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You Said Forever

Written by Susan Lewis

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You Said Forever

Susan Lewis



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Chapter One

'May I ask how Chloe is?'

Though Charlotte had heard the question she kept her eyes down, giving the impression her mind was elsewhere.

'I've always said,' the woman chatted on, undaunted, 'that it was a wonderful thing you did. Very courageous.'

Charlotte attempted a smile, but her hand was tightening on the bottle she was holding, not to smash it against a wall. She'd never do that in front of a customer, indeed had never done it, but this woman was making her tense. 'As you can see,' she said, pouring a soupçon of pale lemon-coloured wine into a clear glass, 'our Pinot Gris has a delicate tinge of green . . .' She broke off as a random kick of emotion stole her words, but her movements remained fluid as she poured another sample of the vintage into a second glass and handed one each to the woman and her husband.

Swirling the wine to release the bouquet, the man put his nose to the rim and inhaled deeply. 'Pear,' he declared, inviting contradiction and receiving only a friendly nod of agreement from Charlotte. Frowning curiously, he added, 'With a hint of . . . ginger?'

Charlotte's sea-green eyes showed approval. He'd missed out the trace of citrus blossom, but who, other than a seasoned professional, would have picked up on that? She only knew it was there because Will, their winemaker, had told her.

'Cellaring, three to five years,' the man murmured, reading from the tasting notes Charlotte had handed him.

These visitors were English, Charlotte could tell from the accent, though she had no idea if they were tourists or residents of New Zealand.

She was doing her best to ignore the woman's scrutiny, but it was so powerful, invasive, it might go right through her skin. Whoever she was, she clearly wasn't interested in the wine, but at least her husband was making a good show of it.

'Am I right that she's called Chloe now?' the woman asked, apparently not bothered by Charlotte's discomfort, or simply not noticing it.

Once again Charlotte bypassed the question. 'As you can see from the notes,' she said to the man, 'our philosophy is to make artisan wines that are food friendly, have texture . . .'

'Is she here?' the woman wanted to know,

attempting to peer past the walls of floor-to-ceiling wine racks and chalkboards to the hidden office beyond. She turned around, as though her quarry might be creeping up on her from behind.

With the frontage of the tasting room, known as the cellar-door area, rolled wide open there was nothing – and no one – between the tasting counter and courtyard, where guests were welcome to sit under the jacarandas while sampling Tuki River wines. If they came at the right time of day they might also be served a small tray of canapés, courtesy of Rick's Bistro across the way. Although each table was covered in a crisp white linen cloth, it was easy to see they were fashioned from barrels – puncheons in fact – and the empty wine bottles acting as candleholders all bore the Tuki River Winery label. Earlier, on her way from the house, Charlotte had gathered some sprigs of lavender to liven up the tables, but a gently insistent breeze wafting in from the ocean had soon carried them off.

'You can see she's not here,' the husband muttered under his breath.

The woman turned back to Charlotte.

'She's at school,' Charlotte said, trying to sound friendly while feeling resentful. *For heaven's sake,* she wanted to shout at the woman, *the girl is eight years old, so where the heck do you think she is?*

'Of course,' the woman smiled, seeming to think the notion sweet. 'And how's she doing?'

Starting to wonder if this apparently random visitor was actually a reporter, Charlotte picked up another bottle to continue the tasting. 'Perhaps you'd like to try the Reserve Chardonnay,' she suggested. 'It's a 2014 vintage, and we don't have much of it left now . . .' *If only that were true.*

'Mummy! I'm home,' an excited voice called across the courtyard from the parking area.

The woman spun round immediately to find Cooper, Charlotte's almost four-year-old son, hanging out of a car window, all wayward dark curls, dusty face and sky-blue eyes. Behind the wheel of the car was Rowan, his nanny.

'Have to go to the bathroom,' Cooper announced, giving a telltale shiver as Rowan drove on.

'Oh, he's adorable,' the woman cried, clasping a hand to her chest. 'And how wonderful that Chloe has a brother now.'

She also had a sister – Elodie, aged eighteen months – but Charlotte wasn't about to confide that. 'The Reserve Chardonnay,' she continued, 'was left in barrel, on full yeast . . .'

'Do you get your oak barrels from France?' the man interrupted, apparently wanting to show off some knowledge.

'Of course,' Charlotte replied.

'They're the best,' he informed her, as though she might not have known.

'Could I get a photograph with you?' the woman

asked, taking out her iPhone. 'You're quite a celebrity back home, you know. I expect you are here too.'

'Yvonne, we're here to taste the wine,' her husband growled.

'Of course, but . . .'

'Excuse me,' Charlotte said as her mobile rang, and seeing it was her half-brother, Rick, she eagerly clicked on. He was nothing if not an expert at coming to her rescue, even when he had no idea she was in trouble. 'Tuki River Winery,' she announced, making it sound like a business call.

Twenty minutes later Charlotte watched, with no small relief, as the couple wound their way through the still-empty tables across the courtyard to the rustic, herb-bordered parking area beyond. They'd bought three bottles, two Pinot Gris and a Chardonnay, which she'd packed up in a smartly branded carrying box and tied with a dark green ribbon. It was important to give the appearance of being successful and upmarket, even if they were struggling to stay afloat.

Gathering up the used glasses, she put them in the sink behind the beechwood countertop and turned on the tap. Images of Chloe were fluttering out of the past: Chloe shrieking with joy as she ran into the waves; her eagerness to help build a beach fire; eyes lighting up at the prospect of a surprise; delight at being accepted into a poi dance class; laughter as she and Charlotte practised the dance

moves at home; pride on receiving a gold star at school; hanging limply in Anthony's arms as he carried her to bed.

How was it possible for Charlotte's heart to melt and freeze at the same time?

Melt with love; freeze with fear of the way Chloe had changed in the last year.

She gave a small gasp, taking in the air of now, returning herself to the task at hand.

The irritating English couple – the woman anyway – could well prove the last visitors of the day, although Charlotte sincerely hoped not, since Tuki River Winery could do with selling a whole lot more of 2014's vintage than they were currently managing. Not that random drop-ins, or even sizeable tour groups were ever going to sort the problem. However, there was never any knowing who might be amongst them, disguised as a tourist but with the purchasing power to change Tuki's fortunes completely.

It didn't happen that way, and she knew it, but clutching at straws was one way of keeping her hopes alive as she tackled the hectic, chaotic demands of each and *every* day. Another was to carry on believing in her dynamic and undaunted husband, who owned and ran this idyllic – scenery-wise, anyway – vineyard in the Special Character Zone of New Zealand's Hawkes Bay.

The original plan, almost five years ago, had been

to move from England and buy a vineyard near Charlotte's mother and stepfather in the Bay of Islands. Unfortunately, that had fallen through at the eleventh hour, almost crushing the dream, until her stepfather, Bob, had put them in touch with Kim Thorp and Andy Coltart, the owners of Black Barn Vineyard, a multi-award-winning estate in the heart of Hawkes Bay. Kim and Andy had more or less brokered Charlotte and Anthony's purchase of this two-hectare vineyard, now renamed Tuki River Winery. The modest twelve parcels of vines were spread randomly and hopefully amongst endless acres of fruit orchards, cornfields and thousands upon thousands of hectares of long-established vines belonging to some world-famous estates.

It had never been anyone's intention to use Charlotte and Chloe's 'celebrity' to help pull in the punters. It wouldn't even have crossed the minds of the serious businessmen involved in getting them started; for them it was all about the product, as it was for Charlotte and Anthony. However, that wasn't how the average tourist, or even some locals saw it. For them, the cellar-door area of Tuki River Winery was a golden opportunity to get a look at the mother and daughter who'd been all over the news almost five years ago.

It was rarely they got to see Chloe; she was either at school or up at the house, which was a good fifteen-minute walk from the cellar door through a

lush two-acre parcel of reserve Chardonnay vines. Charlotte, on the other hand, was almost always to be found organising wine tastings at the cellar door, or checking in guests who'd come to stay at one of Tuki River's three holiday retreats nestled around the estate.

Four years might have passed since they'd come here, and Hawkes Bay might be a good seven hundred kilometres from her mother's home town of Kerikeri, but Charlotte's sensational arrest for child abduction in Northland, followed by the forced return to England, apparently remained a source of deep fascination. It was shocking just how intrusive and insensitive some people could be. It was as though, because Charlotte and Chloe had been on their TV screens and in their newspapers, not to mention all over social media, they felt entitled to know all the details of their lives. Charlotte Nicholls, joint owner of Tuki River Winery, was the same Charlotte Nicholls, social worker (known at the time as Alex Lake), who'd snatched a child from an abusive family in the UK and *got away with it!* That was how a lot of people put it, *got away with it,* and Charlotte couldn't argue with that because she *had* taken a child, namely Chloe – although she'd been called Ottilie back then – and she *had* got away with it. This wasn't to say she hadn't been tried for the crime, with a very strong chance of being sent to prison at the end of it. As it turned out, the jury had

gone against all the evidence that proved her guilty, and set her free. To them all that had mattered was Chloe, the small child of four, who'd been so badly abused by her father and neglected by her mother that she'd only started to speak when Charlotte had come into her life. Chloe needed Charlotte perhaps even more than most children needed their mothers. Charlotte – and Charlotte's mother Anna – were the only people the sweet, but terribly damaged little girl had the confidence to relate to, so who in their right mind was going to send Charlotte to prison and condemn Chloe to a life in care?

As soon as her freedom was assured Charlotte had applied to the family courts for an adoption order, so Chloe was now legally hers and no one, but no one, could tear them apart.

Since thinking about Chloe could cause her to feel breathless, and often brought dark butterflies to her heart, Charlotte did what she usually did when the world seemed to be closing in on her; she buried herself in work. This wasn't difficult, for there was always so much to do. Consequently she was hardly seeing anything of her children these days, and could only thank god for Rowan, her stepfather's twenty-three-year-old niece, who'd come down from the Bay of Islands to help out. Without her Charlotte's family might well have fallen apart by now, although Charlotte kept telling herself that no matter what, she'd never let that happen. If it came

right down to it, she'd turn her back on the business and tell Anthony that he had to find someone else to help run it. The thought of doing that made her feel sick, for she wanted, with all her heart, to support him, to be able to put him first and be at his side when they managed to turn his dream into a dazzling reality. Tuki River Winery meant the world to her too, but not more than her children – or her marriage. The trouble was they were all so tied up in each other that she hardly knew where one began and the other ended.

Going to her laptop, in a niche below the chalkboard she updated each morning with the special offers of the day, she was about to check on their Internet orders – please god let there be some – when Rowan pulled up in the old Range Rover and a scrub-faced, barefoot Cooper came tearing across the courtyard, his angelic little sister in wobbly pursuit.

'I made cakes at kindi today,' Cooper cried as she swung him up in her arms. 'They're not real so you can't eat them, but they look real so we could pretend and see if we can trick Daddy.'

Laughing, Charlotte planted a smackeroo on his cheek and stooped to gather up Elodie.

'Mummy,' Elodie beamed, her adorable little smile spreading all over her pixie face. She was proving much slower in talking than Cooper had, and didn't seem to exude his boundless confidence, but she was still a baby and the reasons behind her

delayed development didn't necessarily have to be as sinister as Charlotte sometimes feared. Certainly the doctor had found nothing to concern him, not on the physical front anyway. On the psychological front . . . That was something Charlotte couldn't bring herself to go into. Not yet, but she would, as soon as things calmed down a little, and in the meantime she was doing everything in her power to make sure Elodie knew how much her mummy loved her.

'You don't suppose your attachment to Elodie has something to do with the fact that she looks like you?' Anthony had teased when it had become evident that Elodie was going to stay blonde like her mother, with the same aquamarine eyes and delicate features. She didn't have freckles yet, but with her creamy fair skin she would undoubtedly develop them soon enough, while Cooper, with his father's olive complexion and inky dark hair was, according to Anthony, a little demon amongst the vines.

Chloe bore more of a resemblance to Anthony and Cooper, though her eyes were a velvety chocolate brown, while theirs were varying shades of blue or grey depending on their moods. Her hair, russet-brown and curly, cascaded halfway down her back and was almost as impossible to brush as it was to tame into slides or elastics. She was a strikingly pretty young girl who'd lately become alarmingly unpredictable and far too worldly for her years.

'So where are you all off to?' Charlotte asked, as Cooper whizzed across the yard to the children's playground where he'd spotted his uncle doing something to a swing. Rick's Bistro was sprawled across a small north-facing slope the other side of the playground, and was a popular eatery for both locals and tourists. Out of loyalty Rick and his partner Hamish always encouraged clients to choose a Tuki River wine with their meals. If it weren't for the bistro a whole week could go by without Charlotte and Anthony selling a single bottle.

'Are you going to answer Mummy?' Rowan prompted Elodie. Rowan was a sweet, round-faced girl, part Maori, part Kiwi, with a shock of coppery curls, unevenly set brown eyes and a colourful tattoo of a butterfly on her left shoulder that fascinated the heck out of Elodie. Chloe was so desperate for one too that she'd tried inking one on herself, until finding it impossible she'd decided to draw one on each of Elodie's cheeks instead. That would have been bad enough, but being Chloe she'd had to add a moustache and spectacles, and all in indelible ink. Chloe and Cooper had hooted for days, which was as long as it had taken for the mask to be washed off without taking Elodie's tender skin with it.

(She had looked funny, but Charlotte and Anthony hadn't dared to let Chloe know they thought so or she'd be sure to do it again – and no doubt worse.)

'We're going to pick up Chloe from school,' Rowan reminded Elodie.

Elodie turned to her mother, and as though suddenly tired she dropped her head on Charlotte's shoulder.

Wishing she could keep Elodie with her, Charlotte said to Rowan, 'Does Chloe have ballet today?'

'Swim club,' Rowan corrected. 'I'll drop her there then take these two for ice cream in the village while we wait. Do you need anything while we're out?'

'You could pick up a few things at Bellatino's,' Charlotte replied, reaching for her purse. Thank goodness the retreats were providing an income, albeit small; if it weren't for them they really would be struggling to put food on the table.

Grabbing her mobile as it rang, she saw it was Anthony and clicked on.

'Hi, it's me,' he told her.

'No kidding,' she responded wryly.

He wasn't listening, something was already taking his attention, and a moment later he said, 'I'll call back.'

As the line went dead Charlotte handed Elodie to Rowan. 'Why don't you stay and watch Chloe until she's finished at swim club,' she said, preparing a list for the deli, 'then take all three of them for ice cream?' Chloe liked ice cream and surely wouldn't want to miss out.

Perhaps Chloe didn't like ice cream today. For all Charlotte knew it could be the new poison. Or maybe there had been an incident at the ice-cream shop that Rowan hadn't mentioned for fear of getting Chloe into yet more trouble.

'I would if Chloe wanted us to stay,' Rowan was saying, 'but this morning she said she didn't. I'll see if she's changed her mind when we collect her, but I was hoping to get them home, fed and in bed by eight so I can meet the girls at Pipi's for a glass of wine and dessert.'

Knowing this was what many of Havelock North's young mothers did once or twice a month – eat with the kids, put them to bed, then leave the husbands or nannies in charge while they met up with friends – Charlotte tried not to mind that she wasn't a part of it. She'd do better simply to feel thankful that Rowan's devotion to the children allowed her, Charlotte, to work late when she needed to, which was just about every night and a big part of the weekends.

Almost before Rowan had driven off Charlotte was back at her computer, about to log into the Wineworks portal, when a call came from Francis, the cellar-door manager at the Black Barn Vineyard. 'We've just sent a tour bus your way,' he told her. 'About forty on board, from one of the cruise ships, so brace yourself. If you need a hand shout and I'll send someone over.'

Knowing she'd never cope with so many alone, Charlotte said, 'I'll find out if Rick and Hamish can come. If not you'll hear back from me.'

Eternally grateful for how supportive everyone was at Black Barn, Charlotte was about to call Rick when she spotted him heading her way. With his tight, wiry frame, close-cropped hair and electric-blue eyes he was as handsome as he was plucky, kind and intuitive – and she couldn't have loved him more if she'd known him her entire life.

'Just the person,' she smiled as he stopped to straighten up one of her tablecloths and brush away a fallen jacaranda pod. It was a pity the vibrant lavender-blue flowers were starting to fade now, for with their dense and exotic fern-like foliage they provided the most beautiful and romantic canopy for the cellar-door courtyard. That alone should have made people want to come, especially in the evenings when the candles were lit and soft music was playing.

Sadly it had yet to happen, at least in a significant way.

'It's my turn to ask a favour,' Rick reminded her, tidying up the tasting notes she'd left awry on the counter. 'Heidi's just called in sick, so we're short of a server tonight. Any chance?'

Not in a million years, however what Charlotte said was, 'I've got a group of forty on the way for a tasting. You come help me with that, and I'm all

yours between eight and ten thirty.' That should give her half an hour after finishing here to spend with the children while wolfing down a sandwich and sorting out whatever needed doing at home. *Half an hour, was she kidding? Please just let Chloe be in a good mood or she really would have to let Rick down.*

Anthony, who still hadn't rung back, was in Wellington putting on a tasting for an Australian distributor and wouldn't be home until sometime tomorrow.

Sinking at the thought of that and all it entailed – *later, Charlotte, don't think about it now* – she merrily high-fived Rick to seal the deal.

'How are things here?' he asked, starting to set out glasses ready for the tasting at which almost no wine would be sold, because cruise-ship tourists rarely bought more than a bottle per couple, if that.

'Still waiting for the big order,' she admitted. 'If it doesn't come soon . . .'

'Think positively,' he admonished.

'Or practically,' she corrected. 'We have to know what we're going to do if we can't shift the 2014 stock before the 2015 vintage is bottled and this year's fruit is harvested, or it'll be like trying to stuff ten thousand gallons into ten pint pots. We don't have the space, or the wherewithal to buy more storage.'

'There's still plenty of time.'

Irritably, she said, 'It's February, Rick. That gives

us a couple of months, max, to sell the twenty thousand bottles of wine we've failed to shift in a year.'

Stopping what he was doing, he came to give her a brotherly hug. 'It'll work out,' he said softly. 'Zoe's got everything in hand. You need to put your trust in her.'

Only wishing she could get past the unease she felt around their new publicity and marketing adviser, Charlotte said, 'Zoe Reynolds has been working with us for over three months now and we've yet to see any results.'

'You will, but these things take time, and half of that three months was taken up by the Christmas break. No, listen, just look what she did for the bistro. She put us on the map, and I promise, she'll do the same for you.'

'PR is one thing; sales are another.'

'They go hand in hand, and she has some serious contacts in the gourmet world. Isn't she with Anthony in Wellington now, introducing him to the Australian guy?'

Hoping that was all Zoe was doing with Anthony, Charlotte said, 'Do you seriously think this man is going to buy our entire stock?'

'I don't know who he is, so I can't answer that, but if he's a major Aussie distributor there's a chance. And let's not forget that you've got some good vintages, the Reserve Chardonnay in particular, it just hasn't been marketed right. And that's

what Zoe will take care of. I wouldn't have recommended her if I didn't have so much faith in her, not at the rate she charges. It'll be worth it in the end, you'll see. Now tell me, have you spoken to your mother recently?'

Frowning as she thought, Charlotte said, 'Why?'

'She's worried about you.'

'Which means you've spoken to her.'

'Actually, I had a call from Dad and inevitably the subject of you came up.'

'I hope you told him there's nothing to get worked up about. Mum's got enough on her plate with your sister going through chemo and your dad's foot still in plaster.'

'That's what I told him, because I knew you'd want me to, but I have to admit I worry about you, Charlotte. You need to ease up a bit, take some time off . . . OK, OK, I know you're going to start shouting at me about cashflow and not being able to afford extra staff and never having enough time to brush your hair never mind have a bath . . .'

'I never said that. I shower every day.'

Laughing, he said, 'You need to take some time with the kids. It's what you want, so do they. They need you, especially Chloe . . .'

'Don't,' she protested, putting up a hand to stop him. 'You're not telling me anything I don't already know, so let's leave it there and talk about how many you've got booked in for this evening.'

Regarding her darkly, he seemed on the verge of saying more, until finally he took out his mobile and began sending a message. 'I'll have Hamish email over the menu so you can get early answers to anything you don't understand.'

'Is anyone else working the tables?'

'Yours truly.'

'I'm not washing up,' she told him forcefully.

Laughing as he connected to his partner, he wandered back across the courtyard, appearing as relaxed as a multimillionaire enjoying his favourite hobby. Since this was exactly what he was, thanks to the sale of his and Hamish's Auckland-based advertising agency to a multinational company headquartered in New York, Charlotte could only feel pleased for him that things were turning out so well with the new venture, namely Rick's Bistro. Envious too, of course, in fact madly so, since Anthony's several millions acquired from the sale of his house in London's Holland Park, and various other investments, had been sunk in their entirety into buying and regenerating the vineyard. And she shouldn't forget the sensational home on the hill that they'd designed and had built when they'd truly believed they couldn't fail; nor the renovation and expansion of the holiday retreats, which, it had to be said, were always booked out. Sadly, though, they didn't provide anywhere near enough income to make even a noticeable contribution to the two hundred

thousand dollars a year they needed simply for vineyard overheads.

Watching miserably as a glossy red tour bus full of Oriental cruisers pulled into the car park, she tried raising her spirits with a reminder of how much she'd loved it all at the beginning. It could be like that again, she kept telling herself. Something would happen to prevent them having to go to the bank for a loan they might never be able to repay. They weren't going to lose their home and everything they'd worked so hard for. Something would come good before the harvest, because it had to. And as soon as it did she would bring someone in to help run the cellar door, accounts, online orders, special offers, holiday retreats and staff rostering, so she could spend more time with her children.

Her husband too, of course, presuming he wanted to spend time with her.