



LOVE  
*Redesigned*

*French Kiss Connection series*

SLOANE B.  
COLLINS

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**LOVE REDESIGNED**  
**French Kiss Connection Series**

**SLOANE B. COLLINS**



**SOUL MATE PUBLISHING**  
New York

*For Joe,*

*My real life hero for over 26 years*

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## Chapter 1

Everywhere she turned, something reminded her of *him*. Fifteen long years, with no contact from Roman at all—not even a peep—and the memories were still just as fresh as the day they’d parted in Paris.

Earlier this morning, Genevieve Haywood had been relieved to drive away from the airport and leave Paris behind as she and her BFF Daniel headed to the Chateau Gaillard and Winery in the Alsace region. She shook her head, still amazed and a little awestruck that her cousin, Connie Sue, was marrying a man who owned a *real* French chateau.

On the countryside road heading to St. Armand, they’d passed a Farmer’s Market, and Daniel had begged her to stop so he could do some shopping. He’d batted his amber eyes at her, smiled his trademarked, and much-practiced devilish grin, and she was a goner. They’d been best friends for almost twenty years and he knew exactly how to get what he wanted.

Not that she minded . . . he had an eye for bargains. He’d helped furnish her Atlanta apartment using thrift store furniture, and given it his interior designer flair, so it was her perfect retreat.

And how she wished she was there right now, away from France, and away from the memories.

“I’m going to need at least an hour, Gigi.” Daniel craned his neck, trying to look everywhere at once. “OMG! They have leather goods . . . and linens! Ooh, look at the all food vendors! I think I’m in love. I’m off to explore.” He kissed her cheek. “See ya, Sugar!”

He dashed off before she could argue. More than a few heads, both women *and* men, turned to follow his progress.

Most of the time she felt dowdy compared to Daniel, but he’d forced her to go shopping before this trip, and he’d bullied her into some chic outfits. Another perk of having a best friend with flair. The outfit he’d picked for her today gave her confidence, even if it was just a white tee, dark jeans, and a belted taupe sweater. The

low-heeled dark brown boots were an indulgence, but she'd drawn the line at the spike heels he'd wanted her to buy.

Seriously, where would she wear spike heels when she worked on her feet all day at the bakery, then collapsed at night?

Wandering among the carts, she took her time inspecting each small patisserie cart, the lovely handmade baskets, and the myriad cheese vendors set up in the area. This was her business, after all. Good idea to size up what other bakers were doing, even halfway across the world. Sweet after sweet, dessert after dessert. By the time she made it past the last bakery vendor, her mouth was watering.

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her that breakfast on the plane had been hours ago. Maybe a snack to tide them over on the way to her cousin's place?

She wandered into another section of the open-air market, this time filled with cart after cart of lavender, and everything you could do with it. The dried lavender bouquets hanging on a cart reminded her of the funny little old French woman who had lived on the first floor of Roman's building. She used to give them the most delectable pastries wrapped in violet bags, with lavender sprigs tied into the ribbon.

Bread loaves spilled out of baskets, and her stomach growled again. They used to buy fresh-baked bread at the open-air market near Roman's studio apartment and take it back to eat on the balcony.

She stopped cold. Thinking about him wasn't a good idea. Broken hearts were supposed to hurt less over time, weren't they? But this . . .

Even now, it hurt.

Moving on, she made a concerted effort to set Roman and her still-wounded heart aside.

She breathed deep. There were several flower vendors, and the heady aroma of fresh flowers perfumed the air. She wanted to bottle the enticing aroma of food and flowers mixed together and take it home to Atlanta.

Atlanta was home. Normalcy. Security.

And she had to get back there for her soon-to-be-burgeoning business. Her win on "Southern Belle Cake-Off" had brought

attention to her cake designs and a flood of orders for the next few months. She'd hated being on television, but the exposure had been perfect for her business plans.

So until she could get back home, she'd be the perfect bridesmaid. Her cousin deserved nothing less, after all. Connie Sue didn't need to know that being here, in France, reminded her of . . . the man she *wasn't* going to think about, and how painful those memories were.

She mentally shook herself, straightened her shoulders. The bread vendor standing at his cart caught her eye. She smiled, and pointed to a couple of loaves of bread for him to add to her purchases.

After paying for the bread, she moved down the lane to the next vendor. She leaned forward to examine the labels on the mustard jars. A chime sounded, and she pulled her smart phone out of her pocket. She clicked on the email app only to see the newsletter from a cake artist she had recently befriended.

She sighed, disappointed. *Still* nothing from the bank about her small business loan application.

*Why is it taking so long to hear from them? Will it be good news, or another rejection?*

Tucking the phone back in her pocket, she heard a peal of laughter behind her, and idly looked around. On the other side of the aisle, a couple of women were talking to a well-built man wearing a beat-up black leather jacket. One of them ran her fingers down his arm, flirting.

Tall and muscular, his worn jeans hugged his backside, showcasing long legs, ending in motorcycle boots. Black-as-sin hair curled at his collar, just long enough to blow in the breeze.

She stood frozen in place, staring at his back. Willing him to turn around to confirm her worst fears, but terrified he would.

It couldn't be. Not here. The one person she never wanted to see again. He was on her mind, being here in France . . . that's all. It *couldn't* be him.

Her heart raced, and she wanted to run, but her legs weren't cooperating.

He turned around and glanced at her, caught her staring. He winked and grinned at her.



Her body relaxed, and she sighed, very relieved.

*Not him, of course.*

She felt a little silly. But it *could* have been Roman. They were only about five hundred kilometers from Paris, after all. Close enough for a day trip. What if he really wasn't in Milan?

*Wait a minute. Why would he be here?*

There was nothing way out here but cows, grapes, lavender, and wine. Plenty of wine. Nonetheless, Paris was still too close for comfort. "Idiot," she muttered.

*"Excusez-moi?"*

She jerked around to see an older man standing by the pastry booth.

*"Puis-je vous aider?"* he asked.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Ah, American?" He sniffed.

"Yes."

"May I help you?"

She picked up a prettily wrapped package of *kirsch bouchette* off the shelf. "I'll take this, please." It may not be as good as what she would be making for the wedding parties, but at least she wouldn't show up empty-handed at the chateau.

Digging in her pocket, she grabbed some Euros and handed them to him, then tucked the package into her tote bag and ducked around the corner of the booth.

*"One moment, s'il vous plait, Mademoiselle!"*

She looked behind her to see the vendor hurrying toward her.

"You forgot your change."

"Oh, stupid me." *I guess I'm a bit scattered today.* She spared another glance back at the good-looking man and the women fawning over him. She turned back to the vendor. "Thank you."

She clutched her bundles close and walked between stalls of linens. Anxious to be at the chateau and safely locked away with her baking, she looked for Daniel. She dodged shoppers, heading for the car at the opposite end of the market. Looking around the textile booths crowding the sidewalk, she finally spotted his perfectly gelled, moussed, and tousled dark-brown hair.

"There you are! Are you ready to go?" She tried to pull him away from the array of materials, her tone sharper than she'd

intended.

“Whoa. What’s got you all fired up?” Daniel gripped her arms, holding her steady.

“Nothing.” She tried not to snap this time.

“Riiight,” he drawled, and stared at her, lips pursed.

“We . . . we need to get to the chateau.”

He looked her over. “Honey, you look like the hounds of Hell are after you. What happened?”

“I just want to leave.” *So I can get away from my Parisian ghosts.* “Now. Please.”

“I’m almost done. I want to get some of this fabulous *peau de soie* to make throw pillows for my living room. What do you think?” He held up a bolt of material so she could see it.

“Fine. It’s pretty. I’ll wait in the car.”

He folded his arms across his chest and thrust his hip sideways. “Genevieve Grace, I *am* your best friend, aren’t I? What is going on? You can tell me anything.”

“I will, but not now!”

“Let me just pay for this and I’ll be there in a minute.” He leaned in to whisper to her. “What do you think of the guy behind the counter? Yumolicious, right?”

She glanced at the waiting vendor. Tall, blonde, good-looking, but not too pretty. Just Daniel’s type. She’d never get him out of there if there was a chance for him to flirt.

Time to change tactics. “I have fresh bread,” she tempted him, holding the bag up like a carrot on a stick, and walking backward. If there was anything he loved more than shopping, it was food. So unfair he never got fat.

His eyes gleamed. “Yum. Go on to the car and I’ll be there in a minute. Oh, here, take some of these bags, please. Wait till you see the leather messenger bag I bought.”

Finding the car, she stowed the shopping bags in the back. She climbed into the passenger seat and set the bag with the bread on the floor between her legs. She checked her email for the hundredth time since they’d landed, but nothing yet.

A few minutes later, Daniel got in the car, started the engine, and pulled out onto the road. He thrust his hand out in front of her. “Bread, please.”

She grabbed a loaf out of the bag, tore a chunk off, and handed it to him.

He bit into the bread and chewed. His mouth full, he mumbled, "Okay, now spill."

"I could have sworn I saw *him* back there."

Daniel swallowed the bread and glanced at her. "Him who?"

She shot a look at him. "*Him.*"

"Who, *Roman*? The guy who broke your heart?"

She nodded. "Thank God it *wasn't* him. I'm not ready."

"Last I heard he'd moved to Milan several years ago."

"That's what the gossip magazines said."

"Wait a minute. Back up. You read the gossip rags now?"

"No," she said. "I just remembered seeing a while ago that he'd moved there."

"Uh huh. Well, I heard it was after he broke up with that model he'd been seeing. She went nuts and sicced her husband's bodyguards on him."

"She wasn't married . . ." *Oops, caught.*

He snickered. "Thought you weren't keeping track of him."

"Kind of hard not to when he's splashed in all the magazines."

"*Fashion* magazines, darling."

"Some regular magazines . . . depending on who he's dating."

"Yeah, like actresses, models, socialites. He's in high demand, and not just for his designs, if you know what I mean."

Blood rushed to her cheeks, and she squirmed. *Boy, do I ever know about that.* "I know nothing about the fashion world. I know pastry. I wear chef coats most of the time—"

"And you totally rock them, Sugar."

She laughed. "Just one more reason he and I weren't suited. Besides, he made his choice a long time ago. I wasn't good enough for him." She grabbed the bottle of water in the cup holder and drank, soothing her parched throat.

"He was an idiot fifteen years ago, and he's an idiot today. And if I ever come face to face with him, I'll tell him just that."

"You would not. You're too nice."

"Look, he hurt you in more ways than one. If you hadn't been so upset, been in such a hurry, the accident may not—"

"Stop." She held up her hand. "I don't want to talk about it."

She looked out the window at the acres and acres of sprouting grapevines they passed. The countryside was so charming, and now she was too preoccupied to give it the appreciation it deserved.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s painful. We’ll be hidden away at the chateau soon enough, Sugar. You’re gonna be so busy baking for the wedding events you won’t know if you’re coming or going.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand. “I’m so glad you came with me. Why the hell I agreed to be a bridesmaid *and* make the wedding cake and pastries for the events, I’ll never know.”

“She’s your favorite cousin, that’s why.”

“She’s my only cousin.”

“True.”

Daniel steered the car through the portico and drove up the long drive to the Gaillard Chateau and Winery. Nearing the chateau, he braked. They both looked out the window at the old stone building. It loomed against the sky, tall, gray, and imposing. And so very French.

“Sugar, I don’t think we’re in Atlanta anymore.”

Roman Duchaine sat on the small antique settee, drumming his fingers on his knee. He shifted again, trying to find a more comfortable position. He flicked a disgusted glance at the uncomfortable piece of furniture. This was made for women, not men of his height.

Tucked away behind the carved folding screen, the bride-to-be was changing into the gown, chattering to Mignon, his assistant. He hoped Constance liked the wedding dress he had created. He’d labored over the design, wanting it to be perfect for her, and his cousin.

It had taken him by surprise when Francois chose to marry this American. He had hired her last year to promote the winery, and fallen quickly for her. He who had always sworn to remain single after his disastrous first marriage. But she had turned out to be good for Francois, and his twin daughters, Melisande and Arabella. Francois’ emails since they met had been full of anecdotes about Constance. She brought light and a Southern charm into the dark chateau, and into his cousin’s life.

He'd first met Constance at Christmas when he decided he couldn't stand another holiday without family, and he'd spent several weeks at the chateau. Seeing Francois so happy with his new family had been a driving factor in Roman's decision to return home and settle down in the village where he'd grown up.

It was time to put his ghosts to rest and have a family of his own.

Standing up, he crossed the marble floor, unable to keep still. So much history in this cavernous ballroom. The aged silk covering the walls had held up well through the years. Francois had recently had the panels on the lower half of the wall restored in preparation for the wedding.

He just wanted to finish the wedding dress and four attendant gowns, and be done with everything. He rubbed a hand over the pang in his chest. He was truly happy for his cousin, but all the love in the air reminded him of what he had found, and lost, so long ago.

"Roman? Hellooo."

Constance's voice wrenched him from his reverie and he looked up at the bride-to-be standing on the dressmaker's platform. Shoulder-length, honey blonde hair, upturned nose, sweet smile, and sweeter disposition. She was the classic American girl-next-door he had once read about. But as the marketing director for his cousin's winery, she was a force to be reckoned with, using charm to get what she wanted accomplished.

"You okay? I don't think you heard a word I've said."

"*Je suis désolé*, Constance. What did you say?"

"I've just been yammerin' on about this dress. It's exquisite! I'm so excited you're designing my wedding dress. I couldn't believe it when my sweetie told me his cousin was the world-famous designer Roman Duchaine. Thank you for doing this for us." She grinned. "Okay, for me. I know you don't want anyone to know you're designing the dresses for us, but I can't help feeling extra special."

"It has been my pleasure, *Mademoiselle*," he said, and kissed the back of her hand, making her giggle.

Glancing behind her, she said, “The only thing I’m worried about is the long train. I’m scared to death I’ll trip and ruin it.” She turned around to face the mirror. “Why is the mirror covered up?”

“Because I want to make sure everything is perfect before you see the full effect.”

The door to the ballroom opened and Mignon slipped back into the room. She carried a long delicate veil.

“Ah, the *pièce de résistance*. This is why I insisted the dress have a long train.” He took the veil from Mignon and stepped on the platform next to the beaming bride. Using pins, he secured it in her hair, then stepped down to adjust the folds as it caressed the back of the dress.

“This is your ‘old’ and ‘borrowed’ piece for the tradition. The veil has been in my family for two hundred years. Every bride in our family, or marrying into our family, has worn it. Francois asked me to design your dress to complement it.”

“Hurry, please!” She looked down at the dress. “I’m dyin’ to see what I look like!”

He stepped around the platform and pulled the cloth off the antique mirror. “Then wait no more. What do you think of your dress?”

She gasped, staring at her reflection. He kept his eyes on her face, mentally crossing his fingers, and hoping she was pleased with his design.

The pale ecru satin and overlay of tulle enhanced her rosy skin and blonde hair. Jeweled spaghetti straps gave way to a plunging v-neckline. Intricate silver beading on the bodice continued down the waist, and into the skirt. The seamstress had followed his pattern exactly, and he thought it was well-worth all the revisions he had gone through on the design.

Only a tall woman could carry off such a dress, and it was perfect for Constance, emphasizing her height and slender figure.

He met her gaze in the mirror in time to see tears well in her eyes.

“Do not dare cry—I forbid it! *Tu es belle*. You are beautiful, and supposed to be full of joy.” The last thing he needed was a weepy woman on his hands.

She gave him a watery smile. “This is the most stunning gown I’ve ever seen in my life.” She angled to see the veil flowing down her back. “It’s exquisite! You’re an absolute genius. Thank you so much for my dress. I may have to cry after all.”

She sniffed, and he whisked a handkerchief out of the pocket of his jeans, handed it to her.

She mopped up her tears, and fingered the veil. “I can’t wait for Gigi to see this veil. She loves anything vintage, and this definitely qualifies.”

“Which one is she?”

“She’s my cousin from back home in Georgia. You’ll love her. Their plane landed in Paris early this morning, and they’re on the way here. I just hope the measurements she sent me are right so you won’t have much more to do on her dress.”

“When do the other bridesmaids arrive?”

“In a couple of days. Gigi’s coming early to get ready for the showers and the party in the village.”

“They are all staying here?”

“Yes. I wish you would stay here, too, at least through the wedding. You’ve just moved back home and I know Francois is happy you’re here for good. There’s plenty of room for you so you don’t have to go back and forth between our place and yours.”

“*Oui*, there is. But I am getting used to my new house. Besides, the chateau is about to be overrun with women,” he said, grinning.

“You should be warned I’m a born matchmaker. I’ll find a woman—the right woman—for you one of these days.”

He sighed. There had been plenty of women in his life over the years. But none of them were *her*. “I’m afraid the right woman does not exist for me anymore.”

“What do you mean ‘anymore’? Was there someone once?”

“Yes, a long time ago.”

“What happened?”

“She left Paris to marry someone else, and broke my heart. So now I am . . . as you Americans say . . . playing the field, perhaps?” He shrugged, hoping she would leave the subject, and his single life, alone. He would find the right woman on his own terms, and would not be subjected to the machinations of others.

“We’ll just see about that,” she drawled, batting her green eyes at him.

He and Mignon helped Constance off the platform. Mignon guided her behind the screen, carefully holding the train and veil off the ground. He walked into the small study off the ballroom to make notes on the alterations needed for the wedding gown. Sitting at the desk, he opened his notebook. A few moments later he heard Constance squeal.

“You’re here!”

*It must be the cousin.* He grinned, listening to their excited chatter.

Fifteen minutes later, Constance stuck her head into the study. “My cousin is here! Mignon is helping her put the dress on, so come on out and meet her. I think you two might just hit it off.” She grinned at him.

*Already beginning to play matchmaker?*

He rolled his eyes and stood, then walked back into the ballroom. Opening the notebook again, he looked for his notes on the cousin’s dress. He stopped behind the platform, and glanced up at the woman wearing the blush pink bridesmaid gown. Her curves were accented perfectly by his design. A good start. Now to check the fit of the material.

“*Bonjour, Gigi.* I am . . .” His words trailed off as he beheld the woman reflected in the mirror. A delicate heart-shaped face, delectable lips, olive green eyes widening as they met his in the mirror. Long wavy blonde hair spilled down her back.

Golden hair he had once gloried in as it spread across his pillow.

“Genevieve . . .” he whispered, his voice like gravel.



## Chapter 2

*It can't be.* Genevieve stared at him in the mirror. She couldn't breathe, couldn't hear anything but a strange roaring in her ears. Her head spun.

She slowly turned around, willing herself not to collapse in a heap.

It was him. This time it really *was* him.

Eyes the color of her favorite chocolate truffle glared at her from beneath thick black brows. His silky black hair was shorter now, and he'd grown a beard. His full lips . . . the same that had once explored every inch of her body . . . were pressed so tightly together they were almost white. Had he always been so big, so broad? He seemed even more imposing now.

And damned if he wasn't even more ruggedly handsome than he was before.

"What are *you* doing here?" she croaked.

He turned on her cousin. "*This* is your cousin?"

Connie Sue flinched and stepped back, the smile slipping from her face as she looked at the two of them. "Yes. Why?"

He glared at Genevieve. "You lied about your name as well?" he ground out.

Lied? Lied about what? Her muscles tensed. *What the hell is he talking about?* He had a lot of nerve calling her a liar when he's the one who had kept things from her, stomped all over her heart. Dumped her for someone else. Someone who could further his career.

"I never lied to you. It's my nickname, short for Genevieve Grace. When we were little, Connie Sue couldn't pronounce my name, so she started calling me Gigi, and it stuck."

*You're babbling, you idiot. Shut up!*

She'd loved the way he said her name in his French accent too much to mention her nickname. So romantic. She'd even told him once, in the heat of the moment, how much she loved the way he said her name.

“Who is Connie Sue?”

She pointed at her cousin who stood next to the platform, her mouth gaping open in shock.

Connie Sue raised her hand. “I am.”

“Isn’t your name Constance?”

“It is. Constance Suzanne Rayburn. We’re from the South. You know—Jim Bob, John Boy, Connie Sue . . .” Her voice dwindled down and she looked at Genevieve. “How do you two know each other?”

“It was a long time ago. She is *nothing* to me now.” He stalked across the room and walked out, slamming the door. The chandelier clanked from the force of his anger.

Gigi stepped off the platform, her knees wobbling. *I need to sit down.* She sank down in the chair next to the antique folding screen. Black spots danced in front of her eyes, and she bent over, put her head between her knees.

“What crawled up his butt and died? I’ve never seen him act like that,” Connie Sue huffed.

“*Why* didn’t you tell me *Roman Duchaine* was the designer you hired to design the clothes for the wedding?”

“He’s Francois’ cousin. Roman asked us not to tell anyone—he doesn’t want the paparazzi to find out and swarm the chateau. This is our day, and he wants the focus to be on *us*. Besides, you’ve never been much into fashion, so I didn’t think it would’ve mattered to you.”

*Francois’ cousin? Oh, Lord.*

She sat up slowly, memories of a picnic they’d once gone on flooding her mind. Lying under a tree in a field of sunflowers, he had told her about his mother, and how she’d walked out when he was eight. His father had plunged headfirst into a bottle and resurfaced five years later only to be buried. His father’s sister had taken Roman in, more out of a sense of duty than anything, and he’d grown up with a cousin.

But he’d never said they lived in a chateau or where it was.

Dropping her head into her hands, Genevieve muttered, “I *knew* I shouldn’t have come.”

Connie Sue touched her shoulder. “Will you *please* tell me what’s going on? I can’t imagine where you two could have met.

Or when.”

“Remember when I was studying in Paris at *Le Cordon Bleu* in ‘98? And Dad had his heart attack?”

Connie Sue nodded. “You had to rush home.” Realization dawned. “*Merde*. Don’t tell me *Roman* was the one you were seeing.”

Genevieve nodded.

“In all these years, you never told me anything more.”

“I was nineteen and heartbroken. Not something you confide in a fourteen year old cousin.” *Or what happened afterward*. “Besides, I had my hands full between dad, the car accident, and having to go to work.”

“He may be related to Francois, but nobody treats my cousin like that and gets away with it.”

Scrambling out of the chair, Genevieve’s feet tangled in the long skirt. She grabbed Connie Sue’s arm before she could follow him. “No! Leave it. There’s too much water under *that* bridge.”

Connie Sue pulled her into a hug. “I’m so sorry. I never had any idea you two knew each other.”

“I never told anyone. Then, when he started making a name for himself in the fashion world, I *really* didn’t want anyone to know.”

“Do you want to go back to Atlanta?”

“No. I wouldn’t do that to you. I’m committed to making the pastries for your parties, and the wedding cake. I want to do it for you and Francois.” She squeezed Connie Sue and stepped back. “Y’all went through too much to get to your wedding day. I want to see you married to your Prince Charming in your fairytale wedding.”

“Besides . . .” Genevieve forced a smile and held the skirt out, gently swishing it back and forth. “I love this dress! I’d never be able to afford an original Roman Duchaine dress on my own.” She needed to keep things light—no way would she ruin this joyful time for her cousin.

Connie Sue brightened. “I can’t wait for you to see my wedding dress. And the dresses for the twins! They look just like little fairies.”

“You’re going to be a great mom. I’m thrilled for you. When do I get to meet the girls and Francois?”

“Tonight. Melly and Bella are napping right now, and Francois couldn’t move his meeting this afternoon.” She turned Genevieve toward the mirror.

“Do you really like the dress? They’re all the same blush color, but I had him design a different one for each attendant.”

Genevieve looked at herself in the large mirror, fighting the urge to squirm. “It’s truly exquisite. Almost as if he’d known it was for me . . .” Her voice trailed off. He had once promised her he would design a dress for her only, something no other woman would ever wear.

“Well, don’t you look purty,” Daniel drawled, walking into the room. “Careful, Gigi, or you’ll outshine the bride.”

“No way. Look at her. Peaches is radiant.”

The bride-to-be rolled her eyes. “Are you ever going to stop calling me that silly nickname? I am marrying Count Francois Bertrand Gaillard. I’m going to be Countess Constance Gaillard.” She tilted her nose in the air and struck an affected pose.

Genevieve snatched a pillow off the settee and tossed it at her cousin.

“You’re Connie Sue Rayburn, Miss Georgia Peach 2004, and you always will be.”

She ducked as Connie Sue threw the pillow back at her, but her foot caught in the long skirt. She tried to right herself but heard fabric rip.

“Must you be so careless?” said a deep voice from the doorway.

Roman stalked across the room. He loomed over her, invading her space.

She cringed inwardly, caught a subtle whiff of his scent and shrank back.

Something flashed in his eyes, a storm of emotions rioted through their depths until shutters closed her out. Kept her from looking too closely.

*Hurt?*

He squatted down and sifted through the hem of the blush-colored organza.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tear this gorgeous dress.”

He glanced up at her, an inscrutable look on his face. “It can be repaired.”

He stood up and turned around.

She glanced at Daniel. He stepped forward, hands clenching into fists, his face red as a stop sign.

*Crap.*

“You’re Roman Duchaine,” Daniel said through gritted teeth, contempt dripping from his voice.

*Oh, no.*

Roman inclined his head. “And you are?”

Daniel strode forward. “You sonuvabitch.” His fist flew forward, hitting Roman in the jaw.

Roman’s head snapped back from the force of the punch.

She froze. Her eyes opened wide. Had he really just *punched* Roman?

By the stunned look on his face, Daniel couldn’t believe he’d done it either.

“What the hell?” Roman yelled.

Tension filled the room, and she was afraid a fight would escalate. She forced herself between the two angry men, facing Daniel, and backed into Roman.

His hands gripped her waist, fingers digging into her flesh. A wave of longing swept through her at his touch.

God help her, she still wanted him.

Desperately.

*I am so screwed.*

Daniel pushed forward, and she put her hands on his shoulders, lightly rubbing them. “Stop it.”

He tried to pull from her grasp, but she tightened her grip. “Daniel, look at me. It’s okay.”

He met her eyes and stepped back. Lifting his arm, he pointed at Roman. “You stay away from her, or you’ll answer to me.”

“Not a problem. I have no interest in *her*.” He shoved her aside and stalked across the room, his footsteps echoing in the cavernous ballroom.

Her heart sank.

“Crazy *Américains*. Always think violence is the way to solve things.” He turned to Genevieve but pointed at Daniel. “Does he raise a hand to you? Does he hurt you?”

She shook her head, bewildered.

He opened the door but didn’t turn around. “Leave the dress with my assistant, and take care not to further destroy it.”

She watched him walk out the door, this time closing it quietly.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God. That *hurts!*” Daniel cradled his hand.

“I *cannot* believe you just punched him.”

“Me either. He was here, in person, and I remembered what he did to you, and I got pissed off. I don’t care if he is some big shot designer. No one disses my girl.” He cupped her chin and tilted her face up. “You okay, Sugar?”

She nodded. “Let’s go get some ice for your hand.”

### Chapter 3

Connie Sue opened the door to the guestroom. "This is your room."

Genevieve walked into the small guestroom and looked around at the pale violet walls and elegant furnishings. "I don't believe it. There's a crown over the bed!" A small golden canopy hung on the wall, and grayish-purple fabric draped down to frame the bed.

Connie Sue giggled. "Makes you feel like a princess, doesn't it?"

"This is the most elegant room I've ever seen. I'm almost afraid to touch anything." She walked over to Connie Sue and hugged her. "You've come a long way from a farmhouse outside Atlanta, baby."

"Sometimes I have to pinch myself to believe this is really happening."

"All funnin' aside. I have to ask, since your folks aren't around anymore. Does he treat you right? Make you happy?"

Connie Sue sat down on the bed. "Absolutely. He totally makes me happy. He completes me. Took us awhile to smooth things out, but we made it. And I adore Melly and Bella. I think I'm going to love being a mom."

Genevieve opened the suitcase waiting for her on the luggage bench by the closet. "Good, because I might have to let Daniel loose on him if he doesn't treat you right." She picked up her robe and toiletry bag, shook out the dress she would wear for dinner later.

"I cannot believe he punched Roman! I didn't know he had it in him. I always thought of him more as a lover than a fighter," Connie Sue remarked.

"He learned to defend himself growing up. He told me once it was hard growing up in a small town in the South, knowing he was different. I guess he got to be kinda scrappy in fights. I'm so

sorry it caused a scene. This is a happy time for you, and I don't want anything to interfere with that."

"It's not your fault. I just wish I'd known." Connie Sue twitched at the duvet on the bed. "Sooo . . ."

"What?"

"I assume by Daniel's reaction he knew about Roman. How come you never told me? Did your dad know?"

Genevieve shook her head. "No, I never told Dad. It was long over by the time he was in recovery, and I didn't feel comfortable telling him about my broken heart." She stroked a hand over Connie Sue's hair. "I'm sorry I never told you about it. Like I said, you were too young, and I really didn't want to talk about it. To anyone. Daniel knows because he'd called me once and Roman answered the phone. So he bullied it out of me when I got home. You know how he can be." She pulled her boots off, and curled her toes in the luxuriously thick gray carpet. She sighed. *How do women wear heels every day?*

"So, are you going to tell me how you met him?"

"I'm dying to take a shower after that long flight. Can we talk later?"

"Sure. I'll be right here waiting." Connie Sue leaned back against the bank of pillows and crossed her legs.

*Shoot. Doesn't she ever give up? I just want to be alone to process all of this. Maybe have a good cry while I'm at it.*

She walked into the bathroom and shut the door. Hoped if she dawdled long enough, her cousin would get tired of waiting and leave. Her mind was still reeling over seeing Roman again. *Why does the world have to be such a small place?*

Sliding the shower curtain back, she almost whimpered. She'd always wanted a showerhead that hung from the ceiling and disbursed water like rain. She turned the faucets on to let the water get hot, and glanced at her reflection in the antique mirror hanging on the wall.

She peered closer, noticing the faint lines fanning from her eyes. *Why is it men age so well, and women just age? It's not fair he's only gotten better looking the older he gets. Even the gray sprinkled in his hair and beard make him look distinguished.*



She straightened up, mentally slapping herself. *Stop thinking about him! You're over him. You are!*

His voice . . . it still had that velvety texture, deep and delicious, smooth as the finest dark chocolate she preferred for baking. He'd literally had her at 'bonjour' the day they met.

*If I'm so over him, then why do his words echo in my brain?*

She huffed out a breath, undressed, and got in the shower. The warm water cascaded over her, washing away the tiredness from the long plane ride. She took her time and relaxed for the first time that day, letting the hot water soothe her tired muscles. Her stomach growled and she realized she was actually hungry. And if she was hungry, Daniel would be starving.

Getting out of the shower, she dried off and put her thick robe on. Opening the door to let the steam escape, she sighed in exasperation.

Connie Sue sat on a small sofa in front of the window.

"You still here? I figured you would have gotten bored waiting for me." She walked out of the bathroom to get her hairbrush, then noticed her suitcase was missing. "What did you do?"

"I put everything away for you. I also had a snack brought up since I'm sure you're starving." Connie Sue pointed at a tray of cheese and crackers, then poured a glass of wine and handed it to her. "This is the new sparkling wine Francois has been experimenting on."

Genevieve sipped, and the bubbles burst on her tongue. "Mmm, yummy."

Connie Sue rolled her eyes. "Oh for God's sake. Don't you know you're supposed to sniff the bouquet first? Then sip it, and savor the flavor."

"Well la-dee-da. Look at you becoming a wine snob."

"Honey, by the time you go home, you'll be as knowledgeable as I am."

"I doubt it. This is *your* business. Cakes are my area of expertise." She walked back to the bathroom and picked up her face moisturizer. Might as well try to battle back some of those lines.

Connie Sue leaned against the door frame. "I've been patient, so would you please tell me how you met Roman? This is kind of

freaking me out. You've done everything you can to avoid talking about this, but I can tell you're hurting."

"You aren't going to leave me alone until I do, are you?"

"Nope. Now spill." She checked her watch. "There's not much time before dinner."

"Is he eating here tonight?"

Connie Sue shook her head. "No, he said he had things to take care of at home when I asked."

She should have been relieved—they'd be thrown together enough over the next few days.

"So come on, out with it. Tell me how you met."

"I'd been in Paris about three weeks, and was into the first intensive course, Basic Patisserie. One afternoon I was heading back to my flat when it started to rain. Money was tight, so I usually walked to and from my classes. Rain is the norm in Paris, but this was a real thunderstorm. By the time I crossed the street, I was almost soaked. All of a sudden, someone held an umbrella over my head."

She still remembered the thrill that had rushed through her when she looked up at him for the first time. "I've never told anyone this, much less admitted it to myself, but when I looked at him, I thought 'Oh, there you are. Where've you been?' It was like I'd been waiting for him all my life, but didn't realize it."

"That's kind of how I felt the first time I met my Francois. We just clicked," Connie Sue said.

Genevieve met her cousin's eyes, full of empathy. She did understand.

"What did he look like when he was younger?"

"His hair was a just a little longer, but he didn't have a beard back then. He was real lean, and so tall he made even me feel short. He was wearing a black leather jacket—the ultimate in bad-boy wear. I was a little afraid of him, but only because he just seemed so . . . right. I mean, he sheltered me from the rain, and took me to the outdoor café right there, so there were other people around. But then he smiled at me . . ."

*That smile warmed me from head to toe, the heat lingering in certain areas.*

*"Venezabri de la pluie," he said, handing her a linen napkin.*

*She shrugged and wiped the rain off her face. "My French is not so good yet."*

*"You are Americáin?" he asked in English, his voice a deep, delicious rumble in a French accent.*

*A shiver of awareness trembled through her. "Yes, I am."*

*"I said to come in out of the rain."*

*"Oh. Thanks for rescuing me." She gestured to his jacket. "I guess you're my knight in black leather." Did I really just say that?*

*He slowly smiled, full sensual lips framed even, white teeth. Black hair, chiseled cheekbones, a broad forehead. The way his cocoa brown eyes looked her up and down appreciatively made her feel all woman.*

*"It does not look like the rain will stop anytime soon. Would you care to join me for a café au láit?" He pulled a chair out from the table for her, and she sank into it.*

*A waiter appeared, and he ordered coffee for them both.*

*She'd fallen for him from the moment he smiled his devastating smile at her.*

Something hit her head and Genevieve jumped. She picked up the wadded napkin her cousin had thrown at her and tossed it in the trash.

"Must have been some good memory."

"We talked for hours that day. He got some towels from a waiter at the café so I could dry off, and he let me wear his jacket."

"I'm assuming you continued seeing him?"

"We were almost inseparable from then on. When he wasn't at work, and I was out of school, we were together. He showed me all of Paris, and when he could borrow a car, we'd take long drives to the country . . ." She broke off, picked up the hair dryer and faced the mirror.

"Did you love him?"

She met her cousin's eyes in the reflection.

"Desperately."

"Did he love you?"

"He never said it, but I hoped he did. I guess I was wrong."

"What happened when you had to come home?"

Talking about Roman was hard enough. But talking about that, after she'd come home, the accident . . . There were some things

best left alone. She plastered a smile and dodged, saying, “If we’re going to get to dinner, I need to finish getting ready.”

Her cousin sighed and pushed off the door frame, squeezed Genevieve’s shoulders. “You can talk to me anytime, sweetie. I hope you know that.”

“I do, thanks. But . . . even though it’s been over for fifteen years . . . it’s still hard to talk about.”

## Chapter 4

Roman slouched in the overstuffed chair in front of his fireplace, bare feet propped up on the coffee table. He sat in the near-dark, brooding, watching the flames dance in the old stone fireplace. Shadows writhed and twisted on the pale walls. He thought he'd done so well blocking *that girl* from his memory.

"Hell," he muttered. Girl nothing. *She's a stunning woman.* Now all he could think about was her, and the way she had embraced Paris, and him, on her adventure in the City of Love.

She once told him it had been her mother's dream to study in Paris at the famed cooking school herself, but it never happened. She had married young, and Genevieve was born nine months later. The love of baking passed from mother to daughter, and Genevieve talked about the many hours they had spent in the kitchen together.

He sank further into the leather chair, sipping the whiskey, wishing it would make him forget the memories washing over him. He'd held her as she cried, told him about the cancer that had eaten away at her mother for a year. Genevieve had been thirteen years old at the time, and charged with being the caregiver since her father worked long hours. Upon her death, she had left a small insurance policy and savings account designated for Genevieve to one day study in Paris. Her father had been livid when he found out, but she had stood up to him to achieve her dream, and her mother's, to study in Paris.

Her determination was one of the many things that drew her to Roman, and he'd been stunned at how quickly he'd fallen in love with her. She had quieted his demons, made him feel loved and cherished.

Like he finally mattered to someone.

How could he have not seen Constance's resemblance to his lost love? Why had he never connected it when Francois introduced them and said she was from Georgia?

The years had not detracted from Genevieve's quiet beauty. But what were the shadows beneath her expressive eyes? What was her life like? *Are she and the husband content? Happy? Do they have children?* Maybe a little girl with Genevieve's green eyes and bouncy blonde hair. And the infectious laugh that had always charmed him.

The hot spurt of jealousy surprised him.

He sipped the whiskey and swallowed, savoring the burn. The door opened and Francois walked in, still impeccably attired in his gray suit and starched white shirt. He turned the light on, and Roman blinked at the brightness.

"Whiskey? My wine cellar is at your disposal, and you choose whiskey." Francois stopped at the bar along the stone wall and pulled a crystal tumbler off the shelf. He crossed the room to the table next to Roman's chair, picked up the bottle, and poured himself a drink. He sat on the sofa and loosened his tie.

"Why are you here?"

Francois set his glass down and looked around the living room. "You have accomplished a great deal of work on the house since last week."

"Are you here for a tour?"

"I wanted to see how you are. You have not answered the phone all evening."

"I didn't want to speak to anyone." He sipped again. "I suppose Constance told you about her cousin."

"She told me a little before dinner. She rushed off for a meeting with the wedding planner after we ate. I had no idea who her cousin was before today. Constance did not know about you either. She said all she knew was Gigi had been seeing someone in Paris." He sipped the whiskey again. "You never talked much about the American after she left. But I know it almost destroyed you. Shall I send her home?"

"No, it is not fair to Constance. Just make sure Genevieve stays out of my way."

"You're *my* family, and my best man. I don't want *you* to stay away. Or to be hurt again."

He set his glass down on the table. "You are my only family, more brother than cousin. I will not let you down."

“She’ll be too busy baking to do much anyway. At least she is not the maid of honor, so you won’t have to escort her down the aisle.”

“Thank God for small favors,” Roman muttered. “What do you think of her husband?”

Francois quirked a brow. “Husband?”

“I think she called him Daniel.”

Francois’ eyes opened wide, and he started to speak, but stopped. He picked up the bottle and poured another drink. “What do *you* think of him?”

He rubbed his sore jaw. “I prefer not to think of him. He must feel threatened by me, or he would not have hit me.”

Francois laughed. “He hit you? I did not hear about this.”

“They do not make a good couple.”

Francois stared at him, and Roman realized he’d spoken aloud.

*I sound like a jealous ass.*

“Don’t be an imbecile. Talk to her. I think it will help.”

“We have nothing to say. She left me to marry someone at home.”

“It’s not my place to say anything, but I’m telling you to speak to her at least once. You will understand why when you do.”

Francois’ cryptic words only irritated him further. “Go home to your fiancée and your daughters, and leave me alone.” A stab of envy pierced his heart.

Francois hesitated, then got up and walked to the door. He looked back once and met Roman’s eyes. Silent now, he turned and walked through the door, closing it behind him.

*Alone at last.*

He heaved himself out of the chair and started toward his bedroom, but stopped and picked up the bottle. Perhaps it would help him sleep.

And forget.

He’d tossed and turned all night, thoughts of Genevieve filling fragmented dreams and every waking moment. He’d finally given up on trying to sleep and risen before the alarm rang.

He'd needed physical action, and took his tortured thoughts out on the walls he was tearing down in the barn to convert into a studio. He'd been able to relieve *some* of his frustration and aggression with the sledgehammer.

But a call from Mignon reminded him he still needed to check the fit of Genevieve's dress. They had not completed the fitting the day before, and he was too much a perfectionist not to check it himself.

She would try the dress on, and he'd get the hell out of there.

He parked in front of the chateau and climbed out of the car. Francois stood at the base of the steps, speaking with a young woman. He hailed Roman.

"This is Sophie Bélanger. Sophie, this is my cousin Roman Duchaine."

Roman shook her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you."

*"Bonjour, Monsieur Duchaine."*

"Sophie is part of the International Sommelier program, and is here interviewing for the manager-in-training position for the winery."

"A very ambitious program. Good luck to you." He was impressed. She must have started her coursework young.

*"Merci,"* she said, smiling. "I've been working and studying in America the last few years, so it's nice to be home again. This is the last part of my coursework, and I hope to learn all I can from Monsieur Gaillard."

"Then let me welcome you home to France. Again, it was nice meeting you." He turned to Francois. "I have to get to a fitting. I'll see you later."

He shook hands with her again, and started up the steps. Glancing back at her again, he thought she looked familiar, but wasn't sure why. Short, wavy black hair, and a very pretty face, like an old-time glamorous movie actress, but he didn't think he'd ever met her.

A few minutes later, he walked into the ballroom. The bridesmaid dress hung on the rolling rod, but no one was there.

The door opened behind him.

Genevieve rushed into the room, followed by Mignon. "Sorry. I was delayed in the kitchen." She kept her gaze averted. "Mignon



said you need to check the dress.”

“You can change behind the screen. Be careful so it does not rip further.”

She and Mignon retreated behind the screen. He tried not to imagine her taking her clothes off. Tried not to remember how her satiny skin warmed beneath his fingers.

She emerged a few moments later dressed in the blush pink attendant gown. He would be impartial, as if she were any of the hundreds of models he had used over the years.

He directed her to step up on the platform, and he circled around, looking for any imperfections in the fit.

“Do you have the shoes you are wearing for the wedding? I must check the length of the skirt.”

“They’re in the blue bag by the screen.”

He picked up the bag, pulled the shoe box out, and opened the lid. Strappy sandals dyed to match the dress lay inside. He held the shoes out to her.

She set one shoe on the platform, started to step into it, but she wobbled. He instinctively reached out to steady her.

Electricity sparked up his arm, and his eyes flashed to her startled ones. *Did she feel that as well?*

She put the other shoe on, and he focused his attention on the skirt. He twitched the organza fabric, looking for the tear he’d heard yesterday. Nothing.

He worked his way up the dress, skimming his hand lightly along her leg. The warmth of her skin soaked through the dress. He reached her upper thigh, and her breath hitched.

At the side of her waist, just beneath one of the fabric roses, he finally found where the stitches had ripped.

“Mignon, I found the tear.” He looked around for her. “*Où est-elle allée?*”

She looked at him blankly. “What?”

“You don’t speak French any longer?”

“I don’t have much use for it in Atlanta, so I lost whatever I learned.”

“I asked where Mignon went.”

“I didn’t realize she’d walked out.”

“I need the needle and thread.” He turned away and rummaged in the sewing box. Finding the correct color, he threaded the needle, and knotted the ends.

“Hold still, please.” He leaned close to her, concentrated on sewing the small rip in the seam so he would not prick her with the needle. Tying off the thread, he reached into the sewing box for the scissors, but could not find them. He stifled the urge to curse, frustrated. *More delays.*

“Hold still.” He leaned forward, brushed her breast by accident.

She inhaled sharply, and shrank away from him.

Perversely pleased at her reaction, he laid his cheek against her, his head pressing into her softness. He took his time biting off the thread. His heart raced. Pulling back, he noticed goose bumps break out on her arms. He glanced at her face.

Her eyes were closed, almost as if she were in pain. Alarmed, he noticed her face had grown pale.

He started to reach for her, but her eyes opened and she glared at him.

“Are we done here?” she snapped. “I’ve still got a lot to do before the party tonight.”

He’d intended to throw her off balance. But now he was the one suffering. He forced his traitorous body to relax, hating that he’d gotten hard the minute he touched her. *Especially since she feels nothing but disdain for me.*

He walked around the platform, purposely running his hands over her body to check the fit. He was frustrated, and wanted to lash out at her. “I’ll be finished when I’m finished. I don’t let my women wear my designs unless they are perfection.”

“Your *women*? *Your* women? First, I’m not anyone’s woman. And second, I sure as hell ain’t yours. I’m here to do a job and to stand up with my cousin at her wedding. I’m not one of those women splashed in the magazines and on the internet who drape themselves all over—”

## Chapter 5

She winced, knowing she'd gone too far, and sounding like a jealous shrew.

His eyebrow quirked, and he turned his face to hers, smirking. She wanted to wipe the smug satisfaction off his face.

He stepped back. "You may go."

She stepped off the platform and ducked behind the screen. Stretching her arm behind her, she tried to reach the zipper. No good. She tried her other arm, but her fingertips only brushed the zipper pull.

"May I assist you?" Roman's deep voice rumbled behind her, and she whirled around. He leaned against the wall, watching her.

"Where's Mignon?"

"She still has not come back. I have one seamstress out ill, so I assume Mignon is working on the other attendant dresses."

"Great." She huffed out a breath and turned her back. "*Please*. I can't reach the zipper."

He moved behind her, crowded her in the tiny cocoon behind the screen. They could have been separated from the rest of the world. Beads of perspiration popped out on her forehead.

His fingers brushed a long curl of hair over her shoulder.

She must look a fright, her hair springing loose from the bun. She reached up and yanked out the scrunchy. Her hair tumbled loose.

He groaned, his breath warming her neck.

The sound echoed through her, shivering down her spine, all the way down to her toes.

She scooped her hair back up and into a tight knot.

She felt him grip the zipper pull and begin tugging it down. Inch by agonizing inch. His fingers traced down her spine, following the zipper, branding her.

It was one thing to see his pictures on the internet or in magazines. It was another to have the living, breathing, flesh-and-blood man standing behind her. Talking to her, touching her.

After all they'd shared so long ago.

She shivered.

"What's going on here?"

She looked up and caught Daniel watching them over the screen. She clutched the bodice of the gown as it started to slip down her chest. "He had to check the alterations, and fix the tear from yesterday."

"And he plays lady's maid as well?" Daniel glared at Roman.

"I couldn't reach the zipper."

"Huh." Daniel craned his neck over the top of the screen. "Looks like it's down now. Does *he* need to help you with anything else?" He jerked his head at Roman.

She glanced at Roman, startled to see his jaw clench.

He inclined his head. "Thank you for taking the time for the fitting. I am finished with you." He left the small dressing area, and she heard his footsteps ring across the marble floor. The door banged shut.

*Why does that sound so final?* She winced. *It's what I want, isn't it?*

She glanced up to see Daniel still looking over the screen.

"What?"

"Exactly what was going on back there?"

"I told you, I couldn't reach the zipper. He was the only one around to help me. Now move, so I can get dressed."

He backed away from the screen to give her privacy. "Huh." He snorted, his voice drifting to her. "Considering he's such a world-class designer, you'd think he'd have all kinds of assistants underfoot."

"He has a couple here, but one is down sick."

"Oh yeah? And what else do you know about his *affairs*?"

She zipped up her slacks, and stepped into her clogs. She started to put the long-sleeved shirt back on, but she was still hot. She put her chef coat on over her bra and snapped it top to bottom. As long as she stayed buttoned up, no one would know. Folding the t-shirt, she walked out from behind the screen.

"He just mentioned it to me during the fitting." She glanced at the expression on his face. "You're not jealous, are you?"

He scoffed and jerked his shoulder. He softened, and touched her arm. “I’m worried about you. You see this jerk-face after fifteen years . . . All I know is, I came looking for you only to find him undressing you.”

“He wasn’t undressing me. I had to take the dress off.”

“Your back was to him. You didn’t see the look on his face.”

She stilled. “What do you mean?”

“He was looking at you like he wanted to strip the dress off you completely and . . . and . . .” His face reddened, and he scrubbed his hands over his face, something he only did when he was frustrated. “Not to sound like one of your bodice-ripper novels or anything, but I’ve never seen such raw passion on anyone’s face. He looked like he wanted to devour you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner—maybe even dessert, too. With fresh whipped cream and a cherry on top.”

She held up a hand to stop him. Confusion rushed through her, and if she admitted it, some small amount of satisfaction. *I may be getting older, but wow. That kind of gives me a boost.* She smiled to herself and looked up.

Daniel frowned. “You’re not considering getting involved with him, are you?”

“No. *No*. Not a chance. But come on, he can have anyone . . . and probably *has*. To think he would be interested in me after all these years, if there were the slightest chance, and I can turn him down? I guess there’s a small mean part of me that would gloat.” She opened the door to leave the ballroom, but stopped and turned back to him. “And you better not tell anyone I just said that.”

He nodded.

“I mean it, Daniel. Pinkie-swear.” She held out her little finger.

He gripped her finger with his own, held her still. “Honey, who was there when you were in the hosp—”

“Hush! Don’t say it. I don’t want anyone to know about the accident.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything else. But do you really think I want to take the chance he’ll hurt you again?”

She searched his face and realized he was concerned for her.

“You’re the best.” She hugged him hard, thankful she had him in her corner.

“Of course I am, Sugar. You’re lucky to have me for your BFF.” She rolled her eyes and left the ballroom.

The other gowns were now complete, ready to be fitted. If only his studio were complete, he wouldn’t have to work out of the chateau. Less chance of running into *her*.

His stomach growled, reminding him he hadn’t eaten anything all day. Preparations for the wedding feast were taking place in the main kitchen, so he detoured down the hall to the smaller kitchen for a snack.

He entered the airy room, but it was already occupied. Genevieve stood bent over the marble counter, piping icing onto cookies. She glanced up at him, a dollop of icing hanging from the pastry bag. She had tidied her hair into a tight bun, and wore a white chef coat in lieu of an apron.

“I don’t mean to interrupt you. I did not have time for lunch earlier, and I need a snack.”

She was silent, and flicked a glance at the door, almost as if she wanted to run.

He clenched his teeth, then winced, rubbed his jaw. “Your husband has quite a temper.”

“Husband? He’s . . .” Her words trailed off and she straightened, staring at him. She set the pastry bag down.

“He’s what?” he asked, forcing his voice to be casual. He opened the stainless steel refrigerator door. He scanned the shelves, but every fiber of his being was tuned to the woman behind him.

“He’s very protective of me.”

He shut the door, then opened the pantry. He stared, unseeing, at the food on the shelves. His thoughts churned.

“Do you want a cookie?”

He turned around.

She pointed to a basket at the end of the counter. “Those are the cookies I can’t use for the party. Help yourself.”

He reached into the basket and pulled out a piece of cookie. Biting into it, the flavors exploded on his tongue. Delicate and

light, he tasted sugar, vanilla, and hints of lemon.

She turned back to the counter and picked up the pastry bag. “Take the basket with you. I need to get these finished,” she said, dismissing him.

He should leave. *Why would I want to be around her?* Yet here he was, leaning against the counter, watching her work. Her movements were graceful, and precise. He could tell she knew what she was doing, and was very proficient.

For the first time, he looked at what she was working on. Heart-shaped cookies lined the trays, frosted to look like the bodice of wedding dresses. She had even piped tiny pearl necklaces on each cookie. He was charmed in spite of himself.

“You always were very talented.”

Her head whipped up, and she looked at him in surprise. “Th—thank you. I’m making them for the party tonight.”

He nodded. “They will go . . . what was it you used to say? They will go like hotcakes at a church fair.”

Surprise flashed across her face. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“I remember a great many things about you.”

She looked down, but her cheeks turned pink. He detected a slight smile.

“I think it’s wonderful the villagers are throwing a party for Connie Sue and Francois,” she said.

“It is a close-knit community, and many of the villagers are employed here at the winery. Francois is a very kind boss, good to his employees. He has instituted great change since he became in charge.”

“Connie Sue mentioned he took over when his father passed away, and began making a lot of changes. Sounds like he’s turned the place around into a thriving business.”

“Constance has been very beneficial in her role as Marketing Director, and great help to him. With her assistance, and his new direction for the winery, Francois has reached a greater audience for the wines.”

“She’s always been good at her job,” she said.

He detected a note of pride in her voice.

She set the pastry bag down and picked up the tray, carried it toward the alcove off the kitchen.

He noticed for the first time a tall cart on wheels. She pushed the tray onto the rack. Curious now, he followed her. Row after row of cookie trays filled the rack. The lower shelves held trays of cookies that were dressed in black and white icing tuxedos.

“Did you make all of those?” He was amazed at how much she had accomplished in such a short time.

“Of course.” She covered the rack and backed into him. She whirled around and stumbled.

He steadied her, but she jerked away from him. *Why is she so angry? She used to welcome my touch.*

She stepped around him, her back rigid, as she walked toward the counter.

“The cookies look very professional.”

“It *is* my profession.”

“You own a *patisserie*?”

“No. I work for a couple who own a bakery in Atlanta. But I’m working toward starting my own business soon, and branch out into specialty cakes.”

“What do you mean ‘specialty cakes’?”

She picked her phone up from the counter and clicked several buttons. She held it up for him to see, and he walked around the counter to stand next to her.

Her delicate scent of vanilla and spices washed over him. A memory assailed him of an afternoon she had arrived at his apartment, straight from her classes at *Le Cordon Bleu*. *He had grabbed her, wrestling her onto the bed. He nuzzled her neck, breathing in her unique essence.*

*She laughed and tried to push him away. Said she was hot and sweaty from baking all afternoon in the hot kitchen.*

*He had grinned, said she smelled decadent, good enough to eat. He’d offered to lick any remaining sugar off her bare skin. They had not made it to the shower until late that night.*

He caught her watching him, a wary expression on her face. He slid the phone from her hand, brushing her fingers. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed she curled her fingers together and



clasped them to her chest. He flicked through the slide show of pictures.

“These are what I made for the TV show ‘Southern Belle Cake-Off.’”

He glanced up at her. “You were on television? Making cakes?”

She shrugged, red staining her cheeks. “Yes. I didn’t want to do it, but it’s been great exposure for my business.”

“A cooking show?”

“No, it’s a regional competition for cake artists in the South, and they filmed parts of it for one of the food networks.”

“How did you do?”

“I won.”

His eyes widened, and despite everything that had happened, he felt a surge of pride for her. “*C’est fantastique!* Congratulations!”

She ducked her head, and he could tell she was embarrassed. She ran her fingers over the snaps on the chef coat as if making sure she was still secured inside it.

He had the insane urge to pluck the snaps open, one by one, until she was exposed.

Biting the inside of his cheek, he focused his attention back to the pictures displayed on her phone. He scanned creation after creation, and at each picture, his admiration for her grew. “These are outstanding. *Absolument*. You are truly talented. Your husband must be very proud of you.”

Abruptly, she turned away, and began stacking the used utensils in the sink.

Had he hit a nerve? “I assume by the way Daniel leapt to your defense that he knows about me?”

“I told him some things.” She wiped the counter, turned away. “I need some air. I’ll clean up later.” She walked toward the back door and opened it.

He heard rain pattering on the roof of the porch. “You’ll get wet.”

She turned to him briefly. “I don’t mind the rain. The earth will smell all the sweeter.” And she was gone, shutting the door behind her.

*Mon Dieu, I still want her.* Fifteen years and a broken heart later, she still affected him. She looked so prim and proper buttoned up in her chef coat, her long golden hair pulled into a tight knot on top of her head.

He wanted . . . what did he want? His fingers itched to take her hair down from that prim knot on top of her head, and see if she was still the passionate woman he had loved.

He opened the door and stepped outside. Scanning the garden leading to the grape fields, he caught a flash of white through the gate. Drops of cold rain rolled down his collar, and he hunched his shoulders.

*What am I doing? Go home, imbécile!*

But his feet didn't listen, and he followed the stepping stones through the garden.

She was right—the earth did smell sweeter in the rain. She'd always loved the rain, the way the earth smelled fresh and new. How many times had she stood on his balcony while it was raining? She had told him since she was in Paris, she wanted to experience everything. And that included rainy Parisian afternoons.

His jaw clenched, remembering one such afternoon he'd pulled her back into the room, tumbling her onto the bed. They'd made love for hours, the rain outside the only music.

He rounded a row of hedges and looked for her. There, by the potting shed. She opened the door to the large building, disappearing from view.

He paused a moment and sucked in a deep breath, trying to relax. He smelled roses, and glanced at the thorny branches laden with pink flowers that climbed the limestone walls.

They would have to be pink. *Her* favorite flower.

He knew he should turn back. No good could come from this. Nothing could be said to undo the past. Nothing could be done to change the path their lives were on today.

But he didn't slow until he turned the handle on the potting shed. He pushed, and the door groaned open.

She stood at one of the tables, sniffing the flowers waiting to be replanted. She straightened up and folded her arms, frowning. "Why did you follow me?"

The question that had haunted him all these years spilled from him before he could stop it. “I want to know how you could have been sleeping with me when you had a rich fiancé at home in the States.”

## Chapter 6

She flinched, and felt the color leach from her face. Her head spun.

“What?” she croaked.

“You heard what I said.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She had to get out of there. Scooting around him, careful not to touch him, she headed for the door.

He grabbed her arm, stopping her. She tried to pull away, but he hauled her against his chest, gripping her arms to hold her still.

Her eyes closed, memories of being held by him swept over her. His scent, earthy and dark, overwhelmed her.

“Why?” He shook her lightly. “Why did you leave me for *him*?”

She opened her eyes, astonished at the anguished look on his face, the hurt in his voice. Water droplets dripped from his black hair.

“Did you ever love me?” He walked her backward until she hit the cool wall.

She was trapped here, alone with him, nowhere to go. She needed to get away.

“Let me go—” she began, pushing against his chest.

His head descended, lips covering hers in a bruising kiss. She tried to hold her ground, but was defenseless against the onslaught of his mouth. He was relentless, using lips and tongue until her mouth opened, surrendering to the drugging kiss. His taste brought back memories, at once familiar yet new. The heat and power of young lovers had grown into maturity.

Her toes curled in her clogs. God, when was the last time anyone had kissed her and made her toes curl?

*No one since him.*

Sensations flooded her body, pleasure making her ache, and her heart soared. It had been so long since she’d been kissed or touched this way. Too long.

His touch was irresistible, and her hands slid around his waist, creeping up his back. Her fingers fisted in his shirt, pulling him closer.

She suddenly felt his warm hand on her bare stomach, skimming up her ribs. He cupped her breast, and she gasped. His touch was so hot it was a wonder the material didn't melt away.

His teeth scraped her tongue, and she shuddered.

He shifted, and his hand left her skin. She wanted to protest, grab his hand and put it back.

The sound of snaps opening filled the air, and she moaned. She opened her eyes as Roman's mouth left hers. Cool air hit her as he spread open her chef coat, and she gasped. He raised his head and raked his eyes down her almost naked top.

She'd never put the t-shirt back on, and wore only a lacy white bra beneath her coat. She was exposed, vulnerable, in more ways than one.

He groaned, and his hand shook as he lifted it, lightly traced a fingertip along the edge of the bra. His finger seared her skin, and tremors raced through her.

Her nipples hardened, and she wanted to press his hand against her to soothe the ache. She looked up at him, and her legs threatened to collapse into a puddle.

He focused his eyes on hers, hunger hardening his features.

"Your skin is still so soft," he whispered.

His voice washed over her, and she drank in the sound she never thought she'd hear again. Her fingertips tingled, and she curled them into a fist. She ached to touch him, trace the lines and angles on his face. Smooth the anger and pain away.

He kissed her again, pressing her against the wall. His erection nudged her and she shifted, instinct welcoming his hardness. Warmth pooled in her belly. Their tongues tangled, dancing, stoking the embers of passion so long denied to life.

"Gigi . . ." A voice calling from outside the shed permeated the fog in her brain.

"Sugar, where are you?"

Daniel.

He was looking for her.

*Oh, God. What am I doing?*

She turned her head to the side, fighting to catch her breath. “Stop. Roman, we have to stop. Daniel is looking for me.” She pushed against his muscled chest.

He moved away, braced his hands against the potting table, his breath heaving.

The chill hit her hot skin, and she pulled her coat together, snapping it closed. She ran her fingers over her lips, still tasting him. *Why did he kiss me?*

*Why the hell did I kiss him back?*

She curled into herself, wrapping her arms across her chest and held tight. Otherwise she’d shatter into a million pieces. She wanted to . . . to . . . punch the wall. Or run as fast and far away as she could.

“Go,” he croaked, his shoulders hunched. “Go back to *him*.”

Her blood boiled, and fury threatened to choke her. “How dare you? It didn’t take you long to find someone else to warm your bed after I had to leave,” she threw at him.

He jerked around to face her, his face ashen. “What are you —”

“Leave it! I don’t want to hear anything you have to say.” She stormed to the door, opened it, cutting off his words with a slam.

Her blood boiled. How dare he treat her this way when he was the one who had dumped *her*?

## Chapter 7

The rain had cleared out earlier that afternoon, leaving the air fragrant and cool as the sun dropped into the horizon. Genevieve pulled the lacy bronze shawl closer around her shoulders as she carried her offering across the cobblestones.

She still reeled from their encounter in the potting shed. He'd acted as if he hated her, couldn't stand the sight of her. Yet he'd followed her, kissed her as if he would never let her go.

Was he playing with her? *Why? Am I a toy, someone to have fun with until he finds the next playmate?*

Whatever the reason, she had to stay strong and get through the wedding, for Connie Sue's sake. Heck, for her own sake. It had taken a long time, but she'd rebuilt her life, had locked the memories and pain away in boxes and stuffed them in the attic of her soul, never to be looked at again.

But that plan had been blown to hell with one look at *him*. Never again would she go running to him when he crooked his finger at her, sexy as it was.

She pasted a smile on her face and added her basket of wedding cookies to the dessert table, examined the array of sweets with a professional eye. Fruit tarts, *crème brulee*, raspberry torte, puffed pastry filled with *crème*. She groaned, determined to reign in her weakness for desserts. Another table had baskets of bread and every imaginable type of cheese. Yet another held bottles of Francois' wines: from red, to white, to sweeter dessert labels.

Stepping back from the buffet area, she glanced around the village square. Medieval buildings surrounded the clearing, standing tall and proud, sentinels of days gone by. Tables and chairs filled the cobblestone streets, and one side had been set up for dancing. A band played music on a make-shift stage. White twinkling lights crisscrossed above the square. It reminded her of an ancient fairyland.

Connie Sue and Francois walked into the square, hand in hand, and the crowd erupted into cheers and applause, hailing the couple. They moved through the crowd, greeting the villagers. She could tell her cousin had won them over from the way they laughed and hugged Connie Sue, and a rush of pride filled her.

Daniel had gone to find them a table, and she wandered around looking for him. She finally found him across the way, waving her over. On the edge of the square stood Roman, arms crossed. Watching Daniel through narrowed eyes.

She quickened her pace and arrived at the table. She really hoped neither one of them would make a scene. Puzzled, she still couldn't believe he assumed Daniel was her husband. Maybe it was better this way. Maybe now he'd leave her alone.

"Come on, let's go get some food," Daniel said, grabbing her hand. "I want to try everything. I know it'll be good!"

She laughed. "You and your stomach. One of these days you're going to get fat and ruin your figure. Then what will you do? No man will look twice at you." She slung her arm through his as they headed to the end of the line for food.

"Then you and I will move in together, and have a houseful of cats. We'll grow old gracefully, sitting in our rocking chairs on the porch, drinking margaritas."

She gave him a light shove. "You're allergic to cats."

"Then I guess I'll have to hit the gym even harder after this trip. But until then," he said, rubbing his hands together, "It's eat, drink, and be merry."

They filled their plates from the bountiful offerings, and Daniel grabbed a bottle of wine. She picked up wine glasses, and they headed back to their table.

Casually, she searched the area Roman had last been standing. Nowhere in sight.

Good. Now maybe she could eat in peace.

Daniel kept up a running commentary on the food they ate, and the people around them, making her laugh. She knew he was doing it to keep her occupied. Once again, she was grateful he'd been able to fly to France with her. What would she do without him?



Swallowing the last bite of food on her plate, she set her fork down, scanning the tables. Unerringly, her eyes were drawn to Roman. He stood head and shoulders over much of the crowd, and his leather jacket continuously drew her eyes. She couldn't help it.

He circulated among the tables, greeting people. Men shook his hand, and pounded his back. Women, of all ages, flirted with him. A couple of young women flanked him, and he listened intently to what they were saying. A woman with brunette hair all but plastered herself to his side.

*Tart.* She gulped another swallow of wine.

*Geez, Genevieve. Jealous much?* She swore not to care what he did or how he lived his life.

Daniel stood up. "I'm hitting the dessert table before everything is gone. Want me to bring you anything?"

Since she would have to pass through Roman's cozy little *tête-à-tête* to get to the dessert table, she'd rather stay seated where she was. "Sure, thanks. Saves me from breaking my neck on these cobblestones. I shouldn't have worn high heels."

"But they make your legs look fabulous, so hush up. You want anything in particular?"

"You know what I like."

He turned around and headed to the dessert table.

Her gaze strayed once more to her left, to where she had last seen Roman. He stared at her, his expression hard as granite.

She stared back, determined not to give an inch. Two could play that game.

His eyebrow rose, as if acknowledging her bravery, daring her to continue.

"Let's dance."

She looked up. Daniel plunked an assortment of desserts down on the table.

"You just brought dessert," she protested.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her up. "I don't want to give *him* the chance to come over here and bother you."

"Who?"

He looked at her. "You know who. Frenchie. He's glaring at you."

“We don’t have anything to say to each other, so why would he?”

“After his behavior earlier today, I’m making it my mission to protect you from him.”

Embarrassment swept through her. Had Daniel seen what happened in the potting shed? “What do you mean?”

“In the ballroom, when he was undressing you.”

“I told you, I couldn’t reach the zipper.”

“Whatever. I’m not going to let him take advantage of you.”

“Thanks, sweetie, but you don’t have to play big brother to me. I can handle things.” Daniel *could* be awfully sweet sometimes. Bossy, but sweet.

“Is that why I heard you crying last night?”

Her ankle turned on the uneven cobbles, and he steadied her, holding her upright until she regained her footing. He tucked her arm beneath his elbow to help her to the dance floor. “What?”

He shrugged. “I went to your room to check on you, and I heard you crying. I figured you’re entitled to one good cry, but that’s it.”

Daniel swung her onto the dance floor and she moved easily into his arms. They danced well together, but her heart wasn’t in it, so she just went through the motions, grateful he was leading.

He twirled her around, and she put a hand to her head. *Better lay off the wine the rest of the night.*

She tried hard not to search the crowd for *him*, but couldn’t help it. There, at the other end of the dance floor. Daniel led her into a turn, but she swiveled her head to see who Roman was dancing with. He turned his partner, caught her eye.

She jerked her head around, and winced at the sudden crick in her neck. *See? That’s what you get for being nosy, trying to see who he’s with. Focus on your partner.*

One song led into the next, and Daniel kept her on the floor dancing. She sighed, resting her chin on his shoulder. Inevitably, she found Roman again, just as he led a young woman to the edge of the floor after a dance. No sooner had he stopped than another took her place.

Roman led the pretty girl into a dance. He laughed at something she said and glanced up, meeting Genevieve’s eye.

The smile slid from his face, and if she hadn't known better, she'd say he looked at her with longing.

*That should be me in his arms.* The thought startled her.

Daniel executed another turn, and she closed her eyes, sighing at the sadness in her heart. She didn't want to hate Roman forever. He was a good man—he'd been good to her so long ago, and she could tell he loved his cousin and nieces.

Another week to get through the wedding. She needed closure—they needed closure.

She opened her eyes again, looked around the crowd of people. Nowhere to be found. *Good.* So why did her heart drop a little when she *didn't* see him?

"May I have this dance?"

She looked to her right, and Roman stood there, waiting.

Daniel stiffened, his eyes cut to hers. He opened his mouth, and curled his fist.

In the interest of keeping peace so no blood would be shed at her cousin's party, she cut him off. "Yes."

Daniel protested. "You don't want to do this."

Roman took a step toward him.

She put her hand in Roman's. "It's just a dance."

Daniel stepped away, and she could tell he was ticked off. And she would hear about it later, she was sure.

Roman pulled her into his arms. She fit perfectly, just as she had so many years ago. The music slowed, and he pulled her closer, feeling her resistance. He lowered his head slightly, pressing his cheek to her hair.

Her shiver trembled through his body. It was heaven . . . and hell . . . having her in his arms again.

Why was he doing this? He needed to stay far away from her. But he wanted to know why she had lied to him. The whole evening, he had known where she was every moment, watched her with Daniel. They danced well together, and he'd seethed, seeing how close they were. She was like a beacon in the royal blue cocktail dress, her blonde hair falling in sexy waves around her shoulders.

He scanned the crowd. Daniel sat at a table talking to Connie Sue. It was now or never.

He danced her in an ever-widening circle, toward the nearest alley. As soon as they were abreast of it, he stepped off the dance floor.

She pulled back.

He held tight to her hand. "Please, I need to speak to you. In private."

Hesitating, she looked around for Daniel, he assumed. She finally nodded her assent.

He led her to the little alley, made sure no one else lingered. He kept a space between them, but held her hands, afraid she would dart away from him.

"I must apologize for my behavior earlier today. I have not been able to get you out of my mind since yesterday. Will you forgive me?" He'd been miserable all day, feeling like the biggest cad. He'd never stepped between a married couple, even if the press said he did. He had a code of honor, and he couldn't live with himself for doing it today. "*S'il vous plaît?* Please."

She remained silent, staring at him. What was going through her mind? Would she forgive him?

"You are married, and it is not right for me to behave this way. Please forgive me."

He looked into her olive green eyes, leaned his forehead against hers. Tried so hard not to kiss her.

"I—I'm . . . I'm not married."

He raised his head. Surely he hadn't heard right. "*Pardón?*"

"I'm. Not. Married."

*Not married?* Relief swept through him, and his heart felt lighter. The heavy weight of regret fell away from him. He stared at her in the faint light spilling in from the party. "Then who is . . ."

"Shh."

They stared at each other. The emotions played across her face—she'd always been so expressive. He could almost see her thoughts as she battled within herself. He just hoped they were both the victor.

She pulled her hands from his, and disappointment seeped through him. But she stepped closer, surprising him. She rested

her hands on his chest.

He couldn't help it, he had to touch her. He lifted one of her hands to cup against his cheek. He turned his head slightly and kissed her palm. A shudder slid through her, echoed in his own body.

She slid her arms around his neck, twining her fingers in his hair. "Kiss me," she whispered.

He bent to her, but kept the space of a whisper between their lips, giving her the chance to pull back in case she changed her mind. *Please. Don't change your mind.*

He advanced, slowly, breathing her sultry scent in. He touched her lips, gentle at first. But she was a drug, an addiction. He sipped at her silken lips, hunger gnawing at him, urging him to take it farther.

She deepened the kiss herself, tilting her head, and met his sweeping tongue. He tasted wine, and her own unique flavor. *My Genevieve.*

He slid his hands down her back, molding her to his body, bringing her softness flush against him.

She made a sound, almost a mewl, and it heated his blood, filled him with a longing so acute he ached.

He'd searched for someone who could make him forget her, but no one had ever come close. He'd earned a reputation as a ladies man due to all the dating, one he regretted. No other woman had ever touched his heart like she had.

Lightning ratcheted through him. He wanted to take her here, now. Sink into her sweet body and relieve the ache he'd felt for so long.

A voice sounded over the loudspeaker, calling his name. He groaned, not wanting to end this kiss. Not now, not after fifteen years without her.

He'd craved her touch, her taste, for so long. She was an addiction, the one who had finally returned to him after too damn many years.

He pulled back and had to concentrate on breathing, reigning in his desire. Her lips were swollen from his kisses, her eyes glassy. She licked her lips, as if still savoring his taste.

"It is time to light the lanterns."

“Huh?” Her eyes seemed to clear, and sought his, questioning. “What are you talking about?” She bit her lower lip, in just the way that used to drive him crazy when she was puzzled about something.

“It is a tradition here to light lanterns and send them to the sky in honor of the bride and groom’s upcoming wedding. As best man, I must lead the villagers in this.”

“Oh,” she breathed. “I want to see that!”

He pulled away from her reluctantly, tried to regain his equilibrium. She’d rocked his entire foundation, and his world had shifted on its axis. Everything he’d built the last fifteen years suddenly didn’t matter any longer. Nothing mattered but her. But what could they have now? Even if she wasn’t married now, she’d still left him for someone else. He hadn’t been enough for her.

He led her to the mouth of the alley, but paused when she stopped.

He looked down at her in the light spilling toward them from the square. She ran her hands through her hair. God help him, he wanted to taste her again.

“Wait. Please, may we spend time together tomorrow? I think we should talk.” He waited for her answer, hoped she did not feel him trembling like a schoolboy.

“Yes, I think it would be good. We need to clear the air.”

“*Merci*. I will pick you up in the morning. We can drive through the countryside. I would like to show you where I grew up.”

Her lips curved into a smile. “I’d like that very much.”

He led her back to the square. They stopped to pick up their own lanterns, and he showed her how to light them. Soon, everyone held lanterns, ready to light the sky.

Roman stepped to the microphone and toasted the beaming couple.

The music began again, a romantic ballad. Francois led Constance out to the middle of the crowd, and swept her into a waltz.

One by one, the lanterns were released to float up into the sky. Soon the night was lit up, and he heard her sigh.

He looked down at her smiling face.

“Isn’t it romantic?” she whispered.

He nodded, thinking she had never looked more beautiful. He clasped her fingers, tucked her close against his side. She squeezed his hand in return, and his heart soared. Right now she was the only thing anchoring him to the ground, otherwise he would follow the lanterns into the sky.

## Chapter 8

Genevieve's nerves warred with the anticipation of seeing Roman again. Now that she'd seen him, her goal was to get through this week unscathed. She needed to remain focused, get home, and hopefully get her business up and running.

*Why did I kiss him?* She'd tossed and turned for hours after getting home, reliving the kiss, and the way he made her feel. She could only blame the wine she had imbibed to steady her nerves. It had loosened her inhibitions when it came to him. That had to be it. Too much wine.

*But you didn't drink that much, so try again, sister.* The thought drifted through her mind, and she squashed it.

She lightly touched her lips, remembering the feel of his. It had felt so good, so right. Thank heavens it had been time to light the lanterns, and things had gone no further between them.

She needed to keep her resolve firm and not let him kiss her any more.

*He's a danger to my heart.*

She was not going to be another one in his string of flings. Not now. Not again. But they needed to clear the air, so they wouldn't spend their time bickering and thereby ruining the wedding.

*I just want to know how he could have replaced me so fast when I left. Especially with her. He must not have felt the same way I did.*

She waited on the front steps of the chateau. It was lovely here, and a small part of her envied Connie Sue for getting to live in this magnificent place. The gardens bordering the estate and winery were extensive, flowers giving way to grapevines growing in neat, soldierly rows. She'd even seen a vegetable garden near the larger kitchen, and Francois told her they tried to be as sustainable as they could.

A breeze ruffled her hair, and she looked up at the sky. Clouds obscured the mid-morning sun, and it looked like it might rain again.



A silver car rolled up the driveway. She recognized the telltale hood ornament: Mercedes. Of course.

She walked down the steps and reached for the passenger door the same time as he did. Their hands bumped, and she jerked away.

“*Bonjour*,” he said, opening the car door. He helped her in, and shut the door. Getting in, he started the engine, and drove smoothly down the driveway.

She settled into the buttery soft leather seat. “This is a long way from that little beater you used to borrow, isn’t it?”

He shrugged. “Have you had a chance to look around the property since you arrived?” His voice sounded stilted, distant.

*Is he embarrassed about the kiss last night, too?*

She shook her head. “Not much. I’ve been busy baking and helping Connie Sue. It looks beautiful from what little I have seen.” She blushed, not wanting to allude to their encounter in the potting shed. She was still too raw from the emotions of the day before.

“It is good the wedding is in a few days, for you are here during the growing season for the grapes and lavender.” He slowed the car and pointed to a field to the right of them.

Lavender grew profusely in neat rows, as far as the eye could see. She sighed. “Magnificent!”

Roman drove farther up the road, then pulled off onto a gravel lane. The dark purple blooms lined both sides of the narrow lane, and beyond lay a field of sunflowers. A building came into view, a crumbling ruin of some sort.

“What is this place?” she asked, thoroughly charmed by the sight.

Roman got out of the car, and she opened her door and climbed out. He rounded the hood and she caught him frowning at her. *Did he expect me to wait for him to open the door?*

“It is the ruins of a Cistercian Abbey. I thought you might like to see it. You were always fascinated by the old buildings in Paris.”

*He remembered.* A pang sliced through her stomach.

“You said once you were born in the wrong time. But if that were the case, I would not have met you.”

He reached into the back of the car and pulled out a basket. He brushed her arm but stepped away quickly, leading the way to

the crumbling abbey.

“I brought some croissants and coffee, if you’re hungry.” He pulled a cloth out of the basket, opened it, and let it drift down on a clearing in the grass next to the low wall. They sat, and he pulled the croissants out of the basket, handed one to her on a napkin.

She bit into the croissant, and the buttery flavor tasted so good she moaned.

He glanced at her and raised an eyebrow.

“There is nothing like a *real* French croissant, fresh-baked in the morning.” She savored every bite, and was tempted to have another.

He grinned at her, and bit into his own croissant.

Sipping the hot coffee, she listened to the silence of the morning. She desperately wanted to ask him why he never called her, never told her himself he had found someone else. They needed to talk, but now, the words wouldn’t come. And she really didn’t want to fight.

But she was afraid.

Afraid of herself, and for her dreams.

He held up the thermos of coffee. “Would you like some more?”

“Yes, thanks.” She held the cup out toward him, and he put his fingers over hers to steady the cup as he poured.

“What happened to your hand?” he asked, setting the thermos down. He slid the cup out of her hand and set it down on the low wall, then tilted her hand to look at it closer. His fingers were warm around hers, and he traced the scar at the base of her thumb with the tip of one finger.

Little sparks of fire filtered up her arm from his touch, and she tried hard not to tremble. “A pan of boiling sugar overturned, and I tried to catch it.”

“It is a shame to have such lovely skin marred, but it shows the strength you have in doing what you do.” He leaned forward, hesitated over her hand, and kissed the scar. His touch zinged up her arm, warming her insides. Breathless, she wanted to snatch her hand away. Ached to have him do it again.

Her hands were full of nicks and scars, the hazards of working in a bakery. He traced each one, until she gently pulled her hand away, curling her fingers in.

It would be too easy to stay here, with him. But Roman being who he was, in high demand by the fashion world, she would never have a life of her own. She was determined not to end up like her mom, where the world revolved around her dad and his needs and demands.

They enjoyed the peace and quiet. It was as if by mutual agreement, neither one wanted to do or say anything to disturb this truce.

A drop of water hit her cheek, and she looked just up as the clouds opened. Rain poured down on them, and they hurried to gather up the picnic. They dashed to his car and climbed in out of the rain. The drops hit the car so hard, it sounded as if gunfire had erupted.

“It looks like our drive will be cut short,” he said, shifting into gear. “Would you like to see my house? It is nearby, so we can dry off. Or I can take you back to the chateau, if you prefer.” He held his breath, hoping she would not want to return to the chateau.

“You bought a house here?”

“*Oui*. I’ve moved back to France recently.”

“But don’t you live in Milan?”

“How did you know that?”

She hesitated.

“Genevieve?”

Waiting for an answer, he glanced at her.

She met his eyes, didn’t say anything.

He searched her face, waiting for an answer. *Why does she hesitate? What is she hiding?*

She blushed, her cheeks turning pink. “Oh, all right. I looked you up online before I bought my airline ticket.” She turned her head away, looked out the window.

“You looked for me online?”

“I wanted to make sure you weren’t in France.”

“Oh.” Her answer stung, and his heart sank.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t tell you that to upset you.”

“I think we should talk. I want to know . . .” He slowed the car at the crossroads. “Will you come to my house so we can talk in private?”

*Please.* He held his breath, hoping she would agree.

“Yes, I can do that, and I’d like to see your house.”

Something relaxed in him, and he turned right at the intersection.

“It is not too far from my cousin.”

“What made you decide to move back here? And how come there’s been no mention of your move?”

“It was time,” he said, trying to put into words what he was afraid to admit out loud. “I missed my cousin, and my homeland. I’ve kept it quiet as much as possible because I didn’t want the press to find out and hound me. I want solitude here. It’s time for me to settle down.”

“Cut out the wild life you’ve been leading?” She laughed.

She may have laughed, but he heard the derision in her voice, and he flicked a glance at her. Why would she care?

She stared out the window. Her fingers clenched around the strap of her purse, and he wondered if she realized she was strangling it.

He reached out and touched her tightly closed fist. “Most of the gossip printed about me is not true.”

She snorted. “Riiight,” she drawled.

“I may have been wild a long time ago . . .” *after you left me.* “But I don’t want to be that man any longer.”

“Why the change of heart?”

“I’m getting older now. I do not want a wild reputation.” He pulled into the driveway of his house. “I want a family,” he murmured.

Realizing what he had just said, he jolted to a stop beneath the *porte cochere* by the garage. *Please don’t let her have heard me.*

She reached for the door handle, but he held his hand up. She slowly pulled back, and he got out of the car, hurried around to open her door. He took her hand to help her out, and electricity crackled between them.

She looked up at him, startled. Putting space between them, she turned her attention to his house.

He tried to imagine what it looked like from her perspective.

Built in the eighteenth century, the gray stone walls had held up well. A slate roof faded to grayish blue topped the two story house. He'd replaced the old windows with new white ones, and had the stone chimney shored up. Wooden window boxes filled with flowers brightened the façade, and dark green ivy climbed the walls to the roof. Flowers bloomed profusely in the garden, so many he didn't know all the names yet. Soaring lilac trees surrounded the property around to the back. His new home had history and character. It was the first place he had felt at home in a long time, if ever.

"Oh, my. It's just lovely. I can't wait to see the rest of the house."

The rain still streamed from the sky, so they hurried through the downpour to the front stoop. He unlocked the door and led her inside.

"I'll get you a towel," he said, and led her to the small powder room by the kitchen. She went in and closed the door. He hurried to his own bathroom and picked up a towel and clothes for her.

He knocked on the guest bathroom door. "If you want to wear these, I'll put your clothes in the dryer."

She opened the door and he handed her the dry clothes and bath towel.

He toweled his hair dry, then changed into jeans and a long-sleeved black t-shirt. He forced himself to walk to the kitchen, and tried not to imagine her taking her clothes off just down the hall.

A short time later, she joined him in the kitchen, carrying her damp shirt and jeans. He glanced at her and a slow smile spread across his face. Even as tall as she was, his sweat pants and thermal shirt still engulfed her. She had rolled the sleeves up past her wrists so her hands peeked through. She handed him her wet clothes and he walked into the laundry room, put them in the dryer.

"Here are some socks if your feet are cold."

She sat down and slipped them on, sighing. "Much better. Thank you." She looked around the room, and for some reason it

was important to know what she thought of the kitchen.

He had incorporated modern appliances into the old room, keeping the original stone walls intact. He'd added glass fronts to the sage green cabinets. A search through the old barn had unearthed a large wooden table for dining, and he'd sanded and polished it until it gleamed.

He could see her here, baking, trying new recipes.

His heart soared. *Could we have a life together?*

She looked around at everything, finally turning to him. "It's the perfect kitchen. The floor to ceiling windows make it feel as if the kitchen is part of the garden. I love it. Lots of room for cooking and entertaining."

She looked lost, and a little alone. He could only imagine what she was thinking.

He opened a cabinet and pulled two glasses off the shelf. "Would you like a glass of wine? It's from Francois' vineyards."

"Are you allowed to drink anything else?" She grinned.

His mouth kicked up in a half smile. "Let's go into the other room. I started a fire, so it should be warm now." He opened a bottle, and while it breathed, he put together a small platter of bread and cheese. He put it all on a tray and led her to the living room.

"Very cozy. I like your house," she said. She stood in front of the fireplace and held her hands out to warm them.

"It's becoming home."

"Isn't it kind of big for you, though?"

He hesitated. "I wanted to find a place large enough for my family."

## Chapter 9

The flames crackled and popped, but she couldn't feel the heat, couldn't move. "Are—" her voice cracked, and she cleared it. "Are you engaged?"

"No," he said.

He turned her around, and guided her to the couch. "What's wrong? You are so pale." He brushed the hair out of her eyes, turned her chin up. His eyes searched hers.

She nodded. "I—I think I'm just cold and tired. It was a late night last night."

He poured them each a glass of wine, handed one to her.

Where to begin? So many unanswered questions. So much pain over the years.

"When were you divorced?" he asked, his voice low.

Her face grew hot. "I was never married."

"What? But isn't that why you left Paris when you did?" He frowned. Deep lines etched a furrow between his eyes.

"No. I don't know why you thought I was married. You surprised me yesterday when you called Daniel my husband. I didn't know what to say. He's my best friend. He and Connie Sue are friends also, so she invited him to the wedding. Besides that, he's gay."

"When I came back from Milan, Patrice told me you left a letter for me, and she read it. Said you'd had a change of heart about me, you wanted to be financially secure instead of staying with a struggling designer. You were going home to marry a boy you'd been seeing before you went to Paris."

"Ah, yes. Patrice. Your *patroness*." She swallowed a gulp of wine, and set her glass down so hard it clinked. "You know she always hated me."

"*Nón*, she did not."

She rolled her eyes. *Is he really that obtuse?* "Get real. She was always jealous of the time we spent together. She wanted you for herself. I may have been a naïve nineteen year old, but I

could tell the way she looked at you that she wanted you. And obviously she lied to get rid of me. Seems to have worked, considering how fast she ended up in your bed.”

Red suffused his cheeks, and he looked away.

“After you left, I started drinking. I couldn’t function. I barely remember anything . . .” He glanced at her. “How do you know she and I . . . we . . .”

“I waited two weeks for you to call or answer my emails. When I didn’t hear anything, I called you early in the morning so I’d be sure to reach you at home. She answered the phone. I heard you in the background ask who it was, and she told you to go back to sleep. She couldn’t wait to tell me y’all had been *celebrating*, even hinted you two were an item now.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face. “She took advantage of my state. It’s no excuse for me, but I was miserable without you. We were never an item.”

“What about the partnership?”

“There was no partnership. She garnered the investors for my label, and wanted more. But eventually she tried to control me, and my designs, so that’s when I moved to Milan.” He squeezed the bridge of his nose. “I still do not understand this. If you did not leave to get married, why did you leave me?”

“Right after you left for Milan, my dad had a massive heart attack. I was the only one left in our family. Even though we didn’t have the best relationship, there was no one else to take care of him. *That’s* what I put in the letter I left for you.”

His hand crept to hers, lightly clasped it. “I’m so sorry. I wish I’d known.”

“I didn’t know how to reach you in Milan. I was still in shock when I landed in Atlanta. My dad had triple bypass surgery the day I got home. It didn’t go well, and he was an invalid the rest of his life. I had to go to work to support both of us.”

“Is he still living?”

“No, he died several years ago.”

He reached across the gap between them, brushed a lock of hair off her cheek.

Her skin tingled at his touch.



He hesitated, then pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. “*Je suis désolé*. So sorry you had to go through that alone,” he murmured, stroking her back.

She leaned into him, soaking up his warmth. What did she want? He still appealed to her on a basic, primal level. If the kisses were any indicator, they would still be highly compatible in bed.

*Compatible? Ha! An understatement.* Their passion had flared hot and bright fifteen years ago. They couldn’t keep their hands off each other. She’d never been able to say no to him. And she’d *thought* he felt the same way.

But what about outside the bedroom? He was a world-famous designer, a celebrity in his own right. He could snap his fingers and have any woman he wanted.

She was a nobody. Sure, she wanted to start her own bakery, and make the artistic cakes that were becoming more popular every day, but she couldn’t compete with him. Nor did she want to. He would swallow her up, and she would never be her own person.

The long strokes down her back lulled her into relaxation, and she laid her head on his shoulder. He still wore the same cologne, and she breathed deep, closing her eyes.

He lowered his face to her neck, his beard tickling her skin. Goose bumps rose on her arms.

Pleasure fogged her mind, and she shuddered. Struggled not to give in and take what she wanted.

She sat up, pushed against his chest to give her some breathing room. “I don’t—”

He cupped her head and leaned forward, kissing her into silence.

She shuddered, torn between pulling him in and pushing him away.

He nipped her lower lip in a silent demand for more. She opened, and his tongue swept in. She shuddered at the intrusion, but welcomed it at the same time. He tasted of wine, coffee, and the unique flavor all his own.

She rubbed her tongue over his, eliciting a husky groan from him. Lightening rocketed through her body, from her head to her

toes, and down her arms to her fingertips.

He pressed her against the back of the couch. She sighed, welcoming his weight. She ran her hand down his cheek, the bristles of his beard prickling her palm. She arched against his hard body. He'd been lean so long ago, but had filled out with hard muscles over the years. *Deliciously so.*

He tore his lips away from hers, kissing a path to her neck. He gently bit her skin, just below her ear, then soothed the spot with his delectable tongue.

She tried to catch her breath. Flames licked a path along her skin, following his lips, his tongue, his fingers.

She had to stop this insanity. *But it feels so good.* He *feels so good.* Needing to touch him, she untucked his shirt, slipped her fingers underneath to his back. His muscles bunched beneath her hands.

He groaned. "You are more enticing than ever," he muttered thickly. "I can't help myself. You're like the finest wine, one I have been too long denied." He pulled the neckline of the thermal shirt down slightly to reveal her collar bone, and pressed a kiss there. His fingers slid beneath the hem.

Tracing a path along her stomach, he brushed the scar.

*No!* She froze. No way did she want him asking questions about the scar. Horrified he would find out, she pushed against him. "Roman, stop. Stop! We can't do this." She struggled out from beneath him, stood up and turned her back to him, wrapping her arms around her waist.

"What's wrong?" He turned her around, cupped her cheeks in his hands.

Her eyes closed, and she stepped away from him, leaving him cold. "I just don't think this is a good idea. We haven't seen each other in fifteen years. We don't know each other now."

She was right. It had been a long time. A very long time. The lies he had believed for fifteen years were not true. She hadn't deserted him. Hadn't led him on only to leave him for someone else.

His body ached to take her to bed, and everything else be damned. But he didn't want to scare her away. He pulled her into

a hug, held her gently. "I would very much like to get to know you again. You are an incredibly beautiful and talented woman."

She pulled back and stared at him. "Why me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You can have your pick of any woman in the world . . . and may I say you *have*," she said.

*She sounds jealous.* Satisfaction bloomed inside him as he searched her face.

"Why do you want to know me? I'm nobody." Her voice caught, and she cleared her throat. Moisture shimmered in her eyes.

"You are not *nobody*. You've always been someone special to me."

She tried to pull away from him. "Don't make me laugh."

He held her tight, wouldn't let her retreat now that they were finally talking. "You're right, you're nothing like the women I've been involved with over the years."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously and she shoved his hands away from her.

"Listen to me. I'm glad you are not like those women. They are superficial, and you are real. Their only concern is being seen with me, dating me, for their reputations, and what I could do for them. You were a stunning young woman, and you brought happiness into my life. You've matured into an even more gorgeous and talented woman."

"You callin' me old?"

She was trying to be stern, but he could tell the compliment pleased her.

*If I rush her, I could lose her for good.* She did not see in herself what he recognized in her. "Would you spend an evening with me?" He held his breath, praying she would agree.

For long moments, she stared at him. Finally, she nodded.

Relief swept through him and he wanted to cheer.

"When?"

He heard the hesitation in her voice.

"I have to attend a banquet tomorrow night in Paris. I would very much like to have you accompany me."

"I—I can't go to Paris! It's a five hour drive each way, and I have so much baking to do."

“There is a small airstrip not far from here. Several weeks ago I asked a friend of mine to fly me to Paris tomorrow afternoon, then back the next morning.”

“You mean spend the night, too? I just told you I don’t think spending the night together is a good idea.”

“You will have your own room. I would never ask you to do anything you do not want to do.” He couldn’t stop himself from adding, “I will not touch you until you want me to. But it won’t stop me from imagining you in my arms, and in my bed, naked beneath me.”

Color washed over her cheeks, and she bit her lip, enticing him to soothe the sting. She had no idea how every movement she made was seductive. Every fiber in his body cried out for her to be his once again. He ached to hold her, to show her what she did to him. He wanted to spend hours, days, worshiping her—body, mind, and soul. But if the only way he could be near her was to leave her alone, then he would, and would suffer through it gladly.

She met his eyes, and he saw the trust. “I know you’d never force me. You’re not that kind of man. I have to be here to get ready for the shower on Tuesday evening. Will you promise me we’ll be back early?”

“*Oui*, I promise.”

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, almost reluctantly. She traced his lower lip with her index finger, and he held still, refrained from reaching for her again.

He would show her they were right for each other. He needed to spend time with her, convince her she could trust him not to hurt her.

She looked out the window. “It’s getting late. If we’re going to be gone so long, I need to do a lot of baking for the shower. Would you please take me home?”

“As soon as you are ready.”

She picked up the glasses and carried them to the kitchen. He followed her, thinking she looked so natural in his home. He retrieved her now-dry clothes, and she excused herself to change.

She met him back in the kitchen a few moments later, and looked out the window. “It’s stopped raining. Can I see the

backyard real quick before we go?”

“Of course.”

They walked out the kitchen door to the gardens. A path through a canopy of wisteria led the way to the small lake at the edge of the grass. He glanced at her as she stopped, staring at the wisteria dripping above the pathway.

She walked beneath the canopy of fragrant flowers, her steps slow. She inhaled, the scented air filling her lungs, her breasts lifting. She looked up, reaching for a stem hanging low. Her fingertip lightly touched the fragile purple blossom.

“I love wisteria,” she murmured.

He’d loved the wisteria canopy when searching for a house to buy, and that’s what had convinced him he had to have this place. Realization dawned, and his skin prickled, turned cold. Somehow, subconsciously, he’d remembered she loved the flower.

He’d bought this place for her.

## Chapter 10

The small private jet banked right. Genevieve stared out the window as they flew toward the airport, passing near the Eiffel Tower.

She was still upset over the argument she and Daniel had the previous afternoon. He'd gone ballistic when she returned from Roman's house and told him and Connie Sue about her date in Paris.

"Are you freakin' crazy?" Daniel had yelled. "After all you've been through, you're going away for the night with *him*?"

"You can't even say his name, can you? I told you we talked this morning—"

"That still doesn't excuse his behavior." He'd thrown his hands in the air.

She'd rounded on him. "It's one night. He asked me to accompany him to an awards banquet. I'll have my own room. I'm not going to get involved with him, okay? My life is in Atlanta, his is in France. There's a lot of ocean between us, not to mention a lot of years. I have to focus on getting my business up and running. I'm not going to screw that up." She'd hugged him, but it hadn't softened him. He held himself rigid, so she walked away.

"I worry about you."

"I know you do. You've always been there for me, and you have no idea how much it means to me. But I need to do this. It's a door that never closed. Not knowing what happened keeps me wondering about *what if*. Maybe we can sort it out and part as friends. Wouldn't that be better in the long run?"

Daniel had agreed, but still gave Roman the stink eye when she climbed in the car to go to the airport. He was normally a lamb, but at times like this, he was fiercely protective.

She and Roman spent the flight talking, and she shared some of her plans for her business. Her stories from the TV competition had him laughing. She loved how his laughter rumbled out of him, low and sexy, and it was the first time she'd seen him with his

guard down since her return. For the short time they had left together, she resolved to make him laugh just to hear him let loose. Like he used to.

“And then the cake artist from New Orleans had a hissy fit when the cake layers started leaning like the Tower of Pisa. He dumped the entire bowl of icing on his assistant’s head, even though it wasn’t her fault. The poor thing stood there with bright pink frosting topping her head like a cupcake. Apparently the drama improved the ratings, I heard later on.”

He leaned back in his seat, his eyes lighting up.

“Another team added salt instead of sugar to the cake batter. Can you imagine the look on the judges’ faces when they took a bite of cake expecting sweet and instead got salty? The lead on that team was so upset that she lobbed fistfuls of cake at her assistant. The assistant insisted it was the lead’s fault and lobbed cake right back at her.”

He chuckled. “Did anything happen on your team?”

“No, thank heavens. We made it through unscathed. In fact, the host of the show took me aside later and said the judges were very impressed with our professionalism, and it went a long way toward our scores being so high.”

“I wish I had seen the show. I am sure you were great on it.”

“I was scared to death. I don’t like being filmed, so I had to block out the cameras. I pretended I was back in the kitchen at home with my mom, and it helped me focus on designing, baking, and decorating the cakes. It got me through the show.” She took a sip of water and changed the subject. “So how did you end up living in Milan?”

“After I had been at the Paris design house a few more years, I had enough of my own designs ready, so I quit and launched my own label. I hadn’t been happy in Paris for some time actually, ever since you left. Everywhere I went, there were memories of you.” He leaned closer and his shoulder brushed hers.

She froze, the crystal glass halfway to her mouth. She shifted, pulling away from him.

“Don’t back away. I’m not blaming you. It was time to break away, to be out on my own. Just as you are getting ready to do with your career. It was a good move for me, and I learned a great

deal living in Milan. My designs started reflecting the Italian culture, but I kept enough of my French heritage in the clothes that I created a niche market for consumers. Eventually, I made it as a couture designer.” He shrugged.

She had learned long ago that when he gave one of those Gallic shrugs, it meant he was embarrassed. He’d never bragged about his achievements, and had always been self-effacing any time he succeeded.

“You always were committed to achieving your dreams. It takes perseverance and drive to make it in the fashion world. I’m happy things worked out for you.” She laid her hand on his arm and squeezed.

He covered her hand with his own and opened his mouth to say something, but the flight steward walked up to them.

“*S’il vous plait attachez vos ceintures.*” He picked up their glasses. “Please, to fasten the seat belts. We land in a few moments.” He bowed and backed away.

She fastened her seat belt. “Much faster than driving to Paris, isn’t it?”

“*Oui.* I am lucky Francois decided to purchase the jet for the winery business, and that he put it at my disposal.”

She leaned back in the cushioned leather seat. She had originally assumed it was a puddle jumper, but this was a luxury jet, with multiple seating areas, wooden paneling, and plush carpeting. “Yeah, I meant to say something. I hadn’t realized it belongs to your cousin. I’m impressed.”

He picked her hand up and squeezed. “I am very happy you agreed to accompany me tonight. It will be a nice break from wedding frenzy. I have a car waiting for us, and it will take us straight to the hotel. The event begins at eight o’clock, and is being held at the same hotel, so you will have plenty of time to prepare for the evening.” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Not that you will need extra time. You are stunning no matter what you wear.”

Tingles raced up her arm. She looked at their joined hands. Just sitting next to him on the short plane ride had set her hormones dancing. She had to maintain her resolve not to get involved.



It would be too hard leaving him again.

She raised her eyes to his, searched their depths.

He met her gaze, and she thought he might kiss her. The jet touched down and broke the spell they were cocooned in.

They rode to the hotel in the back of a limousine, her nose practically pressed against the window. She wanted to see it all again. So many of the sights familiar to her. How she'd loved living in Paris, everyday bringing a new adventure.

And Roman had been the best adventure of all.

"You've missed Paris, haven't you?" he asked.

"I didn't realize how much until now," she murmured, catching sight of the Arch de Triumph glowing in the dusky evening lights.

"You should come back after the wedding and spend a few days here. I'd be willing to play host."

She turned around to find him sitting closer to her. He sat silent, his face not revealing what he was thinking.

"I'd love to, but . . . I have to get home."

He sat back in the seat, turned his head away from her. "Just keep it in mind. The offer stands."

*Is he hurt? Does he really still care for me after all this time?*

They reached the Hotel Ritz, and the privileges of Roman's fame and fortune had them whisked straight to a luxurious suite. While he tipped the concierge, she walked around the room, marveling at the extravagant furnishings. The living room was large, filled with antiques. Floor to ceiling windows lined the corner room, overlooking the city.

She drifted to the bank of windows and looked out over the city she had once loved being a part of. The sky was on fire with the sun just setting, and it cast a russet glow on the Eiffel Tower.

He stood behind her, wrapped his arms around her middle, pulling her close. "See anything you like?"

She nodded. "There's no other place like it on earth." She relaxed into his strong arms and leaned against his warmth. How many times had they stood just this way on the balcony of his tiny garret?

He touched his cheek to hers, his beard tickling her skin. "Paris has missed you. / have missed you. There is no one else like you. I've searched for someone to fill the hole in my heart, but

have not found her.” He kissed the side of her neck, rested his chin on her shoulder. “Have you found anyone to love over the years?”

“No,” she whispered, cleared her throat. She paused. Loneliness filled her, and she said, wistful, “No. I’ve dated some, but never found anyone I wanted to be with. Frankly, I was too busy working to pay off our hospital bills.”

His arms tensed around her. “*Our* hospital bills?”

She caught herself, stepped out of his arms, out of his reach. “I mean Dad’s hospital bills, and the expenses related to his illness, then his funeral. So I never really had the energy to meet people or date after working two jobs.” *Oh my God, that was close.*

“I wish I had known you were going through those troubled times. I would have done anything to help you.”

She turned around and tried to smile at him. “Thanks. But I’m doing okay now.”

“Let me show you to your room.” He led her to a closed door.

She turned the handle and walked into a fairyland of pink roses and candlelight. “Oh,” she sighed. “You remembered pink roses are my favorite.” She breathed deeply, inhaling the delicate scent of the exquisite flowers and scented candles.

She turned to look at him.

He looked away, ran a hand over his eyes, down his face.

“What is it?”

“I remember everything about you. I’ve never forgotten you. You were the first woman I loved, the first person who, I thought, loved me?”

“You loved me? You never said anything.” Young and inexperienced, he’d been her first love, her first lover. She’d been afraid, too scared to find out if he returned her love.

“What can I say? I was young and stupid. I was desperately in love with you, but so afraid of telling you. I feared you would reject me. Then Patrice told me why you left—”

She walked to him, put her fingertips on his lips to silence his words. His lips were soft and warm.

“Let’s not bring her here. This is our place, and you’ve made it so special for me. For us,” she said.

He reached up and gently held her fingers, kissing the tips of each one. Heat pooled low in her belly, spread throughout her body.

His deep brown eyes searched her face, so intense it made her shiver.

He pulled an oblong black box out of his pocket and handed it to her.

“What’s this?”

“Open it. I hoped you might like to wear it this evening, for old time’s sake.”

Hands trembling, she slid the ribbon off the box and opened it to reveal a charm bracelet lying on red velvet. She gasped, and slowly pulled it out of the box. The tiny charms tinkled like music.

“I bought the bracelet for you and started collecting charms while we were together. I was going to give it to you for your graduation from *Le Cordon Bleu*. But I never had the chance.”

She examined each of the charms. There were so many of them. Her throat closed, and tears threatened at his insightfulness. He’d lived a frugal life in Paris, and money had been tight for him back then. He must have scrimped and saved to buy each one.

“I wanted you to know how special each memory was to me. The Eiffel tower is for our first visit there together. The rolling pin was for when you passed your fondant test. The umbrella because you loved the rain. The heart, because I wanted you to know you would always have mine.”

Her throat closed, and her eyes pricked with tears. “It’s beautiful, Roman. Thank you so much. I can’t believe you kept it all these years.”

“I think deep down inside, I always hoped I would someday see you again. That I would find you some way, somehow. But I was afraid to try . . .”

She searched his face, wanted to see her answers there.

His eyes smoldered, and she wondered if he sensed the same need skittering through her.

*Can I do this? Should I do this? What’s going to happen when I go home and never see him again?* She never did anything like

this. Every step of her life was planned down to the minute. It had to be in order for her to achieve her goals, her dreams.

It was sink or swim time, and her body was urging her to dive deep, and take him with her.

*Forget tomorrow, live for today.*

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him, softly at first. She was surprised he did not deepen the kiss, kept his hands to himself. She braced her hands on his broad shoulders, tilted her head. She licked the seam of his lips, and he opened, allowing her in.

He still hadn't touched her, and she realized he was keeping his promise, letting her set the pace, deciding how far to go. In that moment, she decided she wanted him, had to have him.

*Carpe diem. Seize the day. Seize this minute, dammit, and live for once. Feel alive again!*

They might never have this chance again, and she was going for the brass ring.

"Touch me," she murmured against his lips. "Make love with me."

He groaned, and his arms swept around her, pulling her flush against his body. He held her so close they seemed melded together.

His heart thudded against her breast, and hers answered, matching it beat for thundering beat.

"Are you sure?" He leaned back and met her eyes.

Unable to wait a moment longer, she unbuttoned his shirt, her fingers trembling. She pushed it off his shoulders, slid her fingers slowly through the smattering of dark chest hair. She traced the faint arrow of hair to his belt buckle, and his stomach muscles quivered.

He stopped her hands before she could unsnap his pants. "I need to touch you, love. Turn around."

She turned around to let him unzip her red dress, trembled as it whispered down her body to puddle on the floor. He stopped her before she could face him again, and unhooked her black lace bra, dropped it to land on her dress. His arms slid around her, hands cupping her breasts, pulling her back to lean against him.

She felt the warm skin of his chest against her back, and her eyes drifted to the mirror on the opposite wall. She watched,

fascinated, as his thumbs flicked her nipples, and she arched into his hands. Liquid desire spread through her veins, coated her skin. His erection nudged her bottom, and she shifted her hips, rubbing against him. He groaned, and a shiver danced down her spine.

“*Mon Dieu*, what you do to me,” he whispered in her ear, his voice dark and husky. One hand traced slowly down her stomach to slip beneath her panties. He stroked one finger inside her, then spread the moisture between her folds. He groaned. “So wet. For me?”

A rush of intense yearning burst through her blood, and she moaned, even as she nodded. Shards of pleasure shredded her reserve. Excitement coiled within her, and she was about to spiral out of control. She trembled.

He’d ignited an inferno, and it raged through her body. She hadn’t been this close to anyone in a very long time. No one else made her feel the way he did, or could draw the pleasure from her so quickly.

“You are so ready for me. I need you, need to be with you, Genevieve.”

She heard the tremor in his voice and turned in his arms. His eyes were nearly hooded, luminous with passion. Burning, yearning for him, she kissed him, pulled him toward the bed. The backs of her knees hit the mattress, and she sank onto it.

Unbuttoning his slacks, she slowly slid the zipper down, pushed them down even as he removed his shoes. His erection jutted forward, long, thick, and hungry. For her.

He wanted her. *Her*. Knowing it, seeing it, empowered her to be bold, brazen. To take what she’d been aching for the last few days. Hell, the last fifteen years if she were honest.

She held him gently in her hand, traced her fingers over the velvety steel. Licking a droplet off the head, she tasted the sweet and salty tang that was his essence. Her lips opened, and she circled him, using her tongue to please him.

He sucked in a harsh breath, fisted a hand in her hair, pulled her head back gently. “You are torturing me. I won’t last if you keep touching me. I want to come inside you this first time.”

His gruff admission washed over her, made her impatient. The breath backed up in her lungs, and she lifted up enough to take her panties off, then scooted backward on the bed.

Roman knelt on the bed, staring at her. She felt exposed, even in the darkened room, and moved to cover herself, uncertain now. He took her hands, gently pulled them away from her body. He leaned toward the lamp. "I want to see you in the light."

She stopped him. "Leave it off. I—I want the candlelight." She wanted him—she did. But the butterflies turned into bats and pinged around her stomach.

He sheathed himself with a condom. Leaning over her, he sank slowly onto her body. He kissed her, his tongue sweeping inside to dance with hers.

His taste drove her wild, and she kissed him back with the hunger of fifteen long years.

He lifted up enough to kiss her breasts, licking each nipple before pulling it in to suck on it. Sharp arrows of desire raced through her to gather in her core. She cried out and arched, her fingernails digging into the skin of his back.

He nudged her knees apart and fit himself between them. The tip of his hard length entered her, stretched her wide. He filled her, and she bit her lip, her eyes widening. Her whole body tensed, strung tight as a bow.

He stopped moving, muscles rigid. Held himself back. "How long has it been?" he ground out. Sweat popped out on his forehead from his restraint.

"A long time," she shifted, embarrassed . . . no, mortified was more like it. "A really long time."

His heart stuttered, and he dropped his forehead to hers. He didn't know whether to be shocked or exultant. "We can stop if it hurts too much." *Please, God, I don't know if I can stop.*

"N-no . . . it's okay. Just give me a-a minute."

Relief swept through him. For three days he'd been so angry, since he realized she was back in France. But he'd spent every moment since then wanting her. Needing her. Bracing himself on one forearm, he looked down at her. So lovely, the candlelight

flickering over her skin, turning it a tawny shade. He wanted to make this special for her . . . for them.

He leaned down and kissed her, the taste of her drugging his senses. He pulled back, sliding out of her, and she relaxed. As hard as it was, as hard as *he* was, he would have to go slow.

She'd been a virgin when they first met, and he'd been honored she chose him to be her first. He'd have to take the same care now as he had so long ago.

Brushing the hair back from her neck, he spread it across the pillow . . . just the way he remembered. He licked the shell of her ear, whispered in her ear what he wanted to do to her, with her.

She rewarded him with a shiver, gasping.

The curve of her neck tasted delicious as he traced it with his tongue. The valley between her breasts elicited a heady intoxication as he breathed in the scent of her skin. A forgotten memory surfaced when he kissed beneath her breast—her skin tasted like spun sugar in just that spot.

He could explore her body for days, never tiring of uncovering her secrets. But right now he wanted to lavish his attention on her breasts. He teased her, licking, stroking everything but her nipple, until it was pert and hard as a berry. A berry he could no longer resist.

He touched it with the tip of his tongue, blew lightly on it. Her hand slid over his shoulder, cupped the back of his head. He drew her nipple into his mouth, stroking it with his tongue, suckling her.

She gasped again, arching beneath him. "Oh, God." She held him to her, whimpering.

He smiled to himself, pulled back and transferred his attention to her other breast. She'd always loved the way he made love to her there, and he was happy to see that hadn't changed, that she was still so responsive. He fixed his lips to her nipple possessively, happy no one else had been there recently.

Using his hands, his mouth, he continued his exploration. No part of her was left untouched as he learned the feel of her curves again, the seductive flavor of her body.

He marveled at the texture of her skin, as soft as the silks he had once found in India. She sighed and writhed beneath him, murmuring his name.

He kissed his way down her legs, spread them wide, and breathed in her arousal. He stroked his tongue between her velvety folds, her flavor exploding in his mouth, and a possessive animal lust consumed him. He held her hips steady, and she trembled at his onslaught.

Taking his time, he savored her, as he would a gourmand's delight. He aroused her, listening for every intake of breath, remembering what she liked, and discovering new depths to what pleased her as the woman she had become.

Her hands fisted in the sheets, and she arched, crying out his name. He held her steady as she came, and he wanted to take her up again and again, if only to hear her claim his heart again and again. He still felt as if he were dreaming her return to France.

*Is this real?*

He glanced up and met her eyes.

She smiled, an enchantress smile, and held her arms out to him. "Take me, Roman. I need you."

He moved swiftly up her body, fitting himself to her entrance. He slowed, pulsing, inch by granite inch, letting her body adjust to him. She was on fire, and he'd never been happier to feel that heat. Her heat. It took all his will and strength to remain still. He'd never been this hard or out of control.

He tried to think of something to take his mind off the urge to thrust. Mentally he cut the pattern on his newest design, trying to keep that urgent need reigned in. But a moment later, she wrapped her long legs around him, rising up to meet him, and he thrust deeper.

Her velvet heat clamped around him, and tremors shuddered through her body. She was slick and hot, convulsing around him. He wanted to last longer, but couldn't help it. He was going to explode, all too soon. But not before he brought her more pleasure first. He kissed her possessively, driving her to another orgasm, until she tore her mouth away and cried out.

His hunger for her surged, and he lost control. The orgasm roared through him, searing his soul.

*She's mine.*

Completely spent, he couldn't move until he forced himself to roll to the side so he wouldn't crush her, then pulled her close.



He glanced at her face, caught her watching him, biting her lip. Her face looked completely blank, and she closed her eyes. She curled into him, resting her cheek on his shoulder, hiding her face.

“Are you alright?”

“Mm hmm,” she murmured, her voice distant. “Fine.”

He lifted his head up to look down at her, caught a blush rising in her cheek. Doubts assailed him. Was she regretting their intimacy already? He knew she'd been satisfied. She could not have faked her responses to his lovemaking. For as reserved as she could be, she had a passionate nature, and had always responded to him.

“Are you sorry?”

She shifted, but didn't look at him. “For what?”

“About what just happened? Because I am not. It was incredible to me.”

She was quiet for long moments, and he began to worry.

“No, I'm not sorry.” She pulled the sheet up, covering herself. “Honestly, I think it was inevitable, considering our past. But sex doesn't change anything. It can't.”

He wanted her in his life, not just his bed. This was not just sex, was it? But could it be love? Not just the love he'd had for her so long ago, but a new love. A love redesigned by their experiences apart in the intervening years.

He was beginning to think so, to hope it was. For the first time in a very long time, he was hopeful.

Later that evening, Roman stared out the window of the hotel room at the city lights, waiting for her to finish getting ready. As much as he loved Paris, the way the city and the fast pace energized him, he still wanted to be in his new home. With her by his side.

But would she want him? There had been so much pain separating them over the years. She had a life in America, and friends, wanted to start her own business. He had just returned to France, ready to move his business here, begin showing in Paris again.

Her bedroom door opened, and he turned around she crossed the room. His heart raced.

She was stunning, like a Grecian goddess come to life. A long white satin dress draped her in elegance and sophistication. A simple neckline framed her delicate collar bone. A silver beaded belt accentuated her hourglass figure. Her hair was pulled up into a loose chignon, a few soft tendrils floating around her face. Long diamond earrings sparkled at her ears, and drew attention to her graceful neck.

The dress was simply icing on the cake. It was the woman inside that captivated him.

“Do I look okay? I had to borrow this from Connie Sue.” She slowly turned around and looked at him over her shoulder. Her smoky eyes watched him, as if begging for his approval.

The front of the dress was sedate, simple. The back made him want to strip the dress away and keep her in bed. Forever. It was seductive, daring, and completely bare. The fabric draped to the sides, leaving her elegant back exposed almost to the base of her spine.

He crossed the room to stand behind her. “Words fail me. You are stunning, and so damn sexy.” He nuzzled the spot behind her ear, trailed his lips down her spine, kissing each vertebrae.

She shivered.

He turned her around, and she looked up at him. He read the doubts in her eyes. He’d never been able to convince her she was beautiful, and even now, she just couldn’t see it.

“You are beautiful in your chef coat and jeans, you are beautiful in an evening gown. It doesn’t matter what you wear because it is your essence. It is you. I do not want to share you with anyone, but if we don’t leave now, we will never make it out of this room.”

Her eyes flashed with an unknown emotion. He reluctantly let her go. Didn’t want to push her any more than he had. The whole night stretched before them, and he planned to spend every minute of it worshipping her, body and soul.

He picked up the tuxedo jacket and slipped it on.

“You clean up pretty good yourself,” she said, her Southern accent charming him.

He glanced at her, found her staring at him. *Is that hunger in her eyes?*

“I’ve never seen you in a tux. You’ve come such a long way. You’re hugely successful, and have really made something of yourself. You should be proud.”

Instinct had him withdrawing, and a sliver of disappointment sliced through him. A great many women had complimented him over the years, since he became wealthy, but it was always about what he could do for them. Surely she was not like *them*?

## Chapter 11

A glass elevator whisked them to the ballroom level. She knew she'd made a mistake sleeping with Roman. But she'd been drawn to him, couldn't stay away from him . . . his touch. She wanted to go forward, have a good relationship with him, one of friendship. But they'd had sex, and sex always complicated things.

But then she'd walked out of the bedroom and saw the expression on his face . . .

She could admit it now, to herself—she'd wanted to wow him tonight. She'd put the dress on, and God, she felt naked and exposed. But the desire and appreciation on his face had shored up her confidence. For the first time in a long time, if ever, she felt she could actually compete against the women he normally dated.

The doors opened, and they stepped out onto a red carpet. Lights flashed, momentarily blinding her. She blinked to clear the spots. Paparazzi lined the red carpeted walkway. She hesitated, and Roman glanced at her, raised an eyebrow in question.

He smiled, and she stepped up beside him. He skimmed an arm around her, resting his hand low on her back, his touch eliciting sparks on her bare skin. Little spikes of yearning darted through her, and it was all she could do to refrain from pulling him back upstairs.

A short man wearing headphones and holding a clipboard greeted Roman and gestured to the walkway. She couldn't hear the conversation, but followed when he started walking again. They were led toward the door to the ballroom, walking the path as flashbulbs constantly strobed. Reporters jostled microphones and elbowed each other as they tried to attract Roman's attention. He blithely ignored them, even when they began shouting questions at her, asking her who she was.

Roman tucked her closer to his side, shielding her from the pack. They stood in line at the door, waiting to get in.

Everywhere she looked, it seemed as if people were staring at her, whispering. She finally could see inside the ballroom.

Hundreds of people sat at tables or stood in groups talking. What happened to the small banquet he had told her about?

She tapped Roman on the shoulder, leaning closer to him. He bent his head down to hear her. "I thought this was a small banquet."

He shifted his head to speak in her ear. "It is small, only three hundred or so were invited." He nibbled on her earlobe.

She frowned.

"You're the only one I want to spend time with. We will be as brief as possible, I promise. Thank you for accompanying me."

She met his gaze, and the look on his face said it all. He leaned down and kissed her, hard and fast.

Light bulbs flashed again.

*I think I'm in the weeds now.*

The little man holding the clipboard reappeared, and guided them through the crowd towards the front of the room.

She really hoped they weren't sitting too far in front. She'd rather be anonymous.

But they kept walking until they reached a long table. In the front of the room. The one with the speaker's podium and microphone smack dab in the middle.

*Well, crap on a cracker.*

Roman held a chair out for her, then sat to her left. She looked out at a sea of people, most of whom seemed to be staring at her. Little Miss Nobody.

She leaned closer to him. "Are you *speaking* at this banquet?"

"Yes, I have to make a speech after they present the award."

"What award?"

"Did I not tell you? I'm being honored as designer of the year, and for mentoring new designers as they begin their careers."

"No, you didn't tell me." She clenched her teeth together, strove for calm. "Congratulations. But why didn't you tell me about this?"

He frowned. "Didn't I tell you? It is not a big thing. I have to attend many banquets a year, so I really did not think about it. I apologize." He pulled her hand through his arm, leaning closer to her ear. "Forgive me?"

She hesitated. The last thing she wanted was to be drawn into his world. He looked so contrite that she finally nodded.

Someone touched his sleeve, and he turned away to shake hands.

She silently cursed. Just one more nail in the coffin cementing the difference in their worlds. She was always behind the scenes in her job, never in the limelight, except for that TV show, which she'd hated doing.

She watched him greeting people, and he seemed to be in his element. Yes, he made sure to introduce her, and tried to include her in conversations. Her innate shyness kept her quiet, tongue-tied. Definitely out of her comfort zone here.

The host of the evening asked the guests to take their seats. The lights dimmed, and upbeat music poured forth from hidden speakers. Models strode down the runway splitting the room, and an announcer explained these were dresses from each of the collections Roman had designed over the last decade.

The models came forward, each dress more spectacular and flawless than the last. The fabrics were lush and exotic, the designs brilliant.

The show ended, and the room erupted into a standing ovation. She all but leapt to her feet, so proud of him she would either combust or burst into tears. *He is a true design genius!*

One of the models approached the table and took his hand, leading him to the stage. He waved at the crowd, looking at ease.

He rejoined her at their table again, and leaned toward her. "I never like that part of shows."

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

"Having to walk out on stage after the models are finished showing the clothes."

She studied his face, and noticed his cheeks stained red. *He's shy about the praise?*

"Well, you deserve the accolades, you really do. The clothes you've designed are brilliant, and gorgeous. You should be proud of your accomplishments—"

A waiter leaned between them and set a plate down in front of her, and she had to move back. She'd tell Roman later how proud she was of him.

After a gourmet dinner was served, the speeches began. She enjoyed hearing the young designers praise Roman for his efforts and support as they launched their careers. Every one of them extolled his patience and kindness, guiding them on their individual paths to their own dreams. He had given them the confidence they needed to make it in a competitive business and reach their goals.

The host of the evening stood up to introduce yet another speaker. “Ladies and gentlemen. It is my great pleasure to introduce a surprise guest. The person who helped Roman himself launch his own career.”

Beside her, Roman stiffened, and his hand clenched around hers under the table. He leaned close to her, his jaw tense.

“I’m so sorry. I had no idea she was invited.”

“What do you—”

The host spoke again. “Please help me welcome Patrice Toussaint.”

The applause became a dull roar in her ears, and she wanted to sink into the floor and die.

*She* walked out from behind the curtain and stood at the podium. Not a silver hair out of place on her perfectly coiffed head. The evil she-wolf turned to Roman and they shook hands. Patrice leaned forward as if to kiss him, but he subtly sidestepped. Her glance fell on Genevieve. Recognition dawned, and her gray eyes narrowed, her lips pursed, and she detected a crack in Patrice’s icy facade.

They hadn’t spent much time around each other back in the Paris days, but she could tell the older woman had wanted him for her own little toy.

Patrice had been a cougar before the term was coined.

Calculating the passing years, she guessed Patrice had to be in her mid-fifties by now. The woman oozed elegance, poise, and sophistication. She was cool under pressure, determined to have everyone kowtow to her.

But this devil always wore Chanel.

Patrice began speaking, her voice low and modulated. “I first met Roman when he was a young man of seventeen, at the home of his aunt, and my dear friend. He was always drawing in a

sketchbook, his head buried in it for hours. I finally had the opportunity to see what he worked so diligently on, and I was amazed at his talent for designing clothes. As his aunt and uncle entertained, he would linger in a corner, and draw the guests. But the clothing he always altered, with subtle lines, or variations on the color and silhouette.”

Patrice laid her hand on his shoulder, and Genevieve wanted to yank it off him.

“I finally asked him one time why he always changed the clothing on guests. He explained the changes made the women look better, more elegant, more refined. And he was inevitably correct. I encouraged him to begin designing clothes on his own, incorporating his own ideas. I once had to attend an important tea at the *Palais Royale*, and asked him what I should wear. He designed the perfect outfit for me, and I was the best-dressed woman there. I eventually encouraged him to attend the Paris Fashion Institute for formal training, and once he graduated, I dropped a few words to a design house, and launched him on his career in fashion. And the rest is history!” The audience rose again for another ovation as Roman stood to accept his award.

So proud of him it hurt, and as much as it galled her to admit it, he wouldn't be where he was today without Patrice. And she herself might never have met him in Paris.

At the end of the dinner, people swarmed Roman, congratulating him on the award. The models all flocked to him, and he greeted each one warmly, and by name. They were all beautiful, tall, elegant, and exotic.

*What the hell is he doing with me?* Jealous spikes darted up and down her spine, surprising her with the intensity.

Pushed away from him by the throng, she signaled to him she'd be back.

He nodded and continued talking to the people surrounding him.

She headed toward the restroom, but turned back to glance at him. He stood head and shoulders above the crowd. So handsome. He took his celebrity in stride, as at ease in the crowd as he was when alone.



Pushing open the door to the ladies room, she was relieved to see no one. At last, a quiet refuge from the crush of people and photographers. She settled on one of the cushioned stools in front of the mirror to repair her lipstick. Pulling her smart phone out of her bag, she scrolled through the emails, hoping to see the one she'd been waiting for all month. Still nothing.

The door opened, and someone walked in, sitting a couple of stools down from her.

"Georgina, isn't it?"

Dammit, she knew that silky voice. She'd just had to listen to it gushing about Roman and how *she'd* discovered him.

"No. It's Genevieve," she corrected Patrice, icy disdain evident. "Not that you'll remember it five seconds from now."

"My. You've grown some claws over the years, haven't you?"

Genevieve slipped her phone back in her purse and snapped it closed as she stood up to leave.

"You do realize you're only a novelty, do you not? A fling from his past?"

Her hand froze on the doorknob. "Excuse me?"

Patrice continued. "You would have held him back from the brilliant career he was destined for. He would not be the man he is if you had stayed. Do you really think you will fit into his world now? You may be dressed up this evening, but we both know you are not right for him. What do you want? Money? Is that why you came back?"

Genevieve's hand itched to slap the cotton stuffing out of the older woman, and the rage roaring through her was as foreign to her as a teetotaler at the VFW Hall on St. Patrick's Day.

She rounded on Patrice. "You *bitch*," she said, her voice low. "I know you were responsible for discovering Roman and encouraging his talent, and it's because of you he got his chance to become a designer. But you couldn't leave it at that. We know you lied just to break us up. You wanted him for yourself. Well fat lot of good it did you. You caused more damage than you'll ever know." Opening the door to leave, she made sure to close it quietly, and not slam it.

Leaning against the wall, she shook, unable to control the tremors. *I've never spoken to anyone that way. My mama would*

*be ashamed of me. Or maybe not, considering the damage Patrice did to us.*

A group of women were heading her way, and she needed to leave. She pushed off the wall and headed for the elevator. She kept her gaze lowered and didn't make eye contact. The long ride to their floor only prolonged the agony of knowing Patrice was right.

She was nobody, and he was better off without her.

Roman opened the door to the suite and scanned the opulent room, near frantic after realizing Genevieve had been gone well over half an hour. He checked the small kitchen, then headed toward her bedroom. As he opened the door, he heard the water running in the bathroom, and relief warred with guilt. He should have noticed much earlier she hadn't returned to the ballroom, but the number of people he had to speak to kept him distracted.

Steam fogged the mirror, and he loosened his tie. He grinned. Why not join her in the shower? His body tightened, thinking about running his hands over her soap-slicked body. He slipped his jacket, tie, shoes, and socks off, anxious to hold her again.

Unbuttoning his shirt, he opened the frosted glass door, and almost reeled back in shock. She crouched on the floor in the corner of the shower as the water streamed over her. Her hands covered her face and her shoulders were shaking.

"Genevieve! What is it? What is wrong?" He stepped into the shower, cool water pelting him. He shut the water off, and knelt before her. He ran his hands over her lightly, checking for injuries.

She looked up at him, startled, her eyes rimmed in red from crying. She hiccupped. "You're . . . getting y-your clothes . . . w-wet," she said, her breath hitching.

"It does not matter. You matter. Please, tell me what is wrong." He picked her up in his arms, holding her shivering body close to his warmth. He stepped out of the shower and snagged a towel off the rack. He set her down gently on the low bench and wrapped the towel around her shoulders. Grabbing another towel, he gently squeezed the excess water from her hair.

"I had . . . a run-in with Patrice in the l-ladies room." She wiped her eyes on the towel.

Rage flared hot, and his jaw clenched around the vitriol he wanted to spew. He inhaled, fighting for calm. Inhaled again. It would not do any good to lose his temper with her already so upset. "Are you all right?" He shook his head. "Eh, *stupide!* Of course you are not. What did that *chienne* say to you?"

She half-smiled through her tears. "I lost a lot of the French you taught me, but I do remember that word. I already called her that in plain old English."

He grinned. "Good for you, my love. She deserved it, and more. I would like to wring her neck."

"You mean her scrawny, over-botoxed, plastic surgery neck?"

He could see the effort she was making to make *him* feel better. He stood and helped her to her feet. "Let's get you dried off and to bed." He removed the towel from her shoulders and started drying her off.

She leaned against him. She had to be weak from sitting in the shower so long.

His protective instincts took over. He went slowly, rubbing the soft towel over her, not to seduce, but to comfort.

Her eyes closed, and she sighed.

Reaching her stomach, he noticed a long scar across her abdomen he had not noticed earlier when making love with her in the darkened bedroom. He knelt down to look closer, and chills raced through him, freezing his blood.

"*Mon Dieu!* What happened to you?" He looked up to meet her horrified gaze.

She grabbed the towel from him and clutched it to her front. She backed away from him.

He followed her, held her shoulders to stop her. "Tell me." He fought to keep his voice gentle. "What happened to you?"

She started shaking again, her teeth chattering, and the tremors scared him. He grabbed the fluffy, thick hotel robe off the hook and wrapped her in it. Once she was bundled in the robe, he picked her up and carried her to her bedroom. He sat on the chaise longue in the corner, and held her on his lap.

"You do not have to tell me. But just know I am here for you." He pulled her close, stroked her back, hoping to soothe her. Willing her silently to tell him what had happened to her.

“I was in a car accident,” she said, her voice quiet.

His hands tightened on her, and he breathed until he could calm down. “When?”

“Fifteen years ago.”

His eyes closed. It must have happened after she returned to the States.

“About two weeks after I returned from Paris, I wasn’t feeling well, so I went to the doctor. I found out I was . . . p-pregnant, about t-ten weeks along.”

*A child?* His head spun, and shock raced through him, numbing him. “We have a child?” he croaked, his throat parched.

“No.” Her voice broke. “I’m so . . . so sorry,” she sobbed.

“I don’t understand. What happened to it?”

“The doctor told me I was pregnant, and even though I was in shock . . . I was ecstatic. I couldn’t wait to tell you I was having your baby. As I told you yesterday, I called you . . . Patrice answered. I was h-heartbroken . . . she was h-horrible. I wasn’t thinking straight. I had to get to the hospital. Dad was scheduled for another surgery. I was numb, in shock. There was a terrible thunderstorm, flooding in the streets. The car hydroplaned, and . . . and crashed . . . into a t-tree. I was pinned . . . behind the wheel, until someone f-found me and called 911.”

Tears slid down her face, and he wrapped his arms tighter around her.

Terror lodged in his throat, and he fought to catch his breath. *She could have died. Helpless and alone. I should have been there with her.*

“There was so much damage from the accident. I almost died. My b-baby . . . our baby girl . . . didn’t . . . couldn’t make it. I had to have a . . . h-hysterectomy.”

Grief edged out the shock. He wanted to rage at the world. He’d almost lost her, and he’d lost his child. *Our child.*

She sobbed against his shoulder. The sound tore him apart, and he felt helpless. What could he do?

She clutched his arm. He’d have to be strong . . . for her. He would give in to his own grief later.

“If only I hadn’t been driving, I’d still have h-her today. I would’ve h-had a piece of you in my life. Even after l-losing you.”

“I’m so sorry, so sorry. I could kill Patrice right now. I’m so thankful you survived. I hate you had to go through this alone. Was your father supportive? I know he was in the hospital, but was he there for you?”

Her breath hitched, and she shook her head. “I never told him. He was out of it for days, and by then I was starting to recover. I couldn’t add more stress to him while he was recovering. Daniel was th-*there* for me, though.”

Jealousy, rage, and grief sliced through him, cutting his heart into pieces. *I should have been there for her. For her and my baby.* He closed his eyes as a wave of pain engulfed him.

“No one else knows, just Daniel. And now you.”

“Not even your cousin?”

“No, she was too young, and this wasn’t something I wanted to share with anyone. The grief was too raw. I had to take it a day at a time just to stay sane. I buried myself in work and taking care of Dad.”

“You said it was a girl?” His voice cracked. But he had to be strong. For her. He hadn’t been there for her fifteen years ago, but he would be now.

She nodded against his shoulder. “I named her Catherine Paris Haywood. Catherine for my mom, and Paris because of where I found you.”

He held her, until her breathing evened out and she relaxed into sleep, worn out from the emotions she’d experienced. She had lost so much, been through too much in her young life. All these years he had blamed her for a lie. He’d hardened his heart to her, trying to forget her, and all that time, she’d been suffering alone.

He vowed he would do whatever he could to help her, to make it up to her, as much as he could. Whatever she needed . . . *and please God, let it be me.*

## Chapter 12

The next afternoon, Genevieve looked for Connie Sue to ask her a question about the cupcakes for the shower that night. She leaned against the wall outside the ballroom, so bone-tired she hurt. Reliving her nightmare the evening before had wiped her out completely. She'd never wanted him to know what happened. But now he knew.

He'd been so distant on the flight back to St. Armand. Yes, he'd been solicitous, taking care of her in little ways, but it felt like the ocean that separated them was even wider and deeper now. She shouldn't have slept with him, or told him about the accident. Why did she leap from one mistake to the next?

The door to the ballroom opened, and Connie Sue rushed out.

Genevieve pushed off the wall and stopped her cousin. "Hey, Cuz, got a question for you. Do you want the cupcakes out on the table during the shower, or brought out later?"

"Um, I think on the table. I want everyone to see your gorgeous cakes right away. Who knows? You may end up getting enough business from my wedding you'll have to move here."

Genevieve rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right. I'm starting to build a small following at home. I don't want to risk it." She turned to head back to the kitchen, but Connie Sue grabbed her hand.

"Wait. You have got to see Melly and Bella in their flower girl dresses. Roman is doing their fitting right now, and they are just precious. I left my phone in the office, so I'm going to call Francois to get over here for this. I'm also going to get the camera. Toodles!"

Genevieve grinned, and opened the door to the ballroom quietly so she wouldn't disturb the little girls and their fitting.

They were both standing on the platform, holding still, staring at themselves in the mirror. Roman knelt behind them fiddling with the tulle skirt on one of them—she didn't know which twin she was yet.

*Connie Sue was right. They are too cute for words!*

He sat back on his haunches. “Well, ladies. Do you like your dresses?”

Melly and Bella turned around and launched their little bodies at him. He grabbed them close so they wouldn’t fall off the platform.

“*Merci, Oncle Roman! Nous sommes comme des princesses!*” Their excited chatter filled the cavernous room, echoing off the walls.

She smiled. She recognized the word ‘princesses’, their current favorite game to play, according to Connie Sue.

Each little girl kissed him on the cheek. His arms tightened around them. He held them close, and one of the girls squeaked.

She glanced at his reflection in the mirror.

Grief was etched on his face, heavy shadows beneath his eyes. He’d taken care of her the night before, been strong for her.

Her heart constricted. She recognized grief—it’s what she had lived with every day for fifteen years. And he had just found out last night.

She couldn’t bear to talk to him right now. It would only upset Melly and Bella. She quietly closed the door, and sank onto the chair in the hallway. She bent over, dropping her face into her hands and tried hard to stem the tears as they leaked through her fingers.

She had cried more on this trip than she had in the last several years.

“Are you slacking, Sugar?” Daniel asked, laughing.

She looked up, startled.

He hurried over to her. “What is it? What’s wrong? Why are you crying? You’re pale as my white duvet.”

“Sorry. I was just . . . Roman . . .” She pulled a tissue out of her pocket and blew her nose.

“What did Frenchie do now?” he ground out.

“He didn’t do anything. He’s got the twins in the ballroom. They’re trying their dresses on, and he was hugging them. It was the most precious thing, and it damn near broke my heart.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I told him last night. He hasn’t even had twenty-four hours to process I lost our baby,” she whispered in a strained voice.

“Oh, Sugar,” he murmured. “You okay?”

She nodded, then shrugged.

“It wasn’t your fault. You know that, right?” He straightened, his tone turning sharp. “He’s not blaming you, is he?”

She started to speak but the door opened, and the twins raced out of the room, followed by their nanny.

“I need to go. I can’t see him right now.” She hurried down the hallway in the opposite direction.

Roman leaned against the wall feeling as if his world had caved in. The night before he’d been in shock, but it became reality when the twins hugged him.

He should have had a fifteen year old daughter.

Pain roared through him, and it was like nothing he’d ever experienced before.

The door opened, and he turned his back, not wanting anyone to see his tears.

“You better not be blaming my Gigi for the accident, you sonuvabitch,” Daniel said. “Can’t you just leave her alone? How could you make her feel the accident was her fault? It’s not enough that she has to see you now, be reminded of the hell she went through, but you blame her?” He grabbed Roman’s arm.

Roman twisted around to shake him off. “No!”

Daniel fell back a step. His eyes widened.

“I would *never* blame Genevieve. She told me about the accident. The fact she almost died . . . with our child--” He broke off, a sob forcing its way out of his chest. He sank to the dressmaker’s platform, holding himself as if to ward off killing blows. He couldn’t bare himself like this in front of anyone, and he tried to contain the raw emotion.

Daniel’s hand reached out, hesitated. “Crap.” He sat down and wrapped an arm around Roman’s shoulders. “It’s okay. You need to grieve. You need to let go.”

At Daniel’s words, the dam broke, and a sob ripped from his chest. All the years of loneliness poured out of him, all the heartache he’d suffered being separated from the one person he had ever really loved.



The one person who now couldn't give him the children he wanted so much.

The tears slowly subsided, and embarrassment filled him to have been so emotional in front of this man who already hated him.

Daniel removed his arm and handed him a handkerchief.

Roman took it, not meeting his eyes. "*Merci.*"

"It's a lot to absorb, I know," Daniel said, his voice catching.

"You were there with her, weren't you?"

Daniel nodded. "I was her emergency contact. When they called me . . ." He shuddered. "I was terrified I'd lose her. She's the best friend I've ever had. She's closer than a sister could be."

Roman rubbed a hand through his hair, weary, drained. "Thank you for being there for her. It's killing me I never knew, that I was not there for her."

"I understand now what happened, but I have to tell you, she was heartbroken. Between losing the baby, and you, I didn't think she'd ever come out of it. She was just a shell for over a year. It didn't help she had to go straight from her own recovery to caring for her dad."

"I vow to spend the rest of my life taking care of her. If I could make it up to her, I would."

"What do you mean?"

"Whatever she needs, I'll make sure she has it."

"You can't just throw money at her," Daniel snapped.

"That's not what I mean. I want to take care of her."

"She's not going to accept charity."

"I do not think of her as a charity case. I cannot explain right now. I must think."

"And here I was just startin' to like you." Daniel narrowed his eyes.

Roman quirked his left brow. "Are you going to hit me again?"

Daniel grinned, his face reddening. "Sorry about that, old man. Truce?" He held a hand out.

Roman gripped it, and they shook hands. "Truce."

Daniel shifted away from him and stood up, facing the mirror. He straightened his shirt, tugged on the cuffs.

Looking away, Roman stared at the cold marble floor, his thoughts cascading, tumbling.

“You love her?”

His voice was quiet, but Roman heard the heat beneath the words. He looked up and met Daniel’s stare in the mirror. “I care for her deeply, but I can’t talk about this with you.”

“Just don’t hurt her. That’s all I ask.”

“That’s the last thing I want.” He refused to look away until Daniel turned around and crossed to the door, closing it quietly behind him. The bond he felt now with her friend was tenuous, but it was a beginning. They both cared for her.

*Now what do I do? I want children, but I want them with Genevieve.*

He stood up and walked out of the ballroom, more than ready to go home and be alone. On his way to the front door, he nearly ran into Genevieve pushing a cart holding a tower of pink cupcakes.

“Do you need help?”

She avoided his eyes. “Could you please open the Salon door?”

He opened the door and helped her roll the cart over the threshold. “Pretty cupcakes.”

“Thanks. Do you want one? I have plenty of extra. They’re pink champagne.”

“No, thank you. I’m not very hungry,” he said.

She looked up at him, searching his face. “Are you okay?”

He nodded, not meeting her eyes. “I’m fine. I must leave—”

Her phone chimed and she snatched it up off the cart. She looked at the screen and her shoulders slumped.

“Problem?”

“No . . . well yes, actually. I’m still waiting on the bank to let me know if they’ve approved my loan application.”

“Are you buying a house?”

“No, I need financing for the building I’ve had my eye on. This is the third bank I’ve tried, and I’m almost to the point of desperation. I made special cakes for each one so they can see exactly what I want to use the money for. This one said I might not

hear until the end of the month.” She tossed the phone down on the cart and began setting up the cupcake tower.

He was drained, and all she could think of was money? “I’ll leave you to your work. *Au revoir.*”

The pressure kept building in his chest and he needed to get out of there. He opened the front door to see Patrice walking up the steps.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Francois’ mother invited me.”

He’d almost forgotten they were friends.

“When did your little American come back into your life?” Her lip curled, and the lines of time were evident on her face.

“She is here for the wedding. Her cousin is the bride, and she’s making the cakes.”

Her lip curled. “Oh, *she’s* the one? I did not realize.” She moved closer to him and touched his arm. “Just between you and me, Francois’ mother is very worried the cakes will be in poor taste. When he told her they were hiring an unknown, she decided to have a contingency plan in case they are disastrous.”

His eyes narrowed. “I have sampled some of Genevieve’s pastries, and they are divine. Tell my aunt there will be no need for a backup.”

“I’m sure that’s not all you’ve sampled,” she said, contempt dripping from her voice. “She is trying to get into your good graces, if not your bed, to secure financing for her little business.”

He looked at her, startled.

“Oh, yes. I heard the little baker was trying to start her business. That is why Constance and Francois decided to take a chance on her. I just hope she does not let them down. There will be many important people at the wedding who could make or break her. Just keep it in mind.”

He loomed over her, clenching his fists.

She flinched, stepping back.

“You know nothing about her. And I’ll tell you something else. You stay away from her, and you better stay away from me. I was grateful to you for helping me start my career, but you’ve interfered and intruded where you are not welcome.”

She ran a hand down his arm. “She is not worthy of you, or your status. I only want what’s best for you, and for your career.”

He looked at her slim hand on his arm, wanted to hurl her through the window. It was her fault he and Genevieve had lost their child. But he couldn’t, wouldn’t, say anything to her. He flung her hand off him, and strode down the steps. Yanking open the door, he got in his car, slammed the door. He glanced up at her as he put the car in gear, and noticed her pale face. *I hope I never see her again.*

Driving down the lane to the road, doubts assailed him. His heart ached, and echoes of his father’s voice berating his drawings filled his mind. *“You’ll never be good enough. Who would want your designs? You need to make a real living. But then maybe you take after your mother, and you’ll never amount to anything.”*

The shower for Connie Sue was drawing to a close, and Genevieve slipped out after the cupcake tower had been decimated. Pleased they had been devoured by the chattering women, and received rave reviews, she was relieved to escape. Directions from Francois in hand, she pointed the rental car toward Roman’s house. She hadn’t even taken time to change out of her little black dress and high heels.

Reaching his house and heading up the path, she soothed a hand over her stomach, hoping her nerves would settle down. Something was bothering him. He’d been so distant earlier in the afternoon when she talked to him in the hall, and she wanted to help if she could.

But she needed to be careful. No more sex. She couldn’t handle getting in any deeper, not when she had so much at stake back home.

She knocked on the door and waited, and the scent of wisteria drifted to her with the breeze. A moment later he opened the door.

The butterflies kicked up double-time, and she swallowed hard. He stood in the doorway, so outrageously sexy. It wasn’t fair a man could look that way—dangerous, brooding, wearing just a white t-shirt, jeans and bare feet. She wanted to jump him right then and there.

*“Bonsoir.”*

“Oh, um, hi,” she said, stumbling over the words. “I just wanted to check on you.”

He cocked his head and stared at her.

*What is he thinking? Does he not want me here?*

He rubbed the back of his neck, but opened the door wider. “Come in. Can I get you anything?”

“No, I’m fine.”

He led her into a room she hadn’t seen last time, his study. Built-in bookshelves painted sage green to blend in lined the wall opposite the arched doorway. Two leather wing chairs flanked a bay window overlooking the small lake behind his house. A bottle of whiskey and a glass sat on the large wooden desk. Music played softly from the stereo in the corner.

Roman gestured for her to sit in one of the chairs, and he bent to pull books out of one of the boxes on the floor. “I’m still unpacking, so I hope you don’t mind if I continue.”

His tone was cold, and the vibe around him said ‘stay away.’

Books filled the shelves, and there were a number of awards on three shelves. He had done really well for himself over the years.

“Can I help you unpack?”

“No, you relax. You’ve had a busy few days. Besides, you are too dressed up.”

She stood up, too restless to sit still, and wandered to a large drafting table tucked away in a small alcove. Sketches were scattered across the table, and more lined a wall covered in corkboard. She examined the drawings, in awe of his talent for designing women’s clothing.

Eartha Kitt’s sultry tones filled the room. The song took her back in time to a night she’d taken dinner to Roman at the workroom in the Design district. They’d been together about two months at the time.

*She walked in to the workroom and found him hunched over the drawing table, pencil in hand. Music filled the room, and she recognized his favorite song. His whole concentration was focused on the papers spread over the desk. She loved watching him work. He put his whole heart into what he did, and he was*

*working so hard to be noticed and taken seriously as a designer. He'd make it one day, no doubt about it.*

*Setting the picnic basket on a small table, she pulled the sandwiches out and set them on plates, added the pickles and olives he loved at the side. She poured hot tea from the thermos into a white mug. He'd want coffee, but as it late as it was, he didn't need the caffeine.*

*Walking to the drawing table, she put a hand on his shoulder.*

*His head whipped toward her. A grin split his face. "What a nice surprise! What are you doing here?"*

*"I figured you might be hungry by now." She brought the other hand up and massaged both shoulders, feeling the tension relax. She loved his shoulders, so strong, capable of carrying the weight of the world on them.*

*"What time is it?"*

*She looked at her watch. "After nine. Come on and eat. I've got it all set up." She pointed across the room at the table.*

*He glanced at the table, and his eyes widened. "I never heard you come in."*

*"I didn't want to bother you until it was ready to go."*

*He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "You're merveilleux . . . wonderful, you know that?"*

*She kissed him, then pulled back to lead him to the table.*

*But he stopped her, kissed her again, his lips coaxing a breathless response from her. "What did you bring me to eat?" he murmured.*

*Her brain fogged, and she had to think a minute. "Um, sandwiches."*

*He kissed along her jawline to her ear. "So they'll keep for a little while?"*

*She leaned back and looked at him.*

*His eyes were heavy, and now focused only on her. Oh boy.*

*Her body tingled, remembering the break he'd taken from work that long ago night. She looked up to see him watching her, felt her face flush. "Is this your next collection?"*

*"Oui. Fall Fashion Week in Paris will be here in a few short months, so we must begin sewing as soon as the wedding is over with."*

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you something last night. I remember you as the young man I was with for five months, but I don’t know the man you are today. Last night at the banquet, I listened to people talk about you and your career . . . you’re a famous designer, and you’ve come so far. You worked hard, and your determination paid off. You’ve got an amazing amount of talent, and so much vision.”

He leaned against the desk, cold and aloof.

“I just wanted you to know how incredibly proud of you I am. I’ll leave you alone now so you can finish unpacking.”

She started toward the doorway, but his voice stopped her.

“Isn’t this where you ask me for money?”

She whirled around. “What?”

“Isn’t that what you came here for?”

“Why on earth would I do that?”

“Maybe you feel it’s owed to you for your suffering?”

She flinched, stepped back from his harsh words and cold anger. Nausea rose, and she fought the urge to throw up. “How could you say that to me? I came here tonight to see if you were okay. You took care of me last night, and I know you were upset today. I saw you with Melly and Bella in the ballroom earlier this afternoon.”

He stepped toward her, but she backed away, holding her hands up to ward him off.

“And another thing. I want to start my business on my *own*. I don’t want money from anyone but a bank. This is *my* business, *my* life. You don’t have to worry that I want anything from *you*.” She hurried toward the door.

*I’ve been such an idiot. Why did I get involved with him again?*

She reached the door and turned the handle.

His hand slammed against it so it wouldn’t open.

“Forgive me. I jumped to conclusions, and I apologize.”

His hands gripped her shoulders but she jerked away from him.

“Why would you think I wanted money from you?”

This time he succeeded in turning her around to face him. Looking guilty, he said, “I should not have said those things. As I

was leaving the chateau, I ran into Patrice. She spewed her venom before I could get away from her.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Yes, I noticed her at the shower and stayed far away from her. What exactly did she say to you?”

He glanced at her, and red crept across his face. “It doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have listened to her. I was raw after Daniel—”

“Daniel what?”

“Nothing. Never mind,” he said, abrupt. “Did she eat any of your cupcakes?”

“She did. Three. Although I know it pained her. I think she tried one just so she could trash it, but then liked them. I wanted to add something extra just for her . . . like arsenic.”

He laughed, and although she was still pissed at him, she was relieved she could lighten his mood.

“I’m surprised she ate any knowing you made them.” He pulled her into his arms. “I am sorry, *mon amour*.”

She tightened her arms around him. “Do you want to talk about last night?”

“Not yet. I don’t think I am ready. Can I do anything for you?”

She pulled back and shook her head. “Then I’d better get going.”

“Stay here tonight. With me.”

She looked up at him in surprise. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Please.” He kissed her softly on her lips. “I just want to hold you.”



## Chapter 13

After unloading the rest of the books in his study, Roman led her to his bedroom. He handed her a t-shirt, and she went to the bathroom to change. He got ready for bed, and settled between the sheets.

A short time later, she left the bathroom, and turned the light off. Her eyes flicked nervously to him, and she quickly looked away.

He had the sheet pulled up to his waist, but he had not put a t-shirt on. His eyes tracked her as she walked across the room.

She hurried to get under the covers, kept her eyes averted. She laid on her side, her back to him.

He turned the lights off, and rolled onto his side, pulling her close to curve around her. He shifted against her, and he could have sworn she sighed in relief when his pajama-clad legs brushed hers.

"I missed this, missed holding you," he murmured, feeling for the first time in a long time he might sleep through the night.

With her in his bed.

*Where she belongs.*

That woke him up.

"Good night," she whispered.

He soon heard her breath deepen, and she relaxed against him.

Of all the times for her to come back into his life, just when he had decided it was time to marry and have a family. Would he be a good father? He wanted to be a good one, something he had certainly never had, especially after his *mamá*n had left him and his father.

He'd been thinking about asking her to stay, but her revelations the night before changed everything. She couldn't have children.

His children.

He pulled her tighter, and she nestled closer to him. She felt right in his arms, in his bed . . . in his life.

She was not the same carefree young woman he had fallen for so long ago. She had matured . . . how could she not, considering the trials and tribulations she had faced at such a young age?

He clenched his teeth to keep from raging at the pain filling him. He should have been with her, should have refused to leave on the trip to Milan that he now understood had been fabricated to get him away from Genevieve. Then he could have gone to help her tend to her father, and she wouldn't have lost their baby.

He stroked her hair gently, and she sighed. He lifted his head and propped it on his arm so he could watch her sleep. With her face relaxed in sleep, she who was so strong looked so vulnerable now.

Yes, she had matured—she was capable, loyal, and so fiercely determined to be dependent on no one. She had taken him aback earlier this evening when she defended herself. He was so used to people asking him for handouts. Patrice's poisonous words hadn't helped.

Guilt and regret left him exhausted, and he was sorry he'd jumped to conclusions. He knew this woman better than that, shouldn't have assumed she wanted anything from him.

He laid his head back on the cool pillow, and tried to formulate a plan, but sleep finally beckoned, and he yawned.

He jerked awake sometime later. The mattress dipped as Genevieve sat up. His heart sank, and he hoped she wasn't leaving.

She walked across the room and closed the bathroom door. A few minutes later he heard the water running, and she opened the door. She walked back across the room and got back into bed. Relief swept through him. She wasn't leaving him. At least not yet.

She turned on her side to face him, and he smiled at her.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she said, her voice quiet.

"It is of no matter. I would rather lie awake all night with you by my side, than sleep without you."

She traced a finger over his lips, and he pressed a kiss to it. Her fingers gently brushed his chin.

“When did you grow a beard?”

He tried to remember. “It was about five years ago, I think. Do you hate it? I can shave it off, right now.”

She laughed. “No, it makes you look very distinguished.”

“Now you are calling *me* old?” He grinned.

“Not at all. I meant distinguished, but in a bad-boy sort of way.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek, then pulled away. “Is that better?”

He moved closer to her, and rubbed his cheek against her soft skin. “Do you still like it now?”

“Mhmm,” she said, her voice low and sexy. “Feels dangerous against my skin.”

“I don’t want to be a hazard to your skin. I can change it for you.”

“It’s your beard, your face. You shouldn’t change it just for me.”

He didn’t think they were speaking of his beard any longer.

She was close to getting in over her head. But, oh, how she wanted him. He’d been a perfect gentleman, even holding her as close as he had when she’d drifted off to sleep. The more time she spent with him, the more she wanted him to ask her to stay. But she couldn’t. She would only become lost in his world.

Her mother had been lost in her dad’s world. He didn’t want her to work, or have friends, or join clubs. She was there to take care of him and their daughter. Yes, her mom had loved them both, but there were times, even as a child, she could see her mother’s sadness, her yearning for more.

The full moon shone through the window, lending just enough light to see the way he stared at her with his intense gaze.

It made her breathless the way he focused on her.

When he looked at her that way, with such pure male arousal . . . her heart fluttered, then raced. He made her feel as if she were the only person in the world who mattered to him. Her blood pumped thick and hot. His mouth was a magnet, pulling her closer until she ached to taste him.

Closing the short distance, she molded herself to him, her soft curves to his hard body. He groaned, and she felt it rumble

through his chest. His body was like an oven, and she remembered she'd never been cold when they slept together.

His hand stroked her back, then moved around to cup her hip, snugging her closer to his erection. A tide of fire coursed through her, made her sex pulse. The need swamped her, drugging her senses, until her entire being was focused on him.

It was stupid of her to continue this. It would only make it harder for her to leave him. And she would leave. She had to. But why not take the pleasure she could? Why not give him the pleasure he wanted from her.

She had no doubt he would find someone else as soon as she was home.

But for now, he was hers.

Rising up on one elbow, she leaned over him, and kissed him, hungry and hard. Her lips glided over his warm ones, and she tangled her tongue with his. She pushed the sheet off and turned to straddle his hips.

His fingers tightened on her hips, and her restraint broke loose inside her.

She smoothed her hands over his shoulders, tracing the muscles and contours of his body. She slowly circled a male nipple, and he growled deep in his throat. She smiled, stroking lower across his ribs. He flinched just enough to make her remember he was ticklish.

"Genevieve," he said in a stern voice, warning her not to tickle him.

Now wasn't the time for fun and games, however. This was a time for heat and passion. Sighs and moans. And she wanted to wring every last sound out of him.

So she bent and licked a path across his chest, reveling in the textures of his skin. He tasted so . . . male. And like the finest chocolate, she craved the taste of him, the scent of him.

"Genevieve . . ." This time he sighed her name, and it touched her inside, made her smile.

His hard ridge pressed against the ache in her, and she slid back and forth slowly, teasing them both. But it wasn't enough—between his pajamas and her panties, there was too much material. He needed to be naked. She rose to her knees and

slowly peeled the pajama bottoms from him until she could toss them away. Pulling the t-shirt up and over her head, she dropped it on his pajamas. She leaned forward and kissed him, brushing the tips of her breasts against his chest, tantalizing him, and herself, at the same time.

His fingers toyed with her nipples, tweaking them until they were stiff peaks. He slid lower down the bed until he could take one into his mouth. He sucked hard, and her sex contracted in response. She grew wetter, hotter. Every pull of his lips sent a trail of sparks through her body.

Still on her hands and knees over him, she tried to lower herself so she could feel his hardness where she wanted it so desperately.

But he held her still, continuing to touch only her hips and her breasts, laving first one nipple, then the next.

This was it. She was going to combust, or die waiting for him to touch her where she needed him.

“Roman, I need . . . I need . . . touch me, please,” she whimpered, almost incoherent from pleasure.

He skimmed a hand to her panties, caressed her, sliding against the silk. But it still wasn't enough.

Finally, finally, his fingers slipped beneath the elastic. She waited for him to touch her where she ached the most. But a moment later she heard fabric rip. She gasped as her panties fell away, and started to protest.

“They were in my way. I'll buy you twenty more pairs . . . a hundred. I need to touch you. Now.” His fingers stroked through her slick heat, and she almost wept in relief.

Sensations built, one after the other, consuming her, filling her every breath, every thought, until her world narrowed down to him. To Roman.

“Now, please, God, now. I need you inside me. Don't make me beg.”

He gripped her hips, pulling her down onto his erection, and she slid home easily this time, no pain. He filled her, soothing and arousing all over again, and the pressure continued to build as she reached for what only he could give her.

“*Má Cherie*,” he murmured, even as he swelled and pulsed inside her.

She tried to slow her frantic pace, wanting him to feel the ecstasy as well, to give him what he was giving so selflessly to her.

But he would not slow, thrusting up even as she slid down.

He fisted his hand in her hair and met her for a kiss, fusing their mouths together.

Her climax broke, sending wave after wave of joy cascading through her limbs. The desperate urgency left her as a calm descended, and she ground down on him as his own pleasure peaked. He arched up toward her, and she held him close as he spilled into her, calling her name.

Boneless, she moved off him to curl at his side, and he tucked her close. She drifted to sleep, secure in his arms.

“I meant to leave so much earlier than this. Now I have to do the walk of shame in this blasted cocktail dress.”

He laughed. “I think you should come back to bed.”

Just the sound of his deep voice rumbling was enough to turn her to mush. She glanced at him as she sat down to put her strappy sandals on.

He lay on his massive bed, arms folded beneath his head. He looked like well over six feet of satisfied man. His hair was mussed from her fingers, and he grinned lazily at her. The sheet had slipped to his hips.

They’d made love several times during the night, and God help her, she was tempted to twitch the sheet away, take him up on his offer. She wanted him again.

Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, she blanched. “It’s well after eight in the morning! I’ve got so much to do to prep the wedding cake. I need to get going.” She walked over to the bed and bent over him, brushed a kiss against his lips.

He grabbed her wrist, held her still, and deepened the kiss.

Her heartbeat accelerated, and she forced herself to step back, tugged on her hand. “I have to go.”

“At least let me make some coffee for you.”

He flung the sheet off and a thrill raced through her as he got out of bed and pulled on a black silk robe. She hated to see him cover his body—it was solid and strong. A sculptor would have a field day with the planes and angles of him.

He opened his closet and slipped a white dress shirt off the hangar, handed it to her. “Here, wear this over your dress if it would make you more comfortable.”

Gratefully, she shrugged into it, covering the sparkling beads. She tied the long shirt tails in a knot at her waist, and rolled up the cuffs. “Thanks.” His scent lingered in the fabric of the shirt . . . maybe he’d forget he gave it to her, and she could smuggle it home with her. To remember . . .

She followed him to the kitchen and sat at the table, marveling at his precise movements as he prepared the espresso. It was going to be a long day, and she needed the jolt of caffeine to keep her going. She glanced at the folded newspaper on the table and caught sight of a picture of Roman. So devastatingly suave and sophisticated.

She picked up the paper and unfolded it, realized it was a picture of both of them on the red carpet walking into the banquet the evening they spent in Paris.

Her French was very rusty, so she couldn’t quite translate what the caption said. She held it up. “What does this say?”

He glanced at the paper in her hand, and his lip curled. “It is nothing. Just a rag. Pay it no attention.”

Worried now, she stood up. “What. Does. It. Say.”

He went still and turned around to face her. “I tell you it is of no consequence. There are always photographers at these events.”

She held the paper out to him, silently insisting he read it to her.

He sighed and picked up the paper from her now-shaking hand. “The caption asks who my new ‘flavor of the week’ is, and how long you’ll be around.”

Her heart dropped. She wanted to bang her head against the cabinet door at her stupidity.

He slapped the paper on the counter and walked around to her. “I’m sorry. I do not have the best reputation when it comes to

women. I admit I have dated many women over the years, but it is because I was looking for a special woman.”

He cupped her chin in his big hand and tilted her face up to his. “I was looking for you,” he said, and kissed her.

His kiss weakened her resolve, and his hands pressed her tighter to his body. Desire warred with dismay over the newspaper captions.

She fisted her hands in his robe, felt his warm skin beneath. She leaned into him for a moment, then pushed away. She licked her lips, still tasting him, tried to catch her breath.

“I have to go.”

“Please do not let this come between us. I have only just found you again.”

“If the paper is just a rag, as you say, why do you have it?”

“Because it has a picture of you and me, together again after so many years.”

See? How could she stay strong, keep her resolve, when he said sweet things like that?

Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked to clear them. *I am so tempted to stay here, but my dreams are at home. And what kind of life would I have if I did stay? He's the sun, shining bright, and I'd be just another planet orbiting him—another in a long string of women.*

She shook her head. “I can't talk about this now. There's a lot to do before the wedding.” She hurried to the door and left.



## Chapter 14

“Stupid . . . stupid . . . stupid . . . stupid.” The mumbled words kept time with the beat of the mixer as she made the icing for the cake.

“Who’s stupid, Sugar?”

She jerked her head up and saw Daniel leaning in the doorway of the kitchen, holding a shopping bag.

“Oh, nothing. Never mind. Been shopping? Did you bring me anything?” She turned her back to him and reached for the vanilla. She measured it out, poured it in the mixture, and risked a glance behind her. Dammit, still standing there staring at her.

She turned toward him, and rummaged in the drawer for a clean spatula. “What are you up to? I didn’t see you earlier.”

He walked into the kitchen and tossed several newspapers on the counter. They landed with a thud, face-up, a photo of Roman kissing her on the red carpet on top of the stack. “I went down to the village to explore the shops and passed a newsstand. Imagine my shock when I passed by row after row of pictures of you and Frenchie. I picked up a few for your scrapbook.” He folded his arms, his jaw clenched.

She slammed the drawer closed and snatched the top newspaper from the counter. *Great. Just great. More pictures.* “So? It was a kiss. A very nice one.”

“I thought you weren’t going to get involved with him.”

“I’m not,” she protested. Hated lying to him.

“Suuure you’re not,” he drawled. “Is that why you spent the night with him *again* last night?”

She glared at him. “What makes you think I did?”

“Because you weren’t at breakfast, and I happened to see you driving up this morning, trying to cover your walk of shame with a *man’s* shirt.”

Now she was angry. “So what if I did, *Father?* I’m a grown-damned-woman, and I’ll do whatever the hell I want.” She pointed the dripping spatula at him. “And you have no say in the matter!”

The hurt that crossed his face made her flinch. "I don't want to see you hurt again. But I'll leave you alone." He turned to leave the room.

Guilt winged its arrow at her heart, and she hurried after him. "I'm sorry. I really am. This is just all so confusing." She pulled on his arm, but he didn't budge. "I can't explain it. At first we just needed to clear the air. And once we did . . . He's familiar and new all at once. And it's been such a freakin' long time since anyone . . ."

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Long dry spell? I know." He turned around and hugged her. "You're a strong, capable woman, and you're so close to your dreams. You haven't let anyone get close to you in a long time. Don't let him hurt you again, please? I don't know if I can stand to see you go through that again."

*He's right, I know he is.* "I won't let it go that far, I promise. Please don't be angry with me. 'Kay? I couldn't stand to lose you."

He relented. "You'll never lose me, Sugar." He kissed the top of her head and let her go. "Now, can I lick the bowl for you?" He pasted a grin on his face, and she knew all was forgiven . . . almost.

It was done. He had found the right place. Now all he had to do was convince Genevieve this was the right thing for her. For them both.

He walked through his cousin's chateau looking for her. *She must be in the kitchen still making her preparations.* As he neared the smaller kitchen, he smelled the most delectable scent of cake baking.

Sure enough, there she was, working at a frantic pace, her hair pulled up in a tight knot on top of her head. Chocolate smeared her chef coat, and a smudge lined her cheekbone. He wanted to lick it off her.

As he was about to speak, she picked up a forkful of cake scrap and ran it through a bowl of chocolate icing until it was almost dripping. She opened the oven door and looked inside, stuffing the mouthful of sweets into her mouth without pausing.

He chuckled, and her head whipped around, her eyes glassy. Red crept slowly up her neck until her cheeks glowed. He'd forgotten that when she blushed, her neck and chest grew rosy as well.

"What are you working on? Is the wedding cake to be chocolate?"

"No, it's the groom's cake. Francois wanted chocolate."

"Are you hungry?"

"I worked straight through breakfast and lunch. And sometimes chocolate is the only thing that keeps me going."

"Let me take you out to dinner. You need sustenance, and a break."

She started to shake her head, but then pressed a hand to her middle. "I guess I do need to eat. What time is it?"

"Almost eight."

"That late? Alright, let me just change my clothes."

"You are fine just as you are."

She snorted. "Yeah, right. I'm a mess!"

He picked up her hand and kissed it, then did lick the chocolate off her cheek. The flavor was intense, sweet, and satisfying . . . just like her. He wanted to dip his finger in the bowl and spread it over her body, follow it with his tongue.

She trembled.

*Perhaps this will work. She is as affected by me as I am by her.*

"I promise I am taking you to a casual place. A t-shirt and jeans is perfectly acceptable."

A short while later he parked in front of an old restaurant, his favorite spot in St. Armand. Light spilled into the street, and laughter drifted on the breeze. "I will be right back."

"Isn't this where we're eating?"

"I have to go inside a moment, but we are eating elsewhere." He kissed her cheek and opened the door as she sat at one of the small café tables outside.

The proprietress greeted him warmly. "*Monsieur* Roman, it is so good to see you! Welcome home." She peered around his shoulder. "Is that the young lady?"

He glanced outside. She was checking her infernal smart phone yet again. He frowned, but quickly schooled his features. "Yes, that is her. You have the dinner ready for us?"

Madame Bertini nodded. "*Oui*. Everything is set for you. I hope you both like the dinner." She patted his shoulder. "And I hope the young lady is impressed. Let me know how the evening goes. But you behave, young man," she admonished him, smiling.

Warmth rose in his cheeks. This woman could still make him feel like the fifteen year old she had hired to buss tables so long ago. He pulled some bills out of his wallet and handed them to her, adding an extra-large tip for the trouble he had put her through.

He opened the door and she glanced up at him.

"Are you ready?"

"Starved. I was about to start eating these flowers." She stood up.

He tucked her arm under his elbow and led her to the building at the corner. It was perfectly situated in the center of town, and would be sure to draw a lot of foot traffic. White twinkle lights decorated the outside of the shop. It would need some work, but it looked charming tonight.

Turning the key in the lock, he opened the door and they walked in to a fairy tale room. Candles glowed softly, romantic light filling the room. Pink rose bouquets were scattered throughout, and the wood counters gleamed in a high polish.

Madame's team had outdone themselves. An array of food graced the sideboard, and an elegant table was set in the middle of the room. China glistened in the candlelight, and silverware was polished till it gleamed.

He turned to her to gauge her reaction.

"This isn't a restaurant, is it?" She turned to him, and her eyes shimmered.

"No, I wanted to show you this place, and thought we could have dinner here at the same time." He walked to the sideboard and picked up a plate. "What would you like to begin with?"

She joined him and looked at the food. "Mmm, some of everything, I think. It looks delicious, and smells absolutely divine!" She took the plate from him and began ladling food onto it.

He smiled, a vague memory drifting to him from the past. She would forget to eat for hours as she practiced her *pâtisserie*, and then be so hungry she would not hold back on food. She tended to burn so much energy she never became fat.

He pulled a chair out at the table and held it for her. He poured wine for both of them, and settled in to eat. It was very cozy, this intimate setting, the two of them cocooned in candlelight.

They talked about anything and nothing as they ate. *Almost as if we are an old married couple, ending the day together.* And this was something he wanted with his whole heart.

Genevieve pushed her plate away after polishing off a decadent dessert of chocolate mousse with raspberry sauce. “That is something I never get tired of. Thank you so much for having this wonderful dinner set up.”

He stood and held his hand out to her. He kissed her lightly on the cheek. “It was absolutely my pleasure. Now tell me,” he said, leading her to the kitchen and gesturing around the room, “what do you think of the building?”

“It’s charming,” she said. “It has a lot of potential for a shop. But would you tear out this kitchen? It seems a shame to waste it.”

He was taken aback. “No, why would I?”

“Why do you need such a big kitchen in your shop?”

Realization dawned. She thought *he* was opening a store here. “*Nón*, this building is not for my business. This would be a perfect spot for your *pâtisserie*, and to launch your cake design business.”

She stopped dead in the middle of the room, and slowly turned to him. “Come again?”

“You have been so worried about obtaining the loan to start your business. I passed this building the other day and noticed it is for sale. It would be perfect for you. I spoke to the owner today, and he is ready to sell. I will buy the building and you can open as soon as everything is set to your liking.”

She stood so still, her body rigid, fists balled at her sides. “No, thank you.”

“What?”

“*No*, thank you.”

“But this way you can start your business without having to worry about a bank loan.”

“I want to do this on my own. Why do you think I’d have agreed to this?”

“I want you to achieve your dreams. You have vision and talent for not only designing cakes, but bringing the vision to life using nothing more than cake batter and icing. Not many people are so talented.”

He clutched her upper arms, wanted to shake her, make her understand. “And you love France, I know you do. I have thought about you, and only you, since we were reunited. I want us to have a chance together. I still love you.”

## Chapter 15

For one fleeting moment, her heart soared, then sank. She held still as a statue. “Roman . . . I don’t know what to say. But this —”

His arms tightened around her. “Can you honestly tell me you do not have any feelings for me? I cannot believe that. Not with the way you respond to me.” His lips crushed to hers, anger and desperation rolling off him in waves.

Her arms were pinned at her sides, and she couldn’t move, but her traitorous body responded. Blood thickening in a desperate need, heat coiled low in her belly. Sparks zapped along her nerve endings.

She did want him. She may even love him still.

Even as his lips slanted over hers, taking, tantalizing, she knew this would never work. She didn’t want to be a star, but others would see her as nothing more than a hanger-on around him. She would be eclipsed by him always.

He tore his mouth away, breath heaving. He paced away from her, prowling around the room like a caged animal. He rubbed the back of his neck, and she could tell he was frustrated.

She had to make him understand. “I really appreciate the offer, but I can’t be indebted to you for this.”

“What if I am a silent partner?”

“It wouldn’t work, not for me. If my business takes off, I’d never know if it was me or your name attached to it.”

He faced her again. “No one has to know I am involved.”

Her heart broke. He looked so sad, and she hated hurting him. She slowly crossed the room to him, dread filling her. She laid a hand on his arm, hoping to soothe him. “I would know. I don’t want to depend on anyone. My father dictated my mother’s life, never let her do what she wanted to. Her friends drifted away, and she was lonely. She loved me, and I think she loved him, in her own way. But I could tell. He didn’t want her to work, or join clubs. She was there to take care of *him*.”

“And then you had to care for him when he became ill. He treated you the same way.”

She jolted. Very perceptive of him.

He trailed his finger down along her jawline. “I would never do that to you. I know how much you want this business to succeed, and I want you to shine. Did you ever think maybe *I* want to take care of *you*?”

Shocked, she stared at him. “Why? You’re a star in your world. A celebrity. People would wonder what you’re doing with plain little ol’ me, the hick from Atlanta.”

“You are a beautiful woman—a successful, driven, talented woman. The woman I love. This is what everyone will see.”

She froze. The words were a balm, soaking into her. Too good to be true. Her heart floated, then sank like a stone in a pond. *He loves me? This can’t be happening. Not now!*

“Besides, I think Constance would be thrilled if you moved here. She was so excited you were coming for the wedding.”

“You didn’t even know it was me.”

“No, I did not. But she talked about her cousin Gigi all the time.”

“I admit I’ll miss her, but she can come visit me in the States.”

“And me? You will not miss me?”

*Miss you? Of course I’ll miss you! It’s tearing my heart out to leave you again.*

She laid a hand on his chest. “But what about your own dreams? You told me just the other day you want children of your own. You know I can’t give them to you. You need to find someone to have children with.” Tears gathered in her eyes, and she turned away. *And it’s killing me that it won’t be me.*

“I want you in my life. Please, let me do this for you. I want you to stay here.”

“Don’t make this any harder than it is. I can’t do this.”

“You can do this. But you don’t love me. Isn’t that what you’re saying?” He scoffed. “Of course, that’s it. I was a fool to think you could love me.”

The hurt and betrayal on his face sliced through her, and she couldn’t breathe. Panic had her clawing at her throat. *I have to get out of here.*



She hurried across the room and opened the door, stepped out into the cool night air. She gulped the air greedily, trying to center herself. Her throat closed with the tears she held back. Crossing her arms for warmth, she hurried down the sidewalk. She just wished there was some way to warm her insides.

A car slowed next to her, and the window rolled down. "Genevieve, get in the car, please. I will take you back to the chateau," Roman said through clenched teeth.

Goosebumps on her arms warred with her desire to be alone. A brisk wind chilled her to the bone, and she decided this was stupid. She wasn't even sure which way the chateau was on the dark road out of town. She stepped off the sidewalk and climbed into his car.

She glanced at his face, his expression stony. Laying a hand on his knee, she said, "I'm sorry. I know you meant well. I just decided long ago to be completely independent. It's what I have to do."

Studying him closely, she noticed a muscle twitch in his clenched jaw. "As you wish. I will not bring it up again."

The rest of the ride was made in cold silence. This was her fault, and she hated hurting him. But it was for the best.

Wasn't it?

Roman dropped her off without saying a word, and she headed straight to her room. Opening the door, she heard Connie Sue calling her from down the hall, so she stopped, leaned her head against the doorframe. She just wanted to crawl into bed and pull the covers over her head.

Connie Sue rushed up to her, and clutched her arm. "Thank God you're back! I've been waiting for you for hours!"

"What's wrong? Is it Francois or the twins?"

"No, no, they're fine."

"Then can it wait till morning? I'm exhausted." *And I want to be alone.*

"But it's a disaster! You know how I told you my maid of honor Joanie couldn't get here until the day before the wedding because of some work thing she had to do? Well, she called me a few hours ago. She broke her leg. Now I don't have a maid of honor!"

She pushed Connie Sue through the bedroom door. “Alright, come inside and calm down. You’ve been doing great so far, and I’m not going to let you turn into a bridezilla at the last minute.”

She led her cousin into the room, marched her over to a chair, and pushed her into it.

“All you have to do is decide which of your bridesmaids to promote. Not a big deal, we’ll get through this.”

Connie Sue breathed deep. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to get scary on you. I already know what I want to do, I’m just worried she won’t do it. I mean, everything is done, really. All she has to do is stand up there alongside me and give me moral support. Something she’s already been doing all my life.”

Genevieve sat down on the bed, her eyebrows furrowed. “Wait a minute . . . you’re not—”

“Please, please, please?” Connie Sue clasped her hands together. “Please do it for me. I wanted you to be my maid of honor all along, but you said you had too much baking and couldn’t do it. But now you’re almost done with the cakes, aren’t you?”

Genevieve opened her mouth to refuse, but the begging puppy-dog look on Connie Sue’s face stopped her. She sighed in resignation. “What do I have to do?”

“Nothing at all. Well, just hold my hand and make sure I don’t freak at the last minute and not marry him.”

Gigi narrowed her eyes. “Are you thinking of changing your mind?”

“No! Of course not. I love Francois, and want to be his wife more than anything. I’m just trying to tell you it’ll be easy for you. Well, you will have to sign the marriage license as a witness, but that’s it.” Connie Sue clasped Genevieve’s hands in her own. “Please?”

She rolled her eyes and sighed in resignation. “All right. I’m honored to be your maid of honor.”

Connie Sue hugged her. “Thank you! I’m so relieved. This is what I wanted all along. Now I’ve got to run.” She opened the door. “Oh! I almost forgot! The only other thing you have to do is walk back down the aisle with Roman. But that shouldn’t be too

hard since you've been seeing so much of him." She smiled slyly and flew out the door.

"Well, crap on a cracker," she muttered. *Why didn't I think of that?* Too late now, no way would she back out on her cousin. She would harden her heart and soldier on.

A knock sounded at her door, and Daniel called her name. A moment later he opened the door.

"Howdy, stranger. Where ya been?"

She sighed. "Roman took me to dinner."

"What's wrong? Trouble in paradise?" he asked, a smirk on his face.

She just looked at him.

"Oh. There really is trouble?"

"He was going to buy me a building in the village here so I could start my business."

"Reaaaally," he said, drawing out the word. He sat next to her at the foot of the bed.

"What on earth possessed him to do such a thing? I've never even hinted at staying."

He picked at a loose thread on the bedspread. "So . . . are you thinking about it?"

"No!" She punched his arm lightly. "I've never even thought about it."

"Never? Not even after wild monkey sex with him?"

Her face flamed. She pushed him off the bed. "Grow up."

"Pardon me. Never, not once, not even in the afterglow of truly amazing sex, did you think about staying here with him? This is me you're talking to." Still sitting on the floor, he faced her and stared her straight in the eyes. "I can tell when you're lying to me."

"I'm not lying to you."

"Okay, but I can also tell when you're not admitting it to yourself. Sugar, I've seen you these last few days, and you're gaga over him. Admit it."

She got up and paced to the window, stared out at the dark night. Deep in her heart, she admitted she was crazy about him. "It would never work. My home is in the States. You're in the States. The network I'm building for my business is in the States."

Daniel's arms slid around her, comforting her. "Honey, home is where the heart is. You can start a network of business here, and considering how many people have been and will be eating your cakes this week, you could have a booming business right here." He rested his chin on her shoulder. "And as for me, who says I want to stay in Atlanta?"

Shocked, she turned around to face him. "What do you mean? Are you moving away?"

"I don't know. I've been restless lately, and have pondered moving somewhere else, starting fresh. I haven't met anyone lately I'm crazy about, so maybe I need some new blood."

"But . . . but . . . When were you going to tell me?"

"I haven't decided anything. I may stay right where I am in my little ol' rut. I only told you so you'd realize you have options yourself. I want you to be happy. And if *he* gives you that, then go for it."

"Wait a minute. What's going on here? You don't like him! Just this morning you were angry with me about being with him."

"So I changed my mind. I've just been thinking it over. That little heart to heart he and I had the other day helped so I don't hate him so much. Besides, I've seen the way he looks at you. He still loves you. And now that I know he's willing to buy you a building so you can fulfill your dreams . . . well, maybe he's not such a bad guy."

Her heart glowed for a second before she snuffed out the light. "Not after tonight he doesn't. I told him no. I want nothing from him."

"Why not take it as a loan?"

"Because he would come attached to it, and I don't want him dictating how I run my business. Besides, he and I move in totally different circles. I'm not interested in the limelight, and he is definitely one big lime in that spotlight. He'd eventually grow to resent me. It just wouldn't work."

"Are you sure you—"

She cut him off. "Just leave it alone, please. Discussion is over. Goodnight."

The day before the wedding, Roman drove through the rain to the chateau. He wanted to check all the gowns once more, and see if Francois needed anything.

He glanced at the stack of papers from the real estate office sitting in the passenger seat where he'd tossed them the night before. They were an angry reminder of the argument they'd had at the shop. *Why must she be so stubborn? Does she not see I only want to help her?*

Her rejection still stung. He couldn't feel any worse than if she'd sliced open his chest and pummeled his heart. All he wanted was for her to be happy. But he wasn't good enough for her, and she wanted nothing to do with him. His entire life he'd wanted to matter to someone, wanted to be there for the woman of his dreams. *But she does not exist.*

His shoulders drooped, and he rubbed the heel of his hand over his chest.

He swung the car into the lane leading to the chateau and had to swerve to avoid colliding with a truck. The front drive was a hive of activity, and rental chairs and tables were being moved into the chateau for the wedding. He continued to the side driveway, and entered the house from there. The entrance would take him past the kitchen Genevieve had appropriated for her baking, and he had no wish to see her at the moment.

But as he walked through the hallway past the kitchen door, the enticing smell of cake made him drift closer. He peeked through the door.

Her back to the doorway, Genevieve sat on a stool in front of a large cart. A five-tiered cake sat on the cart, covered in blush pink icing, so close to the color of the dresses he had made. She had a great deal of talent, no doubt about it. Clients would clamor for her cake designs.

She worked on placing delicate flowers on the cake. It was a stunning creation. A cake top that looked like a bouquet of flowers sat to the side. Pride rushed through him, and he thought he would burst. *If she were not so stubborn, I could help her launch her business now, not wait for a bank to take a chance on her.*

The door at the opposite end of the kitchen opened, and Melly and Bella rushed in, followed by Constance. He ducked back so

they would not see him spying on Genevieve. He heard Constance gasp, and he peered around the doorframe once again.

The two cousins were hugging, and Connie Sue pulled back, wiping her eyes.

“I wish your mom could see this cake. She’d be so proud of you. This is the most gorgeous cake I’ve ever seen! The flowers look so real, not like they’re made of icing.”

“I wish she was here, too. I still miss her. I used to love baking with her. She always made it so much fun.”

She walked to the refrigerator and brought out two covered plates. Setting them on the counter, she swept the dome lids off. She picked the plates up and turned to the twins.

“I made these special cakes just for you girls, for tonight. What do you think? Do you like them?” Princess cakes adorned the trays, each decorated in the girls’ favorite colors.

The twins clapped their hands and squealed. Genevieve set the cakes down, and knelt on the floor, gathering them close. They showered her with kisses, and thanked her in their halting English.

She hugged them close and smiled. But it was the saddest smile he had ever seen on anyone. His heartbreak echoed on her face. If anyone deserved to be a *mamá*n, it was her. He backed away from the door and leaned against the wall, closing his eyes.

“You love her, don’t you?”

He opened his eyes. Constance stood next to him. “It does not matter. She does not return my feelings.”

He started to walk away, but she tugged on his sleeve.

“Wait a minute,” Constance said, her voice pitched low. “Just give her time. A lot has happened the last few days, and I think she’s reeling.”

He kissed her cheek. “She has already told me she will not stay.”

“Just give her some time,” she repeated.

“Ever the optimist, aren’t you, Constance? She told me to find someone else, have a family. Does that sound to you as if she has feelings for me?” He turned away to leave.

“She’s being selfless. We had a long talk this morning, and she finally told me what really happened when she had the car accident. I tell you, it just about broke my heart. She knows you want children. But if she’s the one you want, then go after her. You can always adopt.”

Her words stopped him. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. But no . . . “It’s too late. She does not want me.”

He headed toward the exit.

“Oh, wait. I almost forgot.”

He glanced at her.

“Francois said he needs to talk to you. Would you please stop by his study before you leave?”

“Can’t it wait? I really need to leave.”

“I’m sorry, but I think it’s important he see you today.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine. Thanks for letting me know.” He backtracked to the stairs leading to his cousin’s study.

He knocked once and opened the door, entering the dark paneled room. “Constance said you needed to see me, but can it wait? I was on my way out.”

“No, not really.” Francois gestured him toward a wing chair by the fireplace. He blew out a breath and sat down next to him. “I need to talk to you about something. Remember a few days ago when I introduced you to Sophie Bélanger?”

Roman nodded, remembering the dark-haired young woman who was applying for a job with the winery.

“As you know, I perform background checks on all candidates.”

Roman waited, impatient to find out why he needed to know this.

“Something came up I wanted you to know about.” Francois shifted in the chair, then got up and stuck his hands in his pockets.

“What, is she a spy? An assassin?” he asked, dryly.

Francois rolled his eyes. “No, you idiot.”

“Then what did you find out that I need to know?” He tried to reign in his impatience, just wanting to go home, and not caring at the moment who she was.

“I don’t know how to say this, so I’m just going to say it. Did you know your mother remarried a year after she left your father?”

Roman stilled. “No, I never heard anything. I was only eight when she left. And my father never talked about her. Honestly, I tried never to think of her.” That she had not been happy had been clear enough, but that she didn’t want her own son had devastated him.

“She did remarry, and she had a daughter. Sophie.”

The clock on the desk chimed the hour, and it startled Roman. He shook his head. “What?” he croaked.

“Sophie is the daughter of Mariana and Phillippe Bélanger.”

“Are you sure that’s my mother?”

“We do an extensive background check to begin with, but when I heard this, I wanted to make sure it was her. It is.” Francois sat back down. “I’m sorry.”

Roman’s head whirled with this news. He’d finally stopped wondering where his mother had gone when he reached his teens. His father never talked about her before he died. She hadn’t been the best mother, and it had been a relief that he no longer had to hear the fights between his parents. But it had still hurt that she didn’t want him.

“Where did she go?”

“The man she married owns a vineyard about forty kilometers from here. It’s been in his family for over two hundred years, and that’s how Sophie became interested in viticulture. She wants to carry on her family’s business, which is why she enrolled in the International Sommelier program.”

“Sophie. That would make her . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Your half-sister.”

His shoulders hunched, and he dropped his head in his hands. No wonder she had looked familiar to him. “She looks like my mother did. How old is she?”

“Twenty-seven. About ten years younger than you.”

“Is her mother still living?”

“You mean your mother?”

Roman jerked his shoulder.

Francois rubbed a hand across his forehead. “No. She died a few months ago. I’m sorry.”

Shocked, he said nothing. She hadn’t been very old, then.

“Are you alright?”



He looked up. "It's been so long I don't know what to think. How to feel. She's been dead to me for many years." He rolled his neck. "Is it wrong to admit that?"

"No, I don't think so. You hadn't seen or heard from her in, what, almost thirty years?"

Roman stood up and walked to the window behind the massive desk. Heavy clouds had rolled in, obscuring the sunlight. "Why are you telling me this now? You have the rehearsal tonight, and the wedding tomorrow."

"I felt you should know. I had planned on hiring Sophie, but this changes everything. I won't do it if aren't comfortable with it."

"Would she be good in this job?"

"I think she'd be a very good asset. She's smart, capable, and knows everything about wine from the ground up. It's in her blood."

"Then you should hire her. Are you going to tell her she's my half-sister?" He faced Francois, noted the concerned expression.

"That, my friend, is up to you. I will follow your lead."

"Thank you for letting me know. I'll see you later at the rehearsal. Let me know if you need anything." He deliberately changed the subject. "Are you ready to get married?"

Francois smiled. "More than ready."

Roman clapped a hand on his shoulder. "You're a very lucky man, cousin. Call if you need anything."

He walked out the door and left the chateau. Rain streamed from the sky, but at this point he didn't care.

A sister.

He climbed in the car but made no move to start the engine. He leaned his head on the wheel.

*What else can happen now?*

## Chapter 16

The wedding party gathered in the medieval chapel on the chateau grounds, ready to begin the rehearsal. Genevieve waited next to Connie Sue, watching the other two attendants walk down the aisle. The wedding planner gestured for her to begin her walk, and she stepped through the doors, waited a beat. She paced herself, looking everywhere but at the front of the cavernous chapel where the groom waited next to his best man.

Roman.

She reached the steps leading to the altar and stepped to the left into her spot. Turning to watch her cousin walk down the aisle, her gaze skittered past Roman, then shot back to see him staring at her.

She bit her lower lip, then licked the spot. His eyes dropped to her mouth, and a muscle twitched in his jaw.

Shocked, she noticed dark shadows beneath his eyes. His face rivaled that of an old world sculpture. He could have been carved from granite, and she hated putting that look on his face. But dammit, she had to live her own life, and achieve her own dreams!

She refused to let him make her feel bad. She squared her shoulders and met his cold gaze with one of her own. She was not going to back down. Not this time. She had seen her mother back down too many times from her father. She narrowed her eyes at him.

One of his eyebrows lifted slightly, but he kept watching her.

Connie Sue stepped into her line of sight and hissed at her. "Knock it off."

Facing the priest, Genevieve whispered, "Knock what off?"

"I started walking down the aisle and it looked like the battle of Antietam was getting ready to commence the way you two were staring at each other."

"Sorry. I wasn't going to look at him, but the way he was glaring at me ticked me off."

“There’s more going on than you know. I’ll tell you later,” Connie Sue whispered.

The priest cleared his throat, and Genevieve flushed, smiled an apology at him.

*What’s going on?*

The wedding planner hurried to the front of the room, and began directing how the ceremony would proceed the following day.

They made it through rehearsal finally, and adjourned to the formal dining hall of the chateau for the dinner. The long table gleamed with crystal and silver, and the chandelier reflected the candlelight in the delicate teardrops.

She was grateful to sit down after being on her feet all day. An elegant dinner was served, each course more amazing than the previous one. After all the rich French food she’d been eating, she wouldn’t be able to eat for a month after she got home.

*Home.*

Why did the thought of leaving France make her feel so wretched? It wasn’t just leaving Roman. She could make a home for herself here in France, in St. Armand. The medieval village called to her, and the few people she’d gotten to know felt familiar to her already, like long-lost friends.

The servers brought in the desserts she had made, and set them in front of each person. Individual miniature wedding cakes decorated in the wedding colors of blush and gold sat on each gold-edged plate. She’d used edible-gold leaf to stencil the initials of the bride and groom on top of each cake.

Up and down the table, the guests oohed and aahed over the cakes, and she waited breathlessly for them to begin eating.

The sound of a knife clinking against crystal silenced the diners, and she looked up to see Roman standing on the other side of Francois.

“I would like to offer this toast to Francois and Constance. A good marriage is not unlike a delicate wine. Both require blending and nurturing to achieve the very best there is to offer. Francois has transformed the land into a prosperous vineyard, and to our delight, Constance has become a valuable part of the winery

beside him, filling the empty spaces not only in the company, but in his family and his life.

“Constance and Francois, you are blending your strengths and weaknesses, your flaws and perfections, blending the both of you into the perfect bouquet, which strengthens over time. To love, the very essence of life.”

“Here, here!” Glasses were raised in honor of Connie Sue and Francois, and everyone sipped the special sparkling wine served for the toast.

Sipping slowly, she savored the texture of the wine, and Roman’s heartfelt words. Did she want that? To fill someone’s life, and have them fill hers? She leaned forward to set her glass on the table, caught him glancing at her from his seat. Would he ever forgive her for hurting him? Again? From the look on his face, it wouldn’t be any time soon.

*He looks so sad, so beaten down. Did I do that to him?*

The dinner concluded, everyone stood up and mingled, prolonging the evening. Guests stood in small clusters, talking. She glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention to her, and slipped out the side door. Heading to the small kitchen she’d been using, her steps echoed on the marble floor. It wasn’t as if she were running away, she had a duty to do. A final check on the wedding cake and she’d be through for the night.

“Gigi, wait.”

She turned to see Connie Sue hurrying after her, her black stiletto heels clicking on the marble.

“Look, I don’t know if I should say anything or not, considering what’s going on between you and Roman. But I felt you should know.”

“What’s wrong? Is he okay?” She frowned, gripped Connie Sue’s hand.

“Francois is in the process of hiring someone for the winery. Turns out she’s Roman’s half-sister.”

“What?” she yelped. She covered her mouth, hoping no one had heard her. She lowered her voice. “But he doesn’t have any family except for Francois.”

“I know. This turned up in the background check we ran on Sophie. His mother married someone else and they had a

daughter. He never knew about the marriage or the daughter, much less that his mother lived not too far from here.”

“He must be devastated.”

“Francois said Roman was pretty much in shock when he told him earlier today.”

“Thanks for letting me know. No wonder he looked so upset tonight.”

Connie Sue returned to the dining hall, and Genevieve resumed her walk to the kitchen.

Walking into the room, she turned the overhead light on. She caught a movement out of the corner of her eye, and her heart jumped. Whirling around, she saw Roman sitting on her stool, leaning back against the counter.

“Why were you sitting in the dark?” She wanted to rush to him, hug him, and make sure he was okay. But after all that had happened the night before, he wouldn’t welcome it. She no longer had that right, and it made her so sad.

“I assumed you wouldn’t come in if you thought I was here.”

She had half a mind to escape, but lifted her chin. He wouldn’t drive her away, keep her from doing her job. “What do you want?”

“*Bón*. There’s the spirit I knew you had.”

She tied an apron over her black cocktail dress. “Whatever do you mean?” she asked, trying to be nonchalant.

“You’ve done everything you can to avoid me. I’m tired of it. I’ve done nothing to harm you, only wanted to do something to help you. I don’t deserve to be treated this way.”

His words held her still, frozen to the spot. Had she really been treating him that way? Tears clogged her throat. Pain sliced through her stomach, and she rubbed the scar, willing the hurt to go away.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize . . .” She faced the sink, grabbed a towel and dabbed at her eyes.

“I did not come here to make you cry.”

She twisted the towel in her hands. “I apologize.” Setting the towel down, she faced him. “I didn’t mean to act that way. It was unintentional. I don’t want to fight with you.”

“I do not want to fight either. Too much has passed between us, now and fifteen years ago. We should not be enemies. I would

like us to have a truce. We must get through the wedding, and I don't want Constance or Francois forced to choose sides."

"That's the last thing I want." She walked around the island to stand in front of him, and held her hand out. "Truce?"

He took her hand in his warm one, held it. "Truce." He dropped her hand and started to walk out.

"Wait."

He glanced at her over his shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "Why?"

"Why? Because I care about you. Connie Sue just told me about your . . . what Francois found out."

He leaned his forehead against the door frame. He looked defeated, and her heart went out to him. She walked up behind him, wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him, laid her head against his back.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He heaved a sigh. "Not really."

"Okay. If you do, I want you to know you can talk to me."

"Thanks. I'm still trying to come to terms with the fact I have family other than Francois. I don't know her at all, just met her briefly when she was here to interview with him."

He turned around and she stepped back from him.

"I'm here if you want to talk."

He sighed. "But you won't be for much longer, will you? You're going home soon. This is something I'll deal with later. You don't need to concern yourself." He walked out of the kitchen.

She stood still, listening until his footsteps faded away. "I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to cry. I'm tired of crying."

She headed to her room for a good cry.

## Chapter 17

Twinkle lights lined the stone steps, forming a path into the chapel. Pale pink to deep blush flowers were gathered in bunches everywhere, perfuming the air.

The bride beamed, and Genevieve had never seen her cousin look happier. The wedding dress Roman created suited Connie Sue perfectly. She looked elegant, sophisticated, and would wow the guests.

Connie Sue clutched her bouquet of pink antique roses.

“You ready, Cuz?”

“Absolutely. Let’s go.”

The wedding planner opened the doors into the chapel, and the first bridesmaid walked down the aisle. The second soon followed.

Then it was Genevieve’s turn. She took a deep breath and steadied her fluttery nerves. She stepped onto the white runner, and heads turned to look at her. Bile rose in her throat. She really hated people looking at her. Especially this many. She stared forward, willing her stomach to calm.

Roman came into view, and he smiled at her. Winked.

He knew. Somehow, he remembered she hated being the center of attention, and he was sending her encouragement. She kept her gaze on his, focusing on him to get herself down the aisle.

Finally, she made it to her spot, and breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn’t have done it without him.

The first strains of “Ave Maria” played, and the guests rose. Connie Sue stepped onto the runner. Genevieve heard several gasps, and she bit her lip. Her cousin really did look stunning. She was going to be a countess, and definitely looked the part today.

She took the bouquet from Connie Sue, and her cousin stepped forward with Francois. Half turning toward the priest, Genevieve’s eyes kept straying to Roman. He looked so handsome, so elegant. Every inch the star he was. The dark-gray

tuxedo and tails fit him to perfection. Not many men could wear a blush-striped cravat, but he carried it off with aplomb.

He caught her looking at him, and gave her a half-smile. Her cheeks heated, and she wished she could fan herself. She averted her eyes, but it didn't last. She wouldn't be in France much longer, so she kept sneaking looks at him. Couldn't help it.

*How am I going to get over him this time?* She had no choice . . . she'd have to do it.

The rings were exchanged, vows said, and before she knew it, the ceremony was over with. The Count and his new Countess walked back up the aisle.

Roman stepped forward and offered her his arm. She slid her hand under his elbow, feeling the muscles and strength in his arm. He may design women's clothing for a living, but he kept in shape.

She glanced up at him, and he met her eyes. He pulled her a little closer, and they began their walk up the aisle. She breathed him in, the cologne she loved so much on him filling her senses.

They walked outside the chapel and up the lighted path to the chateau. Once inside, he stepped away from her, and her hand slid from beneath his crooked arm. Someone stopped him to talk, and she entered the ballroom alone.

Bereft now, it was like a big piece of her had suddenly gone missing.

Dinner was served, the cake was cut, and she made it through the toasts. Music swelled, and it was time for the bride and groom's first dance.

She watched Francois lead Connie Sue to the dance floor. He looked so in love with his bride, and she knew he cherished her cousin. A slice of envy lashed through her. She wanted the love and happiness she saw reflected on her cousin's face. Yes, she was thrilled for Connie Sue, but why couldn't she have that too?

*I could.* She subtly scanned the room, looking for the tallest man there. She finally saw Roman on the opposite side of the dance floor. He stood straight and tall, holding a champagne glass, his eyes on her.

From somewhere, deep inside, she mustered up a smile. This was supposed to be a joyous day for her cousin, after all.



The happy couple passed in front her, blocking her view, and she lost sight of him.

The music changed, and the orchestra leader asked the bridal party to take the floor.

Her skin heated, and she felt someone at her side. She didn't have to look to know it was him. Her body knew him. Craved him.

"May I have this dance?"

His voice rumbled through her, sending her into a quivering mass. He led her to the dance floor, and she faced him, looking up into those delicious brown eyes.

He pulled her closer, slid a hand around her waist.

She put a trembling hand in his, and he quirked a brow.

"Are you okay?"

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "It's all done. She's married now, and I can stop worrying about her." Would he buy it?

He pulled her even closer, and she rested her head on his shoulder. She closed her eyes, surrendering to the feel of being in his arms again. For one last time.

One dance flowed into the next. She wanted to stay there all night, dancing. Wanted to stay there forever. In his arms.

All too soon, the music stopped, and the orchestra leader announced it was time for the bride to toss the bouquet. She reluctantly pulled away from Roman, and he led her to the side of the dance floor.

He kissed her cheek, his lips lingering, before he disappeared into the crowd.

Daniel nudged her. "Okay, get up there to the front of the crowd."

"No way. Don't be ridiculous! I'm too old."

"You're thirty-four, still a spring chicken. You get up there now, Sugar. You have just as much a chance at catching the bouquet as anyone. Now get up to the front."

"Maybe I don't want to catch it. *You* go catch it. You're single."

He gave her his stubborn look. "Get up there or I will drag you there myself."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. But I'm not going to catch it, even if it does come near me."

"You never know," he singsonged.

“What am I missing here?”

“Nothing, nothing. Now go before it’s too late!” He pushed her to the front of the dance floor.

She joined the throng of laughing single women, feeling mortified.

Connie Sue stepped up on the orchestra’s platform and faced the crowd of women. “Ready, ladies? May the best person catch the bouquet!”

Genevieve saw her cousin glance her way before she turned around. *Oh no. She better not!*

Connie Sue turned her back on the women, and counted down. “Three, two, one!” She raised her arm and tossed the bouquet over her head.

The mass of flowers sailed straight at her, trailing ribbons. She tried to duck so it would reach the person behind her, but no luck. It headed right for her face, like a heat-seeking missile.

She had no choice but to catch it.

Damn Connie Sue and her perfect pitching arm.

Her cousin turned around, and squealed, clapping her hands. She stepped off the platform and hurried to Genevieve.

“I did it! I wanted you to catch it!”

“Yeah, thanks for that.”

“Oh come on. This will bring you luck with a certain someone you’re crazy about.”

“Just because you’re getting your happily ever after doesn’t mean I need one.”

Her cousin’s face fell. “I was just trying to help.”

A rush of love went through Genevieve. “I know you were, and I appreciate it. Come on, let’s go celebrate.” She linked arms with Connie Sue and they headed for the champagne table.

Roman escaped the crowded ballroom, and opened the door to the terrace. He inhaled, smelling the perfumed air of the rose garden lining the old stone wall below. He heard a noise and looked to the right. Genevieve sat at the outdoor table in the faint glow of light, trying to open a bottle of champagne. The bouquet she had caught sat on the table, a glaring reminder of his lost dreams.

He hesitated, wanted to avoid her. But his feet would not listen, and he walked a few steps closer.

“I see you caught the bouquet.”

“It was kind of hard not to when Connie Sue threw it straight at me.” She grinned ruefully.

“She intended for you to catch it?”

“Oh yes. If you haven’t realized it yet, Connie Sue gets an idea in her head, and she will gnaw on it like a dog with a bone. I think she and Daniel cooked it up ahead of time, because he forced me to the front of the crowd when she was ready to toss the bouquet.”

He chuckled. “But how could she guarantee you would catch it?”

“She played softball all through school, even won awards for pitching. She used those skills tonight to get that bouquet in my hands. You can bet Melly and or Bella will be taught the finer points of pitching one day.”

It was good to see her laugh again. “Why are you out here alone?”

“I almost forgot! I’m celebrating.”

“Oh?”

She held up the unopened bottle of champagne. “I finally got an email from the bank. They approved my loan.” She patted the bench next to her. “Come help me celebrate.”

He forced himself forward, but propped a foot on the bench instead of sitting next to her. “Then congratulations are in order. I’m sure you are very relieved and happy.” He pulled the bottle from her hands, but she grabbed it back.

“I can open it.” She tried once again to open the bottle.

He sighed. “Why can you not accept help from anyone?”

Her gaze flew to his, and she looked surprised.

“You can be so stubborn, and you insist on doing everything yourself. Would you please just let me open the bottle for you? Allow me this one small thing?”

She handed the bottle to him. “Thank you.” She picked up the flute from the table and waited.

He popped the cork and poured, filling her glass with sparkling bubbles.

She sipped from the champagne flute. "Have some champagne . . . Oh shoot, I only have the one glass."

"No matter," he said, taking her glass. He held the glass up to her in a toast, then deliberately turned the glass so he drank from the spot where her lips had rested a moment before.

Her breath hitched audibly.

He glanced at her, noticed her eyes glued to his tongue as he licked a drop from the side of the flute. He handed the glass back to her and sat down on the stone bench, his thigh pressed alongside hers.

She leaned into his side, laid her head on his shoulder for a moment. Even though his heart was breaking, he wanted to take her upstairs. Or better yet, home to his own bed, and keep her there forever. His future would be bleak without her in it.

She drained the glass, then refilled it and handed it to him. "I'm sorry."

He turned to her, studied her serious face in the glow of light spilling from the chateau. "For what?"

Taking his hand in hers, she linked her cool fingers with his. "I'm sorry for hurting you. I know you only wanted to help me. Please forgive me." She dropped a kiss on the back of his hand. "I don't want to leave here with you hating me. Again."

He set the glass on the table, next to the bouquet. She looked up at him, and he gently cupped her cheek. She nestled her face against his palm. He kissed her slowly, luxuriating in her lips.

"I don't hate you," he said, pulling back slightly. "This is your career, your life. I don't want to let you go, but I understand your home is in the States. Your life is there. I don't want this to be goodbye, however. I want to remain in touch with you, come visit you."

She pulled away from him and stood up. Already the miles separated them.

"But . . . you live here. You don't get to America very often, do you? Much less Atlanta. What are you talking about?"

He stood up and faced her. "I will fly there to see you."

She shook her head. "I don't think it's a good idea. I told you, you need to find someone who can give you what you want, give you the children you want."

His future crumbled faster than ever. He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “Genevieve, please—” He shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from tossing her over his shoulder and carting her home.

The door opened, and Daniel stepped out on the terrace.

“There you are, Sugar. I didn’t know where you’d disappeared to. You should be back inside. People are raving about the wedding cake, and want to meet the cake designer.” He looked from one to the other. “Am I interrupting something?”

Roman glanced at her. “You are not interrupting. I was just leaving.” He strode toward the stone staircase leading to the garden. But as he headed down the steps, he thought he heard Genevieve mutter “Dammit.”

He had been willing to fly to see her frequently, to pay for her ticket to see him in France when she could. Obviously she wanted nothing to do with him, but was trying to let him down easily. He scoffed. So much for easy.

Once again, she’d broken his heart. This time he didn’t think he could pick up the pieces. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to reach his new home. He would start his new life as a hermit that very evening.

Genevieve took a step, wanting to chase after him, but faltered to a stop. Roman disappeared down the garden steps. The old gate clanged as it slammed closed. Her hand closed over the charm bracelet. She fingered the heart charm, felt her own breaking.

“What’s going on?” Daniel asked.

“My loan got approved.”

Daniel whooped and picked her up, turning her in a circle. He set her down, then looked at her. “You don’t seem too excited. Why aren’t you celebrating?”

“I was, then Roman came outside. When I told him, things got weird again. He said he understands my life is in Atlanta, and he would come visit me. He doesn’t want this to be goodbye.”

“Well that’s good, isn’t it?”

“Long distance relationships are hard enough, but we live in two different countries. Besides, he wants a family, children. I can’t

give him what he wants.” An ugly ache spread through her, and she sank back onto the bench. The thought of him marrying someone else, having children with another woman—it was too much.

Daniel nudged her.

Startled, she looked up at him. “What?”

“I said, maybe he would consider moving to the States.”

“No, it wouldn’t work. His life is here. His business. Besides, I’m going to be way too busy getting my own business off the ground, and up and running. I won’t have time to see him.”

“That’s right! Now come on, we need to celebrate. Let’s go get some cake and another glass and get this party started.”

He started to walk toward the terrace doors, but she stopped him. “Am I stubborn?”

He turned back and looked at her. “Yes.”

“Well that was blunt.”

He shrugged. “You asked, I answered. What brought it up?”

“I was trying to open the bottle of champagne, but the cork wouldn’t come out. He offered to do it, but I . . .”

“Let me guess. You insisted you could do it yourself, and he got mad.”

She nodded.

“You do it all the time. I think I’ve just gotten so used to you refusing help for anything I stopped offering.”

She frowned. “Am I as bad as that?”

“You’re so determined not to rely on anyone but yourself, and you rebuff any offer of help. You’re an independent woman, and very strong. You’ve had to be. And after being your best friend for a million years, I know it’s because of your mom.”

It had never occurred to her by trying to be independent and rely on no one, she was refusing even minor offers of help.

“You’ve just been handed the key to your dream, Sugar. Why aren’t you happier?”

She pasted a smile on her face. “I am happy! Let’s go party.”

## Chapter 18

Genevieve rolled over yet again, stared at the digital clock. Five measly minutes since the last time she looked at it. She huffed out an exasperated breath. She was exhausted from spending all day on her feet preparing the wedding cake, then getting through the wedding. But it was her best work, and Connie Sue was married, so why wasn't she asleep?

Roman had withdrawn after she told him she'd been approved for the bank loan. He wasn't happy, and a kaleidoscope of expressions had crossed his face: anger, anguish, sadness.

She yawned, desperate for the oblivion sleep would bring.

Counting sheep didn't work, they just stood around. So she tried mentally walking through the steps of making and rolling fondant onto an elaborate cake.

The cake fell flat.

She flipped over again, stared at the moon peeking through the tree outside her window. Something scratched at her door. The twins' puppy?

She started to get out of bed, but the door creaked opened. The moon cast just enough light through the window for her to see it was Roman. He walked toward her, pulling his shirt off over his head.

"What—"

He leaned over her, kissing her into silence.

She sighed as his mouth caressed hers. His lips were cold, but quickly warming up.

He pulled away long enough to toe his shoes off, shed his jeans.

She scooted to one side of the bed and pulled the covers back, inviting him in.

He slid into bed, pulling her close. Their lips met again, frantic, and she opened for him. His tongue met hers, dancing with it. She could almost taste his desperation, and it echoed hers.

He flicked the buttons open on her nightshirt, pushed the sides apart. He cupped her breast, and his mouth abruptly left hers to capture her nipple. He sucked it deep, swirling his tongue around until it pebbled.

Fire streaked through her and she gasped, arching toward him. Liquid heat gathered in her core.

He lifted his head, blew lightly on her moistened nipple.

The cool air made her shiver in need.

He switched sides, licking and sucking, rolling the other between his nimble fingers.

Her blood ran hot, and she was surprised she didn't combust. She cupped his head, threading her fingers through his hair, holding him to her breast.

*I love him. I never stopped.*

She raised her head, gently pulled him up to meet her for a scorching kiss over her heart. A heart that was breaking. She poured all her love into the kiss, wanted him to know she loved him still, but couldn't find the words to tell him.

His hands stroked her skin, trailing from breast to hip, hip to thigh. He nudged her legs apart, and cupped her. One finger dipped into her moist heat, then danced over her clit.

She moaned, and he drank it in, muffling the sound.

He followed his fingers, kissing her stomach, her hip, her thigh. Spreading her legs farther apart, he pressed a kiss at the apex, teased her with his tongue and fingers.

She fisted her hands in the sheets. He was killing her. But what a way to go.

Her hips bucked as his tongue worked magic on her. Tingles raced from her toes up her legs. Every fiber of her being focused on his mouth, and what he was doing to her.

He shifted his hands beneath her, held her hips still until she thought she would go mad.

She reached down and grabbed his hair, trying to pull him up. She needed him inside her. Now.

He refused to give way, his tongue relentless in pursuit of her satisfaction. He released a hip, slipped a finger inside her, then two, filling her.



She clenched around his fingers, her body bowed as the tremors turned to quakes. Wave after wave of pleasure swept over her, and she tried to catch her breath.

He raised his head, glided over her, pushed inside, hard and deep. He filled her where she ached the most, and her pleasure spiked out of control.

She wrapped her legs around him, letting him in deeper, met every thrust. Her fingers clenched on his backside, pressing him tightly to her.

She opened her eyes.

He stared at her in the faint moonlight, and a tear trickled down his cheek.

Her heart aching, she pulled him down into a kiss.

His lips were oh, so gentle, even as he thrust in and out, wringing every drop of ecstasy from her.

He stiffened over her, his breath caught, and he climaxed so hard she could feel his release. Intense pleasure coiled sharply in her womb, then exploded. She gasped out his name, and followed him over the cliff. Tingles spread to every nerve ending, even as he collapsed on her, breathing hard.

She soothed her hands down his back, held him still when he shifted to roll off her. Sleep claimed her. Finally.

She opened her eyes as faint rays of dawn slipped through the window. She stretched, luxuriating in her relaxed state. *Why do I feel so rested?* Then she remembered, and smiled. She turned her head on the pillow to wake Roman, but the other side was empty and cold.

Lonely, she lay still, and remembered she'd woken at four to feel his fingers moving over her softly, arousing and teasing her awake. He lay behind her as they spooned, one hand wrapped around a breast, the other working her into a delirium. His raging erection pressed against her bottom.

He had lifted her leg, pulled it back over his, slid into her from behind. He held her close, controlling her movements so all she could do was feel him. He whispered in her ear, French words she didn't understand. He could have been reciting his grocery list. But in French, it sounded delicious, romantic, and very hot.

She'd fallen back asleep at some point after they made love. He must have left not long afterward.

Remembering every touch, every move, she realized for all the passion they had shared, in the past and now, he'd never been so gentle and tender. A tear rolled down her cheek as she understood.

He'd been saying goodbye.

## Chapter 19

In a flurry of goodbyes, Connie Sue pulled her aside and hugged her. Genevieve's breath hitched. She wouldn't cry. Not now. Not until she was alone at home.

Home. Why did she suddenly *not* want to go home to her apartment, her retreat?

"Thank you so much for coming to France for my wedding, and making the cakes, and standing up with me. It meant so much to me you came all this way for me. I'm really sorry things didn't turn out better between you and Roman." Connie Sue clutched her tighter.

"You're my favorite cousin. Of course I came for you," she quipped, hoping to stem the tears gathering in her cousin's eyes, and clogging her own throat. She held on, loathe to let go. "I'm going to miss you, Cuz."

Connie Sue sniffed. "I'm going to miss you too. You know you're welcome here anytime, right? Francois extended the invitation as well." She pulled back slightly and looked into Genevieve's eyes. "And I know damn good and well Roman wants you here."

She stepped away from Connie Sue. "It's going to take me awhile to get the business open, so I don't know when I could get away. You can always visit me, you know. I'm sure the twins would love Stone Mountain."

"I wish I could drive to the airport in Paris with you and Daniel."

"Don't be silly! You're on your honeymoon now." She pulled Connie Sue close for another fierce hug. "I love you, Cuz. You take care, and make sure Francois takes care of you. Or I will have to fly back here and kick some sense into him."

Francois stepped up to them and put an arm around Connie Sue's shoulders, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "Do not worry. I will take good care of my wife."

Yes, she was in good hands. Genevieve wished she could have what they had. *You could, you moron.* She shoved the

wayward thought away.

She and Daniel grabbed their luggage and put it in the rental car, then began the long drive to Paris and their flight home. He flipped the radio on and guided the car smoothly down the long driveway.

She turned around and looked out the back window.

Connie Sue and her new family stood on the chateau steps, waving.

Swallowing past a lump at the sight, she waved back, then settled in to her seat, relieved the radio was on so they didn't have to talk.

The airport was crowded, and they finally made it through Security. They settled into seats at the gate, but a few minutes later an announcement came over the loudspeaker. "Genevieve Haywood, please report to the Gate attendant."

Daniel nudged her, and she got up and walked quickly to the counter. *I hope nothing's wrong at the chateau.* Then she shook her head. Connie Sue would have called her mobile phone.

"I'm Genevieve Haywood," she told the gate attendant.

The woman handed her a large envelope. "This was brought to the airport for you, *Mademoiselle*. The sender could not deliver to you as he is not a ticketed passenger."

Curious, Genevieve thanked her, then headed back to her seat.

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know." She looked at the handwriting on the front and recognized the bold strokes. "It's from Roman," she said, glancing at Daniel.

Opening the flap, she pulled out a sheaf of papers. An envelope dropped into her lap, Roman's logo embossed on the creamy paper. She slid her finger under the flap and pulled the letter out.

*My beloved Genevieve,*

*I decided this morning to give you these designs before you left, but did not realize you were leaving so soon. I understand your reasons for leaving. You are a talented artist, and I am very proud of you and what you have achieved.*

*I designed this dress for you fifteen years ago. My plan was to propose when I returned from that fateful trip to Milan, but instead I found you gone. I was devastated, and did not think I would ever get over you. But upon seeing you just a few short days ago, I realized I am still in love with you. I want to marry you, to be your husband, and for you to be my wife. Yes, I want children, but I want them with you. Your cousin pointed out adoption is always an option. With you by my side, we could work things out.*

*But you have a dream coming true, and I cannot, will not, stand in your way. I hope you will keep these designs as a symbol of my love and devotion for you. Should your heart change, I would be honored to make this dress for you, or design a new one to your liking. And to spend the rest of my life cherishing you.*

*Je t'aime, et je t'aimerai toujours,*

*Roman*

She reread the closing sentiment, and translated it in her rusty French, murmuring aloud. "I love you, and always will."

Unfolding the sheaf of papers, she noticed they were sketches of a wedding dress. The pages had faded to cream, and crinkled with age. The dress design was stunning, flawless. Each page showed a different angle of the dress, and details noted in Roman's precise handwriting lined the sides of the paper. The style suited her perfectly, and was exactly what she would have chosen if she were ever to contemplate marriage.

He knew her. This design showed her how much he'd known her likes and dislikes, even so long ago. He knew her heart.

"That's a lovely dress. What's it for?"

She raised her head. Tears blurred her vision.

"He was going to propose to me fifteen years ago, and designed this for me. He said if I ever changed my mind, he would make it for me."

"Sounds like he still loves you. Still wants to marry you."

"That's what his letter says."

Daniel put his arm around her and hugged her close. "How do you feel?"

"I love him," she blurted out. The words scared her to death, and she couldn't believe she had said them aloud. "I love him so much."

“Then what are we doing here?”

The fear was enough to strangle her. “I’m scared. He has such a strong personality . . . what if I end up like my mother, living in his shadow, never having a life of my own?”

“Honey, I’ve known you for a long time, and I don’t think it will ever happen. You’re too strong in your own right. You won’t let it happen, and from what I’ve seen of him, he wouldn’t either. He wants to make you happy. That’s what he was doing when he wanted to buy the building for you in the village. He’s putting you and your dreams first.”

She stared at him, his words filling her with hope.

“I didn’t know your mother very well, but did you ever consider she was content having her own little family? From what you’ve told me of her, and the pictures I’ve seen of her, I think she put you and your dad first because it’s what she wanted to do.”

“I’ve never thought of it that way. She may not have always been happy, but she didn’t leave us. Roman’s mother did. She put her own needs first.”

The loudspeaker blared overhead, and she jumped. It was time to begin boarding.

She stood up and collected her carry-on bags. Daniel stood as well, but stopped her. “Take a chance. Put your heart first, not your head. You can work anywhere, but how often does a love like this come around?”

Roman turned the car into the lane leading to his home, glanced at the clock on the dashboard. She hadn’t called him from the airport. By now, she had changed planes in London and was on the way to Atlanta.

He hit the wheel, frustrated he wasn’t able to deliver the package to her in person. He had held out hope she would call him when she received the envelope. But her silence gave him her answer.

No.

He drove up the long lane and parked outside the garage. The day was gray, heavy clouds threatening rain. They matched his mood exactly. He climbed out of the car and headed to the front door.

Nearing the front stoop, he glanced up and stopped dead in his tracks.

Genevieve sat on the steps.

He held himself still, afraid to move. Afraid she was a mirage, an oasis, and if he moved, she would disappear again.

She stood up. "Hi."

"*Bonjour*," he croaked, feeling as if his heart was lodged in his throat. "I thought you were at the airport in Paris. How did you get here so fast?"

"I tracked down a pilot with a private plane and flew here."

She held an envelope out to him, and he noticed her hand shaking. The envelope he had rushed to the airport to give to her.

"Did you mean what you said in your letter?"

He nodded slowly. "*Oui*. I love you, so very much."

She stepped toward him, brushed close enough he caught her enticing scent drifting on the wind. "Make the dress for me, please."

"*Pardón?*"

"If you still want to marry me, will you please make the dress for me?"

Joy filled him, and he met her as she moved closer, threw herself into his arms.

Where she belonged.

He cupped her face. "Are you sure?"

A smile bloomed on her face. "Absolutely sure. I love you. I never stopped loving you."

"You couldn't wait to get home and start your business. What made you change your mind?"

"Well, you did. And Daniel told me I was stubborn, that I could work anywhere. But how often does love come around?"

"Remind me to thank him," he said. He thought he would burst from happiness.

"He'll be here for the wedding. You two didn't start out on the right foot, but I asked him to walk me down the aisle, and stand up with me. I hope you don't mind."

"Is it a deal-breaker?"

She grinned. "Yup."

"Then it is fine with me. Will he be the ring-bearer?"

She laughed. "My 'Mister of Honor', I guess you could say."

"I love you, Genevieve." His dream was coming true. Fifteen years later, and he finally had the only woman he had ever loved.

She leaned forward to kiss him, but pulled back.

"I have a condition. Two actually."

"And they would be?"

"One, I'd really rather have a small wedding. I know you have a lot of friends and business associates, and you're a star, but I really don't want a big production."

"If it were up to me, it would be just you and I, and a minister. What is the other condition?" He couldn't imagine what it would be, but he really didn't care at that point.

"Could we please not invite Patrice?" She smiled at him.

"Done. I'll have her banished to Siberia."

"Perfect. I love you."



## Epilogue

Her wedding day. It was finally here after almost a year of planning, moving to France, applying for business licenses. Pretty much turning her life upside down.

It still gave her butterflies, and she pressed a hand to her stomach. Roman loved her, of that she was sure. But she still worried from time to time she'd be pushed away from him.

Someone knocked at the bedroom door.

"Come in," she called.

The door opened, and Daniel walked in, attired in a light gray suit. He looked at her, and whistled. "You look gorgeous, Sugar!"

"You think so? Is my hair okay like this?" She turned to the mirror and tucked a stray curl up into the loose double chignon.

He pulled her away from the mirror, picked up her hand, and twirled her around so the tea-length gown belled around her. "You're beautiful. I love the dress—it's a classic vintage design, simple and elegant. Just perfect for you."

She smoothed the creamy white satin down over the tulle skirt, adjusted the matching belt at her waist. A single large white camellia graced the buckle at her side, delicate fronds waving in the breeze. The dress could have been strapless, but Roman had designed it so organza formed a sleeveless covering for her shoulders.

"Roman sent this for you." Daniel handed her a small gift bag.

She opened the bag and pulled out a silk camellia, a diamond pin nestled in the center. "Oh, it's perfect for my hair since I didn't want to wear a veil!" She turned back to the mirror and pinned it in place to the side of her chignon.

"You about ready?" Daniel asked, his voice hoarse.

"You okay?"

He cleared his throat. "I'm just really happy for you, Sugar. Your dreams are coming true."

She pulled him into a fierce hug. "Thank you so much for walking me down the aisle. You've been my friend through thick

and thin for almost twenty years, and I love you to pieces. There's no one I'd want more to walk me down the aisle today."

He stepped back and flapped a hand in front of his face. "Now don't you make me cry, because then you'll cry and ruin your makeup, and we'll never get you to the wedding on time!"

She picked up her bouquet of white roses, camellias, and lily of the valley. She took a deep breath and nodded. "Ready."

Daniel opened the door to her sitting room just as Connie Sue was about to knock.

"Oh my gosh. You're gorgeous! I was just coming to get you." She stood back a moment and looked Genevieve up and down. "Well, the dress is new, but do you have old, borrowed, and blue?"

Genevieve touched an earring. "I'm wearing my mother's pearl earrings, and I have blue on my garter. I guess I forgot about the borrowed thing."

Connie Sue picked up a bag from outside the door. "Never fear, Connie Sue is here." She pulled out the shoes she had worn at her own wedding. "Good thing we're the same size, isn't it?"

She stepped out of her plain heels, and put on the borrowed glittery white pumps, grateful her cousin had such good taste.

"Now I'm ready to go."

The trio headed down the stairs of Roman's house . . . her new home, toward the back yard. Cutting through the kitchen, she glanced at the caterers hired for the occasion preparing the meal for the reception. They all stood aside and applauded as she passed by them. She ducked her head, her cheeks growing hot.

Stopping at the cart holding the wedding cake, she looked at it for the hundredth time. It had to be perfect, after all. She'd gone with simple and elegant, four layers covered in a pale pink fondant with white accents. Roman had given her the cake topper, one he'd found at an antique store in Paris. Three delicate pink porcelain roses sat in a cluster, adorned with crystal baby's breath. She cherished it, and his thoughtfulness, in searching for something special for their day.

"Come on, Sugar, we need to get you married." Daniel tugged on her arm. "It's a masterpiece already."

They left the house, Connie Sue corralling the twins. Melly and Bella were excited to be flower girls again, and it was all they had

talked about for weeks. Their matching dresses were similar to Genevieve's, but a pale lilac color. They wore adorable wreaths on their heads, and lilac ribbons hung down to mix with their dark curls.

The sun was just beginning to set, the sky filled with deep jewel tones. Stepping onto the white runner, she stopped at the long arched trellis walkway covered in wisteria blooms and white twinkle lights. Stunned, she realized he must have had the blooming flowers flown in just for their wedding ceremony, since it was too early for theirs to bloom yet. A wooden plaque hung between the sides of the trellis, attached by ribbons and flowers.

*Our story continues.*

He was constantly doing little things to show her how much he loved her. A joyous sense of rightness filled heart. *This is the right thing for me. For us.*

"Do you have a piece of paper and a pen?"

Daniel searched his pockets but came up empty.

"I'll be right back." She hurried back to the kitchen and opened the door.

Heads turned toward her, and Luc Roussel, a local chef she had gotten to be friends with, sauntered to her side. "Gigi, you're supposed to be walking down the aisle. You aren't changing your mind, are you?"

"No way! I just need a piece of paper and a pen." She opened the drawer of the tiny desk in the kitchen and rummaged around. She found a pen but her normal pad of paper wasn't there. She looked around and spied a piece of butcher paper on the counter. She tore a piece off and wrote quickly:

*I can't wait to kiss you, and be your wife for always.*

She folded the paper and tossed the pen down, hurried back outside. Bending over, she asked the twins to give it to their Uncle Roman when they reached him.

The music swelled as Connie Sue began her walk through the archway and down the aisle to the lakeside altar. As matron of honor, she looked regal herself in the black and ecru floral embroidered dress Roman had designed for her to wear.

Melly and Bella soon followed her. Melly dropped pink rose petals from the basket, carefully measuring them out as she

walked the aisle. Bella took her duties seriously, clutching the note for Roman tight in her little hand.

Daniel turned to her, picked up her hand and tucked it beneath his arm. "Ready?"

She smiled at him, and nodded.

They walked through the archway and stopped at the edge. She glanced to the side and noticed a frame hanging on the side of the wood. Her breath backed up in her lungs as she read the sentiment.

*I have always known it was you.*

Her hands shook as she looked up the aisle that seemed to stretch for miles to meet Roman's eyes. He smiled at her, and she wanted to run to his side.

The music changed to "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring," the song they had chosen because it was her mother's favorite. In that moment, she imagined her parents were both there, by her side. She had held on to a lot of hurt over the years, and now finally understood she had to give it up in order to be the best wife, the best partner, for the man she loved.

She glanced at the guests watching her walk down the aisle, and smiled at Sophie sitting on the groom's side in the front row. A few months ago, Roman had finally decided to tell his new half-sister about their relationship. It had been a shock to Sophie, but they were beginning to forge a bond.

Daniel and Genevieve walked forward down the aisle, but he paused about three-fourths of the way down. He nudged her and she glanced at him. He surreptitiously pointed to another frame hanging on the back of one of the guest chairs.

*Beside you is where I belong.*

Her eyes filled with happy tears and she opened her eyes wide, determined not to let them fall.

They continued down the aisle, and the twins reached the altar. Bella held her hand up to Roman. He knelt down and took the note, hugged each of the girls. He stood again and slowly unfolded the note.

She waited, hoping it was enough to show him how much she loved him.

He looked up at her, and met her eyes. The intense look of love and lust on his face filled her heart. She couldn't wait to get rid of all these people so they could be alone.

As they neared the halfway point, another sign hung from the back of a chair.

*In you I've found the love of my life and my best friend.*

Never again would she doubt she had done the right thing.

She pulled Daniel forward, almost hurrying the rest of the way down the aisle. A wreath graced the front of the altar, and one last beribboned sign.

*Avec vous, je sais ce qu'est l'amour. With you, I know what love is.*

They reached the altar, and she turned to hug Daniel. "Thank you for always being there for me."

He kissed her cheek. "Always, Sugar. Now go get your man." He stepped to his place beside Connie Sue.

She moved to Roman's side, looking up at the man she loved more than anything in the world. They had been through terrible times, together and apart. But now they were starting their life together, as it should be.

"I love you so much. Thank you for today."

"I wanted you to know how much I love you, and want to proclaim it to the world."

He leaned forward and kissed her, and it slid through her to the very depths of her soul. She would have gladly gone on kissing him, but the minister cleared his throat.

"You are putting the cart before the horse, young man."

The guests laughed, and her cheeks burned. Roman squeezed her hand and they reluctantly pulled apart.

The minister began, and she listened closely, taking every word he said to heart. She spoke her vows to Roman, keeping her eyes on his. With every word, she tried to convey how much she meant them, and she promised to live up to them each and every day.

When it was his turn to repeat his vows, she held his hand, and could hear the truth behind his words. He loved her, and she would never doubt it again. They had begun as young lovers, but

now came to each other with a new love—a stronger, redesigned love. One that would sustain them all their days.

The minister pronounced them husband and wife, and told Roman *now* he could kiss his bride.

*And boy does he know how to kiss.*

His lips moved over hers, sealing their vows.

They faced their guests and walked hand in hand down the aisle, ready to start the newest chapter of their lives.

Together at last.

LOVE REDESIGNED

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SLOANE B. COLLINS

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