



## Chapter 6

# A VERY BUSY WOMAN

THE NEXT MORNING, Sarah informed Emmy that Laney wished to see them in her office before the little girl set out exploring. They would arrive in that room only after making their way through several more hallways and climbing and descending a few more staircases. Then they crossed a small, green courtyard, dodging the sprinkler that spun its way around and around at the very center.

Emmy hadn't seen Laney since the incident in the living room and wondered anxiously why she had called for her now, so she didn't notice much of what she and Sarah were passing. She stared at her feet as they made their way through several different hallways, descended a few staircases, and eventually went outside and crossed a pebble-strewn courtyard. Then they passed a large stone archway that led into another entrance hall. Here, Emmy finally lifted her eyes to follow a large, wooden spiral staircase that wound up and up and up towards a glass dome somewhere in the sky. While Sarah knocked and waited beside the office door, Emmy forgot for a moment that she had been nervous about coming here as she fixed her gaze on the clouds above.

Laney was sitting behind a large, oak desk in front of a large, dusty window with a view of the park beyond. A few chairs were positioned in front of the desk and along the side wall were glass cases containing large glass bottles. A round table in the corner was decorated with a large white tablecloth and a centerpiece of white and pink roses. It was set for ten guests. Emmy understood that it was a sample to show to clients who wanted to have a wedding at Lamère.

"Why do they each get six forks?" she asked, tugging on her *au pair's* jeans.

Sarah just smiled and Emmy saw that Laney was doing the opposite. Her lips were pursed and her eyes worried.

"Come over here, girls," she said quickly, pushing aside a large computer monitor.

Emmy and Sarah each sat down on a chair in front of the desk. Emmy kept her hand hooked in the belt loop of Sarah's jeans, sure that she was about to be reprimanded for the living room incident.

Laney stared down at her and said, "Well, I suppose Sarah has told you all about what we do here at Lamère. And I'm sure you've understood that Jérémie and I are quite busy and prefer privacy. But I just wanted to know if you need anything. Books? Toys? A television set, maybe? Do you like sports or dance?"

Emmy looked at Sarah for ideas. She wasn't used to asking for gifts and couldn't think of anything she would want anyway.

"I looked into those ballet classes I suggested," Sarah answered cheerfully. "She's a bit older than the girls in the beginner class, but Madame Jolie said it shouldn't be a problem. Classes are on Wednesday morning this summer. And I think a TV might be nice. She could listen to the French.

She doesn't seem to like, um, working in the workbooks too much, but maybe if she got more comfortable hearing it first, and hearing it correctly instead of with my American accent, she would be willing to go further. She has so much potential, you know."

And she grinned down at the little girl whose stomach unclenched just a bit, because she knew she was receiving a compliment though she didn't quite understand what "potential" meant, wasn't sure what "ballet" was and certainly was not interested in a television set. She had never liked spending time in front of the television, especially at the foster home, because even if she did enjoy a calm movie about animals or princesses, the younger children fought about what they would watch or whose turn it was to get the video game controller. Then the older children would force them to watch their virtual battles with monsters and blood and other things that repeated themselves as scary movies in Emmy's mind at night.

"Yes, like those morning cartoons," Laney said. "I saw that at Fanny's house once. Every Saturday morning, she makes the kids *crêpes* with chocolate, and they watch cartoons in English. She has five children, so I guess she would know."

Emmy was aware that this last sentence was uttered with bitterness, and she wondered who Fanny with Five Children was and if she might ever meet those children.

"Well, let's start with that," Laney continued. "I would prefer, though, that she didn't have her own set. She can watch it during the week in one of the guest bedrooms, so that she doesn't watch anything too scary. Fanny's Michaël had nightmares for weeks after stumbling on a horror movie when she was out."

Laney frowned and became distracted by something on her computer screen. "Actually," she said, "would you mind ordering the TV and setting it up? I have meetings every day of this week with the families; we're getting down to the wire and we have so many changes to make because of this weather and I don't know if I'll have time to watch with her..." She stopped, almost breathless, then added, "Well, you know how it is."

"Of course, of course!" Sarah exclaimed, as if she had just been asked to be a guest of honor at this weekend's wedding, even though she knew that this would mean less time to finish her usual morning ironing. "I'll take care of everything. Also, Emmy was wondering if she might explore the castle a little bit today. I have that ironing to finish, so I can't be with her, but I think she'll be okay, right?"

"Yes, of course," Laney said, her eyes flicking back to the computer screen, pausing, and then back to Sarah again. "No problem at all. No one will be here today except in my office and the park. But remember what I said about..." She paused and stared meaningfully at the *au pair*.

"Of course," Sarah said dutifully. And with that, she ushered Emmy out of the room as Laney turned her eyes back to the computer. When they had exited through the courtyard, Sarah said, "Don't worry if Laney seems annoyed, Emmy. When summer is over, she'll have more time to visit you, maybe play with you, help you with your homework..." She trailed off sadly then went back to her sing-song tone, as before: "Anyway, let me show you the ballrooms really quick before you go off on your own!"

She led the little girl into a large room with a very high ceiling, wooden walls with different figurines carved all over them—elephants and grapevines and different types of

flowers—and tall shuttered windows along one wall. There was a fireplace like the one in her playroom against one wall and in the corners were stacks of chairs with beige sheets draped around them.

“This is the Salle Saint Etienne,” Sarah said. “Saint Stephen’s Room. The cousin of the prince of Monaco, or something like that, had his wedding here.”

“A prince?” Emmy asked, her eyes growing wide. “Did you see him?”

Sarah laughed. “Yes, a prince. Well, I didn’t exactly see him, but I helped design and order the flowered archways. We placed them at every entrance to this room and all over the park. Oh, but that wasn’t the most extravagant wedding I’ve seen here. Once in a while, we get a distant heir to the British throne or a Saudi prince or princess. But those types of people prefer the Salle de Grandeur—the Grand Room. Over here.”

Emmy marveled at the idea that princes and princesses not only still existed, but had walked these very halls. She followed Sarah to two large wooden doors that opened into the longest, tallest, and brightest gallery she had ever seen. Though it was cloudy this morning, the mirrored walls, six chandeliers, and white marble floors multiplied the light streaming through the windows. Against one wall stood several marble sculptures of angels and wood-nymphs and other curious creatures three times the size of a full-grown man. The room was filled with row upon row of round tables covered in soft white cloth. A large red carpet ran from where Emmy stood to the far end of the room which was so far away that the staircase on the other end seemed to be of quite normal size. Approaching it, though, Emmy saw that it was as wide as a basketball court and led to a

terraced landing above.

“It’s a long walk to the other end,” Sarah laughed, but they trudged ahead and up the dozens of stairs to gaze back at the hall and through the windows over the park.

“I’ll leave you at the door on the left,” Sarah said, pointing to a discreet wooden door on the back wall. “The one on the right leads to the guest bedrooms, but that’s not very interesting.”

She took from her pocket a set of at least thirty keys that clunked and chimed against one another as she searched for the one that would open the door. When she found the right one, the door clicked open, and Emmy was faced with yet another set of stairs.

“Here you go! You can take this staircase up and then go anywhere you like. You’ll see, it leads to the more secretive part of the castle.” Her eyes glinted mischievously. “Much more inspiring than hotel rooms if you ask me. Here.” She slid a gold-colored watch off her wrist and placed it on Emmy’s. Emmy turned her hand in every direction, admiring it.

“Oh, it’s not real gold,” Sarah laughed. “I bought it for two euros at a flea market and my friend Marin fixed it up and shined it himself. If you like it, you can use it whenever you want. See, when both hands are on the 12, it’s time to meet me back here so that we can go back to your room for lunch. Now off you go.”