



# La Bonne

MICHÈLE DE LULLY

SANDHAIN présenté par Léo

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Michèle de Lully

# Dedication

*For S.C.*

## Chapter One

The limousine had real leather seats, smooth and sensuous to the touch. My dress, on the other hand, was starched beyond all reason and terribly uncomfortable. Worse was the style, a horribly prim black sack with tacky white lace. It didn't accent my figure at all.

"It's not supposed to," the seamstress had told me. "You don't want to be attracting the attention of the gentlemen of the household." Because she knew my circumstances, she added, quite unnecessarily, "You've had enough of that."

Her comment was completely unfair. The particular man she was referring to was exactly the kind of man whose attention I needed. Older, true, but also stable, nice, and plenty handsome. I would have slept with him for free, just for a place to stay the night. Or maybe for the hope of something more, a relationship with a grown-up instead of a football hooligan. So when he hinted at a little something extra, I played along. Not having to go back to the apartment while my alleged boyfriend was still in a drunken rage *and* pick up a bit of cash? Well, why not?

Because he was a gendarme, that's why. One kiss, the money in my hands for ten seconds, and the cuffs came out. I have to admit, at first glance, I had been kind of excited. I hadn't figured someone so clean-shaven for that kind of kinkiness. But then the speech, the ride downtown, a night in jail, and six months in a work-release program with used-up drug addicts and streetwalkers old enough to be on a pension.

I had tried to explain that I wasn't a professional, that I hadn't ever done it for money before, but when my useless jerk of a boyfriend had shown up in court as my sole character witness, drunk as hell and shouting he'd teach me to whore around, and actually took a swing at me in the courtroom...the judge had turned to me and said, "And now we'll make sure you never do it again."

They got me a job in a hotel, cleaning up rooms. I swore off men on my own, finally realizing that the punks and ruffians I had been with weren't real men, and never would be. With a regular paycheck and no lad to drink it up, for the first time in my life, I had the chance to think about a future.

That's why I had leaped at the unexpected offer. I hadn't planned on a career in the service industry, but I had always dreamed of what life in Cheroigne House would be like. The majestic old house stood outside of town, surrounded by acres of land that seemed untouched by the rest of the world. At some point in our lives, all of the children of the town had snuck up to the hedges and gazed at this legacy of nobility and wealth, wondering what it was like on the inside. Now I would find out. There was an opening for a personal maid.

So here I was, in a limousine and a Victorian servant's dress, riding up the half-mile driveway lined with stately old trees. Time seemed to flow backward, and the car almost turned into a carriage in my mind. I could imagine living here, like they had in the long-ago days, when everything was grand and simple, like a sepia photograph.

Not that I had imagined doing it as a maid, but at this stage of my life, it was still a step up.

"Just a moment, miss, and I'll get your door," said the driver as he pulled to a stop at the back of the house. He hadn't been that solicitous when I got in the car in town, but the atmosphere of the house was irresistible.

"You'll use the back door," he told me, almost apologetically, as he guided me up the stone-paved path. "We all do. It's just the tradition. And you'll find that tradition is still strong at Cheroigne House."

He turned me over to Maria, a plump woman in a white apron and the head of the downstairs staff. She gave me a cup of tea, a friendly smile, and stern words.

"Dame Cheroigne has a long history of charitable efforts. Giving a girl like you a second chance isn't usually one of them, but the detective on your case is a distant relation of the Cheroignes. It's on his

recommendation that you're here. But it is my recommendation that allows you stay. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said weakly. So my handsome gendarme really had come through for me after all, in ways I had never imagined. He was a keeper, that one. Too bad he was married.

"Your duties here will be simple housework. I'm sure you can manage. What will be difficult is living up to the standards of the House. The Dame will interview you in a while, you must demonstrate you know how to act in the presence of a lady."

I didn't know how. But I guessed I could fake it by keeping my head down and being meek.

"And stop staring at the floor. It makes you look...guilty."

Well, maybe not.

I told myself to relax. After all, the worst that could happen was that I would be sent away, back to the halfway house, to live in the stinking, noisy city with the muggers and the car wrecks and the smog and the cheap, dirty hotel rooms full of cheap, dirty people.

By the time I got to the bottom of the tea cup, I had made myself dizzy with wanting this job—even if it meant kissing up to old Maria every day. I gave her my sweetest smile and started paying attention to her lecture.

Eventually, Maria decided I was at least worthy to see the grand old Dame, and went off to arrange it. She left her purse sitting out on the table. I thought that was rather untidy for a maid, until I realized it was supposed to be a test. I couldn't resist. I checked to see how much she had staked out as bait.

Her wallet had a lone bill in it. Nice, crisp, clean, and no doubt marked. At first I was insulted that they thought I could be tempted so cheaply. Then I decided Maria was just so out of touch with the real world that she *thought* such a pitiful amount was actually tempting.

I did the only thing one can do in that situation. I added a bill from my own wallet to Maria's. That would teach her.

This little act of mischief boosted my spirits, and when Maria returned to escort me into the Dame's presence, I was feeling ready to take on the worst Cheroigne House could throw at me.

I was wrong.

Dame Cheroigne looked me up and down and I shivered under her glare. She might have the elegant silver coiffure of a lady and the regal posture of a queen, but she had the eyes of a dragon. They missed nothing, and they could be misled by nothing.

"Do you always sniffle so?" she demanded. I got the immediate impression that everything she would ever say to me would be a demand.

"No, ma'am," I said. It had been a long time since I had called anyone ma'am, but if I wanted this job, I would have to learn to like it.

And in a way, I already did. It was nice to know exactly where you stood.

"I like that," she announced. "No excuses. Excuses are a waste of everyone's time. Do you understand the nature of your position here?"

"Yes, ma'am." Maria's speeches were nothing compared to thirty seconds in the presence of the dragon. I'd be thrown out in a heartbeat if I broke the rules.

"Very good," the Dame said. That was it. I was dismissed from her attention until I broke the china, spilled the soup, or otherwise screwed up. Then she would notice me long enough to fire me.

I was about to take myself back to the kitchen and my new life as under-assistant-chambermaid, when my attention was caught by a shining halo of gold floating into the room.

She was young, perhaps eighteen. Her face radiated innocence, smooth white skin like skim milk under long yellow hair that hung down in curls and waves. Even in the overwhelming dress she wore, her perfect figure was obvious.

The dress was just outrageous. An ocean of blue silk, with ribbons tied in knots so intricate that I could not count them from where I stood.



“Grandma—” she started, but stopped when she saw me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“What is it, Amanda?” The Dame didn’t introduce me. Obviously she figured my uniform identified me as much as was necessary. Tradition, indeed.

“I need help with this dress,” Amanda answered. “I can’t reach the buttons on the back.” And she turned around, revealing a disordered army of hooks and eyes.

“Of course you can’t,” the Dame told her, looking in dismay at that forest of whalebone. “It’s a formal dress. But I’m not about to button it up for you twice, so you can wait until tomorrow to put it on.”

Just watching made me feel like I was in a fairytale. I didn’t want it to fade away.

“I’ll do it,” I blurted out.

The Dame looked shocked, like she had forgotten I was in the room.

But Amanda was grateful. She smiled shyly at me. “That would be wonderful.”

My heart flopped to be the subject of that sweet gaze. I wanted to be her—this fairy princess, young and beautiful and pure. I wanted to be part of her world.

I went over to Amanda and began fussing with the hooks while the old Dame glared at me.

I had to move her golden hair out of the way, and the silky smoothness of it felt like cool water in my hand. Amanda’s bare back was unblemished ivory, firm and supple, creamy. I would have envied her perfection if I wasn’t so awed by it.

Pulling on the hooks, I bound up the back of the dress. When I was done, I swept her hair back into place and turned her to face a small ornamental mirror hanging from the wall.

“Stand up straight,” I murmured, pulling gently on her shoulder while my other hand pressed into her back. The change in posture made her chest stand out most impressively.

The Dame watched me with a critical eye.

"It's lovely," Amanda said.

It was. But not half as lovely as she was.

"But blue...I want to try on the peach one," Amanda decided. She turned to me, hesitating, almost as if she thought I could say no, and asked, "Can you help me?"

"The maid has duties to fulfill," overruled the Dame.

Amanda argued her case. "Tomorrow is my formal engagement dinner. Doesn't preparing for that count as a duty?"

"For a lady's maid, perhaps," the Dame said. "Not for a chambermaid."

Amanda looked me in the eye, and I smiled encouragingly at her. I saw something inside her come to life, a bright spark that was only noticeable by its previous absence.

"Then make her a lady's maid," Amanda told the Dame. "Aren't I of an age to have a personal attendant?"

"I hardly think she is suitable," snapped the old lady.

Amanda looked at her grandmother, all innocence. "Why not?"

*Because she's been arrested for prostitution.* I waited for the Dame to say that, to put me in my place, to extinguish that brief flame of friendship and respect that had flared between us.

Instead, the Dame sighed, and Amanda and I knew we had won. A grin spread across both our faces, a shared victory of the young over the old.

"She might not wish to be your attendant." But it was a question, not an objection.

"I would be honored, ma'am," I said. And I meant it.

If I couldn't be Amanda, at least I could be with her. Try on dresses for her to select from. Sort her vaults of jewelry. Wear her shoes after she discarded them after a single ball.

And maybe even be her friend.

"Then it's settled." Amanda smiled and held out her hand to me.

The Dame intervened. "She is to be your personal attendant, Amanda. You don't shake hands with her."

Amanda's face colored, and she snapped her hand behind her back. Yes, it was a very traditional house.

"Now go on upstairs, dear. I will send your maid up to you in moment."

With a smile like sunshine, she winked at me and flounced out on waves of blue silk.

I wondered what had changed the old lady's mind so quickly.

The Dame gave me a piercing glance. "The job requires discreetness and propriety," she said, almost as a challenge.

"Of course, ma'am."

She twisted her mouth, just the tiniest bit. "My granddaughter is hopelessly naïve, having been spoiled useless by her mother. She knows nothing of the outside world, and simpers like a child. Perhaps it's time that she has the company of a woman her own age. Someone she can talk to. About...whatever it is young women talk about these days."

I struggled to suppress my grin. She knew perfectly well we talked about the same things she did when she was young—clothes and boys. I could imagine the Dame speaking quite knowledgeably about clothing. So it was the talking about boys she wanted done.

"Perhaps you will put some starch into her," the old lady mused. Then, in case I had gotten the wrong idea, "But not too much. Remember your class and station."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, forcing myself to wait patiently.

Not entirely willingly, the old lady finally waved her hand and gave me leave to go.

I all but skipped out of the room to find Amanda waiting for me at the foot of a great staircase. She reached out for my hand, like a little lost duckling. "I hope we can be friends," she said. "My mother never really let me know anyone my age."

How could I refuse such a pitiable request?

“Sure we will,” I said. And it might even be true. The way her face lit up touched my heart. I took her hand and together we raced up the long stairs, two at a time, collapsing into a heap at the top, breathless and giggling.

Once inside her room—which was larger than any apartment I had ever lived in—she grabbed a peach-colored dress from her massive four-poster bed and pranced in front of a floor-length oval mirror standing against the wall. Holding the new dress up before her, she looked at herself in the mirror, and so did I.

“Do you think he would like this one better?” she asked wistfully.

“He?” As I had guessed, there was a man involved.

“His Highness, Petros the Fourth, last claimant to the Aechean throne.”

Not just a man, of course, but a prince!

“He will love it,” I assured her. “But let’s try it on, and see what you think of it.” As I helped her out of the hooks and bones of the blue gown, I reflected that any man would love anything that fantastic figure was wearing. I discovered just how fantastic when she stepped out of her dress. Her silk slip draped over a figure of surpassing perfection.

Curious and just a little malicious, I stopped as she began to pull the peach dress over her head.

“You don’t wear a slip under this kind of dress,” I told her. This dress was much more elegant, a slender dinner affair that wasn’t layered under ornate lace and embroidery.

“You don’t?” she asked, surprised.

Feeling wicked, I plowed ahead with my deception.

“No, of course not.” I watched her pull the slip off, and that still wasn’t enough. I wanted to know just how perfect my fairy princess was.

“Nor a bra,” I said, shaking my head at her naïveté. True to that unlimited quality, she believed me. With round eyes and a little blush, she unhooked her bra and let it fall.

My voice dropped to a husky whisper. Possessed with some strange desire, I added, "Or panties." For a heart-stopping moment, I thought she would refuse, call me a scoundrel, rat me out, and have me tossed out on my ear. But she didn't.

"Okay, if you say so," she said demurely, and stepped out of her underwear.

I had never really thought of women as sexually appealing, but I had never been this close to a naked, beautiful princess before. She was perfect, from the top of her golden, curly hair, to her firm and buoyant breasts, narrow waist, feathery lace of gold between her thighs, tight, firm buttocks, long legs, down to the tips of her manicured toes, all wrapped in a deliciously creamy skin as fresh as the morning dew.

I helped her into the gown, pulled it down around her. Kneeling at her feet to adjust the hem made me feel intimately close, almost like I was kneeling in front of a man. Buttoning up the carved bone eyelets on the back of the dress, I brushed her soft golden hair out of the way, reveling in the sensation of it. After I was done, I adjusted her hair, combing it out with a brush I found on the dresser. Then I stood behind her, posed her head with a little arch, and asked, "What do you think now?"

"I think you're right," she said, looking into the mirror. Without the underclothes, the dress clung to her like paint, making a surface so smooth and shiny I could barely resist running my hands over it. "This dress shouldn't be worn with underthings."

The stunningly beautiful woman in the mirror agreed. She didn't look like an innocent child anymore. I couldn't imagine any man not breaking his neck when she walked by. Yes, I was envious, but only a little. Mostly I was just in awe. Amanda was too sweet to envy, too pure for spite.

"And now the jewelry," I said. Laughing with excitement, she pulled open the dresser drawers. They contained jewelry, all of them, nothing but jewelry, of every kind. Bracelets, pendants, necklaces, earrings, rings, brooches, tiaras, all studded with every precious gemstone I had ever heard of and plenty I hadn't. For hours we laughed and played,

trying everything on in front of the mirror, until they no longer represented wealth or privilege to me, but simply pure and untainted beauty.

## Chapter Two

When I first saw His Highness, I forgot to breathe.

I was expecting some stuffed shirt, either a tweedy, arrogant young man or a fat, arrogant, old one. What I saw was a Mediterranean concoction that melted my knees, a honey-brown liqueur that I wanted to drink until I drowned in it. His stylish suit could not conceal the hardness of his body, lean and lithe and graceful at every turn. His black eyes saw everything, and when they swept over me I wilted, shamed by my desire.

I was not a princess. This was not my world. I was just a maid, an ordinary person on the edge of this glittering realm of aristocracy.

I was glad, then, that I would not be attending dinner. As a personal maid, I had been present when he first entered the house, standing by my lady. Then I handed her—my sweet golden flower—off to him, and watched them go on into the main dining room. Of course Amanda loved him. And of course he loved her. They were a fairytale, and my part in it was limited to convincing my naïve young mistress to wear nothing under her gown.

Amanda had been almost red with embarrassment at the idea of appearing in public like that, but I had talked her into it anyway. Partly because the gown really did look better that way, but mostly because that's how I would have worn it. To spend all evening in the company of man like that, with nothing on underneath, would leave me as limp as a wet rag. With the predictable result.

My room was next to Amanda's, and the previous night we had slept with the door open, giggling to each other like schoolgirls, but I was

certain the door would be closed tonight. I could only hope it was reasonably soundproof.

"He is lovely, isn't he?" Maria might be old, but she was still a woman. In traditional fashion, the male and female servants took their dinners in separate rooms. The arrangement was fine with me. I'd sworn off men, after all, until I had my future under control.

"I read in the *Daily Herald* that he was seen in Monaco with this month's *Vogue* cover-girl," snipped the laundry-girl.

"Lucky her," I countered. Jealousy was so petty.

"Now, now," Maria defended him. "I'm sure he was as much a gentleman there as he always is here."

"He's been here before?" I asked.

"Of course," said Maria. "He's been betrothed to Amanda since she was twelve. A marriage of state, you see."

The traditional price of royalty. I hadn't thought it applied anymore. But in Cheroigne House, tradition didn't seem to know it was dead and buried.

"Do they—" I started, but then stopped, embarrassed. It wasn't my place to ask that question.

"Of course they do," Maria answered anyway. "Who wouldn't love our dear Amanda? And how she loves him! Maybe in the old days girls had to marry fat old kings, but not anymore. He's been a frequent guest of the House these six years, and a perfect gentleman every time. You can't believe everything you read in the papers," she admonished.

"They had a *picture*," grumbled the laundry-girl, but not very loudly.

Amanda hadn't told me much about Petros, but she had been looking forward to this night with unquenchable eagerness. I just assumed she wanted a chance to dress up and entertain, but now I understood she wanted him. So did I, but then, so did every woman in this house. The image of old Maria flopping on the kitchen table and yanking up her skirts made me choke on my croissant, coughing until I was red in the face. Maria pounded my back while the laundry-girl ignored me sourly, disapproving of my attention-seeking, no doubt.



A tinge of guilt made me avoid their eyes. Even while I had been fighting for breath, romantic notions of him charging into the kitchen to save me, wrapping those sculpted arms around me for a Heimlich maneuver, had flashed across my watery vision. Any excuse to get his hands on me.

But I had to stop thinking like this. Not only was I beneath his class, Amanda was in love with him. And in these last two days, I had become her friend. For the first time, I was in the company of a woman who did not view me as competition. Amanda simply had no concept of it. And why should she, with her charmed life?

My jealousy wasn't any better. She wasn't responsible for her station in life. I couldn't blame her for being born rich and beautiful. She had everything, but it wasn't her fault, just like it wasn't my fault that I had been born with nothing. I should count myself lucky just to be a witness to this young love, this glorious fantasy that everyone dreamed about and I was now getting to live. Secondhand, but still closer than the *Daily Herald*.

\* \* \*

After all that self-consolation, I was unprepared for the end of the evening. It was a subtle thing, something that no one else remarked on or even noticed. A trivial thing, even, but it struck a hollow gong deep inside me.

As His Highness was leaving—he wouldn't be staying the night, after all—he kissed Amanda goodbye.

Like a sister.

A brush of the lips, without passion, without desire. Affection, love, but not even a hint of sexuality. Amanda didn't notice—her eyes fluttered rapturously, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

Like a flash of distant lighting, it occurred to me that Amanda didn't know there was anything wrong.

Alone with her in our rooms, I was suddenly uncomfortable.

"What did you think?" she babbled. "Do you think he liked the dress? Did you think he was handsome?"

"He's more than handsome," I assured her. "He's almost as beautiful as you are."

She blushed at that, not with vanity, but innocence. "I love it so much when he comes to visit." She stared dreamily into the mirror.

"You never visit him?"

"Of course not. That wouldn't be...proper."

"Does he ever spend the night here?" I was starting to get worried.

"Of course not!" She almost blushed. "That wouldn't be proper, either."

A fearful suspicion crept out of the shadows of my mind.

"Then you haven't—I mean, you two haven't—" In the presence of so much innocence, I couldn't finish.

Amanda didn't answer, just stared at me with widening eyes.

"Oh, my," I said lamely. Oh my, indeed.

Shyly clutching a pillow to her chest, Amanda worked up the nerve to ask me. "Have...have you?"

The string of pathetic boys I had screwed in various cars, apartments, and even once in an alley hardly seemed like bragging material at the moment.

"Yes, I have," I answered, declining to elaborate. "Most girls our age have, Amanda."

"But you're not married!"

"So?" What century did this girl think she was living in? "It's been ages since you had to be a virgin to get married. Times have changed."

As soon as I said it, I realized my error. Ages had passed in the rest of the world, perhaps, but time had a different meaning here.

"Not in Cheroigne House," Amanda said ruefully.

When I still looked dubious, she explained. "There's a test, with a doctor. It's part of the procedure of a royal marriage. They have to certify I am a virgin."

All the beauty of her clothes, her jewels, her mansion, seemed hollow and empty at that point. My outrage boiled over, and I could not stop myself from objecting.

"That's not *fair*."

"It's my duty," she answered, gentle but resolute. "And I don't mind. Petros is the only one I want, anyway."

But are you the only one Petros wants, I thought savagely. They don't test the men for virginity.

Amanda was not completely oblivious. Looking at my face, she guessed my thoughts. "I don't know," she answered them, "and I don't care. Someday he will be mine, and that's good enough for me."

Stupid, stupid me, I couldn't leave well enough alone. "Not with that kiss," I muttered.

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"Nothing, forget it."

But she would not be denied. "Tell me! You must tell me!"

Fearing tears, I relented.

"He kissed you like a sister, Amanda. Not like a woman, like a sister."

"Are you sure?"

"I've kissed enough men to know," I said. "If you'd ever kissed even one boy, you'd have to know."

"He's the only one. Ever."

I couldn't believe it. "Not even a...stableboy?" Didn't princesses always kiss the stableboys?

"No, of course not. Why would I?"

Well, of course, why would she?

"How is it different?" she asked sadly.

"It's just, different. Like, does he ever use his tongue?"

From her face I could see the answer. The idea that a French girl had never been French kissed was just depressing.

“Does he touch your hair? Pull your head back? Anything?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I don’t know any of that.”

And then the tears burst after all. She threw her face into the pillowed and cried.

“Why would he want me? Stupid, silly me!”

I put my arms around her and tried to comfort her. It was not a problem I had ever encountered. Men, in my experience, had always wanted sex. Usually, that was all they wanted. The idea that Petros didn’t want it from Amanda was just incomprehensible.

Briefly, I considered the possibility that our prince was inclined to different pursuits. But the memory of his eyes raking over my body dispelled that fear.

“He’s been coming here for years, right? Ever since you were twelve?”

“Yes,” she said, the sobs gently dying now. “I knew then that we would be married someday. It didn’t mean anything to me, except that we would have a grand wedding and live in a castle. He was young, only eighteen, but he was always nice to me. He brought me presents from far away and made me laugh.”

“Nobody asked you if you wanted to marry him?”

“Grandma told me I had the right to refuse. But I never wanted to. I just wanted to grow up soon, so we could be together all the time.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” I mused. “Maybe he still thinks of you as a little girl.”

“But I’m not! I’m eighteen now. We’re to be married soon.”

“Soon? No date is set?”

“Not yet,” she admitted. This was bad news. Men who didn’t set dates tended not to keep them.

“Then we just have to make him see you differently, Amanda.” I was sure she could compete with any starlet, with just a little coaching. She had the looks and the personality. All she needed was a spark.

“How?” she wondered.

“Maybe you should kiss him next time. And let him know...” What was she going to let him know? She didn’t know anything.

“I don’t know how to kiss,” she confirmed.

“Then you’ll learn.”

“But,” her face grew very doubtful, “Johann the stableman is married. And old. And he smells funny, too.”

“Not him,” I laughed. The idea of that lumpy old man groping this dewy flower was ludicrous. “I think we can do better.”

“Who?” she asked, and it was a good question. The answer was obvious. I didn’t mind, it was for a good cause. And besides, it might be kind of fun. She was just that pretty.

“If you don’t think it’s too gross, maybe I could show you. Just as friends, of course.”

“Oh, please!” she begged, and the earnest desire in her face made something inside of me warm and moist.

“Well, the first thing, it’s like this.” I gave up on words, they wouldn’t help her. Gently I took a fistful of those golden curls in my hand, from the nape of her neck. Slowly pulling her head back, I bent over her. We both closed our eyes and I put my lips to hers. They were softer and more delicate than I had expected—a totally different experience than kissing a man.

Gingerly at first, I pushed my tongue against her lips. When she resisted, I probed a little harder. Her innocence aroused me, luring me in, like a delicate rosebud ready to blossom.

“Open your mouth,” I whispered, opening my eyes just inches from her face. She looked up at me with an earnest trust, closed her eyes again and parted her lips. I bent my mouth to hers and sent my tongue inside. She met me with hers, then went limp and let me have my way. I hadn’t been kissed in months, and she was sweet and warm.

I found myself enjoying it.

Surprise made me retreat. The next surprise was that she followed, her tongue thrusting into my mouth. Together we wrestled, in and out, until I felt my breasts straining against my starched uniform, my nipples standing up hard and eager.

I broke off the kiss then, and looked away. I couldn't speak.

"That was...nice," she said, her voice low and breathy. The arousal in it made me shiver. If Petros had been here, he would have torn her clothes off and had her right there.

I almost did.

"We should practice some more," I said instead. Part of me wanted to flee, to run away, but I didn't move.

"Yes, please," she agreed.

"But later."

"Of course," she said. "Later."

Then we kissed again. This time I stopped when I found my hand creeping to her breast.

"Definitely later."

"Definitely," she agreed, and I retreated to my room.

Changing into my nightgown, I wondered what had just happened. Her eagerness I could understand. She was young, inexperienced, untouched. Anything would feel good to her. But what about me? Was three months off men enough to sign me up for the other team?

Or was it that she was just so sweet and clean, everything about her seemed shameless? I loved her, in the way you love kittens and babies and everything gentle and good. But there was more than that...I found her eagerness arousing, begging to be unleashed and brought to ecstasy, hot and sweaty and wholly *woman*.

Firmly fixing my mind on Petros, picturing him in illicit visions, I slipped my hand between my thighs and rubbed myself furiously. Thinking of what he would feel like, around me, on me, in me. Thinking of his hands and strong arms, his hot breath in my ear. I climaxed in record time.

But as I fell into sleep, I could still taste her in my mouth.

## Chapter Three

Whatever embarrassment or shame I might have felt evaporated in the morning when Amanda greeted me with a bright and hopeful smile.

“I was always afraid there was something missing,” she confided in me. “I couldn’t bring myself to admit it. But now I know we can fix it.”

Her naiveté was infectious, and I found myself believing that even world-traveling princes could be turned into good husbands. At least we would try.

Amanda was doing her part. Her days were taken up with language lessons, English, Italian, and of course Greek. Tutors lectured her in history and etiquette, even heraldry—a more dry and dusty subject one could hardly imagine—and she listened to them all with more polite interest than I could ever have faked.

For exercise there were the horses. Like all girls, I had fantasized about owning a pony. House Cheroigne had an entire stable. Not sweet little riding horses, but majestic thoroughbreds that had to be faced as equals and mastered. Amanda embraced the challenge with glowing passion, and watching her put a stallion through its paces gave me a ray of hope. If she could transfer that confidence to training Petros, he would become a fine husband after all.

The stablemaster rounded up a gentle nag for me, so that I could pretend to be involved. I had fun, yes, but I was also humbled. It seemed unreasonable to call what I was doing riding, when the word was also supposed to describe the superb athletics that Amanda spent hours a day performing.



She was training for an upcoming contest. As always, she had the honor of House Cheroigne to defend. In this case, that included a half-dozen men and horses who labored full-time preparing for a handful of events each year. She was not just trying to win for herself, but to honor these men who gave more loyalty than money could buy. To fail would be to let them down. Amanda assumed the responsibility as her natural duty.

Watching her gallop around a course of obstacles, executing heart-racing jumps and head-spinning turns, I found myself glimpsing the woman she could become. Head held high, facing every ditch and fence with equanimity, confident in her skill, assured of her complete knowledge of every horse's tiniest quirk and quality, supported by the bond of trust between horse and rider, she was never more beautiful to me. Such promise, such hope for a future so bright.

It touched something buried deep inside me, something I thought had been lost forever. I turned away from it, afraid to let it grow again. But the image of her face, speckled with mud and sweat and a huge smile, would never fade.

\* \* \*

This particular gymkhana was being held just outside of town, at our local fairgrounds. It was odd to be out in the real world as a servant of an aristocrat. All the times I had come to the local fairs I had certainly never imagined this future. But I was surrounded by other servants, and after a while it all seemed perfectly natural.

For an hour or more I was occupied with helping Amanda get ready. But eventually it was time for her to enter the field.

"A kiss for luck," she whispered to me.

"Don't be silly," I said. We were surrounded by a small crowd, the families of other contestants, random strangers, and a handful of press.

But just before she turned to go, I pulled her close to me. In her blush I saw that she expected a kiss after all, and I was disarmed by her simple intimacy. I almost did kiss her.

Instead, I reached out to touch her earlobe.

"I don't think you want to wear these out there." She had on a pair of diamond earrings, set in gold. As sparkly as they were—and that was very sparkly, because the stones were huge—if they fell in the mud they would be lost forever.

She blushed and unhooked them, but her outfit didn't have any pockets.

"Here, hold on to them for me," she said. "In fact, why don't you wear them?"

It was a measure of how fast our closeness had grown that I let her hook the jewels through my ears. Nothing from Amanda could be impure. But the weight of them drove home a more prosaic concern.

"Amanda—I can't." These things cost more than I made in, well, ever. What if I lost one?

"Don't worry, they're insured," she said, as if she had read my mind.

Relieved and excited, I hugged her. At that moment I wanted to kiss her, the public be damned. But I didn't, and she did not kiss me. Instead we hugged. For a heartbeat longer than was strictly appropriate between friends.

"Good luck," I told her. And with a winning smile, she was gone. I tried not to finger my ears.

She wouldn't actually be in the first round, so I had some time to kill. I went in search of the restroom, for the obvious reason, and also with a little hope there would be a mirror there. I suppose I should have paid more attention, but I was somewhat distracted, thinking about how good life was turning out for me. So when the hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around, the cynical black spot in my soul was not that surprised.

Until I saw who it was.

“Renaud! What are you doing here?” The last time I had seen him he was being ejected from the courtroom by angry bailiffs. To be honest, that was the last time I wanted to see him.

“Did you miss me?” he leered. I could smell the beer on his breath, even though it was still early in the morning. What had I ever seen in this beefy, long-haired lout?

“I went to jail.” A lame answer, considering the obvious fact that I was not in jail now.

“Serves you right, tramp, for trying to cheat on me. But now you can make it all up. Now’s your chance to set it right with me.”

It’s true I’d been without a man for months now, and that I had once enjoyed Renaud’s attentions, but at this moment I found his touch revolting—especially after just basking in Amanda’s purity. I wasn’t particularly opposed to sneaking off and making out in some empty building. The idea was actually kind of interesting. I just wasn’t interested in Renaud anymore, in any way, shape, or form.

He compared very, very badly to my prince and princess. Or even to the police detective I had originally tried to trade him for. He must have seen disapproval in my eyes, because his leer turned nasty.

“Not that, you stupid bint. I didn’t come out here for a bang.”

“Then what?” I demanded, relieved and just a little miffed. He’d never turned one down before.

“I’m working. Such as it is. Came out here to see what I could pick off the snobs. And then you walk into my hands...”

It was then that I remembered the earrings. Instinctively I put my hands to my ears, and he laughed at me.

“I saw her give them to you. I saw the way you hugged her. You think she’s your friend, but you lose those pretties and you’ll see what she really thinks of you.”

“No, Renaud. I’m not giving them to you.” I tried to make my voice strong, but his words cut me like a knife.

“Give? Of course not. I’m stealing them. You get mugged, what’s a girl to do? Run crying back to your rich little bitch. And when they throw you out, I’ll even give you a cut of the take. If you ask nicely enough.”

“I’m not going to do it.”

His face darkened. “You want me to knock you around a little? A black eye will make your story look much more real. If that’s the way you want it, that’s fine by me.”

He pulled out the knife I knew he always carried. I trembled, but I did not dare run or scream. Renaud wasn’t very smart. If I panicked him, made him act without thinking, I was sure he was capable of the most terrible idiocy.

“I’ll even cut you a little. A favor, for old time’s sake.” He laughed, in a dark, twisted way. I think he was just saying it to scare me.

But I had resolved to make a new life, and I wasn’t going to let Renaud come in and wreck it all. I owed myself more than that.

“No. I’ll give them your name.”

“Why?” he cried, outraged. “Just say it was any bloke. Pretend you don’t know me, and we both can score!”

“No, Renaud.”

He raised his fist high. I think he had forgotten he had the knife in his hand. I was more scared at that moment—of his stupidity rather than his anger—than I had ever been. But I thought of my shining golden princess coaxing a reluctant horse through a terrifying jump, and stood my ground. For perhaps the first time in my life.

“You’re not going to kill me. So no matter how bad you beat me, I’ll give them your name, and you’ll go to jail. Hard time, Renaud. These people know the prosecutors, the judges. I have friends now. You’ll do hard time.”

I saw the emotions flash across his simple-minded face. Fear of the law, anger at being denied, hunger for the wealth that hung from my ears...and something else. Something in him was puzzled by my defiance. Even in the terror of the moment, I saw that shadowed respect, and felt the distant glory of it.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he finally said. I could hear the defeat in his voice.

“Nothing, from my point of view,” said a cultured and firm voice. I recognized it instantly and my heart fluttered. How could it not? A damsel in distress being rescued by a prince. If her heart did not flutter, she might as well be dead.

Renaud whirled to glare at Petros, stunned at how close he had gotten before either of us had noticed. The knife was still in Renaud’s hand, but Petros looked at it contemptuously.

“I think you should leave,” Petros suggested.

“For god’s sake,” I said. “Just go away, Renaud. Leave me alone. And I’ll leave you alone.” I didn’t want revenge, or even justice. I wanted my past to stay in the past.

“You can have her,” Renaud snorted. “I did, and it wasn’t worth the effort.”

Petros did not respond. He just watched Renaud. In that silence, Renaud swaggered off. He probably thought he looked cool and victorious, but he just looked like an unhappy bully to me.

“Are you all right?” Petros asked me.

“Yes,” I said, although I was still shaking. “How did you find us?”

“I came to watch Amanda, but instead I found myself watching you. I saw him watching, too. So when he followed you, I followed him.”

This was the longest speech Petros had ever directed at me, and I luxuriated in his accent. Until I figured out what his words meant.

“You watched the whole thing?”

Petros gave me significant look. “I did.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you do something earlier?”

He shrugged, eloquent and sensuous at the same time. “For the same reason you did not. It seemed wise not to startle him, at least while you had everything under control.”

Infuriating man! I didn’t want logic, I wanted abject apologies and comforting hugs.

He stepped in close and put his arms gently around me.

“Are you sure you are all right?” he asked again.

“I am now,” I said, before I realized quite what the words coming out of my mouth were.

“You displayed uncommon valor. And unreasonable. He might have hurt you. Amanda could have easily replaced those baubles, but I do not think she values you so lightly.”

Leaning into his hard body, shamelessly feigning complete weakness just so I could melt against him, I wanted to cry out, who cares what Amanda wants? Do you want me?

But I didn't.

“It wasn't about the earrings. It was about...choices. It was about escaping the past.” I didn't expect him to understand. After all, how many men actually listen?

But Petros skipped a track ahead of me. “Is that why you don't want me to go after him?”

I hadn't realized, until this moment, that I didn't.

“No, please don't. He won't bother me again. And he has enough trouble in his life. I realize now I can't help him, but I don't want to add to his problems.”

I began to recognize just how dubious it looked. My thug of an ex-boyfriend had met up with me in a secluded area while I was holding a fortune in someone else's jewelry.

I waited for the lecture. Petros, after all, was from the moneyed class. Why would he let a thug go, just to respect the wishes of a servant?

“I suppose you don't want me to tell Amanda, either,” he said.

I felt tears coming on. What if she was suspicious? I could never bear that look of mistrust in her eyes. Not even a flicker.

But when I looked up, there was no doubt in Petros's face. Only a world-weary look of sympathy.

“She might not understand,” he said, echoing my thoughts, and that was that.

It was clear that he did—even more, I think, than I. I had not expected this. I had categorized Petros the first time I had seen him, and now I had to face the fact that I had been wrong. I did not actually have a handle on who this enigmatic prince really was.

But for now, I cried in his arms, pretending that he was just a simple hero and I just a simple girl.

Then we went to watch the real princess.

\* \* \*

On the way home, I pondered a mystery. How could Petros have seen something to trust in me, yet missed the glory of Amanda in her element? She had taken first place, but congratulated the runner-up as graciously as a queen at the Olympics. Yet Petros kissed her as tamely as before, an older brother indulging his kid sister.

I struggled half-heartedly with the problem, and only succeeded in forgetting about it until that night in her room, when she turned to me suddenly and said, “Let’s practice.”

She was wearing a sea-green nightgown of lace and silk that cost more than all the clothes I owned and left less to the imagination than anything I had ever worn. Her hair hung in golden curls over her shoulders, and her bright blue eyes had an imperious hunger that made me quiver.

To distract myself, I rebuked her. “Greedy, aren’t we?”

She was immediately contrite. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push. If you don’t want to—”

“No, of course I do. I want to see the look on Petros’s face next time, when you knock his socks off.”

She laughed and so did I. Because it was true—I wanted her to rock Petros’s world. At least I would be there secondhand.

She leaned into me, expectant but unsure. With more authority in my voice than I felt, I instructed her.

“Draw your head back just a little when he first starts to kiss you. This will make him come in closer, and then you can get more of a kiss before he pulls away.” This was one of my best tricks and I was giving it away.

“Like this?” she asked, and I bent over to kiss her. She did it perfectly, pulling back just enough and then trapping me in a moment where our lips locked. When I felt her mouth open, I broke away, embarrassed.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Nobody had ever asked me that before, just for breaking off a kiss.

“Yes,” I lied. “This is just a little strange for me.”

“It’s strange for me, too,” she said, “but I’m glad you’re the one who is teaching me.”

“Trust me, Amanda, there are lots of boys who would be glad to do it.”

“I know,” she said, her delicate face so grave and thoughtful it made my chest ache. “But I know I can trust you.”

How I had longed to say that to the people I had kissed. How untrue it would have been, how true it was now.

We kissed again, and this time I did not pull away. At least not until I felt her body pushing into mine.

“Could you put your hand on my hair, like last time? I really liked that,” she said, without a trace of self-consciousness.

So I complied. Wrapping my hand in those soft curls, I pulled her head back and forced my mouth onto hers. She yielded completely, her body unresisting and open, and I was seized again by that desire to plunder and despoil this innocent perfection. I kissed her savagely, too wrapped up in my own pleasure to notice how her arms crept up around me, until I felt something hard poking into my breast.

Leaning back, breathing heavily, I saw that her nipples were stiff and erect. She sighed in pleasure, and I realized that mine were just as



aroused. When she opened her eyes, I gave in to the moment and kissed her again.

For perhaps an hour we sat there, hugging and kissing, making small talk and giggling, like lovers. Or at least like the lovers I read about in books, I had never had a man be so intimate so long without sex. Or even with it.

At last, my head swimming, I declared it was time for bed. Amanda did not complain, but simply asked, "Can we practice again tomorrow night?"

"Of course," I said, unable to say anything else in that tender moment. Then I went to my own bedroom and shut the door.

Placing a hand between my legs, I discovered I was soaking wet. As I brought myself quickly and easily to climax, visions of her and of Petros flickered through my mind, often indistinguishable.

\* \* \*

Over the next few nights, we conducted regular sessions. Amanda was a quick learner, and I began to realize that we had passed what she could learn from practicing. I continued to indulge, because it was my job to indulge her, or so I told myself. I would not admit just how much I enjoyed it, how flattering it was that she found my company and my touch so desirable, or how exhilarating it was that this golden goddess would so gladly stoop to obey me.

But obedience was the problem, I realized. Amanda did what I asked, but not more, because she did not know there was more. It was like the thunder without the lightning. Amanda's kisses needed desire, hunger, a promise of things to come.

"I think you're ready to move to the next step," I told her one night.

"The next step?" she asked, wide-eyed. More than ready, I thought.

"You know there are, um, other things that Petros will do, right?"

"Yes," she blushed, "at least, I assumed there were."

So she didn't know.

"Here's the thing, Amanda. It's not going to work for you, unless you are ready." I remembered my first time. Then I remembered much later, when I finally discovered why everybody thought it was so much fun.

"Petros won't hurt me," she said. "I know that much."

"That's not what I mean. There's more to it than what he does."

"Like what?" She was truly innocent.

"Like what happens to you. Like being carried away on an ocean wave. Like being enveloped in a lake of glorious fire."

Now I had her attention.

"But to get there, Amanda, you have to help him. He can't take you there alone."

"Show me," she begged, "show me how to help him."

"Have you ever, you know...touched...yourself?"

Her eyebrows arched, and I knew the answer was no. Now I was tongue-tied and feeling foolish. How was I going to explain this to her?

"Touched myself where? What do you mean? Could you show me?" she asked shyly, and I almost died from shame.

"No, of course not!" She flinched and I realized how harsh my words sounded. "I'm sorry, Amanda. I didn't mean it that way. It's just, you know, something you do in private."

"Then how will I learn?" she almost wailed.

"Bathtub," I said, relieved to finally have an idea. The bathtub was perfect—a place where you were naked, relaxed, and with a rough yet soft washcloth close at hand. "When you take a bath, I'll show you."

"Let's do it now," she suggested. "I feel like a bath anyway." We'd been kissing for half an hour by now, and I felt like I could use a cold shower too.

I went to draw the water, turning on the silver taps in her huge marble private bath. She stepped out of the white silk slip of a nightgown she had been wearing and walked into the bathroom with me.

There was a brief embarrassed moment over her nakedness. Then it was past, and we were comfortable together, two close friends with nothing between us.

I watched her step demurely into that clear water, her breasts full, her nipples standing up like they always did during our practice sessions. The gentle rise between her thighs called to me, and that dark hunger to possess welled up inside me like a black fountain. Now clear-headed and unrestrained, I helped her down into the warm water.

Taking a cloth, I began to wash her back. "Just relax," I told her, bizarrely confident. "Just let yourself go, and don't worry about anything." The words seemed strangely familiar, but of course they did—they were the sort of words men had said to me.

Stroking her gently, I washed her arms and legs. I could see her melting. "Close your eyes," I whispered, and began to wipe the cloth over her perfect breasts. She breathed in heavily, and that affected me so much that I squeezed my hand, firmly grasping her breast, the nipple pressing through the cloth to my hand.

She did not pull away, but sat there with her eyes closed, willing to submit to whatever I chose to do to her.

"Relax," I commanded, and slowly moved the cloth south, letting it trickle against her skin the entire way. When I reached that perfect, feathery strip of gold, I let the cloth pile up on it, one fold at a time, and then I pressed down with my hand and rubbed.

Her eyes opened now, and I smiled at her with that hungry look I had seen so many times before on the faces of the men who had touched me like that. "Just let it happen," I told her, and kept rubbing tenderly.

When she began to arch her hips into my hand, my sensibilities got the better of me. "Now you," I told her, and replaced my hand with hers. "Do that yourself."

"Will you watch me?" she asked, so innocently I could not say no.

"Of course," I said, and sitting there at the edge of the vast marble tub, I did. The sight could not have failed to move anyone. She was a

beautiful and pure creature discovering the ultimate pleasure. It was like watching an angel learn to fly.

When she finally climaxed, thrashing in the tub, gasping for air, I almost joined her. My breath ran deep now, and I knew without checking that I was as wet as I had ever been.

“Do you do that often?” she asked me dreamily, still floating on the cloud.

“Every night,” I confirmed, for lately it had been.

“Every night?” she exclaimed.

“Yes, and from now on, so will you. Every night.”

“Every night?”

“Yes,” I told her, “and maybe every morning, too. We’ll see how your kissing progresses.”

“If that’s what I have to do for Petros,” she sighed.

“Of course it is.” Of course, that’s why we were doing this. For Petros.

Alone in my room, my hand going to its familiar place, once again I could not separate the visions of Amanda and Petros. To be one of them, just to be there, beside them, the young and beautiful and pure. To start over again, but this time with everything perfect.

When I began to have visions of Petros washing Amanda in the tub, I passed into that fiery territory and stayed there until sleep claimed me.

## Chapter Four

The secret smile that Amanda flashed at me over breakfast was enough to melt a prison matron's heart. Still, it barely made a dent in my confusion. I was supposed to be a lady's maid and I was corrupting her. But that only bothered me for scant seconds.

Vastly more importantly, I was supposed to be a normal, healthy woman, and this girl was corrupting *me*. I needed a man to set me straight. My problem was just that it had been so long I couldn't remember what it was like.

Except I could quite clearly imagine what it would be like with that Greek prince, that lithe, graceful icon of manliness. But thoughts like that made me light-headed, so I had to push them away, and in their place spilled images of sweet, bubbling Amanda.

Today she bubbled more than seemed possible. After lunch she ransacked the mailbag and came up victorious. She tore open the fancy envelope in her hand with ferocity, an arch reminder that my golden kitten was in fact a grown woman, even if she did not know it yet.

"Grandma," she sang out, barely reading the card. "Grandma, I must ask your leave."

"What are you going on about, you foolish girl?" snapped the old lioness, suspiciousness flooding her face instantly. I could see how Amanda had remained so sheltered, the Dame was as paranoid as a police detective and twice as perceptive.

"Petros has given me a birthday present. Do you remember, last month, at dinner, he said he would have a surprise for me soon?"

The Dame glared, but saved her ammunition 'til the battle was truly joined.

“He says the weather is perfect, now, and the boat is repaired.”

Still the old lady did not bite. Silently I urged Amanda to proceed cautiously, to try to trap the old woman, but her girlish enthusiasm swept her away.

“He has invited me on a cruise! On his own yacht, the *Argo*. For two weeks!” She read from the card, enraptured with the words, “I long to see your glow by moonlight on the waters of my people. The Aegean sea will think Helen come again, to steal the hearts of men.”

“*Mon Dieu!*” The old lady gasped for breath. So did I—that sugary prose was enough to choke anyone. I would have laughed in his face if a man had said that to me.

But delivered in Amanda’s guileless voice, sweetness was the only aftertaste.

“Absolutely not,” said the Dame. “You can’t spend two weeks at sea with him.” I had to silently agree with her. Put Amanda within reach of a tongue that honeyed and there wouldn’t be any need of a doctor’s report. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, my dear,” she said, and clearly meant it. It was Petros she didn’t trust, any farther than she could throw a Grecian pillar, and neither did I. “But it would not be seemly for an unmarried girl to be alone with a man of his, ah, stature.”

“But I won’t be alone,” countered Amanda triumphantly. “I’ll have my maid with me!”

My jaw dropped in time with the Dame’s. Neither of us had expected that.

“That is one of her functions, is it not?” Amanda pressed. “To provide an assurance of propriety?”

Amanda had run her grandmother up a tree. A tree she had obviously been planning since the moment she saw me and hatched the sudden desire for a personal attendant. I was pretty sure I would get the blame for it, though.

"I do not think a single maid is enough for propriety's sake," the Dame countered weakly, and I had to suppress a laugh. A hundred maids would not be enough.

"Then we should begin interviewing additions to the staff immediately," Amanda said coolly. "The *Argo* sails next week, and I intend to be on it. I am eighteen now, and you cannot keep me from my betrothed." She swept out of the room with such dignity that, for a moment, I thought she had become the Dame.

Glaring futilely at the departing princess, the old woman growled at me. "Perhaps not quite that much starch."

Could it be true? Could my indiscretions have given Amanda that imperial confidence? The concept left me tongue-tied with amazement.

"No matter," said the Dame when it was clear I had nothing to say. "Let us discuss the next phase of your employment."

The menace in her voice was naked. So much for dignity. The old woman was about to threaten me with as much ferocity as a lioness protecting her cub.

"Since you've put this spine into Amanda's back, you'll have to see it through. Has anyone explained the facts of the matter to you?"

I could guess well enough what she was getting at. Amanda had to come back from that voyage intact.

"Yes, ma'am," I admitted.

"Not sufficiently, I warrant. So allow me to detail how they affect you personally. You still have three months left on your halfway house sentence. Should you skip out on those months, you'll be sent to a real prison."

"Yes ma'am," I agreed, "but I'm serving them here. There was paperwork."

"Paperwork," she said carefully, "can be lost."

I gasped, drawing my breath in shock. The Dame played for keeps.

“Your recommendation came from a police detective known to be a good and honest man. But he is of Cheroigne descent. Recommendations also can be lost.”

She leaned forward and grabbed the apron of my uniform. Such intimacy from this distant and formal old woman made my blood run cold.

“You are, like all young women, a foolish girl. You do not understand how important these things are. But they are important to me and to others, men and women you will never meet, but whose whims and attitudes can make or break your life. Bring my granddaughter back a virgin. Do not even contemplate the alternative.”

“How?” I choked, more out of a desire to buy time to think than in expectation of an answer.

“How else?” she all but snarled. “He is a man. You are a woman with nothing to lose. The rest you should be able to figure out on your own. But remember—Amanda has much to lose, and if you let her lose it, my wrath will have no ending.”

It would seem that I had just been ordered to place myself at the sexual disposal of my lady’s fiancé. I would have been outraged, except that it was the fantastic Petros, and I would not be able to keep a straight face while objecting.

But what it would do to Amanda began to worry me. Our friendship, as fast as it had grown, would never survive such a treacherous strain.

The old lady must have seen this fear on my face, for she said in a far gentler tone, “Do what is best for Amanda, in the long run. Do you care enough for her to do what must be done now, for the sake of her future?”

I nodded. Barely, but I did nod.

“Then see to it,” she finished coldly. “And I will see that you are amply rewarded. House Cheroigne does not forget its enemies, but neither does it forget its loyal servants.”

And that was what I was, of course. A servant. A few weeks ago I would have been violently angry at such oppression. But I had seen how the house ran, like a Swiss watch, every person in their appointed place.



And I had seen the cost that the ladies paid for their privilege, in Amanda's isolation and perhaps even now in the Dame's coldness. I was not sure I wanted to switch places, frankly.

But I did not want to leave, not yet. If I could, I would see Amanda safely married to her prince. That would be the one good thing I gave away in my life, to balance all the selfish pleasures I had stolen. For now, at least, I would serve the will of House Cheroigne, and the future interest of my lady, even if she would never understand.

\* \* \*

The best thing about this trip was that I wouldn't be wearing that horrible maid's outfit. But the rest of my wardrobe was rendered downright tawdry next to Amanda's casual finery. The contrast between her fitted slacks and my cheap ones, between her beautiful dresses and my sleazy miniskirts, brought me to the brink of tears. I was trying on my pathetic tops in front of the mirror and trying not to cry when Amanda found me.

"Here," she said, handing me one of her lace-lined spaghetti-strapped designer affairs. I'm sure it fit her like a glove, flattering her every curve, but on me it just advertised every flaw. I wasn't skinny on top or thick around the waist, but I could never live up to the clothes that were tailored for her perfect figure.

"Hmm, not really," Amanda said, eyeing me critically.

I bit my lip to stop myself from snapping back with something catty. It wasn't her fault, I kept telling myself. But at this moment that excuse was stretched to the breaking point.

"You're right," she said to the bitter face I was making. "I can't see wearing that in the Mediterranean, either. Too much lace."

She turned her back to me and rifled through her closet. I took off the top and laid it carefully on the bed. It probably cost more than a week's salary for me.

Amanda sighed in dissatisfaction, throwing another extravagant silk blouse onto the floor. When she pouted like this, she looked like a twelve-year-old. No wonder Petros still thought of her as a child.

"I hate all my clothes," she said miserably. "Grandma has to let me go shopping. She can't expect me to go to Greece in *that*."

My jealousy spiked at that moment. The girl had closet after closet of designer labels so elite I had never heard of them. She had beautiful things and didn't appreciate them, while I had practically nothing. I had to turn away from her to hide my anger and get myself under control. I picked up her discarded clothes and hung them back in the closet, like a good maid.

"See, I don't have anything like this," Amanda said when I came out of the closet. She was holding my black leather miniskirt against her waist and posing in front of the mirror. At first I actually thought she was making fun of me, and my face burned.

And then I realized she really wasn't. She had expensive clothes, yes, but they were the pretty things a girl would choose. Not the clothes a woman who was trying to land a man would choose.

On the other hand, my entire wardrobe was basically an advertisement for male attention.

"Let me see your bathing suit," I said. Petty of me, yes, but I was still wounded and trying to salvage some pride.

She looked at me dubiously, but went into the bathroom to comply. I pulled out my bikini, stripped down and slid into the scraps of hot pink fabric. Cheap, tacky, slutty even, and it revealed enough of my assets to lay bare their every fault. But men still turned their heads when I walked by in it.

Amanda came out in her one-piece suit. It was lovely, of course, and her body was flawless. She was beautiful.

But not sexy.

We stood together and looked in the mirror, the princess and the slut, and now it was Amanda's eyes that grew wet.

“Will you help me?” she asked plaintively. “Will you help me pick things he will like?”

“Of course,” I said, shamed by my pettiness. I had been glad of her humiliation. But she had never sought mine. She had complimented what I had as much as she could.

“Of course,” I said again, my resolve returned. “We’ll get you clothes that will get you arrested if you wear them in public.”

She laughed and hugged me, and all my resentments melted away.

“Let’s go,” she said, and stripped off her bathing suit without hesitation. Once again I was exposed to that superlative nude body. My jealousy threatened a comeback, but she really couldn’t be blamed for this.

I stepped out of my bikini, and for a brief moment we were both naked. Amanda noticed me then, remembering that there was another person in the room who was not related to her. A person she had, just last night, been kissing passionately. We still did that most nights, and I had to confess that she was coming along nicely. There was real passion behind her efforts now. I didn’t admit it, though. For some reason I agreed to the practice whenever she suggested it. Why was a topic I choose not to think about.

She blushed, and I went into my room to dress. Thinking about how Petros would react to the clothes I would put on Amanda’s flawless body filled me with a wicked glee. Her irresistible but unconsummated enticements would be my revenge on the handsome but untouchable players. And his marriage would be my victory over feckless men everywhere. Which was, in my experience, *all* men, most especially the handsome ones.

\* \* \*

Our shopping trip met an early obstacle. All of our justifications were rendered ineffective by the simple fact of the Dame being out of the house.

"I don't need permission, anyway," Amanda decided. "I can't be expected to go on such a trip without some shopping."

I wasn't so sure the old lady would see it that way, so I pointed out the other problem.

"But she has the limo. We can't walk there, can we?" I didn't know where there was, but I was certain it wasn't anywhere close.

That stumped Amanda, and I started to feel lousy. Here was this poor little rich girl, a virtual prisoner in her own home. I remembered all the times I had felt trapped and I relented.

"We could just call a cab."

"They'll come out here?" Amanda asked, and I felt suddenly guilty. The Dame wasn't going to appreciate this bit of education.

But to hell with the dragon, Amanda was an adult now.

"Of course they will, Amanda. They'll go anywhere, as long as you pay them enough."

"Oh," said Amanda, and sat down in defeat.

"What's the problem?" I asked her. How could money be an issue here?

"How can I pay them?" she asked. "I don't have any money. I don't even have a credit card."

It occurred to me that Amanda might never have even *seen* cash. Why would she?

"I've got some money," I said. "I'll pay for the cab ride." Such generosity to the rich, I thought sardonically. But that wasn't fair. The truth was Amanda was my friend. And I'd pay cab fare for a friend.

"Would you?" she exclaimed, and my heart leapt. Her enthusiasm was infectious. If she got this excited over a cab ride, once she figured out what sex was all about, poor Petros didn't have a chance.

"Sure," I said with a smile. What do you get the rich girl who has everything? A cab ride, so she can buy more of everything. But it felt good to be able to give her something.

We called a cab from the phone in the parlor, giggling like schoolgirls. Maria knew we were up to something and frowned disapprovingly. Probably that would have been enough to stop Amanda in the past, or even me, but the two of us together were irrepressible. When the cab honked in the driveway, we dashed out of the house before the butler could object, and threw ourselves into the backseat.

"Town," I gasped, "and step on it." Then Amanda and I both burst out laughing.

"You got it, miss," said the driver, and the car accelerated down the lane, escaping the minatory glare emanating from various members of Cherokee House staff at the door.

"A bit of a lark, eh?" The driver grinned at us from the front seat. He must have thought us both servants, playing hooky for the day.

"Not that much," I warned him. Who knows how lucky he thought he was getting? Men have the most outrageous fantasies sometimes.

"Do you know where Della Villa is?" Amanda asked him.

"Yes, miss," he answered, more chastised by Amanda's comment than mine. "It's a bit of drive, though, at least an hour."

An hour! In a cab! This would bankrupt me. It would clean out my purse, and I had earmarked that money for other things.

But it occurred to me that I didn't actually need those other things right now. My bed and board was taken care of, after all. It would be graceless to complain about the cost to Amanda, she just wouldn't understand. So for once I kept my mouth shut and let my gift be given freely, without recriminations or guilt.

"We'll start there," she told the driver. "Unless you think we should go somewhere else?" she asked me, suddenly an uncertain little girl again.

"No, that's fine," I said. I had no idea what Della Villa was, but I wasn't ready to admit that just yet.

Amanda leaned back and relaxed, obviously used to being chauffeured around. I wasn't, but I tried to follow her example. It was good practice for me. On this upcoming trip, I was sure there would be lots of things I had to get used to.

\* \* \*

Della Villa was in the part of the city I never went to. I couldn't afford those kinds of shops. I didn't even know anyone who could.

Inside the shop I felt small. The clerks were all younger and prettier than me, and better dressed to boot. They ignored me, of course, smelling out my true nature instantly. But they greeted Amanda with what seemed like real smiles, not just the polished ones big spenders get.

We pawed through the racks of beautiful clothes together, and I found myself giggling again. Amanda was positively beaming at me. But of course, I realized, she had never gone shopping with a friend before. She had never really had a friend to shop with.

"How about this one?" she asked, holding up a see-through lace blouse.

"Of course not, silly," I laughed at her, and then automatically checked the price tag. It would look good over a slip, after all.

There wasn't a price tag.

"Amanda," I whispered. "There's no tag."

"What do you mean?" she whispered back, joining in my conspiracy even though she clearly had no idea what it was about.

"How do we know how much it costs?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes at me. "They'll know at the checkout counter," she said, and went back to looking through the rack.

Well, indeed. I forced my breath out, and let it go. It wasn't me we were shopping for, after all.

"No," I said to the next one. "That's no better than what you have now. Try this." I handed her a halter top with rhinestones—at least I hoped they were rhinestones—sewn around the edges.

Holding it up and posing in front of the mirror, she tried to hide her frown.

"You're right," I said. Amazing that they would sell something that trashy here. "Try this one instead."

The blue accented her eyes, but she still seemed dubious.

"You have to try it on in the dressing room," I explained. "After you take your blouse off, you'll see how much better it looks."

She blushed a little. "I'm not sure I know how to put it on," she said. "I don't own anything like this."

"It's not that different." I laughed. "I'll help you. Here, take these shorts, too."

In the dressing room cubicle, watching as she slipped out of her blouse and slacks, I was again seized by that mischievous demon-spirit.

"You can't wear a bra with this, either," I told her, and began matter-of-factly unfastening hers. She stood there helplessly while her perfect breasts sprung free. Looking at her in nothing but a pair of thin white panties made me feel in control, like she was a doll I was playing dress-up with.

Outside the cubicle, we stood in front of the three-way mirror. I adjusted her hair, bent her head in a magazine pose, and we both examined her reflection critically.

In three different views we could see her nipples pressing up from underneath the thin blue cloth, her firm, round breasts wrapped like a present. The shorts fit her like she had been poured into them, and her buttocks were as contoured as her breasts. Between halter-top and shorts was only her tiny waist and flawless skin, below them her lissome legs stretched to the floor.

If I had a spoon, I would have eaten her like an ice-cream sundae. Instead, I sighed in satisfaction. Oh Petros, I thought. Poor, poor Petros. He had no idea what was coming.

"Will he like it?" Amanda asked.

"Do you like it?" I countered.

"I feel almost naked," she confessed.

“There’s your answer,” I grinned. “Now let’s try on these,” I said and steered her towards some ridiculously cute but very chic sailor outfits.

I spent hours dressing and undressing her, posing her in front of mirrors, ripping clothes off and stuffing her into others, twirling her through the aisles. She complied eagerly, living the role she had been born and bred to, a fine show horse being put through her paces.

We settled on a deep stack of clothes, including three different bikinis, the most exotic one a tiny black number with spaghetti straps and loops that left it open at the sides.

The cream on the pile was a dinner gown in sheer white silk that hung off the shoulders and managed to conceal less than the bikini. In the shop’s bright lights she might as well have been naked.

“In candlelight it will be fine,” I assured her. “But of course, you won’t want to wear these under it.” I snapped the elastic on her underpants.

“Of course,” she said, turning my lewdness into sophistication. “We’ll take this, also,” she said to the shop-girl, and handed her the gown. “And don’t forget those.” She pointed to a pile of clothes I had been trying on during our dress-up extravaganza.

I had set aside the ones I liked best, pretending that I might be able to afford one of them. Not that I could, but I had enjoyed the pretense. “Amanda,” I whispered. “Those were mine.”

“I know,” she said. “You need something to wear on the trip, too.”

“But I don’t have that kind of money,” I protested.

“We don’t need money here,” Amanda reminded me. She didn’t even bother to produce a credit card. At the register, she merely signed a slip of paper, and the smiling girls packed it all into fancy paper bags.

My emotions were in turmoil. I did not know how to accept such a princely—or should I say princessly—gift. No man had ever given me a fraction of that without expecting to use my body in payment. No one had ever given me anything without expecting me to be in their debt. I hid my confusion from Amanda, saying nothing while we waited for a cab. I was quiet while the driver loaded our packages and held the door for us—no smirks from this one, since the shop we were standing in front



of branded us as wealthy. I was silent while we drove through the city, and Amanda, bored, put her head in my lap and went to sleep.

Stroking her golden hair, I forced myself to relent. She had not given me anything of hers, I reasoned. It cost her nothing. No doubt she just wanted her maid to look good and not embarrass her with shabby clothes. As her employee, I had to be dressed in finery, to show off how rich she was. It meant nothing.

I made up a lot of reasons until I was able to put my anger aside in a little box labeled *Open later—much, much later*. But I could not even begin to consider the possibility that she had given so generously out of simple friendship. Having never had love without a price, I did not expect to find it here.

## Chapter Five

We flew first-class, of course. I made the most of the free booze. I needed it, still recovering from last night.

With the departure looming over us, Amanda had sought reassurance and comfort in our last make-out session. Our hands had roamed across each other's bodies with remarkable freedom, and we had kissed with the desperation of co-eds on spring break saying good-bye to their beach-boys. Now, just holding her hand while the plane took off made my heart race.

I was really looking forward to throwing myself at Petros. Or any man, for that matter. This girl-kissing thing was seriously confusing me. But the cabin was utterly devoid of hunky fantasy material, filled with middle-aged businessmen and old ladies. I had only my memories of the magnificent prince, and half a dozen martinis, to take my mind off of Amanda's soft touch.

Landing in Athens, still loopy from the cocktails, my heart went into overdrive. This was it, show time for my little princess. We stalked off the runway like hungry lionesses, ready to pounce. But our prey was too wily. We were met by a chauffeur instead of the man.

Something struck me as wrong from the moment he opened the door for us. Climbing inside, waiting while our voluminous luggage was piled in the trunk, it nagged at me. The chauffeur was polite, yes, but he wasn't quite personable enough. The limo was clean and neat, of course, but a little faded, and the mini-bar was stocked with popular brands, not exotic ones.

As we pulled away from the curb, it hit me—the limo was a *rental*.

Luckily, Amanda was too naïve to notice.

The realization sobered me, but it also explained why our prince had not met us himself. He had too much pride to ride in a rented car and pretend it was his. That was a good sign.

But if the boat was a rental, I was going to do my best to make sure there wasn't any wedding.

\* \* \*

I had underestimated Petros's artistic sense. Meeting us in the airport would have been ordinary and boring. Greeting us at the docks, with the moon high in the sky, the lights of the boats sparkling on the water, and the cool breeze off the shore, was unbelievably romantic. And the ship was vastly more impressive than any car could be. Long, slim, and white, its mast reaching for the stars, and its master climbing through the rigging like a leopard leaping from branch to branch. When he saw us, he dropped to the deck and turned his flashing teeth and eyes on us. We had come to hunt, but now my heart fluttered like the prey.

"Amanda!" he said, affection and joy radiating from his smile so warm that I felt my face flush.

"Petros," she said, and skipped into his arms.

He bent to kiss her, and I struggled not to smirk as she pulled my little trick. I could see his eyes widen as she pushed up into him. I could even tell the instant her tongue brushed his lips. For some reason, he caught my eye before I looked away, and I knew that he knew I was somehow responsible for this new Amanda.

Good-looking, rich, *and* perceptive. Just how many qualities did this prince possess?

"Mademoiselle," he said, taking my hand and bowing. As I was adding incredible politeness to the list of his qualities, he kissed my hand, the briefest touch of his lips gracing my skin, the heat of his breath shocking.

When those black eyes looked up at me, my knees went weak. When his hand dropped away from mine, it felt as if I had been plugged into a thousand-volt power line and only now noticed its absence.

He turned to lead Amanda into the depths of his ship, to the room he had no doubt spent much effort preparing for her. His performance was almost perfect. Only an involuntary twitch of his eyes told me that the electricity had died for him as well when our hands had lost each other. Then the moment was gone, and he was the perfect host, the ideal fiancé, the gracefully confident prince.

But that brief look left me a burning wreck. I followed them silently, keeping my place, while my cheeks burned in shame and grief. Grief that his naked loneliness should be revealed to me, shame that I wanted him so much. I had seen that look before, in my mirror, so many times. So many mornings wasted with whatever pathetic excuse of a boy still snoring in my bed, sleeping off a hangover. So many days I played the part of girlfriend, so many nights I walked through my lines as a lover, hiding my emptiness from everyone and myself.

To see this haunting in his eyes, where there should have been unbridled joy, threatened to overwhelm me with tears. To know that I wanted to take him in my arms and tell him I had felt the same way, all my life until this very instant, terrified me into silence.

Between us stood Amanda and her happiness. I could not destroy her dreams for my own selfish fantasies.

In the stateroom, it was easy to pretend what I had seen was only in my imagination. He laughed and joked with her, held her tenderly, kissed her with gentle passion before he left. In the stillness of his absence, Amanda flung herself onto the bed in a swoon.

"I love him," she said to the room, and the guilt of my desire stabbed me like a knife.

"He loves you, too," I said, pretending I did not want it to be a lie. "This stateroom is impossible."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking around.

"It's huge. Boats are small, and everything on them is supposed to be small." At least, that was what I had read in my travel magazines.

"I think your room is through there," Amanda said, pointing at the only other door out of the room. "Maybe it's smaller?"

It wasn't my room. It was a bathroom, with a tiny shower.

"Oh," said Amanda.

"I told you boats were small."

"But there's only one bed," she said. It was a double-bed, but compared to the four-poster pavilion she had at home, it looked like a couch.

"I think we have to share," I suggested. "He probably didn't expect you to bring someone." How I wished she hadn't.

"That will be fun!" she said, her face brightening. "We can whisper secrets under the covers, and read books with flashlights like kids!" She bounced on the bed and laughed at me.

"Did you ever do any of those when you were a kid?" I asked her.

"No." The brightness faded for a moment. "I always wanted to, but I never had any friends my own age." And then she brightened again. "But now I have you!"

My heart cracked under the weight of those words. But I meant it when I replied, "Yes, now you have me." I meant it when she giggled and hugged me, and we kissed like happy sisters. I meant it even while my eyes watered as I pushed away the memory of Petros's gaze.

"Are you okay?"

"Just allergies," I lied, and wiped my eyes. "We should get unpacked. You have a dinner to attend tonight."

\* \* \*

We dressed for dinner in our sailors outfits, planning a little joke on the captain. Blue shorts, low-cut white blouses and little blue jackets with gold trim that accented Amanda's glorious hair. They didn't flatter

me quite so much, and I couldn't really compete with Amanda's décolletage, but that was fine by me. I didn't want any more attention.

Marching into the saloon, we snapped to a salute and pealed out, "Reporting for duty, sir!" in our worst British accents. Throwing our hands to our heads naturally thrust our chests out, and the cool night air put points on them. The men in the room—for it was full of them—stared at us until Petros spoke. Then they turned back into invisible and utterly discreet servants instantly.

"Stand down, Lieutenants," he ordered us with mock gravity. "The mess hall is informal protocol."

That exhausted our store of naval expertise, so we resorted to giggles. Petros matched us with an easy grin, and the three of us sat down to eat at the long table.

I couldn't fault the setting. The tablecloth was spotless, all of the dishes were crystal, and the utensils rang with the clear tone of pure silver. The food that came from that little ship's kitchen was as fancy as anything I had ever had. And the wine was perfect.

With easy grace Petros dominated the dinner conversation, making us both honored guests and family members at the same time. Only two other men sat with us—the ship's doctor, who struggled to live up to his role as educated gentleman, and the First Mate, silent and dark as the deep open sea. I was somewhat experienced at the study (and seduction) of men, so I applied my wiles to these two to see what they contained.

I made the doctor blush easily enough, trapping him in unintended flirtations. Under ordinary circumstances I could have had this one between the entrée and dessert, sneaking off to a broom closet even with his wife in the room. But these were not ordinary circumstances. His deference to Petros was not just a paid man's bowing to the boss.

The First Mate was worse. He treated me like a lady regardless of how risqué I played. Even when I resorted to playing footsie under the table. Calmly he moved his foot away, without remark, almost without noticing. I was not a pretty girl in a skimpy blouse to him, I was something that belonged to something that belonged to Petros.

That something was Amanda. Her polish was natural, and her genuine joy and affection were impossible to resist. The First Mate smiled for her, not just because he thought Petros would want him to. The doctor was overly polite at first, but Amanda put him at ease. We were just one big, happy family, a laughing table of old friends and comfortable mates. It was the performance of my lifetime.

It would have taken an expert to see the flaw. It would have required the most cynical and suspicious of minds to notice that Petros and I did not once catch each other's eyes. No one at that dinner table was so cold-hearted, so distant, as to see that. I wasn't even sure Petros noticed.

\* \* \*

In our cabin, still reeling a little from the wine, Amanda and I debriefed. We laughed about the stern post of the First Mate, the stuttering doctor—the sheer joy of two young beautiful women surrounded and adored by men of status and prestige. We discussed our strategy between giggles, reviewing the mission accomplished and planning the next one.

“You were terrible,” she noted astutely. “Terribly shameless—Petros will think you are utterly wanton.”

“Maybe I am,” I laughed. The Mate was considerably older than I normally considered attractive, but his leathered face had a strength that any woman would love to lean against.

“No you aren't,” she contradicted me. Foolishly, I thought, for she had no idea how wanton I could be. “You just know it's perfectly safe. Petros won't let them get away with anything.”

Sadly, I reflected that she was probably right. I would not find any physical comfort from his crew. My orders were to comfort Petros, anyway, to divert his lust from Amanda until they were safely married. How could I ever explain to the Dame that I feared I was not merely a diversion? It sounded ridiculous to even to me.

“We should get to sleep,” I suggested. “I suspect that breakfast comes early on a boat.” Maybe in the depths of slumber I could forget the feelings that smoldered inside of me.

“It’s kind of a small bed,” said Amanda. “I don’t want to disturb you.” She was struggling out of her clothes, still a little tipsy. It was terribly cute, like watching a kitten extract itself from a ball of yarn.

“What do you mean?” I asked, as I helped her undress.

“I haven’t done my practice yet,” she leered up at me, and then giggled.

“Oh...” It was kind of a small bed to be lying next to someone doing that. “Well, I need a bit of fresh air, anyway. I’ll take a stroll on deck and give you a few moments.”

She giggled again, too innocent to blush. I rushed out the door before she could see my face. I was still in shock at my initial reaction.

When she had told me that she wanted to masturbate, my first thought had been how comforting that would be. One more glass of wine and I would have been in that bed with her, seeking the intimacy and pleasure I had always sought from men. One instant of hesitation and I would have quenched my fire on her, drowned my visions of Petros in her golden hair.

Outside, in the cool of the night, with the breeze caressing the boat, the gentle flap of a sail here and there the only sound, I wrapped my arms around myself and fought the tears.

The boat slid gracefully through the water, as if it knew where it wanted to go, patient in its confidence and knowledge of purpose. How I longed to be like the ship. Instead, I shuddered, not from cold but from confusion. The desire for Petros was so strong I could feel his arms around me. My love for Amanda was so overwhelming I could smell the delicate scent she woke up with every morning. I had no idea which one I wanted more, love or lust, friend or mate—but I knew with absolute certainty that I could have neither.



Something settled on my shoulders, a jacket, slipping from the hands of Petros himself. I jumped, not from surprise though I had not heard him approaching, but from guilty conscience.

"You startled me," I accused him.

"You looked cold," he replied.

"No." But then I held the jacket close around me. I could still feel the heat of his body in it.

"You will be soon," he said. "Up in the rigging the wind is blowing cool now, soon the chill will slip to the deck."

What a depressing way to put it. Piqued, I tried to argue with him. "Do you always see the bad things before they come?"

"Usually."

An hour ago he had been witty and laughing, now that one terse word hinted at gray vistas on distant and lonely shores. And I could not pretend innocence.

"She loves you," I said.

He was silent so long I thought he had not heard me. When I opened my mouth again, he spoke before I could.

"I know this. Why would you think I do not know this?"

"Because you don't love her." Then I stopped, aghast at my own indelicacy.

"Of course I love her. Everyone loves her. How could I not love her?"

It would be so easy to take his words at face value, to let the sincerity of his tone carry me through the straits of doubt into calm waters. But I knew what I had seen, and I had my own desires to fill my sails, however impossible or wrong they were.

"You look at her the same way you looked at the dock when we left it. Something you depend on, but wish you could escape forever."

He put his hand on my shoulder and spun me around to face him with so much strength I involuntarily flinched. I had been hit before, after all. I could see the disgust on his face when he saw me recoil.

"I am not..." he said, trying to defend himself.

"I know. You are not going to hit me. You are not going to disappoint Amanda. You are not going to make a scene, embarrass anyone, upset any applecarts. You'll do what is expected of you, always. Because it's who you are."

"How can you be so sure?" he said, with a growl that would have sent any man I had ever known fleeing.

But I knew better. "I've been with plenty of men," I told him, flaunting my dishonor. "So many that they all seem the same to me now. But you're different." And it was true. He was driven by responsibility, not by desire. The richest, handsomest playboy I had ever met, and underneath it all was a knight who still believed in honor.

"I have known my share of women. And you, too, are different."

This tack took me by surprise. Surely he'd had cheap sluts before. Flustered, I retreated further into his jacket.

"You say what you think," he continued, "and even though you want me, you hold yourself apart. Why?"

"That's ridiculous," I snapped. "You're so full of yourself."

He stepped in close and pulled me to him. When I crashed against that tall, lean body, I melted over it like icing. But at the last minute, I turned my head away, and we did not kiss.

"So I want you," I confessed in a whisper, too ashamed to speak this truth louder. "But I can't have you, and I will not betray Amanda. Not even for you."

"All my life," he whispered back, "I have sought a woman who looked beyond the horizon. The prettier they are, the shallower the gaze. Like children, they are distracted by pretty lights, and I find myself bored."

"Men are no better," I countered. "Hitch up your skirt an inch and suddenly they're so stupid they can't tell you what day it is."

"So here we are." He gave a sad smile. "Two noble souls, denying each other for the sake of duty, and helplessly attracted to the only denial they have ever met."

There was nothing else to say. I leaned against him and tried not to cry. He put his arms around me and held me like I was a solid mast in the middle of stormy seas.

"It's just the moon and the sea," he said.

"It would never work. We're from different worlds."

"In the morning light, the enchantment will be gone, and we will be glad we were not foolish."

"You're a great guy, but we hardly know each other. It's just lust."

Together we told the lies that would let us walk away from this moment. But my heart rebelled, and I pushed against him with a sob.

Something hard pressed against my thigh.

"I should go," I whispered.

"Yes." His voice was only slightly strained. Nuzzling in my hair, his hands caressing me, his words were utterly incongruous. "It's getting late."

"I'm going now." I rubbed up against him.

"I'll see you in the morning." I could not help but admire his restraint. His arousal was obvious, my willingness palpable, and yet he did not hold me when I stepped away.

I stared into his eyes. Behind lust, I saw respect, behind that, duty. Now I melted inside, and I knew that if I touched him again I would beg him to take me. And I knew he would refuse, even while he wanted it as much as I did. I could not lay such a burden on him, I had to be strong enough to walk away. I had come to protect Amanda from him, but now I had to protect him from us.

And I had to be the one who left, since he had some obvious difficulty walking at the moment.

I took a step before remembering the jacket. I could hardly explain this to Amanda. Taking it off, I handed it to him.

"Thank you," I said.

"Thank you," he said, and then I had to run away before I completely lost it.

I burst into our stateroom without knocking. Amanda flinched under the covers.

"I'm sorry," I said automatically, and began to strip.

"It's okay," she whispered as I fell into bed next to her. "It wasn't working, anyway."

"What?" I was too confused and miserable to really care about her problems right now.

"It didn't seem to work," she repeated, and I realized she was almost in tears. "I don't want to fail now. I can't fail now."

"Don't worry about it. You can try again in the morning." I just wanted to go to sleep. Or more accurately, I wanted her to go to sleep so I could take care of my own problem.

"Will you help me?" she asked, a little kitten meowing for milk.

Like I said, I was confused, miserable, very aroused, and still a little drunk. "Fine," I snapped, and shoved my hand between her legs.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and moved against my hand in the most sensual way.

"Is that better?" I asked, petting her gently.

"Oh," was all she said.

"See, like that," I said. "Here, show me." Grabbing her hand, I directed it between my own legs.

I was totally unprepared for the bolt of lighting that arced through me. I had only been teasing her, but when her hand touched me, I was galvanized.

It was only natural to kiss her, like I had so many times before, and before I could think about it, we were united, connected at the groin, the mouth, and every part of our bodies that touched. Her nipples pressed into my breasts, and her warm, silky legs glided along mine. We touched each other in the most intimate places, kissed with abandon, our breath mingling together. Hungrily I slid my mouth over her face, her throat, down to her breasts. She pulled her nightgown aside with her free hand,

and I took a nipple into my mouth. When she arched her chest into me and moaned, I pushed back against her hand with my hips.

“Put your fingers inside me,” I whispered, and she did. I don’t remember much after that.

But I remember what came after the climax, while we lay together in each other’s arms, sated and drifting into sleep.

“I love you,” she whispered, and went to sleep without waiting for a reply.

\* \* \*

In the morning I was embarrassed, waking up with her nightgown in disarray and her body intertwined with mine. When I tried to extricate myself, she sleepily hugged me, and the reaction between my thighs was automatic.

Angrily, I leapt out of bed and stormed into the shower. I was thoroughly confused, and not a little ashamed. Never mind my sudden gender-confusion, sleeping with Amanda was hardly any more fair to Petros than sleeping with him would be to her. The things she had done to me surprised me, but the way I reacted to them terrified me. I had accepted being sent out here to relieve sexual tension. If Amanda was the one who had to be serviced instead of Petros, well, one had to have a certain amount of flexibility in these affairs.

But what I was doing with Amanda was more than service. It felt, to me, like love.

Speaking of which, the events of last night were somewhat muddled. I wasn’t actually quite sure what I was doing with Amanda. Specifically, I couldn’t remember if I had used my fingers on her the way she had used them on me. If I had, we had a bit of a problem.

Going back into the room, I saw Amanda was awake and already busy, a dreamy look on her face.

“Good grief,” I said.

“You said twice a day,” she breathed heavily.

“Well, stop for a minute. I have to ask you something.”

“I don’t want to stop. I’m almost there.”

“Amanda, this is important. Did I...”

After it was clear I wasn’t going to continue, she asked, “Did you what? But probably, yes,” she added with a cheeky grin.

In desperation, I bit my lip. “Amanda...is there blood on the sheets?”

Amanda stopped at that, finally a little worried. She threw back the top sheet, revealing that stunning blond triangle in all its glory, and I could see the shine of its wetness on her and her fingers.

The sheets were clean, and we both breathed in relief.

Then she went back to work.

“For crying out loud,” I snipped, but I didn’t look away. Instead, I stared, entranced. Only when I saw the invitation on her face was I jolted into movement, retreating to the shower.

The warm water didn’t help me forget my own reactions. The readiness with which she had thrown back the covers and exposed herself to me, touched herself in front of me, invited me, pounded down on my burning body with the water from shower head. I tried touching myself but it didn’t work, it wasn’t enough. I wanted her. I tried thinking of Petros, and nothing changed. I wanted him.

I didn’t know what I wanted.

I leaned my head against the wall and wept in frustration. The water washed my face clean.

## Chapter Six

The day was unimaginably beautiful. Glorious sun, sails billowing in a gentle breeze, water smooth as glass. Amanda was beautiful, too, relaxed and without the slightest fear or worry, laughing and playing. I had never realized how attractive pure happiness was.

When we stripped down to our bathing suits to take a dip in the ocean, it was hard to not to realize how purely attractive Amanda was. I had trouble not staring. I have no idea how the crew managed. Even Petros was affected, jumping overboard so quickly I thought he was water-crazy. Until I realized he was just trying to hide how hard of a time he was having.

Looking down at his glistening body floating in the water, his smiling face beckoning me to join him, I forgot everything else. Only when Amanda dived past me into the water did I remember my place—and my other feelings. Seeing her breasts lift as she floated on her back and paddled through the crystal blue water made me want to jump on her.

This was insanity. I was a maid, a poor working girl, and they were aristocracy, creatures out of fairytales and fashion magazines. Rejection flooded through me, watering my eyes with its intensity, and I turned to go.

“Come in!” Amanda cried out to me.

“It is safe,” Petros assured me from the water.

But it was not the vast and open ocean that I feared. Now I leapt into the water to hide the tears that I could not stop.

When I came up from the dive, they were facing each other and giggling. I faced the boat and struggled to control my emotions.

“Swimming with no land in sight takes some getting used to,” Petros said gently.

Loving when there is no hope in sight is impossible to get used to, I wanted to say. But I said nothing.

“It’s exhilarating!” exclaimed Amanda, and out of kindness she swam to my side.

“The boat will not leave us,” comforted Petros, swimming to my other side. “I still owe the crew money.” He winked.

Trapped between both of them, so close I could feel the warmth of their bodies in the water, my head became so full of confused but erotic images that I could not think. Sensing my distress, Amanda pushed in and kissed me on the cheek.

The action helped, in one way, it resolved my confusion into pure lust. At that moment I wanted sharks to swim up from the sea, tear off our bathing suits, and force us to huddle tightly together for protection. The tenseness of the situation would make Petros erect, and purely out of a desire to protect Amanda’s virginity, I would impale myself on him while she hugged us close and kissed us, her arms enfolding Petros and I and holding us together.

Yes, I imagined all of that in the two seconds it took her to kiss my cheek. I was so distracted I forgot to paddle. When I started sinking, I thrashed out with both hands to push myself up in the water.

Each hand brushed against a groin—Amanda’s valley to my left, and Petros’s mountain to my right. I ducked and swam away from them like I had bumped into cactus. It was an accident, of course, and naturally neither of them so much as blinked, but I could not forget the memory of that brief contact. I set out for the boat in earnest.

“Captain, the wind returns,” announced the First Mate, while leaning down to help me up the ladder on the side of the ship.

“Maintain course, but hold her slow,” Petros ordered. “I need some exercise,” he explained to us.

“So do I,” Amanda chimed in.

“My dear,” began Petros, but she cut him off.



“I’ll tell you when I am tired.”

I wrapped myself in a towel and watched them from the railing. I didn’t need the towel for warmth. I was just feeling overexposed.

As the sails rolled down and filled with air, the boat began to move again. Petros and Amanda kept up with it, gliding through the water with professional strokes. But soon they were both really working at it. Seven knots was a lot faster than I could swim at all, and they were going for the long haul.

I watched this competition with a critical eye. First, it wasn’t fair. Amanda’s long golden hair was a real handicap, flowing out in the water. Beautiful, enticing, sensuous...with an effort, I forced my mind back to the topic at hand. Second, Petros was a wonderful athlete. And third, he’d done this before. Would he use these advantages to display his strength, build up his ego, defeat and humiliate her?

It was a stupid question. These were two healthy human beings, not the broken, emotionally dysfunctional creatures I had lived my life around. After twenty minutes or so of vigorous swimming, Amanda laughed and slowed down.

“Come on,” he encouraged her. “Another five minutes. You can do it.”

Yes, I secretly urged her. Keep swimming. For twenty minutes I had gotten to stare at their beautiful bodies without feeling guilty or awkward. My fantasies swam with them, flooding my head in the warm hypnotic sun. I could see my nipples poking up through my bikini top, and I was thinking of arranging the towel so that I could slip a hand to my groin without anyone noticing. I was so far gone that the realization that I was trying to figure out how to masturbate in public while watching my friends swim had no effect on me.

“You go on,” she told him, catching the rope that a sailor threw to her. “I think I’ll join the viewing deck.”

Now, at least, I had the decency to blush.

The sailor pulled her in and helped her up the ladder. Toweling off, she came to join me.

"That was great," she said, referring to the swim. But she was looking at Petros when she said it.

"Yes, it is," I murmured. I couldn't say more because the sailor returned with a tray and two wine coolers.

"Thank you," Amanda told him, taking one and handing the other to me.

I realized I was waiting for something. I was waiting for the crew to increase the speed of the boat, thus diminishing Amanda's accomplishment, making it look like Petros had taken it easy on her. Even if he only lasted a minute or two more, it would have made the distinction between man and girl clear.

But they didn't. The boat stayed the same speed, and Petros swam for another twenty minutes, until he was as limp as a dishrag. After the sailor pulled him aboard, he flopped into a deck chair, drooping across it like a blanket.

"You poor baby," Amanda said, and began toweling him off.

Poor baby, indeed, I thought to myself. All that work to render himself limp, and now she was hovering over him in that skimpy bikini, touching him, letting her sun-dried hair brush across him. I could almost feel his frustration growing.

Seized by that malicious spirit Amanda always seemed to unleash in me, I did something terrible to poor Petros.

"Amanda," I said, "I think we should put on some sunscreen if we are going to stay out here any longer."

"We already did," she said. "In the cabin."

"But that was before we went in the water," I replied, pulling the bottle out from under my chair. It was just habit, not planning, that had made me bring it. I swear.

I poured some into my hand and beckoned her over. Like a meek kitten, she knelt at my feet and pulled her hair over her shoulder so I could do her back. I rubbed the lotion onto her soft shoulders and down her spine. When I got to the strap of her bikini, I slid my fingers under it, oiling every part of her back.

Pulling gently on her shoulder, I got her to lean back and turn her face to the sky. Now I put the lotion the front of her shoulders, making slow circles that expanded down her chest. When I touched her breasts, she made the slightest sound, so quiet you could pretend you didn't hear it.

I didn't dare look at Petros, that would shatter the pretense of innocence. But if he was human and alive, he had to be affected. God knows I was. Putting my hand to her belly, I spread the lotion down to the very top of her bikini bottom, pushing just a little against the already low-cut fabric.

"Stand up," I told her, and obediently she did. The thrill of power that shot through me almost undid my restraint. Oiling her legs, I spent perhaps a little too much time on the inside of her thighs.

"My turn," I said when she was done, and now I could risk a look at Petros. Like a gentleman, he was not staring at our ridiculously salacious exhibition, but the bulge in his bathing trunks was definitely not the water-shrunk package he had come out of the ocean with.

"Damon," he called to the sailor lounging at the railing. "Could I get a beer?"

The man did not speak, but to his credit, he did not leer either. I noticed when he returned that he had two beers, one of which he kept for himself. Stationing himself at his post on the railing, he caught my gaze—since I was desperately trying to look anywhere but at Petros while Amanda oiled me up, or at her, either—and the hard sparkle in his eyes was as good as a leer.

But too discreet to complain about. Despite his lounging about, Damon was thoroughly professional.

So now I could not look at him, either. The implied invitation was clear. No one in the crew would ever dream of propositioning Amanda, but as a fellow servant, I was fair game. The idea of relieving myself with one of Petros's wiry sailors—or perhaps with *several* of them—was just one of the fantasies running through my head.

Nothing speaks to the desperation of my condition more than those torrid thoughts. While my best friend was rubbing my all-but-naked body with oil in front of her fiancé and the object of my lust, I was fantasizing about being gang-banged by his crew. Three months without a man and I had become one. Sex was all I could think about.

Amanda finished with me and flopped into her deck chair, exposing her body to the sun. I almost jumped on top of her. Instead, I sat down, spread out, and went to work on my second wine cooler.

We made small talk, resting in the sun from our labors. They from the swim, and I from my fantasies, which had exhausted me while leaving my desires unquenched. I don't know how he managed to hold out so long, but finally Petros said he had some captain's chores to do before dinner. I was pretty sure one of them included polishing his main mast in the privacy of his cabin.

Amanda and I went back to our cabin to dress for dinner. As soon as we were inside with the door closed, she hugged me tightly.

"What is that for?" I asked, a little unnerved. My fantasies were still ringing in my head.

"That was amazing," she giggled. "The oil thing. Petros was beside himself."

"Um," I said. I might have noticed if *I* hadn't been so beside myself, but I could hardly say that.

But in true Amanda fashion, she could.

"It had to drive him crazy. It drove me crazy. When you pushed your hand down my belly, I wanted you to keep going so bad." Now her hug turned into a cuddle.

"Amanda," I said, because I couldn't think of anything else.

"Like you did this morning," she whispered. "With your fingers."

"Amanda!" I snapped, and pushed her away.

"What?" she asked, in complete innocence, on the verge of tears. What could I say? That everything we had done so far was wrong?

I couldn't shame her like that. "You're supposed to be thinking about him, not me," I said instead.

"I do. But it helps to think about you, too."

Now I was too confused to think up any more lies. So I just blushed.

"I'll never make it through dinner," Amanda groaned. "I have to do something now." And without further ado she stepped out of her bikini, fell backwards on the bed, and began masturbating.

I was left standing there, still swamped with the feelings of love and protection that her trust had exposed in me, watching her pleasure herself and knowing that she was thinking about me while she was doing it.

Amanda looked up at me with her innocent eyes, without a trace of self-consciousness, fear of rejection, dominance, anger, greed, or any of the other emotions I had always associated with sex, and asked, "Could you touch me like this morning? Just a little bit?"

It was like someone else was in control of my body. I knelt on the bed over her, put my fingers between her legs, and gently stimulated my best friend, employer, and chief competition for Petros, to orgasm. While I did it, she held my free hand in hers, our fingers intertwined, and whenever her eyes opened from the ecstasy she floated in, her gaze sought out mine. When she climaxed, she grabbed my servicing hand with hers and tried to force me deeper inside.

"No, *ma chérie*," I whispered, and closed my fingers into knuckles that ground against her swollen mound. Her hips bucked involuntarily, and she ground the back of her head into the pillows, gasping for breath until the flood receded.

"Thank you," she whispered, and without forethought, brought my pleasing hand to her lips and kissed it.

Now that spirit seized me again, unfolding from some hidden place inside me. I opened one of my fingers, still wet, to her lips. Obediently she kissed it, and when I pushed, she let it slip into her mouth and licked it with her tongue.

She did not recoil as I fed her each of my other fingers, but accepted this new exotica with eagerness and joy.

“Your turn,” she whispered when my fingers lay against her face again. With both hands, she tugged at my bikini bottoms.

“Yes,” I said huskily. I stepped out of them, and her hand went instantly to me. “My turn.”

I looked at her beautiful face, framed in all that golden hair spread out on the pillows, and wanted to possess it.

She watched me climb up the bed and straddle her face with an astonished smile, as if she had not guessed such a wonder was allowed. Trapped between the pillows below her and my thighs above her, she made no effort to escape.

Holding the headboard of the bed with my left hand, I wrapped my right hand in her glorious hair. The dominating spirit in me took control of my mouth. “Kiss it,” I said, like men had said to me while holding my head at their waist.

She raised her head to comply. When her lips touched my most tender spot, an arc of pure electricity shot through me. I let go of her hair, snatched a pillow and stuffed it to my mouth, stifling my involuntary squeal of pleasure. I had had men do this to me before, with various levels of interest and success, but her softness, innocence, and hunger burned me. Without hesitation she plunged into me, her tongue invasive and smooth, her lips suckling and warm, my own wetness splashing to my thighs. I held myself still, my legs locked like iron, as she fed from me, each little thrust of her tongue inside me rocketing up my spine in a way no other penetration ever had.

Shoving the pillow deeper into my mouth, I looked over my shoulder to see her long, lovely body stretching out under me, and her fingers furiously working between her legs.

If I made a sound, if Petros came through that door, it would be over. He would take her on the spot. No man, not even our noble prince, could withstand this lure, this eagerness, this unquenched desire. I imagined

Petros's lean body on top of her, penetrating her, pushing on her with such force that her eager tongue was driven deeper into my body.

The image swamped me, dragging me down into swirling depths. Fisting the pillow into my mouth, locking my body into immobility so I did not thrash and pound the walls and scream, scream, scream, I climaxed with a ferocity I had never known.

I came to lying on the bed, wrapped up with Amanda, arms and legs intertwined while we snuggled together. Only ten or twenty minutes had passed since we had entered our cabin, but my life had changed. I could not bear the thought of giving up what I had just discovered. I could not wait until I could do it again, force my innocent kitten to service me with her eager joy.

I had made my choice. I knew what I wanted, and it was Amanda.

## Chapter Seven

This newfound resolution lasted while we dressed, chattering like school girls. It lasted while I lovingly fixed her hair, making her as pretty as I could. It lasted while we held hands and walked to the galley, her white gown maddeningly close to transparent in the dusk. Even though I had plenty of experience with that naked body, I kept trying to get a better look at it through the gown. So did the crew. A surprising number of bumps and clatters followed in our wake, as men walked blindly into various walls and bulkheads of the ship they knew like the backs of their hands.

My resolve lasted right up until Petros greeted us for dinner. Then my wayward loins spoke up, shouting to my brain that what they really needed was a good stiff pounding from a good stiff cock attached to a well-oiled, lean masculine body with the face of an archangel.

“Your beauty is unsurpassed tonight, my dear,” he told the gold-crowned girl next to me. When he leaned forward and kissed her on the lips, the image of her face between my legs jolted me.

“Courtesy of my indispensable companion,” she answered, and lifted my hand to Petros so he could kiss it.

I had to fight down a surge of jealousy. Of course he could not kiss me on the lips. She was being as generous as she could, sharing his affection with me, and besides, she had just called me indispensable. My heart stuttered.

That meant she wanted to keep me, too.

“Thank you,” Petros said, looking into my eyes. “For this double vision of loveliness, I will be forever grateful.”



Such flowery nonsense. It rushed to my head like the sugar from an entire box of bonbons.

I could do this, I thought. I could live like this, lusting after him and relieving myself with her. Except, of course, once they were married, she would not be in my bed every night. But we could have afternoon trysts while he was away doing whatever it is princes do in the afternoons.

Eagerly I convinced myself of this beautiful future.

But after dinner, standing on the deck in the moonlight, watching the ship cut gently through the water, the night wind wiped such fantasies away.

“Aren’t you cold?” Amanda asked me.

“Go on in,” I said. “I’ll come to bed in a minute.”

“Don’t stay out too long,” she whispered, and kissed me lightly on the cheek. Then the warmth of her presence was gone and I was alone.

The sea was the same one I had swum in that morning, but instead of crystal blue it was black and opaque. Like my future.

I’d never had an affair with a married man without getting caught. The idea that I could carry on an affair with both husband *and* wife was ludicrous. We would be discovered. I would be a traitor to Amanda and a pervert to Petros. Disgraced, I would be cast out, and their fairytale marriage would be ruined. And if the tabloids got wind of it, their lives would be ruined.

Throwing myself overboard right now would be less painful for all of us.

“Careful there,” said Petros, coming up behind me with the silent grace of a cat. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me away from the rail, like he was afraid I might really jump. “You—” he started to say, but I interrupted him. Turning in his arms, I kissed him, deeply, passionately, without restraint.

He did not pull away, and for a time we existed only there, our bodies melded together and joined in fire at the mouth.

"*Mon amour*," he whispered in my ear when we broke apart. "Why do you do this to me?"

"It won't happen again," I said miserably and turned away from him.

But his arms did not let go, and I stayed in his embrace, though I faced the open ocean again.

"Then stay with me," he whispered, his voice and his promises as seductive as the fabled call of the sirens. "Tomorrow, at Ermoupolis, we will put Amanda on a plane home, and together we can return to the sea."

"Don't be silly," my mouth said, but my body could not resist. I pressed my buttocks against his body, and the hard spot they found sent tingles up my spine.

"How can I lie with Amanda, knowing that you are a room and a million miles away?" His breath deepened as we ground together, making heat between us.

"You can't," I said while my back arched into his solid chest. "I have to leave, it's clear."

"How can I let you go, knowing you are staring into deep water like a sailor without hope?"

I clutched the railing in both hands, the better to push back into him. The fabric of his slacks was thin, and my dress even thinner, but if not for those millimeters of cloth we would be committing the most serious transgression.

Ironical how my conscience could justify grinding against my best friend's fiancé's erection because we weren't actually having intercourse. His hand cupped my breast, and I slid up and down against the front of his pants.

"We can't do this," I whimpered.

"I cannot stop," he said. "Not when I know you need me."

"Amanda needs you." The sound of fabric on fabric making heat was washed away by the cool wind.

"But I need *you*."

"If you had me, you wouldn't want me," I argued. "What honor would I have if I robbed my friend?"

"Why must duty always prevail? Am I not entitled to happiness of my own?"

"Because you're only happy when you are doing your duty," I answered him. "And that's why I love you so much."

In frustrated silence, our bodies acted out a pantomime of what they could never have.

Pushing my hair into his face, my voice cracked and low, I begged him. "When you do this to Amanda, will you sometimes think of me?"

"*Mon dieu*," he said, and shuddered. Then he leaned against me, as if all the strength had gone from his legs.

"Captain, I think there's been an accident on deck," I whispered, trying not to giggle.

"The sun...lotion...all day," he gasped. Pitiful excuses, but he was just a man, after all. They can't help it.

What was my excuse?

"I have to go," I said, no longer smiling. "We can never do this again." I slipped from his embrace, and he let me go.

But a few steps away he spoke quietly to me.

"I need you too. If you go, I will follow."

"I'll stay until the wedding," I promised. "After that, you'll forget me. Amanda is everything I can never be. You'll see."

He did not argue with me, but his posture shouted denial. In the wake of that iron resolve, I fled.

\* \* \*

My cabin was no sanctuary from desire. With business-like efficiency I stripped and readied for bed, only to have my reserve shattered by Amanda's playful smirk. And the carrot she fondled playfully, holding it to her lips for a kiss.

"I stole it from the kitchen," she grinned. It was thick, heavy, and long. Bright orange, too, but in the dim moonlight from the porthole I could overlook that.

"What the hell for?" I asked, suddenly worried.

"I wanted to know what it looks like. I mean, when you...you know. I want to see it."

"That's stupid," I said, but my loins disagreed. The thought of anything hard and long was exactly what they wanted right now.

"Fine." Her perfect lips screwed up like an angel pouting. "I'll keep it for myself." And she moved her hands under the sheets, the carrot disappearing with them.

"Don't you dare!" I gasped, yanking the sheets off her. I was put here expressly to prevent what she was about to do.

"Oh, relax," she giggled. "I'm not that stupid. But it feels nice when I do this." The sultry vixen was back again as she rubbed it between her legs.

My recent experience above deck had left me aching with emptiness. Not that I had ever been able to say no to her.

"All right, fine. Just stop that." I crawled into bed and lay on my back, my legs spread. "Go ahead," I said, trying to be petulant, but coming out almost desperate.

She giggled and prodded me with the thing. When I jumped from the contact, she laughed again.

"You get used to the cold," she whispered. "And it's lots warmer than it was, anyway."

"It's not just that," I told her. "You can't just jump in like that. You have to warm me up first."

"Like this?" she said, and bent her head to my thighs.

"Oh God, yes," I moaned when her lips touched that magic spot again. Yes, exactly like that.

She might have said something else, but I was locked in a fantasy of Petros bending over me like that. I hardly needed warming up. I had

come into the room ready, and nothing about seeing Amanda in her nightgown playing obscenely with a carrot had changed that. I could not even tell she had begun until she lifted her head and I saw only half a carrot.

“More?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“More,” I gasped. “Harder, and don’t stop licking.”

With a wicked smile her face disappeared again, and her long soft hair spilled over my legs and belly. I arched my hips to let her inside, and surrendered myself to climax.

“My God,” she said sometime later, her face glowing with fiery astonishment. “Is it really like that?”

“Yes.” I kissed her tenderly. “You’ll see.”

“I can’t wait,” she cried in frustration. “I want to know what it feels like so much.”

“You have to wait, Amanda.” I hugged her tightly to take the sting of denial away.

“Please,” she sobbed, and I could feel her entire body burning in unquenched desire. “Please.”

“Shh,” I whispered. Moved by pity, I slipped my hand to her thighs and touched her gently.

“Do that thing with your fingers,” she begged. “Just a little, like before. Please.”

“You know I can’t,” I told her, almost annoyed at her whining. And then, holding her there in the dark while she begged to be violated, that dark spirit rose up in me again. Lust burned in me, confused between Petros and her and my own enigmatic desires.

“If you really want to know what it feels like to be penetrated, there is something unique to these Greek isles...”

“Yes,” she said instantly. The way my hand was moving between her legs, she would have said yes to anything.

Wickedly, I found the carrot with my free hand. It was still well-oiled from its recent sojourn inside of me.

“Roll over on your belly,” I commanded. Now I lay beside her, with her groin trapped between my hands.

“Mmmm,” she moaned as I prodded at her backside with the tip of the carrot. My other hand continued to minister to her clitoris, keeping her soft and trembling.

“You said you wanted to be penetrated. Now lie still and take it,” I ordered her. She trembled under my command, and I thrilled to the knowledge that I had never let a man use me as totally as I was about to use her.

“Yes,” she whispered to me, and surrendered. The carrot sank an inch into that tight, forbidden opening before she moaned again.

“More?” I asked ruthlessly.

After a moment’s gasping, I felt her entire body relax.

“Does it hurt?” I asked, curious.

“Not like I thought it would,” she whispered. “I can take more.”

Amazed and aroused to incredible heights, I gently began to stroke her, going a little deeper with each thrust. The power I wielded over her entranced me. As I moved the carrot in and out of her backside, her front wet and soft on my fingers, I began to perceive what it must feel like for a man to enter a woman. Listening to her cries, feeling her squirm under my invasion, I forgot about anything but her.

“A little more,” I whispered, and I felt her relaxation deepen. The carrot went in almost all the way now.

“I lied,” I told her. “A little more still.”

The last inch and I barely had enough to hold on to. Gently I massaged her from both sides, one stretching tight muscles and the other pressing against soft, wet flesh until she climaxed with a scream.

“Oh God,” I said. “Be quiet, you goose!” I imagined Petros bursting in here to see what was wrong, and finding me with a carrot up his fiancée’s backside.

Then I pushed that image out of my mind. I needed to get *some* sleep tonight.

Perhaps it wasn't as loud as I had feared. The door remained closed and the night undisturbed.

Slowly I extracted the source of all this commotion, and tossed it to a far corner of the room. I was a little embarrassed now with my own wickedness.

"Thank you so much," Amanda whispered, showering me in little kisses. "Is that what it's really like?"

"Yes, only better when it's in front," I said with authority, although I had no comparable experience to go by. "Now go to sleep and stop bothering me, or I'll let Petros do that to you."

"Oh," she gasped, shocked into silence. Then, in a small voice, "Would he?"

I had no idea. He very well might. I remembered the feel of his hardness pressed up against my buttocks. But if I started thinking about that, I would find myself hunting in the corner for that carrot and starting all over again.

"Go to sleep, silly," I told her. Snuggled together, comfortably drained, we did.

\* \* \*

The next day Amanda and I showered together, though with nothing more than hugs and kisses. We were both satiated from the day before, my aching emptiness fed and her burning curiosity fulfilled by that stalwart vegetable. We dressed each other with an eye to sex appeal, and bounced out of the cabin holding hands like lovers. I knew my face radiated the just-been-fucked glow it always did after good sex, and I didn't care. Amanda's face glowed too, but then it always did.

Petros, on the other hand, was not glowing. He looked like a hungry wolf, his dark eyes haunted and his lean face taut with self-denial.

Vicious imp that I was, I pretended complete innocence of the night before. Instead I clung to Amanda with all the familiarity of a girlfriend hanging on her new beau. After all, Amanda had done to me as much as

any man I had ever been with and I had violated her in unspeakable ways. We had no modesty left between us.

But, for the sake of the rest of the world, we refrained from French-kissing and ass-grabbing in public.

Petros bore this display with more grace than I could believe. But he was unusually quiet.

As we made our way through the crowd of boats to the dock, he described the sights available to us on the island. We would have several hours while the crew took on supplies. Watching him graciously escort Amanda through the crowd, trying to make myself stop staring at her firm buttocks under the tight blue shorts, I thought of some supplies I wanted.

As they climbed into the waiting cab, Amanda scooted over to make room for me in the back seat. But I stopped at the door and only leaned in.

"There some shopping I need to do," I told them. "Go on without me."

"The crew will fetch anything you ask for," Petros said.

"Girl things," I said, dismissing him. Then I gave Amanda a big, wet kiss, stepped out, and slammed the door. The cab took off on that signal, and I was free.

Free in a Greek island port, wearing a pair of absurdly short pants and a blouse tied up in a halter. In the absence of Petros's defensive presence, there were plenty of men willing to stare at me. Normally I would have enjoyed the attention, but I found myself only annoyed by it.

I hailed another cab and retreated to the backseat.

"Do you have any adult stores on this island?" I asked the driver, a short, balding, middle-aged man. He looked like the kind of man who would know.

"Pardon?" he said.

"Adult stores. Novelty shops. That sort of thing."

"Pardon?"



I finally realized that “pardon” was the only French word he actually knew.

“Porno,” I said, using the one word recognized everywhere.

“Ah,” he exclaimed with a smile and put the cab in gear.

\* \* \*

The shop was so seedy I felt dirty just going in. The selection was limited, of course, mostly American and French videos in shabby condition. There was a single cabinet dedicated to toys. And I had to ask the clerk, a small, wizened lady, to open it.

She did so without any visible curiosity or leering, which was more than I could say for the three other customers in the shop. All men, they had stared at me from the moment I walked in. I tried to ignore them and focused on the goods in front of me.

A vibrator would be nice, but then I thought about the peculiar sound they make, and how quiet the boat often was. Perhaps something without power.

Then it caught my eye—long, straight, thick, soft to the touch but with a firm core, and realistically detailed. If Amanda wanted anatomy lessons, this was perfect. Just looking at it made me remember why I liked men so much.

On my way to the counter, one of the men said something clearly obscene, but it was wasted since I didn’t speak Greek. The clerk snapped a single word at him, and he blushed and retreated to the back of the shop. I tried to show my gratitude with a smile, but the old lady was impervious. She rang up my purchase without interest, took my Euros, and handed me a fistful of Greek coins for change.

I dropped them into the jar full of change sitting on the counter. No doubt she got a lot of tips from foreigners this way. But even the rattle of change did not earn me a smile.

After I left the shop, I thought about sightseeing, but I felt underdressed and uncomfortable carrying around a dildo in a plain

brown paper bag. So I found another cab and headed back to the ship, where I knew I could lie around naked if I felt like it, and the crew would be discreet.

Not that I was planning on showing them my purchase. I didn't trust their reserve that far.

\* \* \*

"Would *mademoiselle* care for anything else?" asked the same sailor who had served me wine coolers yesterday, and again today. Although his tone was perfectly polite, I was pretty sure he would be more than willing to provide *special* services.

But I wasn't interested. He was handsome enough, and plenty exotic, but I was in a relationship.

The thought hit me like a bucket of cold water. What was I thinking? I was fucking my boss. That wasn't a relationship, it was a disaster waiting to happen.

The fact that she was a she, and engaged to the man I really wanted to fuck, was just too strange to think about.

Stretched out on a deck chair, enjoying the sun and the sounds of the busy port after all that quiet at sea, I thought about how I should take the sailor up on his unspoken offer. If I started banging one of the crew, Petros would forget me and I might forget Amanda.

It was a really, really good idea. But the sailor was out of luck, my treacherous nethers remained untempted, and so I remained unmoved in my chair.

As the day faded, I began to have sleepy fantasies. What if Petros came back to the boat alone? Then I could have him without a guilty conscience, innocent of betraying my friend. After all, it would be a *fait accompli*, beyond my power to prevent.

But the idea of life without Amanda, the most cheerful and fun companion I had ever had, lacked appeal.

What if *she* came back alone? What if Petros could not accept us, and flew home in disgust, leaving us the use of his boat to sail out of his life. Together we would take the boat on the rest of the cruise, enjoying each other, finding new heights of pleasure, new experiences. First the toy I had bought, and then when the novelty wore off, the crew, one after another, forming a line and...

I put down my wine cooler. Even in my fantasies, I could not live without men. I could never be sexually satisfied without that special something they brought to the encounter.

I picked up the wine cooler again. Another few minutes of this line of thought and I would be in my cabin, opening that brown paper bag.

What was wrong with me? I'd had lots of sex just the day before. What had turned me into a sex fiend?

Watching my two lovebirds arrive in a cab, I realized what it was. Denial. Living in such close quarters with Petros, wanting him but not even allowing myself to pretend I would ever have him was a sensation I had never experienced. Usually getting men, or getting over the ones I couldn't have, was easy.

But then, usually the men were easy. Usually, I was easy. And now that I exercised restraint, held back from indulging my immediate lusts, I found something underneath.

Respect.

For Petros, for the way he held Amanda's hand walking up the gangplank. For the way he smiled at her jokes, made her feel loved and comfortable, even while he lusted after me. For Amanda, for the way she shared everything she had, for the trust she placed in me.

Amanda flounced across the deck, her golden hair flowing around those perfect breasts straining under the silk butterfly top tied in front, and embraced me with a full hug and a kiss on the lips. The automatic response between my legs increased my respect for Petros another notch. He was enduring this beauty's kisses and flaunting without any release.

"Did you have a nice time?" I asked her.

"It was lovely. We went to an old temple of Diana, where I tempted fate by kissing my boyfriend in sight of the goddess. The tour guide warned us that Diana will try to steal him from me now."

"A Greek prince never abandons his word, once freely given," Petros declared, but I did not know if he was talking to me or her.

"Then I shall tempt her again." Amanda laughed and planted a long, deep tongue-kiss on Petros.

I had to turn and look the other way halfway through. Not from jealousy, which was astonishingly absent, but from pure arousal. The sight of the two people I loved most kissing each other erased all the comfort I had been feeling, leaving behind only raging desire.

"No man would ever forget such a kiss," Petros said gallantly when she let him breathe. I knew it was true from experience, having kissed Amanda myself. "The goddess will tempt in vain."

We were alone on the foredeck while the sailors busied themselves elsewhere. In that quiet intimacy, Amanda surprised us all.

"Still," she said, "perhaps I should confuse the trail." Then she sat on my lap, leaned down, and kissed me like she had Petros. Long, wet, and deep.

I could not resist her, of course, and Petros could not turn away. I could feel his eyes on us, like the stare of a tiger ready to pounce.

"Confuse is the right word," I said shakily when she was done with me.

"Anything to keep my man," Amanda said cryptically.

"But I must leave you for the moment," said Petros. "Not at the call of the goddess, but duty. I must see to my ship before we sail." His voice was uncharacteristically tight.

"Wait," she called to him as he turned. With one hand she reached out. When he stepped over to take it, she drew him in. Still sitting on my lap, she kissed him again.

From this vantage point, I could tell that all of my kissing lessons had paid off. This was no schoolgirl peck of affection like the first kiss I had

witnessed back in Cheroigne House. This was a fuck-me-now kiss of championship quality.

Petros noticed my admiring scrutiny, his eyes catching mine ever so briefly. I could not fathom what lay in those dark pools.

“*Mademoiselles*,” he croaked, and retreated as fast as dignity and suddenly-too-tight pants would let him.

“We did that all day,” she giggled in triumph. “Everywhere we went.” Then she cupped my breast with one hand and gently squeezed.

“Amanda,” I gasped.

“He did that, too,” she grinned. “Once, in the cab, until he realized what he was doing and pretended he had been reaching for my shoulder. That’s a good sign, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said. The way he had obviously been moved by her kisses even while standing in front of the woman he had offered to run away with the night before was an even better sign, but I could hardly tell her that. “We’d better get ready for dinner,” I added. I needed to get her off my lap before *I* started fumbling for her shoulders.

## Chapter Eight

Dinner was easy and light, just old friends having a good time. Their sexual tension was gone, smoothed over by politeness, class, and long-standing affection. I did not miss it. Amanda had exhausted me the day before.

Or perhaps I just wanted reassurance that I still belonged in their world a little longer. Always before, I had used sex to keep my lovers close to me. Now it seemed sex was getting in the way. If I wasn't having sex with Amanda, or thinking about sex with Petros, I would be able to focus on just being part of their family.

I stuck close to Amanda for the rest of the night. I didn't want any private encounters with Petros. I couldn't trust myself. So I did what I was supposed to be doing—chaperoning Amanda. Thinking about recent developments, I realized I probably couldn't trust Amanda either. Not alone with Petros.

Or with me. After a thoroughly pleasant and normal evening—drinks on the deck, a friendly game of cards with the doctor as my partner, getting ready for bed in our cabin—Amanda turned and embraced me as soon as we crawled under the sheet.

“Again?” I said.

“You said twice a day,” she whispered huskily, kissing my ear.

“But you don't have a carrot,” I argued. Silly, but I was desperate.

“I can use my fingers,” she replied, running her hand down to my thighs. When I caught it and moved it away, she giggled. “Or my tongue,” she said and bent her head to lick my throat.

There, in the darkness, next to her soft body and fiery desire, I surrendered again. I could no longer pretend I did not want her, every minute of every day and night.

“I bought you a present,” I whispered.

“Where?” She sat upright and turned on the lamp. She really liked presents.

“In the brown paper bag in the dresser. No, don’t open it, bring it over here.”

Happily she sat on my lap, clutching the bag. “Show me now!” she demanded.

“Go ahead,” I told her.

She reached into the bag and pulled out the dildo. Her eyes widened most gratifyingly.

“Is this what it really looks like?” She was enraptured.

“During the fun times, yes. Most of the time, no.”

“It’s...huge.”

It wasn’t particularly. I’d had real men larger than that, although it did look bigger isolated from the rest of the man.

“How does it all fit?” she asked, still marveling over it.

“Practice.”

“Show me,” she begged in her bedroom voice. Her face was inches from mine, and I kissed her like I would a man, turning my face up and offering it to her.

“It starts here.” I opened my mouth. When she held it up for me to suck on, I closed my eyes and pretended it was Petros.

Then I opened them again. As fantastic as it would be to do this to Petros, it was an even better fantasy to do it while Amanda watched. I gave it my best performance, teasing, licking, and finally sucking down half of it before I had to come up for air.

“Do men really like that?”

“Yes, dear, they really do. So much so, most of them take it for granted. So, off you go. Your turn.”

Now I held it for her while she practiced. And the fantasy was the same—me watching her doing Petros. When she stopped to breathe, I kissed her deep and long.

“Will Petros want me to do that?” she asked after I let her go.

“Every day. Maybe twice a day, if you’re lucky.”

We laughed at that. Then she rubbed the dildo between my breasts and kissed me.

“I want to see the magic disappearing act again,” she whispered into my mouth. I could deny her nothing. Leaning back onto the bed, I spread my legs and let her pull my nightgown up.

When she bent her head between my thighs, I clutched the pillows like lifesavers in an ocean of bliss. When her lips made contact with me, and the wetness of her tongue joined the wetness between my legs, I bit the pillows and sank beneath the surface. Her long hair fell down and caressed my exposed flesh, and her breath burned me.

“I think you’re ready,” she announced. The pleasure subsided briefly and I could think again. Looking down to see her smiling face, wet and glistening in the lamplight, I smiled also.

“Yes, mistress, you may have your way with me now,” I said.

And she did.

The entry was a shock, as always, but once inside it felt natural and complete. She moved the dildo in and out, and now I floated on the waves of my private ocean. Not the drowning fire of her earlier kisses, but the comfort of the familiar and fulfilling.

“Kneel,” I suggested. “Hold it between your thighs, like it was attached.”

“You want me to pretend to be a man?” she asked in mock surprise. She crawled up on her knees until she was so close that her hand bumped back into her on each thrust.

The fire returned. This was not familiar. Lying there, being fucked by a staggeringly beautiful woman, her perfect breasts hanging over me, her erect nipples begging my hands to rise up and cup them, was not



familiar and comfortable. It was exciting, terrifying, exhilarating. It was *erotic*.

"Is this what it would be like with Petros?" she whispered, her voice hard with desire. "Is this what he would do?" She thrust into me forcefully, her groin pressed up against the hilt of the dildo, her thighs pressing up against mine and the shaft of the dildo fully inside me.

"Petros," I gasped, repeating the name, and the imagery was too much. I exploded in orgasm.

She fell on top of me, showering me with kisses while I spasmed and quivered. I did not trust myself to speak, for fear I would call out Petros's name in open desire. How could she have done that to me? How could she have brought up his name here and now?

"I wish it could be me," she sighed. "I want to be there, underneath him. I want to know what it is like to have a man on top of me."

"You will, my dear. Soon enough."

"Always there, there, soon enough! I am sick of waiting. I have waited my whole life, I cannot bear to wait anymore." Her pretty face twisted up with tears of frustration.

"Let me help," I said, and reached for her thighs. I was still awash in the pleasure she had given me and I wanted to respond.

"Do it to me," she asked. "Like that."

"I can't, Amanda! You know that."

"Do it as close as you can, then."

She lay on her back and lifted her legs to her chest, exposing herself completely. I knelt over her and gently let the dildo rest on her little tuft of fur.

"Hold it between your legs," she asked. "Like I did you."

I obeyed. Looming above her, I teased her with my fake cock, watching her face burn in the agony of desire.

"Make it wet," I ordered her, and spread her enough to oil the instrument well.

“Penetrate me,” she begged, and I did, the only way I was allowed. Gently I slid the dildo up her backside, an inch at a time. I put my free hand over her groin and stroked her clitoris with my thumb.

She clutched her legs to her chest, and turned to bite the pillow. Watching her aroused me again, and I began to ride her like she had ridden me, pumping in and out.

“I’m going to come,” she whispered.

“Not yet,” I commanded.

A few more thrusts and she whimpered, “I’m going to come!”

“Not yet.” I was enjoying this too much. The feel of her underneath me, in my power, was exciting as it had ever been having a man under my power. I rode her for as long as I could.

“I’m coming,” she finally grunted, and this time I could not stop her. Gasping and moaning she bit into the pillows, stifling her screams of release.

Afterwards we snuggled together, our souls exposed to each other now that our bodies had been made free with. She fell asleep easily, and so did I. Not that I didn’t try to make myself sick with worry over what I was doing, and how my heart would be broken when Amanda had a real man and didn’t need her play-toy. I tried to worry. I just couldn’t, not right then.

\* \* \*

Petros was teaching Amanda how to sail. Not how to turn the wheel and make the boat turn, but how to sail—how to feel the wind, set the sails, and command the crew. This was beyond my station, and to be honest, beyond my abilities, so I sat on the foredeck and sulked.

It wasn’t normal sulking. I had a plate of caviar, a bottle of Dom Pérignon, and fresh croissants that tasted like they came from the bakery at home. Given all that, it was a pretty subdued and pleasant form of sulking.

I wasn't the only sulker. My would-be companion, the stalwart sailor who always seemed to be waiting on me, had his own supercilious air. It was subtle, of course, but he was obviously miffed at having been turned down. For some reason, it seemed to make men feel better if they knew you were turning them down for someone else, but I could hardly explain I was getting adequately serviced by my girlfriend. Waiter-boy would just have to deal.

Although, it would simplify my life if I just gave in to him. Then I wouldn't have to hide from Petros, and I wouldn't have to worry about what I would do once Amanda grew out of her experimental stage. That's how I was explaining it to myself these days. Amanda, being young and naïve, was just testing the waters. Most of us have a few erotic experiences with the same sex while we're figuring out how it all works. True, it was usually little more than a few kisses and some tentative groping, not nightly violations with a dildo in various orifices, but everything in Amanda's life was larger than normal.

How this explained what *I* was doing was a topic I carefully avoided thinking about. That's where the champagne came in handy. And the sunshine, the salt spray, and the comfortable deck chair. The day was sterling, like fine blue china, something to put in the cabinet and look back on with fond memories for the rest of your life. And every day in Amanda's life was like this.

Later, dressing for dinner in our cabin, I had a moment of worry. The sheets had been changed. Not that that was a bad thing, but I couldn't remember putting away our toys.

"I did it," Amanda grinned at me as I checked our lingerie drawer nervously. "I'm used to cleaning up before the servants come in."

"I'm not very discreet," I apologized. I'd never had to live with people always around me, watching me. I wasn't sure I wanted to either. Being Amanda's servant got me the nice things I wanted, without the spotlight that paid for them. All in all, I had it pretty good. If I could just stop wanting to have sex with her future husband.

Except it wasn't just sex I wanted from him. That was made clear to me over dinner, where I simpered over his every word like any ingénue. I wanted his approval, his respect, his attention, his concern. I wanted to make him smile.

Every woman he met did too, so my performance went unnoticed, or at least unremarked upon. Amanda already had all those things, so she didn't notice my competition for them. What she wanted was his hunger, his need, his lust. But he was too much of a gentleman to display that.

On the other hand, my lessons had solved her problem. There was now no question of what she wanted from him. He could not be thinking of her as a little sister anymore.

"Would you like to try a night course?" he asked Amanda after coffee was served. I almost choked on mine, especially when Amanda enthusiastically agreed.

"You are a quick study, my dear," he said approvingly.

"She is," I said. I couldn't help myself. It was too good of a punch line to pass up.

"I try," she said demurely.

This looked like it could get out of hand, until I realized they were just talking about sailing. Together they went off to stand at the wheel and pretend to do something important. I went to the prow of the boat to enjoy the moonlight.

After only a little while, Petros joined me. Despite all my best efforts, here we were, alone together again in the moonlight, on the deck of his ship, with the wind ruffling his silk shirt around his taught lean body, his dark eyes reflecting glimmers of starlight.

Stop it, I told myself. Pay attention to something else. But I failed.

"How are you enjoying the trip so far?" he asked me.

"How are you?" I countered.

"No sailor complains while the weather is good. And the company is flawless. It is not often I have two beautiful women on my ship."

"That's not what the tabloids say." Instantly I regretted my pettiness. But it was the only way I could keep my distance from him.

"You can't believe everything you read," he said lightly.

"It's not often you have your fiancée on board," I said to change the subject.

"It is not often that I have been in her company, true. But I must admit I find her so changed now to be almost a different person."

Success. I had won. But I didn't feel like celebrating.

"Are you responsible for that?" he asked.

Again I reacted to his perceptiveness with hostility. "It's what I was hired to do."

"Why would I settle for the student when I could have the teacher?" he murmured soft and sweet and much too close to me.

"Because you can't have the teacher." I stepped further away. "And it's not true, anyway. Amanda would have grown up on her own. She was always the one you deserved."

"What about what I want?"

"She's the one you want, too. Are you going to stand there and tell me you don't want her?"

He sighed, and his gaze turned to the open sea that lay dark and obscure before us.

"She is someone I have been fond of for many years. And now she has become a woman, beautiful and sensual. Of course I want her. I think I even love her."

The man of my dreams was telling me he loved another, but the words did not hurt like they had all the times before. Because I loved her, too.

"She's crazy about you. The two of you will be very happy together." I gave up my fantasies, throwing them overboard into the dark water, watching them fall behind and disappear in the night.

“And what of you? Will you be her maid, her friend? Will you torture me with your presence every day, knowing that I can never make you fulfilled like I do her?”

Those fantasies crawled back on deck and shook off the water without looking any the worse for wear. How I wanted him to fill me!

“I told you, I’ll leave after the wedding,” I said, trying not to let the tears out.

“And that will be better for me how? Knowing that you are out there alone, knowing that I cost Amanda the first true friend she has ever had?”

“What do you want me to do?” I demanded in frustration.

“I don’t know.” His voice was as miserable as I had ever heard. “I have spent my life in the company of beautiful women, polished and practiced, adept at pleasing others and utterly focused on making me happy. It used to be enough. Until you. Now I can barely breathe waiting for the next time I can see you.”

“Stop it,” I said, and I was crying now.

“I love Amanda. I could never consider breaking her heart, breaking my promise, shattering her dreams and future. The financial concerns my family has in this union, the affairs of state, the meddling of archaic customs and the people who serve them, mean less to me than seagull droppings. I would work in a diner, washing dishes, to come home to you every night.”

For a moment that beautiful future beckoned us from the horizon of possibility, shrouded in twilight. Until the hard sunrise of reality.

“But how can I break Amanda?”

How could I ask him to? Of all the people I have ever known, she accepted and loved me just for me. Not for what I could do, but just because I was there.

“You can’t, and you won’t,” I said fiercely.

“I see that you love her, too. Out of love for her, you push me away. I cannot ask otherwise, since your love for her is part of the beauty I see in

you. How can we share this love without breaking both of us? How can we share Amanda?”

Very specific positions of how the two of us could share that lovely creature raced through my head, making me dizzy. Petros stepped forward and caught me in his arms, trying to steady me, but his touch just made my head whirl faster.

“Are you all right?”

I answered by kissing him, melting into his grasp like butter. He could throw me to the deck and take me without a word, and I let him know it with my entire body.

Sterling knight that he was, he did not. How I hated his strength and honor then! How it made me burn for him even more.

“I am no captain,” he said miserably when he broke my kiss and cradled my head against his chest. “I cannot find a safe course to sail among these rocks.”

I am no true friend, I thought, standing there in the grasp of my lover’s fiancé and unable to let go.

“Once I am gone, it will be okay. Amanda will be too happy with you to notice, and in time you will forget me.”

“We Greeks have long memories.”

The wind cut across my back, blowing sharp and cold. I snuggled further into his warmth, living for the moment. The future would come soon enough.

“Am I never to know more of your body than kisses?” he whispered to me.

“Never. Your body belongs to Amanda.”

“But my heart belongs to you.” Then he kissed me, and for that little while I was truly happy.

Raindrops spattered against my back.

“Where is Amanda, anyway?” I asked, even though it was rather late to start worrying about being caught.

"I left her at the wheel, alone. It is a test of confidence, to sail in the dark with only yourself to trust."

The wind was harder now, and the rain drizzled in earnest.

"You should go inside," he said. "And I should return to the wheel, in case this rain becomes a storm."

Silently I cursed this cruel sea. A moment ago it had been romantic moonlight, and I had been happy. Now it snatched away my time with Petros, leaving only his taste in my mouth and a gaping hunger for more.

The sea responded with its own curse. Water fell from the sky like a wave. The rain became a deluge, instantly, and I was soaked to the skin in a heartbeat.

"Go to your cabin!" he ordered me and started to run. Terrified, I clutched for him as the wind knocked me around like a scrap of paper. He had forgotten I was not an experienced sailor. He had forgotten I was not competent at everything without trying, like Amanda was.

He came back for me. He came back and held me while I struggled against the elements, half-carrying me to the cabin door. He ignored the needs of his ship while he saw to mine. Inside, after he had disappeared back into the maelstrom, and with the door closed against the wind, I broke down and cried.

Then I dried off, changed into my pajamas, and got into bed where it was warm.

After a while, Amanda staggered in, looking like she had just emerged from underwater, shivering and blue with cold. Her golden crown was plastered to her skin like spaghetti.

"Come to me, *mon enfant*," I said, and helped her strip out of the chilled, wet clothes. She wrapped herself in a towel while I dried her hair.

"It is a bad storm," she said, subdued. "And it could get worse."

I had just been through a terrible storm in my heart. "It'll be okay," I promised her and hugged her tightly, sharing my warmth.

"I should go out there and help," she said, still uncertain.



“What could you do but get in the way? Petros is at the wheel, and the rest of the crew know their jobs.”

“It was my watch.” I thought she was about to cry. “It should be my job.”

“You’re still learning, little one. You can pilot through the next storm.” I tried to distract her with kisses.

“I learn fast,” she murmured into my hair. “Don’t I?”

“You do, my sweet.” I was still on fire from holding Petros, and now I was holding her. The ship rocked and heaved, and we fell over in the bed, all tangled up in limbs, sheets, and towels.

“I’m scared,” I told her, and I really was, though not of the storm. “Make me forget my troubles.”

“You want to make love in the middle of a storm?” She licked my throat with the tip of her tongue and took my breasts into her hands.

“What else should we do?” I spread my legs so that she could lie between them, her body up against mine.

We kissed and touched, but I wanted more. I broke away from her to open the dresser drawer and get our toy. The pitching of the ship made this a little difficult, but I was determined.

“I need this,” I told her. When she started to move her head down, I stopped her. “I’m already ready.”

“Storms have an interesting effect on you,” she laughed. I could hardly tell her it was Petros who had that effect on me.

I lay on my back while she climbed on top of me. I held on to her like a lifeboat, with all my limbs, while she supported herself with one arm and held the dildo with the other. I wanted to turn out the lamp so I could pretend she was Petros, but I didn’t want to interrupt her. So I let her fuck me. I just accepted that it was her, my glorious golden angel, and that she was on top of me and fucking me and that was what I wanted.

The boat pitched and the lights flickered. I was thrown up into her, while she lost her balance and fell down onto me. But she didn’t stop

thrusting into me, even while we readjusted, and finally the waves inside me carried me away.

"My turn," she said greedily. "I'm scared too." She squirmed off me, winding up face-down on the bed.

"Stay there," I told her, when she tried to roll over. I climbed up on top of her, straddling her backside, pinning her to the bed.

"Make yourself wet for me," I ordered. I was too busy trying to keep my position to spare a hand.

She complied and slipped her right hand between her thighs.

"Are you ready?" I asked, sliding the dildo between her cheeks. Her response was to push up with her hips.

I let the toy, still well-lubricated from me, push against her tight hole. With a moan she relaxed herself and it sank in. She was a quick learner, indeed. A few short strokes and then it went in without resistance.

"Yes," she said. "Harder."

With my right hand between my legs holding onto the back end of the dildo, I began to fuck her. She moaned my name, and it sent shivers down my spine.

"Pretend I'm Petros," I said. I was already too attached to her. I didn't want her becoming any more attached to me. What if she moaned my name while she was with him?

She said something in Greek, of which I could only catch his name.

"What was that?" I asked.

She repeated it in French. "Petros, my love, use my body for your pleasure."

And I did.

Ramming up against her, I ground my pelvis against my hand and the back of the dildo. I humped and pounded her for my own pleasure, barely registering her moans, the way her hips thrust willing back into mine, the glorious warmth of her thighs underneath me. Images of Petros filled my head, Petros on top of me, on top of her, grunting in ecstasy, taking his pleasure from ours. I fucked her until I came, and only after

that, while I was lying on top of her trying to catch my breath, did I remember the delicacy of the opening I was exploiting.

I mumbled something apologetic into her hair.

“Will he be that rough?” she whispered hopefully.

“If you want him to,” I told her. “Even harder, if you ask him right.”

“*Mon dieu*,” she whimpered, and I had to hold her from behind while she masturbated herself to a second climax, her body heaving slightly less than the bed and the ship.

When the lights suddenly went out, I wondered what kind of monster I had awakened. Would Petros be happy when his virgin bride begged for such perversions?

But in the dark, her warmth and my exhaustion were more than the storm could defeat. I fell asleep to the sound of pounding wind and rain and the rocking of the boat like a cradle.

## Chapter Nine

We slept through the storm. Petros and the crew fought for our lives, the yacht trapped in waves it was not meant to face, its little engine and low decks meant for the placid sea, not the angry ocean. But sailing is about sailors as much as it is about ships, and so Petros brought us all safely into the morning sun, oblivious to our danger. I only figured it out later from news reports of the damage the storm had done to the islands.

Petros, of course, said nothing about it. I got a few hints from the attitude of the crew—they were more cocky, humbled, serious, and elated all at the same time. Men are strange beasts.

But not as strange as the creature I had created. Amanda's confidence grew in leaps and bounds. Every day she inserted herself deeper into Petros's life, becoming a partner in more than just promises. He watched her with the same look every man has when he has met his match, surprised to discover that he needed what he had always run from.

And every night, she was insatiable. We leapt into bed and attacked each other, relieving our mutual need of Petros. Amanda was in many ways a better lover than any man I had ever been with—soft, gentle, giving, and, thanks to the miracle of plastic, always able.

I couldn't pretend it was all about Petros, either. There was no way Petros would allow me to mount and dominate him like I did Amanda every night. And I couldn't pretend I did it only for her anymore. Merely thinking about the image of her underneath me, climaxing as I violated her body, never failed to shorten my breath or set my heart racing. This was particularly inappropriate whenever the three of us were sunbathing on the deck, clad in little more than scraps of silk.

We stopped at the island of Tinos and Petros gave the crew some shore leave. I immediately started dreaming about finding a real sex-shop, one with all manner of implements I was suddenly eager to try out on my little golden doll. I had never seen the allure of gags and chains and whips, but then, I had never imagined using them on a beautiful aristocrat before. The vision of Amanda on her hands and knees, with a bridle in her mouth and a pony-tail sticking out her rump while I rode her around her fabulous bedroom, chastising her with a riding crop, made me crazy.

Time was running out for me. There were only a few days of the cruise left, and then a few weeks before the wedding. So my fantasies were running out of control. I let them go wild. There didn't seem to be any harm in it. Amanda and I spent the day shopping for clothes and knick-knacks, while I imagined her lying naked in piles of expensive dresses and begging me to use her.

When Petros met us on the ship with a face as black as the stormy sky that had almost killed us all, my heart froze.

*He knows*, I thought, and the world crashed down around me.

"What is wrong, my love?" Amanda said, with perfect innocence. No, not innocence, but concern—for him. I don't think she knew what guilt was.

"I must show you something," he said. I recognized the strange quality in his voice as anger and I was afraid.

He led us to our cabin, my heart stuttering the entire way. I knew he would reach into the drawer and pull out that dildo, and then—anger, humiliation, disgrace. I was practicing my speech, preparing to take all the blame, to declare Amanda's total innocence. Really, I was. This time, I would do something for someone else, no matter what the cost to me.

"I can explain," I whimpered, as he opened the door. The flash of anger in his eyes terrified me, worse than lightning.

"You can explain this?" he snarled, pointing to where the First Mate stood glaring at a hole in the wall of our cabin.

Dumbfounded, I could only stare.

“No,” said Amanda. “We can’t explain that. Why did you tear a hole in our wall?”

“To get to this,” Petros growled, striding across the room and taking a small object from the First Mate. He brought it back to us, and for a moment I could not guess what it was.

But Amanda recognized it immediately.

“A camera,” she whispered. The weapon of her only natural enemy—the paparazzi.

“I was checking for storm damage,” the First Mate explained. “This panel had been disturbed, the film in the camera is fresh. I believe one of the crew has been filming the ladies at night.”

“Who?” Amanda asked.

I couldn’t think enough to ask questions. All I could think about was what we had done last night.

“We don’t know yet. Most of the crew is on shore. I will go and find them, and see how they are spending their leave.” The First Mate’s voice was more threatening than Petros’s eyes.

“We can’t act without knowledge,” cautioned Petros. “But do not worry, my dear. They will ask for money first. Pictures of pretty girls in their nightclothes are not so valuable, even when they are pictures of royalty.”

“They might be of more than just nightclothes,” Amanda said. “Or rather, less.”

I was stricken with awe at her coolness.

Petros could not stop his eyebrows from arching, ever so slightly, at the thought of Amanda naked. What man could? Aside from the First Mate, whose brows lowered and glowered even more, if that were possible.

“Still,” Petros said, “nudity is nothing to be ashamed of, so the price will be low. They know they can get more from us than from the tabloids. I am sorry that such scum should invade your privacy, but the damage is limited.”

“That is easy for you to say,” snapped Amanda. “But I was a guest on your ship. And this is how I am treated?”

My awe turned into amazement. How did the dragon get on board the ship, and what had she done with Amanda? The creature standing before me was Dame Cheroigne, in everything but body.

“We will recover the film,” soothed Petros. “It will not be watched. The men who did see it will be bribed and threatened into silence.”

“You would pay men who watched me naked before even you did? This is how you would honor your future wife?”

If her goal was to inflame him, it succeeded. Petros’s face darkened so much I began to tremble in fear.

“Perhaps more threatened than bribed,” he said, and although his voice was smooth and even, it was the scariest thing I had ever heard him say.

The men left, the way men do when they’re going to do something, leaving the door open behind them, their one-track minds leaving no room for thought of anything else. I closed the door, and crossed the room to where Amanda was sitting on the bed.

“Amanda,” I whispered. “What are we going to do?” I wanted to hug her, but I was frankly scared of the dragon.

She turned to me, just a child again, tears in her eyes as her face trembled and collapsed. I hugged her then while she cried. I cried, too.

Sometime later, I tried to comfort her with words.

“He won’t watch the tape. And he won’t believe them when they talk about it.”

But she was inconsolable. “All my life Grandma told me to be careful. And I should have been.”

No more tears from me. Reduced to a mistake, an error in judgment, I felt that familiar distance return, the gulf that had always held me apart even from the men I gave my body to. I became stone again.

She felt my coldness and did not understand. She clung to me, seeking comfort, but my arms hung at my sides like dead weight.

"What?" she whispered, but I could not speak. I had been here before. I knew what came next, contemptuous dismissal of my childishness, rage at my unreasonable demands, and then silence, when he stormed out to drink with his mates. This was how every relationship I had ever had ended.

But I had never been in a relationship with a woman before.

"Tell me," she begged, showering me in kisses, touching my face. "Tell me," she cried, pressing into me, seeking shelter, seeking...contact.

My world spun around me.

"Why are you angry with me?" she cried. "I'm sorry I didn't think about the danger. I know I should have protected us, but I thought we were safe here."

I had thought I was safe here, too.

"What are we going to do?" she sobbed again.

"We?" I said. "There is no we. Even a hint of what is on that tape, and the Dame will fire me. I will go back to jail."

She froze in shock. I recoiled inside, anticipating the blow, the hateful words, the rejection. I was revealed to her now, no secrets, no pride, just a criminal on probation.

"No," she said. "No, I cannot lose you too. I will not allow it."

"How will you prevent it?" I said bitterly.

"We won't go home. We'll stay here, in Greece. Petros will find us an island, and we will hide there until they forget. They always forget, in time."

"What?" I was thoroughly confused.

"The press always forgets. And whatever crime you committed in France cannot be so serious. They will not extradite you. We can live on just the jewelry I brought with me. And I have trust funds they can't touch. We will survive."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about my life," she said. "I'm tired of living it for others. I won't lose you."



“But you would lose everything else. The estate, the title...your rank. Petros.”

“I never truly enjoyed that house until you came into it. And if Petros leaves me over this, he is not the man I thought he was. I have found something I want for myself, and I will keep it.”

And she kissed me so fiercely my lips hurt. But it was nothing compared to the constriction in my chest, the pressure in my head, the fire that burned low inside me seeking permission to consume my soul.

“You would give up everything for me?” In all the stories, for all of time, the prince throws away a kingdom for love. But how could I have guessed a princess would do the same?

“For us,” she said, and kissed me again.

My soul shattered, and I knew I could never be stone again. I broke into her arms and sobbed, for all the dreams I had given up on, for all the hopes I had buried in shallow graves in the murk of despair.

“Do you love me?” I whispered.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. I did not know until I was faced with losing you, but now I do. I love Petros, as I always have and always will. I burn for his touch, I live for his approving gaze, but if I must choose, I choose you.”

Her conviction was a little frightening. Could I return it in equal measure? Would I turn away Petros for her?

“Must we choose?” I asked, hopelessly.

“I don’t see why. Men of my class always have mistresses, why can’t I? If you can share me with Petros, then he can share me with you.”

“Or you could share Petros with me,” I said, before I could stop myself.

Her eyebrows rose a little. “I didn’t know you were interested.”

“What? All women are interested in him, Amanda. How could you miss that?”

She shrugged. “You always seem so cynical about men. I wasn’t sure you liked them.”

Thinking back, I could see how she got that idea. I didn't normally discuss my old lovers with my current paramour, and I had been treating Amanda more and more like a lover than a friend.

"I like men," I assured her. "I like Petros. And he likes me. He was kissing me on the deck, just a few days ago."

Her beautiful lips formed an "O" of shock, but I rushed on before the harm could sink in.

"He can hardly blame you for fooling around with me if he was doing the same."

"Fooling around?" she said uncertainly.

"Just kissing, Amanda. Nothing like what we do. He's only flirting with me. He has some romantic notion that I'm wild and independent and will free him from his boring aristocratic life."

She smiled tenderly, touching my face. "I know where he gets that idea."

"But you see," I pressed on, "he can't possibly hold it against you. He'll have to forgive you, and then you can be together."

"But where will you be?" she asked. "And he is not free. He cannot walk away from his rank. I have no responsibilities, only an old lady's dreams of nobility to protect. But his country still needs him. He still has a place in politics, a duty to his people."

I had no answer to this.

"Promise you will stay with me, no matter what," she asked.

I did. With all my heart.

"Then the rest we will manage."

We kissed for a while, drawing strength from each other.

I said it first. "Should we tell him? What's on the tape, I mean. It might be better to let him know from us." I dreaded that confrontation, but I loved Petros enough to spare him from the shock.

Amanda nuzzled at my ear. "Maybe we should show him," she whispered, and her hand stroked my breast.

The sudden vision of Petros walking in and seeing us kissing and touching like this took my breath away.

"Aren't men supposed to like watching girls together?" she asked.

"God knows the men I've known never shut up about it. But this might be different. This is his future wife and her servant. Two women he claims to be in love with."

She raised her eyebrows again. I decided to come clean with it all at once. "He talked about running away with me. But we both knew it could never happen." Then I hugged her, trying to erase my betrayal.

"Then he does love you," she said. "I can hardly blame him, for I love you too."

"Is it possible?" I whispered. "Could we...could the three of us..."

"We won't know until we try," she said. "I came on this trip to seduce Petros, to make him truly mine, and I brought you to help me. Now I realize that you have seduced me and made me yours. Do you truly want Petros, or are you only saying this to please me?"

This girl was crazy in love with me, if she couldn't even imagine that I would want that Greek god to ravish me.

"Yes, Amanda, I want him. I love you desperately, but he is the man I have always dreamed of. But what about you? Are you sure you're interested in men, that way?"

"I'm sure," she said. "From the way I feel inside when he kisses me. From thinking about what it would be like to have his hands, his lips, his tongue on me, like yours. Thinking of lying between the two of you, kissed and touched on either side. Thinking of being underneath, both of you taking turns lying on top of me..."

"We have to stop now," I whispered, my hands under her clothes, her fingers inside my shorts and my body, connecting me to her like an electric wire.

"Say you love me," she answered, "and then I can face the rest of the day."

"I love you." And I did. In this sameness of a sister, I had found the reflection that made me whole. In her innocence, I had found untainted love.

\* \* \*

At dinner, we had one answer. A crewmember could not be found. The same haughty steward who had brought me champagne and caviar, while hiding a camera in my bedroom. The First Mate was set on a course of destruction like a torpedo, and the rest of the crew seemed to approve. Petros was his normal self on the surface, but I knew him well enough now to know that the taint of failure and betrayal burned him underneath his careful politeness.

It made for a difficult dinner.

"My love," Amanda said to him while the coffee was being served. "Could we retire to my cabin? There are some details about our wedding that I need to discuss."

"Of course," he said graciously.

I had to admire her skill. She had done a plausible job of acting as if he had already taken care of any other problems. I certainly hadn't helped. My heart was pounding too hard with the anticipation of what we had planned. At first, from fear of rejection or anger on his part, but as the evening went on, it became more and more about pure lust.

In our cabin, as I tried to sit discreetly on a cushion while Amanda sat on the bed as regal as a queen, he spoke first.

"You need not worry, my dear ladies. I have called in a few favors from government sources." The fact that he was even talking about his efforts told me he was deeply unhappy with the lack of results.

"There are some things you should know," Amanda said. "That pertain to the tape and to our marriage. Specifically, things involving my maid."

Petros had the honesty to blush. "I am sorry, Amanda. I did not intend to hurt you."

“Was that what you thought when you were kissing her? Groping her on the deck of your ship, while I lay sleeping?” Amanda was being mean, I thought, and considerably disingenuous. She had been masturbating with a carrot, not sleeping.

“My heart is not under my command,” Petros said stiffly. “But you need not fear. Your maid rejected me.”

“Not so much,” I muttered.

“What has this got to do with the tape?” he asked logically. How could he be reasonable at a time like this?

“Come here,” Amanda said to me. I obeyed her, of course. When the spirit of the dragon overtook her, everyone obeyed her. “Are these the lips you kissed, Petros?” she demanded, reaching up to stroke my face with a delicate finger. “Would you have me forgive you for this?”

“Yes,” stated Petros. “I kissed them and I would do it again, if I were permitted. I love you, Amanda, and I will marry you and be faithful, but I will not lie.”

“What will you do as penance?” she asked.

“Whatever you require,” he said.

“Anything?” she said, and her voice thrilled me with the power it held.

Petros paused before he answered, looking hard at her face. No doubt the presence of the dragon surprised him as much as it did me. Perhaps it also excited him as much as it did me, to see the woman under the girl we loved.

“Yes,” he said finally. “Anything. I owe you that. I want to owe you that much.”

She smiled like the Mona Lisa, a great blonde cat in the savannah in the prime of youth and life and joy.

“Then this is what I ask. You must forgive me for kissing them.”

Petros was quick on the uptake for a man, but nobody could have expected that. I could see from his face that he was trying to figure out if he had suddenly forgotten how to understand French.

"Have you had many women, my love?" Amanda said.

"You know this," he said. "I cannot change the past. Why bring it up now?"

"Then how can you deny me one?"

"Amanda, I do not understand. It sounds like you just said, 'How can I deny you a woman?'" Yes, he was definitely going with the theory that he could no longer speak the language.

For an answer, she pulled my face to hers with no more force than the touch of a finger on my chin, though I could no more have resisted it than I could stop from falling into empty air. She kissed me, deep and long, and I responded, my whole body quivering.

"This is what is on the tape?" he asked, when she released me to breathe.

"Possibly more," Amanda said. "It depends on how much of a forgiving mood you are in."

"I have the indulgence of a Pope at the moment," he said, his eyes dancing in the cabin lights. "Pray, go on."

"There were some other things I might need absolution for," Amanda said. "Such as kissing these." She reached up and began unbuttoning my blouse. Petros and I could only stand there, our breath laboring while she opened my blouse, unhooked my bra, pulled down the cups, and began to suckle gently at one exposed nipple.

"*Mon dieu*," he exclaimed. "Amanda, I am chastised. Do not tease me anymore, I beg you.

"Tease?" she said, pulling away from my breast. My nipple stood up, straining to follow her. "I told you this regarded our marriage. I intend to retain the services of my maid. Indefinitely. I need to know if this is going to be a problem."

"How much was on that tape?" he asked me directly.

"A lot more," I confessed.

"While you were kissing me, you were doing this with her? You toyed with my heart?"

"Don't even think of being angry," I snapped at him. "You kissed her, too. You toyed with me, too."

"I played only for keeps," he said. "And now that I see the game has changed, I wonder where do I fit in?"

"Come over here and drop your trousers, and I'll show you," said Amanda.

"Are you serious, Amanda? Can this truly be what you want?"

I looked down at her shining eyes. The lust was on her, and I knew there was no reasoning left. So I spoke for her.

"We discussed it, Petros. It is what we want."

He came then and stood before us. I dropped to my knees and together Amanda and I opened that button-sealed treasure chest. Tugging down his waistband, pulling down his tight briefs, we both gasped in admiration.

"Show me what you did before," she said. "What they all like."

Without hesitation, I took him in my mouth. I think he might have moaned, but I was much too distracted to notice. I lost myself in pleasure for a moment, until Amanda tugged on my hair.

"Let me try," she said. "Watch me, and tell me if I do it right."

I was treated to the glorious vision of his rapidly stiffening manhood filling her beautiful mouth. I could not merely watch. Leaning in, I kissed the side of her mouth, running my tongue across him at the same time. He began to make involuntary thrusts, short and slow. Together, Amanda and I shared him, swapping him from mouth to mouth, our tongues and lips tasting each other and his cock, which grew and hardened, poking at our cheeks with each thrust.

His erection aroused me to the point of dizziness. With a hand on Amanda's breast, I could tell that she was suffering the same fate. I slipped my right hand down and gently worked it under her skirt. I happened to know she wasn't wearing anything underneath it.

She squealed in pleasure as I stroked her clitoris, but the sound was mostly muffled by the cock-feast we were sharing.

“When is it my turn?” Petros growled, struggling to contain himself.

I stood and did what I had wanted to do since I first met these two. I shrugged off my blouse, stepped out of my skirt, and stood naked before them both. Petros raked me with his gaze, and Amanda looked me over only slightly more gently.

“And you, my lady,” he said to her. Amanda stood also, elegantly stepping out of her clothes, her erect nipples straining upwards, her delicate golden bush glistening where my probing fingers had spilled her wetness.

He looked back and forth between us, guiding us to stand side by side with his strong hands, admiring us like King Midas presented with an ocean of gold.

Kisses, on the lips, from one to the other, flitted between us like a butterfly. One hand on each of us, a breast fitting in like a glove, and we burned under his touch. When his kisses dropped to our nipples, I caught her eyes. They flashed at me under her golden halo, and her smile was that of a goddess fulfilled. We kissed each other until his head sank lower. She pulled away from me, throwing her head back and moaning. Before I could ask what was wrong, his tongue flicked across my clitoris, and I moaned uncontrollably.

We held on to each other for stability as he kissed the strength from between our legs. I could find no jealousy when he turned to her, only arousal at the sight of my lovers’ pleasure. And when he turned to me, I could find nothing, blinded by ecstasy. Back and forth he went, until our knees trembled.

He stood, his erection standing out before him.

“You can’t,” I said, putting a protective hand between her thighs.

“Take her,” Amanda said. “I want to see.”

Petros was no longer capable of arguing. I lay on the bed, my knees spreading. Amanda took his cock in one hand, guiding it. He hesitated, but Amanda spoke for me.

“She’s ready. Look.” She let go of his cock and slid her fingers inside of me. Her familiar penetration was as exciting as the first time. When



she pulled her fingers out, I looked down to see her stroke her wet hand over his cock, leaving the head glistening. She held it gently by the shaft and guided it into me. I watched it disappear inch by inch.

I was past sound, my breath frozen in passion. Until he began to pound me, and then I squealed with every thrust.

“Shh,” Amanda tried to hush me, putting her hand to my mouth. I took her still-wet fingers into my mouth and sucked on them for strength.

He stopped thrusting to lift my legs up to his shoulders. Now he could penetrate even deeper, and I started to squeal again.

“I do not recall hearing such sounds from your cabin,” Petros said, his smooth voice broken into grunts as he fucked me.

“She’s usually doing something else with her mouth,” said Amanda, and she straddled me, her strong thighs falling to either side of my head. She lowered herself onto my face, her wetness spilling as I licked hungrily at her beautiful golden mound.

I think she must have kissed him then, because I felt an arc of electricity run through me as the circuit completed. Every time he thrust his cock into me, I plunged my tongue inside her, and she met his tongue with hers. We passed the thrust around the circle, faster and faster, until I could not tell where one began and the next one ended.

When I felt him pull out from me, his cock sliding over the top of my clitoris to spill its warm juices on my belly, she came against my mouth, and I climaxed spasmodically.

She fell down beside me, breathing heavily, staring at the cream on my belly. She reached up and pulled her hair to one side, out of the way, and then bent her face and began to lick me clean. Petros and I groaned, watching our goddess feed from both of us, as her pink tongue swept up the white cream.

“Save some for me,” I gasped.

With a grin, she began to suck it up, but not swallowing. When there was no more, she moved to my face, and spilled it from her mouth to

mine. I reached up and kissed her deeply, savoring the taste of man in our mouths, feasting until it was all gone.

Petros said something in Greek and collapsed on the bed beside us.

"But it's my turn," Amanda said.

Petros's eyes rolled. "My love, I am only a mortal man."

"He isn't that old," I told her. "A few minutes of rest, and he'll be ready to do it again."

"I don't want to wait a few minutes," Amanda said, our little spoiled rich girl again.

"What can I do, in any case?" asked Petros. "You said we could not."

"Well," I answered, a little hesitant. "You did want to know what was on the tape. Are you still in a forgiving mood?"

His eyes widened in curiosity. I couldn't bring myself to explain in words, so I just went to the drawer and pulled it out.

Amanda threw herself face down on the bed, eagerly thrusting her hips into the air, while I stroked myself with it, warming to my heat.

"I am still uncertain," he said, though surely he had to guess what I was about to do. I knelt over her, oiling the dildo from my still-generous lubrication. It felt good inside me, reminding me of the manliness that had so recently been there.

Petros was speechless as I gently penetrated her, working it in, an inch at a time, while she grunted in pleasure, until it was all the way in. Then I slipped my right hand around in front of her, supporting myself on my left. As I massaged her clitoris, I began to push in and out of her, starting with short, slow strokes at first, working my way up to the full-length thrusts I knew she loved.

He watched as she thrashed and moaned underneath me, working herself into another climax.

My dominating spirit wanted to see more. "Maybe you should quiet her, like she did me," I said. He moved to the head of the bed, leaning against the wall so that she could take his cock in her mouth. Her moans turned into happy gurgles.

Watching her pinned between us aroused me again. Not only did I anticipate when it would be my turn to be speared from both ends, but seeing her in so much pleasure was intoxicating. She loved what we were doing to her as much as we loved doing it. I noticed that her head was rising up. Through the tangles of her golden curls, I could see that Petros had indeed found his second wind, his cock stiff and ready again.

"Time to switch," I suggested. When Petros pulled away from her, she whimpered in disappointment and tried to follow him with her mouth. I let the dildo ease out of her backside as Petros worked his way to the foot of the bed.

"One last taste," I said, bending down and taking his lovely cock in my mouth. Then I guided him into her backside, steering the head into that small, forbidden hole.

Amanda moaned.

"That's only the first inch," I told her.

"*Mon dieu*," she said. And then, "More."

Together Petros and I worked his cock all the way into her. We went slowly, but there was no resistance. Then he began to fuck her with the same small thrusts I had started with, under the guidance of my hand on his own firm buttocks. Not that it was necessary to go slowly. Amanda was ready for anything at this point. But I wanted to tease her.

Once he had a nice rhythm, I went to the head of the bed and took his old place, putting her face between my legs. Her tongue went to me immediately, hungrily, and I leaned back against wall and let myself float.

Petros pumped her steadily. I watched him disappear into her, felt her forced forward into me by his weight, and my head swam. The sight of his beautiful olive body plundering her pure white flesh blinded me. I looked down to see her face, but it was hidden by the golden curls spilling over my waist as she sought to give to me a fraction of the pleasure she was receiving.

Tugging gently, I pulled her head away so I could look in her eyes. Her lips were wet with my juices, her eyes shimmering, her hair gleaming in the soft light.

“Tell him to do it harder,” she said to me.

He grunted like a boar, and pushed deeply into her. I muffled her moan by shoving her head back into my lap, pressing my nether lips against her ruby ones.

Now he rode her, rising up and crashing down like the breaking surf. She sank under each wave with a moan of pleasure, but thrust up in time for the next one. Her hands clenched in mine, her body arched, her breath coming in long ragged gasps that were hot on my thighs. Selfishly I ground my hips into her face, taking my stimulation where I could, impaling myself on her eager tongue. Petros hammered her with all the strength he had used on me, and she took it like a champion. Soon he began to groan like a man in the fires of Hell.

I leaned forward, crushing my thighs against Amanda’s face, pressing my lips to his. He pushed his face to mine, but did not go silent. I sucked at his breath, trying to contain the gale, my thighs convulsing in orgasm while his body poured itself into us, his cock pumping into Amanda and his lungs emptying into me. Air and water we took from him, until he collapsed, a Titan brought low by witchery.

He and Amanda rolled to the side as one. I could see his ebbing erection was still inside of her. I crawled down and spooned up against his back. Reaching across him, I cupped one of her breasts in my hand, and she brought her own hand up to hold mine. Then Petros entwined his fingers with both of ours.

Together we lay there, sharing warmth.

“Do you accept my conditions for our marriage bed?” Amanda whispered sleepily.

“What you ask is impossible,” he said. “But I will pledge to it. I will pledge to love you both, equally, for as long as you love each other.”

“I thought you said it was impossible,” I argued. Always, I argued with good fortune and hope.

“We Greeks are never deterred by the impossible. Icarus may have flown too close to the sun, but I assure you he did not regret it. Not for one instant, even as he fell, did he regret it. To touch the sun is worth it.”

Hope and good fortune ignored my arguments, and moved in to stay.

“Wait,” I whispered, falling asleep. “You said equally.” My buttocks twitched in anticipation of that classic Greek treat that Amanda had just enjoyed. “I’m not sure I’m ready for so much Greek culture.”

“I speak Greek. I’ll teach you,” Amanda giggled.

The squeeze of Petros’s hands was all he had to say, but it was enough.

## Chapter Ten

We gave ourselves up too easily. The Greek Secret Service was more than equal to the task. The voyeurs called Petros that morning, just as he said they would. By late afternoon a portly, sharply dressed, middle-aged government man was handing Petros a large brown envelope and effusing his gratitude at being able to assist His Highness in this trivial matter. He wouldn't even stay for dinner.

Nor did anybody lecture us on carelessness. For the first time in my life, nobody seemed to think I was to blame for the trouble I was in.

The hapless crewman wasn't in that much more trouble, we learned. It hadn't been his idea, he had only gone along with it to pay his gambling debts. Once the police got involved, he cooperated, and so the only people going to jail were some British paparazzi I would never have to meet, let alone face their lurid, knowing winks.

Petros's leers were bad enough. He actually carried a television into our cabin that night so we could all view the infamous tape together.

Then he made us do it all again while he watched.

Making love to Amanda was always sweet, but doing it while Petros sat naked in a chair, his gaze burning out at us from above his grin, added a musky spice. We camped it up, trying to tempt him into ravishing us, but in the end we broke first and begged him to join in. Lying on my back, Amanda cradled in my arms, and staring down in rapture as he penetrated me, I climaxed more quickly than I had thought possible. Then Amanda mounted me and I held her while he took her from behind, her breasts crushing into mine, her hair draped across me, her beautiful face contorted in ecstasy as they both pounded to their climax.

In the afterglow, basking in that sweet warmth, I wondered at how my life had changed. Lying here with these rich, beautiful people was only the smallest part of it. The way Amanda kissed me, the way Petros held my hand, were greater treasures by far. I had given my body to plenty of men before, but had never received their hearts in return. And now I had two.

It occurred to me that perhaps the fault was not all mine, that perhaps I had been giving myself to people who could not or would not give back. But Amanda was too sweet and pure to not return love, and Petros was too courageous to shirk from true exposure. They were not scarred and broken from the hardships of life. I understood now it was not because they were rich, but because they had been raised well. The dragon might be a hard old biddy, but she loved her granddaughter with both strength and wisdom. My mother loved me, too, but she had never figured out her own life, let alone how to help me with mine.

Not that I didn't appreciate the money, even secondhand. Lounging about in decadent luxury on the Mediterranean Sea made for an easy life.

"Tomorrow I must send you home," Petros said mournfully. "How I will live until we meet again, I do not know. You have become the meaning of my life."

"You've got the tape." Amanda giggled. "That, and your right hand, will keep you going."

"Such mockery is unfair. After all, you will know hardly any deprivation. You have each other!"

"Yes, we will have each other," I murmured. "Over and over again, every night. But we'll be thinking of you all the while. Really."

It was easy to be cavalier while he was in our bed. But later the next day, watching Amanda kiss him goodbye at the airport, I could not hold back the tears.

"It is only for a little while," he told us, disconcerted at the waterworks. Amanda was crying even harder than I was, and Petros really seemed to have no idea why.

"Amanda has just discovered what it is like to leave the man she loves. It hurts the first time, especially when you don't have memories of sweet reunions to put against the pain."

"Then why do you cry?" he asked me.

I told him the truth. "Because I cannot even kiss you goodbye in public. Is this the life I have to lead? Always in the shadows? Always—"

He interrupted my diatribe with a long, deep kiss, holding me in his strong, graceful arms.

"Petros," I whispered when I could breathe again. "We are in public."

"We Greeks are known for our passionate displays of affection. I could kiss my sister goodbye like that, and no one would think twice of it."

I strongly doubted that much tongue could be exchanged between blood relatives without a crime being committed, but I was feeling too happy to argue.

"No more weeping, my darlings. You have a wedding to plan."

"Not really," Amanda scowled. "I'm pretty sure our wedding will be conducted by rules laid down before we were born."

"An affair of state, yes," he agreed. "But still, you have at least a wedding night to plan."

That sent shivery twitches down my spine. I knew what he had in mind for me. I had never considered it before, even while I was doing it to Amanda, but I found the prospect terribly exciting.

And of course he would do to Amanda what she had done to me. I knew how excited she was about that.

We were both getting rather too excited, right at the moment. I was about to suggest looking for a broom closet so we could have one more taste of him before we went, but I was saved from my wanton tackiness by the boarding call.

"A month is not so long," he promised us, and then we had to go.

"You better hope it's long enough," she told me as we walked down the boarding ramp.



“Long enough for what?”

“Your training in Greek culture.”

That made my buttocks clench, but I put on a brave face. “You learned in a few days.”

“I’ve always been a quick study,” she grinned and stuck her tongue out at me. Then she licked her lips sensuously, and that made everything else below my waist clench.

It was promising to be a long flight. But in our first-class seats, we held hands under a blanket, and that was enough. I could wait then, through the hours of the day, through airports and taxi rides, through a welcome-home dinner and the piercing stare of the old dragon, until finally late at night we could retire to our rooms, and I could slip into her bed and touch and kiss her everywhere while we remembered Petros.

\* \* \*

I could tell you about the wedding, all the elegant gowns and fancy dances and hours of protocol, but to be honest, I missed most of it. The bridesmaids were selected by some arcane noble formula, the guest list was as political as a UN meeting, and a mere servant like me didn’t warrant even an invitation to the ceremony, let alone a seat at the bridal table. My part was relegated to helping Amanda dress.

“I’m so sorry you can’t come,” she whispered, with a fierceness that stirred my heart.

“Don’t be,” I assured her. “I’ll take a Greek cruise over a state wedding any time. Go and be happy. This is your day.”

The idea of a big fancy wedding was a nice fantasy, but watching Amanda jumping through all those hoops made me dizzy. It wasn’t really her day, it was House Cheroigne’s day.

“When will you have your day?” she asked me.

“I don’t need one.” Lowering my voice to a whisper, I added, “As long as I have you and Petros.”

The seamstress came back into the room, followed by a color consultant waving swaths of silk, so Amanda could not respond. I didn't really want to talk about it anyway. I had more than I ever dreamed of. It didn't seem right to complain about a piece of paper or a slice of white cake.

Hours later, she was gone, and the servants of the house were cracking open champagne in the kitchen. I shared a glass with them, but I didn't really fit in there anymore. Maria felt I was reaching above my station, and made her disapproval quite clear despite never actually saying a word about it. If she had even a clue what went on in Amanda's room at night, she would have died of apoplexy. Occasionally, when she was doing her best minatory glare, I was annoyed enough to consider it.

But as always, my lips were sealed by the need to protect Amanda. I might not act like a servant, but I still served her best interests.

After Maria made a second, totally unnecessary remark about Petros's and Amanda's upcoming honeymoon, I excused myself and went back to my quarters upstairs.

There I was ambushed by the Dame, with a smile that would shame a hungry dragon.

"There is no hurry," she said from the doorway. The idea of actually entering a servant's room was obviously too much for her. "You have until the end of the week."

"Until the end of the week for what?" I was mystified. Amanda would be gone for at least a month.

"To pack."

My heart fell out of my chest, past my stomach, and through the floorboards. But I did not protest, part of me had expected this all along.

"Your task is done. And well enough, I concede. You'll receive a generous severance payment, of course. And your sentence will be marked off as fully served."

"You expect me to just disappear into the streets? To just vanish from Amanda's life?" I didn't bother to hide my tears. They wouldn't matter, one way or another.

“Yes. That is exactly what I expect.”

I sat on the bed and cried. It was my right to grieve. Regardless of what that dried-up old aristocrat might think.

She frowned at me, trying to quench my tears with reproach. “I recognize you have become unreasonably attached to my granddaughter.”

An absurdity of understatement, though the Dame could not know it. I laughed, although it sounded like a sob even to me.

The Dame’s eyebrows furrowed at my outburst, but she plowed on. “It is, after all, merely a job. You knew it was temporary in the beginning. You should not have let your personal feelings interfere with your professionalism.”

I should not have given away my heart. But who ever has followed that advice? Life is to love, even when you know it cannot last.

I fell on the bed and sobbed. I think the Dame must have become unnerved at my display, because her voice snapped with unladylike anger.

“Grow up, stupid child.” She caught herself, and tried to be more conciliatory. “You have served her well, and we are not ungrateful. But surely you understand, you no longer have a place with her. She will go away now, and live in Petros’s house, with his family’s servants. There will be no room there for a girl from the streets of France.”

I hated the Dame for saying that, even while I knew it was true. This was not my world, and it never had been. Romantic fantasies were for the rich and innocent. The rest of us had to let them go when the hard light of reality ended the dreams of a soft Mediterranean night.

“I do not understand the depth of your anguish. But it only certifies my decision. You have lost your sense of station, and it is best that you go now before you get hurt even more. Or before you hurt Amanda.”

Or before I embarrassed House Cheroigne is what she really meant. I’m sure I wasn’t the first person to have my feelings destroyed for the sake of Cheroigne honor. No doubt, in the old days, plenty of blood was shed for it. But history and politics meant nothing to me when I

remembered the taste of Amanda's lips, her hands clenched in mine while Petros took turns riding us, the softness of her golden hair a cushion against his hard chest as I fell into sweet slumber between them.

This was my life and my tragedy. And there was nothing I could do but weep. The Dame had tradition, money, and connections on her side. If I sank so low as to go stalking after them, she would have me arrested.

So I did the one thing left to me, the one thing left to all broken-hearted victims of star-crossed love. I wept.

The Dame finally left me there, disgusted with my weakness and her own inability to understand it. For once, I didn't care what she thought. Her disapprobation was unable to sting me now. I was stung through the heart by love lost.

Only sleep could give me respite, only the darkness of passing time, with the hope of a few fleeting bright dreams of what might have been to salve my pain. I cried until exhaustion delivered me to that black river Lethe.

\* \* \*

I was awakened from my slumber with a kiss from a charming prince. And then one from a princess.

"Petros, Amanda, what are you doing here?"

"Collecting our effects," he said. "We have a honeymoon to attend to."

"But I thought you were going straight to the airport." They had planned a trip to America. I thought that was a lame honeymoon, but I suppose when your everyday vacation is the Mediterranean, you have to go out of your way to do something special.

"That was just a ruse to throw off the paparazzi. My ship is docked at Saint-Nazaire. She is provisioned and ready to sail to Brazil. We are leaving tonight for thirty days at sea, with only my most loyal crew. No cameras, I assure you."

“Other than the one you gave me for a wedding present.” Amanda said, giggling.

“Sounds like fun,” I said, trying to hide my red and swollen eyes. It sounded like heaven.

“The drive is several hours, and we must make the midnight tide. So why are you still lying there like a useless log?”

It was like Christmas, when you wanted a bike so badly, but there was no package under the tree big enough. You thought Santa forgot, until you went outside and found it there on the porch, wrapped only in a pink ribbon. That was what it felt like when I finally realized they wanted me to come with them.

I threw some things into bags, but I wasn’t paying attention. I didn’t care what I took. All I cared about was that they were taking me.

Sneaking out of the house under the cover of darkness, crawling into the back of Petros’s ridiculously small sports car, pausing at the end of the driveway while they both kissed me some more. Racing though the night, laughing and singing to the radio. Creeping through the sleeping city under a full moon, the smell of salt air telling us the sea waited only a few minutes away. These were the happiest hours of my life. Or so I thought.

Boarding the *Argo* was like coming home. We set sail the instant our feet hit the deck, the crew casting off and drawing up the gangplank behind us. Petros was in a hurry, and no wonder. It was his wedding night.

“I don’t know where to put my bags,” I whispered to Amanda, but it was pointless because sailors were already carrying them away.

Amanda didn’t answer me, but merely followed the men back to the main stateroom where we had spent all those glorious days in the Mediterranean.

“It will be a little more crowded this time,” she warned me with a smile. “Since Petros will be sharing it with us.”

She spoke without hesitation, in front of the crew. No more secrets. Not that we could have kept it secret for a month at sea. But still, it was liberating to have my place in their lives acknowledged.

The sailors left, and Amanda helped me unpack. I was touched to see that she had saved me space in the dressers and closet. Then she produced a pair of sheer white evening gowns, with only a few artfully placed ruffles for decoration and modesty.

"This one is for you," she told me, slipping out of her clothes. "And you don't wear underwear with it."

We both had a good laugh at that, although mine was perhaps more giddy than usual. I was excited beyond reckoning, knowing that very shortly Petros would be taking these gowns off us anyway. Then she wanted to fix up my hair. It struck me as a lot of bother just before bed, but I indulged her. I enjoyed the feeling of her hands hovering tenderly about me.

After perhaps half an hour, there was a knock on the door, and the First Mate announced, "Whenever you are ready, *Madame*."

"I'm ready now," I whispered with a giggle.

"One more thing," she told me, and she pulled two boxes out from under the bed.

She handed me one to open and sat expectantly in front of the mirror. I opened the box and gasped.

A tiara fit for a goddess lay among folds of rich velvet, with elegant stems of platinum, flowered with diamonds, and dangling luscious purple silk ribbons from the rim. I gently crowned my princess, and braided the ribbons into her hair to hold it in place. We were, after all, on a boat. Watching something like that fall overboard would be heartbreaking.

"It's beautiful," I told her.

"I know," she said with a smile.

She opened the other box. I stopped admiring her long enough to be puzzled. What else could possibly be added to that graceful regalia?

From the matching box came a matching tiara. Even when she stood and motioned for me to sit in her place in front of the mirror, I did not understand. I did not dare.

“Sit down,” she ordered. “We haven’t got all night.”

Breathless, I took my place. When she placed it on my head, I could not admire it, because I could not see it. My eyes had gone blurry at the first sparkle from its glittering array of brilliant stones.

“Amanda,” I stammered. “I can’t accept this.” It must have cost more than—more than anything I had ever had experience with.

“But you must,” she said. “Petros would be heartbroken.” And she wove the ribbons into my hair, binding the crown to me. Binding me to her and Petros.

Then veils of exquisite white silk hung over the points in our crowns. I was mystified, but Amanda was for once able to keep a secret. I could get no explanation from her, but I didn’t try very hard. Whatever strange religious ritual she had in mind was fine by me. As long as I got to wear that crown, I was going to be happy.

The last adornments were long white gloves. Silky and smooth to slip on, I imagined her touching me through them. Watching her through my veil, I felt pure and aroused, safe and yet close to intimacy.

She handed me something. A small lump of white sugar. She was tucking one in her glove.

“To ensure a sweeter union,” she whispered. “An old tradition. But I am sure if the ancients had brought you into their beds, they would not have needed sweetening.”

I did not blush. Instead, I pinched her nipple and grinned while she yipped. I wasn’t the sweet one here. Like sugar in lemonade, Amanda turned my sourness into something delicious.

And I suppose that made Petros the ice cubes. Cool, hard, and sparkling. How I wanted him at that moment!

I tucked my cube into my glove, where it instantly disintegrated into fine powder. Amanda took my hand and led me from the cabin.

On the foredeck, a small crowd had assembled. Petros had changed into a tuxedo, and the sight made my knees buckle. He looked ready to fight a bull, entertain a king, or dance a duchess into debauchery. The doctor and the First Mate were spruced up, too, wearing suits that looked very new and very Armani.

I admit I began to get just a little curious as we joined them.

"Is it time?" Petros asked his mate.

The First Mate checked some digital gadget, and nodded in satisfaction. "We are officially in international waters, sir."

"Then let us begin."

Petros rattled off something in Greek, of which I could only understand my name, and Amanda's face glowed so brightly I could see the gleam under the veil.

"What?" I demanded in a hushed voice. "What are you saying?"

"I am asking you to marry me," said Petros. "As captain of this vessel, I have the power to perform marriages. Even if they happen to involve me."

"You're already married," I said, my own blush rushing up from my cheeks to my forehead.

"In the jurisdiction of the open sea, we are bound only by the laws of love. I am asking you to marry me. In a moment I will ask Amanda to marry me, and then I will ask you to marry Amanda. Will you agree to this?"

I was too dumbfounded to speak.

"Go on," Amanda urged me. "This is your day."

"It is our day," Petros said. "The first day of the rest of our lives. Now you must say 'I do'. Assuming, of course, that you wish to."

"I do," I stammered. "I do wish to. I mean, I do."

He laughed gently and spoke in Greek again. He took my hands and slipped my gloves off, letting them fall to the deck like discarded rose petals. Lifting my finger to his lips, he kissed it, and slid a plain gold ring down to rest between my knuckle and my heart.



He handed me a second ring. As I put it on his hand, I noticed something odd about it. One side was smooth and round, but the other side was abrupt, as if the ring had been cut in half down the middle.

He spoke another passage in Greek.

“I’ve just said, ‘You may kiss the bride.’”

Amanda lifted my veil and held it. Petros kissed me. A simple kiss, but the thunder of my blood was deafening. My sight blurred again, and the gentle heaving of the deck felt like the world was in motion under my feet.

The doctor had some kind of fancy document in Greek. Petros signed his name, and handed the pen to me. Dazed, I scribbled my name, and watched in awe as the doctor and First Mate added their witnessing signatures.

“Just a piece of paper,” Petros said, “but one you are entitled to, nonetheless.”

Petros turned to Amanda, and repeated the first phrase. He added a word, which I knew had to be “again”, because Amanda laughed at him and said something teasing in Greek. I was not jealous of their shared tongue. Rather, I was amazed that I could understand it so well. I did not know the language, but I knew *them*.

He slipped a plain gold band on Amanda’s ring finger. How could I have missed its absence in the cabin? All that time she was combing and cosseting my hair and I had not noticed that she did not wear the ring she should have been wearing since their official ceremony. I had taken her marriage as given fact, and never thought to hope for anything else.

She slid the other half of his ring onto his hand, and the two halves mated as one, clinging together like magnets, the hairline that separated them rendered invisible.

She signed the paper next to my signature, and Petros and the witnesses signed it again.

When I pulled her veil back so that he could kiss her, tears were pouring down her face.

“Why are you crying?” I asked her.

“Because this is my true wedding,” she answered. “And besides, you are crying too.”

I had not realized.

“One more,” Petros said with a huge grin. “Even if it is slightly irregular.” Again he spoke the marriage ritual in Greek, but this time with my name and Amanda’s. “You may kiss the bride,” he told us both, laughing with his eyes.

So we did. There, in front of God and everyone, we kissed as lovers.

“What I and the sea have joined together, let no one man or woman put asunder,” he announced, a challenge to a world we all knew would never understand and never accept us. But at least here, in the wide ocean, we would not have to hide. He took each of us on an arm and escorted us back to our marriage bed under the approving protection of his loyal crew.

\* \* \*

In our cabin, Petros poured three glasses of champagne.

“A toast,” he said. “To love.” He linked his arm around ours, and we drank, messily, giddily, gloriously.

“Ladies,” he whispered. “Your clothes.”

We set aside each other’s veils. I unclasped Amanda’s dress, and she undid mine, together we let them fall to the floor, and stood utterly naked before him, wearing only the jewelry he had given us.

“And mine,” he said.

Our fingers fumbled at the buttons on his blouse, tugged at his cummerbund, pulled at his trousers. Soon he stood naked before us, wearing only our united bands of gold on his finger.

And a stiff erection.

“Amanda first,” I said. “She’s waited longest for this.” I dropped to my knees and teased her golden triangle with my tongue. Normally this

would have made her sigh and moan, but her eyes were locked on Petros. He moaned instead, watching me. Then he joined me.

She reclined regally on the bed, one foot on the floor, the other leg spread wide, and watched us. Petros and I shared her and kisses with each other, our tongues meeting in each other's mouths, meeting inside her, a cocktail of delicious flavors. My left hand snuck down to stroke his hard manhood, my right clasped in her delicate feminine hand.

"I want it now," commanded our impatient princess. Her face was flushed and radiant.

Petros rose up between her legs like Poseidon from the waves, his lips wet and his eyes on fire. I could not resist, and turned naturally from her to him, swallowing as much of his cock as I could. Then I guided him with my hand, and gently rubbed her clitoris with the head of his cock. Amanda whimpered in pleasure and anticipation.

"Are you sure you don't want to taste it first?" I teased her, and took him in my mouth again.

"Yes," she gasped. "No. Just do it. I want it now."

I took him in hand again and pushed gently at her. I could feel him shudder as the tip sank into her warm wetness. She cried out loud.

"All that noise over an inch? Are you sure you are ready?"

Her verbal response was incoherent, but her eyes begged for more.

I let Petros slide through my grip another inch. He put his hand on my head, for support, and I felt his fingers wrap in my hair. He pulled back and thrust forward again, fucking her with the first inch and my hand with the rest of his shaft.

"All the way," Amanda begged. "I can't wait anymore."

So I took my hand away, and watched as Petros gently penetrated her in one slow, long thrust. Amanda quivered and groaned, and when he was all the way in, pressed tightly up against her, she looked at him and said, "Do it like you did before."

So he did.

As he pounded her, I put one hand on her belly, where my thumb could rub against her clitoris, and the other hand on his solid buttock, following him in and out.

She gave herself over to pleasure, moaning in climax. But Petros had waited a long time for this too and he was not done. He kept going and I watched her slowly climbing up to a second peak.

I stopped fondling Petros and started fondling myself instead. He had pushed her back enough that I couldn't really fit a hand in between them anymore. I stretched out on the bed so I could grasp her breast with my free hand, and luxuriated in the vision of my golden angel being speared again and again. He drove her up the bed until I reached down and pulled her leg up high so that he could sink in deeper.

From that angle it was natural. My left hand was already wet from masturbating, and she was exposed. I slipped one finger into her backside and was rewarded with a squeal. On Petros's next thrust, I made it two fingers, earning a groan. Three fingers and she began to climax. Petros and I thrust into her in rhythm while she wriggled between us, a beautiful mermaid caught on twin hooks of ecstasy.

He locked up suddenly, buried deep, his hips grinding against her as he emptied his soul inside her. After a moment he sank down next to her, breathing heavily.

I gently pulled out of her as she lay between us. Her hand clutched at me, but I extricated myself and went to wash my fingers in the stateroom's little *ensuite*.

While I was up, I fetched the dildo from its drawer. The two of them might be satiated into exhaustion, but I was on fire with unfulfilled need. Returning to bed next them, I cuddled into her embrace, kissed her, and began to service myself.

"Poor darling," she whispered. "Petros, my love, we cannot forget her."

"My lady," he groaned in exhaustion. "I am only a mortal man." But his eyes watched me hungrily.

"She's not too tired," I teased him. Slowly I extracted the dildo, giving him plenty of time to see it, and brought it wet and shining to Amanda's

lips. She licked it clean, accepted into her mouth, and sucked it in deep until I pulled it out to kiss her deeply. I fancied I could still taste myself in her mouth.

Petros's breath changed rhythm and his face leaned in close to us. We shared our kiss with him, three sets of lips and tongues intermingling. The sensation was strange and familiar at the same time, awkward and yet perfectly natural.

And terribly exciting. Desperately, I returned the dildo to its place between my empty thighs.

"Let me," Amanda whispered, and rolled over on top of me. Taking the dildo with her right hand, she supported herself above me with her left and gently fucked me. Like she had so many nights before. But this time Petros was beside us, his hand running up and down my belly, fondling my breasts, stroking my clitoris, his breath hot in my ear, his eyes burning tracks across my naked body.

I felt my climax slowly building, but Amanda, whose leg was between us, apparently felt something else rising.

"Petros, my love," she said, "You seem a new man again."

"Who could remain unmoved by such beauty?" He grinned at us, and his fingers danced like butterflies on my clitoris.

"Then there is something else I have been waiting for," she said. Lying down next to me, she rolled us over, so that I was on top of her. From this angle she could not really thrust into me, so I began to ride the dildo she held between us. Her other hand, now free, slipped between our bellies to penetrate herself.

Watching her eyes close in pleasure, I ground a little harder. I thought we might go on this way until we both climaxed, but she surprised me. Her hand came out and found a new home on my buttocks.

Then one wet finger slid in me from behind, and I gasped in shock and pleasure.

"Sauce for the gander." Petros chuckled.

Now I was impaled between the dildo and Amanda's finger. The vision of her being pounded by Petros just moments before came back to haunt me, the vision of Petros pounding her from behind during our cruise came back to inflame me.

I accepted Amanda's second finger inside my tight, clenched bottom.

"Relax," she whispered to me, like I had done to her so many times before, and I did.

Gently she fucked me from both sides, my face buried in her hair spread out across the bed, until I was a wet, limp noodle spread across her.

"I think she is ready, my love," Amanda said to Petros.

I felt him move beside me, rising up hover above us. I could feel his strong legs intertwined with ours, and Amanda's moan when he penetrated her again, seeking lubrication. Then the sensation of the head of his cock on my backside, soft as velvet and yet stiff as iron.

Her fingers left me and I felt him probe gently. Like I had shown him with Amanda, he penetrated me one inch at a time. His weight pressed down on me, sandwiching me between his lean muscles and Amanda's soft breasts and belly.

"Do her like you did me," Amanda told him, and I whimpered. He laughed and increased his tempo, but he did not pound me fiercely. Instead, he took his time, enjoying himself inside of me. The dildo filled me from in front, and the sensation of being stuffed beyond my limits left me limp and pliant. Amanda wiggled and squirmed under me, rubbing the back of the dildo against herself, taking her own pleasure.

I lay between them like a blanket, waiting helplessly for their climaxes to release my own. Their heat reflected from the surface of my burning skin and I melted like jelly between silk and leather.

When Amanda quivered suddenly, her orgasm blossoming like an unexpected late-summer rosebud come to life, I clutched at her and shared in it. Petros, triggered by the tightening of my body, emptied himself and fell groaning across my back, his hands reaching under her to hug us both.

Afterwards we snuggled, legs and arms intertwined and Amanda's hair strewn across all of us.

"I like being in the middle," I said, meaning the snuggling.

"I want to be in the middle next time," Amanda said, meaning the fucking.

"Mmmph," Petros said, exhausted beyond reason. In moments, his breathing told us he was unconscious.

"Maybe we should put him in the middle," I whispered, and together we giggled ourselves to sleep.

## About the Author

Michèle de Lully lives in the desert, where erotic mirages of other times and places shimmer out of the hot summer nights. She commits as many of them as she can to paper, when not distracted by glorious sunsets, cool margaritas, and long nights of salsa dancing.

Please visit her at [www.michèledelully.com](http://www.michèledelully.com).



Look for these titles by Michèle de Lully

*Coming Soon:*

La Ceinture (The Belt)

*Sex can be the most devastating weapon*

## Scorch

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Frank Aston has what most men would consider a dream job. As bodyguard to Lady Jacqueline, the heir to Baron Ceston's throne and fortune, he gets to watch her every moment of every day. He knows each inch of her cruel, tantalizing body from her almost black eyes to her long, sensuous legs. But he can never lay a hand on her, not even to save his own life. He can't even reveal a conspiracy against his own liege, the baron, for fear some harm will come to her. On the other hand, Lady Jacqueline has absolutely no regard for his safety or sanity at all.

Lady Jacqueline's dangerous string of seductions leads Frank deeper and deeper into a conspiracy he's unable to reveal. Worse still, the heiress is hell bent on dominating him, breaking his will until he becomes just another man willing to do anything to please his Mistress.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Scorch*:

And just like that, he was gone, leaving me alone with Dr. Naran.

"Come."

She turned and entered the inner office. I had never been here before and I didn't like the look of the place at all. The room wasn't very large. Off to the side was something that looked like a cross between a bed of nails and a clam. There were obvious protrusions on both the top and the bottom, suspended in some sort of gray cushion. The other side of the room consisted of a large panel, hosting a number of buttons, levers and dials, which obviously controlled the table.

"Get undressed."

I began to unbutton my shirt. She watched, focusing on me in a way that made me most uncomfortable. I shrugged the shirt from my shoulders and pulled it off. Her eyes never wavered. I wondered if this is what women felt like when they stripped for me.

Of course, this woman was a complete stranger. I didn't know her at all, had never seen her before our recent introduction. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been embarrassed undressing in front of a woman. I had thought those days were behind me, but I was wrong.

She must have sensed my mood, for she spoke. "There is nothing to be embarrassed about, Frank. During the next couple of weeks, I'm going to be working with your body and your mind, inside and out. You will have no secrets from me. I will share your darkest nightmares and your most intimate experiences. I will know you better than you even know yourself. I will surf your most secret thoughts and mold them to my will. When I am done with you, you will be what I want you to be, no more, no less."

I didn't say anything, but noticed my hand shaking as I placed it on the strips that held up my pants. It amazed me that after all these years, men's trousers were still fastened in this manner. I jerked and the sound of my fly coming undone tore through the room. It was the only act of defiance I would be allowed. I let my pants drop to the floor and stepped from them.

"All of it."

I shrugged, bent over and slid off my briefs. Then I rose and stood before her, the very act almost a defiance in and of itself. I would not cower or act embarrassed. Nor would I allow her to make me her toy. I had a will and would use it.

"Now what?" I asked.

She gestured to the machine. "Make yourself comfortable."

I turned to regard it. I had a feeling this would be horribly unpleasant, but then, disobeying a direct order would be worse. I approached it and reached out a hand. The foam was comfortable and even the protrusions were softer than I'd thought they would be. Without

wasting any more time, I sat on the edge of the table, then lay down. I felt my naked body sink into the foam.

Dr. Naran walked to her control panel and pressed a button. The top half of the machine closed over me until my body was engulfed. I wondered how I'd breathe. I couldn't speak. I felt a moment of profound claustrophobia and fought it down. I soon realized I could feel nothing, see nothing, hear nothing. I had once been in a sensory deprivation chamber and it was much like this.

I seemed to have no trouble breathing, which was something of a relief. Still, I felt anything but relaxed. Then Dr. Naran's voice entered my mind.

"Hello, Frank. Ah, good, I see you can hear me. I'm going to run a few tests on you. Primarily responses to different stimuli. I need to know what makes you react and how. Some of this will, no doubt, be painful. At other times you may feel pleasure. Just relax and let yourself go. The more you fight, the longer this session will last."

I found myself holding my breath and released it. What seemed like a long time later, I felt the temperature drop. An icy wind passed through my entire body, starting with my toes and working its way up. It was as if someone had decided to pull a sheet of frost over me. Then, just as suddenly, it was gone.

It grew hot. Perspiration coated my body. I wanted nothing more than to withdraw from the sensation, but that wasn't allowed and in fact, after a short while, the heat increased in intensity until I could no longer stand it. My muffled screams didn't alter the level of pain, but I was powerless to struggle. Even if the machine didn't hold me in place, it seemed I had no control over my muscles. I mentally writhed in agony, until, many minutes later, the heat faded, leaving me gasping and sobbing.

For a long time, nothing happened. Then I felt tiny electric shocks touch various portions of my anatomy. My fingers, toes, nipples. Here and there, as if some tiny flying insect were circling my body, irritating me each time it landed. The charges increased in both frequency and

power and it was more than just irritation. The back of my neck, behind my left eye, my right knee, my left testicle. The sensation grew more unpleasant, bordering on painful and the intensity continued to increase. Each new shock took me to a higher level of pain, until I thought I would die from it. This time, however, I found I could not scream. I had to lie motionless and endure it. I had no way to measure the passage of time, but I was sure it went on for hours. When it stopped, I was no longer certain I was within the boundaries of sanity.

I felt my body shudder and felt my cock begin to harden. I didn't want it to and fought the sensation. It was uncomfortable, considering it was pointing in the wrong direction. I could feel it pushing up into the foam. But as it grew harder, I felt my desire grow as well, until I couldn't think of anything but release. I found myself gasping for air and uselessly tried to grab my cock. I had never known such desire and when it ended, I wept as I'd never wept before. But this was only the beginning of the torment.

"I can see your thoughts, Frank. You're angry with me. You want to hurt me, but you can't. You're powerless to do anything against me."

The next voice that spoke was that of my mother, who had died when I was ten. "Frankie, you know better than that. Behave yourself, young man."

Then I heard a new voice, belonging to one of my teachers. She had taught Interstellar History and I'd barely been able to concentrate, as I'd been distracted by her large, firm breasts and narrow waist. Her long brown hair reached almost all the way to her nicely rounded ass. I couldn't even remember her name, but I recognized her voice immediately.

"I know you want me, Frank. Why don't you come here. That's a good boy. Suck on my tit, Frank. Suck! Suck hard! Ohhh yes, that's good. Suck it, boy. Suck my tit!"

In my altered state of consciousness, I almost didn't recognize this as one of my own adolescent fantasies. My cock grew hard again, as hard as before and I sucked and sucked, as she bade me. On some level I knew I

was still in the machine, but that no longer mattered. I finally had my tutor where I'd always wanted her. I sucked even harder, hands sliding down over her curves.

Her own hands responded, touching me, trailing down my cheek, neck, chest, lower and lower, until I thought I would die from anticipation. She touched my cock and I felt it jump. I moaned and tried to fight the sensation. I was still in the clam and Dr. Naran was still watching. I wondered if she was doing anything else. I wondered what her body looked like, beneath that white lab coat.

Then my teacher's hand grabbed my cock more firmly and I was returned to the moment. Her eyes glazed over as she stroked, up and down. I clenched my teeth, but couldn't stop myself from thrusting into her.

"That's very good, Frank. Sooo good."

Her hand moved harder and faster, until I was panting. I couldn't think anymore. I could barely see. The only sensation in the world was that of her fingers on my cock, stroking and squeezing. I needed to come more than I'd ever needed anything in my life.

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