

# Chapter 1

Sally gazed at the buildings in awe. They were so old and so pretty. The nearby statue of Cyrano de Bergerac, however, was painted in garish colours, and she didn't like the look of him much.

She turned to her guide to ask him about the statue but found he'd walked on. She hurried to catch up. The street was busy with tourists, and she didn't want to lose him. With her eyes firmly fixed on his back, she walked right into a tall man, who, like her, had been looking at the buildings.

Her apology froze on her lips. She found herself gazing into the dark eyes that had invaded her dreams for so long.

'Seb,' she whispered.

'Sally!'

They stood staring at each other for a heartbeat, then their arms were about each other, as the last ten years fell away.

Seb recovered first.

'What are you doing here? How are you? You look amazing.'

She'd matured into a beautiful woman with poise and elegance. Seb, on the other hand, had deep lines around his mouth and a quiet sadness in his eyes. Although he was only thirty-one, his rich brown hair was streaked with grey.

Sally's guide, having watched their reunion, stepped forward.

'Monsieur, I am Pierre de Monfort.' He shook Seb's hand. Introductions were made, and Pierre asked how long they'd known each other and when they'd last met.

'Ten years, two months, and a few weeks ago,' said Sally.

'But this is wonderful,' Pierre said. 'Sebastian, you must join us for dinner.'

Seb opened his mouth to refuse, but seeing the pleading look on Sally's face, instead replied, 'Thank you, I'd like that. But I still don't understand. Why are you here, Sally?'

'I work for a wine import company in Sydney, and I'm visiting vineyards and finding new suppliers,' she said. 'I'm staying with Pierre and his family. But how about you? I heard you live in England now.'

'Long story. Suffice to say, I'm here because of a horse and, like you, took a sideways trip to look around Bergerac.'

After they parted, with promises to catch up properly later, Pierre was highly amused by the change in his companion. He tried to question her, but she deflected his questions and finally, he gave up. He'd noticed, however, how it was as if she'd been lit up from within. Although she'd already been lovely, now she sparkled. He'd thought before that he'd like her to be his mistress, and now he was certain of it – but he was also certain he didn't stand much of a chance after she'd met her long-lost lover. It was plain to him that was the relationship between Sally and Seb, who Pierre had to admit was extremely handsome.

Pierre had the strangest feeling he'd seen Seb before. Tall and good looking, but serious, careworn. Then, as he drove them back to his house, the penny dropped.

'Your friend,' he said, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, 'he is some sort of horse person – a whisperer, they call him, *oui*?'

'Yes, how did you know?' Sally asked, surprised.

‘A friend of mine was saying about an English man who can tame bad horses. He showed me a piece in the local paper, with a photograph, too, though I thought it was a different name.’ Pierre sighed. ‘My daughter, the one you haven’t met, wants to be a groom of all things. She is joining us tonight. Fortunate, yes?’

‘Seb’s from Australia, really. Like me. He came over to England a few years ago and has never been back. He uses his middle name now – Charles, or Charlie.’

‘You have kept in touch, then?’

‘No, not for a long time. I just follow what he does in the horse world.’

Sally felt uncomfortable. She hoped it didn’t sound as if she were stalking Seb. Sometimes, she went a year without knowledge of what he was doing.

Pierre was looking forward to an interesting evening. He was a people-watcher, as well as a romantic, and what little he’d seen and heard had sparked his imagination. Also, he thought if his daughter spent time working in stables, it might put her off her chosen career. He was hoping she’d take a position on the family vineyard. Though it could be hard, he reflected, to get her a job with this Australian, as he was so well-known he likely had a whole army of people working for him.

## Chapter 2

Seb turned his hire car into Pierre's driveway, passing through a set of wrought-iron gates. He'd lived in England for the last five years but was still in awe of the grand buildings both there and across Europe, where his reputation had seen him travel. The chateau was as imposing as any he'd seen, and there were several cars parked out front. He hoped it wouldn't be a large gathering, as they were one of the things he struggled with.

Once out of the car, he took a few minutes to look around. Coming into spring, the vines lining the driveway were bare, as were the lawns and rose beds closer to the house. The stone steps leading up to the front door were bordered with daffodils, which shone bright yellow as the sun went down.

When he approached the door, it burst open. Sally stood there. Her long blonde hair was piled on top of her head, and her blue eyes were sparkling, made brighter by her navy jumper. Her jeans were tight and showed off her shapely legs.

Seb drew in a breath. She was even lovelier than he'd remembered. He'd been so surprised to see her earlier that he hadn't noticed how she'd looked – it had been her scent and her essence that he'd remembered. In some respects, he regretted accepting the invitation to dinner, as he was afraid of his feelings towards Sally. He'd broken away from her before, but could he do it again? It'd been the hardest thing he'd ever done. At times, his regrets had nearly undone him. But then, maybe she was

married, or had a partner. Someone as beautiful as her couldn't still be single.

'Seb.'

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him fleetingly on the cheek. As Seb held her slender body against his, he knew he was lost again in his love for her.

A discreet cough parted them.

'Monsieur, welcome. Come and meet my family,' Pierre said, with a smile.

He led the way down a stone passage, into a small, cosy room. In the middle was a table set for dinner, with places for six. Inwardly, Seb breathed a sigh of relief.

A dark-haired woman appeared, followed by a young man so like Pierre he was plainly his son. Pierre made introductions. His wife, Margaret, was English. Their son, Louis, was friendly and open-faced; Seb liked him at once.

'How many children do you have?' Seb asked Margaret, as Pierre was getting drinks.

'Four. Two are in Paris – our other son is training to be an architect, and our eldest daughter is doing medicine.'

'What about you, Louis? What do you do?' asked Seb, accepting a glass of red from Pierre.

'I'm joining Papa in our wine business. There's a lot to learn, but—'

Louis broke off as the door slammed open and a tall woman rushed into the room. She had dark red hair, which fell in waves down her voluptuous figure, green eyes, and a full, sensuous mouth. She was one of the most beautiful women Seb had ever seen. He found himself staring at her, then Pierre stepped forward.

'Ha, you've joined us, then. Allow me to introduce my daughter,

Brianna. Brianna, this is Monsieur Proctor.'

Seb put out his hand, but she ignored it and kissed him lightly on both cheeks, French-style. Her scent made Seb think of summer flowers. She was dressed in jumper and jeans like Sally, and though her clothes were casual, they oozed class.

'Monsieur Proctor, I understand you are here to tame horses, yes?' Her voice was husky, and her English was almost accent-free.

'Yes. Though please, everyone, call me Charlie. I was here to see a couple of problem horses. I've spent a few days with them, and I'm returning to England tomorrow.' As he said this, he heard Sally draw a sharp breath.

'Couldn't you stay another day, Seb?' she asked. 'I'm not leaving until Monday. I was hoping Pierre wouldn't mind if I spent Sunday with you.'

Sally knew she sounded needy but couldn't help herself. Horrifyingly, she was already feeling jealous of Pierre's beautiful daughter.

Brianna looked confused. 'I thought your name was Charlie?'

'It is. Charles, or Charlie, is my middle name. Sally here is an old friend and knows me by my first.'

'I see. Please, tell me about these horses – I'm dying to hear all about what you do. I never thought I'd be lucky enough to meet you!'

Seb took a sip of his wine, embarrassed. He didn't like speaking about himself and always kept horse talk to a minimum while away from them. At the back of his mind, he wondered whether Pierre had had an ulterior motive in asking him to dinner.

'Later, maybe,' he said. 'I don't want to talk horses and bore everyone; I'd like to hear about the vineyard first. This is excellent wine.'

Pierre beamed. ‘Now come sit, and we will eat.’

There were mini quiches to start, followed by a tossed salad, lamb chops, cheese, and a dessert. Seb felt as if he’d eaten enough food for a week. He was still careful about what and how much he ate, a habit left over from his time as a marathon runner. The wine flowed freely, though after a couple of glasses, Seb put a hand over his glass. ‘I’m driving, best not.’

‘*Psh*, do not worry. The police here will leave you alone,’ Pierre said, ignoring Seb’s wishes and filling his glass anyway.

Later, Seb found he’d unwittingly almost finished his drink. Much of the conversation was about wine, but some of it focused on Britain leaving the European Union. He could tell the family were worried, but kept quiet, as it was all a mystery to him. Horses were his entire world and he shut himself off from most other things in the news.

Sally was also quiet. She’d noticed how Brianna hung onto Seb’s every word and how often his eyes strayed to Brianna. Too often, she felt.

Towards the end of the meal, Brianna asked Seb about his horses.

‘I don’t have many myself,’ he said, ‘but horses come to my yard to be trained or retrained, usually if they have a problem with their temperament.’

‘Do you employ many people, then?’ asked Pierre.

‘I have a secretary and two full-time grooms, as well as a couple of part-timers.’

‘Is that enough?’ Pierre raised his eyebrows. ‘Do you not want more? There is a young lady at this table who would jump at the chance to work for you.’

This was a bombshell Seb hadn’t seen coming. Nor had Sally, who instinctively didn’t like the idea.

Slowly, Seb shook his head. 'I'm sorry, but I don't actually need any more help just now.'

Sally let out the breath she'd been holding.

'I'll make it worth your while,' Pierre said. 'If she's not up to the job, just send her home. No hard feelings.'

Seb stared at him in disbelief. 'Are you saying you'll pay me to take her on?'

Even Brianna looked unhappy. 'Papa!' she said.

'I will be frank with you all. Brianna here is horse-mad. She has finished college, but all she wants is to be with horses. However, I want her to come into the vineyard with me and my son. Brianna, I am proposing that you work with this young man for a year. If you still want to be a groom at the end, so be it. But if you are unsure, come into our wine business without regrets. I will give you this time to make up your mind once and for all. Do we have an agreement?'

'Yes, Papa, yes!'

Brianna jumped up and hurried to hug her father.

'Excuse me, but I haven't agreed to take her yet,' Seb said, sounding rather desperate.

'You don't have to pay her,' Pierre said. 'I'll pay you. I'll make it worth your while, I promise.' He named a figure that had Seb's mind reeling.

Seb was nonplussed. How could he say no without seeming churlish? He nodded, uncomfortable.

'Do not worry, I will have a proper agreement drawn up,' Pierre said. 'Now, a glass of champagne to celebrate.'

'Not for me, I'm driving.'

'Nonsense. We have many rooms – you must stay here.'

Pierre left in search of champagne, and Seb realised he was a man used to getting his own way.

In the end, he decided it wasn't such a bad idea. So far, he'd hardly had a chance to speak with Sally. He'd spent the whole time acutely aware of her, but had hardly looked her way, because he didn't want to inflame his feelings any further.

The evening wore on, until there was only him, Pierre and Sally left. Pierre got to his feet.

'I'll leave you two to reminisce. Sally, you can show Charlie to the room next to yours. *Bonne nuit.*'

Then he too was gone.

The atmosphere was electric, but both stayed where they were, on either side of the dinner table.

Sally was first to speak. Clearing her throat, she said, 'You didn't want to take Brianna, did you?'

Without taking his eyes off her, Seb shook his head.

'She's very beautiful.' Sally tried not to sound as extremely jealous as she felt.

'Not as beautiful as you,' he said. 'Many times, I wanted to get back in touch. You've never been far from my thoughts. I was afraid I carried bad blood, but I'm not sure it works like that.' He got to his feet, muttering, 'I didn't notice Brianna in any case.' Coming around the table, he bent down and kissed her neck.

Sally turned to him, and then they were kissing as if their lives depended on it.

Pulling back, she led him up the huge staircase and into her bedroom. Remembering that frantic lovemaking had killed Seb's passion in the past, she tried to slow down. He had other ideas. Clothes were strewn about, and they fell onto the bed. There were no ghosts haunting Seb now. He made love to Sally with a passion and urgency that took them both by surprise. After climaxing together, they lay panting on the sheets.

'My God, you're so gorgeous,' he said. 'I've missed you so much.'

Tears ran down Sally's face. Her throat was too closed-up to speak.

'My darling girl, what have I done? What's wrong?'

Taking a big gulp of air, Sally managed to say, 'Nothing. I just love you so much... I never thought I'd see you again. That was so wonderful – better than my wildest dreams.'

'There's more where that came from,' Seb said, leaning over to kiss her again. 'Much more.'

This time, they took it slowly, enjoying each other's bodies. The night passed with little sleep and a lot of love.

Towards dawn, they finally talked of the intervening years. They'd both had short flings with others, but never anything that'd lasted. Sally had worked for a few smaller wine companies in and around Sydney, gone to South Australia for a time, then returned to New South Wales.

Seb had gone to counselling, but horses had really saved him. Gradually, they'd become his life. He had an almost magical affinity with them, and after a time, he'd relocated to the UK, where there was more call for his expertise. In some ways, he'd found it healing to get away from Australia. But he'd been away for five years now, and he hadn't seen any of his family since his parents made one short trip over soon after he'd moved.

'Maybe I could think about moving back, if you want me to,' he said.

'Need you ask?' Sally kissed him lightly. 'Now we've found each other again, please stay in my life. I couldn't bear to lose you a second time.'

Seb felt the same way. 'I guess we've wasted enough time as it is... and that's all my fault.'

'Don't say that. You needed the time, and I think we've both benefitted from it. We were so young, but now we're older and wiser.'

‘You remember my sisters? Sarah’s a doctor now, and Caitlin has two children. I’d like to see my niece and nephew.’

They talked and talked, catching up on the last ten years. Hearing Sally talk of her job in the countryside and what she did on her days off, Seb felt an overwhelming wave of homesickness. He was ready to go back. However, it would take some months to organise. He had a full schedule, and he’d have to either sell the four horses he owned or take them to Australia. Mist, the grey Arab mare who’d saved him, had passed away five years ago. It was one of the things that’d made him decide to leave. Now, it was time to return.