

Loose Id



# MINE

JILL NOELLE

Mine  
*by Jill Noelle*

**Loose Id LLC**

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Loose Id LLC

1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29

Carson City NV 89701-1215

[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

Editor: Raven McKnight

Cover Artist: April Martinez

## Chapter One

*The Court of King Clovis DuFresne*  
*The Year of Light, 2525*

Gabriella Bergeron reclined on a chaise lounge in the south parterre of the king's royal gardens. Shielded from the bright mid-morning sun by the heavy branches of a large, potted orange tree, she pretended to doze. Behind her, off to the right, sat several of her sisters-in-waiting, their high-pitched giggles occasionally audible over the bubbling water of a nearby fountain.

Gabriella peeked through lowered lashes, scanning the pink-tinged marble courtyard. In the distance, a half-dozen soldiers dressed in full livery marched along the grassy knoll, which served as a promenade and general training grounds for the troops. Though well turned-out and fine of form, the men didn't even earn a second glance. Instead, Gabriella turned her head, gazing into the shadows of the colonnade, which ran the length of the royal chateau. A few senior members of government, recognizable by their long, deep blue robes, strolled past. Gabriella squirmed on her chaise, her impatience rising. *Where is he?*

"Look. Here he comes."

"Oh, isn't he just the finest man you've ever set eyes on?"

Gabriella's ears perked up at her companions' chatter.

*Finally!*

Resisting the urge to turn, she held her position, eyes half-closed. Within moments, Michel Auclair strode into her line of

vision, taking his usual place near a large, bronzed replica of Michelangelo's David.

Gabriella held her breath, ignoring the heavy sighs from the other women, as Michel pulled his white linen shirt over his head and dropped it carelessly on a nearby chair. His back toward the women, seemingly unaware of their presence, he began a series of intricate stretches.

Mouth dry, Gabriella watched in rapt fascination, as she had each weekday morning for the last month. Michel Auclair, Personal Trainer for King Clovis DuFresne, and Gabriella's closest friend, had chosen the south parterre for his daily workouts. How long he'd been coming here, Gabriella did not know. She only knew that, in recent weeks, something inside her had changed.

Six months ago, the sight before her would have had little, if any, effect on her senses. Now, she could not tear her gaze away from his rippling muscles if her life depended upon it. His broad shoulders and wide back tapered to a narrow waist above the tightest derriere she'd ever seen. Not that she had seen many with which to compare.

Although the king had ordered no special uniform where his men were concerned, most of them preferred to cover themselves with the long, flowing robes favored by the court officials. Only the soldiers—who never entered the sanctuary of the inner courtyards—and Michel Auclair wore trousers. Made of a loose material similar to that of his recently discarded shirt, the light cloth hugged his thighs, emphasizing their strength.

"Are you watching him, Gaby?"

"You're so lucky, Gabriella! I wish I were next! Maybe I should petition the king."

"Look at that body. It's simply magnificent."

Gabriella did not answer. With each passing day, the teasing she received grew more and more difficult to endure. Thank the goddess, tonight would bring an end to all of that. Tonight, she would enter Training, an intensive period of practice and preparation, during which she would learn all she would need to know about becoming one of the Select Few.

Michel Auclair, in his role as Trainer, would be her teacher. The thought made her stomach flutter and her breath catch in her throat, both of which caused her no small degree of confusion. After all, she had known the man nearly all her life. As her friend and only confidant, he'd always made her feel comfortable in his presence, and they shared a warm rapport and a common interest in history and the arts. Why, then, should the thought of giving herself up to his careful tutoring cause her such unease?

Realizing she'd been holding her breath, Gabriella released a heavy sigh just as Michel finished his daily exercise and reached for a towel. He wiped his face, then draped the cotton cloth around his shoulders before snatching his shirt from the chair. Turning, he started past her, then stopped, his handsome lips tilting up in a devastatingly handsome grin. Gabriella shifted on her chaise, bracing herself for his approach.

He did not speak until he was within her sanctuary beneath the tree. He knelt, bringing himself down to her eye

level. "Good day, Brie. I almost did not see you here in the shadows."

"Good day, Michel." She smiled, a rush of warmth suffusing her skin as his deep, mellow voice washed over her. Michel had a way of speaking, intimate and direct, which she'd always adored. His piercing blue eyes sparkled with humor as he studied her face.

"I've seen you here, watching me, you know?" he whispered. "Have you taken a sudden interest in Tai-Chi-Chuan?"

Gabriella bit her lip, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Tai-Chi," he repeated, nodding over his shoulder toward the statue of David. "An ancient form of karate, created by Chen Wang Ting, a kung fu master of the Chenjiagou, Henan province in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty. I think I have a few books on the subject somewhere, if you're really that interested."

"Oh, your workout. Yes." Gabriella nodded, happily taking the excuse he'd handed her. "It's really quite interesting. Very unique and, um..."

"Stimulating!" The word came from behind her, followed by a chorus of giggles.

Michel raised his head and waved to the other women. "Ladies."

Gabriella cringed as the others surrounded her chair, obviously taking Michel's polite greeting as an invitation to join the conversation. They simpered and flirted with him like a bevy of schoolgirls. Taking advantage of their distracting

presence, Gabriella surreptitiously examined the half-clad male who knelt at her side. He had a strong face, like that of one of the Greek-god statues that lined the balustrade. Chiseled, with high cheekbones and a firm, slightly squared jaw. His golden hair hung to his shoulders, a bit damp from his recent exertions.

Seeing his attention still focused on the other women, Gabriella let her gaze drop lower, taking in the expanse of his chest, heavily muscled and tanned. As she watched, a tiny drop of sweat broke out near the base of his neck and rolled slowly down the slight cleft between his well-honed pecs. She followed its progress as it glided down over his washboard stomach and then disappeared into the band of his trousers. A lump formed in Gabriella's throat.

"Isn't that right, Brie?"

Gabriella snapped her head up to find Michel watching her, smiling slightly. "I'm sorry?"

"I was telling your companions there is no reason to be envious. After all, each of you was chosen, and each of you shall complete your training before the year's end."

She held his gaze and nodded, slowly. "True enough. We're all the same. Each of us was chosen, each of us will receive training, and each of us will belong to the king."

Her words seemed to have an unusual effect on him; his eyes grew dark and stormy, and his jaw clenched, as if he were gritting his teeth. Abruptly, he stood, towering over her so she had to tilt her head back in order to see his face.

"I must go," he told her. Giving the other women a terse nod, he spun on his heels and stalked away.



"Look at that ass," Colette Briandt said, not bothering to lower her voice in the least.

Gabriella scowled up at the stunning blonde, no longer able to hide her irritation. "Must you act like a bitch in heat? Really. It's quite embarrassing."

Colette tossed her hair over her shoulder and placed a hand on her hip. "Oh, you're a fine one to talk, *Brie*. You've been out here panting over him every day this week."

Gabriella bit back an angry retort. Colette had a point. And as much as she might tell herself otherwise, Gabriella knew her recent reaction to Michel Auclair was the same as that of her companions. The thought made her head ache. Especially now, when she could ill afford such a confusing distraction.

"I'm going to my room," she said as she rose from her chaise. "I don't wish to be disturbed until it's time."

She left the courtyard without waiting for a response.

\* \* \* \*

Michel clutched the windowsill as he looked out over the king's royal gardens. The grounds were designed after the gardens of Versailles, though on a much smaller scale. The pattern and layout had been discovered in an ancient textbook, which had somehow managed to survive the Last Great War. The sun, on its downward journey toward the horizon, glittered off the many pools and canals. Beyond the main courtyard, flowerbeds and potted trees, water fountains, ornate statues and urns covered every square foot for a mile in either direction.

The king's chateau and royal apartments were situated dead center, surrounded by beauty as far as the eye could see. Michel's suite of rooms, on the second floor, overlooked the south parterre and, in Michel's opinion, the most elaborate section of the gardens. Off to his right, a large fountain, a two-hundred-foot square, glimmered in the late afternoon sun. At its center, a gilded lead sculpture of Apollo in his chariot rose like a scepter from the ocean. It represented daybreak, with four spirited steeds drawing the sun chariot from the sea on its journey across the sky.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Michel asked, turning to address his companion.

"What's that?" Beaufort LeBlanc helped himself to another slice of leftover breakfast ham, popping a bite into his mouth and then licking the grease from his fingers. "The gardens? Or your latest protégé?"

Michel cocked his head. "You're eating that? It's been sitting there all day. I was speaking of the gardens. I find it incredible we're surrounded by such luxury, when just a mile away, outside the wall, people are living in abject filth and poverty."

"Hmm, yes, so much corruption, and I'm not certain which is worse. The activities inside these walls, or the situation without. But all that will soon change. You and I have seen to it." Beau spoke around another bite of ham.

Michel held up a warning hand, crossing to his study door, which stood partially ajar. After a quick glance into the hallway, he hit a button on a panel in the wall, and the door quietly slid closed.

Returning to the breakfast table, he slumped into a chair across from his friend. "How soon?"

Beau picked a piece of meat from between his teeth, then shook his head. "I'm not certain. Ten days? Two weeks? The documents were delivered safely; that's all I know for sure. It'll probably take their military planners some time to look over the papers and find the breach in King Clovis's defense. I suspect a messenger will arrive shortly before the Sun King's arrival, to deliver any final instructions."

A light bang echoed from outside the chamber, and Beau cast a wary glance toward the door. "So," he said, raising his voice slightly, "another class begins tonight, eh?"

Michel followed his friend's lead. "Yes. Gabriella Bergeron."

"The tall, leggy brunette with the enormous breasts," Beau said dryly. "Yeah, I think I've seen her around. God, I envy you."

Michel shifted, suddenly uncomfortable with the turn in conversation. "It's not as wonderful as you might think."

Beau raised a brow. "Is that so? Let me get this straight. Beautiful young virgins come to you for a week's worth of training, during which time you teach them to pleasure a man in more ways than even *I* could probably imagine, and you expect me to believe it's not all I think it's cracked up to be? Give me a break."

Michel shook his head. "It's just a job, Beau. You don't understand. Have you ever slept with a woman you didn't desire?"

"Well, not that I remember." Beau looked thoughtful for a moment, then his face broke into a wide grin. "But then

again, I'm a pig. I can see how it might be difficult for you sometimes, but there's no way you're going to convince me you're dreading the moment when Gabriella Bergeron wraps those luscious thighs around your waist and you sink yourself into her—"

"That's enough!" Michel jumped to his feet, grabbing the arm of his chair to steady it, barely resisting the urge to toss the damned thing across the room. "I have business to attend, so if you'll excuse me?"

Beau frowned, opened his mouth as if to argue, but then shook his head and stood. Michel escorted him to the door.

"Look, I'm sorry," Beau said.

"Don't worry about it. I'm tense, that's all. It's not you."

Beau nodded. "I'll check back with you in a few days. It's going to be okay. Try to relax."

Michel forced a smile. "I'm okay. Go on. I'll talk to you later."

The door closed, and he pressed another button on the panel. A bright red light blinked on, indicating the lock had engaged. Michel returned to his position at the window. Across the courtyard, he caught sight of Brie, just as she entered one of the lower rooms in the ladies' wing. He glanced at a nearby clock. Five p.m. Time for her final physical exam, as well as last-minute grooming before being shown to his apartments. He turned from the window. That gave him less than an hour to prepare.

## Chapter Two

Michel answered the door on the first knock.

"A new trainee, sir. Gabriella Renee Bergeron." The portly matron thrust a stack of papers out, and Michel accepted them. He shot a glance at Brie, who stood quietly in the shadows, and then studied the neat, precise printing on the top page.

*Gabriella Renee Bergeron*

Age: Twenty-four

*D.O.B.: 11-26-01*

He skipped down past the other vitals, which he knew as well as he knew his own.

*Virginity: Affirmed*

Michel blinked and nodded. The newly developed procedure for guaranteeing a woman's virginity could be quite invasive and often very painful. He cast another look at Brie, wondering how she'd endured. "Everything is in order?"

"Yes, sir." The matron raised a clipboard. "Please sign here, sir."

Out of the corner of his eye, Michel noticed Gabriella's expression. She appeared worried or upset, her brow wrinkled, her normally full lips turned down in a slight frown. Michel scrawled his signature at the bottom of the release form. "That will be all."

He handed the matron the clipboard, and then reached for Gabriella's hand and pulled her into the room.

"But, sir, I need—"

Michel slammed his palm against the control panel and the door slid shut in the old woman's face. He engaged the lock, then turned. "What's wrong?"

Gabriella shook her head. "Nothing, really. Just that these last few hours have been rather ... stressful."

Michel nodded. The rigors of the physical exam could be trying. He searched her face. "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

She smiled, then. "No, Michel. I'm fine, truly. Aren't you going to invite me in?"

He released his breath. "Certainly. Why don't you go sit down, and I'll pour us both a drink."

"Thank you."

He waited for her to precede him into the large alcove, which served as his study. She went immediately to the overstuffed chair near the window—as she had dozens of times before, to share a cup of coffee, or discuss a book they both had read—and curled up, drawing her feet beneath her. Michel smiled at her composure. *Just another day, like any other day.* He went to the liquor cabinet and poured them both a large snifter of cognac.

"You seem very relaxed," he said, handing her a glass. He leaned back against his desk and studied her as she sipped her drink.

"Actually, I'm relieved." Her lips tilted in a crooked smile.

"Relieved?" He frowned. "About what?"

"That the waiting is over. That I'll no longer have to endure the taunts and jibes from Colette and her ilk."

"I see." But he didn't. While the rational part of him comprehended the way of things, he never completely understood what drove the women—the Select Few—to sacrifice themselves to the king's pleasure as if it were the greatest honor. They gave up their entire lives, simply to become the king's possessions, and most of them did so with the utmost joy. Not that they had a choice in the matter.

"Michel? Shouldn't we get started?"

He smiled. "You never were one to waste a moment."

He set his glass on the desk, and then took her hand.

"Come here."

Drawing her to her feet, he brought her against his chest. She gazed up at him, her long lashes framing her warm, dark eyes. He brushed her hair back from her face. "You aren't frightened?"

She shook her head. "Of course not."

"Of course not." He released a sigh. "Brie, tell me something. Are you so anxious to begin your service with the king?"

"No."

For the first time since she'd entered the room, Michel sensed her hesitate.

"I'm anxious to begin service with *you*." She spoke so softly, he thought for a moment he'd misheard. His heart sped up, and his skin grew warm as he remembered Beau's words from earlier that day.

"Shit." He released her and turned away, pacing across the room, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

"Michel?"

He spun around. "Brie, it's my job to train you for the king."

"I understand that. I've known that all my life." She came forward, placing a hand on his chest and offering a small smile. "What I didn't know—at least, not until recently—was how I felt about you."

She stood on her toes and brushed a light kiss across his lips. Michel sucked in his breath as a wave of desire coursed through his veins. He pulled her into his arms and returned her kiss, deepened it, his mouth slanting across hers. She responded with a moan, slipping her arms around his neck and entwining her fingers in his hair.

Michel's head spun, and he lost himself in the taste of her, in her intoxicating scent. When she slipped her tongue into his mouth, he released a groan, grasping her buttocks to lift her against his straining erection. She met his movements, pressing her hips forward and rubbing against him, whimpering softly.

Michel broke their kiss and lifted his head, taking in her flushed face and the heated expression in her eyes. "Jesus, Brie," he said, struggling to draw a full breath and clear his addled brain. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you'd done this before."

She looked away, her blush deepening.

"Brie?" Alarm bells sounded in his head.

"Well, Monique and I..." She looked back, her brow knitted in a frown. "We may have experimented just a little."

"God." The image that rose in his mind made his cock jump. He closed his eyes, seeking to renew his control.



"Are you angry with me?"

"Angry?" He shook his head, releasing a choked laugh. "I'm feeling a lot of things right now, but anger isn't one of them."

She raised a brow, her mouth tilting up in a coy smile. "The idea of Monique and I together ... intrigues you?"

"No, it doesn't *intrigue* me." He pulled her back with him until they reached the edge of his bed. "It makes my cock hard, and makes me want to throw you down and fuck you until you scream for mercy, but it doesn't *intrigue* me."

He watched the play of emotions cross her face; surprise, fear, and uncertainty reflected in her eyes, as clearly as if she'd spoken her feelings aloud.

"The king likes his women experienced, aggressive, and quick to tease," he said, trying, but failing, to keep the disgust from his voice.

"And you, Michel?" she asked. "What do you prefer?"

"I am an instructor. I prefer my women untutored."

"You prefer to be the aggressor? The tease?" Her voice had turned raspy, deep and sexy, and Michel had to force himself to remain still. She frowned. "I'm sorry. I misjudged you."

"How so?"

"You're very experienced," she said, dropping her gaze, her hair falling to shield her face from his view. "I thought you would prefer someone like yourself."

He cupped her chin, lifting her head until he could see her eyes. "This isn't about me, Brie. It's really not even about you. We have to remember that."

"Why?" Her brown eyes flashed with sudden irritation. "What can it hurt if we take one night—just a few hours—for ourselves, to *be* ourselves?"

"That's impossible."

"But why?" She placed her hands on his shoulders. "Please, Michel. Make me understand. I know my duty, and when the time comes, I will do what I must, but tell me why we can't just have tonight."

He grasped her hands and held them tight. "Because everything I want, everything I *am*, is the exact opposite of our king. And you, my love, belong to the king."

She stared up at him a moment as the silence lengthened between them. Finally, she pulled her hands from his and stepped back. "Fine. I belong to the king. And you have a job to do."

Michel studied her a moment, caught off guard by her quick change of heart.

"Yes," he said, "I have a job to do, and your experiences with Monique may be just the place to start."

He moved closer, purposely crowding her, gauging her reaction. "Tell me, Brie, did you and Monique do more than share a few girlish kisses?"

She opened her mouth as if to answer, but then shook her head. She dropped her gaze, then whispered, "I can't tell you."

"Look at me, Gabriella." Michel moved even closer, his heart pounding in his chest. When she did not immediately comply, he raised his voice. "I said, look at me."

She raised her head, meeting his gaze, and Michel smiled. "That's better. Now tell me about you and Monique."

He placed a hand on her breast. She flinched and started to move away.

"Don't," he told her. "Don't move."

"Michel, please. I—"

"Did she touch you here?" He stroked her nipple, smiling when she sucked in her breath. She trembled beneath his touch, but did not move away. "Did you let her touch you, Gabriella?"

"Yes." The word came out in a rush. "Yes, I let her touch me."

He pinched her nipple, lightly. "You're a very bad girl, Gabriella. You know you're supposed to come to me untouched."

"I'm sorry. I told you, I thought—"

Again, he cut her off. "Yes. You thought I'd appreciate your newly acquired skills. Tell me, what else did you learn?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I swear it."

Michel saw the distress in her face. He dropped his hand from her breast and stepped back. "I believe you."

He turned away from her and crossed to the wet bar. Pouring himself another drink, he struggled to gain control of his emotions, his own needs at war with his duty to the king. A duty that, for now, he must continue to fulfill. Gabriella had managed to throw his whole world into a tailspin, with a few simple words.

*I'm anxious to begin service with you.*

He took a long drink, closing his eyes as the costly liquor burned its way down his throat. How many women had come through his door in the last ten years, eager to be trained? Dozens? A hundred? And all of them had one thing in common: their eagerness to learn their lessons well, so they could move into the king's service. Until Gabriella. Unwittingly, she had offered him the one thing he wanted. He closed his eyes, considering the possibilities.

"Michel?"

A shiver raced up his spine and he realized, in that instant, what he would do.

"Take off your clothes, Gabriella."

"Pardon me?"

He drained his glass, then slammed it down. Spinning around, he pinned her with an unwavering stare. "I said, take off your clothes."

She dropped her gaze, but not before he caught sight of her smile. He opened his mouth to correct her, but then changed his mind. Let her revel in her small triumph. Tomorrow, he could begin training her for the king. Tonight, she belonged to him.

### **Chapter Three**

Gabriella's hands shook as she released the laces at the neck of her simple cotton gown. Virgin white, a symbol of her status and worth, the dress served as a reminder of her duty and obligations, of the path that had been chosen for her at birth. Gabriella barely resisted the urge to rip it asunder.

She stole a quick glance at Michel, and her face grew warm at the smoldering look in his eyes. With his jaw set and his brow furrowed, he appeared more a stern teacher than lifelong friend. Gabriella's stomach tightened, and her body vibrated with nervous anticipation.

She shrugged the thin gown down over her shoulders. The soft material slid past her hips and pooled around her feet.

"Lovely," Michel whispered. "Come here."

Gabriella tentatively placed her hand in his outstretched palm, and then gasped as he jerked her forward, bringing her up flush against his chest. She tipped her head back, searching his face for some clue as to how she should react. She met his steely gaze and shivered as he lowered his head and brushed her lips with the softest of kisses.

"Tonight, you are mine," he told her, his breath hot against her cheek. "All mine."

"Yes," she replied on a sigh, wrapping her arms around his neck. She arched forward and rubbed her breasts against his chest.

With a low growl, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed, gently depositing her in the middle of the soft

mattress. Gabriella scooted back, resting against the mound of down-filled pillows. Through lowered lashes, she watched him remove his shirt. She devoured him with her eyes, her breath catching just like it always did when faced with his finely toned beauty.

Unashamed, she let her gaze roam down over his firm abdomen, biting her lip to stifle a sigh of pleasure when he slipped his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and slid them down over his hips.

"Gabriella."

His voice seemed to come from far away.

"Yes?"

"Look at me."

"I am looking at you," she said. Hell, she couldn't *stop* looking at him. He was magnificent. From his broad, tanned shoulders to his well-shaped calves, he appeared more god-like than human. Her fingers itched to touch him, to explore the texture of his skin and gauge his response.

"Gabriella."

With a sigh, she raised her gaze and met his eyes. "Yes, Michel?"

"Roll over."

She frowned. "Roll over? Why?"

He sprang forward, looming over her, bracing his weight with his arms on either side of her shoulders, his face just inches from her own. Gabriella shrank back, heart pounding.

"You said you wanted this. You said you were mine, correct?"

She nodded.

"Then, when I tell you to do something," he said, his tone low and harsh, "you will obey me immediately or suffer the consequences. Is that understood?"

Swallowing hard, Gabriella nodded again. "Yes, Michel, of course."

"Now. Roll. Over."

He pulled back just enough to give her room to comply, and she immediately flipped onto her stomach. A shiver raced down her spine as she realized her disadvantage. Unable to see him, unable to anticipate his next move, she felt strangely vulnerable and suddenly uncertain.

"Michel."

"Be quiet. Do not speak unless I give you permission to do so."

"I—"

*Thwack.* A sharp sting blossomed across her backside and she flinched, even as a tremor of excitement made her wriggle her ass in a purposely provocative gesture.

"Ah, Brie, my sweet little slut, you liked that, did you?"

*God, yes.* She turned her face into the pillow and moaned. She more than liked it. Everything within her seemed to come alive at his touch. Even his words—"my sweet little slut"—brought a rush of joy. She frowned, wondering at her response. Was she? A slut, a whore to want this, to need this, like other people needed food or air to survive?

Michel's hand rested lightly on her ass, and she lifted against it, wordlessly answering his question.

He chuckled softly, and then she felt him move away and the bed lift as he stood up. She did not turn her head, but she

couldn't stop herself from straining her ears, listening intently for any clue to his intentions. As the moments ticked past, her tension increased, heightened even more by the knowledge that she was so exposed.

"Lights off."

The room fell into darkness, lit only by a bank of candles strategically placed on the bedside table.

"Music on."

A sultry jazz tune filled the air.

"Fog."

Gabriella smiled, her heart lifting, her uncertainty gone. Yes, she may have an unusual longing to be dominated, to be used in any way that might please him, but she also needed to know she was cherished. In pulling out all the stops to add romance and ambiance to the moment, Michel had told her more about his feelings for her than any words could convey.

Finally, he rejoined her on the bed, straddling her upper thighs. The heat of his skin made her squirm, but she stilled quickly when she felt him, long and hard, pressed against her buttocks. The thought of his cock resting there, in the crack of her ass, made her mouth go dry, and she closed her eyes, once again battling a rush of desire.

Images of him taking her, thrusting into her from behind, his hands gripping her hips as he pounded against her, filled her mind. Lost in an erotic dream, she lifted her hips off the bed, shifting until his cock slid lower, brushing against her pussy.

Michel met her movements and pushed forward. The head of his cock slipped inside, and Gabriella gasped and went still.



For a moment, time hung suspended, and Gabriella twisted her fingers into the pillowcase, screwing her eyes shut as she listened to the sound of his harsh breathing coming from above and behind her.

Again, he moved; only this time, he drew back, and cool air caressed her heated flesh as he climbed off of her and knelt on the bed.

"Get up on your knees, Gabriella."

She struggled to make her quivering muscles obey his command and scrambled upward, drawing her legs up underneath her as she came into a sitting position.

"Now lean forward and hold on to the bars of the headboard."

She reached out, wrapping her fingers around the cool metal bars, shifting her lower body forward until her ass rose in the air. Her breasts swung slowly, her nipples grazing the pillows. She bit her lip and closed her eyes, breathlessly waiting for his next move.

He ran a hand down her back, slowly caressing her from her shoulders to her ass. Then he lifted his hand and brought it down, hard. Gabriella uttered a startled cry, but did not jerk away.

"You are perfection personified," he said, caressing her tenderly once more. "It's rare to find a woman who is both intelligent and beautiful, and yet holds within her the soul of a slut."

He cupped her breast, rolling her hard nipple between his thumb and finger. Gabriella pressed into his touch, her entire body vibrating with need.

"I recognize your intelligence, Brie, but it's your soul I'm interested in tonight."

He pinched her nipple, and Gabriella opened her mouth, gasping for breath.

"Will you give me your soul, Brie?"

"Yes," she said, arching her back and throwing back her head. "Yes, Michel."

He grasped her hair, pulling her to face him. His features were hard, softened only by the candles' warm glow.

"Are you certain? Do you know what I'll ask of you?"

She licked her lips. "Ask anything of me. I will do anything, be anything you wish. I belong to you, body and soul."

Still maintaining his grip on her hair, Michel rose to his knees, bringing his long, thick cock within a breath of her face. He took the shaft in his fist and brought the head to her mouth. "Suck me."

Gabriella parted her lips, and he pressed forward. She took him in, caressing him with her tongue, moaning against him as she rocked her hips in motion with her bobbing head.

"Ah, yes, baby." Michel moved deeper with each new thrust. "Suck my cock, my lovely little slut. Suck it hard."

Gabriella struggled to draw air in through her nose as she frantically worked her mouth up and down his shaft. The head of his cock brushed the back of her throat and she gagged reflexively, her eyes tearing.

"Slow down," Michel told her, withdrawing and brushing her hair back, his touch now light and soothing. "Take your time, and breathe."

Resting her cheek against his thigh, Gabriella drew in a few ragged breaths. She could feel him trembling, sensed his careful control and the power she held over him, despite their positions. Slowly, she explored his cock with her lips and mouth, focusing on his reaction to every flick of tongue or scrape of teeth. She grew bolder, picking up the pace and drawing him deeper. His labored breathing echoed in her ears, and she moaned against his hard flesh as his trembling increased.

"No." Michel suddenly pulled back.

Gabriella reluctantly released him and looked up, frowning her confusion. She licked her lips and shook her hair out of her face.

"I don't want to come in your mouth," Michel said, moving around behind her until she felt him brush against her ass and thighs. "At least, not this time.

"Spread your legs for me, Brie. Let me see your sweet, wet pussy."

A hand thrust between her thighs as she widened her stance, moving her knees farther apart. A long finger stroked her swollen folds, and sparks of desire shot through her like flashes of lightning portending a storm. Gabriella circled her hips and moaned.

"You're so wet," he said, "so hot and ready for my cock. Do you want me, Brie? Would you like me to fuck your hot little snatch?"

Gabriella wanted to scream, but when she opened her mouth to reply, she barely managed a small groan.

Michel removed his hand, and then she felt the head of his cock poised at the opening of her pussy.

"Tell me," he said. "Tell me what you want."

Gabriella shook her head, struggling to form the words through a haze of lust. "I—please. F-fuck me, Michel. Please fuck me. Ahhh!"

He filled her suddenly, pushing all the way home, ripping past the barrier of her hymen and burying himself until their bodies were flush and his balls slapped against her swollen clit.

Gabriella lost her grip on the bed poles and fell forward, the soft pillows smothering her cry. Michel's fingers dug into her hips, but he held still. His muscled thighs trembled, and as the initial pain ebbed, she became aware of his harsh breath and could sense his barely maintained control.

She rose up, bracing herself on her forearms. Every nerve in her body seemed centered between her legs, every movement, every breath, sending wave after wave of pleasure from belly to breast and back again.

Michel began to move, pulling out and then pushing back in, setting up a slow, carefully orchestrated rhythm. Gabriella's body responded, her pussy clenching and unclenching around his thrusting shaft. She rocked on her knees, back and forth, matching his movements. Her body grew slick with sweat, and she labored for every breath as a white-hot tension formed in the pit of her stomach.

Michel released her waist and bent forward, covering her from behind, his chest pressed against her back. Capturing her breasts, he pinched her nipples in an almost cruel

manner, and yet Gabriella responded as if he'd stroked her in the most loving of gestures.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked, increasing his pace, pressing harder and deeper with each new thrust. "My hard cock in your pussy?"

"Yes," she said, her voice breaking on a sob. "God, yes. Fuck me, Michel."

He slammed into her, again and again, and Gabriella met his every move. Faster and harder, her entire body vibrating and shaking until the tension in her abdomen exploded and she screamed. "Michel!"

"Yes!" He thrust into her hard, once, twice, three times, and then stopped, buried deep in her pussy, rocking his hips forward as he filled her with his hot cum.

Gabriella dropped her head on the pillows, crying quietly, her body shaking as if rocked by aftershocks of a violent earthquake. Michel moved with her, sprawling on top of her, his weight pressing her into the mattress, his face buried in her hair at the base of her neck.

As they lay still, she could feel his cock shrinking, growing smaller inside her, until it slipped free, and even that small movement brought a fresh spasm of pleasure to her overly sensitized clit. She shifted, moving her head to the side and struggling to slow her ragged breathing.

Michel rolled off her, sprawling on the mattress and pulling her into his arms. He helped her roll over, and then tenderly brushed her hair back from her face.

"My God," she whispered.

Mine  
*by Jill Noelle*

"Yes." He stroked her cheek, her neck, and then lower, gently cupping her breast. "Perfection personified."

Gabriella swallowed convulsively, her throat tight and her mouth dry. "Michel, may I have something to drink?"

He dipped his head and kissed her lightly on the lips, then sprang from the bed.

"Of course, love," he said, stalking across the room to the wet bar. "Anything you desire."

"We have to keep your strength up," he added, turning briefly to offer a lopsided grin. "It's going to be a very long night."

Gabriella released a sigh, part pleasure, part melancholy, knowing the sun would rise too soon.

## **Chapter Four**

Warm lips moved across his chest, like butterfly wings fluttering against his skin. A wet tongue flicked at his nipple, drawing a groan that seemed to come from deep in his soul. He lay still, but opened his eyes so he could watch her as she tentatively explored his body in an almost worshipful manner. She'd flipped her long, silky tresses over her shoulder, and he studied her profile, his heart tripping at her flawless beauty. Morning sunlight filtered in through the blinds, bathing her naked flesh in a warm, golden glow. She stretched to reach his other nipple, drawing it into her mouth and sucking it gently, and Michel caught his breath. He reached out, cupping her head and holding her close. Her gaze flew to his face, her eyes wide.

"Good morning," he said, his words catching as she released him and sat back on her heels.

"Good morning, Michel," she answered him solemnly, but then flashed him a mischievous grin. "Did you sleep well?"

"Mmmm ... come here, you minx." Michel grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her down into his arms. "Yes, I slept well. For an entire hour."

She snuggled against him, soft and warm and incredibly desirable. Michel took her hand and brought it down between them. "I want you. Again."

"So I feel," she said, grasping his hard cock in her fist and caressing it lightly. "Michel, we have to talk."

"Later," he said, thrusting his hips into her downward stroke.

"No. Now." She stilled, but didn't release him. "It's morning, Michel. We only have a few days. You must begin my training."

It took a moment for her words to penetrate his lust-clouded mind, but when they did, he shifted away from her touch, rolling onto his side so he could face her. "If I found a way for you to avoid it, would you still go to the king?"

She averted her gaze, but nodded. "Yes. I have to."

A wave of anger and disgust drove him from the bed, and he paced away from her, clenching his fists as he struggled to control the violent impulses that raged through his body. He wanted to break something, anything, to pound his fist into the nearest wall ... or into the face of his liege.

"Michel, it's my duty. You know I don't have a choice."

He turned, studying her silently for a moment, wondering if she could see the pain, the revulsion he felt at the thought of her with another man, any other man, let alone the depraved and sadistic lunatic who was their king.

"Last night," he began, and then stopped. He shook his head. Last night had been a dream, not to be repeated. "Never mind. You're right."

He returned to the bed, sprawling on his back, one arm thrown across his eyes. He couldn't, wouldn't, look at her. "Finish what you started."

Several moments passed, and then he felt her move closer, smelled her essence as she bent over him, held his breath as he anticipated her touch.



"Our king has very specific tastes," he told her, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "You must be boldly aggressive, and very creative in your lovemaking."

Again, her lips touched his chest, only this time her kisses were firmer, less tentative. Struggling to detach himself from the situation, Michel continued his monologue. "He will require you to speak to him. He receives great pleasure in hearing a woman express her desire to be with him, to hear what she has planned for their time together."

Another beat of silence, and then, "I want you."

She spoke the words in a rush, her voice cracking, and Michel sighed. "I'm afraid you'll have to be a bit more convincing, Brie. Come on. Tell me what you're feeling, what you want, what you'll *do* to me."

"I can't."

Michel moved his arm away from his eyes and found her once again sitting back on her heels. "Sure you can."

"No, I can't. I don't know what to say. I know ... I know the mechanics of it all, and I know what we did last night, but I don't know what turns a man on."

"First of all, you don't need to know what turns a man on. The only thing you need to worry about—the only thing you need to learn—is what turns the *king* on."

He took her hand. "Come here. Sit on me so I can feel your hot, wet pussy."

She straddled his waist, bracing herself with her palms flat against his chest. Michel wanted to reach out and touch her, to capture her breasts in his palms, to hear her moan with desire, but he pushed those thoughts away and focused on

the task at hand. "Now move. Slide your ass back and forth and rub yourself against my cock."

Gabriella slid down, and then back, caressing him with her pussy, bathing him in her slick, hot juices. Her head fell back, her lips parted, and she released a soft moan. Michel stared, transfixed by her beauty, by the wanton expression on her face. His cock twitched, and he fought the urge to thrust into her, to bury himself in her heat and forget. About Beau, about kings and kingdoms and other people's suffering. Instead, he called on his anger, using it as a shield. "Now talk to me. Tell me my hard cock feels good."

Silence, broken only by her harsh breathing as she continued to move against him.

"Gabriella. Say it. Now."

She looked at him, staring into his eyes, and he caught his breath at the passion he saw reflected in her gaze.

"Your cock feels so good against my pussy. You make me so hot ... so wet. I want you. I want to take your hard cock inside me."

*Fuck.* Michel cleared his throat. "Now lean forward. Offer me your breasts and tell me you want to ride me."

She drifted forward, bringing her breasts to his lips. Michel captured one puckered nipple between his lips, laving it gently with the tip of his tongue.

"Oh, God. I want your cock. I want you inside me, now, please." Her ass slid back, and she squirmed against him, whimpering softly.

Michel grasped her hips, lifting her roughly and then bringing her back down, impaling her on his hard shaft. He

thrust upward, hard, and she cried out, digging her nails into his chest.

"Now ride me, Gabriella. Fuck my cock."

She sat back, lifting herself up slowly, then sliding back down, awkwardly at first and then, after a few strokes, setting a rhythm that left him breathless.

"That's it, baby." He reached to caress her breasts, molding them in his palms.

"Oh, Michel, your cock feels so good. You're so big, so hard." She increased her pace, bouncing up and down, her eyes closed.

Calling on strength he hadn't known he possessed, Michel lay still, allowing her to control the moment. Their bodies slapped together with each downward stroke, and her pussy muscles grasped his shaft, tight and hot.

"Oh, God." She gasped. "Oh, my God."

Michel felt her spasm against him, wave after rippling wave as she found her release. He grasped her waist, thrusting upward to meet her. "Tell me, Brie. Tell me what you want."

"I want you to come inside me. Please, Michel, come. Let me feel it, hot and hard."

Her words threw him over the edge, shattering his control, and he flipped her onto her back. He captured her lips, pouring all of his emotions into a kiss, swallowing her cries as he slammed into her again and again. His vision went black, and then he exploded, pumping his hips, filling her with his seed.

*Mine*, he thought, as he collapsed on top of her, gasping for breath. "You're mine."

"What did you say?"

Michel shook his head, realizing he'd spoken his thoughts aloud. He nuzzled her neck, breathing in the scent of woman that was uniquely Gabriella. A sense of sadness, of longing for what could never be, washed over him, and he pulled away. He rolled into a sitting position on the edge of the bed and reached for his pants. Drawing them on, he stood and buttoned them, then reached for his shirt.

"You're leaving?"

He couldn't look at her, didn't think he could handle seeing her, naked and disheveled, fresh from their lovemaking. "I have an appointment."

"Will you be gone long?"

He crossed the room. "A few hours. I'll lock the door. Try to get some sleep."

As the door slid shut behind him, he turned, slamming his fist into the smooth, steel panel. Pain shot up his arm and into his shoulder, and he leaned his forehead against the cool metal. He concentrated on regulating his breathing as he fought his way back from the brink of mind-numbing anger. After a moment, he managed to regain control, and he punched in his personal code, engaging the lock.

Without a backward glance, he walked away.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriella crossed the room to the window. "Blinds open."

The wide Venetian blinds slid silently upward, exposing enormous panes of glass that extended from floor to ceiling. Sunlight flooded the room, driving away the shadows. Gabriella sighed and leaned against the windowsill, her gaze glued to the walkway below. A moment passed, and then he strode into view.

She worried her bottom lip as she watched him make his way through the gardens and pass beneath an archway into the military annex north of King Clovis's private apartments. She frowned. What kind of business could Michel have with the king's royal guards? As far as she knew, his duties only extended to dealings with the Select Few. For a moment, her breath caught in her throat, but then she released a sigh and shook her head.

"Beau," she said, smiling at her own silliness. *Of course.* Beaufort LeBlanc, Michel's best friend, was a member of the Guard. She wrinkled her forehead. In fact, if she remembered correctly, Beau had recently been promoted to head of security. Now *that* might prove problematic.

A buzzer sounded, sharp and loud, and Gabriella jumped. "Dammit."

Reaching to scoop her wrinkled gown from the floor, she hurried across the room. She hit a button on a recessed panel near the door. "Yes, who is it?"

She struggled her way into her dress, and then ran shaky fingers through her mussed hair.

"Tomas, miss, from below stairs."

The cleaning service? Gabriella scowled at the intrusion. She needed a long, hot bath and a couple hours' solitude in

order to sort out her thoughts and solidify her plans. "Can't you come back later?"

"I'm afraid not, miss. I have a schedule to keep."

Gabriella scanned the room, taking in the unmade bed, scattered clothing, and empty glasses. She pressed another button, releasing the lock, and turned away from the door.

"Very well, come in."

Returning to her post by the window, she stared out into the gardens. The housekeeper silently moved about the room, and after a moment, she nearly forgot he was there.

"You've begun your training then, miss?"

Gabriella spun around, caught off guard by such a personal question, but the man had his back to her. She studied him for a few moments as he stripped the bed. Finally, he straightened and turned, offering her a short bow. "Miss Bergeron, I was sent to ascertain your progress, and to offer my assistance."

Gabriella hesitated. "Sent by whom?"

"Our mutual friend, of course." He dug in his pocket, and then pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. "Here. Perhaps this will put you at ease."

She took the paper and opened it up, smoothing out the wrinkles. A large sun, bisected by a golden scepter, sat below the words "Sun King." She crumpled the missive in her fist and handed it back to him. "How did you get in here?"

"His reach is broad, miss. Now, is everything going well? Is there anything I can do to help?"

Gabriella wiped sweaty palms against her skirt, burying her hands in the voluminous folds to hide their shaking.

"Everything is fine. I expect I will be joining the king within a few days."

"And there have been no problems? No signs of suspicion?" Tomas took a step closer, staring at her as if she'd sprouted horns.

"No, of course not," Gabriella said, her voice rising. *Damn, damn, and double damn.* "Look, everything is fine. I'm a bit nervous, of course, but that's to be expected."

"Of course." Tomas placed a hand on her arm. "Be easy, miss. I mean you no harm. I ... we understand the strain you're under, and the sacrifice you're making for the cause."

Gabriella moved away from his touch and his suffocating presence. "You shouldn't be here. Michel could return at any moment."

"I understand, miss. My position within the household is legitimate, if temporary. If you need me, send a message below." Tomas nodded once, and then returned to his task. "I'll just finish up here and be on my way."

Driven by nervous energy, Gabriella paced back and forth a few times and then rushed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

"I'm taking a bath," she called out. "Please lock up when you leave."

She turned on the tap, drowning out whatever response Tomas made, and watched as the hot water filled up the enormous, sunken Jacuzzi tub. A bottle of bath oil sat on a nearby ledge and she dumped some in, breathing deeply as the fragrant mist wafted up with the steam.

"Lemon Drop Essence." She read the label and bitterly added, "How nice."

Not wishing to analyze the ugly emotions that rose to the surface when she thought about the dozens of other women who had probably made good use of the bath oil, Gabriella hurriedly stripped from her gown. She turned off the tap and stepped into the bath, sinking down into the scalding water. She sucked in her breath, inching down a bit at a time, allowing herself to get used to the heat. Finally, she lay back, resting her head against the sloped end of the tub.

She closed her eyes and sighed as the bubbling jets worked their magic, washing away the tension. Soon, she found herself drifting, half in a dream. Her thoughts turned to Michel, and she smiled sleepily, remembering how he'd looked when he'd awakened to find her leaning over him. That sexy smile, his voice husky when he'd wished her good morning. She opened her eyes and sighed again, feeling like a vapid heroine in an old, gothic romance novel.

"Ah, Michel," she said. "If only..."

She sat up suddenly and reached for the sponge. If only, nothing.

She scrubbed herself vigorously, angrily. From the moment she was born, her life was not meant to be her own. Everything had changed, and yet nothing had changed, and the last thing she needed right now was another complication.



## Chapter Five

"The last thing you need right now is this kind of complication."

Michel shot Beau a "go to hell" look and leaned back against the counter in his friend's tiny kitchenette. "Tell me something I don't know. But, man, you just don't understand. She's—"

"Hot?" Beau snorted and took another sip of coffee. "Tell me something *I* don't know. But you can't risk being distracted right now by a sweet piece of ass."

Michel stepped forward and leaned across the table, bracing himself with his hands on either side of Beau's plate. "She is *not* just a piece of ass, my friend, and if you talk about her like that again, I will knock your teeth out."

Beau sat back, holding his hands up. "Whoa, easy. I didn't mean that the way it came out. I'm simply trying to point out that we have a job to do that's going to require your undivided attention."

Michel sank into a chair and put his head in his hands. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just that I've never felt like this before. The thought of handing her over to Clovis makes me sick."

"Michel, are you in love with this woman?"

Michel looked up. "Do I love her?"

"Yes, love her. You know, 'I want to wake up with you every morning, have children with you, grow old with you.'"

"Aw, Beau, I didn't know you cared." Michel placed his hand on Beau's, laughing when his friend yanked away.

"You ass."

"Yeah, I know. So, what's the latest?" Michel asked, changing the subject. "Have you received an update?"

"Actually, I did. I had a visitor earlier this morning. Apparently, they've analyzed the information we provided, and have a strategy that will, if all goes as planned, minimize resistance and casualties."

"And how do you and I fit into this plan?"

Beau rose and began clearing off the table.

"We need to open the gates," he said, carrying his empty cup and plate to the sink. "Do you want some coffee?"

"Your coffee?" Michel pulled a face. "Not even if I were lost in the desert with no water in sight. Beau, stop changing the subject. How the hell are we going to open the gates?" Michel scowled. Was this the best they could come up with? The gates were heavily guarded. If they thought they could just waltz right in, they were in for a rude awakening.

"Here, have some coffee. You take it black, right?" Beau set a steaming cup of the pitch-black brew on the table in front of Michel, and then resumed his seat.

"Beau?"

"I'll handle the guards, Michel. Don't worry about it. I'm in charge of security, remember? On the night in question, I'll arrange a distraction. The guards will be busy with something much more important."

"Like?"

Beau looked away.

"You don't have a plan yet, do you?" Michel asked, his voice rising. "Shit."

"Not yet, but I'll think of something. How difficult can it be? They follow my orders, and by the time any of them figure out it's a trap, it'll be too late."

"You better hope so, or we're all fucked." Michel pushed away his untouched cup and stood. He brushed a hand through his hair. "I need to get back."

He started to turn away, but then stopped. "Beau, how many more days? Did your visitor this morning tell you when this is going to happen?"

"Seven days."

"Damn."

"Too long?" Beau asked, and his voice held an unusual note of compassion.

"Yeah. Too long."

Michel turned and walked out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Two days later, Gabriella and Michel stood together on the balcony, sharing a drink as they leaned against the wrought iron railing. Gabriella looked up, studying his familiar profile in the late afternoon sun. *How handsome you are*, she thought.

"Brie," Michel said, suddenly turning to her, "have you ever seen what lies beyond the walls?"

"No. I've never been beyond the gates." She felt the heat of a blush in her cheeks at having been caught staring at him, but he did not seem to notice.

"Come on."

He took her hand, and she followed him inside, but as he led her toward the door, she pulled back. "Where are we going?"

"I want to show you something."

"Michel, we don't have much time. You only have three days left to complete my training. The king—"

"Can wait." He gave a tug, forcing her to follow him out the door. "This won't take long."

Gabriella hurried to keep up with his long-legged, purposeful strides. He led her down a rickety back staircase and into the cool shade of an inner courtyard. The place held an air of decaying neglect, and Gabriella wrinkled her nose at the odor of garbage and debris that emanated from several overflowing bins.

"Where are we?"

"Just behind the stables. A long time ago, there was a door leading out here from the kitchens."

"Was?"

"It's sealed off now. No one is supposed to be out here."

Gabriella pulled back, digging in her heels. "Then what are we doing here?"

"I told you. I want to show you something." He moved forward, and she reluctantly followed him several hundred yards across the cobblestone courtyard, carefully picking her way through the piles of refuse. When they reached the wall, Michel glanced around and then, releasing her hand, retrieved an old, rusty bucket that lay on the ground a few feet away. He brought it to the wall and stood it on end, with the bottom facing up.

"Climb up. I'll hold you steady."

He took her hand again. Gabriella looked from him, to the bucket, and then glanced at the top of the wall. A frisson of foreboding raced up her spine, and her arms broke out in gooseflesh.

"Michel, I don't think—" She broke off, shaking her head. "All right. But if you let me fall..."

Gathering her skirts in one hand, and holding tight to Michel with the other, she climbed upon the bucket. It wobbled precariously for a moment and she stilled, holding her breath until the bucket settled once more. "This is crazy."

"Hold on and use me to gain your balance, and then look out over the wall to your right."

Gabriella leaned forward, bracing one hand against the rough stone wall and peering up over the edge.

For a moment, all she could do was stare. Her breath caught in her throat, and her eyes grew wide with disbelief. A stretch of open land lay before her, gently sloping down to a narrow, murky canal. Thatched huts stood in neat rows, one butting against another, hundreds of them, all the way down to the water's edge. And in amongst the huts, milling about like cattle, were thousands of people. Men, women, and children huddled in small groups.

"My God. Who are they? Why are they out there?" Gabriella asked, finally finding her voice.

"They are his majesty's royal subjects, of course." Michel's tone dripped with sarcasm. "Notice anything peculiar?"

Gabriella studied the faces of those who were nearest. Their eyes were glazed, their expressions blank, their skin

sallow and gaunt. "You mean, other than the fact that they look as if they haven't eaten in months?"

"Yes."

She continued to scan the crowds, listening to Michel's soft breathing and the song of birds in the trees somewhere off behind her. And then she gasped. "The silence. They aren't making any noise."

"Correct. Come on, before someone sees us." He grasped her waist and swung her down from the bucket.

"But Michel, what's wrong with them? Why don't they speak? Why do they look...?"

"Like they're starving? Because they are." He took her hand again, leading her back the way they had come, up the back staircase. Only after they were safely ensconced in his room did he turn to her, and the anger she saw in his face forced her to take a step back.

"They don't make noise, because the king does not want to be reminded of their presence. They are a nuisance, but a necessary one. Their labor provides the food and other luxuries within these walls. In return, King Clovis allows them to keep just enough food to sustain them. And if they are quiet, he doesn't have them shot." He turned away. "I need another drink."

"Me, too." She followed him to the bar and slumped onto a tall stool, suddenly dizzy. She took a long, fortifying gulp from her drink, wincing as it burned its way down her throat.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," she lied, her mind reeling. She hadn't thought the situation could be worse, but it was. "How long have they been out there?"

"For as long as I can remember." He stared at her, hard, over the rim of his glass.

A sudden thought made her stomach clench again. "Michel, why did you show me that? I mean, why did you show me that today?"

His gaze skated away and he shrugged. "I just thought you should know, that's all."

"I'm sorry. It doesn't—can't—change anything for me, Michel; you know that." Hell, if anything, it solidified her resolve. She placed a hand on his arm, willing him to understand, but he pulled away.

"Why? He's evil, Brie, and the things that go on in his private chambers..." Michel's words trailed off, and he took another hefty drink of scotch.

"If he's so damned evil, then why do you stay here? Why do you continue with what you're doing? Training young women and turning them over to him like they're nothing but pieces of meat? Besides, what can we do? There are no choices for us here, Michel." Her voice shook with anger. How dare he criticize her? He was just as bad—no, worse. At least she had a plan for ending it all.

He opened his mouth, snapped it shut, and then shrugged again. He carefully placed his empty glass on the bar, and then walked away from her and into the bedroom.

Gabriella sighed. Why did everything have to be so complicated? And why the hell did she have to go and take

her anger out on the only true friend she'd ever had? She couldn't blame him. After all, he was as much a pawn as anyone else under the king's rule. What choice had any of them had? What other life had they ever known? She thought about what he'd said—about what went on in Clovis's private chambers—and her hands began to shake. Oh, she knew what went on there, all right. It was the only reason she'd agreed to assist the others. The source of her nightmares, and the driving force behind her resolve to see the thing through.

*He holds orgies—mothers, daughters, his own flesh and blood, it matters not. Children as young as twelve. No one is safe from his deviant ways.*

Even now, just thinking of all she'd been told, she grew nauseated. Her first reaction had been denial, but bit by bit, little by little, she'd come to accept. From there, it had only been a short leap for her to agree to assist in bringing it all to an end. She shook her head. She'd come full circle, and time grew short.

Standing, she placed her glass on the bar beside Michel's and went into the bedroom. He lay on his back on the bed, much as he had that morning, one arm tossed carelessly over his face.

For a moment, she stood just inside the archway, drinking in the sight of him. He was everything any woman could ever ask for in a man. Young, strong, intelligent, and devastatingly handsome. He would make some lucky woman a fine husband, and yet his life had been wasted in service to the king. She wondered, suddenly, what he would do afterwards,



when he had a choice. Would he forgive her? Assuming she lived long enough for him to have a chance.

A lump formed in her throat, and her eyes stung with tears. She drew a deep breath and swiped the wetness from her cheeks.

"Brie?" Michel leaned up, bracing himself on his elbows. "What's wrong?"

She went to him, stripping from her gown and tossing it on the floor as she approached the bed. Naked, she climbed up between his outstretched legs, and then leaned forward, bracing herself with her hands on his chest.

Michel reached out, capturing a tear as it slid down her cheek. "You're crying."

She tried to smile, to speak and reassure him, but his gentleness only made her sadder, and she choked back a sob.

"Oh, Brie." He pulled her down into his arms, holding her close. "I'm sorry."

His kind words were her undoing, and the floodgates of her fear and despair opened. She sobbed like a child, her face buried in his chest.

"It will be okay," he told her, over and over, speaking quietly to her until, after a few minutes, she drew a shuddering breath and sat up.

She sniffled loudly and he smiled, handing her a tissue from a box on the bedside table. "Here. Blow your nose and dry your eyes."

She took the tissue and shakily returned his smile. "Thank you. I don't know what came over me. I just ... those people, and my, well, everything."

"I understand," he told her, running a hand down the side of her arm. "Is there anything I can do for you? Are you hungry? I can call down for something to eat."

Gabriella shook her head and lay down beside him. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her close, and she snuggled against his side, her head resting on his chest. "Just hold me for a little while, please."

"Of course."

He stroked her arm in silence, and she began to relax under his gentle ministrations. Lulled by the sound of his heartbeat, she let her eyes drift shut.

"Michel Auclair!"

Gabriella jumped up at the sound of the unfamiliar voice shouting Michel's name. "What the hell was that?"

Michel sighed and rolled from the bed.

"That," he said, as he punched several buttons on a panel in the wall, "is the king's personal assistant."

A partition opened, revealing a large screen built into the wall. Michel pressed a few more buttons, and the screen lit up. "Video-phone on."

An image appeared on the screen, shimmered momentarily, and then cleared.

"This is Michel. What can I do for you, sir?"

"I've been instructed to check on the progress of your latest student. The king is anxious to meet with her."

Gabriella left the bed and walked up behind Michel, and then peered around, her mouth hanging open. "That's amazing."

"Is that her?" The man on the screen stretched his neck, and Gabriella shrank back.

"Can he see me?" she whispered, remembering her state of undress.

"Yes, and hear you. Stay there and be quiet."

Michel walked forward and his body covered nearly the entire screen. "Tell the king we need a few more days. This one is having difficulty learning some of her duties."

Gabriella snorted, and Michel shot her a glare. She opened her eyes wide, in what she hoped was an expression of innocence, and smiled.

*Be quiet*, he mouthed, and then returned his attention to the screen.

"The king will not be happy," the man was saying, "but I will pass along your message."

Michel nodded. "Be blessed."

"Be blessed," came the response, and then the screen went black.

"Michel," Gabriella said, once she was sure they were alone, "I really don't need a few more days."

"I don't think that's your decision to make." He walked around her and resumed his position on the bed. "You think you're ready, do you?"

She bit her lip, but nodded.

"Then prove it. Seduce me, Brie. Pretend I am your king, and show me how much you've learned."

She smiled softly, even as her heart began a steady pounding and her stomach tightened with desire. "My pleasure, your majesty. Your wish is my command."

She sauntered closer, hips swaying, deliberately, overly provocative. Slipping her thumbs beneath the straps of her gown, she lowered them over her shoulders until the tops of her breasts were visible.

"Oh, sire," she said, running one long nail down the deep valley between her breasts, "I'm so hot for you. My whole body tingles when I think of your big, hard cock sliding into me."

Michel's brows rose, and Gabriella coughed lightly to disguise a giggle. Turning, she wiggled her bottom, and her dress slid down, catching on her hips.

"Brie."

"Yes, Michel?" she asked, throwing a sultry glance over her shoulder, complete with pouting lips and batting eyelashes.

"Come here. Now."

"But sire," she said, facing him once again and arching her back. She cupped her breasts and rolled her nipples with her forefingers. "Isn't anticipation an important part of seduction?"

His gaze jumped from her face to her chest, and then back again, and he literally glowered at her, his forehead creasing, his lips compressing in a harsh and unhappy line. Gabriella smiled and stepped forward, out of her dress. She crawled up beside him on the bed, panther-like.

"Oh, your highness," she said, lowering her head to nuzzle his neck, "have I displeased you? Have I been very, very naughty?"

Perhaps you should punish me?" She looked up, catching his gaze, her heart pounding, waiting for his response.

Michel inclined his head. "Perhaps I should."

He moved suddenly, grasping her arms and flipping her onto her back, pinning her hands above her head. He loomed over her, pinning her to the mattress, and Gabriella caught her breath.

He took her wrists in one hand, and thrust the other between her legs. Roughly, he fingered her, plunging in and out of her wetness. Gabriella rolled her hips. Eyes closed, she arched her back and spread her legs wider, eagerly accepting his touch.

Hot lips captured her hard nipple, drawing it deep. He nipped at her tender flesh and she cried out, instinctively straining against him.

He raised his head and smiled at her, but something dark and dangerously exciting lay barely hidden behind those upturned lips and warm, blue eyes.

"You dare to fight me?" he asked, his tone laced with warning. He raised a brow. "Ah, my little slut, I'm afraid you've just increased your punishment three-fold."

Gabriella licked her lips, her throat tightening even as a wave of excitement washed over her. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"I mean, I had thought to go easy on you," he said, backing off the bed and pulling her up with him, "but your defiance cannot go unanswered."

He turned her around, and then grasped her hair, forcing her to lean over the bed.

"I'm sorry," she said, suddenly uncertain. "I didn't mean—ah!"

A burst of pain followed his sharp, stinging slap on her ass.

"Silence," he said, and brought his hand down again. "You will not say another word unless I tell you to speak."

Gabriella swayed forward, but he held her steady. Her ass cheeks burned, yet the heat and pain paled next to the blaze of lust and need that fired her blood. His hand came down again, and then again, and tears formed in her eyes as she moaned, the sound a mixture of pain and need. "Michel, please."

"Please what?" he asked her. "What do you want, Gabriella?"

"I want you to fuck me." Her answer came swiftly, on a wave of desperate desire.

"And what kind of punishment would that be?" He stroked her ass, and then reached between her legs. He delved into her wetness, running his finger from pussy to her ass, dipping into her tight, puckered hole with each passing stroke. "No, my dear, I don't think you deserve such pleasure."

Gabriella stilled, struggling to quiet her pounding heart, calmed a bit by his deep, rumbling voice, but unable to make sense of his words. "Michel, I—"

His hand came down again on her ass, much harder this time, and she cried out.

"I told you not to speak," he said, his voice deceptively mild. "Do you know what I consider the epitome of surrender, my sweet slut?"

Gabriella hesitated, afraid to answer. As if reading her thoughts, Michel chuckled.

"That's right. Good girl. It was a rhetorical question." Again, he explored her with his fingers, each stroke like a bolt of lightening to her overheated senses. Her juices flowed unhindered, coating her thighs, filling the air with a heady, musky scent.

She heard a rustling sound behind her, and then he moved closer and the head of his cock rested against her ass. He slid it up and down between her cheeks, brushing her swollen clit, and Gabriella moaned. Her leg muscles started to give, but he wrapped an arm around her stomach, holding her to him.

Leaning over, his chest against her back, he traced her earlobe with his lips.

"It's time for your punishment, my love," he whispered.

He straightened, and Gabriella felt the head of his cock pressing against her anus. A sudden, vivid erotic image filled her mind and she nearly came as she imagined what he was about to do. Yes, she thought, *take me*.

Michel shifted forward and entered her, a little at a time, inch by agonizing inch. Gabriella felt herself stretching, and the line between pleasure and pain blurred until the two sensations seemed one.

"Fuck, you're tight." His cock buried inside her, Michel leaned forward again. He grasped a handful of her hair and pulled her head back, bringing her lips to his in a punishing kiss that bruised her lips.

Gabriella whimpered softly against his mouth as he began to move his hips, his hard cock slowly sliding in and out. Michel broke their kiss and straightened, but kept hold of her hair as he continued to move. With his other hand, he

reached around, finding her clit and rolling it between his thumb and finger.

"My god," Gabriella said, struggling to draw in a complete breath. She closed her eyes against her own wantonness. "Oh, yes, Michel. That feels so good. Harder, please. Fuck me harder."

Michel increased his pace, pushing deeper with each forward stroke, filling her with his cock and rubbing her clit, faster and faster as tiny lights flashed behind Gabriella's eyelids and a tingling began in her toes.

"Come for me, Brie," he said, his hold on her hair tightening. "Let me hear you scream my name when you come."

Gabriella dug her fingers into the blankets and hung on, feeling herself being lifted, higher and higher, the sensations nearly frightening in their intensity.

"Oh, God!" She cried out as the first wave crested and her vision blurred.

"That's it. Come." Michel slammed into her, and then he stiffened and she felt his hot cum just as her own world exploded in a burst of white-hot light.

The both fell forward, tumbling onto the bed, their sweat-soaked bodies entwined as Michel wrapped her in his embrace.

"You're going to kill me," he said, placing a light kiss on her forehead. "I'm too old for this."

Gabriella looked up in surprise. "You're only thirty-four, Michel. That's hardly old."



"It is when the woman you're with is ten years younger, and offers you a virtual smorgasbord of erotic delights."

Gabriella smiled inwardly and snuggled closer, her eyes drifting close as she drank in his warmth.

"Shit." Michel disengaged himself from her embrace and sat up. "What time is it?"

Gabriella glanced at the clock. "Just after eleven, why?"

"I need to take a quick shower. I have an appointment."

"Now?" Gabriella frowned. What could he possibly have to do at this time of night?

He dropped a kiss on her nose, and then leaped from the bed. "Yes, now. Go to sleep. I shouldn't be gone long, and I'll try not to wake you."

He turned and started toward the bathroom.

"Michel?"

"Yes?" He turned.

"You can wake me if you promise to be very nice about it."

"See what I mean?" He laughed as he headed into the bathroom. "Insatiable."

## Chapter Six

Michel sprinted up the stairs to Beau's second-floor apartment. Although it was well after midnight, and the chances of being seen were slim, he kept to the shadows and tried to stay light on his feet. When he reached the landing, he quickly glanced in each direction and then, certain the way was clear, jogged down the dimly lit hallway.

As he neared Beau's door, his friend stepped out.  
"You're late."

Michel nodded. "I know. I'm sorry. Are you ready?"

Beau brushed past Michel. "Yeah, come on, we need to hurry. We have less than twenty minutes before the guard returns to his post at the gate."

They left the building and crossed into the gardens, hastening along a path which led directly across the city proper toward the south gate. The grounds were deserted, but they weren't taking any chances. They walked quickly, heads down, looking neither left nor right.

Michel's heart pounded in his chest, and a heady feeling of danger and excitement fired his blood. As they approached the gate, he slowed his pace and scanned the perimeter for any sign of the guard.

Beau held up a hand for Michel to wait, and slipped silently into a small, stone structure, which served as a gatehouse and shelter for the guards during inclement weather.

Michel waited impatiently, shifting from foot to foot, all his senses on high alert. If they were discovered, their whole

plan could be blown out of the water. And there wasn't time to formulate a new one.

After what seemed like an eternity, Beau stepped back into view and signaled for Michel to join him.

"We need to make this quick," Beau said, stepping aside to make room for Michel in the tiny control room. He indicated a panel of buttons and knobs against the far wall. "See those numbers along the bottom?"

Michel nodded, and then realizing Beau probably couldn't see well in the dimly lit room, he cleared his throat and said, "Yes. What's the code?"

"It's a series of numbers, actually, and you'll have to memorize them. We can't risk writing them down." Beau stepped forward. "Quick now, let me show you."

As Michel peered over Beau's shoulder, his friend started punching buttons on the panel. "Three sets of numbers, four digits each. The first is one, six, five, nine.

"Between each series, you have to pull this lever, here." He slid a large red bar on the upper left-hand corner of the panel down, and there was a small *ping*.

"Nine, five, six, one," Beau said, entering each number and then pulling the red lever again. "And then four, two, eight, zero."

*Ping, ping.*

Outside, the gate slid up silently, just as Michel caught sight of a figure a few hundred yards away, moving slowly toward them. "The guard."

"Shit." Beau quickly punched in another series of numbers. There was another *ping*, louder this time, and the gate slid closed.

They rushed outside and sprinted into the shadows along the wall.

"Damn, that was close," Michel said as they retraced their steps toward Beau's apartment. "Do you think he saw us?"

"If he did, we wouldn't be standing here talking about it; we'd be dead. My guards have orders to shoot first, and ask questions later."

"Lovely."

"Necessary. Unlike you, I've had to sell myself off as something I'm not."

They'd reached the foot of the staircase that led to Beau's apartment, and Michel came to a stop. He spun around, his hands clenched into fists at his side. "Are you saying I haven't had to make any sacrifices?"

Beau didn't answer, but his silence was all Michel needed to hear.

"You son of a bitch." He took a step forward, coming toe-to-toe with Beau. "You think I haven't had to sacrifice anything? In two days, I'm handing the woman I love over to our king. I can't save her, and there's nothing I can do about the fact that Clovis is going to fuck her, probably several times, before I can pull her from his clutches. Isn't that enough of a sacrifice for you, Beau? Or would you like to see me bleed, as well?"

Beau's mouth fell open and he shook his head, slowly, as if coming out of a deep trance. "So you do love her."

Michel stepped back, the anger draining away as quickly as it had come. He turned and started up the stairs. "Come on. I need some of your famous coffee."

"Damn," Beau said, falling into step behind him, "you must really have it bad."

\* \* \* \*

While Beau started a fresh pot of brew, Michel paced the tiny apartment. *So you do love her.* "Shit."

"Sit down, Michel." Beau pulled out a chair at the tiny dinette that served as the only seating in the efficiency-sized flat. "You're wearing a hole in my fine carpet."

Michel snorted, but took the chair, flipping it around so he could straddle it and resting his forearms on the high back. He drew a deep breath and tried to marshal his chaotic thoughts. "Coffee done?"

"Just about," Beau said, joining him at the table. "Listen, Michel, why don't you take her and go? Leave first thing in the morning. I can handle this without you."

Michel shook his head. "No way. I'm not leaving you to do this alone. Besides, you can't be in two places at once. The gates have to be opened simultaneously."

"If your head isn't on straight, you'll be more of a liability than an asset."

"My head's just fine, thanks."

"Yeah, but which head are you thinking with these days, my friend?" Beau laughed, but Michel sensed a note of seriousness in his question.

"You don't trust me?"

Beau returned Michel's stare for a moment, and then nodded. "Yeah, I trust you. Let me get you that cup of coffee."

Beau got up and started into the kitchen, but then stopped. He spun around. "I have an idea."

Michel arched a wary brow. "What's that?"

"Take her out. Get her to safety, and then come back. If you leave first thing in the morning, you'll have plenty of time."

"That's impossible."

"No, it's not. You know the codes. You'll only have twenty minutes, so you'll have to time it perfectly, but it's not impossible."

A tiny thread of hope made Michel smile and it felt as if a weight had been lifted from his heart. "Maybe you're right. It's crazy, but it just might work."

"Assuming the wench agrees to the plan."

"What do you mean?" Michel frowned at Beau's less-than-respectful tone, but let it slide. "Why wouldn't she?"

"Well, she's been trained for her duty since the cradle. I know how you feel, but what about Gabriella? Does she love you in return?"

Michel averted his gaze, unable to think under Beau's piercing stare. Did Gabriella love him? He searched his heart, seeking some reassurance that she did, but came up empty. She wanted him, desired him, that much was certain. But love him? He couldn't be sure. He stood up slowly and righted the chair, sliding it back into place beneath the table.

"It's late," he said. "I need to go."

Beau nodded. "If everything turns out like you hope, you'll need to be at the gate at dawn. I believe the sun rises a little after five in the morning. But remember, you'll only have twenty minutes."

"I understand," Michel said absently, his thoughts already skipping ahead, formulating the conversation he would have with Brie, wondering how she would respond.

"Hey," Michel heard Beau call out as the door closed behind him, "what about your coffee?"

Even in his distracted state, Michel cringed. He was in love, not insane. He checked his watch as he hurried down the stairs. Four hours until dawn.

\* \* \* \*

"Brie, wake up. We need to talk."

Gabriella came instantly awake, blinking against the bright light. She sat up and brushed her hair out of her face.

"Michel? What's wrong?"

"I've been thinking," he said, taking her hand in a firm grip. "About us."

"Us?"

"Yes, you and me. I want you to come away with me, Brie. We'll leave in the morning, before the sun comes up. There's a place I can take you, where you'll be safe, until..."

Gabriella struggled to shake off the fog of sleep and think clearly. "Michel, what are you talking about? Until what?"

His gaze skated away and he shook his head. "Nothing. It's not important."

He turned back. "What's important is that I love you. I can't allow you to go to the king."

"Oh, God." Gabriella pulled away and leaped from the bed. She paced across the room, her thoughts racing. Why, oh why, did things have to be so damned complicated? Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined Michel would come to love her, or the surge of joy she'd feel to hear those words.

"Brie?"

She took a deep breath, gathering her defenses, and turned. "I can't. I'm sorry, but I have to go to the king."

"Why?"

"Because it's my duty. It's what I have to do."

"That was before," he said, coming up off the bed. "You have a choice now. I'm giving you an out."

He joined her near the window and tried to take her in his arms, but she moved out of his reach. "No. Michel, listen to me. I can't go with you."

She watched as her words sank in and his expression changed, and her heart sank, even as she realized she'd succeeded in defeating his plans.

"So that's it, then." He turned away. "I guess there's nothing else to say."

His tone chilled her, and even though he was only a few feet away, it felt as if a chasm had opened between them. She touched his shoulder, biting her lip when he shrugged off her hand.

"Michel, I'm so sorry. I do love you, I—"

He spun around. "Don't say that. Don't you dare tell me you love me."



Mine  
*by Jill Noelle*

She opened her mouth to insist that he listen to her, but he had already walked away.

"I'm going to bed," he said. "I suggest you do the same. Tomorrow, you'll have your wish. I'm sending to you to the king."

## **Chapter Seven**

"My Lord, allow me to present Gabriella Renee Bergeron."

At the servant's introduction, Gabriella stepped into the cavernous chamber that served as the king's central hall. She swept the room with her gaze, instantly recognizing it from a description she'd read in an ancient textbook. The Galerie des Glaces—the Hall of Mirrors. The rectangular room had obviously been constructed after that most famous room in the Chateau de Versailles. A wall of windows overlooked the gardens, and directly opposite each window was an enormous, arcaded mirror. The polished glass caught the light from the noonday sun and tossed it back into the room. The effect, combined with the glare from a dozen large crystal chandeliers, was dazzling in a gaudy, overblown kind of way.

Gabriella blinked rapidly and, gathering her courage, sought out her king. Several men and women lounged on enormous satin pillows, which encircled a raised platform. In the center of that platform, perched like a colorful, overfed parrot on a wide, plush couch, sat Clovis DuFresne. His enormous girth was covered with a flowing robe of royal purple and red, and jewels glittered from every finger as he raised his hand to acknowledge her presence.

Catching his eye, Gabriella smiled, and then dropped to her knees, head lowered, in a show of deference to her liege. Several seconds ticked past, and the silence roared in her ears as her knees began to ache where the rough marble dug into her tender flesh.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the king spoke. "Rise, my dear, and join me. I've been anxious to make your acquaintance."

She straightened, flashing him what she hoped was a flirtatious grin, and scrambled to her feet. She moved forward, her ridiculously high heels clacking loudly on the tiles. Michel had chosen her outfit for this occasion, and the moment he'd presented it to her, she had known it for what it was. A punishment, of sorts, for her betrayal; a whore's gown made of garish red silk cut low at the chest and high on the thighs. She felt as if her bottom was hanging out for all to see, and she barely resisted the urge to tug at the hem as she climbed up the stairs to the dais. She ignored the curious gazes that followed her progress and concentrated, instead, on the king. Everything depended upon his being pleased. Pleased, satisfied, and complacent.

As she approached, Clovis watched her, devouring her with an obnoxious stare that made the hairs on the nape of her neck rise. She shivered, suddenly cold despite the blaze from four large fireplaces, but did not hesitate to take the king's outstretched hand.

"Gabriella, you are a rare beauty. I'm delighted to have you with me at last."

"My Lord, I am honored to have been chosen," Gabriella said, lowering her voice to a throaty whisper. She bent over his hand, providing him with an unobstructed view of her cleavage, and pressed a kiss to his warm, clammy palm. Swallowing back her revulsion, she added a brief swipe of her tongue before releasing him and raising her gaze to his own.

A look of surprise flashed across his face, and then he smiled, obviously quite taken with her unusual greeting.

He again patted the seat beside him. "Sit here, my lovely morsel, and let's get better acquainted."

Something about the way he spoke caused a frisson of unease that set her heart to racing. Warily, she sank into the deep cushion, carefully keeping her knees together; but the moment she was seated, Clovis pulled her into his arms. Unprepared for his assault, she had no time to brace herself, and her head fell back, exposing her neck and breasts to his hot, wet mouth. He smothered her with kisses, slobbering like an infant, laving her flesh with his tongue. Gabriella moaned and squirmed in his embrace, but did not pull away. Instead, calling on every ounce of acting skill she possessed, she whispered her encouragement and arched her back, thrusting her breasts against his face.

Clovis stroked her thighs with one meaty hand and, as he pushed her legs apart, a murmur of excitement came from the crowd of onlookers below.

"I hope you don't mind an audience," the king said, as his seeking fingers found and stroked her beneath her skirt. "They are special friends, intimate friends. We are very open here."

Gabriella clenched her jaw and nodded quickly, unable to speak as the king thrust two fingers inside her. To her utter disbelief and mortification, she realized she was wet, her slick juices easing his entrance as he worked his hand back and forth.

As quickly as he'd accosted her, he released his hold and sat back, breathing heavily, his brow coated with sweat. Gabriella straightened, tugging her skirt down and averting her gaze from the large tent in the front of his royal robes.

"Are you just going to sit there?" he asked, a note of unmistakable challenge in his voice. He held her gaze, arching one bushy brown, as his hands went to the cinch about his waist.

He seemed to be testing her, gauging her reaction, and for a moment, Gabriella could not think. By the time she realized what he intended, he'd released the ties of his robes and pulled them back. Her gaze flew to his lap, and she choked back a gasp as she took in the size of his penis. Erect, it had to be nearly ten inches long, and a full four inches in circumference. A knot of fear formed in the pit of her stomach.

She searched her mind for something, anything, she could say to divert his attention and delay the inevitable, but came up empty. After all, she belonged to him and had been trained for this purpose, and he would expect her to be willing, even eager, to serve. To act as if she were anything other than what he believed her to be would certainly raise his suspicions, and she hadn't come this far, given up so much, to fail now. And in the end, what did it really matter? She'd come to him knowing she would die.

Pushing back her fear and aversion, she stood on shaky legs, raising her skirt until the slinky material caught around her waist. As the king's friends shouted crude comments and suggestions, she straddled Clovis's legs, centering herself

above his straining cock, and bracing herself with her hands on his shoulders.

"You're very big, My Lord," she said, ad-libbing her lines as best she could under the circumstances.

"You're shaking, my dear," Clovis replied. "Don't tell me you're frightened."

Again, the thought that he was testing her came to mind, and she rushed to reassure him. "Merely trembling with my desire for you, My Lord."

She reached up and drew the edges of her bodice back, releasing her breasts from their confinement. She leaned forward, offering them up to his thick-lipped mouth.

He suckled her greedily, nipping at her distended nipples and thrusting his hips in the air. The head of his cock brushed her pussy, and she screwed her eyes shut, held her breath, and lowered herself onto his shaft in one swift, downward motion.

She couldn't hold back the gasp as he filled her, stretching her until she thought she would split in two.

As their audience cheered their approval, she opened her eyes to find the king staring at her, his too-full lips turned up in a smile that could only be described as a look of smug satisfaction.

Quickly, she closed her eyes again, pretending a moan of pleasure, and proceeded to move, sliding up and down, her breasts bouncing as she found her rhythm.

"Oh, yes," the king said, panting beneath her, "you learned your lessons well. Fuck my cock. Make me come, and I'll have someone see to your pleasure afterward."

Gabriella didn't want to pause to consider what he might mean by that last. If she did, she might lose her nerve and go mad. Instead, she did as His Majesty had ordered and rode him hard, biting her lip to hold back a sob of fear and pain as he grasped her waist, digging his fingers into her tender flesh. He raised his hips to meet her downward movement, pressing himself deeper and deeper, using his cock like a battering ram at the gates of her womb.

"Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah," the king said, punctuating each thrust of his hips. His movements became frantic, almost frenzied, his breathing labored.

Gabriella sensed what was about to happen, recognized the dimming of her vision, the way the noisy chants seemed to fade into a distant, unintelligible roar, and she fought to maintain consciousness.

But as the king screamed his release, bucking and thrashing as if he were in the throes of death, Gabriella lost her tenuous grasp on reality and fainted.

\* \* \* \*

Something cool touched Gabriella's brow, and she stirred. As she came awake, she kept her eyes closed, listening carefully and trying to get her bearings. She lay on the softest bed imaginable, her naked body covered by sheets that felt as if they were made of clouds.

*Naked body.*

Her eyes flew open and she sat up, too quickly. The blood rushed to her head as a wave of dizziness washed over her.

"Easy now, or you'll faint again," a vaguely familiar voice said.

Gabriella raised her head and peered into the shadows.  
"Who's there?"

A faint scratching sounded from nearby, and then a candle flared to life, casting her surroundings in a bright, cheerful glow.

"It's a testament to our king's instability that he chooses to live without any of our modern conveniences. Do you think he believes he is Henry the Eighth, reincarnated?"

"Beaufort!" Gabriella gasped, tugging the sheets up to her neck. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might need some help." Beau offered her a sheepish grin, his head tipped to the side as he studied her closely.

"Help? What are you talking about?"

"I had a visitor today, a mutual friend of ours. I think you met him the other day?" Beau sat on the edge of the bed. "I believe you know him as Tomas."

Gabriella's mouth dropped open, but she recovered quickly and averted her gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do. Listen, wench, I'm here to help you. We're on the same team, fighting for the same cause, and I don't have time to play games with you."

Gabriella bristled at his disrespectful tone, and yet a thread of hope rose in her mind.



"How can you help me?" she asked, choosing her words carefully, lest the situation turn out to be something other than what he professed.

Beau cleared his throat. "I assume you have a plan. I'll not interfere, but I want to make sure you succeed, and then escape with your life."

"A plan?"

Beau suddenly leaned in close.

"Stop it, Gabriella," he said, his voice a furious whisper. "We don't have time for this. I have a job to do, and so do you—and if I have anything to do with it, we'll both complete our assignments without a hitch and live to fight another day."

Gabriella shrank back against the headboard, her heart racing. She looked into his eyes, held his gaze, searching for the truth. "What is your assignment?"

"In two days, at dawn, Michel and I will open the gates and allow four thousand troops to invade our city. By that time, you will have assassinated our king, and without a monarch to defend, the royal guards will lay down their weapons and surrender."

Gabriella focused on the one word that made her breath catch in her throat. "Michel is involved in this?"

Beau sat back. "Yes. I can't open both gates at the same time."

"Does he—" Gabriella broke off and licked her lips. "Does he know about me?"

"No. I only found out, myself, this morning," Beau said.

Releasing a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, Gabriella nodded. "Good. You mustn't tell him."

"I won't. He needs his wits about him if we're going to pull this off. If he knew, he'd come rushing in here to save you."

"Where are my clothes?" Gabriella asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Beau blinked, and then nodded toward a nearby chair. "You mean that scrap of silk over there?"

The heat rose in Gabriella's cheeks, but she nodded. "Yes. Would you mind handing it to me, please?"

"Sure." Beau stood and crossed the room. He grabbed her dress and tossed it to her. "It's late. You should probably stay in bed."

For the first time since opening her eyes to find Beau standing over her, Gabriella took a good look around. The bed upon which she lay was nestled into a deep, dark alcove. Heavy draperies hung from the ceiling, providing further seclusion. A long, gilded balustrade ran the length of the room, dividing the bed area from the room proper. Heavy brocade embroidered in gold hung from the bedposts. Ornate silver and bronze statues and busts sat on strategically placed tables, and antique paintings were set into the wood paneling.

"Where am I?" she warily asked, afraid she already knew the answer.

"The king's chamber, of course."

"Of course." She swallowed convulsively. A wave of nausea rose in her throat and she gagged. Memories came swift and unbidden, her mind filled with images of herself with the king.

Again, she gagged, and she clasped a hand tight against her mouth.

Beau reacted quickly, grabbing a large, flower-filled urn from a nearby table. He yanked out the blooms and, after a moment's hesitation, tossed them under the bed.

"Here," he said, thrusting it in her lap. "Use this."

She threw him a grateful look and then leaned over the vase, retching painfully.

"Breathe," Beau told her, coming up beside her and laying a firm hand on her shoulder. "Take a few deep breaths and you'll feel better."

Gabriella did as he suggested, drawing long draughts of air through her nose and releasing them through her mouth. Finally, after several minutes, the nausea subsided and she leaned back again.

"Feel better?"

She shook her head, grimacing at the horrid taste in her mouth. "I'll never feel better again."

"That bad?" Beau took the urn and walked to an open window. Without hesitation, he tossed it through. A second later, the sound of the priceless vase crashing in the courtyard below echoed through the chamber.

"Nice," Gabriella said, but she couldn't stop the smile that came to her lips.

Beau returned to the bed, grinning like a mischievous child. "He won't even miss it. So, now what?"

Gabriella sighed. "Now, you leave. There's nothing for you to do here, Beau."

"Yes, there is. Michel is my best friend, and he's in love with you. If I can't tell him what you're doing, the least I can do is make sure you come through this in one piece." He took her hand and squeezed it lightly. "Give it up, wench. You're stuck with me."

Sensing the warmth beneath his gruff exterior, Gabriella returned the pressure on his hand and smiled. "Okay. You're in charge of the king's guard, right? I noticed several men-at-arms stationed throughout the room earlier. Is he always so well guarded?"

Beau nodded. "He is, but I have it on good authority that he does, on occasion, send them from the room."

"On occasion?" she asked, raising a brow. "Under what circumstances?"

"Our king is a very jealous man," Beau told her. "If his current, um, *paramour*, happens to show more interest in his men than in 'His Majesty,' he tends to become rather ... irritable."

Gabriella nodded, carefully considering this new bit of information. "So, in order to get him alone, all I need to do is show interest in the guards?"

"It's not quite that simple," Beau said, and his tone told her she wouldn't like what he was about to say. "King Clovis has also been known to beat his women. Sometimes severely. Your plan could backfire."

"Then I'll simply have to think of another way."

"And when you do, you'll let me know, so I can help?"

Mine  
*by Jill Noelle*

Gabriella nodded, and then leaned up to place a light kiss on Beau's cheek. "Thank you, Beau. I'm grateful for your assistance."

"You can thank me by keeping yourself alive. If anything happens to you, Michel will have my ass."

She smiled absently, but did not reply. Beau might think he knew Michel well, but she knew better. She'd lost his love the moment she'd walked from his apartments that morning. He would never forgive her betrayal.

## Chapter Eight

Michel's heart hammered in his chest, and sweat poured into his eyes. He swiped at his forehead, but kept moving, pushing his body harder and harder through a series of intricate maneuvers. Lungs burning, he leapt up, slicing the air with an arching kick and spinning around in one long, graceful motion.

He landed in a crouched position, arms akimbo, and held himself motionless. He closed his eyes and drew in several deep breaths, meditating on a single word he held in his mind.

*Gabriella.*

For the first twenty-four hours, he'd done everything he could to erase her from his thoughts. But like a living specter, she haunted him, day and night. Her smile, her laugh, her eyes when she'd looked at him with such sadness when she'd said good-bye. She'd invaded his heart, his soul, and nothing he did could loosen that hold.

Finally, he'd given in and embraced the inevitable, acknowledging that he loved her with a depth and a passion that would not be denied. And he'd started counting the minutes until they would be together again. Soon. As soon as he and Beau finished their assignment, he would go to her. He only hoped she would forgive him the deception, and understand why he had to wait.

Slowly, he straightened, shaking his damp hair from his face.

"Here, you look like you could use this."

Michel turned and accepted the towel from Beau with a nod. "Thanks. What are you doing here?"

"I needed to talk to you. Let's walk."

Michel fell in beside Beau, and they walked down a shaded pathway, deeper into the gardens. When they were several hundred yards away from the crowded courtyard, Beau stepped off the pathway and into a small orchard. They came to a halt near a large, potted tree.

"I wanted to make sure you were ready for tomorrow."

"I was born ready," Michel quipped. He shoved his hands in his pockets and stared off into the distance.

"Mmmm ... Your enthusiasm is underwhelming. What's on your mind, my friend?"

"Nothing. I mean it; I'm ready." Michel met Beau's eyes and held his gaze. "I want a life, and a future."

"Let me guess. This future of yours includes a certain long-legged, buxom brunette."

"It does." Michel nodded, slowly but decisively. "When this is over, I'm going to ask her to marry me."

"Marry you! Gods, how archaic," Beau scoffed good-naturedly. "Only the lowliest peasants still practice such obsolete ceremonies."

"There is something to be said for that ancient tradition. And, frankly, I've had my fill of elitist society's vulgarities."

"Not me," Beau said with a lopsided grin. "I expect to be rewarded well for risking my neck. I look forward to living out my days in luxury, surrounded by beautiful, adoring women."

With so many lovely ladies to choose from, why limit yourself to just one?"

"I don't expect you to understand, and I really don't blame you, all things considered. I just feel differently now."

"Since Gabriella?"

Michel nodded. "Since Gabriella."

"Then let's hope tomorrow is a success," Beau said, throwing an arm around Michel's shoulder as they started back toward the path. "And that we both live to receive our final reward."

\* \* \* \*

Gabriella sat on a low stool near the king's dais and, for the moment, tried to make herself invisible. She studied the comings and goings of King Clovis's royal subjects, hoping to sense some pattern or behavior she might put to good use. But in the two hours she'd spent observing the habits of the court, she'd only reached two conclusions.

One, the king's personal guards were pigs; and two, Clovis, himself, was the lead swine. Their antics might be considered juvenile, if not for the dangerous, patently sadistic manner in which they approached the women who were unfortunate enough to cross their paths.

Except many of the women didn't act as if they were unfortunate at all. To look at them, one would never imagine they were nothing more than glorified prostitutes. Well-dressed, over-fed prostitutes, who had sold their souls to the devil in return for the illusion of status and prestige. They laughed and accepted their abuse in such a good-natured



manner, Gabriella wondered if perhaps they were drugged. She scowled. After what she'd seen, she wouldn't put anything past Clovis and his minions.

With a heavy sigh, she turned her gaze toward the man whose attention she had somehow managed to avoid since last night. She'd been left alone in his chamber, and only the knowledge that her time was running out had driven her from that sanctuary early that morning. Since she'd entered the main hall, he'd completely ignored her. Relief warred with a sense of unease, as she realized she had to act, and act quickly. Somehow, she had to lure the king into a private rendezvous.

What would happen, she wondered, if she were to simply request a meeting? Judging by his lack of interest this morning, he'd likely laugh in her face. After all, he was surrounded by beautiful women, most of them falling all over each other in an effort to gain his attention. Gabriella wrinkled her nose. She certainly hadn't been a stunning success at playing the seductress.

Movement at the back of the hall caught her eye, and she looked up to find Beau striding toward her. For a moment, Gabriella feared he might walk right up to her in front of everyone, and she caught her breath, but released it when Beau stopped before King Clovis's makeshift throne.

"My Lord," Beau said, bowing deeply. "I must speak with you, sire. Alone, if you please."

The king raised a brow and gazed down his nose in a manner that Gabriella found particularly condescending. He waved a large chicken leg in the air, pointing it at Beau as he

were wielding a royal scepter. "What is it, boy? Can't you see I'm busy?"

*Busy*, Gabriella thought, eyeing the half-clad strumpet who had sidled up behind the king, her enormous breasts swaying unhindered as she leaned close and placed a light kiss on his greasy cheek.

"My Lord, I do beg your pardon," Beau continued, and Gabriella had to admire his control. He didn't bat an eye as the king turned his head and suckled the woman's breast, slurping one overly large brown nipple with his tongue. He merely waited until the king finished mauling his whore, and then cleared his throat. "Very well, My Liege. I have it on good authority that you may be in danger. As head of security, I must request that you retire to your chambers at dusk, and remain there until I come for you in the morning."

This seemed to finally catch the king's full attention. He tossed his half-eaten chicken leg on the floor and leaned forward, pounding his heavy fists on the table. Gabriella flinched, and as Clovis let loose with a stream of profanities, her heart went out to poor Beaufort.

"It's those damned peasants again, isn't it? I thought you had them under control!"

Beau inclined his head. "As you say, My Lord, the peasants are properly contained. The danger comes from outside your empire."

"Outside?" King Clovis slumped back in his chair. "Hell, you say."

"At this point, it's nothing but a rumor, but I don't want to take any chances. If you simply retire to your room at

nightfall, I will post guards at your door, and I'm certain this will all be sorted out by morning."

"And if I don't?"

Gabriella's brow rose at the king's petulant tone.

"Then I can't be responsible for your safety," Beau said.

"Perhaps you could take one of your women with you, to see to your ... comfort?"

The king tilted his head, as if considering Beau's suggestion, and then his lips curled up in a grin that made Gabriella's skin crawl. She held her breath as Clovis turned his head and met her gaze. The look he sent her way was like a punch in the stomach, but she did not turn away. Beau had handed her the means by which she could fulfill her assignment. She could not afford to refuse such a gift.

Gathering her courage, she batted her eyelashes and offered him a seductive smile.

"My Lord?" Beau said, interrupting their not-so-subtle exchange. "What will you do?"

"I will take your advice, of course," the king said. "But you better have this situation resolved by morning, or you'll be looking for another job."

Beau issued another quick bow. "As you say, sire. I'll have two of my men here at dusk."

Without asking permission, he turned and walked out of the great hall. Gabriella watched him leave, and filed away a mental note to thank him later, if she made it through the next twenty-four hours alive.

## Chapter Nine

Gabriella found herself escorted to the king's chambers shortly after sunset. The soldiers, members of the king's royal guard, were stone-faced but polite, as they opened the door for her and stood back to allow her to precede them into Clovis's apartments.

Carefully schooling her features into a pleasant expression, despite the sharp pains in her stomach that felt like a knife twisting in her gut, Gabriella swept into the king's bedroom. Clovis sat in a chair near the window, completely nude. His pasty, flaccid skin glowed sickly in the lamplight, and Gabriella fought the urge to turn away. He looked up as she entered, his hot gaze moving from the guards to Gabriella, and then back again.

"Take your positions outside the door," he said, waving a limp-wristed hand in a gesture of dismissal. "We're not to be disturbed under any circumstances. Understand?"

"Yes, Majesty." Both guards answered in unison. They backed into the corridor, closing the door in their wake.

"Lock it."

Gabriella held his gaze a split moment, before turning to do his bidding. *Stay calm*, she told herself as she slid home the old-fashioned bolt. *It's almost over. Stay calm.*

She turned, leaning back against the door for support, and fingering the long, sharp knife she'd stolen from the banquet table that morning and hidden in the deep pocket of her voluminous skirt.

Clovis rose from his perch near the window and walked toward her, stroking his flaccid cock. "I wasn't very pleased with your performance last night. You're very lucky I decided to give you a chance to make it up to me."

"Make it up to you?" she asked stupidly, and then nodded. "Yes, make it up to you. Of course."

She swept forward, meeting him partway across the room. Falling to her knees, head bowed, she placed her palms on his thighs.

"Forgive me, My Liege," she said. "I was overwrought with excitement at having finally tasted your passion."

"I hand-picked you, you know? Even as a child, you showed such promise. I was hard-pressed to wait until you had completed your training." He sighed, as if his heart were heavy. "Alas, you proved a disappointment."

He started to move away, but Gabriella reacted quickly, laying her cheek against his leg and releasing her breath in a long whoosh against his limp penis. Clovis froze, and his cock twitched.

"Sire, please," she whispered, running one long nail down his scrawny thigh. "Give me a chance to prove myself worthy."

"I don't know. Perhaps I should send you away and ask for someone a little more ... experienced."

*I'll show you experience*, she thought, and bit her lip to hold back an angry retort.

Pushing back her revulsion, she took him in her fist, running her hand up and down the length of his cock. He hardened quickly, an immense erection that jutted up and out

at an absurd angle. Gabriella took a long, deep breath and then took him into her mouth.

Immediately, Clovis grasped her hair, yanking her head down as he thrust his hips forward. Gagging and choking, Gabriella jerked back, pulling from the king's grasp. She looked up at him, eyes tearing.

"That was your last chance," he said, turning toward the door.

"My Lord!" Gabriella leapt to her feet, speaking in a rush. "Please. It was only the angle. I can't ... I wasn't taught to pleasure a man in that manner while on my knees before him."

Clovis stopped and turned around. "The angle? What does that have to do with anything?"

Nodding toward the bed, she gave him a tremulous smile. "Lie down, sire, and let me show you."

His thick lips curled up in what she supposed could pass as amusement, and he waddled to the bed. He crawled up on the mattress and sprawled out, arms and legs akimbo. "For the moment, I will humor you. But if you disappoint me again, I'm afraid your punishment will be more than you can bear."

"I'll not disappoint you again, My Lord." She climbed up between his bird-like legs. How, she wondered, could such spindly sticks support such an enormous weight? Her gaze slid upward, taking in the king's excited state. Disappointed he may be, but she certainly had his cock's full attention.

"Allow me to set the pace," she said, once again wrapping her hand around his shaft and stroking it lightly. "Just lie back, and relax."

"Mmmm..." King Clovis murmured, his eyes closed.

Gabriella seized the moment and slipped the knife from her pocket. She placed it beneath the blanket nearby, just as the king stirred. "What are you waiting for, slut? Suck me."

Lowering her head, she drew the tip of his cock into her mouth, sucking lightly. She twirled her tongue around the bulbous cap, and then scraped him gently with her teeth. Keeping her movements slow and tranquil, she deliberately set out to lull the king into a state of blissful ignorance.

"Now that's more like it," he said, rotating his hips on the mattress. "Take me deeper."

Gabriella slid her mouth further down his shaft, concentrating on her breathing and swallowing to prevent herself from gagging. She increased her pace, bobbing her head up and down, and the king started to moan.

Without breaking her rhythm, Gabriella glanced up. Clovis's head lolled back, his mouth open and his eyes screwed shut. He bucked his hips, but Gabriella slowed down, controlling the pace, afraid he would find his release before she could act.

Keeping one eye on his face, she retrieved the knife, bringing it up close to her side. She flipped it around, blade down, and clenched it in her fist. The heavy steel hilt felt solid and comforting in her hand.

She released his cock and slid up his body.

"Oh, sire," she said, keeping her voice low and husky, "I simply must have you. Please let me fuck you!"

As the king opened his eyes, his thick lips turning up in the beginnings of a smile, Gabriella raised the knife high over her head. His startled gaze darted from her hand to her face, and then back again, his eyes wide.

"Wha—"

Gabriella brought the blade down hard, slicing through the soft, pliable skin at the base of his throat. The knife hit bone, and the shock of it rang all the way up her arm and vibrated her shoulder.

King Clovis opened his mouth, but no sound came forth as a trickle of blood-tinged spittle dribble down his chin. He wreathed on the bed like a beached whale, arms flailing.

Gabriella pulled back quickly, withdrawing the knife. Blood spurted from the wound, thick and hot, splattering face and neck and gown. She cried out and scooted back, dropping the weapon onto the bed.

A low moan escaped her lips and she swiped at her face, unable to look away from the gruesome sight of the king in the throes of death. He flopped and jerked around, and she backed up, all the way into the far, shadow-filled corner of the bed's alcove. Bringing her legs up to her chest, she rested her chin on her knees, withdrawing into herself. And as the room faded, she found a quiet, safe place in her mind. A place without doors or windows, where no one could ever hurt her again.

\* \* \* \*



Michel hurried through the gardens, running through the various gate codes in his mind. He'd memorized them days ago, but repeating the series of numbers had a strangely calming effect and allowed him to focus on the moments ahead.

As he approached the gatehouse, he paused, ducking into the shadows and scanning the immediate area. The guard post appeared empty, so he hurried the last few yards and slipped inside, noiselessly closing the door behind him.

He wiped sweaty palms against his pants, and then glanced at his watch. The backlit dial glowed softly, and the digital numbers blinked bold and black. Five-oh-four. He and Beau had agreed to raise the gates at ten-after.

Standing before the control panel, he mentally counted down the seconds, his gaze flitting from the digits and dials to the window above.

Something moved in the distance, coming swiftly toward him. His heart pounded, and he squinted through the dirty glass. "What the fuck? Aw, shit."

He turned and whipped open the door, glancing both ways before slipping outside. He darted into the darkness near the wall. Flattening himself against the stones, he held his breath and waited, watching the guard's approach. The soldier spoke rapidly into a microphone attached to his helmet, and although he was too far away for Michel to make out the words, he could tell something important had happened. As soon as the soldier entered the guardhouse, Michel took off, sprinting into the gardens.

"Dammit, Beau," he said, "that guard wasn't supposed to be here."

His heart rose in his throat and he staggered to a stop, his stomach clenching as the import of what he'd just said struck home. He looked around, expecting to be surrounded by the king's royal guards at any moment, but nothing stirred.

"Beau," Michel whispered, and glanced at his watch. The dial winked back at him. Five-oh-eight. "Shit."

Dodging off the path, he headed toward the north gate, praying he wouldn't be too late. He ran as fast as he dared in the darkness, side-stepping potted plants and low-placed statues. Within a few hundred yards of the north gate, he slowed, covering the remaining ground cautiously, listening for signs of trouble.

Beau was in the gatehouse, bent over the control panel, when Michel walked up. "We have to get out of here."

"Michel! By the gods, you nearly gave me a heart attack," Beau said. "Give me one minute to enter the last two codes."

"Beau, *now*. Something's happened."

"There's someone in the gatehouse!"

Michel and Beau looked up at the shout to find a platoon of soldiers racing toward them, weapons drawn.

"Now what?" Michel asked, closing the door and leaning his back against the rough wood planks. Time seemed to slow as he watched Beau punch numbers on the control panel and listened to the steady *pings* as the code registered in the computer's electronic brain.

"Now, I open the gate," Beau said in a calm, low voice. "Listen carefully, Michel. Three feet to your left, along the

back wall, there's another door. It only opens outward, so all you have to do is push on it. I want you to leave."

"Fuck you, Beau," Michel said. "I didn't come this far to walk away."

Outside, the soldiers closed in. Beau uttered a curse and spun around, his lips curled up in a sneer.

"You didn't get your gate up, did you, Michel?" he asked, but did not wait for an answer. "You're next to useless. Go find your little woman, if you're man enough to keep her. She has more balls than you do, my friend. By now, I imagine she has succeeded, and our king is long dead."

Michel stepped away from the door, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. As often as Beau had needled him in the past, Michel had never come close to hitting him. But at that moment, he very much wanted to smash in his face. Only the sound of the soldiers' shouts, and the sickening feeling that Beau was egging him on for some personal reason, stayed his hand.

"What did you just say about Brie?"

"You heard me. Gabriella didn't go to the king because she wanted to perform some obscene, preordained duty. She had an assignment, and I suspect she did better at hers than you did at yours."

Michel swallowed, hard, his mind reeling. Gabriella, an assassin? It didn't make sense. Behind him, the soldiers had set up a steady pounding on the door. Within moments, the old wood would give way beneath the pressure.

Beau suddenly smiled. "Go to her, Michel. She needs you. I'll be fine. I'm like a cat; I always land on my feet."

"Come with me."

"Can't. I still have one more code to enter."

"I'll wait for you."

"Go, you bullheaded little shit. What if she's hurt? What if she's captured? In case you haven't noticed, things are falling apart around here, fast."

Behind them, the wooden door splintered.

"Dammit." Michel spun around, sliding his hand along the far wall until he found the door. He paused, looking back at Beau, but his friend had already turned away, back to his task at the control panel. Saying a quick prayer for Beau's safety, Michel pushed through the door and jogged back into the gardens, just as all hell broke loose around him.

\* \* \* \*

High-pitched screams filled the air, warring with the sounds of men's shouts and the sharp crack of gunfire. Reaching the king's apartments, Michel pushed through a set of French doors and stumbled to a halt. The Great Hall was in shambles, the enormous mirrors shattered, the marble floor covered with bits of broken glass. Bodies lay everywhere, surrounded by pools of blood, and Michel gagged at the thick stench of death. Breathing through his nose, he scanned the dead, afraid of what he might see, sending up a quick prayer of thanks when he didn't find her.

*Gabriella.*

He sprinted the length of the hall and burst into the corridor. Smoke billowed in through a broken window,

burning his lungs and stinging his eyes, but he didn't pause to consider its source.

"Brie!" he shouted as he raced down the hallway. "Where are you?"

He threw open the first door he came to. A quick glance inside told him the room was empty, and he moved on, repeating the process until he'd reached the end of the corridor. A set of double-doors stood open, and Michel stepped inside, knowing without being told that he'd found the king's chamber.

His gaze went to the bed, and he froze. Blood soaked the bedding and heavy tapestries that half-covered a dark alcove. The thick, red liquid had dripped down the side of the mattress to form a large, glistening puddle on the floor.

"Brie."

Michel stepped forward and grabbed the curtains, whipping them aside. He gasped and stepped back, his heart racing. The king lay on the bed, his naked body coated in his own blood, a gaping wound in his throat.

His shocked mind struggled to connect the gruesome sight before him with Gabriella, tried to imagine her committing such an act. He could only guess at how she may have been affected, at the horror she must have endured. Her absence could only mean she'd been discovered. Perhaps, even now, she lay dead, killed for her role in the king's demise.

Black smoke suddenly poured into the room, billowing in great clouds that choked his breath and cut off his vision.

Michel dropped to his knees and crawled from the room. Once in the hallway, he got to his feet and retraced his steps.

As he exited the great hall, he drew his gun for the first time in his life, and joined in the fight, taking his pain and heartbreak out on anyone unlucky enough to cross his path.

\* \* \* \*

Gabriella rode before His Royal Majesty, Jacques Lacroix, clinging to the saddle as his enormous charger pranced and tossed its head in the air.

"I apologize for your discomfort, my dear." The king spoke close to her ear, and his hot breath sent shivers down her spine. "It is not yet safe for me let you down. There are still a few pockets of resistance, but I expect my men will soon bring them to order."

Gabriella nodded, unable to speak as she glanced at the ground. It seemed miles away, and the image of her falling off and being trampled beneath flying hooves was enough to steal her wits and leave her mute.

The king wrapped one strong arm around her waist and hauled her back against his chest. Gabriella went willingly, drawn to his strength and warmth, strangely comforted by his presence, despite having only known him for a few hours. In fact, the moment he'd found her, curled up in the corner of Clovis's bed, she had been attracted to him. He had an odd way about him, soft-spoken, yet strong. Incredibly tall and handsome, with a long mane of golden-blond hair and a closely trimmed beard. She trusted him completely, and with such conviction, she wondered if she had truly lost her mind.

She looked ahead, gazing at the wreckage of what was once Clovis's empire. Up ahead, a figure slumped against a column in the shadows of the colonnade. Gabriella stiffened.

"What is it?" Jacques asked.

"Take me over there, please." Gabriella struggled to contain her excitement. *Michel*. He'd survived. "I know that man. We must make sure he is unhurt."

The Sun King turned his horse in the direction she indicated, but as they moved closer, Gabriella's apprehension grew. Did he know what she had done? What if he turned her away? What if he couldn't forgive her for her betrayal?

While she watched, Michel glanced up, shading his eyes as he squinted into the low-hanging sun. He stared at her a moment, and then stumbled to his feet.

He walked slowly forward and took hold of the horse's reins. From her perch above, Gabriella stared at him, carefully schooling her features and hiding her pleasure at seeing him again behind a mask of indifference, protecting her heart. Michel stared at her, and she could only imagine what she must look like to him, covered in blood. His gaze dropped to her waist, where the king's arm still held her, and Gabriella could almost feel his anger when he once again met her eyes.

"Darling, you said you know this man?" Jacques asked. "Is he mute?"

Before Gabriella could respond, Michel spoke up. "Beg your pardon, My Lord. I am not myself."

"Ah, well. Who are you, then?" Jacques asked, his tone riddled with amusement.

"Michel Auclair, sire."

"And this woman, you know her?"

"Yes, sire," Michel replied, and Gabriella held her breath as his eyes captured hers. "I know her. She is mine."

"I beg your pardon?"

Michel finally looked at the king, his expression fierce. "I said, she is *mine*."

Gabriella's throat closed on a sob, and tears poured down her cheeks. When Michel opened his arms, she pulled free of the king's grasp and slipped from the horse, burying her face in Michel's chest as he held her close.

"Well, I don't suppose I have to ask if she'll be safe with you," the Sun King said. "If she belongs to you, then take her home. She has sacrificed much, and needs time to heal."

Gabriella looked up into Michel's eyes, cupping his cheek in her palm. "You forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," he said, scooping her up in his arms and cradling her against his chest. She clung to him, and he smiled, that devastating grin that made her heart flip and her legs turn to jelly.

"You're mine," he said, and placed a light kiss on the top of her head. "And you better *never* let me go again."



## Chapter Ten

Gabriella stood on the balcony, staring up at the velvet night sky. She released a sigh and snuggled back against Michel's chest. "What do you suppose happened to Beau?"

"I don't know, but if he were alive, I think he would be here, celebrating our victory."

She turned in his arms, gazing up at him. "You think he's dead? Oh, Michel, no."

"He may be out there, somewhere." Michel nodded toward the distant countryside. "Several of the Royal Guards escaped. Perhaps he went with them."

She searched his face. "You don't believe that, do you? He'd never go with them. At least, not willingly."

Michel brushed her hair back from her face, and the familiar gesture made her heart skip a beat.

"No, I don't believe that," he said. "But sans a body, there's always hope."

Releasing a sigh, Gabriella rested her forehead against his chest. Tears stung her eyes, and her throat ached. "He was a good friend; he truly cared for you."

"I know. He always acted like such a bad-ass, but in the end, he proved he was nothing but a big softy. He saved my life, *and* managed to open the gate. We owe him a huge debt."

"Perhaps the best way to repay him is to be happy," she said, raising her head and offering him a small smile. "He

certainly lived life to the fullest. I suspect he would want us to do the same."

Michel nodded, and his head dipped down until his lips brushed hers.

"I suspect he would," he murmured, nibbling at the corner of her mouth.

Gabriella moaned and wrapped her arms around his neck. She arched her back, pressing her breasts against him, silently inviting him to deepen his kiss. Parting her lips, she sighed her pleasure, her tongue joining his in an erotic dance that stole her breath away.

Michel pulled back and gazed down at her, his blue eyes sparkling with warmth. "Will you come to bed with me, Brie? I want to make love to you."

Bemused by his question, she cocked her head, considering him carefully. "I suppose you deserve a reward, after standing up so bravely to our new king and claiming me for your own."

"It's you who were brave," he said, scooping her into his arms and carrying her to the bed. He deposited her lightly on the mattress, then removed his pants before he stretched out beside her. "And it is you who shall have the reward."

Gabriella arched a brow, her curiosity piqued by his words. "A reward? How lovely."

She ran a hand down his chest, delighting in the way his muscles rippled beneath her palm. "Have I ever told you what an incredible body you have?"

Michel laughed. "You didn't have to tell me. I caught you ogling me that day in the gardens, remember? The way you

looked at me, the heat in your eyes, I wanted to tear your clothes off and take you right there beneath the orange trees."

"Really!?"

"Mmm..." Michel nuzzled her neck. "Really."

He cupped her breast, brushing his thumb over her hardened nipple, and Gabriella arched into his touch. She reached between them and grasped his cock, clasping him tightly.

"Don't," he told her, and gently extracted her hand. He placed it back at her side. "Just lie still. Let me."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he chose that moment to kiss her again, and her thoughts fled beneath his sensual onslaught. His hands moved to her bodice, and he unlaced her gown, slowly sliding the ribbons from their holes until the light cloth fell open. A cool breeze caressed her skin, soothing her heated flesh for just a moment before Michel dipped his head, capturing her hard nipple in his mouth. He suckled her deeply, rhythmically, and slipped a hand up her skirt and between her outstretched thighs.

"Mmm, you're always so wet," he said, raising his head to meet her eyes. "So *fuckable*."

Gabriella couldn't speak, could barely think, as he plunged a finger into her pussy, easing it in and out. He continued stare at her, his lips turned up in a slight smile.

"Kissable," he said, and brushed her lips in the softest of kisses.

"Fuckable," he said, and ground his hard cock against her thigh.

"And sexy as hell." He suddenly moved, climbing between her legs and raking her skirt up, exposing her thighs. "I want to taste you."

Gabriella's eyes grew wide. "Taste me?"

He grinned. "Your reward, remember?"

"But I—" Her words ended in a startled gasp as he lowered his head, lapping at her with his tongue.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, as he drew her clit into his mouth. "Michel. Oh, God."

She reached for him, entwining her fingers in his hair as he worked her pussy with his lips and tongue and teeth. He was moaning against her, vibrating her sensitive flesh, igniting a fiery tension in the pit of her stomach.

Tossing her head on the pillow, she circled her hips, matching his rhythm. Her breasts ached for attention, and she cupped them, pinching her nipples, just as Michel plunged two fingers deep inside her pussy.

"Oh, God! Oh, yes, oh, God." She cried out as the first ripple exploded within her. Michel slid up, swiftly filling her with his cock, pumping wildly.

Clutching his shoulders, she held on, lifting to meet his every downward stroke, as her pussy clenched and unclenched in a wave of release that made her dizzy.

"Oh, yes, Michel!" she cried out. "Fuck me. I want to feel you come inside me."

He lowered his head, covering her mouth with his own, and she tasted herself on his lips. She opened her mouth, accepting his seeking tongue, wanting more of him, all of him, inside her.

Michel increased his pace, plunging into her again and again, and his kiss turned rough. She shuddered, her whole body trembling, and tore her mouth away, gasping for breath.

"Your pussy feels so good," he said, raising his head and capturing her gaze. "So wet and tight on my cock. I love to watch your face while I fuck you. You're so incredibly hot.

"Come for me again, Brie." He shifted so each thrust caused the shaft of his cock to slide across her clit. "I want you to come on my hard cock."

His words sent her spiraling out of control, pushing her over the edge of some frightening precipice, and her body seemed to explode.

"That's it," he said, plunging into her harder and faster. "Come for me."

Gabriella cried out, bucking her hips and frantically grasping his shoulders, digging her nails into his skin, her entire body quivering.

"Yes!" Michel clasped her to him, pulling her up and into his downward thrust. He stiffened, and then pumped into her again, filling her with his warm, thick cum.

Closing her eyes, Gabriella let her head fall back, basking in the unbelievable sensations between her thighs. "My God. I think I've died and gone to heaven."

Michel collapsed beside her, pulling her into his arms, and she snuggled against his chest.

Exhausted, she closed her eyes, breathing in his scent, lulled by his steady breathing and the warmth of his skin. Just before she drifted off, she heard him whisper, and her mouth turned up into a smile.

Mine  
*by Jill Noelle*

"Yes, Michel," she replied, her voice thick with sleep, "I am yours. Forever and always. And you, my love, are mine."

**THE END**

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