

# Collecting Thoughts

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ISBN-13: 978-1974360277

ISBN-10: 197436027X

## DEDICATION

to Scott and Bryony,  
Without a doubt the two most perfect creations of my life.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you Tim, for everything



## CHAPTER ONE

“Stay on the right, stay on the right, stay on the right,” Darcy intoned quietly, chanting the words with zombie-like regularity, keeping in time with the steady flip-flap of the front windscreen wipers as she stared fixedly out into the murk. She was searching for a road sign to the village.

Suddenly, with absolutely no warning, the headlights of a daffodil-yellow minivan pierced through the misty drizzle, materialising out of nowhere like some fiery-eyed apparition from the corner ahead of her. All Darcy saw was that the van’s wheels were well over the centre of the narrow asphalt lane, leaving her nowhere to go except up the banked verge of the slick-surfaced lane-that-was-barely-more-than-an-asphalt-footpath she’d been so carefully negotiating.

Instantly, her muttered mantra morphed into a startled yelp of terror, “...Aargh! Get on your own side! Road-hog!”

With a hastily indrawn breath and scrunching up her shoulders as if it would make her car instantly narrower: like some low-rent version of Harry Potter’s purple Knight bus, Darcy braked hard and hauled the steering wheel as far to the right as she dared. The last thing she wanted was to get marooned on the soft verge...and yeah, she’d heard *all* the bad jokes about not mentioning soft verges to the French...but she was in no mood for joking right now.

Right now she was far more concerned with avoiding a tragically premature end to the trip she’d spent so much time and energy selling to the children as a wonderful Normandy adventure by colliding with this obviously manic French driver.

It would be such a shame, she thought fleetingly, as she fought to keep the big green car under control, for it to end badly, especially now that she was so close to getting herself and the children to the village alive and in one piece.

“That’s if I can find the bleedin’ village,” she said under her breath, unaware she’d resorted to one of Patrick’s less-pithy expletives in her exhaustion and frustration at being lost in the French countryside. As someone who had previously never talked to herself and seldom swore, Darcy had found herself resorting more frequently to soliloquy and an invective-enhanced vocabulary in the weeks since Patrick’s abrupt departure from her and their children’s lives. Her best friend, Halley, had warned that the solo-conversation thing was a habit that was an early indicator of going off the deep end, sanity-wise, but as far as Darcy could see, imminent insanity was the least of her worries at this juncture in her life. The swearing, she hoped, was merely a by-product of the heightened stress she’d been under recently and would disappear, once they were more settled. Well, that was her theory -for what it was worth.

The jolly green giant lurched part-way up the bank and back down intact as the van flashed by. Expelling her pent-up breath with relief at the near-miss, Darcy steered back onto the narrow road. The male driver of the delivery van had not slowed even slightly; instead giving her a cheerily unrepentant grin and a cheeky parp from a horn that sounded as if it belonged more to one of Rosie’s Noddy DVDs than on any real road.

Hugging the right-hand kerb and driving at an even more sedate pace than she had been travelling previously, Darcy spared a quick glance in her rear-vision mirror to check that her sudden manoeuvre hadn’t upset the children.

She needn’t have worried. Connor and Rosie were still sound asleep in the back, with the overflow of toy-filled bags and other paraphernalia that Darcy hadn’t been able to fit in the trunk mounded between them to create a sort of travelling Great Wall of China; designed to separate the warring factions. Her little darlings, who normally got on well together, had taken to throwing things over the wall at one-another as they became increasingly frustrated with the time spent in the car. Long car journeys such as this didn’t exactly bring out the best in their divergent personalities.

Her movements limited by the head rests of her booster seat and her seat belt, seven year old Rosie’s tousled curly mop that so resembled her mother’s bright red curls had lolled forward in what looked to be an awfully uncomfortable position. Connor, the elder of the two by four years, was snuggled cosily under his comforter with his blond head resting on his favourite pillow, complete with an appliquéd space rocket pillowcase that he’d insisted upon bringing with him from London.

At the sight of them, both still sleeping and safe from harm, Darcy took in another calming breath, expelling it through thinly pursed lips as she removed one hand off the steering wheel to rub briefly at her tired eyes.

No two ways about it: driving in a foreign country, in the rain with dusk approaching and no one to help navigate was no picnic, Darcy thought

gloomily. She frowned through the rain-spattered front windscreen of the car while she attempted to work out where she'd gone wrong.



They had left England enjoying a balmy autumn morning, complete with sun and clear blue heavens and arrived into patchily grey skies that had become increasingly murky on the journey south. It was one of the disadvantages, Darcy mused crossly, of travelling *underneath* the English Channel instead of floating on top of the waves. There was no gradual sense of any changes in the weather and no visual warning of what to expect when you popped out the French end of the Chunnel.

On the plus-side, she reasoned, there had been nada in the way of seasickness either, so on balance perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing.

Disembarking Eurotunnel's le Shuttle, they'd continued their journey south. The thickening rainclouds that had been gathering overhead ever since they approached Abbeville had finally opened as they departed Rouen and intermittent showers had been falling for the past thirty minutes with a predictable repetitiveness that showed little signs of relenting any time soon; certainly not before they were due to arrive at their destination.

Glancing upwards at the endless ranks of blue-black clouds that marched across the darkening Normandy skies like World War Two troops advancing for battle; Darcy didn't relish the thought of unpacking in the wet and fervently hoped that they'd arrive in one of the short dry spells between showers.

She'd been caught out by the first cloudburst. After years of big-city living with the London Underground or local buses as her regular daily transport and lacking practice at driving, she had been concentrating hard on steering an unfamiliar car on unfamiliar roads. It had crossed her mind that as an American driving in France, she should have, theoretically, found this easier than driving about London. But ironically, having belatedly sat her licence in Britain and having never driven in the U.S. she felt every bit as daunted as any other Brit. confronted with the continental road network and French driving habits.

Distracted for a moment by the sight of her newly ringless left hand gripping the steering wheel in white-fisted concert with her right, locked in a precise ten to two position that would have made her London driving instructor proud, she hadn't noticed the oncoming storm. As the first light raindrops had turned into an unanticipated deluge requiring high-speed wipers, Darcy, unprepared for this added difficulty and having just driven down the on-ramp onto the busier A13 autoroute, had frantically pulled, prodded and punched just about every switch on the dashboard until she finally found the one that operated the front windscreen wipers.

Just in time, as it was by then, near-impossible to see through the rain-smearred glass. Well, she'd thought happily as she adjusted the wiper's speed

to something more effective than a spasmodic snail's pace; she now knew which buttons operated the rear wipers, the windscreen wash, the heating and the emergency lights, should they ever be required.

Terribly useful. Not. She planned to return the jolly green giant (so-christened by the children on first sight of its eco-green paint job), back to the rental company as soon as she bought something more compact to replace its sorry green ass.

Looking on the bright side, Darcy thought, having left the autoroute and the route nationale for narrower country lanes, the car's windscreen wipers had provided the perfect metronome-like backing band for her sing-song chant.



She had noted on some level that things had gone very quiet in the rear of the car as they'd approached Rouen but had been too busy negotiating the heavy afternoon traffic and deciphering incomprehensible French road signs to enquire if her passengers were content or merely comatose. By the time traffic had at last thinned enough to allow her a moment to glance back, both children had been fast asleep.

Out like little lights, she'd noted happily. They were tucked out by the pre-dawn start from London and the day's driving as well as their channel crossing. For them, the journey had been exciting (leaving the house and London), boring (the painfully slow drive out of the city and down to the Chunnel train station at Folkestone), briefly exciting again (driving onto the double-decker train carriage and the first five minutes of the crossing) and dead-boring (more driving, this time from the Calais terminal to Rouen).

For Darcy it had all just become increasingly tiring and painful...so that by now, she wanted nothing more than to arrive at their destination and remove her poor aching body from this uncomfortable car seat that she had decided hours ago must have been fabricated by some sadistic synergy of evil design professionals to have resulted in such terribly *un*ergonomic seating. Afterwards, in a moment of honesty, she had conceded that some of her discomfort might have been partially her own doing. She wasn't exactly the most relaxed of drivers, and hours of tight shoulders and clenched hands had taken their toll.

Mindful of this, she rolled her shoulders as much as driving would allow, hoping to relieve some of the pressure. The exercise did nothing discernible; the pain in her neck wasn't going away that easily. Then she tried clenching and unclenching her buttocks in a vain attempt to get some circulation back into her tender flesh but that wasn't entirely successful either.

Doing her best to ignore her aches and pains she acknowledged with a small glow of what she thought of as justifiable pride that she'd only gotten (ever so slightly) lost just once on the entire trip. And that had been in the

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centre of Rouen...hardly surprising when she'd never driven through the city before and all the road signs were in French, a language in which she'd never progressed much beyond schoolgirl level. And, since the children had slept through that part of the journey and therefore knew nothing about it, it hardly counted at all...after all, as the saying went... *if a tree falls in the forest and no-one is around to hear it*, and ...yadda-yadda...however that ended...she was too pooped to finish the thought.

Anyway, she surmised tiredly but with self-satisfaction, not bad for a first time driver in France with no one else to gripe at for screwing up the navigation ...as Patrick had always done with her whenever he drove.

## CHAPTER TWO

Darcy felt like she had been planning this trip forever instead of the three frantically busy weeks it had really taken. Working every moment of the days and a hefty portion of several nights she had packed up the children's and her London lives to move them lock, stock and smoking-barrel across the English Channel to Normandy.

The thought sourly crossed her mind; if she'd had the aforementioned smoking-barrel, she'd have probably used it on her stinky rat of an ex-husband, Patrick, when he'd unexpectedly announced that he was moving out of their marital home to go and live in sunny Rio with his newly-pregnant Brazilian girlfriend.

The same girlfriend that he'd apparently first met at an international engineering conference two years previously, been seeing on the sly every time he'd crossed the Atlantic to attend yet another terribly important meeting and not bothered to mention until he'd invited her and her equally in-the-dark husband to stay at Darcy and Patrick's Islington home a scant eight weeks ago.

Patrick had swaggeringly made the dual announcement of his falling out of love with Darcy and his impending departure with his new beloved for the South American continent while the four adults were sitting chatting about this and that around the family dinner table the night after their guests had arrived. That dinner menu was now indelibly etched in Darcy's mind.

Patrick's news had been delivered with a abruptness akin to the dropping of the Hiroshima bomb, right there in the gap between a main course of succulent roast pork with apple sauce and dessert, which was to have been a wickedly-rich chocolate mousse, accompanied by an appallingly expensive sweet wine that Darcy had gone out and bought specially, knowing how much Patrick liked it.

Not, thought Darcy afterwards, quite the pleasant dinner-table conversation she'd imagined having with their guests.

Shocked, not so much by the news as the manner it had been delivered, she had sat for some seconds, dithering between several options: ...door number one, she could continue playing the polite hostess and offer dessert and wine to her stunned (him –poor thing) and smirking (her, the Brazilian bombshell –Darcy realised later that she must have been forewarned by Patrick as to what was coming) dinner guests; door number two, indulge in an absolutely justifiable hissy fit and upend the mousse she'd placed just moments before in the middle of the table over Patrick's balding, half-drunk, Irish-trash cheating head; or alternatively, door number three, flee the room in utter embarrassment.

Years of her own mother's drill-sergeant schooling at not making scenes meant she'd opted for the latter, not so much fleeing as demurely pushing back her chair and quietly walking out of the room, to climb the steep stairs to her and Patrick's suite and sit on the side their bed staring out at the darkened street until she'd heard the front door close behind what she assumed were their now-departed guests. On her return downstairs Darcy found Patrick gone as well, having taken a full set of luggage that he must have had pre-packed in readiness. Still reeling at what had just transpired; she had opened their front door to the sight of a black London cab pulling away from the kerb in front of their house with Patrick and his baby-mama on board.

Still, she had one thing to be thankful for, she had thought, while she had sat there in the gloom of their master-suite listening to raised male voices drifting up from downstairs. At least he had waited until after the children had left the table. Darcy had served their dessert early and they had both taken their pudding plates with them into the TV room to watch re-runs of *Sponge Bob Square Pants* so had been spared witnessing the sordid scene.

Cold, calculating snake that he was, she'd realised later, he'd spared her nothing -timing it all near-perfectly to do maximum damage to Darcy's feelings.

"Drama Prince!" Halley had pronounced, when she had come over the next morning, adding that, knowing Patrick it was a wonder that he hadn't invited a few more of their friends to witness the spectacle.

Still, as embarrassing as it had all been, it possibly didn't rate as the worst he'd done to her in their years together, Darcy thought, looking back over her troubled marriage as she mused bitterly in the weeks afterwards.

As a consequence, since that night, despite kindly meant offers from her friends, she had refused all invitations involving meals or food-consumption of any kind, on the grounds that you never quite knew what was going to happen around a dinner table.

## CHAPTER THREE

With effort, Darcy dragged her frazzled mind back to present-day France and the immediate task of finding the *gîte* that she and the children were to stay at over the next week. It had not been possible to move directly into their accommodation, a small cottage attached to stables at the chateau as it required cleaning and airing prior to their taking occupation.

Chateau de Belagnac, -pronounced with a silent ‘g’- she had been informed by her new employer’s personal assistant, and its out buildings had been unoccupied for years and would not be ready for occupation for some time. Darcy had been told this during her interview but one of the provisos of her taking the job had been that making their cottage liveable for her and the children would be top priority.

Mademoiselle Clement, the PA, had assured Darcy that this was so through a phone call the week before in which she outlined where they would stay in the interim. As the new owner would be out of the country on a business trip for the first two weeks of her employment directions to a nearby *gîte*, or holiday cottage, would be left pinned to the door of the church in the village of the same name. Non *Madame*, this spoken in what Darcy thought of as hoity-toity tones, it was quite ‘*impossible*’ to miss the village church. It was, after all, directly adjacent to the stables and their adjoining cottage where *Madame* and her children would be living after the cleaners had finished their job.

*Madame* would understand, the assistant had said, as if reassuring a particularly dim-witted child, it was a *very* small village and in the unlikely event of *Madame* becoming lost she had only to ask directions from the local inhabitants...as everyone thereabouts knew where Madame Guillot’s *gîte* was located. And ‘*non Madame*’, sending the directions by fax or email was totally unnecessary as, repeated once again for the idiot child; the church was ‘*absolument impossible*’ to miss. Darcy had ended the conversation

thinking that if she was called *Madame* in that condescending, snotty tone one more time she would not be responsible for her actions.

Twenty minutes of driving later ...“*Absolument impossible*, my aching un-French fanny.” Darcy muttered darkly.

Passing an intersection that she was sure she'd seen not less than ten minutes previously she became aware that her almost spotless record of not getting lost was about to become completely tarnished if she didn't find the correct village and the church pretty soon. She must have taken a wrong turn somewhere back there between the exit from the route nationale and the village. She was fairly sure that she'd been driving round in what now felt a lot like a roughly shaped circle for the last ten to fifteen minutes trying to find ‘*Belagnac-with-the-silent-g*’ and there wasn't a single handy knowledgeable villager anywhere in sight for her to ask directions from. It appeared they were not as hardy a breed as the PA had intimated and less than inclined to hang about in the pouring rain to give travel tips to disoriented foreigners.

It was a pity, Darcy thought wearily, that their hire car hadn't come with a working GPS or at the very least, a decent road map, but she guessed that's what you got for low-budget rental. She knew she should have bought the map booklet she'd picked up and leafed through at their last assorted-caffeinated-beverages-and-bathroom stop but aware of just how laden-down the car was she had replaced the thick map book back on the rack. Not such a clever move, she now thought with the advantage of 20/20-vision hindsight.

The showers had not so much stopped as called a short truce to regroup and gather forces, but from the occasional patter of fat dollops of water on the front windshield she could tell another cloudburst was not far away. Darcy peered through the droplets on the car's front window, noting that, on the positive side, the glass was now washed clean of the bug splatter it had collected on the earlier part of the drive. Looking through the gathering gloom of dusk come early she saw something that attracted her attention enough to have her sitting straighter in her seat. There, over the trees to the south, or was that north? West? East?

Oh whatever, she thought despairingly. For someone who normally had a fairly good sense of direction she really had no idea which way was which anymore. Giving up on compass points she went for simple; -there ...to her ...right, that looked like a church spire and not too far away. Hoping she had found the missing village she drove along for another minute, keeping the spire in view above the trees, frightened that if she lost sight of it she might be driving around for the rest of the evening. The scene expanded as she drove out from between a long avenue of dripping green lime trees to a section of hedgerow that had been removed for replanting.

...Well, she thought triumphantly, she might not have found the village

church but she *had* found Chateau de Belagnac. Woohoo! She recognised the chateau from photos the ever-so-helpful assistant had attached to an earlier email prior to the job offer.

Hopefully, that meant that the church couldn't be too far away, given that it was right next to the chateau's stables as the assistant had repeated, slowly and loudly, several times. Or did it? She wondered, feeling uncertainty creeping into her musings. After all, the chateau sat in nearly three hundred acres of grounds.

No, she reasoned, the stables surely wouldn't be that far away from the chateau proper... please, please, pretty please, let that be true. As she made this plea, Darcy was taking peeks through the new hedgerow planting. The spectacle of the chateau was mesmerising. Brushing all thoughts of getting to their destination aside, she checked behind for traffic before indicating right and pulling off the road into a gateway alongside the narrow sealed pavement. Rain or no rain, she was getting out and having a proper look at the place she'd left home and hearth for, dragging her children along with her. A bona fide chateau to live in and practically a blank canvas, she'd been told in the interview, to re-landscape. Well, she wrinkled her nose with the thought, to live *close to*, more precisely, rather than *in* ...but that was just as good.

She took a quick peep into the back seat. Yep, the children were still out to it. No point in waking them up when they'd see it tomorrow anyway. And, although it might be a teensy bit selfish, Darcy knew she really wanted to have this first impression all to herself. She'd dreamed of a job like this for years. A total re-design of the landscape of a deserted chateau that hadn't been touched by anyone else in over fifty years. Living on site and a budget to die for, -not that she was absolutely sure what the budget was as yet- but the owner was sufficiently wealthy that Darcy didn't imagine penny-pinching should be an issue. Under happier circumstances it would have been utter bliss but even in her present predicament it qualified as way better than average.

She unclipped her seat belt, grabbed her jacket from the pile of discarded clothing that had, over the course of their journey, taken over the front passenger seat and opened the car door, shrugging into the warm fleece-lined jacket as she got out.

"Brrr", Darcy immediately noted that it was considerable colder here than the temperature had been in London. And getting out of the car, as her city-street high-heeled shiny leather boots sank into the mucky ground, she also swiftly concluded that a pair of wellies would be high on her shopping list this week.

Darcy squelched over to the gate, carefully choosing the spots that were least muddy for her unsuitably shod feet. The gate was a solidly-crafted affair, eccentrically comprised of rusty steel with a crest-bearing panels

placed either side of its central upright bars and set between tall solidly-built brick pillars. On its far side a weedy and rutted gravelled lane led away across the paddock into woods, disappearing from her view after about fifty yards.

Directly on the other side of the gate was rough looking pasture. Even if the weather had been more conducive to exploring, Darcy doubted very much that she'd be attempting to climb over the chained and padlocked gate. Watching her with wary bovine eyes from inside the field and only yards away from her, yes, she rattled the heavy chain to check; thankfully the thing was firmly locked, were a dozen or so feral-looking French cows. All of them sported lengthy horns with what looked like, from this relatively safe (she hoped!) distance wickedly sharp points that could have given a Texas Longhorn a run for its money. Those horns and the territorial look in the nearest beasts' gaze were sufficient deterrent to keep her outside the barred gate.

Still she wasn't out here in the weather to look at a herd of cows... it was the rather forlorn-but-still-undeniably-beautiful building in the middle distance that caught Darcy's attention. Slim turrets at either end of a symmetrical and roughly rectangular rosy-red brick chateau took the structure from the banal into a realm inhabited by those dreamy castles usually inhabited by Disney princesses and the like. This chateau was tall too. Darcy counted five levels, if she included the basement, which appeared to be half-above, half-below ground, and the large central tower, which rose above the rest of the roofline, flanked to either side by tall chimney stacks.

White louvered shutters blocked every stone-edged window and with five floors there were a profuse number of them. Darcy did a quick tally, noting as she did so that the building's proportions and styling leaned towards the more feminine and dainty end of the spectrum of chateaux that she had seen. And, unlike many old country houses she'd encountered in Britain, this seemed to be all of the same era, with no later add-ons.

Using her raised finger to add up the windows, she muttered, "six, seven, eight, and nine." Hmmm ...with nine tall narrow windows on either of the main floors, "times two," that came to eighteen. "Oops," she corrected. Less one for the wide doorway that was set in the centre of the above ground floor, its flights of stone steps to the left and right leading directly down to the pasture ...well, that made a final count of seventeen.

Looking more closely, she decided that the chateau was divided into multiples of three; three windows either side of the central tower, three making up the tower with two lots of three stacked above, that was another six ...wow twenty three so far. The thought flitted through her head that she was glad she'd been hired to design the landscape and not to wash the windows. Especially those at the very top of the middle tower, which were

smaller dormers set into the precipitous slope of the dark slate roof and finished with decorative arched stone pediments.

Inspecting the roof, she noticed that the finial atop the right hand turret leant drunkenly to one side and the steep mansard roof with its prettily shaped round windows –one to either side of smaller rectangular windows, also with arched pediments, appeared to be more a mossy shade of green rather than the slate grey that Darcy could see nearer the ridgeline -where the weather had possibly kept the dark grey slates clean. Also, she was pretty sure that the dirty grey of the lighter stonework surrounding the windows would have been creamy white if it was clean, which, even from a distance, she was sure it was not.

All the structure lacked was a mantle of briars, or possibly, if her son had his way, a fire-breathing dragon, Darcy decided, and it could definitely qualify for its own fairy-tale princess. She knew for certain that Rosie, who was still in that Barbie-doll-and-Disney-princess phase, would absolutely adore it.

Bother. She'd gotten distracted and lost count. Determined to finish, she went backwards, once more using her index finger to count the windows off and adding as she went... "seventeen, plus those six in the tower, that's twenty three, plus two times three to either side...that makes, hmm, ...twenty nine,"...then, belatedly, she noticed there were more windows on each floor of the end turrets. She was about to give up what was quickly becoming a rather fruitless exercise when the rain shower that had been threatening for the last quarter of an hour suddenly decided to do more than threaten.

The spits were rapidly turning into sizeable drops that were falling with more and more force. Darcy made a mad dash for the shelter of the car, managing to splatter her boots with mud in the process. Time, she decided, to find the church, the directions and the gîte.

...Fortunately, the church proved easily found. The road curved gently to the right, skirting what she presumed were the chateau grounds, until Darcy came to the village of Belagnac. There was a small school to her left and as she drove past Darcy recognised what she thought might be the building that was to be their new home on her right.

Another old gateway, this time in an overgrown hawthorn hedge, led into the chateau grounds; with a suggestion of a gravelled drive running along the front of a long two-storied building. Maybe that was their stable cottage on the end closest to the road? That portion of the building was in red brick while the remainder was plaster with timber detailing and a red tiled roof, setting it apart from the rest. Even from a brief glance, Darcy could tell that it wasn't worth stopping to explore as solid dark brown wooden shutters covered all the windows so she decided to ignore the chateau's buildings for now and pulled over instead into the church car park

next door, just as the bells tolled the hour. They were lovely, ringing out clear tones across the village, but also very loud and she couldn't help but wonder if they tolled every hour, day and night.

Hmmm, she thought, that might be interesting living there practically right beside them in the shadows of the church. She hoped she and the children weren't in for sleepless nights.

A few cars were parked in front of the building but none of the villagers were to be seen, anywhere. "Huh," she grunted quietly, wishing that the all-knowing PA had been here to see this. Still, Darcy had a sense of being watched as she opened the car door and ran over and up a couple of steps to unpin the scrap of notepaper from the sheltered doorway of the church - as if unseen eyes were checking out the stranger in their midst.

She hopped back into the driver's seat to read the written instructions and roughly-drawn map in the warmth of the car. Great. The printed directions said to go back the way she'd come and turn off the first road to the right ...drive two kilometres, over a bridge, up a slight rise and the *gîte* would be signposted at its gateway. She tucked the paper into the driver console's cup holder and started the car.

This had better be as easy as it sounded, she thought, as she reversed to turn. She had absolutely no energy left for second tries.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Ugh, Aargh,”... Darcy strained in a futile attempt to lift the heavy steel-barred gate. It had resisted all her attempts to move and wasn’t budging. Not only was it hanging badly on hinges stiff with rust but the end she was currently wrestling with was firmly wedged in an overgrown hawthorn hedge.... “Oomph,” this last was uttered involuntarily as her cold fingers slid off a rail that was slippery with dew.

Losing her grip, the upwards force she’d been exerting had to go somewhere. Hands flying upwards, she stumbled back, stopping abruptly and with enough impact to expel all the air from her lungs as her rump hit the driveway. Gasping, she hurriedly got back to her feet, surreptitiously rubbing the part of her posterior that had met the ground and darting a quick glance behind her to make sure no one had noticed her fall.

Unfortunately, the big green rental car, parked behind her in the entranceway had done absolutely nothing to shield her from anyone’s view.

“Bugger”, she swore, sotto voce, using another of Patrick’s expansive vocabulary of swear-words. Not just one but several heads had turned in her direction from across the road, where a small knot of parents had been standing chatting outside the school fence after dropping their children off for class. She had seen them arriving as she’d pulled into the gateway with the intention of slipping unnoticed into the chateau grounds.

So much for not attracting attention.

Abso-bleedin’-lutely fabulous beginning she thought in the words of her favourite BBC sitcom, just “Ab Fab”, she muttered sourly.

What’s more, several of the children inside the yard had stopped playing and were now hanging over the low schoolyard fence, keenly watching her as well. Added to all that, Connor was hanging out the car window, giving her a double thumbs up and a cheery “not very Ninja, Mum!”

Darcy made a face at Connor before turning her back on them all,

pulling up her sleeves in preparation for another go at the recalcitrant gate.

The sound of footsteps crunching on the gravelled ground behind her alerted her to someone approaching. She turned, not wanting to start a conversation but determined to be polite and make nice. It wouldn't do to rub the locals up the wrong way so early in their stay.

"*Bonjour Madame,*" it was one of the men from the group who'd been chatting over the road. The "*bonjour*" was spoken so quickly that to Darcy's ears it sounded more like "b'jr." The man, who was stockily built and not much taller than Darcy's own five feet five inches, was smiling broadly in that way that men do when they're about to offer assistance to a maiden in distress. He extended a large callused hand in greeting. Darcy smiled back - though the smile was more of a grimace, and proffered her own hand to shake. Ow, it felt like shaking hands with a meat-grinder. She hastily put her hand back down by her side, experimentally wiggling her fingers a little to check that none of the more delicate bones had been broken by the handshake - just as well he hadn't hugged and kissed her as she'd seen some of them doing earlier, she thought, or she'd be in intensive care.

The man spoke again, Darcy struggling to follow his rapid-fire French. "*Je suis Bertrand Martin. Est-ce que je peux vous aider?*"

Wow, she had understood that phrase, even hearing it said at about fifty times the speed she'd ever remembered it uttered in her school French classes. She thought about her answer, arranging the words in her head before replying.

"Ah. *Oui. Merci.*" Not exactly the sparking conversational French she'd like to be able to produce, but it would have to do for now. She pointed at her chest, "*Je suis Darcy O'Donn... ah non, Darcy Thomas.*" She would have to get used to saying her maiden name, which she'd gone back to using, post-Patrick. She wanted to add that the gate was stuck, but since she didn't have the foggiest what the word for "gate" was let alone, "I can't get the stupid thing to move," she tried it in English, now pointing to the gate and miming "stuck" while pulling unsuccessfully at the gate rails. Marcel Marceau would be rolling summersaults in his grave by now if he'd seen her pathetic attempt, she thought, but the man smiled, well, it was more a half-grin than a smile really, as he raised his eyebrows and nodded knowingly.

"*Oui. J'ai vu.*" In fact they'd all been watching her efforts to move the gate with avid interest while gossiping about the recent sale of the chateau and speculating what it might mean for the community, before they'd seen her flying backwards and hitting the dirt. "*Peut-être, vous avez besoin de la glace, plus tard, pour le bleu.*" He pointed towards his own rear end, precisely pin pointing the place where Darcy had contacted the ground. He was quite openly broadly grinning now.

Yup, he'd seen, which most likely meant they'd all seen. Great start, thought Darcy. She'd already given the locals something to laugh about.

Way to go girl.

Bertrand had the entrance clear in moments, chatting to her in non-stop rapid-fire French as if she understood everything he was saying while he used his solidly workboot-clad foot to break off a couple of low branches that had been protruding from the hedge and blocking the gate from moving. In her rush to get the thing open Darcy hadn't noticed those minor details.

Duh, she thought self-deprecatingly, not so clever after all.

Listening carefully, she was managing to translate about one word in ten, which made the conversation very one-sided. This didn't seem to be bothering Bertrand. He gave one last almighty heave and the heavy gate was free of the hedge, the grass and entwining weeds that had been wrapped around the lower rungs. He wrapped a large hand around the metal rung and with an ear-splitting screech of protest from the hinges, opened it far enough to allow Darcy to drive her car through, standing back and holding the gate while she drove past then closing it behind and wandering along after the car.

Darcy stopped on the lane that ran in front of the stables. As she got out, grabbing the cottage keys from the dashboard where she had left them, Connor and Rosie clambered out of the back seat where they had been sitting waiting for her to get the gate open.

Her new friend walked over to Connor and Rosie and shook their hands, repeating his "good morning" in French to each of them. Darcy could see that the children were trying to be polite although they looked rather taken aback at being greeted in such an adult fashion.

Darcy heard Bertrand complimenting Rosie on her pretty name which he pronounced with that French trill that Darcy knew she'd never be able to emulate, putting the emphasis on the last syllable instead of the first as most English speakers would have done.

At Connor's name, he raised his eyebrows and looked nonplussed until Connor was forced to spell it out in French. Bertrand nodded in understanding, but when he said Connor it came out more "Kon-nour." Well, thought Darcy, listening to them as she searched through the keys to find one that fitted the door, at least Connor knew his alphabet in French. Maybe all that extra French tuition at his prohibitively expensive London school hadn't been a complete and utter waste of time and money after all?

Now, Darcy was battling with the unyielding lock on the stable cottage door.

Was nothing going to be easy this morning? She thought crossly.

It was one of those half-and-half stable doors which Darcy thought added a kind of appropriately rustic charm to the cottage but although she eventually forced the key to turn, the door wouldn't move an inch. The lack of a porch over the doorway had resulted in the wood becoming soaked in

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last week's rain and the water-swollen timbers didn't want to budge even an inch.

She felt Bertrand's hand on her arm, gently indicating that she should move to one side. Darcy gave way, deciding that it was not the time or the place to stand upon her feminist principles if she wanted to get inside the cottage any time this morning. Bertrand put his shoulder to the top half of the door and shoved. With a loud rending sound the top portion reluctantly opened. Bertrand leant over the lower door to release the internal sliding bolt lock that was holding it closed then pushed it open as well, motioning them inside.

He looked over at Darcy and shrugged as if to say "easy if you know how."

As Darcy and the children walked inside, it seemed inevitable that he would follow along behind.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The cottage layout was childishly simple and reminded Darcy of a house she'd once made in a shoebox for her dolls. The proportions were eerily similar.

The front door opened inwards onto a tiny entryway from which led three doors. To their left the first accessed two box-shaped bedrooms, immediately claimed by Rosie and Connor. It didn't seem to bother either of them that they'd have to walk through one room to get to the other or that they were miniscule cube-like spaces and much smaller than the high-ceilinged airy bedrooms they'd left behind in London. Pacing out the floors, Darcy calculated that the rooms were roughly symmetrical; with available floor-space less than three and a half yards squared and ceilings at about the same distance from the floor.

Connor, continuing through the connecting door to the second room at the rear of the cottage, swiftly claimed it as his and pronounced it on the spot to be a 'totally cool' bat cave. It had only one smaller window let into the wall of the building that faced the church and was decidedly gloomy even with its solo shutter flung wide open. Pleased that he was satisfied, Darcy, though relieved there had been no arguments, thought there was no accounting for children's tastes.

Fortunately Rosie's front-facing room was light and airy once the shutters to its two large casement windows were opened and pushed back out of the way to lie flat against the outer walls.

Darcy was thankful, too, that neither child seemed bothered by the peeling plaster or aged dirty-yellow paintwork but made a mental note that she'd need to brighten up these rooms as soon as possible. What didn't thrill her so much were the number of near-elephantine size hairy-legged spiders that had taken up residence in the crevices around the shutters. Apart from a small few that had seemed shell-shocked to be exposed to the

light and had opted to remain in plain sight, they'd mostly skittered out of range as the shutters had been opened, to lurk among the deeper cracks in the plasterwork around the windows.

Bertrand had taken one look at the creatures and declared them harmless with a cheerful, "*ils ne sont pas dangereux*" and a nonchalant wave of his hand but Darcy felt less than reassured. In her mind, they were categorised 'Something to be dealt with ... ASAP.' It wasn't that she was an arachnophobic, she reasoned, but she was not at all keen on sharing her living spaces with crawly creatures that had four times as many eyes and legs as she did. If they couldn't be kept outside or relocated, she could see multiple cans of bug spray in the immediate future. In the meantime, she'd do her best to adopt a live-and-let-live attitude.

She poked her head into the next room; hers by virtue of being the last available bedroom.

The third bedroom, sharing the wall next to the children's and somewhat larger, also opened directly off the entryway. Like Connor's recently acquired room, it had but one window facing the church. Granted, the window was larger, with double shutters but even with both wide open it was dimly lit, until, that was, Bertrand removed the timber cover from the glazed top half of the outside door, allowing more light into the room through the doorway.

Thank goodness thought Darcy, relieved ...because unlike Connor, she didn't fancy living in a bat cave and disliked dark rooms, preferring ample sunlight. The room felt damp, had carpet lifting in one corner and skirting boards that looked as if small animals had been gnawing the timbers. But the boards could be replaced and she hoped the damp was just a result of the cottage being closed up and unheated for so long.

Maybe, she thought, studying the teeth marks in the chewed boards, it would be a good idea to get a cat, or at least some mouse traps. Sooner, rather than later.

There was a second door in the far corner of her bedroom, leading to another tiddler of a hallway. With the dollhouse proportions, it was as if someone had taken a shrink-ray to a real house.

The bathroom, which boasted the bare necessities of a toilet, hand basin and shower, sans curtain, over a midget-sized porcelain hip bath, opened off this hall directly opposite the bedroom door with another door at the far end leading back through to the kitchen.

This faced the lane with a shuttered window similar in size to those in Rosie's room and a *very* basic L-shaped sink bench with open shelves underneath. The nicest thing that could be said about this room, Darcy thought grimly was that its fittings looked original. Original, circa 1950 or earlier, that was. On second glance, the room did have two redeeming features: one was a heavy provincial-style double-fronted cabinet with

scrolled feet that might have been a real antique and the other the decorative tile floor.

They'd need a fridge, perhaps an under-bench model, as anything larger wouldn't fit in the space, she thought as she walked on; though, with three doors opening in to it, two to the tiny halls and the third connecting to the living room, the kitchen would be as much circulation space as it would be for cooking. She was starting to feel overwhelmed with the horribleness of the tiny spaces -until, that was, Bertrand wrested open the kitchen windows and shutters to reveal a picturesque view of the tree-dotted fields and rolling countryside beyond. Suddenly, Darcy started to like the place.

As each set of shutters was opened, some requiring more force than others and one or two with damaged hinges that would need repairing, the cottage came to life. The bright autumn sunshine made everything look so much better. It really was quite charming, or it would be, Darcy told herself, after a jolly good scrub, some replastering and a fresh coat of paint.

Darcy moved through to the last room -their living room. Thankfully, this was by far the largest, and, with the opposite wall being against the stables was effectively a dead end and not designed to be a thoroughfare to another space. The living room occupied the entire depth of the building and would have been, Darcy estimated, around four yards wide. Still not enormous, but large enough for her and the children to inhabit without feeling too claustrophobic, she decided.

There were more sets of double-shuttered windows to the front and rear. As Bertrand opened these the room was lit with adequate, if not overly ample daylight, showing up the dusty timber flooring. Pity there couldn't have been a third window, she thought, but that option was ruled out by the stables taking up the party wall.

Unlike the rest of the cottage, this room was partially furnished. Darcy was pleased and relieved to see someone had left a creamy-coloured three-seated couch, still encased in protective plastic wrapping, pushed against the wall. There was also a small dining table, not new and without any chairs, placed in front of the windows that opened to the laneway. The best find of all was a brand new fridge, still in its packing carton. It was a little larger than she might have bought but after removing the packing, she could see that although tall, it wouldn't take up too much space and had the added bonus of a separate freezer compartment, something she knew most under-bench models lacked. Connor and Rosie, both keen ice-cream eaters would be pleased.

Sitting among the packing materials, Darcy gazed around the room. The plasterwork was in better condition than the children's chosen bedrooms, but whoever had been occupying the cottage must have had a massive cigarette addiction as there was no fireplace to account for the state of the walls. As it was, every one of the painted surfaces was an ugly shade of dirty

nicotine-yellow. Darcy ran the tip of one finger over the wall closest. It came away smudged with grime and grease.

"Yuk." She'd hate to see inside the heart and lungs of whoever had lived here before ... disappointedly thinking, so much for hoping that she'd only need to clean the floors and maybe the bathroom or kitchen before moving in. This cottage was going to need a total top-to-bottom scrub just to make it liveable. Good thing she'd bought some heavy duty bleach and an assortment of cleaning equipment.

She walked back into the kitchen. Well, she mused, looking at the positives, this place was so small that she'd never get tired out from running round and once it was clean it would be a breeze to keep nice. She leant with her hands on the kitchen window sill and stared out the open window to the view beyond, gazing at the wide expanse of cerulean-blue sky, verdant green fields, hedges, beautiful big leafy trees just starting their autumn turn and the horizon beyond woods in the far-distance ... and with those killer cows she'd seen the other day in the near-distance, behind what she hoped was a sturdy fence.

Amazing view, apart from the scary livestock, she thought, and it sure beats looking down the mews any day. Still, she was relieved to note that the fence between the cows and the cottage was of the solid post-and-rails variety. She hoped they knew to stay on their side because she certainly wasn't planning on venturing into their domain anytime soon.

She stood for a moment, just enjoying the serenity of the view and day-dreaming about how pleasant it would be to throw open these shutters each bright morning.

Not for long. Her daydream was prematurely halted by Bertrand touching her arm to gain her attention. He pointed at Rosie dancing around her tiny bedroom down the end of the hall.

"*Votre petite fille. Quelle age a-t-elle?*" he questioned in a polite but nevertheless demanding tone.

She was on a roll with this French thing, Darcy thought gleefully. She could answer that. Even if she did have a small nagging suspicion that Bertrand was simplifying his sentences in order for her to understand. Ah, who cares? Better baby sentences than no sentences.

"*Elle a sept ans,*" she replied, holding up seven fingers just in case she wasn't understood.

Darcy's face took on a wistful look as she considered her daughter. Yes, her beautiful little girl was seven already, growing up so fast that she was rapidly losing her babyish features. Aside from inheriting Darcy's curly red hair, she'd also got her mother's eyes and her maternal grandfather's ears ...but her chin and the stubborn set it sometimes took was quite decidedly a result of her father's genes.

"*Et votre fils?*" Bertrand held up both his large ham-fists, palms out and

fingers extended, as if to ask how many fingers Connor was.

Looking down at the wagging digits, Darcy was less than impressed with his estimation of her ability to parley voo French, even if he was right.

"*Onze*," she spoke a tad shortly, adding a year, since his birthday was in a week's time and she couldn't be bothered trying to explain this to Bertrand.

That sent Bertrand into a torrent of incomprehensible French, from which Darcy caught two words, "*l'enfant*" and "*l'école*."

She put on her best 'I haven't the foggiest what you're talking about' face and said "*Quoi?*"

Bertrand gestured to his right and spoke again but it was still too fast for Darcy to follow. Seeing that she wasn't getting it he pulled on her hand to lead her outside back to the closed road gate. He pointed across the road towards the school, repeating what he had just said.

This time Darcy caught the words "*Ma femme*," "*professeur*" and the phrase "*voire fille doit aller à l'école*". "My wife," "teacher" and "your daughter ... something about school"...and then the penny dropped. He'd been telling her that Rosie must go to school and maybe something about his wife being a teacher.

"*Oui*," she replied, desperately trying to think of the words. "*Ma fille va à l'école*." No, that was 'goes to school' what she wanted to say was 'will go to school' ... 'as soon as I get around to it.' Um...oh pox, she hated being put on the spot and felt like an aphasia sufferer, searching for words she couldn't find. Correct tense or not, beggars couldn't be choosers and she hadn't asked for this conversation. Now, what was 'next week?' She chewed on her lower lip in frustration ...then it came to her in one of those 'lightbulb' moments ... "*La prochaine semaine*." Yup, she'd organise schools for the children next week, or the week after. Or whenever she got up the nerve to approach the heads or superintendents or whoever ran the schools around here.

"*Non. Nous pouvons aller maintenant*." Bertrand said with an assurance that Darcy certainly didn't feel.

Well, thought Darcy, she knew what "*maintenant*" meant.

"Right now?" she squeaked in surprise, forgetting that she had reverted to speaking English. Here she was wearing her oldest clothes and her lovely new wellies. And although the wellies were prettily covered in bright red poppies they were not exactly what she considered the right attire for a meeting with a prospective school principal. In her fervour to have him understand, she pointed at her clothing and footwear, before she shrugged almightily and shook her head.

Bertrand smiled down at the pretty red-haired foreigner, saying "*ne vous inquiétez pas*," nothing to worry about. He indicated the boots before reciting perfectly in English the opening stanza of John McCrae's renowned poem about poppies,

*"In Flanders fields the poppies blow,  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below."*

He smiled briefly before adding, "*En Normandie, ils sont très bien. Nous nous souvenons toujours des guerres ici.*" Given time, this blithely ignorant *Américaine* would undoubtedly find this out for herself. The wars were never forgotten here and never would be. Not while there were still so many Normandy graveyards full of white crosses marking the graves of the fallen, old rusty hulks from the allied landings remaining visible at low tide on the beaches, ordnance being dug up regularly and stories told and re-told of acts either courageous; like the tale of John Steele, the D-Day paratrooper who survived by playing dead when his chute caught on the church steeple of Sainte-Mère-Eglise or heinous atrocities such as the massacre of Canadian prisoners of war at the Ardenne Abbey near Caen and the deaths, further afield of the entire village of Oradour-sur-Glane in the closing days of the war.

What he was thinking was ... *'Il faut battre le fer pendant qu'il est chaud,'* Strike while the iron is hot. He did not think that *Madame* needed to know that his motivation wasn't entirely altruistic or that their little village school was struggling to meet state requirements for student numbers, putting his wife's job at risk. They needed as many pupils as they could get and he was not about to allow any new resident in their village the opportunity of enrolling her daughter in another village school or, heaven forbid, some private school in Rouen.

Curious, Rosie and Connor had followed the adults outside to see what was happening. Bertrand beckoned Rosie over. After opening the gate far enough for the three of them to pass through he took her little hand gently in one of his and held onto Darcy's somewhat more firmly in his other, tugging them both out the gate and across the road.

"Stay right here, Connor. We'll be back soon ... I think," Darcy called back over her shoulder. "And, don't go off exploring on your own," she yelled as an afterthought. The place was old and she was already imagining unsafe wells and dilapidated buildings that her adventurous son could hurt himself in.

"S'okay, Mom. I'll just play on my Nintendo 'til you get back. Take all the time you need and don't stress," Connor yelled in response. Darcy heard him only faintly, as they had already crossed the road and he was out of sight. Sometimes, she mused, it was amazing how level-headed and mature Connor could be ...when he wasn't acting like an irresponsible five-year old. The trick was, as with Jekyll and Hyde, knowing which one of the two personas he would adopt in any given situation. It was a skill she'd yet

to master.

## CHAPTER SIX

Twenty minutes later, Darcy and Bertrand emerged from the front door of the school, returning into morning sunshine that promised a pleasant day.

Darcy, a little shell-shocked, blinked in the bright light. She couldn't believe it –not only had she met the principal and enrolled Rosie in school but, after introducing Rosie to her new teacher, Madame Martin, who was both Bertrand's wife and the new entrant teacher, she had left Rosie behind in the classroom with the other children. The last she'd seen of her daughter, she was sitting at a small desk beside another little girl who could speak a few words of English and looked pleased as punch to have someone to try out her limited vocabulary on. Darcy wasn't quite sure if Rosie had gone along with all of this out of surprise or if she was actually happy to be meeting some potential new friends. Darcy was hoping for the latter. Otherwise she knew she'd be hearing all about it at the end of the day.

She walked out into the school yard, a bemused expression on her face, wondering if she'd made the right decision. She was tempted to go back inside but Bertrand's hand on her back encouraged her to move on across the yard.

Bertrand, who had done most of the talking during the interview, turned to her at the school gate, shook hands again saying, "Au revoir Madame. A demain," before he moved towards his car, which was by now the only one left in the roadside parking bay. The car was so unlike the man that Darcy couldn't hide a small smile. It was an older model wagon that would have been quite unremarkable except it was painted a garish shade of what could only be described as bright 'Barbie' pink. Bertrand, opening the driver's door and noticing her expression, ran a work-roughened hand over the paintwork and fondly said, "Mes trois petites filles ont choisi le couleur," as he spoke, he used his other hand to indicate the heights of his three

daughters. He smiled broadly, his eyes crinkling with pleasure, “C’est belle, n’est ce pas?” He hopped in the driver’s seat and started up the motor, giving Darcy a cheery wave from the open driver’s window as he drove away.

Seeing a large notice board at one end of the parking area Darcy walked over to have a look, thinking it might have some pertinent information about school events, timetables or term dates but the only notice pinned under the protective glass was a hand-written menu informing parents of the meals their offspring would be having for school lunches over the forthcoming week.

Wow, thought Darcy, scanning down the list ...three courses for lunch! How on earth did the children stay awake after all that food to get any work done in the afternoon? The menu even went so far as to state what types of cheese they would be sampling each day. She had an idea ...maybe she’d join them for lunch, -all she and Connor had were some ham and egg sandwiches that she’d hurriedly slapped together before they’d left the gîte that morning. Well, she thought, you knew you were in France when your child ate a three-course meal for a school lunch. It was a far cry from the questionably-nutritious school lunches Darcy remembered from her years at school in the States.

Shaking her head in wonder, she retraced her steps to the cottage. Connor was sitting where she’d left him -angled across the doorstep with his back resting against the door jamb, body in the shade and legs stretched out in the sunshine, his fingers moving at speed over the console of his Nintendo 3DS. He was so totally engrossed in the game he was playing that he didn’t even take time to look up at his mother, barely acknowledging her return with a waggle of his head. Much too busy shooting aliens, bad guys, killer tomatoes or whatever was currently invading his screen, Darcy thought resignedly.

She walked past him to the car, opening the trunk and removing the buckets, brooms and other cleaning equipment that Madame Guillot had lent her to start the cleaning. The gîte was pre-paid for the duration of their stay but Darcy had discussed with Madame Guillot that they might sleep here at the cottage if she could make it habitable by nightfall. Hopeful of making the cottage liveable, they’d packed the car with the bare necessities for an overnight camp-out.

Stepping over Connor’s outstretched legs she went back inside to the cottage kitchen. She briefly considered asking him to help, before vetoing that idea on the principle that it just was not worth listening to his complaints about having to work while his sister didn’t.

Besides, she kind of wanted to get stuck in to this on her own. For a naturally energetic person, the past two days of inactivity at the gîte had been more than Darcy could stand. After a day of resting up from travelling

she'd been full of beans and rearing to get started on this new project. It had seemed like a good idea to get stuck in and clean the cottage herself. Huh, she thought, drumming her fingers across her full lower lip. Looking around now all she could think was 'be careful what you wish for...' if she'd known the magnitude of the job in store for her, she might have been a bit more inclined to play tourist for the week and go off to sightsee in Mont Saint-Michel or Bayeux instead. But here she was, bucket and mop in hand, having given up the sightseeing for a day's hard labour.

The crew that were contracted to work on the chateau, inclusive of opening up and cleaning the cottage weren't due to start until the end of the week so Darcy had phoned her new employer's assistant to inquire if she could make a start. The erstwhile Mademoiselle Clement, plainly not saying that she thought Darcy quite mad to offer, said that she could think of no reason why not, providing Darcy kept receipts for anything she needed to purchase. She was "absolument certainment" there would be a bricolage nearby where Darcy could buy anything she would require to expedite the cleaning and any painting she might want to do, but, if Madame would be a little patient the team hired to renovate the chateau would be there within a few more days and could do the work for her. "Mais oui," of course Madame could make a start if she so wished. The assistant would keep Monsieur Dubois up to date with what Darcy was doing. Les Anglais were insane, (clearly intimated but unsaid), Merci and Goodbye (said).

So polite, Darcy mused, ending the call. And so very snooty. A right be-atch, as Halley would have said had she been there ... which, unfortunately, she wasn't. Halley had promised to visit, as soon as they were settled, she'd said when they parted company back in London ... but since she was totally freaked by creepy crawlies of any kind and leaned heavily towards being a neat-freak it was probably just as well that they postponed any visiting until after the spiders were rehomed and the cleaning was all done and dusted.

Darcy walked back through the rooms, undecided quite where to begin. They were all pretty horrible but the living room by far the grubbier. She swore the last tenant must have chain-smoked for years to get that much tar on every surface ... so she'd work top-down and start with the ceiling, which, although not high was still further than she could easily reach. She'd have to find a ladder to help her get up there.

Mademoiselle Personal Assistant-Be-atch -now shortened to the PA-BA, had mentioned in their phone conversation that tools and equipment for the renovation should have been dropped off at the chateau in preparation for the start of work, but, and for this she was sorry, (not really), she did not know in which of the (many) outbuildings they had been deposited. The workmen knew this, so she hadn't needed to be informed—a point she was sure Madame Thomas would appreciate. Undoubtedly, if Madame

looked, she would most assuredly find what she required (eventually). Madame, by this stage, was becoming increasingly annoyed with the assistant's prissy French attitude and cut the call short before she said something she'd regret.

Darcy pulled the ring of keys from her deep jacket pocket. They had been delivered to the gîte that morning ...Mlle PA-BA was nothing if not efficient. There were rather a lot of them, most old and rusty, but some so new and shiny that they looked freshly minted.

Staring at them she had a fleeting vision of what Harry Potter must have felt like in the Chamber of Secrets when confronted with all those keys to choose from –still, on the plus-side, at least these were just sitting quietly in her hand and not zooming around on wings intent on harming her. But which one? She held the ring up to her face on one finger and jangled the keys before her eyes. Well, they weren't telling so there was only one way to find out ...



...Half an hour later she was about to give up. She'd unlocked and checked all five stables, to no avail, then the tack room and the two garages at the far end of the stable building. All had been empty save for some odds and ends of junk, a few musty bales of straw, too many cobwebs and chokingly dusty air.

She'd found zip in the old burnt-out shells of the barrack buildings that she'd been told were relics from when the chateau had been occupied alternately by the allied and German forces during World War Two. The coach house right next to the chateau likewise –only that hadn't been so hard to check out because she'd been able to peer through the glass windows. All she'd seen was masses of trestle tables and chairs covered in bird poop –no tools, no ladder.

She looked around for more buildings ...hmmm; there was a roofless round pigeonier among the trees to the far side of the main driveway ... highly unlikely as a repository for anything of any value unless you were into pigeon poop. Then the bulk of the chateau caught her eye ...hardly an 'outbuilding', but bitchy Mademoiselle Efficiency could have got it wrong. Darcy thought of the 'helpful locals' who were to have assisted her finding the gîte. Hmmm, it wouldn't be the first time the PA-BA was mistaken.

Irritated at wasting time hunting a ladder when she could have been making progress with the cleaning, Darcy stalked up the gravel lane to where it joined the main chateau entryway. There was an asphalted drive that curved sinuously away to her left through the trees and overgrown grass of the park from the main road gateway to arrive at the northern face of the chateau. That gate was, of course, a much grander affair than their little side gate, but like all the chateau's entrances Darcy had discovered in the past days, locked against intruders with a heavy length of chain and an

equally sturdy padlock. It appeared they took security seriously here.

She approached the closest turret, surprised to discover that it had a modern-looking metal door set a couple of steps below ground level. She tried one of the newer keys. Several keys later, Darcy pushed the heavy door open and proceeded inside into a dimly lit octagonal-shaped vestibule.

She moved forwards into the space, discovering that the door must have had a self-closing mechanism as it suddenly clanged closed behind her, startling her and making her jump. She brushed a hand along the wall, feeling for a light switch but wasn't surprised when nothing happened even when she found a panel and flicked the switch ...understandably, the power was off. The interior was dark but it was not completely impossible to see. As her eyes adjusted to the lack of light she could just make out steps leading down to the sub ground basement.

She began her search anew. The first door to her left opened onto a big industrial-looking kitchen with huge gas ovens and equipment that spoke of feeding small armies. No tools, no ladder. Darcy closed the door and carried on.

With all the exterior window shutters closed little light pierced the gloom and it was hard to see where she was going as she ventured further along the hall. She resorted to feeling her way along the cold clammy walls with one hand. The hall smelt of air gone stale and something else that made Darcy's nose twitch...it put her in mind of long-dead mice or the like, but determined to find a ladder, she kept going, glad of her new water and rodent-proof footwear.

The next door on the opposite side of the hall led to a room with floor to ceiling cupboards and shelving; possibly a butler's pantry, Darcy decided. The adjacent room to this was a scullery, full of huge stainless steel sinks and benches. Darcy wasn't too surprised to see a lift in one corner, –not quite large enough for a person unless they sat but more of an oversized dumb-waiter.

Several rooms later, including a rather odd one with several power cables hanging from the ceiling and long tables that put her in mind of a manufacturing sweat-shop, she finally found what she'd come looking for ...stacked neatly together where the hallway widened to one side and ended in large double doors that Darcy supposed might lead outside ...in tidy piles, was a large cache of tools, mops, brushes, rollers and trays and large paint pails labelled as white paint (in French, of course),... and the much searched-for extension ladder.

Okay, fine, she thought, a little disappointed at not having an excuse to venture upstairs. It had taken longer than she liked but she now had all she wanted ...so no more exploring for today ... she balanced the long ladder under one arm and popped a couple of paint brushes into her jacket pockets. Then, spying some new overalls still in their plastic bags she

stuffed a pair of those under her arm as well. She couldn't carry any more for the moment, so she'd have to come back for the paint when she was ready for it once she'd finished cleaning.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It was late. The cottage was quiet and the children were asleep –tucked up in sleeping bags on air beds in their chosen bedrooms.

Darcy had managed a sort of tepid shower by crouching in the tiny bath and had changed into her warmest pyjamas, swaddling herself in a thick pale blue chenille dressing gown before flopping down exhausted on the still-wrapped sofa. It made a rude whoopee-cushion noise as she sat and again when she put her feet up, but she didn't care. She felt like a bit-player in some naff sit-com but had no extra energy to get up and take off the plastic. There'd be time enough tomorrow to remove the wrapping.

The day had been long, tiring and full of unexpected challenges and surprises. Rosie had enjoyed her first day at school and had made not one but three new friends. She had gone to bed full of enthusiasm and was already planning play-dates for the coming weekend.

The other *big* surprise of the day, well, Darcy revised, quite small really, was occupying the far end of the sofa. Their newly acquired kitten, christened 'Napoleon' by Rosie and Connor had been sitting in one corner of the sofa first toying with a loose section of the plastic then plopping himself down and diligently licking his legs.

He stopped grooming and got to his feet, stretching his back into an arc before yawning enormously. Either curious or just needing company, he padded along the length of the sofa, balancing carefully on Darcy's outstretched legs like a hiker crossing a log bridge, to curl his lithe little body on her warm lap. She put one hand on his head, gently scratched behind his ears and was soon rewarded with loud purring. He was a pretty tiger-striped tabby with a snow white tummy and face but looked, to Darcy's eyes, far too young to be taken away from his mother. She'd noticed as he stretched that his ribs were clearly visible under the fur.

"You probably miss your Mommy, don't you wee chap?" she crooned

to the tiny thing as she patted, but the kitten's eyes had already drooped closed and if he was missing his mother he wasn't making a big deal of it.

Napoleon had been an unexpected and unsolicited gift from Bertrand, who had popped in to check on progress just before school was out. It was just as well he had dropped by or Darcy, busy cleaning and not yet into a pick-up routine, might have forgotten to collect Rosie.

She'd already scrubbed the entire living room and children's bedrooms and was up the ladder once more, making a start on the kitchen ceiling when Bertrand poked his head in the kitchen window. He had a cardboard box in his hands and, opening it to show Darcy the contents, explained that a friend's '*chatte*' had produced an unwanted litter. This little one needed a home rather urgently, the alternative being an unsavoury end to its young life and he'd immediately thought of "*les enfants*." He was sure that Rosie and 'Konour' would enjoy having something to take care of and the kitten would have a wonderful home to roam around in. After all, he said, how many '*petits chattons*' had as much space to explore as the chateau afforded? This little chap would be very lucky. It had been a large litter and he'd been a bit under-fed, but Bertrand was sure that with the right food and care he'd put on weight quickly.

All of this was said in Bertrand's usual full-speed French, but Darcy understood enough to realise that she was being landed with a rescue kitten who would otherwise face a tragic end.

Just what she needed on day one ...she would have liked to have said 'no' but once Connor and Rosie saw the kitten they were so entranced with their new pet that there was no going back. Napoleon was there to stay.

Bertrand, as if to make amends for foisting the tiny animal on her, had brought enough food for the kitten to get them through the first day or two and, obligingly, went outside around the rear of the cottage, fighting through shoulder-high nettles to switch on the gas heating before he left once more, setting up the pilot light to heat water. Darcy had, up to then, been relying on an electric kettle to boil water for cleaning and cups of tea, having flipped the electricity breaker for the cottage when she'd returned from the chateau after finding the ladder. She hadn't known about the gas - if she'd turned it on earlier the bathwater might have been warmer, but that was, she thought wryly, all water under the bridge now. At least they'd have hot water for the morning.

Darcy let her head fall back on the sofa backrest. It had been a long day of hard scrubbing, washing and rinsing walls and floors. She'd lost count of how many times she'd climbed up and down the ladder but if the ache in her thighs and backside was any indication, it was a lot. Better than any stair-master or gym membership for the old but-tocks, she thought idly. She had a feeling that getting out of bed tomorrow morning was going to be something of a challenge, especially since she was planning to sleep on the

floor.

Something was causing an itch on her wrist. Probably a reaction to one of the cleaning products, she thought, as she raised her hand to scratch. Some of those cleaning agents could be nasty and her skin was inclined to respond badly. She'd worn gloves but inevitably liquid had run back down her arms when she was cleaning the ceilings.

She pulled the sleeve of her dressing gown back, expecting to see red welts where her skin had reacted to the caustic cleaner, but there was only a single tiny spot of bright red raised skin. It was itching badly now and she scratched her arm knowing she shouldn't but unable to resist. If she didn't know better, she'd think it was a flea-bite.

She glanced at the sleeping kitten with lips pursed thoughtfully then peered more intently down her robe sleeve. There it was -undeniable proof that the cleaning products were not the culprit. Darcy captured the tiny black parasite in a pincer-grip between her finger nails. Oh great just what she needed; she used her fingers to gently part the kitten's fur, and sure enough, fleas. No wonder he was so skinny

"Oh, yukkity yuk." She said under her breath. Cradling the kitten in her hands she removed the furry bundle from her lap and set it back on the other end of the sofa. It would have to stay in here for the night and she'd deal with the fleas first thing tomorrow.

Darcy had set up her own bed on the floor in this room as her bedroom was the one space she hadn't finished cleaning but she didn't want to stay in the same room as the flea-infested kitten so she picked up her mattress and sleeping bag and quietly relocated both to the floor in Rosie's room, after closing the door to the living room firmly so the kitten and its extra baggage would be contained in that space.

She crawled into her sleeping bag, pulled it up tight to her chin and was asleep in seconds.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“There’s the Vets, Mom,” Connor announced, pointing to a sign off to the right. It had always been a bit of a family in-house joke that Connor was bilingual as he often alternated between the American and English pronouns for his mother.

Darcy, who’d seen the clinic’s sign for herself, indicated, crossed the road and pulled into a small parking area in front of the building.

Most of the limited parking space was already taken up by a big shiny black SUV. She was glad she hadn’t met that behemoth on the lane the other day or she’d have been in the ditch for sure, she thought.

“You want to stay here or come in and help?” she asked, looking hopefully at Connor in the rear vision mirror while undoing her seat belt and trying not to sound overly needy. Connor’s French was so much better than hers and she was hoping for some back-up.

“Nah. You go, I’ll stay. She turned her head to see Connor already reaching for his gaming console.

“Fine,” she sighed. She wasn’t looking forward to this, but she might as well get it over with. Time she learned to fly solo. She opened the car door as far as the vehicle next to her would allow and squeezed out, mentally rehearsing the lines, in French, that she’d need to explain to whoever was inside the Vets that their cat had fleas and she needed something to kill the little blighters.

“*Pour tuer les petites buggers,*” she said quietly under her breath as she opened the door into the clinic...giving the ‘buggers’ a French intonation. Though she was pretty sure that would not help ...well, here goes nothing...she approached the counter, focusing on her task. The vet’s reception area looked much like any she’d ever visited, lots of posters with impossibly well groomed dogs and cats and shelves full of food, bowls and all the other paraphernalia for pampered pets that was on offer, to be sold

at a premium price. There had to be somewhere else cheaper to buy most of this stuff but she was here on a mission, those fleas had to die, and soon, otherwise the cottage would be rife with blood-sucking parasites.

Darcy stood at the counter, waiting with increasing impatience for two young women in too-tight tops, their perky, uplifted breasts straining to escape from the low-cut thin fabrics, who continued chatting animatedly, to eventually decide to stop their conversation and attend the desk.

The first had long blonde hair falling in a smooth sweep across her face while the second touched a hand to a black bob that accentuated her perfect cheek and jawbones. Both were immaculately styled and made-up, and stared at her from the other side of the counter as if she'd interrupted something important. The looks they gave Darcy told her, loud and clear, that her casual attire of blue jeans, teamed with Converse high-tops and an old much-washed white tee with the bright orange University of Tennessee logo on its front did not come up to their exacting standards of dress and appearance.

"*Bonjour Madame,*" the blonde flipped her hair back from her face and gave the standard polite French greeting, but her eyes were focused beyond Darcy as if there was something far more interesting on the wall behind her.

"*Bonjour,*" Darcy responded, a little put out at the receptionist's lack of manners but doing her best to ignore the slight. So far so good ...that was the easy bit, she continued, thinking it was worth checking first, "*Ah, parlez-vous Anglais?*"

The blond shook her head, "*Non,*" she replied shortly as if speaking English was the last thing she'd ever want to do.

Oh well, Darcy thought, it had been worth checking. No 'easy way out' then. She took a deep breath before launching into her carefully prepared speech. "*Um, J'ai un nouveau chatton.*"

The girl nodded as if to say, so you've got a kitten, well big deal, you're in the right place. She turned to smile across at her friend as if sharing a joke. "*Bonne.*" Yippee.

Darcy didn't like that smile, it had a spiteful undertone that spoke of condescension and reminded her of a class bully she'd once had a nasty run-in with. Steeling her shoulders, she carried on regardless. "*Il a les puces. Beaucoup des puces.*" Fleas, and lots of them. Teeming, in fact, as she'd seen when she'd rechecked Napoleon's coat this morning. Standing room only. So many that it was a wonder the tiny kitten still had any blood left. Darcy had looked up the French word for fleas in an online dictionary as it wasn't one she'd ever needed to use before. She didn't recall *ever* having talked about fleas in her French language class ...funny that, and yet, here she was, about to have a conversation about the little blighters.

The receptionist looked blankly at Darcy for a moment, and then smiled beatifically. She moved from behind the counter and teetered across the

tiled floor on impossibly high heels to shelves laden with cat and dog food and lifted a small bag off the shelf, offering it to Darcy.

*"Ca, c'est bon pour les chattons."* As if to prove it there was a picture of a cute cuddly kitten on the front of the pack.

Bet it didn't have a trillion blood-sucking fleas like ours does, Darcy thought sourly. But she didn't want cat food ...What on earth had the girl thought she'd said?

*"Non, merci,"* she shook her head, waving away the food and trying again. *"Il a les puces."* Perhaps if she put a heavier emphasis on the *'puces'* the girl might get it. Fleas, lady, fleas, fleas, fleas...

*"Pousse?"* the second girl said. To Darcy's ears it sounded exactly the same as what had just come out of her own mouth.

*"Oui, Puces,"* Darcy repeated, hoping they were getting somewhere this time. Perhaps a visual aid might help? She made jumping motions with her hand along the countertop, her head bobbing in time with her hand, until she could feel Rosie's Dora the Explorer hair scrunchy that she'd used to tie her unruly hair back off her face, falling out.

The blond turned to her companion, shrugging and making a face that plainly said 'foreigners, why do we have to put up with them?'

Darcy pushed her hair from her eyes. She could feel herself starting to fume but did her best to keep her annoyance in check. Was she going to have to draw a picture? She'd practiced this repeatedly ...how could they not understand?

She was about to ask for a pen and paper ...that was *"stylo,"* wasn't it? and *"papier,"* when a deep male voice spoke from directly behind her.

*"Je crois que vous comprenez très bien que Madame a dit 'les puces', pas 'la pousse'. Elle a besoin de l'insecticide, pas la nourriture."*

Darcy didn't need to understand the words -the deliberate reproof in the tone was apparent in any language. The blond responded by looking chastened, instantly turning to select a small bottle of liquid from a shelf behind the counter lined with treatments. Lips pursed tightly, she set it on the countertop and returned the bag of cat food to its shelf.

Darcy turned, embarrassed that she'd been performing unawares for an audience for the second time in less than two days. She felt a blush start at her neck and climb rapidly over her entire face. Oh great, she thought, glancing at the man who had spoken ...now her misery was complete.

The owner of the voice didn't appear perturbed in the least. Quite the opposite; he gave the impression that he was supremely relaxed, lounging on an upholstered bench that ran along the wall alongside the door Darcy had come through. He leaned back, long legs encased in black chinos stretched comfortably in front of him, feet stylishly but comfortably clad in loafers crossed at the ankles. He wore an open necked white cotton shirt under an expensive-looking black leather jacket. In the hand that lay across

his lap he loosely held a leash that was attached at the other end to what appeared on first inspection to be a large black shaggy rug lying at his feet. Hearing his master's voice the 'rug' yawned massively, showing off a huge pink tongue and an impressive mouth-full of glossy white teeth, including ice-pick sharp canines. If Darcy hadn't had the counter at her back she'd have taken a step backwards. As it was, she moved a little sideways, away from the animal.

"You were saying that your newly acquired kitten has fleas. Yes?" he spoke to Darcy, eyebrows raised in polite enquiry. It wasn't so much a question as a statement. As he spoke, he leant down to lay a hand on the dog's head, stroking it as if to show Darcy the animal was no threat.

Darcy noted that though he'd spoken French like a native his English had a slight American drawl. It was an unexpected combination.

Deep set dark eyes surveyed her from a face that more than justified the description 'strong'. Heavy black brows, long strong patrician nose, pronounced cheekbones and a jaw line so sharp it had Darcy picturing an icebreaker effortlessly cutting its way through Arctic floes. His thick black hair was saved from being cut almost military-short by being allowed to grow slightly longer at the front, creating not so much a fringe as short tufts of hair of the kind that just asked for fingers to be run through them. Aged mid to early thirties she estimated, close enough to her own thirty-one years.

Unbidden, the thought slid into her mind that if she hadn't sworn off men for the rest of her life she'd have thought he was drop-dead gorgeous. No wonder the reception girls had been acting out when she'd walked in. They'd been playing to a rather spectacular gallery of one. She now understood the motivation, though she didn't think much of their methods.

And, she reminded herself, Patrick had been no slouch in the looks department, though somewhat less favoured when it came to hair follicles – a subject he had become increasingly touchy about in the last couple of years. He could be charming, too, when it suited him; and look where that had got her, ergo, charming good-looking men were not to be trusted. It seemed a perfectly logical progression that she should dislike this man on first sight on those grounds alone.



He, on the other hand, had been enjoying the show so much he was loathe to speak up, knowing it would end his leisurely perusal of her rear end...and the view from where he been sitting had been quite lovely. Well-fitting jeans on a woman with a generous backside were a thing of beauty and it been a pleasant change to have time and opportunity for a leisurely viewing.

He wondered if she knew how sexy she'd looked when she'd started bouncing up and down doing her flea impression. He imagined she would

have looked just as good from the front but the rear view hadn't been bad at all ...and that mass of curly copper hair, escaping in all directions from its childish band added to the appeal.

He schooled his face so that his thoughts wouldn't show ...she had sounded English,-though there were undertones of another older accent he couldn't quite place- ...and English women were renowned for not handling compliments about their appearance or their sexuality well. Plus, she was embarrassed quite enough already if the hue of her face was anything to go by.

Now that she was turned towards him he could appreciate the front view ...for a woman of average height she was beautifully proportioned. Small waist, good breasts, -ample but not too large-, delicate face with a full lower lip ... unpainted but still a rather luscious shade of red, possibly because she was gnawing at it in consternation.

All the better to kiss you with, he thought, as he continued his scrutiny. A decently sized nose ...-he wasn't fond of females with tiny pert noses-, preferring women that looked like women, not little children...and large green-grey eyes with flecks of hazel which went perfectly with strong straight brows and that mass of hair. Verry nice.

"Ye-," the word wouldn't come out. She tried again, "Yes. I was." Darcy answered as shortly as possible, then, remembering her manners, added, "Thanks," before turning abruptly away. She just wanted this to be over. She paid for the treatment, grabbed the small bottle before it could be put in a dispensary bag and made a swift escape outside and back to her car. It wasn't 'til she had closed the driver's door that she became aware that she'd been holding her breath. She let it out and took a deep cleansing breath in, as if to flush the last few minutes from her life.

"Oh good, you got it," Connor said perkily, as she dumped the bottle of insecticide in the well between the seats. "Any hassle?"

"Nah, none at all, it was a total breeze." Darcy replied in a forced but determinedly nonchalant tone, not willing to run through her experiences of the past five minutes with anyone just yet, if ever. Total balls-up, more like, she thought.

"Great," Connor replied. "I knew you could do it. That's why I didn't go with you."

"Gee whizz pal, thanks a bunch. Remind me to help *you* out that way sometime buddy," his mother retorted through tightly gritted teeth, as she started the engine and reversed from the car park.

## CHAPTER NINE

If only she'd known ...thought Darcy, squatting in the middle of the kitchen floor, language barrier notwithstanding, she'd have taken Napoleon to the vet with her and asked *them* to administer the treatment. If she'd had the kitten with her, it would have saved the charades and surely, once she'd got past the molls in reception, the vet would have been more professionally polite.

As it was, she'd translated the instructions, which fortunately, or otherwise, had come with detailed illustrations, only to discover that the treatment was in a form that had to be pump-sprayed over the entire kitten, not as a liquid that would do the job with a couple of drops on his back as she'd expected.

Convenient. Na huh. Napoleon, after the first spray, which had barely caught his backside as he was darting away, wasn't having a bit of it. He'd disappeared under the large free-standing cupboard in the kitchen and was now lurking right at the back in the furthest corner, just out of her reach. When she crouched down Darcy could see two wide frightened yellow kitten-eyes staring back at her.

The day was just getting better and better...not.

Darcy placed a small mound of cat food on the tiled floor in front of the cupboard.

"Here, kitty kitty," she pitched her voice to sound inoffensive and encouraging. She glanced at her watch. The children should be back soon, she'd sent Connor across to the school to collect Rosie.

"Here, *chatton chatton*," maybe Napoleon would prefer to be spoken to in French. Well, he was going to have to become bilingual if he was to continue living in this household. The kitten moved a few tentative paces forwards, the draw of the food overcoming his fear.

"Come on, just a couple more steps," Darcy cooed. There, he was

within reach. She shot out a hand and scooped him out from under. Holding him gently by the scruff of his neck in one hand she readied the spray in the other.

"I'm sorry toots, but we gotta do this," saying this, she gave him a hefty dowsing of the spray. Napoleon let out a yowl of protest but Darcy was determined that she wasn't stopping until he was thoroughly drenched. She held him against her chest until she had sprayed his tummy then turned his squirming little body over on her lap, holding him down with one hand between her thighs while respraying his head and all over his back to finish the job. By the end of it all they were both soaked with insecticide and neither was particularly happy with the other.

Napoleon sat on the tiles looking wet, bedraggled and pathetically sorry for himself. Darcy's t-shirt and jeans were sodden and stuck uncomfortably to her chest and thighs.

She scrambled to her feet. "Oh gross, I'm going to need a shower after this," she said to the kitten. Hoping to mollify the sad little creature, she picked him up to place him in front of his food bowl but was instantly sorry she'd touched him.

"Yuk, yuk, yuk," dying fleas were dropping off the kitten onto the newly washed tiled floor. Well, at least the stuff worked fast, thought Darcy grimly. Just as well because she didn't want to go through this again.

She could hear voices outside. The children must be back.

Darcy started towards the outer door intending to open it ... they had been keeping the bottom half of the door locked to prevent Napoleon from getting lost before he imprinted the cottage as his home ... but instead of opening the half-door she froze, as in addition to Rosie and Connor's childish voices, she could hear another deeper masculine voice. It sounded vaguely familiar but she couldn't quite place where she'd heard it before.

"*Merde*," Darcy muttered the one French word she knew not generally taught at a school. She so did not want a visitor right now. But it was too late ... they were already at the door. Three bodies were silhouetted against the bright late afternoon sunshine as the children's heads and another taller torso and head leaned over the open lower half of the door, to stare first at Darcy and then Napoleon, who was sitting at her feet. Darcy looked down and nudged the kitten gently with one foot to stop him licking himself.

"I don't think that's a good idea, wee chap," she remonstrated, "You'll make yourself sick." All they needed to go with the fleas that were falling all over the floor in the kitten's wake was a heap of kitten vomit.

"Don't come in," she called over the door, "there are dead and dying fleas everywhere on the tiles in here."

"Cool," Connor's voice came from the doorway.

"Eee-yew. That's disgusting," Rosie's girly tones piped in. She was standing on tip-toe with only the top of her head and her eyes visible over

the door. Darcy was inclined to agree with her daughter but before she could say so a third voice said, with a deep base laugh, "Ah yes; the new kitten '*avec des puces*'. In that case, perhaps we'd be best to wait out here while you dispose of the corpses."

She *had* known that voice! It was the stranger from the vet clinic; that annoyingly good-looking man who had helped her, at the same time as he'd been undressing her with his eyes. She wasn't stupid, she knew that look. It was one of the reasons she'd left the dispensary in such a hurry, that ... and being mortifyingly embarrassed.

And now, here she was with her clothes plastered to her body like some contestant in a varsity wet t-shirt competition. Oh happy day! Could it get any worse?

As if on cue, Napoleon chose that moment to begin coughing, his whole body convulsing alarmingly. Darcy stepped back just as the kitten puked, narrowly missing a direct hit on her high-tops. She looked down, surveying the damage. Napoleon had thrown up his lunch and a long nasty-looking tapeworm that was now writhing on the tiles. The sight of the disgorged intestinal parasite was so disgusting that Darcy could feel her own stomach start to roll. Just when she'd thought this day couldn't get any worse ... she bent down to pick up Napoleon, now crouching miserably beside her boots.

"Don't touch him." The stranger commanded, leaning over the top of the door to unsnib the lock. In one smooth movement he'd opened the door and scooped up the kitten in one large hand.

"Wha," Darcy yelped, startled by the audacity of someone barging into her home as if he owned it.

He cut her off. "This kitten needs more than a flea treatment, he has worms. I'm on my way back to the vet to collect my dog, so I'll take him with me and he can be dewormed while I'm there."

"Hang on a minute," Darcy protested hotly, "Who are you? And what makes you think you can just take our kitten?"

"Ah ...now you require introductions. You were in such a rush to depart the clinic there wasn't time for us to exchange names or numbers," the stranger replied smoothly, looking over Darcy's dishevelled appearance and noting the way her spray-saturated tee clung to her body, outlining and emphasising her breasts.

With some effort he brought his gaze back to her face, "But perhaps now is not a good time to shake hands? No? Though, please allow me; at least to introduce myself ...I am Gabriel Dubois, the new owner of the chateau and your new employer also." He smiled -in what Darcy instantly decided was quite a barbed manner, before adding, "And you must be Darcy Thomas, my resident landscape designer. Who was supposed to move in next week but couldn't resist jumping the gun and is here already."

He pointed a finger at the orange UT logo on her chest, "I recall from your résumé that you had attended the University of Tennessee; it made you stand out from the other applicants because I once spent a memorable semester at Vanderbilt before moving on to Harvard."

And very attractively displayed the logo was too. That was a plus that had not been evident from the résumé.

Gabriel noticed that Darcy recoiled as if he'd bitten her and tried his hardest not to smile again at her discomfort. Oh how delightful, she was blushing again. Women with pale skin like hers coloured up so easily. He wondered if she realized how spectacularly it contrasted with her hair.

Yep, Darcy thought darkly, worser and worstest.



Napoleon was returned within the hour. What's more, he'd arrived home in style -reclining in his very own cat carrier, sans fleas, worms and Gabriel added, given the first of his vaccinations. Gabriel had also bought a litter tray, a bag of kitty litter and assorted cat toys. The children carted the kitten and his new toys triumphantly off to Connor's room to play.

"He'll need to be given rabies shots at twelve weeks. I made an appointment," Gabriel handed Darcy an appointment card with a date and time filled in, then continued, "The vet says he's a trifle small for six weeks old, probably because of the parasites, but he should grow like a mushroom now that he's gotten rid of all his extra unwanted guests," he stopped for a moment as if considering, before adding, "And I shouldn't imagine that you'll have so much trouble making yourself understood on your next visit to the practice." There was a steely look in his eye that indicated he'd had a word, or several, with the reception staff.

They had been standing talking in front of the cottage's living room window. Wanting to sit but observing that the table was lacking chairs, Gabriel rested his backside on the window sill. Over his shoulder, Darcy could now spy the big black dog sitting patiently on his haunches on the front passenger seat of the black SUV she'd seen taking up so much of the parking space at the vets. Not expecting any other traffic along the drive, Gabriel had parked in the lane outside the window.

Darcy wished she didn't feel so awkward but it was hard not to, given the rocky start she felt she had gotten off to with her employer. At least she'd had time to shower while he had been away and had put on clean, dry clothes that didn't cling to her flesh like a second skin.

Gabriel had noticed this on his arrival but didn't think her dry jeans and another freshly-donned t-shirt were any improvement on her previous outfit. He noted also that she'd added a second layer as well; a loose-fitting checked shirt that hid any curves from view. He couldn't work out why someone who looked like she did would want to shroud their body in such an ugly garment. What he did know was that he very much wanted to get to

know this woman better, tetchy and unsmiling female that she was.

Searching around for an excuse to see her again, he didn't have to look far. Glancing around the room, he noted the solitary sofa; one that had been ordered by his assistant, the table and little else. "The cottage is a bit sparsely furnished, isn't it? He observed. "Unless you're into that minimalist rubbish?"

Well, that left her in no doubt as to what he thought of minimalism, Darcy thought irritably. "I've only finished the cleaning and we haven't had time to buy furniture," she replied defensively, "I assumed the cottage would be fully furnished, but since it's not, perhaps you could recommend somewhere inexpensive to shop? I'll want furnishings that are child-and-kitten-friendly."

"The cottage would have been fully furnished if you'd waited until after next week to move in, my assistant would have organized the rest of the furniture," he shot back, "but since you're here, you can help decide what you want. We'll go shopping tomorrow ...there's an Ikea at Tourville, about half an hour's drive from here. It should have the kind of stuff you want and it opens at ten. I'll pick you and Connor up at nine-thirty." It sounded more like an order than a request and he didn't wait for her to reply. He was already heading for the door.

Darcy followed him, almost bumping into his broad back when he stopped abruptly. She reacted without thinking, putting out a hand to steady herself. Her fingers touched his broad back and she pulled back from the contact as if burned. She could feel the heat instantly transfer itself to her face. Perhaps if she stared at the floor he wouldn't notice her flushed cheeks?

He turned, brandishing a business card and pulling a pen from his jacket pocket to write a telephone number on the back. "Here's my private cell phone number should you need to get hold of me," he said. He'd felt the warmth of her hand through his light business shirt and also noted the lightning speed with which it was removed. He smiled tightly, handing Darcy the card.

Saying nothing, she tucked it into her back jeans pocket without looking up.

"My business trip was cancelled at the last minute and when my PA advised me that you were planning on moving in earlier than we arranged I thought I'd come and see what you were up to. I'm staying with an old friend who lives nearby so call the cell instead of my business number or it'll go through my assistant and take twice as long."

"Thanks, but I shouldn't need to call," she murmured, thinking, it would be a cold day in Hell before she would call the snotty PA-BA again. Especially now she knew who'd doxed her in to the boss.

He shrugged. "You do know that you didn't have to do any of this," he

swept his hand to indicate the clean walls and floor. "Why didn't you wait for the cleaners to do their job?" he quizzed, looking down at her. Did the woman ever stop blushing? And why was she so nervous? He wasn't accustomed to being treated like a leper when someone inadvertently touched him.

"I can't think of a single good reason why, right now," Darcy replied shortly, still staring fixedly at the floor, feeling the increasing heat on her neck and face. Then, aware that she sounded rude, added belatedly and in more reasonable tone, "I guess I was going insane doing nothing and I wanted to get the children settled as soon as I could. I didn't mean to be a nuisance and mess up your planning. Sorry." Now she felt she sounded like a contrite five year old apologising for some misdemeanour.

"There's no need for an apology," he spoke the words mildly, "I was merely curious why someone would want to make extra work for themselves," he pulled a small cardboard container from an inner pocket, "Here, I picked these up for you and the children at the pharmacy. It might be wise if you take them." 'Them' was a packet of worm tablets which he pressed into her hand.

Darcy accepted the tablets with mumbled thanks. When she looked up Gabriel was already out the door and gone.

Thank goodness. Darcy leaned against the cool wall until her blush faded and her heart rate returned to normal. "Get a grip, girl," she chided herself, "You've got to work with this man ...you can't afford to start acting like a teen with a massive crush and just because you haven't touched a man in..." she thought briefly about how long it had been since she and Patrick had touched in any loving way, "well,...way too long, is no reason to go gaga over the first good looking guy you meet." She looked at her fingers where they had connected with his back, surprised they weren't singed at the tips ... "Talk about voltage. Must be overactive hormones," she muttered, aware she was talking to thin air once more. It was high time she started making friends with the locals so she could chat to someone other than herself or the furniture, she decided.

## CHAPTER TEN

Determined to show her new boss that she could be organised and professional when she wasn't caught on the hop, Darcy made sure that she and Connor were ready with plenty of time to spare.

Rosie had been shepherded across the road to school, after a solemn pinkie promise that anything bought for her room would be in shades of pink. It had been her favourite colour since the age of three; and as far as she was concerned, still the only colour worth having. She had pouted a little at not being able to accompany the others but once she spied her new friends already playing in the school yard, she ran off to join them, the outing forgotten.

Darcy was standing admiring the view of the countryside from the kitchen window clutching a second cup of coffee, when at precisely half past nine Gabriel pulled into the open gate, towing a small trailer behind the SUV. The empty trailer rattled on the rough surface of the lane as he passed by the cottage to continue further down, but he was back moments later. He must have turned where the lane met the main drive, Darcy thought, as she watched him brake to a stop.

She continued watching as Gabriel hopped out of the vehicle and walked around to the passenger door to let his dog out. He was dressed more casually today with a dark green cashmere pullover under the same leather jacket he'd worn yesterday teamed with jeans.

He had parked directly outside the kitchen window and as he bent to pat the dog's shaggy head Darcy had a fine view of his jeans clad backside. No, she admonished herself, pulling her gaze away from the sight, she was *not* going to become distracted by male eye candy ...especially that which belonged to her employer. Thinking to distance herself, she walked the few paces to the sink to pour the dregs of her coffee down the drain but turned again as she heard the dog barking excitedly out the window. He'd dashed

off down the drive towards the chateau making an unholy din. Appearing unconcerned, Gabriel straightened, turned and walked to open the cottage door and wander inside.

"Frodo's seen a squirrel," he announced as he closed the door, toeing Napoleon gently away from an inquisitive inspection of the bottom door before picking the kitten up to stroke him. Napoleon promptly crawled under Gabriel's jacket and rubbed against his soft pullover. Darcy tried not to notice but felt a small stab of envy for the kitten. "I think the squirrels are pretty safe though," he continued, "he's never caught one yet, but he doesn't give up trying. It'll give him a chance to stretch his legs before we start off."

Darcy, who had admired the red squirrels bouncing through the long grass and playing on the rooftops, hoped he was correct about his dog's hunting capabilities. Frodo? Ha, she got it; the name was well-suited to the dog with the big hairy feet that was running around outside.

Attracted by the voices and the barking Connor appeared from the bathroom where he'd been sent by his mother to brush his teeth. Gabriel held his hand out to shake. "*Bonjour* Connor. Its time you got used to French ways," he said, then turned to Darcy, "You too. When in France you must do as the French do. It's like Rome, but not," he took her hand, instead of shaking it, he pulled her towards his body while placing his other hand on her shoulder and rapidly kissed her on both cheeks. "*Bonjour Darcy, Ca va?*"

"*Bien, merci,*" Darcy, taken by surprise, replied automatically. She quickly set her features into a mask of, what was, she hoped, polite indifference.

She had come to the conclusion, lying awake the night before that she would make whatever effort it required to keep this relationship as impersonal as possible. She was, after all, a cool-headed professional and she was going to act like one. The last thing she needed was to jeopardise her employment by falling for the boss. She'd dragged her children away from everything familiar to them and taken this job with the express purpose of giving herself time and space to collect her thoughts, while she decided what she would do with the next chapter of her life. She thought of it as hitting the pause button, a kind of hiatus before moving on with her life after Patrick's betrayal; and nothing else. That's what she'd decided and that's what she'd stick to. She was so not ready to be feeling any kind of attraction to another man.

Now, if he'd just take his bleedin' gorgeous hand off her shoulder, she would be able to continue breathing and stick to her resolution.

Gabriel, his hand still lightly covering her shoulder had felt the indrawn breath and waited, curious to see if she would go blue or faint before exhaling. Talk about uptight English. Or was that American, who had been living in England long enough for the English attitude to all things sensual

to have rubbed off on her? Still, it wouldn't be kind to let her faint from lack of oxygen so he took pity on her and removed his hand.

Darcy's relief was almost palpable. He turned away slightly to hide his grin.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked, when he thought he had his face back under control.

"Yes," she replied, catching that look before his smirk was reigned in to something more acceptable. Her eyes narrowed in annoyance ... He knew exactly what he'd done.

In the future he could keep his hands to himself, or, or what? ...better not go there. She picked her handbag up off the bench and stalked, stiff-backed to the door.



It took no time at all, speeding along on the A13, to reach the bridge which crossed the River Seine at Tourville la Riviere. Darcy sat in the front passenger seat beside Gabriel while Connor got to know Frodo, who had politely given up the front seat to be restrained in a doggy safety harness next to Connor in the rear.

Darcy watched the countryside flash by, letting her mind drift and enjoying not having to drive for a change. Gabriel indicated to turn off the auto route, negotiating several roundabouts as they approached the shopping centre.

The distinctive blue and yellow IKEA megastore stood out, among a wide selection of other shops. As Gabriel circled the car parks and manoeuvred to park the SUV under a large shady tree, Darcy noted the plethora of chain stores, some familiar, some not. There was a huge Carrefour hypermarket and a Decathlon sports store. Great, she thought, they needed to stock the kitchen and she wanted to buy bicycles for the children now that they were living somewhere with enough space to ride safely without venturing onto a road.

"Mind if we grab a coffee before we start?" Gabriel asked. "I've got a feeling this is going to take a while, and I need caffeine to start my day. And I prefer the coffee and pastries here to IKEA's Swedish fare."

As he spoke, he was opening the driver's door and exiting the vehicle, so Darcy felt she had little choice but go along with his request. She thought of the two coffees she'd already consumed and hoped there was a loo somewhere nearby in the enormous complex.

The morning was warming up; Darcy shrugged out of her jacket and stuffed it under her seat as Gabriel filled a dog bowl with water for Frodo and left the SUV windows open wide enough for fresh air to flow. The big dog whined unhappily at being left, but released from his harness, clambered over the rear seats into the wide hatch area and lay down, head on paws.

The moment they entered the main shopping complex Connor spied a Micromania gaming shop and pleaded to investigate. Seeing that it was only a couple of doors down from a small café Darcy relented.

"You're not to go anywhere else," she instructed. "This place is huge and I don't want to spend all morning looking for you." She watched her son scoot away and hoped he'd heeded her caution as she accompanied Gabriel to the café.

The coffee was much better than the instant Darcy had been drinking earlier and the selection of fresh pastries that Gabriel bought to go with it too tempting. Darcy had eaten a small strawberry tart, and was eyeing a mille feuille, with its layers of flaky pastry, rich creamy custard and vanilla and chocolate icing.

"Go on, you know you want to." Gabriel was watching her from across the small table. "You're salivating worse than Frodo for a doggie treat."

"Am not!" Darcy retorted indignantly, not overly pleased with the comparison to his dog.

"Here, if it makes you feel any better, I'll take half," he leaned forward with a knife poised above the pastry, grinning as Darcy whisked it out from under the blade and onto her own plate before he had time to lower the implement.

"Whoa, watch out, you could lose fingers doing that," he admonished, "If I'd known you were a mille feuille addict I'd have bought more than one."

"I'm not addicted -I could give up any time I liked," Darcy protested, smiling, but when he reached out, playfully, as if to grab her plate with the pastry on it, she whipped it away and up to her mouth, licking along the icing. "Mine, all mine," she jeered laughingly.

"If I really wanted that, it would take more than a bit of girly spit to stop me," he replied candidly, leaning back comfortably in his chair while watching her dig her fork into the layers, "I come from a big family and I know how to fight for what I want."

"And still. Mine," Darcy forked a big mouthful into her open mouth, wagging her eyebrows tauntingly.

"You sound like those obsessive Aussie seagulls in Nemo," Gabriel said, pleased to have seen her relaxed and smiling at last. It was a vast improvement on the various grim looks he'd seen on her face so far.

"Oh yeah. Mine, mine, mine, mine," Darcy repetitively chanted, before adding, "How on earth do you know that?" He didn't look like the kind of guy who spent a lot of time watching children's movies.

"Big family...lots of nieces and nephews," he replied, shrugging in that way that immediately reminded her that, despite his Americanised English he was still so very French. "Believe me; it beats watching 'Frozen' for the hundredth time or 'Dora, L'Exploratrice' with the girlie girls. Give me

Nemo and the sharks any day. But we're getting off the subject. You could share that, you know. I missed breakfast 'cos I had to get up early to pick up the trailer and I'm still hun-gry," he growled as he drew the word out and turned his lips down in a parody of a sad face.

"Pa-thet-ic," Darcy laughed out loud. "You should take lessons from Rosie and Connor if you want to get *that* look right," but she passed over a forkful of the crisp pastry and crème anyway, her other hand held under to catch any stray globs of custard. She had intended handing the forkful to Gabriel, but he leaned forward and grasped her wrist, gently forcing her to feed him. As he licked the pastry cream from the tines, Darcy could feel herself colouring under her makeup at the unexpectedly intimate gesture.

She was saved by Connor choosing that moment to return from Micromania, bursting to tell her all about the game he'd seen that he 'really had to have,...' As Darcy started to say "Not today buddy," Connor's face crumpled.

"There, *that's* the look you need to perfect," she said to Gabriel, pointing at Connor, who was by now looking as if he'd lost his last friend in the world. She sighed gustily, "come on sport, show me this 'must have' game," ...she climbed to her feet and held out her hand to her son.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Shopping with Gabriel was turning out to be fun ...which was something of an unexpected surprise for Darcy. Shopping with Patrick had never been anything more than a chore that usually ended with them buying what Patrick chose, but Gabriel, while having definite opinions about everything, invited discussion and Darcy found herself arguing, good-naturedly, about what she wanted.

Connor's interest lasted only until they'd decided on the furniture for his bedroom: a high metal bunk bed, double-size so, said Connor, there would be room for him and Napoleon, a bright red sofa that fitted neatly under the bed for lounging on and that could fold out to provide a second double bed for sleepovers, a magnetic memo-board with fun magnets, and storage units for his clothes and games. Then they found wall lamps styled to look like medieval wall sconces and georgette curtains in navy blue, patterned with glow in the dark stars and studded with black fabric bats. Pronouncing it all to be 'totally wicked', Connor retreated to the children's play area to battle it out for supremacy on his new Pokemon game that he'd talked Darcy into buying at Micromania.

Rosie's room was next. They chose another metal bed, this one a in a sleigh style, finished white with pretty curlicues along the sides. With the two doors and two windows there was little floor or wall space in Rosie's room, so they opted for a funky pocketed pink (what else?) wall-hanger that could hang from the ceiling beside her bed for storage, a cute mirror that was hidden behind fanciful gothic-inspired fabric doors, a child-sized white armoire and a delicate chandelier with pastel-coloured pendants. Then Gabriel picked up a small (mainly pink) butterfly-shaped mat and Darcy saw some gorgeous filmy white lace curtains covered with fabric butterflies. They recorded codes for the larger items so they could find them in the warehouse later and added the smaller purchases to their voluminous Ikea

shopping bag. Darcy was sure Rosie would adore the finished room and couldn't wait to set it up.

Chairs for the dining table, a low storage unit for a television, rugs and a soft green mohair throw and peacock-inspired cushions for living room sofa, and that room was done. There was little needed for the bathroom other than a tall narrow storage unit and a new shower curtain. Darcy was relieved to think she wouldn't have to crouch in the tub to wash anymore as it wasn't large enough to be comfortable.

Then there was the kitchen. Darcy was taken aback when Gabriel announced that it needed a total refit. They spent some time battling possible styles back and forth and ended up choosing simple white units that incorporated clever storage solutions to replace the existing bench and co-ordinating wall cupboards with glass fronts to display crockery.

Darcy loved wandering around the show room space, comparing the different rooms set up for customers to study. So many styles, so little time, she thought. And, since Gabriel had insisted that all of this was effectively part of the chateau and that he was paying for it, she didn't have to worry about the bill -which made it all the more enjoyable.

They'd left her room til last. Darcy felt like a child on Christmas morning, ...after looking at all of the beds, several times over, she was trying to decide between a simple practical bed in white timber, a fabric covered bed with a U-shaped padded head and footboards and a lovely black metal headboard that was designed to be wall-hung. Gabriel, feeling that the pastries were long-gone and growing hungrier by the minute, gave up trying to hide his impatience.

"Stop," he said, "lets narrow this down. Answer my questions," -now he was doing a bad parody of a Russian accent. Questions had come out as 'kvestions'.

"Ok-ay."

"Hmmm, let me think ...You like to sit up and read in bed? Da?"

"Um, yeah, I do," Darcy replied, a little hesitantly.

"Then forget the fancy metal thing, -you'll grow to hate it after you've banged your head on the bars a few times.

He was right. Bother, she thought, answering with an uncompromising, "Hmmm, maybe."

"That wooden bed's boring. Bland. Blah with a capital B and not your style at all ...so that leaves the one with the padded ends. Comfortable, practical, good-looking; and you can curl up with a load of pillows and read to your little heart's content. Sold to the lady who can't make up her mind and the guy who needs food," he spoke quickly and jubilantly, smacking his hands together like an auctioneer who'd just made a sale.

She hated to agree with him, smart aleck; but he was right on all counts. She'd already picked out a white timber closet with two big drawers under

hanging space that would easily hold all the clothes she'd brought from London, and a bedside table from the same range. The white timber bed would have been too matchy-matchy.

"You might possibly be right," she said, twisting her lips in a way that he already knew indicated she didn't like that he was, ... "but don't get too used to it," she warned, "I'll get those white curtains with the red candy stripes and the red and white duvet with the garlands of roses...and, red cushions. It'll give some contrast." She was thinking aloud, "Oh, and that cute round table with the curly legs....and a lamp."

"Fine, whatever you say, milady," Gabriel bowed, "Now, can we move on to something more important... like lunch. I'm starving and I'm not looking at anything else until we've eaten. But first I'd better go outside and take Frodo for a walk and a bathroom break or there will be *bad* things awaiting us when we get back to car."

Darcy glanced down at her watch, amazed that they'd spent almost two hours in the store. Time had flown by and her stomach was letting her know that it been some time since the morning's coffee and pastries. "Fair enough," she agreed. "I'll go retrieve Connor from the play area and we'll meet up back in the children's section next to the café."



"Ok, zince ve are een Ikea," Gabriel announced in an attempt at a Swedish accent that was almost as bad as his previous Russian, "You vant Swéédée méétée bøøls for za lunch? Ja?" he spoke to Connor, adding, "Zay are zo yømmy" as he patted his enviably flat stomach. Back from the car park, he had walked up to Darcy and Connor, who were checking out the soft toy display in the children's area,

Darcy smothered a laugh, "Better not give up your day job. I've heard better Swedish accents on the Muppets than that."

"Yeah ...Poot the chickie in the baskee," Gabriel intoned, picking up a soft toy hen and lobbing it with considerable accuracy into a small basketball hoop on the wall. He then assisted Connor in netting a couple more hens before they started to attract the eye of a nearby staff co-worker. Abashed, the two retrieved the chickens and returned them to the display, except for one which Gabriel kept. He picked up a soft black and white football as well, saying they would make good toys for Frodo, who was a sucker for toys and soft things.

Darcy briefly wondered if it was the dog or the man who was a sucker for soft things...she had enjoyed watching him play with her son. Gabriel was certainly a lot more fun to be around than she had expected from their first encounter. His ease with Connor showed that he hadn't lied about spending time with children. Darcy wasn't sure what she had imagined her new employer to be like but it was certainly nothing like this. The Gabriel Dubois that she had googled when checking out the potential job had

appeared to be more of the go-getter, hard-headed businessman-stroke-tycoon type, rather than someone who put on silly voices and horsed around with boys in Ikea.

They headed for the cafeteria, joining throngs of shoppers who had also decided it was lunchtime. They all opted for classic Ikea fare ... Three plates of meatballs, Lingonberry sauce and chips later, they found an unoccupied table by a window, parking their shopping trolleys nearby. Connor had chosen a soft drink from the cooler but Darcy and Gabriel's coffees needed filling at a dispenser in the centre of the large room. Now that she had stopped to rest, Darcy's legs felt tired from standing all morning. She was quite happy to sit with her back to the warm sun from the wide picture window while Connor went off with their cups to the dispenser. She closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth.

Gabriel sat opposite, his dark eyes watching her. She seemed unaware that the sun at her back had made a halo of orange light in the curls around her head. The effect was quite mesmerising.

"Darcy," he mused, his gaze still on her hair. "That's unusual for a girl's name, isn't it?"

"Hmmm," Darcy sighed, opening her eyes to answer lazily, "My mother had a thing about Jane Austin,...you know, *Pride and Prejudice* and all that,...ours was a big family, I've got five older sisters and I was lucky number six,...they kept trying for a boy,...but got me instead,...the final disappointment. By the time I'd arrived she'd used up all the girl's names:" she recited them off, "Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Catherine and Lydia, and in some fit of fancy she decided to name me after the lead male character. Once I got used to it, I didn't mind. I decided it's better than being stuck with *Lizzy* or *Kitty* for a name."

"And just think, you could've ended up being *Wentworth*, or what's that other character's name? *Collins* -he was a bit of a creepy pervert, wasn't he?"

"Yeah," she laughed, "that might have been nasty, so I probably got off quite lightly." She looked across at Gabriel. "I've got a question for you too."

"Sounds ominous," he said, leaning backwards in his seat and stretching one long arm across the back of the adjacent chair. "Okay, fire away."

"No, it's nothing too bad; I'm just curious how you happen to have an American accent when you speak English but it disappears when you speak French."

"That's easy, relatively. It's part of a bigger story ....and speaking of 'bigger', six is not a big family...I was the sixth of nine. Born and raised not far from here. Without going into unnecessary detail, let's just say I got into some trouble in my wayward youth." Gabriel played with the cutlery as he recounted, "My father died when I was twelve and I didn't handle it well.

My mother, who's American by the way and a lawyer, decided that I was too much to deal with and packed me off to my aunt and uncle in New York when I was almost sixteen to get me away from my undesirable friends. You *could* say I was a sort of Fresh prince of Bel-Air but I didn't land in such a sweet set-up as Will Smith." He laughed unselfconsciously before continuing. "My uncle was a take-no-prisoners New York cop who believed in tough love. *Maman* figured I'd be forced to go straight; as always, she was right ...in short ...I finished school, won a scholarship, went on to Harvard business school, and picked up an American accent that I just can't seem to get shot of along the way." Relaxing, he stretched his legs out in front of him, feet crossed at the ankles...it reminded Darcy of the day she'd first seen him at the vets.

"On the subject of accents, you've got an odd accent yourself," he shot back ...grinned... "And not only when you speak French."

"Thank you *so* much for instilling confidence in my French-speaking abilities," Darcy retorted dryly, screwing up her nose and making a face.

"I didn't say that it was bad ...only odd. Perhaps 'different' would be a more accurate description. You have a sort of hybrid southern belle, upper class English thing going when you speak English. And when you speak ...and by 'speak' I mean 'torture' the French language, you simply sound sexy."

"What?!" she interjected, leaning across the table. "How can I possibly sound sexy when I speak French? I can hardly put two words together."

"You can't help it," he shrugged, "Practically all English-speakers sound sexy to French ears when they speak French. There're always a few exceptions, of course, but by and large, that's the rule."

"Oh, I get it. Like all French-speakers sound sexy when they try to speak English and say 'zis' and 'zat' and stuff like that." Darcy stretched both hands forwards on the table top pointing at Gabriel, "But you don't do that, do you?"

"Ahh, do I detect that you are hinting I don't sound sexy? I can say 'zis' and 'zat' if you want me to," he leaned forward until their faces were almost touching, placing one elbow on the table and putting a finger up to his cheek as he teased, the other hand creeping forward to cover hers, wanting to see the effect. Sure enough, within seconds her face was alight with a rosy blush. He chuckled quietly, leaning back. Mission accomplished.

She knew she was being baited and refused to rise. Changing the subject seemed a good idea. She directed the conversation back to safer waters. "And you came back to your old stomping ground to buy a chateau?" Darcy let the question in that statement hang, hoping for an explanation.

Gabriel contemplated for a long minute before answering, then looked Darcy directly in the eyes as he said, "Well, I'm the local bad boy, made good,...what better way to prove it than to buy the biggest property in the

neighbourhood?”

“I doubt it’s that simple,” Darcy said.

“No, you’re correct, it’s always more complicated than that,... his eyes took on an unfocused look and he directed his thoughts inwards. “...I’ve always had a thing about the place. I used to bike past it on my way to school when I was a kid and I’d make up stories about living there. When I was young I played with my friends in the woods, then, when I grew older, I got up to other ‘fun’ stuff in the woods,” he smiled mockingly before adding, “some of that was what got me shipped off to America.”

“You mean, like girls?” Darcy said -a little appalled at what she figured he did mean. “But you said you were only fifteen when you left. That’s kind of young for that kind of ‘fun’, isn’t it?” she blurted, shocked. She could see Connor coming back towards them with the hot drinks, and imagined her child up to ‘fun’ in four or five years’ time...it was not the kind of picture she wanted in her mind.

“You’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy. This is France.” His eyes narrowed at the judgement he could see in hers. “What do you want me to say? We’re all immoral? Or maybe just me?” he challenged.

“I’m here to design your garden, not judge your morals,” Darcy retorted, uncomfortable with the way the conversation had turned so suddenly to teenage sex.

“Fine,” he replied, sitting back again, unaccustomed to feeling irritated that he had been judged and found wanting. “But if you don’t want the answers, don’t ask the questions. I can guarantee that you won’t like everything you hear people saying about me.”

“I don’t listen to gossip.”

“That’s untrue, and you know it,” he shot back quietly, his voice lowered as he eyed Connor who was approaching with their hot drinks. “Everyone listens to gossip. With the possible exception of my mother,” he added after a moment’s thought, “And then they embroider it and pass it on. It’s part of being human...and you look very human to me.”

There was a strained quality to the conversation at the table as they ate lunch and finished their coffee. When they got up to leave, Gabriel put out a hand to restrain Darcy, allowing Connor to walk on ahead of the pair.

“I apologise,” he spoke sincerely, saying simply, “It wasn’t my intention to upset you.” He stopped for moment before continuing, “Somehow a straightforward conversation with you becomes loaded with twists and turns that I never anticipated.” He looked thoughtfully down at her.

“I’m sorry too,” Darcy replied, meaning it. “I guess I’m just, prickly. My best friend says I’m like a hedgehog when take offence –I roll into a ball, spines out and post a ‘do-not-touch’ notice. She says I should develop a thicker skin.”

Gabriel ran his hand lightly down her cheek. “I wouldn’t worry too

much. I can handle the ‘prickles’, and I like your skin just the way it is. Especially that little dusting of freckles over your nose and cheeks.” The touch was momentary; he dropped his hand and turned away, catching up with Connor, but Darcy could feel the trace of where he’d caressed her cheek for some time after.

They made their way downstairs to the storage areas to pick up and pay for the furniture and housewares they’d chosen. Gabriel ordered the kitchen cabinets and organized delivery to the chateau. This done, they headed outside, filling the SUV’s hatch and the trailer with their purchases.

“Um, there’s one more thing I’d like to do, if it’s okay with you?” Darcy asked Gabriel’s back as he was bending to tighten a tie down strap on the opposite side of the trailer. When she realized that she was ogling his tight jeans-clad bottom for the second time that day she quickly looked away.

“Please tell me it doesn’t involve any more heavy lifting,” Gabriel responded, turning his head towards her and rolling his shoulders as he crouched to tie off the end of the strap. He wondered why she was staring off into space.

“Well, I can see we’ve still got a bit of a gap,” Darcy indicated the trailer, “and I’ve been thinking about getting bikes for the children. I saw there was a Decathlon store over there,” she pointed to the opposite side of the parking lot.

“A bit of a gap, you say?” Gabriel shook his head in disbelief. “No way. You’ll never fit two bikes, even kids’ size, in that space.” He considered briefly, and then added, “How about we go and choose them and I’ll come back tomorrow to pick them up?”

Darcy nodded her agreement.



After a short inspection of those available, Connor chose a red all-terrain bicycle for himself, with front and rear suspension and a ‘wicked’ flame pattern on the frame. It didn’t take much longer before they all agreed on a lolly pink bedazzled bike for Rosie that included a front pannier that would be perfect for carrying her collection of Barbies and My Little Ponies around the chateau grounds.

Darcy turned from paying for the bikes and organizing for them to be put aside for collection, to find Connor and Gabriel had disappeared. She searched up and down aisles jam-packed with goods for every sport imaginable -plus a few she hadn’t imagined- until she found them, standing deep in conversation in front of the archery equipment. As she approached, Gabriel turned to her.

“Connor here says he wants to learn to shoot...arrows, not bullets,” he indicated the display, “I started when I was younger than him and I’d be happy to teach him,” he paused briefly, his dark eyes rather sardonically watching Darcy before he continued, “...assuming that’s okay with you of

course.” They both stood and waited for her reply, but Darcy could spot a stitch-up when she saw one. They’d already decided between themselves, and if she said ‘no’, she’d be the wicked-witch-of-Normandy.

She shrugged. Like Gabriel had said earlier in the day, when in Rome, or France, do as the romans do ... or, as in this case, the annoying Frenchman who held the trump card of her son’s approval. “Fine,” she answered, thinking, blimmin’ heck, bows and arrows ... with nasty sharp pointy ends that are designed to go straight through things. She looked up at Gabriel, “Please tell me you’re very good at this and you’ve never had an accident.”

“I am *very* good at this,” she looked so cross that he decided he might as well wind her up a bit more... “As I am at many things,” he added, “some of which we’ve previously discussed.” He noted her stiff shoulders. Smiled pleasantly. “And, what’s more, I have *never* had an accident,”... he hesitated there, she’d fluffed up like a mother hen wanting to protect her chick, then carried on as if he hadn’t noticed, “though there was that *one* time when I shot my brother in the ass ...but it was nothing serious. No limbs were lost and no one died.” Now was openly laughing at her.

Darcy gave him a narrow-eyed stare. As the victor, he could at least try for a little humility, she thought sourly.

They left the store with Connor proudly carrying a new bow, arrows and all the accessories required for archery.

Darcy was not at all thrilled but did what she could to hide her concerns. When they arrived back at the car, she stood back as the two co-conspirators made space in the supposedly too-full trailer for the additional purchases.

Well aware of this, Gabriel did *his* best to hide the knowledge. He would not tell her that archery lessons had all been his own idea, although Connor had jumped at the suggestion. Watching Connor, he’d decided that the boy needed another interest other than that of incessantly playing his electronic games.

Both adults were busy with their own thoughts on the return drive to the chateau. After a few desultory attempts at conversation they lapsed into a not particularly comfortable silence that lasted all the way back.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

It was Sunday morning, very early. Holding her running shoes in one hand Darcy crept out, closing the cottage door as quietly as possible -not wanting to wake the children-, before turning towards the cool misty early morning half-light.

She wanted this little bit of time alone,...this 'quantum of solace', she thought wryly; reminded of the movie she and Connor had watched, curled up together on the sofa the night before, after Rosie was in tucked-up in bed and asleep. The movie wasn't her favourite with Daniel Craig in the Bond role, Darcy mused, his character seeming so cold and emotionally shut-down after the events of the first movie, *Casino Royale*.

While she'd known the rating was a little above Connor's age, they'd been somewhat desperate for something to watch on the brand new television they'd bought earlier in the day. Given that French TV was still too advanced for their comprehension skills, they had resorted to watching an old movie they'd brought from London. Darcy had made use of the remote's fast-forward button for any sections she thought were less than suitable for an almost-eleven year-old ...ignoring the occasional protests of her son at her censorship.

She had had a sleepless night as a result of watching -oddly, the movie had made her think about how she had reacted to Patrick's betrayal of her trust. She hoped she wasn't going to sink to those depths of distrust in humanity the Bond had? Sure, she reasoned, -maybe she was a bit gun-shy right now but she hadn't lost all hope that someday she might find happiness again. Eventually she'd fallen asleep with these thoughts trickling through her subconscious and had woken in the pre-dawn with a sense of determination to keep her heart soft, rather than allowing it to become calloused and unfeeling.

She'd peeped into the children's rooms before leaving the cottage. It was

difficult to see much with the shutters still closed but she could just make out the outline of Rosie, wound up so tightly in her flower-covered duvet that only the top of her red-blond hair was visible. Connor's bat-cave would have been darker still but for the weak glow emanating from a batman nightlight plugged into the low wall socket. She'd stretched up on tip-toe to check her son in his elevated bed. Connor was lying on his back; arms askew, with Napoleon snuggled just below his chin. In the short time since they'd installed the bunk bed the agile kitten had learnt to jump from its considerable height to the floor via a shelf on the wall next to the bed and then on to the back of the new sofa-bed to the floor, so Darcy knew he could get safely down if he so chose.

The children's rooms looked wonderful with all their new furnishings in place. Gabriel had helped move their Ikea purchases into the cottage and had sent an electrician around to wire in the new light fittings. With the rooms furnished the little cottage had been instantly transformed from a slightly dingy hollow shell into a comfortable home for her small family.

Plastering and painting, Darcy had told Gabriel, when he'd suggested she wait a few more days at the gîte while he got the contractor in to redecorate, could wait 'til a future date. She felt it was more important, after so much upheaval, that her children had spaces of their own and some routine in their lives in preference to perfectly finished walls.

Rising from the bench where she'd sat to tie her shoelaces, Darcy began walking, waving her arms in circles to warm herself before breaking into a slow jog. The sweats she was wearing felt as if they fit more snugly than the last time she'd worn them ...maybe she'd have to cut down on the frequency of croissants and pastries, she thought reluctantly, or she'd have an ass the size of Africa.

With this thought in mind she headed out the lane gate and along the asphalt road towards the old southern entrance to the chateau -the same one she had stopped at on the day of their arrival. Depending on how much energy she still had when she arrived at the gate she planned to either cut back through the woods to run a shorter route to the cottage or carry on along the road until it met with the main road leading back to the village. It had been a while since she'd jogged so she would see how she felt before deciding whether to take her longer or shorter option.

In the fifteen minutes it took Darcy to run to reach the south entrance she was wheezing badly enough that she opted for the shorter cross-country route. She hung her arms over the gate for a minute or two, not even pretending to admire the view of the chateau that she had appreciated so much on her first sight of it from this gate before scaling up and over.

The mist hovered just above ground level and clung to her hair and skin in a light sheen. Fortunately, the scary cows that had inhabited these fields when she'd first stopped here had all disappeared ...which was a good

thing, Darcy thought with relief. Earlier in the weekend, when she had noticed them gone and inquired about their absence, Gabriel had told her that the fields had been leased to a local farmer, but the lease had expired with the sale of the chateau. She and the children had taken the opportunity to explore this section of the chateau grounds the day before, finding that the cattle had left some useful tracks through the woods, as well as numerous cow pats for the unwary, so Darcy knew she'd have to watch the ground while she was running or risk stepping in something squishy and smelly.

Still a trifle winded and thinking to take the shortest route, Darcy set off from the gate, jogging slowly through the trees along one of these paths, her head down, concentrating on where she was putting her feet.

The chateau had once had a narrow carriageway leading from the southern gate that curved sharply away to the right, circumnavigating a shallow duck pond before running straight for a hundred yards or so between two double-spaced rows of Chestnut trees. With the northern drive now wider and asphalted, this driveway appeared to have fallen into disuse. It had been left so that the trees now crowded closely either side of the leaf-strewn lane, their branches intertwining overhead to form a green shady tunnel that might be pleasant on a sunny day, but was somewhat eerie on a misty morning such as this.

Feeling her breathing settling into a better rhythm and wanting to add some distance to her run, Darcy left the carriageway before it entered the avenue, opting to jog a more sinuous route towards the lane. The cow path she was following ran this way and that through the trees, crossing the carriageway at regular intervals. Thinking nothing of it, she was just about to set foot on the lane having come out from behind the trunk of one of the large old chestnuts that edged the drive when she felt, rather than saw something whizz past her face very close to her cheek.

"Arretez! STOP!" Darcy froze in mid-step in response to the thunderingly loud voice bellowing angrily from the drive to her left.

Turning towards the sound, Darcy took a sharp indrawn breath that had nothing to do with her running. Instantly, she could feel all the blood draining away from her face. There was Gabriel, standing in a wide legged stance, twenty feet down the lane, with his body half-turned towards her ...but it was the lethal-looking arrow notched in a tightly drawn bow which he held, pointed directly at her that caught her full attention.

"Move back behind those trees and stay there. Now!" he commanded in a tone that gave nothing away of the horror he'd felt when he'd seen her run out from among the trees just as he was in the act of firing a fast volley of arrows at the target he had in place forty yards further down the track. Not daring to move, he stood immobile and rock solid, but she could tell from his face and straining arms that he was struggling to keep the tautly

held arrow from being released...and at his distance she wouldn't stand a chance of avoiding being shot.

Following his curt instructions, she chose flight over fright and hastily stepped back to hide behind the thick trunks of the trees lining the drive, leaning her back against the wide sheltering bulk of the nearest chestnut tree. Now that she was facing in the opposite direction she could easily make out a circular target with a neat array of arrows centred on its brightly painted bullseye, placed some distance away farther down the lane.

Once Darcy was out of danger, fright rapidly took over from flight. Feelings of relief and embarrassment intermingled as her legs started to feel rubbery and incapable of holding her up. Added to this, she was having trouble getting enough air. "Oh bugger," she breathed, as she could feel her peripheral vision starting to turn misty. She sensed that the mist was a precursor to fainting,... incapable of standing any longer, she could feel herself sliding down the tree's trunk to slump at the base when she heard the solid thunk of an arrow hitting its intended target. Milliseconds later Gabriel appeared, a bow hanging from one hand. He shot out his other to grab her, stopping her from falling. Through the mists, all Darcy could make out was a murderously angry face obscuring the diminishing pool of vision she had remaining. His head was surrounded with a sort of fuzzy halo effect, like an angel, but the face did not look as if belonged to any sort of celestial being, more like something that originated from somewhere below ground and much, much hotter.

"What on earth were you thinking?" Gabriel's voice was still shouting as loud as ever, incoherent with an outrage fuelled by gut-wrenching fear. "I could have shot you!" He hung the bow off a low hanging branch on the tree beside him before grasping both Darcy's arms just above the elbow. He dearly wanted to give her a good shake, but one look at her pallid features and unfocused eyes showed him how badly frightened she was. Rethinking his strategy in response to her appearance, he drew her to himself, hugging her tightly against his warm body. Darcy dropped her head on his chest, eyes closed, feeling his heart pounding under her cheek as they both struggled to regain equilibrium. After a few moments she opened her eyes. The fog that had nothing to do with the morning's mist had started to clear and she could feel her legs again so she made to push back from the intimacy of being held so closely, but he tightened one arm around her waist, not allowing her any freedom. With the other hand he tipped her face up towards his own and she could feel his warm breath on her cold cheeks. Surely he didn't intend to kiss her? She thought warily.

He didn't. Instead, he spoke, with an abruptness that revealed his underlying rage and concern. "You shouldn't be here. And why the hell did you try to run through the shooting range? I'd put out enough warning cones to stop Napoleon's army." As Gabriel spoke, he applied pressure

with his fingers to turn her face to the right -showing her closely spaced fluorescent orange cones placed at regular intervals between the trees, the glaringly bright cones decorated with pictorial warnings of a bow and arrow as well as written warnings.

Well, Darcy thought belatedly, I'll never forget what 'Tir a L'arc En Cours' stands for in the future.

"I'm s-sorry," she stuttered, nervous laughter betraying her distraught emotions, "I wasn't watching -I was looking down at my feet. I didn't want to get my running shoes dirty by stepping in a cow pat." It sounded like a lame excuse ...but it was true, she thought.

"Cow dung isn't going to make a neat hole in you and kill you," Gabriel angrily poked a finger in the centre of her chest, leaving her in no doubt as to the probable location of the 'neat hole'. "And you almost ruined my perfect accident-free record." He tried to smile but there was still too much fear for what might have happened if she'd burst from the trees a split-second earlier bubbling inside of him for it to form properly and the result was more grimace than happy face. He could still remember exactly how shattering it had been to feel the arrow he'd been on the point of releasing slipping through his grip.

"I know that now. I wasn't watching," she repeated despondently, "I've said I'm sorry." She stared fixedly at his chest as if unwilling to look him in the eye at this close proximity.

"I suppose it's not all your fault. It's partly mine as well," he continued to hold her, looking down at her face, pleased to see that colour was beginning to seep back into her pale cheeks. "I should have warned you last night that I was thinking of setting up a practice range here and I suppose the signs should have been in English as well. I set up well away from the chateau on purpose, but I never imagined you would be out here at this time of the morning." He shook his head, still trying to dispel the sight of her darting from behind the tree right as he was on the point of letting go the final arrow. "I didn't know you were an early morning jogger," he commented.

"I'm not, or at least I was, but I haven't been for a while. This is the first morning I've been out since we arrived," Darcy spoke a little breathlessly. She was increasingly aware of how tightly she was being held and started to back away from him, but his arm around her waist became more rigid in response, limiting her movement, "I left the children asleep in their beds and now I really need to get back," she said nervously.

"I'm sure a couple of minutes here or there will not make any difference."

Hearing a new note in his tone and looking up at his face, Darcy noted that Gabriel's smile was becoming more predatory than placating. Once again she started to back away from his embrace but his arms tightened in

response.

Knowing that she possibly would protest but unwilling to stop himself, Gabriel lowered his head closer to hers and breathed in deeply. As he'd expected, she smelt good enough to eat -slightly sweaty from the run with underlying fragrances of roses and lavender from her favourite shampoo and soap.

All the while keeping his hold, he backed Darcy up two paces until she was wedged between his own body and the very solid tree, angling his face down to place an experimental feather-light kiss to the top of her forehead. Darcy stood frozen, unaware that she was holding her breath but neither encouraging nor repelling his advances. Taking advantage of her indecision, Gabriel continued soft kisses over her eyebrows, her eyes, and then down her nose until he reached her lips. Once there, he began by kissing her top lip, sucking at the tender flesh before he covered her mouth with his own, and all thoughts of experimentation forgotten as he took the kiss deeper.

Despite her best intentions to remain aloof, Darcy found herself responding to him, kissing back with a passion she hadn't know she possessed. Sensing her mood, Gabriel took control of her mouth, using his tongue in a manner that further weakened Darcy's resolve to remain uninvolved. Now that tree was supported her body, his hands were free so that his fingers were tangled behind her head. He impatiently pulled her wild curls from the restraining hair tie; one of Rosie's again, that she'd used to restrain her locks before starting her run and of their own volition; her own hands had somehow found their way under his shirt to caress the muscles along his back. Pressed as she was between the solid trunk and his body she was left in no doubt about how aroused he had become. That was okay, she thought, drowsy with arousal -her own body was letting her know that she found him pretty above-averagely attractive as well. 'So much for professionalism', a little voice chirpily quipped, from somewhere deep in the recesses of her sane mind. Concentrating on returning kisses, Darcy did her best to ignore it.

But about then, the feel of the rough tree-bark through her sports top suddenly brought back to Darcy the conversation they'd had in the café at Ikea. The reminder of how he'd spoken about his past 'encounters' left her suddenly feeling as if she'd just completed an ice-bucket challenge. She didn't want to be just another 'conquest in the woods'; a trophy to add to Gabriel's collection. She abruptly stopped kissing him, awkwardly pulled her hands out from under his shirt and tried to squirm away, pushing at his chest with both hands. As involved as he was, it took Gabriel a moment to notice the change, but then, breathing heavily as if he'd been running himself, he released her.

"What's wrong?" he asked, concern in his voice. "Did I hurt you?"

"I can't do this," even to Darcy's own ears, the words sounded lame,

but she didn't feel she had the energy to go into a lengthy explanation about why she didn't want to get involved with a man, especially this man, right now.

"I've got to go," she turned her body from his, intending to walk away, but his hand that had been loosely holding her wrist tightened, holding her an arm length away from him.

"You were enjoying yourself as much as I," Gabriel's eyes were still wide and dark with desire and he could feel the rapid beat of her pulse under his fingertips. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

"I just remembered something that I promised myself ...and besides, she spoke briskly, I don't want to be another bit of 'fun' in the woods." Darcy was still breathing hard, as if she'd continued running and not stopped. "Wasn't that how you put it?" she enquired.

Gabriel swore softly, "I'm going to wish I hadn't told you that aren't I?" He sensed she wasn't telling the whole truth and continued, "but, come on, I told you that it was years ago, when I was little more than a randy young boy," he explained. "You might give me some credit for learning a bit of finesse in the years since." He eyed her flushed face and unruly hair, messed from where his fingers had run through the corkscrewed curls. Her richly coloured locks had a wildness about them that he was now sure would be shared by the rest of her, if only he could break through her defensiveness. He could feel hands itching with impatience to get back among those curls.

She merely regarded him with narrowed eyes, saying nothing.

"What did you think?" he couldn't resist taunting, "That I was planning on taking you right here and now, with the leaves as our bed?"

"Wouldn't you?" she threw back, "If I'd let you." She finally managed to tug her hand from his and stepped away another couple of paces. Despite her self-imposed vow to remain uninvolved with the male of the species, her body was still reminding her how good it had felt to be held by him. Common sense said that it felt safer to keep a little distance between them.

"Well, unless you come back here, we won't know, will we?" he challenged, raising an eyebrow in a mocking query. "Wouldn't you like to be sure?" he smiled and raised a hand in a come-hither gesture.

Darcy's reply was to turn from him and break into an uneven run. She abandoned the circuitous cow-path route in favour of the more direct lane, choosing the path of least resistance and suddenly very keen to get back to the cottage and her children.

"You needn't think this is the end of it," Gabriel spoke quietly and assuredly to her retreating back as he stood watching Darcy go ...the sight of her derriere as she 'turned tail' and ran away from him in those close fitting sweat pants was pleasant enough, but nothing compared to the enjoyment he'd derived from kissing and caressing her. And it wasn't as if she'd been an unwilling participant, once she'd defrosted a bit. He was

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going to capitalize on that ...and he'd do his utmost to make that sooner rather than later, he decided, as she ran into the misty light at the end of the avenue and away out of his sight.

Meanwhile, he retrieved his bow and went back to take out some of his frustration on the practice range. It was probably a good thing, he thought, as he nocked the next arrow and raised it to shoot the distant target, that the water-heating furnace in the chateau wasn't yet operational and the showers were only running cold.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Two days later, the episode in the woods had faded only slightly when Darcy was startled by Gabriel rapping lightly on the living room window to get her attention. Flustered by his sudden appearance, she dropped the list she'd been studying.

Having spent a trying morning in Bourg-Montfort, the closest town with a school that would be suitable for Connor, enrolling him at Collège; Darcy had been sitting at the table with the kitten asleep on her lap while reading over a lengthy list of required books and associated paraphernalia that her son would need to start school later in the week. She had been making a 'To do' list and had ticked off a few of the requisite items, which she and Connor had managed to pick up at the local Carrefour supermarket on their way home -but it looked as if another trip to a bigger shopping centre was going to be necessary for the remainder of the materials. At least she wouldn't need to buy a uniform; something she was thankful for, since they still weren't regulation in most French schools. She had just added the replacement of the rental car to her list: as the Jolly Green Giant was due to be returned by the end of the week and she wanted to check out car dealers and showrooms in Rouen for a new car. Darcy had an idea of what she wanted but was keen to test-drive the cars on her short-list before making up her mind. She rose, trying to look less ruffled than she felt; tucking the sound-asleep kitten into one of the oversized pockets of her loose cardigan before walking the few steps through the tiny kitchen to open the outer door.

"It's unlocked, you know," she said by way of greeting, trying to disguise the nervousness in her voice with humour and standing back to allow Gabriel room to walk into the narrow hall. "The butler's quit and run away so next time you can just let yourself in."

Gabriel smiled. "Thanks, I'll remember that," he replied. As he noticed

her edging back against the wall, his smile deepened. “Good afternoon, Darcy,” he purposefully walked towards her, placing his hands on her shoulders and kissing her cheeks before she had time to respond by backing any further away. Given the small space in the hallway, that hadn’t really been much of an option anyway. Darcy coloured up instantly; the previous days’ encounter hadn’t faded nearly as much as she would have liked and now those sensations she had experienced came flooding back with the force of a tidal wave. Frodo, who had come in behind his master, stepped forwards as well, massive tail wagging while sniffing her cardigan pocket appreciatively, causing Darcy to place a hand protectively between the dog’s large black nose and the sleeping kitten. She was concerned that he might take too much interest in the tiny feline, who would be little more than a snack-sized morsel to a dog of his size. But there was little need for worry – Frodo did the doggie equivalent of a nonchalant shrug, backed away and turned with some difficulty in the tight confines of the hall before heading in the direction of Connor’s room.

“Do you mind him being inside the house?” Gabriel asked politely, knowing that not all foreigners regarded pets with the equanimity of the French.

“Not at all,” Darcy replied jauntily, attempting to cover her embarrassment, “he’s Connor’s new best buddy.” From the jubilant noises emanating from the direction of the boy’s bedroom the two were happily reacquainting themselves. “See,” she emulated the dog’s nonchalance with a shrug, “and if he sheds, well, that’s what vacuum cleaners are for.”

“Okay,” Gabriel grinned, “I’ll remind you of that the next time he comes inside with his huge muddy feet.”

“Hmmm,” having seen the size of Frodo’s paws, Darcy’s enthusiasm for the dog dimmed slightly. “Did you come over for something in particular?”

“Yes, not that it’s not lovely to see you anyway, but I did. I’m away later today for a week of business. I have to go as I have some loose ends I need to wrap up before I start on this project but I wondered if you would like a guided tour of the chateau before I go. There are great views of the park from the top floors and I hoped that we could discuss some ideas for the landscape.”

“Good idea,” she replied, keen to complete the tour of the chateau she had cut short when she had been searching for the ladder. “I’ve already wandered around some of the grounds but it would be useful to get an overview from up high.” Then she eyeballed him with something close to a glare, “Though this had better not be some version of ‘come up see my French etchings,’ she said suspiciously.

He held up a hand in protest, “Purely business, I assure you.” He pointed towards the children’s rooms. “I did think that Connor might like to come too. Between him and Frodo I’m sure we’ll have ample chaperones

to keep us in order.”

“There is no ‘us’ that require being kept in order,” Darcy retorted crisply.

“But who’s to say there won’t be if we don’t have a chaperone?” he challenged with obstinate good humour. His tone was so reasonable that it irritated her beyond speech -wisely, Darcy chose, for the moment, to say nothing. Instead, she turned her back to head into the living room, where she removed her cardigan with some care, setting the garment and its precious cargo on the soft sofa cushions. She tucked the sleeves around the still somnolent furball that was Napoleon. The kitten’s response to being relocated was limited to half-opening one eye and stretching out a single clawed paw before curling back up in his woolly nest. Thinking of the dog, and still not feeling absolutely sure if he liked kittens or *liked* kittens ...as in *‘I like kittens with a béarnaise sauce...’*, she closed the door as she left the room -taking coats for herself and Connor off hooks on the wall opposite the outer door. While she had been busy tucking the kitten in bed, Gabriel had informed Connor of their plans and the boy and dog were already standing on the doorstep, boots on in the case of Connor and tail furiously wagging in anticipation of an adventure for the dog.



The view from the heights of the chateau’s uppermost windows was undeniably fabulous but it was more the gentle breeze of fresh air from the open window that Darcy needed right at this minute. Struggling to regain her breath from climbing the last of the four flights of steep stairs, Darcy’s chest heaved. That she was clinging a little tightly to the window rail of the open central tower’s largest window was something Gabriel noted but didn’t pursue with any comment. It was, after all, a rather long uninterrupted drop down to the ground below and although heights didn’t bother him in the least, he knew they did others.

Besides, the sight of Darcy’s heaving bosom in a slightly too-tight tee was doing him the world of good, he thought smugly, enjoying that view more than the one from the tall, open dormer. She had removed her thick duffle-jacket after climbing the second floor stairs, complaining of overheating. If he’d known that was what it took to get her to take off clothing he’d have suggested this earlier, he mused privately. Given the effect climbing the stairs had on her, he was wishing they had more floors to ascend -but as the only steps left were up to the windowless attics there was no real excuse to suggest they go any further upwards on this occasion.

They had toured the chateau floor by floor, starting with the sub-ground-floor kitchen and utility rooms. Darcy would have avoided a repeat-tour of that level but Connor had been fascinated by the place from the moment he first peeked into the lowest floor’s boiler room, where the behemoth monster of the chateau’s gas-fuelled furnace sat waiting to be

fired up. It did help somewhat that this time, unlike Darcy's first visit below-ground; they had lights, as the electricity had been reconnected. The air smelt less musty too, than she remembered and someone had done a cursory clean-up, it seemed, as Darcy didn't catch sight of any dead carcasses of rodents she was sure had been in the hall. Not that Connor would have minded, she thought. He was still in that phase where disgusting things delighted him and it probably would have just added to the overall appeal of the place.

The boiler-room had an access door allowing servicing from the outside that opened to one side of the wide cascade of steps that led down to the drive. Gabriel mentioned to Darcy that the service company would be arriving later the following week to check and reinstate the huge heating unit, but there was little point, he said, at this stage, in firing it up before the construction and redecoration work were complete. He also cleared up Darcy's question as to the purpose of the strange room she had noted on her previous visit to the chateau's cavernous sub-ground level. That space had functioned, he explained as the ironing and mending room, used at a time when the chateau would have had numerous staff and copious amounts of linen and cotton to iron. He planned to repurpose the large room and several others on the eastern end of the basement level into a smaller kitchen and living suite, more in keeping with his future plans for the chateau.

He expanded upon his ideas as they continued their tour of the next level. They had climbed from the basement to the above-ground floor, the *rez-de-chaussée*, he said to Connor, mindful that his two guests would need to expand their French vocabularies if they were to stay in Normandy for any length of time. Listening as he outlined his plans, Darcy was both surprised and delighted to discover that Gabriel had no intention of turning the chateau into a private show-pony home for himself. Other than an apartment for his private use that would occupy less than half the top floor, he explained, as they toured, he wanted to develop the bulk of the building into a respite centre for families in need of time-out, for whatever reason; it could be anything from ongoing ill-health of a family-member to those recovering from a tragedy or loss.

Darcy, thinking of the brief personal history he'd shared with her the day at Tourville could understand some of his motivation to provide such a place. If she was privately amazed at his philanthropy, given his much-reported wealth and rumours of his lifestyle, she didn't say, though she did note the prick from her conscience that she had automatically assumed a more selfish scenario. It hadn't helped, she thought a trifle defensively that she had been hired by an agent and not given the full story at the time of her interview.

The rooms on the *rez-de-chaussée* level were far more glamorous than

those of the lower floor. The four had exited the western turret stairs to double doors that opened onto a wide hallway. This ran the entire length of the chateau, west to east, ending at another set of doors leading to the spiral staircase of the far turret. From this hall, rooms opened either side; smaller chambers that might have once been bedrooms to the south with larger, dramatically-proportioned salons to the north. Connor and Frodo raced the length of the hall and back before Connor breathlessly asked to carry on up the grand central staircase that led from this floor, which Gabriel said accessed the two floors above. He was given permission, provided he didn't open any windows or go up the final narrower stairs to the central tower. With a quick nod of agreement, he and the dog were gone. As she saw Frodo's fluffy tail disappearing up the staircase to the accompaniment of Connor's noisy footfalls on the bare timber stair treads, Darcy thought uneasily -well, there go my chaperones.

As if not noticing the absence of boy and dog, Gabriel opened a heavy door from the hall to the first of the salons, pointing out that although dirty and a bit drab, the room would require little more than floor to ceiling cleaning, repainting and re-oiling of the floorboards to be exquisitely lovely once more. Or at least that was what he optimistically envisaged.

Darcy could see potential in the larger space that grew exponentially when Gabriel opened several of the louvered shutters that had been blocking the light from the rooms' trio of tall elegant windows. A delicately carved white veined-marble fireplace featured centrally on the wall to the west; with double doors set centrally in the opposite wall leading directly to the next room. On the walls between the doors, relief-work plaster mouldings depicted a cornucopia of hunting trophies and regalia set in decorative panels at regular intervals. The floor was constructed of classic French diamond-patterned timber parquet, which would be handsome, she thought when it was cleaned and re-oiled instead of being obscured by the thick blanket of dust and grime coating the boards.

"Nice space," Darcy's voice echoed eerily in the empty room as she spoke, looking upwards to a ceiling that was at least three times her height. "Glad I don't have to clean it."

Gabriel's resonant laugh echoed off the walls as he threw open the first of several sets of tall double doors. These were panelled and decorated with a raised design of curlicues and vases of flowers and led to a central room that was part entrance foyer, part salon. Wide glazed doors with windows either side opened to the north terrace and balustraded stone steps. The terrace and steps took up the entire expanse of the central third of the chateau and led directly to the gravelled driveway. To the south, through doors that were already partly opened Darcy could see a second foyer that the long hallway bisected. This showcased the more formal staircase that Connor and his canine companion had disappeared up and hid a set of

doors that Gabriel opened to show Darcy a smaller terrace to the south. In contrast to the northern steps, this terrace had divided stairs that dropped to the ground with curved Italianate balustrades sweeping downwards in either direction.

"Wow," Darcy breathed, "there were no worries about doubling up on grand entrances or wasting space just for a good first impression back when this was built were there?"

"This *is* the formal floor of the chateau," Gabriel concurred, "and these levels were frequently constructed with the prime purpose of impressing visitors. It does get more practical, if a chateau can ever be called 'practical', on the upper floors."

They progressed to the eastern-most rooms through an identical set of doors to those of the first salon; entering a prettily-detailed room of similar proportions to the earlier salon, this one decorated with gilded cherubs and garlands of plaster-cast flowers. Instead of smaller rooms to the southern side, as there had been off the hall to the west, here there was another set of double doors leading to a comfortably-sized room that Gabriel said he hoped to turn into a library for his guests.

Up the stairs to the second floor they climbed, to the *premier étage*, where, as Gabriel had promised, the rooms became more regular and less ostentatiously decorated, although there were still some finely-wrought mouldings, detailed cornicing and decoratively patterned ceilings to be seen as well as several lovely marble fireplaces in different hues in the larger bedrooms. Darcy, playing a game in her mind as to which room she would choose for her own, thought the richly veined deep green stonework of one of the western bedrooms the most dramatic, although the rosy pink shade she saw in another room would make for a delightfully feminine suite as well. Twice, when she poked her head in doorways along the long hallway, she was surprised to find large communal bathrooms with multiple shower stalls and large tiled frescoes on the wall that were quite out of keeping with the rest of the building. She would have asked Gabriel about the rooms but he was otherwise occupied in telling her his plans for the chateau's future.

This floor was where the construction crew would start work, he explained; adding bathrooms and limited kitchen facilities for individual families so there would be a certain amount of privacy and autonomy for each group, although anyone would be welcome to cook and eat in the large sub-ground kitchen, should they so desire. The individual suites would be generously proportioned, no more than two per floor and there would be a smaller apartment created from the rooms on the rez de chaussee's north-western side as well, for a live-in concierge-cum-house-mother who would be available to help with babysitting, cooking or whatever was required to make resident's stays more relaxed.

This overall concept had been made achievable, he added, by the

chateau's layout –although the three stairwells might seem ostentatious at first, they made it possible to divide the floors into private suites, all with their own access. He also explained that lift access to the upper floors on the west would be added, with a shaft rising from the existing oversized dumb-waiter service elevator which already operated between the lower and upper-ground floors. Gabriel and his architect, after much discussion, had finally agreed that a lift would be essential for some of their clientele, and would not be compromise the architectural integrity of the original building. The single lift would provide for anyone who couldn't manage the stairs while also solving the problem of guests from all but one suite struggling with luggage up multiple flights of stairs.

The new below-ground suite, he said, would be accessible from the lower hallway without guests needing to infringe upon one another's privacy, which meant that only his own suite be without lift access. He didn't mind one bit. He was fit and able, he laughed, and the stairs would be good exercise for him. It could all be done fairly easily without diminishing the character of the interior as the only rooms affected were one small bedroom on the *premier étage* and a bathroom on the floor above. The pipework would have to redone anyway to turn the old communal ablution spaces into more personable bathrooms and there was ample space in the attics under the roof to accommodate the necessary lift machinery.

There was no sign of Connor or the dog on the second floor, so after a quick inspection Darcy kept any questions she may have had to herself, keen to continue up the stairs to the higher level and find her son. She puffed her way up the next flights, vowing to get out more often for her morning runs, tugging her thick jacket off on the landing and looping it over one arm. When Gabriel held out a hand for the jacket she gave it up without protest, happy to get rid of the additional weight.

To the east and western ends the rooms on this floor were let into the chateau's roof space, which was still sufficiently high that these rooms had ceilings much higher than an average house. Two round dormer windows sat either side of a rectangle –not as tall as the windows of the floors below but still not small by normal standards. The central third of the floor projected from the steep grey slate roofs to either side north and south. This part of the chateau's central tower had windows that were similar to those on the lower floors, just a little shorter. The eastern end, Gabriel had explained as they mounted the staircase, would be developed as his own suite with the western wing becoming a fourth family suite.

They found Connor and Frodo waiting as requested, sitting at the base of a final stretch of narrow steps that led upwards in the centre of the room. Noting the boy's obvious impatience at the slower adults, Gabriel suggested that they leave the inspection of the rooms on this floor for another time and waved the pair upwards.

The steps were more steeply inclined than those of the grand stair and walled in on either side, resulting in a feeling of enclosure and a sense of the unknown as to what might be at the end. Gabriel and Darcy followed in the wake of Frodo's frothy plume-like tail until they all exited into a single large room with a footprint that filled the whole of the central high tower of the chateau. This had once been a children's schoolroom, Gabriel explained, it dated from the chateau's most recent use as a private holiday camp; the child-sized desks and chairs which littered the room and chalkboards still attached to the walls gave testimony to his statement. Ah, thought Darcy; as Gabriel spoke of the chateau's most recent occupants; that went a long way to explaining the oversized semi-industrial kitchen and the bathrooms with multiple shower stalls, toilets and hand basins that she had seen on the middle floor.

The room was large but disappointing. Not the charming sort of schoolroom that one might have imagined finding up in such a romantic attic space as this -more a rather quite dull and plain work-horse of a space, although well-lit from more dormered windows facing both to the north and south. As Gabriel levered one of the larger windows open, he described the children's play space that would be created when the building renovation was done, with shelves full of books and board-games, media screens and bright, comfortable and durable furnishings functioning as a kids-only space. Thinking of children being up here unsupervised, Darcy hoped that the plan included stout safety bars on the windows.

The window Gabriel had opened gave an uninterrupted view to the south -as well as an uninterrupted view of the ground that produced a mild case of vertigo for Darcy. She wasn't overly fond of being up this high, and staring down at the stone steps far below made her feel more than a little dizzy and nauseous.



As an antidote to the feeling in her stomach, rather than looking straight down, Darcy raised her gaze to concentrate on the view across the park; her eyes drawn to the unmown expanse of green grass that ran away for several hundred yards in a gentle slope directly southwards. It was slightly wider than the chateau building, bordered by magnificent oaks, alders, hazels and sycamores, and ran to the north also. In Darcy's opinion, this southern view was the better of the two as it continued unbroken to greenwoods and rolling fields and hedges of typically pastoral Normandy countryside in the middle distance, whereas the northern vista was spoiled somewhat by an abrupt termination at a busy road. The same road she now knew that she should have taken on their arrival, which led directly from the village to the highway from Rouen and which was only partially obscured by a hedge and a few sparsely placed trees, these doing little to hide an intrusive line of modern power pylons on the far side of the road that marched off into the

horizon towards Rouen and the Normandy coastline.

Darcy had already concluded that, aside from the pretty chateau and outbuildings, two of Chateau de Belagnac's best assets were the wonderfully mature stands of trees that bordered both vistas and dotted the fields surrounding the buildings and the steeply banked, typically Norman hedgerows that bounded all sides of the grounds. These richly planted hedges and the double avenue of grand old chestnuts lining the old southern carriageway (where she had met Gabriel so abruptly the day before ...though she was doing her best not to think about that!) were irreplaceable boons when it came to redeveloping the landscape, as they were the type of features that took years to look their best and couldn't easily be duplicated in the short-term.

Reflecting on what had played-out down in the avenue, Darcy fully acknowledged that she had been shying away from that memory and didn't welcome the reminder of staring down over the tall trees that obscured the lane where she had so narrowly avoided being shot; and of the more intimate goings-on that had followed. Shepherding her thoughts, she concentrated on herding them back to the subject at hand but it seemed her mind had a will of its own and she couldn't rewind her memories to get the pictures of Gabriel's lovemaking out of her head.

"What are your thoughts," Gabriel enquired politely. He was leaning nonchalantly against the wall next to the open window. He'd been watching her, rather than the view out the window and aside from the tightly-buttoned shirt, had been fascinated by the play of emotions flitting across her mobile features. It occurred to him that not a thought crossed his new employee's mind that didn't swiftly appear on her expressive face.

Nonplussed by the question, Darcy jerked her head around and stared up at him uncomprehendingly. Surely he couldn't know what she'd just been thinking about?

"Your thoughts ...on the garden design," Gabriel prompted, turning to point out the open window, "you know ...that stuff we came up here to discuss,"

"Oh, yes," Darcy nodded, an expression of profound relief now crossing her face, "Garden design. Landscaping. Yeah, right." She took a deep breath, which did interesting things, he noted, to the already stretched fabric across her breasts, "Of course that's what you meant."

"And?" he spread his hands wide as if to give her the floor.

"And ...well, I've only had time to walk a small part of the park but I've already come up with some ideas I hope you'll like and some points for discussion."

"Go on. I'm listening." Her boss leant on the wall once more and recrossed his arms over his chest, giving her his undivided attention.

"Well," Darcy adopted a more professional demeanour, "You have

several huge advantages to start with.”

A small smile hovered around Gabriel’s lips. Tempted as he was to respond, he kept the unintentional double-entendre to himself, though watching intently as Darcy continued speaking with earnest enthusiasm, “First, there’s a beautiful chateau to work around and showcase: Belagnac has great bones; the basics are all here ... we just need to build upon them. There are the existing trees, which are superb by the way, there’s the nicely balanced symmetry of the north and south vistas, some lovely outbuildings like the carriage house and quaint countrified ones like the stables, and a few butt-ugly but historically important ones like the barracks.”

“But wait, there’s more,” Gabriel interjected, purposely sounding like a telemarketer.

Darcy gave him a withering look that would have quelled a lesser person.

Gabriel simply raised one eyebrow sardonically, “No, really, I mean there is at least *one* more building I think you’ll like. A lot, if I’m not mistaken. If you don’t believe me then when I return next week we’ll take a wander into the old walled gard...”

“There’s a walled garden!” Darcy squealed excitedly, sounding more like a five-year old being promised a treat than a seasoned professional designer, “Why didn’t you tell me that *before*? Where is it? Can I see it? How large is it? What state are the walls in?” She was talking more to herself than him now, muttering softly, “wow, a walled garden ...that is so amazing!”

“Whoa there. I obviously underestimated the importance of a few brick walls to someone such as yourself,” he eyed her warily. “A mistake I will not make again if I wish to retain any sense of hearing.” He rubbed at one ear absent-mindedly and took a deep breath before continuing, “to answer your questions; Yes there is a walled garden, three complete walls to be precise. They mostly surround an old gardener’s cottage. That’s an old gardener’s cottage ...not a cottage for an old gardener, by the way, just an old cottage ...and that’s the building that I was trying to tell you about.” From the look she was giving him, he could see that his small joke had missed its intended mark so took another deep breath, counting off her questions one by one on his fingers, “Let me see, in order of questioning, ...I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know about it myself until recently and as you know we don’t currently have any drawings for the park and I hadn’t had the opportunity to walk the grounds before now.” Another breath, “Where is it? It’s down there,” he pointed in a north-easterly direction, “Fifty to a hundred metres from the chateau, best exit from the east turret. It’s a bit hidden by the trees and a lot of overgrown shrubs, ivy and rubbish. And, yes you may go and look at it any time you want. Just watch out for the old well that’s lurking in the long grass between the end of the drive and the gate. I am not too sure how safe the cover is. Whew, I’m running out of

air and you asked a lot of questions.” He inhaled deeply a third time, “Hmmm, What was the last one? Oh, the state of the walls,” he considered, “best you see that for yourself I think. The sections that I saw didn’t appear too far gone to repair, to me anyway, but you’re the expert in these matters so I’ll defer to you as to what needs to be fixed or added, or taken away for that matter. There’s a large gap on the fourth but I’ve no idea if that section was ever present or if it’s collapsed. I didn’t look that far.” He folded his arms, leaning back once more, “We don’t have time right now or I’d take you over there myself but I’m sure you will have no trouble finding it. Everything needs a bit ...no, make that probably, a lot, of work, if the state of the cottage is anything to go by. I did have a closer look at it and there’s ivy growing all over the building and some vandalism, possibly compliments of local yahoos such as I once was, so watch out for the broken glass,” he finished with a warning.

“That is sooo brilliant,” Darcy’s eyes were shining and she didn’t even try to disguise her enthusiasm. “I’ve wanted to design a walled garden, since, well, forever. I’ll go and check it out first thing Wednesday morning after I take Connor to school. I can take some photos and measurements and get started on a concept plan.

“Not forgetting the rest of the one hundred and twenty hectares that goes with the ‘amazing walled garden’ of course,” Gabriel air-quoted the walled garden and couldn’t help but caution her, “I don’t want to rain on your parade but it’s just a patch of very long untidy grass and weeds at the moment with a few old brick walls and nothing much else.”

“A blank canvas,” crooned Darcy in almost orgasmic pleasure before she became aware of how intently he was watching her. His previously insouciant demeanour had suddenly changed to something approximating that of a big cat hunting prey. “Connor’s just over there,” she warned, alarmed at his altered expression.

“And the dog too, don’t forget. We wouldn’t want to ruin his naivety, would we?” he added with a sardonic twist to his mouth.

“Darcy ignored his comments, speaking more briskly now, “Okay, I’ll need to factor in a way of connecting the existing walled garden to the chateau.”

“Walled hay paddock,” he corrected.

“Quiet please. I’m thinking here,” she held up a hand, tapping her forefinger against her lips. He could all but see the cogs turning in her pretty head.

“Connections will be important. Otherwise you end up with all these arbitrary bits and pieces that have no sense of mystery or delight involved in getting from one to the next. And it’s important too that the design acknowledges the past but plans for the future. Plus, now that I know you’re planning for families, I’m thinking about new uses like, for instance,

a nature-play area that could include a tree house.”

“And here I was thinking the entire park was a nature-play area,” he interposed.

“Yeah, but it would be good to have somewhere specifically for younger children to play that’s close to the house and that can be supervised,” she explained. “Then there are the formal aspects to consider –this is, after all, a French chateau ...but at the moment it reads more like an English park that has been done-over by Capability Brown.”

“Done over? Interesting turn of phrase. I thought the English approved of his style,” Gabriel commented. “In fact, I thought they preferred it to any other?”

“You forget I’m not English. Personally, I think Capability Brown single-handedly destroyed the best features of a number of historically-important gardens, and whilst he installed some nice lakes and trees he also over-simplified the landscape of some wonderful old English houses and parks. Hey, but that’s just me. Nobody listens to American landscape designers when it comes to these things.”

“Well, the English may not listen to Americans but we French bow to your greater knowledge.” To make the point, he did just that, with a very courtly effort that showed considerable practice, before adding, “We *must* like you: We did, after all, give you the Statue of Liberty, did we not?”

“Ha, you missed your calling; you should have been in Louis’ court at Versailles.”

“Yes,” he replied, dead-panning it, “Louis would have loved me. But there was that whole guillotining thing going on back then,” he drew a finger across his throat in a sharp motion, flipping his head sharply to one side as if it had been severed from his neck as he did so, “so, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll pass.”

“Anyway,” she carried on, tamping down a smile as she tried to ignore his antics, “back to the subject of landscape design. I *had* thought I’d plan for a formal garden with a sunken area to the immediate south of the chateau but now that I know about it, the walled garden might be a better location for that kind of formality. I’d still plan for a small feature-garden to the south, -to provide an anchor for the building to the landscape that it currently lacks and add a sense of that typical French primness, without being overpowering, you know?” he nodded, indicating wordlessly that he did know, so Darcy continued, “we’re not trying to recreate the gardens of Versailles or Villandry here but I do want a nod to design *a-la-française*.” Gabriel squinted his eyes slightly at her less-than-perfect pronunciation of the French, but wisely, said nothing, not wanting to halt the flow of her ideas. Darcy twirled a single finger around in a circle as she explained -it was as if she was drawing her design in the air, he thought. “I was envisaging a central water feature,” she was saying ...and now her hands made watery

gestures -which he assumed must be his new fountain. He couldn't help it when one side of his mouth twisted up in a half-grin as he watched her performance. It wasn't quite as good as her 'flea' demonstration but it wasn't half-bad either. He tried to concentrate on her words but the actions were claiming more and more of his attention. He zoned out for moment then heard something about "...and clipped hedges with flower beds for shelter and colour -oh, and seating," she was adding, "but again, perhaps those things would be better served within the shelter of the walled garden. Hmm, maybe we should limit it to hedges and topiary. My thinking is that the design should look good viewed from any window of the chateau, especially from the upper floors." She tapped a finger against her full lips thoughtfully, unintentionally drawing his gaze to her mouth. "Then there's the north aspect; it needs tidied up with a suitable edge-treatment and gravelled for car parking. Some oversized pots would look great but that's getting down to details."

"And the devil's in the details, don't they say?" At her quelling look, "Hmmm, I like those ideas," he nodded penitently, "please do continue..." Now he had to admit to himself that he'd completely lost track of what she was saying and was just watching her mouth. Hmm, those lips of hers ... she might have ideas of what she'd like to do with his chateau but he had better ideas of what he'd like to do with that mouth.

She was on a roll now and didn't seem to notice his lack of engagement and preoccupied air. Partially because she was staring out the window, seeing her designs unfold in her mind's eye "...I haven't had time to think any of these conceptual ideas through completely -but I see horse-rides throughout out the park, and a reinstatement of the old carriageway for horse-riding as well..." She ended her verbal presentation on a questioning note, hoping that he wouldn't shoot any of her ideas down before they had a chance to sprout wings.

"Yes," he replied seriously, as if he'd heard everything and hadn't missed half of what she just said. "You've obviously thought it all through quite carefully. Draw something up and we'll talk it over again once I return."

She could hardly believe her luck that he hadn't said 'no' to anything she'd suggested! Instead, emboldened by his enthusiastic tone, she added another idea, "Have you considered redeveloping the existing carriage house? It would make a nice location for stables and it isn't too far from the chateau."

"Hmmm," he replied, dragging his gaze away from her lips at last. Reminding himself sternly that this *business* meeting had been his idea in the first instance he brought his attention back to her words rather than her face, answering seriously, "I'll give it some thought and let you know. My architect has already suggested repurposing either that building or what's left of the barracks as an indoor swimming pool but I haven't made up my

mind yet on which. And don't forget, we'll need to add a garage for several vehicles somewhere as well."

"Okay," Darcy considered. Emboldened by his adding to the re-design, rather than taking away, she countered, "Those two major vistas need a bit more *raison d'être*, if you know what I mean. A focal point at the far end of each would give people an excuse to walk the length rather than just hanging around the chateau and looking out at things. It's a good way of encouraging people to exercise; ...perhaps if there was a summerhouse for picnics, or an obelisk (she knew how much the French liked all things Egyptian); that sort of thing. And the north vista would definitely be improved with more trees at the road end to hide the views of trucks travelling along the road ...I'd recommend some carefully-placed trees to block out the power pylons - It's a shame we can't move the horrible things. They're such an eyesore. I'll check the sight lines from here in the chateau and come up with placements that will work best. Oh and..." she added as an afterthought, "...that old dovecote would make a nice sort of half-way destination if it was restored."

"I agree those pylons are an eyesore but I doubt we can move them," Gabriel replied. "Neither the government nor the power companies would look kindly on us should we attempt to, -plus they are not actually on the chateau grounds," he shrugged philosophically. "I will make sure that you have access to the chateau while I'm gone if that helps to check the visual lines. Hmm, as for the dovecote; I've had a cursory inspection. It's pretty solidly built and I'll speak with my architect to see if he can come up with a practical reason to renovate it because I doubt that we'll be raising flocks of doves to include on the dinnertime menu anytime soon."

"Access to the chateau would be useful, thanks." Darcy did not bother to mention that she had a set of keys already, compliments of her earlier visit. "Once I have an overall concept drawn up I'll bring it to you and we can start working towards costing and detailed drawings."

"Sounds like an excellent plan." Gabriel glanced at his watch. "Now, if I'm to make it to Paris by this evening I had better get going." He handed Darcy her jacket before he closed the window and motioned towards the steps. Connor and Frodo clattered down the stairwell at speed followed more sedately by the adults.



At Gabriel's suggestion, they took a different route down, via the spiralling steps of the west turret. As they approached the top landing, Gabriel cautioned Connor to wait and commanded the dog to heel. "There's been a leak in the roof here," he explained, pointing upwards to a large patch of mouldy and water-stained ceiling, "the top two steps are a little rotten but the rest are perfectly sound." He noted a small frown of concern that had appeared on Darcy's brow, "you needn't worry for your

safety -I've checked. They'd probably take our weight, but I don't want to chance an accident." He straddled the steps and took the dog in his arms, easily hefting Frodo's considerable weight before setting him down on the steps below. Connor objected to being carried and chose instead to leap-frog over the offending steps with the assistance of a balancing hand from Gabriel.

Darcy hesitated on the landing, "I could go back down the main staircase," she said as she took a step backwards.

"Don't be a wus mom," -this from Connor, who was feeling brave after his manly jump. Gabriel patiently stood there, legs spread akimbo across the steps as he waited, but the expression on his face plainly reiterated the words her son had just voiced.

Darcy steeled herself. As she felt Gabriel's hands encircle her waist and lift her with no apparent effort, she hissed quietly, "and don't you be thinking that I don't know that you planned this." She concentrated hard on ignoring the drumming beat of her heart as she hung suspended in air, his warm hands touching her skin where her shirt had ridden up.

"Who? Little old me?" Gabriel, his face close to hers, appeared to be very pleased with himself, though she had to admit that he could do a pretty good southern belle accent when he tried. She huffed out her cheeks in exasperation. "Put me down. Right now."

"One can never be too careful," Gabriel seemed to be moving in slow motion as he took his time depositing her on the lower step. Darcy was about to reply acerbically, when she was interrupted ...,

"Wow, look you guys," Connor's voice, coming from the spiral below sounded as if he'd found something exciting, "there's like gazillions of dead blowflies down here on the steps. They're all scrunchy when you stand on them!"

Darcy let out a deep sigh and started down after her son. "And you, of course, just *have* to walk all over them." She shook her head at the behaviour of boys and grown men alike as she made her way down the steps to the exit door.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Connor had been dropped off at school with only a mild case of grumbling, for which Darcy was supremely thankful, prepared as she had been for more extreme forms of protest, ...especially given that it was his birthday. Now she was off on her own private adventure to check out the walled garden she'd been told so little about. Resorting to subterfuge to get out of the cottage without the kitten following her, Darcy had distracted Napoleon with a kitty treat in his food bowl, -a ploy that had given her just enough time to make it out the door before his tiny paws risked becoming caught in the jamb. Ignoring his plaintive *mreows* at what he obviously saw as abandonment, she pulled the cottage door firmly shut behind her and turned towards the chateau, striding rapidly along the overgrown gravel lane in front of the stables.

They had all woken to drizzle and a soft grey misty sort of morning but, Darcy had been pleased to see, the weather had cleared shortly after nine and the sun was now making a brave attempt to poke its head through the clouds. Darcy was so keen to start her 'secret-garden adventure', as she had privately named it, that she was determined not to be put off by the prospect of it being a little damp underfoot. Whilst she had said to Gabriel that she was excited at the prospect of unearthing the old walled garden, she hadn't added that she'd had a fascination with walled gardens ever since her first childhood reading of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and she'd dearly wanted to design her own version of that space after she had read the pages describing that fictional but famously derelict, garden - unloved and untended- lying slumbering behind its tall, ivy-clad walls. That book had been part of the inspiration for her desire to train as a landscape architect but ...she had been subsequently disappointed to discover that secret gardens were not generally included in the lexicon of modern landscape design careers and she had long ago put the idea of ever having

the opportunity to create her own secret garden on the shelf of *projects that would never fly*.

As Darcy walked along she sighed happily, thinking, this whole project was already something of a dream-come-true, but the addition of a walled garden just put the icing and several candles on the cake.

On a more prosaic level, she had come well-prepared to map out and measure up the space. She'd tucked a fifty metre measuring tape she'd bought from a bricolage on the outskirts of Bourg-Montfort after the school drop-off, into one of the deep pockets of her coat. Her digital camera was in the other and she had a clipboard with paper and a pencil tucked under one arm for jotting notes.

Walking in the shadow of the north aspect of the chateau, Darcy was glad to get back into the sunshine beyond the tall building. Feeling as if she was diving into the unknown, she stepped off the gravel and began striding through long wet grass that quickly soaked her jeans above the tops of her poppy-decorated wellies. Heading in the general direction Gabriel had described, she was hoping to arrive at the gap in the brick wall that was the current main entrance to the walled-garden-stroke-hay-pasture ...preferably without falling down the well he had warned her was lurking somewhere hereabouts.

She successfully missed an encounter with the well shaft to make it across the expanse of grass -now stopped by a solid bank of shrubbery that now blocked her way. Searching for a route through the greenery, she found a narrow path among the dense growth marked by recently broken branches, presumably the work of Gabriel on his last foray. The thicket of shrubs ended abruptly at the western garden wall. Reaching well above her head-height was the first of the three complete brick walls Gabriel had said there were. Since part of her mission this morning was to check on the state of the walls, Darcy took note of the brickwork. The bricks and mortar on this one looked sound and Darcy was pleased to see that it had been constructed of the same rose-coloured bricks as the chateau-proper.

She searched along the wall until she found an opening, -wider than she had expected- and set roughly half way along its length. Whilst the romantic in her would have preferred to discover a narrow, weathered timber door (locked and to which, of course, she held the only key) set into the high wall, pragmatically, this was a little more useful as entries went as it would admit a small vehicle. Darcy pushed her way through the gateless gap to find the unmown hay pasture of Gabriel's more prosaic rhetoric. Recalling her last conversation with him and what he had said about the gardener's cottage she turned her gaze towards the north-west corner of the space ...to fall instantly and profoundly in love with a daintily-feminine, terracotta-tile roofed, red-brick, plaster and timber-filigree cottage that was slumbering like a sleeping princess in a fairy tale, its rear wall against a

backdrop of untidy hedges and tall trees. Granted, its beautiful proportions were partly obscured, -camouflaged with untamed shrubbery and engulfed in so much rampantly growing ivy that it instantly reminded her of *'Ivy Cottage'*, a favourite bedtime book of Connor's when he'd been little. This might have been an apt name for the little cottage, she thought if they were in a children's picture-book or fairy tale, but this was *not* a fairy-tale and the ivy would have to go. Darcy knew quite well that ivy and timber cladding was not a match made in either gardening or building heaven. The cottage's ivy blanket might have already pitted and split the timber cladding, allowing water to seep in, which inevitably resulted in irreparable rot. If this was the case, she hoped the damage was minimal.

Darcy waded her way through the long grass and weeds, keen to take a closer look, forgetting in her haste Gabriel's warning about the broken glass, until she was swiftly reminded by stepping on a shard that pierced all the way through her boot. Alerted by the prickle of something sharp against her sole and thinking she might have picked up a thorn in her sock she awkwardly balanced on one foot as she held herself upright by holding on to the corner of cottage's front wall. She extracted her foot from the boot, wobbling a little but determined not to put her stockinged foot onto the wet ground. It was only when she'd found nothing in her sock and set the clipboard on a window sill to pick up the boot, shaking it and examining the sole that she discovered the long glass shard that had impaled itself in the rubber sole. Good thing she hadn't put her full weight on it ...Urgh, she didn't want to imagine what the consequences would have been. Darcy carefully pulled the glass out of the sole and left the wickedly sharp shard sitting on the window sill next to the clipboard. She was more mindful where she put her feet afterwards. If it detracted from the little cottage's fairy tale character, the shard was also a reminder that most fairy tales had thorns or their nasty equivalents *somewhere* in the story. Now, belatedly, Darcy noted the smashed front windows that she had missed at her first delighted perusal of the cottage.

She stepped back a few paces to take stock of the sight, -away from the shattered glass and bits and pieces of rubbish that she could see had been thrown near the entrance doors. Unless there was another door round the back from what she could see there was only one way in. And she really wanted to look inside. At even a cursory glance, it was obvious that the cottage wasn't locked ... quite the opposite in fact, one of the double half-glazed doors was ajar ... practically an invitation to explore, Darcy reasoned. She approached the door, her hand outstretched, ...quite unaware of how much she resembled a red-haired Goldilocks, she walked forward, ducking under the errant boughs of an out-of-control wisteria to push the door a little wider open and venture inside.

The interior was simple but had definite potential, she quickly decided.

Granted, the two main downstairs rooms were a bit nasty ...empty drink cans and rubbish were strewn across the floor, but no beer cans, as she might have expected elsewhere ... she half-heartedly wondered if French teenagers didn't feel the need to drink alcohol on the sly since it was so freely available around the dinner table? ..and, if she'd been able to translate them, the graffitied walls of the dark and dank living room that opened off the larger kitchen would have dramatically expanded Darcy's limited vocabulary of French slang and cuss words ...though a fair number of the messages were more of the "Jean-Paul loves Marie-Claire" variety with a scattering of exceedingly amateurishly drawn spray-painted images, tags and lines of what might have been poetry or smutty limericks. It didn't really matter -Darcy couldn't read most of it anyway.

The air was musty and she wrinkled her nose in disgust, placing a hand over her mouth and nose to block the smell. If the sagging bed in the corner of the room was any indication, it looked as if the place had been reduced to having become something of a young-lovers make-out base or a shelter for homeless vagrants. As her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she saw that the lack of light was because, for some reason she could not fathom, the windows to the side and rear of the room had been bricked up and plastered over, leaving only the front windows with their broken panes and ivy curtains for light. Fortunately for future inhabitants, the lintels, decorative brickwork jambs and stone sills of the infilled windows hadn't been touched which would make for a fairly easy reinstallation of sashes and frames once the debris was cleared. With its windows reinstated the room would be quite lovely -in her mind's eye Darcy could imagine views out to her wonderful new garden.

She returned to the larger farmhouse kitchen. A peek through a doorway into a tiny lean-to addition at the back that was the toilet and next to it a basic bathroom of sorts left Darcy unimpressed within the existing sanitation facilities. She was not inclined to venture any further into either room.

Instead, she traversed the tiled floor of the large farmhouse-style kitchen; the only real indication of its intended function being a deep porcelain butler's sink in one green mildew-coated corner, to climb a set of rickety narrow stairs set in the far corner. She really wanted a peep at the upper rooms. Gaping rotten holes surrounded by split and shattered timbers in the centres of the lower treads had her tiptoeing close to the wall in the hope the wooden steps might be better supported near their edges. Happily, she made it past the worst of the rot without falling through. Upstairs, the rooms mirrored those of the ground floor -although, like the chateau this small cottage appeared symmetrical on its outside, on the inside it was a quite different story. The stairs led to one larger bedroom which was situated over the kitchen, with a full-height dormer extending a little

from the front walls and half-glazed double ‘French’ doors set directly over the front door. By necessity the doors opened inwards because there was no balcony, instead three horizontal bars outside acting as a kind of safety railing. Darcy tugged the doors open and stood for a moment staring out, imagining the view to her restored and planted garden. As she watched, a soft breeze wafted over the uncut grasses of the field below, causing a sort of Mexican wave across the expanse of green before blowing in the open doors. She breathed in the freshly moist morning air, watching a flight of starlings swooping over the meadow and feeling as if she couldn’t wait to get started on transforming the space into the verdant garden of her imagination.

For now, she closed the doors and turned to the final room. This was smaller than the first and built directly over the footprint of the living room below. It was almost a sort of annex from the larger room, accessed by more glazed doors and dropping a single step down to the floor, which gave a little more headroom under the low ceilings. If necessary, Darcy saw, this could be an independent room from the larger as there was also a narrow door from the miniscule hall at the head of the stairs.

Even with the accumulated dirt, damp and detritus that had drifted in through a broken window pane the rooms were lovely. The spaces were intimate without being cramped though the ceilings were rather low in places. The dormers to the north and south provided some much needed head space as the ceilings followed the lines of the pitched roof. Darcy noted patches of damp on the floor that indicated that the tiled roof needed repairing in places but she was pleased to see that the walls up here were graffiti free.

Down the stairs, outside again and mindful of the broken glass, Darcy walked around the eastern end of the small building. The blocked up windows of this side and the rear reminded her of a weekend visit to Bath with Patrick and the children where she had stolen an hour alone and joined a walking tour that had concentrated on Bath’s unique architecture. The guide had been delightful –as well as getting some good exercise, she’d learned how to recognise the three orders of columns and the cause of so many of Bath’s windows being infilled, -in retaliation to a revenue-gathering exercise dubbed the window tax- but she doubted that window tax was the reason behind these spaces being blocked. Glad that it really wouldn’t take a great deal of effort to reinstate the original windows, Darcy could easily imagine how the dull, damp and dim living room and the narrow stairwell would be transformed with all that additional light.

She had already begun the renovations in her mind...

...Once the ivy that had grown up as far as the eaves was removed, the timbers could be stripped and repainted the same pretty peppermint green that they were now...what little paint remained on the timber eaves was

heavily weathered in a way that might be fine for distressed furniture but was death to vulnerable timbers exposed to the elements. Enough of the existing colour remained under the shelter of the wide eaves for Darcy to see that the hue worked well with both the rose-toned brick and orange tiled roof. Fortunately, it appeared that very little of the delicate filigree timbers appeared damaged by the shrouds of ivy but it wouldn't do to be sentimental about the ivy...it would have to be removed. Besides, the paint colour –which put her in mind of Fortnum and Mason's signature shade, had given her an idea for an alternative name for the cottage that would be more in keeping with the new herb garden she planned as part of the restoration.

The weeds were getting taller now and Darcy had to fight her way through tangled hemlock and nettles to get around the back...she could see a brick lean-to shed close to the rear wall that must have once housed a toilet. Given that the bathroom's small window was inset and framed by a larger stone lintel and jambs of stonework in the same sort of alternating short and long rybat formation as the chateau it shouldn't prove too difficult, she thought, to add an extension at the building's rear, exiting from the existing bathroom, to create a more usable bathroom and toilet. It would certainly look and function better than the old lean-to, of that she was sure.

There was only a smallish patch of ivy clinging to the brickwork quoins of one corner of this face of the cottage though the menacing tendrils of the climber were creeping higher, -almost up to the vertical timber cladding. Looking upwards, she noted that the fretted timber detailing around the windows and eaves of the extended dormer walls above was every bit as delicate and pretty as the rest of the outer walls. Darcy liked the idea that the cottages' designer and builder must have been the kind of people who cared about everything they created, whether it was part of the more visible sections of the building or hidden away at the rear and seldom seen. Becoming aware that her jeans were getting sodden from rain-drenched waist-high nettles she halted her musings and decided to retreat back around the front of the cottage ... the trees behind the cottage were overhanging to such an extent that the north side must see little sun. Some judicious pruning would soon fix that, she thought, walking along the south frontage towards the kitchen windows.

These and most of the western end of the cottage were also hidden by overgrown trees. A huge magnolia and Portuguese laurels effectively blocked any view of the cottage from that side and their drooping branches had deposited masses of old leaves on the tile roof and the ground. The magnolia was truly massive and would be magnificent when it flowered but would need thinned and pruned, as would the laurels -all jobs for a competent arborist.

Darcy didn't need to see anything more to be sure that this was a worthwhile restoration project that would beautifully compliment that rest of Gabriel's chateau upgrade. She hoped Gabriel felt likewise when he returned from his business-trip, because she intended on making fixing this cottage up a priority. Restored, it would be the perfect focal point to complete her walled-garden project. Beautifully-crafted small buildings like this were like jewels and as rare as hen's teeth – it put her in mind of the cottage in the middle of the garden at Sissinghurst Castle, that kind of thing couldn't be manufactured, it just had to happen ... but, unlike most National Trust properties, she'd like to see this one lived in. It would make a gorgeous little house for someone ...and she had just the person in mind for *Peppermint Cottage*. The name seemed perfectly suited to the little cottage, but she'd run it by Gabriel first to get his approval before making it official.

With this thought in mind she picked up her clipboard and pulled the tape from her pocket, skewering a twig into the soft ground to use as an anchor for the end of the tape, she began measuring the area for drawing up her new 'not-so-secret' garden.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Darcy tapped her fingers on the steering wheel as she drove, humming unselfconsciously if a tad tunelessly with the French pop song playing loudly on the car radio. Sometimes, she mused, not understanding the lyrics was an advantage, since half the stuff on commercial radio was pap anyway. She was enjoying herself immensely. And what wasn't there to enjoy? It was a sunny morning, both children were settled in school and here she was scooting along in her own little car on her way to explore old gardens in Normandy. It was the beginning of a new week and today was her first real day of 'work' ...if you could call trotting off to visit grand old gardens work ... Oh, but she did love her job!

In celebration of the day she had dressed in a pretty full-skirted daisy-print dress with a lace-trimmed cardigan, although the low-heeled primrose-toned leather pumps on her feet had been dictated more by the practical needs of garden visits than any fashion-choice. The jolly green giant had been returned to the rental company and replaced with this much superior model, chosen on the weekend from a Rouen car dealership by her and the children. Darcy squinted ...then took one hand off the steering wheel to remove a pair of sunglasses from the specially-designed holder on the dash. She perched them on her nose with a deft single-handed flip, pushing the bridge with her finger until the temple tips caught her ears. There, she thought, that dealt quite nicely with the sunshine bouncing off the road surface that had been a little too bright for her eyes.

Today, even negotiating the busy traffic around Rouen on her way to the chateaux she planned to visit hadn't fazed her unduly. The new car was a joy to handle, small enough to avoid all those big hogs on the narrow country roads and peppy enough to zip past slower cars on the motorway. It hadn't taken long for her to get out of Rouen and on the A151 to Dieppe, and now it wouldn't be far to the N27 and her first stop.

A short while later Darcy pulled into the parking area of her first stopover of the day. She set the car's handbrake then grabbed her digital camera and shoulder bag off the passenger seat before hopping out. Pulling off her glasses, she looked around at the stark grey surface of the parking area, which was really just a wider unmarked section of the drive, thinking, hmmm, it might be serviceable but it wasn't very pretty. The driveway was formed from wide grey concrete slabs that she knew had been put in place back in the last World War, when this chateau, along with the whole of Normandy, had been held under German-occupation.

Fortunately, the drive was saved from looking like an airport runway by the magnificent beech trees that lined either side. Craning her neck upwards, Darcy shaded her eyes with one hand. The tall, regularly-spaced trunks were like elegant church pillars forming a living cathedral of luminous green, with the added benefit that they were swaying gently in the light morning breeze, creating a daytime '*son et lumière*', a verdant sound and light show composed of their rustling leaves and the play of light and shadows. Wow, the majestic trees more than made up for the mediocrity of the concrete ...she loved old trees ...this morning it appeared that she loved just about everything! And since her car was the only vehicle parked in the lot, maybe she'd have the garden to herself ... Oh happy day! A morning with only herself for company was just what she craved...she even knew the French for it...*toute seule* -there, her language skills were improving already.

She consulted the guide book in her hand -written in English- she might be improving but her French wasn't *that* good yet. This garden was the beginning of today's self-guided tour, and she was here, specifically, to see this chateau's *potager arc en ciel*. Curious as the meaning, Darcy had googled the translation but it somehow sounded so much better in French than in the English, which translated as 'rainbow vege garden'...the anglicised version didn't have quite the same romantic ring as the French and definitely lost something in translation. Whatever, she thought, shrugging her shoulders, then realizing what she'd just done, laughed self-consciously at herself, glad that no one had seen her very Gallic gesture. It must be something in the water here, she thought, because she certainly had never been a shoulder-shrugger before.

Darcy strolled along the drive, enjoying the feel of the sun after the damp dullness of the previous days, complimented by the peace and quiet of a country morning only interrupted by the tuneful chirp of birds singing in the trees. She headed for the chapel doorway that was signposted as the entrance to the chateau – a wall separated the drive and the grounds beyond, making the chapel the only entrance for visitors to the chateau-proper.

Suddenly her quiet morning was rudely interrupted by an engine starting

up somewhere to her right. Slightly irritated with the intrusive noise, she looked in that direction ...to note that several hundred yards away someone on a tractor mower was beginning the massive job of trimming the long grassed allée that separated the long avenues of trees outside the wall. Shading her eyes with one hand, Darcy watched the machine working ...thinking, they'd need something similar for Chateau de Belagnac. She made a mental note to mention it to Gabriel when next she saw him. Squinting her eyes against the bright sunlight, she could just make out two men standing in the shadows under the trees adjacent to where the tractor was working ...they also seemed to be watching the tractor at work. Well, they were welcome to, she laughed lightly -she had more important things to do than stand around watching grass being mown.

She fished in her bag for her wallet to find money for the entrance fee and carried on her way to the chapel.



Three quarters of an hour later Darcy emerged from between the tall decorative wrought iron gates that opened to the potager and headed back across the lawn towards the chateau. Compared to the colourful richness of the planting inside the high walls of the garden she'd just left, the rest of the chateau grounds seemed quite austere, as if all the gardener's energies were concentrated on that one patch of ground. Of course, it *was* quite a substantial patch of ground and at least as large as the walled garden at Chateau de Belagnac would ever be, even with the extended area that she was now picturing in her head ...because seeing this garden had given her an idea (or two!) and she hoped Gabriel would agree to enlarge the space to include the ground behind the gardener's cottage.

She approached the chateau, which she now knew from her guide book, had required rebuilding on a massive scale after repeated bombing by the allies in the Second World War, having had the misfortune to have been chosen as a V1 bomb-launching site by the German occupying forces. Why anyone would want to nickname the bombs 'doodlebugs' -as the bombs had been dubbed colloquially, was beyond Darcy's understanding -to her the name sounded far too affectionate to be used for such agents of death and destruction.

Looking at the chateau as it appeared now, sitting staunchly in the wide grassed allée between its double avenues of towering European Linden and beech trees, it was impossible for Darcy to tell that it had ever been rebuilt. The building was more stolid in appearance than Belagnac, lacking her chateau's taller central tower and the turrets at either end. Darcy was immediately aware that she had used the personal pronoun for Chateau de Belagnac and was a little surprised -sure, she had always been more of a 'wherever I lay my hat, that's my home' kind of girl, but usually it took a little longer than a week for her to claim ownership. Unwilling to go down

*that* path, she pushed the thought aside and continued contemplate the chateau in front of her instead. Yes, she thought, it did have similarities to *'hers'* in that it had a raised ground floor with the basement windows peeking half above ground level, similar alternating stone rybats surrounding the first and second floor windows and matching quoined corners to the walls. If Chateaux had a definable sex, Darcy mused, this one could be male, and might make a nice consort for Belagnac ... she spent a few moments, imagining their progeny ... cute little baby chateaux dotted about the Normandy countryside ... but then that was France to a tee anyway, wasn't it? Throw a stone in this part of the country and you'd quite likely hit a chateau of one sort of another, they were so thick on the ground.

Shaking her head to dispel her silly daydream, Darcy pulled herself back to reality. She shot more photos as she meandered along the cobbled walk to one side of the chateau, before retracing her steps back to the chapel. This had been converted from its original purpose to serve as both entranceway and gift shop. But today was not a day for shopping, or for stopping too long in any one place. Darcy had places to go and gardens to see, so couldn't afford to tarry long in any one garden ...so, after saying a polite *'au revoir'* to the woman behind the counter she wandered out onto the sunlit driveway. She was in the act of framing a shot of the beech avenue and her bright red car when she noticed another vaguely-familiar black SUV parked on the far side of her vehicle. Surely not, she thought. But, as she approached and a large shaggy dog crouched in the rear passenger seats gave a welcoming bark of recognition through the part-open window, it confirmed Darcy's growing suspicion that Gabriel was somewhere nearby. Despite her outwardly peaceful demeanour, Darcy felt her pulse speed up at this realisation. She took a deep, slow breath to try and relax.

"Hey there Frodo boy, what are you doing so far from home? I thought your master was still in Paris until tomorrow at least," she made the enquiry as calmly as she was able, as she groped around in the bottom of her bag for her car keys, suddenly keen to leave the car park as soon as she was able. Hearing her voice, Frodo enthusiastically wagged his equally large hairy tail and attempted to stick his nose through the gap where the window had been left ajar. Whilst still searching for her lost keys, Darcy pushed her other hand through the narrow gap to give him a pat and was instantly rewarded with sloppy dog slobber all over her fingers. Ick, she thought, now wishing she had a travel packet of tissues in her bag to wipe her fingers.

"He's waiting for you. As were we," a quietly assured voice that was unmistakably Gabriel's spoke from directly behind her. Startled, Darcy tried to turn around, but was hampered by her wrist still stuck through the car window. Craning her neck til it hurt, she had a limited view ...but sure

enough, there he was, looking darkly dangerous in black leather boots, black jeans and a midnight blue sweater that seemed to stick to his torso like a candy wrapper to a sweet. The leather jacket that appeared to be something of a favourite was slung casually over one shoulder.

She was about to object to being crept up on, ninja-style, but held her tongue when she saw that Gabriel wasn't alone. Bertrand, whom Darcy knew from a weekend email, (compliments of Mlle PA-BA) had been newly appointed as head-gardener and jack-of-all-trades for Chateau de Belagnac, was standing a few steps behind Gabriel. The genial man smiled and raised an eyebrow at Darcy, doing nothing to hide his intrigue at the situation. He'd wondered at his new boss's instruction that they stand quietly, unseen, among the trees to the opposite side of the driveway ...but now he was beginning to comprehend the order.

Without turning back to the car window, Darcy attempted to extricate the hand that Frodo was still licking but it caught in the tight space between the glass and door frame. She tugged. "Ow." Just her luck ...it was stuck.

"Hold still," Gabriel commanded, closing his big hand on her wrist and carefully twisting her hand to release it. "See, dog drool makes a good lubricant," he joked. Then, without warning, while still holding her wrist in his grasp he bent his head to hers, "*Bonjour Darcy*," he murmured, as he used the opportunity to kiss her on both cheeks, lingering ever so slightly longer than might be considered polite but not enough to be offensive. "You are looking quite like a summer garden today. *Très jolie*." Typically, Darcy responded to his polite compliment with the beginnings of a blush, as she started to pull her wrist from his grasp. He tightened his grip sufficiently so that she couldn't pull free and he could feel her pulse beating strong and fast under his fingers. Good, he'd got a reaction. He was pleased that the previous week's absence hadn't rendered her immune to him.

"Let me go," Darcy hissed quietly. She didn't want Bertrand to hear the exchange.

"Don't be so impatient," Gabriel didn't bother to moderate his voice. Unlike Darcy he didn't care if Bertrand heard or not. He held her wrist aloft as he used his key's auto function to unlock the doors of the SUV. "I'm only finding something to wipe that goop off before it gets all over your pretty dress," he remonstrated mildly, while opening the front door and picking up a small towel that had been lying in the passenger well. But instead of handing it to her he wiped her fingers clean himself, taking his time about it. "You object to me touching you but I saw you allow Frodo to kiss your hand," he smiled knowingly, staring directly into her eyes ... "if you keep this behaviour up, a man could get jealous of his dog." At these words, Darcy blushed even more. Gabriel laughed softly. "Frodo has a bad habit of drooling over *all* of his friends, not just you, so I keep a towel for emergencies." He added, "And I have disinfectant wipes in the glove

compartment if you're afraid of catching anything nasty."

"No thank you. That's good enough." Finally, she managed to pull her hand free from his. Inexplicably, both relieved and reluctant to be free of his grip, Darcy turned away from Gabriel purposely, saying a cheery "good morning" to Bertrand, whose cheeks she kissed quite unselfconsciously.

"So what brings you here?" she asked Bertrand, whilst doing her best to ignore Gabriel, before realising that she was asking the question in English. Bertrand shrugged, smiled and looked over her shoulder at Gabriel for a translation of her query.

Gabriel spoke briefly in rapid French to Bertrand before answering Darcy himself, "We came to check out the tractor mower ..."—Ahh, she thought, as the penny dropped ...Well, that explained the two men she'd spied watching the mower at work, upon her arrival.

"I'm intending to buy an identical tractor to the one they use here and I wanted to see it in action," Gabriel continued by way of explanation. Bertrand looked on somewhat bemusedly while stroking the stubble of his chin. He might not understand every word of the conversation between these two, but the sexual chemistry in the air was something any decent Frenchman could catch on to. It made for fun viewing and was something of an added bonus to the morning's journey. It made for a juicy morsel of gossip and he was going to enjoy telling his wife when he got home.

In his explanation of the circumstances behind his and Bertrand's visit, Gabriel had omitted to mention that when he'd been told of the bright pink post-it note that Darcy had stuck to the chateau door the evening before, (this via a phone call from Bertrand), outlining her plans for the next day, he'd engineered, after a hurried phone call of his own to the head gardener of the chateau she'd said she was visiting, a legitimate if somewhat flimsy excuse for Bertrand and himself to travel to the same chateau that morning ...at a time he was sure would likely coincide with her own visit. Sort of like the wolf getting to the fair before the three little pigs, he'd thought ...or the one little pig, in this story. That it had meant an unprompted and long, bordering on all-night, session around a boardroom table and a hurried completion of his business affairs in Paris, followed by a rather speedy drive to Belagnac in the early hours of the morning, was, he thought, information that was on a need-to-know basis. And, and far as he was concerned, Darcy didn't, at this stage, need to know.

Here he was presented with the only woman he'd met in a considerable time (and he didn't like to remind himself just how long that was), that he actually *wanted* to spend time with and she was seemingly going out of her way to avoid him. In the days before he had left for Paris the preceding week, she had succeeded in frustrating him to the point where he had all but stopped sleeping. Since it was not in his nature to let things eat at him for long before searching for a remedy ...and particularly when she'd

resorted to communicating with him via luridly-coloured 'post-its' stuck to his chateau door, he'd decided it was high time to do something about the situation.



He *had* phoned mid-week from Paris in the hope that distance might have softened her rather glacial attitude towards him, but the only useful result from speaking with her was permission, upon his return, to begin archery lessons with Connor -with the proviso that all lessons must be conducted out in the open field to the south of the chateau, where she could keep an eye on her son. After this icy exchange, he'd concluded that it was his, perhaps -he now conceded in hindsight-, ill-timed kiss during their encounter in the woods and not the fact that he'd come close to shooting her with an arrow that was the cause of her reluctance to spend any time in his company.

Well, now he had put in place plans to fix it so they'd spend the rest of the day together ... whether she liked it or not. He would back off, be the perfect gentleman and give her time to get to know him. It was the best plan he could come up with on short notice. After all, if global warming could melt the poles, surely he could manage to defrost this one small iceberg.

He spoke in pleasant tones, "I got your delightfully written ...note, recounting your plans for today. So, now that we're here, you can travel with me and Frodo to tour these other gardens and perhaps expand upon your ideas of last week of what you plan for Chateau de Belagnac," he paused, nodding towards her car, "and Bertrand will drive your tiny little car back to the chateau." He gave the small red car a sideways glance, and then turned to Darcy with mock seriousness, "Because there is no way I'm going to get into that bright red baby buggy." Unable to resist needling a little, he added, "what's it going to be when it grows up, do you know?"

As he'd expected, Darcy rose, as if on cue, to the bait, stoutly defending her choice of car. She raised the hand he'd only just wiped clean in a fist, unfurling her fingers one by one and counting them off with her opposite index finger for emphasis, "It's everything I need and more," she expounded tersely, her voice clipped with affronted annoyance, "it has daytime running lights, so crazy French drivers can't help but see me, and traction control so I can avoid said crazy French drivers when they don't. It has seven air bags and a five star Euro ANCAP safety rating in case I can't avoid the aforementioned crazy French drivers, it is a four-door hatch with enough space for me and the children -and," she said glaring pointedly at him, "no one else. It drives like an automatic, has great visibility, both an MP3 and iPod connectivity ...*and* it's got six-speaker audio," she'd run out of fingers on the first hand and had moved to her other ... And, she thought but didn't say, its bright shiny new and cherry red, which is my all-

time favourite colour ... other than most shades of green that was. "And to top all that off," she'd saved the best for last, "it's a hybrid, so I'm not contributing towards polluting the atmosphere like your great behemoth of a big black dinosaur over there. She pointed a derisive finger at his SUV.

Smiling broadly at her tirade, Gabriel plucked the car keys from the hand that was waving around in front of his face. "And now Bertrand's driving it home," he said pleasantly, tossing the keys to Bertrand, who caught them neatly, before giving Darcy a small salute as he unlocked her car. "Come along *Madame*, the day's wasting and we've got places to go and gardens to see in my big black behemoth." He opened the front passenger door of the SUV with a flourish and stood to attention beside it, waiting expectantly. Wordlessly and with narrowed eyes, Darcy stalked past him and clambered in. Gabriel, the soul of politeness, closed the door like some well-trained chauffeur before walking around the back to open the rear door to fix Frodo's safety harness. After speaking briefly, in French, with Bertrand, Gabriel climbed in the driver's seat of his own vehicle and started the motor, reversing out of the parking space.

As they drove along the long tree-lined avenue away from the chateau he could see Darcy sneaking peeks in the side mirror, watching her brand-spanking new car immediately behind them being piloted by Bertrand. "You needn't fret," he placated, "Bertrand is an excellent and experienced driver, despite his being French. Your very tiny car will be quite safe and will waiting for you in the garage when you return this evening." As he spoke he glanced at the pink post-it that he'd stuck on the dashboard, "next stop, Château de Miromesnil, right?"

A long drawn-out, "*Hrrmmph*," was all the reply he received.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“So?” Gabriel questioned, as he piloted the big car up the north-bound slipway to the road to Dieppe, -having decided it was best to shatter the thickening silence before it hardened into something unbreakable.

“So ...what?” Darcy turned her head from taking a last longing look at the rear bumper of her beloved car, fast disappearing in the opposite direction.

“So what did you think of the place? Was it good? Bad? Gabriel inquired. “Did you steal lots of ideas to use in designing de Belagnac?”

“I didn’t come to *steal* ideas”, Darcy bristled, before relenting and acknowledging with a tiny smile that her statement might not be entirely truthful. “Well, maybe I did come to ...not so much *steal* as *borrow* ...a little, but that’s only part of what I was doing. It’s useful to check out other people’s work ...you know? Nothing is created in a vacuum but, equally, it doesn’t mean that I intended to slavishly copy anything I saw.” Darcy fell silent, thinking for a moment more, before marshalling her thoughts and continuing, “It’s more that I wanted to get a feel for what flourishes in this part of the country and visiting other gardens is an easy and enjoyable way of finding out what grows well and what doesn’t.” She added thoughtfully, “plus, I’d read about this potager and I just wanted to see it for myself.” Leaning forward, she pulled her camera from the bag at her feet. “I took about a hundred photos. Digital is great for this kind of thing, I’ll download them onto my computer when I get back and sort through the images later. There’s definitely stuff I saw that I can use; learn from, maybe improve upon.” She removed the batteries from the camera before returning it to her bag, “as for what I thought of it...well, hmm,” she ran her fingers through her hair as she ruminated.

Gabriel glanced across the central console at his passenger ...tiny frown lines creased her normally unwrinkled brow and she was chewing her

bottom lip ...from the time he'd spent with her he already recognized that look ...it was something she did without realizing when she was collecting her thoughts and sorting them all into order.

After a long silence, Darcy spoke, "...you asked if I thought the garden was good or bad. Well, good or bad doesn't really come into it, in my opinion. Everyone has their own idea of what makes a 'good' garden. That's such a personal thing and it's often more subjective than objective. But it did get me thinking and sparked some ideas ...the walled area at de Belagnac," she shortened the title, dropping the 'chateau' as she had heard him do, "it covers around the same area. It's a good-sized space but rather than using a hedge you can see over the top of, (similar to that she'd seen in the rainbow potager), I'd prefer to sub-divide the garden with another high wall to create more intimate spaces within the existing walls ...and then I'd also like to make it a bit bigger..." When Gabriel turned and shot her a look she plainly said "excuse me?" Darcy quickly elaborated with "yeah, that sounds contradictory even to me ...what I mean is, I like the basic proportions of our walled garden as it is"... she purposely emphasised the word '*garden*'. Since the '*garden*' was, at present, nothing more than rough grass enclosed on three sides by high brick walls with the fourth side bordered by the former gardener's cottage, untended trees and overgrown shrubs that looked as if they hadn't seen a pruning shear in fifty years, she knew that it didn't really qualify, as yet, to be called such ...but it would, most definitely, by the time she was finished with it.

'*Our*' garden, he noted ... interesting ...he quite liked the sound of that. She didn't seem aware that she'd used the possessive pronoun. What he did note as he briefly flicked a glance across at her for the second time in as many minutes was that, as he'd noticed the day at Ikea and while she had been talking with him upstairs in the chateau a week ago was that when she became passionate about something she tended to speak with her hands in a sort of fluid way that reminded him of some exotic dance... he liked the mannerism and didn't want to stop her in mid-dance, so merely nodded at her to go on.

Darcy took a deep breath, for courage, before launching into her plan, "What do you think about extending the space to four or five yards behind the rear wall of the gardener's cottage and rebuilding the fourth wall to completely enclose the garden with, maybe, a greenhouse, some cold frames for hardening off seedlings and perhaps espaliered fruit trees along the wall?" she added in a rush, before slowing to add, "It's the warmest aspect and would be great for herbs, tomatoes and other plants that like the heat." She held her breath, anxiously awaiting his reply.

"Sounds great," he replied, nodding interestedly. "Draw it up ... just a rough sketch outline of what you like should be sufficient for now, and I'll take a look at it."

Darcy sighed with relief. Knowing her revised scheme would be expensive, she'd been prepared for a refusal. She wasn't accustomed to this sort of laissez faire attitude with a budget...but she'd do her best to get used to it...fast. She had already formulated a loose plan for the extra space in her mind... The additional high south facing wall would provide both passive solar heating for the greenhouses that she wanted for tender seedlings, extended-season fruits and vegetables and vertical space to train roses and espaliered fruit trees. There'd be beds full of fragrant herbs, fruits growing for the chateau's kitchen and the cottage, once renovated, could be surrounded with swathes of pretty annuals and perennials. There would be shingle-paved paths where they were needed for winter access and mown grass for the rest to keep a softer serene green feel to the space –with some beds filled with flowers for cutting or drying for potpourri and others grown for seasonal colour. Shrubs and taller grasses for texture and built elements; perhaps a treillage walkway or an arbour covered in laburnum or wisteria for vertical interest until the trees could gain some height, and obelisks for training flowering climbers like sweetpeas or bean plants. Darcy hadn't decided upon all the details for her garden yet but it would be quite delicious to let all the ideas slush around in her brain for a time in the interim. The garden she had in mind would be timeless, a delightful hybrid of English and French design, which was one of the reasons she had included her third and last destination for the day -a garden designed by the esteemed English garden designer, Gertrude Jekyll.

Darcy sat back more comfortably in her seat, mulling over ideas and idly watching the green Normandy countryside flash by as Gabriel piloted the big SUV north to the second destination on her morning's itinerary.

Seeing that she was pre-occupied with her thoughts Gabriel wisely left her to them, more than happy that the silence between them was now a comfortable one.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Okay, here we are at garden number three ...which I happen to know has a café, so we are stopping for lunch before Frodo and I expire from thirst and hunger,” Gabriel announced this as he pulled the SUV to a stop in the lee of a mounded berm topped with trees that separated the car park from the road. He parked and they alighted, Gabriel clipping a leash on Frodo after the dog had made use of one of the tree-trunks before they walked together across the lane that separated the car park area from the garden entrance.

“Oh no,” wailed Darcy as she read the garden’s opening hours on a sign attached to the outer wall, “it’s just gone twelve midday and they’re closed for the next two hours.”

“I figured you weren’t planning your day around French opening hours and that’s why I phoned ahead after we departed Miromesnil and arranged for us to tour privately,” Gabriel sounded smug. Darcy had been aware, as she dozed lightly in the sun-warmed car, of him speaking in rapid-fire French on the hands-free mobile as he drove but she had not even attempted to follow any of the conversation, and as he had not offered an explanation of what he’d been speaking about, she had not asked.

“Don’t feel bad -it’s a common mistake that foreigners make when they visit France. There may have been changes in the cities but lunch-hour is still considered sacrosanct in smaller villages like this,” as Gabriel spoke he pushed open a white-painted door set in the stucco wall next to the sign, waving Darcy ahead into the garden. The courtly gesture was somewhat lost when Frodo, mistaking the wave-forward as being meant for him made a bound for the doorway at the same moment as Darcy. They collided, with Darcy tripping over the big shaggy animal. She would have fallen to the ground if Gabriel’s arm had not shot out and grabbed her around the waist. Once again she found herself plastered against the man in an all-too-

familiar position, chest to chest, thigh to thigh.

Darcy looked up, outwardly calm and determined to remain unaffected, “You could let go me now. Anytime you’re ready,” she was trying for a light tone to counteract the alarmingly increased speed of her pulse.

“Are you sure milady?” Gabriel cocked an eyebrow in query, “you wouldn’t prefer the relative safety of my arms to the large furry trip-hazard that is my dog?” Privately, Gabriel vowed to reward Frodo with an extra-large marrowbone when they got home for his efforts.

“I bet you put him up to that,” she narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“You give me far too much credit,” he demurred, his arm still wrapped firmly around her, “When you get to know him better you will realise that Frodo is *not* that trainable.”

Darcy could see his point. She turned slightly to eye the large black dog, now sitting calmly on the gravel drive just inside the gate and panting in the warm sun as if he’d just run a marathon.

“We’d better get him out of the heat before he melts,” she advised breathlessly, wanting to divert attention away from herself while she got her traitorous heart-rate under control.

His dog was not the only one feeling the heat, thought Gabriel. He was loath to release her but did so anyway, thinking it wise to put a little space between them before parts of his anatomy responded more than was generally acceptable in a public place. He stepped back, once again waving Darcy to step through the gate and followed her into the garden. “The café is this way,” he pointed to wide dove-blue painted barn doors to their immediate left.

“You’ve been here before?” Darcy questioned, curious how he could know that.

“Yes,” he concurred, “The house has been on the market for several years and I looked through it when I briefly considered buying the place - before de Belagnac was put on the market.”

“Wow,” gobsmacked by the prospect of someone just up and buying an Arts and Crafts treasure like this, the one word was all Darcy could manage in reply. “You certainly wouldn’t have needed me if you’d bought this place. The park and gardens are supposed to be quite beautiful.” She might not have had Gabriel’s advantage of having already seen the garden but she had researched it thoroughly via the internet. “I can’t imagine how much something like this would cost.”

“You’re right,” he agreed to both points but chose not to mention the asking price. “It is certainly quite lovely but it’s also something of a national monument and would not have suited my purpose nearly as well as de Belagnac. I was told that the house was designed by Edwin Lutyens and the garden by Gertrude Jekyll –I did some research myself and found that they were both icons of early twentieth century English design. Can you imagine

the furore, on both sides of the channel, if I changed anything? And, granted, the house would have been large enough for my requirements, but it is also full of irreplaceable features and is practically a museum so what good is that to me when I want to be able to open a house to families? I want somewhere that children can run around the place and not be too concerned if something gets broken.” He called the dog, suddenly keen to end a conversation that alluded to his wealth, as he had an idea that it was not a great selling point in his favour where this woman was concerned. “I believe they are waiting lunch for us so we shouldn’t hang around here, and Frodo is still out in the heat,” he reminded. That the dog in question was now lying prone on his back with all four legs in the air with an air of utter contentment was a moot point. Like her, he was not above using his dog as an excuse to change the subject to get them moving along. He called. Frodo reluctantly stood and shook, causing a minor dust-storm, reminding Darcy of a rug being shaken outdoors.

Still a little nonplussed that Gabriel had even been able to consider buying such an obviously expensive house, Darcy shook her own head in wonder and followed the pair inside the garden gate.



The sunlight was fading to a soft glow as Gabriel drove through the main gates of Chateau de Belagnac, as if some heavenly hand was turning down the celestial dimmer switch. Both tired and excited in equal measure by the day’s touring Darcy looked around the park as they drove into the chateau grounds, comparing it to the places she’d seen. The view in front of her had little in common with their final stop, Bois des Moutiers, or even the two previous stops. No politely refined garden rooms here, full of well-tended planting and thoughtfully placed seating bounded by walls, neatly clipped hedges and topiary, or anything that remotely resembled a finished garden of the ilk of Bois des Moutiers and definitely no tidy row-upon-row of weed-free vegetables as she’d seen in the walled potagers of Chateaux de Miromesnil and Bosmelet, but still, Darcy was more pleased to see the unpolished vistas through the trees than she could express in mere words. The trees bordering the main driveway looked absolutely splendid in the last rays of sunlight with long shadows creeping across the rough ground.

“Just let me out here. I’ll walk to the cottage,” Darcy suggested, as they approached the stable-lane turn on the drive.

“Bertrand won’t be bringing the children back before seven. There’s no rush,” Gabriel ignored her request as he drove the SUV on past the turn-off and into the shadow cast by the bulk of the chateau. He had called Bertrand earlier in the afternoon to arrange for Connor and his sister to be collected from their respective schools and given *le goûter*, a substantial afternoon snack beloved by French children that would sustain them until dinner-time. Since Bertrand and his wife lived near-by in the village, the children

could be returned at any time, but Gabriel thought to use every minute that he had available to spend time with their mother.

He switched off the motor and stretched his long arms out in front, easing tired shoulders. Darcy did her best not to ogle the muscles outlined in his upper arms by the thin knitwear. "Why don't you come in and relax for five minutes. I'll open a bottle of wine, or cider maybe, and we can have a drink, since I've been designated driver and haven't been able to drink anything stronger than coffee all day," he commented plaintively. He hadn't mentioned his early start from Paris but it had added up to a long day's driving and he was looking forward to a glass of something cool, and preferably not *sans alcool*. At Darcy's askance look across he held up a hand to forestall further protests, "I promise I won't bite. I'm just offering you a cold beverage at the end of a long day." After a leisurely lunch, they had stayed until nearly five o'clock at Bois des Moutiers, wandering the formal gardens, the park and then, at the invitation of the owners, touring inside the house. Gabriel was sure that Darcy's camera must be teetering on the brink of running out of storage capacity with the vast numbers of photos she had taken.

Darcy had noted and been thankful that Gabriel had stuck to water and coffee with lunch. She'd been a passenger in a car too many times with Patrick more than a little inebriated at the wheel to want to ever repeat that experience. She dithered, thinking 'should I, shouldn't I?' smoothing her dress over her thighs while mentally pulling the petals off one of the daisies that adorned the fabric. But before she could get to the last determining petal she undid her seatbelt, decision made ...she was thirsty after the drive home and one quick drink couldn't hurt, "Okay, you've twisted my arm," she pulled her own arm up behind her back in a self-simulated twisting motion.

"If only it were that easy," Gabriel spoke cryptically as he laughed at her performance, shaking his head while he got out to free Frodo from his safety harness. He picked up a stick from the ground and sent it spinning in a long high arc across the grass. "Go get it boy." Frodo was out of the SUV and off in an instant, bounding away through the long grass. "The new mower will be delivered next Wednesday," he commented casually across the SUV to Darcy, who had alighted from the opposite side of the vehicle, as he watched the dog returning with the stick clamped firmly between his jaws, only the top portion of his black head and back visible among the grass stems. "In the meantime Bertrand has organised a local farmer to come in and harvest this for hay," he indicated the wide grass-rich allée, "It won't transform us into a show-place overnight, but it will make it easier for Frodo to run around, that's for sure."

"Perhaps it'll turn us into a Monet haystack-painting," Darcy said happily, visualising the landscape as a richly-painted Monet masterpiece

## COLLECTING THOUGHTS

with mounds of haystacks dotted around the field, full of the nuances of light and harmonic colour so typical of the master's work.

"And perhaps not. I hate to burst your bubble but methinks you haven't seen modern hay bales. They're not the stuff of romance," he cautioned. Frodo emerged from the grass to drop the stick at his feet before it was duly thrown again. The dog shot away in pursuit.

"Oh well," she shrugged, "it was a nice picture while it lasted." The shrug-thing, she noted, was becoming a bit of a habit these days.

"Fine, let's go get that drink," Gabriel whistled for the dog as he turned towards the turret doorway.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Would Madame prefer Loire valley Sauvignon blanc or Normandy cider?” Gabriel asked, holding up a bottle in either hand. “They aren’t chilled but it’s so cool down here that they’re at about drinking temperature anyway.” They were in the sub-ground floor kitchen, which appeared to have been cleaned by the Swiss army since Darcy’s last visit. Every surface shone.

“I’ll try the local product, thanks,” Darcy replied. She was sitting at a long kitchen table that looked as if wars had been fought on and around it. Every face of the timber was scratched, worn or indented in a way that only long years of regular service to humanity could produce.

Gabriel noted her delicate tapered fingers running over the surface, as if she were reading braille, as she felt the nicks and hollows of the tabletop. “My mother rang to say she was sending me this -It arrived while I was away. She said, and I quote: ‘that I needed it as a reminder of what a real life, well-lived looked like instead of the gilded cage that I had created for myself with my global business empire.’”

“Ouch, from a mother, that’s harsh.”

“That’s somewhere along the same lines that I was thinking in response as well,” he spoke dryly, as he set two champagne flutes of effervescent amber-tinted cider on the tabletop in front of her. He placed a wooden chopping board replete with a round of brie, a long baguette and a mound of walnuts still in their shells beside the glasses before dumping a nut-cracker and knives next to them and taking the seat nearest her on the corner of the table, a position that allowed him to watch her face as they talked. “If you look just down there on the side by that leg nearest you you’ll see where I carved my initials when I was thirteen,” he remarked, “I couldn’t sit down for several days afterwards when my mother found it.”

“Ouch again.” Darcy commiserated, eying the initials CFD jaggedly etched into the upper table leg. If she thought the punishment a little severe

for the crime, she didn't say. Parenting styles differed, after all and she didn't feel she had always made the right choices when it came to discipline herself, particularly since being deserted to parent alone.

His next words echoed her unspoken thoughts. "Yes. She has been heard to say that abolishing corporal punishment was for wimps who were not solo-parenting nine children. And it certainly cured me from future vandalism. Personally, I think giving me the table might well be a tangible reminder of what she is capable of if I don't do as she says."

"I think I like the sound of your mother," Darcy said, her wide grin veering towards malicious.

"You would like her. A very fair-minded woman but not one that you ever want to cross swords with, if you know what I mean," Gabriel replied, gently touching his glass to Darcy's before taking a long swig of his own drink. "Oh, that's sublime," he hummed with evident pleasure, leaning back comfortably in his chair and closing his eyes.

Why was it, thought Darcy, her mind going off on an unplanned track, as she stared at his ridiculously long dark lashes set against flawless skin and those high prominent cheekbones, that males always got the lions-share of eyelashes? First, he had the advantage of those big dark jersey-cow eyes ...or maybe it was more jersey-bull? *And* he got mile-long lashes to go with them. No fair. And why was she sitting here thinking about his eyes when she shouldn't be? She felt at a loss for something to say and searched around in her mind for a conversation-starter to take her mind off his facial features or any other of his physical attributes she might fancy. Rummaging around, she hit upon a topic that was safe, although even she knew it bordered on staid. After taking a healthy swig of her own drink she cleared her throat. "You haven't given me a clear figure for a budget for the landscape work yet. Do you have an amount in mind?" She didn't want to over-design only to be told at some future date that she'd exceeded the budget.

"Nope. Work is over for the day so we can't discuss business. I'm taking my mother's words to heart. We'll have to talk about something else," he opened his eyes and looked directly at her, "How about you, for example."

"Me?" try as she might; it was hard to look away from his gaze.

"Hmmm, it occurs to me that you know considerably more about me than I do you, so now's a good time to remedy that."

"There's not much to tell," and she was wary of sharing. She drank again, finishing half the glass in one long draught. The bubbles tickled as they ran down her throat. "You already know that I'm from a big," she caught his disparaging look, "biggish family," she corrected, resisting the urge to burp from drinking too quickly, "I grew up like any other good ol' southern gal ...graduated high school, left home, college, post-grad., pregnant, married, had babies, got ditched. Same old, same old." She hoped

that her casual manner had masked the pain she felt.

"Tell me about the ditcher then," he wondered just how 'ex' the ex was? "What was he like? Does he deserve retribution? Should we send my mother after him?" He cut a generous segment of creamy cheese and spread it on a piece of torn-off bread, handing it across to her. From the way she was drinking, he surmised that she was unaware of the alcohol content of Normandy cider. If she continued consuming it as if it were apple juice the effects might be interesting before long.

"As much as I'd love that, I think not," Darcy replied bitterly, accepting the food. The ripe cheese tasted of buttery mushrooms and the bread, bought fresh from a boulangerie in Varengeville sur Mer, the village in which Bois des Moutiers was located, had a perfectly crunchy crust and was still whisper-soft white inside. The combination was simply delicious. "Hmm –nomnom, that's so good," she spoke around the mouthful, her voice slightly muffled, "He's skipped the country to go and live in sunny Brazil with his baby-mama, or at least I think he has –I haven't heard from him in weeks," she didn't add that he'd stopped support payments for the children around the same time. Without her savings they'd have all been up a certain creek without a paddle. At least she was well-paid now that she had started work again. She swilled another large mouthful of her drink and swallowed, burping genteelly behind her closed fist.

"Your Patrick was a bit of a skunk really, wasn't he?" Gabriel observed quietly, reaching behind himself to snag the half-full bottle of cider off the bench. He placed it within Darcy's easy reach. While he was not aiming at taking advantage of her, the drink did seem to have the added benefit of loosening her tongue and he wanted her to continue talking.

"Ah, not a description I'd have thought of," Darcy countered, "I might have gone more for slimy slug if I was thinking of a comparison with the animal kingdom ...but smelly skunk is fairly apt. He did turn out to be a stinker," she agreed, finishing the glass of cider and refilling it from the bottle. "Is it getting warm in here?" she asked, as she shrugged out of her cardigan and dumped it on the table.

"Just how big a stinker was he?" Gabriel enquired. "Do I detect a note of bitterness in your tone that suggests something deeper than mere sexual betrayal?"

"Since when did sexual betrayal become merely '*mere*'?" Darcy snapped indignantly, starting on the second glass. "I must have missed that memo." Gabriel merely raised an eyebrow and passed her a handful of walnuts he'd been cracking open with the nutcracker as they talked. She popped one in her mouth. Fresh nuts were so much better than those bitter old pre-packaged things she'd been buying if she were still in London, she thought, tasting the sweet flesh. As she crunched another nut it occurred to her, was she becoming like one of those bitter old nuts she so disliked that it was

now so easily evident to others? She'd thought she had her anger well enough under control that it didn't show, but she wasn't feeling so sure now.

"It wasn't the first time he'd cheated on me," she admitted, her words ever so slightly slurred, "and it wasn't even the second," and those were just the previous two that she'd known about –Patrick had been good about leaving hints that way ...he liked her to know that she wasn't enough for him. She had briefly gone back home to her mother with the children after the second affair, hoping for moral support. What was it her mother had said once she knew why her daughter had left her husband? "If it's good enough for Hilary Clinton to stand by her man after he cheated more than once, it's good enough for too you, my girl. Get your sorry ass back to London." Yeah –really supportive on the family-front.

"Anything else?" Gabriel felt he was becoming something of a father-confessor, but figured it would do Darcy no harm to get things off her chest. He passed a glance at said chest –Darcy might be feeling over-warm from the alcohol but the cool temperature in the kitchen was having an interesting effect on her nipples through the thin fabric of her dress. He supposed he *should* advise her to slow down with the cider but, given that the priestly role didn't sit particularly well on his shoulders, he was loath to either do that or go and turn the heating on, ...not just yet, anyway. Perhaps in a while? She needed to talk. It was justification enough for him to sit still and listen.

The cider must be going to her head, thought Darcy a little muzzily, she felt slightly out-of-touch with her body; otherwise she'd never have shared either the previous admissions or what she said next, "He hit me." She announced baldly, "Patrick hit me, and I let him away with it." It had started after they been married a few years and hadn't happened often, maybe only once or twice a year when her husband got completely wasted at his office Christmas party or some shindig with his old mates then picked a fight with her as an excuse to lash out. He was never particularly sorry afterwards and she'd always just let it go for the sake of the children. She had kidded herself that she wasn't an abused wife because it didn't happen every second weekend. "I wasn't completely stupid," she added defensively, "I did take photos of the bruises when he hurt me and they're all time-stamped –not that it's much proof really, this far on," she concluded miserably.

"Ah, so that's it," ...the alcohol had done its work. Gabriel reached across and plucked the glass from her slack fingers, getting up to pour the last of the cider down the sink before refilling the glass with cold water. He returned the flute to her hands and sat down again.

Darcy played with the glass, turning it this way and that but not drinking the clear liquid, "I guess I'm just not much good at picking men," she said

gloomily.

"I'd say there's some room for improvement," Gabriel agreed, nodding sagely. "But there's still time," he smiled roguishly as he spoke, knowing it would irritate her out of her funk, "French men like older women,"

"I'm not old! I'm only thirty-one." Darcy yelped as she threw a walnut at him. He batted it away easily. "You're lucky that wasn't still in the shell," she warned.

"So scared, so very scared," he taunted, handing her several more newly-shelled nuts as replacements. "You need to eat some more to help soak up that alcohol that you've just poured down your throat as if it was soft drink." He spread Brie on another segment of baguette. "I've never seen anyone get drunk so fast on cider. French children can drink more than that - talk about fastest drunk in the west,"

"I'm not drunk," Darcy objected muzzily, the words slurring in negation of her statement. "Well, maybe a teensy little bit," she held up her thumb and forefinger half an inch apart, "Bout this much,"

Gabriel held his hands aloft, stretched wide either side of his body, "bout that much, more likely."

"I don't usually drink ...not at all," Darcy announced in a sing-song voice.

"Oh, *C'est chouette!* Great! *Now* you tell me," he rose to his feet. "Drink that water and I'll make some coffee. Let's hope you sober up as fast as you get drunk ...and as you're not in any state to do it yourself, how about I cook dinner?" he suggested, before adding, "I'll call Bertrand and tell him to deliver the children here rather than to the stable cottage." Taking her silence for consent, Gabriel had his phone out and was making the call before Darcy could respond in the negative.



Forty minutes later Gabriel was chopping cucumbers and putting the finishing touches to a fresh green salad that he'd made to go with pasta and sauce. Darcy had offered to help but had been instructed to sit and watch, as he hadn't trusted her to wield a knife in her current condition. She had drunk two glasses of water, a cup and a half of strong coffee and finished off the last piece of the baguette while he cooked at the enormous stove, and was feeling more in control of her senses than before. The room was now comfortably warm as Gabriel had gone down the hall to switch the heating on after a last lingering look in the direction of her chest.

Frodo barked. Darcy heard the outer door slam and feet tromping loudly on the stone stairs that led down to the sub-ground floor. The door to the kitchen burst open, "Hey Mom! We had Croque Monsieur!" the children chorused happily by way of greeting. "We've got the recipe so we can show you how to make it for us again," they smiled helpfully.

Darcy smiled back, wondering how difficult this recipe would be to

make.

“French ham-and-cheese-on-toast,” explained Gabriel, speaking over the *mêlée* of dog and children, “not so very hard. Now, shall we eat?”



“I have an idea,” Gabriel announced over dinner, as he refilled Darcy’s water glass. “The workmen tell me that they’ll be using jackhammers in the chateau on Friday and I do not want to be here for that so how about we all take the day off and head for Disneyland Paris?”

“But what about the children’s schools?” asked Darcy, “I thought that French schools took a very dim view of parents taking their children out for anything less than Armageddon?”

“Leave that to me,” advised Gabriel, “I’ll sort it. There’s too much bureaucracy in France these days anyway –we’re drowning in it. Perhaps it’s time for another revolution. I know children, we could start one. After-all, freedom, *La Liberté* was supposed to be part of what we were fighting for. I say freedom from school on Friday! *Vive la revolution!*” he raised his fork above his head. Connor and Rosie were quick to follow his example, shouting “*Vive la Revolution!*” with childish enthusiasm although they had no idea what the words meant. Frodo joined the fray, barking loudly and jumping around the group at the table. Darcy covered her ears.

“Sterling idea,” their mother spoke in withering tones to Gabriel as the din abated, “I thought you said you spent time with your nieces and nephews. You should know better than to incite the population to revolution. Considering that the last began with people starving and ended with the guillotine,” she refrained from mentioning beheadings outright in front of the children. “We are hardly starving here,” she said pointedly, indicating all the left-over food on the table.

“Ah, but you are wrong Madame, we are starving ...for fun, not food, and it’s time we all had some. Fun, that is. As for the coming revolution ...we’ll change a few of the details this time around,” he insisted, “but the principle is still the same; Freedom from authority.” The last was announced in stentorian tones which had the children and dog dancing excitedly round the table once more.

“Sound more like anarchy than freedom to me,” she called over the ruckus before shushing her children. The dog was beyond her control and continued barking.

“Ah well, perhaps a little of both,” he said loudly over Frodo’s yapping. “We French are only ever a heartbeat away from anarchy anyway. Doesn’t take much to push us over.” He flicked his fingers in a negligent gesture, then noting her less than impressed gaze he put a finger to his lips and called Frodo to sit at his feet. The dog obeyed instantly.

“Awfully compliant for an untrainable anarchist,” Darcy couldn’t resist teasing.

"If only I could get you to comply to my wishes so easily," he countered softly, getting the last word in.

"Time we went home, Connor, Rosie," Darcy felt a sudden urgency to leave the suddenly over-warm kitchen. "Grab your things. We have school tomorrow."

"But not on Friday!" the pair chorused together.

"No, not on Friday," Darcy sighed, giving in. "Now say 'Thank you' to Gabriel for dinner and let's go."

"Thank *you* for an enjoyable and informative day," Gabriel returned. Darcy had spent much of her time throughout the day with him discussing the pros and cons of each of the gardens they had visited and fleshing out her ideas for de Belagnac. If it hadn't been quite the conversation that Gabriel would have preferred, it was, at least, conversation. Progress had been made towards his end goal. He was satisfied that the early morning start had been worthwhile. Now his bed was calling.

After his offer to walk them to their door was politely declined, he said goodnight to the trio at the turret door, reminding Connor that they had their first archery lesson in the morning as the boy had a later start for school. Then, yawning hugely, he called Frodo and turned back down the stairs and along the lower hallway to what he had dubbed his 'dragon's den' -partly in an homage to Connor's bat cave -the almost windowless room he intended to inhabit for the duration of the renovation and landscape improvements was perhaps more spacious than Connor's but equally dim. It was furnished with little more than two beds, one human, one dog and a small wardrobe -not exactly the Ritz, but it would suffice for the interim. His elegant well-appointed Paris apartment was too far distant to commute on a daily basis and he wanted to be around for the buildings works, and, he was happy to admit to himself but to no one else, to continue his pursuit of the lovely Darcy.



Blissfully unaware of the level of organisation that was being put into her chase, Darcy strolled along happily in the moonlit night with her children skipping alongside. Walking past a huge old oak that grew alongside the lane they were astounded to see a tawny owl drop silently from a thick branch to snatch up a mouse in its sharp claws, extending its mottled buff-coloured wings over the unfortunate creature to prevent its escape before delivering a killing blow and returning to a dark hole high up in the tree's trunk to consume its supper. Darcy was interested to see that neither of the children found this sight abhorrent, seemingly to accept nature for what it was as they quietly observed the spectacle before moving on.

Bertrand had left a post-it note, -one of her own judging by the bright pink colour- stuck to the outside of the cottage door informing her that the

## COLLECTING THOUGHTS

kitten had been fed and his litter box cleaned, as per Gabriel's instructions. Darcy, who had completely forgotten Napoleon's evening feed-time, was thankful that someone else had remembered. Guiltily, she thought her lack of memory might have had its source in a certain bottle of Normandy cider.

She unlocked the door, prepared to make much of the kitten in reparation for her sins but as Napoleon was sound asleep on her bed, she decided instead that leaving him there and contorting her body around his little form, lying smack in the centre of her bed, was penance enough. She woke at around two in the morning to a kitten purring loudly in her ear but a gentle shove put him at a better distance from her hearing and they both dropped back to sleep.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Darcy was making a list:

One small daughter safely deposited at school. Tick.

One kitten, sunning itself on the windowsill of the open window where she could keep half an eye on it to make sure it didn't wander. Tick.

One large blank piece of paper on the table in front of her awaiting her roughed-out concept for the park. Pens, pencils, assorted drawing paraphernalia and fresh cup of coffee sitting alongside. Tick.

And lastly, one son out in the centre of the field having his inaugural archery lesson where she could also keep an eye on him –if she looked up she could see his tousled blond head nodding vigorously in response to Gabriel's instructions- though what good that would do if anything were to go wrong was more than Darcy could work out this fine morning. Hrmpf. Big fat cross.

She sighed deeply. It was a little difficult to concentrate on her design concept for the park when those two were out there playing around with sharp pointy things but she supposed she had to let it go. She had work to do.

She sighed once more, pulling the paper closer and grabbing a black felt tip pen from a mug full of black and coloured pantones sitting on the table beside her. This design work required her undivided attention. It was easy enough to keep an eye on the kitten to make sure it stayed nearby but she couldn't keep looking up to check on progress out in the pasture. So for the next hour and a half she kept her head down, mostly –she couldn't resist the odd nervous glance- transferring her ideas from her head to paper in rapidly drawn plans and sketches. Deep in concentration, she was just finishing a quick perspective sketch of the walled garden, looking from the central pergola towards the gardener's cottage when a shadow fell over the paper. It was Gabriel, with Connor looking remarkably unscathed and,

what's more, more than just a little pleased with himself, standing at his side. She'd been so engrossed she hadn't heard their approach.

"I got a bullseye!" Connor announced jubilantly. "And Mom, we stowed all the archery gear in the stable tack room and Gabriel's padlocked the door, 'cos he said you'd worry unnecessarily otherwise," he added helpfully.

"Yes, we did. And he's a natural," this from Gabriel, smiling, patting Connor's shoulder in congratulation. And, Darcy noted, looking rather smugly self-satisfied as well.

"Must be all that practice shooting things on his video games," his mother replied dryly. She knew from Gabriel's comments that he thought Connor's video games a waste of time. As far as Darcy was concerned, they were a useful parenting tool but when she'd shared this with him, Gabriel had been unimpressed.

Gabriel scooped up Napoleon from the window ledge to give him a scratch under his chin. Other than raising one eyebrow disdainfully, he didn't comment, preferring to converse with the kitten. "Hey little fellow, I see you're making a start at venturing out into the wide wide world. We'll make a barn cat out of you yet." Napoleon, the little turncoat, Darcy thought grumpily, was purring his heart out at the attention.

"Hmpf," she interjected, "I don't see Napoleon *ever* sleeping in barns. I woke this morning to him curled up on the spare pillow next to me. He spent all night on my bed."

"Well, aren't you one lucky fellow?" Gabriel drawled laconically to the kitten. Feeling a short stab of envy for the feline he bent to set the kitten on the path outside, with instructions to Connor to watch it didn't wander too far, before leaning over the sill to inspect Darcy's work, and Darcy herself. His appreciative eye noted the close-fitting black yoga-style pants she wore with the wisply-thin UT tee-shirt she'd worn the day he'd first seen her at the vets -he had fond memories of that same shirt wetly plastered to her body after her tussle with the kitten. That her morning had been productive was self-evident from the numerous sheets of drawings spread around the floor. "I like your drawings," he commented, surveying the just-completed sketch lying on the table in front of her and several more strewn on the floor. "Have you ever thought about exhibiting your work?"

"Nah, I went to art school before I studied landscape but it wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. The sketches are only a means to an end. I prefer to see my drawings translated into three-dimensions."

"Meaning you like to build stuff?"

"Yeah -and plant things," she shook her head. "I can't plant up a drawing."

"Still, they're very good," he reiterated.

"Thanks." He noted that she could handle compliments about her work without blushing -interesting- unlike whenever he complimented her

person. “Unless the drawings are constructed they’re just a pretty picture,” she spoke pragmatically. “I’ve got a few more I’d like to do then if you could look them over and give them the okay, or not, I’m going to work these up on CAD. After I do that these drawings will be useless. I usually end up throwing them away.”

“Please don’t do that,” he entreated, “I’d like to frame some as a record of the renovations.” He could see these sketches adorning the halls of the chateau as a permanent reminder of the works.

“Okay,” Darcy shrugged, “I guess they’re yours anyway. You’re paying for them.” She looked down at her watch, a bright green and silver Esprit model with a large face that she could read easily at a glance. “I’d better get Connor to school,” she raised her voice to get her son’s attention, “Sweetheart, grab your bag and we’ll go.” The bag was sitting at the door ready.

“How about I take him and let you carry on with this?” he suggested, sweeping a hand to indicate the paper-strewn tabletop. “We’ll take the kitten so you aren’t disturbed and if you’re ready by the time I get back perhaps I could look over the drawings you’ve completed.”

“Gee, thanks. Much appreciated.” Darcy said a brief goodbye to Connor, picked up her pen and a fresh sheet of paper and had begun the next drawing before they had gone ten steps.



The final sketches were sitting on the top of a now-neat pile of completed drawings on the tabletop and Gabriel hadn’t returned so Darcy made another coffee and flicked her computer on to check her emails and Facebook messages. She logged in to Facebook first and smiled when she saw there were several new messages and photos from her closest friend, Halley.

Halley was a third generation Brit of Chinese-Afro-Jamaican descent who Darcy thought had been blessed with all of the best attributes of her varied ethnicities, with the possible exception of, -as Halley bemoaned loudly and often- her hair. She and Darcy had met rather ignominiously one evening in the ladies powder room of a pub while both were at the mirror attempting to tame their unruly locks –neither had much success with their hair that night but a bond was made that had now outlasted both a husband and a partner.

Halley had been left by hers when pregnant with her daughter Alicia, who had celebrated her second birthday on the weekend. Darcy had been sad to miss the party but had sent a gift and been in touch regularly since leaving London. She’d been looking forward to reading the after-match commentary and was not disappointed with Halley’s amusingly detailed play-by-play review of events. Darcy missed Alicia’s sweet cherubic angel-face and was glad to see an album of photos of her and her little friends

having an obviously fun time at her party. The final photo of a partied-out little girl asleep on a big floor cushion, surrounded by discarded boxes and wrapping paper was enough to make Darcy feel tearful with yearning to see them both.

Sipping the hot coffee, she opened a second tab to check her email account and got a nasty shock that caused her to jerk her hand in alarm, spilling hot liquid down the front of her tee. With the near-boiling liquid burning her chest, she was torn between running to the bathroom to tear off the shirt and reading the rest of the vitriolic rant that was an email sent from her ex. The need for a cool compress won and she ran for the bathroom, thinking as she went that she should have changed her email account when she'd left London –it was an oversight that she hoped would not come back to bite her any worse than the diatribe that she'd just begun reading. She dragged the offending shirt over her head. Running cold water over the tee she held it to the scorched skin just above her bra. The cooling effect was bliss but now there were rivulets of cold water running down her tummy onto the band of her pants. Keeping the wet tee in place, Darcy grabbed a hand towel and held it against her stomach to catch the drips as she strolled back into the living room through the kitchen, thinking that she would shut down the email account as soon as she had scanned the rest of his hate-filled missive for anything of importance, before creating a new account.

She had read the whole ugly tirade, full of threats and invective, through twice and was heading back to the bathroom to change the no-longer cold compress when Gabriel opened the outside door and poked his head around the jamb. He was holding a small paper-wrapped package in one hand and Napoleon was sitting quite comfortably on his wide shoulder. Darcy froze on the spot, looking to him like a child caught playing a game of statues. ...Not again, she thought. What a day this was turning out to be –and it had started so well.

He stared. Now, that was more like he'd remembered that tee-shirt, only better, since the wet, clinging fabric was in her hand rather than on her body, was Gabriel's happy thought. Unable to drag his eyes away from the sight, he moved towards her. He had made it as far as the kitchen door when she unfroze.

"Stay right there and don't say a single word," Darcy held up a hand to forestall any comments as she hot-footed it into the sanctuary of her tiny bathroom. She emerged moments later wrapped in a voluminous bath sheet. As per instructions, he stood rooted to the spot, looking like some latter-day pirate who had swapped his customary parrot for a cat, as he silently watched her stride the two steps across the hall before disappearing once more into her bedroom where she shut the door firmly. When she did not return straight away he took the kitten down from its lofty perch and

walked into the living room, depositing the package on the table and Napoleon on the chair next to Darcy's computer.

The kitten immediately jumped up onto the desk and began to batt at the keyboard. Seeing the screen was in active mode Gabriel leant down to stop Napoleon's game in case it ruined a document Darcy had been working on. He glanced at the screen intending to simply check nothing had been affected but the words that sprang out at him had him sitting and reading the screen-full of correspondence. He read it only once through. He hadn't needed a re-read to get the drift of the document.

Darcy came back into the room, dry and with a fresh shirt and sweats to find him seated in her office chair frowning angrily at her computer. As she walked through the door he swivelled to face her.

"He doesn't sign it Patrick *le Pew* but I assume this is the work of the stinky skunk?" he queried in a quiet tone, indicating the screen.

"Yes it is," she smiled thinly at his paltry attempt at humour but he could see from her expression that she was worried. She was gnawing her lower lip so hard he thought she'd draw blood if she didn't stop.

"He says he's," Gabriel paused, "let me paraphrase this without all the additional adjectives and threats –both implied and direct," he pondered for a moment, "extremely unhappy that you've left London with his children and he wants to know where you are so that he can collect them to take them to live in sunny Brazil."

"He doesn't want the children -he just wants to hurt me some more and he knows that's the best way of doing it." Darcy slumped onto the sofa as she spoke, picking up the kitten and cuddling him to her in a way that suggested she would protect her children, no matter what. Napoleon tolerated the close confines of being clutched in her hands for a moment then struggled to be free so she released him. He jumped down on the floor and began licking at a paw.

"On the contrary, from the threatening language in that email, I'd say he's very focused on hurting you in a far more physical and direct way," He'd read something in paragraph three about taking a knife to her in a way that was both disfiguring and permanent. "Would you allow me to take a copy of this and alert the gendarmerie and police, here and in London? I would say that you need a restraining order taken out on him at the very least."

"I don't know," she replied uncertainly. "That all sounds pretty serious." She needed time to think first, before she did something so irrevocable. "He's never threatened me outright like this before. It could be all just words written in a drunken rage." Patrick had tended to become more voluble and verbally abusive when he drank. It had been one of the reasons she seldom touched alcohol. His threats had never been as vehement as this though, she acknowledged with a chill creeping down her spine.

"Do you have a spare USB?" Darcy mutely pointed to a drawer in the desk, "On second thoughts, I'll just forward it to my own email address." He did so before she had time to object. "There, done. Now, shall we delete this account so he can't send you anymore of this vitriol?"

"That's what I was about to do before you barged in and read my private correspondence," she wanted to be angry at someone and he was the handiest target.

Seeing the attack for what it was Gabriel didn't take umbrage. "My apologies but you were the one who told me the butler was no longer in residence and to let myself in, so I did," he parried in mild self-defence. "As for reading the email, that was Napoleon's fault so take it out on him, not me. I never set out to poke into your private life, but having read that, I'm thankful that I did. You shouldn't have to face this creep alone, you know." He tapped a finger on the computer screen, "Does he know where you are? Is there any chance he could find you?" he asked.

Darcy tried to feel thankful for his support but the knot of fear growing in her stomach was getting tighter and tighter as she went through a mental list of who she'd told about the move to France. She trusted her closest friends, like Halley, not to let anything slip should Patrick question her but there was one weak link in particular that she didn't trust at all. She wished now, that she hadn't let her mother know their new address and the location of the chateau. She jumped to her feet and started pacing the room.

"Possibly. Maybe. I don't know," perhaps her mother might, for once, be on her side rather than Patrick's, but Darcy doubted it.

"Well, for now, this cottage is like a little fortress when the shutters are closed so you should be safe enough at night. I'll get Bertrand to add a new deadlock to the door today and I'll notify the police," he reached out and took her in his arms as she passed by, hoping to comfort her fears. As an indicator of how upset she was, she didn't protest being held.

"Hey, I bought mille feuille." He indicated the package on the table, "One for each of us this time," he smiled down at her strained features, "So perhaps, in the meantime, we shall be like Marie Antoinette and eat cake in the face of adversity,"

"Yes, let's," she responded sardonically, "Because the whole cake-eating thing worked out so well for her."

He laughed. Sarcasm was an improvement on the worried frown. Reluctantly, he dropped his arms, letting her go. Now was not the time to being making moves on her, he knew, but it was more than he could make himself do to move away. "Okay. You make fresh coffee and I'll put these on plates. First one finished gets to fight the other for theirs."

"You're on," she laughed, pushing him away and stalking off to the kitchen ahead of him.



By end of day, as promised, Gabriel had Bertrand fit a new dead latch and safety chain on the outside door and check all the shutter mechanisms to make absolutely sure they were sturdy.

For the next two days, Darcy went through all the motions of being a good mother and professional, carrying on as if nothing had happened to disturb hers and the children's new existence. She made good progress with the landscape drawings, working through the days and making the most of not being able to sleep by toiling at her computer long into the night. By the early hours of Friday morning she had the concepts complete, printed off on her A3 printer and ready for her bosses' approval.

Unknown to her, she was not the only one awake. Gabriel and Frodo were also up and on the prowl. The man and dog making regular nightly patrols by the stables and cottage. Seeing the thin slivers of light still seeping from the cracks in the living room shutters at two a.m. the following morning Gabriel was tempted to interrupt her work, but kept on walking, thinking that a knock on the shutters or door would just add to Darcy's fears and potentially disturb the sleeping children.

It wasn't as if he'd been sleeping well anyway, he thought as he wandered back past the stables towards the chateau, so at least this gave him something useful to do with the wakeful hours. Frodo was more than happy to accompany him on these late night perambulations and gambolled alongside his master quite contentedly.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

By mid-morning, Friday, Darcy felt as if her eyelids were sagging down somewhere near her chin and thought she could do a fair job as a walk-on zombie in a Disney movie, should Disney require one today that was. These random thoughts sifted through her tired brain as she waited in the queue with an over-excited Connor to board the Space Mountain ride. Connor had already ridden once with Gabriel and had been adamant that his mother experience the '*radically awesome*' ride with him as well. Darcy wasn't feeling assured...as the queue shortened and the ride drew inexorably nearer she couldn't help wishing she'd been disqualified to board, as Rosie had, on the basis of being too short. Unfortunately, she had more than met the height requirement.

The sight of other riders being launched upwards in pods inside a sort of oversized steam punk cannon contraption was nerve wracking and she wondered if it wasn't too late to back out. Connor, sensing this possibility had held on tightly to her hand from the onset and dragged her forward into the queue.

Darcy envied Rosie, who had been mollified on missing the first go by Darcy taking her on the near-by Orbitron's flying rockets. More sedate and more to her taste, she thought. Thinking that he was doing her a kindness, Gabriel had taken Rosie off for a session of driving the little cars on the roads of Autopia in order to allow Darcy a turn on Space Mountain.

"C'mon Mom, they're waving us on," Connor's voice broke through her ruminations; it was their turn to board the 2x2 seater pod. As the shoulder restraints were lowered Darcy took a deep breath and hoped she would live through the next five minutes. After all, it was a ride designed for kids. How bad could it be?



“...I am NEVER doing that again! Why didn’t one of you warn me how bad it’d be?” Ten minutes later Darcy was still waiting for her heart rate to drop below one hundred a minute and her knees to stop shaking. They were sitting on a park bench close to the ride’s exit.

“You do look a bit green Mum,” commiserated Connor gleefully.

“You’re not going to faint on us are you?” added Gabriel’s voice from somewhere above her head. “Do you need to put your head down between your legs?”

“What? And kiss my ass goodbye,” Darcy groaned, “It’s a little late for that. I feel like I have already.” She put a hand on her heart, “How did I ever get talked into going on that nightmare of a ride?” She had hated it from start to finish. From the first adrenaline-pumping moment to the last; being thrown around in the dark, disoriented by the brightly coloured, pulsing laser lights and never knowing which direction her body was going to be projected in next was not her idea of a fun time. She’d grown up with the roller coasters of Opryland and Dollywood and thought she was good with this adrenaline stuff but that ride had taken her into a whole other galaxy of fear.

“I vote we move on to another ‘land’. Something with quieter rides that are more suited for Rosie.” She glanced at the map she held, “How about Fantasyland -I hear the Mad Hatter’s tea-cup ride is good?”

“Nah, that’s for babies, we can do that later after we’ve done the cool stuff,” Rosie’s voice broke in, “I didn’t get to go on Space Mountain so I get to choose next and I want to go on the Star Tours ride.”

“Mademoiselle has decided,” Gabriel gave Darcy’s back a reassuring rub. “I’m sure you will like this one much better,” he spoke glibly.

Darcy returned his facile patter with a steely-eyed stare before turning to Rosie, “lead on Princess Leia –and you’d better be right.”

“*Ne t’inquiètes pas*, don’t worry -surely the force will be with you this time,” Gabriel’s voice whispered encouragingly in her ear as they moved towards the next rides’ entrance.



Standing at the window with a glass of red wine in her hand and looking out over the lights of the Place des Vosges Darcy mused on the day. Space Mountain had, if nothing else, woken her up from her sleep-deprived stupor, invigorating her sufficiently to enjoy the multitudes of rides and entertainment on offer throughout the rest of the day. They’d stayed right up ‘til closing, fitting in as many rides as they could and going back for seconds on their favourites. That had been Phantom manor, the haunted mansion in Frontierland for Rosie and the Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom –well, *Temple de Péril* here in France-, roller coaster in Adventureland for Connor. Once she’d regained her equilibrium after the Space Mountain debacle Darcy had been pleased to find that Star Tours was fun and that

she hadn't been put off the exhilaration of gut-churning rides for life.

There'd been a scary few minutes with Rosie later in the afternoon, when her daughter had discovered, somewhat belatedly -as had her mother with the Space Mountain ride- that she *absolutely* didn't like the rolling motion of the Thunder Mountain roller coaster cars at speed ...unfortunately this revelation hadn't happened until they were moving off from the embarkation platform of the Thunder Mountain roller coaster -a mocked up mining train that was -supposedly- deemed more suitable for younger children. Darcy had been mortified to see Rosie genuinely terrified for the first time in her short life, but the die was cast and there was little she could do but hold onto her tightly and tell her it would be all over soon. The excited screams of their fellow passengers had done nothing to help the situation and Rosie had shut her eyes and refused to peek until the cars were slowing for disembarking. Blessedly, the trauma had all been promptly forgotten after a toffee apple, cokes all round and the timely discovery of the haunted mansion. Amazing what a ghostly bride and a host of singing severed heads could do for a frightened little girl, Darcy thought, shaking her own head in wonder.

Darcy was thankful -she'd been envisioning long counselling sessions with a child psychologist in her future and a permanent black mark against her record as a good mother. She mused that some of her guilt might have been due to the fact that under different circumstances, she would have loved to have taken the roller coaster ride by herself -it had been just the right mix of thrilling fun and cowboy kitsch that was the hallmark of a classic Disneyland ride. Unfortunately for her, the queues had been too long for her to go back and try it on her own.

There was just no accounting for children's tastes, Darcy thought, wryly as she sipped at the rich silky burgundy. Connor had been quite freaked out by the house and hadn't wanted a second visit and yet he adored the roller coasters. He and Darcy had managed half a dozen goes on the Indy ride near the end of the day when the crowds had thinned out and the queues had all but disappeared, while Gabriel and Rosie chose to pay a return visit to the haunted house. Darcy liked to think that the multiple two minute rides on the twisting roller coaster had gone some way to redeeming her in the eyes of her son after her freak-out at Space Mountain.



Hearing the door to the room open, Darcy turned towards the sound. It was Gabriel, returning from parking his SUV in a nearby parking building. As they had driven into Paris he had commented that no self-respecting car owner who cared anything for their vehicle would leave it out on a Parisian street for any extended period ...and certainly not overnight.

He'd been amused, earlier in the day when he and Rosie had been 'driving' -with Rosie doing a very able job at the wheel- around the Autopia

roads that there'd been a sign cautioning participants not to bump one another. As it was a well-known Paris practice to bump-park, where the cars in front and to the rear of a park were less-than-gently nudged to make space for another car, he found it quite ironic to be told to '*Ne pas tamponner*' at Disneyland Paris. Rosie, who had yet to read French had happily banged into a couple of other cars motoring slower than she wanted to travel until Gabriel had told her that the park staff might take her licence away should she do it again.

Darcy had replied that they were quite familiar with the bump-parking method of car parking in London as well and that perhaps the Chunnel was to blame for the disorder spreading from France to the UK. Gabriel had guffawed and retorted that it was quite typical of the English to accuse the French for just about anything that went wrong in England. He wasn't buying it.

As he closed the door, he dropped his keys with negligent familiarity into an antique Meissen bowl sitting on a magnificent Neoclassical French walnut credenza just inside the door and picked up the bottle of wine to pour himself a generous glass. Tipping the bottle towards Darcy he raised a questioning eyebrow as to whether she required a refill.

"No thank you," she replied tartly, "I'm watching my alcohol intake around you. I don't think either of us wants a re-enactment of Monday evening."

"Oh, I don't know, I found it quite-," he paused, reminiscing, "informative –and just a tiny bit amusing to see what kind of drunk you were."

"I was not drunk!" she protested hotly.

"You may not have actually consumed a great quantity of alcohol but you were certainly well on your way to being 'in your cups' as you English-speakers say."

"Hmphf," she couldn't disagree so she sat sipping her wine on what she knew to be another antique –a Louis XVI settee. It looked like the real deal and judging by the rest of the furnishings tastefully arranged in the room ... *salon*, she self-corrected, she had no reason to assume otherwise. There were just enough contemporary pieces among the antiques, like the Mondrian painting on the wall that she was certain was an original and two Philippe Starck Miss Lacy chairs, to stop the generous space from looking like the set from a French historical drama.

When Gabriel had commented on their late return to the Disneyland car park that they were all too exhausted to travel back to Belagnac and then suggested that they might as well make a weekend of it in Paris by staying at his apartment, Darcy had, eyeing her pair of drooping half-asleep children and feeling completely drained of energy herself, agreed. Gabriel had called Bertrand to make provision for Frodo and the kitten and they had piled

into his SUV to make the shorter drive back into central Paris. Darcy had not expected said *apartment* to be a five-bedroomed showplace on Place des Vosges, -arguably the most chic residential square in Paris- but in hindsight she realised, she should not have been surprised. Most of the time, Gabriel was so unpretentious that it was easy to forget just where Forbes magazine had placed him on their most recent rich-list.

"While I remember and before I get annoyed at you for anything else," she thought it safer to change the subject, "thank you for wonderful day. The children had a terrific time."

"You are more than welcome," he replied, "I think the days 'cultural and historical enlightenment' went off quite well, with the exception of one or two rides that none of us will mention in the hope that they will be forgotten by a certain little girl and her Maman."

"*Quoi?*" Darcy queried, raising an eyebrow and practising her French at a level she could handle. "What do you mean 'cultural enlightenment'?"

"Well, let's put it this way. It may be worthwhile for us to pop into the Louvre or the Natural History museum for a *petit* visit just in case either of the children's schools should ask about what they have seen on their day off."

"Oh, liar, liar, pants on fire! You said you would sort them about the day off."

"And I did. It's just that in the interests of diplomacy and face-saving for the schools concerned I may have toyed with the truth a little as to exactly what we were planning on doing on the precise day in question."

"Don't want to know. Don't care," Darcy covered her eyes, her ears then her mouth with her hands in quick succession. "We had a great day and I'm prepared to leave it at that."

"*De rien*. So -tomorrow? Louvre or Natural History museum?"

"Either. Dealer's choice," she replied. "The children will equally happily spend time with both atrophied mummies and fossilised dinosaurs so I don't mind which it is. If you're sure you can spare the time, that is. I thought you had a global business empire to run?"

"*Ne t'en fais pas*. No worries. You'll be helping me out -if I don't take some time off, who knows what my mother might do? I don't want her to have to send more old furniture my way. Besides, I have COO's, CFO's, CTO's and all sorts of TLA's who are more than qualified to run the empire for a short time without me checking in at five-minute intervals."

And if they didn't, he thought sternly, they'd all be out on their ear and looking for new jobs in the next financial quarter.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Well who knew there were so many mummified cats in Egypt?” Darcy muttered as she stared at multiple fabric-wrapped feline remains through the glass case.

“Yeah,” Connor said happily, “and it says here that they got sacrificed when they were still alive, decapitated and filled up with sand and pebbles before they were embalmed.” He was reading from a book he’d brought with him. Darcy glanced at her son. Deep in the dimly lit bowels of the Louvre’s Egyptian Antiquities collection he was so totally in his element.

Trust Connor to come prepared with additional gruesome information when it was subject dear to his heart, thought his mother. She was sure she couldn’t be the only parent on earth whose son found the subject of mummification so fascinating -although sometimes it felt that way.

“Hey, and the archaeologists found little pots of milk and mummified mice with some of them when they opened the tombs. Coo-al!”

“Amazing,” her reply was more dutiful than enthusiastic. Three solid hours of the Sully wing, culminating in ancient Egypt and she was flagging. They had started from the top and worked their way down. She had quite enjoyed the French paintings on the third floor, pausing for some time before the Ingres painting of voluptuous ladies in the Turkish Baths, and the Grecian statues and associated antiquities had been quite lovely but very old linen-wrapped dead things were not her forté.

She searched around for Rosie and Gabriel. Both were crouched down studying what appeared to be a desiccated crocodile and from the wrapt expression on Rosie’s face it looked as if she was well on her way to catching the ‘mummy bug’ as well. Even Gabriel appeared every bit as enthralled by the exhibits as her children. Darcy shook her head in wonder.

Her hair had come loose, again. Finding a seat, she gratefully plonked herself down, reaching up to refix the clasp at the back of her head before

rubbing her hands over tired cheeks and eyes in an attempt to wake up. It wasn't working. She looked up to check on the children and found Gabriel watching her with an appraising expression.

"I think we'd better take your mummy for a cup of the Louvre's strongest coffee or she's gonna curl up in one of these open sarcophagi and go to sleep," he pronounced.

Rosie laughed, "If she did, would that make her into a French mummy or a 'gyptian vampire?" she asked ingenuously.

Darcy couldn't help but smile. Her youngest could be quite the comedienne when she chose to. "Ya, I am ze vampire mummy -I vaant your blood," she intoned in sepulchral tones, pulling her lower lip back and sticking her eye teeth over to appear vampiric.

Rosie giggled in response and hid behind Gabriel's legs, bending to peek between his knees and pretending fear between titters. Darcy frowned for a moment at the sight of Gabriel clowning with her daughter, wondering if it was such a good idea for her children to be getting so familiar with this man she barely knew, then, with her next breath, she banished the thought. She wasn't going to ruin the day by looking a gift horse in the mouth. Gabriel had been fantastic with both children ever since the day they'd first met; patiently teaching Connor archery, uncomplainingly queuing for multiple 'goes' on favoured rides at Disneyland and delightfully playful with Rosie - and if he wanted their company that was fine by her. She'd grown up with too much of her mother's poor attitude to anything good happening in her life to want to visit that sort of thinking on her children.

Gabriel had been watching and had noticed the brief cloud come over her features but at her ensuing smile he waved a hand toward the exit door. "Let's go and get that coffee, shall we?"

Darcy nodded and smiled her grateful thanks.



"So, did I ace the test or fail dismally?" Gabriel questioned. Connor and Rosie had drifted along the café's terrace to gaze down at the people in the Cour Napoléon lining up to enter the Louvre's glass pyramid, after promises not to wander out of sight. The detritus of four meals and assorted drinks littered the table, soon to be picked up by their hawk-eyed waiter.

"What test? I don't know what you're talking about." Darcy replaced the cup from her second coffee back on its saucer with exaggerated care.

Gabriel sat silently and continued to look at her quietly, gaze unwavering. The waiter approached to clear the table but he waved him away, setting more than enough cash to cover the meal and tip under a glass, all the while maintaining eye contact with Darcy. She felt as if he was stripping her bare -and not in the clothing sense- she knew that look of barely reigned-in desire well-enough after having been on the receiving end

of it more than once since their first meeting. This was different – the kind of expression a competitor in the business arena might fear – intuitive, intelligent, intense, and not taking any bullshit. All achieved with élan and inscrutable civility. Little wonder he was so successful.

Gabriel waited patiently, not probing, not speaking. It seemed that his good manners were more than just a veneer, Darcy realised, - and they went all the way down. His mother must be proud, she thought tangentially.

The silence was becoming palpable. Darcy knew she was only postponing the inevitable if she didn't come clean, right now. "I'm sorry you saw that. Yes," she paused, "...you did. With flying colours, if you must know."

"I'm so relieved," his reply sounded sincere. Hearing it, Darcy felt more confused.

"Why us? Why me specifically?" she was compelled to ask, not being quite able to shake the notion that she wasn't good enough for his attention.

"Why ever not?" his reply was succinct, if not particularly enlightening. Gabriel stared across at Darcy –with her puzzled eyes and her hair escaping every which way from the clips and clasps she had used in an unsuccessful attempt to tame it, and he wanted nothing more than to reach over the tabletop and fill his hands with the crazy red-russet curls and kiss her pretty, bewildered-looking mouth.

"But you could have your pick of anyone here." She waved a hand to indicate the crowded terrace and the courtyard below, "Quite probably anyone in Paris. In France. In the world, if you wanted."

"Goodness. Whilst I am flattered and do deeply appreciate your summation of my appeal to the masses," he smiled, more thankful than he could say that she'd finally started to warm to his charms, "it's not been as easy to find the right person as you might think. Sometimes it's hard to see the tree for the woods." He purposely reversed the well-known idiom, lowering his hands to the tabletop and leaning forward, something she'd noticed he did when he wanted to exclude all others from his conversation and concentrate his focus on her alone, "By the way, are you including all the males as well in the whole 'anyone' thing? Because I don't swing that way, you know, I bat for one side only. Always have, always will. And I haven't batted for that side for more than a year." Closer to two, he thought, mentally counting backwards. His last relationship had ended badly –partially, he acknowledged, because of his over-commitment to work but equally due to her under-commitment to him. His mother was right, he knew, when she'd told him it was time he lived a more balanced lifestyle.

He picked up Darcy's left hand and idly started rubbing a finger over the indentation in her ring finger as he spoke. "I know you are recovering from

the stinky skunk and I'm trying my utmost to be patient, but my mother will tell you, when we go to dinner at her house next Sunday –Darcy's jaw dropped a little at the first mention she had heard of an implied familial invitation- that I am not a particularly patient man. So I hope that you will take this the way it is intended when I say that these past two weeks have been hell for me, playing the gentleman and not pressing you for more than you felt able to give. My resolve not to kiss you until you wanted to be kissed was wearing thin." He put his lips to her hand and gently pressed his lips to her upturned palm. Darcy felt the tingle all the way to her toes. "I'm hoping that now that I've passed your 'test' I might be permitted to kiss you. *Omi?*"

"Um, thank you for that. I think." Darcy took a deep breath –hoping to clear her head. She was still processing the whole notion of dinner-with-the-mother and her mind could not handle a lot more at this moment. "Um, that doesn't mean you're going to kiss me right now, does it?" she asked guardedly, "it's a bit public for me and I'm not sure how the children would handle a PDA."

"No, not here," he laughed slightly at the acronym. "But soon. For now, instead, shall we round up the children and press on with the remainder of ancient Egypt?" he asked, climbing to his feet and smiling broadly.

"Can't hardly wait," Darcy's reply was droll. She clambered to her feet, hoping that the coffees she'd just consumed would be enough to keep her awake, if not completely alert, throughout the experience.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I won’t sleep with you, well, not yet anyway, just so you know where I stand.”

“I believe you are standing in my kitchen at present and, trust me when I say this, if you were with me, in the sense you are implying, we would not be sleeping. It’s such a pointless euphemism for sex.” They were back at the apartment where Gabriel was making *Croques Monsieur* and chips for dinner –the price you paid, laughed Darcy, for allowing children to choose the evening menu. Sober in the kitchen this time, drinking sparking mineral water from a sapphire-blue Baccarat tumbler, she had been permitted to act as sous-chef and was busily slicing potatoes for the chips.

Darcy had half expected the apartment to be staffed with a housekeeper or cook at the very least, but Gabriel had explained that he preferred his personal space to be just that and not shared with wait-staff. Besides, he pointed out, there were great restaurants within easy walking distance with whom he was on excellent terms. A cleaner came in weekly, but for the rest, he managed on his own.

“And we don’t say ‘*dormir*,’” he continued, “we say ‘*coucher avec moi*’ –one implies sleep the other implies a bed ...quite different. Not that a bed is necessary for sex but at least we French assume you are *awake* and participating, rather than sleeping.” His laugh was low and filled with innuendo. The look he was directing at her was testament to the thoughts going through his mind.

“Hah. You’re quibbling over semantics –that’s all,” she retorted, wishing that she’d kept her mouth closed and not started the conversation running in its present direction.

“Which is an important area of study, I believe, and,” –he emphasised the word by waving a spatula in her direction, echoing her own thoughts – “I would remind you that you instigated this conversation, not me.”

“Yes, I did,” she felt her face growing flushed with embarrassment but was determined not to let her discomfort stop her from saying her piece, “I just wanted it to be quite clear and out in the open,” she had turned back to the chopping board, feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken and continued to dice the fries. She jumped when his hand came over hers’ and removed the knife from suddenly nerveless fingers.

He had moved so quietly she had that black-clad ninja back in mind. Now he was standing so near she could feel his chest touching her back as he breathed in and out, and when he gently turned her to face him, with the bench at her back, there was nowhere left for her to escape. He stood with his hands spread either side of her body on the dark granite benchtop, trapping her against the kitchen units.

“Is this ‘out in the open’ enough for you?” he asked, his voice dangerously low and quiet as he lowered his face to nuzzle a spot just below her ear. The conversation topic was instantaneously forgotten as Darcy responded by turning her head fractionally so she could gain access to his mouth. They kissed and somewhere from the depths of his ardour she heard him groan, whether in pain or pleasure she was unsure. As the kiss deepened, she decided that she didn’t care which it was -she just wanted more.

Next moment, her wish was granted, when his hands were under her buttocks and hoisting her onto the smooth benchtop. He pulled her forwards across the polished surface, tugging her body closer to his own as he continued to plunder her mouth. Darcy had only just reached up to run her fingers through his hair in the way she’d been fantasising since the day she’d first laid eyes on him at the vets, when a familiar voice came from through the open kitchen door.

“Can I have another glass of Coke, Mo-,” Connor, walking through the door from the salon, broke off as he saw the pair. Darcy would have sprung backwards if she’d had anywhere to go, but trapped against the bench and Gabriel’s unflinchingly solid torso, all she could manage was to sit up straighter. “Why’re you kissing my mom?” Connor asked Gabriel in a querulous tone that suggested it was something he’d prefer not to see.

Gabriel placed his hands atop Darcy’s shoulders, turning his head to speak to her son. As she attempted to pull away he tightened his grip ever so slightly, holding her in place. “Because I wanted to –and for once, she wasn’t objecting, so it seemed like a good idea to take advantage of the moment. You okay with that?” he asked curiously, wondering what the boy might reply. And what he might do about it if that reply was less than positive.

Connor’s answer was neither positive nor negative in regard to the adult’s actions. Typical of his age and stage, he only saw the situation in

relation to himself. "Ick, that's what heaps of the girls at my school keep hassling me to do," he answered, in a tone that suggested they'd asked him to perform an act that was somewhat disgusting. "One of them even asked me if I was in love with her last week and then got all stroppy 'cos I said I wasn't." He made a face, "I don't even know her," he complained, making Darcy think it might be time for a mother-son chat on the art of letting a girl down gently and without hurting her feelings. "French girls are gross," was his final parting pronouncement as he shut the fridge door with a bang. He poured himself another glass of cola. Glass full, he didn't bother to give the pair a second glance as he wandered back to salon with his drink in one hand and his game console in the other.

"Well, that's us firmly put in our place," Gabriel laughed ruefully as he rubbed a hand over his chin. He noticed Darcy's face was flushed from where his stubble had abraded her tender skin and wished now that he'd had the foresight to have shaved earlier.

"Yeah. Kinda killed the moment," Darcy added dryly.

"Oh, I don't know," he turned her cheek gently with his hand, running a thumb softly over the abused flesh, "I'm sure we could get 'the moment' back fairly easily if we tried," there was a challenging glint in his eyes.

"And have Rosie walk in on us next?" He recoiled momentarily as if gut-punched, "Hmm, that's what I thought too. Now, can you back up so I can get down from here?" she had pushed at his chest with no success; he was as immovable as the granite bench. Instead, he dropped his hands to her waist and lifted her off the counter, sliding her body down his own in delicious torment before briefly touching her lips with his as he set her to the floor.

"Later," it wasn't so much a statement as a promise.

Darcy didn't reply. It seemed better to concentrate upon getting normal feeling to return to her legs. She spun back to the chopping board and continued slicing the last of the potatoes.

"And I'm sure there'll come a day when Connor no longer finds French girls to be 'gross'-by which I'm assuming he currently finds them simply unattractive and not immensely overweight?" Gabriel said, reluctantly returning to his cooking.

Darcy nodded. "Yup -it's all Gross, Feral, Bogan or Gay if he doesn't like something at the moment. I'm having trouble keeping up with the latest lingo. I wonder if they've got an app for that?" she mused as she opened cupboard doors at random, "do you run to a deep fryer or do I have to cook these chips in a frying pan?"

Gabriel pointed to her left, to under-bench cupboards. "There's a regular deep fryer and a new airfryer down there. We take our frites seriously in this house -comes from being half French-half American, but I'm trying the airfryer out to see if it comes up to scratch. You can be the

first to use it if you like.”

Darcy pulled the airfryer out and set it on the bench, “I had one of these in London. It seemed kinder to my arteries so I bought one last year,” and left it behind, she thought, like so many other things, her former life included, -or so she’d hoped. The nasty words of Patrick’s email ran through her head, causing her to wonder.

Gabriel, perceptive as always, correctly interpreted the grim look he saw pass over her face. “It will be alright Darcy. The police have been alerted and there’s a restraining order out on him.” After the police had read the venomous garbage Patrick had written and saw the photos Darcy had kept as a record of the times he had hit her, the judge had no problem with pushing the order through in a hurry.

“Yeah –but how did the Dixie Chicks put it? “Something about him being able to walk right through a restraining order and put me in intensive care?” she shuddered, “I don’t put a lot of faith in court orders either and I’m not sure that it was the best thing to do. It may just provoke him rather than scare him off.”

“If you think that is likely, I have a suggestion then,” this was something Gabriel had given some thought to while out patrolling with Frodo in the wee small hours, before he’d lured her to Paris on the pretext of visiting Disneyland. “If you were to stay here in Paris in the apartment he wouldn’t be able to find you even if your mother were to divulge your address at the chateau.” Darcy had seen for herself that the apartment building had both an excellent concierge and additional security. What she didn’t know was that the security detail had been hired only the week before, with her safety in mind. “You could work here as easily as you could at the chateau,” ...and in doing so, he hoped, set his mind at rest.

“Yeah –but Connor and Rosie have just started new schools and I don’t want to uproot them again when we’ve barely gotten settled,” she countered. “Besides, I’ve given Patrick too many years of my life to want to let him take up even a moment more. Life is too short. I left London because of what he’d done and I don’t see why we should have to move again.” The set of her jaw was stubborn as she spoke.

“Well, at least move into the chateau with me so you aren’t so vulnerable.” With the primary school, the church and the garage as her closest ‘neighbours’ the stable cottage was too distant from other houses for the village to afford any useful surveillance, even though Bertrand had been quietly circulating photographs of the ex around the village in hopes someone would see him before he had the opportunity to do harm.

“No,” she was adamant. “I’m not budging. He may not even turn up and we’d have all that upheaval for nothing. I’m *sure* it was all talk. He won’t bother with us and I’ll be fine.” She was convinced it was all a ploy on Patrick’s part to unbalance her and that he was off on a beach in Brazil

somewhere with whatsername, intent on improving his tan and not even thinking about them.

From her tone, stiff unyielding posture and tightly crossed arms, Gabriel could tell that he was fighting a battle he was not going to win.

"Very well," he conceded, "but I'm hiring a security detail for the chateau. You'll have to accept that compromise, for both yours and the children's safety," -he was not above using the children as collateral if it meant she would tolerate the extra security- "...at the very least." And then, perhaps, he would be able to get some sleep again. Coming back to the topic of 'sleep' he switched the subject back to their earlier conversation.

Seeking some clarity he asked, "So what was that whole provocative 'I won't sleep with you' statement really about? It's not as if I've tried to drag you into my bed here or at the chateau or since you're arrival. The last time I checked there were five bedrooms in this apartment and only one of them is mine. Which you have yet to as much as set foot in," he pointed out softly.

"Um, I," Darcy occupied herself with searching for a bowl to rinse the potatoes.

"...Have I, at any time in the past two days, tried to seduce or coerce you into my bed?" He silently reached above her head and handed her down a deep white Rosenthal bowl, awaiting an answer.

Darcy kept her hands busy with sluicing the chips under water before leaving them in the bowl to soak. "Well. No," now she just felt silly. At a loss, she continued fiddling with the chips until he pulled her hands from the bowl and handed her a dry towel. When she just stood there with the towel in limp fingers he took it from her and dried her hands himself, -reminding her of the day in the carpark at Bosmelet.

"Though, to be fair and honest with you, it's not through lack of thinking about it," he kept one eye on the door to the salon and spoke sotto voce in case a child should appear, "just so you know." There, she was blushing once more.

"May I ask one more thing before we put this topic 'to bed'?" he couldn't resist the choice of words and was more than a little pleased to see her squirm.

She nodded a rosy-cheeked assent.

"Was that little speech made out of concern for social propriety or more to do with your past?" He noted her slight flinch -he'd hit a nerve. "It's just that I recall that the order of things in your life, when you gave me that very brief cider-enhanced synopsis of your major life-events last Monday evening was a little less traditional than one might have expected from a, ...How did you put it? Good ol' southern gal? I did wonder afterwards if you would have married Patrick *le Pew* if you hadn't been already pregnant."

"Ah, you caught that, did you?" she was chewing her lip again, "that was

the drink talking and I kinda wished I hadn't mentioned it afterwards."

"As did I after I'd TMI'd you with my teenage antics that day at Ikea," he laughed self-deprecatingly, "and I can't even blame alcohol for that overshare."

"Well, maybe we could call it 'even' on the overshares and, um, just move on,"

"Suits me," he smiled. "But just so you know. I'm not that pimply fifteen year old boy fooling around in the woods and desperately wanting to get into some girl's panties anymore."

Darcy had trouble imagining his perfect complexion troubled by something as mundane as zits, but it gave her a more amusing image to ponder than him getting into some other girl's knickers.

It was good to see a hint of a smile, he thought, unaware of the image she was holding in her mind of his spotty fifteen year old self. "I don't rush my fences now. Life is, as you said, too short not to enjoy every stage of a romance and if I was to seduce you into sex at this stage it would considerably diminish the fun and excitement of *La chasse*."

Darcy's smile promptly disappeared. The gangly youth had been replaced with an image of a small furry creature scurrying in panic from the grown man's lethal bow and arrow.

"Don't look so concerned, *ma petite rousse*." He ran a hand down over her red locks, twining one of the errant strands of hair around his index finger. "*La chasse* is a time-honoured tradition that has been ignored for too long by couples in a hurry just to scratch an itch. Time we reinstated it, I think." He cupped a hand behind her neck to pull her forwards into a kiss that was as brief as it was intense, mindful of a certain small girl who might appear in search of food or drink if the embrace lasted longer.

"Hmmm," Darcy spoke, echoing his own thoughts, "perhaps before we reinstate *la chasse*, we had better finish off *Le Dîner* or there may be major protests from the living room and more interruptions.

"Yes, let's," with that, Gabriel turned to open the fridge door. "So, do you have a preference for Emmental or Gruyère cheese on your *croque, Madame?*"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“I hope you won’t mind but something’s come up that has necessitated a slight change in our plans for today,” Gabriel announced over coffee and croissants the following morning. “I’ve only just found out,” he tapped a finger to his smartphone, now lying on the breakfast table where he’d placed it after reading a new message, “that I have an important event on here in Paris this evening and we’ll need to stay another night. Its short notice, I know, but I must attend – if I don’t go tonight, I may not be invited back next year.” He smiled a trifle mysteriously before he added, “And I’d very much like you to accompany me as my guest.”

Darcy hesitated in the middle of slathering raspberry jam and extra butter on her warmed croissant to glance up, curious at his choice of words. What kind of annual event made it a proviso that you had to attend or you wouldn’t be invited back? Certainly none that she could think of.

She was the only other occupant at the table; Connor and Rosie had already gulped their breakfasts with the speed of young wolves and had raced off downstairs to the concierge’s ground-floor apartment, yelling back up the stairs that they were going to play with her spaniel bitch’s recently whelped pups. Madame Moreau, the apartment’s concierge, was a delightfully plump grandmother who had been overjoyed to see two children arrive in the normally childless apartment building that she had overseen for twenty years. Gabriel had laughingly described her as the woman who ruled his life her with an iron fist cleverly disguised inside a hand-knitted tea-cosy, in place of the more usual velvet glove. Madame spoke limited English but upon first meeting Connor and Rosie she had made Gabriel repeat in English her invitation for the children to visit her any time. Her front door, marked by numerous pots of flowering red geraniums, was always open, she said, situated where she could see anyone who passed by just inside the pass-coded outer security door to the

apartment building.

"We can be up early tomorrow and make it back to Belagnac and Bourg-Montfort in time for the start of school," From his recent early-morning driving experience, he could calculate just how long that journey took and knew he could easily have both children at their respective school gates by start of lessons.

Gabriel's next question left Darcy wondering what on earth they were going to. "You wouldn't happen to have brought a white dress with you by any chance?" At her puzzled expression he added, "White shoes? White accessories? Anything from casual to cocktail would be appropriate."

"Well, I've got a pair of nude-toned high-heeled sandals and a white cardigan but nix on the dress. Don't know why I thought the sandals would be useful for walking around Disneyland but I put them in my bag anyway." When packing, Darcy had thrown in a few extras and then hadn't bothered to sift back through her bag to edit out the items she might not require for the trip - knowing there would be ample space in the big SUV. "Why do you ask?" she was intrigued.

"Dress code," he replied briskly. There was a glint of something cagey lighting up his eyes that she couldn't fathom. "I can't explain any more than that, -not yet, anyway," he held up a hand to forestall additional questions.

"It's not one of those weird 'brotherhood' things is it? You aren't going to suddenly inform me that you're a member of some secret sect, like you're a mason or something?"

"No. And if I was a mason I doubt you'd be invited, -French freemasonry is still pretty much men-only." Despite her questioning he would add nothing more to satisfy her curiosity.

Darcy's imagination ran riot. She pictured an ominous visualisation of some creepy group of cloaked and hooded men standing around a sacrificial slab, -with her in her virginal white dress trussed up like a thanksgiving turkey upon it and the music from Carmina Burana crescendoing in the background. The music grew louder and louder in her head as she saw herself struggling desperately against her bonds to get free.

Unaware of the direction of her thoughts, Gabriel continued to plan out loud. "There aren't many shops open today -Sunday is still a bit sacred in Paris where shopping is concerned but I can order a selection of dresses in for you to try. Shall I guess your size or do you want to tell me?" His voice, all practicality, went some way to breaking through her vision. "We can still visit Montmartre this morning with the children as we'd planned and the dresses should be delivered here by mid-afternoon for you to choose."

Still a little lost somewhere between her disturbing vision and reality, Darcy had nodded agreement to all this and given him her size before she realised what she had done. She shook her head to dispel the imagery and change her 'yes' to 'no' but Gabriel had taken the first nod as assent and

was talking on his mobile, making the necessary arrangements.

Darcy reached for her coffee cup, listening to him issuing instructions – she couldn’t help the sneaky hope that he’d got the super-efficient Mlle PABA out of bed to do his bidding. Hearing him speak, she had a small guilty thought that it must be nice to have the money, power and connections to be able to make all this happen at such short notice. As he ended the call and replaced the phone on the table, she mused that it appeared to be too late to back out of this particular roller-coaster ride. She was thinking that she hoped it would be more along the lines of Indiana Jones-exciting than Space Mountain-terrifying, when the unpleasant sacrificial scene from Temple of Doom shot into her mind in vivid Technicolor; Carmina Burana was instantly replaced with loud banging drums, chanting and terrified screams. “Oh great,” she muttered crossly under her breath.

“What did you say?” He had seen the frown but couldn’t make out her words.

“N -Nothing –just some crazy visual imagery going through my head,” she didn’t feel up to explaining the convoluted twists of her imagination over breakfast.

“O–kay. How about I go down and prise the children from Madame Moreau’s before you end up with a puppy to go with your kitten –and I’ll ask if she wouldn’t mind babysitting Connor and Rosie this evening, then we’ll head for Montmartre?”

“Thanks, that’d be great. I think.” She knew Madame would be an exemplary baby-sitter but wished the children could accompany them, not sure that she felt ready for a night out alone with Gabriel.

“I’d take Connor and Rosie with us but tonight’s an adults-only event.” He pulled back his chair and stood.

Knowing how uncommon it was for the French to exclude children from ‘events’ did little to restore Darcy’s confidence that she was going to have a fun time that evening. She might have backed out still, could she, but Gabriel had already left the room.



“When are you going to tell me where we’re going and what we’re going to?” Darcy asked plaintively. She was sitting next to Gabriel on the Metro. He was impeccably dressed from top to bottom in an off-white V-necked cable pullover, white linen pants and white leather lace-up shoes and looked as if he’d just come from a very civilised game of cricket on some English village green.

But that wasn’t all, -as if he wasn’t ‘white’ enough he had a white jacket looped through the straps of an insulated cool-bag that sat at his feet and a white fedora hat atop his head –its black band the only hint of colour in his entire outfit. Before they had left the apartment, he had handed Darcy two light-weight folding slat chairs; painted white, -Duh, she’d thought

caustically, -no surprises there. He had stowed them in a carry-bag with a request that she shoulder this while he hefted a small folding card table and the cool bag, full to the brim with food, a bag of ice and bottles of drink.

By now, Darcy's nerves and curiosity were all-but killing her, and like that cat she was dying for some 'satisfaction' to bring her back. She reached down to smooth the accordion-pleated skirt of her new white dress, wondering if they were off to some fancy-dress party. Or maybe a picnic in the park? But then, why the table and chairs? Whatever, it was, it looked as if they were eating out, somewhere in Paris and she was dying to know where and with whom -this thought immediately brought back her breakfast-table visions; -perhaps, she revised, not so much *dying* as very keen, to be told what was going on.

"Patience, *ma petite rousse*, we will arrive soon enough." Gabriel hadn't let slip a single detail about their destination, his gaze scanning the stations, "ah, this is our stop now, Trocadero. *Allons-y*."

"Yeah, but *allons-y* to what? And who died and left you the new Doctor Who?" Darcy grumbled as she followed his retreating back, teetering in her strappy heels on the uneven surface. As she emerged from the Metro, two things happened in concert: first, she noticed that they were no longer the *only* people dressed all in white, while at the same time she suffered a 'Marilyn moment' with the full-skirted dress, -the soft white pleats flying up in all directions with the assistance of a crafty little breeze that had sprung up from nowhere.

"Eek, help!" any previous thoughts flew from her mind and her voice was reduced to a mortified squeal, as she almost dropped the chairs while she and fumbled with her skirt in a wasted effort to keep the garment under control. A few appreciative wolf whistles came from nearby, where several of the closest white-dressed gentlemen clapped in enjoyment of the spectacle of a very nice pair of legs on display right up to matching satin panties. As the breeze went on its merry way and her skirt calmed and settled back down once more, Darcy would have hidden her face in her hands but for the need to keep hold of the chairs, so she opted instead to go with the moment, smiling as she dipped a curtsy and acknowledging the onlookers before walking on.

Gabriel had turned around at her first utterance to see what was happening and got the full Monty, so to speak. He hadn't joined in with the clapping but he had enjoyed the performance, considerably. The dress, he thought, in old English parlance, was worth every penny of its not inconsiderable cost.

As Darcy approached, Gabriel switched the table to underneath one arm and held out a hand for the chairs, making absolutely no effort to minimise his very broad grin, "Shall I take those for you," he offered with belated gallantry, "it appears you may need both hands free."

Darcy raised a single well made-up eyebrow in response as she passed him the chairs.

He stood, surveying her from head to toe, the look neither calculating nor lecherous, but rather, purely appreciative, as if he was contemplating a work of art.

“Have I told you how enchantingly beautiful you look this evening?”

“No, you haven’t, or you hadn’t, not until just now.” She was a little flustered at the compliment, coming right on the heels of her unintended knickers-flash. “You don’t look too bad yourself.” She glanced around at the every-growing crowd, “*Now* are you going to tell me what we’ve arrived at?” Now she could see that there were hundreds of white-clothed people alighting from the metro station, similarly toting small folding tables, chairs and picnic baskets.

“In a moment,” he was still enjoying filling his eyes with the sight of her. “That dress very much suits you,” he admired. Clearly an homage to the famous Marilyn number from the movie *The Seven Year Itch*, the dress was a halter-neck with a full pleated skirt that stopped at a few centimetres above her knees, but the similarity ended there –this dress Darcy was wearing so beautifully was far more form-fitting than the original, its Grecian-inspired bands of pleated silk dipping to cross under her breasts were cut precisely, drawing attention to Darcy’s toned back, small waist and luscious curves and the accordion pleating had more in common with Issy Miyake than any other clothing designer. On her, it was perfect and looked as if it had been made for her shapely curves. She had accessorised simply, her jewellery limited to a small diamante hair clip keeping her soft curls pinned behind one ear while the rest cascaded over her opposite cheek and a simple silver bangle around one slim wrist. Anything more would have been superfluous.

As for Darcy, for once, she was happy with her hair –as long as the evening didn’t get too windy or humid she had hopes it would stay under control for a change.

“Shall we walk while I enlighten you about this evening,” he said pleasantly. “Take my arm or you might get lost and not be able to find me again in all this white.”

“Sort of –*It’s all white on the night?*” she couldn’t resist the pun.

“Hah hah,” he laughed softly. “You hold tight or it will not be all white. I don’t wish to spend the entire evening searching for you once you’ve disappeared and I do not plan to dine alone.”

“This,” his arms full, he couldn’t sweep his hand to indicate the milling crowds so inclined his head as he began to explain, “is *Le Dîner en Blanc*. It’s a once-yearly event that has been going on in Paris for the past twenty-five years. It started small, as many good things do, with just a few friends who wanted to have a nice dinner in a spot they really weren’t supposed to, back before flash-mobs and pop-up parks and such were *de rigueur* –and they all

wore white, quite simply, so they would recognise each other in the crowd.”

Darcy laughed at that, “how ironic, and now, if you wanted to stand out you’d have to wear anything *but* white.”

“Well, it has grown considerably and there are a few more traditions that have been added since then. Wearing white is just one of them,” They were standing side by side at the top of the massive divided stairs that led down to the Trocadero’s plaza and water features. Dominating the view on the opposite bank of the Seine was the tall elegantly iron-latticed spike of the Eiffel tower.

“For one, everyone who is invited must arrive by public transport.” Darcy could see buses below on the far side of the plaza, pulling up and disgorging hundreds of white-clad revellers. As one bus pulled away from the kerb another would promptly take its place.

“How does everybody know where to meet?” she asked.

Gabriel dipped his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out his smartphone in answer. “Text message sent an hour before you’re expected to arrive. The people on the buses are told where to meet their bus but the location of the dinner is only revealed once they’ve boarded.”

Darcy looked out over the growing crowds below with a sense of wonder, tinged with a dash of disquiet at the sight of *sooo* many dinner guests, “and everyone brings their own table, chairs and food?” She tried to tamp down the butterflies that were churning in her stomach at the prospect of sharing a dinner table with a cast of thousands.

“Yes. Guests must bring a table, a picnic basket, foldable chairs and a table cloth – the cloth must be white, of course. Participants are sworn to secrecy and only those with valid invitations may attend. If you miss a year, you don’t get invited back the next, hence why I was so keen for us to attend. Now, shall we head down and set up?” They made their way carefully descending the flights of steps.

Once they were down among the fountains, Darcy noticed that the tables the invitees had brought with them were being unfolded and positioned, with something akin to military precision, in long straight rows. She and Gabriel joined a line that was in the process of being set up. After greeting their nearest dining companions, Gabriel unfolded and added their table and chairs to the existing row, unfurled the tablecloth then proceeded to set plates, utensils, glassware, napkins; a tiny lantern with a tea-light and, Darcy was thankful to see, food -as, despite the butterflies she was beginning to feel quite hungry. There were no shortcuts and nary a single plastic knife or fork to be seen. Gabriel had even carried the porcelain dinner plates from the apartment and the Rosenthal glasses. From the place settings that had already been set up, Darcy could see similar attention to details, including vases with white roses; she also noticed that the men were standing to one side of the line of tables while the women were waiting

patiently opposite, so did likewise. They all stood chatting politely until the entire row was set up then everyone sat. Watching her fellow-diners and doing likewise, she thought, more rules, but decided that it gave a nice touch to the evening that no one was so impatient to start that they couldn't wait for their fellow guests.

The dinner that followed was magical and more than a little surreal – with the breeze remaining never more than a soft zephyr, the moonlight and with the lights of the Eiffel tower blinking brightly in the background it was impossible not to feel grounded in the very essence and spirit of Parisian life. Between Gabriel acting as translator and the fortunate accident that the couple seated at her left elbow spoke English, she felt part of the festivities and not excluded by her lack of understanding. Darcy loved every minute of the evening –from the food, the conversation and the dancing to the sparklers that revellers produced from their baskets and passed around so everyone had one. She had been relieved that her butterflies had settled not long into the evening and the experience went a long way to exorcising the ghost of her dinner-table fiasco with Patrick and his inamorata.

Not long before midnight, the eating, drinking, singing and carousing halted. Pre-warned by Gabriel of this Cinderella-like regulation, Darcy was still surprised when, of one mind, all the participants packed away their baskets, blew out their flickering candles, folded no longer pristine white table cloths and picked up their belongings, to reboard the buses and disappear into the night as if they had never been there. Along with everyone else she and Gabriel tidied up and made their way back to the metro and the apartment.



Darcy passed through the street entrance held open by Gabriel on their return. Feeling the warmth of the air, she slipped his jacket off her shoulders, intended to return it to its owner. Noticing her shivering in the late-night air as they had left the Trocadero, Gabriel had dropped it over her bare shoulders but here in the inner courtyards of the apartment block the heat of the day still lingered to warm the space. The sweet scent from a honeysuckle growing up a trellis behind a flower bed of blooms diffused into the night air. Darcy breathed it in, enjoying the end to a perfect fairy-tale evening.

"I had a really nice time tonight," she spoke softly, mindful that that her voice would echo easily in the close confines of the paved entrance. "It was spectacular," she did a little twirl, setting the dress floating in the half-light. "Thank you so much."

"I had hoped you might enjoy yourself," he replied, drinking in the sight of her floating like some ethereal creature around the courtyard, "I just hope you still feel that way when we have to get up by six to make it to school on time."

## COLLECTING THOUGHTS

“Ah, there’s always a piper to pay after the fun, isn’t there?” she bent to remove her sandals.

“Most often,” he didn’t disagree, pushing open the door to the stairwell and standing aside for her to walk through. Although his fingers itched to touch her, he stilled himself, knowing that ‘*La Chasse*’ would be over before it started if he was to lay so much as a hand upon her right now.

“Just remind me in the morning, if I get grizzly, that I said it was *absolutely* worth it,” Darcy smiled sweetly as she padded past him barefoot, and started to climb the stairs.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The morning light filtering through those sixteenth century stained glass windows was quite breathtakingly beautiful, thought Darcy, peeking from under her half-closed eyelids and admiring the way the architect had seated gothic-inspired originals into an uncompromisingly contemporary setting; in doing so, creating a marriage of old and new so successfully and with such style and confidence.

Not that she'd been expecting to be sitting here looking at this view as anything other than a tourist, she thought a trifle irreverently.

But nevertheless, here she was, her bottom parked in church, on a perfectly nice Sunday morning, the likes of which she could have been sitting outside in the sunshine eating madeleines and drinking coffee. But no, instead of a comfortable bistro chair, she was seated on a hard timber pew, attending morning mass with what appeared to be veritable legions of Gabriel's immediate family. She didn't need to glance backwards to know that if she did she would see an entire pew, packed full of brothers, sisters, associated-in laws and their offspring. It was off-putting, to say the least.

When Gabriel had issued the invite to Sunday lunch en famille, the week before –or had he in fact issued an invitation? –it had been more of an assumption that she would go along with a royal summons from his mother that everyone, herself included hadn't questioned. Anyway, she thought sourly, the thing was, she hadn't realised that Sunday lunch en famille would be preceded with Sunday mass accompanying masses of said family. More accurately, Sunday morning mass at L'église Sainte-Jeanne-d'Arc, Rouen, with lessons, hymns, sermon and prayers all delivered in incomprehensible French.

Darcy, not understanding the words of what sounded like a never-ending prayer had been taking the opportunity to peek at the sixteenth century stained glass windows; recovered, she knew, from the ruins of a

nearby church and saved from allied bombing runs in World War Two. Raising her head and looking at the panes more directly this time she decided that they were all the more striking and poignant in this modernist setting.

She sent a furtive glance along the pew to spy Connor, eyes wide open, staring back at her with a glazed look that spoke volumes of his undisguised boredom. She gave him a brief thumbs up, hoping he would see it as a supportive gesture of two comrades-in-arms doing their utmost to survive the rigors of battle but his response was to cross his eyes and give her the thumbs down, after which he went back to staring at the ceiling. Rosie, the lucky thing, had fallen asleep on Gabriel's mother's lap while reading a picture book earlier in the service.

Making the best of a tedious situation, Darcy continued her inspection of the church interior. Like Connor, her gaze was drawn upwards. Fortunately, the ceiling was totally stare-worthy; the dramatically sweeping curves of the timber detailing making her feel as if she were underneath the hull of some large upturned boat, or, maybe the ribs were those of Jonah's whale? She glanced at her watch -an hour gone- she sighed. Confined as she was she felt a certain kindred spirit with poor Jonah, imprisoned inside the belly of the beast and not able to escape.

She returned to staring at the ceiling. She knew from the church's name and location of its association with Joan of Arc;-she'd been burnt on a pyre only metres from the church- and had read that there were elements of symbolism in the design that were intended to evoke the flames that had consumed the unfortunate girl all those centuries ago but to Darcy eyes, the timber and plasterwork spoke more references to a boat tossed by roiling ocean waves than flames or fire. She supposed it was an individual thing how people interpreted what they saw. Perhaps, she mused, she didn't see the flames because she didn't like to be reminded of the extent of cruelty that people could rain down on one-another.

By now her eyes were fully opened and, service forgotten, she had turned her head, craning her neck to follow the waves and undulations of the interconnecting beams, the designer in her interested to see how the architect had resolved the points where each separate section of ceiling connected.

"Almost finished," Gabriel's voice spoke at a level barely above a whisper in her ear, the quiet tones still causing Darcy to start and unintentionally reminding her of her lack of decorum. She swiftly returned her attention to the priest standing on the raised dais at the front, raising his hand to give the final benediction. If the small smile the robed cleric gave her was any indication, it seemed that her close inspection of the buildings' upper reaches had not gone unnoticed from the front of the church either. Oops, she thought, smiling impishly back at the priest; my bad.

Mass finally over, the self-same priest was stationed at the church doors, greeting parishioners as they exited into the morning sunshine. He shook Darcy's hand briefly and in response to Gabriel's introduction and Darcy's slightly abashed "good morning" spoke to her in fluent English. "Delighted to meet you, Darcy," he smiled broadly now, "the church ceiling is *quite* spectacular, isn't it?"

Darcy blushed becomingly and started to apologise for her wandering attention but he cut her off in mid-apology, saying that listening to others drone on in a language one did not understand was never an easy thing. Hearing she was American, he enquired which state she was from, saying that he'd lived in America for two years himself, and that he hoped her first experience of a French Catholic mass wouldn't put her off from coming to a service again. His pleasant manner put her at ease and made her think that perhaps she would give mass another go but that if she was going to stay for any length of time she really ought to start French language lessons to improve her listening skills.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Gabriel, I suggest you take Darcy out for a coffee and a madeleine while we go home and finish the lunch preparations,” his mother spoke with the polite assurance of someone long accustomed to being obeyed. “You should take advantage of this lovely morning to sit out in the sun. The children can come along with us -I’m sure they would enjoy playing more than hanging around at a café.” The children in question were milling about and chattering with Gabriel’s younger relatives, reminding Darcy of young dogs, wagging tails and sniffing at one another while checking out potential friends or foes.

Darcy was a little taken aback by Gabriel’s mother’s quite specific reference to coffee and madeleines; she couldn’t help but wonder if his *Maman* had somehow burrowed inside her head in the past hour and read her rebellious thoughts of what she’d rather have been doing than sitting in church on such a nice morning.

“That’s very kind of you,” she replied hesitantly, “if you’re sure it’s not too much trouble?” She looked questionably at Connor and Rosie to see what they thought of the invitation but neither of her children seemed noticeably perturbed at the idea.

“No trouble at all,” Madame Dubois replied, signalling to one of Gabriel’s brothers, “Robert, please take Gabriel’s keys and drive his car to the house. I’m sure he and Darcy would prefer to walk.”

Madame Dubois –Diane, Darcy corrected herself again - she had stressed that Darcy must call her by her first name when they had been introduced, was one of those women who, despite not being French born and bred, looked as if the French lifestyle had been tailor-made for her. Elegant, perfectly made-up and her neat hair-do without a strand out of place, she had arrived at the church wearing a snappy little suit that Coco Chanel would have been proud of. But within minutes she had completely

dispelled Darcy's notion that she was some sort of touch-me-not, well-groomed dragon-lady by gathering all her grandchildren around and dispensing from her fashionably-large leather handbag, a selection of colouring books and pencils, small toys, sweets and other edible treats designed to keep them occupied through the service. Then, when Rosie had started to get fractious early in the proceedings, she had beckoned her to her, settling the little girl on her lap and pulling another picture book –in English this time- from the voluminous bag as well as a small container full of pieces of fruit. All this was done with the minimum of fuss and Rosie had quite happily remained on her lap, albeit asleep, until the benediction was given.

Now Diane called her large family together, looking to Darcy like a cross between a mother hen fluffing her feathers to find her chicks and a general summoning the troops. It took several minutes but soon the others were organised and on their way, leaving Darcy and Gabriel alone.

"Is it just me, or is your mother indulging in a bit of maternal match-making?" queried Darcy as she watched the departing hordes.

"Well, if she is, I'm not one to complain," Gabriel smiled, "she has, after all, just engineered it so we have an hour and a half to ourselves on a sunny morning in Rouen. How bad can that be?" He'd barely seen Darcy all week and was keen to spend time together. Between renovation work on the chateau keeping him busy to all hours and her being glued to her computer working on landscape construction drawings, they'd hardly spoken more than half a dozen words since arriving back after the weekend in Paris.

"You do have a valid point," she acknowledged, her tone softening.

"So," he began, "would you rather sit here in the touristy end of town or walk a bit with me and see the real Rouen? We can venture past the cathedral and see the sights as we go."

"I'm all for a healthy walk," she said agreeably, "as long as there's a coffee at the end of it –and I like the sound of that madeleine too. We wouldn't want to disappoint your mother, now would we?"

"Perish the thought," he laughed. "Okay, stick close to your tour guide," he reached over and took her hand in his, "and we'll head this way." They had left the square and were meandering down a cobbled street that looked as if it was predominantly intended for pedestrian shoppers. Darcy was glad she'd worn low heels with her Sunday dress. Much as she admired Diane's chic suit, her white sleeveless tank-dress with its print of large red roses and fresh green leaves was more her style. She'd teamed the summery dress with a Kelly-green cardigan and low heeled red pumps.

She had noticed that some of Gabriel's brothers –or were they the brothers-in-law? - She'd lost track of who was who half way through the pre-mass introductions, had worn formal suits to the church service. Gabriel, though smartly dressed, was attired more casually; pairing olive-

green chinos with a grey blazer, a dark blue button down shirt and tie and comfortable brogues. They hadn't gone far before he tugged at the tie with his free hand to loosen it before pulling it off and stuffing it into his jacket pocket.

"*Bon*, I can breathe again. *Maman* insists that all men should wear ties to church; personally, I think they are instruments of the devil and shouldn't be permitted anywhere near hallowed ground." He made a face that put Darcy in mind of Connor when he had to wear formal clothes, then commented, "And here is where your tour begins, *Madame* -This is Rue du Gros Horloge." Gabriel raised their linked hands to indicate a large gilded clock with roman numerals above an archway as they approached. "But more importantly," he tugged her hand to the left once they had walked under the heavily carved relief-work of the arch, "Glup's sweet shop. It's a favourite haunt of my nieces and nephews and I'm sure Connor and Rosie would appreciate a visit when you are next in town."

"You know, I'm fairly sure that tour guides don't generally hold the '*tour-ees*' hands," Darcy commented tartly, but as she hadn't removed hers from his he counted it a point won in his favour. She allowed him to pull her over to look at the display of assorted chocolates and lollies in the windows of Glup's and noted the location and opening hours of the sweet shop for future reference.

"Now I could give you the tourist spiel as we go," he said as they strolled further along the street, "but personally, I think it'd be better for you to just experience the place this first time and not get bogged down in all the details, so we're simply going to walk and talk, about anything or nothing much – and you can look around for yourself. Okay with you?"

"Oh thank you," she answered gratefully. Whilst the arch and clock they had gone under were ornate and presumably historically important, for now, she was quite satisfied to admire them in passing and window shop as they walked. The large clock did go some way to explaining the name of the street, she thought idly, -but like the rainbow vegetable garden of her earlier garden tour, big-clock-street sounded much better in French than it did when translated to English. "As long as I can look in the shop windows, I'll be quite happy," she too was tired from the week and felt a bit of down-time wasn't a bad idea.

Her week's focused energies had been rewarded by completed drawings for the walled garden and formal garden area to the south of the chateau.

She was looking forward to handing the plans on to Gabriel's landscape construction crew, who were due to start on site Tuesday the following week.

Idly, she noted the presence of several British chain stores as they walked by. She peered in the windows of Printemps then admired the cathedral as they passed by. Noting its oddly mismatching towers, she was

curious enough to ask why it was that way.

To her question Gabriel replied minimally, "World War Two –lotsa aerial bombing." Darcy nodded in understanding but didn't ask for more details in the way of an explanation.

The conversation was pleasantly desultory, consisting mostly of amusing anecdotes from their week that they batted back and forth. They'd travelled several more blocks and Darcy was starting to wonder just where she was going to get her coffee when they arrived at Place St Marc, where a bustling Sunday market was in full swing. Gabriel's towed her in the direction of a small shop with an overhead sign that read Boulanger-Pâtisier. "The café next door doesn't mind if we buy something from here to eat with our coffee so we'll get the food first and then sit down for drinks, he explained."

It wasn't long before they were sat at a table on the edge of the square waiting for coffees to go with their treats and indulging in doing what the French do best –people watching. The market-goers were a lively and varied bunch and it was amazing for Darcy to see what passers-by were buying. As well as the usual fresh produce, cheeses and flowers the market had everything from second-hand clothing and bric a brac, to antiques.

Market-goers walked by clutching anything from live chickens to an antique table –this carted past by two well-muscled young men in stove-pipe jeans and tight tees, one on either end with a pretty girl sitting cross-legged in the centre of the tabletop as if she was some exotic eastern princess being transported on a litter. She looked rather pleased with herself and waved a joyful greeting at Darcy as she paraded by. Darcy waved back, before taking another bite of her honey and lavender madeleine. It was delicious, she noted with pleasure, and well worth the wait.

At one point Gabriel suggested that they might go across the street into the market to explore but they looked at each other, and spoke, in unison "Nah," before going back to sipping, talking and watching. A second round of coffees and the time passed too speedily.

"Okay, now we have to go," Gabriel had glanced at his watch and noted that they had less than fifteen minutes before lunch was to be served. "Maman's house is only a couple of blocks from here."

As they passed the flower-seller, he stopped briefly to choose bunches of varicoloured garden-grown roses, the first for his mother, he explained as he offered the second to Darcy. Thankful, she stuck her face in the petals and breathed in their delicious fragrance. They might not last as long as the long-stemmed flowers that a florist would sell, she knew, but the perfume more than made up for their shorter life expectancy.

At a second stall, Gabriel quickly purchased two heart-shaped cheeses. He gave these to Darcy to hold onto while he paid for fresh olives, tomatoes and string beans.

“Two hearts,” she quipped, brandishing the cheeses as they moved on, “now I know you really must be Doctor Who.”

“Well, I’ve given them both to you and, I might add, you’ve accepted,” he afforded her an appraising look.

“Yeah –to eat,” she laughed, “perhaps you had better end the comparison there before we move from the good Doctor to Silence of the Lambs.”

“Let’s!” he agreed.

“And here, you can have your cheeses back –they’re a bit whiffy for my taste.” She returned the cheeses to him.

Gabriel checked his watch once more, “Well, as I’ve left my go-faster red shoes at home we’d best put those two smelly hearts into action. My maman does not like people to be late for meals. So it will have to be, *Allons-y! Vite!*”

“Whatever, -after you Doctor *Phoo*,” she answered pertly, trailing in his wake.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Thank you so much for minding the children,” Darcy spoke across the wide kitchen table to Diane. The two were sitting around the big kitchen table after a tasty meal of Scallops a L’Orange entree, followed by a main course of Chicken Normandy, stuffed tomatoes, glazed carrots and fresh green beans. Laying a hand on the smooth, unmarked tabletop, Darcy noted that it seemed that Gabriel’s mother had found a suitable replacement for the one she’d sent her son.

After clearing the debris from the first courses and setting out fresh strawberry and raspberry tarts along with a selection of cheeses displayed on a thick slab of marble Diane had declared a ‘time out’, sending all the children and their respective parents across the road to the nearby park, armed with Frisbees, a basketball and instructions to burn off some excess energy before dessert.

When Gabriel had looked as if he might hover, Diane had laughingly shooed her son away with the others, telling him to mind Connor and Rosie as a stand-in for their mother as they were going to have some ‘girl-time’. As the others departed, she had brought out a bottle of cider and poured a glass for herself and Darcy, proclaiming that much as she loved her children and grand-children, she also loved the sound of silence when they all left a room. Having now experienced the din created by five of Gabriel’s eight siblings –those currently living within ‘Sunday lunch’ radius of their mother’s house, and seven of their children for a little less than three hours, Darcy was inclined to agree.

“Let’s take this outside to the courtyard so I can enjoy some of that sun too before it disappears for the day,” Diane said.

They exited the large family-style kitchen to a courtyard enclosed on all sides by three and four storied buildings. The space should have been claustrophobic but the rambling, organic nature of the architecture and the

varying rooflines, windows and balconies made for a lively and interesting yard. A small table had been placed in one corner, hidden from any neighbourhood prying eyes by a gnarly old wisteria vine growing twisted around stone columns supporting a sagging pergola. Diane plonked herself down and indicated that Darcy should take a seat as well. "It's good when you are solo-parenting, to take time off when you get the opportunity. Take it from one who's been there, done that," she said, before adding, "you weren't the only one that was peeking during prayers this morning," she smiled when Darcy looked abashed. "I was watching your face, -it was treat!" then she laughed out loud, "You don't get to be a lawyer for as many years as I have been without learning to read people's expressions –and yours quite plainly said 'What the hell am I doing caged up inside this building on my day off?'"

"I never was much good at hiding my thoughts," Darcy admitted, hoping she'd never find herself on the end of a cross-examination by this woman. "They tend to show on my face. It has been a busy week," she added by way of explanation, hiding a yawn behind her hand.

"I imagine that every week is busy," Diane said kindly. "I hope you don't mind my questioning Gabriel a little about you, but he said you hadn't been parenting alone for long so I would think you may be still finding your feet somewhat."

"Not terribly long," Darcy agreed, wondering what else Diane knew about her from Gabriel, "it's only been a few months and then there's been the move from London to Belagnac, but the children are settling in well and enjoying school so things are going along fine. For now." She felt optimistic for the first time in months that they were going to come out the other side of their personal dark tunnel but didn't want to tempt fate by appearing over-confident.

"Ah –there's that expressive face again –you needn't worry, you know. Getting information out of Gabriel was like getting blood out of a stone. He was very tight-lipped about the two of you, apart from one or two things he let slip." Darcy sensed, from Diane's body language that she'd love to know more. So, she thought, that's what this 'girl-time' was all about, was it?

"I love your house," Darcy knew she was changing the subject in a fairly blatant manner but didn't want to continue a conversation about her personal life with someone she'd just met.

"It is quite wonderful isn't it? –I moved here fifteen years ago; a few years after I'd sent Gabriel to live with my brother and when my youngest girls were still at Le Lycée. I know it's far too big for me now but I never seemed to be able to make myself sell and move into anything smaller. I love the way it has weathered the years. We are survivors, this house and I." Gabriel's mother had taken the hint and ran with the new topic. It didn't

hurt that it was one she enjoyed. Her home was a four-storey half-timbered house in a street full of similar, but all quite individually unique, old houses.

When she and Gabriel had turned into the road, Darcy had been enchanted with the little stream that flowed along one side of the narrow street, running directly in front of entrance doors. Low slab bridges at every house allowed residents access to their doors and to the shops and cafés along the cobbled street. As a landscape architect it was the kind of detail she'd often wished she could convince developers to include in their schemes –all too often any natural waterway in a building scheme disappeared underground, to be culverted and paved over, never to be seen again, but this was a perfect example of what could be achieved when someone went with the flow, so to speak.

“And you are one of life’s survivors too I believe,” the slight sparkle in Diane’s glance told Darcy that she might have dropped the subject of Darcy for now, but it would be revisited sometime in the near future. Sighing gustily, she returned to talking about the house, “The problem is –the house only comes alive now when the children come to visit on weekends or when I babysit my grandchildren,” the sigh was barely gone before a quixotic light came into her eye, “if we can’t talk about you, can I let you into a little secret about me?” Diane deftly derailed the conversation onto another track. She looked around as if to check that the coast was clear of potential eavesdroppers.

Darcy nodded, intrigued as to what Gabriel’s mother might be about to share with her.

“I’ve met a man,” Diane’s eyes twinkled excitement while at the same time her voice was full of something close to trepidation. She set her drink on the circular garden table. “I haven’t told any of my children yet –you’re the first to know.” It seemed that Diane didn’t have any of Darcy’s difficulties when it came to sharing at a personal level. “I’ve only known him a short time but I can feel that ‘zing’ that tells me it’s something special –you know?”

Darcy knew about the ‘zing’ all too well, but once again, wasn’t about to share her feelings for Diane’s son, most especially not with his mother.

“I can see that you and Gabriel have it –the ‘zing’, I mean.”

Well, so much for not telling, Darcy thought. She started to shake her head in denial but Diane waved a hand to halt any protestations. “Nonsense my dear, of course it’s there –I’m his mother. I know ‘all’ and besides, I could hear it in his voice the first time he talked about you on the phone. I just wanted to be sure that it was reciprocated by you,” she tapped her index finger alongside her nose, “that’s why I invited you today.”

Great –thought Darcy –checked over by the mother –next thing she’d be opening her mouth to inspect her teeth.

“Oh, you are so right about your face!” Diane exclaimed, clapping her

hands, “it shows absolutely everything you are thinking. You would be such a dream for me to cross-examine on a witness stand. I would know the instant that you weren’t telling the absolute truth.”

Darcy wasn’t thrilled that Diane was so adroit at discerning her thoughts, or that she had just said what Darcy herself had only been thinking minutes before. It wasn’t that she lied a lot –but like everyone, she’d told the odd porky in her life –stretched the truth–, she amended, and she liked to think she could get away with it. There had been several times she had found it necessary to be somewhat economical with the facts of late when it came to explaining the reasons behind the shift in their circumstances to the children – she wondered now if they’d seen right through her as easily as Diane had? Perhaps years of being a mother to her brood of children and a lawyer to boot had honed Diane’s bullshit skills beyond the norm –at least she hoped this was so.

“You were telling me about this man you’ve met,” Darcy put the spotlight back onto Diane in hopes of deflecting it off her life. The ruse worked.

“Yes, I was. He’s quite lovely.” Diane’s face was alight with pleasure. “He is a lawyer who joined my practice a couple of months ago. We’ve been dating for a month now but I don’t really know how I’m going to go about introducing him to my children. Before this, I’ve never dated anyone in the twenty-one years since Frédéric –their father– died and I’m not sure how they will take the news.”

“Might I suggest that you start with just one or two? The entire family might be a little overwhelming to someone who isn’t used to, um,” Darcy searched her mind for a suitably descriptive word other than ‘hordes’.

“You’re quite right. The shrieking hordes might scare him off.” Once again Diane had all but echoed her own thoughts. Darcy thought she’d better start working on her ‘game face’ if she ever wanted to have any private thoughts around this woman in the future. “Perhaps you and Gabriel would meet us for dinner one evening soon –that would be a small start.” She pondered a moment, “There is one additional thing about him that I want to share.”

Oh dear, thought Darcy, what this time?

“It’s not that awful,” Diane remonstrated, shaking a finger.

So much for the ‘game face’, Darcy thought wryly. “I’m sorry,” she apologised, “please carry on.” She took a sip of the sweet wine to cover her embarrassment before setting the glass back on the table.

“Well, Willem was a priest before he became a lawyer. He hasn’t been married and has no family of his own –he left the church because he felt betrayed by the way the Vatican was handling molestation cases against children by the priesthood. But that’s all ancient history, and I doubt that my children will have any issues with any of it –it’s just that Willem is fifteen

years younger than me,” Diane made a moue shape with her lips.

You go girl! Nothing to apologise for there, thought Darcy. She jumped in before Diane could tell her what she was thinking, saying, “And why would that be any kind of problem? If you were a man, it would hardly be worthy of a comment.”

“You are quite right,” Diane agreed. “It’s just that deep down in the core of me, sometimes I’m not as French as I might seem. The girl from Missouri is still burrowed in the depths somewhere and I know that my folks ‘back home’ would have something to say about it. And whilst I know that I’m not some cougar out hunting for a younger man –I was completely blown away when he asked me out the first time, -but I doubt they’ll never see it that way.”

“Well, then,” Darcy spoke in a practical tone, reminded of her own mother’s negative and unsupportive responses to her life choices, “it’s a good thing they’re not here then, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I do like you!” Diane spluttered with laughter. “Such honesty!” She reached across to lightly pat Darcy’s outstretched hand. “You are going to make a delightful addition to the family!”

Darcy sat back, stunned. Dropping her arms lifelessly at her sides she was unable to form any words to respond to Diane’s comment in either endorsement or rebuttal. She opened and closed her mouth to say something several times but nothing would come out.

Diane sat with her head cocked to one side; studying Darcy with a bemused expression, “You poor dear –you look like a trout flailing on the riverbank. Take a breath, please,” she instructed gently, now looking more amused than concerned. “I never meant to shock you into an early grave, - heaven forbid! – Gabriel would never forgive me, but I thought you were well aware of how ardently he felt about you.” She watched Darcy closely for a moment to make sure she had started breathing again and when she was certain no permanent physical harm had been done, continued, “I may be a little more outspoken than you’re accustomed to but I feel I have to tell you that I’ve never seen my son look at a woman the way he looks at you –half as if he’d like to carry you off to his bed and half as if he’d kill rampaging bulls to protect you.” Her smile turned nostalgic, “it’s a lucky woman that finds a man like that once in a lifetime; – and believe me when I say that I know what I’m talking about - he takes after his father in that regard. It is one of the reasons why it’s taken me so many years to even consider another man.”

Darcy’s brain had resumed functioning. She made a decision to go with a swift denial but before she could voice her thoughts the sounds of doors opening and slamming and the thumping feet of the returning ‘hordes’ put paid to any continued private conversation. Diane rose from the courtyard table to proceed inside and serve dessert and there was no further

opportunity to resolve the subject they'd started before it was time to leave.

Frustrated that she'd not been able to repudiate the notion that she had plans of joining the Dubois clan at any time in the future, immediate or otherwise, Darcy chewed over Diane's words along with a generous portion of deliciously tart raspberries surrounded by smooth crème pâtissière in a perfectly baked short crust pastry; again on the drive back to Belagnac; and still afterwards once she was home in the cottage supervising teeth cleaning and bedtime for her children. Despite her prolonged deliberations she could come to no reasonable conclusion as to why Diane had made the assumption that she would be joining the family.

Yes, she admitted, she liked Gabriel, a lot, but it was too much of a stretch of her imagination, fertile as it could be, to picture them together as a permanent fixture. After her disastrous marriage to Patrick, she did *not* want to go there again.

Mindful of Diane's divulging of Gabriel's intent, Darcy found excuses not to visit the chateau more than was absolutely necessary over the next days. Granted, Gabriel was her employer, which meant a certain amount of to'ing and fro'ing between the cottage and chateau to finalise design plans and discuss revisions, budgeting and alterations was inevitable but for the most part she cited a heavy work load as her reason to turn down all invitations he made to bring the children over for meals or spend time with him. During the days she made sure that she was busy outside overseeing the early stages of excavation and ground work in the walled garden, surrounded by the construction crew and not available for private consultations and when not outdoors she used the need to stay ahead of the construction team as a valid reason to remain in the cottage, glued to her computer screen and working long into the night to finish the final detailed design drawings for the works. By Gabriel's tight lips and general demeanour when she did see him, she knew her ruse was not going to work much longer.

Fortune smiled upon her, she decided, when, towards the end of the week Gabriel was called away to urgent business meetings in Moscow, where he said he'd be for the next fortnight while involved in face-to-face discussions with potential partners regarding future business opportunities. When Darcy heard the news, she didn't know if she was relieved or disappointed.

Knowing in her heart that she needed to sort out her feelings for the man but glad of a reprieve that meant she didn't have to keep hiding out like the coward she was starting to feel she was becoming, she turned to her work once more and pushed all other considerations to the recesses of her mind

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Standing smack-bang in the middle of an encircling maelstrom of brawny men and moving machinery, all busily going about their allotted specialities, Darcy was in her element. To the untrained eye, in comparison to the green field it had been three weeks before, the site looked an unsalvageable mess; -the ground was chewed up by heavy machinery, trenches criss-crossed where walls and services were being installed and numerous holes had been dug, pockmarking the field with deep pits and accompanying mounds of fresh earth that made the pasture look as if it had been invaded by giant moles. To anyone who knew better, it was obvious that, whilst still a work-in-progress, considerable headway had been made.

Compared to other sites she'd worked on, the pace was frantic, rocket-fuelled by a budget without cash-flow issues. Len, the construction foreman was juggling multiple trades on site at once -so that by today, the end of week three, the fourth garden wall that would completely enclose the space was half-complete, two thirds of the pergola uprights had been concreted in place, underground services for drainage, power and reticulation were well on their way to completion and the greenhouse foundations dug out, concrete poured and supporting walls begun.

The greenhouse metalwork, wall frames and roof trusses were due to be delivered from the factory where they were being prefabricated by the end of the following week after which the glazing could go ahead. Early the following week coils for a ground-coupled heat exchange system would be laid in trenches to be dug in the adjacent field and the retaining walls for the sunken garden would go ahead. Assuming there were no delays, the pace showed no signs of slowing down until works were complete.

Darcy had been working day and night for the last two weeks just to keep ahead of the crew. Right now, she was attempting to hold a sheet of plans steady so she could explain a minor revision to the job foreman. An

early afternoon breeze that had sprung up out nowhere was buffeting the pages in a way that made the alterations near-impossible to read and seemed determined to rip the drawing from out of her fingers.

“How about we take refuge in the cottage?” Len, the head of Gabriel’s construction crew suggested in a loud voice, speaking over the noise as a concrete truck rumbled close by them, bringing more material for the additional wall footings. The truck driver grinned and flipped a friendly salute as he drove by, a little close for her comfort, Darcy thought, as she took an involuntary step backwards. Sometimes, she did wonder why she ever bothered wearing a brightly coloured hard hat on building sites –it felt, at times, that the yellow hat just marked her as an easier target for the various drivers of heavy machinery to locate.

What Darcy didn’t realise was that a good number of the crew were quite fascinated with the very feminine figure they were seeing daily in their male-dominated workspace and had been running a betting pool on who could get a date with her first. So far, no one had succeeded, but in their efforts to get noticed by her there had been one or two close calls. Len, who was happily married and therefore immune to the malaise that had struck his normally stoic work-crew was keeping a close eye on the situation; more interested in maintaining a safe work environment and getting the job done than in the dating habits of his crew. Though even he did admit that today, their resident designer looked particularly pretty and feminine in a bright yellow sunflower-embroidered dress and white cardigan teamed with her trademark poppy-covered boots. Unaware of her effect on the landscape crew, Darcy had chosen the dress in hopes of cheering herself up; -Gabriel had been absent now for two full weeks- despite thinking about him constantly she was still unsure of her feelings for him and hadn’t come to any conclusion of what to do when he arrived back. It was getting her down.

“Get you mind back on the job,” she chided herself, as she followed Len; stepping up and over planks spanning the central wall footings then around several large piles of neatly stacked bricks to move towards the cottage.

Approaching the small building, Darcy was unsure just how much of a refuge it might be. A steady stream of workmen had been coming and going from the front door all week; as she’d watched them the day before a picture of worker bees entering and exiting a busy beehive had popped into her head. And now, as well as the building labourers, she could see the arborists readying their saws to begin work on pruning the nearby magnolia tree, so it did not appear that the cottage would be a quieter option –but at least they would be out of the breeze.

Brightly stranded climbing ropes were hanging from the tall tree where Darcy could see a woman wearing a safety harness dangling high up among

the branches, marking a damaged bough with a can of fluoro spray-paint while a man on the ground was preparing to haul a chainsaw tied to another rope upwards to her. Darcy knew them to be a husband and wife team that specialised in this work. They'd come highly recommended and would be here at the chateau with their ropes, ladders, saws and a cherry picker for the next week or so checking all of the trees on the grounds and performing remedial work as required.

Darcy followed the foreman through the front door of the cottage into what would be the kitchen when work was complete. Outside, Peppermint cottage was now sporting fresh coats of its namesake paint. The tiled roof had been repaired and made watertight once more, timbers had been stripped, filled, sanded, repaired or replaced in a few instances and the bricked-up windows had been unblocked and reglazed. The reinstatement of the windows had made a huge transformation inside the cottage, with daylight flooding the salon and the stairwell and filtering through into the kitchen area. Work was still going on inside and the bathroom addition wasn't quite out of the groundwork's phase but the little cottage looked almost serene in the midst of all the activity –as if it knew full-well that this bustle was all for its benefit.

Darcy set the pages she had been clutching on top of a dusty folding table that had been set up in the centre of the room. A smattering of assorted chairs sat around –testament to the space's current use as a smoko room on days when the weather did not invite the workers to take their breaks outside. Today it would have to also make do as a site office. Without the wind playing havoc with her drawings, it took only a few moments to explain the changes Darcy wanted. She had amended the depth at one end of the pool in the sunken garden area to allow for the placement of large rocks that would function both as stepping stones and as refuges for the fish they planned to stock the pond with. Otherwise, Darcy knew from experience, without the hide-outs, the local birdlife might get the idea that they'd provided a breakfast banquet of fresh fish just for them.

"That's no problem at all -I'll let the boys know about the changes. That all then," Len inquired politely. Gabriel was using men from his own construction company –one of the many arms of his business empire- and had chosen Len, a native English-speaker, for his bilingual skills as well as his vast building experience. Darcy appreciated not having to give instructions in her pigeon-French; it was challenging enough as a designer to not create misunderstandings on a construction site without having the added problem of language to contend with.

"It's good you got this to me today because I'm bringing in a metal detector on Monday before we complete the excavations for that area and for the heat-exchange trenches. Bertrand tells me that there're some local stories of old WW2 ordnance being buried in the field outside the walls so I

don't want to take any chances with my machinery or people."

"Sounds like a very good idea to check first," Darcy said, not wanting to think of the carnage that an unexploded shell might make. As she spoke these words the gritty roar of a chainsaw started up directly outside the kitchen windows, rendering all conversation next to impossible. She mouthed her thanks, waved a brief goodbye to Len and went back outside, keeping her hands over her ears until she was at a distance from the din.

At the original gate to the garden she turned to survey the scene; quite different to the view she had had when she had first walked through this gateway—in the final layout there would be a total of six external gates; two to both the western and eastern walls and one each to the north and south. As well, there would be a rear doorway let through the new wall into the greenhouse, with another two internal gates set in the central spur wall that would divide the garden into unequal halves. At the moment all the vehicles that visited site were coming across a temporarily laid track that ended at the wall behind the cottage. This gate she was standing at was only just big enough to allow entry for the chateau's small tractor mower but the concrete trucks and delivery vehicles that were needed to bring materials to site were much wider so they would finish the final section of wall behind the cottage once all need for large vehicles was done. It was this smaller section of wall to the rear of the cottage that would require the expertise of a master stonemason -Gabriel had said he had a friend who possessed the necessary skills- but Darcy had yet to meet him.

It was a mess she admitted, as she gazed across the building site, but it was a mess with a purpose. As she studied the work in progress, in her mind's eye she replaced the butchered building site with the finished garden. It would be breathtakingly beautiful.

At the pace the crew were setting themselves it wouldn't be long now til all the walls were built, including the central spine. A columned timber arbour with a gently curving 'roof' would run all the way from the gate where she was standing, through the spur-wall, to another gateway in the far eastern wall that would provide a tantalising glimpse of the trees in the woods beyond.

Looking through the first already-constructed sections of the arbour, Darcy could imagine the timbers completely covered in weeping wisteria vines, dripping with pretty fragile flowers in bands of colour from white to blue and pink, sub-dividing the space into four garden rooms with its flowery curtain.

The 'room' closest to and directly in front of Peppermint cottage would be predominantly a flower garden with wide perennial beds to either side of a fleur-de-lis based central feature. Across the far side of the wisteria arbour, to Darcy's immediate right from where she was standing would be the herb garden. There would be ample space in its beds for the cottage's

namesake plant and numerous other useful and beautiful herbs.

Then, she pictured, visitors could walk along the wisteria ‘tunnel’ through the gate in the central wall –here they would find two more garden rooms, to the right would be the sunken garden, designed to provide a space for solace and contemplation with a feature pool with lilies -and fish, Darcy reminded herself, now that the detail of the fish safety-zone was included and with a small sheltering pergola nestled up against the eastern wall. Across the wisteria arbour to the north would be the fourth zone or ‘room’ –the practical part of the garden with the greenhouse and hotframes for growing seedlings and coldframes for hardening off the new plants set against its northern wall. And there would be a potager –with beds of vegetables laid out in sandwich-shaped triangles, upright frames for beans and peas, and, as in all the other ‘rooms’ more perennial borders around the edges to provide all year colour and interest.

Darcy considered further, really, she supposed, there were five ‘rooms’ – the fifth being an area to the side and rear of the cottage -separated from the rest by a tall hedge jutting from the central spine wall instead of another brick wall and intended to give the residents of Peppermint cottage a small private space that was for their use alone -with the added bonus of the feature stonework wall. Darcy could envisage a lawn, flower beds and trees for children to play in, a large cherry tree with a swing, perhaps, on one sturdy bough and to possibly provide a home for the red squirrels to scamper up and store food in. They wouldn’t have to wait too long for the tree to grow big enough either –Gabriel had given permission for her to buy mature specimen trees where they were required for instant effect. When she had heard, she had almost rubbed her hands in glee at the prospect.

The reminder of Gabriel sobered her gleeful thoughts considerably. She felt she’d been running hot and cold where he was concerned and really wanted to come clean and get things out in the open. She had admitted to herself in these last weeks that Diane’s prediction had not only stunned but frightened her as well, and instead of dealing with in a mature grown-up manner, she’d resorted to scurrying away and hiding. Time to grow a spine, she thought.

She stood straighter and drew her shoulders back; well she’d start on that resolution ...first thing Monday.

In the meantime, Gabriel wasn’t home until after the weekend and the children and she were anticipating a long-overdue visit by Halley and Alicia. They were picking them up at the train station in Rouen this evening. The prospect of a whole weekend of girl-time and spoiling her god-daughter stretched enticingly in front of Darcy and she wasn’t about to let a little love-sickness stand in the way of that!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Halley shifted her pyjama-clad backside into a more comfortable position among the sofa cushions, propped her feet in their pink bunny slippers up on the low coffee table and turned to Darcy, reaching across to clink her large glass of Burgundy Pinot Noir against that of her friend's, "Here's looking at you, kid," she smiled, perfect white teeth gleaming against her ivory skin tones in the room's low lamplight. "Man, I've missed you – London's just not the same without you and the children."

"Missed you too," Darcy spoke softly, smiling across the cherubic sleeping form of Alicia who was wearing new Pumpkin Patch squirrel-appliqued pjs and a fluffy pink hooded dressing gown. Not wanting to miss anything, the little girl had insisted on staying up, but had succumbed to sleep fifteen minutes earlier. Since she and Halley would be sleeping on the sofa pull-out bed, Halley had left her curled on the cushions where she'd fallen asleep, tucking the sofa throw over her daughter before gently removing her thumb from her mouth. The thumb-sucking was something she was working on discouraging but every now and then Alicia would revert to comforting herself by sucking when in new or altered circumstances. Halley tucked the tiny hand back under the silky mohair cover, hoping it would remain there this time.

"Okay, she's properly asleep now," Halley pronounced. "It's time for us to put our thinking caps on and spend some quality drinking-and-thinking time working out what I can do to stay here."

Darcy took a sip of her wine and furrowed her brow in thought. That Halley was interested in relocating to live nearby –well, not so much nearby, she revised, as on the property, had been a revelation that had struck like a lightning bolt out of the clear blue sky earlier in the evening.



It seemed that they'd barely driven through the gate before Halley had become quite entranced with Chateau de Belagnac and well within the first hour had stated that she had fallen deeply in love with the place –all of which caught Darcy completely by surprise.

Fairly sure that her best friend would find the chateau and its environs a trifle quaint at best and most likely way too countrified for her upmarket city tastes, she had been prepared to put up with a bit of ribbing as to why she should want to stay here, living in a cottage that was less than half the size of her London home and with very little on her doorstep that she had once had.

As they had driven through the village, Darcy had pointed out the Mairie, garage, church and school, but other than these amenities she acknowledged that Belagnac had little more than the few homes that housed the villages' less than six hundred inhabitants. The closest Carrefour supermarket was several miles up the road and for any other shopping it was necessary to take a trip to Bourg-Montfort, Rouen or Tourville.

Whilst she had enjoyed the walkability of her old London neighbourhood, with schools, shops, cafés and other conveniences all within spitting distance, these were things that Darcy no longer found inconvenient. She felt that living at the chateau more than made up for anything she might have given up and had learned to plan her weekly shopping trips around school drop-offs or pick-ups.

Thinking about that, she briefly acknowledged that prior to his departure Gabriel had frequently been picking up both Connor from his school and miscellaneous grocery items for her, something she'd missed these past two weeks with his absence.

She determinedly pushed the thought from her mind, as something she had decided not to think about over the weekend.

Darcy had driven in the gateway nearest the cottage. With Gabriel away and so many building materials stacked up ready for work to begin again on Monday she had instructed Len to padlock the main gates against possible pilfering, so they had opted to drive in what Darcy had jokingly dubbed 'the servant's entrance'.

From the moment of their arrival –as she opened the car door and set her feet on the ground, Halley had expressed pleasure in everything she laid eyes upon. They had barely taken the luggage inside when she insisted upon strapping Alicia into her pushchair and setting off to explore the grounds. Ten minutes after driving in the gate, laying eyes on the chateau for the first time, she proclaimed that she was 'in love' ...and the first second she spied the gardener's cottage, despite the rubble and organised chaos that surrounded it, she had declared to Darcy that she just had to find a way to live there.

Darcy, who was carrying Alicia on her hip because they'd left the

pushchair at the edge of the driveway to walk across the rough ground, didn't really believe Halley meant a word that she'd said. Still, she told her friend the name she had chosen for the little house.

"Peppermint Cottage," Halley rolled the title around in her mouth like a sweet before smacking her lips. "Hmmm ...mmm. What a great name and what a pretty colour. I love it, I adore it!" she crooned. "It's so cute –just a perfect fit for me and Alicia. The double doors, the windows with those shutters and all that gorgeous lacy woodwork stuff round the eaves - it's every bit as lovely as you described and more." She echoed Darcy's earlier thoughts about the colour, "It's like a little gift-wrapped tea-caddy from Fortnum's, isn't it? So best friend in all this big wide world -when can I move in?"

"Who are you?" Darcy gawped askance at Halley, "and what have you done with my wild-horses-couldn't-drag-me-to-leave-the-city friend?" she tilted her head to one side as she tried to fathom if Halley was just jerking her chain or for real.

Halley's full lips trembled and her chin wobbled at this, leading Darcy to conclude from the full-on acting that she was serious. "You really do want this, don't you?"

"Yup. Abso-blimmin'-lutley, babydoll," Halley turned soulful dark eyes on Darcy as she spoke. "Please tell me it's available and hasn't been given it to someone else. 'Cos if you have, darlin', I'm gonna have to kill them," she spoke decisively and in a quite matter-of-fact tone.

"Kill them, kill them, kill them," sang Alicia, bouncing on Darcy's hip as she echoed her mother's sentiments in her cute toddler's voice.

"Ooops," Halley looked abashed. "My bad. That would be K. I. L. L. them," she belatedly spelled out the word ...but the damage was done. Alicia sang on, repeating the phrase louder and louder. "Oh, B. U. G. G. E. R." Halley dug into her pocket, pulling out a bag of jelly babies, "Here, have a sweetie, sweetie and let's hope you stop saying that."

Darcy set Alicia down on her feet, straightening her clothes –she was wearing a tot-sized orange puffer vest with multi-toned orange and white tartan trousers and leather boots. Darcy continued to hold firmly onto one hand –mindful they were standing in a building site and not a toddler's playground.

Alicia used her free hand to stuff several of the garishly coloured sweets in her mouth at once, which, with her mouth full to overflowing had the desired effect of stopping the inappropriate lyrics. Darcy looked on with bewildered amusement, hoping she wouldn't choke and keeping an eye on the little girl to make sure she swallowed. Sweets gone, Alicia sat down on the earth, captivated by the mound of cement sand the builders had left for the weekend she started to dig enthusiastically with her hands.

"Does it matter if she gets her clothes grubby?" Darcy started to ask.

Halley tapped a distracted Darcy on her shoulder, her face set in a questioning look as she awaited the reply to her previous query.

"Sure. If it would get you to move here, and you want it, it's all yours babe," Darcy didn't care that she didn't actually own the aforementioned cottage. That, she decided on the spot, was merely a detail and not to be considered. Her BFF, here in France with her and the children –did it get any better than that? "I'm sure my boss would come to some arrangement with you so you could stay." Especially if I put in a good word for you, she thought, not taking into account that she had barely been putting in any words with him prior to his departure for Russia.

"So the rich old dude likes you, does he?" Halley asked.

Somewhere along the way, Halley had gotten the impression that Gabriel was old. It was an error that Darcy had yet to correct. She wagged her hand as if to say 'so-so', not wanting to give anything away. The last thing she wanted to do right now was to pursue that subject.

Then, like the cold douse of an ice-bucket challenge, reality hit. "But what would you do for a job here? You've got a great career back in London that pays you truckloads of money. You can't move here and be a pauper."

"Yes I can," Halley disagreed. "Well, not the pauper bit but I'm over my job. It's time for a change. Plus, I've already handed in my notice."

Darcy was shocked speechless. Halley was such a meticulous planner that ditching a well-paid job was the last thing she'd thought her friend would ever do.

"You're not the only one that wants a new start. We'll just have to think of something I can do here instead of London that will pay the bills. I don't have to make *truckloads*, just enough to get by without eating up all my savings." Halley sighed deeply, "It's been two years now since it's just been Alicia and me alone and I want some time-out to re-evaluate what I'm doing with the rest of my life. You know that kind of time you take when you can stand by a pond and just skip stones –if I knew how to skip stones that is. Which I don't. But maybe if I live here for a while I might learn." She sighed heavily once more, "Whatever. I'm just tired of being superwoman, working ten to twelve hours days and trying to be a good mother at the same time. I don't mean to complain but there's never any time for *me* and I feel like my life is leaking away." She looked at her friend, willing her to understand.

"I know what you mean," Darcy replied, hiding her amazement that Halley had quit a job that came with a number of additional staff perks and privileges, an on-site child-minding service for one. "I came here with the express purpose of collecting my thoughts and working out what it was I wanted to be before I move on to something else." She sighed heavily. She wasn't ready to admit, even to her best friend, that she no longer had the

desire to move on to anything else and just wanted to stay right where she was. “You’ll be pleased to know, there is a duck pond,” she continued, thinking of the wide, shallow pond near the south entrance. “And it would be perfect for skipping stones, if that’s what you really want to do.”

Halley eyed her friend thoughtfully. Her intuition told her there was something in Darcy’s eyes that spoke of a secret being kept hidden from her but she figured she could be a little patient for whatever it was to be revealed. Well, at least she could wait until the end of the weekend, she decided.

Taller than Darcy, Halley placed one long slender arm across her friend’s shoulders as she turned to survey the mayhem of the construction site. “Don’t take this the wrong way honeypie –I think you’re a brilliant landscape architect and all- but I just can’t help but question what you’ve done with the place darlin’. I’m sure you’ve got a plan but it’s lookin’ kind of scorched earth meets ground-zero’ish at the moment.”

“Oh, give over,” Darcy pushed back playfully, “it’s just in that ‘you have to break a few eggs to make an omelette’ stage ...except in this case, we’ve had to break a *lot* of eggs.”

“Yup –cartons and cartons of the things, I’d say,” Halley agreed. “What do they say?—something like, ‘Never let fools or children see unfinished work?’” Halley quoted.

Darcy nodded in agreement, “yeah.”

“I’ve never really understood that proverb ...So, should we cover Alicia’s eyes or what?”

“Nah,” Darcy answered, adding, “Connor and Rosie have been over to see what’s going on here plenty and they think it’s totally awesome. They both love the cottage so you might have to fight them for it,” she amended her previous offer. “Though personally, I’m quite happy to stay where we are by the stables. It’s quiet –I don’t even hear the church bells ringing anymore- and I love the long views out over the fields and to the woods.” It had taken surprisingly little time for Darcy and the children to become so habituated to the hourly bells that they no longer noticed the tolling.

“Good,” her friend smiled, “so, no competition from you. And I can take on your kids easily.” She pranced around, jabbing at an imaginary boxing opponent, intoning in a sing-song voice, “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.”

“Give over, Muhammad Ali. The only bees that’ll be doing any ‘stinging’ round here will be the ones that arrive next week in their new hives.”

Halley lowered her fists. “Cool, can I get one of those dinky white spaceman suits with the silly hats? I’d love to learn how to make honey.”

“Well, the bees do all the work making honey. We just have to collect it and eat the stuff.”

“So maybe I could be a bee-farmer?” Halley suggested.

“You? An apiarist? I don’t want to be a negative Nelly but I don’t think so sweetie,” Darcy patted her arm. “Remember, the last time a bee flew into your apartment and you made me catch it and put it outside. You just stood there and did that ‘girl’ thing.” Darcy waved her hands tremulously either side of her head to give a visual on what the ‘girl’ thing had looked like.

“I did not!” Halley protested, before she considered for a moment, “Yeah – I did kinda, didn’t I? Hmmm, you’re probably right. So bee-keeper is out. But there must be something else. Tell you what -We’ll sit down this evening over a glass or two of liquid inspiration and see what we can come up with. Meanwhile, how about we take a tour of the village and check out all the hot local talent?”

Darcy shook her head despairingly. From what she’d seen, the ‘hot local talent’ was either: middle-aged and married like Bertrand, or still in short pants and at school. There was a distinct lack of males in the village that were either old enough or unmarried enough to be potential date material for Halley, but she didn’t say so and they went for a walk anyway. She figured the fresh air and exercise would do her friend’s libido more good than spying up the local ‘talent’.

Of course, she thought as they walked, there was Gabriel. She hadn’t described her boss and the owner of the chateau’s physical appearance to her friend. Not sure where Halley had got the impression that he was an old man she wasn’t about to say anything that might change her view. Knowing Halley, she’d jump to conclusions and want to know every little detail of their working and personal relationship –details that Darcy did not want to discuss.



Setting her wine glass on the low table Darcy looked over at Halley, “I’ve just had an ideal!”

“Oh goody,” Halley beamed a bright smile. “Well. Share with the class sweetie, why don’t you?”

“After I collected Connor from school this afternoon, we went for a hot chocolate. There’s a Chocolatier in Bourg-Montfort that does a whole bunch of chocolate stuff –you know, hand-made chocolates and truffles – of course; but as well as those she makes her own chocolate sauces and chocolate ice-cream and hot chocolates and all sorts of sinfully delicious chocolaty-related num nums.”

“That’s very nice. I do, as you know, like chocolate. I did that course last summer on chocy making. It was yummy – I think I gained five pounds in less than two months. But your point would be?”

“There was a poster on the window advertising for staff.”

“Get outta town! Reckon it’s been filled yet?” Halley looked down at her p-ys and then her sleeping daughter, “I suppose it’s too late to go and see if it’s still available at this time of night?”

"They'll be shut by now. You'll have to wait 'til morning but if you're keen, we can go first thing and see if there's still a vacancy. I know the sign only went up today or yesterday because I was there on Wednesday afternoon." The shop had quickly become a favourite after-school-treat spot for Darcy, Connor and Rosie and they visited several times a week for ice-creams and hot chocolates. Its diminutive owner, aptly named Mademoiselle Petit, had taken a shine to Rosie and was always giving her extra treats for the children.

"Even if it is unfilled –reckon they'd want me?" Halley looked as if she was having a minor crisis of confidence, not something Darcy had ever seen her do before.

Darcy held up her fist, unfurling her fingers one at a time as she spoke, "Come on girl. You have a management degree, you've worked for years in the hospitality industry, you're great with people, speak fluent French and Mandarin and you're really good at making chocolates." She waved her open hand, wagging fingers, "What's not to love?" She grinned at her friend, "The only problem I can see is that you might have to dumb it down a little or they'll think you're overqualified."

"You're right!" Halley straightened up momentarily before visibly sagging once more, "You don't think I'm being stupid giving up my salary and all the perks of being a hotel manager?"

Darcy spoke thoughtfully, considering her words before she uttered them, "If you've been thinking about this for a while and it's not just some spontaneous spittin' the dummy kinda thing..."

Halley shook her head hard in denial, causing her frizzy hair to bounce in a way that put Darcy in mind of Frodo running.

"...which I can see it's not," Darcy finished the sentence. "Well, then I think you should give it a go. It's not going to hurt your career to take a short break and if you feel like you need some time to get your head together, I'll do everything I can to help you." Darcy reached across Alicia's slumbering form to give her friend a one-armed hug.

Halley wiped away a tear from her cheek with the back of one hand.

"Look at me, I'm all sniffly now."

"I have just the thing to fix that," Darcy rose and went into the kitchen, returning with a box of fresh chocolates from the Chocolatier. "Time to break out the emergency supplies," she announced, presenting the unopened box to Halley.

"Oh, now you're speaking my language girlfriend!" Halley reached for the package, tore it open and selecting one at random and popping it in her mouth, "Oh yum," she spoke reverently, savouring the morsel, "salted caramel. Delish. If this is an example of the product I definitely want to get on board." She swallowed and reached for a second, "better test another, don't you think, just to make sure that wasn't a fluke." she raised her

slightly red eyes to Darcy. "I'm gonna get this job tomorrow, girlfriend."

Now that sounded more like the Halley she knew and loved, Darcy thought happily.

"Can't think of any reason why not," she agreed.

"And you know what's going to clinch it for me?"

Darcy raised an eyebrow questionably.

"No-one else that applies will be able to speak Mandarin," Halley spluttered with barely-contained laughter, "Cos I'm sure we'll get a boatload of Chinese tourists wanting to buy all things chocy in the teeming 'tropolis of Bourg-Montfort!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"I got the job, I got the job, I got the job!" Halley crowed delightedly, circling her arms over her head as she did an impromptu booty dance in the middle of the tree-shaded outdoor car park. When a good-looking blond-haired man who had just alighted from a beat up Citroën 2CV stared at her from across the far side of the parked cars she smiled and repeated the phrase in French and then Mandarin, all the while continuing her dance.

He smiled across the space, "I understood you the first time," he called, "but I do appreciate the repeats. Bonjour. Nǐ hǎo. And congratulations to you." He waved a muscular arm before he walked off down a narrow lane and disappeared around the corner.

"Mmmm," Halley purred, "I wants that one."

"Down girl, down," Darcy patted her arm. "You just got a job, perhaps we could leave the man for a week or two."

Halley pouted, "I can multitask. I'm a woman, a mother and a hotel manager –oops, make that junior apprentice chocolatier," she amended. She'd taken Darcy's advice the night before and had written an abbreviated CV, which she had printed on Darcy's printer, omitting several of her higher qualifications while accentuating her considerable on-the-job experience. Along with her disarming personality, it had done the trick, –that and the fact that Madame Petit the proprietor had a growing business and a desperate need for more staff.

They'd been on the Chocolatier's doorstep that morning shortly after its opening and it had taken very little time for Mademoiselle Petit, to realise that in Halley, she had found the perfect mix of personality and skills for the job. She was hired on the spot, with the proviso that she could start work first thing Monday morning –something that neither Darcy nor Halley; in their rush to apply for the job, had factored in.

Halley had been expecting that she and Alicia would return to London

for a week or so to pack up and rent her apartment but when Mademoiselle Petit –Chantelle, told her that her mother lived in the apartment above the shop and would be more than happy to mind Alicia while Halley worked, the deal was practically clinched.

Darcy, who had introduced Halley to the chocolatier and had been present, at Chantelle's smiling request, during the short interview, -little of which she had understood as it had been conducted in French- had immediately added her own offer for Halley to stay with her at the stable cottage until she had her own place.

The conversation went to and fro in English and French for several minutes, dependent upon who Halley was speaking with, but by the time it was done Halley had made up her mind that she would stay with Darcy for the interim, begin work Monday morning and call in an agency to organise the rental of her home until such time as Peppermint Cottage was move-in ready.

While all this had been taking place Connor, Rosie and Alicia had been sitting at one of the pretty pale blue shop tables in the front window, occupied with hot chocolates and handmade marshmallows. The adults joined them for another round of drinks and chocolates in celebration. They left Chantelle looking happy and relieved with a casual *à bientôt* and a promise from Halley to be back first thing Monday morning.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

The cottage was peaceful and quiet once more. After a hectic morning rush-hour of getting everyone to school and work on time Darcy sat at her computer, recovering in the aftermath of the manic activity.

Somehow they'd all managed to get to their day's activities washed, dressed and breakfasted but she wasn't sure how. She had walked Rosie across the road to her school before driving Connor, Halley and Alicia to their respective destinations, promising herself that she would pick up groceries later as she didn't want to spend time running errands on her way home.

Darcy was sure things would get easier once they had established a new routine, but a weekend with guests and the frantic morning had taken its toll and she was feeling a little jaded starting the week. Napoleon had taken the opportunity to jump up on her lap and finding no protests at his occupation, had begun washing his paws with his usual single-minded attentiveness.

A cup of cooling coffee at her elbow, Darcy's unfocused eyes were staring in the general direction of her computer screen but her mind was off elsewhere. She was in a world of her own, pre-occupied with re-living the busy weekend she'd just had, day-dreaming about the future and planning what she would say to Gabriel when she next saw him.



"Talk about 'the train is running, but the engineer is asleep at the wheel'," the soft voice belonged to Gabriel, but how it had got to within an inch of her ear without her noticing was something Darcy would never know. She had jumped and sworn, yes, partly from fright and partly she suspected, from a sense of guilt that although she had known he was back she had not gone in search of him.

Before leaving for work, Halley had extracted a promise from Darcy that she would speak to her boss as soon as possible this morning about the gardener's cottage, but despite knowing that the black SUV had driven down the lane earlier she had stayed indoors, telling herself that she would go and speak to Gabriel shortly. That had been an hour and a half and two cups of coffee ago and she knew it had more to do with nerves than it did with her sense of lethargy.

Darcy paused, waiting either for the heart attack that she was sure was imminent or for her pulse to return to its more regular rate. Feeling the blood pounding in her ears she gripped the arms of her office chair, drawing in calming breaths.

Gabriel meanwhile had plucked the kitten from her lap and sat relaxing on the sofa, fondling the feline's ears and watching her with a hawk-like gaze.

"Hard weekend?" he inquired politely, noting the dark shadows under her tired eyes.

"You could say," she replied cryptically, "or, you might say beginning of a hard week."

He leant forward with a look that said 'do tell'.

Darcy knew that now was the time to divulge what she had so rashly promised to Halley. She started to speak but had some difficulty getting to the point, going around in circles with a windily detailed rendition of the weekends' events, including Halley's obsessive delight at seeing the chateau and Peppermint cottage, her interview, job offer and the Chocolatier's condition that Halley not return to London but stay and start work immediately. Eventually, she ran out of story and breath, still not having asked the one pertinent question that she needed to in regard to the cottage.

"Why do I get the feeling that there is a pointy end to this very long tale?" Gabriel steepled his forefingers together to form the apex of triangle, tapping them together several times for emphasis as he spoke. He smiled in a way that suggested to Darcy that he knew exactly where she had been heading with her narrative.

Darcy steeled herself, "I might have, sort of, intimated..."

"...intimated?" he was enjoying this, it was patently obvious from his knowing smirk.

"Okay ...maybe I *promised*,"

"Yes," he sat there on her sofa, pretty feather-patterned cushions to either side, looking like a maharajah reclining among the peacocks. Darcy sent a thought-bolt to Napoleon, wishing she had the power of telepathy that she could silently instruct the small feline to dig his claws in somewhere that would hurt. Napoleon, it seemed, was too busy licking his paws and washing his ears to receive the message.

The moment had arrived. As the dam broke, it all came out in a torrent

of words, the syllables tripping over one another in her haste to get them said, "...Okay, I promised my best friend that she could rent your gardener's cottage even though I hadn't asked you about it and I completely understand if you say no but it will break Halley's heart and she might hate me forever if you don't and you didn't say that you had anyone lined up to rent the place." She took in a deep breath to replace all the air she had just used up.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" he grinned evilly, she thought. "It's like pulling teeth, hurts for a moment then it's all better."

Her only reply was a frosty stare as she awaited his decision.

"No," he replied, the single word slicing through the air like an executioner's axe.

Her heart sank, rapidly followed by her expression.

So much for her '*completely understanding*' if he said no, he thought. "You really do show every single thing you're thinking on your face," he commented, making her wonder if he'd been discussing her with his mother. She still didn't reply so he continued, "This is the friend, is it not, that you told me was top-notch hotel manager in London? Right?"

"Hmm-mm." The mumbled reply was all she could muster.

"Well, the chateau will require a manager."

"Where're you going with this?" She saw a faint glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

"The chateau needs a manager, the manager needs a home –seems to me like they're made for each other."

"It isn't quite that straight forward," she interrupted. "As I said, Halley has found a job with the chocolatier and she wants a break from managing for a while. She says she wants to 'skip stones'."

"*Quoi?* Excuse me?" he raised both eyebrows quizzically.

"She wants to take a break from everything that she was doing while she figures out what she wants to do next," Darcy explained. "She's been a solo mum with a full-time job and a little girl and she wants to slow down –so she says she wants to skip stones on a pond," she swivelled on her revolving chair as she mimed the action.

"Ah, yes. Now I know what you mean," he nodded sagely. "No better place to do that than here, I'd say."

"But you said 'no'," she shook her head and turned her palms upwards to indicate his refusal of her request.

"If you'd given me a chance, I'd have expanded on that," he replied tersely. "I was merely saying 'no' to her needing to rent the cottage if she took on the job of managing the day to day life of the chateau. Accommodation would come with the job. As you know, Bertrand is responsible for all things outside the chateau walls but we need someone to handle bookings, organising counselling sessions, ordering food and

supplies, possibly some cooking –all that sort of stuff. My guess is that she would have been ideal for the job, but, if she wants to continue working with Mademoiselle Petit, that's okay too. She can rent the cottage once it's ready." He stared at her thoughtfully, "But I can't have you fading away in the meantime by running yourself ragged with so many living in this tiny cottage."

She was not sure she liked that he thought she looked 'ragged'.

He ignored her frown and pursed lips, continuing, "...Not when there is a huge empty chateau sitting a few hundred metres away. The children's play-space and the top floor apartments have been completed while I was away and are ready now. I'm moving out of the dragon's den into my own apartment this evening and your friend may have the other apartment until the garden cottage is ready for her."

"Besides, you will need the space..." he added enigmatically.

She wasn't the only one who had agreed to something on the weekend without first consulting the other party. He had a small detail he needed to tell her also and was hoping she might be as understanding as he had been; not so much attempting to grease the wheels but more hoping he wouldn't soon get shot down for something he'd accepted on her behalf.

"Awesome," Darcy could hide neither her relief nor her euphoria at the double whammy of Halley getting the cottage and her having her own space back. Much as she loved her friend and would have done anything for her, the old adage that 'fish and guests go off after three days' was all too true – the stable cottage was just too small for five and she could foresee problems with Halley and Alicia sharing the sofa pull-out for much longer. She had been on the point of suggesting that they change places, with mother and daughter moving into her bedroom but knew that wasn't an ideal solution either. The tiny bathroom and kitchen spaces just weren't designed with a large 'extended family' in mind and they had all tripped over one another incessantly that morning in the rush to get out the door on time.

"She won't mind, will she that there will still be workmen downstairs?"

"Not at all. Besides, they'll be gone each day by the time she's home from work," Darcy said reasonably. "The builders have made great progress with Peppermint Cottage while you were away. The bathroom foundations are almost done, and once that's built there's just the kitchen refit and decorating to be completed. Should be ready within a few weeks," she predicted.

Gabriel nodded his agreement. He had already been over to the walled garden area and spoken at length with Len that morning. "I'm sure she'll make an ideal tenant for your Peppermint Cottage. I had no one lined up for it though I do have a probable occupant for the dovecote once it's renovated. Will your Halley be okay with having a neighbour nearby?"

"I'm sure it won't be a problem. Halley is quite sociable -she gets on with everybody- and she's totally infatuated with the place. It would take a herd of rampaging elephants to trample the place before she'd even notice anything else." Darcy spoke candidly. "Besides, she'll have an eight foot high wall and gates between her and the dovecote by the time the works are complete."

"Speaking of which, the person I've in mind for the tenancy is going to be building the final section of garden wall. He's an old friend of mine from New York and a stonemason by trade. He'll build the ha-ha you've designed for the south frontage as well and any other stonework that needs building or repairing.

"That's wonderful! While you were gone I've finished drawings for a stone folly as a focal point for the north allée." An on-site stonemason – woo hoo! Darcy thought delightedly.

"Great. I'll have a look at the drawings later. But right now, I do have a couple of minor conditions for your BFF getting the cottage," Gabriel was good at thinking quickly on his feet and immediately decided that he might as well use whatever ammunition was at hand to further his own interests this morning.

"And they would be?" Darcy spoke warily.

"Condition number one is that you put down that computer mouse and come with me to the market in Pont-Audemer. You look as if you are in no state to be in charge of a computer today and you need some time off," he proclaimed. His conversation with his site foreman had given him a clear picture of how many hours Darcy must have worked while he had been away.

"Oh, those kinds of 'conditions'," she grimaced. She was about to say she couldn't possibly, that she had too much work to take time off, when she yawned massively. Unable to control it, she held both hands over her gaping mouth.

"I rest my case," with these words, Gabriel calmly rose and before she realised what he was doing he had reached over to the keyboard, and with a few sure strokes had saved and exited the drawing she had been staring at, shutting down her computer. "Bertrand can do all of the afternoon pick-ups or get one of my men to help. He is more than capable and Chantelle Petit is his niece so it will give him a nice chance to say 'hello' when he collects your friend and her daughter.

"Alright, I suppose I could do with a few hours off," she conceded. "I warn you though, my boss is a tyrant and if he catches us playing hooky there'll be hell to pay. I could lose my job."

"*Tant pis* -too bad. We'll take our chances," was his dry rejoinder. "And I know you've been doing a lot of overtime so I'll put in a good word for you if we get caught." Even before his departure and despite having employed a

night-time security guard to make regular patrols Frodo and he had still been taking their late-night and early-morning walks past her front door so he knew of her late-night work habits.

“And condition number two is?” she asked.

“This one is a little more, um, tricky,” was it her imagination or did his face look shifty, like some kid caught with his hand dipped in the cookie jar?”

“Define ‘tricky’ please,” she drummed the fingers of her right hand on the desktop as she waited for the explanation, sounding, he thought, a lot like his mother.

“I can do better than define, I can show you,” he walked towards the door, “*un moment, s’il te plait.*” With this cryptic comment he strode outside to the SUV, parked right outside her door. Darcy crossed to the window, curious to see what was up but he was making sure that his broad back hid whatever he was collecting from the vehicle. He turned, holding something tucked under the opposite flap of his leather jacket as he closed the car door and it wasn’t until he re-entered the room that she saw a head peeking out from under the jacket, swiftly accompanied by excited barking.

“Oh no,” Darcy held out her hands in mock horror as the wriggling bundle of a Cavalier King Charles spaniel puppy struggled to jump the gap between Gabriel and her. When he scrambled from Gabriel’s arms towards her own, she had little choice but to instinctively catch the little dog as he leapt. The puppy squirmed in pleasure, even more in her arms, his entire body mobile as he clambered up her chest to liberally cover her face in wet slurps and doggie kisses.

“Condition number two,” Gabriel repeated over the yapping pup, “is that you accept Fifi’s baby with my concierge’s blessings and as few complaints to me as possible. Agreed?”

Darcy stared open-mouthed, like a landed fish gasping for air. Now, she ‘got’ the earlier comment about them needing their space back. She placed the pup on the floor where it immediately ran circles around her feet, before grabbing at her shoelaces and tugging them, quickly pulling them undone to start a mini tug-of-war.

“Madame Moreau decided that you had such nice children that she wanted you to have one of the pups from Fifi’s litter,” Gabriel explained. “You’ve met her so you should know by now that she is a lady of very firm ideas. In my defence, it was beyond my control –there is no saying ‘no’ to Madame M when she has made up her mind, so please don’t shoot the messenger.” He raised both palms in a ‘hands-up’ gesture of surrender.

“Since you brought this little chap all the way from Paris with you, I’d say you’re a bit more than the messenger.” Darcy was beginning to wonder if she had a ‘foist pets here’ sign painted on her forehead. They’d just got Napoleon house-trained and able to venture outside and now she’d have to

start all over again.

“Oh great –puddles of puppy pee and piles of poop everywhere.” He was very cute though, she thought, with rust-coloured splotches over both his eyes, floppy ears the same tone and big puppy feet tripping over each other. He’d already tumbled over once and was having trouble coordinating all four limbs as he pranced around the room exploring in the corners and under furniture.

“That’s a lot of ‘p’s’ in one sentence *ma Cherie. Non, ma petite rousse,*” he spoke encouragingly, “he shouldn’t take long to house-train. Madame already had the whole litter going outside to do their business,” Gabriel watched as the puppy tried to push his head under the sofa. The pups’ ears reminded him a little of Darcy’s curls –what did they say about dogs and their owner’s growing to look like one another? It appeared that these two were already half way there. They’d look sweet together.

Thinking of Napoleon’s possible reaction to a new house mate, Darcy watched for signs of trouble as the puppy saw that the sofa had an occupant. The kitten stood up on the cushions with an ambivalent look on his face, staring down at the pup and when the little dog put his front paws up and tried to jump up Napoleon took a step backwards. But soon his natural curiosity had him stretching his neck down to check out the newcomer. He got a swift lick from puppy for his efforts, took one more disdainful look at the small canine and retreated to crouch in the far corner of the settee.

“I’m sure they’re going to be firm friends,” Gabriel spoke optimistically.

“Hmpf, and what gives you that idea?”

Gabriel wisely decided not to pursue the topic. The package had been delivered safely and he was off the hook, so to speak.

“Frodo is staying with Bertrand here at the chateau today –we’ll drop the pup off with him as well before we leave and it will give Frodo and your new puppy a chance to get to know one another. I’m sure they’ll be fine. Frodo is big but he’s a very gentle soul –so long as you’re not a squirrel. Bertrand will collect the children from their schools and they can play with the dogs ‘til we arrive back.”

It seemed that he had it all organised. Darcy shrugged. Today, it seemed easier to go along with the stream than fight the current, she decided, so within minutes she found herself unceremoniously hustled into the passenger seat of the black SUV and they were off on the road to Pont-Audemer.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The old town of Pont-Audemer was quite lovely, Darcy thought, as she gazed along the canal from the Rue Sadi Carnot bridge. While it had a busy market-day atmosphere, there were none of the touristy overtones that the more popular destination towns such as Honfleur or Deauville suffered from. Looking about, Darcy decided that it felt more like a real snapshot of Normandy life than its nearby counterparts.

She easily understood how this township had got the title of the 'Little Venice' of Normandy; although there was little chance of confusing Pont-Audemer's waterways with the Grand Canal and associated channels of the Italian city. There were no vaporetto, no gondolas and no splendid Venetian palazzos to see, but the typically Norman half-timbered houses that overhung the canal banks were appealing in their own way.

Conversing as they walked, Gabriel told her that the canal system had once served a thriving tanning industry, including the prestigious house of Hermès, but it now provided a pretty backdrop for the narrow cobbled streets, a gothic church noted for its stained glass, and a bustling, bountiful street market.

Darcy was more than happy to wend her way around shoppers and stalls, strolling up and down the streets in the morning sunshine while taking in the sights. As they walked along, Gabriel and she stopped at the market stalls to browse for anything of interest. She paused for a moment to take photos of the flower-sellers' colourful display of blooms with the solid bulk of the Église Saint-Ouen in the background. The very old church certainly had an interesting outline, she mused, staring up at the front façade with its single tall tower, looking curiously lop-sided but exuding an air of placid unconcern with the hustle and bustle going on directly outside its front doors; as it probably had for most of the millennia of its existence.

Putting away her camera, she spied two precisely-clipped box balls

displayed in large dark-green glazed pots that she knew she must have. The front doorway of the cottage would look prettier, she thought, with the addition of some plants and one of these to either side of the door would make the little place look more lived-in and charmingly countrified rather than the slightly dishevelled appearance that it currently exhibited.

Gabriel stood by and watched with smiling interest as she summoned up the phrases to say that she wished to purchase the plants. Keen to see her French improve he left her to her own devices, until she became mired down in an effort to ask the vendor to hold the pots and plants for later collection. Seeing her floundering, Gabriel stepped in and organised the payment, asking the stall-holder to place the large pots and the plants aside until they returned to collect them. Knowing that the latter was still beyond her nascent French skills, she thanked him and they wandered on.

She bought apples, a small pumpkin and several unusually-shaped squash from a stall, thinking that the cucurbits would be nice for decorating the cottage, come Halloween, then admired the practiced skill of the man in the adjacent stall, who was sitting repairing the rush seat of a ladder-back chair.

They passed by a display of stuffed ducks, all neatly lined up, that made her smile, thinking of '*ducks in a row*', then next door, as per usual in the more traditional markets, there was a more vocal selection of livestock for sale. She saw chickens, ducks, rabbits and several squealing piglets, all eventually destined for the dinner table rather than as family pets. As they were cheek by jowl to the dead specimens, Darcy hoped the live ducks didn't realise that their stuffed brethren in the adjacent stall were of the same species as it seemed a little cruel.

Rosie had thought the animals cute when she had seen them lined up in their pens and cages at their local Bourg-Montfort market and Darcy had not wanted to destroy her daughter's childish fantasy that they would 'be taken to nice homes and be loved forever'. Reminded of this, she was tempted to buy a particularly plump dark-eyed grey bunny that was sitting in its cage and nibbling on hay to save it from becoming rabbit stew, before she recalled that they were already providing a home for a growing kitten and the new, currently nameless, pup. Regretfully, she left the rabbit to its fate and walked on.

"I'd like to get some chicken to try out your mother's recipe that she made for that Sunday lunch." She had been chatting casually with Gabriel as they ambled round the stalls, aware that there were things that needed said but determined to stay on 'safe' topics for the moment.

"You want to buy one of these live ones?" Gabriel reached into his jacket pocket for his wallet.

"Ugh, no thanks," Darcy demurred, "I don't think I could kill a hen to eat. I'm a bit squeamish about that sort of thing."

"Ha, so you're more English than you think!" he scoffed. "Meat should not always come from a butcher or supermarket. My mother would tell you that chicken recipe is much better with fresh poultry."

"I don't care," she said unapologetically, "I'll make do with supermarket chicken if it means I don't have to wring a hen's neck, then gut and pluck it." She was adamant.

He shrugged, then couldn't resist a small dig, "I'm not surprised that you liked that dish so much, -your old friend, apple cider is included in it," there was humour in his voice as he spoke, reminding her of the night she had under-estimated the tongue-loosening effect of Normandy cider.

"Well, if you know there's cider in the recipe, perhaps you could tell me the rest of the ingredients so I can make it for dinner tonight," she ignored his jibe.

"I could," he nodded, "if I was invited to eat," he qualified.

"Pushy..."

"...You want the recipe or not?"

"Okay -you're invited," she laughed despite her misgivings. "So. Cough up the ingredients. Now."

"Let's see," he recalled, "Chicken thighs," then dryly, "from a supermarket. Not fresh."

She gave him a look that was intended to quell his extraneous comments.

"Apples," he eyed the bag in her basket, "which you have already."

"Yes?"

"Brown onion," he collected several from a stall and paid for them.

"Okay. Next."

"Olive oil."

"Have it."

"Butter."

"I guess that's inevitable, it being a French recipe and all." Living here was a daily challenge to her thighs, she thought.

"Chicken stock, olive oil," he recited.

She nodded,

"Nutmeg, thyme and, let me think -ah yes, apple cider vinegar and sour cream," he finished.

"Will they have the cider vinegar here?"

"Possibly. We can look."

"And I can pick the sour cream up at the supermarket when I get the chicken -I doubt they'll have that here."

"Full cream, not low fat," he growled.

"Yeah, yeah," she was really going to have to get back to running more often, she despaired. The twice a week she was managing just wasn't going to cut it with recipes like this. Not if she wanted to continue to fit into her

clothes.

“Speaking of my mother,” he had been waiting for the right time to have this conversation, and had been looking all morning for a suitable opening. Glad that Darcy had provided one, he continued, “I called my *maman* yesterday from Paris and had the most *enlightening* chat with her.” He paused, wanting to gauge her reaction.

Her lovely doe-eyes turned wary. To Darcy, his pleasant smile looked decidedly smug and all-knowing.

Gabriel had known for weeks that he had fallen in love with those beautiful hazel-green eyes –and everything else about her. Knowing her history, he’d been waiting, patiently he’d thought, on her feelings to catch up with his, but after the conversation with his mother he’d decided to stop procrastinating and drive the issue into the open, wanting to clear the air before he took his next step.

Darcy remained silent, thinking that she might have an inkling as to what he would say next.

“You know, before I left for my business trip I was getting tired of the three steps forwards, two steps backwards dance that we’d been doing. And, I had been wondering what had happened to make you so suddenly go into hiding from me?”

Ah –he’d noticed that. Not that she’d been very subtle, she acknowledged candidly.

“I figured I’d give you a bit more time to sort out your feelings for me,” he glanced down at her face, “...and you do have feelings for me,” he asserted confidently.

Her eyes morphed from doe-eyed to deer-in the-headlights within a single heartbeat.

“So, after hearing from *maman*, I realised that the reason behind your,” he paused for effect, choosing his words carefully, “abjuration of me was that my mother let the cat out of the bag about my intentions towards you.” The deer looked as if it was about to run at any moment. “I am correct in thinking this, am I not?”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Darcy stalled for time, scratching uncomfortably at her suddenly hot and itchy neck with her short nails.

“You don’t fool me,” he shot back, irked at her caginess. “She preemptively overshares the information that I was planning on asking you to marry me.”

“Sh... Your moth... Diane never said that,” sputtered Darcy. Well no, not those exact words, but she’d certainly intimated as much with her you’ll be a *‘delightful addition to the family’* speech.

“I should have known better than to tell *maman* my plans,” he shrugged resignedly; “you would think that a lawyer would know better when to keep her mouth shut.”

"Hey there, watch *your* mouth. She was just being nice!" Darcy hotly defended. "Don't you speak about your mother that way," she chided.

"Ah –ha," he chortled, "so now you think she was being nice, but it still made you run a mile from me, didn't it? Hmmm?"

Darcy set her shopping basket down on the ground and ran her hands over her face, massaging her temples with the heels of her hands in consternation. "I don't know what to think! I've barely got out of one marriage and I'd be nuts to jump headfirst into another one. I'm not even properly divorced yet!"

"Six weeks, a judge and a decree absolut can fix that," he deadpanned.

"Oh, you're impossible," she shook her head, reminding him of Frodo drying himself after a bath. Her curls went wild. He felt an overpowering desire to fill his hands with those crazy curls and kiss her senseless –and it was high time she knew that.

In her frustration and confusion she started to take a step backwards, but he was there instantly, dumping the bag of onions from his hands to grasp her upper arms.

"Uh, no," he halted her retreat, gripping hard enough to stall her backpedalling, "you're not getting away this time. I put up with that dance for *two* weeks and we're not doing it again." He pulled her towards him, wrapping his arms around her torso until she was toe-to-toe, thigh-to-thigh, hip-to-hip and chest-to-chest against his own body. Bending to her, his lips came down and claimed her own in a rampant display of male dominance that left her gasping for breath.

She surfaced to amused glances from the surrounding crowd. There was even a smattering of applause and whistles.

Gabriel released her, still holding her left hand with his and grasping it tightly enough that she knew if she tried to escape he'd repeat the previous performance. Darcy was red-cheeked, though not as embarrassed as she might have expected to be in the circumstances.

...Until, that was, he went down on one knee.

Darcy was aware of a collectively indrawn breath. Later, she wondered if it was partly from the spectators or entirely from her. All she knew was she was having trouble breathing as she clutched her free hand to her chest.

Maintaining his grip of her, Gabriel fumbled briefly with his free hand in an inside chest pocket of his jacket.

Withdrawing his fist, he reminded her of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Palm upwards, she saw that it now held the familiar shape of a black velvet-covered ring box.

Her hand went from her chest to her mouth. She was pretty certain she knew what came next.

Sure enough, after taking a deep calming breath, Gabriel spoke:

"...Darcy my dearest, I had plans to take you to a nice restaurant this

evening and ask this in a more romantic setting but here and now seems as good a place as any, and besides, I think it might be a good thing if I have some witnesses to substantiate that this actually happened,” for someone who was normally so self-assured, his smile was a little uncertain.

Darcy stood frozen like a statue unable to say anything. Now she knew what people meant when they said ‘Time stood still’. She felt as if everyone at the morning’s market had stopped to watch the spectacle unfold.

Gabriel flipped open the lid of the box with his thumb to reveal an engagement ring set with a sparkling diamond, sapphires and emeralds. “You have brought an unexpected spectrum of colour into my life so this ring seemed right for you.” His eyes became serious; looking fixedly into hers he spoke the next words “Will you, Darcy Thomas do me the honour of consenting to become my wife?”

And in that instant, Darcy knew the truth of her feeling for him. Her uncertainties vanished. She no longer cared about the mistakes she’d made in her life up to this moment. She wanted this man with all her heart. From now until forever, come what may.

“Ye..,” her lips felt numb with fear but she knew in her heart that it was the right step. She swallowed with difficulty and licked her lips nervously before trying once more, “Yes,” she said, with quiet determination. “Absolutely, Yes. Totally, Yes and I’ll probably drive you insane within a year, but just remember it was you that asked for it. YES!”

The crowd had grown by this time and the applause was neither subdued nor unenthusiastic. As Gabriel slipped the glittering ring on her finger there were tears, as more than one market-goer came forward to congratulate the newly engaged couple. Darcy found herself thoroughly kissed and hugged by complete strangers but not minding at all.

Gabriel put up with this for several minutes before reclaiming his fiancée and making sure that any memory of other men’s kisses was thoroughly dismissed by his own. In a happy co-incidence that they both decided, upon later reflection, was heaven’s quirky way of blessing the event, the cider-seller whose stall they’d happened to stop next to came forward with complimentary glasses of fresh Normandy cider. Laughing, Gabriel quickly seized the moment to expand the offer to ‘drinks all round’ for the crowd and the market rapidly took on a party atmosphere, drawing in a considerable crowd of interested onlookers.

Sometime later, they left –Darcy with a pretty bouquet of fresh roses gifted from the flower seller in her basket and a take-home bottle of cider tucked under Gabriel’s arm from the cider vendor.

On the drive back to Belagnac Darcy couldn’t help but sneak glances at the pretty ring on her finger, its glowing tones reflecting her own happiness and the sense of certainty that she’d done the right thing in saying ‘yes’.

The colourful ring was just what she would have chosen herself; a

double row of pavé diamonds in platinum formed the band, dividing to support a four-petalled flower surrounded by four leaves. The leaves, set at the diagonals were glistening green emeralds, with larger petals of iridescent blue sapphires at the compass points and dominating the centre, a beautiful shimmering round-cut diamond.

Now she'd just have to tell Halley and the children. She was sure Connor and Rosie would be happy with her decision but Halley was in for a shock that her best friend was engaged to the 'old dude' that was her boss!

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

As she drove through the gate and down the lane after morning drop-offs the following Monday, Darcy's head was buzzing with a hundred different things that all needed to be done.

Deep in the throes of party planning for her and Gabriel's upcoming engagement celebration, she was lost in a world of her own; her head full of menu-options, flower-choices and dress decisions all needing her attention as she drove the car into the wide bay at the end of the stable and parked. She got out, collecting a parcel from the front passenger seat before opening the rear door to unclip an excitable Gizmo from his car safety harness –he'd been so-named by the children because of his dislike of getting wet- Connor and Rosie had found this out the hard way when he'd escaped the bath and run around the cottage, shaking water everywhere. She set the wriggling pup down on the ground where he promptly peed against the car wheel.

Well, she thought contentedly, that was one less puddle in the house – there'd been more than one or two of those in the last week as Gizmo struggled to become accustomed to his new home, but he was improving daily and had taken very little time to become a firm favourite with Connor and Rosie. Napoleon, however, was taking a little longer to come around to accepting his newest housemate and had resorted to spending much of his time sleeping up high on Connor's bed, where Gizmo's overly enthusiastic puppy tongue could not reach him.

It was an overcast morning and the narrow concrete path that ran in front of the cottage was wet from rain the night before. Darcy smiled as she watched the pup carefully skirt around several small puddles that had formed on the concrete, not wanting to get his paws wet. Darcy walked past the shuttered windows of the stable cottage, admiring her newly potted topiary boxes in their glossy green pots as she walked towards the outer

door.

The deep maroon-coloured pansies she had added were nodding their dark faces this way and that in the slight breeze. She turned to call Gizmo, who had back-tracked and was now snuffling his way along in front of the old stables, sticking his curious nose into any small gaps he could find under the doors to check for interesting smells. Judging by his slow progress, there seemed to a lot of them this morning.

“Gizmo, come here boy,” she called. The little dog raised his head at the mention of his name but promptly went back to sniffing so Darcy walked back to pick him up, tucking him under one arm as she juggled pup and parcel, and feeling about for her keys in her jacket pocket.

With all the distractions, she was already at the door before she saw the translucent plastic Ziploc bag that had been tacked with a large six inch nail to the lower half of the timber door. She peered at the bag; there was a page of folded notepaper inside and she could just make out the impression of words written on the other side of the paper. She frowned and wondered why on earth someone would have resorted to hammering such a large disfiguring nail in her door just to leave a message?

Darcy set the parcel and pup down on the doorstep to free her hands. As soon as his feet touched the pavement, Gizmo started his favourite game of playing tug of war with her shoelaces. Feeling unaccountably disquieted, she ignored the puppy, concentrating on the bag.

The nail hadn’t been hammered in particularly firmly so she was able to loosen it with her hand, jiggling it side to side until she worked the metal free of the timber. It left a sizable hole in the old timber door. She grasped the plastic bag and pulled open the sides, putting her hand in to retrieve the note. As she tugged the paper out she saw that the bag had contained more than just the notepaper. Something at the bottom of the bag glinted in the morning sunlight. Curious, Darcy pulled the sides open further, tipping the contents into her the palm of her other hand.

With a sick feeling in her stomach she recognised what the item was. It was her old wedding ring –the same one she’d left in a ring box, a silk-lined box not dissimilar to the one Gabriel had held in his hand a week ago –only this had been left hidden under her lingerie in her underwear drawer when she and the children had departed the house in Islington.

There could be only one way it had found its way here.

Patrick must have somehow discovered where she was.

Darcy glanced to either side and briefly over her shoulder, half expecting to see him appear from behind the hedge or around the corner of the stables. Suddenly, she was aware that there were numerous places a man could hide in close proximity to where she was standing. A tight knot of fear blossomed in her gut as she considered what to do.

She wasn’t going inside –that was for sure. She’d seen those movies

where you sat in your theatre seat and cried ‘you idiot, don’t get out of the car, don’t open the door to that wardrobe, and don’t go into the house!’ ...and they did it anyway. She knew the construction crew were working in the walled garden and Gabriel was probably working in his apartment over at the chateau. She placed the ring back in the bag and without stopping to read the note bent to scoop up the pup before she ran as fast as she could in the direction of the chateau - keeping as far from the stables and any other possible hiding places as she was able.



“That’s it,” the timbre of Gabriel’s voice was grim. “I want you to pack up whatever you need and move in here before tonight.” The order was one that brooked no opposition. Gabriel stood in the centre of his newly refurbished apartment’s salon, holding the note, staring down at the writing as if he would like to wring the neck of its author. “The security detail and I will accompany you while you collect what you require.” He had already telephoned both Connor and Rosie’s schools and sent Bertrand to collect the children. “I don’t want you walking around the chateau grounds, or anywhere else alone.”

“I can’t do that!” Darcy protested. “I’d be little more than a prisoner in my own home. And the children will need to go back to school tomorrow,” she added more reasonably. “They shouldn’t miss classes. We can warn their teachers to make sure they know that only approved people can pick them up from school.”

“You think that’s enough, given this?” Gabriel held out the scrawled message as if it was a poisonous viper that was ready to bite. “Might I remind you what it says,” he reread the note,

*“My darling Darcy, Please find enclosed an item you seem to have left behind in your hurry to leave London. I want you to remove that blasphemous thing on your finger and replace my wedding ring, you lying, cheating Whore of Babylon and Mother of Harlots. You’re mine for the duration of your life so get rid of it - or there’ll be hell to pay. You remember that knife we bought while on holiday in Switzerland? Well, I’ve got it here with me and I’ll use it on you if you don’t do exactly as I say.*

*Bet you thought I couldn’t find you? Well, I just bided my time ...It really wasn’t difficult at all to trail along behind your little friend. I knew she’d come and see you eventually –you two bitches have been joined at the hip since the night you met.*

*I’ve been watching you all this last week and I can come get you whenever I choose. You just remember - You and your spawn belong to me and only me! Yours for all time, XX Patrick”*

The kisses looked as if they had been written in blood.

Whilst Darcy admitted that Patrick’s letter made for disquieting reading and she’d been sickened the first time she’d run her eyes over the words but on hearing it read aloud, she was fairly sure that it was more a dramatic effort on Patrick’s part to frighten her into submission than any real threat

to her welfare. It wasn't the first time he'd used threats of bodily violence to frighten her into doing things she hadn't wanted to, but he'd never followed through with anything before other than the sporadic use of his fists.

She glanced at the plain gold ring, back in its bag and lying on the end table of Gabriel's long leather sofa. Trust Patrick to misuse the rhetoric of the Bible to threaten her, she thought. As a long-lapsed Irish Catholic, he was familiar with Biblical language but knew nothing of love, forgiveness or, as he'd proved time and again, fidelity.

It had taken very little time after they were married for Darcy to make that discovery—but by then she'd already been well into her pregnancy with Connor—the justification for their marriage. He'd been the unplanned icing on the cake of her final year of post-graduate study in London. That's where she'd met Patrick—finishing off his Engineering degree. It just went to prove yet again, she thought sourly, that intelligence and a tertiary education didn't necessarily make for a good person—it just a grammatically more eloquent class of liar and thug.

She considered options, "Okay, I will agree to move for the time being," she capitulated.

Gabriel nodded. Relieved.

"...But only for the time being—until we can establish if Patrick is still around or not. I'm not going to cower in the corner over this." She was doing her best to sound positive but he could hear the tremble in her words.

"Very well, I'll set up the spare rooms for you, Connor and Rosie—they'll have to share but it's a large room, unless of course, you'd prefer to share with me?"

"Nice try, but no," she smiled thinly.

"I thought not." He hadn't really been trying to get her in his bed—that would come soon enough. His aim had been to reduce the tension in the room and make her smile. As he spoke, Gabriel crossed the space and took her in his arms, holding her as if he could keep any and all harm from befalling her. As he held her, he felt her body shudder once with a spasm of unrelieved fear. He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face to place a gentle kiss upon her lips, "What was that?"

"Nothing," she replied nonchalantly, "a goose walked over my grave, that's all." Her face took on a distant look as she reconsidered if Patrick would act on his threats and how best to keep her children safe. She twisted the new engagement ring around her finger in anxiety.

"Okay." He didn't believe her for a minute but played along with her wish to put on a brave face. As a distraction he decided to change the subject to something more pleasant. Their upcoming engagement party would do admirably, he thought.

They'd already discussed wedding dates and both wanted the

engagement to be a short one. A Christmas wedding was the preferred option so far. His mother had finally halted her deliveries of old kitchen furniture –in the two weeks he’d procrastinated, he’d already received two chairs that went with the table as reminder to hurry up after the Sunday lunch- and had instead sent his grandmother’s antique Baccarat ruby crystal champagne flutes and a large bottle of Moët & Chandon by way of congratulation. It had been her suggestion that Gabriel host a celebration event at the chateau that would enable the remainder of his siblings and relatives who had yet to be introduced to Darcy to meet his future bride – this had started small, but had rapidly grown from a simple dinner party into something approaching a formal ball, to which the village, the chateau and landscape construction crews and many of his employees were now invited.

“Given all that’s happened, will you now let my PA take over the planning for the ball?” he asked.

“When did it become a ball?” Darcy was surprised out of her reverie. “The last I heard –and that was just yesterday- it was a rather large, boisterous cocktail party to which we were inviting your family and the construction crew.”

“Hmm,” he mused, “my sisters and mother got in on the act last night and came up with the idea that we open the chateau to the whole village, then somehow,” ...and he still wasn’t sure exactly how it had happened, “it became a formal ball to which I am now inviting my Parisian staff as well.”

“Shoosh. What next?” he was relieved when she laughed and didn’t appear upset in the least. “No popes, no presidents, no minor royalty invited?” she ribbed.

“Do not say any of that within my mother’s hearing,” he shook a finger in remonstrance, “or it may be a case of ‘be careful what you wish for,’” he warned.

“Oh, I don’t mind –we can do without the royalty but it’s high time this old place came alive again. Actually, I think a ball’s a great idea.” She paused, “As long as I don’t have to plan it –I hit my limit with the cocktail party.”

“My staff will be more than capable of handling the organisation.”

“I don’t have a gown,” she mused, pacing as she made plans. “I’ll have to go shopping for one –and for clothes for Connor and Rosie. I assume the children are still invited even though it’s turned into a more formal event?” She was wondering if a trip to Paris might be necessary.

“Of course they are. And would you allow me to take care of the dress?” he asked.

“I suppose so –no Versace though. I don’t want to wear something that costs more than my car,”

That was fine. He’d been thinking more Dior than Versace anyway. “I’ll

need to check your measurements,” he grinned. “You did say you might have put on a few pounds.”

He easily ducked the cushion she threw at his head in response, grabbing her on her way past.

“We’ll start with your hips, shall we?” Undaunted by her attempts to wriggle away; he placed his large hands either side of her hips as if to estimate the circumference. “Okay, hmmm ...I think I have that. Waist next,” he rubbed his hand over her buttocks, fondling their firm roundness before releasing her hips to slide them up to her waist. His hands almost spanning her narrow waist, -he used the opportunity to pull her closer, noting that she had stopped wriggling and was standing quite still. “Yep, got that ...and next,” he slid his hands upwards towards her breasts,

“I think I know where this is going,” Darcy was finding it increasingly difficult to breathe as his fingers encircled her ribcage, his thumbs lightly resting over her nipples. It would take more than her bra and clothing, she thought, not to feel the sensation of his caresses. She placed her hands over his, intending to gently move his thumbs away, instead finding herself mirroring his movements, eyes closed as she enjoyed the heightened awareness of her own body and feeling that she was rapidly losing control of her response.

With a sigh that verged on a groan, Gabriel removed his hands. Taking her own in his, he joined them together behind his back before returning to kiss her, lightly and then more deeply as he twined his busy fingers in her hair. “We could shift the wedding date forward you know,” he breathed against her lips between kisses and caresses.

He was driving her near-insane, feathering light kisses all round her mouth. “Fine by me, I’m not doing anything special tomorrow morning, if you’re not busy,” Darcy moaned, claiming his lips once more to sink into a deep, mindless kiss.

“...Darcy my love, we need to stop this, while I still have any shred of self-control,” Gabriel whispered raggedly, minutes later.

“Hmmm,” Darcy whimpered, overly aware that the soft sofa was only inches away and inviting them to use it as a makeshift bed.

In answer, Gabriel gently but reluctantly pushed her away to arms’ length.

He had very long arms, she thought frustratingly. “Next time, perhaps you’ll use a tape measure?” she said with what she thought was droll good-humour, then, more accusingly, “and I just remembered that I told you what size I was when you bought that white dress in Paris.”

Well, he’d succeeded admirably in distracting her, he thought gruffly, and succeeded in equal measures in ensuring that he’d be having cold showers for days as well. He wasn’t too sure how he was going to survive her living in the same space for as long as it took to apprehend her ex but if

## COLLECTING THOUGHTS

they didn't find him soon, it would be ruinous for his own health, of that he was quite sure.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

It was a beautiful evening, the temperature crisp and cool and the moon barely risen. Feeling like Cinderella arriving for the ball, Darcy reached down and gathered the filmy fabric of her full sapphire-blue skirt in one hand as she mounted the wide stairs to the north terrace. No glass slippers to worry about, but it wouldn't do to trip going *up* the stairs, she'd decided.

Only this Cinderella wasn't travelling solo. The two children flanking her and a burly armed security guard trailing close behind were making sure of that. Darcy glanced to one side, smiling down at Rosie's diminutive form in her pretty pink organza dress then turned to the other to see Connor tugging at the tie to his formal dark suit.

"You look very dashing," she said to her son, "but would you stop fidgeting with that tie, please –or at least leave it alone until we get inside the door." They were almost at the terrace, with the wide doors open to the entrance foyer beyond so it shouldn't be out of the realms of possibility that he'd make it, she thought –or so she hoped.

The chateau had been such a hive of activity all day that Darcy and the children had decamped back to the relative quiet of the stable cottage for a more peaceful time during the daylight hours –with her security detail in tow, of course.

Darcy was getting tired of being tailed wherever she went –there'd been no sign of Patrick in the weeks since he'd left her old wedding ring in a bag nailed to her door with instructions that she again wear it and his less than thinly veiled threats about what he'd do if she didn't comply. With time passing, she was feeling less inclined to believe that he'd even stuck around to see if she'd acquiesced to his demand.

Life around the chateau had settled back to normal –well, she thought, as normal as it could be with her and the children ousted from their cottage and sharing Gabriel's apartment. Living in such close proximity to one

another was character-building, she was sure, but had been proving increasingly stressful on her and Gabriel's self-imposed decision to refrain from sleeping together before they were married.

They were the only ones who were unhappy with the current arrangement -the children were having a great time and Halley thought it all rather romantic and wonderful that Darcy was co-habbing with the 'old boss dude next door', as she had so amusingly put it. Connor and Rosie loved every minute of living in the rooftop apartment, especially with Halley and Alicia just across the hall – though Darcy privately thought that might have a lot to do with having the newly furnished children's tower play suite with its large screen TV and gaming consoles pretty much all to themselves. Even the animals had settled into their new quarters with few squabbles.

Halloween had come and gone the evening before. The children and she had bought and hollowed out a large pumpkin –carving it into a jack-o-lantern, and they'd hung decorations but it had been a rather low-key celebration. Due to this being France, not America, there had been no trick-or-treating and the day had been a little overshadowed by tonight's festivities. With the preparations for the ball getting underway during the day -as well as continued construction both indoors and out it had made for a busy time; although Mlle PA-BA had insisted on all work inside being halted at midday the day before to give her teams sufficient time to clean and prepare the chateau for tonight's party. Seeing what Mlle had achieved in a relatively short space of time, Darcy had been mightily impressed with her organisational skills, if not her winning personality.

As they had walked across from the cottage she had noted the regularly spaced lamps along the driveway that were illuminating both the main driveway and their path from the stables to the chateau's front entrance. It seemed that Mlle paid attention to the smallest detail when it came to event planning. Darcy's respect for the woman was growing by the minute.

Putting these thoughts aside, Darcy looked upwards to see that every shutter was open and every window was lit. The chateau had come alive for the evening in a way it had probably not seen for much of the past century. Light spilled from the open doors onto the terrace and the smooth strains of a Viennese waltz could be heard from the musicians playing inside.

Gabriel was standing just inside the doors, chatting with his mother while greeting guests and awaiting her arrival. His eyes lit up the moment he saw her outlined against the darkening night sky.

"I was starting to worry that you'd stood me up," he breathed softly in her ear as he kissed her lightly. The hard truth was, he acknowledged, that every time she was out of his sight these past two weeks he had worried himself stupid.

"No chance of that," Darcy assured him, "we were just having a bit of

trouble with a certain tie.”

“Feels like I’m gonna choke,” Connor pretended to gag and took the opportunity to complain yet again, something he’d been doing at regular intervals since the offending tie had been placed around his neck.

“I feel for you, Connor,” Gabriel commiserated. He tapped a finger to his own neatly tied black bow, “but when the occasion calls for it; a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do to look good, doesn’t he?”

And look good, he did, admired Darcy. Gabriel carried off the formal black and white attire as if born to it and his black shoes were so shiny she was sure she’d be able to see her reflection in them, should she want to.

Connor smiled back and looked a little mollified by the gesture of camaraderie. Gabriel squatted down to speak to him, “if you don’t like caviar and canapés, there’s child-friendly food and drink that way,” he pointed down towards the kitchen on the floor below, “and there’s a new Wii console with your name on it and games, videos and snacks that way,” now he pointed straight upwards, “so when you’re hungry or you feel like you’ve had enough, you just go where you want to, ok? Oh and I should mention, upstairs is a no-tie zone.”

“Cool,” Connor was thrilled.

Gabriel turned his attention to Rosie, “and who is this beautiful princess that has graced us with her presence tonight?” he poked her lightly in the tummy, causing her to giggle.

“I’m not a princess! It’s me, Rosie!”

“You most assuredly are a princess tonight,” he repeated. “And Princess Rosie, you might find a little something I left upstairs in a box in the apartment. Just ask the nanny when you get up there.” Rosie’s reply was to fling her arms around him and plant a big wet kiss on his perfectly shaved cheek. Gabriel appeared more than happy with her excited thank you.

As the children hurried away in the direction of the main stairs Gabriel nodded briefly to a couple of additional staff he had hired for the night, who inconspicuously followed in their wake. He spoke to Darcy, “My PA has also hired nannies for the evening who will keep an eye on things upstairs so you needn’t worry; the children will be well-cared for. They won’t be the only young ones here –all of my nieces and nephews have either arrived or are on their way and several of the other guests have children and babies as well.”

Darcy thought she might have to re-evaluate her appraisal of the PA-BA; –she was starting to like her more and more. She wasn’t so sure about the gifts though. “You didn’t need to buy presents for the children,” she opened her mouth to protest.

Gabriel pointed to a growing pile of prettily-wrapped boxes on and around the large antique marble-topped console table sitting against the wall opposite, “We are receiving gifts for our engagement, so why shouldn’t

they? I wanted Connor and Rosie to feel included in our celebration.”

“Oh,” she thought for a moment, “well, I can’t fault that logic, so thank you.” She reached up to kiss his cheek as Rosie had done, although a little more demurely, before spinning to survey the entranceway. Where before there had been builder’s tools, saw horses, dust and debris, there was now an enormous floral display of blue and green hydrangeas in a large white porcelain vase, twinkling candelabra, swathes of silky fabric and sparkling clean parquet floors.

I feel like I’m in Versailles, it’s so grand and lovely,” Darcy was astounded with the change from earlier in the day.

“Except you and I know better,” he reminded. They both knew the darkness outside hid from view the unfinished areas of the garden and that there were stacks of builder’s materials just outside the glow of the lamps. Gabriel acknowledged that he could have waited until the works were complete but he hadn’t been inclined to put off this party a moment longer.

“*Bonsoir* Darcy,” Diane interjected, greeting her future daughter-in-law warmly, “that colour looks spectacular against your skin. And the bead-work is so you –we made a perfect choice, didn’t we Gabriel?”

Gabriel had noticed Darcy’s gown as she had entered the foyer – contrary to his original plan to buy something couture for his fiancée, once the word was out about the planned ball, his mother, several sisters, Halley and Darcy had collectively decided to make a special trip to Paris to shop for dresses. He had to admit that this choice was as well suited to her colouring and figure as anything he might have possibly bought.

The figure-flattering blue gown contrasted delightfully with her titian hair and was cut to showcase her curves to perfection. Ruched at the waist with a twist that created a V under her breasts, it had sheer elbow length sleeves and featured a stunning display of sequins and beaded crystals creating a striking branched pattern in black, white and sapphire over the bodice and sleeves. Having seen several of Darcy’s flower-themed day dresses, Gabriel wondered if she realised that she had something of a predisposition towards the botanical in her choice of clothing. He liked that –it gave her a distinctive style all her own that set her apart from other women.

However, although he realised that it was appropriate to the formality of the occasion, he wasn’t so sure if he liked her hair tonight as much as he did when it was free and wild. Darcy’s wilful locks had been coaxed by the stylist into soft controlled curls caught in a loose chignon at the nape of her neck and pinned with a diamond clip that Diane had loaned her. The style exposed her ear lobes and Gabriel felt an overwhelming desire to nuzzle the bare skin but knew he should show more politesse and restraint in front of the evening’s guests. Instead he put his hand into his jacket pocket and withdrew a flat case.

"You look absolutely enchanting, but I feel there's one small thing missing still."

Darcy's face fell, she had put more effort into dressing for this evening than she had into any previous occasion, bar her first wedding so what could possibly be wrong?

Gabriel proffered a flat black velvet box, "for you my love," he spoke simply. At Darcy's bemused expression, he added, "the children have their celebration gifts so surely the belle of the ball should expect something as well?" she made no move so he extended the case further, encouraging her to accept it.

She held the box tentatively, opening the sprung lid as if it might bite. Revealed on white silk cushioning was a pair of halo sapphire and diamond drop ear-rings.

"Ooh, pretty. I like," Diane's voice spoke next to her.

"Wow," Darcy couldn't think what to say. She was having some trouble catching her next breath.

"And look at that, they match your dress perfectly," Diane's tone was full of good humour.

Darcy glanced over at her future mother-in-law, "You told him," she chided gently.

"I plead the fifth," Diane announced, placing her flattened fingers against her mouth for a second before taking them away again to add, "And if I did happen to mention anything, it was only the bare minimum. After all, there's no good buying rubies when you're wearing blue, is there?" she said reasonably. "Now, put those baubles on so we can get on with this party!" she instructed breezily.

Darcy laughed. That sounded more like the Diane she was getting to know and love. Gabriel held the case while she unclipped the ear-rings and put them on.

"Thank you. There," she turned her head this way and that, "anything missing now?"

"Only this," Gabriel leant down to place a quick kiss on her lips. When it looked to become more prolonged his mother dug him in the ribs.

"Enough already," she scolded, merrily. "You're messing the girl's lipply, son. Put her down and greet your guests. You can play later."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Despite living upstairs, Halley was late to the party. Alicia had taken much longer to settle than she had planned upon. Typical, she thought, as she rounded the final bend in the stairs and started down the last flight; the one night she got to dress up and play with other adults, her sweet daughter chose the moment to behave like a little martinet, screaming her head off and not going to sleep until she'd worn herself out with crying.

She knew that she could have passed Alicia off to the nannies –both competent and kind women, but she didn't care to burden someone else with her responsibilities. So, here she was an hour late and rushing to get downstairs when she should have been able to saunter down at her leisure and make her grand entrance. After all, she thought, a dress like the one she was wearing deserved a decent moment of its own in the spotlight.

Unfortunately, in her rush to make up for lost time, she had eschewed the safety of holding onto the banister in favour of a swifter descent down the last few stairs. She was going far too fast, running her left hand along the newly painted wall in an effort to remain upright when one of the spiked heels of her evening sandals caught in the trailing hem of her ivory-coloured gown, sending her diving headlong towards the floor below.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, leaning against the wall where he could see but remain for the most part, unseen by others, Gabriel's good friend and reluctant party guest, Mason, was staring into his champagne glass, wondering if he should get another drink or perhaps go in search of some more substantial food than the girly nibbles that were constantly being waved in front of his face by attentive wait-staff. He wasn't the kind of man who liked bite-sized morsels topped with extortionately expensive fish eggs –right now he would have preferred a solid cheeseburger and fries.

He felt rather than a blur of pale fabric pass in front of him –dropping the champagne flute he instinctively put out both arms and caught whoever

it was that was going by in such a rush. As his arms closed around the woman, putting an immediate halt to her downward flight, he was rewarded by a waft of the heady fragrance she wore –something exotic and spicy and redolent of a warm oriental dusk. There had been a time, not long past when he would have enjoyed the moment, but that had gone by the by. Now, he was just plain irritated that he had a woman in his arms when he had expressly not ordered one and had been at some pains all evening to stay out of their way. ...and when all he'd wanted was a cheeseburger!

All Halley heard was glass shattering as she felt strong muscular arms go around her –stopping what she had been sure was going to be a nasty fall; she'd barely had time to gasp before this white knight had caught her. Catching her breath, she turned to see who her saviour had been, wanting to thank him.

"Ever think of holding onto the handrail?" the surly tone and grim face of her benefactor made her think twice before she became too effusive with her praise.

"Um –Sorry about that, I'm late. I was in a hurry," she started to explain but he gave her no time to expand her explanation of why she had been tardy.

"Long dress, ice-pick heels. Not really a clever combination on stairs." Mason set her back on her feet, righting her once more when she would have stumbled, as he looked her over with lazy nonchalance from top to toe. "You don't look blond, but maybe it's hidden under hair-dye." He gave her a narrow-eyed stare, "Or maybe you've been drinking." He sure as hell had been –how was anyone supposed to get through one of these shindigs without alcohol?

Whew. Was the 'blond' reference him just calling her stupid? He might be drop-dead gorgeous but he was mean, Halley rapidly deduced. Her face had been close enough to his to smell a whiff of alcohol on his breath. Maybe he was one of those mean drunks? Darcy's ex was a mean drunk, ergo, she hated all mean drunks. All intentions of politely saying 'thank you' were instantaneously wiped from her mind.

"What?" she spluttered indignantly. "Who the hell would have hair like this if it wasn't their real hair?" She rose to her full height, five foot eight plus several inches of heel, straightening her shoulders and fairly bristling at the insult. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she noticed that even with the heels, he could still look her straight in the eye.

"Hair like what?" her hair looked fine to him. It was raven-dark and sleekly styled into a low bun at her neck. She was in the act of taking a step backwards when his hand shot out to stop her.

"Let go!" she hissed, angry now. "You obviously haven't seen me on a *normal* day." It had taken hours of torture by the stylist to coerce her hair into its present style. Why was she even bothering to tell him this? She

didn't know. She tugged at his hand with hers. It was like an immovable slab of rock.

"Broken glass right behind you," he dropped her hand as he said the words. "But by all means step in it if you wish your highness."

She looked around at the shattered glass of his champagne flute on the floor—he'd saved her from possibly slicing open a toe—the second time in as many minutes that he'd kept her from harm. But he was still quite horrible with it. She took a deep breath, determined to remember her manners and say a polite thank you this time, before she skedaddled and got as far away from him as she could.

"*Bonsoir* Halley. Mason." The voice belonged to Gabriel, the gorgeous, not-so-old-after-all, French dish who was her BFF's boss and new fiancé. "What's this broken glass doing here?" Gabriel didn't wait for an explanation. "We should get someone to clean that up." He signalled one of the wait-staff who nodded and hurried away to find a brush and pan. Gabriel turned back to the pair, unaware of hostilities, "You are looking quite splendid this evening Halley—what a lovely gown."

"Thank you Gabriel, it's nice that someone noticed," Halley couldn't resist a dig at her current companion, returning his earlier slit-eyed stare.

Gabriel glanced from one face to the other—neither looked at all pleased and he caught the vibe that all was not well between the two.

Halley carried on speaking as if Mason was not present, "I like to think of it as sort of Pocahontas meets Maid Marian." Mindful of the glass on the floor, she did a single in-situ twirl. The dress did, after all, still deserve a moment in the spotlight to be shown off. Brightly coloured turquoise, ivory, lime and pale jade-green beading encircled the neckline and cap sleeves of the diaphanous fabric above a simple sweet-heart neckline and fitted bodice of ivory silk. A matching beaded accent ran around the band that accentuated her elegantly slim waist before the sweep of ivory silk fell to the floor.

"Very nice too," Gabriel approved. "And I see a touch of Queen Makeda along with Pocahontas and Maid Marian." At Halley's appreciative smile at his reference to the legendary Queen of Sheba he added, remembering what he had come to say, "Darcy's been looking everywhere for you. She was becoming concerned that something must have gone wrong."

"I got way-laid. Alicia wouldn't go down and I didn't like to leave her so grizzly with the nannies."

"That is their job," Gabriel gently reminded.

"I know, I know. I guess I'm not too used to having someone else that's competent who could look after her instead of me."

"*Pas de problème*, you're here now, that's all that matters. "Would you like a drink? I see Mason has forgotten his manners and not offered you one."

"Hmpf," Mason's voice broke in gruffly, "if anyone was getting a drink for someone else, she should be getting one for me. That was mine on the floor." While they had been talking, the glass shards had been swept up and removed.

"Ever the gentleman," Gabriel eyed his old friend. Something was obviously amiss between these two but he couldn't see how that could be. They'd barely had time to meet one another. He wondered what could have happened to turn them into warring factions in such a short time.

Darcy would not be pleased –she had been hoping that her and Gabriel's closest friends would get along amicably, especially since they would be living within a stone's throw of one another.

"I was intending to introduce you formally later Halley, but I see you've already met your soon-to-be new neighbour and my best buddy from New York, Mason."

"What?" Halley was aghast. No. Surely this man was not the one who would be moving into the dovecote once it was renovated? He couldn't be going to live anywhere within a hundred mile radius of her and Alicia. What if his malignant bad temper was catching? "Um, I have to go find Darcy," she spluttered. She didn't even try to sound polite this time, choosing to beat a hasty retreat in search of her friend.

Gabriel watched her go then turned to his long-time friend, eyebrow raised in query. "I see your bedside manner with the ladies is in as good a form as ever," he spoke dryly.

"That's what happens to me when I get fed overpriced fish roe and tiddly little quail eggs," Mason spat back touchily. "It brings out the beast in me." He looked hopeful. "You got any real food for a real man in this poncy palace of yours?"

"Poncy palace?" Gabriel shook his head despairingly, "Really –that's the best you can do? Alliteration does not become you, old buddy," he laughed shortly. "And you forget, I know where you come from, 'real man'." Mason's Boston family delighted in being able to trace their lineage back to European royalty, something Mason was normally at pains to ignore or downplay. "Still, if expensive caviar and quail's eggs bring out your inner hulk perhaps we can do better with some meat patties, mayonnaise and white bread downstairs."

"And a beer," Mason figured he was owed one after the loss of his last drink.

"You're pathetic -you do know that, don't you? Come with me." Gabriel flung an arm companionably over Mason's shoulders and the two went off in the direction of the sub-basement stairs. As they moved along the hall Gabriel's voice drifted back, "I'm sure Darcy will be busy for a few minutes calming down Halley and talking her out of leaving on the next train back to London now she's met you, so I might as well join you for that beer.

## COLLECTING THOUGHTS

Perhaps while we're drinking it I can give you some lessons in how to talk to women so you won't scare her away next time."

"Huh. In your dreams, Lothario, I know more about women than you ever will. Besides, you're snagged now buster, so that's the end of your education. I have years to improve my game, not that it needs it." Not that he cared any more.

"Well I'm not unhappy about being out of the game but you're tempting fate by putting that thought out there man. Famous last words," Gabriel's laugh was cut off by the hall doors swinging shut behind them.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Darcy's stood on the edge of the dance floor, her body swaying in time with the liquid tones of the music as she watched couples spin by. Gabriel had suggested she stay and mingle with their guests while he had wandered off with a promise to find Halley, so she was taking the opportunity to sit this one out and watch the others dance while she enjoyed a breather. The doors to all of the chateau's salons had been thrown wide open and the largest of the rooms was serving as a ballroom with music provided by a string quartet and an accompanying pianist at the far end of the room.

Darcy's eyes scanned the crowd, enjoying watching the dancers. Diane drifted by, looking much younger than her fifty-three years in a sleek pale-mint coloured gown. The straight boat neckline and simple cut would have been considered suitable for her age and drawn no comment one way or another but Diane had taken things a step further, choosing a gown inset with skin-toned illusion panels flanking the bodice which ended in short sleeves of the same nude fabric, making the bodice appear as if either side was sheer. This, plus the hand-sewn lines of seed-pearls and sequined flowers accenting the panels transported the gown from the merely modest to subtly sexy.

Darcy thought it took someone with Diane's savoir faire and flawless deportment to pull the look off with aplomb but from the admiring glances of the men in the room and most especially from the man she was dancing with, her style was appreciated. Darcy watched them dance by in practised unison, wondering if this was the new lover Diane had mentioned during their post-lunch chat. He looked about the right age and had monopolised Diane all evening despite several approaches for dances from other men. Diane, Darcy noted with interest, did not appear to be objecting to his attention.

Diane was not the only lady looking lovely this evening; as she watched,

Genevieve, Gabriel's twin sister spun past in the arms of her husband. Five months pregnant, she looked serenely elegant in a Grecian inspired gown that accommodated her growing bump. That Gabriel had a twin sister been something of an unexpected surprise but when he'd added, quite nonchalantly, that twins ran in the family and he also had older identical twin brothers Darcy had needed time to catch her breath.

Genevieve was one of his four sisters; another circled past in the arms of her partner and wearing a vintage-inspired A-line dress in bright red, a glittering diamond necklace nestled above the décolleté neckline. Darcy tried to remember her name –Marion, she thought, or was it Miriam? She'd been introduced to so many this evening that her head had started to spin from unfamiliar names and faces.

Even Mlle PA-BA, who now had a name, which Darcy could not, for the moment recall, looked both sophisticated and elegant in an indigo-hued skirt and top ensemble that featured a pointed peplum overskirt fluttering at her narrow hips. The look would have been a little bit Miss Moneyppenny except for the thigh-high side split that turned it from staid to sexpot. Darcy mused briefly on the thought that French women seemed to have a particular taste in clothing infused with their mother's milk. From the longing looks Darcy had caught Mademoiselle casting in the direction of Gabriel earlier; she thought she may have deduced why his personal assistant had been less than cordial to her. She hoped Gabriel would not need to look for a new PA anytime soon but that their engagement and marriage would put paid to any romantic daydreams Mlle had towards her boss. Darcy guessed that Mlle wouldn't have been the only woman disappointed to hear that Gabriel was taken.

She was idly running her eyes over the other guests, indulging in a spot of pleasurable people-watching when she caught a glimpse through the gyrating dancers of what she thought might be Rosie's pastel pink frock on the far side of the crowd, nearest the open doors. Wondering what might have brought Rosie downstairs from playing with the new Madeline doll set that Gabriel had given her she waited for another gap to confirm that it was her daughter and not some other guests' dress she had peeked. It took several attempts at peering through the crowd before she was able to confirm that it was Rosie.

That second fleeting gap had also revealed that she was standing holding the hand of a man Darcy assumed was one of Gabriel's security detail. She knew she shouldn't be worried but some deep primordial mother-instinct told her that something was wrong with the picture. Darcy started skirting round the dancers as quickly as she was able, moving in Rosie's direction.

Half-way round, her view of the pair cleared sufficiently that she could see that the man holding Rosie's hand in his was not the hired security but instead, a member of the party wait-staff. The tray of drinks he was holding

up near his face and the uniform black-ribboned stripes down his trouser legs had told her this, but something still felt decidedly off. Although socially confident, Rosie was not normally comfortable enough with strangers to hold hands.

The dark-haired man's face was turned away but as she approached he turned. Her heart froze mid-beat as she recognised Patrick, disguised in a black wig and with darkened eyebrows. The gloating smirk upon his face, however, was all Patrick. As she opened her mouth to shout a warning, he cocked his head in Rosie's direction and used the elbow that held the tray to push back his jacket just far enough that she could see a knife in a sheath strapped to his belt. He shook his head and pursed his lips tightly together to indicate that she should remain silent as he backed out of the room, pulling Rosie along with him.

Darcy followed, her mind blank of all else except her daughter's safety - pushing past the last few guests who were between her and the door in her haste to make the exit.

The foyer was empty of anyone that might help - guests either dancing in the large salon or sitting at candlelit tables in the dining room, chatting and drinking. As she watched, Patrick dumped the tray of drinks down on the table next to the vase of hydrangeas. Still grasping Rosie to him he used his free hand to give Darcy a 'come-hither' gesture before turning and heading swiftly along the hall towards the eastern turret, disappearing with Rosie through the door to the turret stairwell. Panic rising in her throat, Darcy followed without hesitation.

As she pushed through the door an arm shot out to grab her around the waist. She felt the sharp prick of the knife in her side as Patrick pulled her away from the door and towards the descending stairs. Rosie was standing on the landing watching, a troubled look on her little face, but with Patrick using Darcy as a human shield, the knife was not visible to her.

"You be going back on upstairs with you Rosie darlin'," Patrick ordered his daughter in a tone that brooked no objection. "Mummy and Daddy are just going to have a wee walk and talk alone out in the garden for a minute or two." The words might have been innocent enough on their own but his tone was sinister, leaving Darcy wondering how that 'walk and talk' might end.

Rosie nodded and ran off up the turret stairs in the direction of the children's tower. Darcy let out a sigh that her precious daughter was at least safe then began to think how she might get herself out of her current predicament. Nothing useful was coming to mind.

Patrick turned his attention to Darcy, poking her with the point of the sharp knife with enough force that she was sure it had drawn blood. She tried to hold back her sharp gasp as the blade bit into the tender flesh of her waist but her response was involuntary, causing her ex-husband to

laugh unpleasantly.

"You didn't think I'd forget you, did you babe?" Patrick's words were slurred, indicating that he wasn't entirely sober. Not a good sign, Darcy knew from experience. He'd always been a nasty drunk and alcohol brought out the worst of his demons.

"What do you want?" the question seemed moot but she couldn't help asking.

"Why you of course, my love,"

"But what for?" she tried to be reasonable. "The last time we spoke you were leaving me for another woman in another country." She didn't bother to mention the baby.

"I changed my mind and decided we should stay together." Patrick didn't add the unnecessary detail that his girlfriend's husband had convinced her to stay with him and raise the child as their own. Or that he'd turned out to be some Brazilian big-wig with friends in high places who could make Patrick's life a short-lived hell if he tried to so much as step off a plane or cross over one of Brazil's many borders to be with her.

"Unlike you, it seems, living with your boyfriend and exposing my children to your debased behaviour, you slut. Come to think of it ... You don't deserve to be with me."

Talk about double standards, Darcy thought. She chose not to waste her breath attempting to explain that their stay in Gabriel's apartment was both platonic and temporary –brought about by the need to stay safe from the man who was right now forcing her down the spiral steps and out into the dimly lit chateau grounds. As he shoved her out the door, Patrick shifted his grip and held her tightly against him. She looked down to see her own kitchen knife sitting snug between her breasts.

"Where are we going?" Darcy asked, with the hope of stalling for time for someone to notice her absence and raise the alarm.

"Out of the light," Patrick snapped, pushing her across the southern terrace away from the outdoor lamps set in the freshly mown lawn and towards the darkness of the trees, "just far enough so you and I can finish our business." Saying this, he grabbed her left hand and wrenched off her engagement ring, flinging it away from himself across the grass before replacing it with her old wedding band which he pulled from a pocket. He forced the ring onto her finger, uncaring that it hurt. "Found this upstairs. There, that's better –at least you'll end your life a respectable married woman. Perhaps there'll be some sanctification in that to atone for your sins."

Dear God-in-heaven help me, Darcy prayed, hearing the coldly matter-of-fact tone in his voice. At last she understood. He really did intend to kill her. She had never thought him capable of it. She struggled to get free but he held her now with implacably tight arms, the knife cutting into the

beaded fabric of her bodice.

They were passing the last of the lanterns, shuffling through its pool of light when an enraged shout broke the silence. "You have one chance to stop right where you are and let her go before I put an arrow straight through you!" Gabriel's voice roared through the darkness, all notions of chivalry forgotten in his fear for Darcy's safety. The only reason he hadn't shot the bastard in the back already was that he wasn't absolutely sure if Patrick had a weapon held to Darcy or not.

Patrick turned his body sideways and used Darcy as a human shield as he half-faced towards the chateau windows. He saw Gabriel standing backlit in an open library window, bow raised in a shooting stance, with an arrow cocked and ready to let fly.

"This isn't your business, you Froggie bastard. Bugger off!" He yelled back. "You aren't bleedin' Robin Hood and you won't risk hitting her to hit me. And keep those men back," he could see the dark outlines of Gabriel's men in the half-light around them, hemming him in.

"Not for discussion," roared Gabriel. "Second and last warning," he spoke in the stentorian tone Darcy remembered from the day she'd almost become his unintentional target-practice. "Put the knife down right now or I shoot." He had felt the bile rising in his throat when he'd spotted the light from the lamp reflecting off the weapon's blade. The vicious threats of Patrick's letter to Darcy came back to him, making him wish he'd put one through his heart from behind when he had the opportunity. He drew bead on his target along the length of the arrow—he'd have one try at this and couldn't afford to miss.

The knife in Patrick's hand was edging upwards to her throat.

Darcy pulled her head back in a fruitless attempt to get away from the blade, an action that had the opposite effect of exposing the column of her throat to the honed metal. Another inch and the tip would pierce her skin.

Time was up. He couldn't wait any longer.

There was a whizzing sound and the solid thunk of an arrow striking its target.

Patrick screamed and dropped the knife—the carbon-alloy shaft of a precision target arrow had suddenly appeared out of the darkness, piercing the back of his hand and protruding through his palm, its bright yellow fletching looking incongruously cheerful in the lamp's glow.

At the same moment a man appeared as if out of nowhere.

Mason leapt in a low tackle that took Patrick's feet out from under him and threw him to the ground. The security team was close behind and made short work of binding Patrick's hands. If they were a little rough and caused more pain to the hand impaled by the arrow, they didn't seem bothered.

Gabriel jumped from the chateau windows to the ground, swiftly running to Darcy.

"Did he cut you? Are you hurt?" he put a hand to her waist where the fabric of her dress was torn. She gasped when his hand lightly touched the wound Patrick had inflicted. He pulled the hand away to see blood on his fingertips. "You're bleeding." He started patting his jacket pockets looking for his mobile, "I'll phone for an ambulance."

"No," Darcy pleaded, "It's just a minor cut." She pointed to Patrick, who was moaning and cradling his injured hand, "but you might want to get help for him."

"The security team will take care of that –before they all start looking for new jobs," Gabriel's voice was grim. "It seems everyone was otherwise occupied when Patrick abducted you." He would never forget the heart-stopping moment when Rosie had appeared downstairs in the kitchen to inform him and Mason that her Daddy had come for a visit and taken Mummy for a walk outdoors.

Now that the tension was over, Darcy could feel herself beginning to shiver. Gabriel removed his suit jacket and placed it over her trembling shoulders, holding her close. She looked down at her hand, "I lost my ring," she wailed uncharacteristically, as she tore off the gold band and flung it as far away from her as she could.

Gabriel turned and started to lead her back to the chateau. "Don't worry, my love, we'll look for it in the morning, and if we can't find it I'll buy you another. Unlike you, *ma petite rousse*, the ring is easily replaceable." He could see she was reacting to the shock of her ordeal and sought to comfort her. She managed a watery smile in return.

Gabriel could hear a siren in the distance as the local gendarmes sped to the scene and would have preferred to get her back indoors before they arrived and started questioning everyone. "Now, shall we all be terribly English and pop inside for a cup of tea to calm our nerves?" he suggested, trying for a pitifully bad Sloany English accent to lighten the air.

"Huh, hold the tea and make that a shot of Jack Daniels," Darcy retorted saucily, sounding more her old self. "This girl's from Tennessee and made of sterner stuff than that!"

## EPILOGUE

The down comforter was delightfully warm and cosy and Darcy was tempted to steal a few minutes more under the covers, but she'd woken to see clumps of freshly fallen snow weighting the branches of the trees outside her window and the pristine morning was beckoning in a way that couldn't be ignored. Added to this, the thought of what the next hours would bring had her flinging the bedclothes back and tugging on her dressing gown. The prospect of a few moment's peace before the start of what would undoubtedly be a hectic day was enough to get Darcy showered and dressed in warm pants, her down jacket, gloves and a woolly hat, ready for a brisk walk outside.

She couldn't help herself; before she left her bedroom she walked to the door and took down the hanger, unzipping the protective bag one last time to take a peek at the dress she would wear. Holding out the skirt so she could better admire the skill of its seamstress, she thought happily ...her wedding dress was gorgeous.

Gabriel had had his way this time and convinced her to choose a couture gown. Darcy had gone along with his request but had opted for vintage –preferring the look of this strapless 1949 Dior collection cocktail-length dress to more contemporary designs.

The full underskirt and close-fitting bodice were in a light eau-de-nil but it was the festoons of delicate appliqued silk wisteria-like petals in shades from the palest pink to bright lavender that covered the entire dress that had made it her absolute first choice.

The thought popped into her head that she hoped this dress would fare better than her previous formal gown but she pushed it away into the deepest recesses of her mind –there was room only for unremitting joy today and she wouldn't let Patrick, now deported and firmly ensconced in her Majesty's prison system; spoil a single moment of it. She tucked the

skirt back into the bag, carefully closing the zipper and hanging it back on the hook.

Laughing quietly to herself at the contrast of her appearance right now to what it would be later in the day; Darcy tugged on a pair of thermal socks before padding through to the living room to check on the animals. The two had called a truce and had recently taken to sleeping on the sofa together -once Napoleon had realised that Gizmo would never be as good at climbing as he and could not make it up to the heights of Connor's bed. The puppy's body was curled around that of the cat, almost full-grown now but still a kitten in many respects. She smiled to see their limbs intertwined like a couple of newly-wed lovers. In the past months the two had gone through progressive phases: from Mexican stand-off to doing their best to ignore one another, then enduring each other's company, and now, serendipitously, to the current stage of best buddies. Of all the phases, Darcy mused, this was the most tolerable and she hoped it would last.

She bent to switch the Christmas tree lights on. They twinkled prettily among the fresh fir and all their family tree decorations. In the midst of all the wedding preparations, it had seemed important to remember the season and not lose the fun of decorating their little cottage. She had placed the children's wrapped gifts around the tree the night before so they could have one day of enjoying the sight here before everything was moved over to the chateau.

Leaving the sleeping animals, she snuck along the hall to check on the children, hesitating at Rosie's door, not wanting to go further in case she woke one or both of them. She heard nothing from Connor's room, so assumed he was still asleep. The light from the hall pooled on her daughter's bright red curly mop, so much like her own. Rosie had taken to sleeping with her Madeline doll, now most-favoured among her toys; Darcy could see the little red-head next to Rosie's on the pillow. She had bought Rosie the books for Christmas, a special set with both the French and English translations to help her learn the language. Darcy smiled as she pulled the door closed at the memory of Rosie announcing the week before that she would require several new little sisters so that she could 'walk in two straight lines' like Madeline.

Boots on, Darcy snuck outside and squeakily scrunched her way along the snow-covered lane towards the chateau. She'd come outdoors with no clear agenda for a walk, but it seemed that her feet had decided the direction she would go in. Not that it really mattered, she thought, she just wanted a bit of time out to enjoy the morning. She walked on, past the stables and the half-tumbled down WWII barracks then on to where the lane joined the main drive.

As she rounded the end of the trees that formed the north allée she smiled -ah, so she wasn't the only one who had decided to venture outside

and enjoy the morning quiet.

Gabriel was standing in a now-familiar stance the centre of the allée, taking a bead on a target some hundred yards away. As she watched he let the arrow fly, hitting the bullseye of the target with pinpoint accuracy.

She considered the vista, him standing with his bow in the all-white landscape with the chateau veiled in thin mist behind. Other than the contemporary clothing he wore, it could have been a scene out of any time.

Seeing him reaching into the quiver over his back for another arrow she called out a hello.

"Hey," he called across the expanse of untrodden snow, "I hoped you might be up. I put out extra signs just in case. He waved a hand to indicate the placards.

Darcy looked around; sure enough there was a veritable forest of warning signs set in the snowy ground all around the perimeter.

"Ha ha, very funny," she started across, "as if I wouldn't have seen you standing out there!"

He smiled as she approached, enjoying the sight of his wife-to-be coming towards him. "I've made breakfast. Wanna join me?" he offered. "You should say yes, I think you'll like it."

"Oh –I don't know, I'm pretty picky," she retorted, laughter in her voice.

"If you come here and give me a kiss, I'll tell you what I've got ...and it might include mille feuille if I like the kiss."

"Mille feuille for breakfast! Seriously? I'm getting married today and I have a wedding dress to fit into."

"You look just fine to me. Perfect, in fact, but if you're worried, come closer and I'll check your measurements," he proposed suggestively, waggling his eyebrows at her.

She tipped back her head and laughed at his innuendo, walking towards him, lightness in her heart and her step as she moved forward to a shared future with this man she loved.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Irene Davidson is the pseudonym of Adrienne Oaks.

Growing up in the far south of New Zealand, Adrienne rapidly came to the conclusion that her native home was a long way from anywhere and unless she wanted to spend all her holidays on Stewart Island she'd need to get used to flying.

With this in mind, she jetted off to school in Tennessee, university in Palmerston North (that's in the North Island), living in London and France, then Australia and the USA, gathering material for writing along the way.

Following a degree in biology, she studied post-grad in Landscape Architecture before producing two beautiful babies; both of whom are now well on their way to being grown-ups.

Adrienne currently lives in Seattle, Washington, with her husband Tim and an adopted greyhound called Smudge.

## OTHER TITLES BY IRENE DAVIDSON

Flowers in the Morning, (Book 1 in the White Briars series)

Leaf on a Breeze, (Book 2 in the White Briars series)

A Good Read (Book 1 in the Athenaeum Library series)

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