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Chateau of Echoes

Siri L. Mitchell



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To Tony

My favorite dreams are those I've dreamed with you.

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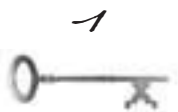
août

*S'il pleut pour Sainte-Radegonde,
misère abonde sur le monde.*

August

*If it rains on the day of Sainte-Radegonde,
misery abounds in the world.*

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On the third day of August, I received a letter from America. The envelope indicated no name, simply an address in California.

It was a glorious summer day for Brittany, France. The temperature was hovering around 75, and the clouds thinned to let the sun through now and then. That made it warm enough to slip a cornflower blue halter over my black capris. A breeze fingered my hair and tipped my straw gardening hat over my right eye. I am blonde but not in a striking sort of way. I belong to the shade rather than the sunlight, being pale and having eyes the iciest shade of blue.

I paused at the mailbox, clamping the letter between my upper arm and my body, put a hand to the brim of my hat, and played tug-of-war with the breeze to tie the strings of my hat more tightly underneath my chin. As I walked from the mailbox up the mile-long pea-gravel drive toward the chateau I call my home, I relished the crunch of the stones beneath my feet, welding me to the present.

The chateau, which dates from the fourteenth century, has four turrets. It definitely isn't the biggest in France, and it isn't the most beautiful, but it is mine. And looking at it as the sun filtered through the clouds, drenching it in a golden haze, I felt an unreasonable sort of pride. The chateau had existed over half a millennium without me, and it would probably exist another half after me. I was only borrowing it during the brief period of my existence. But for that short moment, it belonged to me.

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Friends expected that I would be lonely, learning to live alone again in a huge chateau, but it was here that I began to reorder my life. To carve out a space for myself in the world. It had never felt too big or too empty.

It used to be just perfect.

But that morning, I had been working in my potager garden and had the familiar feeling of not being alone. Of a gentle tapping in my heart. And as I sometimes do, when I feel offended by the monolith of a God who refuses to stay away from me, I said out loud, “Would you leave?” And, as usual, I felt an emptying in the air around me.

More and more, I had found myself talking to a God that I didn’t want to acknowledge. A God I didn’t know I believed in anymore. I wished I could be as sure as Peter, my late husband, that God didn’t exist. But I wasn’t, even though I’d effectively bet Peter’s life on those atheist beliefs. But if God did exist, then where did that leave Peter? And what kind of person did that make me?

It was just easier to ignore God. So I did.



After walking past the two square stone pillars that separate the chateau from the grounds, I stopped, surveying the gravel drive and the barren courtyard that lay in front of me. I meant to convert the gravel into a formal garden. Someday—after I’d renovated the stables and taken care of other more immediate improvements. I wanted to channel the driveway into a defined loop and turn the enclosed expanse into a Daedalus labyrinth of cotton, lavender, and yew. Or maybe a knotwork design in a combination of privet, yew, and box. I tried to imagine what

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the enclosure would look like, shrouded with green geometric patterns of clipped hedges.

I had compiled a collection of books on historical landscaping and had spent many pleasant hours flipping through them, accumulating ideas. I just didn't know yet what I wanted. But for the moment, it was fine. It looked like 90 percent of the other chateaux in France.

I walked on, kicking up dust from the gravel. Then I scaled the steps of the chateau and swung the massive oak door shut with a kick from my foot. I slipped out of my shoes, took off my hat, and set it beside a vase of flowers on a round table in the vaulted entry hall. The flowers were bunched too tightly, so I stopped to pluck and poke at them. Their purples, pinks, and yellows lightened the mood of the heavy stone walls.

There are three narrow arches leading from this hall. The one on the left provides access to a tightly wound staircase that both descends to the kitchen and allows access to the three floors above. The one in the middle leads to a hallway with another, more generously proportioned, spiral staircase and, past it, the reception hall. From the reception hall, the dining hall can be seen to the left and the council room to the right.

The archway to the right descends to the cellar.

Opening the letter, I walked through the central archway and then sat on a settee in the reception hall. The wavy leaded panes of clear glass set into the thick stone walls diffused the light, and the rectangles of colored glass along the tops of the windows made puddles of color on the black and white tiled floor. I like this room. It's not meant for use, but rather as a stopping place on the way to a meal or a gathering area for people to meet up before embarking on their day's business. There are several settees, a *dressoir* sideboard, three pairs of chairs and a table, all lined against the walls in true medieval fashion. The ceilings are of painted

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wood and beamed. A geometric pattern decorates them in colors of mid-green, gold, and scarlet. The fireplaces at each end are wide and are nearly six feet tall. The mantels are carved from stone and have twisted columns supporting them on either side. Several framed antique maps are hung on the walls.

Sliding the letter from the envelope, I admired the heavy, expensive cream paper on which it was written and the assertive slant of the handwriting. It contained a request from an author to rent a room from me for a period of six months. I recognized the name, Robert Cranwell, even after having lived in France for nine years.

Apparently, he'd had the ingenious idea to write a novel that would be loosely based on the life of Alix de Montôt, *comtesse de Kertanuan*. He'd decided that staying at my chateau, reputed to have been her home, would surely inspire greater authenticity in his work.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes when I read that line.

Alix de Montôt.

Had I known the trouble she would cause, I would have burned her journals the day I'd found them. For a fifteenth-century waif, she'd caused a disproportionate amount of chaos in my life.



I'd found her journals in an old trunk in the *cave*, or cellar, of one of the estate's outbuildings in a meadow a mile and a half from the chateau. It was the meadow that served as the halfway point of my three-mile jog. I'd had the structure torn down for safety reasons and the foundation stones scattered. The day I discovered the cellar, I had come to make sure the work had been done properly. I noticed a trap door near what had

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been a corner of the building. Of course, being American, I immediately envisioned a blonde, blue-eyed angelic child falling through the ancient door, breaking a leg, being trapped inside, and slowly starving to death. My next thought was of the inevitable million-euro lawsuit that would follow. The French aren't a litigious society, but I'm sure eventually they will become one.

In any case, I tried to pull the door up to see exactly what it guarded. I was surprised the wood hadn't rotted, as the building's roof had fallen through decades before. The planks forming the door had to have been a good four inches thick, and the hinges and ringed door pull, though rusted, were equally as sturdy. It was the rust that kept me out that first day.

But the next day I was back, armed with a spray can of heavy-duty oven cleaner. I had learned all sorts of tricks as I renovated the chateau's kitchen. For that room, at least, I'd trusted no one but myself. The oven cleaner smelled worse than a ripe *Mont d'Or* cheese, but it worked. I had to walk back to the chateau to get a crowbar from the stable-*cum*-garage, but once levered, the door swung up and I was soon walking down a steep, narrow flight of stairs.

Like stairs on ships, they were narrow and deep. Layers of chill enveloped me on the way down. By the time I'd reached the last step, I was blowing into cupped hands to warm my fingers. Without a flashlight, I couldn't see much, but I had the impression of a low ceiling and a dead space. Not of any *thing* dead, but of a space that was not in use.

In climbing back up, I was careful not to touch anything for fear of cobwebs or mice. Thinking still of lawsuits, I let the door drop back with a bang and decided to head home and fix myself lunch. I had a creepy feeling, as if I'd collected an assortment of spiders on my short adventure,

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so I turned every way I could, trying to get a look at my back. When I couldn't, I reached around, swatted my back, and did a hokey-pokey sort of dance right there in the old ruins.

Starting out on the trail I'd worn through the meadow, my imagination began to populate the landscape with the people who must have lived there during the region's long history.

People assume King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table lived, fought, and died in Britain. The Bretons believe that some of the legends actually took place in *Brocéliande*, this haunting area of *Bretagne*, or Brittany. To my understanding, which was gained over the course of a four-hour dinner in the company of the Embassy's cultural attaché, Celtic tribes had bounced from Brittany to Britain and back again so often that historians get whiplash.

Celtic society on the Armorican peninsula of Brittany was all but obliterated by raiding bands of Saxon pirates. And then those same pirates turned their boats toward Britain. The threat of raids and pressure of population groups fleeing in advance of the Saxon menace led to a full-scale evacuation of the southern part of the island. The evacuees came to the depopulated peninsula of France. And when those British came, they attached their name to the land and the population. Brittany, or *Bretagne*, would forever after be populated by Bretons. But the new residents ran into some of the old residents who had retreated inland, and two families of the ancient Celtic Diaspora reconnected.

Until a new threat came to the peninsula: the Vikings. Once more, the Bretons fell victim to barbarians, and this time, some of them chose to flee back to Britain. And some of those who did not, chose to cross the Channel instead with William the Conqueror. Many of the fine old families in Britain are descendants of a Breton — who may at one time in

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fact have lived in Britain after having emigrated from Brittany.

So when Brittany declares herself the land of King Arthur, the country of the fairies Viviane and Morgane, she might not be lying. For to whom do the Arthurian legends belong? To the first Americans who battled the Saxons? Or to the British who battled the Saxons? Or perhaps the legends are more ancient. Perhaps they were told in whispers that crossed a continent during the dispersion of those original Celts. How many times does a story boomerang before it forgets who first sent it wheeling into the sky? Before it forgets whether it is part of the warp that underpins the fabric of a culture or a fabulous golden thread that has embellished it? Regardless, on one point everyone agrees: Arthur still lives.

I often imagine the lives of those legendary characters, wondering what they must have seen as they walked this land. But this time, my musings felt personal. Not as if I was walking through history, but as though I had walked into it. Turning around, I gave the area one final look before retreating to my chateau.



Three days passed before I felt nervy enough to go back. It's difficult for me to explain exactly how that cellar made me feel. This is the closest I can get: It had been like walking into a pool of still water. As if by prying open the door, I'd disturbed and set into motion something that had settled for centuries.

Knowing what I do now, I wonder if I imagined all those feelings. If maybe I was using knowledge gained afterward to interpret those past events, but I don't think so. I think it was God. A God who rules over

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time and history. A God who can use the diaries of a centuries-dead girl to bring healing to the heart of a modern woman.



When I finally went back, I took the crowbar and a flashlight. It was a beautiful morning. A fog was rising from the grasses and winding through the trees. The sun hadn't yet beaten its way through the gloom, but it had enough power to light the mist and make it shimmer. It was the sort of fog that puts shadows in motion and makes you think you see things that aren't there. Or things that haven't been there for centuries. I always imagine knights on horseback on mornings like this, searching for Marzin, or Merlin, the Magician. Some say he still haunts *Brocéliande*, imprisoned forever by a fairy's spell.

The trapdoor was easily pried open, and the flashlight made a friendly circle of cheer in front of me as I descended the stairs. I had a winter hat and gloves on this day to guard against the room's chill.

The flashlight probed the recesses of the space. After descending the eight-foot shaft of the stairway, I saw a rectangular area no more than twelve feet by thirty feet that had been carved out of the ground and completely lined with fitted stone. The ceiling was about fifteen feet high. The cellar would probably have been used to store food for the chateau, although there was no evidence left of any shelving system.

The space was clean swept. No mice or mouse droppings. No spiders or webs. In fact, there was absolutely nothing in the room. I was disappointed because I'd been so certain I would find something.

My shoulders must have sagged, because the flashlight moved about a foot down the wall opposite me, until it lit the junction with the floor

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and came to rest on a small chest two feet high and two feet long.

I walked forward and poked at it with the flashlight. It seemed rather heavy for its size. Its top was curved into a half-barrel shape. It was completely covered in leather, which was attached to the wood by rivets. They had been placed to form curving, decorative shapes. I had seen chests of this sort in museums like the Cluny in Paris.

Trying the lid gently, I thought that, like the door above, it might have rusted shut, but it lifted easily, silently, the flashlight revealing the contents. I was enough of an antique lover to know that the twin stacks of books inside were extremely valuable, but I was too much a bibliophile to resist opening the cover of one and turning the vellum pages. I had expected to see an illuminated manuscript with vivid filigree embellishments, but the book was more journal-like, the letters more individual than those made by the first printing presses or even those formed by scribes. They had more personality.



The chest and the books stayed with me for a week before I decided to turn them over to the University of Rennes II, asking only that they keep me informed of what the books revealed. They were quickly devoured by both the Department of Archaeology and the Department of Celtic Studies, which confirmed that half of them were journals, and that they had been kept by a woman named Alix de Montôt from 1459 to 1462. The other half were popular books of the era.

The discovery was reported across France. The importance lay in both the gender of the diarist and the period during which the journals were kept. Women weren't well educated during the late years of the Middle

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Ages, and it has been rare for any journal to last five hundred years, let alone the journal of a woman. So, since the first report of the discovery, the university has been inundated with requests from researchers to access the volumes.

That was two years ago.

Now that the first two volumes of the diaries have been translated into modern French and English and published in academic journals, I have been hounded by researchers. They seem to think that since I live in what is assumed to be Alix's chateau, they should have the right to stay at my inn free of charge. At least twice a month I catch someone skulking around my property trying to "walk in Alix's shoes."

Not that I scorn all academics. I have one graduate student from Rennes staying with me, but Séverine is different. She's charming, even though my American brain still wants to spell her name "Severing." She asked if she could explore the chateau and its grounds. Nicely. And at the moment, she even helps me with the inn.

And now, Robert Cranwell. An American. An author.

Alix's popularity had spread across the Atlantic. It was bound to happen. But if he wrote Alix's story, then it would probably get turned into a movie, and then I might as well be living in Disneyland for all the visitors I'd have.