

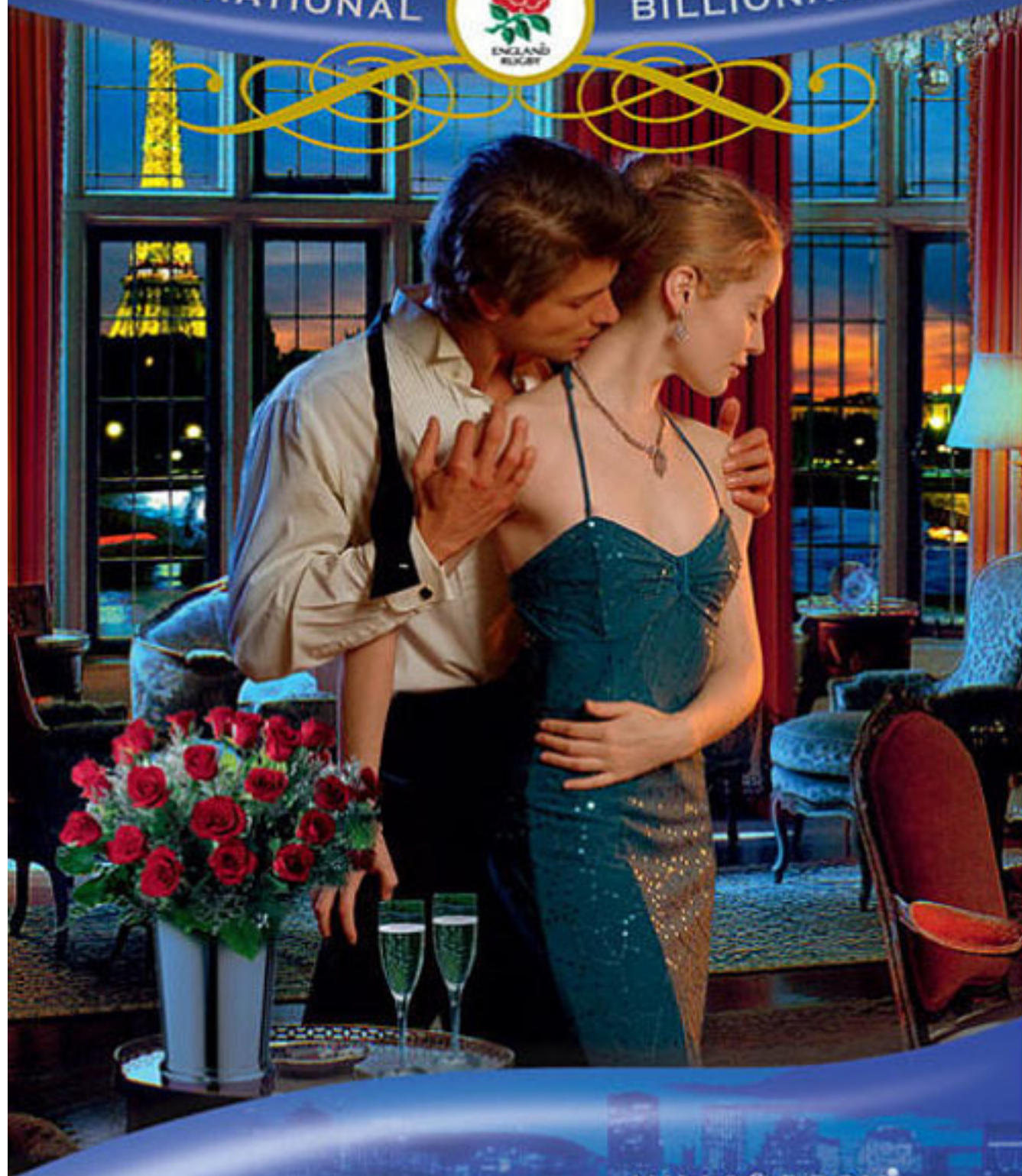
The French Tycoon's Pregnant Mistress

Abby Green

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**The French Tycoon's
Pregnant Mistress**

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The French Tycoon's Pregnant Mistress / A. GREEN —
«HarperCollins»,

In the tycoon's bed – and at his command! Frenchman Pascal Lévêque has his sights set on Alana Cusack, once one half of an infamous celebrity couple. Her seeming innocence intrigues him... Alana's marriage was a sham. It has left her feeling unattractive and unwanted in bed. Now the devastating tycoon has claimed her as his mistress, he'll teach the inexperienced Alana how much pleasure can be had in the bedroom. But when one night leads to a baby, Pascal vows he'll take Alana to Paris...and to the altar!

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Содержание

THE FRENCH TYCOON'S PREGNANT MISTRESS	6
CHAPTER ONE	7
CHAPTER TWO	18
CHAPTER THREE	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

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Abby Green got hooked on Mills & Boon romances while still in her teens, when she stumbled across one belonging to her grandmother, in the west of Ireland. After many years of reading them voraciously, she sat down one day and gave it a go herself. Happily, after a few failed attempts, her first manuscript was accepted. Abby works freelance in the Film and TV industry but thankfully the 4 a.m. starts and stresses of dealing with recalcitrant actors are becoming more and more infrequent, leaving more time to write! She loves to hear from readers and you can contact her through her website at www.abby-green.com. She lives and works in Dublin.

Dear Reader

I was thrilled to be asked to write one in a series of books centring around the exciting world of International Rugby. My home, Ireland, is bursting with Rugby pride and prowess. The backdrop of Six Nations fever certainly helped me to envisage the single-minded pursuit of an arrogant French hero intent on the seduction of my vulnerable, yet strong Irish heroine!

The game, to me, represents earthy competition and raw sport at its most base and primal level—heady stuff, and very evocative of passion and attraction.

Recently the matches have been played out in the impressive Dublin ground of Croke Park, and that's where I've set the opening of my story. As of 2010, though, the game will return to its home ground of Lansdowne Road, which is currently being refurbished to international standards.

When it came to research—well, let's just say that it was no hardship to sit and watch the Six Nations in preparation. I have to confess while watching France v Italy my focus on the rules of the game did wander a little from time to time.

I hope that you enjoy reading Alana and Pascal's story as much as I enjoyed the process of writing it...

Happy reading!

Abby

THE FRENCH TYCOON'S PREGNANT MISTRESS

BY
ABBY GREEN



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CHAPTER ONE

‘WITH a nail-biting finish like that, I think we can safely say that this tournament is wide-open and set to be one of the most exciting yet. This is Alana Cusack, reporting live from Croke Park. Back to you in the studio, Brian.’

Alana kept the smile pasted on her face until she could hear the chatter die away in her earpiece and then handed her microphone to her assistant, Aisling, with relief once she knew she was off air. She avoided looking to where she knew the man was still standing, his shoulder propped nonchalantly against the wall, hands in the pockets of his dark trousers, underneath a black overcoat with the collar turned up. He’d been talking to one of the French players, but now he was alone again.

He was watching her. And he’d been watching her all through the Six Nations match between Ireland and France. He’d unsettled her and he’d distracted her. And she didn’t know why.

That was a lie; she knew exactly why. He was dark and brooding, and so gorgeous that when she’d first locked eyes with him, quite by accident, it had felt as though someone had just punched her in the stomach. There had been an instant tug of recognition and something very alien and disconcerting. Certainly something that no other man had ever made her feel.

Not even her husband.

The tug had been so strong that she’d felt herself smiling and raising a quizzical brow, but then she’d seen an unmistakably mocking glint in his dark eyes. Of course, she didn’t know him; she’d never seen his long, hard-boned face before, had never seen that mouth, which even to look at from where she sat, had the most amazingly sensuous lips. Immediately she’d felt herself flushing with embarrassment at her reaction to him.

He had to be French, as he shared the quintessential good looks of so many of the crowd today, quite exotically different from the more pale-skinned home crowd of Irish supporters. And he’d been sitting in the seats reserved for VIP’s, situated just below the press area. He looked like a VIP. She’d only had to look once to know that he effortlessly stood out from the rest of the crowd. But her gaze had been inexorably drawn to him again and again, and to her utter ongoing mortification their eyes had met more than once. When he’d stood intermittently with the crowd during a try or a conversion, he’d stood taller and broader than any of the men around him—and in a crowd full of rugby supporters, that was something.

Yet was he waiting now because he thought that she’d been giving him some sort of come-on? Everything in Alana clammed up and rejected that thought. She would never be so blatant.

‘Do you need a lift, Alana?’ Aisling and the others had finished packing up, and Derek the cameraman was looking at her. Suddenly she felt very flustered. She didn’t *get* flustered. She was often teased for appearing cool, calm and collected at all times.

‘No,’ she answered quickly, aware that the stranger had moved out of her peripheral vision. A sense of panic threatened her—that he might be right behind her, waiting for her. ‘I have to go to a family dinner later, so I have my car here.’

‘So no glitzy after-party to see the French celebrating for you, then?’

She mock-grimaced, secretly relieved that she had an excuse. ‘I’ll only have time to stop in to show my face on my way, just to keep Rory happy.’

He shrugged and was about to walk away after Aisling and the other assistant, with their small amount of gear, when he stopped and turned again, distracting Alana.

‘Good reporting today, kid.’

Pleasure rushed through her. This was so important to her; Derek was practically a veteran of TV. She’d been slogging for a long time to get a modicum of respect. She smiled. ‘Thanks, Derek. I really appreciate that.’

He winked at her and turned to walk away again. With the fizz of pleasure staying in her chest, she checked around for anything left behind and made to follow the others, before stopping and cursing as she remembered that her laptop and notebook were back in the press seats.

Derek's words were forgotten when that prickling awareness came back. She turned around with her heart beating hard, fully expecting to see the man again. She had a curiously insincere feeling of relief when he wasn't there. He'd obviously gone, bored with waiting around. Taking the lift back up to the upper level, she told herself to stop being ridiculous, that she'd merely imagined that they'd had some kind of silent communication...

He thought he'd missed her when he'd gone to look at the pitch for a moment, and he didn't like the momentary sense of panic that thought had generated.

But she was still here.

Now Pascal Lévêque stood back with arms folded and surveyed the enticing sight in front of him. A very shapely bottom was raised in the air, encased in the tight confines of a pencil skirt. Its owner was currently bending over, hauling a bag out from under a seat. His eyes drifted down. Long, slim legs were momentarily bent and now straightened to their full length—which was *long*, all the way from slim, neat ankles right up to gently flaring hips which tapered into a neat waist. He wondered if she was wearing stockings, and that thought had a forceful effect on the blood in his veins.

He wondered, too, then, what it was about her that had kept him looking, that had kept him here, when he should have long gone. What was it that had kept drawing his eye back again and again, uncharacteristically taking his attention away from the riveting match?

Neat.

That was it. She was neat. Right from her starched, buttoned-up stripey shirt complete with tie, down to her sensible court-shoes and shiny, straight hair neatly tucked behind her ears, a side parting to the left. It was tied back in a small ponytail, but he could well imagine that if let loose, it would fall ever so neatly into a straight shoulder-length bob, framing her face. And since when had he been into *neat*? He was famously into seductive, sensual women, women who poured their beautiful, curvaceous bodies into clothes and dresses designed to fire the imagination and ignite the senses. Women who weren't afraid to entice and beguile, using all their powerful charms for his pleasure.

She was shrugging into a long, black overcoat now, hiding herself, and bizarrely, he felt all at once irritated, inflamed and perplexed. What the hell was he doing, practically slaving over some vacuous TV dolly bird? He knew that any second now she'd turn round, and he'd see that up close her face wasn't half as alluring as he'd imagined it to be from a distance: with a healthy glow, full, glossy lips and doe-shaped eyes under dark brows which contrasted with her strawberry-blonde hair.

No; she'd turn round and he'd see that she was caked in orange make-up. Her eyes would flare with recognition—hadn't she already recognised him earlier, and given him those enticingly shy looks? And then he'd be caught. He was already trying to think up something to excuse his very out-of-character behaviour when she did turn round. He opened his mouth and suddenly his mind went blank.

Alana had no warning for what or who faced her. That gorgeous, brooding stranger was right in front of her. Just feet away. Looking at her. They were standing alone in an eighty-thousand-seat stadium, but to Alana in that moment it shrank to the four square feet surrounding them. And it was then that she had to acknowledge that the prickling awareness she'd been dismissing had just exploded into full-on shock. The blood seemed to thicken in her veins; her heart pounded again in recognition of some base appreciation of his very masculinity.

He stood with his head tilted back, hands in the pockets of his trousers. His coat emphasised his broad shoulders, the olive tone of his skin. But it was his eyes that she couldn't take her own shocked gaze from. They were wide, dark, intelligent and full of something so hot and brazenly sensual that she felt breathless.

Her hands gripped her notebooks close to her chest, and she was absurdly relieved that she was wearing a long coat, feeling very strangely that this man could somehow see underneath, as if with just a look he could make her clothes melt away. She shook her head, unaware of what she was doing, and to her intense relief, she found her voice.

'Excuse me, can I help you? Are you looking for someone?' Since when had her voice taken on the huskily seductive tones of a jazz singer? Even though they were alone, Alana felt no sense of fear. Her sense of fear came from an entirely different direction.

'You were looking at me.'

Pascal winced inwardly at the accusing tone of his voice and the baldness of his statement, but he was still reeling from coming face to face with her. His recent assumption that she would prove to be entirely unalluring was blasted to smithereens. She was all at once pale and glowing. Dewy. Cheeks flushed red from the cold breeze...or something else? That thought had blood rushing southward with an unwelcome lack of control. Her eyes were a unique shade of light green. Her lips were full and soft, not covered in glossy gloop. He'd never seen anyone so naturally beguiling.

'Excuse me?' Alana welcomed the righteous indignation that flowed through her, and told herself it wasn't adrenaline. But since when had righteous indignation made her shake? She'd been right; he was obviously just a tourist looking for a little fun. He'd misconstrued her meaning when she'd smiled at him. Well, she wasn't on the market for that sort of thing.

'From what I recall you were doing a fair amount of looking yourself.' She hitched up her chin. 'I thought I recognised you, but I was wrong, so forgive me if I led you to believe that something more was on offer. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to get back to.'

The man smiled, revealing gleaming, strong white teeth, and Alana felt momentarily dizzy. 'I am well aware that you are working, after all, didn't I just see you interviewing Ireland's manager? I was making an observation, that's all. And you were looking at me.'

'No more than you were looking at me.' She desperately tried to claw back some semblance of control.

He rocked back on his heels and a different light came into his eyes. An altogether more dangerous light. And Alana could see that she was effectively trapped. The space between the seats was far too narrow for her to even attempt to push past him, and the only alternative would be to jump into the next aisle—far too unladylike and desperate. And, in the skirt she was wearing, impossible.

Alana felt unbelievably threatened. She called up her best brisk manner and hitched her laptop-bag strap higher on her shoulder, hoping he'd take the hint. 'This conversation is getting us nowhere. Now, really, I have to get back to my office, and I'm sure you have somewhere far more exciting to be.'

After a long, intense moment, to her utter relief, he stepped back and indicated with his arm that she should precede him out of the row of seats that led into the press area. Alana gritted her teeth and walked past, but, even though she tried to arch her whole body away as she moved past him, she was aware of his height which had to be at least six foot four, the sheer breadth of him and an enticingly musky smell.

The smell of *sex*.

Oh God, what was wrong with her? Since when had she ever thought she could smell sex? And since when had she even been aware of what it smelt like? She felt weak in the pit of her stomach, but thankfully she was now past him and hurrying back up the main steps to the lift, which would bring her down to ground level and back to reality.

Her silent prayers weren't answered when she felt his presence beside her, yet he said nothing as the lift doors opened. When he stepped in with her, Alana punched the button, silently pleading for the journey down to be quick. It was excruciatingly intense, sharing the small confined space, and she practically bolted as soon as the lift juddered to a halt and the doors opened. As she walked towards the main gates at the back of the stand, Alana could see her car parked on the road outside. And then she heard his steps stop behind her.

Of course, he'd kept up with her effortlessly; she had the unsettling feeling that she was on a tight leash. He was like a predator indulging his prey, not moving in for the kill just yet. And knowing that, against all rational thought in her head, Alana stopped, too, and turned round. Her heart was still pounding from the close proximity in the lift, and she just realised then that she must have held her breath the whole way down.

He was looking at her with those intense eyes. And then he said, 'Actually, I do have somewhere more exciting to be. Maybe you'd care to join me?'

The full effect of his accent washed through her now; it was as if she'd blocked it out when she'd first heard him speak, having been too much to cope with along with everything else. He was absolutely devastating, and he *was* coming on to her. Alana couldn't believe it. She knew perfectly well she was nothing special; she looked like a million other girls. What on earth could this man want with her? Anyone could see he was in another league. Alarm bells rang, loud and insistently.

She shook her head and started backing away towards the gate and her car, but the physical pull to stay in this man's orbit was something she had to actively fight against. Simultaneously a sleek, dark Lexus pulled up beside them. Clearly his car—his chauffeur-driven car—which had of course been parked here in the VIP parking area.

She was shaking her head. 'I'm sorry, Mr...?'

'Lévêque.'

'Mr Lévêque.' Even his name sounded sexy—purposeful. Important. 'I have to get back to work.' She repeated it then, as if to drive a point home. 'This is work for me. Enjoy your weekend in Dublin. There are plenty of other women out there.' *Who won't be stupid enough to walk away*, the voice mocked her. But as she finally turned and walked towards her car she told herself she was glad. He hadn't looked put out; he hadn't even tried to get her to change her mind. He was just a rich tourist over for the match. And she knew all about sports supporters. She used to be part of that crowd, used to *be* a professional supporter. Not any more.

Pascal refused to give in to the desire to look to where she was getting into her car as his own swept past and away from the stadium. He couldn't really believe that she'd refused him. A woman hadn't walked away from him since...he couldn't remember when. His mouth thinned. She was right: there were plenty of other women out there. She really wasn't anything special.

So why was it that all he could see were those invitingly soft lips? And those huge, green eyes, full of changing depths? And that alluring body in its veritable uniform that made his hands itch to rip it off and see what it hid?

He was bored. That was it. And he'd been without a lover for some weeks. He was going to a party tonight. If all he was looking for was a quick lay, then he'd get it in spades.

Feeling his equilibrium start to settle again was a welcome relief, because it hadn't been normal since he'd laid eyes on her. He settled back and relaxed. And then promptly tensed again, all recent justifications out the window. He hadn't got her name. And he didn't even know if she was married. He couldn't remember seeing a ring, but now it glared at him. That *had* to be it. Equanimity rushed through him again. This time he firmly cast her out of his head as a weird, momentary diversion and looked forward to the fast-approaching evening and the promise of fulfilment that was now a dull, throbbing ache in his body.

'Alana, you can't leave yet.'

'But, Rory, I've got to get home, it's my brother's fortieth.'

Her boss ignored her and pulled her firmly by the hand, back into the throng of people she'd just battled her way through to get out. She rolled her eyes in exasperation.

'Alana, you have to meet him, you're interviewing him tomorrow. He rang in person after the match, specifically asking for you—must have seen you reporting or something, but who cares? Do you have any idea what a coup this is? He's an important sponsor of the Six Nations...famously reclusive... billionaire.'

Alana was getting bumped and bashed by people along the way as she struggled to keep up with her hyper TV-boss. She couldn't hear half of what he was saying. Something about an interview? That was nothing unusual; she did interviews most days. Why was he making such a big deal about this one? She cast a quick, worried look at her watch on the wrist not held captive by Rory. The surprise party would be starting in half an hour, and it would take her that to get out to her parents' house in Foxrock. If she missed the start of it, her life wouldn't be worth living.

Then Rory stopped abruptly and she careened into him. He turned and gave her a worried once-over. 'You'll do; it's a pity you're not more dressed up, you know, Alana, you could have made more of an effort. Really.' His mouth pursed in disapproval.

Irritation rankled; all too frequently people seemed to expect her to be what she had been—before. 'Rory, I'm dressed for a family party, remember? Not the French team's celebrations.'

Which she had to privately admit now were something else. Clearly someone had a lot of money to spend. They were taking place in the lavish ballroom of the Four Seasons hotel just on the outskirts of Dublin city-centre. She wasn't dressed in the glittering half-sheath dresses that most of the women seemed to be sporting, but she was perfectly respectable. And she preferred it that way. She had too many uncomfortable memories of being paraded in fashions that had been too tight, too small, too *everything*. And not her. She knew she went out of her way in situations like this to draw the line between the woman she had been and the woman she was now.

Rory looked over her head, tensed visibly and then looked back, taking her shoulders as if she were a child. 'He's just arrived. Now, I can't impress upon you how important this man is. Apart from his role in the Six Nations, he's the CEO of one of the biggest banks in the world. I'll introduce you and then you can go, OK? No doubt he's got bigger fish to fry tonight than meeting you, anyway.'

Rory grabbed her hand again, and before Alana could say anything, he was leading her over to where a man stood with his black-suited back to them, surrounded by obviously fawning people and a couple of scantily dressed women. And suddenly Alana's legs turned to jelly. Even before they reached him she felt her heart start to pound in recognition. It got about a million times worse when Rory hissed in her ear, 'His name is Lévêque. Pascal Lévêque.'

'I believe I saw you covering the match earlier, no?' He said this innocently with that deeply sexy voice, as if they'd never met.

For the second time that day Alana looked up into those eyes. Those eyes that she hadn't been able to get out of her head. Her mouth turned dry, her hands clammy. Her reaction was alarming; she'd sworn off all men, and had no time for frivolous flirtations, and she couldn't understand why this man was having such an extreme effect on her. Other men flirted with her and asked her out, and she dismissed them with barely a ripple of acknowledgement or reaction. But this was different. And she'd known it from the moment she had met him, which was why she'd all but run.

Silence lengthened, and Rory nudged her discreetly but painfully. Automatically Alana held out a hand. She spoke on autopilot. 'Yes. Yes, you did.'

Pascal Lévêque then took her hand in his much larger one, but instead of shaking it he bent his head, his eyes never leaving hers. Alana saw what he was going to do as if in slow motion, but still the feel of his mouth on the back of her cool hand sent shockwaves through her entire body. Immediately she tried to pull her hand away, but he wouldn't let her go. He straightened slowly. She felt his index finger uncurl to caress the point under the wrist where her pulse beat fast, and then he let her hand go. The gesture was fleeting but utterly earth-shattering.

He broke their eye contact, leaving Alana feeling curiously deflated, and with a brief, succinct question Rory left, muttering something about getting drinks. The rest of the crowd the man had been talking to melted away too. He turned back, fixing on her with that intense gaze again.

'You've had time to change, I see. Tell me, is this still classed as work?'

Alana bristled. Hot, burning irritation was rising. 'Of course I changed—it's a party. And, yes, this is still work.'

His eyes swept down, taking in what she knew to be a perfectly suitable albeit very unexciting dress. It was a black shift, high-necked and under a matching jacket. Unrevealing.

'You've changed, too,' she pointed out, feeling ridiculously self-conscious. But, whereas she felt sure she merged into the background, he was managing to stand out in a crowd of identically dressed men in a traditional black tuxedo, white shirt and black bow tie.

His eyes met hers again. 'Don't you want to take off your coat? It's warm in here.'

Warm!

She could feel a trickle of sweat roll down between her breasts as if his words had just turned the room into a sauna. 'No, I'm fine.' But all at once the jacket which had felt positively lightweight now felt like a bear skin. To be confronted with him up close and personal was overwhelming. Her eyes wanted to look their fill of his broad, lean body, wanted to rest and dwell and see if he filled out his suit as well as she suspected he did. Who was she kidding? As well as she *knew* he did. She didn't have to look to feel the latent power of his taut body envelop her in waves.

Before she knew what she was doing, she felt her hand come up in a telling gesture to smooth her hair behind her ear. It was a nervous habit. His eyes narrowed and followed her movement, and Alana flushed. Damn. She did not want to look like she was in any way aware of him.

A smile quirked his mouth. 'Your hair is perfectly...tidy.'

Was he laughing at her? And then she remembered what Rory had said. She glared up at him. Her hand dropped. 'Is it true that you requested me for this interview?'

He shrugged nonchalantly. 'It's tiresome, but every now and then I have to give in to press demands. So, yes, I requested you...in the hope that, perhaps with you asking the questions, it would prove a more diverting experience than I'm used to.'

His eyes were hot and sensual. Everything professional in her reacted to his dismissive and high-handed manner. She smiled sweetly, and something treacherous ignited in her belly when she saw a flare of something in his eyes. She ignored her body's response. 'Mr Lévêque. If you think that just because I'm a woman I'm going to confine my questions to what your favourite colour might be, then you're sadly mistaken.' At that moment she made a mental note to stay up all night if she had to, to research this man.

His eyes narrowed and cooled, and she shivered slightly.

'And if you think that because you're a woman I would dismiss your ability on that basis alone, then you are much mistaken. Any interest I have in you as far as the interview goes *is* purely professional. I've had your work investigated, and you impressed me.'

Alana was completely taken aback, and immediately felt like apologising. But, looking up at him now, she felt that cool wind still washing over her. She could almost believe that she had imagined his hot look of just moments ago. That she had imagined everything leading up to this point. She had an uncanny prescience of what it would be like to be this man's enemy.

'Well, I'm... That is, I hadn't thought that—'

He cut off her inarticulate attempt to apologise. 'Like I said, my interest in you is purely professional...as far as the interview goes. However...' He stopped and moved closer. The air around them changed in a heartbeat. Became charged.

Alana sucked in a breath. His eyes were hot again, making her feel very disorientated.

'I can't promise that my interest doesn't extend beyond the professional.'

As with earlier in the stadium, Alana felt as though the huge, packed ballroom had just shrunk around them. Adrenaline pumped through her along with the desire to flee.

'Mr Lévêque. I'm very sorry, but you see—'

'Are you married?' he asked so quickly and abruptly that Alana was stunned.

'Yes,' she answered automatically, and saw something dark flash across his face. And then she stepped back and shook her head. What was this man doing to her brain? 'No. I mean I am, I *was*, married.' She bit her lip and looked out to the room briefly, desperately willing Rory to come back

and interrupt them. She looked back up at Pascal with the utmost reluctance. His eyes glittered, and a muscle twitched in his jaw. She wondered how they'd got onto such personal territory so quickly, and then his words came back: *I can't promise that my interest doesn't extend beyond the professional.*

A whole host of emotions and memories was threatening to consume her. And the fact that she was here, in an environment so evocative of her past, was quickly becoming claustrophobic. She took a breath, deeply resenting that he was making her talk about this. 'I *was* married. My husband died eighteen months ago.'

Pascal opened his mouth as if to say something, and Alana was already tensing in anticipation. But her prayers had been heard, and Rory bounded up at that moment with drinks. He thrust a glass of champagne at Alana before handing what looked like a whiskey to Pascal. And then panic struck. She put the glass on a nearby table, some of the champagne sloshing out over the rim.

She opened her bag to pull her phone out. Ten missed calls. She groaned, 'I am in *so* much trouble.'

She turned to Rory. 'I have to go.' She looked at Pascal briefly, welcoming the feeling of panic which was distracting her from his overpowering presence.

'I'm sorry, but I'm already late for another engagement.'

She started backing away, valiantly ignoring Rory's none-too-subtle facial expressions. She bumped into someone and apologised. She felt her hair come loose from its sleek chignon and pushed it behind her ear. She was literally coming apart.

'It was nice to...meet you, Mr Lévêque. I look forward to the interview.' *Liar.* He just watched her, a small, enigmatic smile playing around that hard mouth, and stuck one hand deep into a pocket. Alana could already see women hovering, ready to move back in again, and something curdled in her stomach.

'Me, too,' he said softly, and lifted his glass like a salute—or a threat. '*Á demain, Alana.*' *Till tomorrow.*

It was disconcerting to say the least to try and conduct a coherent conversation while the remnants of the hottest lust he'd ever experienced still washed through his body in waves. Even the welcome knowledge that she wasn't married failed now to impinge on his racing mind. He was still trying to clamp down the intensely urgent desire to know exactly whom she had gone to meet and where. Was it a date?

'So, what made you decide to ask for Alana Cusack to interview you?' Her boss, Rory Hogan, the head of the sports division of the national TV channel, laughed nervously. He was beginning to intensely irritate Pascal with his obsequious behaviour—and also by drawing his attention to the uncomfortable fact that, in the space of the short car journey earlier, Pascal had gone from dismissing Alana Cusack from his head to making a series of calls to find out exactly who she was, and then requesting her for his interview the next day.

Following an instinct, he decided not to dismiss this man straight away. 'I decided to use her because she's the best reporter you've got, of course.'

Rory's flushed face got even more flushed. 'Well, thank you. Yes, she is good. In fact, she's rather surprised us all.' The other man looked round for a second and then moved closer. Pascal fought against taking a step back; Rory was becoming progressively more drunk.

'The thing is, you see, she was only given a chance because of who she is.'

Pascal's interest sharpened. He injected a tone of bored uninterest into his voice. 'What do you mean?'

Rory laughed and waved an arm around. 'See all these women hanging on?'

Pascal didn't have to look; they were practically nipping at his heels. His lip curled with distaste. Situations like this always attracted a certain kind of woman—eager for marriage to a millionaire sportsman, and the platinum-credit-card lifestyle his wages could afford. The women who had achieved that status lorded it over the ones who hadn't, but it didn't make them any less predatory.

‘Well, she was one of them. The queen of them, in fact. Y’see, she was married to Ryan O’Connor.’

Pascal sucked in a breath, shocked despite himself. Even he had heard of the legendary Irish soccer-player. That knowledge fought with the mental image of Alana in front of him just now, in that unrevealing black dress that had covered her from neck to knee, her hair as tidy and smooth as it had been earlier.

Rory was on a roll now. ‘When they got married, it was the biggest wedding in Ireland for years. The first big celebrity -wedding. The Irish football team were having back-to-back wins. Alana was seen as their lucky mascot; she went to all the matches. It was an idyllic marriage, a great time...and then she wrecked it all.’ Rory flushed. ‘Well, I mean, I know she’s not personally responsible, but—’

‘What do you mean?’ Pascal was rapidly trying to remember what he knew about Ryan O’Connor, still slightly stunned at what Alana’s boss was revealing.

‘Well, she threw him out, didn’t she? For no good reason. And Ryan went off the rails. Ireland’s luck ran out, and then he died in that helicopter crash just days before the divorce was through. We ended up giving her a job because she was unbelievably persistent, and she knows sports inside out. It’s in her blood; her father played rugby for Ireland.’

Pascal was still trying to reconcile the image he had of Alana with the women around him in their tiny dresses that left little to the imagination. And yet, he could see her now as she’d been backing away just moments ago; she’d been flushed in the face, and a lock of hair had been coming loose. It had been that which had sent his lust levels off the scale. He’d had a tantalising glimpse of her coming undone, of something *hot* beneath that über-cool surface.

But the thought that she had been one of those women made everything in him contract with disgust. Yet she certainly hadn’t been flirting with him, despite knowing who he was. Unless it was just a tactic. In which case, he vowed to himself now, he’d play with her to see how far she was willing to go and walk away when he’d had enough. One thing was for certain—he wanted to seduce her with an urgency that was fast precluding anything else.

The next day Alana looked at herself in the mirror of the ladies toilet at work. Nervously, and hating herself for feeling nervous, she smoothed her already smooth hair. She’d tied it back in its usual style for work, and now tucked it firmly behind her ears. She leant close to check her make-up. She’d had to put slightly more on than usual today to cover the circles under her eyes. She’d arrived home late last night, and had then stayed up researching as much information about Pascal Lévêque as she could.

The fact that she hadn’t had to stay up long said it all. He rarely gave interviews; the last one had been at least two years previously. He was the CEO of Banque Lévêque, and had reached that exalted position at a ridiculously young age. Now in his mid-to-late thirties, he had brought a conglomerate of smaller archaic banks kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century, turning them into Banque Lévêque and making it one of the most influential financial institutions in the world.

Alana saw the flush on her cheeks and scrambled for some powder to try and disguise it. There had been little on his childhood or family, just one line to say that he’d been born in the suburbs of Paris to an unwed mother. Nothing about his father.

Her mouth twisted cynically. She wouldn’t have been surprised in the slightest to learn that he was married. From her experience, the holy sanctity of marriage was a positive incitement for men to play away. She stopped trying to calm her hectic colour down; it was useless, and if she put any more make-up on, she’d look like a clown. She met her own eyes and didn’t like the glitter she saw.

The wealth of information she’d found on his personal life—quite at odds with the paucity of information on his family or professional life—had put paid to the suspicion that he could be married. Picture after picture of stunning beauties on his arm abounded on the Internet. It would appear that he’d courted and fêted an indecent amount of the world’s most renowned actresses, models and it-girls. However, no woman ever seemed to appear more than twice.

The man was obviously a serial seducer, a connoisseur of women. A playboy with a capital P. And Alana Cusack, from a nice, comfortable, unremarkable middle-class background, with a relatively attractive face and body, was not in his league. Not even close.

He was rich. He was powerful. He was successful. He played to win. He was the very epitome of everything she'd vowed never to let into her life again. She packed up her make-up things and gave herself a quick once-over. Her dark- navy trouser suit, and cream silk-shirt buttoned up as high as it would go, screamed *professional*. She adjusted the string of *faux* pearls around her neck. With any luck he'd have met and seduced one of the many women at the party last night, and not even remember the fact that he'd shown any interest in her.

'Let's get started, shall we?'

Alana spoke briskly, and barely glanced up from her notes when Pascal was shown into the studio. But she felt the air contract, the energy shift. The excitement was tangible. She hadn't even experienced this level of palpable charisma from some of the world's most famous sportsmen. She'd been given a thorough briefing from an attendant PR-person not to stray into personal territory, and above all, not to ask him about relationships with women. As if she even wanted to go there.

She felt rather than saw him sit down opposite her. She could hear the clatter of people getting ready around them with lights and the camera. Derek was with her again today, and he said now, 'Just a couple of minutes; I need to check the lights again.' Alana muttered something, feeling absurdly irritated. She just wanted to get this over with.

'Late night last night?'

She looked up quickly and glanced round to see if anyone had heard. No one appeared to have. She hated the intimate tone he'd used, as if drawing her into some kind of dialogue that existed just between them. It was less than twenty-four hours since she'd met him in the first place. She *had* to nip this in the bud. She looked at him steadily, ignoring the shockwaves running through her body at seeing him again.

'No.' She was frosty. 'Not particularly. You?' Why had she asked him that? She could have kicked herself.

He smiled a slow, languorous smile that did all sorts of things to her insides. She gritted her teeth. He was immaculate again today in a dark suit and pale shirt, a silk tie making him look every inch the stupendously successful financier that he was. 'I went to bed early with a cup of hot cocoa and dreamt of you in your buttoned-up suit.'

Before she could react to his comment, his eyes flicked over her in a brazen appraisal. 'A variation on a theme today, I see. Do you have a different suit for every day of the week?'

A molten, heated flush was spreading through Alana like quickfire. She was so incensed that he was already toying with her that she couldn't get words out. They were stuck in her throat.

'OK, Alana, we're ready to go here.'

Derek's voice cut through the fire in her blood. She glared at Pascal for a long moment and struggled to control herself. He hadn't taken his eyes off hers, and now he smiled easily, innocently. With a monumental effort, Alana found her cool poise. And after the first few questions had been asked, and Pascal had answered with easy, incisive intelligence, Alana began to relax. She'd found a system that was working. She just avoided looking at him if at all possible.

And that was working a treat until he said, 'I don't feel like you're really connecting with me.'

She had to look at him then. 'Excuse me?'

His eyes bored into hers, an edge of humour playing around his lips that only she could see. 'I don't feel the connection.'

Alana was very aware of everyone standing around them and looking on with interest. She wanted to get up and walk out, or hit him to get that smug look off his face. 'I'm sorry. How can I help you feel more...connected?'

He gave her an explicit look that spoke volumes, but said innocuously, 'Eye contact would be a help.'

She heard a snigger from one of the crew in the room. A familiar pain lanced her. There was always the reminder that people wanted to see her fail. She smiled benignly. 'Of course.'

Then the interview took on a whole new energy because, now that he was demanding that she make eye contact with him, she couldn't remain immune to the effect he had on her. And he knew it. She struggled through a few more questions, but with each one it felt as though he was sucking her into some kind of vortex. The sensation of an intimate web enmeshing them was becoming too much.

In a desperate bid to drive him back somehow, she deviated from her script, and could sense Rory's tension spike from across the room as she asked the question. 'How did a boy from the suburbs in Paris develop an interest in rugby? Isn't it considered a relatively middle-class game?'

Now she could sense the PR-person tense, but they didn't intervene. Clearly Pascal Lévêque was not someone to be *minded*, unlike other celebrities. He would stay in absolute control of any situation. For the first time, he didn't answer straight away. He just looked at her, and she felt a quiver of fear. He smiled tightly, but it didn't reach his eyes. 'You've done your research.'

Alana just nodded faintly, sorry she'd brought it up now.

But then he answered, 'It was my grandfather.'

'Your grandfather?' She avoided looking down at her notes, but she knew there had been no mention of a grandfather.

He nodded. 'I was sent to the south of France to live with him when I was in my teens.' He shrugged minutely, his eyes still unreadable. 'A teenage boy and the suburbs of Paris isn't a good mix.'

Something in his eyes, his face, made her want to say, 'it's OK; you don't have to answer', and that shocked her, as she never normally shied away from asking tough questions. And she didn't know why this question was generating so many undercurrents. But he continued talking as if the tension between them didn't exist.

'He was hugely involved in league rugby, which is a more parochial version of the game. Very linked to history in France. He instilled in me a love for the game and all its variations.'

Alana had no doubt that she'd touched on something very personal there, and the look in his eyes told her she'd be playing with fire if she continued. All of a sudden, she wanted to play with fire.

'You never considered playing yourself?'

His eyes were positively coal-black and flinty now. He shook his head slightly. 'I discovered that I had a knack for using my head and making money. I prefer to leave rolling around in the dirt to the professionals.'

Alana coloured. Was he making some reference to the fact that *she* was playing dirty, straying into the no-go area of questions into his past? She looked down for a moment to gather herself, and realised that she'd asked all the scripted questions. And then some. She opened her mouth to start thanking him and signing off, when he surprised her by leaning forward.

'Now I have a question for you.'

'You do?' she squeaked. His eyes had changed from black and flinty to brown and...decidedly unflinty.

'Will you have dinner with me tonight?'

Shock and cold, clammy fear slammed into Alana. And then anger that he was asking her in front of an entire crew. The camera was still rolling. She could feel tension snake through the small studio. She tried to laugh it off, but knew she sounded constricted. 'I'm afraid, Mr Lévêque, that my boss doesn't approve of us mixing business with pleasure.'

Rory darted forward, while motioning for the crew to start wrapping up. 'Don't be silly, Alana, this is an entirely unique situation, and I'm sure you'd be only too delighted to show Mr Lévêque gratitude for taking time out of his busy schedule to do this interview.'

Pascal sat back, fully at ease. 'This is my last evening in Dublin. I thought it would be nice to see something of the city. I'd like your company, Alana, but if you insist on saying no, then of course I will understand.'

He stood up and looked down at Rory, straightening his cuffs. 'Can you have the tape of the interview sent over to my hotel? I'm sure it's fine, but I might take the opportunity to approve it fully if I've got some time on my hands.'

In other words, surmised Alana from the tortured look on Rory's pale face at the possibility of losing their biggest scoop to date, Pascal could turn right round and deny them the right to broadcast it. She stood up then, too, and spoke quickly before she could change her mind.

'That won't be necessary, Mr Lévêque. I'd love to have dinner with you. It would be a pleasure.'

CHAPTER TWO

‘I DON’T appreciate being manipulated into situations, Mr Lévêque.’

Pascal looked at Alana’s tight-lipped profile from across the other side of the car, and had to subdue the urge to show her exactly how much she might appreciate being manipulated. He knew she felt the simmering tension between them too. At one point during the interview earlier, when she’d had the temerity to dig so deep—too deep—their eyes had stayed locked together for long seconds and he’d read the latent desire in those green depths even if she tried to deny it.

‘I prefer to think of it as a gentle nudging.’

She cast a quick look at him and made some kind of inarticulate sound. ‘There was nothing gentle about it. Your unspoken threat was very clear, Mr Lévêque—the possibility that you could deny us the right to the interview.’

‘Which is something I could still very well do,’ he pointed out. As if on cue, Alana turned more fully in her seat. Her eyes spat sparks at him, and he felt a rush of adrenaline through his system. He was so tired of everyone kowtowing to him. But not so this green-eyed witch.

‘Is this how you normally conduct your business?’ she hissed, mindful of the driver in the front.

He moved closer in an instant, and Alana backed away with a jerk. She could smell his unique scent; already it was becoming familiar to her. One arm ran along the back of the seat, his hand resting far too close to her head, his whole body angled towards her, blocking out any sense of light or the dusky sky outside, creating an intimate cocoon.

‘There’s nothing businesslike about how you make me feel. And let’s just say that I don’t normally have to use threats to get a woman to come for dinner with me.’

Alana was reacting to a million things at once, not least of which was her own sense of fatal inevitability. ‘No, I saw your track record; it doesn’t appear as if you do.’

‘Tell me, Alana, why are you so reluctant to go out with me?’

And why are you so determined? she wanted to shout. Her hands twisted in her lap, and Pascal caught the movement. Before she could stop him, he had reached down and taken her hands in his, uncurling them, lacing his fingers through with hers. Alana could feel a bizarre mix of soporific delight and a zing of desire so strong that she shook.

‘I...don’t even like you.’

‘You don’t know me enough to know if you like me or not. And what’s flowing between us right now is nothing to do with *like*.’

It’s lust. He didn’t have to say it.

‘I...’

His hands tightened. She could feel his fingers, long and capable, strong, wrapped around hers. She looked down, feeling dazed. She could see her own much paler, smaller hands in a tangle of dark bronze. The image made her think of other parts of her body—limbs enmeshed with his in a tangle of bedlinen. With super-human effort, she pulled her hands free and tucked them well out of his way. She looked at him, and she knew she must look haunted. She felt hunted. Ryan had never reduced her to this carnal level of feeling, and the wound he’d left in her life was still raw. Too raw.

Pascal was close, still crowding her, his eyes roving over her face, but something had changed in the air. He wasn’t as intense. He reached out a hand and tucked some hair behind her ear.

‘I like your hair down.’

‘Look, Pascal...’

He felt something exultant move through him at her unconscious use of his name, and not the awful, prim ‘Mr Lévêque’. He dropped his hand. ‘Alana, it’s just dinner. We’ll eat, talk and I’ll drop you home.’

At that moment she could feel the car slowing down. They were pulling up outside a world-class restaurant on St Stephen's Green. She seized on his words, his placating tone. She told herself she'd get a taxi home, and then she'd never have to see him again.

She looked at him and nodded jerkily. 'OK.'

Alana was burningly aware of the interest she and Pascal had generated as they followed the maître d' to the table. While the establishment was much too exclusive for the clientele to seriously rubberneck, nevertheless their interest was undeniably piqued.

It was another strike against the man who sat opposite her now, broad and so handsome, that despite her antipathy she couldn't help that hot flutter of response.

He sat back in his chair. Alana could feel the whisper of his long legs stretching out under the table, and she tucked hers so tightly under her chair that it was uncomfortable.

'You don't have to worry, Alana, I'm under no illusions; you're compartmentalising this very much in the "work" box.'

She just looked at him, and he quirked a brow at her.

'The fact that you insisted on meeting me at my hotel rather than let me pick you up from your home, the fact that you haven't changed out of your work clothes.'

Alana felt stiff and unbelievably vulnerable at the way he was so incisively summing her up. 'I didn't have time to change. And, yes, for me this is work.' She leaned forward slightly then. His perceptiveness made her feel cornered. 'I've had the experience of living with a level of public interest that I never want to invite into my life again. Being here with you, being seen with you, could put me in an awkward position. I don't want people to think we're here on some sort of date.' She sat back with her heart thumping at the way his face had darkened ominously.

'So who do you date, then, Alana?'

'I don't.'

'But you *were* married to Ryan O'Connor.'

The fact that he'd already found that out made her feel inordinately exposed. Her mouth twisted cynically. 'No doubt you didn't have to dig too deep to find that out.'

'No deeper than you dug to find out about my life.'

'That was for a professional interview.'

'Do I need to remind you that your questions didn't exactly follow the script?'

She flushed hotly. His eyes flashed with that same icy fire she'd witnessed earlier. She said defensively, 'You must know that if you open yourself up to any kind of press attention, then there's a risk that you'll be asked about things that are off-limits.'

He inclined his head, the ice still in his eyes. 'Of course; I'm not so naïve. But somehow I hadn't expected that of you.'

Ridiculously, Alana felt hurt and guilty. He was right; with another person who wasn't pushing her buttons so much, she would never have taken the initiative to ask unscripted questions. It had been her reaction to him that had prompted her to try and provoke a response that would take his intense interest off her, that playful teasing he'd seemed set to disarm her with. Again she wondered what she'd scratched the surface of earlier.

She opened her mouth, but at that moment a waitress arrived and distracted them by taking their orders. Conversation didn't resume until she had returned with a bottle of white wine. They'd both ordered fish. Once they were alone again, Pascal sat up straight. 'You can tell yourself that you're here for work, Alana, but I did not ask you here to talk about work. It's a subject I have to admit I find intensely boring when we could be discussing much more interesting things....'

'Such as?' she asked faintly, mesmerised by the way his eyes had changed again into warm pools of dark promise.

He took a sip of wine and she followed his lead unconsciously, her mouth feeling dry.

'Such as where you went last night, if you don't date.'

Initially Alana had felt herself automatically tensing up at his question, but then something happened. She found herself melting somewhere inside, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Some part of her was responding to his heat, and it was just too hard not to give in just a little. So she told him about her brother's fortieth birthday. And that led to telling him about her six brothers and sisters. And her parents.

'They're *all* happily married with kids?'

Alana had to smile at the vague look of horror on his face. She knew people sometimes couldn't get over the entirely normal fact of large Irish families. She nodded, but felt that awfully familiar guilt strike her. She was the anomaly in her family. She tried to ignore the pain and spoke lightly. 'My family are a glowing testament to the institution. I have a grand total of fifteen nieces and nephews and my parents have been happily married for fifty years.'

He shook his head in disbelief. 'And where do you come?'

'I'm the baby. Ten years younger than my youngest brother. Apparently I was a happy mistake. The age gap meant that despite coming from such a big family I've always felt in some ways like an only child. For most of the time that I can remember, it was just me and my parents.'

Alana fell silent as she thought of her parents. She was acutely aware of their increasing frailty, and especially her father, who had had a triple bypass the previous year. With her older siblings busy with families and their own problems, the care and concern of their parents largely fell to her. Not that she minded, of course. But she was aware nevertheless that they worried about her, that they wanted to see her settled like the others. Especially after Ryan.

Alana took a quick gulp of coffee and avoided Pascal's laser-like gaze. They'd finished their meal, and the plates had been cleared. It was as if he could see right through her head to her thoughts. She hoped the coffee would dilute the effect of the wine, which had been like liquid nectar. She'd shrugged off her jacket some time ago, and the silk of her shirt felt ridiculously sensual against her skin. And she found that it was all too easy to talk to Pascal Lévêque. He was attentive, charming, interested. *Interesting*.

But then he cut through her glow of growing warmth by asking softly, 'So what happened with you?'

At first she didn't understand. 'What do you mean?'

'Your marriage. You were about to divorce your husband when he died, weren't you?'

Immediately the glow left, Alana tensed. She could see his eyes flare, watching her retreat.

Unconsciously she felt for her jacket to pull it back on, instinctively seeking for some kind of armour. Her voice felt harsh. 'I see that whoever your source was didn't stop at the bare facts.'

Pascal's jaw clenched. 'I'm not judging you, Alana, or anything like it. I'm just asking a question. I can't imagine it was easy to take a decision to divorce, coming from the family that you've described.'

Her arms stilled in the struggle to get her jacket on; his perceptiveness sneaked into some very vulnerable part of her. He didn't know the half of it. Her own family still didn't know the half of it. They'd been as mystified and dismayed as the rest of the country at her behaviour. Something her husband had ruthlessly exploited in a bid to win as much sympathy as possible.

She broke eye contact with effort and finished the job of putting on her jacket. Finally she looked at him again. 'I'd really prefer not to talk about my marriage.'

Pascal was tempted to push her, but could see her clam up visibly. She'd become more and more relaxed over the course of the meal. He'd had to restrain his eyes from dropping numerous times to the soft swell of her breasts under the fine silk of her shirt. He still had no idea why she seemed so determined to cover up as much as possible. But, instead of his interest waning, the opposite was true. He had to admit that was part of the reason he'd asked her out—some kind of bid to have her reveal herself to be boring or diminish her attraction—yet she was intriguing him on levels that no other woman had ever touched.

He was not done with this, with her. But he knew that if he pushed her now, he could very well lose her. This was going to test all his patience and skill, but the chase was well and truly on. So now he flashed his most urbane smile and just said, 'No problem.' And he called for the bill. The abject relief on her face struck him somewhere powerful.

Pascal wouldn't listen to Alana's protests. He insisted on dropping her to her house, which was only ten minutes from the restaurant. Tucked in a small square in one of the oldest parts of Dublin, her house was a tiny cottage. Pascal's car was too big to navigate past all the parked cars at the opening of the square, and she jumped out. But he was quick, too, met her at the other side of the car and insisted on walking her up to her door.

She turned at the door, feeling absurdly threatened, but by something in herself more than him. Standing close together, her eye level was on his chest, and she looked up into his dark face. The moon gleamed brightly in a clear sky, and the February air was chill. But she didn't feel cold. She had the strongest feeling that if he attempted to kiss her, she wouldn't be able to stop him. And something within her melted at that thought. She blamed the wine. And his innate French seductiveness.

But then suddenly he moved back. Alana found herself making a telling movement towards him, as if attached by an invisible cord and she saw a flash of something in his eyes as if he, too, had noted and understood her movement.

Before she could clam up, he had taken her hand in his and was bending his head to kiss the back of it, exactly as he had the previous night in the hotel. His old-fashioned gesture touched and confused her. Her hormones were see-sawing with desires and conflicting tensions. And then, with a lingering, unfathomable look, he started to walk away down the small square and back to his car. Against every rational notion in her head, Alana found herself calling his name. He half- turned.

'I just...I just wanted to say thank you for dinner.'

He walked back up towards her with an intensity of movement that belied his easy departure just now. For a second she thought he was going to come right up to her and kiss her. She took a step back, feeling a mixture of panic and anticipation, with her heart thumping, but he stopped just short of her. He reached out a hand and tucked some hair behind her ear. It was a gesture he'd made earlier in the car, and she found herself wanting to turn her cheek into his palm. But then his hand was gone. And his eyes were glittering in the dark.

'You're welcome, Alana. But don't get too complacent. We will be meeting again, I can promise you that.'

He turned again and strode back to his car. He got in, shut the door and the car pulled away. And Alana just stood there, her mouth open. Heat flooded her body and something much worse—*relief*. She knew now that she had called his name and said thanks, because something about watching him walk away had affected her profoundly. She had an uncontrollable urge to stop him.

She had to face it—even though she'd been telling herself she wasn't interested in him from the moment their eyes had locked at the match, she *was*. He was smashing through the veritable wall she'd built around herself since she'd married Ryan O'Connor and her life had turned into a sort of living hell. It was frightening how, in the space of twenty-four hours, she found herself in a situation where she was actually feeling disappointed that a man she barely knew hadn't kissed her. Her famously cool poise, which hid all her bitter disappointments and broken dreams from everyone, even her own family, was suddenly very shaky.

By the time Alana was standing in her tiny galley-kitchen the next morning drinking her wake-up cup of tea, she felt much more in control. She only had to look around her house, in which she quite literally could not swing a cat, to feel on firmer ground. This was reality. This was all she'd been able to afford after Ryan had died. Her mouth tightened. Contrary to what everyone believed, she hadn't been left a millionairess after her football-star husband had died in the accident.

She was still picking up the pieces emotionally and financially from her five years of marriage. And, while her emotional scars might heal one day, the financial ones would be keeping her in this tiny

cottage and working hard for a very long time. The truth was that Ryan had left astronomical debts behind him and, because their divorce hadn't come through by the time he'd died, they'd become Alana's responsibility. The sale of their huge house in the upmarket area of Dalkey had barely made a dent in what had been owed to various lenders.

Alana swallowed the last of her tea and grimaced as she washed out the cup. Pride was a terrible thing, she knew. But it had also given her a modicum of dignity. She'd never confided in anyone about the dire state of her marriage, had never told anyone about the day she'd walked into her bedroom to find Ryan in bed with three women who'd turned out to be call girls. They'd all been high on cocaine. He'd been too out of it to realise that it wasn't even his bedroom. By then, it had been at least three years since *they'd* shared a bed.

That had been the day that her humiliation had reached saturation point. The pressure of having to maintain a façade of a happy marriage had tipped over into unbearability. She'd left and filed for divorce.

But her wily husband had quickly made sure that it looked as though Alana had coldly kicked him out. She hadn't suspected his motives when he'd sheepishly offered to move out instead of her. But she should have known. The man she'd married had changed beyond all recognition as soon as he'd started earning enormous fees and tasted the heady heights of what it was to be a national superstar.

Admitting that she'd failed at her marriage had been soul destroying. She hadn't wanted to confide the awful reality of it to anyone. Even if she had wanted to, her father's health had been frail, and her mother had been focused solely on him. And, around the same time, one of her elder sisters had been diagnosed with breast cancer. With her sister having three children, and Alana being the only childless sibling and suddenly single again, she had moved into her sister's home to help her brother-in-law for the few months that Mère had spent getting treatment. Alana's marital problems had taken a backseat, and she'd been glad of the distraction while the divorce was worked out. She'd kept herself to herself and shunned her family's well-meaning probing, too heart-sore and humiliated even to talk about it.

It was exactly as Pascal had intuited last night, and she hated to admit that. It *had* been so hard, coming from a family of successfully married siblings, to be the only one to fail and to cause her parents such concern. Her monumental lack of judgement haunted her to this day. She obviously couldn't trust herself when it came to character assessment, never mind another man. And Pascal Lévesque was ringing so many bells that it should make it easy to reject his advances.

Alana brusquely pulled on her coat and got her keys. She refused to let her mind wander where it wanted: namely down a route that investigated the possibility of giving in to Pascal Lévesque's advances. Alana reassured herself that by now he'd have forgotten the wholly unremarkable Irish woman who had piqued his interest for thirty-six hours.

Thirty-six hours. That's all it had been. And yet it wasn't enough. Pascal stood at the window of his Paris office and looked out over the busy area of La Défense with its distinctive Grande Arche in the distance.

Alana Cusack was taking up a prominence in his head that was usually reserved for facts and figures. Ordinarily he could compartmentalise women very well; they didn't intrude on his every waking hour. They were for pleasure only, and fleeting pleasure at that. The minute he saw that look come into their eye, or heard that tone come into their voice, it was time to say goodbye. He enjoyed his freedom, the thrill of the chase, the conquest. No strings, no commitment.

But now a green-eyed, buttoned-up, starched-collared, impertinent-questioning witch was making a hum of sexual frustration throb through his blood. He had to get her out of his system. Prove to himself that his desire had only been whetted because she was playing hard to get, and only because she *seemed* to be a little more intriguing than any other woman he'd met. The fact that she'd been married intrigued him too. Her marriage had obviously left her scarred. That had been clear

from a mile away. Was that why she was so prickly, so uptight and defensive, so wary? Was she still grieving for her husband?

Pascal ran a hand through his hair impatiently. Enough! He turned his back on the view and called his PA into the room. She listened to his instructions and took down all the details, and she was professional enough not to give Pascal any indication that what he'd just asked her to do was in any way out of the ordinary.

But it was.

'There's something for you on your desk, Alana.'

'Thanks, Soph,' Alana answered distractedly as she flipped through her notes on her return from a lunchtime interview and walked into her tiny cubbyhole office just off the main newsroom. She looked up for a quick second to smile at Sophie, the general runaround girl, and her smile faltered when she saw the other girl's clearly mischievous look. With foreboding in her heart, Alana opened her door, and there on her desk was the biggest bunch of flowers she'd ever seen in her life. Her notebook and pen slid from her fingers onto the table. With a trembling hand, she plucked the card free from amongst the ridiculously extravagant blooms.

She cast a quick look back out the door, and seeing no one, quickly shut it. She ripped the envelope open and took out the card, which was of such luxurious quality that it felt about an inch thick between her fingers. All that was written on the card in beautiful calligraphy was one mystifying letter: 'I...'

She was completely and utterly bemused. Her dread was that they would be from him. But the card was enigmatic. They could actually be from anyone.

Not one person looked at her oddly afterwards, though, not even the junior reporter who covered current affairs who had drunkenly admitted at the office party last Christmas to having a crush on her. It wasn't her birthday, and she hadn't done an especially amazing babysitting-stint lately for any nieces or nephews, which sometimes resulted in flowers as a thank-you.

For the rest of the day Alana was like a cat on a hot tin roof. Distracted. She only left and brought the flowers home once she was sure nearly everyone had left the office.

The following day, as Alana walked in, flicking through her post, Sophie again said, 'Morning! There's something for you on your desk.'

Alana's heart stopped. It was like groundhog day. She went into her office with a palpitating heart and shut the door firmly behind her. Another bunch of flowers. Slightly different, but as extravagant as yesterday's. Her hands were sweating as she repeated the process of opening the envelope and taking out the card. This one read: 'will...'

By the end of the week Alana sat at the wooden table in her sitting room and felt a little numb. The smell of flowers was overpowering in the tiny artisan-cottage. A vase sat in the centre of the table abundant with blooms. And also on the table in front of her, neatly lined up in a row, were the five cards that had accompanied a different bunch of flowers every single day of the week.

All together, they now made sense: 'I will see you tonight'.

But of course she'd known what the full meaning of the cards was when she'd received the fifth one that morning. All day she'd experienced a fizzing in her veins and a sick churning in her belly. She'd vaguely thought of going to the cinema, or seeing if friends wanted to go out, anything to avoid being at home where she was sure he was going to call. An awful sense of inevitability washed over her. She wasn't ready for this. She would just have to make him see that and send him on his way. But still...the gesture, the flowers, and his obvious intention to fly all the way back to Dublin just to see her, was nothing short of overwhelming.

Her phone rang shrilly in the silence and she jumped violently, her heart immediately hammering. Her mouth was dry. 'Hello?'

'What's this about you and Pascal Lévêque?'

Alana sagged onto the arm of her sofa. 'Ailish.' Her oldest and bossiest sister was always guaranteed to raise her hackles. Twenty years separated them, and sometimes Ailish came across as a little overbearing to say the least. She meant well, though, which took the sting out of her harsh manner.

'So? What's going on? Apparently one of the world's most eligible bachelors took you out for dinner last weekend.'

Tension held Alana's body straight. 'How did you hear about it?'

'It was in the tabloids today.'

Alana groaned inwardly, wondering how she'd missed that. Someone at work must have leaked the story. God knew, enough people had heard him ask her. And it wouldn't have taken a rocket scientist to work out who the flowers had been from, either.

'Look, I interviewed him and he took me for dinner, that's all. Nothing is going on.' The betraying vision of her house full to the roof with flowers made her wince.

Her sister harumphed down the phone. 'Well, I just hope you're not going to be gracing the tabloids every day with tales of sexual exploits with a Casanova like that. I mean, can you imagine if Mam and Dad saw that? It was bad enough having to defend you to practically the whole nation after you threw Ryan out—'

Alana stood up, her whole body quivering. The memory of her parents' lined and worried faces was vivid. And her guilt. 'Ailish, what I do and who I see is none of your business. Do I comment on your marriage to Tom?'

'You wouldn't need to,' replied her sister waspishly. 'We're not the ones being discussed over morning coffee by the nation.'

Alana heard her doorbell ring and she automatically went to answer it. 'Like I said, what I do is none of your business.' Her sister's 'judge and jury' act made anger throb through her veins, and she knew her voice was rising. She struggled for a minute with the habitually stiff lock, and tucked the phone between her neck and shoulder to use both hands.

'I am a fully grown woman and I can see who I want, go where I want, and have sex with who I want whenever I please.'

The door finally opened. Her words hung on the cool evening air as she took in the devastatingly gorgeous sight of Pascal Lévéque just standing there, turning her inner-city enclave into something much more exotic. Her heart-rate soared. She'd forgotten all about him in the space of the last few seconds, and the high emotion her sister had been evoking. In her shock she lifted her head and her phone dropped to the ground with a tinny clatter.

Pascal swiftly bent and picked it up.

An irate voice could be heard: 'Alana? *Alana!*'

Alana couldn't take her eyes off Pascal. She took her phone back, lifted it to her ear and said vaguely, 'Ailish, someone's just arrived. I'll call you back, OK?'

Words resounded in her head: *too late to escape now.*

CHAPTER THREE

BY THE time Alana had stepped back into her house, followed by a tall, dark and imposing Pascal Lévesque, the shock was rapidly wearing off. She crossed her arms and rounded on him with a scowl on her face. Once again he was demonstrating that ability to suck in the space around him and make everything seem more intense—dwarfed. She tried to block out the fact that he was quite simply the most handsome man who'd ever stood feet away from her and looked at her with an intensity that bordered on being indecent.

'That phone call was a conversation that shouldn't have had to happen. And it was all your fault.'

He inclined his head slightly. He looked *huge* in her tiny sitting room. 'I apologise, but, as all I heard was the intriguing last sentence, you'll have to forgive me as I don't know what I've done. And we certainly haven't had sex yet.'

Alana flushed when she recalled what she'd been saying to her sister as she'd opened the door. 'Did you know that apparently our dinner date was in the papers today?' Defensive, angry energy radiated off her in waves. She could almost see them, like a heat haze.

He shook his head, his eyes never leaving hers, hypnotising her. 'No. I wasn't aware of that. But of course, there were people at the restaurant, and I would imagine that one or two people heard me ask you at the studio; perhaps it was leaked.'

Alana laughed out loud. 'One or two? Try the whole crew standing in the room. It's recorded on tape, for God's sake.'

He started to shrug off his big, black overcoat and proceeded to whip out a bottle of wine from somewhere, like a magician. Panic flowed through Alana. She put out her hands as if that might halt him. 'What do you think you're doing? Stop taking off your coat right now.'

She shook her head emphatically. 'No way; you are not coming in here with a bottle of wine, and we are not going to be having a cosy chat.'

For a big man he moved swiftly and gracefully. His coat was already draped over one arm, the bottle of red wine in one hand, long fingers visible. She remembered him holding her hands, entwining those fingers with hers. A pulse throbbed between her legs.

She looked up at him and knew she must look slightly desperate—she felt desperate.

'I don't mind where we go, Alana, but I've come all this way to see you, so you're not getting away.'

His voice was like deep velvet over steel. He meant what he said.

She gulped. 'What do you want?' she asked weakly. He was threatening and invading every aspect of what had been up till now her impregnable defence.

Pascal restrained himself from telling her exactly what he wanted. He didn't want to frighten her off. But what he wanted very much involved a lot less clothes and a flat, preferably soft surface. She was dressed all in black, her hair tied back. Not a stiff shirt this time, but a roll-neck top that effectively concealed everything. And yet the material had to be cashmere or something, because it clung to her torso and chest, and for the first time he could see the proper shape of her. The thrust of her breasts against the fabric was sensual torture. They were perfectly formed, high and firm. He could imagine that they would fill his hands like ripe, succulent fruits, their tips hardening against the palm of his hand... He slammed the door on his rampant imaginings. His arousal was springing to life. He forced himself to sound reasonable, calm.

'What I would like is to share this bottle of wine with you and to talk. We can go somewhere else if you'd prefer.'

Alana looked at him suspiciously, hating this invasion of her space. He was as immovable as a rock. If they went somewhere else that would involve more time. If they stayed here, he'd be gone sooner. She made her reluctant decision and reached out a hand.

‘We might as well stay here. It’s a Friday night; most places in town would be like cattle markets by now.’

Despite her obvious lack of delight at the prospect, Pascal carefully masked the intense surge of triumph he felt and handed over the wine, even being careful to make sure their hands didn’t touch, knowing that could set him back. *Dieu!* This woman was like an assault on his every sense. He hadn’t imagined her allure, she was more vivid, more sexy, more *everything*, in the flesh.

As Alana went into the galley-kitchen, she was aware of him moving into the sitting room, hands in the pockets of his trousers and looking around. She sent him a surreptitious glance. He was dressed smartly—dark trousers and a light shirt, top button open as if he’d discarded a tie somewhere. He must have come straight from work—on a private plane? Somehow she couldn’t imagine him queueing up with lesser mortals for a scheduled flight. He was the kind of man who would stride across the tarmac and climb into a sleek, snazzy jet.

‘You got my flowers, I see.’

Alana’s hand stilled on the bottle opener for a moment. She looked at him. ‘Yes, thank you.’ She cringed inwardly. Had he seen the cards all laid out in a row on the table as he’d come in? ‘You shouldn’t have, though. It caused no amount of speculation at work, and I’d really prefer if you didn’t.’ God, she sounded so uptight. And what was to say he’d ever send her flowers again anyway?

‘As you can see, this house isn’t exactly big enough to take them.’

Pascal looked around and thought privately that this was hardly what she must have been used to, as Ryan O’Connor’s wife. It made her even more enigmatic. She was fast proving that, whatever scene she’d been a part of in the past, that was not who she was now. ‘No, I guess not. I’m sorry if I embarrassed you, Alana, I merely wanted to show you that I meant what I said, about seeing you again, and I didn’t have your number, so...’

Alana stabbed the cork with the bottle opener. ‘It’s fine; forget it. The old-folks’ home around the corner were delighted, as they got the other half of the flower shop you sent.’

She sent him a small, rueful smile then, unable to help herself. She didn’t like being ungrateful for gifts.

Pascal was looking at her with an arrested expression on his face, his eyes intent on the area of her mouth. Her lips tingled. Alana’s hands stopped on the cork. ‘What is it?’

But then his eyes lifted to hers as if she’d imagined it, and he went back to looking at her books and prints. ‘Nothing.’

Eventually she pulled the cork free with a loud pop and got down two glasses from her open shelves. She poured the wine and handed him a glass, keeping one for herself.

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