

# THE SEVENTH UNICORN

By Kelly Jones  
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## EXCERPT

### *PROLOGUE*

The pain came in the night as the old nun said it would. Adèle sat up, placing her hand over the swell of her belly, feeling frightened and unsure, though the discomfort itself was no greater than the cramps of her monthly bleeding. And then the pain subsided. She lay again, the rhythmic breathing of the young novice sleeping nearby filling the void in the tiny cell they shared. “Not yet,” Adèle whispered to herself. “Wait.”

She tried to return to her sleep, but could not. She had been dreaming. It was the dream that had come to her each night since she’d arrived, a scene so familiar she could pull it up with ease, a dream that did not require slumber. Each detail as clear and precise as the drawings she had carried to the garden that day tucked inside her book of prayers.

The air is ripe with the clove scent of carnations, the fragrance of the orange trees, the damp earth. Adèle has come to the garden to draw, as she often does, under the pretense of prayer and meditation. She slips one of the drawings, which she had begun during her last visit, from the prayer book. It is a drawing of her sister Claude playing the harmonium, attended by a handmaiden who works the bellows. With pen and ink Adèle has created the texture of the satin and velvet of their garments. On the right she has placed a unicorn, symbol of a maiden’s purity, an animal that could be tamed only by a virgin. She has drawn a lion, the symbol of strength, on the left. The family arms, *gules, a bend, charged with three crescents argent*, is hoisted on banners held by the two beasts. Now Adèle takes out pen and ink and with skillful strokes she encloses these figures inside a garden that resembles an island. She draws rabbits and a dog within the island, then places several of these small creatures, adding a fox and sheep, in the background as if floating in air. She sits for a moment examining her work, quite pleased, and then she places the drawing on the sun-warmed bench to dry while she goes to gather flowers to complete her scene.

When she returns, a man stands near the bench. He has picked up the drawing and examines it with great concentration.

She knows he is the tapestry weaver. She had watched as he and the older man arrived from Brussels this morning. Have they completed their meetings with her father? Suddenly she feels very bold. “You are the *tapisserie* from Brussels?”

She has startled him and he turns. “I am.”

“Please,” she says, reaching for the drawing. He places it in her hand and for several moments they stand not speaking.

“You are an artist of impressive skill,” the man says. She smiles but does not reply, though she can see he is entranced.

“The woman in the drawing,” he asks, “a woman of fantasy?”

“My sister, my eldest sister, Claude.”

“Your sister is very beautiful.”

“Yes.”

“And a musician?”

“My father has encouraged her musical talent to attract and entertain a young knight, or a nobleman, perhaps even a prince. Our family is of humble origin. Merchants, drapers from Lyon.”

The weaver nods as if he has heard the stories, but he seems as surprised as Adèle that she would speak of such private family affairs. Yet, isn't it well known that the Le Vistes had attained great wealth and property in Lyon, then advanced their political position in Paris and married well? And isn't it known that despite Jean Le Viste's rapid ascent in the administration, as far as he has risen in the service of the king, he has failed to attain the noble status and royal title he so desires? Her father, Adèle muses, is no more lord or knight than a simple *tapissier* from Brussels. Yet she knows her father would not approve of this intimacy they now share.

“My father,” she asks, “he will use an artist from Paris to design the tapestries?”

“It is his wish. There are many skillful painters in Paris.”

She picks a daisy from her bouquet and holds it to her nose for a moment, then studies it carefully. “But the finest workshops, the weavers, are in Brussels?”

“Yes,” he answers, “the finest weavers are in Brussels.”

“Has a theme been chosen?”

“There has been much discussion. Your father is one to think on a grand scale. He wishes to celebrate the family's accomplishments, his appointment as *président de la cour des aides*, but also the anniversary of his marriage to your mother.”

“Politics,” she says, slowly shaking her head as she scatters the flowers she has collected on the bench. She sits, pulls a large book from below, nestles it in her lap, and places the parchment upon the book. Then, using the flowers as a model, she begins to draw, arranging pansies and daisies around the small animals in the background. “And how many pieces will my father commission?” she asks. “Does he wish to cover all the walls in the château? Or will this be a simple *chambre*?”

“There has been talk of seven panels.”

“Seven is a good number.” She pushes back her long hair, which has fallen across her cheek.

The *tapissier* watches as she fills the background with flowers. “*Mille-fleurs*,” he says and she smiles, aware it is a style currently fashionable in the design of tapestry. When she has finished, she reaches down, picks up a wooden box below the bench and takes out a soft cloth. She wipes the ink from the point of her drawing pen. As she places the pen, ink, and cloth inside the box the weaver asks, “May I?” He has noticed the prayer book at her feet and the other drawings slipped between the pages.

“You may.” She picks up the prayer book and hands it to him. And then, with a shameless gesture that again startles them both, she brushes the flowers to the ground, inviting him to sit beside her. He hesitates for a moment, then he sits.

There are four more drawings, five total, each depicting a woman on a garden island with a unicorn and lion. He examines each with great interest.

He holds up the drawing of a woman weaving a caplet out of flowers.

“My sister Jeanne,” she says.

“Your sister Jeanne is also very beautiful.”

“Yes.”

He studies the drawing in which a hunting bird is perched on the gloved hand of the young woman.

“My sister Geneviève,” she says. “And, yes, she is also very beautiful. And a skilled hunter.”

He comes to the drawing of a woman holding a mirror in which she has caught the image of the unicorn cradled in her lap. The lion to the woman’s right supports a banner embellished with the Le Viste family arms.

“My mother,” the girl says.

“There is great sadness in her eyes,” the weaver replies thoughtfully.

“Alas, what is there but sadness for a woman who produces no sons?”

“A woman who produces but four daughters?” he says with a smile. “Four beautiful daughters.” And even now she feels her own smile, a rise of warmth and, then . . . great pain as this image fades.

She is back in the tiny cell, the scent of the garden replaced by the dry scent of stone. The cramps have come again, this time harder, deeper. Yet still she thinks, *it is not time*. She pulls up the memory once more, the final drawing as the *tapissier* studies it carefully.

The woman in this drawing does not possess the delicate countenance of the others; her face is long and drawn. She stands, holding a lance in her right hand, her left hand caressing the horn of the unicorn, which more closely resembles a goat than the elegant beasts in the other drawings. The small animals in the background are collared or chained.

“The young woman in this drawing?” he asks, his eyes moving from the parchment to Adèle’s face. His brows rise and his eyes tighten, revealing his confusion, as if he understands she has drawn herself but cannot see the likeness. Perhaps he wonders why she has chosen to portray herself in this manner.

And then, again, the pain. She feels the break of water between her legs, the bedclothes damp. The smell of blood. She calls to the young nun, who awakens. “Now,” Adèle whispers.

The old nun arrives quickly. The pains are closer now and more intense. Adèle sees the horror in the young nun’s eyes. And the blood, deep red, and then Adèle cries out.

She sees the tapestries, brought from the workshop in Brussels. Six now, her impatient father unable to wait for the complete set, and Adèle has yet to see the seventh.

She can no longer hold these images. The pain has overtaken her, so fierce it demands her entire body and spirit.

The old woman stays with her, as does the young nun, through the morning chants coming from the chapel, through the midday, the evening. Adèle sees the fatigue in the old woman’s eyes. Just inches from her face, the nun’s lips move in silent prayer, and Adèle’s prayer is only that she will have the strength to bring this innocent child into the world. But the pain takes so much from her, she cannot pray in a proper way. Words will not form. Again it is night; the only light comes from the flickering candles in the cell. Adèle has an urge to push, to push with all her might.

“Not yet, my daughter,” the old woman says, and even this seems to be a prayer. She touches Adèle’s face with a damp cloth and massages her legs, her arms, her stomach with warm oil, speaking always in a soft, steady voice. She presses a cup to her lips.

Wine with herbs to sate the pain.

Finally, the woman commands, “Now, Adèle, push.” There are others in the room, holding her arms, her legs, pulling her up as if this child is a ripe fruit ready to drop to the earth. “Push,” the old nun whispers, and Adèle does, again and again until the woman exclaims, “*Deo gratias, Deo gratias!*”

With a strength that seems to rise from outside her, Adèle gazes upon the child. He is so very small, but when he gives off a hardy cry, Adèle’s heart leaps and she whispers her own prayer of praise.

The old nun is bathing him. The early morning light reveals blood everywhere—on the child, on the bedcovers, on the rushes that have been placed on the floor, on Adèle’s legs, on her feet. The woman swathes him tightly for warmth, and when she hands him to the young nun who carries him from the room, once more Adèle cries out.

“Rest, my daughter, rest,” the old nun says, and Adèle closes her eyes. Again, she sees the crimson red. At first it is blood, but then . . . she can see how pleased her father is when first he gazes upon the tapestries, the rich red threads, the blue, and gold. And then his discovery, and then the rage. But now it is gone. She no longer feels the anger, or the pain, but a peaceful calm, and she is walking once more in a garden.

## CHAPTER ONE

The Convent of Sainte Blandine, a two-story structure of rustic stone, appeared to be abandoned. Weeds and wild vegetation rose up on either side of a narrow dirt path leading to the front door and reached their way into a small orchard of unpruned fruit trees. Rows of dilapidated trellises, choked with grapevines, stood among discarded wooden crates on the opposite side of the path. The north side of the building was covered with ivy, eating away at the brick chimney, which must have been a more recent addition, as it did not match the rest of the large stone structure. Several bricks had worked their way loose and had tumbled to the ground where they lay in a pile. The air, still except for the slightest breeze rustling through the trees, gave no indication of recent life or occupancy.

Alex Pellier stood in the path and examined the map again. She’d followed the directions precisely—south from Lyon, past the village of Vienne. The highway from Lyon was carefully labeled, then every turn and jolt and bump—and there had been many—on both the gravel and dirt roads marked and identified. The map had come tucked inside the letter from the Mother Superior.

Alex approached the large wooden door, perplexed by the deserted appearance of the building and grounds. She knocked and waited. No answer. She knocked again.

Surely someone would come; she had an appointment.

The letter from the Mother Superior, in an unsteady yet still graceful cursive hand, written with an old-fashioned ink pen, had arrived at the Cluny addressed to Madame Demy, the Director of the museum. The language of the letter was as ornate and embellished as the script: “Elegant embroidered altar linens trimmed with exquisite handmade lace, priceless tapestries of the finest quality dating back to the convent’s founding in the thirteenth century, an extensive library, including medieval manuscripts of great value.” According to Reverend Mother Alvère, the convent wished to dispose of

the properties before the move to Lyon. All items would be available for viewing the last weekend of May.

Alex knocked again, but still no answer. Had the nuns already left for the retirement convent in Lyon? It had been just two days since Alex received a second letter from the Mother Superior, a reply to Alex's request for a date to visit. An appointment had been set for this very day at seven P. M. It was now ten after.

She knocked again. Had she driven all the way from Paris for nothing?

After several more minutes, she walked to the side of the building and put her face to a window, which was boarded up from inside, and peered between the gaps. She could see nothing but the faintest sliver of light cast on a dark wall.

She returned to the front entrance and knocked again with greater force. Still, nothing. She was about to try the door when a small window on the upper portion opened. The face of a woman appeared, small and wrinkled, framed in a stiff white hood and wimple.

For several moments the woman stared, then in a raspy, irritated voice she said, "*Bonjour.*"

"*Bonjour,*" Alex replied. She introduced herself and explained that she was from the Musée National du Moyen Age, the Cluny in Paris, and that she had an appointment with the Mother Superior.

"*Elle est malade,*" the old woman replied tersely. There was no indication that the nun would invite Alex in. It was clear she would not be able to speak to the Mother Superior who, according to the nun, was ill.

Alex unlatched her briefcase and pulled out the first letter from Mother Alvère. She handed it through the small window to the nun. As the woman read, her eyes squinting into tiny slits, Alex explained that she was staying in Lyon that evening, and it was a good one-hour round trip. Couldn't she come in and take a quick look?

The old nun did not reply, her eyes moving slowly across the page, her thin lips set in a scowl. She looked up once at Alex, then back to the letter as if it contained some secret code or hidden meaning.

"Madame Demy?" the woman asked.

"Madame Pellier," Alex replied. Perhaps she should have presented the second letter, the most recent, addressed to Alexandra Pellier.

She pulled it from her briefcase. The old woman reached out and took the second letter, not bothering to return the first. The downward turn of her mouth remained fixed.

Alex stood, her face growing warm with impatience while the woman read the letter as tediously as she had read the first.

Finally, the woman handed Alex the letters, gazed at her for a moment, then said in a low voice, "Madame Pellier," as she motioned with a gnarled hand.

The door swung open, Alex stepped inside and followed the stooped little body, which moved surprisingly fast, through a vestibule and down a dark hall. With her old-fashioned habit, yards of coarse black cloth, hood, and wimple, the woman looked nothing like the modern nuns Alex saw in Paris with their knee-length skirts and permed hair.

The place smelled of old stone and something else . . . a nursing home, Alex thought as they continued down the narrow hall. Yes, the scent of ancient bodies, triggering a memory from years ago, a visit to her great-grandmother in a nursing home.

Yet there was no evidence of other inhabitants. Alex knew the order itself was dying, that there were less than a dozen remaining nuns, ranging in age from sixty-nine to ninety-two. They were to be sent to a retirement convent owned by another order in Lyon, by directive of Philippe Bonnisseau, Archbishop of Lyon. Sainte Blandine's was to be renovated and converted into a hotel.

They turned into a second hall, as eerily quiet as the first, the stillness disturbed only by their soft footsteps on the stone floor, the slightest *click-clack* of rosary beads hanging from the nun's belt. Abruptly, the woman stopped and motioned Alex into a small room.

Alex's eyes moved quickly, taking in as much as she could in the dim light. The walls were covered with shelves, some sagging in the middle from the weight of hundreds of books. A table and chair sat in the middle of the room, a wooden desk in front of the bookshelves on the opposite wall. The air was thick and smelled of dust. Tiny motes floated in a narrow stream of light coming in from a single small window. The nun lit two wall sconces, a lamp on the desk, another on the table. As Alex scanned the shelves, a knot of anticipation tightened inside her. Could the Convent of Sainte Blandine truly possess authentic medieval manuscripts, as Mother Alvère had implied in her letter? She turned to explain that she was particularly interested in earlier works dating back to the convent's founding, but the nun had somehow managed to slip out of the room.

Alex approached the first shelf. Books were crammed in, one on top of another. She pulled one out and dusted it off. *Théologie de la Trinité*, published in the early 1930s, with the proper *Nihil Obstat* on the back of the title page. Probably of value to a book collector, but not a medieval museum. As her eyes moved up and down, she wondered if there really was anything old enough to be of interest to the Cluny. Nothing specific stood out, but ancient manuscripts were often rebound. Yet finding anything here without some kind of guide or catalogue would be almost impossible. *Needle in a haystack*. She glanced back at the door, but the nun had not returned.

She pulled off a couple more books and could see others jammed behind these. She lifted several out, taking only those that appeared to be the oldest, and carried them to the desk. Quickly she flipped through them and found nothing. She moved on to the second wall. She glanced at her watch. She had no idea how long she would be allowed in the library, and she also wanted to look at the tapestries described in the Mother Superior's letter. Her thoughts turned to her young daughter, Soleil. It was the French word for "sun," and she truly was the light in Alex's life.

Alex had dropped her off with Simone and Pierre Pellier, Thierry's parents, in Lyon. She had told Simone to put Soleil to bed by eight-thirty, though Alex knew that Simone would most likely keep her up, simply for the pleasure of her company. Simone doted on her granddaughter—the only child of her only child.

Alex sat now, her eyes moving up and down the shelves. She liked the idea of actually *discovering* a medieval treasure. Madame Demy generally turned any invitation that seemed somewhat dubious over to Alex. She'd been to homes in Paris and the French countryside where the items purported to be of medieval origin turned out to be nothing more than latter-day imitations. Yet there was always the possibility. During times of political upheaval in France, property had been confiscated or looted and items ended up in the most improbable places. A set of tapestries now displayed in a New

York museum had been found in a barn, used to wrap produce. And who knew what might be discovered in a remote monastery or a convent undergoing renovation . . . a manuscript or altarpiece seen by the monks or nuns solely as an object of religious inspiration, but truly a work of art hidden away for centuries. Possibilities excited Alex, whereas Madame Demy preferred a sure thing—a printed catalogue with proper description and provenance noted. They both knew there was a finite number of authentic medieval items of museum quality, and there was fierce competition for acquisition. Once a piece entered a museum’s collection, it was basically off the market forever. That in itself was enough motivation for Alex to check out every prospect, however unlikely.

As Alex scanned the shelves, a group of worn leather covers on the upper shelf in the middle section caught her eye. She walked over and, standing on tiptoe, attempted to pull down one of the books. They were so tightly packed it was a struggle. Finally, she worked one loose. After a good yank, the book fell from the shelf, hit Alex on the head, then came apart, sending pages and dust flying.

Alex dropped to her hands and knees and began gathering pages, which, she could see from the print, were not any older than anything else she had found. Then her eyes rested on a page that didn’t appear to be the same as the others scattered about the floor. It was penned by hand, the ink faded and browned with age. It was written on parchment, the bottom ripped off. Alex picked it up. It had the texture of ancient parchment, almost a brittle feel. She placed it on the floor in the light coming in from the window, hunched over it, and began to read.

The language was archaic French. Some of the words she could decipher, others she could not. In places the ink was faded, the script unreadable. It appeared to be a poem. She read, translating the words:

*She met him in the garden*

*A chance encounter*

*But drawn as if by fate . . .*

*. . . amidst the scent of . . .*

The garden itself was described in detail—daisies, pansies, lilies of the valley, carnations, periwinkle, and roses.

*He a simple tapissier, she a maiden fair . . .*

*. . . the most fragrant blossom of them all . . .*

Alex laughed quietly. Rather “flowery” language. She continued to read a lengthy description of the trees in the garden, which included, among those she could translate, oak, pine, holly, and orange.

Then something about the young woman . . . well . . . as close as Alex could translate it into modern terms—she laughed out loud at this thought—*a fruit ripe for plucking*.

Interesting. But hardly a medieval manuscript. It was a little poem, scratched out on faded parchment, and not a particularly skillful literary achievement at that. She should get back to her work. Yet she was curious. She read on.

*To deny this love no truer sin*

*so unto the house of the women*

*who loved the Lord . . .*

*The convent?* Alex wondered. Here the verse was torn. She glanced at the pages

scattered on the floor, wondering if the piece torn from the bottom had also been tucked away in the book. The corner of a sheet stuck out from behind several pages. She pulled it out. It appeared to be a second page to the poem.

*The labor of their love . . .*

*buried there beneath the stone . . .*

More faded words.

*and once more their love to blossom,*

*the fruit, the passion of their love*

*to be found in the village near . . .*

As Alex sat on the cold stone floor, staring down at the parchment, she wondered—was this merely a romantic little verse, penned by some sexually frustrated nun? Or was it more? It was very old. She could tell—from the language, from the parchment.

She heard a movement in the hall and looked up as the wrinkled, frowning nun entered the room. The woman's eyes darted across the floor. She glanced at the pile of books on the desk, made a clucking sound, then mumbled something like, "*Monsieur le Docteur Henri Martineau,*" or was it Marceau? "*est arrivé.*" Alex was unsure of the nun's exact words, but it was quite clear, as the old woman stuffed the books back on the shelf, that Alex's time was up.

Alex gathered the pages from the floor. The nun stooped with surprising agility and picked up the torn poem as if it were just another page. She reached out for Alex's pages, inserted them all back inside the leather cover, placed it on a lower shelf, then motioned for Alex to follow her once more.

"Perhaps I could take a look at the tapestries?" Alex asked.

"*Non aujourd'hui,*" the nun replied. Not today.

In the hall, a nun in a wheelchair appeared, pushed slowly by another nun. Alex and the old woman stepped aside to let them pass. The pushing nun nodded. The woman in the wheelchair looked up and smiled. So, Alex thought, there were other residents still in the convent. She had wondered if the old wrinkled doorkeeper was the only inhabitant.

"*Demain?*" Alex asked. "Could I return tomorrow?"

No reply from the nun as they turned into the first hall and ran into another nun, escorting a tall, thin, angular man. They both wore somber expressions and neither spoke. The man was young, probably in his mid-thirties, and pale, with blond hair and a thin mustache, so light in color it nearly blended in with his skin. *The doctor attending to the old Mother Superior?* Alex wondered as they passed.

"*Merci,*" Alex thanked the nun as she was led to the front door. "*Demain?*" she asked again.

"*Au revoir, Madame Pellier,*" the nun said, and nothing more. She opened the door.

Again Alex found herself standing outside the convent, a warm irritation rising along the back of her neck. She wanted to take a look at the tapestries, so she would have to return the following day. Maybe Mother Alvère, who had issued the invitation, would be available tomorrow.

Alex started toward her car. A second car, a dark-green vehicle, was now parked beside hers.

It was half past eight when Alex arrived at the Pelliers'. She was greeted at the front door by Marie, the Pelliers' nurse and caregiver. Pierre, who was not well, had retired, but Simone was sitting in the kitchen with Soleil. They were eating chocolate ice cream and gingersnap cookies. In her arms, Soleil cradled a beautiful porcelain doll that looked surprisingly like a real baby. With a tiny silver spoon, she lifted small scoops of melting chocolate ice cream up to the doll's little rosebud mouth.

Soleil bounced up and ran to her mother. "Mama, Mama, *regarde ma belle poupée!*"

Each time they visited the Pelliers', Simone would present Soleil with an expensive gift. Simone and Pierre had spoiled Thierry, who came to them late in life, and Alex did not want this for her daughter. Yet she said nothing. After Thierry died, Alex swore they would stay close to Soleil's grandparents, but it seemed, particularly since Alex had taken the position at the Cluny, they had so little time to visit. Because of Pierre's ill health, the Pelliers were unable to travel to Paris. He had recently suffered a second stroke. He could no longer speak and was now confined to a wheelchair. Yet there was still something in his eyes, an alertness, and Alex knew that he still cherished these visits.

"*Oui, elle est belle, Sunny,*" Alex said to her daughter. "*Grandmère est très genereuse.*"

"*Oui, très genereuse,*" the child replied, smiling at her grandmother as she stroked the doll's cheek. "*Merci, Grandmère.*"

Marie had saved dinner in the oven. Alex thanked her, then sat down to eat as the older woman and Soleil finished their ice cream. As Alex visited with her mother-in-law, Soleil spoke to the doll in a soft voice. "You are a very special child," she said in English. "And I will speak to you in English so you will be bilingual."

Soleil's words made Alex smile. Since she was a toddler, just learning to communicate verbally, Alex had encouraged her daughter to speak both French and English.

After tucking Soleil into bed, Alex sat with Simone in the living room. Marie brought in a tray with cups and a carafe of coffee, then excused herself.

The room was large and elegant, yet comfortably furnished with authentic antiques—Louis XIV chairs, an Aubusson tapestry, imported oriental carpets, a large marble fireplace, and several paintings and sculptures Pierre had collected over the years—a Rodin, a Poussin, a small Delacroix drawing.

Simone rose to refresh their coffee. Even as she aged, Madame Pellier was a beautiful woman, with a regal, graceful posture. As a young woman, she had been an actress, but had given up the stage when she married the wealthy, dashing Pierre Pellier. Snowy white hair swirled around her face. Her wide-set blue eyes still shone, not only with outward beauty, but also with a deep inner strength and splendor. *Belle-mère*, the French word for mother-in-law. "Beautiful mother," the literal translation, and with Simone Pellier, Alex thought it truly fit.

"*S'il vous plaît,*" Alex said, rising. "Please, Simone, let me get that."

Simone motioned Alex to sit. "Relax, Alexandra. You've been working all day. I've spent the day playing with Soleil."

"*Merci.*" Alex sat, although she wondered if Simone wasn't tired from spending

the day with her granddaughter. Simone was not a young woman, and Soleil was a rather rambunctious, active six-year-old.

But in truth, Alex *was* exhausted. She was frustrated by her experience at the convent and annoyed that she would have to return the following day. She had hoped to spend Sunday morning and early afternoon with Simone and Pierre before driving back to Paris.

“I’m afraid I must return to the convent tomorrow,” she told her mother-in-law.

“Soleil is fine here with us. You know how much we enjoy having her. Perhaps we can plan another weekend when you’re free of your business obligations.”

“Yes, Simone, we should. Thank you for your help.”

The following morning, Alex and Soleil walked with Grandmère the two blocks to the cathedral for Mass. When they returned, Marie had brunch set out on the sideboard in the dining room. Fresh peaches and strawberries, apricot cream-filled crepes, scrambled eggs, fresh orange juice, and dark rich coffee with milk and sugar sat alongside fine china and silver. Grandpère was waiting for them.

Madame Pellier prepared two cups, mixing sugar and milk into her husband’s, then her own. She held the delicate cup up to Monsieur Pellier’s lips. She didn’t fuss, but performed this little task effortlessly, then visited with Alex and Soleil as she fed small bites of everything to Grandpère, carefully wiping his chin when he dribbled. They had always been devoted to one another. When Alex met them fourteen years ago they were elderly but, even then, their dedication to one another was evident. She had once hoped she and Thierry would share a long life together as his parents had, but Thierry had been gone for almost four years. The ache Alex felt now was not because of this loss, but because she had come to know that, even if Thierry had survived that fatal accident, there would never have been this deep love that Simone and Pierre Pellier shared. Even now as the old woman carefully wiped the spittle from the quivering chin of the frail, worn man in the wheelchair, Alex envied them.

Shortly after noon, Alex left again for the convent. She turned on the radio to help pass the time, feeling little enthusiasm for the drive, though she was eager to take another look inside the convent. Simone had packed strawberries and cookies, and Alex nibbled on a gingersnap as she gazed out at the vineyards running up and down the hillsides. Alex’s father had told her the family had its roots in this rural area between Lyon and Nimes. According to his great-grandfather, the last of the Benoits to pronounce the name *Ben-wah*, they had immigrated to the States in the late 1700s to escape the political turmoil. The Benoits had supposedly descended from nobility, a belief upheld by nothing more than family tales passed down through the generations.

The sky darkened with clouds. Alex turned off the main road and onto the gravel road to the convent. It started to sprinkle. By the time she reached the dirt road, the rain was falling in thick sheets. The regular motion of the windshield wipers kept a steady beat as the heavy rain pelted across the window. She turned off the radio, nothing but static now.

Vaguely, through the rain-spattered window, she could make out the form of another car coming toward her—the same dark-green vehicle she had seen the day before—the doctor’s car. But he was coming much too fast. She slowed almost to a stop as the other car continued straight at her and then at the last moment swerved, nearly running into her as they passed. Alex took a deep breath and glanced back. The man had

slowed down too. He looked back. Was he waving at her? No, she could see now, his hand was raised, not in a wave, but a clenched fist as if the near accident had been her fault!

She stopped the car completely and watched as the vehicle disappeared into the mist. Road rage on this little dirt road? What kind of idiot was he, driving so fast? She took another deep breath, then cautiously continued up to the clearing outside the convent gate.

She parked, debating whether she should wait until the rain let up, or dash to the front door and hope someone would answer without the long wait she'd had yesterday. If she stood outside for more than a few seconds, she'd be drenched. Alex sat, trying to decide exactly what she should say. First, she would inquire about Mother Alvère's health, then politely request that she be allowed to speak with the Mother Superior if she was well, or at least be allowed inside to take another look as she must return to Paris that afternoon. After a few minutes, the rain still pouring down, Alex reached over and picked up her briefcase. She put it over her head and ran. Puddles of water on the dirt path, which was now a river of mud, splashed up on her legs. She knocked on the door, her hand dripping wet. As the day before, no one answered. She knocked again. Then again. Finally, the window on the upper portion of the door slid open and the old wrinkled face appeared. The woman stared, her deep-set black eyes hollow and lifeless. And then, just as Alex was to inquire about Mother Alvère, but before she could speak, the old nun said, "*Elle est morte,*" and the window closed.