

REBECCA WINTERS

HAVING THE
FRENCHMAN'S
BABY



Cherish

Rebecca Winters

Having the Frenchman's Baby

«HarperCollins»

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Having the Frenchman's Baby / R. Winters — «HarperCollins»,

Rachel Valentine is the wine buyer for the Valentine family's exclusive Bella Lucia restaurants, and her relationship with master winemaker Luc Chartier should be strictly business.... Romanced by the beautiful Alsace vineyards, and seduced by the charismatic Luc, Rebecca can't help but fall in love. But their one night of passion is followed by a shocking revelation about Luc's past. Heartbroken, Rebecca returns home - only to discover that she is pregnant with Luc's child.

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THE BRIDES OF BELLA LUCIA

A family torn apart by secrets, reunited by marriage

When William Valentine returned from the war, as a testament to his love for his beautiful Italian wife, Lucia, he opened the first Bella Lucia restaurant in London.

The future looked bright, and William had, he thought, the perfect family.

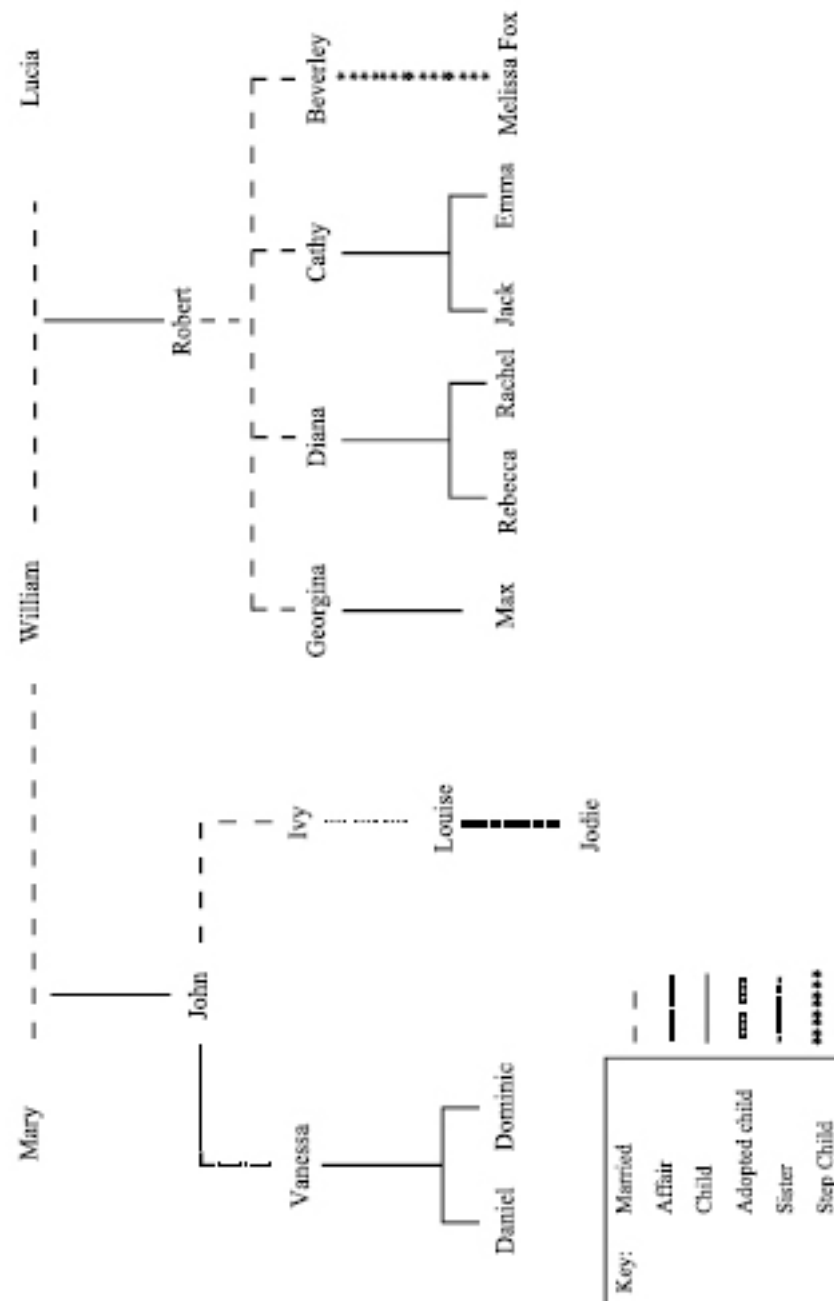
Now William is nearly ninety, and not long for this world, but he has three top London restaurants with prime spots throughout Knightsbridge and the West End. He has two sons, John and Robert, and grown-up grandchildren on both sides of the Atlantic who are poised to take this small gastronomic success story into the twenty-first century.

But when William dies, and the family fights to control the destiny of the Bella Lucia business, they discover a multitude of long-buried secrets, scandals, the threat of financial ruin and, ultimately, two great loves they hadn't even dreamed of: the love of a lifelong partner, and the love of a family reunited.

Read the first two books of this compelling new miniseries, and meet twin sisters Rachel Valentine, in *Having the Frenchman's Baby*

by Rebecca Winters,

and Rebecca Valentine, in *Coming Home to the Cowboy* by Patricia Thayer.



Having The Frenchman's Baby

Rebecca Winters



THE BRIDES OF BELLA LUCIA

A family torn apart by secrets, reunited by marriage
There's double the excitement in August—meet twins Rebecca and Rachel Valentine
Having the Frenchman's Baby—Rebecca Winters Coming Home to the Cowboy—Patricia
Thayer (available from Silhouette Romance®)
Then join Emma Valentine as she gets a royal welcome in September
The Rebel Prince—Raye Morgan
Take a trip to the Outback and meet Jodie this October
Wanted: Outback Wife—Ally Blake
On cold November nights catch up with newcomer Daniel Valentine
Married Under the Mistletoe—Linda Goodnight
Snuggle up with sexy Jack Valentine over Christmas
Crazy about the Boss—Teresa Southwick
In the New Year join Melissa as she heads off to a desert kingdom
The Nanny and the Sheikh—Barbara McMahon
And don't miss the thrilling end to the Valentine saga in February
The Valentine Bride—Liz Fielding
This book is dedicated to Kim, who has always believed in me and my ideas.
Everyone should be so lucky.

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CHAPTER ONE

WHEN Rachel saw a silver Maserati careen around the bend of the narrow road and head straight for her, she yanked the steering wheel to the right, praying to avoid a collision.

To her shock, the dark-haired, Italian-looking driver slowed down and waved, as if to thank her for getting out of his way.

“You lunatic!” she shouted at him, and received a white smile for her effort before he cruised on.

Craning her neck out the window, she cried, “Lunatic!” But he’d sped up again and was out of sight before she could get her rental car started again.

The incident had left her so weak, it took a minute before she felt composed enough to continue on.

Within five minutes she arrived in the little town of Thann, France, and found the hotel where she would be staying for the night.

Before she freshened up and went out again, she had an important call to make. But the fear of her twin sister’s rejection always put a knot in her stomach.

Their estrangement had gone on for too many years. It was a tragic situation Rachel wanted to fix if she could find the courage. Maybe this phone call could be the first step.

Yesterday was the anniversary of their mother’s death. Normally Rachel would have flown to New York to put flowers on the grave, but this year her work prevented it.

To her relief the sexton at the cemetery agreed to accept the florist’s delivery and place the flowers against the headstone.

If Rebecca had been able to visit the cemetery, she could tell Rachel if she’d seen the flowers. After six rings she heard, “Rachel?”

So her sister was in New York...

“Hello, Rebecca.” She swallowed hard. “I wasn’t sure if I would even be able to reach you.”

“I’ve been in Wyoming, and only came here briefly on business. What is it?”

“H-how are you?”

“I’m okay.” Was her twin’s voice shaking too? Or had Rachel just imagined it. “And you?”

“I’m okay too.” She bit her lip. This wasn’t going well. It never went well. “By any chance did you notice some flowers on Mother’s grave yesterday?”

“If you mean the potted rose tree, then yes.”

“Oh, good.”

After a tension-filled silence, “Is that all you wanted to know?”

Rachel clutched the receiver tighter. No...it wasn’t all, but she didn’t know where to begin.

“Look, Rachel, I’m in kind of a hurry and have to go.”

She nodded. “So do I.”

“Where are you?” Rebecca asked at the last second.

“France.”

“Then I guess I should say au revoir.”

Tears stung her eyes. “Goodbye, Rebecca.”

After her harrowing ordeal on the road a half-hour ago, this pain was all she needed.

Wiping her eyes, she got up to wash her face. Once she felt a little calmer, she went down to the front desk.

“Could you please tell me which vineyard is the best in the area?”

Without hesitation the concierge said, “That would be the Domaine Chartier et Fils, mademoiselle.

“If you take the road west from the town center and follow it three miles, you will come upon a fifteenth-century convent which has been owned by the Chartier family for generations. You can’t miss it.”

Rachel thanked him and went out to her car parked on one of the quaint side streets.

Thousands of tourists flocked to Alsace, the north-eastern province of France bordering Germany and Switzerland. Now that it was June, she’d had trouble finding a place to squeeze in.

After putting her black attaché case in the front passenger seat, she slid behind the wheel. But she wasn’t quick enough to prevent a couple of guys from enjoying the view of her long, elegant legs. The skirt of her white business suit had ridden up her thighs.

Ignoring their interested gaze, she leaned over to close the door. The action caused her dark, glossy hair to swish against her shoulders. Quickly she started the car and pulled into the narrow street.

She’d passed through the town center a little while ago, having driven a portion of the village-studded wine route from Colmar, a city forty-five minutes from Thann.

Blessed with a good sense of direction, she soon found herself traveling to the outskirts past Hansel and Gretel houses whose window-boxes overflowed with geraniums and other summer flowers.

Instead of the rain she’d left in the UK just over a week ago, a glorious noonday sun shone down. The rays caused a dappled effect as they penetrated the lush green foliage of the manicured landscape.

If it hadn’t been for that menace who’d run her off the road, the day would have been idyllic.

Still bristling over his cavalier attitude, she eventually reached the edge of the town and rounded a curve where she discovered herself flanked on both sides by rows of tall grape vines. She followed the healthy-looking vineyard up the slope.

In the distance she spied a magnificent structure reigning over the checkerboard plots of vineyards the French called *terroirs*.

A gasp of wonder escaped her throat, prompting her to slow down so she could absorb her fairy-tale-like surroundings.

She marveled at the slightly pinkish cast to its stone walls. Any second now she expected to see Rapunzel at one of the arched windows, and the handsome prince below, begging her to let down her golden hair so he could climb up to her.

Since Rachel’s early-morning flight from Bordeaux, located on the Atlantic seaboard, such fanciful thoughts seemed part of her experience.

She’d traveled to many beautiful places in Europe on restaurant business with her father and grandfather. But this was the first time she’d felt an instant bonding to a special spot of earth. Her feelings seemed to go far beyond the physical.

In her heart she thought, I could live here for ever.

She slowed down and pulled to a stop to snap a few pictures with her digital camera before moving on.

While she did business in Alsace, she would look into buying a little house with a tiny plot of vines she could use for a retreat. One day years from now she would retire here and write her own book on wines.

Bread might be the “staff of life”, but to her mind the grape vine produced the “magic of life”.

It wasn’t just the final product to be consumed with or without a fine meal—Rachel loved the whole fascinating process, starting with the soil, whose amalgam of elements combined with the right amounts of sun and rain to produce a unique grape that could be turned into a superb wine.

Her sensations of delight mixed with reverence continued to grow even stronger as she followed the signs that led her to an exquisite rose garden growing in the middle of the old convent’s courtyard.

She pulled into the section on the right designated for visitor parking and turned off the motor.

More signs on the door of a modern-looking building indicated the business office. It had been attached to the side of the convent, which she imagined was used these days to store the wine.

Rachel touched up her mouth with a coral frost lipstick, then alighted from the car with her briefcase.

It was a good thing she'd learned long ago to wear comfortable leather sandals while on business. Negotiating the cobblestones with some semblance of dignity was no small feat.

On her way inside she counted a dozen cars. That meant a busy Monday for the staff who'd opened their wine cellar to customers eager to sample everything from Riesling to Pinot Blanc.

Rachel imagined the tourist traffic was non-stop, even in the low season.

Once she stepped inside, the receptionist in the foyer looked up from the computer and smiled. "Bonjour, mademoiselle."

"Bonjour, madame," Rachel responded in kind.

But her accent must have given her away because the other woman said in excellent English, "The cave is through that door on your right."

"Thank you. However I've come on business, and would like to meet with the owner." She handed the other woman her business card.

"My name is Rachel Valentine. I'm the chief wine buyer for three restaurants in London, each called the Bella Lucia."

The receptionist eyed her with renewed interest. "Valentine, you say? I can't find your name on the computer. Was Monsieur Chartier expecting you?"

"No. In fact I didn't know of the Domaine Chartier until I arrived in Thann early today."

"I see."

"When I asked the hotel concierge to direct me to the best vineyard in the region, he gave me directions to the convent."

"Monsieur Chartier will be happy to hear it."

"Naturally I realize he might be too busy to meet with me today, so I'd like to make an appointment for tomorrow if that's possible."

"We're closed tomorrow, but let me check with his secretary and find out his schedule. He has other vineyards in different villages, so he could be anywhere. Excuse me for a moment, please."

"Of course."

Rachel had studied enough French to speak and understand basic phrases, but the receptionist's volley of French spoken in a low rapid tone was much too fast for her to follow.

After the woman hung up she said, "If you'll let me know where you can be reached, Monsieur Chartier's secretary will give him the information."

"That would be fine. I'm staying at the Hotel du Roi."

"Très bien. Though I can't give you an exact time, you'll be contacted before the end of the day."

"Thank you for your help."

"Pas de quoi, mademoiselle."

Rachel went out to the car and returned to the hotel where she caught up on some paperwork.

Around five-thirty her stomach made noises it was time to eat. She decided to try the hotel's restaurant.

In case someone tried to reach her at the hotel rather than on her cell, she told the concierge she'd be in the dining room if a call from Domaine Chartier came through for her.

Whenever Rachel traveled, she always found it instructive to study the wine list and find out what local wines were served, especially in an area like this renowned for its white varietals—wine that came from one kind of grape only.

She wasn't surprised Domaine Chartier wines dominated the choices. The serveuse recommended the Tokay Pinot Gris to accompany the asparagus entrée, the hotel's plat du jour.

The moment the waitress returned with the wine, Rachel thanked her, examined the labeling and then opened the bottle herself. An aroma escaped from the golden liquid whose combination of flavors was pure revelation.

She poured some into the wineglass and took an experimental sip, letting it swirl on her tongue before swallowing.

More flavors came through: maple syrup, quince and...pine-apple if she wasn't mistaken.

So soft to the palate, yet beautifully rich and elegant due to its fine ripe acid balance...

It had a long finish in which she could find no fault.

Ah...perfection itself.

"I take it the Pinot Gris pleases you." A deep male voice spoke to her in English with a heavy French accent.

Her eyelids fluttered open in surprise. But when she saw who it was, she nearly fell off her chair.

"You!"

Across the small round table from her stood the man who'd come close to crashing into her earlier.

For a Frenchman he was tall and powerfully built. Probably in his mid-thirties. He wore his dark brown hair considerably longer than most men she knew.

With his heavily lashed brown eyes and olive complexion, she had to admit he was incredibly handsome.

That, plus the fact that he had the audacity to be holding her wine bottle in his hand, ignited her anger all over again.

"If you've followed me for any other reason than to offer sincere apologies for your reckless driving, I'll call the police to have you arrested for harassment."

The maddening smile she remembered flashed once more.

"There are two versions to every story. The police are more likely to believe that you were all over the road because you're used to driving on the left and became confused."

"Considering they're French, they probably will," she countered. "Now that you've had your fun, please leave that wine bottle on the table and go away."

"I noticed you enjoying it."

He wasn't about to quit.

No doubt this man, who was too attractive by far and knew it, found it amusing to flirt with what he considered an available female. Particularly one drinking alone in public and enjoying it so much she'd been sitting there with her head tilted back, eyes closed, unaware of the people around her.

"Not that it's any of your business, but it happens to be the best white wine I've ever tasted." And that was saying a lot...

He seemed to ponder her comment before he said, "I'm glad to hear it, Ms Valentine. Nineteen ninety-eight produced an excellent vintage."

She blinked. "How do you know my name? Who are you?"

He put the bottle back on the table. "Luc Chartier. I understand you wanted to make an appointment with me."

He was that Chartier?

Rachel sat up straighter in the chair. "I thought your secretary was going to phone. I had no idea you would take the trouble to come to the hotel this evening."

He gave an elegant shrug of his broad shoulders covered in a light gray silk suit. "Why not? I was in the area when I received a call from my secretary, Philippe."

"It's always a pleasure to meet a new wine buyer, especially one who has already sampled the goods with such uninhibited relish."

His lips twitched again, rekindling her anger.

"Because of you, I almost missed the experience."

He cocked his dark head. "What do you say we call a truce to the Hundred Years War and start over again? You've already admitted the Pinot Gris has no equal. I'd like to make up for the fright I caused you by giving you a personal tour of the domaine."

Rachel rolled her eyes. “In that rocket you call a car? No, thank you. I have little desire to end up as twisted wreckage around a bunch of grape vines.”

“I’ll make a concession and drive you in the estate Wagoneer,” he inserted. “That way we can go off road. I swear I’ve never had an accident with any of my prospective buyers.”

She believed him. Yet even if it weren’t true, Rachel imagined his charisma got him what he wanted no matter how audacious he was. But not this time.

“I’m afraid I’ve changed my mind about making an appointment.”

“I prefer to be spontaneous too,” he came back. “What are your plans after dinner?”

“Surely that’s not any of your business.”

He examined the shape of her oval face until her cheeks grew warm.

“The last thing I meant to do was frighten you on the road today. I’ll admit I had serious matters on my mind. Forgive me.”

Forgive him?

Where had that apology come from? It sounded a hundred percent genuine.

She could feel the ice cracking.

“Whether you do any business with me or not, I’d like to make it up to you, Ms Valentine.

“If you’ll give me half an hour, I’ll come back for you. While we talk wine, we’ll take a ride through the vineyard. Now that it’s in flower, it’s especially beautiful at dusk.”

Rachel sat back. “You’re making this very difficult for me. If I refuse to accept your apology, then I come off being the lesser person.” After a slight hesitation, “I suppose it’s possible I was so enthralled with the view, I forgot I wasn’t the only driver on the road.”

“An honest woman,” he murmured.

“A man who can say he’s sorry. I guess we’re even.”

“Pax?”

Rachel nodded. “Pax. I’d be a liar if I didn’t admit I’d enjoy seeing your vineyard. But only if you’re sure it’s all right with your wife.”

There was a distinct pause before he said, “If I weren’t divorced, my wife would be the one showing you around. As it is, you’re stuck with me.”

“Since you’re the owner of Chartier et Fils, I have no complaints,” she quipped to hide a myriad feelings she didn’t dare examine too closely.

Some unnamed emotion produced a glimmer in the dark recesses of his eyes. It caused her pulse to race for no good reason.

“In that case, I suggest you change into something casual. Lovely as your outfit is, you won’t find it suitable if you want to get out and do a little walking.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

“Until you’re surrounded by the vines, you can’t fully appreciate what a miracle they are.”

He’d just expressed the thoughts she’d always held.

Whatever else went on inside him, she sensed he was a man who was in love with his work. Apology aside, not many vintners she’d met cared enough to go out of their way to this extent for a buyer.

“What color is your Wagoneer?”

“Blue.”

“I’ll watch for you.”

“Bon. Enjoy the rest of your meal. A bientôt.”

As he walked away Rachel noticed that quite a few interested female eyes followed his progress from the room.

After eating a little more of the delicious vegetable entrée, she charged the bill to her room, then went upstairs to change. She took the wine bottle with her for a souvenir of her first day in Alsace.

Once she'd slipped into jeans and a plum-colored knit top, she put on a pair of well-used walking shoes she'd packed in her suitcase.

With twenty more minutes to wait until he returned, she decided to do something productive in order not to think too much.

Before she'd agreed to go with him, she'd been so furious, she'd actually shouted names at him. That was something she'd never done to anyone in her life.

Not wanting to think about how badly she'd lost control, or, worse, how easily he'd won her around, she decided now would be a good time to make a call to the UK.

Pulling out her cell phone, she punched in the digits. After three rings a familiar male voice answered.

"Grandfather? It's Rachel."

"How's my Black Beauty this even—"

But before he could even finish the question, a coughing spell ensued. The doctor explained it was to be expected with a pulmonary embolism, yet it still alarmed her.

"Just a minute," he said in a croaky voice.

"Take all the time you need."

She adored her Grandfather William, who'd called her his Black Beauty from the time she was a little girl.

Though she'd grown up tall and slender, her thick hair had some brown mixed in with the black, but he didn't worry about small technicalities.

He'd given her the book of the same name before her mother had taken her and Rebecca to live in New York when they were ten.

His present for Rebecca had been a magnificently illustrated book of Sleeping Beauty.

"These are so that neither of my little beauties will forget me," he'd whispered in a loving voice.

"I don't want to leave you and Daddy," Rachel cried between sobs. The divorce between his son Robert and their American mother, Diana, had taken a traumatic toll on the entire family.

His gray eyes moistened. "I know. Sometimes we have to do things we don't like to do. But I'll come to visit you, and when you and Rebecca fly to London to stay with your father, you'll have sleepovers with your grandmother and me."

True to his word, there were sleepovers, and her grandparents did make trips back and forth from the UK to Long Island when they could get away from the restaurant business long enough.

On those occasions he would say, "You're the thoroughbred of the Valentine family, Rachel. Of course, you inherited your mother's famous Crawford smile and her large blue eyes. On you their tinge of gray gives them a wistful quality."

"Now that you're becoming such a lovely woman, you're going to have to protect yourself from the many men who will want a relationship with you."

Rachel had taken everything her beloved grandfather had told her so much to heart, she'd reached the ripe old age of thirty-three and was still single.

Over the course of the years she'd met a lot of appealing men in her position as wine buyer for her grandfather's restaurants. However none of them was the right kind of man to marry because none of them measured up to him. Not in character or kindness.

But a little while ago something of significance had transpired, though surely not the coup de foudre her grandfather had always warned her about.

"Love at first sight. When I was in Italy during the Second World War, that's what Lucia and I experienced. Fortunately for me, she was the right kind of woman to marry."

"Your grandmother and I were completely happy together. I want that same happiness for you when you meet your beloved. You'll know when it happens."

Rachel scoffed at the romantic notion that such a thing could happen.

Still, she couldn't ignore certain emotions Monsieur Chartier had evoked. When she'd opened her eyes and had seen him standing there eyeing her so...intimately, she'd felt an explosion inside her that had never happened to her before.

"Rachel? Are you still there?"

Her grandfather seemed to have recovered from his coughing episode.

"Where else would I be? I want to know what Dr Lloyd had to say today."

"To quote him, I'm 'coming along'."

"That's wonderful news. Now I can enjoy my business trip without worrying too much."

"What I'd have given to come with you."

"We'll do it when you're all better. But since you have to rest right now, I'll think of something to make up for it.

"I'd bring you home a bottle of your favorite Châteauneuf du Pape, but with those blood clots in your lungs, I know alcohol is verboten, so I'll bring you a box of chocolate truffles instead."

"Always my thoughtful girl. How much longer will you be gone?"

"A week."

Because of this detour to Thann she needed two. But considering he'd been in and out of hospital several times for pain and shortness of breath, she would have to take this a day at a time.

"Did you say hello to Vincent for me when you visited the Rolland vineyards in St Emilion?"

"Of course. He sent his regards and has extended you an invitation to visit as soon as you're better."

"That's nice."

"His father also told me to say hello to you. He's looking forward to another game of chess with you the next time you come."

"He likes to win."

Rachel chuckled. "I'm afraid chess isn't my best suit either."

"Where are yo—?" But before he could finish, another bout of coughing had started up.

"In Thann." Anticipating his next question, she said, "I haven't located Louis Delacroix yet, but I will. Right now you need to stop talking and drink some water. I'm going to say goodnight. I'll call you tomorrow evening."

"Bl-bless you, Rachel. GoodNIGHT." The second part came out with another loud cough.

Supposedly the coughing meant he was getting rid of the dead cells off his lungs, which was a good thing.

She hung up, put the phone back in her purse and hurried down the hall, nodding to some of the guests coming up the stairs.

When she emerged from the lobby doors, she discovered Monsieur Chartier lounging against the body of the Wagoneer parked directly in front.

The sight of him pushed the worry over her grandfather to the back of her mind.

He'd changed into a soft yellow sport shirt and blue jeans that hugged his long, rock-hard legs.

She lost the battle not to stare at the strong column of his throat and the smattering of dark body hair.

Their eyes met for a stunning moment. Though she might be a mature businesswoman, this striking man had the power to reduce her to a moonstruck teen without doing one thing to entice her—except to exist.

But, as Rachel had just found out, existence was more than enough to keep her from concentrating with any degree of coherence.

The moment he saw her, he unfolded his suntanned arms and opened the passenger door for her.

As she moved past him to climb inside she felt a disturbing awareness of him she didn't want to feel because he was a new business acquaintance. He wasn't supposed to mean anything more to her.

If being in his presence was going to cause her to forget why she'd come to Thann, she'd better start interacting with him on a professional basis.

Once they'd left the town she said, "I drove past your vineyard on the way to the convent. It looked a lot larger than the ones I passed on my drive from Colmar."

"You're very observant. There are less than six thousand vineyards in Alsace. Of that amount four thousand of them are only five acres or less each."

"So small?"

He nodded. "After Alsace fell back into French hands from the Germans, we had to build up our wine industry all over again.

"My grandfather went from village to village, buying up a few acres here, a few there.

"Today we have a total of five hundred acres located in seven villages. This vineyard of three hundred acres is an exception."

"That means a lot of little babies to nurture."

He turned his dark head toward her.

"Babies?" The way his native tongue caused him to pronounce the English word charmed her in ways she couldn't describe.

"Yes. Fragile under certain circumstances, strong under others. Always needing love and care."

"An interesting analogy, one I'll have to pass on to my staff."

He sounded genuinely amused, as if his thoughts had been far away, yet somehow her comment had managed to penetrate his consciousness.

When they reached the convent, he kept on going. In a few minutes he made a left onto a dirt road that bisected part of the vineyard.

Twilight had descended over Thann. She lowered the window. A gentle breeze filled the interior with warm air still rising from the sun-soaked soil.

He brought their vehicle to a stop and turned off the motor.

"We'll go on foot from here. Maybe if we listen closely, we'll hear growing pains."

Rachel let out a gentle laugh before climbing down without his help. She didn't want to risk an accidental touch. Already her thoughts about him had grown out of proportion to the occasion.

She followed his lead as they worked their way down two rows of vines in flower on either side of them.

Like her father and grandfather, he was tall, yet he moved with a certain masculine liteness. In fact he seemed part of this fusion of man to nature, as if neither could be separated from the other.

While she reflected on how in tune he was with his ancestral roots, he stopped long enough to scoop up a handful of earth.

Turning to her, he held out his hand.

"Like the seed a man plants in a woman's womb that brings life from God, so the seed of the Riesling grape lies cocooned in this particular blend of soil found nowhere else on earth."

The analogy shook her to the core.

"What are the components?"

"You really want to know?" His question was straightforward, yet tinged with a hint of mockery.

She couldn't blame him if he thought she was a typical female buyer whose attraction to him was strong enough that she would say or do anything to prolong their time together.

Rachel was guilty of having feelings that had nothing to do with grapes or wine-making. In truth, now that she'd gotten over being angry, she found herself intrigued by him, not just his life's work.

"I wouldn't have asked otherwise," she came back, striving for a steady voice. "The more I learn, the more I find out I don't know, but I want to learn as much as I can."

"Then you're a rare species."

She held his enigmatic gaze. “Since I’m fortunate enough to be in the presence of a master vintner, I realize my good fortune. So let me warn you that I’m prepared to pick your brains for as long as you’re willing to indulge me.”

The second those words came out of her mouth, she couldn’t believe she’d said them. He probably thought she was flirting with him. Maybe subconsciously she was. What on earth was wrong with her?

In the fading light she couldn’t see the expression in his eyes, but she felt them studying her intently before he answered her question.

“Limestone, granite, clay, marl—”

“Marl?”

“A crumbly mixture of clays, carbonates, shells and magnesium. Each vineyard’s soil is different and suitable for a certain kind of grape.

“Did you know, for instance, that wild grape vines grew here before the Romans domesticated them?”

“How fascinating! Even then the conditions were perfect,” she said in awe.

“Yes. The aroma you enjoyed from the Tokay grape earlier this evening came from the soil at St Hippolyte.”

“It was wonderful!” she exclaimed. “I detected woodsmoke, a touch of honey and something else I still can’t identify.”

“Licorice?”

“Yes!” she cried softly.

His eyes gleamed. “I have to admit I’m impressed, mademoiselle.”

Evidently she’d passed some sort of initial test or he wouldn’t have said anything.

He shifted his weight. It threw his profile into relief, drawing her attention to the lines bracketing his mouth.

Whatever his experiences of life, which included the grief of divorce, they lent him a brooding demeanor. Yet his sensual appeal was so compelling, she had to tear her eyes away.

“It would take more than a lifetime to learn everything you know, monsieur, so don’t mind me if I hang on to every word.”

His eyes smiled. “In that case I’ll tell you the most important thing to remember. You won’t ever detect that same aroma again if it comes from a different terroir.”

A wry smile broke out on her face. “I’m going to hold you to that claim and sample every type of wine from your various vineyards.”

After a slight pause, “That could take some time.”

“How many wines do you produce?”

“Sixteen.”

A higher figure than she’d presumed. He’d just provided her with an excuse to linger in his kingdom a little longer. But if she were wise, she wouldn’t give in to that temptation or he would know she’d lost sight of her professional objective because of her growing attraction to him.

“Now I’m the one impressed,” she declared. “What days are your wine cellars open? I know tomorrow you’re closed.”

He let the soil fall from his hand. “Nevertheless I’ll ask my manager, Giles Lambert, to phone you and make himself available in the morning.

“The old man’s a walking encyclopedia of information. He’ll be delighted to brainwash you into making Domaine Chartier your exclusive white wine source.”

With those words, Monsieur Chartier had just brought this unexpected interlude to a close. Knowing he wouldn’t be around tomorrow should have eased her mind, yet she felt a strong sense of disappointment, which was ridiculous.

Hopefully her expression didn’t give her away. “If it won’t be an imposition for him.”

“He lives to talk about our precious vines.”

Her mouth curved upward. “Then I assure you I’ll be a captive audience. The Tokay I was served at dinner convinced me I don’t need to look elsewhere this trip.

“One thing I’ve learned about wine—I don’t like being overwhelmed by too many choices. I’d rather concentrate on your Pinot Gris and Riesling while I’m here.”

“You’re very wise,” he muttered, sounding as if her comment had surprised him. “If you’re ready, I’ll take you back to the hotel.”

Unable to help it, she found herself examining his firm jaw and the slight cleft in his chin. Her gaze wandered higher to his straight nose. He had well-shaped brows. All in all the arrangement in such a patently masculine face made him irresistible.

Rachel didn’t want to leave the vineyard yet, but he’d given her no choice. He had some place else to go.

Walking ahead of him, she reached the Wagoneer first and got inside before he could assist her.

He didn’t seem inclined to talk. When she thought about it, she realized he hadn’t asked her one personal question. There’d been no show of curiosity on his part, not even about the kind of restaurants she represented.

Rachel on the other hand was the one guilty of so many unanswered personal questions about him, she was ready to burst.

Yet she realized that a man like him didn’t come along often. To imagine he might be available to her, let alone interested, was absurd.

Any woman who misread the signals and tried to step over the invisible line he’d drawn would soon feel the fool.

What she should do was thank him for deputizing his venerable vineyard manager to educate her about the fabulous wines the Chartier family had produced for generations.

But she refrained from saying anything when she sensed a curious tension coming from him since they’d driven away from the vineyard.

As he maneuvered the curve that led them back to town she noticed the way his suntanned fingers tightened almost compulsively on the steering wheel.

Evidently he had something serious on his mind far removed from the possible sale of wine to some nebulous restaurants in the UK.

Was it the same thing that had been on his mind earlier today right before their near miss?

Not wanting him to think she expected tonight’s experience to be repeated, the second he pulled up in front of the hotel she opened the door and slid out while the motor was still running.

Facing him the way she would any business person at the end of a successful meeting, she said, “You’ve made my introduction to Alsatian wines the highlight of my trip.”

“Even if our initial meeting caused you some tense moments?”

She smiled. “Even then. Seriously, I’d like to thank you for giving me this much time. I’m looking forward to meeting with your manager tomorrow. Goodbye, monsieur.”

She shut the door.

If he said anything in response, she didn’t hear it as she hurried inside the hotel.

Since she wouldn’t be seeing him again, she intended to put all personal thoughts of him out of her mind.

After reaching her room, she picked up the bottle of Tokay and opened it once more to inhale the aroma.

Licorice... Of course. He knew all its secrets.

Too exhilarated to think of sleeping yet, she set up her laptop and began recording the evening’s events.

She didn’t want to leave out a single piece of information or a bit of wisdom he’d imparted. One day all this research would go into her book.

When she finally went to bed, she was still reliving the time spent with him.
“Please don’t let him be too unforgettable,” she begged of the darkness before closing her eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE forty-minute drive back to St Hippolyte, Lucien Chartier, whom everyone called Luc, got on his cell phone to Giles.

“We have a potential buyer from the UK staying in Thann at the Hotel du Roi. According to Philippe, Mademoiselle Valentine buys for three London restaurants, all called the Bella Lucia.

“I asked him to check them out for me. They’ve been established since nineteen forty-six and are reputed to be some of the most exclusive restaurants located in London.”

Mayfair, Chelsea and Knightsbridge wouldn’t mean anything to Giles, but Luc knew exactly what kind of upscale, international clientele visited such establishments.

Many famous actors and musicians from the swinging sixties had made the original restaurant famous. Between all three restaurants, three hundred and fifty people were served on a nightly basis.

Nothing could please Luc more than to know that Domaine Chartier would be gracing the tables at Bella Lucia in future. Little by little the world was getting acquainted with Alsatian white wines.

“Do me a favor and give her the royal treatment tomorrow. She’s surprisingly intuitive about wine. What she doesn’t know, she’s eager to learn. That’s where you come in, Giles.”

The older man made a sound in his throat. “I haven’t met many women buyers from the UK.”

“Nor have I.”

In fact she didn’t have a strong British accent. There’d been moments when he could have sworn she was American. Rachel Valentine was a surprise in more ways than one.

For one thing, he hadn’t thought she would forgive him. To his surprise she was willing to admit some culpability. An unusual woman.

Once they’d gotten past that hurdle, she’d shown an uncommon interest in the whole business of wine culture. There was a great deal more to her than the surface revealed.

An exceptionally beautiful surface, standing there in the vines.

The gentle night breeze had swirled her hair into a cloud of brunette silk. He’d watched it swirl around other parts of her as well, molding the top she was wearing to her lovely body.

He tried to force his thoughts to stop right there, but they filled his mind anyway.

Since first passing her on the road, then seeing her in the hotel dining room enjoying herself to the fullest, it shocked him to discover he was having difficulty controlling certain pictures of the two of them that wouldn’t leave him alone. Breathtaking pictures he shouldn’t be entertaining. Not with Paulette lying comatose in her hospital bed.

Guilt over his ex-wife’s condition caused him to drive faster, but the image of Ms Valentine tasting the wine seemed to be emblazoned in his psyche.

At first he’d thought she’d imbibed too much wine like so many other buyers anxious to sample everything at once.

Taking advantage of the moment had given him time to study her feminine profile—the way the white material of her expensive suit followed the lines and curves of her slender figure.

He’d felt a quickening in his body that hadn’t happened for so long, he couldn’t remember the last time. Years...

Troubled by the involuntary reaction over which he’d had no control, he’d plucked the bottle from the table, curious to know how much she’d consumed.

When he’d realized it was still full, his glance had flown to her wineglass, which had contained only a small residue of wine.

At that point his eyes had fastened helplessly on her pomegranate-red mouth, then her tender throat exposed to his gaze where he’d watched her savoring her first swallow of the velvety liquid.

Mon Dieu. He’d never seen anything so provocative in his life.

His hand tightened on his cell phone. “Since she wants to concentrate on the Tokay and Riesling, I suspect she could be here for a few days. Call me when you’ve taken her order.”

“I’ll make certain it’s a big one,” Giles promised.

“Why do you think I gave you the responsibility?”

Though it was inevitable for Luc to come in contact with attractive women, he was reluctant to be around her again. She’d awakened something inside him totally unexpected.

“If you need to get in touch with me tomorrow, I’ll be at the hospital. Just leave a message on my voice mail and I’ll get back to you. Otherwise I’ll see you at the banquet.”

“D’accord.”

He hung up, relieved to have put Giles in charge of Ms Valentine. Out of sight, out of mind.

As for tonight, the single best way to cure what was ailing him was to drop by the hospital in St Hippolyte.

Needing to ignore what had happened tonight, he drove straight to the long-term-care medical facility and hurried inside. After three years, it had become his second home.

To his surprise he met Yves Brouet’s accusing stare when he walked in Paulette’s room a few minutes later. That was all he needed.

She lay in a coma between them. Only the sound of the machines keeping Luc’s ex-wife alive made any noise.

Normally the two men staggered their times in order to spread out the visits. And to avoid each other. Luc usually went there in the morning before putting in a full day’s work.

“Holy Mother of God, Luc—how long are you going to fight the family on this?”

As he’d just come from battling his attraction to a certain wine buyer from the UK his dark eyes glittered with a mixture of fresh guilt and pain. “For as long as it takes.”

“Let my sister go. Let this be finished so she can rest in peace!”

Luc’s hands formed fists. He leaned over to kiss the forehead of her thin face before walking out of the room into the hall.

He refused to allow any arguing in front of Paulette. On some level he was convinced she could hear and understand what was going on. It horrified him that Yves had talked about her dying while standing next to her bed.

The other man followed him into the corridor. “My sister’s gone. You have no right to prolong this agony.”

After being best friends from childhood, it didn’t seem possible the two of them had come to this impasse.

“I’m paying for her care, Yves.”

“Money be damned. We’re talking about Paulette. She wouldn’t have wanted this. You know she wouldn’t!”

“That’s easy for us to say since we’re not the one in there fighting for life.”

Yves’ face screwed up in pain. “That’s no life. You might as well know now. Since there isn’t any reasoning with you, the family got together last month. We’ve hired an attorney to fight you in court and get these infernal machines turned off.”

“I know,” Luc whispered. “My attorney already informed me.” It was only a matter of time before Luc’s sister Giselle found out.

Thank God his new house was ready to move into so he could live on his own again. Between his mother who backed him, and Giselle who sided with Yves and fought him at every opportunity, Luc hadn’t had a moment’s peace in the last year.

“You can’t win, Luc. You’re not her husband. The only reason we gave you this long before getting legal counsel is because of our families’ longstanding friendship over the years. But because of this insanity of yours, that’s gone...disappeared.”

That was right. Because of Luc, Paulette had been consigned to a living death. But not if he could help it.

He shifted his weight. "I'm planning on her waking up, Yves. When she does, I'll do whatever I can to help her get on with her life."

Yves plowed fingers through hair as blond as Paulette's. "No, Luc. Your responsibility to her is over. Even if Paulette were to wake up and make a full recovery, she wouldn't want you involved."

Luc closed his eyes tightly for a minute. "When she wakes up, I intend to be here for her."

"Could it be you're confusing guilt and remorse with love?"

Those words stung. "I loved your sister. That's why I married her."

"But sometimes love isn't enough. Come on, Luc. That time is long past and now Paulette yearns to escape her body."

If Luc thought that were true...

"This morning Maman and Papa asked me to talk sense to you one final time. They said that if you really care about her, then prove it and allow her to go free so this madness can end."

Luc shook his dark head. "I can't... All the research I've done on coma patients indicates they respond to their loved ones' stimulation. She could wake up at any time."

Strong hands clasped Luc's cheeks. "But she hasn't, and she won't because she's in a vegetative state. A few sounds and tiny movements over thirty-six months means nothing! So I'm begging you—give it up!" he half sobbed the words before wheeling away.

Luc watched his friend's solid figure until it disappeared around a corner. No one could get to him like Yves, who'd been closer than a brother from childhood.

Overwhelmed by guilt attacking him from every direction, he rested against the wall for a minute and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands.

Not only had his four-year marriage ended in failure, Paulette's car accident was his fault.

Talking to Yves had just compounded his guilt because of the pain he'd brought to her family. Besides their grief over her condition, they didn't have the kind of money it took to pay attorney fees.

Had Luc become such a selfish bastard, he didn't care who got hurt any more as long as he got his own way?

Crucified once more by Yves' tortured plea, Luc went back to her bedside to say goodnight.

When he left the hospital, he passed by the nursing station to let them know he was on his way out. They had his cell-phone number and knew to call him day or night if there was any change in her condition.

Luc left the hospital aware there was no change in Paulette.

There would never be a change.

That was what everyone was telling him, including his sister's husband.

Jean-Marc was a good man, but he and Giselle never missed an opportunity to remind him it was Paulette's family who had the last say in the matter.

Her parents had brought her into the world and raised her. They wanted what they felt was best for their daughter. It was their God-given right after all.

Rights.

How Luc hated that word.

Yves had spoken the truth when he'd said Luc had no legal grounds to fight their family.

But wanting Paulette to wake up from that coma didn't have anything to do with rights.

At the core of his anguish lay the need to rid his soul of a burden growing increasingly heavy.

He'd had three years to come to terms with the divorce. What haunted him was the inability to go back to the day of her accident and prevent it.

Ever since he'd found out she was lying unconscious in the hospital, he hadn't ceased begging her forgiveness. But he didn't know if she'd heard him.

Once her family made the decision to turn off the machines, there wouldn't be a possibility of her hearing him, let alone forgiving him.

He hit his fist against his palm.

Once again it all got down to what he wanted, as if the universe revolved around him.

One word from him to the Brouet family and everything would change for them.

On the surface he had to admit life would change for him, too. No more daily trips to the hospital.

But inwardly nothing else would be different. Remorse over the accident that didn't need to have happened stifled life's possibilities.

Once back in his Wagoneer, his pain and frustration were further aggravated by the faint smell of roses that still lingered in the car's interior. Sensitive to fragrances all his life, he was haunted by Ms Valentine's scent.

It appeared this visit to the hospital hadn't rooted her out of his system the way he could prune a vine and make a clean cut of the unwanted cane.

Part of him resented her intrusion at this critical period in his life. Just the thought of her opened the floodgates to his private thoughts.

Once again he was bombarded by unbidden pictures he hadn't been able to expel from his consciousness.

He revved up the engine, and his tires squealed as he left the parking lot. In a few minutes he reached his mother's home where he'd been living temporarily. But he was so conflicted by feelings and emotions tearing him apart, he knew there'd be no sleep for him tonight.

Because of a certain enigmatic Frenchman, Rachel tossed and turned during the long, dark hours of the night. Relieved when the light of dawn crept into the room, she showered and got dressed in a silky cream blouse and tan skirt for her work day with Giles Lambert.

He'd phoned her last night to make the arrangements, promising her a thorough tour of the winery.

Like her grandfather, he had a zest for life and possessed so much charm she was already predisposed to like him.

She could only hope a productive day spent with him would take away her disappointment that it wasn't Luc Chartier doing the honors. Part of her feared that, when she left Alsace, no ploy would be able to banish him from her thoughts.

Like a comet that only passed near the earth once in a lifetime, he'd left his indelible impression on her, then hurtled on into deep space supposedly out of mind and sight.

Maybe when her grandfather had recovered from his latest bout of illness, the two of them could come back to Alsace so she could legitimately meet with the owner of the Chartier vineyards again.

Legitimately...

Good heavens—she was as bad as a teenager plotting ways to get the most gorgeous guy in the world to be interested in her. It seemed her attraction to him was so intense, she wasn't above using her grandfather to accomplish her objective.

Filled with self-disgust, Rachel grabbed her cell phone to put in her purse before going downstairs to eat breakfast. To her surprise it rang before she could leave the room.

For one foolish moment she thought it might be the man whose image had haunted her all night. Just the thought of hearing his deep voice caused her heart to leap. She clicked on eagerly, not bothering to check the caller ID.

"H-hello?" she answered, sounding out of breath, because she was!

"Rachel—"

Her spirits dropped like hot rocks.

"Dad—"

"Something must be wrong for you to be calling me this early in the morning."

Normally he didn't show up at work until ten-thirty or later. But evidently a problem had arisen and he needed someone to bark at, mainly her.

He always sounded impatient when he was at the restaurant he managed with her half brother Max. Since every day was hectic behind the scenes, she supposed he could be forgiven.

But being this far away and hearing him so abrupt with her caught her off guard.

"What's this I hear about you traveling to Alsace? I don't recall us discussing a stop there. Today's the fifteenth. Your itinerary says you're supposed to be in Champagne."

Uh oh. Somehow her grandfather must have let it slip. Not that it was a secret.

Clearing her throat, she said, "Grandfather asked me to look up an old friend in Thann as a special favor."

"So I've heard, but I don't want you spending too much time there. We can't afford to slight our other suppliers."

Her temperamental father knew her better than that, but he had to say it because she hadn't obtained his seal of approval first.

"I wouldn't do that, and I've already contacted Monsieur Bulot to let him know I'll be there in a few days.

"The point is, now that I'm here I'm doing a little research, so please don't worry."

"You've been to Angers, then?"

"Of course, and St Emilion. They're filling our orders as we speak, so you needn't be concerned."

Her explanation appeared to mollify him somewhat because his curiosity finally won out enough to ask, "Have you come across anything interesting?"

Rachel's eyes closed tightly.

It wouldn't be possible to answer his question with one succinct answer. Too much had happened since she'd met Luc Chartier. Getting to know him had done something to her. But it was too soon to find the right words to describe what was going on inside her.

"I'm discovering that Alsace is a land of enchantment. I'll tell you all about it when I get home." She needed to change the subject. "How is Grandfather? What about his pulse-ox level?"

"I never got the chance to find out. Last night John barged in, so I left."

The rivalry between her dad and his half brother reminded her of her own unwitting problems with her sister. They lived too far apart with Rebecca working in New York as a highly successful advertising executive.

Though they were unidentical and conducted different lives, they were alike in dozens of small ways. Rachel knew instinctively Rebecca would be enamoured of Alsace too. How sad they couldn't have shared a trip like this.

She heaved a troubled sigh. This morning she didn't want to think about insoluble family problems.

"Dad? I have to go, but I'll call you when I get to Champagne."

"Don't stay in Alsace too long."

"I won't." She frowned. "What else is bothering you? You sound more upset than usual this morning."

"Titan stepped on a rusty nail. The vet took care of him, but he's not himself yet."

Translated, the Dobermann had been well sedated. Too bad that couldn't be his permanent condition.

"I'm sure he'll be back to normal in no time."

Her father's dog made everyone nervous, even Rachel. She preferred Saffy, the miniature poodle who belonged to her father's wife, Bev. The poor little thing cowered every time she saw Titan coming.

That was exactly what Rachel did when her father felt threatened by John and became difficult, which was most of the time these days.

“I’ll talk to you soon, Dad.”

She hung up the phone, thankful to have found a small corner of paradise here in Thann where she could put that seething cauldron of tension aside for a little while.

A few minutes later she entered the hotel dining room. During those times when she had to sample wines, she always ate a good meal first, even if she wasn’t hungry. Today was a case in point. Luc Chartier’s stranglehold on her feelings seemed to have affected her appetite as well.

Luc couldn’t swallow the croissant, let alone his coffee. He pushed himself away from the breakfast table and got to his feet, startling his mother.

“Where are you going at this early hour?”

“To the hospital. Where else?”

“But you were there late last night—has something happened to Paulette you haven’t told us about?”

“Maman—” Giselle blurted impatiently. “Surely if there’d been any change in her condition, we would all know about it.”

She switched her dark gaze to Luc, “But I have to admit I’m curious why all this extra vigilance over her. What’s going on with you, mon frère?”

That was a question he couldn’t answer yet.

“I’ve been so busy lately, I decided to spend quality time with her. Dr Soulier says the more stimulation, the better.”

“As you should do,” his mother remarked.

Giselle threw her napkin down. “Why do you encourage him, Maman? After three years, we all know she’s not going to wake up.”

“None of us knows that,” Luc countered. “As long as there’s a chance, I’m going to do everything in my power to make it happen.”

“I don’t understand this obsession,” Giselle cried in frustration.

“I do,” their mother snapped. “Despite a piece of paper, Luc is still married to her in the eyes of God, and don’t you forget it, ma fille!”

At this point Giselle was on her feet. Her eyes looked suspiciously bright as she turned to him. “I can’t stand to see you go on like this.”

He and Giselle had always been close, but the situation with Paulette had strained their relationship.

“After today you and Jean-Marc won’t have to. I’m sleeping at my new house from now on, starting tonight.”

“So soon?” his mother questioned. “I was hoping you would stay here a little longer. Since your papa died, I love having my children around.”

He kissed her cheek. “We all need our space, Maman.”

“But you have no one to cook for you.”

“That’s the least of my worries.”

“Well, it’s one of mine! I’ll be by to bring you some food so you won’t starve to death.”

Giselle eyed him soulfully. “Paulette’s not going to wake up. You do know that, don’t you?”

“Enough!” their mother cried, pointing her finger at Giselle.

“You have your hands full taking care of your own husband and children. I would like to see how you would react if it were Jean-Marc lying in that hospital bed.”

Giselle’s cheeks went a ruddy color. “If we were already divorced, I can assure you I wouldn’t have stayed at his bedside three years waiting for the impossible to happen.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” their mother said firmly.

Giselle continued to look at Luc. “Remember what Papa always said? There comes a time when we must laissez-le de se faire.”

Trust his vintner sister to remind him of the old expression their father lived by.

Don't add anything artificial to the process. Leave the wine to do what it is meant to do.

Translated, let Paulette's family decide to shut off the machines and then see what happens.

Tears filled her eyes. “You're not meant to live a monk's life. At this rate you're going to have a breakdown.”

Breakdown.

An interesting choice of words his guilt hadn't allowed him to contemplate since last evening, when he'd first laid eyes on Rachel Valentine. A woman like her didn't need a man with his kind of baggage.

“I have to go.”

“That's all you have to say?”

Giselle was in pain for him, but right now he was too fragmented by opposing forces to think. At this point it felt as if all his energy was focused on the beautiful wine buyer from the UK who was less than an hour away from here.

“Tell the children I'll be over soon to take them to the park.”

Luc pressed a kiss to her cheek, and another one to his mother's. Then he strode out of the house to his car and drove away. But when he reached the crossroads where he would normally turn left into town, he yanked the wheel to the right and took off for Thann as if unseen hands were driving the car for him.

Rachel pulled into the courtyard of the convent. There were no other cars in the parking area. She was being given exclusive treatment by Luc Chartier's right hand and ought to be thrilled about it.

A trim man with thinning brown hair came out the door to greet her. He looked to be about her grandfather's age, but, unlike him, this man was in excellent health.

When she commented that he moved like a person twenty years younger, he said, “Blame it on the fruit of the vine.”

Rachel knew better. Giles had been blessed with good genes. So had her grandfather. But two years ago he'd gone into the hospital with blood clots in his legs, and had been bothered by them on and off ever since.

“I feel guilty that you're spending your day off to show me around, Monsieur Lambert.”

“Call me Giles. There's no reason to feel guilty. With my wife gone, I need to keep busy. This is a pleasure for me, and Luc knows it. Come along and we'll get started.”

“Thank you.”

She followed him inside and through the door to the cave.

It was a marvelous room with a vaulted ceiling. There was a long bar and a fabulous stock of wines behind it she was dying to inspect. But what caught her interest was the huge, ancient-looking armoire on the wall opposite the counter. The doors remained open to display wine-making artifacts placed behind glass.

Next to it hung a massive chart that walked the layman through an understandable explanation of wine-making. The text was in French, English, German and Spanish.

“This is absolutely fascinating,” Rachel declared. “I've never seen anything like it on any of my buying trips.”

While she snapped pictures, Giles busied himself putting wine bottles on the counter for her to sample.

“It was Luc's idea so it would cut down on the time the staff spends explaining everything to our customers. As a result, we can handle more clients at a time.”

“Genius innovation.”

She read everything, then moved in front of the armoire where the items were labeled.

“What a wonderful treasure!”

She took more pictures, but her gaze lingered on an old jade-green flagon. The placard read, “The Chartier family nuptial wine jug. Fourteenth Century.”

A cry of delight escaped her throat. “Tell me about this!”

“Which item are you referring to?”

Suddenly the blood pounded in her ears because it wasn’t Giles who’d asked the question.

She would know Luc Chartier’s heavily accented voice anywhere.

She spun around trying to catch her breath because he’d entered the room without her being aware of it.

“G-good morning,” she stammered, attempting to gather her wits. “I thought this was your day off.”

He looked fantastic in a gray turtleneck and white cargo pants. She couldn’t prevent her eyes from traveling over his hard, fit body before their gazes fused.

“I decided the things I needed to do today could wait.”

His words sent curling warmth through her body.

“What about Giles?”

“He likes to potter around here.”

The old man winked at her.

“To borrow your metaphor,” Luc said in a low aside, “he’s like a mother with a new baby. His work is never done.”

“I heard that,” Giles muttered. Rachel couldn’t help smiling.

Luc studied her as if he enjoyed looking at what he saw. “Now tell me which item in the cupboard fascinates you so much.”

As he moved closer she could smell the soap he’d used in the shower. Her senses seemed to have come alive around him.

She turned toward the glass. “The nuptial jug. I’d love to hear the story behind it.”

He stood near enough that she could feel his warmth in the cool room whose walls were several feet thick.

“When a Chartier man has found his heart’s desire, he pours his favorite wine in that special jug from which he and his beloved both drink, whereupon he declares his undying devotion.

“It’s called the marriage ritual of the vine. My father, like his forebears, proposed to my mother in the time-honored Chartier way. They both drank from this jug before they were married in the convent chapel.”

Rachel trembled at the evocative image his words had conjured.

She’d been a lover of fairy tales all her life. What he’d just told her was a real-life fairy tale.

How would it be to marry a man like Luc and share in such a thrilling ritual?

He’d told her he was divorced. She couldn’t comprehend the pain his ex-wife must feel to live apart from him now.

She cleared her throat. “That’s a beautiful story, monsieur. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

She heard a sharp intake of breath. “After spending time with you last evening, I’m convinced you’re one person who can appreciate it.”

“Such a ritual is a very romantic tradition.”

“You value tradition?” he questioned silkily.

Her gaze flew to his. She swallowed hard to discover his dark brown eyes searching hers.

“Let’s just say I envy those who have established traditions to follow. I believe their lives are enriched for them.”

He continued to examine her features in the shadowy light, sending ripples of sensual pleasure through her system. How could that be when he wasn’t even touching her?

“So do I,” his voice rasped. “Now tell me what brought you to Thann besides wine buying.”

She blinked. “How did you know there was another reason?”

“Since you hadn’t heard of Chartier et Fils until the concierge told you, I assumed you’d ventured into my territory because something else brought you here.

“Be honest. How many people do you know who have ever heard of Thann, let alone could point it out on a map of France?”

His mouth curved upwards, causing her heart to turn over. She couldn’t help reciprocating with another smile.

“Actually I do know one person.”

When she didn’t reveal anything else, his eyes narrowed.

“But you’re not going to tell me who it is because it’s none of my business. Is that what you’re saying?”

“No—” she protested, embarrassed that Giles could hear them. “Not at all—I just don’t want to bore you with the details of my personal life when you’re such a busy man and have a thriving company to run.”

She was trying to remain professional so she wouldn’t endanger her business relationship with him. But it seemed as if everything she was saying now caused his features to harden a little more.

“If you bored me, do you honestly think I would have driven from St Hippolyte to be here with you this early in the morning?”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She averted her eyes, not knowing what to believe. All she knew was that by some miracle her hope of spending time with him this trip had just been granted. She never wanted it to end.

“The truth is, I already knew some of the Alsatian wines were excellent. But I have to admit it was my grandfather who put the idea in my head to come here.”

“The one who started the restaurants to honor his wife?” Luc interjected.

Rachel couldn’t have been more surprised. “Yes—how did you know about that?”

“I told Philippe to do some homework for me so I could better serve you.”

Rachel had had no idea Luc had gone to those lengths. No wonder he hadn’t asked her a lot of questions about the family business last night. He hadn’t needed to because his secretary had done it for him.

He left nothing to chance. The knowledge made him even more remarkable in her eyes.

“My grandfather has been ill. About three weeks ago he asked me to go through an old trunk for him and sort out his memorabilia.

“I’m making a journal of his life, so I was excited to see old letters and pictures he’d kept.

“When I handed him some photos to identify, I learned things I’d never known before. He heard I was leaving for France on another wine-buying trip, and urged me to come to Thann to look up an old French friend he’d met in Italy during the Second World War. Apparently they lost track of each other in the intervening years.”

“Ah, oui?” Giles spoke up. “What was his name?”

“Louis Delacroix.”

Giles smacked his forehead with his palm. “Sacré bleu—Louis? Did you hear that, Luc?”

“I did,” her host murmured, staring at her with a strange new light in his eyes that made her legs grow weak.

“Louis was a good friend of mine,” Giles explained, “but he died of pneumonia four years ago. Before he became ill, he went to live with his younger sister in Ribeauville.”

Rachel was crushed by the news. “Oh, I’m sorry, not only for your loss, but for my grandfather’s. He was eager to talk to him and reminisce about the old days. I have pictures I brought with me.”

The older man’s eyes dimmed for a moment. “Many of us from Thann were in the war. Not everyone came back, but Louis did.”

“So did you, thank goodness. It was Louis who told Grandfather that Alsace produced the best white wine in the world. Of course my grandmother Lucia argued that Italian wine was better.

“Grandfather asked me to look him up so he could tell me which vintner in the region made the best white wine. After what you’ve told me, I have no doubt it was Chartier.

“When I couldn’t find any ‘Delacroix’s listed in the phone directory, I asked the hotel concierge his opinion. He told me the Domaine Chartier.”

“You’ve made our day,” Luc declared in a husky voice.

“Hasn’t she, Giles?”

“Mais oui!” The news had caused the old man’s expression to brighten again. “Your coming here is incredible!” he admitted.

Rachel found it pretty unbelievable too.

“I tell you what, Mademoiselle Valentine. Tomorrow we will drive to Ribeauville and pay Louis’s sister a visit.”

“Could we?” she cried eagerly. “Do you think she’d be willing to talk to my grandfather on the phone?”

He lifted his hands in a typical French gesture. “She will talk until his ear drops off.”

While Rachel laughed, Luc said, “I have an even better idea, Giles. While you make arrangements with Solange for tomorrow, I’ll take care of Ms Valentine today. We’ll tour the vineyards and en route she can sample the wines you picked out for her. I’ll get in touch with you later.”

“Parfait.” Giles packed the bottles in a carton. “I’ll put this out in the car for you.”

After he left, Luc’s gaze trapped hers. “How does that plan sound to you?”

Though a little voice in her head warned her not to read too much into this, another part of her was screaming to go with him.

She moistened her lips, feeling a sudden nervous excitement over being with this arresting man who by some magic had caused her to abandon common sense.

“If you’re sure.”

He flicked her a questioning glance. “What’s going on in that intelligent mind of yours?”

It could never be as brilliant as his. She had to think fast not to give her deepest reservation away.

“When my grandfather recovers, I’m going to bring him to Thann. Since he and Giles were friends with Louis, I’d like the two of them to meet. They’re both remarkable people.”

“Agreed. Otherwise your relative wouldn’t have such a kind and compassionate granddaughter worrying about him. Every grandfather should be so lucky.”

Stop saying these things to me, Luc. Already her attraction to him was too strong. If she were wise, she would leave for Champagne before the day was out.

“Thank you for the compliment, but the truth is, he’s easy to love. Much as I’d like to phone him with this news right now, I’ll wait and let Solange surprise him. A call from her will mean a lot more to him.”

“That’s a moment I would like to witness.”

In an unexpected move, he cupped her elbow. “Shall we go?” His touch sent fingers of awareness through her. She was afraid he could feel her trembling.

Together they walked outside the convent, but she didn’t understand when he led her to her car instead of his estate wagon.

“Follow me to the rental agency. After we drop off your car, I’ll help you check out of your hotel. By the end of the day we’ll get you installed in a hotel renowned in the region.”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to go to all this trouble for me.”

“I like to take care of my potential buyers.”

He opened the car door so she could climb inside. She took the greatest care to make sure her skirt wouldn’t ride up her thighs, but before he shut the door his all-seeing glance took in everything anyway.

He leaned in the open window. “Have you forgotten that without wine buyers like you, I wouldn’t have a business?”

That was true.

To her chagrin she’d been so mesmerized by him, she’d almost forgotten she was a woman who fell into the client category.

But he hadn’t.

CHAPTER THREE

ON THE outskirts of Ribeauville, Rachel turned her head in Luc's direction.

"You live in the most beautiful place on earth." She drew in a deep breath of the warm June air. "Alsace must be one of the world's best kept secrets."

They'd long since checked her out of the hotel and had turned in her car.

The rest of the time she'd been drinking in the passing scenery while Luc gave her a history of the area. He'd enchanted her with a tale of the legend of Thann called the Miracle of the Fir Trees. She could listen to him indefinitely.

He darted her a lingering glance. "At the risk of sounding smug, I admit I feel the same way. I never wanted to be anywhere else but here, or do anything else except the work my father did."

"How wonderful to have that kind of relationship with him."

"I was very fortunate." His arm rested across the back of the seat, as if he needed more room to breathe and relax. His fingers grazed her shoulder. The slightest touch from him whether deliberate or not filled her with yearnings she couldn't tamp down.

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