*.”

“As opposed to...”

She made a face. “Who else?”

Meaning her father of course. Dana Lofgren was a woman who didn’t take herself too seriously. Despite what he assumed was a ten-year age difference between them, he feared she was growing on him at a time when he couldn’t afford distractions.

“What more can I do for you this morning?”

“Not another thing.” But her blue eyes burned with questions she didn’t articulate, piquing his interest. “Thank you for dinner last night and your time this morning. It’s been a real pleasure, Alex. Expect to hear from Sol right away. Here’s his business card.” She handed it to him. “He’ll work out all the details with you.”

To his shock she got in her car before he could help her.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” He wasn’t ready to let her go yet.

“A daughter’s work is never done. I have to be in Paris this afternoon, then I’ll fly back to L.A. Enjoy your solitude before everyone descends on you.”

The next thing he knew she’d turned around and had driven off, leaving him strangely bereft and more curious than ever about her association with a father who was bigger than life in her eyes. Alex saw the signs. Ten, twenty, even thirty years from now he had a hunch Jan Lofgren’s hold on her would still be powerful.

He stared blindly into space. Whether strongly present in Dana’s life, or deliberately absent as Gaston Fluery had been in his daughter’s life, both fathers wielded an enormous impact. The thought disturbed Alex in ways he’d rather not examine.

An hour later, after he’d changed clothes and had begun cutting down more overgrowth, his cell phone rang. It could be anyone, but in case it was Dana, he pulled it out of his pants pocket. The ID indicated a call from the States. He clicked on. “Alex Martin speaking.”

“Mr. Martin? This is Pyramid Pictures Film Studio calling from Hollywood, California. If it’s convenient Mr. Sol Arnevitc would like to set up a conference call with you and Mr. Paul Soleri before he goes to bed at eleven this evening. It’s 7:00 p.m. now. Mr. Lofgren heard from his daughter and is anxious to move on this.”

Alex was anxious, too, for several reasons. “Eight o’clock your

time would work for me.”

“Very good. Expect their call then.”

After twenty more minutes loading the truck, Alex went back to the château and entered through a side door leading into the kitchen. He washed his hands, then poured himself a cup of coffee before carrying it to the ornate salon off the foyer, which he'd turned into a temporary bedroom-cum-office. He liked living with the few furnishings of his parents he'd had shipped.

The salon's original furniture was still stored on the top floor. Once he'd made inroads on the outside of the château, he would concentrate on the house itself, that is if he made enough money in time. For now he'd supplied himself with the necessities for living here: electricity, cable and Internet, running water hot and cold, a new water heater, a stove, a fridge, washer and dryer and a new bed with a king-size mattress and box springs.

He snagged the swivel chair with his foot and sat down at his desk. No sooner had he booted up his computer than his call came through. Once the other two men introduced themselves, they made short work of the negotiations. The company would be on location from August 8 through 31. Sol quoted a ballpark figure, but left it open because other expenses always accrued.

Alex didn't know if Dana had anything to do with the actual amount, but it was a far greater sum than he'd hoped for. Sol sent him a fax, making the contract official before he rang off.

Paul stayed on the line with him for another twenty minutes. They discussed logistics for the cameramen and staff. Alex

e-mailed him a list of hotels, car rental agencies and other businesses in and around Angers such as Chanzeaux.

“Chanzeaux?” the other man said. “Dana mentioned she stayed at a hotel there last night. I believe it was the Hermitage. According to her it’s the perfect place for her father.”

It pleased Alex she’d given her seal of approval. “The food’s exceptionally good there. Mr. Lofgren should be very comfortable.”

“Since we’re behind schedule as it is, we all want that,” he admitted with a dry laugh that spoke volumes about Dana’s father. “The crew will arrive day after tomorrow. Everyone else the day after. I look forward to meeting you, Alex.”

“The feeling’s mutual.”

After clicking off, he headed outside again. Dana would be back in a few days, this time with her father. Over the years Alex had been involved in various relationships with women, but he’d never found himself thinking ahead to the next meeting with this kind of anticipation. He had no answer as to why this phenomenon was suddenly happening now.

During the taxi ride to the house, Dana phoned Sol whose secretary told him the contract with Mr. Martin had been signed. Relieved on that score she called Paul, wanting to touch base with him before she saw her father.

“Hey, Dana—Are you back already?”

“Yes, but only long enough to pack before I leave again. Sol says everything’s ready to go.”

“That’s right. I’ve got us booked at three hotels fairly close together. Just so you know, the Hermitage didn’t have any vacancies, but with a little monetary incentive I managed to arrange adjoining rooms for you and your father for the month.”

She smiled. “You’re indispensable, Paul.”

“Tell your father that.”

“I don’t need to.” Except that nobody told Jan Lofgren anything. Little did Paul know that even though he’d arranged a hotel room somewhere else for Saskia, she’d probably end up staying with Dana’s father. “Listen, Paul—I’m almost at the house so I’ve got to go. Talk to you later.”

“*Ciao*, Dana.”

After she hung up, her mind focused on her own sleeping arrangements. Since the film studio had the run of the estate until the end of August, Dana decided she would stay in the deserted château away from everyone. When else in her life would she get a chance like this? She’d buy a sleeping bag. It would be a lark to camp out inside.

Her dad wouldn’t need her except to do the odd job for him and bring him lunch. Once he settled in for work each day, he hated having to leave with the others to go eat. Maybe he used it as an excuse to be alone with his own thoughts for an hour. Who knew?

What mattered was that she’d have most of her time free to explore the countryside and only come back at dark to go to sleep. Her thoughts wandered to Alex. She wondered where he

was staying. The concierge at the Hermitage indicated he lived in the vicinity. Considering the taxes he owed, she imagined he'd found a one-star hotel in order to keep his expenses down. It made her happy that the film company would be giving him a financial boost. He—

“Miss?”

Dana blinked. “Oh—yes! I'm sorry.” They'd reached her family's modern rancho-styled home in Hollywood Hills without her being aware he'd stopped the taxi. She paid him and got out.

Just in case her father had brought Saskia home, she rang the doorbell several times before letting herself in. After ascertaining she was alone, Dana took off her shoes and padded into the kitchen to sort through the mail and fix some lunch.

The clock in the hall chimed once, reminding her France was nine hours ahead of California time. She doubted Alex would be in bed yet. Was he out with a beautiful woman tonight? And what if he was?

For a man she'd barely met, Dana couldn't believe how he'd gotten under her skin so fast. It was that unexpected invitation to dinner with him. He didn't have to take the time, but the fact that he did made him different from the other men she'd known. She found him not only remarkable, but disturbingly attractive.

While she finished the last of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich, she reached for her mother's favorite French cookbook from the shelf. It wasn't a cookbook exactly. It was a very delightful true story about an American family living in France

in 1937. Quite by accident they met a French woman who came to cook for them.

Everything you ever wanted to know about France was in it, including French phrases. It was full of recipes and little drawings, so much better than a Michelin guide. Both Dana and her mom had read it many times, marveling over a slice of history captured in the account. Dana would pack this with her.

In the act of opening the cover, warm memories of her mother assailed her. A lump stayed lodged in her throat all the way to the bedroom where she flung herself on the bed to thumb through it. Chanzeaux looked just like the adorable villages in the book with their open-air markets selling the most amazing items. She rolled over on her back, wondering about Alex. Having lived on the other side of the world, did he find France as charming as she did?

There were many questions she'd like to ask him, but she'd already probed too much. Anything more she learned *he* would have to volunteer when they happened to see each other. He could be slightly forbidding. It would be wise to stay out of his way. That went for her father, too, except to feed him.

Oh, yes, and remind him to go to the local hospital for his weekly blood test. No one would believe what a baby he was, which reminded her she'd better check the medicine cabinet and make sure he had enough blood thinner medication to be gone two months. After they left France, they'd finish up the filming in Germany where Dana had already checked out the locations

ahead of time.

With a sigh she got up from the bed needing to do a dozen things, but a strong compulsion led her to the den first. Ever since she'd heard that the Fleury family had once produced wine, she wanted to learn what she could about it. The wine she'd had with Alex had left the taste of nectarines on her lips. As she'd told him that night, it could become addicting.

She typed in Anjou wine, France. Dozens of Web sites popped up. She clicked on the first one.

The Anjou is one of the subregions of the Loire Valley producing a variety of dry to sweet dessert wines. The two main regions for Chenin Blanc are found in Touraine and along the Layon river where the soil is rich in limestone and tuffeau. Long after you've tasted this wine, it will give up a stone-fruit flavor on the palate. The Dutch merchants in the sixteen hundreds traded for this wine.

That far back?

Fascinated by the information, Dana researched a little more.

Coteaux du Layon near the river is an area in Anjou where the vines are protected by the hills. It's best known for its sweet wines, some of the recipes going back fifteen centuries. By the late seventeen hundreds, several wine producers became dominant in the region including the Domaine du Rochefort, Domaine du Château Belles Fleurs and Domaine Percher.

There it was, part of Alex's family history. Dana's father would find the information riveting, as well, but for the meantime she'd

keep it to herself. The owner was a private person. It would be best if she waited until he brought it up in the conversation, if he ever did.

A few minutes later she'd gone back to her room to do her packing. She had it down to a science, fitting everything into one suitcase. As she was about to leave and do some errands, her father came home and poked his head in the door. "There you are."

She looked up at him. "Hi."

"You just got back. How come you're packing again so soon?"

Dana had anticipated his question. "I'm going to fly to Paris with the camera guys in the morning."

"Why?"

"Because Saskia will be a lot happier if she has you to herself when you fly out the day after tomorrow."

"Saskia doesn't run my life," he declared.

No one ran his life. Dana certainly didn't figure in it except to fetch for him, but the actress didn't like her. "I know that, but it doesn't hurt to keep the troops happy, does it?" She flashed him a smile, hoping to ease the tension, maybe provoke a smile, but all she provoked was a frown.

"You really think you found the right place?" he asked morosely.

The film was on his mind, nothing or no one else. Until he saw the estate, he'd be impossible to live with. Good luck to Saskia. "If I haven't, Paul will switch us back to Plan B outside Paris

without problem.”

After staring into space for another minute he said, “Have you seen my reading glasses?”

“They’re on the kitchen counter, next to the script. Have you eaten?”

“I don’t remember.”

“I’ll fix you some eggs and toast.”

“That’s a good girl,” he muttered, before leaving her alone.

He only said that if he needed something from her. Because he was a narcissist, it was all she would get. She knew that, yet because their natures were exact opposites, a part of her would always want more. Still, when she thought of Alex’s mother being cut off by her father, Dana realized her relationship with her father hadn’t degenerated to that extent. Not yet...

Alex was in his bedroom when the phone rang again. He’d just hung up from talking with another Realtor who hadn’t heard the estate wasn’t for sale and never had been. They never stopped hounding him. With each call he’d hoped it might be Dana.

“Monsieur Martin *ici*.”

“*Bonjour*, Alex.”

His lips twitched. Her accent needed help, but with a grown-up rosebud mouth like hers, no Frenchman would care. “*Bonjour*, Dana. How are things in Hollywood?”

“I wouldn’t know. How are things in that jungle of yours?”

Laughter burst out of him. “Prickly.”

“My condolences.”

“Where are you exactly?”

“In front of the château.”

He felt a burst of adrenaline kick in.

“I was hoping you would let me in, but considering your plight, I’ll be happy to come back after you and your machete have emerged.”

The chuckles kept on coming. “I’m closer than you think. Don’t go away.” He hung up and strode swiftly through the foyer.

As soon as he opened the front door of the chateau, she got out of the car. Today she was dressed in jeans and a white short-sleeved top. If the pale blue vest she wore over it was meant to hide the lovely mold of her body, it failed.

Though she gave the appearance of being calm and collected, he noticed a pulse throbbing too fast at her throat. He knew in his gut she was glad to see him.

“When did you fly into Paris?”

“At six-thirty this morning with the camera guys. When their rooms are ready, they’ll crash until tomorrow, then probably show up around eight in the morning to start checking things out.”

“What about your father?”

“Everyone else will arrive at different times tomorrow.”

“I see. He didn’t mind you coming on ahead?”

“Most of the time we do our own thing.” She gave him a direct glance as if daring him to contradict her.

Alex had asked enough questions for now. It was almost noon.

“Let’s get you inside. In case you’d like to freshen up, there’s a bathroom on the second floor at the head of the stairs.”

“Thank you.”

Dana followed him up the steps into the foyer dominated by the central stonework staircase. With no furniture, paintings, tapestries or rugs visible, the château was a mere skeleton, but she seemed mesmerized.

Taking advantage of her silence he said, “The place was denuded years ago. Everything is stored on the third level where the servants used to live.”

He watched her eyes travel from the walls’ decorative Italianate paneling to the inlaid wood floors. “There’s a chandelier packed away that should hang over the staircase. Without it the château is dark at night. I told Paul that if night interiors are called for, he’ll need to plan for extra lighting. Your father—”

“My father’s very superstitious,” she broke in on a different tack. “He gets that from his Swedish ancestry. When he stands where I’m standing, he’ll be frightened at first.”

“Frightened?”

“Yes.” She turned to him. “It’s always frightening for a figment of your imagination to come to life, don’t you think? At first he won’t know if it’s a good or bad omen.”

When her father saw the château, he would be speechless. His excitement wouldn’t be obvious to the casual observer, but she’d see his eyes flicker and feel his positive energy radiate. For a

while it would insulate him from his usual irritations. Even Saskia wouldn't grate on his nerves as much, at least not at first. But that was *his* problem. Dana had done her part.

"Would you mind being more explicit?" Everything she said intrigued Alex. Besides her shape and coloring that appealed strongly to his senses, she had an inquiring mind. It engendered an excitement inside him that was building in momentum.

"My father gave his favorite screen writer some ideas and they collaborated on the script for this wartime film. Your chateau and grounds could have been made for it. For some time I've had the feeling this is the most important project he's ever taken on."

He folded his arms. "Can you tell me about it, or is it a secret?"

"A secret? No." After a pause. "The film is filled with the kind of angst my father is best known for." He heard her breathe in deeply. "Does that explanation help?"

"About the setting, yes, but I'm curious about the story itself."

She gave a gentle shrug of her shoulders. "That's for my father to decide. I don't think he knows it all yet." As far as Alex was concerned, she was being evasive for a reason. "Dad's had a mind block lately. It's made him more irritable than usual. It will take settling into it here for those creative juices to flow again. But to give you a specific answer to your question, his films always leave the audience asking more questions."

That was the truth, but she was holding back from him and that made him more curious than ever. Evidently she knew better than to give too much away. Was that because her father wouldn't

like it? “Why do you think he came up with this particular story?”

“How does any author come up with an idea? They see something, hear something that arouses their interest and a kernel of an idea starts to form.”

She angled her head toward him. “Part of it could be the guilt he personally feels for his country’s compliance with the enemy in the first days of World War II. Another part might be that deep down he still misses mother and wishes he’d had a son instead of *moi*.”

She’d said it with a smile, but Alex felt the words like a blow to the gut. He’d heard emptiness, sadness in that last remark. It made him want to comfort her. “Still, I have my uses. Thanks to you, I found *this* for him.” She spread her hands, as if encompassing the entire château. “Heaven sent.”

Alex swallowed hard. “For me, too.”

“I’m happy if it helps you. I bet your mother is, too.”

She kept surprising him. “You believe in heaven, Dana?”

“Yes. Don’t you?”

“After this discussion, I want to.”

A faint blush filled her cheeks. “I’m afraid I’ve rattled on too long and have kept you from your work. Please go ahead and do whatever you were doing. If it’s all right, I’ll just wander around here for a little while before I take a nap. I picked up a sleeping bag in Angers and brought it with me.”

Why would she do that? “If you’re that exhausted, I’ll call the Hermitage and tell them to get your room ready now.”

“No doubt they’d make concessions for you, but I’m not staying there, so it’s not necessary. Thank you anyway.”

Alex rubbed the back of his neck in an unconscious gesture. “Paul told me he would arrange rooms there for you and your father.”

“He already has, but while I’m in France I intend to be on my own most of the time. After everyone goes home at the end of the day’s shoot, I plan to stay right here where I can have the whole château to myself.”

An angry laugh escaped his throat. “I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

She flashed him an ingenuous smile. “Don’t worry about me. I don’t frighten easily and love being alone.”

His eyes narrowed. Dana had seemed such an innocent she’d almost fooled him. “I’m afraid you don’t understand,” he ground out. “My ad didn’t indicate the château could be used for anything but the filming.”

A long silence ensued while she digested what he’d said. “I assumed that since the company had rented the estate for the filming, it wouldn’t matter if I found myself a little spot in the château to sleep at night.” Her supple body stiffened. “My mistake, Alex. I’m glad you cleared it up before any harm was done.”

“Dana—”

She’d almost reached the front door before turning around. “Yes?”

He started toward her. "Where are you going?"

"To find me a place to stay."

"Wouldn't you be better off with your father?" he asked quietly.

"You want your pound of flesh, don't you." Her cheeks filled with angry color. "First of all, if I were seventeen I'd agree with you, but I'm going to be twenty-seven next week, slightly too long in the tooth to still be daddy's little girl."

His estimation of her age had been way off.

"Secondly, my father isn't in his dotage yet. In fact, his latest love interest is one of the actresses in the film and will be sleeping with him, which makes three a crowd. When you see Saskia, you'll understand a lot of things." She smiled. "If my dad ever found out your impression of him, he'd have a coronary."

Alex hadn't seen that one coming. It knocked him sideways.

"Thirdly, while I'm in this glorious region of France, I'd like to pretend I'm an independent woman who needs to spread her own wings for a change. It must have given you an uncomfortable moment thinking I'd made you my target. Again, I apologize."

He'd anticipated her flight and moved in time to prevent her from opening the door. Their hips brushed against each other in the process, increasing his awareness of her womanly attributes. The tension between them was palpable. She slowly backed away from him.

The last thing he'd wanted was to make an enemy of her, but that's what he'd done. One word to her father and he could

kiss this deal goodbye. The hell of it was, he couldn't afford to lose this film studio's business, not when he needed the money so badly. A large portion of his life's savings combined with the modest inheritance from his father were all invested in this venture.

“Dana—it never occurred to me you might want to stay in the château.”

She refused to look at him. “You're not a dreamer.”

“You'd be surprised, but that's not the point.” Trying to gauge what her reaction would be he said, “I live here.”

Her gaze flew to his. By the stunned look in those blue depths, he knew instinctively his revelation had come as a surprise.

“The concierge at the Hermitage intimated you lived somewhere in the vicinity. To me that ruled out the château...” Her voice trailed.

Alex's first impression of the French woman in Chanzeaux had been right. She was a busybody. When Dana's father arrived and she learned of his importance, it would bring a flood of unwanted curiosity seekers to the estate. His mouth thinned in irritation. He would have to fit the gate with an electronic locking device to give the film company privacy while they were working. Today, if possible.

“I'm afraid there's been a lot of speculation about me since I flew in from Bali.”

“Bali—What were you doing there?”

“My work. I'm an agricultural engineer.”

She rubbed her palms against womanly hips, as if she didn't know what to do with them. "Are you taking a sabbatical of sorts then?"

"No. I resigned in order to settle mother's estate before leaving for the States."

Following his remark she said, "Then you're only in France temporarily."

"Very temporarily, even if my business venture should succeed—" he drawled.

"What is your plan exactly?"

"To restore the château and grounds to a point that the estate can be put on display alongside the others in the area. Millions of tourists pour into France each year willing to pay entry fees for a look around. With a couple of full-time caretakers, it could prove to be a smart business investment, leaving me free to pursue my career overseas."

Her expression had undergone a subtle change he couldn't decipher. "It's an ambitious undertaking, but with your work ethic I'm sure you'll make it happen." She glanced at her watch. "I need to go and let you get back to your work."

"Not so fast." He looked around before his gaze centered on her once more. "It does seem unconscionable not to let you live here when this was originally built to house several dozen people. Under the circumstances I *insist* you stay, but it means we share the château."

Chapter Three

INSIST?

The provocative statement was backed by a steel tone, making her tremble. It seemed Alex Martin had changed his mind and was willing to let her stay here. Not willing, she amended. Determined all of a sudden.

Why?

Maybe like Neal he could see himself making a lot more money to save the château if he starred in a film. He was gorgeous enough to be a top box office draw, yet the mere idea that he saw Dana as a stepping stone to influence her father made her so ill, she shuddered.

If she was wrong about his motive, then for the life of her she couldn't think what the reason might be. The man could have any woman he wanted.

Alex's dark brows knit together. "Why so reticent now?"

The question coming from his compelling mouth was like a challenge wrapped up in a deceptively silky voice. It curled around Dana's insides down to her toes. If she didn't have to think about it, the idea of being under the same roof with Alex Martin for the next three weeks was so thrilling, she was ready to jump out of her skin.

But she *did* have to think about it for all the usual reasons of propriety, common sense and self-preservation—

self-preservation especially because he could be moody and overbearing like her father, the very thing she'd wanted to get away from for a while.

And then there were the unusual reasons, like the fact that her father was coming here to direct the most important film of his career on her say-so alone. If she made a misstep with Alex now and he decided to renege on the contract, how would she explain it to her dad, let alone the rest of the company?

Money had changed hands. Too much was at stake on both men's parts for there to be trouble at this stage because of her.

When she'd declared that she wanted to be an independent woman and spread her own wings, she'd set herself up to be taken at her word and Alex had acted on it. He was probably laughing at her naïveté right now while he waited to hear that she'd changed her mind and didn't want to stay here after all.

The stakes were too high for her to turn this into a battle. An inner voice warned her there was wisdom in going along with him. Dana knew nothing like this would ever come her way again. Why not take him up on it? She wouldn't be human if she didn't avail herself of such an opportunity.

"Thank you, Alex. I'll do my best not to get underfoot." From now on she could fade into the shadows and be like Diane de Poitiers, Henri II's mistress at Chenonceau, who adored the château and oversaw the plantings of the flower and vegetable gardens.

Dana would glut herself on the history of Belles Fleurs, but

wherever she slept, she would make certain it wasn't anywhere near Alex. When she'd called his château small, she'd meant it hadn't been built on the scale of Chambord with its 440 rooms, but it was big enough for her to get lost in.

An odd gleam in his dark eyes was the only sign that her answer had surprised him. "With that settled, shall we go upstairs? You can have your pick of any room on the second floor."

By tacit agreement they both started toward the magnificent staircase. "How many are there?"

"Six."

While she was wondering where his room was located, he read her mind. "For the time being I've made the petit salon off the main foyer into a combined bedroom and office for me."

They'd be a floor apart. That was good. Of course when she wanted to go out for any reason, he'd be aware of her leaving through the front door, that is *if* and *when* he was around. After a few days of becoming aware of his routine, she'd make sure not to disturb him any more than she could help.

When they reached the long vestibule, she was overwhelmed by what she saw. "This is similar to the rib-vaulting at Chenonceau! It's utterly incredible!"

Alex nodded. "On a much smaller scale of course." She was conscious of his tall, hard-muscled frame as he continued walking to one end of the corridor on those long, powerful legs. "Let's start with the bedroom in the turret round."

“Oh—” she cried the second he opened the door and she took everything in. “This is the one I want!”

A smile broke the corner of his sensuous mouth. “You’re sure? You haven’t seen the others yet. The turret round on the other end has a fireplace.”

“I’m positive. Look at these!” There were fleur-de-lis designs placed at random in the inlaid wood flooring. She got down on her knees to examine them.

“If the original designer of this château could see a modern-day woman like you studying his intricate workmanship this closely, he would be delighted by the sight.”

“Go ahead and mock me,” she said with a laugh before getting to her feet. For the next few minutes she threw her head back to study the cross-beamed ceiling. There were little white enamel ovals rimmed in gold placed every so often in the wood depicting flowers and various forest creatures. “How did they do that? How did they do any of this?”

She darted to the window that needed washing inside and out, but at least it wasn’t broken. The entire room would require a good scrubbing to get rid of layers of accumulated dust. Even so there was a fabulous view of the countryside and a certain enchanted feel about the room. Eventually she turned to him. “Do you think this might have been your mother’s?”

Her question seemed to make him more pensive and probably brought him pain. She wished she’d caught herself before blurting it out.

“My mother lived here until her early twenties. I have no idea which bedroom she occupied, but it wouldn’t surprise me if it had been this one. The view of the Layon from the window at this angle is surreal.”

“I noticed,” Dana murmured. “I’m glad she met your father so she wasn’t so lonely anymore.”

Alex shifted his weight. “*Lonely* is an interesting choice of words.”

“She would have been, wouldn’t she? To know her father preferred her brother?”

“I’m sure you’re right,” he muttered. “Mother often seemed melancholy, at least that’s what I called it, but you’ve hit on a better description. Even in a crowded room she sometimes gave off a feeling of loneliness that no doubt troubled my father, too.”

“Forgive me for saying anything, Alex. It’s none of my business. It must be the atmosphere here getting to me.”

“You *are* your father’s daughter after all, so it’s understandable.” She didn’t detect anything more than slight amusement in his tone, thank heaven.

“If you’ll tell me where to find some cleaning supplies, I’ll get started in here before I bring up my sleeping bag.”

He tilted his dark head. “I have a better idea. We’ll drive into Angers in my truck and eat lunch. I need to pick up some items. While we’re there, we’ll get you a new mattress and box springs.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I wouldn’t allow you to stay here in a sleeping bag. After we

come back, we'll clean the room together and I'll bring down a few pieces of furniture from storage. By sunset Rapunzel will be safely ensconced in her tower.”

She chuckled to hide her excitement at spending the day with him, not to mention the rest of the month. “You’re mixing up your fairy tales. I don’t have long hair.”

He gave an elegant shrug of his broad shoulders. “It’s evident you haven’t read the definitive version. Her father had her long golden tresses cut off so no prince could climb up to her.”

A few succinct words dropped her dead in her tracks. In the tale Dana had grown up with, there’d been a wicked witch. Was he still teasing her, or had this tale suddenly taken on a life of its own. “Then how did the prince reach her?”

He paused in the doorway. “I guess you’ll have to read the end of the story to find out.”

His cryptic explanation was no help.

“I’ll bring the truck around. When you’ve freshened up, meet me outside. I’ll lock the door with my remote.”

When she left the château a few minutes later, Alex was lounging against a blue pickup loaded with cut off branches and uprooted clumps of weeds. Dana marveled that he did this kind of backbreaking work without help. Pruning the grounds would be a Gargantuan task for half a dozen teams of gardeners, but he couldn’t afford to hire help because the taxes were eating him alive.

She felt his dark fringed eyes wander over her as she

came closer. They penetrated, causing her pulse to race. Still, everything would have been all right for the trip into town if their bodies hadn't brushed while he helped her inside the cab. Her breath caught and she feared he'd noticed. With nowhere to run, she had to sit there and behave like she didn't feel electrified.

"This won't take long," he said a few minutes later, jolting her out of her chaotic thoughts. They'd stopped at a landfill to dump the debris. Fortunately there was a man there ready to help him, making short work of it. Soon they were on their way again.

After driving this route several times already, Dana recognized some of the landmarks leading into Angers. The massive castle dominating the town on the Maine came into view.

"Have you been through it?"

She shook her head. "Not yet, but I plan to. What about you?"

"One look at the condition of the estate and any thoughts I had of playing tourist flew out the broken windows."

Dana flicked him a sideward glance. "You know what that old proverb says about Jack working all the time."

He surprised her by meeting her gaze head-on. "Are you by any chance intimating I'm a dull boy?"

"Maybe not dull..." Dana said, before she wished she hadn't.

"You can't leave me hanging now—" It came out more like a growl, but he was smiling. When he did that, he was transformed into the most attractive man she'd ever seen or met. There was no sign of the boy he would have once been, one probably not as carefree with a mother whose heart had been broken.

“As you reminded me earlier, you’ll have to read to the end of the story to find out.”

“Touché.”

Dana was glad when he turned onto a side street and pulled up near a sidewalk café full of locals and tourists. She slid out of the cab before he could come around to help her.

There was one empty bistro table partially sheltered from the sun by an umbrella. Alex escorted her to it before anyone else grabbed it. The temperature had been mild earlier, but now it was hot. A waiter came right over and took their orders for sandwiches.

Alex eyed her. “I could use a cup of coffee, but maybe you’d prefer something cold. The air’s more humid than usual today.”

“Coffee sounds fine.” The waiter nodded and disappeared. She sat back in her chair. “I thought most French people preferred tea.”

“I grew up on coffee.”

“No billy tea?” she teased, referring to his Aussie roots.

He shook his head, drawing her attention to the hair brushing his shirt collar. In the light she picked out several shades ranging from dark brown to black. “I’m afraid tea doesn’t do it for me.”

“Nor me.” She smiled. “You seem so completely French, I forgot.”

“It’s a good thing *my* father isn’t around to hear that.”

After a brief silence she said, “When you want to go home, that’s a long flight.”

“I have no home in the traditional sense. My father’s work took us many places. We globetrotted. Mother died in the Côte D’Ivoire and father on Bali where we were both working for the same company at the time. They’re buried in Brisbane.”

Dana took a deep breath. “Well, you have a home now.”

One dark eyebrow lifted. “A liability you mean. I’m not certain it’s worth it.”

She wished she could lighten his mood. “That’s right. You have other plans. Where in the States?”

“Louisiana. It’s where my particular expertise, such as it is, can be fully utilized.”

“Are you in such a hurry then?”

The waiter served them their order before Alex responded. “I wasn’t aware of it, but I suppose I am.”

While he made inroads on the ham and cheese melt, she took a sip of the hot liquid. “Sounds like your father’s lifestyle rubbed off on you.”

The gaze he flicked her was surprisingly intense. “From the little you’ve told me about yourself, I’d say you’ve been similarly afflicted.”

“Afflicted?” An odd choice of word. She stopped munching on her first bite. Of course she understood what he meant. Years of traveling around Europe finding locations for her father prevented her from staying in one spot. But it didn’t mean that under the right circumstances, she couldn’t settle down quite happily.

“Some people never leave the place they were born,” he murmured. “I’m not so sure they haven’t figured out life’s most important secret.”

She chuckled. “You mean, while nomads like us wander to and fro in search of what we don’t know exactly?”

An amused glint entered his dark eyes. “Something like that.”

“Well, given a choice, I’m glad I’m the way I am. Otherwise I wouldn’t be living this fantasy. My own little girl dreams of being a princess in a castle in a far-off land have come true. Never mind that it will all end in a month, I intend to enjoy every minute of it now, thanks to your generosity.”

Aware she’d been talking too much, she ate the rest of her sandwich.

“You think that’s what it is?” The question sent her pulse off the charts. “Little boys have their fantasies, too,” came the wicked aside.

Fingers of warmth passed through her body. “My mother taught me they’re not for a little girl’s ears.” After drinking the last of her coffee she dared a look at him. “Just how young did you think I was when we first met?”

“Too young,” was all he was willing to reveal. He put some money on the table and stood up. “If you’re ready we’ll get some serious shopping done. Groceries last, I think.”

She would pay for her keep, she thought to herself. He might be letting her sleep at the château, but she didn’t expect anything else.

After visiting a hardware store, he took her to the third floor of the department store where the mattresses were sold. Alex sought out the male clerk and they conversed in French. Their speech was so rapid she understood nothing. Within a few seconds the younger man looked at her and broke out in a broad smile.

“I don’t think I want a translation,” she told Alex.

His lips curved upward. “You don’t need to worry. When he asked me what kind of a mattress we were looking for, I simply asked him if he knew the story of the Princess and the Pea. He said he had the ideal one for you.”

She tried not to laugh. “I see.”

The clerk spread his hands in typical French fashion. “Would Mademoiselle like to try it?”

“She says yes,” Alex spoke for her. They followed the man across the floor to the sample mattresses on display.

“This one is the best. *S’il vous plait*. Lie down.”

“Don’t be shy,” Alex whispered. “He’s not Figaro measuring a space for your marriage bed.”

An imp got into Dana. “Maybe he thinks he’s measuring yours. Why don’t you try it first and humor him?”

With enviable calm Alex stretched out on one side of it, putting his hands behind his handsome head. Through shuttered eyes he stared up at her, jump-starting her heart.

“*Venez, mademoiselle*.” The clerk patted the other side. “He said you needed a double bed. See how you fit.”

You said you wanted to spread your wings, Dana Lofgren.

But she hadn't anticipated literally spreading out on a bed next to Alex for all creation to see. Several people on the floor had started watching with embarrassing interest. If she waited any longer, she'd turn this into a minor spectacle.

Once she'd settled herself full length against the mattress, she turned her head to Alex. "How does it feel against your sore back?"

He rolled on his side toward her, bringing him breathtakingly close. "You noticed." His voice sounded deep and seductive just then.

Afraid he knew that she noticed everything about him, she said, "I think we should take it. Look—even this close to me, the mattress doesn't dip."

"I noticed." This time when he spoke, she felt his voice reach right down inside to her core. The way his eyes had narrowed on her mouth, she slid off the bed in reaction and got to her feet on shaky legs.

"Eh bien, mademoiselle?"

She decided to make his day. "It's perfect"

He rubbed his hands together. "Excellent."

"Alex? I'll go to the linen department for the bedding. Meet you at the truck." Without looking at him, she made her way down to the next floor.

When the saleswoman asked what Dana had in mind, she described the beamed ceiling. "There's a mini print wallpaper of gold fleurs-de-lis on a cranberry field. I'd like to follow through

with those colors.”

“I have the exact thing for you.”

Within minutes Dana left the store with a new pillow, pale cranberry sheets and bath towels with tiny gold fleurs-de-lis, a cranberry duvet and matching pillow sham.

Alex had reached the truck ahead of her. Together with two other men from the warehouse, he put the boxes with the mattress and box springs in the back. Upon her approach, he plucked the items right out of her arms with effortless male grace. While he stowed them, she climbed in the cab, eager to get back to the château and make up her new bed.

Without her having to say anything, he drove straight to a boulangerie where she salivated before loading up on nummy little quiches and ham-filled croissants. Alex bought three baguettes and several tranches of Gruyère and Camembert cheese.

“I already feel debauched and haven’t even tasted a morsel yet,” she moaned the words.

On the way back to the truck his eyes swerved to hers with a devilish glitter. “That’s the whole idea. Earlier today I was accused of being a dull boy.”

She quivered. If he got any duller, her heart wouldn’t be able to take it. “I might have exaggerated a little.”

“Careful, Mademoiselle Lofgren, or I’ll get the impression you’re trying to kill me with kindness.” He turned on the engine and they took off.

She'd never had so much fun in her life and the day wasn't over yet.

"I'm coming down the hall, Dana. I hope you're ready."

He couldn't tell if she cried in fear or giggled. "Alex—please—It's almost ten o'clock. You've done enough! I don't need anything more." They'd cleaned every inch of the room until it gleamed. She was so genuinely appreciative of everything he did for her, it made him want to do more.

"I think you'll find this to be of comfort." Using his high-powered flashlight so he could see, he entered the turret round and put the heavy bronze floor candelabra near the head of the bed he'd brought down from storage. It was as tall as she was.

Dana held her own flashlight to guide him. She'd taken off her shoes and was in a kneeling position on top of her newly made bed. Using his automatic lighter, he lit the twelve candles in their sconces. Like the sun coming up over the horizon, the room slowly filled with flickering, mellow light.

"Oh—" she cried softly.

His sentiments exactly. The candles illuminated not only the inlaid woods of the Italian armoire and dresser, but the utterly enchanting female who'd worked hard right alongside him all afternoon and evening. Her peaches-and-cream complexion glowed, causing her blue eyes to dazzle him.

"The candles will burn down in an hour or so. Enough time to do some reading before jet lag takes over."

She shut off her flashlight. "I think I'm in a time warp."

“I feel that way every time I come inside the château.” *Get out of her bedroom. Now.* “Before I go downstairs, we’d better discuss how you want to handle your father tomorrow.”

Something in her eyes flickered that had nothing to do with the candlelight. “What do you mean handle?”

“I thought it was obvious. Sweet dreams, princess.”

Dana had no agenda. No place she had to be.

After sleeping in until noon, she spent a long time in the modern bathtub, studying everything. She marveled at the superb job Alex had done of combining contemporary and eighteenth-century decor.

The tile work of the ancient looking floor had been laid in a stunning, stone-green and white checkerboard design. Her eyes followed the lines of the green border also carried out around the window and the door.

Delighted by every inch of work created by a master craftsman, she was loathe to leave her bath. However, the pads of her fingers resembled prunes. Without electricity to blowdry her hair up here, she needed to towel it some more, then brush it dry before she went downstairs.

An ornate, mural-size mirror with a rococo-style gilt frame hung on the wall opposite the tub, another sybaritic element of the château. A gasp escaped her lips when she stood up and saw herself reflected full-size. She had a mirror on the back of the door at home, but it was in her bedroom and seemed miniscule in comparison.

One more look at herself was a reminder that only a few days of enjoying the food they'd bought and she'd put on five pounds just like that!

Discipline, Dana. Self-control.

On the way back to the room in her robe, she repeated the motto that went for other things besides food. Like other people for instance. No, not other people. Just one person.

She clutched the lapels of her robe tighter. *A man like no one else.*

When she entered the room she could hear her phone vibrating on the dresser. Maybe it was Alex wondering if she was still alive. Suddenly breathless, she clicked on with a smile. *"Bonjour!"*

"Is that you, Dana?"

Her father's voice. What a surprise! "Hi, Dad. How was the flight?" He hated being closed in for long periods.

"Boring." That meant his girlfriend hadn't been able to keep him distracted.

"And Saskia?"

"She's at the Metropole in Angers."

"You sound tired. Where are you exactly?"

"I'm standing in my room at the Hermitage," he grumbled. "More to the point, where are you? The concierge said you never came in last night." He actually noticed?

"That's right. I've decided to stay at the château. It will save me a lot of coming and going."

Alex had the strange idea she was under her father's thumb.

If he only knew the truth, that her father didn't think much about her at all. There was nothing to handle, but her host had insinuated something else and it rankled.

"I thought it was deserted."

"Not completely." She started brushing her hair. "The owner lives here. He's been very accommodating and made an allowance for me. After you've slept a few hours, drive over to the château in your rental car and I'll meet you at the gate."

There was a noticeable silence, then he said, "I'm coming now."

Clearly he couldn't wait to see if she'd pulled through for him. Everything hinged on her find.

"In that case let me go over the directions with you." Without Saskia in tow, he could walk around and think in peace. "See you shortly."

Once she'd pulled on jeans and a short-sleeved cotton top in an aqua color, she finished doing her hair and put on lipstick. Slipping her feet into her favorite leather sandals, she grabbed her phone and left the room. Later, after her father had gotten a feel for the estate, she would feed him a late lunch in the kitchen before he went back to the hotel.

Last evening she'd only had a brief glimpse of the salon. Today the door was closed. Alex could be inside at the computer, but in all probability he was out hacking away at his private jungle.

This was the way it should be. Out of sight, out of mind. Didn't she wish!

She stepped out into a day that seemed hotter than yesterday, but she hadn't noticed because the interior of the château was cooler. It felt like being in a cathedral to walk beneath the trees. Here and there sunlight dappled their branches.

As she continued on, the crunch of her feet on the leaves must have startled some squirrels. They chattered before she saw them scamper up a trunk and disappear. She was still laughing in pure pleasure when she came upon Alex at the gate.

He was down on his haunches in jeans and another thin white T-shirt, fastening something to the wrought iron. She could see the play of muscle across his shoulders. Her heart thudded so hard she was positive he could hear it.

"Sleeping Beauty at last," he murmured, scrutinizing her from head to toe with eyes so dark and alive this afternoon, it sent a delicious current of desire through her body.

"You're getting your princesses mixed up."

"No—" He went back to fastening a screw with his power drill. "You're a woman of many parts. I never know which one is going to emerge at any given moment."

His comment produced a smile from her. "You're full of it, Alex, but keep it up. By the time I leave here, I'll be taking a whole host of enchanting memories with me."

His hands stilled for a moment. "Where are you going next?"

"To a little town on the Rhine in Germany for a month where the last segment of the film will be made."

He dusted himself off and got to his feet. "Stand back and let's

see if I've done this right." Pulling a remote from his pocket, he pressed the button. The gate took its time, but it clanged shut.

"*Bravo.* Too bad you didn't get to work on it sooner. It would have kept me out and forced me to phone you for an appointment."

Before she could take another breath, he shot her a laserlike glance. "As you've already surmised, I didn't mind the surprise or you wouldn't be living here." His comment filled her body with warmth. "But I've decided this was necessary to keep out trespassers while the studio is filming every day." He tossed her the remote. "It's yours. I have more in the office I'll give to Paul for anyone who needs one."

"Thank you."

She felt his gaze linger on her features. "Were you looking for me?"

Dana sucked in her breath. "No. My father's on his way over from the hotel. I told him I'd meet him here."

As if talking about him conjured him up, a red rental car appeared and came to a halt. Before Alex said anything that would remind her of his parting words last night, she pressed the button on the remote and the gate swung open.

"Hi, Dad. Drive on through."

He nodded his balding head and did her bidding. Once he'd passed through, he stopped the car and got out. Solid, yet lithe, he'd dressed in his favorite gray work slacks and matching crew neck shirt. His blue eyes, several shades darker than hers, gave

them both a stare that others might consider fierce, but Dana was used to it.

“Dad, I’d like you to meet Monsieur Alexandre Martin, the owner of the estate.”

“Monsieur.” The two men shook hands.

“Call me Alex. I’ve seen several of your films which I found remarkable. It’s a privilege to meet you.”

“Thank you. Your English is excellent.”

“He’s part Australian, Dad.”

“Ah. That explains the particular nuance I couldn’t identify.”

“Unlike your accent in English that no one could ever mistake for anything but Svenska,” Dana quipped.

“Too true.” His hooded gaze darted back and forth between her and Alex before he addressed him. “My daughter has convinced me I won’t be disappointed with this location.”

Alex eyed her father through veiled eyes. “Why don’t you take a walk down this road alone. The left fork will bring you to the front of the château. The door’s unlocked. Take all the time you want wandering around. I understand you’d rather do the discovering than be herded.”

Dana’s father looked stunned. That was because Alex had taken his cue from her. Among his many qualities, he’d just shown he was a master psychologist.

“Hand me the car keys, Dad. I’ll drive it to the front courtyard and join you in a few minutes.”

His surprised glance switched to her before he dropped them

in her hand. After nodding to Alex, he turned and began jogging.

Once he'd disappeared around the curve in the driveway, she turned to Alex who'd started gathering up his tools. She could tell he was anxious to get back to his pruning. Considering he'd spent all day yesterday and last evening seeing to it she had a bedroom worthy of a princess to sleep in, she didn't want to be the reason he was kept from his work any longer.

As soon as she'd climbed in the car, she poked her head out the window. "You handled my father brilliantly, Alex. Congratulations on being one of the few." The last thing she saw was his dark, enigmatic glance as she started the engine.

Get going, Dana!

Afraid if she stayed any longer she'd end up blurting out something incriminating like, did he want help? she followed the driveway while studiously avoiding looking at him through the rearview mirror.

After pulling up next to her rental car parked in front, she gave her father a few more minutes lead before she got out. This was one time she was so confident of his positive reaction, it shocked her when he suddenly emerged from the château with a face devoid of animation. The look she'd expected to see in his eyes wasn't there.

"Follow me back to the Hermitage. We have to talk."

Chapter Four

ALEX was up in one of the tallest trees, cutting away dead branches, when he saw both cars leave the estate. Jan Lofgren couldn't have been on the premises more than ten minutes. That was quick, but Alex guessed he wasn't surprised. In less time, Dana had made the decision to rent the estate on behalf of the company.

His opinion of her father had been correct before meeting him. He personified conceit. Dana miraculously had none.

Two hours later, Alex was coming back from the landfill after another haul when his cell phone rang. Paul Soleri was calling to make sure he and the crew could get in. They were on their way to the estate.

The timing couldn't be better. Once Alex could welcome them and answer any questions, he'd resume his work. The knowledge that Dana would be coming back to sleep after dark never left his mind.

Before long a car and two minivans pulled up in the front courtyard. Alex stepped out of the château to meet Paul and the dozen light and camera technicians assembled. They all appeared delighted by what they saw. Their enthusiasm escalated as they entered the château.

After Alex introduced himself and pointed out the location of the bathroom facilities, he told them to look around and explore

all they wanted. Except for the petit salon on the main floor and the west turret round on the first floor, everything else was available to them.

If they wanted to do any filming in the building housing the winepress or down in the wine cellar beneath the château, they were welcome. Already he could tell they were getting ideas as they left the foyer and darted from room to room checking things out.

Paul, who was probably in his midforties, took him aside. "Has Jan been here yet?"

"Yes. A few hours ago. He didn't stay long, then he left with his daughter."

The dark blond man pursed his lips. "I'm surprised I haven't heard from him yet."

"Perhaps he was tired from the long flight."

"That's not like him," he mused. "I assumed he'd be here."

"I have to admit I thought it strange he left in such a hurry," Alex commented.

"It doesn't matter." A pleasant smile broke out on his face. "We'll go ahead without him."

"Make yourself at home, Paul. As I told you over the phone, all the furniture is stored on the third floor. Nothing's locked. Use whatever you need."

He let out a long whistle. "When David gets here, he'll be floored."

"David?"

“The scriptwriter for this film. He’ll be arriving any minute with the set designer and staff from costumes and makeup. They’re all going to swoon.”

“And that’s good?”

“You have no idea. Since Jan wanted something unique for this segment of the film, we’ve been worried it didn’t exist. Only Dana could pull this off. She’s always had an instinct for picking the right places for him, but this time she outdid herself.

“Don’t quote me, but she’ll end up being a more brilliant director than her father.”

That piece of information came totally unexpected. “Is directing one of her aspirations?”

“Yes, but the last person to know it is Jan, and that’s another good thing.”

Alex remembered her answer when he’d asked what she did in her spare time. *Nothing of report. I read and play around with cooking. Otherwise my father forgets to eat.*

“If you’ll excuse me, Paul, I have to get back to my work outside. Phone if you need me.”

“Will do.”

Inexplicably disturbed by what he’d learned, he strode down the hallway leading to the side entrance of the château. Dana had been emphatic about not wanting to be an actress. Now it seemed Paul had supplied him with a viable reason.

Inherited talent happened on occasion, but he had the distinct feeling it would take uncommon courage for her to step out from

Jan Lofgren's legendary shadow. When she did break out, she'd be caught up in her own career. The thought caused Alex to grind his teeth.

Dana found a parking space outside the Hermitage and followed her dad inside to his room. On the short drive from the château she'd prepared herself to hear that he wasn't pleased with her find.

She knew the place was perfect for the script, so it had to be something else he objected to. For the life of her she didn't know what it was. That meant his mood had already turned wretched and the whole company would pay for it. If she knew Paul, he'd already assembled the crew over there to get to work.

It would be bad enough if they had to pack up again and leave for the Paris location, but there was Alex to think about. The contract Sol had sent him was standard. There was a clause that said Alex would only receive a percentage of the money if for any reason they chose not to film there after all. That wasn't nearly enough compensation for him.

By the time she entered the hotel room, she was ready to fight her father. If he was going to pull out of this deal due to one of his mystical whims, then she would insist Alex be paid all the money agreed upon in good faith.

As usual his room was a mess, but for once she didn't start automatically straightening things. Instead she shut the door and propped her back against it. While she waited for him to speak first, she folded her arms.

He stood next to the dresser, eyeing her while he lit up a cigarette, almost as if he were daring her to protest. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him smoke. Her mother had begged him to stop. As a concession to her, he'd cut down a lot. Dana had hoped he would find the strength to quit altogether. Unfortunately Saskia smoked, too. Dana guessed it was asking too much.

“Tell me about Monsieur Martan.” He pronounced Alex's last name the French way.

A red flag went up.

Months ago her father had started out another conversation in the same manner, only the subject in question had been Neal Robeson.

So...This was about Alex—not about the suitability of the château. Relief flooded her body.

No doubt when Alex had told her father to go ahead and explore on his own because of something Dana had confided, he hadn't liked it. She knew her dad enjoyed being a mystery to other people, so it had made him uncomfortable to be more transparent to Alex because of her. That irritation would pass, particularly since Alex wouldn't be around while her father worked.

“Martin is his Australian name,” she corrected him.

With one long exhale, the room filled with smoke. “He must want to get into acting very badly to give me free rein to his entire estate.”

She moved away from the door. “Have you forgotten I went to him, not the other way around? He wants money very badly to restore the château and make it a viable asset before he resumes his career as an agricultural engineer.”

Her father gave her one of those condescending nods. “So that’s what he’s told you.”

Dana refused to let him get to her. “In this case you’re not dealing with another Neal type.”

“No,” he muttered, “Monsieur Martan is older and has far more worldly experience. Inside that supposedly deserted château with no electricity beyond the main floor, your bedchamber has been laid out so exquisitely, it even took *my* breath.”

She scoffed. “Careful, Dad. You’re beginning to make this sound like Beauty and the Beast. When I told him I was planning to stay there at night in my new sleeping bag, he insisted I have a decent bedroom.”

He stubbed out his cigarette. “I forbid it, Dana.”

Forbid? “I think you’ve forgotten I passed eighteen a long time ago.” As she turned to leave, she heard knocking on the door.

“Jan? It’s Saskia. Let me in, *lieveling*.”

The timing was perfect, but her father looked ready to throw something.

“I’ll get it,” Dana volunteered before opening it.

“Hi, Saskia. Did you have a good flight?”

“So-so.” The brunette actress kissed her on both cheeks, a

pretense at civility.

Dana went along with to keep the peace.

“I was just leaving. See you later, Dad.”

Without hesitation she rushed out of the hotel. It didn't take her long to reach the château.

By the time she'd pulled up next to the cars and minivans parked in front, Dana realized there'd be no peace for her if her father was angry enough to renege on the contract. Alex didn't deserve it, not to mention everyone else who would be put out. It looked like it was up to her if she didn't want this boat to sink.

When she found Alex and told him she wouldn't be staying at the château after all, he would assume it was what he'd thought from the first—that she still answered to her father in everything. But as humiliating as that would be, it wouldn't matter if it meant Alex received all his money.

“Dana?”

She got out of the car in time to see David hurrying toward her from the woods. He was her father's age, a wonderful family man with a great gift for writing.

When he caught up to her, he hugged her hard. “Bless you, Dana. Bless you, bless you for this. Words can't describe.”

“I know.” She'd felt the same way after seeing the château for the first time. It was how she felt now, only more so. He finally let her go, still beaming.

David's reaction settled it. This film was of vital importance to him, too; therefore she had no choice but to pack up her things

and drive to the Hermitage. She checked her watch. It was ten to six. Pretty soon everyone would leave for the night. That's when she'd go inside to get her things so she wouldn't draw attention to herself.

Until then she would walk around the back of the château to find Alex. After what he'd done for her, she owed him an explanation of why she wouldn't be staying here after all. He would never know that because of him, she'd experienced the most exciting day and night of her entire life. A man like him was too good for her, but at least this was a memory she'd hug to herself forever.

After telling David she'd see him later, she followed the path next to the hedge at the side of the château. It led around to the back where she hadn't been before. To her surprise the ground, covered by a mass of tangled vegetation divided by a path, sloped gently toward the river.

She wandered down it a few feet, marveling at the sight. Alex had meticulously cleaned out one half of it to reveal individual fruit trees. Who would have guessed what had been hidden there? In its day, the grounds would have been a showplace.

The other part still needed to be tackled, but he was making inroads. She saw his truck piled with cleared-out vegetation. Nearby were various tools including a power saw.

“Bonsoir, ma belle.”

Her heart raced. “Alex?” She'd heard his deep, seductive voice, but couldn't see him anywhere.

“I’m in a tree!” He tossed something small and green at her feet.

She reached for it, then looked up. A long, tall ladder had been propped against the trunk. Hidden by masses of leaves, she only saw parts of his hard-muscled physique. He brushed a few aside, allowing her a glimpse of his disarming white smile. Dana could hardly breathe.

“Are these all apple trees?”

“*Blanc d’Hiver* apples,” he asserted. “The kind that make the best *tartes aux pommes*. By late October I might be able to harvest a few. The trees behind you yield Anjou pears.”

Dana shook her head. “No wonder this place is called Belles Fleurs. When their blossoms come out, the sight from the château windows will be glorious.

“That all depends if I live long enough to make it out of this primeval forest to prune another day.”

She chuckled. “How old are you?” She’d been dying to know.

“Thirty-three.”

“You’ve got years yet!”

“Years of what?”

“I’m sure I don’t know.” Dana didn’t want to think about his life when he moved on to other places. Other women...It would take a very special woman to capture his heart. “Tell me something—”

“That covers a lot of territory.”

Laughter escaped her lips. “Can you see the vineyard from

that altitude?”

“So you noticed the building housing the winepress.”

“Yes, but I also heard that the vineyard once produced the famed Domaine Belles Fleurs label.”

She heard the leaves rustle. In seconds he'd negotiated the ladder with swift male agility before jumping to the ground, carrying his hand saw. “Someone's been gossiping.” He gathered the branches he'd just cut and threw them in the truck bed. “Wait, let me guess—Madame Fournier at the Hermitage.”

Nothing got past him. “Who else?” She smiled, but he didn't reciprocate.

“Since my arrival, word has leaked out that a long-lost Fleury is back in Les Coteaux du Layon. It sounds like she was talking out of school again.”

Dana had irritated him again; the last thing she'd wanted to do. “Only because I wanted to buy a bottle of the dessert wine we drank the other evening. She told me it came from the Domaine Percher, but she added that the very best Anjou wine used to come from the Domaine Belles Fleurs.”

Alex rubbed his thumb along his lower lip. “There hasn't been a bottle produced since 1930.”

“That's what she said. Naturally I was curious.”

“Naturally,” he came back, but to her relief he sounded more playful than upset.

“When I flew back to California, I did a little research on the Internet.”

His eyes narrowed on her features. “What did you find out?”

“For one thing, Dutch merchants used to favor the Belles Fleurs brand.”

He expelled a breath. “I might as well hear the rest. Knowing Dana Lofgren, you didn’t stop there.”

Embarrassed to be rattling on, a wave of heat washed over her. “There isn’t any more, though I will say this—I’m no connoisseur, but if the Belles Fleurs wine was as good as the kind we had at the Hermitage, then it’s the world’s loss.”

She noticed him shift his weight. “My parents never breathed a word to me about a vineyard.”

“You’re kidding!”

“My father was so intent on protecting my mother from any more pain, we simply didn’t talk about her past. When the letter from the attorney for my grandfather’s estate showed up, there was no mention of a vineyard. In fact, he led me to believe the place was virtually unsalvageable.”

“Sounds like he was hoping you would forfeit so he could buy it for a song.”

He nodded. “I got the distinct impression he was hiding something, but didn’t understand until I saw the winepress building and eventually discovered the vineyard. No doubt he’d been bombarded by vintners throughout the Anjou region who wanted to buy it and work it, even if they couldn’t afford to purchase the château.”

“So he thought he’d buy it first,” she theorized, “recognizing

the money it could bring in.”

“Exactly.”

“Is it supposed to be a secret then?”

He put his hands on his hips, unconsciously emanating a potent virility that made her tremble. “Not at all.”

“But you wish I’d mind my own business.”

“You misunderstand me, Dana. There’s something you *don’t* know. Come with me while I make this last haul and I’ll explain.”

His invitation made it possible for her to be with him a little longer. She couldn’t ask for more than that, but he paused before his next comment ruined the moment. “Unless of course your assistance is required elsewhere.” His brow had furrowed. “Naturally your father has first call on your time.”

Between Alex and her dad, she felt like a football being tossed back and forth. Both of them treated her like she was a child who couldn’t act for herself. She’d thought she and Alex had been communicating like two adults just now, but she’d thought wrong!

Bristling with the heat of anger she muttered, “If that were the case, I wouldn’t have come out here, would I?”

Turning on her heel, she started to retrace her steps, but Alex moved faster. In the next breath his hands had closed around her upper arms, pulling her back against his chest. “Why *did* you come?” he asked in a silky voice.

With his warm breath against her neck, too many sensations bombarded her at once. The solid pounding of his heart changed

the momentum of hers. Aware of his fingers making ever-increasing rotations against her skin through her top, she felt a weakness attack her body. Pleasure pains ran down her arms to her hands.

“I—I wanted to thank you.” She could hardly get the words out.

“For what?” he demanded, turning her around, causing her head to loll back. His dark gaze pierced hers. “That sounded like you’re leaving on a trip. Mind telling me where you’re going?”

“The landfill? It may be a French one, but I can still think of more romantic places.”

“Dana.” His voice grated.

Of course he already knew the answer to his own question, but his male mouth was too close. Her ache for him had turned into painful desire. She needed to do something quick before she forgot what they were talking about.

“I should have taken your advice before you went to so much trouble for me.” She tried to ease away from him, but he didn’t relinquish his hold. “My only consolation is that it’s one room less you’ll have to clean and furnish once you get started on the inside of the château.”

Those black eyes roved over her features with increasing intensity. “You knew your father wasn’t going to approve. What’s changed?”

Dana moistened her lips nervously. “Remember the old saying about picking your battles?” She noticed a small nerve throbbing

at the corner of his mouth. In other circumstances she'd love to press her lips to it. "This one isn't important."

She kept trying for a little levity, hoping it would help. It didn't. Her comment had the opposite effect of producing a smile. Some kind of struggle was going on inside him before his hands dropped away with seeming reluctance.

This was the moment to make her exit. "See you around, Alex."

Needing to put distance between them, she went back to the château to pack. It had emptied except for Paul and David. While they were talking in the grand salon, she hurried out to the car with her suitcase and headed for the hotel.

The same woman she'd talked to before smiled at her. "*Bonsoir*, Mademoiselle Lofgren."

"*Bonsoir, madame*. I need the key to room eleven, please."

Her arched brow lifted. "Eleven? But it is already occupied."

"I know. My father and I have adjoining rooms."

"*Non, non*. A Mademoiselle Brusse checked in a little while ago. I've already given her the key."

Something strange was going on.

"I see. Thank you for your help, *madame*."

"Of course."

Dana grabbed her suitcase and opted for the stairs rather than the lift. Once she reached the next floor, she walked midway down the hall and knocked on her father's door several times, but he didn't answer. No doubt he was with Saskia, but this couldn't

wait. She pulled out her cell phone and called him.

“Dana?” He’d picked up on the second ring.

“Hi, Dad. What’s going on? I tried to check in my room, but the desk said Saskia had picked up the key.”

He answered her question with another one. “Where are you?”

“Standing in front of your hotel room door.”

“I’ll be right out.” The line went dead.

Within seconds he joined her in the hall and shut the door behind him. His famous scowl was more pronounced than earlier in the day. “Saskia and I have been having problems, but I can’t afford to end things with her until after the picture’s finished. She doesn’t know my intentions of course.”

Dana was glad her father was coming to his senses for his own sake.

“She begged me to let her stay in the adjoining room while we work out our differences.”

Poor Saskia. “That sounds reasonable.”

His eyes darted to her suitcase. “Saskia’s room is free at the hotel in Angers. I called and told the concierge to have it waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” she muttered, “but I’ll make my own arrangements.”

There was a long silence before he said, “If you go back to the château, you do so at your own peril.”

Their gazes clashed. “And Monsieur Martin’s, too?”

His eyes flashed with temper. “How did that man get his

tentacles into you so fast?” he countered.

Dana stood her ground. “Why won’t you answer the question, Dad?”

It took him forever to respond.

“I still forbid you, but as you reminded me earlier with all the carelessness of your culture, you’re not seventeen anymore.”

He went back in the bedroom. As she turned away, she heard the door close. Despite his hurtful remark, she was confident he wouldn’t penalize Alex. Not because he’d had a sudden attack of human decency, but because he knew he’d never find a spot this perfect for his film.

Her throat felt tight all the way back to the château where she discovered the gate had been closed. A symbolic dagger for the trespasser to beware?

She closed her eyes, afraid she was being as superstitious as her father. After a minute, she reached for her purse and pulled out the remote. Once she’d driven on through, she shut it again, then continued on to the courtyard.

After getting out of the car, she tried to open the front door, but it was locked and Alex’s truck was nowhere in sight. He might still be around the back, working. Acting on that possibility, she drove to the other end of the château. It wound around to the orchard.

He wasn’t there.

A hollow sensation crept through her. She checked her watch. It was already eight o’clock. Disturbed that he might have made

plans with a woman and had gone into Angers for dinner, she drove to the front of the château once more.

Of course she could phone him, but he wouldn't appreciate a call if he was with someone else. Besides, he'd thought she'd gone back to the Hermitage for good. The only thing to do was drive to the next village in the opposite direction from Chanzeaux where she wouldn't run into her father by accident. After grabbing a bite to eat, she would come back and wait for Alex.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur Martan."

"Bonsoir, Madame Fournier. Has Mademoiselle Lofgren checked in yet?" He hadn't seen Dana's car outside.

She shook her head. *"Non, monsieur. She doesn't have a reservation here."*

"Then her father isn't staying here, either?"

"But of course he is! The person in the adjoining room is Mademoiselle Brusse. She's an actress doing a film with le fameux Monsieur Lofgren."

His hands clenched in reaction. If Dana hadn't come here, then she'd probably driven into Angers to get herself a hotel room. The last trip to the landfill had cost him time before he'd showered and changed clothes, thus the reason he'd missed her.

"Merci, madame." Before she could detain him with more gossip, he went back outside to phone Dana from the truck. It rang seven times. He was about ready to hang up in frustration when he heard her voice.

"Alex?" She sounded out of breath.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded without preamble.

“My left front tire is flat. I’ve been trying to work the jack, but I’ve been having problems. Pretty soon I’ll figure it out.”

The band constricting his lungs tightened. “Where are you exactly?”

“Somewhere on the road between Rablay and Beaulieu.”

“I’m on my way.” He started the engine and drove away from the hotel. “Stay in your car and lock the doors.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“What caused you to go in that direction?”

“When you weren’t at the château, I decided to get dinner in the next village, but I never made it.”

The blood hammered in his ears. “You came by the château?”

“Yes. Dad and Saskia have been quarreling. It’s nothing new, but while they work things out she’s going to stay in the adjoining room.”

“Why did you come back?”

“In order to ask if I could rent my bedroom so to speak, that is if you don’t mind.”

He muttered something unintelligible under his breath.

“What did you say, Alex? I’m not sure we have a good connection.”

This had nothing to do with the connection. His hand tightened on the steering wheel. “And your father approves?”

There was a brief silence. “No. Does that mean there’s no room at the inn?”

Ciel! “You know better than to ask that question.” The fact was just beginning to sink in that she’d come to him whether her father liked it or not.

“You sound upset. In case I’ve ruined your plans for the evening, please forget about me. If I can’t fix the tire, I’ll walk to the château and wait until you come home later.”

“No, you won’t—” A woman who looked like her wasn’t safe in daylight. Alex didn’t even want to think about her being alone in the dark.

“I realize you think I’m too young to do anything on my own, but I’m not helpless.”

“Age has nothing to do with it. I’m just being careful.”

“Point taken,” she admitted in a quiet voice.

His body relaxed. “Where would you like to eat tonight?”

“You mean you haven’t had dinner, either?”

“As a matter of fact, I went to the Hermitage in the hope we could drive into Angers for a meal, but Madame Fournier informed me a certain actress had taken over your room.”

“Saskia didn’t waste any time announcing herself.”

“Madame Fournier lives for such moments.”

Her sigh came through the line, infiltrating his body. “I don’t want to talk about either of them. I’m too hungry. To be honest my mouth has been watering for one of those quiches we bought in Angers. Are there any left?”

He smiled. “I’ve saved everything for us. There’s more than plenty for several meals.” Alex preferred dining in tonight where

he didn't have to share her with anyone. While his thoughts were on their evening ahead, he saw her car at the side of the road and pulled off behind her. "Don't be alarmed. I've got your car in my headlights."

"I have to admit I'm glad it's you. I'll hang up."

Alex heard the slight quiver in her voice before the line went dead. Though he had no doubt she could handle herself in most situations, her relief was evident. So was his now that he'd caught up to her.

After shutting off the ignition, he reached in the glove box for his flashlight and got out of the truck. She rolled down the window and poked her beautiful golden head out the opening. He caught the flash of those startling blue eyes in the light.

"Did I do it wrong?"

For a second he was so concentrated on her, everything else went out of his mind. "Let me take a look," he murmured, before shining the light on the tire. It was flat, all right.

She climbed out of the car. "What can I do to help?"

Her flowery fragrance seduced him. "If you'll hold the flashlight right there, I'll have this changed in a minute."

Their fingers brushed in the transfer, increasing his awareness of the warm feminine body standing behind him. He hunkered down to work the jack and remove the tire. Several cars slowed down as they passed before moving on. "You must have picked up a nail."

"I'll get it fixed tomorrow." When he started to get up she

asked, “Would you like the light to find the spare?”

“Thank you, but I don’t need it.”

He opened the car door to trip the trunk latch. Except for her sleeping bag, there was nothing else inside. That made it easy to retrieve the smaller tire and put it on. After he’d tightened the lug nuts, he lowered the car and put the flat in the trunk with the tools.

She walked toward him and handed him the flashlight. “You did that so fast I can’t believe it.”

“All it takes is practice. Over the years I’ve gotten a lot of it driving trucks out in areas where you have to do the repairs yourself or walk fifty miles.”

“Thank you for coming to my rescue, even if you pretend it was nothing.”

“It was my pleasure.” Unable to help himself, he briefly kissed those lips that had been tantalizing him. They were soft and sweet beneath his. He wanted so much more, but not out here on the road in view of any passerby. “Now let’s get back to the château. I’ll follow you.”

He helped her inside the car, then he jumped in the truck. She made a U-turn and headed for Rablay-Sur-Layon only a short distance off. Once they’d turned onto the private road, he pressed the remote so they could drive through the gate.

The noise it made clanking shut was the most satisfying sound he’d heard in a long time. It signaled that they’d left the world behind. For the rest of the night it was just the two of them.

Chapter Five

ALEX'S unexpected kiss had done a good job of melting her insides. She'd been wanting it to happen, but he'd caught her off guard out there on the road where other people could see them. To make things even more frustrating, he'd ended it too soon for her to respond the way she ached to do.

Dana had almost suffered a heart attack when she'd seen him walk toward her car dressed in a charcoal shirt and gray trousers. His rugged male beauty electrified her senses.

By the time he parked next to her in front of the château, she was feeling feverish with longings she couldn't seem to control. If she didn't get a grip, he'd be convinced he was dealing with a schoolgirl instead of a mature woman.

As she started to get out, he opened the back door and reached for her suitcase.

Being on her own so much, she had to concede it was wonderful to be waited on and taken care of. When she looked back on the dilemma she'd been in before he'd phoned her, a shudder rocked her body. He'd spoken the truth. She wouldn't have been safe inside the car or walking back to the château alone.

Alex used his remote to open the front door. Once they were inside he put down her suitcase and turned on the lights. She felt his dark-eyed gaze rest on her. "Food before anything else,

I think.”

“I like the way you think.”

By tacit agreement she followed him through the foyer past the staircase to a hallway leading to the west wing. He turned on another light. Dana hadn't been in this part of the château before. They passed a set of double doors.

“May I see inside?”

“Of course.” Alex opened them for her. “This is a drawing room that opens into the grand dining room. As you can see, boards have been nailed over the broken windows. When they're repaired, they'll look out on the front courtyard.”

The beauty of the interior caused her to cross her arms over her chest and rub her hands against them in reaction. “I've never seen anything so lovely. The ornate walls and ceilings make me feel like I'm in a palace. After this, you wonder how your mother adapted to life in a normal house.”

“I'm sure my father did his share of worrying about it, but they had a good marriage which hopefully made up for a lot of things.” Just then he sounded far away.

“Believe it or not, my parents had a solid marriage, too, albeit an unorthodox one. Mom had to make most of the concessions, but she must have wanted to, otherwise she would have left him because he's quite impossible.”

Dana followed his low chuckle back out to the hall and down to a turn that opened up to the kitchen.

“How incredible!” It was massive with a vaulted ceiling and an

open hearth fireplace that took up one wall. Modern appliances had been mixed in with the ancient. A long rectory-type table with benches sat in the middle of the room. She estimated sixteen people could be seated there comfortably.

“Through that far door on the right are the steps leading down to the wine cellar. The door at the other end of the kitchen leads to a pantry and an outside door. Another leads to a bathroom.”

“You’ve reminded me I need to wash my hands after ineptly handling that jack. Excuse me for a moment.”

She darted through the pantry stocked with supplies. A new washer and dryer had been installed in there. The pantry was big enough to be a master bedroom. Beyond it she found the bathroom Alex had upgraded. It wasn’t quite as large as the one upstairs, but it had every accoutrement.

The tiles covering the walls and ceiling were the same as the ones lining the counters in the kitchen. Each was an original and had been hand-painted on a cream background to depict grapes, apples, pears, all the fruits probably grown on the estate.

Continually charmed by everything she saw, Dana was in a daze when she returned to the kitchen. She’d been gone so long, Alex had already put their meal on the table. He was standing next to one end with a bottle of wine in his hand.

“Sorry I got detained, but the tiles were so adorable I had to study them.”

“Now that I’m getting to know you better, I find that entirely understandable. Sit down and I’ll serve you.” As she took her

place, he uncorked it and poured the pale gold liquid into their glasses.

Their eyes met. “Is this a special wine?”

“It is now.” His deep voice sounded more like a purr. He sat down opposite her and lifted his glass. “To us. May our unexpected month together hold many more pleasant surprises.”

He’d just laid down the ground rules. She wasn’t to read more into that kiss than he’d intended. After the month was over, this season of enchantment would come to an end. She smiled through her distress at the thought and clinked her glass against his. “To you, *monsieur*. May you outlive any regrets for your magnanimity.”

With her emotions in turmoil, she forgot and drank her wine like it was water. Too late she realized her mistake and tried to recover without him noticing, but it wasn’t possible considering she was choking. His dark brown eyes smiled while he munched on a croissant. “When you’re able to speak again, tell me how you find your wine.”

Embarrassed, Dana cleared her throat. “It’s sweet like the one we had the other night, but it’s not the same domaine, is it? This time I tasted honey.”

“That’s very discerning of you. When you seemed to enjoy the one we had at the Hermitage, I bought this bottle for you to try. It’s another Layon wine called Chaume from the Domaine des Forges. I’m told it’s the sweetest of all.”

She got this fluttery feeling in her chest. Anxious not to appear

disturbed by him, she bit into the quiche he'd warmed for them. It wasn't just his words, but the way he said them. Here she'd promised herself not to get carried away, but being alone with him like this caused her to think many forbidden thoughts.

"You were very thoughtful to do that. Now that I've sampled both, it makes me wonder what the Belles Fleurs wine tasted like."

"We'll never know..." His voice trailed. "Every bottle has disappeared from the wine cellar. I suppose there are a few connoisseurs who bought them up. They might still have them stored in their wine cellars for a special occasion. Good dessert wines can last for decades."

"It seems so sad there's no more wine being made from the grapes grown on your property."

He stared at her, deep in concentration. "I'm afraid I'm not a vintner. It's a whole other world that requires the best oenologist you can hire. A wine expert doesn't come cheap, nor a vintner and crew."

"What do you suppose happened to the records kept by the vintners of this estate?"

"I have no idea. Possibly they're hiding in one of the tons of boxes holding the contents of the library. You haven't seen that room yet. It's in the right wing next to the music room."

After she finished off her quiche, she asked, "Are the books upstairs with the furniture?"

"They're in one of the third floor turret rounds."

She peeled an orange and ate several sections as she digested what he'd told her. "Alex—aren't you curious about them? About the history of this place?"

He ate some cheese before swallowing the rest of his wine. "Not particularly."

"Why?" When he didn't immediately answer her, she felt terrible. It was clear he didn't want to talk about his family's past. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. It's none of my business."

Unable to sit there any longer, she jumped up and started clearing the table.

"Leave it, Dana."

Ignoring his edict, she took everything over to the sink. "I want to make myself useful before I go upstairs."

"You're tired then?"

"Yes." She seized on the opening he'd given her. "You must be, too, considering how early you get up and the exhausting labor you do every day." She found detergent to wash their plates and glasses.

Her heart skipped a beat when he joined her with a towel to dry them. Soon she had the table wiped off and the kitchen cleaned up. They were both standing at the counter.

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