



A Vow to Secure His Legacy (One Night With Consequences)

By Annie West



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But after two steamy weeks there are permanent consequences to their temporary affair...

Now with more than herself to think about, Imogen turns to Thierry to help, but the last thing she expected was for him to imprison her with a gold ring!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Annie West has devoted her life to an intensive study of tall, dark, charismatic heroes who cause the best kind of trouble in the lives of their heroines. As a sideline she's also researched dreamy locations for romance, from vibrant cities to desert encampments and fairytale castles. Annie lives with her family at beautiful Lake Macquarie. She loves to hear from readers and you can contact her at www.annie-west.com or at PO Box 1041, Warners Bay, NSW2282, Australia.

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'Tell me, *ma chérie*, will you be at the resort when we visit? It would be so much more convenient having the owner on the premises when we do the promotional photo shoot.' Her voice was intimately pitched, reaching him easily despite the chatter of the crowd in the hotel's grand reception room.

Thierry looked down into the publicist's face, reading the invitation in her eyes.

She was beautiful, sophisticated and, he guessed by the way she licked her bottom lip and pressed her slim frame closer, ready to be very accommodating. Yet he felt no flicker of excitement.

Excitement! He'd left that behind four years ago. Would he even recognise it after all this time?

Bitterness filled his mouth. He'd been living a half-life, hemmed in by conference-room walls and duty, forcing himself to care about minutiae that held no intrinsic interest. *Except those details had meant the difference between salvaging the family's foundering business portfolio and losing it.*

'I haven't decided. There are things I need to sort out here in Paris.'

But soon... A few months and he'd hand over the business to his cousin Henri and, more importantly, the managers Thierry had hand-picked. They'd guide Henri and maintain all Thierry had achieved, securing the Girard family fortune and leaving him free at last.

'Think about it, Thierry.' Her lips formed a glossy pout as she swayed close. 'It would be very...agreeable.'

'Of course I will. The idea is very tempting.'

But not enough, he realised with abrupt clarity, to drag him from Paris. These meetings would bring him closer to divesting himself of his burdens. That held far more allure than the prospect of sex with a svelte blonde.

Hell! He was turning into a cold-blooded corporate type. Since when had his libido taken second place to business?

Except his libido wasn't involved. That was the shocking thing. At thirty-four Thierry was in his prime. He enjoyed sex and his success with women showed he had a talent, even a reputation, for it. Yet he felt nothing

when this gorgeous woman invited him into her bed.

Hadn't he known taking on the family business would destroy him? It was sucking the life out of him. It was...

His gaze locked on a figure on the far side of the room, and his thoughts blurred. His pulse accelerated and his chest expanded as he hefted a startled breath.

His companion murmured something and stretched up to kiss his cheek. Automatically, Thierry returned the salutation, responding to her farewell as she joined a group who'd just entered the hotel ballroom.

Instantly, his gaze swung back to the far side of the room. The woman who'd caught his eye stood poised, her weight on one foot, as if about to leave.

He was already pushing his way through the crowd when she straightened and drew back her shoulders. Delectable, creamy shoulders they were, completely bared by that strapless dress. The white material was lustrous in the light of the chandeliers, drawing a man's eyes to the way it fitted her breasts and small waist like a glove before flaring in an ultra-feminine swirl to the floor.

Thierry swallowed, his throat dry despite the champagne he'd drunk. A familiar tightness in his groin assured him that his libido was alive and kicking after all. Yet he barely registered relief. He was too busy drinking her in.

In a room packed with little black dresses and sleek, glittery outfits, this woman stood out like *grand cru* from cheap table wine.

She turned her head, presenting him with an engaging profile, and Thierry realised she was speaking. He halted, surprised that his walk had lengthened to an urgent stride.

Her companion was a gamine-faced woman, pointing out people to the woman in white. The woman in white and scarlet, he amended, taking in the pattern of red flowers cascading around her as she moved. There was white and scarlet on her arms too. She wore long gloves to her elbows, reminding him of photos he'd seen of his *grand-mère* at balls and parties decades ago.

Thierry's gut clenched as the woman lifted one gloved hand to her throat in a curiously nervous gesture. Who knew gloves could be erotic? But there was no mistaking the weighted feeling in his lower body. He imagined stripping the glove down her arm, centimetre by slow centimetre, kissing his way to her fingers before divesting her of that dress and starting on her body.

Why was she nervous? A shy woman wouldn't wear such a glorious, blatantly sexy concoction.

Heat sparked. His gaze roved her dark, glossy hair swept up from a slim neck. She had full red lips, a retroussé nose and heart-shaped face. Curves that made him ache to touch.

She wasn't just pretty; she was sexy on a level he couldn't resist.

The old Thierry Girard wasn't dead after all.

'You're sure you don't mind?' Saskia sounded doubtful.

Imogen smiled. 'Of course not. I appreciate all you've done these past few days but I'm fine. I'll drink champagne and meet interesting people and enjoy myself.' If she said it enough she might stop being daunted by the glittering crowd long enough to believe it. 'Now go.' She made a shooing gesture, nodding towards the knot of fashion buyers Saskia had pointed out. 'Make the most of this opportunity.'

'Well, for half an hour. I'll look for you then.'

Imogen blinked, overwhelmed anew by the kindness of her sister Isabelle's best friend. Saskia had not only shown her where Izzy had worked and lived, but shared stories about their time together, filling the black well of Imogen's grief with tales that had made Imogen smile for the first time in months.

Saskia had even presented her with the dresses Izzy had made for herself, eye-catching outfits Imogen would never have considered wearing. But here, in Paris, it felt right, a homage to her talented sister. Imogen smoothed her hand down the fabulous satin dress.

'Don't be silly. Go and mingle, Saskia. I don't expect to see you again tonight.' She smiled, making a fair attempt at Izzy's bantering tone, even tilting her head to mimic her sister. 'Since you snaffled me an invitation, I intend to make the most of my only society event. I don't need you cramping my style.'

'Isabelle said you weren't good with lots of new people but obviously you've changed.' Saskia's lips twitched. 'Okay. But join me if you want. I'll be around.'

Imogen kept her smile in place as Saskia left, ignoring the trepidation that rose at being alone, adrift in this sea of beautiful people.

Stupid. This isn't alone. Alone is discovering you're dying and there's no one left in the world who loves you enough to feel more than pity.

Imogen shoved aside the thought. She refused to retreat into self-pity. She was in Paris. She'd make the most of every moment of the next six weeks—Paris, Venice, London, even Reykjavik. She'd wring every drop of joy from each experience before she returned home to face the inevitable.

She swung around, her full-length skirt swishing around her legs, and refused to feel out of place because other women were in cocktail dresses. Isabelle's dress was too wonderful not to wear.

'*Puis-je vous offrir du champagne?*' The deep, alluring voice sent heat straight to the pit of her stomach, as if she'd inadvertently taken a gulp of whisky.

French was a delicious language. But surely it had been designed for a voice like this? A voice that sent shivers of sensual pleasure across her skin.

She jerked her head around and then up.

Something she couldn't identify slammed into her. Shock? Awareness? Recognition?

How had she not seen him before? He stood out from the crowd. Not just because of his height but because of his sheer presence. Her skin prickled as if she'd walked into a force field.

She met eyes the colour of rich coffee, dark and inviting, and her pulse pounded high in her throat as if her

heart had dislodged and tried to escape. Deep-set eyes crinkled at the corners, fanning tiny lines in a tanned face. A man more at home outdoors than at a fashionable party?

Except his tall frame was relaxed, as if he wore a perfect dinner jacket every night to mingle with a who's who of French society. His mouth curled up in a tantalising almost-smile that invited her to smile back. Was that why her lips tingled?

Dark hair, long enough to hint at tousled thickness. A determined chin. Strong cheekbones that made her think of princes, balls and half-forgotten nonsense.

Imogen swallowed, the muscles in her throat responding jerkily. She cleared her throat.

'Je suis désolée, je ne parle pas français.' It was one of her few textbook phrases.

'You don't speak French? Shall we try English?' His voice was just as attractive when he spoke English with that sensuous blurring accent. Pleasure tickled Imogen's backbone, and her stomach clenched.

'How did you guess? Am I that obvious?'

'Not at all.' His gaze did a quick, comprehensive sweep from her head to her hem that ignited a slow burn deep inside. A burn that transferred to her cheeks as his eyes met hers and something passed between them, as tangible as the beat of her heart. 'You are utterly delightful and feminine but not obvious.'

Imogen felt the corners of her mouth lift. Flirting with a Frenchman. There was one to cross off her bucket list. Back home she hadn't been good at flirtation, but here it seemed she didn't have to do anything at all.

'Who are you?' Funny the way dying helped you overcome a lifetime's reserve. Once she'd have been too overawed to speak to a man who looked so stunningly male. He was one of the most attractive men she'd ever met and despite that aura of latent power he was definitely the most suave. Even that prominent nose looked perfect in his proud face. Just as well his eyes danced or he'd be too daunting.

'My apologies.' He inclined his head in a half-bow that was wholly European and totally charming. 'My name is Thierry Girard.'

'Thierry.' She tried it on her tongue. It didn't sound the same as when he said it. She couldn't quite get the little breath of air after the T, but she liked it.

'And you are?' He stepped closer, his gaze intent. She caught a scent that made her think of mountains—of clear air and pine trees.

'I'm Imogen Holgate.'

'Imogen.' He nodded. 'A pretty name. It suits you.'

Pretty? She hadn't been called that in ages. The last person to do so had been her mum, trying to persuade her into bright colours, saying she hid behind the dark suits she wore for work.

'And now, Imogen, would you like some champagne?' He lifted a glass.

'I can get my own.' She turned to look for a waiter.

'But I brought it especially for you.' She looked down and realised he was holding two glasses, not one. This stranger had singled her out in a room of elegant women and brought her champagne? For a moment she just stared. It was so different from her world, where she paid her way and never had to field compliments from men about anything other than her work.

He raised the other glass, giving her a choice of either. His eyes turned serious. 'Whichever you prefer.'

Her cheeks flushed. He thought she was stalling because she didn't trust him. In case he'd slipped something into one of the glasses.

It was the sort of thing that would have occurred to her once, for in her real life she was always cautious. But right now she was struggling to absorb the fact she was with the most charming, attractive man she'd ever met. The fact that he offered both reassured her.

She took a glass, meeting his eyes, ignoring the tingly sensation where their fingers brushed. 'Is it champagne from the Champagne region?'

'Of course. That's the only wine that can use the name. You like champagne?'

'I've never tried it.'

He blinked, astonishment on his face. '*Vraiment?*' 'Really.' Imogen smiled at his shock. 'I'm from Australia.'

'No, no.' He shook his head. 'I happen to know the Australians import French wine as well as exporting theirs. Champagne travels the world.'

She shrugged, enjoying his disbelief. 'That doesn't mean I've drunk it.' She eyed the wine with excitement. What better place to taste her first champagne than Paris?

'In that case, the occasion deserves a toast. To new friends.' His smile transformed his face from fascinating to magnetic. Imogen inhaled sharply, her lungs pushing at her ribcage. Her fingers tightened on the glass. That smile, this man, made her feel acutely aware of herself as a woman with desires she'd all but forgotten.

Stop it! You've seen men smile before.

Not like this. This was like standing in a shaft of sunshine. And it was an amazing antidote to the chill weight of despair. How could she dwell on despair when he looked at her that way?

She lifted her glass. 'And to new experiences.'

She sipped, feeling the effervescence on the roof of her mouth. 'I like that it's not too sweet. I can taste...pears, is it?'

He drank too, and she was riveted by the sight of his strong throat and the ripple of movement as he swallowed.

Imogen frowned. There was nothing sexy about a man's throat. Was there? There never had been before and

she worked surrounded by men.

But none of them were Thierry Girard.

'You're right. Definitely pears.' He watched her over the rim of the glass. 'To new experiences? You have some planned?'

Imogen shrugged. 'A few.'

'Tell me.' When she hesitated he added, 'Please. I'd like to know.'

'Why?' The word shot out, and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. Typical of her to sound gauche rather than sophisticated. She just wasn't used to male attention. She was the serious, reserved sister, not the gregarious one with a flock of admirers.

'Because I'm interested in you.'

'Seriously?' As soon as the word escaped heat scalded her throat and face. She squeezed her eyes shut. 'Tell me I didn't say that.'

A rich chuckle snagged at her senses, making her eyes pop open. If his smile was gorgeous, his laugh was... She couldn't think of a word to describe the molten-chocolate swirl enveloping her.

'Why don't you tell me about these new experiences instead?'

Imogen opened her mouth to ask if he was really interested in hearing about them then snapped it shut.

Here was a wonderful new adventure, flirting with a gorgeous French hunk over champagne. She wasn't going to spoil it by being herself. She was going to go with the flow. This trip was about stepping out of her shell, tasting life's excitement.

Chatting with Thierry Girard was the most exciting thing that had happened to her in ages.

'I've got a list. Things I want to do.'

'In Paris?' She loved the way his eyes crinkled at the corner when he smiled.

'Not just here. I'm away from home for a month and a half but I'm only in Paris a fortnight.' She shook her head. 'I'm already realising my plans were too ambitious. I won't fit everything in.'

'That gives you a reason to return. You can do more on your next visit.'

His eyes were almost warm enough to dispel the wintry chill that descended at his words. There'd be no return visit, no second chance.

Users Review

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Anh Huckaby:

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