



# French Lessons

MONICA BELLE

BLACK LACE

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## About the Book

### **Head or heart?**

When Elise Sherborne inherits a château in the Dordogne she imagines a life of rustic ease perfectly suited to her romantic and laidback personality.

Only when she moves to France she discovers that Château La Fleur is a crumbling ruin and the money that goes with it hopelessly inadequate. She also has a tenant: the super-masculine and attractive-yet-arrogant Jean Belair.

But when a man from her past turns up she finds herself torn – should she choose the man her heart yearns for, or the inescapably hot Jean who excites her to her very core...?

**Curl up with Black Lace - the leading publisher of erotic romance**

## About the Author

Monica Belle is an Oxbridge graduate and the author of several successful *Black Lace* novels, including *Black Lipstick Kisses*, *Bound in Blue*, *Noble Vices*, *Office Perks*, *Pagan Heat*, *The Boss*, *The Choice*, *To Seek a Master*, *Valentina's Rules*, *Wild by Nature* and *Wild in the Country*.

Also By Monica Belle:

*Black Lipstick Kisses*

*Bound in Blue*

*Noble Vices*

*Office Perks*

*Pagan Heat*

*The Boss*

*The Choice*

*To Seek a Master*

*Valentina's Rules*

*Wild by Nature*

*Wild in the Country*

# French Lessons

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# 1

‘Elise, my office, five minutes.’

‘Yes, Mr Curran.’

I watched him go as he continued on towards his office, taking him in: the carefully untidy hair, the perfectly fitted but slightly rumpled designer suit, the handcrafted Swiss watch. No other man I’d ever known carried himself with such an air of easy, casual arrogance, or took his good fortune in life so much for granted: Aaron Curran, a man born with a golden spoon in his mouth and who clearly felt he was entitled to it, and to me.

It wasn’t going to happen. Nobody makes me their toy, no matter how rich and good looking he is, and I knew that was how it would be, because it had happened before. I don’t know what it is in particular about me, other than the obvious, but men often seem to think I’d make a good mistress, or just a handy plaything. Not that I’d have minded in Aaron’s case – in some ways, at least – and he wasn’t even married. But he had been through most of the girls in the office, and I do have my pride. He liked to show off, too, and he liked control.

He didn’t even really need to see me now, I was fairly sure of that. What he really wanted was to make me do the walk of shame, the full length of the office, with everybody staring at me and wondering what I’d done to be called into the inner sanctum. Worse still, our premises are modern but built within a traditional old building, and his office is beyond a big, solid oak door with no way of looking in or knowing what’s going on inside. Once I was through that door, the office gossips would be having a field day outside,

happily speculating about whether I was being given a ticking off, propositioned or offered a promotion in return for five minutes on my knees under his desk.

I was going to have to go, anyway, but the five minutes' grace he'd allowed me meant I just had time to deal with the post I'd snatched up from the floor as I left the flat. There were three letters: a bill from a catalogue, an invitation to contribute to a charity and a large envelope of expensive, cream-coloured paper with a name printed across the top in gold letters: Clarke, Conway & Clarke, Solicitors of Lincoln's Inn Fields. It looked pretty ominous, and there was a lump in my throat as I imagined myself being sued or summoned to court, and at the same time I tried to think what I could possibly have done to deserve such a fate.

The headed paper within matched the envelope, and the letter printed on it began with old-fashioned formality, addressing me as 'Miss Sherborne' and moving straight into long-winded legal jargon, the upshot of which was not that I was being taken to court, nor anything else unpleasant, but that I was the sole beneficiary of Madame Adèle de Regnier. I couldn't even recall who Madame Adèle de Regnier was, at first, but then it came back to me: she was my mother's much older sister, who had been through a series of tempestuous marriages, providing the family with endless scandal.

It was hard to remember the details, and my parents had kept most of it from me anyway, but I could remember the house, La Fleur. I closed my eyes and tried to think back fifteen years and more, to wonderful sunny summers deep in the French countryside. La Fleur had seemed to me like a fairy-tale castle, complete with high walls and towers, odd little nooks, and rooms so secret and dusty it was as if nobody had been inside for years. There were grounds, too – a magical garden where I'd been able to lose myself for hours, in among beds bright with flowers, mysterious little



paths between high hedges of dark-green yew, a little walled garden full of the scents of herbs, with colourful butterflies everywhere. Beyond the grounds had been the vineyard: row upon row of plants hung with fat golden grapes that made a wine like the nectar of the gods. When I was little, I'd sneaked down from my room in the evenings and begged for sips in return for going to bed and leaving everybody in peace, unless Aunt Adèle snapped at me, in which case I'd flee.

She'd been magnificent – tall, elegant, refined, yet also sensual and comfortable in her own womanhood in a way I'd never experienced before or since. I'd looked up to her as a child, and later, years after I'd last visited La Fleur, she had always been the role model to whom I aspired. Yet I'd had no idea she'd married again, or who Monsieur de Regnier had been. Whatever the situation, unless there had been some terrible mistake, or Aunt Adèle had somehow managed to lose everything before she died, it seemed I had been named in her will as the inheritor of her entire estate, and I was now the owner of La Fleur. All I had to do was call in on Clarke, Conway & Clarke and sign the official documents.

I read the letter three times, the implications slowly sinking in. The two years since I'd left college had been the dulllest of my life, a slow start to what might turn out to be a remunerative career but wasn't going to be an exciting one. I'd expected so much of life, through a wonderful childhood and great college days, but here I was, helping Aaron Curran do clever things with money while I earned just enough to keep myself in a one-bedroom flat on the wrong side of Hoxton. Only now I was mistress of La Fleur, if the letter could really be believed, owner of a château in the Dordogne and a vineyard that had to bring in tens of thousands a year, maybe hundreds of thousands. There'd be no more commuting, no more nine-to-five, no more

bossy bosses and office politics and petty jealousies and pointless meetings and stupid little rules and ...

‘Elise. I said five minutes.’

‘Sorry, Mr Curran.’

My answer was automatic, and so was the blush that coloured my cheeks as I hurried down the long aisle between my co-workers’ desks to where he stood waiting in the doorway of his office. It was only as I drew close that I considered the possibility of resigning on the spot, but it was all too sudden and I went in meekly enough, stopping in front of his desk as he closed the door behind me. I’d always hated his desk, a huge thing made of highly polished oak and topped with sage-green leather, partly because having to stand in front of it made me feel as if I was back at school, and partly because of the way his knees showed underneath the open mid-section, always set slightly apart as if in invitation for me to crawl under and take him in my mouth. From the knowing, calculating smile on his face, I was fairly sure he was thinking the same thing, and that he knew I was fighting a terrible compulsion to do exactly that.

I don’t know what it is with me but whenever I’m in a slightly demanding situation, I get a terrible urge to do the most embarrassing, inappropriate thing possible, like tweak somebody’s nose in a crowded tube train, strip naked at a family wedding, or in this case give my boss the oral sex I was sure he wanted and felt entitled to. Fortunately, I have good self-control, and merely raised my chin a little as he took his seat.

‘Elise,’ he began, ‘you’ve put in quite an impressive performance over the last few months, so I’ve decided to give you an opportunity to step up a pace. As you know, I’m going to New York next week. I need a PA to come with me, somebody who understands how I work and who will be ready to support me, and the company. That person might be you, if you think you’re up to the challenge?’

So this was it, the move I'd been expecting for weeks, and had carefully set up. If I refused, it would look as if I lacked ambition, but despite the veneer of professional respectability of the offer, it was obvious what he expected: me, as his plaything, performing every dirty little trick in his dirty little mind, with the preferment he'd offered constantly dangled in front of my nose like a carrot for a donkey. I knew this because he'd taken Vicky Bell to a conference in Amsterdam, spent the evenings practising the Kama Sutra on her, and on their return promoted her from junior docketing clerk to senior docketing clerk. Now it was my turn, and it wasn't just that he *hoped* I'd say yes and let him seduce me; he *knew* I'd say yes and let him seduce me.

But not me; not Elise Sherborne. My defiance rose with the angle of my chin as he carried on, telling me what a wonderful opportunity he was offering me, before deliberately taking it right to the edge of what he could expect to get away with, just as he had with Vicky.

'But you mustn't think this is going to be a holiday. I'd need you to be on call twenty-four-seven, to deal with anything that comes up, and I do mean anything ...'

'Like your cock?'

He stopped talking, looking at me in blank astonishment that changed to a broad grin as he decided I was being deliberately brazen. I took my cue, gave him a slow, suggestive wink and stepped over to where a new ten-litre flask stood by the water cooler next to his desk. He raised a finger as I undid the top of the plastic container, but didn't speak, maybe thinking I was going to pour it over my chest and unsure if the view would be worth a soggy carpet. I smiled as I carefully lifted the heavy vessel, set my feet apart, curved my back into a provocative S shape, and tipped the water bottle over to pour it into his lap.

'Maybe that will cool you off a bit?'

It didn't seem to. As the first splash of water hit his crotch, he tried to push his chair away and jump up at the same time, but only succeeded in going over backwards to end up with his legs kicking in the air like an upturned beetle. He was cursing pretty freely, too, and calling me all sorts of things, of which 'crazy bitch' was the mildest, so it seemed a good time to make myself scarce. Placing the now-almost-empty container on his desk, I made for the door, pulling it wide to reveal the familiar rows of desks with their familiar occupants, every single one of them now craning their head to try and see what was going on in Aaron's office, and most of them babbling questions at me as I walked out.

I didn't say a word but simply sauntered down the aisle with a deliberate sway of my hips for Aaron's benefit and left, a dramatic exit only partially spoiled by having to come back to pick up my things from my desk, including the letter announcing my title to La Fleur.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. I had my fingers firmly crossed all the way to Lincoln's Inn Fields, half convinced that it would turn out to be some dreadful mistake and that all I'd achieved was to resign in spectacular fashion. Even while I was actually in the solicitors' offices, it was hard to accept my good fortune, as Mr Conway handled everything as though it were all completely ordinary and routine, calmly going through the paperwork before handing me a set of large iron keys. He also informed me that, in addition to the property, I'd been left just under one hundred thousand euros, after inheritance taxes had been settled.

Only as I left Clarke, Conway & Clarke did it really start to sink in, and suddenly my heels no longer seemed in contact with the pavement and my face broke into a grin so dopey, I soon began to get funny looks. I wanted to celebrate, but everybody I knew was at work or impossibly far away from central London, while the crowds around

Holborn tube and the smell of hot asphalt along Kingsway made me yearn to be far away too: in France, with a glass of chilled golden wine in my hand and not a care in the world.

A true romantic would have gone straight to St Pancras and simply left everything behind, but I have a stubborn, sensible streak, and even as I fought the temptation to sing out loud, in the back of my head I was making a list of what needed to be done and who I'd have to see before I left. It wasn't a very long list, though, as there was no current boyfriend and only a handful of people I knew in London, while my old friends were scattered from Bristol to Beijing.

In the end, I went back to my flat and set to work sorting things out, with the promise to myself of a bottle of wine if I made all the phone calls and sent off all the emails I needed to before six o'clock. I made it, just, but had no sooner popped the cork than a text arrived on my phone, from Vicky, telling me she was coming over. It was typical of her – of course knowing nothing about La Fleur – to be genuinely concerned about me because of what had happened at work, and also to be eager for gossip. I wanted to talk anyway and told her she could come, eliciting a ring on my doorbell so quickly she had to have been in my street already. She didn't waste time asking the vital question either.

'Well, that happened? What did you do?'

She was full of excitement, and something close to awe, so I gave her a quiet smile and poured us each a glass of wine before answering her.

'Don't you know? I emptied a water-cooler bottle into Aaron's lap.'

'But why?'

'Oh, just to cool him down a little. He wanted me to be his bit of stuff on a business trip to New York.'

She looked shocked and envious, but a little hurt too, so I went on quickly.

'It was on your behalf too, Vicky, and for the others as well. He can't just use women like that, and I'm sure you'd have done the same before Amsterdam if you'd known what he's really like.'

She gave a doubtful nod and sat down, toying with the stem of her glass as she spoke once more.

'I wouldn't. I wouldn't have had the guts, and I need my job. Anyway, he really likes you.'

'Yes, of course he does, because he hasn't had me yet. That's the way he thinks, Vicky, a conquest at a time. He probably has notches on his bedstead.'

'No, but he does call out your name when he comes.'

'You're joking!'

She obviously wasn't, as she'd gone cherry red and looked as if she was about to burst into tears. I'd been about to tell her all about La Fleur, but didn't want to seem to be boasting, and I was also fascinated to hear what she had to say. There was plenty.

'He does. That was the worst thing about what happened in Amsterdam. I thought I had a chance, just maybe, and I did like him so much. He's good in bed too, fun ... a bit kinky, but in a good way ...'

'Kinky? How kinky?'

'Oh, you know, the usual, but the way he does it meant I could let go completely, and I did. Then, after all sorts, and I do mean all sorts, when he finally came, he called out your name!'

'Sorry.'

'It not your fault, Elise, but can you imagine how I felt?'

'Yes, but what a prat! I can't think why he'd prefer me to you anyway - you're gorgeous - but couldn't he have held it in?'

'He explained, and he did apologise too, but it seems he's wanted you from the moment you walked into his office.'

'Why didn't he ask me out, then? Okay, I'd have refused, because I don't believe in mixing business with pleasure,

but why all the sleazy stuff?’

‘He’s not actually that confident with women. Apparently, it’s because he was at an all-boys’ public school and finds it hard to relate to women, especially beautiful women.’

‘So he says. More likely he was just trying to play the vulnerable little boy so he could get into your knickers.’

‘Well, he only told me that after we’d been to bed.’

‘Okay, so how about this: he has his fun with you, deliberately calls out my name when he’s coming to put you off, then gives you the vulnerable little boy routine knowing full well you’d pass it on to me to help his chances of getting into *my* knickers.’

‘Do you really think he could be that calculating?’

‘Yes! This is Aaron Curran we’re talking about, a man who makes his money by out-thinking his rivals in the City. He starts where Niccolò Machiavelli left off.’

‘I’m sure that’s not true. He says he’s in love with you.’

I answered with what was supposed to be a snort of contempt but which came out more like the sort of noise you’d expect from a distressed hamster.

She carried on. ‘I think he was telling the truth. He was very emotional, and he asked me not to tell you, so what you’ve just said doesn’t really make sense, don’t you think?’

It was hard to know what to think, let alone what to say. I’d always had Aaron down as the classically arrogant public schoolboy, rich enough and good-looking enough to get away with treating women as pretty things to be used and discarded at leisure. He also had a reputation for playing life as if it were a game of chess, with each move calculated to bring him maximum advantage in the long run, and while that might well include me as one in a long line of girls to amuse himself with, if he was planning on marrying at all, it would no doubt be to some high-flying female executive, or maybe the daughter of some major figure in the City. The fact that he’d told Vicky not to pass on what he’d said to me meant nothing, as he’d no doubt

known perfectly well that she would, if not immediately. Yet for all my scepticism, I couldn't help but feel a lingering sense of doubt.

Not that it mattered, because whatever his feelings for me might be, I'd burnt my bridges with a vengeance by humiliating him, and effectively in public, too. No man with any real pride was going to accept that, and certainly not Aaron Curran. I was off to France anyway, and had sent in official notice of my immediate resignation that afternoon in a curt, formal letter that showed no hint of remorse or even interest. Just possibly he deserved the benefit of the doubt, so after a few moments spent pretending to busy myself with cooking preparations, I turned back to Vicky.

'It's too late, anyway. I've been left some property in France, a small wine-growing estate in the Dordogne, so I'll have some income too. That's why I poured the water over him: I knew I could afford to do it. But if you do speak to him, please explain that I might have made a mistake. If his feelings for me are genuine, and only if they're genuine, then I'm sorry; but I wouldn't want to be with him anyway, so it's probably all for the best.'

There was a lump in my throat as I finished, even as I told myself that I was simply responding to his carefully judged manipulation. Vicky nodded in response and then took a swallow of wine, perhaps no more keen to delve deeper into the situation than I was. I couldn't help but feel sorry for her, so offered to cook for her, rustling up some fresh pasta and a pesto sauce with anchovies. We shared a second bottle of wine as we ate, leaving me feeling warm inside and a little dizzy by the time she left, but also strangely dissatisfied.

It was a Wednesday, and Vicky had work in the morning, so I'd drunk far more than she had, but it didn't matter. I could have another bottle if I wanted to, or go out on the town and come back at dawn, or wind up in some good-looking young man's bed in an effort to satisfy the sexual



tension inside me, but I knew it wouldn't work. What she'd said had unsettled me, and I found myself wondering what might have happened if circumstances had been different, if I hadn't been safe in the knowledge that I could leave.

I knew full well that I'd have reacted in much the same way, not actually tipping the contents of the water cooler over him, perhaps, but either declining his offer, or, more likely, telling him I'd come with him to New York, but only on the clear understanding that our relationship remained strictly professional. Nevertheless, now that I'd stood my ground, it didn't hurt to think about what might have happened if I'd accepted his offer, or had felt unable to refuse and found myself having to do as I was told.

Once he knew I was his, there'd have been no holding him back. He'd have been keen to make my status clear from the very start, both to me and to other people. We'd meet up, probably in an executive lounge at Heathrow, and his hand would go straight to the curve of my hip before planting a gentle but proprietorial pat on my bottom. I'd feel embarrassed and ashamed, but there would be nothing I could do. Maybe we'd be alone, and maybe I'd have threatened to pour the contents of the water cooler over him before giving in to the inevitable. There would be a cooler in the lounge, too, and he'd demand that I pour some of the water over my chest. I'd do it, splashing my face and neck, soaking my blouse and bra to leave my breasts showing through as if I was in some smutty, drunken wet T-shirt contest.

The thought made me shiver. All my life I've been a little goody two-shoes, well brought up and well educated, polite and reserved, also secure in the knowledge that I would never have to sell myself, which makes it great fun sometimes to imagine doing exactly that. I could do better, though, much better, and I was smiling at my own dirty imagination as I made for the bathroom. Proud I may be, and no man gets away with treating me that way in real

life, but I'm also strong enough to enjoy my fantasies without feeling bad. This one had a lot of potential, too, as I wouldn't even have the embarrassment of having to face him again and remember what I'd been thinking about the night before. Better still, there was no hurry at all, and the wine had made me feel easy and uninhibited.

I was feeling deliciously naughty as I kicked off my shoes and climbed into the shower, still fully dressed. The previous evening I wouldn't have dared do anything so silly, let alone on a weekday night, but none of that mattered any more. I was going to soak my clothes and play with myself in the shower while I imagined how Aaron Curran would have handled me, had he had the chance – making me dance for him in my soaking blouse, a slow striptease with my lower clothes coming off first to leave me in nothing but a sopping wet, see-through top before he put me on my back, or making me kneel in a chair with my bottom stuck up in the air, or just taking me up against the wall.

My hands were shaking so badly, it was hard to work the shower control, but I eventually managed to get it on and the water to the right temperature, just a little too cold to be comfortable. Next came one of those moments I enjoy the most: the final chance to stop being silly and back out, knowing full well I'm going to go ahead with whatever I'm planning. I held it for several seconds, with the shower head pointed away from me, although my feet were already wet, the cool water bubbling up through my stockings and between my toes, then twisted the shower head around to play it full in my face.

I was left gasping and spluttering, but that was exactly how I'd planned it, with my eyes already closed as I imagined Aaron making me stand still in the middle of the washroom at the executive lounge as he slowly and deliberately poured the entire contents of the water cooler over my head. He'd soak my hair, turning my glossy brown curls to sodden rats' tails. He'd order me to open my mouth

and make sure plenty went in, laughing as it bubbled out over my lips and ran down my neck and into my cleavage. He'd wet my breasts, his grey-blue eyes alight with amusement and arousal as he watched the water soak into the cotton to leave the lacy pattern of my bra on plain show, with the dark outlines of my nipples beneath.

Even as I let my imagination run, I'd done it, playing the shower hose over my head and into my face, soaking my jacket and blouse, the water pouring down to wet my skirt and legs. It felt good, very good, but I needed more, a long, slow rise before I finally gave myself what I was coming to need so badly. I leant back against the wall, playing the shower hose over my breasts and belly, enjoying the pressure on my skin as much as my dirty thoughts as I began to speculate on what Aaron Curran liked that was kinky. Vicky said it had helped her let go, which suggested that he'd restrained her in some way, perhaps handcuffing her to the bed or tying her hands behind her back while they had sex. It was an appealing thought and a nice added detail to my fantasy, imagining my wrists bound securely behind my back as the water was poured over my head and chest. I'd be defenceless, allowing him to have a good leisurely grope of my wet breasts before ripping my blouse wide and jerking my bra up to get me bare.

There was a twinge of regret for sixty-five pounds' worth of designer blouse as I ripped the sides open, but one has to make sacrifices. I wasn't going to need buttons at La Fleur anyway, and could wear it tied beneath my breasts, even with no bra if I felt so inclined. For now, though, it was ruined, open wide with my wet bra cups my only protection, and that not for long as I pulled them up sharply, the way I imagined Aaron getting me bare. He'd be gloating by then, both for my half-naked, vulnerable state and because it would be quite obvious that I was turned on, as helpless in mind as I was in body.

If I were tied up, he'd have to strip me, pulling off my skirt and panties, rolling down my stockings and making me step out of the puddle of sodden cloth around my feet to leave me naked from the waist down. I've always liked that. Topless is acceptable in the right circumstances, even rather chic, but bottomless is just plain rude. Not that I'd have anything at all covered with him – nothing important, anyway – and he would take full advantage of me. I'd probably be spread out on a table with my ankles held high and wide as he used me, or be made to kneel in the sodden ruins of my smart office suit and taken from behind with his hand twisted in the ropes that secured my wrists.

I'd slumped down and was now sitting in the corner of the shower with my skirt rucked up around my thighs and my legs wide to let me play the hose across the front of my panties as well as on my bare breasts. A little more attention to the right spot and I'd have come, but I was determined to hold off a little longer, deliberately teasing myself so that when the moment came, it would be stronger still. The thought of being tied up and had from behind was too good to miss, but I needed to be as close to the situation I was imagining as possible. It took a moment to wriggle out of my skirt and panties and stockings, all the while with my eyes closed, imagining Aaron's strong, male hands doing the work instead of my own.

Now nude from the waist down, I twisted over into a kneeling position on top of my wet clothes, face down and bottom up as if about to be penetrated. I couldn't tie myself and there was no Aaron to take me, but the powerful jets from the shower hose felt so good between my open cheeks and against my sex that my mouth was wide in ecstasy in an instant. Holding back was no longer an option, and I was playing the hose between my legs and using the rounded metal head to rub myself as I let my thoughts run wild. I'd be on the floor, bottomless, soaking wet, held by my tightly bound wrists as he pushed into me, hard and fast. He'd be

talking to me, too, telling me how rude I looked and how he'd always wanted me this way, stripped and helpless at his feet, every intimate detail of my body on plain show as he pushed his cock in and out of me.

His name was on my lips as I started to come, and I couldn't stop myself, screaming it out over and over again as wave after wave of pleasure swept through me - pleasure mingled with more than a little shame for my disgraceful behaviour, but that only made the ecstasy more exquisite. Besides, to judge from what Vicky had said, he was no better than me, so it was really only fair that I'd given in to my feelings, if not to him.

## 2

A week later, as I stepped from the air-conditioned cool of the taxi into the warmth of a French summer's day, it was as if I'd been transported back in time and was once again a little girl. From the crumbling stone arch over the gates to the black iron weathervane in the shape of a woodpecker at the top of the tower, La Fleur was everything I remembered: as beautiful, as romantic, every bit the fairytale castle I'd so often visited in my dreams. The taxi driver had got out to unload my things and was standing behind me in anticipation of his fare while occasionally making those odd little clicking noises Frenchmen substitute for wolf-whistles, but I didn't care.

It was all so wonderful that tears started in my eyes as I drank in the courtyard and crumbling yellow stone walls with their patina of red-leaved Russian vine, the faded, peeling grey-blue paint and rusting iron of the doors and the shutters that closed off every window. It seemed a good deal smaller, though, especially the tower, while the old red tiles on the roof were not only thick with grey and yellow lichens, but also broken in places. The gate into the old stables and gardens hung askew, while what little I could see of the hedges and flowerbeds had largely been given over to weeds. The only sign of life was on the right-hand side of the courtyard, where a short flight of stone steps led down into the winery, and where somebody appeared to have been trying to make a seat out of old barrel staves.

The taxi driver was beginning to get impatient, so I paid him off before returning to the contemplation of my property, my sense of awe now tinged with dismay.

Beautiful and romantic it might have been, enough even to tempt Monet or Fragonard with its state of picturesque dilapidation, but I wasn't planning on painting it: I had to live there, and it was in desperate need of some very expensive repairs. Suddenly, one hundred thousand euros didn't seem very much at all. However, I consoled myself that the vineyards stretching down towards the river would bring me in a decent income.

With the taxi gone, I was left in peace with just the faint singing of a cicada somewhere in among the bushes. I made for the side door, wheeling my baggage behind me, and had soon managed to find the right key for the huge, forged-iron lock. After surveying the exterior, and recalling my discovery before I left home that Aunt Adèle had spent the last year or so of her life in a care home, I was expecting cobwebs and dustsheets inside, so it was a pleasant surprise to find the interior gloomy but clean, more like what you'd expect of a holiday home on first arrival than a mothballed château. The electricity was on, too, allowing me to illuminate a long, low-ceilinged kitchen, all more or less as I remembered from nearly two decades before.

I lost my bearings a little at first, because the driver had brought me in by the courtyard, which was at the functional end of the house, while, on previous visits with my father, he'd always parked at the front, where a fine façade imperiously faced the sweeping carriage driveway and lawns extending to the valley beyond. Now that I was in the kitchen, everything began to make sense once more as I remembered the hall and the finely appointed but seldom used rooms that led off it to my right, and the old part of the house with the tower to my left. There were two staircases: a rickety, winding set of wooden stairs that led from the corner of the kitchen up to what had once been the servants' quarters, and which I'd been expected to use as a child, and the main stairway rising up from the hall in