

# SELLING DREAMS

By Susanne O'Leary

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## Chapter 1

Chantal stretched out on the couch, the silk sheet cool against her bare skin. She propped herself on her elbow and gazed out of the window at the bay, where the early-morning sun was kissing the peaks of the mountains behind the Nice skyline. The azure water was calm with just a ripple or two near the shore, and the palm fronds barely stirred in the light breeze. It would be another hot day.

“Turn your head.”

Chantal turned and looked at the man behind the easel. “Like this?”

“Yes.” He held up a paintbrush and squinted at her. “I want you to put your hand down and stay supported like that on your arm.”

“For how long? I’m getting stiff and I haven’t had my coffee yet.”

“I know, chérie, but try to stay like that for a few minutes at least. The light’s perfect right now. It makes your skin glow and your eyes shine with exactly the same hue as the sheet you’re lying on. Ice blue. I’ve never seen a woman with such eyes. With your black hair and that skin...” He kissed his fingers. “Sublime.”

Chantal stifled a yawn. “Thank you. But please try to hurry up, mon amour. I have to go home and check on Jean and then go to the agency. We’re very short-staffed at the moment, and the busiest season is just starting.”

The man turned back to his work and added colour and light to the picture on the canvas, working silently.

“What are you painting?” Chantal asked.

“You.”

“But what part of me?”

“I’m sliding the brush around your breasts.”

She closed her eyes, imagining the light touch of the brush. “You’re slipping down my waist to my hips,” she murmured.

“Can you feel it?”

“Mmm.”

“And now?”

“Oohhh,” she whispered.

He glanced at her. “You must be psychic. Hold that expression. It’s wonderful.” He worked in silence for a few minutes and then put his brush and palette on the table beside the easel. “The light has changed. Enough for today.”

Chantal stretched like a cat and rose from the couch, wrapping the sheet around her. “Can I see?”

“If you like. It’s not finished yet.”

“I know. But it’ll give me an idea.” She stepped around the easel, the sheet trailing behind her, and looked at the unfinished painting. The colours were breathtaking, with the ice blue of the sheet reflected in the woman’s eyes and her skin like honey-coloured silk against the background of the view through the open window. The face was hers but without lines or expression, like that of a sphinx, looking into the distance or maybe even the future. Timeless. Ageless. Unrecognisable except for the eyes.

“You make me look young and old at the same time,” she said.

He kissed her shoulder. “You are young.”

She snorted. “Forty-nine is not young.”

“You’ll never be old to me.”

She sighed and leant her head on his shoulder. “You’re so good to me.”

He put his arm around her. “You’re my muse and my love. But I have to finish this painting before I leave. I have to go away for an assignment for a few days, and then I’ll be back to prepare for the exhibition.”

“And I have to go. I have several showings today. Thank goodness we’re getting a new girl next week. It’ll be such a great help.”

“How is Jean?”

Chantal shrugged. “No better, no worse. The same.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. Not much to be done, really.” She walked to the chair by the window and started to get dressed. “I’m so glad I can come here and be with you.”

“Me too.”

Chantal eased silk knickers over her hips. “Nobody knows what we do here. Or even that we know each other.” She wriggled into her bra, slipped on a white cotton shift dress and pushed her feet into her sandals. “I really have to go.” She walked back to him and kissed him on the lips. “A bientôt, mon amour. Don’t forget to close the shutters and lock both the door and the gate.”

“I won’t.”

She turned at the door, blew him a kiss and left him and her only source of happiness behind.

## Chapter 2

It was dark when the plane landed in Nice. Flora looked out of the window but could see nothing but the floodlit tarmac, busy with trucks and personnel loading and unloading planes. The fronds of a dusty palm swayed in the breeze at the entrance of the terminal. She knew the airport was on the edge of the Mediterranean, but there wasn't even a glimpse of it. She gathered her bag and jacket and prepared to disembark. Tired and stiff, she stretched her back as she waited for the door of the plane to open so she could shuffle forward. The people behind her moved, pushing her into the man in front, making her step on his heel. He turned around to glare at her, and she met his irritated eyes with an apologetic shrug.

"Sorry," she said.

He didn't reply.

"I did it on purpose, of course," she said, attempting a cheeky smile. "I felt like annoying you. I was wondering how to attract your attention, and stepping on your foot seemed the perfect way."

He didn't smile back but looked a little friendlier. "Okay. Not your fault. Everyone's in a hurry to get off. Are you on holiday?" His barely discernible French accent gave his voice a charming lilt.

"No. I'm going to work here. If I get the job," she added wistfully.

He put his glasses on top of his head, where they nearly disappeared into his thick brown hair. "You're Irish?"

She laughed. "Yes. I suppose my accent gives me away."

"It's quite distinctive. I've just spent a week in Dublin and other parts of your country, so it sounds familiar."

"You were on holiday?" she enquired.

"No, it was for work." He peered along the queue of people ahead of him. "What's taking them so long?"

“I think they said the bridge wasn’t working properly. But the doors are opening, I see, so we’ll be getting off in a minute.”

“If people can get their luggage down. Why do they have so much stuff?”

“No idea. I only have a small bag. I can’t be bothered to lug all my belongings onto the plane.”

The queue started to move forward. The man hitched his satchel onto his shoulder and fished out a card from the breast pocket of his blue shirt. “Here’s my card. I live near Vence. It’s a little town in the hills above Nice. If you happen to be touring around there, give me a call.”

She took the card. “Thanks. I will—if I get the job. Otherwise I have to go back to Dublin straightaway.”

“I hope you won’t.” They were nearly at the door of the aircraft.

“My name’s Flora, by the way,” she said, not wanting to lose his attention. “Flora McKenna.”

He smiled, showing a dimple in his left cheek. “Well, bonne chance, Flora McKenna. I hope we meet again one day.” Then he nodded at the crew standing by the door and disappeared into the crowd surging forward into the long corridor leading to the terminal.

Flora stuffed the card into her pocket. Nice man. And very good-looking. But she would probably never meet him again. She left the plane with a feeling her trip had got off to a good start.

Half an hour later, Flora stepped into the dark soft night and breathed in the smell of petrol fumes mixed with the scent of flowers and pine needles—that special Provence smell she had read about. Above the din of traffic, she could hear a whirring chirping sound she assumed were the cicadas she knew were everywhere in this part of France. Being there was like a dream she never thought she would realise. She felt like pinching herself to make sure she wasn’t asleep and would wake up in her dreary little flat in Dublin to start yet another day scouring the papers for a job. Finding the advertisement for the job in France and calling the number had felt like winning the lotto.

Things had happened so fast after Flora had called the number only a week earlier. A French estate agency was looking for Irish nationals with a good knowledge of French and some experience in the housing market. As the agency she was with in north Dublin had gone out of business, leaving her unemployed, she thought she would give it a shot. Her French was good, and she had a lot of experience selling houses in Dublin, which was possibly not the same as in France, but she was willing to learn. After a Skype conversation with the

manager of the agency in Antibes, she was asked to book a flight so that they could meet in person. The job would be hers if she met all the criteria, whatever they were.

Flora took another deep breath of that magic air and felt the warm wind stirring her hair. It was time to go to the hotel by the airport, where she was to spend the night before she took the train to Antibes and the job interview. She could see the little shuttle bus with the hotel logo pulling up at the bus stop and lugged her suitcase to board it. Settling down on the seat for the short drive, she looked out at the street lined with palm trees and flowerbeds with roses in full bloom. This would have been magic were it not for that interview the next day. She tried to feel confident about it, but the thought that it would decide her future made her stomach lurch.

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The train rattled along the coastline. Flora couldn't take her eyes off the sea and the blue skies, the beaches with colourful umbrellas and the sailing boats. The water was a deep sapphire blue, and she understood why this coast was called the Côte d'Azur by the French. There was no other blue like it. She didn't care that the train was so packed that she had to stand near the door, holding onto her suitcase with one hand and hanging onto the handrail for dear life with the other. The train swayed and bumped, jerking to a sudden stop at each station, where more passengers piled on, squashing into the already-cramped compartments. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and grabbed the handrail again as the train surged forward. The other passengers consisted mostly of tourists in shorts and T-shirts from countries all over the world. She could hear many different languages mingled with French spoken in the sing-song Midi accent.

It made her think of Madame du Jardin, her French teacher who was from Marseille. With her enthusiasm and support, she had inspired in Flora a love for France and all things French ever since her very first French lesson in the first year of secondary school. Madame du Jardin had sashayed into the classroom in her high heels, black pencil skirt and red silk blouse, breaking into a broad smile. She wore her black hair in a bun on top of her head, huge, hoop, gold earrings, and smelled of Shalimar by Guerlain. Flora was mesmerised.

From that moment, she wanted to *be* Madame du Jardin with her cheeky smile, flashing eyes and husky voice. Not that she ever succeeded, as her own strawberry-blonde hair, square jaw and strong bones were far removed from the Frenchwoman's petite frame and Latin looks. But Flora studied French as if her whole future depended on it, spent several summers in Paris, minding the spoilt children of the well-to-do and graduated with top marks. She always felt a little bit French, and looking out at the Mediterranean through the grimy

window of the train, she felt a strong sense of belonging. She suddenly knew that even if she didn't get that job, she would look for something else. She would even mind children or clean hotel rooms as long as she could stay.

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It didn't take Flora long to find the agency. Situated in the main street of Antibes, she could see the blue sign with *Agence du Soleil* in yellow letters over the entrance. She looked briefly at the photos in the window, advertising houses and apartments for sale and mentally gasped at the prices. Two hundred and fifty thousand euros for a studio of thirty square metres seemed very steep. And half a million for a two-roomed flat near one of the beaches? Real estate in this town was not very affordable. She pushed open the glass door, pulling her suitcase behind her, and nearly fell into the main office of the agency, where two women sat at computers behind a long counter. One of them looked up and tittered.

Embarrassed and flustered, Flora tried a smile. "Sorry. The door opened so suddenly and I had my suitcase so—"

The woman got up. "Sorry. We didn't mean to laugh. Are you okay?" Her cool tone didn't convey much sympathy.

"Yes. I'm fine. Just a little—you know—disoriented. I arrived in Nice last night, and then I took the train here this morning."

The woman nodded. "You must be the new girl." She held out her hand. "I'm Iris." She was pretty, with short dark hair, blue eyes and a smattering of freckles across her cute button nose. But there were lines around her eyes and mouth that hinted at late nights and something sad going on in her life.

Flora grasped her hand. "Flora McKenna."

"Are you joking?" Iris suddenly laughed.

Flora bristled. Why was her name so funny all of a sudden? "No, I'm not."

Iris calmed down. "Sorry. It's just that... She paused and tapped the other woman on the shoulder. "Take those earphones off, Daisy, and meet the new agent. Her name's Flora, would you believe."

The other girl took the earphones out of her ears and looked at Flora. "What?" Her eyes focused. "Flora? Oh my God, that's hilarious."

It suddenly dawned on Flora why Iris had laughed. Iris, Daisy and Flora suddenly seemed a ridiculous combination. "How strange," she said.

"Yes, quite odd," Iris said.

"Unusual name," Daisy said. "Kind of old-fashioned, isn't it?"

“It’s because of Bonnie Prince Charlie,” Flora explained.

Iris nodded. “That explains it. Flora MacDonald and the Isle of Skye and all that.”

“That’s right,” Flora replied. “My mother read a novel based on that story before I was born, so I was named after Flora MacDonald.”

“Who was she?” Daisy asked.

“A Scottish heroine. She helped this prince escape during the Jacobite risings in seventeen forty-six or something.”

“Oh, okay. British history. Not something we get to learn in the good ol’ US of A.” Daisy smiled, shook her mop of light-blonde hair out of her eyes and held out her hand. “Hi, Flora, and welcome. As you heard, I’m Daisy. I’m from New York, and Iris here is from London as you might have gathered from her posh accent. Where are you from?”

“Dublin,” Flora replied and shook Daisy’s hand.

“Daisy grinned. “Oh, great. I’m Irish too. My family name is Hennessy. It was good fortune that my granny was born in Cork, which meant I could apply for an Irish passport. This way I had no trouble getting a job in France.” She turned back to the computer. “Anyway, Chantal will be back from her lunch break soon, so we’d better look as if we’re working.”

Iris snapped to attention. “You’re right. She won’t be too happy if we’re caught chatting. In any case, I have to call that couple who wanted to see the house on the Cap. And get the cleaning lady to go in there and make the place smell nice.”

“Tall order,” Daisy muttered, her eyes on the screen. “The smell of drains in that place would knock down a horse.”

“The owners should fix the drains,” Iris said. “But they won’t spend the money. So it’s up to us to cover up the cracks until it’s sold. I’ll have to get some bread to put in the oven, too, for that home-baked smell. And lie about the roof.”

“Lying. Worst part of this job,” Daisy said. She peered at Flora. “Are you a good liar?”

“Um, not really,” Flora had to admit.

“You’d better practice,” Iris said. “Fibbing is a big part of this job.”

“She’s here,” Daisy hissed as a tall thin woman with dark glossy hair and sunglasses pushed the door open.

Both girls turned to their computers and started tapping on the keyboards, while Flora stood in the middle of the floor, still holding on to her suitcase, looking at the woman who had just floated in the door, bringing with her the scent of expensive perfume and air of



authority. She stopped and looked at Flora over the rim of her sunglasses. “Ah. Bonjour. Flora McKenna?”

“Oui, Madame,” Flora whispered and managed to stop herself from curtsying. Those ice-blue eyes were scary.

“Bien. I’m Chantal Gardinier. Please come into my office. I have a few questions to ask you before I can offer you the position.” She walked around the counter and disappeared through a door behind it. Flora hesitated, not knowing if she should leave her suitcase or take it with her.

Iris looked up. “Go on and get it over with. I’ll mind your bag.”

Flora left the suitcase and went to the door and knocked.

“Entrez,” Chantal called.

“Good luck,” Daisy called. “I hope you give her all the right answers.”

Flora winked. “Of course I will. I’ll just lie through my teeth.”

“You’ll do,” Iris remarked drily. “You have the ethos of this place down to T already.”

### Chapter 3

The office was flooded with light. The half-open French window overlooked a small courtyard with tubs of roses and a small seating arrangement against an old stone wall.

Chantal was sitting behind a white desk crammed with photos and brochures. A laptop sat on a small table at the side. The white walls were bare except for two small Provençal landscapes in glowing jewel colours on the wall beside the desk.

“Gabriel Sardou,” Chantal said and pointed at the paintings with her pencil. “Famous Provençal landscape artist.”

“Lovely colours.”

“Yes. Beautiful.” Chantal waved at a chair in front of the desk. “Sit down.”

Flora sat down on the edge of the chair and wrapped her legs around each other, trying to stop herself from shaking. No need to make it obvious how desperately she needed this job. She straightened her back and cleared her throat, ready to answer the questions.

“So...” Chantal slipped a pair of glasses onto her perfect nose and opened a folder. “Flora McKenna...thirty-two years old with eight years’ experience in the field,” she said in perfect but heavily accented English. She peered at Flora over the rim of her glasses. “Is that all correct?”

Flora nodded. “The agency I was working for closed down—that’s why I lost my job. I was actually the manager there for the past two years.”

“I know. I’ve done a little research. I also know you were good at your job in Dublin and managed to sell a lot of houses sold even during the recession.”

Flora nodded. “Yes. Not my fault the agency went belly up.”

“Possibly,” Chantal mumbled and went back to her notes. “Not much more here except I gather your French is up to scratch. But, as we say in France, *la vérité*—”

“*Est au fond de la marmite*,” Flora filled in without thinking.

Chantal nodded, looking satisfied. “Excellent. But speaking good French isn’t so important for your job. If you work here, you’ll be dealing with anglophones. My clientele is

mainly British, Irish and some Americans. A few Germans and Dutch people too, but Iris deals with them as she speaks fluent German.”

“If,” Flora muttered to herself.

“Just a few more questions,” Chantal snapped. “I run a very good agency with quick sales, and we get the asking price too, mostly. So I can’t hire anyone who sticks too closely to silly little moral principles.”

Flora stared at Chantal. “What moral principles?”

“Oh, nothing serious. Just, well, we don’t need to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth all the time, if you get my meaning.”

“Uh, yes.”

“So,” Chantal breezed on, “tell me...how would you go about showing a very small house?”

Flora thought for a moment. “For a start, I’d make sure the house had been cleared of clutter and recommend to the sellers they clean the house from top to bottom a week or so before the viewing. And also make sure the house smelled fresh and clean.”

Chantal nodded.

“And then,” Flora continued, feeling there was a lot more to the question, “while showing the house, I’d make sure the prospective buyers arrived one by one so the house wouldn’t be too crowded and look smaller than it is. And I’d make the buyers enter each room ahead of me, of course.”

Chantal nodded. “Of course. But if there was a minor problem with the house and you knew about it, would you mention it?”

“Such as?”

“Oh...” Chantal waved her hand in the air, “you know, like a little damp here and there or a tile or two missing from the roof. Tiny flaws, really.”

“Not small things like that. In any case, don’t most people have their houses surveyed before they buy?”

“Not around here. How about noisy neighbours?”

“No. That would be silly. We operated very much with the ‘buyers beware concept’ in our agency. You have to highlight the positive and try to hide minor flaws.”

“Quite right.” Chantal paused.

“So,” she continued, studying Flora while she spoke. “What about planning permission? I mean if the buyer should want to extend the house or add something and you needed permission to do so?”

“In Ireland, houses are often sold subject to planning.”

Chantal looked confused. “Subject to...?”

“It means the house wouldn’t be sold unless planning permission was granted,” Flora explained. “Or the buyer would pay a deposit and that would be paid back if the permission was rejected.”

Chantal gave a slight shiver of revulsion. “We wouldn’t do that here. The question I wanted you to answer was...if the buyer expressed a wish to extend or rebuild, what would you tell them?”

There was a long pause. This was a tricky question. Flora knew at once that her answer would decide whether or not she got the job. It would decide the rest of her life, as melodramatic as it seemed. She thought for a moment, weighing up the pros and cons. If she said she would always tell buyers the truth about a house that couldn’t be touched by builders if there was a problem, she would walk out of there dragging her suitcase back to the train station. Or be looking for a job as nanny or maid with a puny salary. But this was about telling lies to people who were buying a dream of living in the sun and who might get into big trouble with French planning laws and lose a lot of money. She pushed away the thought along with all her principles as she looked out at the sun-filled courtyard and the scent of roses filled the room.

“I’d tell them it would probably be allowed,” she said, willing Chantal to believe her.

Chantal nodded. “What they don’t know won’t hurt them. Until a lot later, of course. But that doesn’t happen very often.”

“How often?” Flora couldn’t help asking.

“Oh, now and then,” Chantal said airily. She closed her folder. “Très bien. We’ve covered just about everything. You can tell Iris you’ve got the job, and she’ll give you the contract and explain salary details and so on. I suggest you open an account with Société Générale. They have an office around the corner.” She rose and held out her hand. “Welcome to Agence du Soleil.”

Flora took her hand. “Oh, thank you so much,” she said and nearly burst into tears. The job was hers. She was now officially living in the south of France. Well, she would be as soon as she had somewhere to stay, but that was just a detail. How wonderful. How absolutely unbelievable.

“You can start in the morning. Just office work for now,” Chantal said.

“Of course,” Flora said and floated out of the office on a pink cloud of happiness.

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Flora had only fleetingly thought about finding somewhere to live. Getting the job being the biggest obstacle, the problem of her accommodation was something she thought she would tackle once the interview was over. Dazed and happy, she walked out of Chantal's office to reclaim her suitcase and drag it to the nearest hotel. Once there, she would look for rooms to rent in the local newspaper and, hopefully, find something suitable. But Daisy solved the problem instantly.

"So, I see you got the job," she said when Flora came out.

Flora gave a start. "How did you know?"

Daisy laughed. "From the grin on your face. You look as if you've just won the lotto. So you passed the test then?"

"I suppose so."

Daisy took off her earphones. "Congratulations. And welcome to Happy Valley." She turned to Iris. "Hey, Iris, she got it."

Iris didn't take her eyes off the screen. "Of course she did. Just like us, darling. We're all ready to sell our souls to the devil to live in paradise." She turned to look at Flora. "Where are you staying?"

"I don't know yet," Flora replied. "I thought I'd go to a hotel and then look in the newspaper to see if I can find something to rent. Or even a room in a flat or whatever."

"You can bunk up with me," Daisy said. "I rent a flat in an old house just off Port de la Salis. That's between Antibes and the Cap, further out. The rent's horrendous, so sharing the cost with someone would be a great help. I should really try to find something cheaper. But it's such a great place I can't bear to leave. You'll have your own bedroom and then there's mine, a bathroom, a tiny room the landlord calls a kitchen, a living room and balcony overlooking the bay. The rent would be six hundred a month. What do you say?"

Flora hesitated. "Six hundred a month for a room?"

Daisy shrugged. "Yeah, I know, but this is Antibes and it's a good area."

Flora looked at Iris. "But I don't know what my salary will be yet, so—"

"You can't afford it," Iris said. "Unless you don't want to buy clothes or food or have any fun."

"I'll have a look at it in any case," Flora said, the euphoria of being employed slowly fizzling out.

"That might not be very wise," Iris warned. "Even on a bad day, Daisy's place is fabulous."

"And on a good day?" Flora couldn't help asking.

“Then it’s heaven.”

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The late-Victorian villa stood, surrounded by modern monstrosities, like a tall lily in a field of weeds. After getting off the shuttle bus at the corner of the coast road and Avenue de la Mer, Flora quickly found the house and looked up at the white façade and the frieze with bunches of grapes and flowers around the top windows. It was one of the most beautiful houses she had ever seen. A small front garden with two palm trees and a bougainvillea spilling a riot of purple flowers over the wall led to wide steps up to a double door with stained-glass panels. All the windows had green louvred shutters that were closed against the evening sun. Could this be the right house? She consulted the piece of paper Daisy had given her and looked at the sign beside the gate that read *Villa Mon Rêve*: the house of my dreams. What an apt name. And the right house, she realised, as she saw a window fly open on the top floor and Daisy hanging out, waving.

“There you are! I thought you’d got lost,” Daisy shouted. “Come on up. I opened a bottle of wine and got a pizza.”

The entrance hall was blissfully cool after the heat and humidity outside. Flora rolled her suitcase behind her across the marble floor and started to lug it up the stairs. She stopped as she heard voices coming from the half-open door of the ground-floor apartment. A dark head appeared and a young man in jeans and a denim jacket looked her up and down.

Daisy smiled. “*Bonjour*,” she said.

He nodded. “*Bonjour*. Are you Daisy’s new flatmate?” he asked.

“I’m just going to look at the room for now. I’ll decide when I see it,” Flora said primly, finding herself slipping into French more easily than she had thought she could.

“I’m sure you’ll be seduced,” he replied with a wink.

“Do you live here?”

“No. I’m just visiting my grandparents. They own the building. I’m Bruno, by the way. And who are you?”

“Flora McKenna. From Dublin.”

He smiled. “Nice name. I like Dublin. I’ve been there a few times. Great city. The music, the beer the—how do you say—craque?”

Flora laughed. “Yes. That’s what we call it. You know Dublin well, I gather.”

“Slightly. I’m sure there’s more to it than what we tourists see.”

“That’s true.” Flora gripped the handle of her suitcase and started up the stairs again. “I’d better get up there.”

She could hear the door of the apartment on the top floor open and Daisy shouting something.

“What?” Flora shouted back. “I can’t hear you.”

Daisy clattered down the stairs. “I was just asking what was keeping you. But I see that Bruno’s greeting you in his usual polite way.”

Bruno smiled. “Hello, Daisy,” he said in English. “When are you going to learn French?”

“When are you going to learn manners?” Daisy retorted. “How about helping Flora with her suitcase? Can’t you see it’s very heavy?”

“But she looks so strong,” Bruno remarked. “I’m sure she can handle a little thing like a suitcase.”

“Yeah, right, you wimp,” Daisy muttered and grabbed the suitcase. “I suppose you’re not up for it anyway. Come on, Flora. Don’t just stand there looking at Bruno.”

“Maybe she has better taste than you,” Bruno suggested. He winked at Flora. “I like Irish girls. Especially blondes.”

Flora blushed. “You speak very good English,” was all she managed.

“It’s not as good as your French. How come you speak it so well?”

“I spent a few summers in Paris, minding kids. I speak kids’ French,” Flora added with a laugh. “I know all the bad words. You’d be surprised how foul-mouthed the children of the wealthy can be.”

Bruno laughed. “*Pas du tout*. Probably spoiled and never punished.”

“That’s for sure,” Flora agreed.

“Hey, are you two going to stand out there all night and talk?” Daisy complained. “Come, on, for Pete’s sake, Flora!”

Bruno sprang into action. “I’ll take your suitcase.” He grabbed it and sprinted up the stairs ahead of them and into the apartment, reappearing seconds later. “*Voilà*, your *valise* is in the spare room. I have to go or my *mamie* will be very angry. She’ll have dinner ready very soon.” He kissed his fingers at Flora. “*A bientôt, ma belle*. See you later, Daisy,” he added and bounded down the stairs.

“Now, that’s something I’ve never seen before,” Daisy remarked. “Bruno being *polite*.”

“You don’t seem to like him much.”

Daisy smirked. “Like him? Nah, I loathe him. He’s very good in bed, though. Hottest boyfriend I’ve ever had.”

Flora stared at Daisy. “He’s your boyfriend?”

Daisy closed the front door of the apartment. “Yes. Weird, but that’s Frenchmen for you. Love, hate, hot, cold, shouts and kisses. Very intense and dramatic. Tiring but never boring.”

“Really? I don’t know if I could cope with that.”

Daisy laughed. “Find yourself a Frenchman and find out. But, hey, come in and see the flat. Then tell me if you’d like to stay.”

Without moving from the hall, Flora glanced into the big living room at the end of which she could see spectacular views of the sapphire-blue sea of the bay and the mountains beyond through a large picture window. She looked back at Daisy and laughed. “You devil. You knew I wouldn’t be able to resist. Of course I’ll stay.”

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Much later, over pizza and wine on the terrace, Flora felt as if she had known Daisy for a long time and that the flat had been waiting for her all her life. She drained her glass and munched the last bit of crust of her pizza and sighed as she looked out over the bay in the gathering dusk. The lights around the shore were beginning to glow, and the bay was soon edged by pinpricks of lights, like a pearl necklace on the edge of a blue velvet dress. “What a wonderful view. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of it. I feel as if I was meant to be here, somehow.”

Daisy poured the last drops of wine into Flora’s glass. “I know. That’s how I felt when I came here. Of course, I could never afford to live here alone, so I have to share. But I’ve always been lucky with my roommates.”

“I’ll try to live up to that,” Flora promised. “I’m quite tidy. Not to the point of being perfect, but I try not to be too much of a slob. My room’s so pretty, I’d hate to spoil the look of it.”

“It was done by Bruno’s grandmother. She’s a painter and a textile designer. The curtains and bedspreads are her work. And the rugs.”

“I love the pastel colours. They really go with the sea and the views of the hills behind the house.”

“Very nice,” Daisy agreed. “But tell me about yourself, Flora. The story of your life and all that crap.”

“You first. I’m dying to know what brought you here.”

Daisy shrugged and ran her finger along the edge of her glass. “What brought me here? You want to know how a girl from Brooklyn ended up in a real estate agency in Antibes? What takes women anywhere? A man, of course. Not Bruno. I met him only six months ago. No, it was an American, a guy I met at a party in Manhattan. I’d just broken up with someone



and was kind of vulnerable, I guess. On the rebound, wanting to prove to myself I still had it, whatever 'it' is. I was in a dead-end job, working as personal assistant to a bitch in a corporate office. I was ripe for a life makeover, you might say. I'd just turned thirty, as well. You know, when you're beginning to realise you'll never reach that goal you set out for yourself when you leave college." Daisy shot a glance at Flora. "But maybe you're not there yet?"

"Of course I am," Flora replied. "I'm thirty-two and was unemployed until this morning. And relationships? Yeah, been there too. The great career and two point four children didn't materialise. And there was this man—" She stopped. "I don't want to go into it right now. But I know where you're coming from."

"I'm sure there are more women like us than we know." Daisy turned to look up at the stars that were beginning to glimmer in the dark sky. "It's out there, though, isn't it? Our destiny. That one thing we need to be complete. If only we could find it." She shook herself and looked back at Flora. "But to get back to moi..."

"Yes?" Flora leaned back in her chair and sipped her wine, waiting for Daisy's story. She was so pretty, with her light-blonde hair and sparkly blue eyes—so alluring and fun. She must have had an interesting past.

"You'll laugh when I tell you this," Daisy said. "But my hottest love affair was a virtual one."

Flora sat up. "What? On the Internet?"

Daisy nodded. "Yes. God, this sounds so pathetic. But like a lot of people, I found myself so alone in a big city. I worked hard all day and then didn't have the strength to go out to a club or pub to meet people. So I sat in bed, with my laptop and chatted on the Internet. Facebook, of course. I joined one of those groups. I think it was for fans of detective stories."

"Yes? Go on. You connected with a man who reads detective stories?"

Daisy sighed. "No. I wish. It was an author. He'd written this series of hard-boiled thrillers. God, what a jerk. Except I didn't realise it at the time. He was so sweet and kind of corny, you know? Posted a picture of Humphrey Bogart as his profile. So, then I kind of believed he really was some kind of reincarnation of Bogie and that I was chatting to *him*. And the chats got hotter and hotter. Sometimes, I felt as if we were dating and that we were actually having sex. He said such sweet things to me. Told me how much he wanted to meet me, how much he wanted to sleep with me. Only problem was, he lived in California."

"So you never met?"

“No. And we knew we never would. He said he thought we’d meet in another, spiritual life. That we were kindred spirits and that our relationship was meant to happen in another world.”

“Sounds kind of dreamy.”

Daisy sighed. “It was. In fact, I thought not meeting was a good thing. Fantasies are often better than reality. It lasted two years, believe it or not. I didn’t want it to end. We were getting to know each other in a way I’ve never known anyone before. Because we never met in real life, we dared to reveal the most intimate things about ourselves...” Her voice trailed away and her face, in the dim light of the full moon, was sad.

“But it ended?” Flora said, not wanting to intrude but still needing to know.

“Yes. We had an argument. I didn’t agree with his political views. And then I discovered he was both a homophobe and sexist. His attitude to women was appalling. I didn’t realise it at first, but then I noticed how he saw women as sexual objects. Old-fashioned, of course. But not surprising once I discovered he was a lot older than he first told me. I thought he was in his forties, but it turned out he was in his sixties.”

“Oh, wow. That must have been a bit of a shock.”

Daisy shrugged. “Yes, in a way. But I wouldn’t have minded had he told me in the first place. I’m not ageist. It was the fact that he lied to me that was the worst thing. Anyway, that made me realise online friendships aren’t a good idea. And that real life is so much better than sitting at home posting on Facebook. So, I started going out more. And then I was invited to a party in Manhattan.”

“And met a Frenchman?” Flora asked.

Daisy giggled. “No. He was Greek. Gorgeous hunk, you know, like one of those guys in a commercial for men’s cologne. Total cliché, really. But we had fun—nothing serious, actually. I was still sad and confused after my Internet experience, but Giorgos was just what the doctor ordered. He was in New York on vacation, and when it was time for him to leave, I decided to go with him. He was working in a Greek restaurant in Nice. So I came here and then, when that romance ended, decided to stay. I got a job with Chantal and the rest, as they say, is history.” Daisy stretched her arms over her head. “So here I am, living it up on the Riviera, working my butt off in a dead-end job that pays peanuts and in a relationship with a domineering bastard. Couldn’t be happier, really”

Flora couldn’t help laughing.

Daisy lowered her arms and peered at Flora in the dim light. “But, hey, what about you? What’s your story?”

“Me? Not much of a story.”

“Ah, come on, I can tell there’s some saucy stuff in your past. You have that naughty look.”

Flora laughed. “That’s what I was always told at school. Must be the gap between my front teeth. Makes me look cheeky.”

“It’s cute. But go on,” Daisy urged. “Spill.”

Flora hesitated. There was so much in her past she wanted to forget. So much she wished she hadn’t done.

“I never think before I leap,” she said. “I think with my heart, lead with my chin and never worry about the consequences. This has landed me in some very tricky situations and made me fall in love with a man who—” Flora stopped, unable to go on. They had only just met, and unlike Daisy, she couldn’t share details of her love life with a stranger. In any case, it was too soon and too painful to talk about. She stifled a yawn. “Can I tell you tomorrow? I’m exhausted, and I haven’t even unpacked my bag yet.”

Daisy sprang to her feet. “God, I’m so insensitive. Here you are, listening to the dumb story of my life after what must have been a very long day. Go and unpack and then have a bath. I’ll clean up here and get you some sheets and towels.”

Flora got up and took her plate and glass. “I’ll take this into the kitchen on my way.”

“Thanks, but don’t worry about the rest. I’ll just stick it all into the dishwasher.”

Flora put her plate on the kitchen counter and continued into her room, where her suitcase had been put on a bench by the window. She paused for a moment, looking at the moonlight pouring in through the window, illuminating the big bed, the white chest of drawers and the light-blue rug on the wooden floor. Then she switched on the light by the bed, and the room was at once bathed in a soft light. She went to the window and closed the shutters and then turned her attention to her suitcase. She would just fish out her toiletries and nightgown and unpack the rest in the morning. Looking forward to getting into the bed that Daisy had so kindly made with clean sheets, Flora zipped open the lid of the suitcase. She did a double take as she looked at the contents, just as Daisy bounced into the room with a pile of fluffy white towels in her arms.

“What’s the matter? Is something missing?”

Flora turned to look at Daisy. “I’ve no idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t my suitcase.”