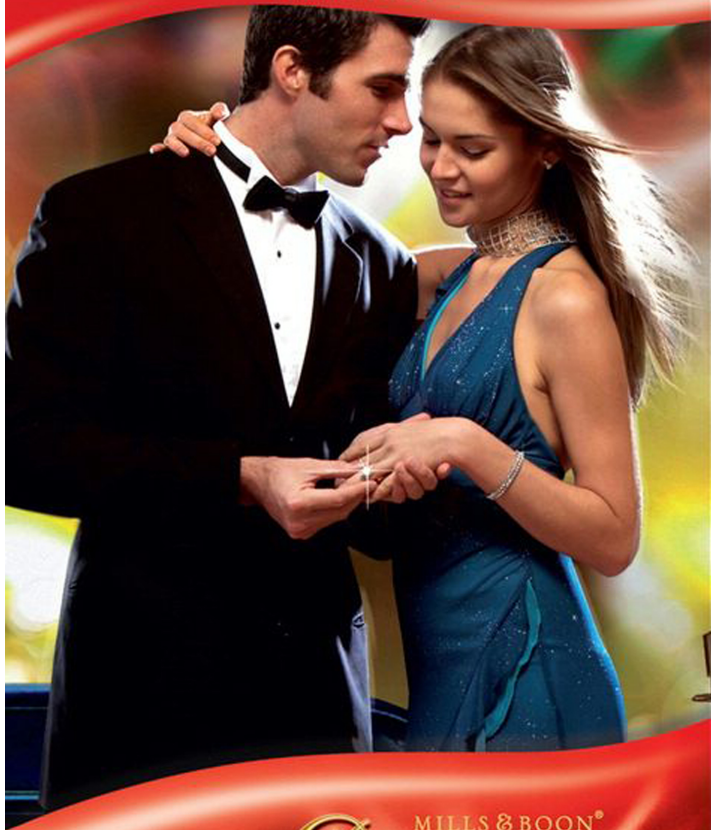


Transformed Into the Frenchman's Mistress

Barbara Dunlop

Bargained Into Her Boss's Bed

Emilie Rose



MILLS & BOON®
Desire™ 2-in-1

Barbara Dunlop

Emilie Rose

Transformed Into the Frenchman's Mistress: Transformed Into the Frenchman's Mistress

Аннотация

Transformed Into the Frenchman's Mistress Barbara Dunlop How had ambassador's granddaughter Charlotte Hudson ended up on a wild movie assignment in an old Provençal château with notorious French playboy Alec Montcalm? The real action was going on behind the bedroom doors – beneath satin sheets. But Charlotte knew their sexy, secret liaison couldn't last. Bargained Into Her Boss's Bed Emilie Rose In the fast-paced, cutthroat world of Hollywood, producer Max Hudson wouldn't let anyone get in his way, especially not his assistant, Dana Fallon. Her tantalising curves wreaked havoc on his mind and his libido, but her sudden resignation caused chaos. Money wouldn't sway her. Luckily, Max had other means of persuasion... THE HUDSONS OF BEVERLY HILLS Privilege and passion...all in the public eye!

Содержание

Transformed Into	5
Bargained Into Her Boss's Bed	7
Transformed	8
Barbara Dunlop	9
Emilie Rose	10
Transformed	11
Chapter One	13
Chapter Two	31
Chapter Three	48
Chapter Four	68
Chapter Five	86
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	105

Transformed Into The Frenchman's Mistress by Barbara Dunlop

“You were beautiful that night,” Alec said, giving her figure a slow once-over.

Charlotte couldn't contain herself. “I was twenty-two that night.”

“You didn't have to take the key.”

“I was confused.” It had taken her a moment to realise the card he'd handed her was a hotel room key.

“You were tempted.”

“I'd known you for two minutes.” Other women might be tempted by a dashing aristocrat with money to burn, but Charlotte wasn't interested in a fling.

“I'd been watching you for a lot longer than two minutes. You were attractive. You seemed interesting and intelligent, and by the way you were making all those other men laugh, I knew you had a sense of humour.”

“Giving me your room key was supposed to be funny?”

“I wanted to get to know you better.”

“It didn't occur to you to ask me for coffee?”

“I'm not a patient man.”

Don't miss the exclusive in-book short stories by USA

TODAY bestselling author Maureen Child after the last page of Transformed Into the Frenchman's Mistress and Bargained Into Her Boss's Bed!

Bargained Into Her Boss's Bed

by Emilie Rose

The urge to kiss Max awake was almost too strong for Dana to resist. Too bad almost didn't count.

"Max," she called quietly. He didn't stir.

"Max," she tried again, a little louder this time. Dana eased onto the cushion beside him. The warm proximity of his leg beside hers made her heart race. "Max, wake up."

His eyelids slowly lifted and his unfocused gaze found hers. "Morning." The groggy, rough timbre of his voice made her stomach muscles quiver. Wouldn't she love to wake up to that every day?

His hand painted a hot path up her spine. She gasped. Then his fingers cupped her nape and he pulled her forwards. Warm lips covered hers. Shocked but thrilled, she responded for just a second before reality hit her on the head.

Who does he think he's kissing?

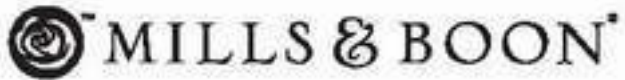
**Transformed
Into The
Frenchman's
Mistress**

By

**Barbara Dunlop
Bargained Into
Her Boss's Bed**

By

Emilie Rose



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Transformed Into The Frenchman's Mistress

By

Barbara Dunlop

Dear Reader,

Is there anything more romantic than a château in the south of France, with picturesque gardens, a well-stocked wine cellar and hot hero? And who doesn't love the thought of being whisked away to Paris, Rome and London in a private jet?

French aristocrat Alec Montcalm has it all: the looks, the pedigree, the money and all those gorgeous women. And Charlotte Hudson doesn't trust him for a single second. Unfortunately, the favour she's forced to ask is a test of her loyalty to her family. It's a favour Alec is willing to grant her – for a price.

I hope you enjoy the newest instalment in the Hudsons' saga!

Barbara Dunlop

Barbara Dunlop is a bestselling, award-winning author of

numerous novels. Her books regularly hit bestseller lists for series romance, and she has twice been shortlisted for the Romance Writers of America's RITA[®] Award.

Barbara lives in a log house in the Yukon Territory, where the bears outnumber people and moose browse the front yard. By day, she works as the Yukon's Film Commissioner. By night, she pens romance novels in front of a roaring fire. Visit her website at [www. barbaradunlop.com](http://www.barbaradunlop.com).

For Susie Ross

Chapter One

Slightly windblown, and more than a little jet-lagged, Charlotte Hudson found herself in France. A phone call from her brother, Jack, yesterday had cut short her tour with their grandfather, Ambassador Edmond Cassettes. The diplomatic contingent had been in New Orleans, where Charlotte and the ambassador were being wined, dined and entertained by the governor, a couple of senators and every Louisiana mayor with aspirations of doing business with the wealthy Mediterranean nation of Monte Allegro.

Then Jack had called, and now she was in Provence, pulling up to the Montcalm family château with a favor to ask. Her college friend Raine would be surprised to see her, but Charlotte was counting on Raine's good nature to help her secure the favor. It was the first time her brother, or anyone on the Hudson side of the family, had included her in Hudson Pictures' filmmaking business. And she desperately wanted to impress.

Charlotte had been raised in Europe by her maternal grandparents, while Jack was raised an ocean away in Hollywood by the Hudsons. She had met the filmmaking dynasty of a family on only a couple of occasions. They were perfectly polite to her, but it was clear they were close-knit, and she was very much the outsider.

But now, terminally ill matriarch Lillian Hudson was

determined to honor her late husband's wishes by having Hudson Pictures bring their wartime romance to the big screen. The entire family had rallied around the project and decreed Château Montcalm was the perfect location.

Charlotte finally had a chance to participate in the Hudsons' world.

She drew a breath, giving her straight skirt and matching ivory blazer a final tug as she approached the main doors of the Montcalm's stately, three-story stone mansion. The doors were intimidating oversize planked walnut, inset with vintage beveled windows. The château was old-world and impressive. She knew it had been in the Montcalm family for a dozen generations, ever since some fiery warlord of a Montcalm ancestor had taken it in battle. Her friend Raine had quite the pedigree.

Charlotte took a breath and reached for the ornate doorbell, waiting only a moment until a formally dressed butler drew the door wide, his expression a study in formality and courtesy.

"Bonjour, madame."

"Bonjour," Charlotte returned. "I'm looking for Raine Montcalm."

The man paused while he considered Charlotte's appearance. "Do you have an appointment?"

Charlotte shook her head. "I'm Charlotte Hudson. Raine and I are friends. We were together at Oxford."

"Mademoiselle Montcalm is unavailable."

"But—"

“I do apologize.”

“Could you at least tell her I’m here?” She hoped Raine would become available if she heard Charlotte’s name.

“The mademoiselle is not currently in residence.”

Charlotte struggled to decide if she was getting the brush-off. “She’s really not here?”

He didn’t answer, but his expression became crisper and even more formal, if that was possible.

“Because, if you could just let her know—”

“A problem, Henri?” came a gravelly, masculine voice.

Oh no. Not Alec.

“Non, monsieur.”

Charlotte reflexively drew back as a tall, aristocratically handsome man moved into the doorway, displacing the butler. Raine’s brother was supposed to be in London. Charltte had seen his picture in the tabloids just yesterday, dancing at some posh nightclub on Whitehall.

“I’m afraid Raine’s away on—” He suddenly stopped speaking. A wolfish smile grew on his lips. “Charlotte Hudson.”

She didn’t answer.

“Thank you, Henri.” Alec’s dismissal was polite but clear, his gaze never leaving Charlotte.

As the butler drew back, Alec leaned indolently against the doorjamb. He wore a charcoal Caraceni suit, a classic white shirt and a dark silk tie that was scattered with bright red flecks. The flecks, it seemed, were miniatures of the Montcalm family crest,

painstakingly embroidered into the fabric.

Her heart pounding with a mixture of awareness and trepidation, Charlotte decided to bluff. She held out her hand and gave him a breezy smile. “I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced.”

At least that part wasn’t a lie. There’d been nothing remotely formal about their one and only meeting. It had been humiliating, and her only defense was to pretend she’d forgotten all about it.

“Oh, we’ve been introduced, Ms. Hudson.” His warm, callused hand closed over hers, sending a shiver along her spine.

She painstakingly schooled her features, raising her brow in question.

“Three years ago.” He cocked his head to one side, clearly challenging her to acknowledge him.

She held her ground.

“The *Ottobrate Ballo* in Rome,” he continued, eyes mocking. “I asked you to dance.”

He’d done a lot more than ask. He’d nearly derailed her career in under five minutes.

Rome had been one of her first official assignments as her grandfather’s executive assistant. Becoming his official E.A. had been a big step for her, and she’d been nervous all night, anxious to do well.

Alec’s smile widened as he watched her expression. “It’s etched very firmly in *my* mind,” he told her.

“I don’t—”

“Sure you do,” he countered softly, and they both knew he was right. “And you liked it.”

Too true.

“But then Ambassador Cassettes stepped in.”

Thank goodness for her grandfather.

“Charlotte?” Alec prompted.

She pretended she’d only just remembered. “You tried to give me your room key,” she accused with a stern frown.

“And you took it.”

“I didn’t know what it was.” She’d been twenty-two years old, a neophyte on the diplomatic circuit, and he’d been right there, poised to take advantage of her.

He chuckled his disbelief, and she glared at him.

Then he sobered. “You were beautiful that night.” His gaze went soft as he gave her figure a slow onceover.

She couldn’t keep the outrage from her tone. “I was twenty-two that night.”

His shoulders went up in a careless shrug. “You didn’t have to take the key.”

“I was confused.” It truly had taken her a moment to realize the card he’d handed her was a hotel room key.

“I think you were tempted.”

Her brain warned her mouth to shut up. But her emotions overrode the instruction. “I’d known you for two minutes.” Other women might be tempted by a dashing, urbane aristocrat with money to burn, but Charlotte wasn’t interested in a fling.

"I'd been watching you for a lot longer than two minutes."

His words caused her thoughts to stumble. He'd been watching her? In a complimentary way, or in a creepy, stalker sort of way?

He moved subtly closer. "You were attractive. You seemed interesting and intelligent, and by the way you were making all those other men laugh, I knew you had a sense of humor."

"Giving me your room key was supposed to be funny?"

His brown eyes turned to molten chocolate. "Not at all. The ball was ending. I wanted to get to know you better."

Charlotte couldn't believe his gall. Aside from being young and naive, she'd been on official business that night, and she'd never dishonor her grandfather nor the ambassador's office by leaving the party with a strange man, particularly a man with Alec Montcalm's reputation. He was still one of France's most notorious bachelors. His dates were lucky to stay out of the tabloids.

"It didn't occur to you to ask me for coffee?" she asked tartly.

"I'm not a patient man." He paused, and she checked an impulse to gaze into his dark eyes, or to contemplate that rakish slash of a mouth, or the tilt of his square chin. Which left her his nose—straight, aristocratic, slightly flared, as if he was drinking in her scent.

He continued speaking. "The direct approach is sometimes the most effective."

"You're telling me that room-key thing works?" She couldn't really be surprised. There had to be plenty of women who'd give

their eye teeth to hop into Alec Montcalm's bed. Charlotte simply wasn't one of them. And she never would be.

His quirk of a smile confirmed her suspicions. But then he seemed to tire of the game. He straightened, his expression turning more businesslike. "In my sister's absence, is there anything I can do for you, Ms. Hudson?"

Charlotte instantly remembered her mission. She also realized she'd made a colossal error by arguing with him. She forced herself to calm down, to step back from the web of emotions he seemed to evoke, and to focus on the reason she'd come.

"When is Raine expected back?" she tried.

"Tuesday morning. She was called to a photo shoot on Malta for *Intérêt*."

Charlotte knew *Intérêt* was the Montcalm Corporation's fashion magazine, and Raine was editor-in-chief. Tuesday morning wasn't going to do it. Jack needed to know this weekend if he could send the film's location manager to Château Montcalm. Principal photography was set to start at the end of the summer, and they were already behind schedule.

Charlotte supposed she could fly to Malta and talk to Raine there. But she knew the magazine wouldn't call out the editor-in-chief unless there was a problem. The last thing she wanted to do was catch Raine at a stressful time. It wouldn't help her cause, and it wouldn't be fair to Raine.

That left Alec. She had *so* hoped to avoid asking him directly. But she wasn't in a position to be choosy.

She took a bracing breath. “There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

Alec’s eyes instantly twinkled, and an anticipatory smile transformed his slash of a mouth.

Charlotte battled a spontaneous sexual reaction. There was a reason women from Milan and Prague accepted his room key on the dance floor. The man was sexy as sin.

“*Entrer*,” he offered, gesturing with his arm and making a small space between his body and the door for her to enter the foyer.

She hesitated, then took the invitation, brushing past him, a tingle invading her shoulder where it contacted his chest.

“Dinner is casual tonight,” he told her. “*La pissaladière*. And I’ll bring up a bottle of 1996 Montcalm *Maison Inoui* from the cellar.”

“It’s not that kind of a discussion,” she warned, turning back to face him. Bringing out the big guns from his family’s winery wasn’t going to make her fall into his bed.

“You’re in Provence,” he countered smoothly, closing the door. “Everything is that kind of a discussion.”

She blinked to adjust her eyes to the interior light. “This is business.”

“I understand.” But his expression didn’t change.

“*Do you?*”

“*Absolument.*”

She didn’t believe him for a second. But she had no choice

but to stay for dinner. Jack needed the location. She needed the credibility with the Hudson family. And she wasn't about to blow this chance.

Alec had been handed a second chance.

Three long years later, the sexy woman he'd admired across the dance floor was in his kitchen, looking sexier than ever. If he'd known Raine's friend Charlotte and his *Ottobrate Ballo* Charlotte were one and the same, he'd have made this happen a whole lot sooner. But patience was good. Anticipation was good.

And now, gazing at her crystal-clear blue eyes, her dark lashes, her full lips and porcelain-smooth skin, he was glad he'd waited. Her neck was long and graceful, decorated with a delicate, moon-shaped diamond and gold pendant that telegraphed taste rather than extravagance. The suit's skirt fit her like a glove, emphasizing the curve of her waist, the flare of her hips and her long, sleek, toned legs that ended in a pair of sexy heels.

On the butcher-block island in the terra-cotta tiled kitchen, he popped the cork on the *Maison Inouï*. It was his family's signature label, their finest vintage, bottles he saved for very special occasions.

He reached up to the hanging rack, sliding off a pair of crystal red-wine goblets.

Having initially gazed around with interest, Charlotte was now standing uncertainly at the center of the large room.

He nodded to one of the low-backed bar stools on the opposite side of the island. "Hop up."

She hesitated for a split second, but then slipped gracefully into the leather-upholstered seat, setting her small clutch bag on the lip of the counter.

“Thank you,” she said primly as he placed one of the glasses of wine in front of her.

Alec remembered that intriguing expression, the shield of formality, covering what he was certain was a fiery rebel, chafing beneath the bounds of propriety. He’d tried to test the theory in Rome, but her grandfather, the watchful ambassador, had stopped him cold.

Back then, he’d shrugged the disappointment off philosophically. Women came; women went. Sometimes it worked out. Sometimes it didn’t.

He lifted his wineglass, swirling the small measure of wine, taking an experimental sip and letting the deep, sweet, woodsy flavor of the wine glide over his tongue.

Sometimes a man got another chance.

The wine was perfect, so he filled their glasses.

Charlotte tasted hers, and her eyes went wide with the experience. “Nice,” she admitted with respect.

“From our vineyard in Bordeaux.”

“I’m impressed.”

He smiled in satisfaction at her reaction.

“Not *that* impressed,” she drawled.

“That was pride of craftsmanship,” he told her.

“My mistake.” But her sea-foam eyes told him she knew it

was lust.

Of course it was. But not a problem. He'd back off and let her relax.

"*La pissaladière*," he decreed, retrieving a steel mixing bowl from beneath the countertop. He then assembled flour, yeast, sugar and olive oil.

She watched wordlessly for a few moments. "You can cook?"

"*Oui*. Of course." He sprinkled sugar into the bottom of the bowl, adding the yeast and a measure of water. French children learned to bake almost before they learned to walk.

"You do your own cooking?" she pressed in obvious surprise.

"Sometimes." He nodded to her wineglass. "Enjoy. Relax. Tell me what you wanted to talk about."

The invitation seemed to sober her, and she took a slow sip of the wine.

Stalling.

Interesting.

"That is one exceedingly fine wine," she commented.

"I applaud your good taste, *mademoiselle*," he told her honestly. Then he retrieved a heavy skillet and drizzled olive oil into the bottom.

"You've lived here a long time?" she asked. Her gaze was on her wineglass as she rubbed her thumb and forefinger over the stem.

He watched the motion for a moment. "I was born here."

"In Provence or in the château?"

“In the hospital in Castres.”

“Oh.” She nodded then turned silent.

“Is that what you wanted to ask me?”

“Not exactly.” Her white teeth came down on her bottom lip.

“My family in America...the Hudsons. They make movies.”

“You don’t say,” he drawled. A person would have to be dead not to know of Hudson Pictures. Their awards were numerous, their reputation stellar and they’d launched the careers of half the Hollywood elite.

“I wasn’t sure you knew,” she defended. “They’re successful in America, but—”

“You’re far too modest.”

“It’s not like I had anything to do with it.” She flicked back her hair, gaze still focused on the burgundy wine. “They’re filming a new movie.”

“Just one?”

That made her look up. “A special one.”

“I see.”

“I don’t...” She glanced around the spacious kitchen.

Alec set down his chopping knife. “Is it getting any easier with these delay tactics?”

“I’m not—” Then she caught his eyes and sighed. “I really was hoping you’d be Raine.”

“Sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I am.” Then she gave her head a little shake.

“I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

If she didn't look so serious, he might have laughed. "Is it some kind of women's thing?"

"No."

"Boyfriend break up with you?" That wouldn't be such a bad thing. She could stay here while she got over the guy. And Alec would be on hand to lend a sympathetic ear, or shoulder, or anything else that was required.

"No," she said. "It's not that."

Too bad. "Am I likely to guess?"

She fought a half smile and shook her head.

He picked up the knife, bringing it down to chop off the stem of an onion. "Then shall we get on with it?"

"You're not making this easy."

He chopped again. "Well, it's not from the lack of trying."

Her lips compressed, then her shoulders drooped. "Okay, now there's been too much buildup."

He rinsed his hands in the small square sink in the middle of the island. "*You*," he enunciated, "are impossible."

"Fine." She braced her hands on the countertop. "Here goes. The Hudsons would like to use your château as a movie set." She clamped her jaw and waited for his reaction.

Alec stilled.

Was she joking?

Was she crazy?

He'd spent years avoiding the press—years of fighting tooth and nail for a scrap of privacy. To invite a movie crew, cameras,

actors, an entire Hollywood cartel into his home for weeks on end?

He gathered the thinly sliced onions onto the knife edge, then dumped them all at once in the hot olive oil. They hissed and sizzled, steam rising to the ceiling.

“No,” he said, with absolute finality. There was not a chance in hell.

Okay, Charlotte had expected resistance. Alec wasn’t going to say yes immediately. Who would? It was an inconvenience and a disruption in his life. She understood that.

“It’s my grandparents’ love story,” she put in, trying to stress the significance of the film. “They met during the war. In occupied France.”

Alec didn’t say a word.

“All of Hudson Pictures’ resources will be behind it.” The quality would be unparalleled.

He lifted a spatula and stirred the sizzling onions.

“My grandmother was a cabaret performer, and they were secretly married under the noses of the Germans.”

Alec looked up. “And this makes a difference how?”

“Cece Cassidy is attached to the project. It’s sure to be a contender for best writer—”

“Like the screenwriter’s the problem.”

“Is it about money?” she probed. “They’d absolutely compensate you for the inconvenience. And they’d leave everything exactly as they found it. You wouldn’t—”

“It’s about my home not being a movie set.”

“They wouldn’t need your entire home.” Charlotte searched her brain for more ammunition. “You’d be able to stay in residence. Jack sent me a script breakdown. They’d need the kitchen, the great room, one of the libraries and a couple of bedrooms. Oh, and the grounds of course. They’d need the grounds. Maybe your back deck for one scene.”

“And that’s *all*?” Alec drawled, his sarcastic tone playing havoc with her confidence.

“I’m fairly sure that’s all.” She kept her voice even.

“They wouldn’t need access to my private study? Or my bathroom?” he continued, voice going up. “Or maybe they’d like to take a peek inside—”

“You could designate some areas off-limits,” she rushed in. “And you could even stay at one of your other houses during filming.”

His eyes darkened, and he brandished the spatula like a weapon. “And give a pack of Hollywood hooligans free rein over my home?”

“It’s not like they’re some biker gang.” Sure, some stars had a reputation for bad behavior, but the Hudson Pictures producers were very professional. And Raine was a friend. Charlotte wouldn’t fill her house with a bunch of wild partiers.

“I never said they were.”

“Then what is it?”

“Do you have *any* idea how hard I have to fight for privacy?”

“Well, maybe if you didn’t—” She stopped herself.

“Yes?” he prompted, cocking his dark head to one side.

“Nothing.” She shook her head. This was turning into enough of a disaster without her insulting him.

“I must insist,” he said, seeming to grow even taller.

“We could cover any privacy concerns in the contract.” She attempted to distract him. “You’d really have nothing to worry —”

“I’ll decide what I worry about. Now what were you about to say?”

She gazed into his probing eyes. “I forgot.”

He waited.

Her brain scrambled, but she couldn’t for the life of her come up with a good lie.

Oh, hell. She might as well go for it. The battle was all but over, anyway. “Maybe if you didn’t make yourself such an attractive target for the paparazzi.”

He paused. “You’re suggesting it’s *my* fault?”

“You don’t have to escort supermodels to every A-list party in Europe.”

His brown eyes darkened to ebony. “You think a plain Jane on my arm would stop the gossip? You think a woman who didn’t fit their mold would do *anything* but guarantee me the front page?”

Charlotte quickly realized he had a point. Being seen with anybody out of type would cause even more speculation. But he’d missed her point entirely. “You could skip the parties.”

"I don't attend that many parties."

Charlotte scoffed out a laugh of disbelief.

He frowned at her. "How many did *you* attend last month? Last week? Lost count?"

In fact, she had. "That's different," she pointed out primly. "I was on business."

He gave the onions another stir and reduced the heat. "What is it you think I do at parties?"

He washed his hands while she thought about that. Then he retrieved a mesh bag of ripe tomatoes.

She tried to figure out if it was a trick question. "Dance with supermodels?" She stated the obvious.

"I make business contacts."

"With supermodels?"

He sliced through a tomato. "Would you rather I went stag? Danced with other men's dates?"

Charlotte wriggled forward on the high seat. "You're trying to tell me you *suffer* the attentions of supermodels in order to make business contacts?"

"I'm trying to tell you I like my privacy, and you shouldn't make assumptions about other people's lifestyles."

"Alec, you hand out hotel room keys on the dance floor." She knew from firsthand experience. He'd tried it with her.

His knife stilled.

She sat back, not even attempting to mask her satisfaction. "You are so busted."

“Really?” He resumed slicing. “Well, you are *so* not making a movie in my château.”

Chapter Two

Round one had gone to Alec, and Charlotte had no choice but to back off and regroup as they moved to the veranda for dinner. The sizzling *pissaladière* was now on a round glass table between them.

Flickering light from the garden torches highlighted the planes and angles of his face, while the freshening breeze picked up the scents of lavender and thyme. He seemed relaxed enough. While the *pissaladière* had baked, their conversation had ranged from vacation spots to impressionist painters to the monetary policy of the European Union.

But now, it was time for round two.

“You could hide anything personal,” she opened conversationally, transferring a slice of the delicate tomato pie to her plate. “You could stay out of sight. I doubt any of the crew would even know it was your *château*.”

“Please,” he drawled, lifting the silver serving spoon from her hand. “There’s a big sign over the gate that says *Château Montcalm*.”

“Take it down.”

“My name is etched into five-hundred-year-old stone.”

Right. “Surely you’re not the only *Montcalm* in Provence.”

“I’m the only one who makes the front page.” He settled on two slices of the pie.

"I think you're overestimating your fame."

"I think you're overestimating your powers of persuasion."

"More wine?" she asked, topping off his glass while treating him to the brilliant smile her grandfather's image consultant had insisted she learn for photographs.

He watched the burgundy liquid rise in his crystal goblet. "It won't work, Charlotte."

She finished topping his glass. "What won't work?"

"I was weaned on *Maison Inoui*."

She feigned innocence. "You think I'm trying to get you drunk?"

"I think you're entirely too fixated on my château." He moved the bottle to one side so that his view of her was unobstructed. "What gives? There are plenty of other châteaux."

She tried to stay businesslike. But his mocha eyes glowed under the soft torchlight, making it look like he somehow cared.

"It's perfect for the story," she told him honestly, gazing around the estate. "The family thinks—"

"You're not even involved in the business."

Charlotte squared her shoulders. "I am a Hudson." She found herself battling a stupid but familiar sense of loneliness. Her Cassettes grandparents had given her a wonderful life, a dream life. If her heart had ached for her brother, Jack, in the dead of night, it was only because she'd been so young when they were separated.

"Charlotte?"

She blinked at Alec.

“There are many châteaux in Provence.”

“He...*they* want this one.”

“He?”

“The producers.” She was doing this for the good of the film, not specifically for Jack.

“Something going on between you and the producers?”

“No.”

Alec gazed at her in silence. The wind kicked up a notch, and the stems of lavender rustled below them in the country garden.

“What?” she finally asked, battling an urge to squirm.

He lifted his wineglass. “You want it too bad.”

She huffed out a breath. “I don’t see why this has to be such a big thing. What do you want? What can we do? How can we persuade you to give up your precious privacy for six weeks?”

He sipped the wine, watching her intently. Then he set down the glass, running his thumb along the length of the stem.

“There is one thing I want.” His molten eyes told her exactly what that one thing was.

“I am not sleeping with you to get a film location.”

Alec tipped back his head and laughed.

Charlotte squirmed. Had she completely misread his signals? Made a colossal fool of herself?

No. She couldn’t have been that far wrong. The man had once tried to give her his hotel room key.

“I’m not asking to sleep with you, Charlotte.”

She took an unladylike swig of her own wine, struggling desperately not to blush in humiliation. “Well. Good. That’s good.”

He grinned. “Although, I definitely wouldn’t say no if you—”
“Shut up.”

He clamped his jaw.

She waited as long as she could stand.

“Fine. What is it—”

“Charlotte!” came Raine’s delighted voice. She rushed through an open set of French doors, dropping her purse and a briefcase on a lounge. “Why didn’t you *tell* me you were coming?”

She wore a slim, tailored black dress and charcoal stockings, and her high-heeled shoes clattered on the stone deck. Her dark hair was cut in a chic bob, and her bright red mouth was sliced in a smile of delight.

“The trip came up suddenly,” said Charlotte, coming to her feet, as did Alec beside her. “But I thought you were away until Tuesday.” She cursed her stupidity at rushing the conversation with Alec. If only she’d waited a few hours!

“I talked to Henri. He told me you were here.” There was a clear admonishment in the tone.

But then they embraced in a tight hug, Raine laughing with delight in Charlotte’s ear.

When they finally separated, Alec broke in. “*Bonsoir, ma soeur.*”

Raine glanced over, feigning surprise. “Alec? I didn’t see you there.”

He shook his head and held out his arms.

She walked into a warm hug and an affectionate kiss for each cheek.

Watching them, regret twitched reflexively inside Charlotte. She glanced away, wishing she could have such an easy relationship with Jack.

“So,” said Raine as she settled into the third chair. “What are we eating?” She sniffed at the *pissaladière*. Then she lifted the wine bottle, brows arching at the label. “*Très bon.*”

“I know how to be a good host, even if you don’t,” said Alec.

“I didn’t even know she was coming.” Raine tipped the bottle up, and up. “It’s empty.”

Alec reached behind him, exchanging it for a full one while Raine helped herself to a slice of the pie.

“What are we talking about?” she asked, glancing from one to the other.

Alec deftly drilled into the wine cork. “Charlotte wants to use the château as a movie set.”

Charlotte cringed at the bald statement.

But Raine looked intrigued. “Really?”

Charlotte nodded.

“That’s *fantastic.*”

“I didn’t say yes,” Alec warned.

“Why on earth not?” asked Raine.

He popped the cork. "Because you interrupted us."

"But you were about to," she prompted.

"I was about to suggest a compromise."

Charlotte reminded herself it wasn't sex. Though there was still a nervous churning in her stomach. What would Alec want? More important, what was she willing to give?

Not sex. No. Of course not. Still...

He continued speaking, and she forced herself to pay attention to the words. "I was going to say yes—"

Raine clapped her hands together in delight.

"Provided," Alec put in firmly, and Charlotte listened closely. "Provided we have an understanding that the third floor is off-limits. As is the south gallery."

"Done," Charlotte quickly answered, sticking out her hand to shake.

"Nobody goes in the rose garden." He didn't shake her hand.

She nodded vigorously. Easy. Piece of cake. According to Jack, landowners always had a list of stipulations.

"Or any of the outbuildings. Shooting stops by ten every night. My staff are *not* part of the production crew. And you stay in residence to make sure it goes smoothly."

"Abso—" Charlotte snapped her jaw shut, dropping her hand to the table. "*What?*"

"I don't want any extra work for my staff," he repeated.

"Not *that* part."

"It's perfect," Raine sang, grasping Charlotte's forearm in a

friendly squeeze. “We can hang out, visit. It’ll be like we’re back in college.”

“I can’t move in,” Charlotte protested. “I have a job back in Monte Allegro. My grandfather needs me. There’s a summit in Athens on the twenty-fifth.”

Alec pinned her with a look. “So you’re willing to inconvenience *me*, but not yourself?”

“I’m not...” She gazed into his mocking eyes.

He raised a brow.

Instinct told her to grab the yes before he could change his mind. But here? With Alec? For weeks on end?

She thought back to the hotel room key, and to the way her stomach had quivered in daring anticipation for the split second when she’d thought about accepting it. She was older now, wiser, and she knew full well the importance of leading a perfectly circumspect life—one that didn’t include a stint on the front page of the tabloids.

But the quiver was still there. And she knew that he knew. She could fight it all she wanted, intellectualize it all she wanted, but the bald truth was that she was attracted to the man. She and several thousand other women fantasized about a night in Alec Montcalm’s bed. And Alec would take advantage of that in any way he could.

But then she pictured Jack’s joy, her pride when she told him she’d succeeded. She thought about her grandmother and the whole Hudson clan. For once, she’d be part of the team.

"I'll stay," she told Alec.

Raine squealed in delight.

Alec reached for his wineglass, raising it in a mock toast while his dark, molten eyes told her the chase was on.

"They will *hound* you," said Kiefer, as he geared his mountain bike down for the incline.

"She's a friend of Raine's," Alec defended, following suit, putting more power to his pedals.

They were on a dirt road that wound along the ridgeline above the Montcalm estate. The tires bumped beneath Alec, and sweat began to form at his hairline as the sun cleared the eastern horizon, lighting up the river and the patchwork of fields and woods below.

"So?" Kiefer demanded. "It's a Hollywood movie. There'll be press all over it. You know how the Japanese are going to react —"

"It's under control," Alec cut in, even though the venture wasn't anywhere near under control. He was attracted to Charlotte, and he'd let that attraction overrule his logic. Filming a movie in his living room? Kiefer, his vice president, was right to be ticked off. They'd met with a high-priced image consultant only last week, and Alec had agreed to try to be more circumspect in his personal life.

"Kana Hanako wants a business partner, not a playboy."

"It's a business deal," said Alec, taking a swig from his water bottle, refusing to acknowledge Kiefer's point. "They're renting

the château.”

“Who’s the star?”

“Ridley Sinclair.”

Kiefer snorted. “You know what I mean.”

“Isabella Hudson. I’ve never even met her.”

Kiefer gaped at him. “*The* Isabella Hudson?”

Like there would be another. “She is a member of the family.”

“You’re going to have Isabella Hudson staying at the Château Montcalm. Good God, Alec, why not just go ahead and murder someone? Even the Japanese tabloids will pick up you and Isabella Hudson.”

“I’m not going near Isabella Hudson. There’ll be no pictures, nothing whatsoever for them to report.”

But Kiefer wasn’t listening. He was inside his own head, obviously dreaming up one dire scenario after another. “You’re going to have to move out.”

“No,” said Alec.

“Go stay in Rome. Better still, go to Tokyo and work with Akiko on the prototype.”

“They don’t need me in the bike lab.” If the one he was riding was anything to go on, R & D had made great strides with the frame alloy.

“Well, I need you out of Provence.”

They crested the hill, and Alec grabbed a higher gear, putting his frustration into muscle power that produced speed. Let a film crew invade his house yet *miss* his chance with Charlotte? No

way.

"I am staying in my home," he told Kiefer, bending his head into the wind.

"We need a mitigation strategy," Kiefer called, falling slightly behind.

"Mitigate this!" Alec sent back a rude hand gesture.

"Don't let the press catch you doing that." Kiefer caught up. "Could you maybe get married?" he huffed.

Alec rolled his eyes. He'd yet to meet a woman who wasn't after his money or his status—usually both.

"At least find a girlfriend? Not forever, just while Isabella is there. Somebody who's a nobody, a plain Jane who won't get you into any trouble."

Alec didn't want a plain Jane nobody. And he had zero interest in Isabella Hudson. He wanted Charlotte.

And then he realized he'd missed his big chance. "Damn," he spat out.

"What?" Kiefer glanced from side to side.

He could have made that a condition of the movie location deal. What was he thinking? Charlotte could have played his girlfriend for a couple of months.

"What?" Kiefer repeated.

But it was too late now. She didn't strike him as the kind of person who would renegotiate.

"I almost had a girl we could bribe," Alec admitted.

"Who?"

Alec shook his head. "We missed the boat on that one."

"Who is she?"

"Nobody."

"Perfect," said Kiefer with enthusiasm.

"I lost my leverage." Alec slowed his bike, taking a right-hand turn into the pullout beside Crystal Lake.

"Well, what was your leverage?" Kiefer's voice was eager.

"Oh, no, you don't." Alec braked to a halt and put his feet down, taking in the view of the lake while they took a breather.

"Oh, no, I don't what?"

"She's smart, tough and unreasonable."

"At least give me a shot." Kiefer squirted a stream of water into his open mouth.

"There's no real problem," said Alec. "The Kana Hanako brass aren't going to give up my Tour de France connection, no matter what the tabloids write."

"Yeah, but they can make my life hell in the meantime. Do you know how much time I waste being yelled at by Takahiro's translator?"

"Do you know how much I pay you to get yelled at by Takahiro's translator?"

"Not nearly enough," Kiefer grumbled. Then he recapped his water bottle and ran spread fingers through his short hair. "Who were you talking about?"

Alec shook his head.

"I swear I won't even talk to her."

Alec paused. "Charlotte Hudson. She's the friend of Raine's."

"Ah." Kiefer instantly caught on. "You could have bribed her with access to the château."

Alec nodded.

"She's not Isabella's sister or something?"

"Maybe a cousin. I'm not sure. Raine says Charlotte grew up with her maternal grandparents, mostly in Europe. Her grandfather's the U.S. ambassador to Monte Allegro. She works for him."

"Sounds tame enough," Kiefer mused.

"The plan's off the table. I had a hard enough time getting her to stay at the château for the shoot."

Kiefer came alert. "She's staying at the château?"

"Don't touch it." Alec's tone was flat.

"I'm just sayin'—"

"You are *not* leaking her to the press."

"Well, somebody's going to 'leak' something. Better it's her than Isabella."

"In whose opinion?"

"Mine."

"You don't count. You're the hired help." Alec snapped one foot back onto the pedal and pushed off.

Kiefer quickly followed suit. "Will you at least ask her?"

"I will not."

"If she says no, she says no. But she might—"

"She'll never agree."

“How do you know?”

Alec pulled onto the rough road for the return trip. “It’s like this,” he explained with exaggerated patience. “You’re executive assistant to an ambassador. You like your job. In fact, the ambassador is your own grandfather. A man with a public reputation like mine asks you to pretend to date him in order to protect his reputation. You say...what, exactly?”

“Point taken,” Kiefer admitted.

They rode in silence to the crest of the hill, where Alec’s thoughts turned to the croissants his cook had been putting in the oven when they left the château.

“Still,” Kiefer continued, as their speed picked up and the morning air whipped past, “the worst she can do is say no.”

“No, no, no,” Charlotte emphasized into the cordless telephone. “You *can’t* put Syria next to Bulgaria. Put them next to Canada, or the Swiss—”

The telephone handset was summarily tugged out of Charlotte’s hand.

“Hey!” She twisted her head to Raine, who was lying back in the next deck lounge.

“Charlotte has to go now, Emily,” Raine said into the handset. “She’s in the middle of a pedicure.”

“You can’t do that,” Charlotte protested.

But Raine calmly hit the off button.

“You need to hold still,” warned the esthetician working on Charlotte’s toes. “Or you’ll have purple passion streaked halfway

to your ankle.”

“You listen to her.” Raine gestured with the phone.

“You hung up on Emily.”

“You’ve been on the phone with her for half an hour.”

“It’s the summit dinner. She was about to put Syria next to Bulgaria.”

“Will it cause a war?”

“Maybe,” said Charlotte, glancing down at her toes. The purple passion sparkled in the sunshine. She’d borrowed a sea-blue two-piece bathing suit from Raine, and they were lounging on thickly padded lounge chairs next to the Montcalm pool. An emerald lawn stretched out in front of them, while lush cypress trees and flowering shrubs screened them from the house, offering dappled shade.

“They’re cultural attachés,” Raine pointed out. “I doubt they have the launch codes.”

“Maybe not. But I can’t just walk away from my responsibilities on a moment’s notice.” Charlotte had spoken with her grandfather this morning, and he’d been more than gracious in giving her the time off, telling her not to worry. But there were about a thousand details she had to make sure were passed on to other staff members.

“I did,” said Raine. “When I heard you were here, I walked right off the shoot in Malta and onto the corporate jet.”

“Is that a problem?” Charlotte quickly asked.

“I guess we’ll find out when the October issue hits the stands,

won't we?"

"No, seriously—"

"The magazine will survive, and so will the ambassador. You need to relax."

"You should not move for at least half an hour," Charlotte's esthetician advised, admiring Charlotte's toes as she rose from her chair.

"Thank you," said Charlotte, raising her newly polished fingernails and fluttering them to compare to her matching toes.

Raine's esthetician finished a final topcoat, and the two women began to pack their things.

Charlotte leaned over to whisper to Raine. "Do we tip or something?"

"All taken care of," Raine whispered back. "Shall I ring for strawberries and champagne?"

"It's still morning."

"You're on vacation. And you're in Provence." Raine grinned and hit a speed-dial button on the phone.

"At this rate, I may never leave," Charlotte muttered, sighing and relaxing back into the soft lounge.

While Raine talked to the kitchen, Charlotte closed her eyes, letting the soft breeze caress her face and listening to the gentle hum of the cicadas fill in the background.

"Quick!" Raine's elbow jolted Charlotte back to reality. "Take a look."

Charlotte blinked against the bright sunshine, scanning the

lawn beyond the pool and coming to two male figures.

Alec. And he was dressed in bicycle shorts and a spandex shirt that clung to every sculpted muscle.

“Isn’t he the hottest thing you’ve ever seen?” asked Raine.

He was, but it seemed an odd thing for Raine to notice. “Alec?”

“*Nooo.*” Raine grimaced. “Kiefer. The guy with him.”

“Oh.” Charlotte hadn’t paid the least bit of attention to the slightly shorter man with short, sandy-blond hair striding down the brick pathway next to Alec.

“He’s our vice president,” Raine elaborated. “The girls in the office go ga-ga over him.”

“Sounds like you do, too.” Charlotte chuckled, watching the man named Kiefer saunter closer. He was probably six foot two. Though a slighter build than Alec, he was well muscled with an angular face, square jaw and an easy, self-confident stride.

“Don’t you dare say a word,” Raine warned.

“You don’t want to date an employee?” Charlotte asked, her gaze moving involuntarily to Alec. Now *that* was a gorgeous man. Everything about him moved in perfect symmetry.

“I don’t want him to think I’m one of his groupies,” Raine corrected.

“It’s that bad?”

“Just look at him,” Raine scoffed.

Charlotte glanced back for a split second. Sure, he was attractive enough. But she wasn’t sensing the animal magnetism

she saw in Alec. If the girls in the office were going to go ga-ga, she would have thought Alec would be their target.

The two women halted their conversation as the men came within earshot. They stopped in front of the two loungers. Kiefer's gaze swept Charlotte without sparing a single glance for Raine.

"*This* is your plain Jane?" Kiefer asked Alec, astonishment clear in his tone.

Charlotte shot Alec an exaggerated expression of offense. "I'm your *what*?"

Alec's jaw tightened. "Smooth, Kiefer." He drew a breath. "Charlotte, this is my vice president, Kiefer Knight. He's just come up with the most ridiculous idea in the world."

Chapter Three

Kiefer pulled a deck chair up next to Charlotte's lounge, angling away from Raine. She could feel Alec's gaze on her honey-brown skin. Maybe a bikini hadn't been such a good idea after all. His attention was raising goose bumps, and she couldn't help imagining his fingers trailing over her stomach, down the length of her legs...

"I'm concerned about Alec's reputation," Kiefer began in a gentle, cajoling voice.

Charlotte forced herself to concentrate on Kiefer's words.

"I understand Isabella Hudson is starring in your movie."

"My family's movie," Charlotte corrected. All she'd done was secure the location. Well, and she was going to babysit the shoot. But that was only because Alec was being obstinate. She really had no role here except pandering to his need for power and control.

"If they're together here, rumors about Alec and Isabella are bound to circulate."

Her gaze shifted to Alec, who still stood indolently at the foot of her lounge, taking in the color of her toenails.

"You're involved with Bella?" she asked him. For some reason, the idea put a cramp in her belly.

"You're botching this," Alec growled at Kiefer.

Kiefer held up his hands in surrender. "Be my guest."

“Kiefer wants you to pretend to be my girlfriend to forestall any gossip about me and Isabella.”

Charlotte tried to sort out his words. “You’re dating Bella?” Why hadn’t Isabella asked for the use of the château? Why had Jack sent Charlotte? And what was Alec doing flirting with *her*?

“I am *not* dating Isabella,” he huffed in exasperation.

“But she’s high profile,” Kiefer put in. “And beautiful. And the press will invent their own headlines.”

Charlotte got the picture. They wanted to throw her to the wolves to save Alec’s reputation. Like there was any hope for Alec’s reputation.

“Is this a joke?” she asked.

“Sadly,” said Alec, “Kiefer is completely serious.”

“He’s been gracious enough to let you use the château,” Kiefer put in.

“Here’s a thought,” suggested Charlotte, an edge to her tone. “Alec can keep his hands off Isabella, and then there’ll be no reason for a ruse with ‘Plain Jane.’”

“I am not going to have my hands *on* Isabella,” Alec practically shouted.

Charlotte barely glanced at him then turned to Kiefer. “Problem solved.”

“The tabloids don’t rely on the truth,” said Kiefer.

“Apparently,” Charlotte shot back, “neither do you.”

“Has anyone thought about Charlotte’s reputation?” asked Raine.

“Charlotte has,” said Charlotte.

“He could have made it a condition of the contract,” Kiefer pointed out.

“He didn’t,” Alec said flatly.

Charlotte turned to Alec once more. “Do *you* think it’s a good idea?” Not that she’d go along with it in any event. And thank goodness Alec hadn’t asked for it before they closed the deal.

“I think it’s an idea,” he said, obviously choosing his words carefully. “Good? Not sure. But it might deflect speculation.”

“Since when have you cared about speculation on your love life?”

Kiefer jumped in again. “Since the president of Kana Hanako, our Japanese partner, expressed concern.”

“Something I should know about?” asked Raine, her alert, businesslike tone at odds with her bikini-clad pose on the lounge.

Kiefer’s attention went to her for the briefest of seconds, but then he blinked and focused on the small pool house behind her. “It’s not that serious.”

“Then why are we having this conversation? Charlotte’s not going to trash her reputation by being seen with Alec—”

“Hello?” Alec tossed in.

Raine waved a dismissive hand. “You made your bed a long time ago, *mon frère*.”

“Just don’t make a bed with Isabella,” Charlotte advised.

“I have *no interest* in Isabella.” His eyes darkened to walnut,

pinning Charlotte in place. “Can I talk to you in private?”

Not when he looked like that. Not when the predatory set of his jaw made her skin tingle and her spine turn to jelly. “I’m letting my toenails dry.”

Both Raine and Kiefer stilled, while Alec stared at her in silence. Clearly, people didn’t normally turn down Alec’s requests.

“Later, then,” he finally said with a tense nod, turning on his heel.

Later proved hard to come by for Alec. Raine and Charlotte took a shopping trip into Toulouse. The location manager, set designer and second-unit director all arrived, followed quickly by carpenters, set dressers and lighting technicians.

The main floor of Alec’s house quickly turned into a construction zone. There was more than one moment when he contemplated moving out for the duration. But then he’d catch a glimpse of Charlotte.

The more he saw of her, the more determined he was to get to know her better—much, much better.

He finally caught her alone, leaning on the rail of the third-floor hallway, staring down to the rotunda foyer where the grips were setting tracks for a camera.

“*Bonjour*,” he opened, resting his forearms on the polished wood, matching her pose.

She glanced over at him, then her gaze darted worriedly from the staircase to the front door and to either side of them.

"No photographers," he assured her.

"I don't trust Kiefer," she responded.

"My apologies," Alec offered. "I shouldn't have let him make that request."

"That I fake being your girlfriend?" she clarified.

Alec nodded. Though his only true regret was that she'd said no. It would have given him a perfect excuse to spend time with her. It was also regrettable that the experience had left her suspicious and jumpy. "I promise he won't jump out of the bushes with a camera."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

A piece of equipment crashed in the foyer below. The noise was followed by an exchange of shouts.

"How do I know you won't destroy my home?" Alec countered. "I guess we're both taking a leap of faith."

She turned her head to gaze at him, and he was struck once again by her beauty. Her crystal-blue eyes sparkled in the sunshine that streamed through the stained-glass dome ceiling. Her lips were deep red as they curved up in a wry smile. And her cheeks were rosy highlights to her creamy skin.

"You can rebuild the château," she told him.

"That's three-hundred-year-old limestone on the floor."

Her glance was drawn downward. "So, it must be pretty much indestructible," she offered in a perky voice.

Alec couldn't help but chuckle. "I'm not going to harm your reputation," he promised.

She gave a small nod. "Thank you."

But then a camera flash went off below, and Alec quickly grasped her hand, tugging her through the open door behind them and swiftly closing it against the world.

"Reference shots for the crew back home," she explained, a grin growing on her face. "But thanks for the effort."

"I didn't want to break my word within the first two minutes."

Their hands were still joined as they stood next to the arched, oak-plank door of the third-floor library. Shelves were lined with leather volumes and heavy, green-velvet drapes were pulled aside with gold cording, letting a beam of morning sunshine stream through paned windows. The room was slightly dusky, cool, quiet and still.

Her small hand was soft under his, the skin of her palm warm, hinting at the texture of other regions of her body. He inhaled the clean floral scent of her shampoo. It reminded him of the lavender plants blowing softly in his country garden.

Everything about Charlotte was sweet and fresh, from her white flash of a smile, to the breezy, shoulderlength style of her blond hair. Her figure was lithe and streamlined. He'd watched her play tennis with Raine yesterday, and he knew she was in fabulous shape.

His thoughts trailed back to the way she'd looked by the pool. The aqua bikini had revealed a light, glowing tan. Her belly was flat, with the sexiest navel he'd ever seen. Her shoulders were kissable, and the curve of her breasts had invaded his dreams

every night since.

“Alec?” Her voice was soft, in keeping with the atmosphere of the room.

He tugged gently on her hand, drawing her toward him. His gaze fixed on her full lips. “Tell me you haven’t been curious,” he whispered.

“I—” But then she stopped, her gaze fixed on his lips, apparently unable to lie but unwilling to be honest.

He smiled. “Me, too.”

“We can’t do this,” she warned.

“We’re not *doing* anything.”

“Oh, yes, we are.”

He tugged her closer still, so that she brushed up against him. “At the moment, we’re merely talking.”

“We’re talking about kissing.”

“Nothing wrong with kissing.”

“You got a camera in your pocket?”

“That’s not a camera.”

She scrunched her eyes shut. “I can’t believe you said that.”

“I can’t believe it shocked you.” He chuckled low. “You’re blushing.” For some reason, he found her reaction completely endearing.

“I’m embarrassed because the joke was so bad.”

“You’re embarrassed because you’re attracted to me and, for some reason, you think you should fight it.”

“Of course I should fight it.”

“Why?”

“You’re a playboy and a philanderer.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“You’ll destroy my reputation.”

“By kissing you in private? I’m flattered you think I have that kind of power.” He drew a breath and held her with a frank gaze. “Charlotte, kiss me, don’t kiss me. But at least be honest. Your reputation is in absolutely no danger at the moment.”

Her shoulders dropped. “You’re right,” she admitted.

But she didn’t make a move.

It was more than tempting to wrap his arms around her, dip his head and take her lips to his. But he held back. She was still jumpy, and the last thing he wanted to do was scare her off.

He wanted this kiss. Of course, he wanted more than just a kiss, but at least a kiss was heading in the right direction.

To his surprise, she placed a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s mere curiosity,” she warned.

A half smile crept out. “But of course.”

She pulled up on her toes. “I might not even like it.”

“You might not,” he agreed, holding himself still by sheer force of will.

This time, it was Charlotte who smiled. “Do many women not like kissing you?”

“I can’t recall any specific complaints. But I’ve sure never had one give it this much thought beforehand.”

“I’m a planner.”

“Evidently.”

They both sobered, staring at each other in silence.

“Oh, man.” Charlotte moaned a surrender, closing her eyes and stretching up toward him.

It was all the invitation Alec needed.

He immediately leaned in, parting his lips, pressing them to her heated mouth.

An explosion went off at the base of his brain, obliterating everything but the taste, scent and feel of Charlotte. He deepened the kiss, flattening her against the oak door, pressing his body flush against hers.

His hands cupped her face, caressing her skin while holding her in place as his tongue plundered shamelessly. She moaned, opened her mouth wider, and her arms wrapped around his waist. He pushed his thigh between her legs, lifting, bunching her short skirt, the fabric of his slacks meeting the satin of her panties.

His body flushed hot, tense, rigid with desire, and a freight train roared in his ears and the world contracted to the two of them.

“Charlotte?” came a faraway voice.

Raine.

Charlotte tensed, and Alec groaned, reluctantly taking his mouth from hers. He eased back, knowing they might have only seconds before Raine tried the door.

“Charlotte?” Raine repeated.

“Let go,” Charlotte whispered.

Alec took a step back, rasping deep breaths, trying vainly to put his raging hormones back under control.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” Charlotte shot back, smoothing her pleated, navy skirt and straightening the white, sleeveless blouse.

He reached out to fix her mussed hair, and she drew in a sharp breath. There was nothing he could do about the just-kissed puffiness of her mouth—except try like hell not to get turned on by it.

The doorknob rattled, and Charlotte jumped back. “Why are we in here?” she frantically whispered.

Alec drew open the door. “Raine?” He gazed at the quizzical expression on his sister’s face. “I’m glad it’s you,” he continued. “There was a photographer downstairs, and Charlotte got a little freaked out.” He gave Charlotte a teasing wink. “I told her there was nothing to worry about. Did you see anyone skulking around with a camera?”

Rained glanced at Charlotte, then back to Alec. “No.”

“Good,” he said heartily. “I’ll be in my office. Kiefer should be here in an hour or so. If you see him, could you have Henri send him straight up?”

With Raine suitably distracted by erroneous details, and having given Charlotte at least a couple of minutes to recover, Alec exited the room.

Then, three steps down the hallway, he put a hand against the wall to steady himself. It was a kiss, he reminded himself,

a simple kiss.

Except that it hadn't been simple. It had blown his expectations right out of the water. If he'd been attracted to Charlotte before, he was nearly wild for her now. The chemistry between them was nothing short of mindblowing, and he wasn't going to be able to focus on Kana Hanako or anything else until he investigated it further.

"I don't blame you for being paranoid," said Raine, as Alec left the library.

"Hmm?" Charlotte stalled, not yet capable of producing actual words. Her skin was tingling, her heart was thumping and her knees felt as if they'd been turned to gelatin.

"Kiefer can be devious."

"Right." Charlotte nodded, telling herself to snap out of it. The kiss had been good—well, great, actually. But she'd expected it to be great. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have bothered kissing Alec, would she? What woman would embark on a kiss she thought would be boring?

"One picture of you and Alec, doing something as innocent as having a conversation, and Kiefer gets his nefarious wish. You want me to talk to him?" Raine paused. "Charlotte?"

"What?"

"You want me to talk to Kiefer? Or maybe you should steer clear of Alec. Just to be on the safe side."

Charlotte drew a deep breath and gave herself a mental shake. "Yeah. Good idea." Steering clear of Alec was better than the

alternative—hauling him into the nearest bed and kissing him until her brain exploded.

“Mademoiselle Charlotte?” came a new voice from the hallway. Henri.

Raine turned to meet him. “*Oui*, Henri?”

“A Jack Hudson has arrived.”

“Jack’s here?” The words jumped from Charlotte as a familiar little knot grew in her stomach. She loved her big brother. But their relationship was complicated.

She couldn’t help remembering Alec and Raine’s greeting embrace. Charlotte hadn’t hugged Jack in more than twenty years—not since she’d been torn from his arms in the airport at four years old, after her mother died, after her own father gave her away.

The next time they’d seen each other, he’d felt like a stranger. She wasn’t sure how to act, and neither was he.

He didn’t seem like the strong, protective big brother she’d fantasized about at night. Their visits grew further apart, and the awkwardness became acute in their teenage years. And now, as adults, neither seemed to know how to break the barrier.

Or maybe Jack didn’t want to break the barrier. He was a grown man with his own life. Why would he need a little sister hanging all over him?

She squared her shoulders and headed to the hallway. Once she got through the initial hello, it was always easier.

Raine fell into step beside her. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You look a little pale.”

Better pale with anxiety than flushed with sexual desire, Charlotte supposed.

“Everything’s moving smoothly,” Raine offered. She knew of Charlotte’s desire to impress the Hudson side of the family. “Even Lars Hinckleman is happy today.”

Charlotte couldn’t help but smile at the mention of the temperamental second-unit director. Raine was right. Things were going—

“I said *dramatic*, not *appalling*!” Lars shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

“Spoke too soon,” Raine muttered, as Charlotte quickened her steps on the curved, wrought-iron-railed staircase.

The stocky man was waving his arms, an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth, his dark hair curling over his forehead.

“It’s authentic Stix, Baer & Fuller,” the costume assistant dared, causing the entire room to hush and collectively suck in a breath.

Even Charlotte missed a step. Lars had been at the château for only three days, but she’d quickly learned the near-military command-control structure of the film set.

Lars leaned into the hapless young woman, his dark, round eyes narrowing. “Lillian Hudson will *not* wear a bird’s nest on her head.”

“She was Lillian Colbert then.”

The man's face turned purple.

The costume designer quickly stepped in. "We'll come up with other options, of course." She latched on to the younger woman's arm and deftly drew her away.

"Fire that thing," Lars huffed to an assistant.

The assistant made a note on a clipboard and said something into his walkie-talkie. Charlotte fervently hoped the command was all bluster. Then she spotted Jack.

He was talking to the director of photography, ignoring the commotion on set, while everyone around him continued with set preparation.

"That's your brother?" asked Raine.

Charlotte nodded, putting one foot in front of the other as she made her way across the foyer.

"You look alike."

Charlotte disagreed. Jack was much darker. He was dignified, where she was decidedly cute. "No, we don't."

"It's your nose, and the eyes," said Raine. "That vivid blue. Gorgeous."

Charlotte gazed at Jack as they drew near. Did they look alike? Did people notice? Could there be other things they had in common? Thoughts, opinions, emotions?

"Hello, Charlotte." He greeted her with a broad smile.

"Good morning, Jack." As always, she felt like there was something she should do. A hug? A kiss? A handshake?

He glanced around the huge rotunda. "Well done," he told her,

sounding sincere.

At least she had that. "This is Raine Montcalm," she introduced.

The director of photography was drawn into another conversation and turned away.

Jack reached out to shake Raine's hand. "On behalf of the family, allow me to express our gratitude for opening up your home."

A brief pain shot through Charlotte's chest. Clearly, Jack didn't see her as a representative of the Hudsons. She'd already thanked the Montcalms, but that obviously wasn't good enough.

"Alec Montcalm." Alec's deep voice startled Charlotte.

He moved up beside her and shook Jack's hand.

"Jack Hudson." Jack introduced himself before she could get her bearings. "My grandmother sends her thanks."

Alec's fingertips touched ever so lightly on the small of Charlotte's back. "Your sister made a convincing argument."

Jack smiled down at Charlotte. "We were hoping her connection to Raine would help."

Alec's hand tensed almost imperceptibly. "Yes. Well, I hope you're happy with the results."

"We'll also need a couple of rental houses for the VIPs and stars," said Jack. "Any suggestions?"

"I can make a couple of calls."

"I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"No trouble," said Alec. "Charlotte?" He glanced down, his

palm warm on her back. “Maybe you could give me a hand?”

More time with Alec?

Her mind screamed no. While her body shouted yes. Then her reflexive nod broke the tie.

To her surprise, instead of taking her back to his office for privacy, he said goodbyes and ushered her out the front door.

“I thought we were making a few calls?” she said as Alec cut toward the garage. She scrambled to keep up in her heels. The sunshine was warm on her bare arms and legs, and the sweet smell of the estate’s flowers and herb gardens invaded her nostrils.

“I brought my cell,” said Alec.

“Where are we going?”

He hit the button on a small remote and one of the garage doors glided open, revealing a burnished copper Lamborghini convertible. The top was down, showing off a black and copper interior, a sexy console and low-slung leather bucket seats.

“Nice,” she acknowledged.

“Thanks.” He popped open the passenger door then offered a hand to steady her as she climbed in.

“Where are we going?” she repeated, even as her body all but sighed into the soft leather. It would be nice to get away from the chaos for a while, clear her head, remember there were other things in life besides the approval of the Hudsons.

In answer to her question, Alec grinned and gestured to the sky. “A day like this? In the south of France? In a Murciélago?

Who cares?"

He made a good point.

Charlotte shrugged both in agreement and capitulation. The seat surrounded her body like a glove. Alec leaned in, pulled out the seat belt and reached across to click it into the buckle. She couldn't resist inhaling his scent, fresh and clean like the region where he lived.

He shut the door, then rounded the hood to the driver's side, removing his jacket and rolling up the sleeves of his white dress shirt. Next, he untied his tie, slipping it off and setting it behind the seat.

Charlotte glanced around at the classy interior. She couldn't help a smile at the thought of zooming through the countryside in such a magnificent vehicle.

Henri magically appeared and retrieved the jacket. "You have everything you need, sir?"

Alec nodded, perching a pair of sunglasses on his nose.

"You ready?" he asked Charlotte.

"I don't have my purse," she remembered.

"Sir?" asked Henri.

"She won't need it," said Alec, turning the key. The powerful engine roared to life, rumbling the seat beneath her. He clicked the car into gear and pulled smoothly out of the garage. They passed semitrailers containing warehouses of filming equipment, one that was a wardrobe room, and another containing a full, industrial kitchen.

"I thought you might like to get away from the circus for a while," said Alec, picking up speed down the long, concrete driveway.

"That Lars makes me nervous."

"I don't know why people put up with him."

"I guess he's in charge for the moment." The second-unit filming was scheduled to take place before the stars and director arrived.

The car came to a smooth stop at the end of the driveway, and Alec turned it toward Castres.

"Being in charge is no excuse for being a jerk."

"Not an excuse," Charlotte agreed. "But it's a reason."

"There's never a reason to abuse power," said Alec, bringing up the revs and changing gears as the road straightened out.

Charlotte considered his profile for a moment.

He glanced over. "What?"

"You have power," she observed, wondering what he was like with his own employees, remembering how he'd insisted the film crew not cause them any additional work.

"At the moment." He winked, gearing down and pulling into the oncoming lane to pass a truck. "I also have speed."

The sports car stuck to the road like glue, accelerating effortlessly past the truck and another car in front.

Charlotte's hand automatically gripped the door handle.

"Nervous?" asked Alec.

"Not exactly." There was something about Alec that oozed

confidence behind the wheel. Well, actually, there was something about him that oozed confidence about *everything*. She trusted him not to push himself or the car past their limits.

“I won’t hurt you,” he assured her in a solemn tone.

She’d have to be blind not to catch the double entendre. “How can you be sure?”

“With power comes responsibility,” he said, easing back into the proper lane. “I was born to both.”

Did she dare trust him with her sexual attraction? And was that what this was about? Was he whisking her off to some discreet inn where they could spend the afternoon in bed exploring it?

Pretty bold of him not to ask her. She should tell him no. Just to thwart his arrogant self-confidence, she should tell him she wasn’t interested in a tryst.

He flipped on his signal and left the main road.

And maybe she would.

Soon.

In the meantime, she watched the businesses roll by on the tree-lined boulevard, keeping an eye out for possible hotels and inns. They passed one, then another, then a small bed-and-breakfast.

But, to her surprise, Alec pulled into the parking lot of a real-estate office.

She raised her brows. “Here?”

“My friend Renaldo,” said Alec. “He’ll let us know what’s up

for rent.”

“Oh.” Didn’t Charlotte feel like a fool. “A realestate office.”

A knowing light came into Alec’s eyes. “What were you expecting?”

“This,” she quickly responded with a nod.

He grinned, and she felt her face heat.

Chapter Four

Alec wanted to sleep with Charlotte—so much so that it was beginning to feel like an obsession. That kiss this morning told him they would all but combust together, and the confused looks she'd been giving him said she'd felt it, too. And now they were alone. They had several hours to spend together. And there were endless possible locations to make love in town. They had everything but a set of runway lights guiding them to paradise.

But something was holding him back. And he couldn't begin to imagine what it might be. Guys like him could talk women into bed without breaking a sweat. Half the time it was about his money, of course. But then half the time he didn't really care.

Maybe he was getting old. Or maybe he wanted to pretend it was different with Charlotte—that there was more to it than sex on his side and manipulation on hers.

Which didn't make sense. He barely knew her. She could be as susceptible to his millions as every other woman he'd met in this lifetime. Just because she was Raine's friend, and just because she was bright and witty, with an endearing dash of vulnerability, didn't make her any different from anyone else.

Still, instead of rushing her to the nearest hotel room, he found himself winding his way through Castres to the first of three houses available for rent.

The first one was an old, converted mill set next to the river

on a few acres of lawn.

“Gorgeous,” sang Charlotte, tipping her head back and turning in a circle as they entered a boxy, highceilinged main room. A polished wooden staircase was set against the stone wall and led up to the landing on the second story. The wood floors gleamed, and the furniture was big and comfortable.

“You think it might be too small?” asked Alec.

“It’s charming,” said Charlotte, passing beneath the staircase, past the stone fireplace to the arched doorway that led to a restored kitchen. Bright enamel pots hung from the ceiling, and a giant white sink dominated the counter below a window that looked out over the water. The cupboards were worn, and the floor tiles had definitely seen better days.

Alec tested the table for dust. “We’re talking about bigwigs and movie stars.”

Charlotte frowned at him. “I’d stay here,” she declared, wandering to the big sink.

He followed. “Yeah? Well, apparently, you’re not all that fussy.”

She turned suddenly, and they were nearly nose to nose, her back trapped against the sink.

“How would you know that?” she asked.

He held up his finger to show the dust, rubbing it off with his thumb.

She watched the motion, and he felt a flicker of warning heat build up inside him.

“Nothing a little elbow grease won’t fix,” she said.

“I’m guessing stars don’t do windows,” he countered, attempting to keep the mood light.

“Of course not. They have people who do it for them. But then, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

“Got a problem with my money?” Sarcasm wasn’t the female reaction he normally experienced.

She paused. “I like your car.”

“You have good taste.”

“You like to go fast?”

He digested the statement for a second, wondering which tack to take.

A flicker of unease crossed her face.

“I like to go fast,” he agreed softly, keeping his expression steady, allowing her decide whether to let it drop or pick it up and run with it.

They stared at each other in silence. The river rushed by below the window, and a songbird serenaded them from a nearby tree branch. The house itself was still and silent. It seemed to be holding its breath along with them.

“I thought the kiss would get us out of this,” she finally said.

“I guess it didn’t,” he responded.

Another minute went by.

“Shouldn’t you be doing something?” she asked.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, something decisive one way or the other.”

He smiled. "I thought about that. And then I thought I'd let you make the first move."

She shifted against the cool ceramic sink. "And if I don't?"

He shrugged. "Then I guess it's like a staring contest. We'll see who blinks first."

"And you think that would be fun?"

"I think it would be fascinating." And he did.

He had a will of iron when he wanted it. Not that he necessarily wanted it in this case. But toying with Charlotte was like stomping the accelerator of his Lamborghini. It was always exhilarating to see which would come first, disaster or delirium.

"In that case." She slipped sideways, dancing away from him, across the kitchen. "I'm betting I can hold out longer than you."

"You think?"

She snagged his attention with a sultry, sexy look. "I guess we'll find out. Where's the next house?"

"Rue du Blanc. Top of the hill."

It was a modern stone villa with twelve rooms and a pool overlooking an olive grove. Charlotte liked it. So did Alec. The kitchen was clean and modern, and there were plenty of bedrooms and enough baths for an entourage.

Their final stop was a full-on castle, with bleached stones, hewn ceiling beams, a formal dining room and seven bedrooms with king-size beds. A gilded fountain dominated the driveway turnaround, while acres of emerald lawn stretched out front. The furniture was French provincial, with many valuable antiques

dotting the impressively large rooms. Out back, there was a swimming pool and a meticulously maintained garden maze that was a work of art.

“I hope they’re not a party crowd,” Alec observed as they moved from the patio back into the formal dining room. Too many highballs, and somebody was going to get hopelessly lost in that maze.

“Okay, now I envy your money,” said Charlotte, making her way back to the grand entrance hall with its octagonal windows, antique rugs and tapestry. “I’d love to pick up something like this on a whim.”

“You like it that much?” asked Alec.

She nodded. “I’d buy it.”

“The kitchen’s a little small.”

“I’d renovate.”

He chuckled. “You’d actually knock out a stone wall?”

She flung open the double doors to the great room. “It’s my fantasy,” she pointed out, walking through the furniture groupings, past oil portraits and a massive, rolltop desk. “I guess I can knock out whatever I want.”

At the far end of the great room, there was a balcony overlooking a duck pond. Charlotte wandered into the sunshine and leaned on the wide rail. “If I lived here, I could name the ducks.”

“You could,” he agreed, moving next to her. “Though I’m not sure how you’d tell them apart.”

“I’d buy a dog. Put up a swing for the kids.”

“Kids?”

“Sure. I wouldn’t use all seven bedrooms myself.” A wistful expression came over her face as she gazed into the distance, obviously imagining a pictureperfect family.

“So, what’s with you and Jack?” Alec ventured, reminded of her real family.

She kept her eyes straight forward. “What do you mean?”

Alec had seen the expression on her face. He’d watched their body language, and the distance they kept between them. “It seemed like there was some kind of tension—”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Are you angry with him?” It seemed like the most logical explanation.

“Why would I be angry with him?”

“I don’t know. It was—”

“I barely know him.”

Alec took in her profile for a moment. “He’s your brother.”

“We didn’t grow up together.”

Alec had heard as much from Raine. “What happened?”

She brushed a speck of sand off the concrete rail, then scratched her thumbnail over a flaw. “When I was four, my mother died. Jack stayed with the Hudson grandparents, and I went with the Cassettes.”

Alec found his heart going out to her. His parents had died when he was in his twenties, and that was enough of a blow.

And he'd always had Raine. Charlotte, on the other hand, had her entire family ripped away when she was little more than a baby. No wonder she fantasized about home and hearth.

"Did you ever ask why?"

"Ask Jack?"

"Your father."

She shook her head. "David Hudson and I don't talk much."

Alec stilled her small hand with his own. "I guess not."

She shrugged her slim, bare shoulders. "It was hardly *Oliver Twist*."

"But it hurt you just the same."

She smoothed back her hair, raking spread fingers through the tangles. "It's just...sometimes..." But then she shook her head.

"Tell me," he prompted.

She turned to look at him. "Like you and Raine. You hug, you tease." She moved her hands in a gesture of confusion.

"That comes from years of learning exactly how to push each other's buttons."

"That might be how you tease her, but that's not why you hug her."

Suddenly, Charlotte looked so vulnerable and confused and alone on the windswept balcony that he couldn't help himself. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her against him, cradling her head against his shoulder and smoothing her tousled hair.

"Be patient," he advised. "Relationships are complicated."

"I'm twenty-five," said Charlotte. "And we live on different

continents.”

“Some are more complicated than others.”

Her body trembled against his.

“Hey,” he soothed, rubbing his palm across her back, trying desperately to keep his perspective. But she was soft and sexy in his arms. She smelled like a spring garden, and the vivid memory of her taste was pounding inside his head.

She drew back, and he was surprised to see she was laughing instead of crying.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

“I guess Jack and I would be on the complicated end of the spectrum.”

Alec gazed into her bright eyes, her flushed cheeks, the wild hair begging to be smoothed out of the way.

“No.” He shook his head, and she sobered under his expression. “You and *I* would be on the complicated end of the spectrum.” And he bent his head to kiss her tempting lips.

The instant Alec’s lips touched hers, Charlotte knew how he did it. She knew why dozens if not hundreds of women fell head over heels for him, knew why they clambered into his bed and made fools of themselves in public.

He wasn’t just gorgeous, wasn’t just sexy, wasn’t just a rich man who could wine them and dine them all over the planet. Alec Montcalm was magic.

It was in his eyes, in his touch, in his voice that made a woman feel like she was the only person on earth.

Her arms wound around his neck, and she tipped her head to better accommodate his kiss. His hot lips parted, and she invited him in, parrying with his tongue while his arms tightened. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and she could feel a tingle start within her nipples, radiating out to touch every fiber of her being.

He whispered her name, then kissed her deeper, backing her against the rail. His hands cradled her face, thumbs stroking her cheeks, fingertips burying in her hairline. It was, hands down, the most sensual kiss she'd ever experienced.

Their bodies were plastered together, and his lips began to roam. First to her cheek, her temple, her eyelids. Then he kissed the lobe of her ear, making his way down the curve of her neck.

She struggled to breathe, her lips still tingling. Her hands found his short hair, tunneling their way through its coarse softness. His kisses found her mouth again, and she moaned her appreciation.

Her clothes suddenly felt stifling, and the waning sun was hot on her back. Sweat prickled her skin and she longed to tear off her clothes to get some respite from the suddenly humid air.

Then he clasped her to him, lifting her right off the patio, turning, breathing deeply in her ear.

"We have to stop," he rasped, even as she kissed his salty neck. She wasn't sure why, so she kept right on kissing.

"Not here," he elaborated with obvious strain.

Of course.

Not here.

They were in a stranger's house.

What was she thinking?

She stopped kissing, burying her face against his shoulder. His skin was superheated, the cotton of his shirt damp against her cheek.

"Sorry," she managed between breaths.

"Hell, I'm sure not."

"We can't keep doing this." She was warning herself as much as she was warning him. If they kept it up, sooner or later, they were going to make love, even if they didn't find the perfect time and location.

"We can," he argued. "But sooner or later, we'll get caught."

"The tabloids," she confirmed, appreciating his concern for her reputation.

"I was thinking of your brother," Alec admitted, still holding her tight. "But, yes, let's go with the tabloids."

"There's only one of Jack," Charlotte noted, not exactly sure of her point. What was she suggesting?

"You saying we can outsmart him?"

"I'm saying he can't be everywhere." She paused. "But the tabloids can." And they were definitely worth worrying about.

"So, what do we do?"

"You might want to put me down."

He gently loosened his arms, letting her slide sensually along his body until her shoes met the deck.

"Damn it," he gasped.

Passion ricocheted along her nerve endings, and she silently echoed his curse. She forced herself to take a step back, and he let her go.

She laughed weakly, turning her attention to the fields, the duck pond and the distant orchard, struggling valiantly to bring her emotions under control. "You do have a way with women, Alec."

He was silent for a long moment, and when he spoke there was a distance in his tone. "Not all women."

Maybe not. But she was willing to bet it was with most women. "We need to get back," she managed.

"Of course," he agreed.

Then he waited for her to start back through the great room. He followed more slowly, locking up behind them.

In the Lamborghini, Charlotte tipped her head back and closed her eyes, letting the wind buffet her senses while Alec sped back to Château Montcalm and normal life.

There was nothing remotely normal about Alec's world. He'd expected a disruption in the château, but nothing had prepared him for five semitrailers in the front yard, a hundred crew members, several dozen extras, one temperamental second-unit director and two demanding stars.

The worst part was, his very reason for doing this, Charlotte, had all but disappeared. Claiming Alec had monopolized too much of Charlotte's time when they checked out the rental houses, Raine had latched on to her and stuck by her side round

the clock. Not that Alec begrudged them their tennis and spa visits, but was a few minutes alone with Charlotte so much to ask? Sure, they had breakfast and dinner together, but Raine was always there, and sometimes Kiefer, Jack or even Lars joined them.

Suddenly, there was yet another crash in the front yard, followed by shouts and the booming voice of Lars. Alec stood up, crossed the room and pulled his office window shut, securing the latch. The barrier dampened the noise, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Then he settled back into his desk to review the marketing strategy Kana Hanako was proposing leading up to the Tour de France.

So far, none of the tabloids had made a link between Alec and Isabella, even though she'd arrived in Provence two days ago. She and costar Ridley Sinclair had chosen the modern villa in the olive grove, and were sharing it along with a few entourage members.

The growl of a motor buzzed its way through the wall. It grew louder and louder, actually shaking the foundation of the château.

Alec threw down his pen, jerked to his feet and stomped his way through the hallways to the entry, ducking under booms and avoiding cameras and light stands as he made his way to his front door.

He cut through the open doorway in time to see a massive, truck-mounted crane come to a halt on his driveway turnaround. Huge, hydraulic arms whined out to smack into the ground,

stabilizing the unit. The key grip shouted directions to the crane operator.

“What the hell?” Alec asked to no one in particular.

“An aerial shot of the balcony scene,” a crew member offered.

Just then, the crane shifted. One of the arms broke the concrete with a deafening boom, and the ground shook.

A few people shrieked, but then most settled to laughing nervously as the disturbance subsided.

Alec wasn't laughing. His driveway was ruined.

“Where is Charlotte?” he growled. This was her job. She'd promised to keep the film crew from destroying his home.

“Where is Charlotte?” he asked in a louder voice.

The three closest crew members turned to look at him.

“I want to speak to Charlotte Hudson,” he enunciated.

One of the crew members spoke into his walkie-talkie.

“Alec?” came Raine's voice.

He turned to find the two women, small souvenir bags in tow, jaunty hats on their heads and pretty tans on their perky faces.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demanded, making a beeline to Charlotte.

Her eyes widened. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

“This was *your* job,” he shouted, gesturing at the chaos around him. “We might as well be having an earthquake. The château is shaking off its foundation. The driveway is destroyed. And I can't even hear myself think.”

“I’ll—”

“I want that crane gone,” he roared. “And I want it gone *now*.” He caught Jack in his peripheral vision.

“But—”

“And no more sightseeing. No more spas. No more fun and games with Raine while I suffer this noise and destruction alone.” He was ranting now, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself. All he’d asked was that she hang around and make sure these people didn’t ruin his life. Even that seemed to be too much trouble.

“They need the crane shot,” she tried, but her mouth was pinched and her skin was going pale under the tan.

“And I need my château to be standing when this is all over.” She shrank back, and Alec could have kicked himself.

Instead, he turned on Jack. “And *you*? What the hell’s the matter with you? I’m standing here screaming at your sister.”

Jack blinked in obvious confusion.

“Why don’t you hit me?”

Now everybody within earshot looked confused.

Alec cursed under his breath, stomping back into the château, thinking seriously about an extended trip to Rome until this was all over.

Charlotte stared at her brother, but his gaze slid away, and he became instantly interested in a list on one of the production assistants’ clipboards. The noise level in the immediate area went back to normal, as everyone’s attention went to their jobs.

Raine shifted toward Charlotte. “That’s not normal,” she

intoned.

“Thank goodness,” said Charlotte.

“I don’t know what got into him.”

“He’s not wrong,” said Charlotte. “I did promise to make sure everything ran smoothly.”

“Alec doesn’t yell,” said Raine. “He stews. He plots. He might methodically bankrupt you. But he doesn’t yell.”

“So, I’ve pushed him over the edge.” Charlotte needed to go clear the air. She couldn’t leave things hanging between them like this. She subconsciously started toward the front door.

“It appears you have,” Raine mused, giving Charlotte a considering look as she fell into step beside her. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Like what?” Charlotte stalled, not wanting to lie to her friend, but *really* not wanting to admit she was attracted to Alec. It was so cliché, so tiresome.

“Like maybe he made a pass at you? And you turned him down. Alec’s not used to hearing the word no.”

“I guess not,” Charlotte chuckled.

“So, did he?” asked Raine, keeping her voice low.

“Make a pass at me?”

Raine elbowed her in the ribs. “Are you avoiding the question?”

“Pretty much.”

“He *did*.” Raine linked her arm with Charlotte, steering her down the walkway, through a wooden gate and into a secluded

garden where they sat down at a white-painted, wrought-iron table next to a trickling fountain. "So, you said no?" There was a fiendish glee in Raine's wide grin.

"Not exactly," Charlotte admitted, setting down her purse and the small bag.

Her friend's eyes went wide. "You said *yes*?"

"I didn't really say anything."

"Oh my God. You two—"

"No!" Then Charlotte lowered her voice. "No. We didn't."

"I don't understand."

"We kissed." Charlotte sat back in the straightbacked chair.

"We kissed, okay?"

"So, why's he mad at you?"

"I'm guessing it's because the crane broke your driveway."

Raine toyed with a tiny leaf that had blown onto the grid-work table. "Trust me when I tell you Alec doesn't yell over broken driveways. And what was that thing with Jack hitting him?"

"You got me," said Charlotte, more than happy to move off the kiss. "Does Alec beat up anyone who yells at you?"

"No one's ever yelled at me. At least not in front of Alec." Raine paused. "And, actually, no, people don't tend to yell at me."

"That's because you're sweet and kind," said Charlotte, only half joking.

"I'm starting to think it's because I have a pit bull for a brother."

Charlotte laughed. "You think he warned them off?"

"Maybe. But let's get back to the kiss. Tell me about it."

"Nothing to tell," Charlotte lied. It had been a kiss for the record books, and she'd been avoiding Alec ever since.

"Where were you? How did it happen?"

"We were on the balcony at one of the rental houses."

"And he just up and kissed you?"

"He thought I was crying."

Raine frowned. "That doesn't sound right."

"I was actually laughing," said Charlotte, forcing her mind to back away from the memory.

"Alec doesn't give sympathy kisses."

"You know about *all* his kisses, do you?"

"I have heard tales."

"Well, you're not going to hear any more tales from me." Charlotte sighed and got to her feet. "I'd better get out there and see what's going on. Alec's right. I did promise to take care of things." She picked up her purse. "I guess our fun's over."

"Uh-uh." Raine shook her head in denial. "I'm definitely going to talk to him."

"Oh, no, you don't," Charlotte protested. She had a job to do here, and she was going to take care of it.

"You don't need to watch every move they make," said Raine. "I'm not going to let him keep you prisoner here for weeks on end."

"*I'll* talk to him," said Charlotte. "Later." After Alec had a chance to calm down, they'd have a discussion and set out the

parameters of her role in the film. She had an obligation to him, and she was going to live up to it.

Chapter Five

Filming went on until eight o'clock that night. Alec requested dinner in his office, not wanting to inflict his foul mood on anyone else. He'd signed up as a film location—a stupid decision, obviously. But it was a decision he'd made, and now he was going to have to live with it.

Things hadn't turned out exactly as he'd planned, but that was life. He'd leave for Tokyo in the morning. Might as well roll up his sleeves and ensure the new bicycle line launch came off without a hitch. He could also make a stop in New Delhi and touch base with the high-tech division.

There was always a long list of social events he should attend. Maybe he'd find a plain-Jane date, get his picture taken, make Kiefer happy. He might as well make somebody happy, because it sure wasn't going to be him, not if he stayed here.

There was a light tap on his office door.

“*Oui*, Henri?”

The door cracked open.

“It's Charlotte.”

Oh, good. Now he could apologize on top of everything else. He sighed and came to his feet. “*Entrée*.”

She slipped into the room, closed the door behind her and leaned against it. She was drop-dead gorgeous in a jazzy gold spaghetti-strap cocktail dress. Its vertical streaks shimmered

against her toned thighs.

The wide, mahogany desk and two padded guest chairs formed a barrier between them. Just as well.

“They’re going to replace the driveway,” she finally said.

He moved around the desk, drawn to her. “It wasn’t about the driveway.”

She nodded her understanding. “Still. They broke it, they’ll replace it.”

“I take it you’ve been doing your job this afternoon?”

“I was.”

“I appreciate that.” What he really appreciated was that she was standing here in front of him, and they were alone for the first time in days.

“It was part of the deal.”

“I was angry because you stayed away,” he admitted, moving closer still, marveling that she grew more beautiful with each step.

“I’ve been here every day.”

“With Raine glued to your side. Where is my sister, by the way?”

“She had to do something with Kiefer.”

“At the office?”

Charlotte nodded.

Alec came to a halt in front of her. “And Jack?”

“At the hotel. With the crew.”

Tokyo faded from his mind as Alec stroked his thumb over

the fabric of her dress. He discovered the shimmer came from ribbons, beads and sequins. There was a weight and fullness to the dress that felt good under his hand. It had a double hem—scalloped over straight. It was a perfect dress for dancing.

Her long legs flowed down into strappy gold sandals. And the gold hoops dangling from her ears set off her shiny blond hair.

“You know,” he told her softly, reframing his mood. “We all did something wrong.”

She tilted her head questioningly.

“You shouldn’t have stayed away. I shouldn’t have yelled. And Jack should have decked me.”

That got a smile from her. “Jack thinks you’re crazy.”

“He needs to learn how to be your brother.”

“I can only hope that doesn’t involve too many fist-fights.”

Alec closed his hand around her rib cage, feeling the texture of the dress tickle his palm.

“I missed you,” he admitted.

She closed her eyes for a long second. “Are we deep into the complicated end of the relationship spectrum?”

“It’s simple from where I’m standing.” He gazed at her creamy shoulders, the delicate straps of the dress, thinking how easy it would be to roll one off and press his lips against the warm fragrance of her skin.

“You’re gorgeous,” he elaborated. “I can’t keep my hands off you. And *there’s finally* nobody else here.”

He slipped his index finger under the strap, sliding it back and

forth. "What could be simpler than that?"

"I came here to talk to you about expectations."

He smiled. "I hope you won't be disappointed."

"I mean my job here. For the film. I don't want to let you down again."

"Forget it."

She searched his expression. "I don't know what that means."

"It means I wasn't angry about the driveway. I wasn't angry you had fun with Raine. I was angry because you weren't in my bed. And that's not a fair reason to be angry."

She stilled. Not breathing, staring up at him with desire, trepidation and anticipation all mixed up together.

His hand tightened, drawing her in. He bent his head, parted his lips and met hers in a slow, gentle exploration.

Last time had been too hurried. He'd behaved like a teenager, not giving a thought to savoring the moment, to making sure she felt cherished, to kissing her the way a Frenchman should kiss, the way a Frenchman ought to approach everything in life.

She tasted of fine wine, his own vintage. Her lips were soft and smooth, warm and malleable under his. She was kissing him back, and passion uncoiled within him. His forearm went to the small of her back, pressing her soft curves against his firm body. She was ambrosia, a gift from the gods, an angel set down on earth for him and him alone.

Her tongue flicked against his lips, kicking a jolt of desire from his body to his brain. He struggled to keep it slow, but his

mouth was moving of its own accord, delving deeper, kissing harder, bending her backward so that her body arched into his own.

Blood rushed through his system, priming his body, challenging reason. Her hands gripped his shoulders, while small moans worked their way from her chest to her mouth. His lips moved to her neck, and she arched back farther. Her breasts were taut against the dress, cleavage bursting from the V-neck, her nipples outlined against the fabric.

His hand covered one breast, and they both gasped in wonder. He drew his thumb over the peak, and her knees buckled. He held her steady, whispering words of endearment and encouragement.

He lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist, pushing her dress out of the way and pressing her against the solid door. He took her mouth once more, kissing her deeply. His hands roamed from her breasts to her waist to her bare thighs revealed by the bunched dress. When he touched the lace of her panties, she hissed out a yes.

Her hands cupped his face, and she covered him with tiny kisses. She drew his earlobe into her hot mouth, and his body nearly jackknifed in shock. He slipped his thumb between her legs, over the silk of her panties. She was hot and moist and delectably sweet.

There were condoms in the bathroom adjoining the office. He cradled her bottom, lifting her away from the door, carrying her to the en suite, all the while kissing, caressing and assuring her

she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Inside, he perched her on the counter, stripped off his slacks and the scrap of her panties, donned the condom, then stepped between her legs. The counter was the right height, and their bodies touched intimately.

He smoothed back her hair and gazed into her eyes. Then he drew his thumb along her swollen bottom lip, following it up with his mouth, drawing her lip inside, tasting her essence as his hands roamed lower.

She squirmed forward, bringing his fingers in contact with the fire between her legs. Her hands fisted in his hair, and her moaning little pants heated his ear.

He parted her flesh.

“Now?” he asked.

“Right now,” she gasped in return, and he pushed inside.

She arched back, and he anchored his hands at the base of her spine, pressing her forward, refining his angle, savoring the feel of her body for long moments before he withdrew. Then he pushed in again, swifter, harder.

Her eyes were closed, and sweat dotted her hairline. Her skin was slick and fragrant against his. Her dress rustled against the counter. He drew down the neckline, revealing her breasts, closing his mouth over one pert nipple, laving it, drawing hard, eliciting a groan as her hands tightened and her fingernails dug into his upper arms.

He moved to the other breast, repeating the motion.

Her eyes were scrunched tight. Her hips arched, her body matching his motion. He wished he could rip off the dress and see her naked. But there was no time for that.

His speed increased of its own accord, and her keening cries made his brain buzz with need. There was nothing left but a roar of desire and a primal need to take them both to the clouds and over the edge and straight into eternal paradise.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close as the tremors shook both of their bodies and heat drenched their skin.

Charlotte lay in the tangled sheets of Alec's big bed. Her cheek rested on his chest, and his breathing was even and strong. A breeze flowed through the open, third-floor window, billowing sheer curtains and revealing the garden lights below.

"I guess we should probably keep this a secret," she ventured.

"You think?" He trailed his fingertips lightly down her bare arm. "Or should we let Kiefer in with the camera?"

"Or we could hold a press conference right here in the bed like John and Yoko?"

"I can guarantee you the front page."

She turned her head, resting her chin on his shoulder. "Seriously."

He gazed into her eyes. "Seriously. It's our secret."

She nodded.

"What about Jack?"

Charlotte frowned, not understanding.

"Are you going to tell Jack?"

“No.” Her brother had never been privy to her love life before.
“Are you going to tell Raine?”
Alec shrugged. “Your call.”
“She’s suspicious, you know.”
“Really?”

“After you yelled at me this afternoon, she asked if you’d made a pass at me. She thought you were mad because I’d turned you down.”

“She’s not far off the mark,” he said.

“I told her we’d kissed.” Charlotte settled more comfortably against Alec’s chest, toying with the edge of the white sheet.

“Are you going to tell her...” His voice trailed off.

Charlotte didn’t exactly know what to call it, either. A one-night stand? A fling?

But one thing she did know, she wasn’t going to get all needy on him and start demanding to know what this meant and where it was going. She’d gone into it with her eyes wide open. She knew what and who Alec was, but she’d hopped into his bed anyway.

“It’s better if she doesn’t know,” Charlotte admitted. “But I don’t want to lie to her. My grandfather—” She stopped.

She wasn’t going to start borrowing trouble here. Her grandfather didn’t need to find out. Nobody needed to find out. Unless Alec was a complete cad, and she certainly didn’t think he was, this interlude would remain locked in her heart forever.

“How long have you worked for the ambassador?” Alec asked, obviously prepared to move on.

She followed his lead. “Since I was a teenager. I started off helping in the office. Then, after college, I worked full-time. And when his executive assistant quit to get married, I stepped in temporarily.”

“When was that?”

“Three years ago. Right before I met you the first time.”

“Ahh.” He nodded. “Rome. You should have taken my key that night.”

“Right. And I’d have made the front page, scandalized my family and been fired from my job.”

Alec paused. “That’s altogether a worst-case scenario, isn’t it?”

“It’s a likely-case scenario. You nearly ruined my life.”

“Good that we waited, then.” He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, gathering her close. “Honestly—right now, I’m very, very glad we waited.”

Charlotte didn’t know what to say to that. He made it sound as if they’d done it deliberately, as if they’d had some kind of connection, as if they’d been thinking about each other over the past three years. Had he thought about her after Rome? Did he even remember her in the long line of women he flirted with?

She gave herself a mental shake. She wasn’t going to make more of this than there was.

“Is Kiefer still worried about rumors of you and Isabella?” she asked, moving on.

“We seem to have an ally in Ridley Sinclair.”

"We do?" Charlotte hadn't even met the man yet.

"I hear he generally has an affair with his costar."

Interesting. "And he's staying in the same villa as Isabella?"

Alec nodded. "That he is."

"You think they'll have an affair?"

"Rumor has it they already are," said Alec. "Though that rumor may have been started by Kiefer."

Charlotte laughed. "I think I'm starting to like Kiefer."

"You be careful of Kiefer." There was a serious note in Alec's tone that caused Charlotte to twist to look him in the eyes again.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Kiefer has a way with women."

"And you don't?" She glanced down at her naked body, the twisted sheets, the comforter that had been kicked off the bed an hour ago. If she needed to be careful of anybody here, it was Alec.

"I hear your father's due tomorrow." Alec changed the subject. She didn't blame him. What more was there to say?

"I heard that Lars has a few more days of secondunit work," said Charlotte. "But they want to start rehearsals for the major scenes."

"Will it bother you?"

"The major scenes?" Charlotte expected it to become even more chaotic at the château. But they'd known this was coming.

"Seeing your father. Is it worse than seeing Jack?"

"It's nowhere near the same," said Charlotte, burrowing

farther beneath the sheet to combat a growing chill from the open window.

Alec reached to the floor and retrieved the comforter, spreading it over both of them.

“Thanks.” She sighed as their body heat formed a warm cocoon.

“Your father?” Alec prompted.

“It’s funny,” she admitted. “I think I always knew David was a terrible father. Even when my mom was alive, he was never around. When she died, I honestly thought it would be Jack who took care of me.”

“How old was Jack?”

“Nine. But he seemed very worldly wise. He used to pour me juice, make me sandwiches and read me bedtime stories.” She smiled wistfully at the memory.

“And then he abandoned you.”

“No, he didn’t.” She knew none of it had been Jack’s fault. “But for years, I expected him to come and get me. I don’t know what I thought, that he’d turn eleven, get a paper route and we’d live happily ever after. Pretty absurd, huh?”

Alec straightened the comforter around her. “You were a little girl.”

“Who took a very long time to wake up to reality.”

“Do you think you might be angry with him?”

She shook her head. “I missed him. That was all.” She still missed him. She wanted a brother, and what she had was an

acquaintance.

“Tell me about you and Raine.” Charlotte knew she should go back to her own room before anyone else got home, but she didn’t want to leave. She didn’t want it to end just yet. “Did you protect her? Tease her? Gang up with her against your parents?”

Alec chuckled. “I was Raine’s worst night—”

A deafening boom shook the château. Orange flames lit up the sky. Alec instantly threw himself on top of Charlotte, bracing her protectively against the bed.

“What the hell?” he ground out, glancing to the window behind him.

Charlotte blinked at the fire, smoke and ash rising toward the dark sky.

“You okay?” he demanded.

Her ears were ringing, and she’d experienced an adrenaline shot strong enough to stun an ox, but she nodded jerkily.

Alec sprang from the bed, crossing to the window while he stuffed his legs into his slacks. “Good God. One of the trailers is on fire.”

“It blew up?” Charlotte stated the obvious as she clambered out of bed herself, glancing around for her dress and shoes.

He dialed his cell phone with one hand, pulling his dress shirt on with the other as he headed for the bedroom door. There, he paused. “Will you be all right?”

“I’ll be fine,” she called. She could hear sirens in the distance, and people were shouting down on the lawn.

She prayed that nobody had been hurt. But the sirens were getting closer, and the shouts were getting louder. She struggled into her dress and into her shoes, then she clattered down the stairs to find out if she could help.

The front lawn looked like a disaster zone. Staff members and crew rushed to the aid of those lying on the ground. Alec was in the middle, shouting to his staff to bring blankets and first aid, while helping the gardeners to set up hoses to soak the semitrailers and a small cottage that were next to the fire.

Charlotte stopped, unsure of what to do.

She glanced at the man next to her. His face was black with soot, and he was cradling his left arm, his sleeve covered in blood.

“You’re hurt,” she stated, moving closer.

He looked down at his arm. “It’s just a cut.”

“Anything else?” She gingerly supported him on the uninjured side, helping him to the porch where he could sit down.

“It was the FX trailer,” he rasped.

She separated the torn sleeve, revealing a long, deep cut on his forearm.

“They were getting the pyrotechnics ready for the battle scene.” The man seemed to be in shock.

Charlotte’s gaze shifted involuntarily to the burning trailer. Alec was silhouetted against the flames. The fire trucks arrived, and he signaled them forward, clearing people out of their path as the firefighters jumped down and began connecting hoses.

If anybody had been inside...

A member of the housekeeping staff appeared, and Charlotte quickly latched on to a couple of towels and a bottle of water. She soaked one towel, carefully cleaning around the wound. Then she pressed the other towel against the cut, applying pressure to stop the bleeding.

“Am I hurting you?” she asked.

The man barely shook his head, his attention fixed on the firefighters and the approaching ambulances.

The attendants ran to a couple of people lying on the ground, and Charlotte wasn’t sure whether she should flag them down.

“I can wait,” the man said, guessing her thoughts.

“Are you sure?” The towel was soaking up a lot of blood.

“Charlotte?” It was Raine’s voice.

Charlotte looked into Raine’s stark expression.

“What *happened*? We just got back—”

“Can you get us a paramedic?”

Raine’s gaze jumped to the injured man. “Of course.”

She scooted across the lawn in her skirt and high heels. She stopped a woman in uniform and pointed to Charlotte. The woman grabbed a black case and trotted toward them.

“Thank you,” said Charlotte as the woman knelt down.

“I’m fine,” said the man.

“Let’s take a quick look,” said the attendant, swiftly removing the towel.

She opened the case and retrieved gauze, disinfectant and medical tape.

"I'll be sending you in for some stitches," she told the man. He simply nodded, looking exhausted.

"What happened?" Raine repeated.

"The FX trailer blew up," Charlotte told her.

Raine's voice went hushed. "Anybody inside?"

Charlotte looked to the ambulance attendant.

The woman shrugged.

"We made it out," said the man, and all three women looked at him.

"We..." His eyelids fluttered rapidly, and the blood drained from his face.

"*Mon dieu.*" The attendant quickly laid him prone, raising his feet. "Shock," she told them, then lifted her radio mic. "Etienne? Can you bring a stretcher?"

Her radio crackled something unintelligible in response.

"Have you seen Alec?" asked Raine as the stretcher clattered toward them.

"He was hosing down buildings." Charlotte peered into the gloom. The trailer was beaten down to a glowing pile of rubble. The other trailers and the shed were still standing. The lawn was a mud bog, and the surrounding flower beds were completely in ruins.

Charlotte's stomach turned hollow. She was causing the destruction of Alec's home. "I can't believe this," she whispered.

"Freak accident," said Raine, gazing around.

The man with the stretcher came to a halt.

“Fatalities?” asked the female attendant, attracting Charlotte and Raine’s attention.

The man shook his head. “It sounds like there were three people in the trailer. They all got out. One broken arm. One concussion. Some superficial burns. And this one.” He nodded to the man who was still unconscious on the porch.

“He’ll need some stitches. We should start an IV and get a blood-pressure reading.”

The two counted off, hoisting the man onto the stretcher, securing straps and hooking up tubes.

“He’s going to be fine,” the female attendant told Charlotte.

“Thank you.” Too bad the same couldn’t be said for Alec’s front yard.

“It’s not your fault,” said Raine as they wheeled the man away.

“I *promised* him nothing would go wrong.”

“Did you set off the explosion?”

“No.”

“Then Alec will understand.”

Charlotte watched Alec talking to the fire chief. His hands were waving, his face contorted and he was talking fast and emphatically. He didn’t look as if he understood much of anything.

“We can replant the flowers,” said Raine. “Haul away the rubble.”

“Fire me,” said Charlotte with a sigh of defeat. She really didn’t want to face Alec’s anger, particularly after she’d seen such

a very different side of him.

“You’re a volunteer,” Raine pointed out. “I don’t think we can fire you.”

“Do you think he’ll back out of the deal?” Butterflies formed in Charlotte’s stomach as Alec started toward them, eyes hard, mouth pulled in a grim line.

“I think we’re about to find out,” said Raine.

Charlotte moved slightly closer to Raine for protection as Alec marched ominously toward them. Her heart rate seemed to increase with every step he took. His hands were dirty, his clothing soaked to his skin, and his face was streaked with soot and sweat.

He looked ruggedly sexy. Except for the scowl. Okay, even with the scowl, he looked sexy. She was hopeless.

He came to a halt. “No one was seriously hurt.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Charlotte.

Alec’s eyes narrowed, and she assumed it was going to take a whole lot more than an apology.

“Do they know what happened?” asked Raine.

“Some kind of electrical malfunction with the pyrotechnics. It’s going to put them behind schedule.” He glanced around in disgust, and Charlotte figured the movie schedule was hardly his first concern.

He looked to Charlotte. “Can I talk to you alone?”

“It’s not her fault,” Raine jumped in.

Alec gave his sister a look that questioned her sanity.

Charlotte supposed it was her fault. And she didn't blame Alec for being angry. She was ready to face the music. But she was sorely disappointed at having let the Hudsons down.

Alec reached for her arm, then he seemed to remember his filthy hands, because he pulled back, nodding toward a quiet corner of the porch.

"I feel terrible," she began as soon as they were out of earshot. "I should have thought about security. I should have thought about safety—"

"I need to ask," said Alec, coming to a halt, turning to face her. He didn't look angry. In fact, he looked concerned.

"What?" she asked bravely, watching his expression closely.

"What happened earlier—between us."

Ahh. Now she got it. She shifted gears. This was the it-was-a-good-time speech, the we're-both-adults speech, the no-expectations speech.

Okay. She was prepared for that. They *were* both adults, and neither of them were under any illusions.

Charlotte squared her shoulders. "You don't have to say it, Alec. I understand. And I agree with you completely." They'd go on as if nothing had happened. If he'd let them stay and complete the movie, that was a huge win for her. She wasn't going to sit around and cry over a one-night stand.

Well, maybe she'd cry a bit. But only because it was such an incredible one-night stand. It would have been nice for it to be two nights or three. But that wasn't the way Alec operated. Or

so she'd read in the tabloids.

“You agree with me?” he asked.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.