

Shadows

Jen Black



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Chapter One

Julie stood by the table in front of the window and had just poured a glass of white wine when Johnny tapped her shoulder. She turned at once and a cheeky grin sprang onto her face. "Hello again, Johnny." Her gaze flitted briefly over the man looming up behind him and returned to Johnny. "Is this someone else you simply must introduce to me?"

Johnny shook his head and clicked his tongue at her as if warning her to behave, grabbed the new arrival's arm and brought him forward into the conversation. "Julie, may I introduce my very good friend Don Hepburn? Don, this is Julie Holden."

The stranger stepped closer. "I'm delighted to meet you, Julie. I've heard so much about you already." He leaned forward, collected her small hand in his huge paw and smiled down at her.

Perfectly prepared to be polite and charming for the third time in twenty minutes, Julie looked up. He was very tall. His voice reminded her of warm brown treacle, and a strange tingling sensation started up in the back of her knees. Julie caught a blast of Aramis, and collected a vague, jumbled impression of wide shoulders, neatly barbered dark hair and hazel eyes that almost impaled her with their intensity. She couldn't think of a single thing to say.

The tone of his voice had warned her that he was amused with Johnny's behavior, but his eyes were steady and held hers in a long searching gaze that seemed to go on and on. Julie swallowed. She knew she was blushing, and knowing it only made it worse. She was also very much aware Johnny would be standing to one side, grinning, yet those flecked hazel eyes would not let her look away.

With a huge effort of will, Julie straightened her shoulders, smiled in what she hoped was a confident manner and tried to ignore the fact that her cheeks must be scarlet by now. "Since Johnny tells the tallest tales to all his friends, I hope you're not disappointed."

Don smiled, and finally let go of her hand. Julie went on staring into his eyes as if mesmerized while the buzz of conversation, the clink of glasses and occasional outbursts of polite party laughter rose around them.

Johnny ostentatiously cleared his throat, and turned towards Don. "Julie is the most intelligent of my friends. She's smarter than you and tougher than me by a long shot. She'll rule the British Library one day and she'll do it with a rod of iron."

Julie heard him through a delicious haze that centered on the man before her; an unbelievably attractive man, handsome in a rough hewn, craggy kind of way, who held himself like an athlete. She wrenched her head round and looked at Johnny in surprise. "If you believe that you'll believe anything, Johnny. I can't even get my own team to do what I want."

"That can't possibly be true." The warm brown voice contained a thread of laughter as it murmured by her left ear.

Julie tilted her head back, and risked meeting those dangerous hazel eyes once again. "Oh, it's true. They run rings around me. Everyone does."

He looked genuinely amused at her reply. He had excellent teeth. Julie gathered her scattered wits together. He was the only man to have arrived at Johnny's soirée in a suit, and that alone made him stand out in a roomful of colored silks, linens and leather. His tailor, she noted, was a good one and doubted her own linen shift looked as impeccable as

his dark suit. Her pale turquoise dress was understated, even plain, but she knew it hinted at curves in all the appropriate places and set off her brown hair and blue eyes.

His smile widened. "I'm sure you couldn't ever disappoint me."

Julie frowned. He was making fun of her. She let the remark pass unanswered, remembered the glass in her hand and took a small, pensive sip of wine.

"Don's a lawyer, Julie. The hottest young hotshot lawyer articulated to a firm that's going places at the speed of the jet stream." He turned to Don. "Julie, on the other hand, is the British Library's research sleuth. She knows everyone's secrets."

"Oh Johnny, don't be silly." Julie came sharply back to reality. "You know that's not true. You'll give Don quite the wrong impression."

"Don't believe it, old chum." Johnny's kind, boot-button eyes fixed on Don Hepburn. "Behind that demure façade our Julie is a sharp little operator."

"Johnny!" She swung round on him, annoyed. "That's hardly complimentary. Whatever will Don think of me?"

Johnny dropped one lid in a sly wink and smirked. "It'll put his lordship—" he nodded towards Don, "on his mettle. He needs to be stretched now and then. He becomes lazy, you know? He can't be bothered to make the effort."

Don calmly and deliberately put down his glass on the white linen cloth, took hold of Johnny by both shoulders, twirled him, and gave him a push towards the far corner of the room. "Go and annoy someone else," he said pleasantly. "Julie and I will amuse ourselves."

Johnny ambled off, still grinning. Julie watched him go with some misgivings. She took a quick gulp of wine.

"Johnny's a great guy and probably my oldest friend but I'd rather talk to him when he's sober." Don retrieved his wine glass, sipped and pulled a face. "Where were we? He'd just introduced us and I know nothing about you except your name—Julie Holden—and that you work in the British Library."

Julie swallowed too quickly and almost choked. Avoiding those intense eyes, she stared across the room. "I've known Johnny for four or five years, but I don't think I know anyone else here. That's the reason I'm standing on my own and Johnny's so busy introducing me to everyone."

Don ran a dubious eye over the room. "I don't think we'd be missing anything terribly exciting here if you let me give you dinner. I've come straight from the office and I'm hungry."

Alarm widened her eyes. "Oh, but—"

Don swayed slightly backwards at her reaction, and held up a large hand, palm out, between them. "Johnny would have my head in a basket if I stepped out of line. So you'll be quite safe. Johnny never has any real food at these things." He looked around the room again. "And I can't exist on olives and silverskins. I know a splendid little Italian place just around the corner. We can be there in five minutes, and I hate to eat alone. Please come."

Impressed by his manners and drunk on the sound of his voice, Julie found herself five minutes later seated in a small, dim restaurant with no clear idea of how she'd got there. A black coated waiter stood ramrod straight by Don's chair, pen and pad poised. Cutlery winked and gleamed in the candlelight, glassware sparkled and anemones filled a wide shallow bowl in the middle of the starched white tablecloth.

Don discussed the menu with the waiter so softly that even Julie had difficulty hearing what was said, and took the opportunity to study him while his attention was elsewhere. The well-cut shirt, silk tie and expensive suit could not quite subdue the rough,

craggy look of the high cheekbones and almost aquiline nose. His hair had been cut by a master, and the dim lighting emphasized the dark shadow where his beard would be come morning; his hands might be large, as she had already noticed; but they were well shaped, and his nails so very clean she suspected he might have them manicured.

A line of a song ran through her head. *If the girls could see me now they'd never believe it.* If he walked into the reading room, they'd be falling over each other to be first to talk to him and the rest would watch, giggling, from behind the shelves.

The waiter melted back into the gloom and Don clasped his hands, put his elbows on the table and turned his attention to Julie. "Do you like the restaurant?"

"Oh, I do."

"What do you like about it?"

"Oh, the...er, the cloth..." She ran her fingertips across the rounded edge of the table and sought inspiration. "It's so lovely to have white damask.... And the lighting...I adore Tiffany. I'm sorry, I'm gibbering." She shot a glance round the room and took a deep, calming breath. "I like it very much indeed. Everything is so dim and sparkling, and quiet. Is the food as good as the ambience?"

"The food will make you forget the ambience." The candle flame flickered over his face and she saw that, endearingly, his two front teeth overlapped slightly. "Now, before we eat, tell me about yourself."

Julie forced her gaze away from his mouth. "I'm twenty-two, come from Hexham and I've been in London a couple of years now. Johnny was originally my brother's friend. That's how I met him, at my brother's twenty-first party. He's recently taken to matchmaking me with all his friends. I suppose he's hoping you and I will take to each other."

"Let's backtrack a little." Don sat back in his chair. "Hexham? Where's that?"

Julie sighed with an exasperation she couldn't quite hide. It was an old question and one she had heard often since she'd moved down south, but she didn't like it any better for that. "Twenty miles west of Newcastle, in the Tyne valley. You've surely heard of Newcastle? It has over three hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants."

"I have heard of it." His smile flashed and vanished. "I went to university there."

"Oh? Then how is it you've never heard of Hexham?"

"I had, but I wanted to give you something to say. You seemed a little nervous."

Julie lifted her chin. "Tell me about Hexham, otherwise I won't believe you."

"A small market town with a beautiful abbey that still has St Wilfrid's polished stone chair. A stone chair with a crack across it. Now do you believe me?"

"You could have read that in a guidebook. How many bridges are there in Hexham?"

Both brows shot up towards his hair. "You really don't believe me, do you?"

Julie shrugged. "You shouldn't have patronized me."

Don stared at her across the candle flame. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to annoy you. There is one main stone bridge in Hexham. There's also a strange little bridge in the Abbey grounds that is covered over now. One short stretch of the stream runs down a narrow lane and then dives underground."

"Oh, you really do know Hexham!"

He reached across the table to touch her hand and Julie snatched hers back, shaking her fingers as if she'd been burnt. "Ow! That hurt!"

"Must be static electricity." Don stared at the starched white tablecloth. "How odd. It's never happened before. I wonder what the laundry uses to produce such an effect?"

The waiter appeared out of the gloom bearing an opened bottle of wine, a mellow red redolent of sun and blackberries that matched the quiet, understated elegance of the room. The venison Don had ordered soon followed and they talked of Hexham, the Tyne valley and Newcastle easily until Don announced over dessert, "I have a girlfriend."

Julie paused with her fork half way to her mouth. The half-eaten chocolate and strawberry mousse suddenly seemed unattractive. She lowered the fork to her plate and eyed Don warily. "That's a pity."

"Not necessarily. I can break it off tomorrow if you think it would be worthwhile."

She moved the fork and spoon back and forth across her plate, then looked up, frowning. "Why might I think it would be worthwhile? It should surely be your decision."

Don swirled the wine in his glass. "You're quite right." His expression was somber. "That was most unfair. I can't ask you to make up my mind for me."

He took her hand, dropped a brief kiss on her knuckles and signaled the waiter for the bill. "May I call you tomorrow night?" His mouth quirked to one side. "If you'll trust me with your phone number, that is."

Julie hesitated.

"If you refuse, I'll just have to have a very serious talk with Johnny."

Julie gave him the number and tried to force the discovery of a girlfriend to the back of her mind. She wasn't altogether successful. A growing weariness crept over her, and she found it something of a strain to sustain a conversation as they left the restaurant and he saw her safely into a taxi. They had been getting on so well, but now she wanted to curl up, alone and in private, and grieve for what might have been.

Johnny phoned the very next day. Barely awake, Julie muttered, "Oh Johnny, it's lovely to hear you but I have a headache. Can I, um...call you later?"

"Aha! A late night, I presume?"

"Not too late."

"What do you think of him?"

"Oh, Johnny, he's absolutely charming. But is he trustworthy?"

Johnny hooted with laughter. Julie grimaced, held the phone several inches from her ear and almost missed Johnny's comment. "His biggest fault is that he can be a little casual with girlfriends."

Julie's heart missed a beat. "What do you mean?"

"He never seems wholly committed, you know?" Johnny yawned down the phone, and then apologized. "He's never without a companion, but in all the years I've known him—and we were at school together—he's never been head over heels about a girl. Never."

How Johnny interpreted her silence she did not know, but his voice floated softly down the telephone wire. "It's possible that you'll be the one. I saw the way he reacted to you, and you to him. It was quite breathtaking." Julie could hear the grin in his voice. "Talk about sparks flying! I really enjoyed it. And don't worry. I've always thought that when he does fall, he'll fall very heavily indeed."

Julie pleaded a headache again and promised to phone him back later in the day. It wasn't easy to fob him off, but once it was done she flopped back on her pillow with a hand to her brow; she really did have a headache.

She spent the morning in a state of nasty excitement. He might never call, or she might have to wait most of the evening only to receive bad news. Any pleasure or anticipation of Don's call was overshadowed by the huge, menacing problem of the

girlfriend who, in various guises, ambushed Julie's thoughts at every turn. She began to feel sick long before her working day was over.

She left ten minutes after her shift ended and walked down the steps with her eyes on the pavement and almost bumped into Don as he crashed around the corner. He rushed her into a cheerful pizzeria near the Museum and settled her at the table, ordered two large glasses of red wine and then sat and stared at her.

"What is it?" Quite unnerved by his silence, Julie was even more alarmed by the way her heart leapt around in her chest.

Don interlocked his fingers and placed them carefully on the crumpled tablecloth. "I'm trying to find the right tone. I couldn't wait till tonight. I talked to Tara over lunch, and now I'm a free man." He reached across and took hold of one of Julie's small, clenched hands. "I'm all yours." He had the grace to look abashed. "If you want me, of course."

Julie was speechless. She'd been braced for bad news, and now suddenly there was no cause for it. The blood rushed into her face, sang around her veins and filled her with such tremendous energy that she wanted to leap about the tiny restaurant and dance with excitement.

"Don't cry."

Julie shook her head. "I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Look." One of his fingers darted to her face and came away with a tiny drop of water on the end of his fingertip.

"Then I must be crying with happiness. Did she make a scene? Tara?"

Don shook his head. "No. She'd been wondering how to tell me that she'd found someone else a week ago. We'll stay friends, which is good."

Julie wrinkled her nose.

"Look, I might as well tell you now. This was all set in order some time ago." Don shifted on his chair, leaned across the table and gave her one of the deep, intense glances that seemed so much a part of him.

Julie groaned silently. What now? Did he have a wife, probably mad, hidden away in the attic? A child locked in a cupboard under the stairs? Could he be an undercover agent about to go abroad....?

He reached for her other hand, and managed it without knocking over either wine glass, which indicated some presence of mind. Julie's pulse leapt in response to the warmth of his skin, and she curled her fingers round his and took comfort from the contact.

The waiter brought their pizzas. Don was perfectly polite, even charming, with the waiter; he made sure Julie had everything she could possibly want to enjoy her meal and cut busily into his own pizza. He seemed to have forgotten the statement that had all but shattered her peace of mind.

"Go on," Julie said. "What was all set in order?"

He put down his fork. "A holiday." Julie concentrated furiously on her pizza; she cut it, forked it up and then laid the fork back on her plate. She nodded encouragingly, trying to hide the sharp stab of disappointment that ran through her. She had just found the man of her dreams; he had detached a girlfriend for her, and now he was going to disappear for a three month vacation. Julie wanted to scream in frustration. She clasped her hands tight together beneath the table instead.

"Tara and I had arranged to go to France for a couple of weeks. A holiday, you know. We were going to use Johnny's cottage. I wonder...would you like to come?"

Julie could almost hear the word *instead* vibrating in the silence. She lifted her fork, closed her mouth around a small chunk of pizza and chewed several times. A neon sign at

the bar flashed on and off and spattered alternate green and red splashes of light across the red checked tablecloth and the sharper white of his shirt cuffs.

"It's already booked and paid for," Don added persuasively. "No cost to you, of course, and it would be a shame to waste the opportunity to get to know each other. It's the old mill Johnny's uncle gave him a couple of years ago. He must have told you about it?"

"He's mentioned it, but I didn't take much notice. I never thought I'd actually go there. You are quite sure that you want to spend two weeks with *me*? We hardly know each other."

"I am."

"When are you going?"

"The car's booked on the shuttle on Sunday afternoon."

Julie's fork clattered down onto her plate. "Sunday! But that's the day after tomorrow!"

"I know. Can you get the time off? Can you come?"

"No! I don't know! I doubt it!" She slumped back in her chair, and folded her arms. "I'd have to ask and get someone to cover all my shifts, and I can't do that before Monday."

"What's your boss like?"

Julie shrugged. "OK. Fine. No problem. It's just that we have rotas, and everyone...my hols are on the rota, but not until July! I'd be asking to go a month early!"

"And is that so impossible? Are impulse holidays absolutely out of the question for librarians?"

She glared at him. "It's got nothing to do with being a bloody librarian! It's to do with sticking to your word and not trying to arrange the world to suit yourself!"

He held his palms up in front of him to ward her off. "Pax! Pax. I accept that a librarian's holiday arrangements may be different to the ones I'm used to. But might it not be worth going in on Monday and asking if it might just be possible for you to take a fortnight or three weeks now instead of in July? I promise you, we'll have a wonderful time." He stopped suddenly, and almost scowled. "Julie, I'm sorry. I'm being very selfish. You may have holiday arrangements already made and every reason to wish to stick to them."

Julie shook her head at once. "No, it's nothing like that. I'd really like to come, but I can't ask till Monday and by then you'll have gone."

"Can you ring your boss?"

Julie shook her head. "I don't know where to reach her at home."

"Well, I really want you to come." He picked up his fork and speared some pizza. "We'll have to think of something."

Chapter Two

Julie had a window seat in the aircraft and stared out in a state of numb excitement. She couldn't eat, she couldn't read and she couldn't sit still. A very real fear of the unknown gripped her and questions about her own sanity tumbled through her head. *What were you thinking? How could you let him buy you an air ticket to Bergerac before you even asked Fiona if you could have the holiday? What have you done? What if he isn't there to meet you? What will you do then? You must be mad; you hardly know the man. You only met him four days ago. You haven't even slept with him yet!*

Spontaneity was not something Julie indulged in very often. Her friends regarded her as cautious, someone who looked for flaws and objections in every argument, in every jaunt and especially in every purchase. Yet she had agreed to come on holiday with a man she hardly knew, a man she did not yet know as a lover. It was hardly sensible; hardly a well thought out plan. Mother would be horrified. She could hear her mother's shocked tones now. "Going on holiday with someone you've only just met, Julie! How could you?"

Instinct, mother. That's all it could be. I just feel that I'm doing the right thing. I'd have been a fool to say no. But that doesn't mean I'm not scared.

Her thoughts flitted about like a hound after a hare until the little plane landed at Bergerac around six o' clock on a warm sunny evening and she saw his tall figure prowling up and down the tarmac. He was waiting for her. He seemed to be nervous, too. All at once, Julie's doubts departed and her stomach settled into its normal well ordered routine.

Don had driven down through France overnight on Sunday, and arrived at the mill very early on Monday morning ready to fall into bed and sleep for six hours. He'd called Julie that evening and once she stopped wallowing in the sound of his voice, she'd told him rather hesitantly that her boss had been very generous and promised to rearrange the rotas so that she could – if he thought it was still a good idea – catch the plane tomorrow.

"Of course it's a good idea. Why on earth not?"

"Oh, well, I don't know. You might have changed your mind."

"Nonsense," he said cheerfully. "Don't lose the ticket, and I'll see you tomorrow. I'd better go and start dusting now, before you get here!"

Not only had he flicked a duster round on Tuesday morning, but he had sprayed every wooden surface with a lavender polish; he'd left the spider webs around the windows because they caught many of the other flies and small creatures that crawled and zoomed about the mill. On impulse, he went out, cut a big spray of meadow flowers and stuck them in a vase on the old-fashioned sideboard, then drove into Vergt and bought groceries.

He showered, dressed and drove to Bergerac, found the airport and waited impatiently for the small plane to land. He paced the waiting area and wondered if he'd done the right thing. What if she turned out to be a nervous, wimpish and stereotypical librarian? He could be in for a hellish two weeks in that case.

His memory of her was vague, he found, but insistent. Pansy blue eyes and fluffy brown hair framing a delicate face zoomed into his mind at the oddest moments. There had been an elegance about her he liked and her voice had been soft and mellow, which was good. Her flushed cheeks had told him she was attracted to him, and Johnny had been hugging himself with delight at the success of his introduction.

We haven't even kissed, not really. The brief and rather chaste kiss at the end of the meal in the pizzeria had hardly registered on the Richter scale of kisses, and their second date on the Saturday had been great fun but progressed no further than holding hands. This could be the biggest mistake of his life. Blast Johnny for getting him into this.

He thrust his hands in his pockets and strolled back across the waiting area, frowning, unable to relax. For a man who was career orientated, for whom girls had always been merely a pleasant adjunct to relaxation, he knew he had behaved in a way that was very much out of character. This wasn't a girl who demanded attention, her looks were not stunning, and she certainly didn't follow the latest fashions; her clothes were classic rather than trendy. She was different. But if he'd made a mistake, this fortnight was going to be the longest fortnight of his life.

He spotted her amongst the small group of travelers surging through customs, recognized the pale, delicate face and willowy figure at once, and something close to joy leapt inside him. It surprised him. As the group thinned out, he saw she wore dark blue jeans and that surprised him, too, for they totally altered her image. *She looks altogether sportier, more adventurous and she's got surprisingly long legs.* This might not be so bad after all. He smiled and moved forward to take her bag.

He embraced her with a chaste touch of lips on both cheeks. "We're in France now." He smiled down into her surprised eyes. "Got to do things the French way. Let's get you and your bag to the car. Thank God you didn't bring too much. I forgot to tell you I drive a sports car."

"I didn't know quite what to bring."

"It's the kind of holiday where anything goes. We'll be totally private and you can wear exactly as much or as little as you like."

Julie shot him a doubtful glance. He pointed his key fob, and a sleek yellow sports car beeped back at him. "Is this it?"

"Yes, she's all mine. Do you like her?"

"I sense a rival," Julie said with a smile.

He laughed, heaved her bag into the boot and saw her settled into the passenger seat. "Right, off we go. It'll take about half an hour before we reach the mill, so just relax. How did it go with your boss yesterday?"

The sleek yellow car purred out into the sunshine and the warm wind poured into the open cockpit and found every inch of bare skin; it was oddly soothing. Julie told him how surprisingly helpful Fiona had been. "It helped that someone else had just asked for time off in July. She was able to accommodate us both rather easily."

"I'm glad." He let her relax as he drove the Honda along country roads, across the river and up through gentle rolling hills. Once they reached the D21, he drove faster and pointed out a bakery and a restaurant he occasionally visited. "Do you see the spire up ahead?"

"Oh, yes! On top of the hill!"

"That's our pointer. If you go out alone while you're here, look for that and then you'll see the turning for the mill."

"It's so narrow." Julie gripped the side of the car as it swung around into a road that was hardly more than one car wide. "And so twisty!"

"You'll soon get used to it. Just take it slow and keep looking ahead."

"It's so pretty." Julie stared at the cornfields and tiny farms tucked away on the hillsides. Three miles down the road, Don pointed. "That's the mill. That's where we're going."

Across the flat cornfield she saw the gable end of a white house with a red roof. The hill, close packed with trees, rose behind it, and a long straight drive lined with trees met the road at right angles. Don got out, undid the chain across the entrance, and drove the half mile through flickering sun and shade towards the house.

The car stopped beneath a huge walnut tree. Julie stared at the mill. "It's gorgeous." The scene glowed like something out of a story book; the terracotta tiled roof sloped down and shaded the verandah where a white plastic table and chairs waited; a sunny space opened out beyond and luscious green trees encircled it. "Is that a pool over there?"

"It is indeed. It was the first thing Johnny had done." He got out of the car. "Are you hungry?"

Julie fumbled with the door handle and got out, still staring around her. "I am, yes. What a lovely place." She walked into the shade of the flagged terrace. "And a wonderful view from the verandah. Just fields and hills and a few cows." She stared out across the east end of the mill.

"According to Johnny a verandah is called a *bolly* around here. Don't ask me why, I don't know. Come inside."

She followed him in and received an impression of bare wood floors, white walls and a vast stone fireplace. The bedroom faced west and sunshine flooded in across the green checked duvet cover. "It's gorgeous!" Julie recognized rag rugs and pine furniture straight out of *IKEA*.

Don dropped her bag on a chair, and headed back to the kitchen. "The shower is there, and the loo is there." He indicated right and left as he crossed the hall.

Julie peeked into both and found no fault with either. Don busied himself with the fridge and the cooker, while Julie hovered uncertainly. The kitchen was tucked into a corner of the living room, opposite the door. "Do you mind if I have a look around?" She indicated the jewel like glow of the trees and grass beyond the open door.

"Help yourself. I'll open some wine. Dinner won't be long."

Julie wandered along the verandah and came to a halt beside the wooden rail at the eastern end. Surprised, she looked over and found a set of steps leading down and around the corner of the house. She leaned out, and saw another stone flagged terrace and realized that there must be a lower level to the mill. Perhaps there would be other rooms down there.

She ran down the steps and halted beside a pair of varnished wooden doors that were shut and locked. The heat bounced off the pale flagstones and bees and dragonflies buzzed around her. A small strip of garden bordered the stone flags on two sides and the fourth side simply became meadow land, almost an acre of it, with what looked like a stream beyond the magnificent trees that rustled in the warm breeze. The scents of lavender and geranium drifted to her nose and she closed her eyes in delight.

Don called. Julie turned, and went back up the steps to meet him. "Dinner's just about ready." He handed her the wine he had poured for her. "If you'd like to sit down, I'll bring it out."

Either he worked very fast or she had wandered off for longer than she thought, for the white table already held a bowl of salad, a wicker basket of bread and the opened bottle of wine. He brought out plates and put a steak before her. He sat down, lifted his wine and caught her eye. "To us."

Julie touched her glass to his. "To us. This looks delicious."

"What do you think of the place?"

"It's wonderful. I really like it. What's in the lower level?"

Don cut into his steak. "Johnny hasn't quite finished it yet, that's why it's locked up. The grand plan is to have two bedrooms and a bathroom down there so he can invite groups of friends. He's got the bathroom done, but he's still not sorted out the bedrooms."

Julie stared at her plate. She was sure a suspicion was now about to be confirmed. "So there is only one bedroom?"

Something in her tone made him look up. Her stare was direct, and accusing. "Yes. Is that going to be a problem?"

"It's a little presumptuous."

"Presumptuous?"

They stared at each other. "Yes, presumptuous. We are not lovers, yet. I expected a room of my own." There, she'd said it. Let him make of it what he would.

Don stared, swallowed too soon, choked and coughed. Julie sneaked a swift glance at him, and then deliberately averted her gaze and took her time spooning salad onto her plate. Don stared at her through watering eyes.

The silence seemed to last a long time. Julie carefully chewed a small piece of steak.

"Christ, I feel as if all sorts of large holes are yawning in front of me. Would you believe me if I said I honestly hadn't thought about it?"

She went on eating and kept her eyes on her food. "How could you ignore it? There is only one bed."

He sipped his wine and there was a long silence. The birdsong seemed suddenly very loud all around them. "Julie," he said softly.

Her heart flipped over at the sound of his voice. She looked up at once, wariness in her eyes.

"Please don't feel under any pressure. We've only just met, and...I don't want to spoil things by rushing them. If you want to sleep alone, that's fine. There's a large squashy sofa in the living room, and we'll toss a coin for it."

She let out a small snort of laughter, and saw he was smiling.

"I'll drink to that." She held her glass out to him in salute.

They had strawberries for dessert, fresh and firm from the market in Vergt. Julie relaxed and stretched her legs out in front of her while Don cleared the table. She had made her intentions clear about the sleeping arrangements, and she had no intention of doing the housekeeping, either. Not that she really thought he had asked her to stay as a housekeeper; but it was worth making things clear from the very beginning. It would make things easier later.

Don brought coffee and a small yellow candle onto the *bolly*. He lit the candle, blew out the match and inhaled the sharp, lemony scent. "Citronella. It's to keep the midges away. We can't have you covered in blotchy bites."

She looked clean and fresh in her sleeveless Ralph Lauren blouse with her brown hair curving in towards her wine flushed cheeks. He hoped he'd said the right thing earlier, about sleeping alone. A phrase of his grandfather's had shot into his head; something about capturing wild things and turning them free; if they came back to you, the old man had said, they were yours for life.

He didn't query if he wanted her for life. Already she had surprised him with her refusal to sleep with him right away. Most girls these days were on the Pill and eager to get

to the bedroom; overwhelmingly so, sometimes. He wondered if Julie was just being perverse or if her reluctance to sleep with him was simply a ploy to see what he would do.

If she persisted in her reluctance, then the isolation and enforced intimacy of the mill was bound to prove very trying. It crossed his mind that he hadn't brought condoms, and he could almost guarantee that Julie wouldn't have a convenient little package readily to hand. Would she be on the Pill? Was she, horror of horrors, a *virgin*?

Even as it crossed his mind, a little wave of delight rushed through him at the thought that he might be her first lover. Thoroughly confused and most intrigued, he handed her coffee.

"I'll take the sofa tonight." Julie watched him over the rim of her cup.

It was almost as if she'd read his mind. Don sat down, sipped his coffee and decided he must stick with grandfather's advice, in spite of the fact that he longed to take her to bed and make love to her. "Are you sure? We could still toss for it. Seems fairer that way."

"I insist. My decision." She gazed at him, her eyes wide and fathomless in the candle light. "No reason for you to be uncomfortable. Besides, I'll have more room on the sofa than you would."

It was undeniably true, and he decided to let her have things her way.

Chapter Three

And now, here she was, unable to sleep in an old romantic mill buried in the heart of the rural Dordogne in France, while Don lay in comfort in the bedroom next door. *Well, it was what you wanted, silly creature that you are.*

Julie ran tentative fingers over her flanks and found her skin slick with moisture. She flung the blanket aside and turned over, but couldn't get comfortable. She sighed; maybe there were small disadvantages to summer in a romantic old water mill in the Dordogne. Perhaps she would catch up on sleep by the pool tomorrow.

The windows were open, and a warm breeze moved through the room. The sound of the crickets was so loud the noisy creatures might well have been sitting on the hearthstone five feet away. Her head rolled awkwardly on the foam cushion.

She scrambled off the sofa and tiptoed across the floorboards, praying she wouldn't step on any small insect life. She felt her way to the kitchen tap where she held her face and wrists under the gush of cold water and sighed in pleasure and relief.

The big room was very dark. The two windows formed lighter rectangles in the darkness, and huge moths bumped against the panes. On impulse, Julie padded across the sloping old floorboards, released the latch and opened the door to the night.

Cool air breathed across her skin. She saw the pale gleam of plastic and ignored the quick rustle as she crossed the stone flags, assuming the small lizards would be scurrying away to the safety of the crevices within the old walls. She liked them; they were small and attractive with their long dainty fingers and toes, and her only fear was that she might accidentally stand on one.

There was a soft susurrations in the air, but she knew the sound already; the trees that surrounded the mill were so tall their topmost leaves and branches continually swayed and rustled in a breeze that never reached the valley floor.

She sat in one of the white plastic chairs, flinched at the coldness beneath her and looked round curiously, suddenly very aware of being out in the darkness of the night with the stars blinking above the massed ranks of dark trees. She felt very bold indeed. Sitting on the *bolly* without a stitch of clothing may be the height of impropriety, but then, who would be here to see? And it was so much cooler, she thought; already the slickness was leaving her skin. If only she had a glass of wine, and perhaps a bowl of olives, everything would be perfect.

She thought of waking Don and dragging him out here to share a glass of wine. It would be a romantic interlude in their romantic French holiday that might change his impression of her altogether. She grinned. *I know he thinks I'm a prude and he's probably worrying that I don't like sex. He probably thinks I'm a repressed virgin librarian. I wonder what he would say if he knew I was out here in the dark, alone, and naked? I'll bet it's not something he would expect of me. I'm quite surprised at myself. But I know where it would end, so let's take it nice and slow and see if we truly like each other before we end up in bed.*

A wisp of long grass whisked down the terrace, breathed across her foot and was gone. Julie shivered and remembered the shed snake-skin he had shown her as a warning not to be frightened if she saw the owner one day; the translucent, fragile skin had been trapped between the stones of the *bolly* and the old drain not five feet from where she sat.

A colder breeze wandered by. Julie shivered. Perhaps this was a crazy idea after all. Movement at the far end of the *bolly* caught her eye and for no reason, her heart thudded erratically in her chest. Only the western end of the *bolly* glowed silver in the bright

moonlight, and the heavy oak pillars that supported the tiled roof stood out clear and sharp.

Beyond them, the shrubs and rose bushes were grey and silver and black against the heavy darkness of the tree-lined drive; they were all quite still. The only movement was in the shadows close in against the house wall. Julie stared and felt another erratic bound in her chest.

There *was* something in the shadows. The blackness moved and twitched, and surely there was a pale shifting blur where hands and faces might be? Two pale blurs, one above the other, and very close together. Hair on the back of her neck lifted and goose bumps sprang up on her arms. She sat rigid in the sudden chill, her eyes dilated on the darkness while her heart beat so loudly that it must surely be heard by whatever was against the wall. Don was asleep on the other side of that wall and she almost wailed her thought aloud. *Why isn't he out here with me?*

It was very cold. Either that or she was an absolute coward. But it's always cold when—she slammed down the thought about ghosts before it crept into her mind, eyed the space between herself and the door and between the door and the dark, shifting shape, and decided she could make it. She would have to.

Julie took a deep, slow breath, flung herself from the chair and raced for the open door. The scrape of the chair on the tiles shrieked through the night and drowned the light thud of her bare feet on the flagstones as she hurtled into the mill and slammed the door shut. She rattled the heavy bolt home for good measure and then stood, her palms braced against the half glass door. She stared through the mottled glass with the iron Perigourdine goose guard stretched across it and tried to slow her breathing. Remembering she'd seen a baseball bat by the door, she groped for it. The smooth wooden shaft was comforting in her hand.

There was a sound behind her and she whirled round, brandishing the bat. The door to the hall opened and Don ambled sleepily into the living room, his bare feet whispering on the wooden floorboards. "What's the matter? Did the wind catch the door?"

"There's somebody out there!"

"What? Out where?"

"Out there!" She flung out an arm and inadvertently rattled her knuckles on the glass. "Ow!"

Don stared around, his face still hazy with sleep. He focused on her. Still panting with fright, Julie thought for a moment he was going to put an arm round her, but he didn't. "I suppose I'd better have a look outside." He bent and pulled back the bolt.

Julie held out the baseball bat. "Here. Take this with you."

Don stared at the three feet of solid wood, stood upright and made no move to take it. "I could kill someone with that."

"Take it!" She thrust it into his hand.

Obviously reluctant, Don hefted it and opened the door. "Put the lights on, Julie."

Julie ran the side of her palm down the bank of half a dozen light switches just inside the door. Light flooded the *bolly* and blossomed on each corner of the mill. There was a sudden clatter in the trees as startled birds squawked and complained, and Don stepped barefoot further out onto the *bolly*. "There's nothing here, Julie. Come and look."

Julie shook her head, suddenly very aware that she was naked. She stayed on the inside; but peered round, with the door curtain pulled across her chest for modesty. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of him. Don stood half way down the *bolly*, a tall,

broad shouldered man with his rucked, striped boxers at half mast and his hair ruffled from sleep. The baseball bat dangled through the fingers of the hand carelessly knuckled against his hip. The width of his chest and the prominent muscles of his arms and thighs were most reassuring.

"They might have gone around the back of the mill."

Don inflated his chest and let it go on a sigh. "OK, pass me my trainers."

Julie retreated, grabbed a long tee shirt from her open bag and hauled it over her head, found his trainers and tossed them out to him. He looked up with a crooked grin as he fastened the velcro tabs. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, ring the *gendarmarie*."

Julie stared at him so seriously he shook his head, grinned and strode off across the *bolly*, hitching his boxers higher as he went.

"What number shall I call?" Her frantic whisper echoed along the *bolly*. "Don! It can't be 999 – what number should I call?"

A casual wave of the hand was her only answer as he disappeared into the shadows. He was gone for some time. Julie ran from window to window trying to keep him in view, and found it wasn't possible.

He returned swinging the baseball bat from one hand, cool, calm and already yawning; he slung an arm around her shoulder and demanded that they switch out the lights and go back to sleep.

She watched him walk into the bedroom, swung a quick glance around the now darkened living room, lost her nerve and scampered after him.

He turned slowly. "Julie?"

"I...er, I don't want to stay out there!"

"Oh." He thought for a moment, and then asked, "Do you want me to sleep out there?"

"No. Yes. I want...I want...I don't know what I want."

"You're scared?" There was a thread of sympathy in his voice, but there was impatience, too.

She nodded miserably.

"OK. Climb in. Just for ten minutes, till you feel calm."

She pictured herself creeping in and curling against his solid warmth. She hesitated, and curled one foot around the other calf. "How about if I make a cup of coffee instead?"

"That'll keep you awake."

She dithered silently on the threshold of the bedroom.

"Julie, do whatever you want to do, but don't just stand there. Sleep here, sleep on the sofa, make a fried bloody breakfast if you want, but just do it." He got into bed and yanked at the sheet. "I'm tired, and I'm going to sleep. Leave the light on. Leave the doors open. I'll hear you if you call."

Julie retreated. She didn't slam the door, though she was tempted. She didn't leave the light on, either. She glared around the living room, wrenched the blanket off the sofa and shook it, furious with him and with herself. A moment of weakness, and she had almost let down her guard. She burrowed under the blanket and recited every poem she could think of until she fell asleep.

Don stretched out on a lounge, totally given up to the sun. A rugby cap hid the upper part of his face and cast shade over his mouth and jaw. Sweat stood in tiny beads and droplets in all the folds and creases of his skin, and the long hairs on his arms were

already wet and dark on his forearms. Julie lay beside him, her slim figure barely hidden in a tiny bikini. For all her slenderness, she had curves in all the right places.

Eyes shut against the bright blue sky, Julie turned her head to let the sun reach the other side of her face. Even the air smelled hot; a rich lush mixture that spoke of suntan oil, leaves and grasses and beneath it all the cool dampness of the pool a few yards away. The water was turquoise, inviting in its surround of pale tiles, and so very still under the walnut trees. On impulse Julie swung her legs surreptitiously to the side of the lounge, and glanced at Don.

He opened one eye as the chair creaked, and lifted his rugby cap with a forefinger. Julie stepped gingerly over grass and hot tiles and wondered if he would follow her. Don watched her, enjoying his own lazy but undisputed reaction to the sight of her.

Last night had been very odd, and breakfast had been a non-event of politeness since neither of them cared to discuss what had happened. Julie hesitated between one step and the next, glanced over her shoulder and saw he was watching her. When he spoke, his voice was deep, and she saw the muscles of his stomach contract. "The pool?"

"I think so, don't you?" With a small, demure smile, she added a provocative sway to her walk. The lounge creaked behind her. She ran the last few steps and dived into the pool.

She surfaced, blinking, and the rolling turmoil of water from Don's plunge into the pool caught and overwhelmed her. His hands found and spanned her waist as if by magic and pulled her towards him. Without conscious thought, her legs loosely clasped his hips and she bobbed gently on the water; something she wouldn't have dared to do in the public pool back home.

It brought her very close to him. Face to face with him, in fact. She froze. Don simply hooked his elbows out and over the side of the pool and leaned back. Julie balanced in the water, the sun hot on her shoulders and the top of her head, and the smoothness of his waist cool against her thighs. She ought to let go of him. She smoothed the water flattened hair back from his brow, dipped her head and kissed him.

He made a murmur of sound and stayed absolutely still. She lifted her head a little. His flecked eyes, golden in the sun, were inches away. She lifted a wet finger and traced the straggly line of his eyebrow. "You taste of chlorine."

The eyebrow lifted beneath her finger. "You surprise me."

Julie giggled, suppressed it and lowered her mouth to his. Their odd position meant she was, for a brief moment, taller than Don. She used the advantage to explore the shape of his lips, test his responses, flick her tongue across his lower lip and watch his eyes close and half open again.

"I think that you're overdressed for the occasion." The words vibrated against her lips. He unclipped her bikini top and flipped it towards the chairs. His hands glided up and down her spine and settled so that his thumbs could massage the tender spot just below each breast. Julie struck out and away from him in a surge of water, then turned and smoothed her wet brown hair away from her face.

He lowered himself into the water. Without taking his eyes off her, he glided towards her, a wave rippling just below his eyes. Julie backed away, giggling. "I'm doing an awful lot of things I wouldn't have done a couple of months ago." She lifted a dripping finger and shook it at him in mock anger. "It's all your fault."

His mouth formed a disappointed, negative smiley. He turned on his back, floated and directed a question to the deep blue sky. "Such as?"

She bounced up and down to make the water choppy and watched him rock on the surface while she put her head on one side and thought about it. "Oh, lots of things. So many spontaneous decisions in two days—I feel dizzy just thinking about it. I left Johnny's party to go off to dinner with a strange man. The very next day I agreed to go on holiday with him. For two weeks. Two weeks alone with him, in a remote cottage. Flying on my own. Driving on the wrong side of the road, swimming half naked, sitting outside in the middle of the night with no clothes on." She finally ran out of steam. "Though I won't do that again," she added, frowning. "I'm sorry I was such an idiot."

"There was no one there, you know." Don folded at the waist, submerged and rose again, blinking water from his eyes. "I tramped everywhere around this damned mill. There was definitely no one there."

A line appeared between Julie's brows. "Something was there. I wasn't dreaming. I distinctly remember reading the luminous dial of my wristwatch in the darkness. It was just after one o'clock, and it was very quiet. There was no traffic noise, no sirens, nothing of city life to disturb me. Nothing, that is, apart from the crickets."

Don swam two strokes to the side of the pool, seemingly unconcerned.

"Well, it is pretty isolated here," Julie went on. "The trees sweep down the hill almost to the door, and the fields stretch away in every other direction. You admitted you almost missed the place when you first arrived because you couldn't see it from the road."

Don threw himself backwards. There was a mighty splash, another tidal wave rebounded off the side of the pool and threatened to engulf her. "But Julie, that's the beauty of it! And it's not quite as isolated as you think. If you stand on the drive you can see the mill at St Pierre a mile or so away. There are a couple of farms just over the hill to the south, the monastery up the hill behind us and a holiday camp, for goodness' sake, just behind those trees."

Julie swam slowly to the other side of the pool and turned, jerking her head aside as Don splashed water at her. He could stand anywhere he wanted in the pool and still touch the bottom. "Yes, that's very true. But there's the strange caravan I saw this morning, lurking in the woods just beyond the stream. We haven't a clue about who lives there and yet it's barely two hundred yards away. There may be thieves about. I've already seen fishermen prowl along the banks of the river just down there." She pointed north. "If anyone ever looked suspicious creeping about in the undergrowth, they do."

Don spluttered and almost went under. "They're only interested in creeping up on the fish, not you!" He completed a couple of crawl strokes, his arms brown and gleaming in the sun, and stood upright in shallower end of the pool. He flexed his muscles like a man in a body builder's advert, and lifted an eyebrow. "But remember, I'm here to protect you."

He looked perfect standing there with sunshine glinting on the smooth, rounded curves of his wonderful body. Julie grinned and mimicked his stance. His eyes opened wide, Julie remembered she was without her bikini top and hastily scrabbled backwards as he lunged towards her. She slapped water at him and squealed in mock terror, grinning from ear to ear.

All too soon the wall of the pool slammed cool and slippery against her back, and Don surged towards her. Trapped, she stood up straight, took a deep, calming breath and held one hand up in front of her face, palm out. He stopped, and in the hot silence, water crashed against the pool walls.

"Lunch," Julie said calmly. "I think it is time for lunch. I shall make it for you."

Julie had chosen to sit at a table out on the baking terrace of *Jour de Fête* and thought perhaps it had been a mistake. Though she was pleased with her pale pink linen sundress, it left a good deal of rosy skin on view and her sunburn was starting to make itself felt. "You'd have thought that by eight o' clock in the evening the sun would have lost some of its heat, but it's still as hot as ever."

Don grunted. He was deep in the menu, and anyway his navy polo shirt covered his arms and shoulders. "It's wonderful, isn't it?"

Julie stared out over the dry, sun-baked lawn to the dark green shade beneath the walnut trees and lifted her hair off her neck with both hands. She'd only stepped out of the air-conditioned car five minutes ago and already the back of her neck was damp. There was something terrifying about the heat.

Don looked up. "What would you like to eat?"

Julie's rosy shoulders lifted briefly. "I might have the goat's cheese tartlet. I get tired of meat sometimes."

The waiter had left a little dish of olives with their drinks. Don selected one and ate it. "Not trying to keep the bill down, are you?" His steady hazel eyes watched her carefully.

Julie shook her head.

"There's no need, you know," he added softly. "I can afford all this."

Julie shifted uncomfortably on her wooden chair. "It's just you said this afternoon you'd moved into a new flat recently, so you must have had some terrific bills lately, for carpets and everything."

"Order what you like, Blue Eyes," Don said cheerfully. "I thought cheese might give you bad dreams."

Julie thought she detected a reference to last night and glared at him. "It wasn't a dream! I was wide awake! There was something there! And don't call me Blue Eyes. It's ridiculous."

Don shrugged and grinned at her. "But you do have blue eyes, sweetie, and they're gorgeous. I didn't find anything out of the ordinary last night. Nearly fell into the stream, and collected a couple of nettle stings on the way, but—"

Julie's bottom lip became a little more prominent, and she glared at him down her nose. "There was something there. It was quite creepy, actually."

"You'll be telling me next you saw a ghost—"

The waitress clattered across the tiles and hovered over them, pad and pencil poised. "You are at ze mill? Sometimes, not good there." Then, as if remembering who and where she was, she straightened her shoulders, smiled engagingly and with a quick sideways glance behind her to make sure the proprietor had not heard her, she hastily added, "*Bonjour!* You like to order now?"

They both stared at her, speechless. Don's raised brows said quite clearly that this was not what he expected in a neat French restaurant in a rural French village. Julie smiled up at the slender waitress. "Yes, we're from *Moulin Blanchard*. You know it? *Vous connais—*"

The girl nodded. With her hair gelled back from her thin face, long bare legs and clumsy wooden sandals beneath a short denim skirt, she looked all of fourteen, but she smiled condescendingly at Julie's pidgin French. "*Oui. Très jolie*, very pretty. But—" The girl clapped her hands to her upper arms, gazed at the ceiling and shivered.

Don saw Julie's blue eyes widen, and hastily butted in. "I'll have the soup *de légumes de maison, le canard* and a bottle of the Malbec. And for Madame...?" He waved a hand at Julie, who ducked her head, consulted her menu and made a swift decision.

"Oh, er...the *tarte au Roquefort*, please. *Et le poisson rouge*." Julie smiled up at the waitress, who wrote busily on her pad.

"D'accord." She turned on her heel and vanished into the kitchen.

"Goat's cheese, Julie?"

"Actually, Roquefort is not goat's cheese."

Don regarded her as if she was an exasperating child, but Julie stared right back, daring him to argue. He might be a successful lawyer and he might be earning a terrific salary; she might have run to him when she was scared last night, but she wasn't going to let him address her as if she was his younger sister or a secretary. Julie smiled and opened her blue eyes wide. "It's made from ewe's milk and it's very expensive. Actually."

Don burst out laughing. "*Touché*. It's nice to know I can depend on my very own personal librarian to keep my facts straight!"

Another party entered the restaurant, sat nearby and began to create a scene with the waitress. Julie's neat brows drew down. She hated disagreements and especially disagreements in public when the recipient could not retaliate. Her time on the library counter had made her sensitive about such things, and she squirmed in her chair and muttered at Don across the table. "People like that get the English a bad reputation."

"Ignore them. I'm sure the French have ways of dealing with *un Anglais difficile*."

Julie was still half listening to the disgruntled conversation behind her when the smiling young waitress arrived with their first course. The girl seemed unconcerned by the protracted exchange still going on at the next table and Julie saw, from the girl's swift sideways glance at her colleague, that she was amused by it.

Don spooned up soup, his hazel eyes half closed as he savored the subtle blend of tastes with a moan of pure contentment. He spooned up more, and checked that Julie was pleased with her choice.

He picked up the wine bottle and filled her glass. "We'll have a wonderful meal, enjoy our wine, then we'll go back to the mill and perhaps we'll make love to the sound of the crickets. How does that sound?"

Julie wrinkled her nose. "It sounds beautiful, but whether it happens is another matter."

"How long," he asked, choosing his words with care, "do you think a courtship should last before—"

Julie trapped his gaze and held it. "Consummation?"

Don could not look away. He nodded, and spooned up more soup.

"You can say the word, you know."

He shrugged. "It sounds a little cold for what I have in mind. I know there must be an average and lots of variation in courtship. But for you? How long?"

Julie held his gaze as she popped a small piece of tart into her mouth, chewed and swallowed. "Is this a courtship?"

Don hid his grin with a mouthful of soup. "Oh, I think so, don't you?"

"That's good to know. How's your soup?"

She woke to Don's hand shaking her shoulder. Groggy with sleep, Julie looked up and saw a willow pattern coffee mug hovering inches from her nose. She collapsed against the sofa cushion with a groan. "Put it on the table, please."

"Time to get up," Don announced breezily. "We'll give ourselves a treat and go out today."

She rolled her head sideways. He was up, showered, shaved and dressed in red shirt and cream slacks, smart enough to go anywhere. No tourist shorts for him. "What time is it?"

He consulted his watch. "A little after nine. Come on sleepy head, time to get up. Do you want toast?" His turned and stared at her when she did not reply. "Toast? One slice or two?"

Julie resisted the urge to throw something at him. "One please, and an Anadin."

"You've got a headache?"

"No, Don. I take them just for fun." Julie pulled a face at him, threw back the blanket and staggered into the shower.

When she emerged, dripping, dressed in only a blue towel, Don was in the kitchen, banging crockery about and whistling. She clutched her coffee mug, now barely warm, and sat down at the table. "Your toast is outside."

Without a word Julie rose and went out onto the *bolly*. Her toast was indeed there, sitting on a blue willow pattern plate with an Anadin carefully placed to one side. The table was laid for one. Don had already eaten, then. Julie slumped down in the chair, one hand to her aching head and took a slug of lukewarm coffee, swallowed the Anadin and bit into the toast. It was cold. She sighed. She liked her toast warm, with the butter melting into it.

A flash of movement caught her eye and she looked up. Someone dressed in head to toe black stepped off the far end of the *bolly* and disappeared around the corner. The coffee mug slipped in her hand, and warm liquid spilled down the front of her towel. "Damn!" When she glanced back along the *bolly*, there was no one there.

Don appeared at the door, half way between her and the end of the veranda. "More coffee?"

She stared at him, and then looked back at the empty space. It couldn't have been Don. "Did you go out just now? Down there?" She pointed down the *bolly*.

He shook his head. "Nope. Doing the kitchen thing. Why?"

Mechanically, Julie drank the cooling coffee, and pulled a face. "Oh, nothing. Is it fresh coffee? Hot coffee?"

"Of course." He retreated, and reappeared with the Perspex globe in his hand. "Don't tell me you're seeing tall dark strangers vanishing off the *bolly*!"

"It isn't funny, Don. At least, I don't think it's funny." She emptied her mug on the grass and held it out for the fresh coffee.

Don poured, his hand steady, his gaze flicking from her to the coffee and back again. She was pale, and blue shadows lingered under her eyes.

"OK." He twirled a chair around to face her and sat down, his arms crossed along the back of it, the empty coffee jug dangling negligently from one finger. "You're not joking, and you've seen something. What?"

Julie sipped her coffee, and eyed him over the mug. For once, his strong-jawed face was serious, and his hazel eyes were fixed on her, waiting for her answer. For a moment, she had an inkling of how his clients saw him in his professional life: cool, calm and absolutely unflappable.

"You're not going to like this, but you're very nearly right. I caught a glimpse—only a glimpse, mind you—of a tall figure dressed in black. I think it was...." She hesitated, unsure of what she had seen, and how he would react.

Don nodded encouragement. "Go on. You think it was...what?"

Julie swallowed more coffee. "A monk."

For several seconds Don simply stared at her. "A monk? Here? Where did he go?"

"He disappeared." Julie knew it sounded stupid. "He just vanished off the end of the *bolly* and walked round the corner. Yet you and I know that there's an eight foot drop onto concrete around that corner."

Don put the coffee jug on the table with great care, turned back and grasped the back of his chair with both hands. He braced both arms against it as if testing his strength, and said nothing. He looked as if he was fighting the urge to laugh.

Well, it did sound silly in the cold light of day. Even in the hot light of day. "Oh, forget it." She got up and swept off into the mill. "Where are we going? What shall I wear?"

Don shook his head, and called after her. "I thought we'd go to Lascaux, and look at the caves and then have a long leisurely lunch somewhere pleasant. It'll be cool underground, so take a sweater."

Chapter Four

It was cool in the caves. It was also dark, eerie and not for anyone who suffered from claustrophobia, but Julie was entranced. She'd heard of Lascaux in her teens; how two small boys had followed their dog underground sixty years ago. She didn't mind that tourists were not allowed into the real cave because their damp exhalations caused mould to grow on the paintings; the facsimile was real enough.

She wandered through in a daze, and Don seemed impressed. The lighting was dim, but the paintings themselves were beautifully lit. The guide spoke in such rapid French Julie soon gave up trying to follow and simply gazed around in wonder. The cave varied in size as they moved further into it, sometimes so tight a fit that she had to squeeze past rocky outcrops, sometimes large and airy so that several paintings could be viewed at the same time.

The colors were of the earth: black, red, ochre, yellow and all the mixtures in between. The walls of the cave bulged where the powerful shoulders of some beast would have shown muscle and in the waving light of the torches, many animals appeared to be running through the cave above their heads.

Back in clear daylight above the earth, the sun hit them with the power of a stun gun as they walked back up the leafy lane to the car. They drove back into the small bustling town of Montignac for a late lunch at the Relais du Soleil d'Or, an old coaching inn off the main street. The dining room was pretty, with wooden beams and lots of windows that looked out over the extensive gardens hidden away at the back of the hotel. Julie stared at the swimming pool, ate the excellent food and raved about what they'd seen at Lascaux.

"Shall we drive south down the Vezere valley after lunch? We could stop off at the Roque Saint Christophe."

"What is it?" Julie asked. "Just a rock?"

"It's supposedly one of the most important prehistoric sites in the valley. You've got the sparkle back in your eyes. I'm glad."

"The sparkle comes courtesy of a fine bottle of red." She grinned at him. "I'd like to see this rock."

They followed the small meandering road alongside spectacular chalk cliffs, through sunlit forests of chestnut and green oak and even Don was unprepared for the sheer size of the place when they parked and climbed the small, dusty trail through the trees.

They found themselves standing a hundred feet above the nut brown river on a ledge that ran for hundreds of yards along a groove in the cliff face. "People have lived here for fifty-five thousand years." Julie had been scanning the guidebook he'd bought for her at the ticket office. "And there are five different levels. This is just one of them."

"That can't be right." Don stared around.

"Oh, yes. Madame is right." A passing tour guide nodded and smiled as he paraded his small party of smiling, camera hung Japanese tourists to the next stopping place. "Eight hundred meters in length, one hundred caves on five levels; perhaps a thousand people lived here in prehistoric times."

Don grunted. "Well, they certainly had a good view." He peered over the edge of the cliff straight down to the Vezere river. "I just hope everyone had a good head for heights."

"It's a bit scary." Julie peered over the edge. "I'll bet quite a few children fell over. It's a pretty dangerous place to have a row with your husband, too. One push, and away

you'd go. I'd stay back here, if it was me. Oh, look," she squealed, still feeling the after effects of the very nice wine they'd had at lunch. "A cupboard!"

At the back of the groove, some ten or fifteen feet away from the dangerous cliff edge, a large rectangle had been chiseled out of the solid rock, and some enterprising archaeologist had placed a crudely carved wooden bowl in splendid and empty isolation in the middle of it. Boulders had been drawn up as seats around a neatly laid fireplace and plastic haunches of meat dangled from hempen loops over projecting corners of rock.

"Just imagine, fifty thousand years ago, people were living here. Cooking, eating, sleeping..."

"Rather hard on the back when you wanted a bit of romance." Don looked at Julie. "Do you think they had romance back then?"

"I'd like to think there was always romance in the world." Julie gazed at the reconstruction of a huge nine foot bear attacking a squat, over muscled man who held nothing more than a wooden spear in his dirty, scarred hands. "I know it looks as if it was a crude and violent life, but I hope somewhere in these caves, there was at least one young man who brought a bunch of wild flowers to his chosen mate."

Don dropped a kiss on the top of her head and pulled her close. "I'm sure there was. Probably more than one."

A little later they headed into the vast, modern air-conditioned emporium of Monsieur LeClerc to stock up on food, and spent at least an hour rummaging along the shelves and sorting through a vast array of chiller cabinets. "It's much more fun shopping here than at home." Julie rooted happily through a huge chest freezer of fish. "You can buy anything from a fresh prawn to a grass cutter."

"I suppose the novelty would wear off eventually. How about fresh sardines? I could barbecue those." Don eyed the magnificent display of silvery seven inch fish, all fat and temptingly fresh.

Everything went well till they got to the check out and the girl at the till addressed them in rapid French. "Oh, er," said Julie. "*Pardonnez-moi. Je ne comprends pas.*"

The girl at the till rattled off her comment once more, and Julie looked at Don, who shook his head. Julie opened her purse, but it wasn't the answer. "*Non, non...*" Her money was waved aside.

Julie wondered what on earth the problem could be. The man next in the queue exchanged glances with the girl behind the till and only just resisted shrugging his shoulders, but offered no help. Someone in the adjacent line tried to explain; but the phrases meant nothing. Julie felt heat rising in her face, and looked desperately at Don, who shrugged and shook his head again.

Finally, a pink-cheeked woman in shorts pushed her way forward from the back of the adjacent line. "She wants you to know that you have spent so much that next time you come, you will have some credit." The woman wasn't English, nor was she French; perhaps Dutch, or German. Julie could have kissed her, and with a huge smile, she thanked everyone effusively in both English and French, and rushed out of the store, still scarlet to the tips of her ears.

"My God, that was embarrassing in the *supermarché*."

She spoke idly as she watched the moon rise slowly over the treetops. Don had barbecued the excellent sardines, and the embers still glowed now and then as the breeze stirred them back to life. They'd demolished the *tarte frangipane* they'd carried home so

carefully, and licked their fingers to savor the last of the almond cream. The citronella candle burned at their feet to stop the insects from nipping their ankles, and Julie twirled her third glass of wine in her fingers as they relaxed on the *bolly*. "We really should learn French properly instead of relying on a few half remembered phrases learnt at school."

"We could come and live here, you know. Part of the time, at least. I've been thinking about looking at a few properties, and seeing what the market is like. Would you like it? We'd need to learn French if we did that."

Julie stared over the rim of her glass. "Are you serious? Do you mean it?" Happiness sang along her veins, for that sort of commitment was really serious. She supposed she'd be able to live in France quite happily with Don.

"Wouldn't you like it? I could barbecue sardines for you every night!"

"I think you'd need to expand your repertoire. There—another French word we didn't know we knew!"

"Living here suits you." Don's head tilted to one side and he studied her lazily. "You've caught the sun, and you've got blonde streaks in your hair. In fact," he said, getting up and moving round the table, "you look pretty darn good. Are you finished? Good. Leave all that and bring your wine. Let's go to bed."

His hand was warm on hers, and though his words were blunt and straight to the point, his face held a mixture of emotions. He stood by her chair and gave her time to consider, for which she gave him much credit.

A multitude of thoughts flashed through her head, none of them clear or coherent; more a jumble of images that had some kind of impact on the decision she had somehow already made. Their first meeting, and the strange feeling at the back of her knees; the calm way he had untangled himself from a girlfriend; Johnny's recommendation; the kiss they had shared in the pool; his brief, natural spurt of temper the previous night. It all sprang together in her mind and without a word she rose to her feet and let him lead her slowly into the bedroom where moonlight shone through the lace curtains at the windows and transferred the pattern onto the plain white bed sheet.

Don's arms came around her, she felt the heat of his body and his mouth by her ear; felt the rumble of his voice deep within his chest. "When you lie down, you will wear the lace."

"Oh, Don!" She put her glass down on the bedside table a little more heavily than she intended, and staggered in the shadows by the bed. "Oops! Perhaps—"

Strong arms caught her. "Let me." Don was far from drunk and he undid the large buttons of her dress, let it drop to the floor and stripped her of her underwear in masterly fashion. His large hands felt the shiver that ran through her as he tipped her gently onto the bed. She curled her legs beneath her and moved over, waiting for him.

"You wear lace very well indeed, my darling."

She made no attempt to hide away; instead, she tilted her head up, and offered him a soft, seductive smile.

She saw a tremor run through him. He hauled his shirt over his head, tossed it towards the chair in the corner of the room and seemed unable to pull his gaze away from her; she glanced down, saw how the moonlight patterned her body in silver and shadow, and understood. His clothes fell anywhere and he lowered his head and charged towards her through the moonlight.

Julie jerked upright. "Don!" She yelped as he landed, and then collapsed in giggles as he flung himself down beside her, rolled her over and covered her in kisses. "You are adorable!" he whispered and seized her ear between his teeth.

"Oh! Please don't bite my ear off. I need it to hear you say that again."

He let go of her ear, gave it a quick lick of contrition and gazed at her mouth. The moonlight illuminated his frown of concentration. "I really want to kiss you. To really, really kiss you. I've wanted to do it for a very long time. Did you know?"

"I think I guessed." She stroked her palms up and down his arms, her thoughts spinning dizzily. He lowered his mouth slowly over hers. Their lips met, and lingered; parted. Beneath her questing fingers, she felt the long muscles of his back stretch and relax. His mouth possessed hers again, going deeper, harder. She opened her mouth willingly for him, pushed her body against his.

Don's hand wandered over her hip and thigh, moved inwards and settled close to the warmest part of her. She sighed and bit into his shoulder, licked the saltiness of him. "You taste good," she murmured, and then let her breath go in a gasp and arched backwards as his fingers moved.

"You like that?" His tongue traced a wet line on the stretched curve of her throat.

"M'mmmmm. Do it again."

The heat of his erection lay across her belly and she lowered her hand to find him. He groaned at her touch, and her heart leapt at the sound. He truly desired her, for the proof was in her hand. She stretched out across the bed, let him look at her and gloried in his admiration. Her breasts tingled and tightened and when his lips grazed a hard nipple, she gasped aloud. Her hand closed on a handful of his hair and brought his mouth up to meet her own.

There was a curious buzzing sensation in the air, or perhaps it was in her head. "Oh, my goodness." She gazed up into his face. "This is powerful indeed. Just before I lose my head completely, have you —"

"I bought some today in the *supermarché*. Relax. I'll take care of it."

She made a small sound in her throat. It was so good to know that he cared. She pressed her mouth against the strong muscles of his neck, curled her foot over his knee and lifted her hips.

"Oh, Christ. Could you do that again, please? Oh! And to think I suspected you were a virgin!"

"Really?" She giggled against his mouth.

"Yes, really." His hand moved, found her breast. "Do you know, I thought of doing this the moment Johnny introduced us."

He looked down at the small, taut cylinder of flesh standing proud under his thumb, ducked his head and flicked his tongue over it. Julie moaned, slid one hand down his belly and took her revenge in the sweetest way possible. She gripped him harder, moved her hand back and forth and he collapsed back on the pillows, gasping. She half rose and rolled towards him, her breasts pricking against his chest. She moved slowly until she straddled his thighs.

She rested her hands on his chest and he twitched a little, groaning. Steadying himself, he sat up, and stretched a long arm towards the bedside table. She watched as he slowly sheathed himself, and felt the ache inside her grow and expand. How she wanted him! Slowly she bent and tasted his lips, maneuvered gently into place and slid down over him. Waves of pleasure shivered through her, and the hairs rose on the back of her neck at the deliciousness of it.

He groaned her name and held her hips as she slowly, so very slowly, rose up over him, hesitated and then swept down. He groaned again on a different note as she rose and fell again, and once more; then, heat bursting through his skin, he grabbed her hips to hold

her in place, rolled and swung her down on to the bed. He went with her, following her, still deeply within her, and could hold off no longer.

She didn't mind. Loosened by wine, her inhibitions had flown out of the window and vanished into the darkness. She concentrated on holding him with her inner muscles so that she was tight for him, and her own sensations re-doubled. Wide-mouthed, she bit his throat and tasted salt. He stiffened, sucked in a rapid gulp of air and began to thrust within her. Energy built and she panted encouragement in his ear. Sweat burst through her skin and she breathed as if running for her life.

"Oh, Julie! Julie!" He gave a final, hard fast series of thrusts and Julie clamped her legs round and hung on, held him, pressed him into her and thrust her face against his neck as her own spasms followed his. He crushed her against him and she rode on the bellows of his chest until his breathing calmed and steadied.

The gentle sun of early morning probed the east end of the mill, and Julie, fresh out of the shower, wore only a towel as she sauntered into the kitchen. She felt renewed from the inside out. They had woken within moments of one another, still twined together; and had moved together so instinctively that neither knew who instigated another bout of lovemaking. The sun shone, the sky was blue and the whole atmosphere of the mill had changed since last night.

Now she was hungry, and ready for her early morning cup of coffee. Don had dug out his favorite shorts, a rather ragged pair of old jeans cut off above the knee; long tendrils of cotton from repeated washings dangled from the ragged edge. "I don't know how you can bear those." Julie tweaked one of the long trailing cottons. "Don't those long tails irritate you?"

"Nope." He handed her a piece of toast. "Here; start on that. I'll bring the coffee. The cushions are already out on the chairs."

She bit into the warm toast, wandered out onto the *bolly* and then stopped as if she had walked into glass. Her sudden gasp made Don look up. He dropped the butter knife and crossed the floor in three silent strides, grasped her shoulders and stared over her head to the far end of the *bolly* where a man gripped a young woman in anger.

Julie made a strange gasping noise and waved her toast back and forth without knowing she was doing it. Don's grip tightened on her and for a couple of seconds they both stood and stared; but when the man shook the girl roughly, and her face crumpled, Don reacted sharply. He made a sound of negation that was almost a growl, pushed Julie aside and strode forward, his bare feet slapping against the tiles. "Hey! Stop that!"

The young man's head swiveled and he glared straight at Don. The air around him shimmered, the darkness of his habit became grey and both he and the girl vanished before Don covered the four or five yards between them.

Julie cried out and clapped her hand over her mouth. Don's speed carried him past the place where the couple had been and she watched him fling out a hand and pivot round the pillar that supported the end of the *bolly*. He stood in the sun, his bare brown shoulders gleaming as he stared around, frowning; as if he expected to see the couple running through the fields down to the river. "Where the hell...? Julie, did you see that?"

Julie nodded miserably. "I've seen him before."

Don didn't argue. He seemed stunned. "It's broad daylight," he muttered. "It's almost the middle of the day, and twenty-five degrees, for God's sake." He looked up at the bright blue sky. "The sun couldn't be brighter!"

"What's the weather got to do with it?"

"I thought apparitions only appeared at night. Indoors. Rooms are supposed to go cold when they appear, too."

"Apparitions? You are talking about ghosts?"

"What else can they be?" He seemed almost angry. "Either that or we're both going mad."

"They must have lived here." Julie shivered.

"Not in this century," he snapped. "Did you see her dress? Besides, the *bolly* wasn't there." He frowned, and stared down at the flagstones. "Here. They were on bare earth." He glared at her from under his brows. "What did you see of the background?"

Julie shut her eyes. "The trees were taller. The house wasn't white, but yellow stone. There was a pond over there behind you. I had the weirdest feeling that I was standing on water, too."

The crickets filled the silence with their endless creaking song. Don spun round. "That's another thing. It was absolutely silent. Now listen – birds, and crickets all over the place!"

"He saw us."

Don paced up and down the *bolly*. "I didn't bargain for a ghost when I rented this place. I'd better ring Johnny. But let's have some coffee first. I'm not so sure I want to ring up my oldest friend and tell him his house is haunted. He loves this place."

Julie looked at the toast in her hand, took a half hearted bite. Strangely, it tasted good, and she crammed the rest of it into her mouth, licked a dribble of melted butter from her hand and went to fetch coffee and two mugs. She found Don's toast where he had abandoned it, put everything on a tray and took it outside.

The coffee was hot and reassuring, and they sat close together and drank it without saying anything. With an odd little grimace, Don fumbled in his pocket for his phone and pressed a couple of buttons.

Julie listened with one ear. She had been too surprised to be frightened, but now it was all over, she shivered even though she knew the cold breeze on the back of her neck was only in her imagination. She recalled the flicker of movement that first night in the darkness of the *bolly*, the sudden flash of a dark robe vanishing around the corner of the mill. This morning had brought them something much more substantial, and Don had seen it too. Oddly comforted by that fact, Julie concentrated on what she had seen while Don talked on the telephone.

The long, dark, simple clothes had made her think the young man was a monk, but the girl had certainly been no convent-bred innocent. The neckline of her gown had been exceedingly low-cut, and pale shapely ankles had peeped out from beneath the dull reddish brown fabric of her skirts. She'd been barefoot, too, and pretty with long dark hair and smooth skin.

He had been handsome, with his sharp-boned face and ragged crop of dark curls. When Don had shouted, the young man had turned, and Julie shivered again, for she was certain he had seen them, though he'd seemed neither angry nor frightened; more...expectant, perhaps? Startled?

Don rang off and clicked his phone shut. "He's never seen it, but the previous owners told him it was haunted by a mad young priest who killed a village girl."

Julie's eyes went perfectly round beneath her fringe. "Murdered? Is he *sure*?"

Don frowned. "The guy looked as if he was having a pretty good go right there in front of our eyes. What did you think he was doing? Why do you think I rushed out? I thought someone was being attacked in front of us!"

"It was very brave of you. I thought they were having an argument. She didn't seem frightened, but upset about something. Do you think I'm being far too fanciful?"

Don shook his head. "I didn't stop to think. If I'd known he was a ghost I'd have dragged you inside and locked the door."

"I don't think locked doors keep ghosts out. What else did Johnny say?"

Don paced up and down the *bolly*. "He seems to think it's all a good joke. He said if we're curious, there's some story about it in the local library."

Chapter Five

Julie woke up quite suddenly, her heart thumping. There was no sound save Don's breathing beside her. *Oh, no. Now what? What woke me?*

She stared around the dark bedroom in a tremble of panic and tried not to breathe too loudly in case something noticed. A dark hump and warmth indicated where Don slept on, unperturbed, at her side. Both the windows were open, and because of the heat they had opened the window at the far end of the living room, and left the two doors in between open to let the wind blow through the house.

The lace at the windows stirred, and the bedroom door swung gently on its hinges. Julie stared into the blackness beyond. Don sighed, and twisted towards her. A floorboard creaked, and Julie's pulse tripled. Don sighed, louder, and twisted away again. A rattle of sound, this time from the window, made her turn. The trees outside rustled and Julie saw the branches sway to one side in the wind.

The wind, it must be the wind rising. Oh, thank goodness for that. I'd better shut the windows before they crash and break the glass. She lay in the warmth and considered waking Don so he could go and close the windows. Even as she thought about it, the window at the end of the living room banged shut.

Julie scrambled out of bed and rushed through the small hall and into the large living room. The glass was old and the wood of the window frame was fragile, and she didn't want to have to phone Johnny to tell him one of the lovely old windows had shattered because she couldn't be bothered to get up and shut it one windy night.

She scampered across walnut boards, and shivered in the cold, damp air flowing from the open window. *There's going to be a storm.* She'd heard how suddenly the wind shrieked in from the Bay of Biscay and brought wind and torrential rainstorms with it.

The wind was strong. She caught a quick glimpse of the heaving blackness outside, and heard the roar of the wind in the trees and bushes as she struggled to catch the flapping window. Both sections of paned glass were nearly four feet high and a good three feet wide, and she had to heave against the pull of the wind to get them both safely closed and the clumsy old clasp properly fastened.

At last, it was done, and she made her way back through the dark room with a feeling of satisfaction. There was another window opposite the fireplace, which they rarely opened because it was directly above the millstream and they didn't want the flies it attracted zooming into the room. Beneath the window, something moved in the shadows.

Julie stopped, rooted to the spot and sucked in a quivering breath. The darkness resolved slowly into a human form arising from some kind of sleeping bench. There was little light, but Julie thought she saw the outline of shaggy curls silhouetted against the window, and the smooth outline of naked shoulder, a male shoulder, well formed and muscled. He took a step towards her.

Julie did not hesitate upon the order of her going. She bolted into the bedroom, leapt across the bed with scant regard for Don's comfort, and shook him roughly, relieved only when she had his warm bulk between her and the door to the living room. "Wake up! Don! There's something in the other room!"

Don jerked upright, and glared around. "Wha'? What? What are you talking about? Put the light on!"

"In there!" Julie pointed towards the door.

Don flung back the sheet. "What is it this time? The mill's tame monk? Are you coming?"

"No!" She fumbled for the light switch, found it and the comforting glow of the bedside lamp flooded the room.

Don stood up and barely registered the fact that she was naked. "Where's that baseball bat you gave me the other day?"

Julie gulped. "In there. By the door."

He cocked an eyebrow at her, winked, turned and crept stealthily towards the hall and the living room.

Julie didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"*Monsieur, je cherche les information.*" Julie spoke slowly and clearly, her eyes fixed on the thin dark face of the librarian.

"*Oui, Madame.* 'Ow may I 'elp you?" He stood behind the old-fashioned oak desk and smiled in a condescending way, the fingers of one hand tapping the flat wood surface. *No doubt he's amused by such poor French.*

For a brief moment she wondered if she had been wise to come here. Don had found nothing untoward last night when she'd sent him rushing into the living room. He'd scouted behind all the furniture, switched on all the lights, encouraged Julie back in and tried to convince her that she had been dreaming. Julie was no more convinced than Don, but of course, he wouldn't admit it.

It was time something was done. Julie smiled timidly at the Frenchman, wondered how he knew she was English, and rushed into her next question. "*Moulin Blanchard.* I need to know *l'histoire de les fantômes.*"

The librarian's heavy brows shot up above the dark frame of his glasses and he actually looked at her for the first time. "*Le Fantôme? Vraiment? Madame has seen it?*"

His glance was so startlingly blue that Julie felt a small shock of surprise. "Oh yes, several times." Well, that was a slight exaggeration, but not so very far from the truth.

"Describe it for me, *s'il vous plait.*"

His manner verged on autocratic, but Julie took a deep breath and marshaled her best schoolgirl French into short phrases. "*Un homme jeune, avec les cheveux noir, les yeux noir aussi. Il porte un robe de marron, avec un...*" She mimed a girdle knotted about the waist of the brown robe. "*La dame –*"

"*Une dame aussi!*"

Julie nodded, unsure if he was mocking her. For a crazy moment his eyes seemed to be brown, rather than blue. Julie shifted restlessly against the old wooden counter, and inexplicably felt uncomfortable in a situation where she'd expected to feel completely at home. It was a library, for goodness' sake.

"*Oui.*" Julie persevered grimly with her French. "*Une dame aussi; très jeune et très jolie. Les cheveux de marron, et...*" She indicated hair that hung to her waist, and forgot what she had been about to say. The librarian's eyes had changed to brown again.

He regarded her oddly, tilted his head to one side and then put both hands on his desk and leaned forward. The overhead light flashed on the vivid blue of his eyes behind the lenses of his glasses as he said in accented English, "Madame, they are long dead. I would like very much to visit with you and *peut-être* see these *fantômes.*"

"Oh." Julie forgot about his strange eyes. She didn't know what to say. She hadn't expected quite this much interest. She wondered how Don would take to having the librarian visit, especially if she told him the man's eyes changed color. Don would no

doubt say it was a trick of the light, or poor lighting in the room. "*Les fantômes, est-ils dangereux?*"

"Non." His black curls shook with the vehemence of his reply. "Not dangerous, but perhaps frightening for you, *non?*"

Julie almost giggled, but perhaps her French sounded just as funny to him. "A little disconcerting, perhaps." She saw him frown. "Oh, *pardon, monsieur; desorienté, un peu.*"

The blue eyes met hers without a flicker. "I will bring *l'histoire de la village à votre maison ce soir*. The story of Pierre *et* Justine is there. *Quelle heure* shall I arrive?"

"Oh, er, perhaps eight o'clock. *A huit heure?* Come for supper, um...*le repas.*" What else could she say?

She had been understood, at least. Feeling very pleased with her attempts at French conversation, Julie hurried back down the curving lane between the stone houses and across the car park to where the Honda was parked under the shade of the solitary tree. She burnt her arm on the hot metal as she climbed in and disregarded it as she grinned at Don. "The librarian is *très intéressant* in our *fantômes*. He is coming to supper tonight with a book that tells all about Pierre and Justine."

Don regarded her quizzically. "Pierre and Justine? They existed, then? How far back?"

Julie shrugged. "I didn't ask. What shall we feed him on? You could barbecue the beef. I'll do the salad, and we'll need some fresh bread." She thought she would keep to herself the fact that the librarian had eyes that changed color between one sentence and the next. It was probably just a trick of the light, after all.

The librarian parked his little red Citroen in the open space behind the mill, walked slowly back up the slope and along the drive to the *bolly* and introduced himself as Christophe. He handed Don a bottle of red wine as he shook hands. "The mill, it is a pretty place."

In the dimness of the library, concentrating on her French, Julie had seen Christophe as little more than a slightly built Frenchman with a head of short dark curls tumbling over his heavy horn rimmed glasses; she wasn't even sure what color his eyes were. But this evening, he was dressed entirely in white, from belted white slacks to a crisp white shirt, and looked effortlessly, appealingly chic.

Don offered to show him round the mill and the two men disappeared down the steps at the side of the house. Julie followed them to the lower terrace, where *le repas* was ready and the barbecue was glowing at the side of the paved area. She dropped into one of the big rush chairs and sipped a *kir royale* from a cold, condensation-covered flute.

There was nothing else for her to do but enjoy the mellow, golden sunshine and the scent of lavender while the two men walked the full circuit of the mill. She watched a turquoise-winged dragonfly settle on a flower spike, let the sparkling dry taste of the *kir* burst on her tongue and savored its hint of blackcurrant. She got up once to turn the meat on the barbecue, and heard approaching footsteps. Don appeared alone and at the sight of him she felt a twist of pleasure rush through her as her body remembered their lovemaking.

"Where's Christophe?"

Don's thumb indicated over his shoulder. "Gone to retrieve his book from the car. How's the steak?" He opened a bottle of wine, filled generous glasses, and paused to drop a light kiss on the end of her nose. Perhaps he remembered, too. Julie couldn't tell if he liked or hated the Frenchman and thought it prudent not to ask at this stage.

Christophe joined them on the lower terrace waving a large, battered leather bound book aloft. "*Voilà.*" A bookmark slipped and fluttered to land by his black leather sandals and Julie bent to scoop it up. Her eye was caught by a small deformity, a purple growth about the size of a grape that stood proud above his little toe. *No wonder he wears sandals. Shoes must be painful. And doesn't he look slight next to Don's broad shoulders?*

She handed over the bookmark with a smile and indicated where Christophe should sit. Don offered wine, flipped steaks from barbecue to plate and handed them over. Julie pressed the salad bowls towards their guest, waited till he had helped himself and indicated the book he had carefully placed on the cushion of the chair next to him. "What does it say?"

Christophe spoke English in slow, short sentences that were very pleasant on the ear, partly because of the rhythm and cadence of his speech, and partly because his voice was a light tenor with some resonance behind it. She guessed he would have a very good singing voice. "They write of the Mill in 1609. We know the mill was 'ere then. It made flour for the monastery and the 'ouses in the valley. Pierre worked 'ere in 1729. He was a lay brother. Justine comes 1735. The same year, she goes. The book says 'e fell in the millstream. 'Also, 'e is buried here but it does not write where."

Christophe picked up his fork. "The house, it has not been lived in—" he wagged his fingers beside his ears and shot a questioning glance at Julie. "*Forme fixe.*"

Don shoveled salad into his mouth and chewed steadily, frowning in concentration.

"Regularly, I think you mean. The house has been empty for long periods?" She looked over at the smooth white walls of the mill, the gleaming brown varnish and the tamed, manicured creeper cascading neatly over the *bolly* rail. "But it seems quite cared for."

Don reached for his wine glass. "That's Johnny. He's slowly been doing it up over the last couple of years. He said it was quite a wreck when his uncle bought it. Freddie had the living room made habitable, stayed a month or two and then lost interest. Johnny's done a lot of work recently."

Julie turned back to Christophe, who was chewing rapidly. "And the ghost, *le fantôme*? What does the book say about him?"

"Ah, the book." He smiled at her interest, and his blue eyes twinkled. "Let me read to you, *s'il vous plait.*" Christophe dabbed his mouth with one of Monsieur LeClerc's better paper napkins, took a pair of glasses from his top pocket and slipped them on his nose. They changed him into the intense librarian she had met yesterday. Julie glanced at Don while the Frenchman opened the book at a marked page and ran his index finger quickly down the squiggly lines of small black writing.

Don met her glance, dropped one eyelid in a lazy wink and blew out his lips in a brief and chaste kiss. His foot found and rubbed against hers under the table. Julie pressed her lips together to stem her laughter.

"It is *en francais, naturellement*; but I translate." Christophe regarded her sternly over the top of his glasses as if aware that her attention had wavered. Satisfied she was concentrating once more, he went on. "Justine, a girl of the village, formed an attachment for a young man; a lay brother. She pursued him. The monastery warned him of his danger. Pierre—" Christophe's delicate hands indicated pushing someone away. "But she persisted. Then one night of flood and storm, she—pouf! 'Ow you say?"

Julie stared at him and took a wild guess. "Disappeared?"

Christophe nodded and went back to the book. "Her family say she went to Pierre. Pierre – at the mill; *Monsieur l'Abbé* writes that Pierre was alone." Christophe shrugged. "It is a mystery."

"Is that all?" Don soaked a heel of bread through the garlicky oils on his plate, popped it in his mouth and watched Christophe.

"*C'est tout.*"

"It's not a lot to go on, is it?"

"I think for 1730 something it's quite a lot of detail. It's long before the French Revolution, Don. It's creepy, too."

"The only creepy thing is that he's buried here, *if that's true*. The rest is just gossip. What possible danger could he be in from the girl?"

"I suppose the monks would think any woman a danger to their celibacy."

Don shook his head. "Lay brothers are not monks. It takes years at different levels even now before they are acknowledged as full monks. Postulants for a year, novitiates for a further two years and another three years as Juniorates before they take their final vows. I know different houses interpreted the rule of St Benedict differently, but the basic pattern was probably the same back then. The primary duty of a monk is to love with all his heart."

Julie's eyes widened. "What a wonderful phrase. How do you know all that?"

"A friend of mine went through his school years wanting to join the Cistercians. He bored us all rigid with it."

"Is he a monk now?"

"No." A smile flicked across Don's face and disappeared. "He reached the age of nineteen and his hormones apparently became too much for him. He's married with two children already." He glanced at Christophe. "It seems as if our chap Pierre had the same problem."

Christophe had pushed his glasses up into the thick black curls, and listened with a frown of concentration as he glanced from Julie to Don and back again.

"Is it Pierre and Justine that we see?" Julie sipped her wine carefully and looked at Christophe over the rim of the glass. She liked wine, but she didn't want to befuddle her senses tonight. She had plans and wanted a clear head.

The Frenchman had followed the conversation. Now he nodded and tapped the page with his finger. "The book says he was a man of *beauté*." He looked at each of them in turn. "Tell me what you see." He helped himself to more salad, and went on eating.

Don savored the last of the olive oil and garlic, poured more wine for them all and kept his eyes on Julie as he spoke. "They were both young, both had brown hair. His was curly, and darker than hers; hers was long and straight. He was dressed in something dark brown or black, and she was in a brownish red color. Both floor length. I saw them very briefly. Julie saw them for a little longer."

Don had given the sort of observant report she would have expected of a lawyer even though he had only seen them for a few seconds. Julie shut her eyes and ran over the pictures in her head. "Dark hair, yes. His was curly, rather like yours, Christophe, but much longer and shaggier. Both colored by the sun, as if they worked outdoors. He was wide across the shoulders but not very tall. Dark eyes, good features, a lovely smile. Yes, a man of beauty, I think. She was small, and curvaceous."

She opened her eyes. Both men stared at her across the table, waiting for more. "He was dressed in a plain brown robe, a long one, down to the floor and with a piece of knotted rope for a belt. She wore an ankle-length skirt and some kind of a blouse, very low

here." Julie patted her cleavage. "And a shawl round her shoulders. All a bit drab, really. But she was small, and pretty."

"He wore sandals when I saw him," Don added. "The girl was barefoot."

Christophe frowned suspiciously. "This word shaggy. What does it mean?"

Julie stared wide-eyed, but could find no words to explain. A pale tinge of pink crept through her suntan, and Don lifted his hand to hide a smile.

"It means...um, it means rough, wrinkled, tousled...." It was plain that none of the words meant anything to the Frenchman. Julie sensed a growing snigger on her left and glared at Don. "Do we have a dictionary here, Don?"

He shook his head, found a sliver of charcoal among the burnt vine clippings at the bottom of the barbecue and spread out his napkin. He drew a quick line on the napkin. "That's straight." He looked at Christophe, who nodded. Don drew again. "That's curly." Christophe nodded again. "And this is shaggy."

"Oh, well done." Julie grinned. The three separate illustrations made it quite clear. Christophe, however, was not pleased.

"You say my 'air is like this?" He tapped the third drawing, outrage clear in his tone.

"No, *non!*" Julie rushed to placate him. "*Pierre's* hair is shaggy. Yours, Christophe, is *curly!*"

He folded his arms, sat back in his chair and regarded them both in turn. His frown dissolved and his mouth quirked up; he flicked a quick, bright, mischievous glance at Julie from beneath long lashes. Julie sighed, realized she had been duped, and shook her head. Don watched the interplay between them, and frowned.

No one spoke. Suddenly a little uncomfortable, the three of them resumed eating. Christophe encouraged Julie to recount each sighting of the mysterious couple and slowly, haltingly, she did so, from the first midnight glimpse of a dark shape on the *bolly*, Pierre walking towards her and the last sighting in broad daylight.

"Pierre walked to you? You are sure he saw *you*?" Christophe shoved his elbow on the table and stared at Julie. "*Est-il cela* he thought you were Justine?"

"Well, I can't tell, can I?" Julie glanced up. The evening sunlight was full on his face, his eyes were a very definite blue and his lashes were long, probably longer than hers. She thought he was quite attractive when he got rid of those incredibly heavy glasses which seemed to subdue his whole face. "I only know he walked towards me, smiling as if he knew me. It was scary."

Don was still scowling. Julie wondered why he was scowling quite so much, unable to believe he was jealous. Perhaps he'd decided he didn't like the Frenchman. She hoped not, for she quite liked Christophe's roguish charm.

They three of them sat quietly, enjoying the mellow sun, sipping the wine and nibbling the olives. Julie left Don and Christophe to their own devices while she made coffee and collected the hazelnut tart from the fridge. The sun had moved round behind the walnut tree and flung its shadow across the flagstones by the time she brought the tray down the steps.

Don rose quietly, took the tray from her and carried it to the table. She flashed a grateful smile his way and cut him an extra large slice of the tart, which he ate with obvious enjoyment. They relaxed, and sipped strong black coffee while a wisp of a breeze moved across the valley, a lizard ran up the wall of the mill and disappeared into a crack under the eaves. Two fields away a russet cow moaned to her calf.

"We could always leave," Don said suddenly.

Julie looked across the table in surprise. "We're not due to leave for another ten days. Where would we go? We've nowhere booked. And I love it here!"

Don put down his coffee mug. "Look, no one has actually said this aloud yet, and I've no wish to scare anyone. But this place is haunted. You and I have been seeing ghosts, you more so than me, Julie. I feel responsible for your safety. Do you really want to sleep with a baseball bat beside the bed because of some spooks? We'd find another place easily enough."

He was very serious. Sitting here in the evening sunlight with two attractive young men beside her and the barbecue still throwing out heat, Julie couldn't quite get to grips with the fact that they had been seeing ghosts. It was a fairly difficult concept to accept. "Perhaps it won't happen again. After all, people wait weeks for a ghost to appear and it never does."

Don's hazel eyes regarded her steadily. "OK. But if it goes on, then we'll think about moving on." He glanced over at the small dark librarian. "From what you say, people have not lived here very much. They came, but they didn't stay." A grin started and spread across his face. "Perhaps they didn't have a baseball bat."

Julie giggled. Perhaps it was the wine, but she felt absurdly content in the company of these two men.

Christophe wasn't amused. "They were farmers. They had—" He hunted for a word, could not find it and mimed chopping wood and shoveling earth. "They defend *la maison*."

Don thought about it. "Shovels." He was not laughing any more. "Scythes, sickles, axes, hoes, probably hammers and mallets. And still they left." He looked at Julie. "Are you sure you want to stay?"

Chapter Six

Somewhere during the evening, to Julie's vast relief, Don warmed to the French Librarian. They were perhaps half way down the second bottle of wine when Don finally laughed out loud and slapped the smaller man on the shoulder after a comment on football, and from then on, all was well between them.

Julie thought cynically that Don's cheerfulness had a lot to do with the quantity of wine he'd drunk. Christophe may have matched each glass of wine with a glass of water but Don drank only the deep red wine. She thought it was just as well he had a large frame to absorb it all.

It was after eleven and full dark when Julie saw Christophe check his watch. "You don't have to drive home." The dangers of the twisty little French roads through the forest between the mill and Christophe's home were uppermost in her mind. "You could stay here."

Don and Christophe both stared at her. Julie shrugged. "Well, there's plenty of room downstairs."

"I think Christophe should see what's on offer before he decides." Don got up and walked over to the mill room on the floor below their living room. The varnished wooden outer doors were open, and he pushed the wild rose's thorny tendrils to one side, opened the inner paned glass doors and gestured Christophe before him. Cool, musty air rushed out as they stepped across the threshold.

A few paces inside, and the air was so cold that Julie shivered. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea." She retreated a step or two. Don switched on the light. "Oh, this is dreadful! I hadn't remembered it was such a mess!"

"Oh, but this is good." Christophe smiled back at her. "There is even a bed!"

"There's more than a bed." Don flung open the door at the far end of the room and disappeared into the darkness beyond. His voice drifted back, oddly muted, and another light switch clicked. Light bloomed ten or twelve yards away. "There's a brand new bathroom here, too."

Christophe joined Don, poked his dark head around the door and admired the shiny white tiles and the very new shower and loo. He grinned back at Julie. "It is better than I 'ave at 'ome."

Julie's gaze swept over the array of mismatched sofas, chairs, unmade up beds, unplugged lamps and the bookcases with a few paperbacks dotted randomly on their shelves. A large telescope straddled one of the mill wheels and an empty chest freezer yawned out of the far corner.

She put her own interpretation on Christophe's comments: either he did not fancy the drive home through the dark, narrow country roads, or he really wanted to stay at the mill. "It's so very cold. Amazing, really, when it's still so warm outside. Oh!"

She remembered a conversation with Don about the temperature dropping when ghosts were around.

Don gestured towards the back of the room. "That long wall's below ground level, that's why it's so cold. It's always cold in here, but I don't think it will worry Christophe if we give him a good thick blanket." Don switched off the light and came back into the main room. He saw Julie frowning. "Remember how the ground slopes down from the *bolly*. Where the steps are."

Christophe was already peering around the old mill wheels. Don smiled reassuringly at Julie over Christophe's head, and halted, his hands in his pockets, prepared to give the other man plenty of time. "It must have been quite an operation when it was working."

Julie wondered what the men saw that made them so interested. The two stone mill wheels stood a little distance apart, each about four feet in diameter and made up of four or five pieces of white stone held together with a two inch band of iron. She looked more closely and realized that each wheel was actually one stone set above another; she imagined they would rotate in different directions, and corn would be ground between them. "The flour would go all over the floor." She rubbed busily at the goose bumps rising on her bare arms.

Both men stared at her. Don looked down at the wheels. "They'd build a box around them to catch it, wouldn't they? Then there'd be a little chute, and the flour would go down into the sacks, and the sacks would go—"

He gestured vaguely towards the far wall of the mill room where Julie knew there was another, smaller room and a garage that was even more of a jumble than the mill room. "Out there, somewhere." He thought about it. "Of course, the carts would come down the slope—where Christophe's car is parked right now—and they'd load up from that side of the mill, beyond the bathroom. Easy, really, when you think about it."

Christophe had found the thick Perspex sheet let into the floor between the mill stones, and peered down into the blackness below. "The stream, it still runs?"

Don nodded. "It's blocked off, but the water still finds its way through. Johnny is toying with the idea of opening it all up again."

"Well, I'd never sleep down here if he did," Julie declared. "There'd be snakes and spiders and all sorts of things creeping about. Ugh!"

"Not if the mill wheels were working." Don peered over Christophe's shoulder into the blackness below. "The noise and vibration would scare every snake within fifty miles."

Julie imagined the heavy wheels rumbling around and had to concede that he may be right. "You'll be telling me he wants to grind his own flour next." She shivered and hugged herself. "Look, I'm going back upstairs before I freeze to death." She walked to the door and halted on the threshold. "I'll sort out some blankets if you're sure you want to stay?"

Christophe grinned over his shoulder and nodded enthusiastically. "But of course. *Merci.*"

Julie walked out onto the warmth of the lower terrace. It was a clear night, and the trees, black shadows against the silvery fields, seemed so much closer to the mill than they did in the daytime. Mist hovered along the edges of the stream and pushed through gaps in the bushes and reeds that lined the banks. A constant rustle of sound came whispering down from the topmost branches of the huge poplar tree as the breeze drifted above the valley. The moon had just cleared the top of the hill and it reminded her of the generous slice of melon she had cut for breakfast that morning. Warm again, she turned and headed for the steps, thinking she would clear the table once she'd got the blankets.

There was no premonition, no warning. She skipped up the steps, swung round the corner and stopped dead with a hiss of fright. At the far end of the *bolly*, two dark shadows stood clutched together, so close they seemed like one person. They were unaware of her presence, and Julie did not dare move in case she drew their attention.

The only light on the upper floor of the mill came from the yellow citronella candle stub, small and forgotten in its terracotta pot on the white table. The weak flame threw a

flicker of light and shadow across the couple by the wall, and Julie hovered with one hand grasping the oak pillar and stared.

Their mouths moved, but no sound reached Julie. It was like watching a silent film. His long dark robe absorbed what little light there was, and the heavy fabric swung above his pale, bony ankles and heavy leather sandals, but the girl's foot, smoothing up and down his calf, was bare.

Pierre pressed Justine against the wall and light glistened briefly on her eyes and teeth as she smiled up at him. She laughed in delight as her lover eased fabric away from her shoulders, and thrust her small, round breasts against his chest. The candlelight glimmered on the curve of her calf and knee as she lifted his dark robe and the inside of her thigh rode higher and higher against his leg. He cupped her breasts in both hands, ducked and kissed them while the girl squirmed with pleasure.

Julie's knees trembled, a pulse thudded in her ears and she had the oddest feeling that his hands roved and gripped her own flesh, that his lips touched hers. She shivered violently, and clung to the wooden rail for fear she would faint. Her head went back in a quiver of feeling that exactly mirrored the wild excitement exhibited by the girl in the monk's arms.

Julie breathed in short, hard gasps. She could not tear her gaze away, but watched, mesmerized, as the girl flung her arms around the young man's neck. Her leg lifted higher, nudged the curve of his hips, and when he lifted his own robe and plunged forward, Julie gasped as if he had entered her rather than Justine.

Julie staggered, clutched the *bolly* rail and took a deep, shuddering breath. Perspiration stood on her skin as she edged backwards onto the steps to the lower terrace, then plunged down and into the big mill room.

The clattering rush of her sandals on the terracotta tiles lifted two dark heads, and at her cry, Don vaulted over the mill wheel, reached out for her and pulled her against his broad chest. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Julie jammed her flushed face against his tee shirt and muttered an incomprehensible sentence. Don's eyes met Christophe's over her head, and an instant later both men turned and made for the door. They collided, bounced off each other and Jill was astounded to see the slender Frenchman slip through the door ahead of Don.

"Don't leave me!" Julie shrieked to an empty room. She shot a glance around the shadowy mill room, saw the dark oblong of the open door at the far end and bolted after Don.

Don and Christophe stood on the *bolly*, scowling. Julie crept quietly up the steps and peeped round the corner, glad that the darkness hid her hot cheeks. "There's no one here." Don seemed annoyed. He walked the full length of the *bolly*, and stared down the drive.

Christophe stood undecided half way along the *bolly*, his back to Julie when she flopped down in a white plastic chair. He half-turned as the sound of her distressed breathing reached him. "What was it that you saw, *chérie*?"

Concern rang through his voice. Julie leaned on the table, glad of its solidity, pulled the candle closer and clasped both palms around the bowl. It was warm and comforting. When she looked up, Christophe's shirt was a glimmer of white in the darkness and in the wavering light of the citronella candle she could see concern stamped across his face.

Julie got her breathing under control, but she couldn't think of a single word of French. She wished she had drunk less wine, and hoped his slow, charming English was up to it. "I saw two people. A man and a woman. Kissing. Undressing each other."

Don heard her comment and snorted. "You're kidding!"

Julie's cheeks burned, and something sparked at the back of her eyes as she matched him stare for stare. "No, I'm not kidding." He had only taken notice of her when the Frenchman had offered comfort, and that irritated her.

Christophe frowned over the word Don had used. "In the book, they were...." He interlocked his fingers, waggled them and shrugged apologetically. "It is OK, Julie. You saw them *faire de l'amour*?"

Julie nodded. Don reached round the kitchen door, switched the lights on and watched the Frenchman with a kind of curious detachment.

"Oh la la!" The way Christophe said the words made Julie think of disasters and catastrophes. She blinked and watched him prowl up and down by the oak pillars, his thoughtful gaze on the flagstones at his feet. She gripped the bowl between her palms, stared at the candle flame and couldn't tell them the worst thing of all; that she had felt all the sensations of *faire de l'amour*, too. It was too weird, and too embarrassing. Christophe would say *Oh la la* with a vengeance if she told him that.

Don took charge. "Keep Julie company out here while I make some coffee." He ducked into the kitchen and Julie heard water running, and mugs banging down onto a tray. He shot his head round the door, tossed three new candles to Christophe. "Light them." He sent Julie a brief, warm smile. "Coffee'll be ready in a moment."

Christophe approached the table where Julie sat and lit the candles from the citronella stub. He watched her as he did it, frowning, and swore when the flame licked his fingers. He fixed two candles in an old metal holder on the house wall and shoved the third in a lantern hanging from one of the beams above his head. He took the chair opposite Julie. She smiled weakly. "I'll get those blankets soon, Christophe."

"After coffee, is good. You are...." He hesitated, searched for the word and failed. He laid his hand on his chest and made little fluttering movements with his fingers.

"Shocked, I think you mean." Julie managed a wan smile. "Yes, it was a shock. I didn't think ghosts existed, outside of books and fairy tales...they looked so real."

The smell of frying bacon drifted out on the still air, and Don reappeared with a fleece, which he draped over Julie's shoulders. She snuggled in gratefully. Christophe lifted his nose and sniffed appreciatively. Julie looked at her watch. "Good grief! It's after midnight! No wonder Don's hungry. It's ages since we ate."

Don brought the big tray to the table and there was a mug of coffee, and a chunk of baguette stuffed with bacon for each of them. Steam from the mugs swirled into the air and the atmosphere lightened. Julie bit into her bun with an eagerness that surprised her. Chewing a huge mouthful, she beamed appreciation at Don when he dropped into a chair beside her.

Don always thought food was a good idea, and at this moment a bacon sandwich seemed so normal, so sane and so British that Julie's spirits began to lift again. She took a second bite, wondered what Christophe would make of it and turned to see him munching happily, and nodding his head. "Very good! Very good!"

The little citronella candle and its three larger companions burned bravely against the encroaching darkness. The two men chewed and swallowed in silence. Julie felt an urge to talk and picked the first topic she could think of in order to fill the huge quiet of the night. "It's very late. There's nothing quite like a bacon sandwich for making everything seem normal, is there?"

"Almost one' clock," Don said.

"Ah, *l'heure de sorcières et magiciens*."

"Oh, please don't," Julie begged. "They might come back." She wiped her chin with the back of her hand and licked remnants of bacon from her fingers.

"Well, we have our very own resident ghost hunter here if they do." Don threw a mocking glance at the Frenchman. "Though Julie seems to be the key. Nothing happens if she isn't there." He took a huge bite out of his baguette.

Christophe stopped chewing as if in surprise, his gaze on Julie. "That is true, *chérie*."

Don lifted one eyebrow and wagged a finger at Christophe. "Less of the *chérie*, if you don't mind."

Julie's jaws stopped moving. Wide-eyed, she glanced at Don, then Christophe, but he only laughed and waved a casual hand. "It is like you English say love. Sorry love, here's your change love, mind your foot, love. It means nothing." With a roguish twinkle in his eye, Christophe ate the last of his baguette and refused to take Don's warning seriously.

Julie realized quite suddenly that Christophe was handsome. She looked at Don, and caught a glance that said only too clearly, if she interpreted it correctly, that if the little French bugger stepped out of line he'd be only too pleased remind him of his place in the scheme of things.

A quiver of pleasure stirred at the back of Julie's mind, but she searched for neutral ground between them all. "Is there any clue in your book as to where Pierre was buried?"

"'E should be in 'oly ground. The church or the monastery. Not 'ere."

"What does the book say, exactly?"

Christophe looked round, remembered he'd left the book on the lower terrace and bounded off to retrieve it. Don took hold of Julie's hand and squeezed it. "I wish he'd go. I want you all to myself."

"I know. I think he's determined to stay until he sees a ghost—"

She broke off as Christophe ran back up the steps two at a time and flung himself back into his chair. He wiped his hands carefully on his napkin before opening the book, and Don and Julie exchanged amused smiles.

Christophe settled his glasses on his nose, and tilted the book towards the nearest candle. "I translate for you, yes? It says, *exactement*, 'Corn was ground daily and the millpond filled again overnight. The monks, they return to the monastery for vespers and compline. They walk to the mill next day.'"

"But there are beds here. Sorry, there were beds here." Julie shook her head. "I'm getting confused already! Anyway, I saw Pierre get up from some sort of a bed over by the millstream window."

"So he stayed here sometimes. Perhaps he stayed if there was a rush job, or if he was expecting a lady friend, perhaps? He wouldn't stay alone though, and female visitors would not have been welcome."

"It must have been a secret affair, then?"

Don nodded slowly. "But even today, affairs go on amongst clergy. He might not have been the only one. Perhaps this mill was a hotbed of illicit romance."

"Do you think he thought I was Justine?"

"*C'est possible*." Christophe closed the book and removed his glasses. "Perhaps he sees you as 'er. Perhaps you look like 'er."

Don steepled his fingers together and laid them against his mouth. "There is a similarity between her and Justine. She's about your height and weight, and you both have brown hair, though yours is a bit lighter and much shorter."

"You think I look like her?"

"A little. Only a little. Especially on a dark night!"

Christophe put his glasses on again and scanned rapidly down the handwritten text. His finger stilled. He looked up. "It says 'ere that he slept at the monastery two nights in seven to facilitate the—" He mimed grinding corn with a pestle and bowl. "The nightmare I can no longer find."

"Perhaps you dreamed it." Don spoke without a flicker of a smile, but Julie clapped her hand to her mouth to hide a grin. All sense of danger had faded away under the combined influence of the bacon sandwich, coffee and the two or three glasses of wine she had drunk earlier in the evening. It took Christophe a moment and then he grimaced. "Ah, the English joke. Ha ha." He read on.

Julie decided she liked Christophe. Her gaze moved instinctively to Don; he was watching Christophe.

"What nightmare?" Don's brows drew down towards his nose. "We've heard no mention of a nightmare."

Christophe read on, but his hand waggled in the air beside his ear. "I thought I 'ad read of a...*un rêve*, a...dream. That he 'ad dreams of 'er, but...." He shrugged; a very Gallic gesture. "Not this book." He was still reading, turned a page quickly with a moue of dissatisfaction. "The story ends. There was a big storm and both go...not seen again." He slammed the book shut so hard that the librarian in Julie flinched.

Don's frown deepened. "I thought you said—"

"Yes, yes! But the old French, she is *difficile* to read. The light is *mauvais*. But it is correct." He tapped the book for emphasis. "In the storm, they both—pouf!"

Don gazed around. "Well, there's no hint of a storm tonight. I guess that means we're safe." Worry crept back into Julie's face, and she looked round nervously. "Relax, Julie. It's only an old, unhappy story. I think it's time we all turned in."

Christophe frowned, so Don rephrased his sentence. "It's time we all went to bed. I'll get those blankets for you."

Christophe's frown cleared. "*D'accord*."

The table rocked as Don got up; the candle flickered, recovered and sent huge shadows leaping across the walls. There was an innocuous rustle above them and something dropped out of a crack between the roof tiles.

They all stared at the small snake curled like an S within the circle of candle light. Very black against the pale stones of the *bolly*, it was hardly the length of a foot ruler, but it stared right back at them and then, like oil running out of a bottle, poured over the edge of the flags and down into the shadows where the drainpipe led under the terrace.

"It wasn't hurt." Julie was more surprised than frightened.

"Fell about eight feet onto stone, too." Don gazed at the underside of the roof as if he expected a cascade of snakes to appear.

Julie turned to the Frenchman. "Do you often get snakes dropping out of roofs?"

"No. But this place has been *perdue* for so long—what is the word?"

"Lost," Don said.

"Ah, yes, lost. The animals 'ave taken it. It is theirs."

"Not for long if I know Johnny. But let's get you those blankets, if you're sure?"

Chapter Seven

"Should we wake him?" Julie extended one smooth bare leg before her and studied it with her head on one side. "Do you think I'm turning brown? I looked quite brown in the shower this morning, and yet out here in the sunshine I look pale."

Don reached for the jar of fig jam and spread it on his toast. "It's a strange propensity of showers to wash off dirt, but you look almost good enough to eat." He ducked as she threatened to throw her toast at him. "In fact, if he hasn't surfaced yet, we could go back to bed and...? No? OK. I'll go and hunt him out in a little while. It was fairly late when we all got to bed and it's only just after nine now." He chewed thoughtfully for a minute, his eyes on Julie. "The ghost might have got him."

Julie's coffee mug slipped as it reached her mouth and a slosh of coffee hit her bare thigh where the towel parted. "You don't think...?" She wiped coffee from her leg and glanced worriedly towards the lower terrace.

Don's chuckle was a low pitched, rich sound of pure amusement. "Of course not. Look around you—it's another perfect French day and there is no such thing as a ghost."

"Oh, but..." Julie frowned. He was right about the perfect day. A brilliant blue sky hung over the mill, birds called, sang, and chirruped and a gentle breeze drifted over her bare shoulders. It was pleasantly warm, but it would be too hot by eleven. "Let's enjoy it before he wakes up. I think I'll do a painting. What about you?"

"Oh, the pool and a book."

Ten minutes later Don lay on the sun lounger, opened his paperback thriller and began to read. Julie arranged her chair alongside him, sat down and unwrapped a rolled bundle that had been stuffed into the bottom of her travel bag. She selected what she needed, sketched a few brief lines on her pad and pulled the water jar closer. After a brief hesitation, she began to splash paint around.

The wide brim of her straw hat shielded her head and neck from the sun. Insects hummed, lizards whispered out to the edge of the terrace, stamped the stone with their tiny forefeet and basked in the sun. Occasionally the ugly sound of a tractor or a car roared along the valley. Don turned his pages at regular intervals, and ignored the droplets of cold water that flew off the end of Julie's paintbrush.

She held her painting out and viewed it critically. Not displeased, she swung her arm and held the sheet of paper under his nose. He studied it and nodded. "It's good. A subtle blend of color in the flowers."

Pleased, she smiled. "What are you reading?"

"It's about bent lawyers making millions." His hazel eyes slid towards her. "I want to learn a few tips."

"Don't you get tired of law and lawyers?" It was a rhetorical question and she knew the answer before he shook his head. She caught herself admiring the glorious muscle structure of his spine and shoulders as he turned over, and contemplated a new painting of a young man on a lounger. She forced her eyes back to her half finished painting, and went back to work.

A little while later, Don got up, stretched and moved over to peer at her work. "That's a lot of green."

"There's a lot of trees." Julie used a paintbrush to lift the brim of her sunhat and speckled shadows danced across her face. "And grass. They're both green. Even that bird

has noticed. Listen.” She held her paintbrush like a conductor’s baton, and indicated a particular line of bird song. “He does the same line over and over again, but it’s the bit at the end where he says ‘it’s greener’ – listen!”

The unseen bird performed on cue, and Don laughed. Their eyes met, held and he bent suddenly, kissed her and knocked her hat off. He picked it up. “It’s nearly eleven, Blue Eyes. I think I should go and see if he’s all right. Are you coming?”

She grumbled, got up and glared at him with mutiny in her eyes. “OK, Big Shot.”

Don swung round very fast and rammed the sunhat back on her head so it slid down over her ears, swung her off her feet and twirled her round till she squealed.

He put her down gently. “Go and put a shirt on, Blue Eyes. I don’t want our Frenchman to see you in a bikini.”

“As if he’d notice,” Julie scoffed.

“I rather think he would.”

She saw he wasn’t joking, so for the sake of peace and something else she couldn’t quite explain, she picked up her big baggy blue shirt, wriggled into it and followed him down the steps.

Don peered through the glass doors and knocked again, louder. “He can’t be still asleep. It’s been nearly twelve hours.”

Don opened the door and stepped inside while Julie hovered on the threshold. “He’s not here.” The bathroom was in total darkness, but he strode down and had a quick glance in case the Frenchman had fallen and hit his head on the tiles.

Julie peeped round the corner of the door. “He’s not in bed!”

“Isn’t that what I just said? Has his car gone? Go and see if his car is still where he left it.”

With the clatter of Julie’s sandals in his ears, Don searched the far room, and looked into the garage space; he even checked the tiny room that held the washing machine and found no trace of Christophe.

Julie reappeared at the door, panting. “Yes, it’s still here. Could he have gone for a walk?”

“He must have.” Don shook his head. “But his clothes are still here. He’s unlikely to have gone for a walk stark naked.” He joined her at the door and stared around in every direction. There was no sign of any living person.

They walked slowly back up to the pool. Julie hovered uncertainly, unsure of her next move. “What should we do?”

“What is the correct thing to do when a guest you hardly know disappears?”

“Well, we could ring the police, and try to explain...”

Don strode towards the *bolly*. “We’d better get dressed. I have this mental picture of you and me in handcuffs, being marched away by frowning gendarmes.” He stopped abruptly. “Is that him?” Don, far taller than Julie, peered across the shrubs and bushes towards the road.

Julie climbed on her chair, wobbled a little and stared. A small figure was jogging – in this heat! – under the trees. “It might be. How odd. I wouldn’t have thought of him as a jogger.”

Some time later Christophe loped onto the drive, saw them and waved. Don ground his teeth together. “He’s got all the gear; professional shorts and vest. I’ll kill him.”

“*Bonjour!*” Christophe waved once more.

Don glared at him. "Imbecile!" Christophe was too far away to hear, but Julie did, and bit her lip. "A good guest informs his hosts if he intends to go out at the crack of dawn so that they don't worry about him."

Julie thought it highly unlikely that Christophe had been jogging since the crack of dawn, but she did think he should have told them where he was going instead of slipping quietly out the back way and leaving them to worry.

Christophe seemed to have no such instincts. Showered, dressed in his now slightly creased whites, he sat in the shade a little later and drank coffee with them. "I enjoy *le jogging*. It clears the 'ead. I carry the shorts and shoes in the car always. And it is Friday."

Don left the conversation to Julie. "Friday?"

"I do not work Friday. Antoine, he works today." Christophe smiled. "I 'ave the 'ole day to do as I please."

"Oh, you're not married, then?"

Julie felt rather than saw Don's eyes swivel to her, but she refused to meet his sharp, speculative gaze. If he chose to leave the work of conversation to her, then he couldn't complain at her choice of topic. It had seemed a natural question; but when she turned back to the Frenchman, she saw that Christophe's grin had deepened and his blue eyes regarded her warmly. Rather too warmly, perhaps. His wet curls gleamed as he shook his head. "No wife, no girlfriend. I am, as you say, un'ooked."

"I think you mean unattached," Don said dryly.

A flush crept into Julie's face. *Christophe thinks I'm interested in him, and Don seems jealous. Don probably is jealous.* She sat forward in her chair. "Well, I must go shopping today. Shall I leave you two here by the pool?"

It was with some relief that she drove the yellow sports car along the drive, and turned south for Bergerac. *It's really time for Christophe to go home, but he seems so interested in the ghosts. Perhaps he'll have gone by the time I get back.*

The run into Bergerac was uneventful apart from the usual French drivers who felt a desperate need to zoom by the yellow sports car at the first opportunity, and Julie's thoughts roamed as she drove along the winding lanes. She wasn't certain how she felt about any of the strange developments at the mill.

Like most people, the thought of ghosts sent a shiver down her spine. The mill ghosts were startling, certainly, and were perhaps the reason she had not had a good night's sleep since she arrived at the mill. *Perhaps lack of sleep is warping my judgment.* She could believe it was all in her imagination except Don had seen them too.

Don had a good brain, dealt only in facts and wasn't easily scared; a reassuring and lovely man to have around. She found she was smiling just thinking of him. Christophe, on the other hand, seemed a little more fey.

She drove to the large hypermarket on the eastern outskirts of Bergerac, and got everything she wanted in record time without a single hitch in communications. Flushed with success, Julie bought coffee, *pain au chocolat* and sat in the sunny café reading one word in three of the free French newspaper laid on the counter top.

It relaxed her to be among people for a while, to absorb the rapid-fire chatter of French, and observe the dark-haired young men drinking beer and smoking the inevitable Gauloises at the bar. Coffee, a bun and a newspaper; such undemanding, normal things even if she did look at the pictures far more than she read the words of the newspaper.

The little red car was still in place when she returned. The front door was open but there was no sign of Don or Christophe. *They've probably murdered each other.* She switched

off the engine with a deep sigh, hauled the groceries into the kitchen, unpacked most of them directly into the fridge and gradually became aware of the silence.

She also found her eyes constantly flicked from side to side in case something vague in black began to materialize at her side. She shut the fridge door with some relief and skipped down the steps to the mill room. Both doors were wide open, but they weren't inside. Julie wandered back to the doorway and stared around the fields. They could have bothered to leave a note. So much for Don's pontificating about kindness to hosts this morning.

A sound made her pause. She looked back into the mill room. The sound came again. It might have been a man's laugh; she certainly heard a splash and a peculiar rumbling, echoing sound from deep in the room. Oh no. The hair rose on her arms and she dashed out into the blazing sunshine, whirled and faced the open doorway. Surely sunlight was the best protection against ghosts? Where was Don when she needed him?

More sounds drifted out of the mill room. She frowned; it sounded very much like Don's voice, and very much as if he was swearing. Most unghostlike, in fact. Warily she stayed where she was and then remembered that all her ghostly episodes had had one thing in common; they had been like a silent movie, totally without sound. Maybe it was Don, after all. She went to the door and called his name.

"Julie!" It *was* Don, and his voice was full of relief. "Come to the back of the mill!"

Julie ran anxiously round the corner of the house and stared down into the millstream. Don, dressed in an old tee shirt and his raggedy shorts, stood grinning at her from underneath the ancient stone archway where the water emerged from beneath the house. The old stream had no doubt once roared through, but it was now a slow trickle of running water, and the banks were overgrown with weeds. Christophe's brown chest loomed out of the darkness behind Don, and he waved up at her rather wearily. He looked as if he had borrowed a pair of Don's shorts and they hung low down on his slender hips.

"Can you find a pair of shears or something?" Don indicated the overgrown banks. "We need to cut back all these nettles so we can get out!"

"What are you *doing* in there?" The mud and slime was ankle deep and she cringed at the mere thought of standing in it.

"It's only water and mud," Don said. "Nothing nasty."

"I don't know how you can."

"The shears?" Don reminded her gently.

Julie glanced around. She was well aware of the huge, vicious nettles that grew around the mill, and they reigned supreme on both banks of the stream. The stream bed ran several feet below the banks, and Don and Christophe would have to scramble out somewhere. "How did you get in?"

"Through the mill room." Don squelched through the mud towards her. Julie's toes curled within her sandals as she watched mud thicken the water around his feet.

"Through the hole in the floor?"

"Yep. It's quite clean. But it's very cold, so can you find something quickly? We'd like to get out and get warm again. A machete would be good!"

Julie didn't want to go back in the mill room. If they'd removed the Perspex cover then heaven alone knew what had crawled out and now lurked in corners. Only the other day – yesterday – last night – they'd seen the black snake go down under the terrace. If the stream went down in almost the same place, then the spaces must all be connected.

She hesitated at the corner, and took a step back. "Did you see any snakes?"

"Nope."

Julie went quietly into the room, and hesitated, her gaze darting from corner to corner. She deliberately clattered her sandals on the tiles, made a satisfyingly loud noise, and nothing scuttled away. Could snakes hear? She thought not; so, regardless of how stupid she might look, she jumped heavily up and down several times. If they couldn't hear, she was certain they felt vibration. She took a deep breath, hurried to the garage at the far end, flicked on the lights and a small mew of fright left her as a harmless green lizard ran across the floor and up the wall.

She ran back with an armful of implements. "Where do you want me to cut?"

"There!" They both pointed to a different spot, and her mouth quirked as she saw Christophe clutch at the waistband of his shorts and heave them higher. Julie dropped the large shears, the sickle and the rake, put her knuckles on her hips and waited.

Don glared at Christophe, who shrugged. He looked dejected, and Julie noticed he continually turned to gaze back along the tunnel they had just left.

Julie dropped both shears and the sickle into the mud close by their feet. As they cut, Julie raked the offending stems away from the stream. In no time at all they both climbed out and stood beside her. Julie was perspiring after the exercise in the blazing sun and runnels of sweat trickled from Don's temples, but Christophe, she noticed, shivered. "Sit in the sun and I'll bring coffee. Do you need dry clothes?"

They both said no, but while the coffee perked, Julie raided the wicker basket for a couple of clean bath towels and seized a pair of Don's jogging bottoms from the bedroom chair and took them out. Don pulled on the fleecy bottoms, Christophe gave her a pallid grin, huddled into the bath towel and watched her open a package of fancy biscuits just bought that morning.

She bit into a chocolate covered Madeleine, shoved the plate of biscuits towards them and sat down. "OK. Tell me whatever possessed you both to go down there?"

Don's hazel eyes mocked her gently. "Don't you want to know what we found?"

She did, of course. "Start at the beginning." She took another biscuit. Between gulps of hot coffee, Don told her how they'd got torches and examined the cavern from the mill room. "It looked clean, so we dropped into it. We knew we could walk out into the open air so we didn't bother with ropes. We never thought about the nettles."

"It's big," Don continued. "Natural rock all the way through; and a deep groove or channel where the millstream used to come in. The water would have dropped eight or nine feet, with enough force to turn both waterwheels. The ideal place for a mill, really. The remains of one wheel are still there, a bit battered and broken, but still there."

Christophe, uncharacteristically silent, shivered and clutched his mug in both hands.

"There was a big sluice-gate where the water would have come in, but it's been bricked up and cemented in place." Don paused to drink his coffee and wolf down another biscuit. "Once the pond outside was full, they'd lift the sluice-gate and the water would pour down, turn the wheels and grind the corn."

"What about the snakes?"

"We didn't see any, did we?" Christophe, still grey faced, shook his head. "There's lots of nooks and crannies up under the floor of the *bolly* but there weren't any in the cave itself. Too damp, I should think. Christophe, are you OK?"

Don was bursting with enthusiasm about the whole adventure, but Christophe huddled beneath his bath towel and shivered. He nodded, but without conviction.

"I'll make some lunch. Will you carry the tray for me, Don?"

"Sure." He dropped the towel and loped up the steps behind her. From the top, Julie looked back in time to see Christophe pick up Don's discarded towel and drape it around his shoulders.

Julie opened the fridge and dragged out several packages. "What's happened to Christophe? He looks quite shaken."

Don shook his head. "I don't know. He was keener than me to start with, and he was fine till we found the waterwheel and then he backed off muttering in French and complaining of the cold. Mind you, it was cold. Far colder than the mill room."

While Julie arranged bread, salad and cold meat on a big platter, Don collected glasses and opened a bottle of wine. "Perhaps he's claustrophobic or something. This might perk him up."

Julie shook her head. "He wouldn't have gone in if he was claustrophobic."

It took quite along time to perk Christophe up. When they asked what was wrong, they received a very Gallic shrug. "I don't know. I 'ad very bad feeling down there. Something in the cave is bad, very bad."

Which wasn't, on the whole, what Julie or Don, for that matter, wanted to hear.

Chapter Eight

Christophe recovered some of his normal enthusiasm by the time lunch was over, and apologized for his cowardice, at which they both remonstrated with him. “*Non, j’avais peur.* But tonight I take you to dinner at the *Moulin St Pierre.*”

Julie mentally congratulated herself on not buying fish at the supermarket earlier, and smiled. “There’s really no need. We have more than enough food here. I went shopping this morning, remember.”

Christophe got to his feet. “I go ‘ome; I rest, and pick you up later.” They did not argue. Christophe seemed to enjoy taking charge and they were content to let him go. The little red car had barely reached the end of the lane before Julie walked into Don’s arms and held him close. “Oh, you smell so good.” She nestled her cheek against the smooth planes of his chest and heard the rumble of laughter deep within.

“Are you sure I don’t need a shower after being underground?”

“No. The faint perfume of Aramis covers everything else.”

He laughed and pulled her closer.

That evening Christophe waited at the end of the drive as promised, and Don folded his long legs into the tiny red car with some difficulty. “This is *small.*”

Julie coughed as Aramis collided with whatever aftershave Christophe had sprayed so liberally over himself, huddled in the back seat and felt relief that she had not added her perfume to the pungent mix. Don’s head hit the roof every time they drove over a bump, and they were both pleased when Christophe wheeled into the dusty car park of the St Pierre.

They drove by the *Moulin a St Pierre* every time they went to Bergerac or the bakery in the nearby village and had thought it no more than a fish farm. Anglers frequented the large man-made ponds and tanks at weekends, and families had picnics beside the water and barbecued any fish they caught.

Christophe led them straight into a cool stone hall where someone dressed in immaculate black trousers and white shirt sprang out from behind the old wooden desk, checked their reservation and guided them across the hall and into the restaurant. Julie gazed around, head swiveling, and admired a pale, painted antique dresser and the stone-flagged floor. Huge modern windows faced south at the back of the building; mature trees broke the full glare of the sun that flooded the hall with watery green light.

The walls of the dining room were of pale, mellow stone, and a huge stone arch spanned the width of the room. The waiter led them up three or four steps onto a mezzanine where a window overlooked a long straight channel of green water. A closed sluice-gate forced the water into two smaller channels to either side of the building.

“There must be a mill room beneath here.” Julie stared at the floor, searching for a trapdoor. “I expect the water used to go straight on through the sluice-gate where the window is now.”

“Look at that drive-shaft.” Don stared up at the ceiling where a massive, ten foot long beam of wood sprouting a complex system of cog wheels had been suspended. The waiter stood patiently beside a circular table bearing smooth white linen, sparkling glasses and silverware.

“Please, sit down.” Christophe gestured them to their places and soon the old machinery was forgotten as they drooled over the menu. Julie sat with her back to the

window, happy in the knowledge that her pale green dress suited her and was exactly right for the occasion. Christophe wore fresh whites, and Don looked handsome in cream slacks, and a brown and cream check shirt. His favorite brown leather belt gleamed at his waist. *I'm so lucky to have two such attractive men with me.* She smiled at them both.

Don's hair had lost its barbered neatness and the open necked shirt displayed the strong tendons of his throat to advantage. He felt her gaze, glanced up and smiled. "What would you like to order?"

As ever, his voice made her stomach curl in delight. *If I was a dog, I'd roll over and wave my paws in the air.* Christophe studied the menu with furious concentration. When he peered at them both in turn over the rim of his heavy glasses, Julie was reminded of a college professor she had once known. "*Permettez-moi to order pour la table?*"

Don looked a little surprised, but agreed without comment and Christophe turned with a beaming smile as the wife of the proprietor approached. She was a tall, sturdily built lady with a tempest of black hair piled in high coils about her head, and she greeted Christophe like a long lost friend. She smiled again on discovering Christophe's guests were from England. "I'm from Manchester. Manchester by way of Scotland and Russia, you might say."

They listened happily to a brief account of Madame Black's travels, but when Christophe tapped the menu and asked a question, a wholly different conversation sprang up between them in rapid French. It went on for several minutes and Madame Black made frequent notes on her order pad.

They ate the glorious *salad aux gesiers* Christophe had chosen as their first course, talked about the restaurant and France in general and drank a glass of wine before Christophe said abruptly, "I talk about today."

Don and Julie's eyes met briefly across the table before they both turned attentively to the Frenchman. "*Vous savez, je pense...* I want very much to look under the mill room?" Christophe waited, hand poised in the air until he had Don's nod of the head. "I was 'appy, then we found the old..." He indicated a circle in the air. "Then I 'ad bad feeling. I know terror."

Julie's eyes widened, but she stayed quiet. It was Don who said gently, "You mean the waterwheel? The wheel made you feel bad? Can you describe the bad feeling?"

Christophe's jaw jutted and moved from side to side as if he ground his teeth together. He frowned at the fork in his hand and turned it over and over on the white tablecloth, probably Julie thought, without realizing what he was doing.

"*Le panique.*"

Don was gentle but relentless. "What made you feel such panic?"

"The...waterwheel, I saw it...it came down, to kill me."

"It was already down in the mud, Christophe. It couldn't fall on you."

Julie compressed her lips together in a physical effort not to interrupt. Don was doing this so well; but she had a terrible feeling about what might be coming next. She clasped her hands together, hid them under the table, fixed her eyes on Christophe, and waited.

"No, no, no! It was—" Christophe's hands described huge circles in the air. "It was *en place*, and working! The water, and the wheel, it came down and 'it me!"

A frown marred Don's brow. "You imagined the waterwheel when it was working? When—"

"No!" Christophe shook his head so hard his curls shook. "*J'étais là! Là!* I was there! The water, it was fast, it was cold." He mimed receiving a series of heavy blows,

and he kept his voice low; but he couldn't hide the thread of panic and fear running through it. Julie felt the hairs lift on her arm and only just suppressed a shiver.

"OK. You imagined what it would be like when it was working, and knew that anyone standing where we were standing would be drowned —"

Christophe groaned with frustration at not being able to make Don understand. "You were *not there!* I, I *alone was there!*"

Julie's goose bumps rose in earnest at Christophe's agonized cry. She put her hand on Don's arm, leaned forward and spoke slowly into the resulting silence. "Christophe. Listen to me. Are you saying you went back in time to when the wheel was working?"

He nodded unhappily. Don flung himself back in his chair, folded his arms and breathed hard through his nose. Julie glared at him. So far they were alone in the restaurant, but before she could say anything further, their smiling waiter hurried forward bearing three plates of *canard aux cerises*, which he placed before them with the precision she had come to expect in France. A flick of the wrist ensured perfect placement before he stepped back and supervised the arrival of three girls bearing bowls of gently steaming vegetables. By the time he had replenished their wine glasses, wished them "*Bon Appétit!*" and departed, Christophe had calmed a little, and Julie had prepared what she wanted to say.

"So in a way, now you have seen a ghost, too?"

His gentian blue eyes, so brilliant in the candlelight, met and held hers for a long moment. He smiled, sadly. "Yes; but *le fantôme* was me."

Julie had been expecting it, but Don was clearly surprised. Julie nodded. "I thought so. I'm glad you've told us." She reached across and patted the Frenchman's hand in a gesture of sympathy. He had courage, and she hoped Don would realize that.

Don frowned over his duck, picked up his cutlery, and began to eat. "This chap Pierre. He drowned, according to your history book, yes?"

Christophe nodded. He looked so miserable Julie felt compelled to change the subject before he began to weep into his food. "This is delicious, Christophe. The cherries add such a piquant flavor to the duck."

Christophe brightened and picked up his fork. "It is my favorite dish, a local specialty." He sat forward on his chair. "I 'oped you like it, too." His glance was almost conspiratorial, and Julie, for no reason, felt warmth rise in her cheeks.

Don, however, was not distracted from his dissection of what had happened at the mill. "So if Pierre drowned, and you felt terror in a place where there was a lot of water and a dangerous waterwheel, perhaps he drowned there?"

"Beneath the mill room?" Julie squeaked. "No wonder he haunts the place!"

Don put down his knife and fork, put his elbows on the table and picked up his wine glass. Holding it in both hands, he sipped, saluted Christophe's choice of wine and considered her comment. "Yes, perhaps beneath the mill room. There are no details in the book. But if you give credence to Christophe's feelings today, which I'm sure you do, it suggests to me that Pierre drowned there." He sipped slowly, hazel eyes steady and watchful beneath the straggle of dark brows.

Julie looked at the Frenchman. "What do you think, Christophe?"

"I am un'appy."

"Have some more wine." Julie seized the bottle and topped up his glass. For the last ten minutes she had been fighting twinges of guilt because Christophe's confession had reminded her of the powerful feelings of arousal, the surging wave of Justine's feelings that had flooded through her the previous evening. Because the feelings had been so powerful,

they were too scary to think about and she had flinched away from them. *But at least my feelings were of pleasure, and not of dying in panic and fear.* Thoughtlessly, Julie patted Christophe's hand in sympathy, and did not see Don's jaw tighten.

"Perhaps we should ask the local priest's advice." Don's voice was cool and matter of fact.

Christophe looked up, chewing busily. "You want 'im to exercise the spirit?"

"Exorcise, yes."

"If the spirit is me, what 'appens to me? It is exer...exorcised, and me, I go — pouf?"

Julie choked on a sip of wine. "Surely not." She bit back a gurgle of laughter and hastily wiped the dribble of wine from her chin with her napkin while her thoughts leapt about all over the place. If Christophe needed exorcism, then possibly she did, too. *I should tell them.*

"The spirit is not *you*." Don spoke in the firm tones of lawyer to client. "It may be communicating with you, somehow, but it is not you."

Julie studied her potatoes, stacked in thin slices like an apple pie, cut into them and found them delicious. "Did it communicate only with you? Why not with Don? He was right beside you in that nasty place."

Christophe shrugged. The experience appeared to have knocked all the stuffing out of him, and Jill wondered if he was telling them everything. "Is there something else, Christophe? Something hard to describe, something you don't understand?"

His troubled blue eyes lifted, and regarded her with relief. He reached for her hand across the table. "'Ow did you know?"

Don's mouth tightened. He stabbed a piece of duck with his fork, chewed heavily and stared around the still empty restaurant.

Julie spoke softly across the table. "Please tell us, Christophe. We want to help, don't we Don?"

Don simply watched the Frenchman with a steady, considering gaze.

Christophe put down his fork, sat back and took a gulp of wine. "*Je ne comprends pas.*" He held one palm before him in supplication. "'Ow can I tell that which I do not understand?"

"Try." Don did not take his eyes from Christophe. The Frenchman was growing paler by the moment. "It may be important."

"*Je suis désolé.*" Christophe looked directly at Don. "*Mais...j'adore Julie.*"

Julie's gaze flew to Don in the humming silence that followed. Don did not move; but Julie had the distinct impression that he had somehow withdrawn from the two people beside him at the table. "Please to understand," Christophe added in a rapid gabble. "Not now, *précisément*. But then, in 1735."

Julie disengaged her hand from Christophe's, thrust them both beneath the table and felt a blush rise through her skin.

Don's gaze lingered on her shadowed, worried eyes. Julie smiled in embarrassment, and Don relaxed a little as he considered Christophe's statement. "So, the spirit was in love with Julie. I can understand that." He shook his head slowly. "Impossible. The spirit could not know Julie."

Christophe's haggard blue gaze, without the shield of his spectacles, held Don's inimical glare with steady determination. "Pierre loved Justine. The spirit of Pierre, *c'est moi*. The spirit of Justine, *c'est Julie*."

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Don.

Christophe's eyes turned directly to Julie. "*Cherie, n'est-il vrai pas?*"

Julie stared, transfixed. His eyes were deep brown in sun-warmed skin and shaggy black curls tumbled over his forehead. "*Nous été comme un, et nous a vous parler.*"

"For God's sake!" Don's voice was impatient, even challenging and it reached Julie through the haze; she gasped, blinked, and the eyes that stared at her with such concern became the deep, unmistakable blue of gentians.

Christophe frowned at Julie. "*Qu'est-ce que c'est?* What is it? What?"

Julie stuttered. "I...I don't...I understood you! You spoke French, and your eyes were brown, but now they're blue!"

"Julie, he spoke French, and even I understood him. There's no need to make this more confusing than it already is."

"What do you think he said?" Her eyes flashed in the candlelight as she turned sharply on Don.

"'We were one and we speak to you.' Satisfied now?"

"Oh, well, OK. You understood it. There's no need to be nasty about it." Rattled, she stared at Don. "But just for a second, Christophe looked like the man on the *bolly*."

Don finished eating, and carefully placed his cutlery together on the plate. Still chewing, he pressed his napkin to his lips, and stared at them both in turn. He settled his elbows on the table, interlinked his fingers and rested his mouth against them. "I'm beginning to think I'm having dinner with two idiots," he said calmly. "You are telling me in all seriousness that Christophe thinks he is Pierre; that he remembers Pierre's death, and you think that while we were sitting here in this lovely restaurant, Christophe turned into Pierre for a moment? I know the wine is good, but really, that's going too far."

Julie's initial reaction was annoyance at being addressed like a stupid schoolgirl. But it crossed her mind that her experience with Justine's feelings inclined her to believe Christophe. Don seemed impervious to the ghosts. He'd seen them once, briefly, and that was all. How could he understand?

The clink of cutlery and glass reached them in the sudden silence and a quick glance confirmed that other people had come into the room without her noticing. The waiter brought dishes to a nearby table and was greeted with little cries of delight. Julie carefully put down her knife and fork. Christophe had already abandoned his.

"I have something to tell you." Before her nerve failed, Julie recounted her experience with Justine's feelings the previous evening.

Don was clearly shocked. "You felt as if he was making love to *you*?" He shot a hard glance across the table at Christophe. "Did you want him too? Is that what this is all about?" His voice hardened. "For heaven's sake, Julie, all you have to do is tell me, and I'll leave the two of you together. There's no need for such a—"

"No! No, no, no, *no*!" Her voice carried, and conversations broke off nearby as everyone stared at their table. Julie blushed, and aimed a rueful and reassuring smile around the restaurant before turning back to Don. "No," she repeated softly. "I don't, but Justine does. What I feel is only an echo of what she feels. And I don't seem to feel these things as strongly as Christophe does—"

"But you didn't tell me," Don said, and the challenge in his direct hazel eyes made her feel both underhand and guilty.

"I should have done, I know; but I couldn't quite believe it. I thought it was me being melodramatic, or overreacting. Or too much wine. It was only when I heard what Christophe said just now that I realized I had felt the same sort of—knowing, perhaps?"

Now that she'd told them both, she felt better; but she could see that her words had knocked Don off balance. He gripped one hand around the other curled fist and braced them against his mouth. His eyes, usually so warm, were quite devoid of laughter.

"You don't seem to be affected," she added.

"Thank God for small mercies. Someone must look after you two, I suppose."

Don was a man who dealt in certainties, and in ways of reaching the truth. He was used to hearing fabrications and falsehoods, and though ghosts were not something he dealt with in his line of work, he believed he was being told the truth. Or rather, he believed that Julie believed she was telling him the truth. Her blue eyes were guiltless, and her face full of concern. Christophe looked ill again. Whatever was happening, the Frenchman was not enjoying the experience.

The waiter removed their plates, and Don glanced up and smiled his thanks. "Though I'm not sure I know how to do that."

He was more concerned with what he thought of as the Frenchman's repeated attempts to take Julie away from him. All this hand-holding had to mean something was going on.

Christophe sat up straight, his palms flat to the table. "Tomorrow, Saturday. I work. Check informations."

Christophe's English had deteriorated under stress. "The local priest couldn't help?" Don suggested "Perhaps advise us?"

Christophe shrugged. "He would exer— exorcise the mill, and me. What if the spirits need our help?"

"Help with what, exactly?" Don frowned.

"*Je ne sais quoi.*" Christophe shrugged, picked up a spoon and tapped it softly on the cloth. "Julie, she knows...?" It was a question, not a statement.

Julie shook her head. "I've got no idea. All I sense is that they love each other and that it is somehow against the rules. She visits him when he is alone. Maybe the monastery has strict rules for its lay brothers as well as the ones serving God."

"And lady friends were frowned on?" Don suggested. "Sounds likely." He wrinkled his brow. "But it's hardly enough to have left this kind of impression, or whatever these things are called. There may have been hundred of thousands of unrequited lovers down the centuries and it's not unusual today. But this pair—"

Don grimaced. "This couple have left some kind of imprint and you two are picking up on it. It's got to be more. Perhaps connected with Pierre's death? Can you find out? Tomorrow? Julie, you're a librarian, and according to Johnny, some kind of super research sleuth. You should be able to find something in the monastery records. If there are any."

It was too much for Christophe's English, and he mimed incomprehension with hands and shoulders. Julie shook her head. "It'll be in French." She frowned at Don. "Old, handwritten French, at that."

"You can make notes, suggestions, and be creative in the hunt. Christophe can translate for you."

Julie looked at Christophe and saw his miserable expression. "I'll help if I can."

Christophe looked up and gave her a wan smile. "*Merci.*"

Don sat back in his chair as the waiter bore three dishes to their table. "It looks like this is us. What did you order for dessert?"

Chapter Nine

Christophe, looking tired and drained but a little more cheerful than at the start of the evening, dropped Don and Julie at the end of their lane and drove on home, leaving them to stroll arm in arm along the dark lane towards the mill.

They leaned against each other, and paused now and then to kiss in a patch of moonlight. They agreed, between kisses, that the restaurant had been charming, the food and wine excellent, the proprietor and his partner efficient and friendly, and that on the whole, the evening had been a success.

"You were wise to stop us discussing anything but silly trivia over the *crème brûlée* and coffee, Don. I think Christophe is on the verge of being ill."

Don did not reply. Julie half-turned and peered up into his face. "What is it? Tell me."

There was a long pause. Don cleared his throat. "You don't fancy this Frenchman, do you?"

She knew from the low pitch and growling tone that it had cost him to even ask the question. She reached up and flung her arms around his neck. "Of course not! But I do feel sorry for him. He seems so overpowered by this thing, whatever it is." She ran both hands over his shoulders. "I've got you. At least, I think I have you," she amended, smiling. "I don't want anyone else."

"They don't scare you, these ghosts?"

They stood in the moonlight, their bodies touching from shoulder to thigh while his warm hands moved, spread across her spine and drew her closer. "At this moment, while your arms are around me, nothing could scare me. But if I were here on my own, and Pierre, or Justine appeared, my hair would stand on end, and I'd want to run as fast I could to get away from them. Of course I'd be scared. I *am* scared. It's only natural. They don't live in this world. They died more than two hundred years ago. But they don't give me such a sense of doom as they do Christophe."

Don nodded at something behind her. "Look!"

Julie turned in time to see a fox run out from the darkness of the field, cross the path in front of them and vanish into the leafy shadows of the overgrown bank. She turned back with a delighted smile. "Busy Monsieur Reynard."

Don spoke softly against her ear. "M'mmmm. It is such a relief to be on our own. I love you, Blue Eyes."

Julie looked up, and immediately got a crick in her neck. She scuffled off her sandals, stepped daintily onto his smart leather loafers and was immediately three inches higher. Don smiled, tightened his grip and lifted her higher still. "And I love you, Big Man." She closed the distance between them with a slow, lingering kiss.

In the space of three heartbeats, electricity buzzed in the air around their heads as if someone had clicked a switch. Julie had felt nothing like it in her life before, and welcomed it. Safe within his grasp and with her feet already off the ground, she crossed her ankles behind him and applied slow and subtle pressure with her thighs.

In such a position, he could only hold her; Julie felt free to clasp his face in both hands, and devour his mouth.

He wrenched his head free. "Julie! For God's sake! I might drop you!"

She pulled back a little, and stared down into his bright, moonlit eyes. "Don't you dare." Her heart thundered in her chest, pulsed in her throat and echoed in her ears.

"What a pity we're wearing our good clothes. But for that, we could just have gone for it right here in the moonlight. But it isn't far..." She nodded towards the mill.

Dizzy with lust, Don turned to gauge the distance, and frowned. "Isn't that someone running towards the mill?"

They stared for several long seconds at the slight, dark figure slipping through the moonlight and shadow that spattered the lane. "The mill looks different. My car's not there! They've stolen my car!"

Julie gripped him hard with her knees as he tried to shake her loose. "Wait! Wait!"

Don drew breath to shout, but Julie clapped her hand over his mouth. "Wait." Way down the track, a small, puny light swung into view, bobbed towards them and then settled just above the ground. "It's them. He's come to meet her."

"Good God! Are we not safe anywhere from these two? They'll be appearing in our bedroom next!"

Julie gripped Don's shoulders and slithered to the ground, her gaze on the two shadows as they met, whirled and melded into one.

"They do seem to be in love, though, don't they?"

Don's head twisted sharply. "What about you? Is he kissing you as well as her?"

Julie shrugged. "I'm not feeling anything from them. I'm too full of my feelings for you. I wonder what would happen if we just ignored them?"

"Let's try it." Don grasped her hand, waited till she had scuffed around for her sandals and then they walked hand in hand towards the dark, entwined shadows ahead of them. Almost at once, the two pale faces turned, registered them and melted away into the darkness.

Julie found Don's hand reassuringly warm as they walked on towards the mill. There were no strange sensations as they passed the spot where the couple had been, but they both gasped when the yellow sports car suddenly shimmered back into view. There was no light on the *bolly* when they got there, the door was firmly locked and all was as it should be.

"Perhaps ignoring them is the best way to deal with it." Julie spoke softly, checking the shadows as she walked past him into the mill.

Don locked the door behind them and tossed the keys onto the kitchen counter. "It's certainly one I heartily endorse. Don't bother putting the lights on, or with coffee. I have plans for you. Come here."

Julie stayed where she was and slowly unfastened one of the large round buttons of her sundress. "Why don't you come here instead?"

For a big man he could move with extraordinary grace and softness; when he was within striking distance, he swooped forward, scooped her up and swung round towards the bedroom. "No."

He stopped, surprised. "No?"

She smiled and pointed to the table. "Over there."

Moonlight poured in through the millstream window, and cut a swath of silver light across the dark room. Don eyed her askance, hefted her in her arms and strolled across the room. Perched on the end of the table, Julie sat in the moonlight and leant back on her flat palms to consider her lover. "Let's give the ghosts something to think about." She reached out, grasped his shirt and pulled him closer.

The moonlight lit the high planes of his face, left deep shadows around his eyes and the hollows of his throat. She wanted him, truly wanted him and the fuzzy daze of his declaration still warmed her. She could hear her own breathing in the quiet room. She

watched his large hands reach out and find the rest of the buttons down the front of her dress and watched him tease the fabric over the hard circles. Anticipation trembled through her, so much that the edge of her dress vibrated in tune to the beating of her heart until he slowly pushed the linen aside.

She watched him gaze at her soft curves and trembled when his fingers brushed her throat and ran down to meet the rise of her breasts. Her heart leapt and she smiled tentatively up into his face, overwhelmed with need and longing and love. From that first evening in Johnny's smart flat, she had known this would happen; but some stubborn streak of pride had made her hold him off. Now, she forgot all pride, forgot all sense of self in the overpowering urge to meld her body into his.

She reared up, jerked his shirt free of his belt, pushed it from his shoulders and wriggled helpfully when Don eased her out of her underwear. Suddenly, heat flared, her skin turned hot and urgency gripped her. She grasped his belt buckle, whipped the leather free of the belt loops, unhooked the waistband of his trousers and ran her nails lightly down and across the skin of his chest.

Don shuddered, raised both hands and slowly and gently forced her back. She arched her spine, slapped her palms back on the wood and tucked her foot into the place where the gaping band of his trousers met flesh. He started in surprise as her foot teased the fabric out of the way. "What a clever girl you are." His voice was choked, but he was smiling, too. "So inventive."

Her foot found more than fabric, and she saw his stomach muscles clench in response. Their eyes met and locked. When they had first made love, Julie, still haunted by thoughts of the glamorous sounding Tara, had been afraid he might find her boring. Somehow, the tranquility and solitude at the mill plus the fact that they were constantly together had cleared that negative fear right out of the way. The ghosts might even have helped. Perhaps they had shown them the way.

He avoided her foot with a sharp twist of his hips and moved in on her, flattening her on the polished wood. Julie gasped. "Oh, this isn't boring!"

Don snorted. "If this is boring, I'm willing to be bored for life." He moved a little, and she gasped again as he pushed up close between her thighs. "Are all librarians as odd as you?"

"Oh, please do that again!" She waited, poised, her body tense, watching him. Her body was alive, and speaking with its own voice, a voice she barely recognized. Her breasts ached for his touch, she longed for his mouth on hers and her heart thudded in her chest. Obliging, he did it again, very much more slowly, and a long shiver ran up her spine and erupted from her throat in a choked gurgle of sound.

"I love to hear that." He thrust his hips forward once more. "Relax. I can keep doing this all night."

Julie groaned as shivers and sparks exploded and imploded within. "I don't think I can. Come here, and kiss me." She reached for him, but he backed away, stepped out of his trousers and folded them onto the chair. She stared, wide eyed. "This is no time to be neat and tidy!"

He laughed, and hauled off his shoes, socks and underpants. Naked, he stood with his hands on hips and looked at her. "There's no rush. We have all night, and I aim to make the most of it."

Julie leaned on one elbow. "Then you may carry me to the bedroom. This table is very hard. What I had in mind would not have taken very long at all..."

She sat up to meet him, and as he stepped between her thighs, clasped them around his hips. Sparks and shivers grew and sparkled around and within her as he took her weight in his arms. She kissed and clung to him, full of wild, wanton giddiness, all the way across the living room, through the hall and into the bedroom. When he eased her back onto the cool white sheet, she opened her legs wide and shuddered as he slowly drove into her. She let out a long delicious sigh. "I thought you were going to take your time?"

He nuzzled her throat. "M'mmmm. I still might."

Julie giggled. "Are you just going to lie there? Oh! Oh! Ohhhhh! Don..."

Poised over her, he looked down. "Complaints? Do I hear complaints?"

"No! Oh! Absolutely not!" She reached up, hauled his head down and recaptured his mouth on a long, long sigh. He was hers, all hers. Without conscious thought, her legs came up around him and she hooked her hips up against him, rocking back and forth until she was on the road, and knew it. "Oh, Don! Don! I'm—"

"I know, I know. I'm right with you—"

"So much for taking your time—"

"Don!" Her voice wavered in the darkness as she arched up towards him, rigid, shuddering, all thought suspended. Within two beats he was with her, clutching her, every muscle taut.

The sheen of sweat lay between their bodies and somebody's heart was beating like a trip hammer. Julie thought it might be her own, but she could feel Don's thumping through his chest wall. The sound of their panting filled the room, and he lay across her like one newly dead. She lifted her head just enough to look at him. "Don?"

An indistinguishable mumble floated into the air. She frowned. It had sounded suspiciously like "Ahluvya."

Julie lay back, stared at the ceiling and smiled. "Go to sleep, my darling. We have all night."

Julie woke next morning with a headache and sense of foreboding that somehow matched the grey overcast day. It seemed hotter than ever, and there was no breeze. The bed sheets were a tangled mess around her legs and she irritably unwound herself from the cocoon and found Don still asleep beside her.

It was a rare thing, for he was such an early riser; most mornings at the mill he had been up and dressed before she awoke. She stopped yanking at the sheet and lay quietly instead, traced the outline of his sleeping form with a loving eye and felt a quiver of excitement through her loins when she remembered how hard he had worked last night.

He had been jealous about Christophe, she knew; but he had maintained control of himself, and the conversation; he had deliberately kept the banter light over coffee and dessert. She had made her own demands of him once they returned home. The thought of making love on the moonlit table made her inner muscles clench and in the bright light of the morning she was a little astounded at her own boldness. Her confidence had grown in leaps and bounds in the last week, and that was such a good thing, for Don was a man who clearly enjoyed bodily pleasures.

Julie got out of bed, grabbed a tee shirt and knickers and crept into the kitchen, which was blissfully empty. She wondered exactly who she'd expected to find in the kitchen if Don was still in bed and then shrugged; in an old house with resident ghosts, one just never knew what to expect.

She swallowed a headache pill. Coffee filtered smoothly, toast browned evenly and she took the tray back into the bedroom and woke Don with a slow, gentle kiss. He was

bleary eyed but a gulp of hot coffee soon had him shuffling upright in the bed. "What a night! You're dressed already," he said huskily, and tweaked her tee shirt. "That's a pity. We could have...Never mind. You're going to the library today with Christophe. Yes?" Julie nodded. "And what was I supposed to be doing?" He yawned, and ran a hand over his dark, stubble covered jaw.

"You, my darling, were washing the car and making lunch for when we come back about 12 o'clock."

"Why on earth would I want to wash the car?"

"You were most insistent last night that you must wash the darn thing," Julie said. "I don't know why."

He sipped his coffee. Unshaven and unshowered, he looked rumpled and tired. "I think I just didn't want to be with you and Christophe."

Julie's eyes opened wide as she munched her toast. "Why not? I know libraries aren't your thing, but you could have helped with the searching. Many hands, and all that."

"Oh, I'll stay here. The place could do with a tidy up."

A little later Julie drove off in the sports car to join Christophe in Lalinde library. Her headache lifted by the time she was halfway there, and it occurred to her that Don must have known that if she took the car, he then couldn't spend the morning washing it. She frowned, and was still puzzled when, a little later, she joined the Frenchman.

The Lalinde librarian had designated a small quiet room midway along a short corridor as the local history centre, and it was stuffed full of maps, books, and pamphlets. A pair of twelve foot oaken tables dominated the middle of the room, a microfilm reader stood to one side and a few wooden chairs waited patiently to be of use. Julie eyed the vast number of battered old volumes and stacks of microfilm with misgiving. Outside the window, a magnolia tree filtered the sunlight and beyond a patch of sparse green lawn, an offshoot of the Dordogne ran between low, level banks.

"We check these first." Christophe indicated a row of dark blue leather bound volumes. Julie counted twelve and resigned herself to a long hard morning's work. Skilled though she was, checking for any reference to the mill or the monastery through indexes written in old French would require furious concentration.

Occasionally people walked past the room, but no one entered. Towards eleven o'clock Julie grew warm, got up, stretched and strolled over to open the window. She hung over the sill, and breathed in the fresh air laced with nose-curling smells that made her salivate. The proprietor of the café on the corner was preparing for the lunchtime rush.

Christophe hissed, and threw down his glasses. He jabbed an impatient finger at a paragraph halfway down the page and Julie obediently returned to the table and bent closer. It was in French, of course; something about an Abbot.

Julie ran her finger beneath the words. "Abbé Roulet, a strict man, lived at the monastery from 1728 to 1745 and was known as..." The hint of vetiver and lime came from Christophe's aftershave and she contemplated it dreamily, and wondered at its familiarity. She closed her eyes and images of deep woods and cool streams floated into her mind.

"Julie?"

She opened her eyes. Christophe had moved round the table to stand by her shoulder and help with the translation. Puzzled, he stared at her, his brow creased. Julie stared back. She had never been this close to him. The shaggy, exotic curls hung down to his eyebrows, the lashes beneath were thick and long; the bones of his face were far more prominent than she had thought. Her gaze wandered back to his warm brown eyes. The

walls of the library receded, the hum of traffic disappeared and the birdsong of the forest filled the room.

She smiled. Her palm lifted, cradled his cheek and the warmth of him flowed into her blood. His head came closer, angled a little; his mouth framed her name, hesitated and then came down over hers. She breathed deep, taking the essence of him within her lungs and from there to her bloodstream.

She rose into his arms. A pulse thudded in her ears, through the bones of her head and she pushed herself against him, encouraged him as he fumbled with her clothes, found her breasts and fondled them. Every sensation redoubled. She cried out and gripped the wood of the table behind her.

A phone rang somewhere close by. For one startled moment, they did not move, but stared into each others' panicked faces. Christophe turned his head and stared at the offending instrument, perched unobtrusively on one of the shelves close to the window. Sweat sheened his throat and air shuddered in and out of his lungs. His eyes were blue, not brown.

Julie gripped the table or she might have fallen. The phone went on ringing while she stared in horror at her breasts, naked and trembling against a webbing of fine black hair across Christophe's heaving chest. His crisp blue shirt hung off one shoulder.

She shut her eyes and tried to still her breathing. Christophe yanked his shirt back into place, and shook her arm. His larynx bobbed as he swallowed hard. He indicated her nakedness. "*Chérie*, please!"

He walked towards the phone. The door opened and a young woman rushed into the room to answer it.

"*Pardon!*" Flushed from her run down the corridor, she barely looked at them. "*Pardon, Madame! Monsieur!*"

Christophe smiled, nodded and turned away. He deliberately blocked any view of Julie, who had turned her back on the telephone while she surreptitiously tugged her bra back into place and re-fastened her blouse. Embarrassment heated her face and throat.

Christophe slid into the seat on the opposite side of the table and turned the book back towards him. He glanced at Julie, and then at the library assistant chattering rapidly on the old-fashioned black telephone.

Julie could hardly look at Christophe, but made herself do it. "What...what did you want to show me?"

He cleared his throat and kept his eyes on his finger as it moved along the page. "It says that *Monsieur L'abbé* was...people named him *L'Homme de Fer*. The man of iron. The monk wrote of Pierre...*rêvé de sa mort*, and that he...*empêché de la monastère*."

"Oh." Julie stared at his eyes. Her breathing was slowing along with her heartbeat, but her memories of the encounter were vivid and she was absolutely certain that the man she had kissed had owned brown eyes. Christophe's were blue. And what, she thought, would have happened if Don had been here? *Oh, my God!*

The phone clattered back into the cradle, and the assistant called a cheery apology for disturbing their research and hurried out of the room without noticing anything untoward.

Christophe put his head in his hands. "*Je suis désolée*. 'Ow can these things 'appen?"

He looked quite haggard, and the deep shadows beneath his eyes worried Julie. "I don't know. But I don't blame you. For a moment or two, we were not Julie and Christophe. We were Justine and Pierre."

The Frenchman rolled his head in his hands and groaned. Julie shifted in her chair. "Do I look different when I'm Justine?"

Christophe's head lifted and he regarded her from between his spread fingers, and then slowly drew his hands from his face. "Your eyes," he said softly. "Now they are blue, but when you are Justine, they are brown."

Julie thought that was interesting. *My eyes change color and I don't feel a thing. Yet I feel every bit of desire that she feels. How odd.* "Yours go brown, too."

They stared at each other. Christophe blinked rapidly. "I know you, when you are her. I know all of your body. Her body." He covered his face with his hands. "Sometimes I see you, you are her. *Pour un moment.*"

Julie nodded, remembering. "Last night. At the dinner table. Your eyes went brown, just for a second. It was Pierre peeping out, but I don't know why."

"We had been talking of them. Don, he not like the idea of you as spirit of Justine."

"I can't say I'm wild about it myself."

Julie made a note on her pad about the man of iron. Though she did not think she would forget it.

Chapter Ten

Don clicked his phone shut, closed his fist around it and dropped his head back on the cushioned lounger. The action tipped the peaked brim of his cap forward till it almost touched his nose, and he raised a finger to lift it a little. The sun beat down on the lower terrace and after a while, two lizards crept out from under the lavender bush beside him and basked in the sun.

He heard his car coming along the road from Lalinde before he saw it. He rose, walked up the steps to the *bolly*, watched the sports car turn into the lane and head towards the mill, and then saw the little red car behind it. His mouth tightened.

Julie got out of the car and walked towards him. As always, from the first day he met her, Don felt a frisson of desire run through him. She looked so cool and crisp in her sleeveless white blouse and blue cotton skirt, and she held a roll of paper in one suntanned hand. There was something about her smile that worried him. In fact, her whole attitude seemed a little strained.

He strolled towards her, bent and kissed her cheek. "I see your tame librarian is behind you. Come and sit down. Lunch is almost ready."

Julie glanced back down the drive. "We've been busy. And we've got more information."

Don's eyes stayed on Julie as Christophe got out of his car and walked over. Was that a flush on her cheeks, or was he imagining it? She couldn't be falling for that little twerp, could she? He took the Frenchman's outstretched hand, greeted him with the unfailing politeness his parents had drilled into him, and noticed but did not comment on the fact that Christophe looked ill.

There was an air of uncertainty about them both as they all sat down to lunch in the shade of the *bolly*. Julie looked over the salads, bread and pâté and back to Don, who wished he had put on a tee shirt. Somehow the display of his naked brown torso was out of place while Christophe was with them.

"Shall we have some wine?" Julie leapt up and disappeared into the mill.

"*Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas?* What's up?" Don frowned at Christophe.

"*Je déteste...qu'est-ce qui arrive.*"

Merde. You may hate what is happening, but at least you know what is happening.

Julie came back waving a bottle of red wine and glasses. "Have you had a good morning?" She seemed to have got over her initial awkwardness, for she gave him the bottle and corkscrew, leaned over and kissed him. "What did you do?"

Don moved round the table to pour the wine, and felt the heat of the sun on his shoulders. He looked down at the small, unhappy Frenchman and felt a shred of sympathy for him. "*Santé.*" He took a sip of wine. "I've spent a good deal of time on the phone. Let's eat, I'm starving."

"Did you ring Johnny again?"

Don nodded. "I needed some advice. I went down into the cavern this morning, only this time I made sure I could get back up." He smiled in answer to her look of alarm. "I found a ladder first." He shrugged and took another bite of bread and pâté. "I poked around in the mud beneath the wheel, and I found bones. I won't go into details," he added as Julie and Christophe stopped eating and stared at him. "But I do think they're human."

Christophe's skin turned an unpleasant shade of grey. "*Ils sont mes os!*" He lurched away from the table and ran towards his car.

"Christ! Now what?"

"Oh, Don!" Julie snapped, pushing back her chair and springing to her feet. "Don't you ever think of anyone's feelings? He just said they were *his* bones!"

Don grasped her wrist. "Let him be. He doesn't need you right now."

She glared back at him and struggled to free her wrist.

"Julie, you'll embarrass him. Let the man puke in private if that's what he's going to do."

She stared out along the drive. The blue curve of Christophe's shirt was bending over behind the bulwark of his red car. Doubtfully, she sat down and frowned. "Human bones? Are you sure?"

Don sat down alongside her, picked up his wine and nodded. "I found a skull, which sort of clinched it. Not very far down, and right beneath the old waterwheel. It seems Christophe saw exactly what happened when he was so terrified the other day. Not that I blame him. I'd have been a bit pale myself if it had happened to me. Stay there."

He went into the kitchen, reappeared with a large glass of water and a hank of kitchen roll, and with a gesture to Julie to stay where she was, he took the glass to Christophe. He returned almost immediately. "He'll be all right in a minute or two. Give him a chance to pull himself together."

He resumed eating, though it hardly seemed the correct thing to do. The brutal facts of death had seemed very close that morning, but Don felt only a singing gladness that he was alive.

Julie touched his arm. When he looked up, a soft smile curved her lips. "Food, wine, sunshine and each other," she said softly. "We are so lucky."

Don caught her hand, kissed the back of her knuckles and let go as Christophe walked slowly back and rejoined them with a wan smile. "So you phone your friend? You told him? You told him of the ...?"

Don nodded, very straightforward and matter-of-fact. "Yes, I rang Johnny and told him what I'd found. It's his house, after all. He needs to know. He rang his uncle, and then rang me back. It all took some time."

Julie swallowed and reached for her wine. "And what did you find out?"

"Johnny's uncle bought the house way back in the thirties, ignored it for another decade and found it overgrown and dilapidated when he did eventually visit. He hired workmen to make it habitable and dam the millstream because the house was running with damp. Up until that point the stream had flowed without hindrance under the house."

Don hesitated, assessed Christophe and, reassured that he was regaining the color he had lost a short time before, continued with his tale. "The waterwheel supports dried out one summer; they split and the wheel dropped. They must have had a drought year, which meant there was far less water running through. It seems everyone just left the wheel where it fell, which is where we found it the other day. There was no need to move it."

"There was a further complication. The weight of the wheel plunging down freed up some bones that had been buried in the mud. The workmen gathered them up, threw them out with the rubbish and thought no more about it. They thought some creature had been swept in on a flood and..." Don glanced at Christophe's face and decided to move on quickly. "But after that, strange sightings were reported and the men were not so keen to work here."

Julie broke in. "But you said you found bones, today!"

"Yes, I did. If you think about it, the workmen obviously didn't find anything that looked human; they didn't search for bones, they just picked up what drifted out."

Julie looked at Christophe. Don saw the sympathy in her face and did not begrudge it. She turned back to Don. "Have you found them all, now?"

He nodded briefly. "I think so. The question is, what should we do with them?"

"Bury them, I should think!"

"Yes, Johnny is agreed on that. The thing is this; the man might have been a murderer. The girl was never seen again, remember?"

Christophe looked up from his barely touched plate. "The bones... 'e wants to be buried."

Don piled the last of the pâté onto his bread. "I understand English law, but French law might be different. Should we contact *Monsieur Le Maire*? Let him make the decision?"

"That's a very good idea." Julie glanced at Christophe. "I've heard that the local mayor rules everything in France. Is that true? What do you think, Christophe?"

Christophe managed a very Gallic lift of the shoulders. "*Fais ce que tu dois faire.*"

Don watched Julie work out the French in her head. "'Do what you must,'" he said, and her expression cleared. There was still something very bright and brittle about her since they had arrived back from the library and instinctively, without knowing the cause, he mistrusted it. "What did your research turn up this morning?"

Christophe and Julie look at each other, and with a tensing of his muscles Don saw the tell-tale blush he had noticed earlier rise again in Julie's face. Christophe cringed like a beaten dog, gripped his wine glass and turned with some deliberation to Don. "I found the dreams. Pierre dreamed of 'is death and 'e was...*empêché de la monastère*. Perhaps, you would say, banishment?"

"That's all?"

"We found some plans of the monastery, and the name of the man in charge in 1735," Julie added brightly. "Not a very nice man at, by all accounts. The locals named him the Man of Iron. And then we found his report to his superior in Bergerac. He says that on the night of the storm, Pierre killed the girl and threw himself into the millpond in remorse!"

Don lifted an eyebrow. "That's rather different to what we heard before." He rested his elbow on the table and sipped his wine. "But it's also very convenient. For him, that is, that man of iron. But," he added, "I don't think anyone would actually throw themselves under a waterwheel as a way of committing suicide."

Julie's face fell. "So you don't believe it? Any of it?"

Don shook his head. "Afraid not." He studied her. "What else happened?"

Her pansy-blue eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"Something happened this morning and you haven't told me yet, so come on, out with it. Let's have it all."

"Nothing. There's nothing else, is there, Christophe?"

He had told her before they left Lalinde that it was she who must decide what they told Don. Now he got to his feet, and nodded politely. "I think it is time I go. My thanks for *le déjeuner*." He directed a small, stately bow towards Don. "*Au revoir.*" He trotted away to his car like a man escaping something unpleasant.

Julie cleared her throat. "I was thinking of going into the village to find the waitress and see what else she knows about the mill." She met Don's gaze steadily in spite of the heat rising in her face. "I know you'll think it's a crackpot idea, and you'll be happy to know that Christophe agrees with you. But I think it's worth doing."

"So you've already discussed it with Christophe?"

Julie nodded, a slight frown between her brows. "Christophe knows her, and where she lives."

Suddenly it was too much. "How are you going to talk to her? With a dictionary to hand?"

"Don!" She stared at him, astonished. "Don't be so angry! Of course not! Christophe can—"

"I have a job for Christophe," Don snapped. "If you want go, you'll have to go on your own." He got to his feet, flung down his napkin and strode rapidly after Christophe and flagged him down just as he was about to drive off.

Christophe got slowly out of his car. Julie ran over and stood between them. "What are you going to do?"

"I want Christophe to come and talk to *Monsieur Le Maire* with me. Human remains must be reported. He can get in touch with the gendarmerie. I think that's more important than following up on local village gossip, don't you?"

There was a small, stinging silence. Christophe looked from Julie to Don, cleared his throat and said slowly, "*D'accord*. It will be my pleasure."

"Will you go in Christophe's car?" Julie asked.

"I thought we'd go in mine. Why?"

She pulled a face. "I don't really want to be left here on my own, but if you take the Honda, I'm stuck."

"You can drive mine, *ch*—" Christophe choked back the endearment.

Don made a growling noise in his throat.

"Thank you, Christophe." Julie threw an angry glance at Don. "It's good to know that someone cares about me."

Don stalked into the kitchen and came out with the car keys in his hand. "Right, Christophe. Let's go."

Don got in the Honda. Christophe hastily dug in his pocket, tossed his own car keys to Julie, flung his hands out sideways in a gesture of helplessness and ran after Don. Christophe hadn't got the car door closed when the Honda howled like a banshee down the lane, a cloud of grey dust and small stones erupting from beneath the back tires.

Chapter Eleven

Julie listened to the howl of the Honda engine as it climbed the hill up through the trees behind the house and didn't know if she was going to burst into tears or throw something.

Don had been so angry, but there was no way he could know what had happened in the library this morning. She poured the rest of the wine into her glass, drank it off in three gulps and banged the glass down on the table.

Don knew the place was haunted. He'd just dug up human bones, he was supposed to love her and yet he'd left her alone with the remains of lunch to clear away and wash up as well. It was too much. She glared at the table, and made a conscious decision that the mess could stay just exactly as it was.

A mixture of temper and hurt made her cheeks burn. She headed to the fridge, seized another bottle of wine and wrestled with the old-fashioned corkscrew. She took both bottle and glass back to the table and flopped down, hooked her foot under the nearest empty chair, yanked it closer and crossed her ankles on the cushioned seat.

The wine was cool and calming in her hand, and crisp on her tongue. Her finger traced the condensation bubbles down the bowl and onto the stem between sips as she considered her predicament, and sniffed now and then as a stray tear rolled traitorously down one cheek.

Guilt, like a long-handled spoon, stirred the mix of feelings. She'd never lied to him in the short time they'd known each other. It wasn't a long time. *Do we really know each other? Did I know he was the type to be jealous over nothing?*

On the other hand, it might seem much more than nothing from his point of view. They must have looked very guilty when they came back from the library and Don had somehow picked up on it; she had known Christophe's loose use of the French endearment had grated on him before today, but she'd been amused by it.

Julie sat up straight. Had he deliberately sent the two of them off to the library to see what would happen? Had he been checking for smudged lipstick stains and rumpled hair when they returned? Such things would be everyday normality in his workaday life. Julie slumped back in her chair, pressed her finger tips to her temples and frowned.

They probably *had* behaved oddly when they came back. It was a weird thing, after all, to find yourself drawn so powerfully to a man you barely knew to the point where—her thoughts stuttered to a halt. Thank God the telephone rang when it did, or who knew what might have happened.

She couldn't describe the intense burst of sexual feeling that had flared in the dusty, magnolia-laden air of the local history room. Visions of being caught naked on the library floorboards flashed through her mind so vividly that the color rose again in her face. *I don't think I'm attracted to him. It's that other woman, Justine...I feel her feelings for Pierre. It's crazy, but that's what it is.*

Perhaps it would have been better to try and explain to Don, rather than let him think something was going on between Christophe and herself. *Well, we tried last night, and he wasn't exactly receptive to the idea.* She gazed at the slowly dissolving cloud of dust hovering over the drive and thought Christophe would be having a hell of a ride down those narrow roads towards the home of *Monsieur le Maire*.

She sipped the wine steadily and began to feel better. It was all Johnny's fault; he shouldn't have introduced her to Don at that silly party. Johnny's endearing habit of

matchmaking all his friends like a sheepdog trying to keep his flock together had backfired a little. From the first moment they'd all three of them known it had been different. She'd looked up into Don's warm hazel eyes, heard that mellow, dark brown voice that turned her insides to mush and she'd fallen head over heels in love.

From the start he had been perfectly honest. He needn't have told her of his girlfriend, but he had; and he'd broken it off, as he'd said he would, and then, full of relief and anticipation, he'd rushed to tell her it was done.

I should have told him what happened this morning. Julie stared towards the drive without seeing it. She refilled her glass and continued to sip the wine even though she'd left it in the sun and it was warm and greasy. *He's been absolutely honest with me over everything, and I lied by omission this morning. I lied to him, and he knew it.* Guilt shot through her, and her hand trembled on the glass stem. *I will tell him. I'll tell him and I'll just have to hope he understands.*

Would I believe him, if the roles were reversed? She drew in a long, slow sip of wine. *It's a tremendously hard thing I'm asking of him, especially after I lied about it. He might never forgive me for lying. He might not believe me at all. Oh, God, I couldn't stand that.*

Julie put down the wine glass, leaned forward in her chair and raised both palms slowly to her face. Behind the shield of her hands, she took several deep breaths and pressed both index fingers into the corner of her brow and nose. A tingling ache arose there. It was some kind of pressure point, she remembered vaguely, and it did seem to calm her a little.

She drew her hands away from her face, and opened her eyes. It must have been a pressure point, for tiny sparks and swirls of light burst on her vision. Julie blinked, and blinked again on a swirl of grey dust that slowly solidified into a solid, curly-haired figure dressed from head to foot in dark brown. She squeaked, snatched a breath, gripped the edge of the table and thought of diving under it. The man had his back to her, and stared down the drive as if expecting someone; and sure enough, a young and very pretty girl ran through the sparkling dust towards him.

Pierre and Justine: Justine's face alight with joy, her hair lifting behind her with the speed of her passage. She faltered and stopped, the smile slowly fading from her face.

Julie looked again at Pierre. He stood stiffly, his palms out in front of him in the age-old gesture of rejection, and retreated slowly backwards towards the mill. His whole body indicated that she should come no further. Justine asked a question, and received an answer, though Julie heard nothing.

Pierre cast a hasty, sidelong glance at the mill, as if indicating there was someone present who would not welcome her. Justine's lip curled back from her teeth and the glance she flung at Pierre was full of scorn. She tossed her head, turned and strode back into the pale, hazy air. Pierre's shoulders slumped and his head dropped as he watched her depart.

A moment later, he jumped as if he'd been shot, turned and hastily trotted back towards the mill. Exactly as if someone had shouted to him, someone who frightened him. *His boss, perhaps. I used to jump like that when my boss caught me reading a book instead of shelving it. But my God, he's heading straight for me! What –*

Julie gripped the arms of her chair, her hands clenched like claws around the plastic. In horrified fascination she watched the young monk skirt the edge of the calm, half-empty millpond and lift his knee to climb onto the *bolly* that did not exist in his world. At that precise moment, he shimmered in the air and disappeared.

So did the millpond. Julie flopped back in the chair, and then jerked up and swiveled round just to be sure he hadn't reappeared somewhere else. Her pulse hammered in her throat and sweat broke out beneath her fringe and along the hollow of her spine. She drew a long, calming breath through her nose, frowned and tried to remember where the millpond had been.

It had seemed so natural, so right, that she hadn't really looked at it; but a hazy picture formed in her mind of a large teardrop shape of dark water stretching from today's millstream right to the mill itself. Julie had only a vague impression of some kind of a stone channel, a sluice-gate and a gurgle of white water disappearing down under the house just to the right of the present front door. It was almost as if she'd seen the landscape as it was then, superimposed on top of the landscape as it was now.

It occurred to her that everything happened when she was on the *bolly*. Except for one occasion, when she had been inside the house. She looked round, pondering the thought that either she was the key, or the *bolly*, or the combination of both.

Julie wondered why she had ever agreed to come to France with a man she hardly knew and got herself embroiled with ghosts. She grabbed her discarded wine, drank it off and refilled the glass. She might have a headache later, but she would deal with it. Headaches she could handle, but ghosts were a different matter.

These visitations, if that's what they are, don't last very long. I can't go and drive into the village now after all this wine, and I don't want to stay here. She frowned. It was after two o'clock, the sun burned down from a ferocious blue sky and even under the shade of the *bolly* it was hot. The birds chirruped unseen in the trees.

Julie lurched to her feet, abandoned the lunch table, changed into her bikini with some difficulty, swept up her wine in an extravagant gesture and headed out to the pool. She took her time and made herself comfortable: the wine within reach, her sunhat properly angled, suntan oil carefully applied and a book in her hand. If her theory was right, she would have a peaceful afternoon.

It was five minutes later when she sat bolt upright and remembered they had seen the ghosts on the lane the night they walked back from St Pierre. Julie frowned, shivered and hastily checked over her shoulder.

A couple of hours later the Honda cruised calmly back up the lane and glided to a halt beside the *bolly*. Julie watched the car from under the brim of her sunhat without moving from her lounger. Don's temper must have subsided, for she could see the two men laughing and talking in the open-topped car.

They waved briefly in her direction, disappeared into the mill and brought long cold drinks with them when they padded over to the pool and joined her. She took the chilled glass Don held out and pressed it against her forehead "M'mmm, that's lovely." She formed her sibilants carefully. "How did you get on?"

Don saw the empty bottle of wine tucked beside the lounger and gave her a long look. Stripped to swimming shorts, he settled on the vacant lounger, and Christophe sat on the side of the pool, rolled up his slacks and dangled his feet in the water. "*Monsieur le Maire* was not at home," Don said. "Either that or he was locked upstairs with his mistress."

Julie choked on her drink. "He wasn't!"

Don laughed. "No, I suppose not. But he wasn't at home, so we're no further forward. There was a funeral in the church and so we didn't stay there, either."

Christophe sat quietly, and stared at his feet. He took off his shirt and still looked uncomfortable. Julie, more than a little woozy, rolled her head on the lounger and looked at Don. "Well, we'll call on him tomorrow, now you know where he is."

He was quite close, and she stretched out a languid arm and sleepily stroked his forearm. When his head turned, she sent him a dizzy smile and tried to send unspoken messages of love. He didn't respond, but Christophe got suddenly to his feet.

"I remember," he said rapidly. "I 'ave appointment. I say *au revoir*." Shirt held loosely over one shoulder, he skipped over to the *bolly*, picked up his car keys from the table where Julie had dropped them earlier, and drove off.

Chapter Twelve

Breakfast was an uncomfortable meal. Don and Julie drank coffee and ate toast with the knowledge that a whole empty day stretched out ahead of them. The day itself wasn't any different to any other they had spent at the mill, but the atmosphere between them had changed.

Julie couldn't quite meet his eyes. Remarkably, she didn't have a headache in spite of the quantities of alcohol she had drunk the day before, and for once, she had slept for something like twelve hours without a break or a dream. She had only vague memories of the early evening after Christophe's sudden departure, and suspected she had fallen asleep on the lounge. Don must have put her to bed, for she had woken up there very early this morning.

She was hungry and the pile of toast soon vanished. She went and made more, came back and put the plate on the table between them. He was sitting quite comfortably, one ankle across the other knee, wearing only his favorite ragged shorts and the early morning sun lit the frown etched into his brow.

Julie's stomach muscles contracted as he turned to face her, his toast beating the air beside his ear as he finished chewing and swallowed. "But we both saw them on the drive. No connection to the *bolly* there. Only to you. You must be the connection."

Julie had vague memories of attempting to explain her theory that the *bolly* was the catalyst for the spooky visitations, and Don had agreed with her last night. Now he had thought of a reason to disagree.

"Oh, no! I felt relieved with the theory about the *bolly*, but you're right. I do seem to be the only common denominator." She looked round nervously. "I don't feel safe anywhere now." She scowled and picked up her toast and could not repress a shudder. "Can we go out somewhere today? Perhaps visit Domme, like we planned? I think we need to get away from this place."

Don seemed relieved by her suggestion and in no time at all they were in the car and speeding off south into the strengthening sunshine. They took the wrong turn in Lalinde but soon made the correction and didn't slow down again until the road crossed the river once more and they saw Domme perched on top of a hill shaped like an ice cream cone. The Honda wound round and round the inverted cone and they were early enough to park in the square almost at the top, beside *le petit train*. Every tourist spot in France owned an endearing miniature train, usually painted blue and white, often with a face painted on the front of the engine. They hauled ten or twelve open wagons crammed with tourists who wanted to see all the attractions but for one reason or another preferred not to walk in the hot sun.

Don immediately heaved himself out of the car, and photographed *le petit train* from several angles. Julie noted the next departure was scheduled an hour ahead and gave silent thanks, for she knew that without doubt, Don would have been climbing aboard and pulling her after him if it had been scheduled in the next ten minutes.

Domme was medieval, and picturesque enough to take their minds off the unpleasantness at the mill. The main thoroughfare was narrow, cobbled and with deep, wide gullies either side to speed rainwater safely down the hill. Beautiful stone built cottages and villas lined both sides, each decorated with window boxes of bright waxy begonias, urns of finger petal geraniums and sweet peas tumbled over trellised walls and clouded the air with perfume.

They ducked in and out of craft shops, bought post cards, sucked ice cream cones with ever increasing speed before ice cream melted all over their hands, and eventually retreated to the top most point of the hill, thought about lunch and sat down rather breathlessly in a pretty little terrace restaurant tucked up against the parapet.

They hung over the massive warm stone walls beside them and exclaimed at the magnificent view over *La Dordogne*, admired the intricate pattern of fields within the curves of the river and watched canoes floating on the brown water far below. "What a marvelous view." Julie pointed towards the river. "Look at that one—they're going to hit—Oh! The bank." The canoe rammed the bank, bounced off and careered gaily off on a tangent towards another canoe. Shrieks and squeals, faint on the warm air, drifted up to them.

"Poor steersmanship," Don said. "Throw him overboard."

"I daren't look. Has he hit the other boat?"

"No. They fended him off, and clouted him over the head with the paddle. They must all know each other."

Julie turned her back on the river and ran her eye over the wrinkled red-and-white checked cloths and red paper napkins on tiny tables beside them. "Do you think the food might be good here?"

They ordered the *menu de jour*, happily poured a glass of wine each from the pottery carafe and pounced on the *agneau a la broche* when it arrived. Julie nibbled the tiny and extremely garlicky lamb squares straight off the skewer and finished long before Don, who ate with his knife and fork. She took a huge slurp of wine and felt a warm red glow as it rolled down to her stomach.

She knew what she had to do, and rushed into it so that she couldn't change her mind. "I have to explain something to you." Her fingers flirted nervously with the collar of her blue and white striped blouse.

Don looked up, still chewing. "Go ahead. Tell me." He bit the last piece of lamb from his fork. He didn't seem surprised, but his brows angled down towards his nose and stayed there.

"Yesterday," she began, "yesterday, I..." Her mind was an absolute and terrifying blank. She took a sip of wine. Don suddenly looked less like her lover and more like her lawyer, sitting there in his smart grey shirt and slacks. Her heart sank. This was going to be difficult. She backtracked a little. "It's amazing how much better I feel after a good night's sleep. Things seem much clearer than they did. You know how weird things have been lately?"

Don nodded, rolling his wine glass in both hands, his gaze steady on her. "Well, they have been even weirder than you think. We've agreed that I seem to be the focus of what is happening at the mill. As you said this morning, nothing happens if I'm not there. I'm the catalyst. Lucky old me."

Get on with it, Julie. You're repeating yourself. She took a deep breath. "You remember I said a day or two ago that I felt an echo of what Justine felt when Pierre made love to her?"

Don put down his wine, folded his arms and sat back. The sun slanted down through the moving leaves of an old tree, lit every single hair of his head and threw deep shadow around his piercing hazel eyes. "Yes."

"And you know Christophe feels Pierre's terror when he drowned?" Julie found her throat hurt, and took another sip of wine. She had to go on; she couldn't stop now. "Well, he feels what he feels for Justine, for me." She listened to the echo of her words, and frowned. "No, that's not quite right. He projects—no, he doesn't even do that. What

Pierre feels for Justine is projected through Christophe onto me. Does that make any kind of sense? It's awfully hard to explain. And what Justine feels for Pierre is projected through me onto Christophe. It's really very strange. We don't seem to have anything to do with it, but yesterday —"

Julie swallowed hard and shuffled restlessly in her chair. "Yesterday, when we were in the library, between one second and the next, it was as if I was Justine and Christophe was Pierre. We kissed. The telephone rang, and that broke the spell, or whatever it was —"

"Now that," Don said flatly, "has the ring of truth about it."

"Don, it's not funny!" Julie wailed.

"I quite agree." He sat forward suddenly, his eyes grim. "No wonder you both looked so guilty when you came creeping back to the mill yesterday. How far beyond kissing did this thing go? Am I to understand that you and he — no, you were in the library, for God's sake? Even he couldn't do that in a library."

The waiter chose that moment to arrive with their main course. He placed *un crêpe à la crème de marron* before them with the usual twist of the wrist to each plate before departing with a melodious "*Bon appétit!*"

Julie looked at her favorite pancake stuffed with chestnut purée and her stomach rolled in protest. "We only kissed."

"And you enjoyed it?"

"It wasn't me!" Julie cried in protest, saw heads lift at neighboring tables. With a supreme effort she got herself in hand. "That's what I'm trying to say. Please understand, Don — I don't know how else to explain it, but it isn't me and Christophe. It's them — Pierre and Justine."

There was a nasty silence. The leaves swayed and danced above their heads and flickering shadows ran over Don's face and shoulders as he stared at her. "You do realize you are talking about possession, don't you?" His eyes narrowed, and then he threw down his napkin with a muttered expletive. "I can't believe I'm actually discussing this!"

A little spurt of anger ran through Julie. "Well, now you might begin to appreciate how peculiar Christophe and I feel about the whole thing!"

"Christ!" To her utter surprise and consternation, Don shoved back his chair and got up in one swift movement. With a glance of acute dislike, he stalked away from the table. He didn't stop. Jaw dropped in amazement, Julie watched him leave the restaurant and march straight across the quaint cobbled square back into the heart of Domme.

Several pairs of eyes at various nearby tables followed Don's retreating figure, and then, full of curiosity, swung back to Julie. Her face flamed. She stared at the *crêpe* on her plate with an absolutely blank mind and for almost half a minute she watched the cream ooze slowly under the edges of the pancake; then, with a strangled sob, she lurched to her feet, grabbed her bag and ran after Don.

She ran straight back to the car, but she kept an eye open for a glimpse of his tall figure as she ran. He would have to come back to the car at some point, and he surely wouldn't drive off and leave her here. Would he? This was her worst fear come true, really. Why had she ever come on this holiday with a man she barely knew?

The midday sun slapped off the cobbles and the stone houses as she ran at top speed through the crooked, badly cambered lanes, and skidded to a halt beside the Honda. He wasn't there. She flopped against the car, badly out of breath, and yelped when the heat of the metal pierced the thin cotton of her dress. Where was he?

She stood in the full sun in the open square for almost half an hour before he strolled from the mouth of a small back lane she hadn't noticed. He walked slowly across to the car

and came to a halt in front of her, his face unreadable. His hand reached out, and she smiled hopefully. His finger tapped her shoulder. "You've caught the sun."

Julie stared blankly at him and then found her voice. "Is there any wonder? You try standing here and see what it does for you."

"I," he said mildly, leaning towards her, "went back to the restaurant. You weren't there."

"Oh."

"I paid the bill, since you left without paying."

"Damn the bill!" She exploded into speech. "Don, Don, we need your help in this. You are the only sane one, who doesn't seem to be affected. We need you desperately!"

"Can the wonderful Frenchman not sort it all out for you?"

Julie ignored the sarcasm and shook her head. "He's suffering, Don. He can't sleep for dreams of being drowned in the dark underneath that dreadful wheel."

She hadn't slept well either, until last night, when she'd drunk so much she just about passed out. Don's head tilted. "Yet he's lived here all his life with no odd effects till you arrive? Don't you think that's strange?"

Julie's misery showed in her face and in the tiny shrug of her pink, burning shoulders. "I can't explain it, unless it's me, my presence, my being here, that has brought it all to the surface. In a way, I suppose it's my fault."

The sounds of the little square, with its terraced cafés, milling people and scampering children faded into nothing as Julie stared at the handsome, grim-faced man standing with his hands in his pockets and suddenly realized her whole life was at a turning point.

"Or mine," Don said slowly, his hazel eyes watching her carefully. "I persuaded you to come here. You only came to please me. I can hardly hold you to blame."

Relief, hesitant at first, spurted through her veins. Perhaps he wasn't going to hate her after all. Relief surged more strongly, and she realized how much she loved him: the straggle of his dark brows, his hazel eyes, so clear and sharp when he was angry; the straight, noble line of his nose and the sharp curl of his nostrils. Above all, she loved his voice, his straightforwardness and his honesty. "I love you," she said softly, greatly daring.

A subtle shift, hard to define, changed his face; his mouth relaxed a little, and the line of his brows lifted. "Really?"

"Oh, really." Julie nodded vigorously and then looked alarmed as he moved suddenly. "Don—"

He covered the space between them, captured her jaw in one large hand and drew her close. His mouth sought hers and bestowed a light, slow kiss; soft as a bird's wing, which restored her in a heartbeat. He smiled down into her dazed and happy face. "Come on, Blue Eyes, let go and eat. Have you got the nerve to go back to the same restaurant, or shall we select another?"

Bemused, Julie stared at him. "You believe me?"

"I believe you." The grim-faced lawyer had gone. This was the Don she knew and loved. "Here's what we'll do: we'll eat, and then we'll spend the rest of the afternoon looking at a couple of houses and take our minds well away from this annoying couple who won't stay dead. We might even find something we'd want to buy. But first of all, we'll sit through an entire lunch this time, and enjoy it."

Full of bravado, they walked back up the hill to the restaurant they had left so dramatically, and sat quietly at a corner table. The waiter eyed them carefully, strolled over and stood before them. "You are 'ere to stay?"

Don looked up and met the waiter's dark stare head-on. "We are 'ere to stay."

Julie laughed and hid it behind her hand. The waiter smiled, and couples who had seen the earlier drama gave them a little round of applause. Two glasses of wine appeared, and Don lifted his and held it out. Julie found and lifted her own.

"To us," Don said softly and his mouth lifted in a crooked, one-sided smile. "And tonight, they can stand around the bed and blasted well watch if they want while I show you exactly how much I love you."

Julie choked, coughed and grabbed for her napkin.

The first house for sale wasn't far from Domme. They tracked it down at the end of a long lane next to a field filled with rabbit hutches, and groaned when they saw the large concrete water tower that loomed over it. "Good God!" Don glared at the offending structure. "If it ever falls it'll smash the house to bits."

They ventured into a garden of mature trees and well tended lawns. The view over the valley was pretty, but the interior was stark and bare. Used as a holiday cottage, it had only the bare essentials of living and looked and felt unloved. Wallpaper peeled away from the walls, damp exuded up through the floor and Julie shuddered. "I couldn't live here. Not even for a fortnight."

The second house was some kilometers away to the northeast. "Are you sure we're on the right road?" Don asked more than once as they drove, always uphill through narrow, leafy lanes, until they burst out of the forest and into the sunlight of a plateau where the warm wind ruffled their hair and whipped Julie's cotton skirt against her legs as she got out of the car.

The estate agent had been enthusiastic about this one, and they could see why. The old stone buildings were attractive and set in the middle of undulating cornfields and green meadows dotted with red cattle.

A huge dilapidated barn with a depressed and sagging roof stood behind them; a rather more robust barn stood at right angles to it, and on the third side of the square stood the renovated, stone built house they had come to see. An ancient archway had been turned into a modern window. On the fourth side of the square, the land dropped away to a rectangular swimming pool glowing turquoise and white within a cool, shady ring of mature trees.

Don shut the car door and gazed round. "What do you think?" White dust from the yard swirled around their heads.

"It's wonderful!"

"Let's go and find the key."

They let themselves in and found the utility room and boiler and all the practical aspects of the house just inside the door. They stepped into a kitchen floored with stone tiles, where wooden units painted a delicious shade of pale creamy-green housed the kitchen appliances and formed a divider between the kitchen and the living space. The window looked out over a window box of pastel geraniums to a dreamy, romantic haze filled valley of cornfields and woods.

They looked down the full length of the ground floor to a cavernous old stone fireplace at the far end of the room, where matching white sofas faced each other across the corner and a wooden staircase led upstairs. Old French furniture filled every corner; two old stone sinks let into the original wall had been stuffed with huge bunches of lavender, and a rack of guns hung on one wall. Rifles, not decorative handguns, but lethal weapons that looked as if they were in constant use.

Upstairs, they discovered four small bedrooms tastefully decorated, yet strangely claustrophobic. "All this wood." Julie ran her hand along the low beams. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Don could look down on some of them, and had to duck beneath most of them. "If I ran upstairs drunk one night, I could knock myself senseless on this lot." He looked back along the wooden corridor that ran the length of the house.

Julie could see that it would get tiresome once the novelty had worn off, but she tried again. "Don't you like it?"

"I hope it hasn't got woodworm."

"But it's mostly new wood, and it smells gorgeous."

"The estate agent told me the owner had used a technique rather like sand blasting an old stone building in England to get rid of the Victorian soot. The beams just look new."

"You're disappointed with the place. You don't like it, do you?"

Don stood on the landing with his head bowed because the ceiling pressed down on the back of his neck, and shook his head. "I like some of it. But I feel cramped up here. I need more space."

Once out in the fresh air, they walked over to the swimming pool and gazed down. Julie groaned. "Oh, couldn't you just leap in and cool off?"

Don grasped her fingers. "Well, there's no one around to see if we do. Or would you rather go home, and jump in our own pool?"

Chapter Thirteen

They drove home, fingers linked together across the cockpit of the Honda as Don drove through the green, undulating countryside. Every now and then his hand dropped from the steering wheel to Julie's knee; from there it slid back her skirt and flirted along the smooth tanned skin of her thigh until, aroused and restless, Julie laughingly seized his hand and flung it away.

After the third rejection, he shot a glance sideways across the car. He grinned from ear to ear. "I want to do what they do in American movies."

"Certainly not."

"Please? Pretty please?" The warm wind streamed across the car and blew the short dark hair back from his brow. Dark glasses hid his eyes, and the curves and hollows of his face were accentuated by the bright sunlight. His smile flashed white as he turned his head.

Julie picked up his large hand and placed it firmly back on the steering wheel. It was as well she did, for a huge French juggernaut roared around the corner ahead of them, and only Don's swift wrench at the wheel prevented the yellow car from being unceremoniously shoved into the field at the side of the road.

Stones and soil rattled like thunder along the bottom of the car and Julie flinched away from the blast of hot rubber, brake dust and the thunderous roar of a large engine at full throttle almost in her ear. The lorry vanished around the corner leaving a stink of diesel, a cloud of dust and a furious honking of the horn echoing back through the trees.

Don steered off the verge and back onto the metalled road. "Phew! That was close."

"The stupid, stupid man!" Julie, shaking with fright and outrage, stared down the road after the French driver. "He drove us off the road! What if there'd been a stone wall, or a tree or a pond? We've passed all those things in the last five minutes!" She realized she was still gripping Don's arm with both hands.

She let go. He flexed his fingers, and looked down. Small white indentations ringed his arm, and there was at least one bead of blood where a nail had dug too far.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly. "Does it hurt? That man was a maniac!"

"I'll survive. Forget him. You know what French drivers are like."

Lulled by Don's calmness and the peaceful drive home, the incident receded from her mind. She had forgotten it by the time they changed and settled by their pool, each with a glass of wine and a book, and Julie was amused and not a little excited when Don sprawled naked on a pad beside the pool. He was so close to the edge that she was tempted to roll him over and watch him fall into the cool turquoise water.

The sun gilded the skin of his back to mahogany and only the twin white mounds of his buttocks remained pale. "Did you put some oil on yourself?"

A muttered grunt came from the dark head flat against the towel.

"I take it that's a no." Julie pretended resignation. She grasped the bottle and rolled over towards him. It was a careful balancing act, but she could just lean from her lounge and stroke suntan oil down the channel of his strong, powerful spine. Leaning a little further, she spread the oil over his shoulder blades, the rounded point of his shoulder and the back of his neck. She squeezed oil over her palm and, with her lips pressed together to suppress a giggle, slapped it down on one white mound.

A muted howl came from the towel and every muscle in that splendid back tightened and then relaxed beneath her eyes. His head moved fractionally and one eye regarded her suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

"I'm putting suntan oil on your back."

"Huh."

Julie's eyes were bright with mischief as Don trustingly laid his head back on his crossed forearms. She smoothed the oil over and around and observed a distinct change in the state of the muscles beneath her hands. Before she was quite ready for it, a strong hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. Balanced on one elbow, one eye closed, he glared at her. "What're you trying to do?"

"I told you. Apply suntan oil to the unprotected bits—"

"You've been doing that for quite long enough."

Julie pouted and raised her brows. "I'm only trying to make amends for upsetting you so much this morning." She shot a swift, penitent glance up under her lashes.

He hid his laughter and tightened his grip of her wrist. She resisted but found she was slowly being drawn from the lounge. "Don! I'll fall!"

The corded muscles, the tension and the width of his shoulders all let her understand it was inevitable. She tumbled from the lounge and landed in his arms.

He buried his face between her neck and shoulder, and before she knew what he was about, his hands had relieved her of her bikini top. "Don! What if—"

The flimsy piece of cloth flicked through the air to land on the corner of the lounge. Julie made a grab for it, and missed.

"What if someone calls?" He settled one palm where the cloth had been. "M'mm, relax. No one will come—except us, perhaps—and you know you can't see anything of the mill from the lane or the road. Relax!"

The sunlight shot through his hazel eyes and turned them golden, and his dark hair was black and glossy. Julie smothered a giggle, and then gasped as his hand moved, over and over, soothing and exciting, until her skin erupted beneath his thumb into a tight, sharp apex that ached for more.

His tongue followed his hand, and Julie's head arched back as the heat of his mouth closed around her nipple. Her gasp was lost in the rumble of sound from deep in his throat.

The heat and the sunlight, the wine and the song of the crickets and birds coalesced into a single ribbon of pleasure that rippled through the summer afternoon. Don rolled her above him so that the fullness of her breast filled his mouth, and the warm breeze lifted her hair from her shoulders and coiled around her spine while the sun burned her thigh and arm.

A creature of sensation, dimly aware of the pool on her left, Julie retreated to the right, noticed cool air where his mouth had been and with a hand to either side of his head, lunged for his lips.

It was a kiss, and a joining. It was long and complicated, and suffered within it a subtle variation of pressures that excited and fed their need and longings. It endured while Don slid, tugged and finally removed the last scrap of fabric, and went on while Julie caressed every bit of him that she could reach, sobbing, panting, until finally she could wait no longer and laid herself open for him.

It was tumultuous, and the buzz was with them again. Her back was on the pad, her head was very close to the edge of the pool. She could not open her eyes into the direct

glare of the sun; and yet she would not have traded places with anyone on the planet. The pad jerked underneath her, scratched across the tiles, and a shadow crossed her face.

"You can open your eyes now." Don's mouth teased hers, and then retreated.

Julie's eyes opened on bright blue sky, focused down onto the lean suntanned smiling face and stayed there, absorbing the slow, oh so delightfully slow rhythmic movements of his body. Her head rolled to the right and she stiffened in shock. "Don!"

The pad jutted out over the pool. Beneath her was turquoise water. Julie jerked up and flung both arms round his shoulders.

"Steady. I won't let you fall."

She subsided. Their combined weight would keep her firmly anchored. She forgot about it, and concentrated on the slow, subtle movements he was making. Sweat ran down his temple and splashed onto her shoulder. "Sorry."

She closed her teeth on his ear lobe. He uttered a short, strangled sound, drove deep within her and collapsed to his forearms. Julie's hands flattened against the warm tiles, gained strength and found his flanks. She breathed in the damp greenness of the trees, the coolness of the pool at her side, the hot, gritty smell of earth and dust; the heady, exotic smell of aftershave heightened and changed by Don's own essence surging from every pore of his body.

Her palms found his ribs, his waist, his hip bones, moving, always moving in a steady, intoxicating rhythm and her own body matched it without effort, without thought and with utter abandon. Her head rolled from side to side, she found it hard to breathe, to get enough oxygen, opened her eyes on the dome of the sky, shuddered and gasped aloud.

Don noted the grasping clutch of her body and grinned in a mixture of pleasure and pain as he followed her shining example.

The rest of the evening was as ferociously hot as the day had been, and the breeze died away completely. It was an effort to walk from the shade of the *bolly* to the kitchen and back with a dish of grapes. Don, red faced in the heat, cooked prawns on the barbecue, dropped them into boiled linguini and swirled a pesto sauce over the combination.

Julie licked her fingers in appreciation, and smiled lazily across the table. "That was wonderful. What a gorgeous, gorgeous day this has been."

The weather changed as the evening drew on. Clouds raced across the sky. The warm breeze returned, became a wind that roared through the treetops, whipped paper napkins into the air, and whirled and danced them across the flagstones. Julie recaptured them twice and the second time stuffed them into her pocket so they couldn't fly off again.

Don stared around at the darkening sky, "We might be wise to take everything indoors. It looks as if there's going to be a storm."

Julie stood in the middle of the patio, smoothed back her hair with both hands and looked towards the west. "Oh, my goodness, yes! Look at the way those clouds are racing in! Quick! We'll never get it all inside in time!"

Don hauled the big umbrella out of the table socket, furlled it and carried it into the mill room while Julie grabbed the oversized cushions from the wicker chairs. She could barely see over the unwieldy pile and jammed herself in the doorway, giggling until Don pulled her through and guided her to the bed where she let them all drop.

She went back for the rest. In the short space of time she had been inside, the wind had grown stronger and colder. Don loaded plates and glasses onto the tray. Large dark circles splattered his red polo shirt and Julie gasped as cold rain hit her bare shoulders. "What about the barbie?"

"I'll bring the rest." Don grabbed what was left on the table, and glanced over at the barbecue. "It's very nearly dead, and this will finish it off. Go, go!"

She ran for the steps. Rain pelted down, Julie's sandal flew off her foot but momentum carried her on. "My sandal!" Don's gaze followed the arc of white into the flower bed and he slowed, scooped it up and ran on. His red shirt clung to his shoulders by the time he leapt up the last few steps and hurtled round the corner and onto the *bolly*.

Water flew off in all directions as he shook his head and tramped into the mill, where the crash and rattle of windows met them. He hauled his dripping shirt over his head and dried his face on it while Julie closed the west facing bedroom window and the change in air pressure made the living room window bang harder than ever.

He grasped both halves of the flapping window and forced them closed against the furious wind. Julie trotted back into the living room, her face bright and shiny with water. "I've shut the loo and the shower window. Here's a towel."

"When it rains, it rains. It doesn't do it very often, but my God, when it does, it does it with a vengeance. Look at that!"

He nodded to the open door. Silver rods of water poured down against the backdrop of green bushes and trees and bounced nine inches off the ground. Small puddles formed across the grass, extended, coupled and yoked together. Rain cascaded off the roof and formed a watery curtain around the *bolly*. As they stared, a monstrous crack of thunder sounded overhead, and lightning lit up the world beyond the door.

Don watched a while longer, one forearm braced against the door frame. Julie went over to the sink and began to tidy up the kitchen. She glanced over at him. "What a good thing we're not drunk."

Don snorted and half turned just as the air shook and boomed and the flicker of lightening illuminated half of his face, throat and chest. "I felt that in the wood." He glared at the offending wall, and jerked his arm from the door frame.

Julie put the last pot in the drainer, emptied the dishwater down the sink and walked slowly towards him while she dried her hands. "On the other hand, there's not much else to do." She peered out under the *bolly*. "I think this is going to go on for quite a while. Should we open another bottle and just go to bed?"

Another crash and rumble of thunder made her jump, and lightning flickered through the darkening sky.

"Just go to bed?" He loomed over her. "You make it sound as if going to bed is the last in a long list of superior alternatives."

She glided close and slid her palms over his bare chest, and the look she gave him was both roguish and innocent. "My try at casual and unpushy. Obviously a stunning failure."

He smiled and gathered her close. "When you match the words with a look like that, I know exactly what you're after."

The roguishness grew. "And you're not?"

"Did I say that? Now you are attempting to lead the witness, Miss...what is your surname, by the way?"

He studied her with a quiet pleasure that made heat rise in his skin.

"What?" She stared up, her eyes dancing. "What? What are you staring at?"

He let go of her with one hand and ran a finger beneath her wet fringe. "I like this wet look you've acquired. Your skin's a delicious honey color, and the rain's made your hair darker. It sticks out in spikes and gives you an elfin look. It's nice."

Instinctively she lifted exploratory hands to her hair. Don held her with one hand spread wide across her spine, and pulled her in close.

"What's wrong with my hair?"

"Nothing. I like it." His eyes roved across the spikes and tangles. "Makes you look—" He considered carefully, head on one side.

"What? What?" She jumped a little as thunder rolled and echoed around the mill.

His gaze dropped to her mouth; a small rosy mouth with a full, sexy bottom lip. The tip of her tongue peeked out and disappeared again. "Very, very kissable. How about if we light the fire, sit on the rug and then open the bottle of wine?" His hands crept down to her bottom. He was pretty sure that there would be more to sitting on the rug than just drinking wine.

Julie giggled. "Oh, you old romantic, you. Come on, then. Have you got your firefighter's badge?"

Don squatted before the huge fireplace, began to twist twirls of newspaper and arranged them carefully on the iron grate. "Yep. But just in case, I see Johnny's got some firefighters here." He struck a match, newsprint flared and flames illuminated the muscles of his chest with a ruddy glow.

When Julie returned with glasses, a bottle and a corkscrew, the newspapers had all but burned out. Don tempted a small, weak flame with wood shavings. Julie grinned. "It's going out. You're only allowed one match, you know."

Don frowned, grabbed a firelighter and sat back on his heels. "Witch." He tucked the small white block in among the twigs and shavings.

Ten minutes of concentrated effort brought the reward of a comforting blaze and cheerful flames licking up the vast chimney. Julie threw cushions down onto the rug. "We should have something like half a tree to put on this. It's big enough. I always wanted to light a medieval sort of fire. Oh, there's a basket of logs over by the door, isn't there? I'd forgotten about that."

Don washed his hands at the sink. "Would you care for a coffee while I'm here? Or do you just want to open the wine?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her as he asked the question and something odd made him look back at the rain swept doorway. He frowned, dried his hands and threw the towel down.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

Don walked softly to the door, making shushing motions with his hands. His gaze riveted on something outside, he beckoned her over.

Chapter Fourteen

She moved quietly into the shelter of his arm, and peeped around the door jamb. Cold air shivered over her bare arms, rain slashed down and a torrent of water surged and frothed almost to the door. It was rather like looking through plate glass at an aquarium, and she pressed closer to Don's reassuring bulk while she tried to make sense of what she was seeing.

"Our two friends have company tonight."

Julie blinked and looked again. It wasn't just a phenomenon of the storm he had brought her to see; when she looked further than the *bolly*, she saw Pierre and Justine across the millpond, standing together as if protecting each other. It was raining in their world as well as this one, and their hair and clothes were soaked. The trees roared and swayed behind them. A thick brown stream of water poured over the sluice-gate into the already overflowing millpond and sought other ways down the hill. Runnels, torrents and jets of brown water hurtled down the slope towards the river and Julie wondered fleetingly if the wooden furniture on the lower terrace would survive and then gave herself a mental shake. The flood had already happened in 1735. The furniture was quite safe.

Pierre and Justine were not alone in their world. A sturdy, forceful figure dressed in a dark grey habit with a generous shoulder mantle and hood faced Pierre and Justine. The monk held a thick wooden staff clenched in his hand. Even with his back to the mill, it was easy to tell from the violence of his movements that he was shouting; but Julie could hear nothing of his words, the surging flood water pouring into the millpond or the storm itself.

Pierre faced the man and though his face was white he seemed determined, and the girl, standing slightly behind his shoulder looked defiant. They had been there for some time, for her blouse and skirt were sodden, and clung to every curve of her body. Her brown hair was flat to her skull, but her brown eyes sparkled with anger in her white face.

A small group of monks stood a few paces back under the doubtful shelter of the taller trees, a mule beside them with a piece of sacking thrown over the saddle to keep it dry. A brown leather satchel, slowly darkening in the rain, hung below it.

"Do you think that's the Abbott?" Julie turned her head and whispered in Don's ear but he took no notice and continued to stare at the scene before them with absolute concentration. "Have they been caught out?"

"Looks like it. Poor devil, he's terrified."

The Abbott flung an arm in the air as if to strike Pierre, and his hood fell back to reveal a tonsure that had long ago been overtaken by baldness.

The rain bounced off *Monsieur l'Abbe's* pale pink scalp as he thrust his face very close to Pierre, and the carved wooden cross atop the stout staff swept perilously close to Pierre's nose. The young man jerked back just in time. *Monsieur L'Abbé* spoke again, and the staff swung round and pointed to the brown water creeping towards them across the grass.

Pierre glanced guiltily at the millpond, shot a glance at the girl and darted across the flooding grass to the sluice-gate that would let the water pour out of the millpond and disappear under the mill. He laid hands on the iron wheel, and with an effort that was visible, began to turn it. It took real muscle power, and Pierre's lips pulled back against white, even teeth as he struggled. He was very close to Don and Julie; his dark eyes flicked once or twice in their direction, but his overriding concern was with the furious Abbott and the defiant girl.

Julie stared, fascinated by Pierre's watchful, anxious expression, and his dark good looks. The rain had long since flattened the shaggy black curls; water beads stood on his lashes, raindrops streamed down his hollowed cheeks and splashed over his lean hands and surprisingly muscular forearms. His foot slipped in the mud, and he steadied himself, jammed his foot against the stones holding the sluice-gate, took a breath and heaved again on the wheel. Julie stared at his foot.

"Don!" She jabbed Don in the ribs. "Look at his foot!"

Don glanced down, but said nothing for *Monsieur l'Abbé*, satisfied that Pierre was at last doing what he should have done an hour ago, strode past the girl towards the group huddled beneath the trees. He used his wide sleeve to wipe his face dry and Julie would have sworn in court that the monks shivered and backed away from him as he barked orders, bade them tie the mule to the tree and then waved the group off through the trees.

They couldn't go quickly enough, hoods pulled over their heads against the storm. Julie realized the path they took was still there, for she and Don had walked along the vague trail beside the millstream. Today a fence marked the edge of Johnny's land, and beyond it the trail petered out and vanished under the wild growth of shrubs and trees. The monks would no doubt find their way to the monastery.

Julie bit her lip. Don's warm arm lay across her waist, and without that, she wondered, would she have stood here so calmly and watched these grey shadows from another world? They were undoubtedly ghosts. Even reading ghost stories could make shivers run down her spine, and here she was watching them without turning a hair.

There was no threat here. Justine might, and Pierre certainly, felt threatened, but Julie knew that there was nothing here that would harm her. She looked at the girl, and realized how very young she was.

Justine had not moved; she had stood her ground through all the shouting and blustering, her dark eyes flicking from Pierre to *Monsieur l'Abbé* and back again. Unlike Pierre, she had no sense of Julie or Don's presence, for she never so much as glanced in their direction.

She seemed unafraid, though a faint wariness showed in her face as the Abbot stamped back, and spat a short, furious sentence at her. Pierre stared over his shoulder with disbelief written across his white face, the wheel still in his hands, but the girl stood her ground, lifted her chin and shook her head.

She was small and shapely, with a face that was quite delicate beneath the long bedraggled hank of hair. With a gesture to the large golden cross gleaming against the dark grey fabric on the Abbott's chest, she loosed a torrent of words, smiled and then clasped both palms protectively across her belly.

Pierre froze, let go of the wheel, and dropped his head in his hands and leaned on the sluice-gate wheel. He was trembling.

"Oh," Julie whispered. "I think she may be pregnant."

The Abbott bellowed at Pierre, who jerked upright and heaved on the wheel again. The sluice-gate racked higher, and water lipped over the gate and then poured out of the flooded millpond in a thick glassy torrent down the narrow channel that both deepened the water and increased its power.

The Abbott loomed over the slender-boned girl, and Julie's nail dug into Don's forearm until he winced. Justine's defiant dark eyes stared into the seamed, cruel face and she spoke a short sentence with stunning composure and even managed a small, tremulous smile. *Monsieur l'Abbé* drew back his hand and slapped her. She reeled to one side, and fell in the mud.

Even in the mud, with rain pouring down her face and throat, the girl possessed courage enough to look up and laugh. The Abbott kicked out, and Justine curled her belly away from the vicious thrust of that horny, sandaled foot

Pierre opened his mouth and must have roared something, for the Abbott swung round in surprise; Pierre abandoned the wheel, seized the man's arm, spun him away from Justine and stood in front of her, his intent clear in his face.

"Good for you, my lad." Julie looked up in surprise when she heard Don's throaty growl. He scowled, so intent on the scene he barely noticed her. Thunder reverberated over the mill, and the rain fell with redoubled force, boiling the brown, choppy surface of the millpond.

The Abbott staggered, caught his balance and turned so violently the gold cross on a chain flopped heavily against his chest. Rain ran down into his open mouth, and his eyes centered on the young man who had dared to touch him. He grasped the staff with both hands, shuffled it through his hands until he had the length he wanted and swung it with all his might. Justine screamed a warning, Pierre swayed to avoid the blow and the staff struck Pierre's temple. He staggered and fell into the millpond.

Justine scrambled to her feet, splashed through the sodden grass to the hidden edge of the millpond and suddenly realized her danger. It was deep, and the storm water pouring through made it a fierce enemy. Pierre's thick robes had dragged him down and the force took him, spun him and carried him towards the sluice-gate.

The girl screamed, turned to run towards the gate just as *Monsieur l'Abbé* swung his staff again and the savage blow caught the girl across the hip. She staggered, whimpered and limped aside, her face white with fright and pain. Her gaze was on the millpond, where her lover was drowning, but her attacker marched grimly towards her, and she backed away in terror and anger.

Pierre surfaced, sucked in air and struggled hard. He sank, thrust his way back to the surface and realized he was in the grip of the current. He got a hand against the rough, weed covered boards of the channel but the water, relentless as a wild beast, pushed him on. He grabbed again as the dark opening to the waterwheel loomed up, but the water slammed his head into the stones and Julie had a brief and sickening glimpse of his arm striking the gate and bending as the bone broke upon impact.

She cried out as he vanished under the stones of the sluice; she couldn't help it, and Don's hands bit into her shoulders to prevent her running out onto the *bolly*. She glared at the Abbott in sheer disbelief. His attention was still on the girl, who stumbled away towards the gloom of the lane that would take her away from the mill and the monastery. Something made both the girl and the Abbott swing round and stare at the dark square hole beneath the mill.

Screams, perhaps. Julie winced, and remembered the heavy waterwheel, and how Christophe had claimed it crashed down on his head and killed him. She pressed back against Don as the Abbott walked steadily back to the sluice-gate, and stood there, breathing hard, peering down.

There was perhaps eight feet between Don, Julie and *Monsieur l'Abbé*. Somehow, in the space of eight small feet, the strength and integrity of the firm twentieth century *bolly* wavered, changed and became the rank grass that had once grown around the heavy stones that held the sluice-gate and allowed the powerful force of water down beneath the mill.

Julie was very sure that neither she nor Don should risk stepping across the eight feet in case they too ended beneath the mill. The grief-stricken girl had gone, already a tiny

speck in the grey gloom of the stormy evening, and Pierre had vanished into that cold, dark cavern that would be a cauldron of storm water.

The Abbott listened, one ear cocked, until, presumably, there was nothing more to hear from the cavern beneath the mill. The heavy face, covered in grey stubble that reminded Julie of lichen on a rock, held the expression of a man relieved of a problem.

The Abbott made no attempt to save Pierre; he didn't go down into the mill room, he didn't shut the sluice-gates to let the water level drop while he rescued the young man. The Abbott simply stood there and looked well pleased, then walked jauntily towards the wet, patient grey mule.

Don took a step backwards into the mill, pulled Julie with him and shut and bolted the door. Julie shivered and clutched herself suddenly, cradling her elbows with her hands. Don walked over, dropped a light kiss on the top of her head and gave her a gentle push towards the fire. "Go and get warm. I'll bring us that drink we were going to have so long ago."

Julie crouched on the rug and fed logs to the fire. The wood was dry and flared almost at once, crackling cheerfully and putting a rosy bloom on her white face. It was almost full dark outside and a brief, startling prong of lightning lit the room as Don nudged a glass of red wine into her hand. The rumble of thunder drowned any noise as he dragged one of the big cozy chairs closer to the fire and hunched on the edge of it so that his knees pushed against her spine.

Don sipped the wine, his mind blank and watched the flames strike ruddy glints into her chestnut hair. She angled her head back towards him and he was appalled to see tears in her eyes. He put his glass on the walnut boards, pulled her up onto his knees and cradled her against his chest, rocking her like an infant. "Don't cry. It all happened a long time ago."

"I know." Sobs shook her slender frame and he felt the wetness of tears against his chest, and tightened his arms around her. "I know, but it was so cruel. They must have loved each other so much, to risk an affair, and he died for it. She probably had a miserable life after he'd gone..." Her brief outburst slowed and halted. She sniffed and blinked away tears. "I hope the Man of Iron got his comeuppance! But he probably got away with it."

Don curled his palm at the back of her head. "His kind usually does get their comeuppance one way or another. Justice may be blind but she usually gets there in the end and sometimes she does it without man's help."

Julie snatched a paper hanky from the box on the bookcase beside them, and blew loudly into it. Her lashes were clumped together, and her eyes pink. "Oh, Don! He was terrified, yet he looked so brave when he stood up to that odious man!"

"Don't forget it wasn't real. It wasn't even in this century. We saw something that happened two hundred years ago."

Julie nodded. "I know; we've been watching ghosts." She was still pale and wide eyed. "That in itself is a frightening thought. Or it should be."

"Weren't you frightened? Didn't you feel threatened?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. I was so caught up in their emotions that I wasn't. But I should have been, shouldn't I?"

Don rested his head against the back of the chair and cuddled Julie close as another flash of light and a roll of thunder crashed and tumbled around the mill. "They didn't seem like ghosts."

A weak smile curved Julie's mouth. "'I ain't afraid of no ghost,'" she warbled, and Don loosed a brief snatch of laughter.

"No. It seemed like watching real people, except that there was never any sound in their world."

"It isn't what I'd been led to expect of ghosts. No drop in temperature, no cold wind and no pure funk, which every schoolboy expects to feel on seeing a ghost." Don settled his shoulders more comfortably in the chair. "What made you say she was pregnant?"

Julie smoothed the heel of both hands beneath her eyes to get rid of the tears, laid her cheek back against his warm chest. "The way that awful man aimed his foot at her belly, and the way she protected herself. Most women protect their face or just generally try to stop a blow, but she was very precise in what she did. She lowered her hands to protect the child. It's a pity we couldn't hear what they said. I think she told him. You know, when the Abbott got all nasty and when Pierre dropped his head in his hands."

Don sipped slowly. Savoring the taste, he held the glass against the flames, twirled it and watched the color change through ruby and cherry. Shadows rose and fell around the white walls and gathered in the corners of the room. "I can't think of anything else that would have had the same effect."

Julie sat bolt upright on his knee. Don choked, and grabbed her. "If you're going to bounce around you can sit back down on the floor. My innards won't stand it."

"Sorry." Julie rushed straight on before she forgot what she was going to say. "But what if – did you see Pierre's foot? Did you notice the growth on his toe? Did you?"

"Yes." He sipped again, watching her. "A small purple growth positioned on the outside of his foot just above the small toe. What of it?"

Julie bounced, Don yelped, and she apologized, scrambled backwards off his knee and subsided onto the rug. Color and vitality had come back into her face, and she talked so quickly her words tumbled over each other. "Christophe has one, exactly the same. I think it's on the same foot. I saw it the night he first came here, and dropped a slip of paper from his book. I bent to pick it up, so I was very close to his..." She thought about it for an instant. "His *left* foot," she added triumphantly.

"And this means...?"

"It means," she said slowly, as if to a small child, "that Justine was pregnant, and she ran away, had the baby and a few generations later, Christophe was born. He might be Pierre's great-something something grandson!"

Chapter Fifteen

Don's hazel eyes, full of flickering shadows in the firelight, slid away from her as he thought about it. There was a long silence, and Julie waited with ill-concealed impatience. At last he stirred, shifted in the chair and said slowly, "You'd have to put about ten generations in between now and 1735; if you can call twenty years a generation. Sometimes it would be more, but I suppose it wouldn't be much less. On the other hand, it could be just a fluke, a coincidence. Or he could be a distant cousin rather than a direct descendant."

"We could ask him about it. It might be a family trait, that thing on his foot." Julie took a gulp of wine. "It might be the answer. You know, why we got involved at all."

"I'm sure Christophe has been here before," Don said mildly. "It may be the reason *he* got involved but it sure as hell isn't a reason why *we* got involved."

Julie pulled a face. "That's true."

"It would give the whole thing more validity. I've been wondering for quite a while why it's been happening, and why we seem to be the recipients. After all, we aren't even French. Why would Pierre wait two hundred and seventy years and then pick on an English couple?"

"Perhaps I've got French blood way back in my ancestry." Julie grinned impishly. "Will you still marry me if I'm Fr—" Blood ran into her face as she realized what she had said. Her chin lifted. "Well?"

His hazel eyes glinted, and his lids dropped a little, as if to hide something. "It's awfully good of you to ask, Julie. I know you won't believe me, but that was my very first proposal."

"And?" Even if she hadn't meant to do it, she wanted an answer now. She didn't like the half-lidded way he looked at her, and she suspected he was trying not to laugh. "And? What's your answer?"

He let the smile spread across his face and transform it. "I'll marry you, French or not."

Julie pushed herself between his knees and threw herself on him. Hot blood burned in her face and her huge grin matched his. "And you're just going to lie there? I think not! I know it would be awfully romantic, but this floor is very hard. Do you think I could persuade you to take me to bed instead?"

The hazel eyes regarded her lazily. "And waste this beautiful fire I struggled so hard to light?"

Julie turned her head and surveyed the four foot wide stone hearth. The flames were shooting high, and threw off considerable heat; she would have to move soon or else singe down one side. She decided to turn a negative into a positive, got up and strolled nonchalantly across to the flower-patterned sofa. "Well, if I can't tempt you..."

She flopped down onto the big squashy cushions without spilling a single drop of wine, and looked back. Only his head had moved as he followed her progress, and his startled expression delighted her; she had taken him by surprise.

He recovered quickly. He uncoiled from the chair and stood there, a big-boned silhouette between her and the hearth. Firelight rimmed the broad shoulders, neat waist and long legs and a thrill shot through her as he covered the space between them in two long strides. He twitched the glass from her hand, put it on the floor, lay down and gathered her against him. "I think we should stay near the fire tonight."

Julie adjusted to the warmth of his long body, lifted her arms and entwined them around his neck. "What would you do if that wretched monk walked through the door right this minute?"

"Ignore him." Don nuzzled her from mouth to earlobe and back again. Then he propped himself on one elbow, and looked down into her wide innocent eyes.

"He could, you know. He could decide he doesn't want to get wetter than he already is and come indoors."

Don grunted. "If I'd just let someone drown and done nothing to help, I don't think I'd stick around. No, he'll head back to the monastery as fast as he can, believe me."

"The thing is he wouldn't knock at the door, would he? He'd just walk through the wall, or materialize or whatever it is ghosts do. I daren't look in the corner over there—" Her eyes flicked to the shadows beneath the window. "You know, where I saw Pierre one night. Have a look, Don. Just to reassure me that we are alone. Please?"

Don dropped a kiss on her nose, nibbled it thoughtfully for a moment and groped for the back of the sofa with one hand. The sofa creaked warningly as he pulled himself high enough to peer over the back of it.

The muscles in his arms bunched and stretched, he inhaled sharply and the muscles of his stomach tightened. Julie watched anxiously. "What...what can you see? Is he there? Oh God! Is he there?" She struggled to sit up, her wits scattering at the thought of that travesty of an Abbott in the same room with them. She got to her knees, grabbed for the top of the sofa back, and gingerly peered over it.

She scanned the shadows thoroughly, and a second time, and saw nothing but the shifting patterns on the white wall. She remembered to breathe as she shot a sideways look at Don. "There's nothing there."

He said nothing. Fright turned quickly into irritation and then into anger. "You deliberately let me think—you wanted me to think he was here! What's wrong with you? I nearly had a heart attack! Stop laughing!"

Don fell back against the sofa and tried to look contrite, but he was laughing too much. "Oh, Julie! Your face when you peered over the sofa!"

She clenched her fist and swung it at him with a wordless shriek. Don caught her wrist, held it while she struggled, and finally hugged her tight against his chest. "At last! You're starting to get mad at me."

"What do you mean?"

They stared at each other on the sofa in the dark room with the leaping glow of firelight from the hearth flickering across their faces. "I wondered how long it would be before you felt confident enough to shout at me. I knew you had it in you."

"Too right," she snapped. "Imbeciles always bring out the worst in me."

"It was just a little teasing."

"Teasing?" Her voice shot up an octave. "Teasing? Have you any idea how much you scared me?"

He lifted her hands, still clasped within his and placed a kiss on her thumbs. She jerked her hands free, folded her arms and frowned at him. Don spoke softly. "I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. I should have known better. Have some wine."

For a moment it looked as if she would take a swipe at the glass and send it flying across the room, but she glared at it and then decided to accept it. She took a quick gulp, and then another. One side of her was in shadow, but firelight lit the other and showed him the bright patch of color in her cheek. It also showed him the rapid pulse beat in her throat.

"I'm sorry. But in a way I'm truly glad. If you can get so angry with me that you'll try and strike me, then I think it means that the shy young lady I met at Johnny's flat has vanished. She would never have hit me. She got flustered if I kissed her. I had her labeled as the last word in demure."

Julie stared at him, huge-eyed. "Anyone would get flustered with you, and what's wrong with demure? Why did you put up with me?"

He retrieved his own glass from beside the fireside chair. "I had to. There wasn't a choice."

"Of course there was. There's always a choice."

"Not if I wanted you, and I did, very much. And Johnny assured me that you weren't usually so—"

"You talked to Johnny about me!"

"No. To be absolutely correct, Johnny talked to me. He talked endlessly, and all I had to do was listen. He thinks the world of you, and defended you at every turn. I was moving too fast for you, I had far more experience than you, I pushed you too far and too fast, I should back off and give you some space. All that sort of rubbish."

"That was sweet of him." Julie looked thoughtful. "He was right, too. You were way too fast for me."

"Sorry."

"Will you stop saying sorry? I'm amazed you put up with me. You can't have had many girlfriends who choked on spaghetti because she laughed at your jokes."

He grinned. "You were different. Delightful."

Other incidents crossed her mind, but she wasn't going to remind him exactly how clumsy and nervous she had been initially. "Not your average society girl," she said dryly.

"Thank God."

"Thank God? Are you sure I didn't embarrass you when I fell out of the taxi because you kissed me all the way from the station to my flat?"

He chuckled at the memory. "It was wonderful. You have no idea how good it felt to meet someone who wasn't simply a clone of every svelte, sophisticated girl around town." He hitched along the sofa towards her. You were yourself. Totally and beautifully, and I loved you for it."

"You did?"

"I did, and I still do." He was very close.

"But I'm not so gauche now. I'm a different person."

He shook his head. "No. The honesty is still there, along with the innocence. But now I'm learning to know the intelligence and the hardihood, too. You have no idea how Tara would have behaved if she'd been here and Pierre had started putting in an appearance. She'd have had her bags packed and kept her hand on the horn of the Honda until I drove her home."

"Really? Wouldn't she have been curious?"

Don shook his head. "Not at all. She'd have been terrified."

She drained the last of her wine, and eyed him over the rim of her glass. "Is there any more wine?"

"You're turning into an alcoholic, girl. Here, have mine."

Her brows rose. Don said briefly, "I think I'll keep a clear head tonight."

"Why? You don't think—there can't be anything more to come. He must be at the monastery by now, and he won't come back."

He shook his head, and moved closer to her. "I wasn't thinking of him at all." His hand rested on the back of her neck and slowly drew her close. "I was thinking of us."

"We've been here before," she mumbled against the warmth of his mouth.

"So we have." His mouth settled slowly over hers. Julie slid down the arm of the sofa, wound her arms about the back of his head, melded her mouth to his, and felt the flame start to lick and curl in her belly.

Chapter Sixteen

The next day was cooler, but still warm to those used to English weather. Julie walked out onto the *bolly* and sniffed appreciatively. "The air's crisper," she called back over her shoulder. "It's not as muggy as it was yesterday."

The grass was damp, the leaves fresh and green. "What's truly amazing is that all that water has just vanished. Don, would you believe it? There's no sign of the storm."

The warm coffee pot nudged her shoulder. She walked over to the table and sat down. Don followed, and poured coffee. "It all soaks away into the ground. The ground is so dry it just vanishes." He sat and looked around. "Hard to believe what we saw last night."

Julie burnt her lips on the coffee, abandoned it and picked up her toast. "Do you mean the real storm, or what we saw of 1735?"

"I was thinking of the real storm."

"1735 was even stranger."

"Well, at least we know what happened now. That's if we believe what we saw."

Julie frowned. "I don't know why it wouldn't be true. What would be the point if it wasn't?"

Don shrugged. "That's human beings for you. We expect logic, but what if ghosts don't? We might just be getting random episodes of someone's life. Or we're hallucinating in tandem."

"Random episode or not, it gave us an idea of what happened, and why Pierre was upset. Upset enough to...to..."

"That's just what worries me. To do what, exactly?"

"Well, to show people what really happened. Village gossip says he killed that girl, but he didn't. He was murdered by the awful monk and the girl ran away. She wasn't killed at all."

"It wasn't only village gossip," Don said thoughtfully. "Christophe's books said the same thing, though I had a thought about that. Do you know when it was first written that Pierre and the girl died? I would put money on the fact that *Monsieur L'Abbé* dictated exactly what was written, to cover up his own tracks. Later sources would simply copy the original."

"Of course!" Julie's face registered surprise, agreement and resignation in quick succession. "He would, wouldn't he? So Pierre wanted the truth known." Her brow wrinkled. "It still doesn't say why us, though. Why are we the special recipients of his messages?"

"Propinquity, perhaps?"

"Propin...I never could say that word properly, but I know it means to be close to something. It can't just be that, surely?"

Don stared eastwards over the *bolly* rail. The early morning haze hung over the fields and trees and wooded hills in the fashion of an impressionist painting. "I looked it up once." Don cradled his coffee cup in both hands. "It means more than you might think; nearness in space, yes; but it also means close kinship, and closeness in the sense of similarity." He looked directly at her. "Perhaps I noticed something you didn't. You couldn't, I suppose. You and Justine look very alike."

Julie's face changed as she absorbed his statement, and then changed again as she started to refute it. "You mean I look like her? But she was far curvier than me and she had brown eyes. She had long hair, and —"

"Yes, I know all that. But there is a strong likeness. The similarities between you and her may not be exact, but they are strong and coupled with Christophe being here at the same time, I think it was the key."

Julie frowned. "But I started seeing Pierre before ever we knew Christophe. Before Christophe came here."

Don sat forward in his chair. "I wonder how many young women have been here since 1735? Think about it; the place was owned by the monastery and I'll bet the Abbott kept it closed for a long time after Pierre's death. He couldn't risk anyone finding a body under the mill. Time would go by, the stream would pour through and the body would either wash away or be buried under the mud and silt."

Julie shuddered and goose bumps rose on her arms.

"Years later it might have been used again, but it wouldn't be used by women. The monastery only sold it recently, and I'll have to ask Johnny if his uncle bought it direct from the monastery; I suspect he did. Johnny's uncle never married, which is why he gave the mill to Johnny, and I don't think Johnny has ever brought a woman here. You might well be the first girl to have come here in all those years, and you look very like Justine."

A car roared down the hill as Julie shrugged. "Well, that makes sense, I suppose. I thought she was pretty, so I'm flattered, too."

Don got up, intending to make more coffee. At her comment, he bent and laid his lips briefly on hers. "More than pretty." The sound of the car died away, started up again and Don glanced towards the drive, and frowned. "*Merde*, it's coming here. We'd better get dressed."

Julie leapt out of the chair so fast she had to grab for her towel as it slipped to reveal one pert breast. "Who is it?"

"I don't know, but we'd better be wearing more than towels when whoever it is gets here, don't you think?" He disappeared inside with Julie, hissing under her breath, hot on his heels.

Don elbowed his way into a tee shirt and shorts and wandered casually back out to the *bolly* as if he always expected guests for breakfast. Julie fought her way into a loose dress that required no fixing or fastening, ran her fingers through her still wet hair and scuffled her feet into sandals. She checked her image in the mirror, walked out onto the *bolly* and stopped dead.

A priest in a long dark robe stood there. Julie suppressed a squawk of alarm with her hand, and realized Don was talking to Christophe. She walked forward with a smile of greeting. This must be the local priest. He was a small, dark man with a swarthy face and silver hair smoothed back from his seamed brow. His dark eyes assessed her calmly, and he offered his hand as Christophe made the introduction. "*Enchanté, Madame.*"

Interesting. Julie wondered if the *Madame* was because she looked old, or because he thought she and Don were married. "Please, come and sit down. Will you have coffee?"

Julie didn't really want to hear the details of the bones, or what should be done with them; the coffee gave her a convenient excuse to retreat to the kitchen. Christophe followed her.

"Julie, 'ow are you?"

"I'm very well, Christophe. And you? How are you sleeping now?"

He shrugged. After the bright sunlit morning, the kitchen seemed quite dark, and his eyes were shadowed. Julie peered at him. His eyes were blue, and she relaxed.

"I am fine." He glanced over his shoulder. "I brought Father Alphonse. We bury Pierre. He has agreed."

Julie wondered for a moment if Pierre had agreed, looked at Christophe's sober expression and decided not to try a joke. She filled the coffee machine without thinking about it, and laid out clean mugs, milk and sugar on the tray. "It will be good to have an end to it all," she said lightly.

"Julie!" Christophe sprang forward and seized her hand. "I 'ave not long. I must speak!" He glanced over his shoulder as if expecting Don and the priest to walk through the door.

Surprised, Julie tried to free her hand, and couldn't. She peered into his face, and breathed a sigh of relief when his blue eyes met hers. "Christophe, really –"

"Julie, I love you! I marry you! Please say yes!"

He dropped to one knee before her. Julie stared at him, and backed away. Unfortunately, the gas cooker was behind her, and Christophe blocked her only escape from the U-shaped kitchen. "Let go of my hand!"

She snatched her hand back, and stared at him wordlessly for several long seconds. "What makes you think I would, ahem, marry you?"

He stared up at her. Without his glasses, he was really quite handsome, and as usual, he was dressed in white. *His trousers won't still be white when he gets up off the floor.*

"You love me. You love me as Pierre, and you love me as Christophe; you know it is true, *n'est ce pas?*"

Julie's heart sank like a stone. She glanced towards the sunlit rectangle of the door, fearing Don might walk in. "Get up, Pierre!" She heard her mistake and groaned. She was confusing the two men into one.

"We can be together now. It is meant to be!"

Julie flung both hands up in front of her. "No! Absolutely not! I love Don, and I shall marry him. He asked me last night." Which wasn't strictly true, of course, but that was a minor detail.

Crestfallen, Christophe stayed where he was. "But you love me! You must!"

Julie felt a twinge of pity. The coffee percolator burbled behind her. This was extremely awkward. She fiddled with the mugs on the tray. "Actually, no. Sorry." When he did not move, Julie bent towards him. "Christophe, please get up, or I shall have to call for Don."

It was like chastising a puppy. When tears formed in Christophe's eyes, Julie backed as far from him as she could. The percolator burbled again, and went on perking.

"Julie, I kill myself if you do not love me, I swear it!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Don't be so melodramatic. You hardly know me. You've let the ghosts influence you too much, Christophe. Now get up, there's a good chap, and let's go and talk to Don and the priest."

Long seconds passed and he did not move. Julie inflated her lungs and lifted her chin with every intention of calling Don. Christophe's hand whipped up, palm out, to stop her. "Don't call. I get up. My 'eart...it is broke."

Julie grabbed the percolator, put it on the tray and picked it up in both hands. Held firmly in front of her, it was like a barrier. She waited, smiling, for Christophe to allow her free passage, and then swept out into the sunlight before he could change his mind.

Don rose, took the tray from her and set it on the table. His glance met hers, and then moved to a point behind her. Christophe stood in the doorway and looked ready to burst into tears. Don's eyes came back to Julie, and there was a question there.

Julie didn't stop to think. "Christophe's heart has just broken. He swears he loves me and must marry me, but I had to tell him that I love you, Don. I think we'll have to ask *Monsieur le prêtre* to look after Christophe." She turned gaily to the priest. "Will you do that, Father?"

The priest laughed, and cast an amused glance at Christophe. Julie looked only and anxiously at Don. He leant forward, brushed his lips across her cheek and, for the space of a heartbeat, he let his feelings show before he glanced at Christophe.

The Frenchman scowled. "You make joke of me."

"Come and sit down, Christophe. Have some coffee." Don pulled out a chair, and held it invitingly. "We've all been pretty confused these last few days. I think in a week you'll have forgotten these feelings for Julie ever existed; I hope so, anyway. I don't want to lose your friendship."

Julie sat next to the priest and began to pour coffee. "What do you think about Pierre, Father?" She gave him the mug of coffee, gestured towards the milk and sugar and deliberately did not look as Christophe slouched across the *bolly* and slumped into the chair Don still held for him.

"Father Alphonse speaks no English," Christophe muttered. He repeated Julie's question, in French, without glancing in her direction.

"Ah." Father Alphonse smiled at Julie and rattled off a sentence in response.

Christophe accepted his mug and sipped. "Father Alphonse thinks it is very sad. The poor young man should be buried in *le cimetière* at the monastery." He took a big gulp of coffee.

"That's wonderful. I'm so pleased." Julie looked at Don. "But I'd much rather be somewhere else when you hand him over."

"I thought you might. Don't worry; we'll take care of it." He smiled at her, a very private kind of smile that made her eyes shine.

The priest saw it, interpreted it correctly and glanced at Christophe. "*Courage, mon fils, courage.*" He reached across and patted his hand.

Julie suddenly sat bolt upright in her chair. "Christophe, I've just remembered we have so much to tell you! We saw them again last night, and we know what happened! I think you might be related to Pierre —"

Don's hand on her arm stopped her. He was laughing. "If you gabble it out like that even I won't understand you, let alone Christophe. Slow down a little."

Julie pulled a face, but realized he was right. She turned apologetically to their guests. "I'm sorry, I didn't think. If I tell you slowly, perhaps you'll translate for Father Alphonse?"

So, in small, neat sentences with many pauses, Julie recounted the tale of the terrible storm, the Man of Iron, and the terrible death Pierre had suffered.

"Everyone should know that Pierre did not kill that girl." She looked at the priest. "Perhaps, Father, you could amend the record?"

Father Alphonse waited for the translation, thought about it, and nodded slowly. He spoke rapidly to Christophe, who dutifully turned to Don and Julie. "The record, yes. Also, the local newspaper. We tell them."

"Perhaps his gravestone could record the truth, too." Don looked at Christophe. "I'd be happy to pay for it." He glanced at Julie. "I'd like to come here again, and I'd

rather know that Pierre rested quietly in the churchyard. We don't want a repeat of what's been going on here, do we?"

Julie shuddered. "No," she said, and then tilted her head to one side, as if thinking about it. "No, absolutely not!"

Don laughed. "I think now you should tell Christophe about the purple growth on Pierre's foot."

"Oh, yes!" She began at once, tortured by the slowness of having everything translated into French for the priest.

"I 'ave it." Christophe said blankly at last. He translated for Father Alphonse and waggled his foot in plain view. As the priest peered at the growth, Christophe looked across the table. His blue eyes narrowed, and realization began to dawn.

Julie smiled. "It is perhaps a birthmark in your family?"

Christophe nodded. "The men of my family, we 'ave it."

"All of you?"

He nodded. "Sometimes small, sometime big, but always, it is there."

"Don't you think then, that you and Pierre must be related?"

He nodded, his blue eyes wide. A small smile curved his mouth. "I think...I always knew."

Don reached for Julie's hand, carried it to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. "So that's the story finished. Now we can concentrate on simply enjoying our holiday."

Julie blew him a kiss. "Unless I feel I'm related to Justine, of course."

Don groaned.

The priest got smoothly to his feet, bowed his silver head in Julie's direction and smiled his thanks. "Madame." He glanced meaningfully at Don and Christophe.

"Of course." Don answered the unspoken request by getting to his feet and leading the two men down to the lower level of the mill. Julie loaded the tray and vanished into the kitchen; she did not want to see Pierre's bones taken away.

Some time later Don came in and washed his hands carefully at the sink. He seemed subdued. Julie walked up behind him, clasped him close and laid her cheek against his back. She breathed in a huge lungful of his own unique aroma. "Have they gone?"

"They've gone straight to the church."

She handed him a towel. "Thank goodness it's all over."

He dried his hands slowly, watching her as he did so.

"What's wrong?" Julie bit her lip, suddenly worried. "You look awfully serious."

"All this talk of the past has made me think of the future. What people will think of us two hundred years from now. It's a sobering thought."

"My goodness, yes!"

"You asked me to marry you."

Julie's heart did a somersault in her chest and ended somewhere closer to her throat. "I did. You accepted. I hope you're not having second thoughts?"

Don threw down the towel, grasped her shoulders and brought her close to him. "Not second thoughts," he said softly. "I'm thinking of our descendants and their birthmarks. How many shall we have?"

"Chi...Children or birthmarks?"

"Children, you idiot. Two? Six?"

Julie gulped. He still looked serious. Did lawyers really want big families? Or was he teasing? "Six might be rather a lot, don't you think? Perhaps we should get married

first, make a home and worry about children later.” She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “You might be able to persuade me...”

His arms tightened, lifted her off her feet. “...that six is a good number?” Suddenly, he was laughing.

Relief flowed through her. “It is possible.” She stared at his mouth, longed to touch it and ran the tip of her tongue over her own in anticipation. “But you might have to use an awful lot of persuasion. A huge amount of persuasion, in fact.”

He dipped his head to hide the sudden gleam in his eyes. “My pleasure, ma’am.” He stooped, swung a strong arm beneath her knees, and moved away from the kitchen with her in his arms. “I may as well begin right now. Believe me, I have plans for you.”

Julie smiled, threw her arms around his neck, found his mouth and stopped worrying about anything at all.

The End