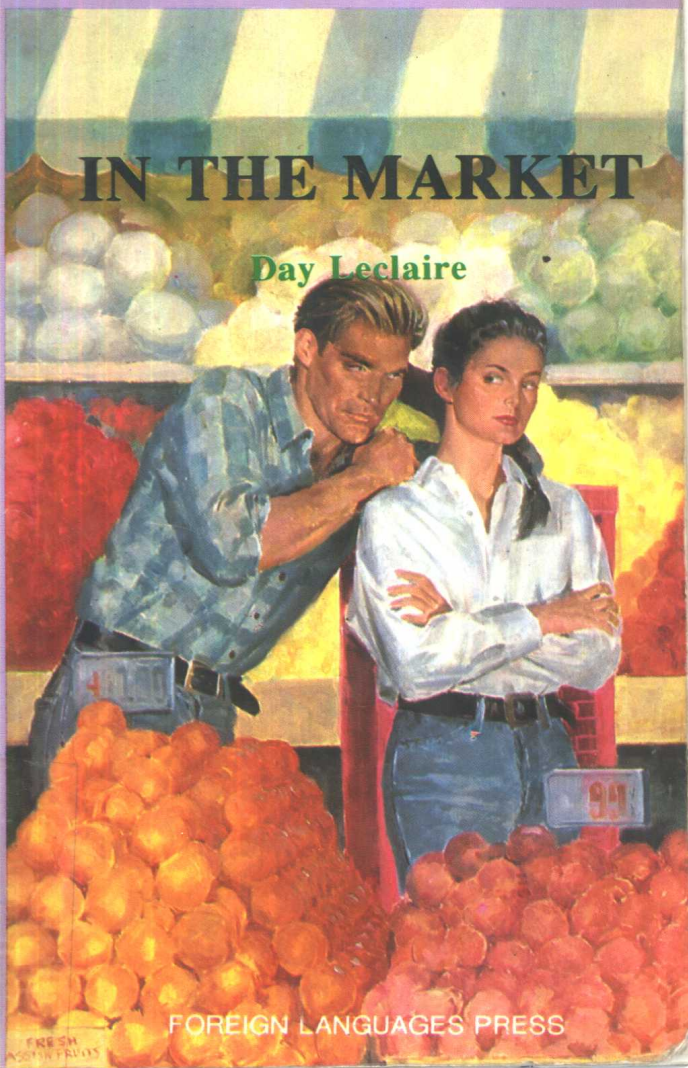




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IN THE MARKET

Day Leclairre



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IN THE MARKET

Day Leclaire

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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“So, teach me.

“Take me on for a week. Show me the ropes.”

Rainer grinned at Jordan, as though he'd offered the perfect solution.

“Ha! Not in a month of Sundays,” she said, amused despite herself. “Not in a million years. Not even for a million bucks.”

“Well, I can't go as high as a million, but how about a hundred dollars?” Rainer offered.

“I laugh in your face.”

“Five.”

“Forget—”

“One thousand and you've got a deal,” Cletus interjected out of the blue.

“Done!” Rainer cried ~~triumphantly~~. “I work for you one week and—”

“And you pay us a thousand dollars,” Jordan said in a dry voice. “I wish all our employees were so reasonable.”

Day Leclaire knows all about the Seattle-based produce market described in her book, *In the Market*. She and her husband used to own it! Though what happens at Cornucopia is fictitious, she admits that more than one tomato battle *did* leave her store a little the worse for wear!

IN THE MARKET

Day Leclair

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

This edition 1995

In the Market

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CHAPTER ONE

RAINER THORSEN RUBBED a hand across his squared jaw and shifted impatiently. He didn't like this—this endless waiting. Nor did he like standing around, biding his time and accomplishing nothing.

Everyone else moved with purpose, and normally he did, too. But this wholesale produce market wasn't his home turf. His retail operation utilized other wholesalers. As much as he wanted to grab a cart and help out the busy salesmen racing back and forth filling orders, he couldn't. His presence here served a different objective altogether.

Even so, hanging around a loading dock in downtown Seattle, staring at a woman—no matter how attractive—had him as near to crazy as he cared to get. It simply wasn't his style. *Action*—now that appealed to him. That's how he preferred handling problem situations. He'd always lived by a personal motto of "When in doubt, get out there and stir things up."

Which meant it was time to start stirring.

He narrowed his eyes. Why couldn't he go over to Ms. Jordan Roberts, look her straight in that lovely smoky-eyed face and say, "Lady, sell me your produce market"? He grinned. That would ruffle a feather or two. Or three. And anything that could ruffle *her* feathers interested him greatly.

He watched her examine a carton of cantaloupes, bending low to tug open the stapled lid. Firm muscles played be-

neath her fitted jeans, drawing his gaze. His grin widened. Nice. Very nice. She lifted one of the large textured melons to her face. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, a tiny smile playing about her lips. The woman understood produce, he conceded. The reverence with which she handled the fruit told him that much.

Rainer spoke to the salesman beside him. "She seems to know her way around all right, but she's too young for this business, Marco, too sweet. It makes me suspicious. There's got to be something else lurking behind that angel face. Something with more of a bite to it."

"She's got a bite, all right," the shorter man confirmed. "It's just that—"

"I knew it! Soft as peach fuzz on the surface, but underneath she's—"

"A nice kid."

Rainer chuckled, his gaze once again on Jordan's trim figure. "Right. A nice kid who bites."

"That's not what I meant. She is a nice kid, always has been," Marco insisted obstinately. "Ten years she's bought from us. First with that crazy uncle of hers, now alone. She's always seemed bright and cheerful and—"

"She's worked this business that long?" Rainer tilted his head to one side, his scrutiny of the dark-haired woman sharper than before. She'd moved farther down the dock, stooping to examine a box of Jonathan apples. She didn't look a day over twenty-two—twenty-three at the most. He'd have to readjust his thinking a bit.

"You gonna take her down?" Marco asked anxiously. "I'd think snapping up a woman's livelihood would go against the grain."

Rainer frowned, not appreciating the reminder. That eventuality disturbed him, as well. But this was family business and *nothing* stood in the way of that—not even a

pretty brunette with a figure that turned every head on the docks.

He decided to answer Marco honestly. "It would bother me more if she owned the store. But she doesn't. Her uncle owns it. She runs it. If I can win her over to my side, the store will be as good as mine." He paused to consider. "I bet I'd be doing her a favor by taking it off their hands. She can't have much of a life, tied to such a time-consuming business."

Marco looked surprised. "I never thought of it that way. Seems a shame. She's always appeared to be such a happy, contented—"

"Biter?" Rainer's admiring gaze drifted back to Jordan.

The salesman scowled. "It's only when she's pushed that you see her scrappy side."

The younger man suppressed a smile at the combative tone in Marco's voice, interested by his spirited defense of the woman. "So much the better," he said gently. "I prefer a fair fight."

Marco groaned. "This is not good. No, sir, it ain't. You don't understand, Rainer. The lady has this little bitty stubborn streak. You swiped her bananas and that's bound to make her a tad testy."

Rainer raised an eyebrow. "I didn't swipe them. You sold them to me."

"Not on purpose, I didn't." The older man's face drooped into deep weather-beaten creases. "I didn't hear they were sold till after I'd promised 'em to you. She'll want 'em back. If she kicks up a fuss and Nick Constantine hears of it, the boss'll have to side with her, no question. After all, those bananas did belong to Ms. Roberts first."

Rainer shrugged. "True. Not that it matters. I'll still have accomplished what I set out to do, regardless of the outcome."

“Which is?”

“To see what she’s made of. You think she’ll fight me for those bananas, don’t you?”

“Don’t have to think. I know. She’ll fight.”

Rainer laughed, clapping a hand on Marco’s shoulder. “I’m going to enjoy this. There’s nothing a Thorsen relishes more than a friendly tussle with a strong determined opponent.” He paused, his grin wicked. “Nothing, that is, except winning.”

Marco shifted uneasily. “Listen, I’ve been thinking. Your father and me, we go way back. Working for Alaric like I used to, I’d do anything for him. Anything. But maybe you could figure out some other way to test Ms. Roberts. She’s a nice girl, Rainer. Why would you want to start trouble with her?”

“Because I live for trouble,” he said, tongue planted firmly in cheek.

Marco gave an emphatic shake of his head. “Not with her, you don’t.”

Rainer lifted an eyebrow. “Are we talking deceptive packaging here—as in volcanic possibilities?”

The salesman stirred uncomfortably. “Like I said, only when pushed. Then she’s Mount Saint Helens in action. I’ve seen them both go off.” He shuddered. “Don’t want to see either do it again.”

Rainer studied the woman with renewed interest. “Must have been a beautiful sight.”

“Beautiful from a nice safe distance,” Marco corrected him. “Not so beautiful when you’re standing in the path of the explosion.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.” Rainer frowned. “Where’s that famous spirit of adventure I’ve heard so much about?”

"With my fiftieth birthday, that's where. Both of which are a good ten years past." Marco shoved his pencil behind one ear and tucked his order pad into his pocket. "In all the years she's come down here to buy produce, she's always kept herself to herself. So why do you have to pick on her? Why can't you go after someone else—*someplace* else?"

Rainer continued to study Jordan. She stood by a carton of grapes, sampling them before giving a nod of approval. He liked the look of her, the suppleness of her movements. Trim, sleek and graceful—what wasn't to admire? Under normal circumstances he'd be tempted to warm himself in the fire Marco mentioned. But business came first, pleasure . . . dead second.

"If there was any other way, believe me, I'd take it. Unfortunately that miniature volcano stands between me and something I want. Something I want very much. And once I get her figured out, I'm going to ease her over to one side and take it."

"Yeah?" Marco chuckled. "You'd have better luck easing aside a pallet full of spuds without a forklift. But it might be interesting to see you try."

"Then stand back and get an eyeful." Rainer rubbed his hands briskly. "Just make sure Ms. Roberts knows who has her bananas. I'll be curious to see how she reacts."

"I already told you how she'll react." Marco made the sound of a bomb exploding. "Thar she blows!"

HE WAS STARING at her again; Jordan could feel it. The prickles of reaction started, creating an uncomfortable itch square between her shoulder blades. All morning long he'd watched her and all morning long she'd pretended not to notice.

Until now.

Now she planned to do something about him. She slid her handcart beneath the heavy cardboard boxes of apples on the dock. Angling the stack backward, her arms took the weight of the unwieldy load with ease. She gave the cart an experienced shove and pushed the load over the metal ramp and onto her twelve-foot flatbed, depositing the apples close to the truck's bright green cab.

Her watcher had the advantage of knowing her identity, or at least where she worked. Both her truck doors read Cornucopia Produce Market, the words emblazoned in letters as rosy as the apples she'd just purchased. Now, if she could only figure out *his* identity. So far she'd been unable to catch a glimpse of him. But one way or another, she'd change that.

She swiveled and tossed her long dark braid over her shoulder, leaning her arms across the handles of the upright cart. Casually she scanned the groups of men standing on the cluttered loading dock.

Squinting against the early July sunshine, her gaze instantly zeroed in on him. "Lord help me!" she muttered beneath her breath. If he'd carried a giant hammer in one hand and had lightning bolts flashing from his eyes, she couldn't have been more surprised—or dismayed. *A Viking!* The man staring with such unswerving intensity was a living breathing Viking. She froze, unable to look away.

He was around thirty, tall and broad-shouldered, with an impressive physique. The sun glinted in the bright white-blond of his hair, which he wore short in the front and long in the back, the wavy strands curling over the plaid flannel collar of his shirt. He stood unmoving, openly studying her, his legs spread wide and his arms folded across his large chest. But his immobility didn't fool her. At any moment she expected him to let out a thunderous war cry and come charging her way.

Jordan shivered. She didn't like the sensations he stirred in her. She felt as if someone had hit an internal panic button, and it took every ounce of her self-control to keep the rush of apprehension from showing.

How could she have overlooked this man for most of the morning? It unnerved her to think she'd been so aware of him, while he'd proved so elusive to spot. More importantly though, why had he singled her out? What did he want?

She forced herself to look away, debating how to handle the situation—if there really was anything to handle. Perhaps she should find out his identity before she took action. With a decisive shove, she pushed the cart off the truck and toward the salesman writing up her order.

"Who's the Viking, Terry?" she asked quietly.

The salesman didn't even bother looking up. "What Viking?"

She frowned. "The big blond guy. The one who looks like he just stepped out of some Norse legend."

"Oh, yeah. Right. That guy." Terry cleared his throat. "Been wondering the same thing myself. I think he's some high roller Marco brought by to meet the boss."

"Well, your high roller's been staring at me," she informed Terry abruptly.

The salesman chuckled, relaxing. "Yeah, him and every other man on the docks. Face it. You're surrounded by a hoard of lusting animals—also known as men. So what's one more? You should be used to the looks by now."

Jordan rested a foot on a cumbersome carton of lettuce and bit her lip thoughtfully. "It's not that kind of staring. He wants something."

"Tell him to get in line. He's got a long wait." Terry paused in his scribbling and yanked a list from his back pocket, running a gloved finger down it. He stabbed his

pencil toward the flats of mushrooms she'd selected. "Those kabobs've gone up another buck, Roberts. Forgot to mention it."

Jordan pushed her unease to one side and concentrated on the job at hand. If the prickles on the back of her neck were anything to go by, the newcomer hadn't budged an inch. She had plenty of time to sort him out once she'd taken care of business.

"Since you forgot to mention the cost went up, you'll have to sell them to me at the old price," Jordan insisted, bartering in the expected manner. "They're not worth a dollar more. Look at the poor things." She selected a mushroom, upending it so he could see where the stem joined the cap. "They've already started to open. And the color—you call this white?"

"Okay. Okay. Ten bucks." He shook his head in disgust. "Boss will fire me for sure over this one."

Jordan smiled at his typical response. "Right. Sure he will. When pigs fly." Nick Constantine would never fire Terry, not when he was the best salesman and haggler on the docks.

She swiftly scanned the long line of stacked boxes left to be loaded, comparing it to the receipt. Oranges vied with kiwifruit, cucumbers with green peppers, the staggering number of fresh sharp odors a source of unending delight.

She checked the order again, her smile fading to a frown. "Wait a minute, Terry. I don't see the bananas. What's happened to them?"

"What bananas?"

She shot him a sharp look. "Don't hand me that. The super deal on the overripes. You were all over me about them when I first walked in."

"Oh. Those bananas."

"Yeah. *Those* bananas."

He yanked the brim of his cap down low over his eyes, ruddy color creeping up his jawline. "You see, they... ah... sort of got sold."

"Sort of got sold?" she snapped. "Sort of—"

Jordan bit off the rest of her sentence, checking her anger. Ranting and raving wouldn't help her case. It was difficult enough working in a male-dominated business without getting a reputation as a shrew. And she'd worked too long and hard to risk losing ground now. Fast thinking and finding the right angle had won many a battle for her—as they would today.

Jordan spoke again, her voice low and even. "The bananas were sold? As in, sold out from under me? I arrived at five-thirty, Terry, which gave me first refusal. You'll remember I didn't do any refusing."

"I remember," Terry agreed, looking everywhere but at her. "How about if next time I—"

She shook her head, not allowing him to finish his offer. "Not next time, Terry. Distress sales are jam on bread in this business. You know that. That's why I come so early. How am I supposed to make a decent living if I can't get my hands on the deals? The competition's death out there."

"Maybe I could squeeze you out a box or two."

"I'm sorry, Terry. A box or two won't do, and I can't afford to shrug this one off." She couldn't afford to shrug any of them off. Not if she was to get her fair share of the bargains.

Terry nodded miserably. "Yeah, I know." He kicked aside the small pile of rotting orange peels and discarded lettuce leaves strewn at his feet. "Give me a few minutes. I—I'll get them back for you."

In all the years she'd dealt with him, she'd never seen Terry so nervous. There shouldn't be such difficulty in sorting out a simple misunderstanding. Jordan frowned.

She'd obviously missed something and she had a pretty good idea what—or who—that something might be.

"Who has my bananas?" she asked.

Terry gave a slight shrug. "Does it matter? I said I'd get them for you."

"Who?" she repeated.

The salesman glanced quickly over her shoulder, speaking in a low rushed voice. "You don't want to start anything, Jordan. Not with that particular customer. You'd be better off just letting it go."

"He has them?"

Terry nodded. "Every last one. Why don't I speak to Marco? I'm sure he'll straighten everything out."

Jordan thought quickly, then shook her head. "No. Don't bother. I told you our . . . friend was after something. And I very much doubt it's a pallet load of bananas. This is as good a time as any to find out what he really wants."

"You think he did it so he could meet you?" Terry brightened, the idea clearly appealing to him. "Now why didn't I think of that? Imagine, stealing your bananas just to get your attention. You've got to admit it's a novel approach."

"Yes, imagine resorting to theft," Jordan mocked dryly, "when all he had to do was walk over and introduce himself."

Despite Terry's romantic view of the incident, Jordan suspected the lifting of her bananas had nothing whatsoever to do with romance, or even bananas. The man wanted to instigate a meeting and this was his clever way of going about it. It also forced her to approach him—giving him the advantage. Shrewd, very shrewd.

Jordan appraised the situation. As far as she could tell, she had two choices. She could stand up to him and demand the return of her bananas, or she could shrug it off