

A man with long, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes stands with his arms crossed. He wears a dark, heavily embroidered jacket with red and silver patterns over a dark red shirt. A red and gold patterned cape is draped over his shoulders. The background is a dark, cloudy sky with a large, bright full moon. To the right, a stone wall or building is partially visible.

Monica
M. Martin

Immortality's
Caress
Book 2

Eloise's
Awakening

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Eloise's Awakening

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For H., my twin soul and my constant inspiration...

Love you beyond forever.

My thanks:

To God for my vivid imagination and good fortune.

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To my readers for supporting me.

Enjoy. M. xx

PROLOGUE

QUEEN CLAUDIA'S EMBRACE

VENICE, 1592

Eloise crossed the ballroom on unsteady legs, her head pounding violently. It took great effort to stay upright, as her vision blurred.

Ahead of her stood Dona Claudia Lamberti, Queen of the kindred clan. "Come to me," her soft, melodious voice telepathically beckoned.

The elder, Gabriele, stood at his Queen's side; his beautiful alabaster face bore an amused smirk, no doubt he found her tottering amusing. However, it had nothing to do with her inherent clumsiness, or extra-high chopines, on this occasion.

"'Tis time..." Claudia's voice hummed inside her head.

The kindred Queen informed Eloise she was dying and promised to embrace her...before 'twas

too late. After all, she had passed the three tests set down by the kindred.

Eloise felt something wet trickle down her mouth and knew her nose bled again. The coppery scent assailed her. She touched her upper lip and inspected her fingers, fear crowding her at the notion of the unknown. Blood splashed onto her extravagant gown, blending with its crimson cloth. "Not now, damn it!" She cupped her nose with a shaky hand, as rivulets coursed between her fingers and dripped onto the floor.

Immortals surrounded her, studying her with open hunger and curiosity, wanting to make a feast of her before her heart ceased to beat. Eloise thanked God she was one of their Queen's favorites.

She frantically searched for Allegra. *Mon ami, where are you? I'm about to die and you're nowhere to be found. Mon Dieu! What kind of friend are you!*

"Silence!" Gabriele shouted over the loud chorus of voices. The excited whispers filtered away as the room came to a standstill. "Fellow immortals, our Queen will embrace this chosen female. Bear in mind the human is of great importance to Queen Claudia, no member of the kindred is allowed to enter her quarters whilst she is resting..."

Immense pressure built inside Eloise's head and crippling pain ripped through her. The room

tilted and brilliant white dots began to fill her sight. *Help me!*

"I'm here." Claudia was at her side in an instant, her touch relieving Eloise's pain considerably.

"Thank you." Eloise's legs buckled and she felt herself sink and the immortal's arms envelope her.

"I'll not let you die, child."

Eloise grasped Claudia's silver-blond hair and pulled. "P-please end this! Now!"

The immortal Queen lowered her head and sank her fangs into Eloise's neck, pain roared through her and she flailed about, instinctively trying to dislodge her. Soon she was too weak to move. From far off, she heard Claudia's melodious voice. "Drink my blood; 'twill make you ageless and immortal... Drink to live."

Eloise felt something wet trickle into her mouth and swallowed.

"That's my girl, drink."

* * * *

Eloise opened her eyes and blinked in amazement. For the first time in years, she didn't feel the need to scramble for the laudanum to ease an excruciating headache.

I'm alive! I'm immortal!

She stared up at the bed canopy. Fragments of

lint and dust drifted about her, every detail clear as crystal, her senses heightened. "I can hear your every breath, My Queen," she said, smiling at the way she seemed to purr her words. She turned her head to find Claudia seated on the edge of the bed.

Her white tunica exposed her dreamlike beauty, its sheer fabric caressing her pale nipples when she moved. Eloise longed to kiss them, remembering how they felt against her tongue. She licked her lips in anticipation.

Mon Dieu! What's wrong with me? My carnal urges are running riot! Claudia smiled knowingly, obviously reading her thoughts.

"I thank you for saving me...for embracing me."

"'Twas my pleasure." Claudia lifted her tresses over one shoulder, her blue eyes filled with pride. "You look radiant. I couldn't bear to wake you."

"I'm ravenous." Eloise licked her lips to moisten them.

"'Tis natural, you're one of us now..." Claudia leaned in and kissed her cheek and then her lips.

Eloise savored the kiss, knowing this would be the last time they'd be together...as Claudia had promised Marcus. Claudia moved lower, kissing her breast. Her tongue tenderly stroked its pink-tip and it hardened beneath her attentive ministrations. Eloise moaned arching her back, pressing her torso firmly against Claudia's face.

Claudia bit into her flesh, sending waves of shock through her. Her newly awakened senses emphasized the pain and pleasure that thrummed through her entire being. Claudia drank from her breast like a babe, her fingers gliding over her mons, dipping between her nether lips, and coating them in juices, before entering her throbbing sex. Eloise arched up and moaned in sheer delight, the sensation better than ever before. Claudia's fingers stroked on relentlessly and before long, Eloise thrashed and bucked uninhibitedly, her flesh clenching tightly about Claudia's tormenting fingers. The tingling sensation spread throughout her body and she exploded.

"I knew you'd become an exceptional immortal, my copper-haired creation," Claudia whispered. Her vibrant blue eyes seduced Eloise, silver flecks blended with the indigo, drawing her in.

Eloise craved a drink, hunger gnawing at the pit of her belly. Claudia understood entirely, for she lowered her head and offered her neck up for Eloise to feast upon, and feast she did! Her maker's strangled cries washed over her while she assuaged her hunger. She detached her newly acquired incisors, which then slowly retracted—the feeling peculiar. "Being immortal feels bizarre," she uttered, raising her head.

"We're purely sensual beings. You have no

notion of how potent your sensuality is, my child." Claudia pulled her tunic over her head and tossed it to the floor.

Eloise feasted on Claudia's pale beauty, her full breasts proud and inviting. "Mon Dieu, you're exquisite."

"Thank you." Claudia laughed softly as she enveloped Eloise, her long legs meshing with hers, her mouth capturing hers.

Hot and demanding, their tongues curled and danced, thrusting back and forth in animated swordplay, their breaths excited gasps. Heaving, thrusting bodies, sinuously intertwined, mons against thigh, thigh against mons, mouths locked in frenzied fervor, clinging and clutching, their limbs fought for a more intimate embrace.

Suddenly, Claudia raised her head.

"My Queen, is something the matter?" Eloise asked, stroking Claudia's hair.

Claudia smiled, shook her head, and then rolled from her.

"I see you couldn't resist, my dear," came a cool, taunting, male voice. The silver flecks in Don Marcus's sapphire eyes took on a yellow glow, the hunger within unmistakable.

"What are you doing here?" Claudia asked.

"I was relaxing, when the musky sent of sexual relations filled my nostrils, and naturally blood rushed to my cock, filling it to bursting point. It

ached to fill and then spill inside something hot and wet, and so I decided to come join you, my love." He raked his fingers through his golden-blond hair.

Eloise's eyes moved over Don Marcus's pale, superbly sculpted form. Droplets of clear nectar wept from the head of his thick erection.

Claudia laughed. "I see you've come prepared. She licked her lips. "Join us if you wish, husband."

Don Marcus raised one brow. "And what if that means mating with your lover? Would you loathe that?"

"Don't be petty, Marcus."

"Ha." His boyish face reddened with irritation and he tugged at his goatee, a habit that denoted his irritation. Almost everyone knew that.

"Eloise doesn't mind, do you?" Claudia looked at her and she shrugged.

"Then I'll climb between her long legs." Don Marcus strode toward the four-poster bed, his eyes on her.

She belatedly tried to close her legs, but he grabbed her ankles, stopping her. He eyed the thatch of copper curls at her mons. "I see you've had a time of it." It was obvious he was referring to how wet she was. She felt her cheeks heat as juices flowed from her sex and down the globes of her derrière.

"I'll make you much wetter." Don Marcus

released her ankles, climbed on the bed and knelt there, his cool eyes triumphant when they met hers. He bent and began to kiss and stroke her feet. She gasped in surprise and then pleasure.

Claudia knelt over Eloise, her wet sex at her mouth. She cupped Claudia's firm behind, then began to lick and suck her soft pink lips and erect clitoris. Claudia purred softly in appreciation.

Marcus's mouth trailed a heated path up Eloise's legs, his tongue stroking, his teeth grazing and randomly nipping. Eloise found it difficult to focus on the job at hand, when his goatee grazed her inner thigh. All the while, Claudia bucked and undulated against her mouth, her climax upon her. With great effort, Eloise concentrated on fulfilling her.

Marcus's hot breath scorched her aching flesh and his tongue flicked over her erect bud, sinuously circling. "Do you like this?" he telepathically asked. She shuddered and thrust upward, her traitorous body liking the feel of his touch. Ragged moans tore from Claudia, her musky nectar seeping into Eloise's mouth. She thanked God when Claudia climbed off her to lie on the bed.

Marcus's teeth sank into her clit and she jerked in pain, which swiftly became bone-melting ecstasy as he laved her better.

I'm in heaven!

His laughter sounded inside her head.

Bastard!

"Aren't we being a little petty?" his voice boomed back at her.

Her flesh throbbed and pulsed around his mouth and her cries pierced the air.

He moved up her shuddering body, her flesh tingling where he touched. Her toes curled when he pressed his heated cock against her open sex. "You hunger for this. I feel it in every fiber of your body."

"Pig!" she said through clenched teeth. He rewarded her with a chuckle.

Slowly, his throbbing muscle filled her, her flesh expanding to take its width. This felt too good not to enjoy the moment. She stroked his back and tight buttocks, arching up when he thrust into her. His mouth moved up her throat, his breathing labored, his movements becoming stiff and strained.

Eloise sank her nails into his firm behind and held him there as she thrust against him. Her coming was sharp and intense. Ravenous, she bit into his neck and drank his blood. Her pleasure intensified tenfold.

After he recovered, Marcus climbed off her. "You're a better bed partner, now that you're immortal."

He leaned over and kissed his beautiful queen,

who scowled back at him. Eloise knew Claudia didn't take kindly to him pleasuring her chosen females, which is why he couldn't resist. He was a complete bastard.

Marcus turned back, grasped a handful of her curls, and pulled her head up, his eyes mocking. "Welcome to immortality, Eloise, and remember, this is the last time you get to suck on my wife, so enjoy yourself."

chapter 1

france, 1688

dreams

Was it figments of a dream, or reality filtering through her mind's eye? There was too much fog to tell.

"I've brought you a special feast, Madame Eloise," Claude uttered quietly, his dark head bowed respectfully. Before her on the black and white diamond-patterned floor knelt a man, his bluish-black hair plastered to his perspiration-covered brow. His head lolled from side to side.

Eloise eyed her guardian skeptically. "I'm ravenous, but not careless, Claude, the man's obviously intoxicated. Well?" she asked. She flung her extensive curls over her shoulders, to get them out of her face.

Claude cleared his throat noisily. "Arr, yes. I fed him a very small amount of the concoction you

once favored when you were mortal, Madame," he replied, his eyes lowered from her probing gaze.

"Laudanum?"

He nodded his head vigorously.

"Who told you these personal details?"

"The immortal, Jada."

"Ah-ha! Of course, my guardian of old." Eloise didn't much like Jada when she was mortal and liked her even less since the woman had become an immortal over sixty years ago. Much like her twin sister, Nadia, Jada was unbearable. However, both were rather capable guardians. Eloise pushed the bothersome thoughts aside and studied her guardian closely. "Did Jada also tell you I used laudanum to ease my pain?"

Claude cleared his throat again. "N—no, she didn't. I—I considered you might be inclined to relax a little—even enjoy having your dinner brought to you. I apologize for making that assumption, Madame."

Eloise immediately felt guilty for her behavior toward Claude, 'twas not his fault her husband had rejected her over one hundred years ago. She'd never recovered enough to trust the male species.

No time like the present to start, after all, he is your protector!

"Very well, Claude, I'll partake of the feast

you've kindly acquired for me."

Eloise felt his disappointment change to excitement and patted herself on the back for her efforts. She waved her hand at the gilt and mural-covered doors. "You may take your leave."

"Yes, Madame." Claude bowed and then quickly moved toward the doorway. He was almost on the threshold when she called out to him.

"Claude." He stopped and slowly turned around, his head still bowed. "I thank you." 'Twas the first time in twenty-two years that she'd ever thanked him for anything.

"You're welcome, Madame."

Eloise watched Claude leave the chamber, briefly wondering why he refused to look upon her, and then supposed he was still afraid of her. She couldn't blame him for that.

She slipped from the floral-covered settee and bent over her prey. He barely sighed when she bit into his yielding flesh, his reaction surprising her, if only fleetingly. Several mouthfuls later and Eloise realized her faux pas. Blackness pervaded her... She was right to never trust a human male!

* * * *

That fateful day began to replay over in her head.

"I'm leaving," Jacques sneered.

"Pardon?"

"I've petitioned for a divorce."

Alarmed, Eloise ceased her needlework and looked at Jacques. *Why ever would he say such a thing?*

"Did you hear me?"

"D—don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not."

"I—I have been a good wife, Jacques. W—why?" She clung to the thin thread of sanity she had left, trying vainly to make sense of it all, but failing miserably.

This can't be happening, not to me!

"Why?" sprang from her trembling lips, the simple little word filled with indescribable pain. Her nails pierced the soft flesh of her palms as her fingers clenched involuntarily. She attempted to smother the anguish that escaped her in a whimper, or rather, a howl of pain. This was some cruel dream from which she'd awaken. She had to!

"Why, you ask?" Jacques tossed his dark head back and laughed. She was stuck in some surreal dream. "Because you're barren! A man must have children to carry on his name. What did you expect me to do? Stay and pretend all is well? You're not a woman. I need a woman to beget heirs, Madame"

"B—but we're in love! *You love me!*"

"Love you? Ha!" he scoffed contemptuously. "I

love your family's wealth as much as they love my title. 'Tis the extent of my love, Madame."

"You told me you loved me! I know you do! Y—you must! You must!"

"You fool! Look at yourself. You remind me of a starved, whimpering animal. You're hideous!"

She lunged at him and clung to his doublet, her eyes beseeching him, tears pooling within. "I—I beg of you, please don't, Jacques. I... I'll do anything t—"

"Get off me! That's what you can do!" He detached her clinging fingers and shoved her away, sending her hurling to the cold floor. "You repulse me, you always have. 'Twas always about the money, 'twas never about you."

"Don't say that!" Inside she was dying. Each brutal word pierced her mind 'til 'twas saturated, and then shock began to numb her pain. She thanked God for small mercies.

"My cock grows soft at the thought of having to bed you," he was saying, and then shuddered in revulsion. "You lack that certain joie de vivre Mademoiselle Katherine has." A cruel smile touched his lips. "And don't give me a wounded look. You must have known."

"How could I, when you said you loved me?"

"Your tears are wasted. I'm marrying Mademoiselle Katherine as soon as my waiting period is over and that's final."

Eloise thought he'd loved her as much as she did him, how could she have been so wrong! "My family will put me out."

"I'm certain you'll find your way, Eloise."

The heartless creature walked from her chamber and her life. He married Lady Katherine and she bore him two daughters, much to Eloise's ultimate satisfaction.

True to form, her family disowned her. She buried her pain and concentrated on surviving. She became a high-class whore and grew wealthy in her own right, both sexes paying a small fortune for her services and her silence.

* * * *

The dream moved on a few years later...

Eloise found herself in London, where she'd met and befriended, Allegra, a Venetian noblewoman.

She'd returned to Venice with Allegra some months later, where she met Allegra's deplorable childhood friend, Dona Sophia Busoni. She'd tried to be polite to the abominable creature, for Allegra's sake, but failed miserably. Then came that momentous invitation...

All three accepted Don Marcus and Dona Claudia's invitation to vacation at their home on the Rivera del Brenta. Unaware of the significance

of their decision...ignorant of the fact they were among immortals.

The elder, Gabriele, embraced Allegra and she became his "chosen one." The immortal guardian trainer and assassin, Shiro Toku, spared the deplorable Sophia, after she failed their tests... However, the kindred banished Sophia to the New World...

Remnants of the past filtered through Eloise's mind, as clear as they were when she'd first witnessed, or gained knowledge of them.

* * * *

Eloise's eyes opened wide and she heaved a gasping breath. The vivid images scattered, swiftly disappearing.

"I knew it! The endless dreams...the hunger... This isn't my silk-covered bed," she whispered. Her preternatural sight permitted her a clear and unmistakable view of the inside of a lined coffin, her coffin!

I hate coffins!

"Claude! I'm not dead, but you soon will be!" she called out in rage, fully realizing what her guardian had done, and not liking it one bit. "You traitorous son of a pig! You-you whore's bastard son, I will hunt you and put you down like a dog! You hear me! Slowly, very slowly, I will tear out

your jugular and bathe in your life's essence as it drains from you, you pitiful excuse for a mortal!" In her rage, Eloise hammered on the lid. It gave way and flew across the crypt's stone floor. The outer marble cover shattering into pieces.

She climbed from the coffin worse for wear, her nails split and broken, her silk and velvet manteau gown yellowish instead of pristine-white and her hair felt like matted straw. She must have looked a fright! Not an appearance she wanted to present to the outside world. And, God, did she smell bad! "What did you do? Drag me here, you foolish mortal!" she muttered, or rather, hissed.

Eloise closed her eyes and visualized her bedchamber, attempting to transport herself there by blinking. The effort was in vain. She fumed all the more, swearing to make Claude suffer a thousand times over for his faithlessness, and vowing fervently never to trust another man ever again, knowing pity had caused her to make this *faux pas*!

She cast a glance around the darkened crypt, sighed, and then ascended the stone stairway, her bearing unsteady. She was more weakened than she'd anticipated and wondered how long she'd been down here. How much opium did Claude feed her victim? And why did he betray her?

And to think I trusted him! I loathe these places! The fool knows I'll seek retribution, so why did he take the

risk?

Because fear of retribution was a small price to pay for his freedom, the little voice into her head nagged.

chapter 2

château de mann

france

music floated over the occupants in soothing, lulling waves, relaxing them. 'Twas a small social gathering, with only ten visitors in all. Most were privileged guests of King Louis, paying dearly for his magnanimous gesture.

Lord Christian Montgomery surveyed his ostentatious surroundings with satisfaction. 'Twas not his chic residence in London, but he was contented with his choice of a home away from home.

Château de Mann was only an hour's coach ride from the palace at Versailles and Paris was about three. He'd only settled here one week ago, having spent the past three weeks refurbishing it. He didn't agree with the previous owner's taste in décor. It was a little too garish for his taste.

Although, he did like the entrance hall and a few select furnishings throughout, some of which were exquisite.

Christian considered himself fortunate his mother had been born in France and that she was once a Lady-in-waiting to King Louis's XIV late consort, Marie-Thérèse, otherwise he wouldn't have had the privilege of buying the property.

While on a visit to Versailles, Charles Leblanc, a prominent Parisian lawyer, informed Christian that Château de Mann was on the market. He could scarcely believe his good fortune when he viewed the magnificent residence. He'd bought the property for a quarter of its worth. He smiled at the thought, always liking a good bargain.

Christian was born in Kent, England twenty-five years ago. His affluent father, dutiful mother, and two older brothers, were devout Protestants, *Wigs*, the lot of them. While studying in Florence, Christian had become a follower of Catholicism, in a manner of speaking... A *Tory*, he was a loyal supporter of King James II of England. Exiled to France the year before, James had recently been deposed by his daughter Mary and her Dutch husband, William of Orange. Many of James's loyal courtiers followed his trail to France.

Christian had feared losing his head on the block, not the best way to expire, considering the executioners had a habit of botching the job! The

Duke of Monmouth was no exception. It took five whacks of the axe to remove his fine-looking head, three years past. Christian's fingers clasped his cravat-covered neck and he shuddered again.

"Are you unwell, my lord?" a breathy female tone interrupted.

Christian focused on Mistress Hammond. "I'm fit enough to play tennis," he returned, a note of disdain entering his voice. He knew what she wanted and he didn't need another woman nagging him. His mistress did enough of that for everyone.

He pondered the play Cecilia had persuaded him to attend, a *commedia del'arte*, produced by the late *Jean-Baptiste Molière*, and played by his troupe at the *Hôtel du Guènegaud*.

The Sun King's dear departed playwright wrote comedy like no other, according to the Parisians, and was once all the rage.

He supposed it would be entertaining, but wondered whether Cecilia was up for it. Trapped in the same coach with his mistress, all the way to Paris, he dreaded. He groaned inwardly. Her new habit, which he loathed, was to cause a public confrontation every chance she got. He dealt with her disobedient behavior in private. His lips twitched at the thought.

"You appear to be quite distant, Lord Montgomery," Mistress Hammond uttered

thoughtfully, her gaze searching.

She appeared to be inspecting him. Most likely, she wondered whether he sported a shaved head beneath his extensive curled wig. Many men shaved to avoid overheating beneath the contraption. He'd heard she didn't much like shaved heads and considered telling her his was. Then she could go off and find another prized cock and leave him be.

"Lord Montgomery?" Her brow furrowed ever so slightly.

"Pardon me, Mistress Hammond?"

"You're away with the fairies tonight."

"I've not much to say this evening. Why don't you join the others in a game of hazard or perhaps loo?" He motioned toward the gaming tables, designed by the famed *Andrè-Charles Boulle*.

Veneered in ebony, ivory, tortoiseshell and brass, their marquetry patterns formed arrangements of birds, flowers and leaves.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, what, pray tell?"

"Aren't you going to proceed?" Her smile looked more like a grimace. "Pardon me. That was terribly rude. I've developed a rather tiresome headache, you see."

"Oh, I see." Her frown was firmly in place now.

He schooled his features to appear detached meanwhile his insides were splitting. "I know I

appear insensitive b—”

“Indeed.” Her lips pursed. “I thought you might like some company, since you’re all alone.”

“Please allow me to explain.” Christian waved his handkerchief back and forth and her eyes followed it. “I hear tell that I’ve grown tired of Cecilia and am searching for a new mistress. Nothing could be further from the truth,” he lied.

“Oh.” She looked nonplussed.

He leaned forward. “Oh, indeed.”

Cecilia was twenty-years old and widowed. Sir Roland Wakefield, her dearly departed, was once an officer in the King’s army. He died in battle, much to her relief, since she’d considered herself above him and believed she deserved more than the hand God had dealt her. According to her, the only good thing to come from their relationship was Chloe, her vicious little Papillion.

Their relationship was purely a business arrangement and from the very beginning, Christian had warned her never to yearn for anything more. Lately, though, she was becoming somewhat possessive, even reprimanded him over his dalliances with other women, since arriving in France. ‘twas time for them to part ways, before she moved past the nagging phase.

Mistress Hammond was easily as beautiful as the conceited widow, and twice as experienced. Quite an expert at determining a man’s needs and

executing them flawlessly, a friend had explained, but Christian didn't need the dramatics.

"D-don't you like my company?" Mistress Hammond thrust her ample bosom forward, in an obvious and vain attempt to seduce him.

Christian let his eyes skim over her crimson and ivory-covered mounds. "You're pleasant enough," he stated, careful to keep his tone unruffled. Meanwhile, he envisioned her stiff nipples popping right out of her bodice, their color, he surmised, would be a soft brown. He imagined her clutching at his shoulders, her nails digging into the fabric of his justacorps when he lowered his mouth and plucked at her velvety tips with his teeth and lips. An involuntary shudder rushed through him. The love of pleasuring a woman was his principal weakness. He'd managed to get himself into many duels because of his lack of restraint around the fairer sex, and had become quite an expert at swordplay.

He leaned closer and whispered, soft and intimately, "If I were unattached, I'd consider taking you..." He deliberately left the sentence unfinished. His moved back, his gaze skimming over her pink cheeks. Her discomfort amused him greatly. He fleetingly wondered whether her nether region would color as nicely after he spanked it, and was surely tempted to drag her off to his apartments and find out.

As though reading his thoughts, she said, "And what if you were to find me in your apartments later this evening?"

"My dear woman, you shock me." He produced a contrived laugh and then an equally fake look of horror. With a casual movement, he shifted back on the settee, effectively covering his discomfort and his burgeoning erection. "I'd put you out, of course."

"Oh." She fiddled with her primed curls.

Christian liked silver tresses as much as he did gold, but not as much as copper. A copper-haired woman always had more spirit between the sheets and wherever else he chose to couple with her—eight copper-haired lovelies had proven this beyond doubt—and now he had a certain penchant for them.

"Would you settle for an hour of my company?" When he deliberately frowned at her words, she added, "Simply conversation."

Christian whirled his tumbler of cognac, his gaze on the amber liquid. "Go and enjoy yourself, madam." He brought the glass to his mouth and drank.

"You're still sending me away?"

"Indeed."

"Why?"

She's like a dog with a bone!

"Why don't you like me?"

"You're embarrassing yourself, madam."

"Heaven forbid I've offended you in any way, my lord." She fluttered her lashes.

"Wench, I've not the time, nor the inclination to juggle two mistresses." He waved a dismissing hand at her as though she were a pesky fly that he was shooing. "God's teeth, Cecilia would have my guts for garters should she discover I even contemplated such a thing." Another affected careless laugh. "I can scarcely satisfy one woman." She opened her mouth to speak and he touched a well-manicured index finger to her lips. "Shhhh, don't deny your objective, I'm quite adept at reading the female species, my dear woman." He smiled to soften his words. "Now go, before Cecilia realizes what you're about."

She rose from the settee and walked away, the train on her crimson manteau dragging across the black and white marble floor, acting like a broom.

Christian whistled low when he caught sight of his charming, if somewhat tedious mistress, crossing the room. She was dressed in a gold, sable, and mint-green velvet and satin manteau gown. The bodice fitted snugly about her ripe breasts and the overskirt was gathered back and fixed with gold, green and sable ribbons, reveling the frothy ivory and gold petticoats beneath, which matched the three-quarter sleeves that were layered with lace and satin at the elbow. Her

golden-blond curls were dressed in the latest Parisian fashion, *à la fontage*. A fair English rose, her exquisiteness rivaled the Parisian beauties at Louis's court.

Chloe rested on her arm, her small hairy ears pricked, awaiting some poor unsuspecting victim. Once, when he and Cecilia were ardently rutting, the little beast had bitten him on the behind. He'd banned the dog from his bedchamber after that.

Cecilia stopped before Lord Adam Beaufort and began to flirt outrageously. Beaufort had been Christian's dearest friend since childhood and wouldn't dream of compromising their relationship by dallying with his whore. Christian sighed at the monotony of Cecilia's taxing behavior. She was trying to make him jealous, for the umpteenth time, and 'twas wearing him down.

Marriage was out of the question, and not just because of their stations in life—he was the youngest son, therefore it mattered little—he simply didn't want the same possessive woman by his side, night after night, year after year. He shuddered at the thought. Lord James Witherspoon, a mutual friend of his and Beaufort's, had suffered that very fate when he married his mistress. They'd not seen him since the wedding and Christian naturally assumed she'd henpecked Witherspoon to death.

chapter 3

the foppish intruder

Eloise was about to climb the grand staircase to her apartments, when the unmistakable strains of wind and stringed instruments floated over her. The scent of human blood filled her nostrils, teasing her mercilessly. She hauled up her bedraggled skirts, turned about face and stormed across the entry hall, with the intention of finding out what was going on. A petite manservant in black accosted her. The look on his gaunt face was one of horror. She itched to strangle the uppity little butler when he placed his hand over his mouth and nose and looked about to gag.

Her stomach twisted. *I need to dine!*

"Madame, this is not a public residence, you can't simply meander in." He tugged on his lace cravat and shook his head vigorously. It surprised her that his periwig didn't fall off. "*Mon Dieu*, you're unsightly!" he screeched, his bulbous

brown eyes almost bulging out of his face. "My lord has very, very important guests and they won't want you polluting the entry." He motioned to the doorway. "Out!"

"You, a mere servant, dare to speak to me in such a tone!"

He looked offended. "My lord feeds unkempt urchins out the back." His thin brows rose high. "However, not 'til after midnight."

"I'm not seeking sustenance of that kind. "This is my home, you imbecile!"

"You're mad! Mad!" He stepped back and frantically dusted invisible particles from his black and silver embroidered justacorps. As was the height of fashion, the coat's length covered the waistcoat and breeches beneath. "A-away with you! You're fouling up the entry."

"You, petite man," she poked him in the chest with an index finger, "The only body-lice you'll catch will be from the man friend you couple with."

"I've never committed sodomy, 'tis an abomination to God! I don't like your insinuation."

"And I don't like you, period. Take me to your master, little man." He just stood there staring at her. "Now!"

He recoiled. "Madame, that's out of the question!"

She pushed past him, knocking him to the floor in the process. The room tilted around her. She placed her palms against her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. She regained her bearings before moving on. She entered the redecorated grand salon, her eyes adjusting to its new look.

Who has destroyed my home? Where are my servants? How long have I been in hibernation? No! No! No! This can't be! Claude, I'll tear out your scrotum and make you eat it!

The erotic classical-style frescos no longer lined the high walls; in their place were soft green and gold embossed motifs and large portraits. An array of colorful angels and cherubs covered the domed ceiling.

Claudia, My Queen, didn't you say the male guardian would protect me as much as the female ones had in the past? Didn't you bid me to trust him? See what happens when I trust a man!

She focused her attentions on the occupants in the room. Gasps and titters met Eloise's ears. Bloodlust welled up inside her, the pain almost crippling. *I should have fed from that screeching manservant. Her incisors grew and her breathing became harsh. I must have nourishment. I must!* With supreme effort, she reigned in her cravings and surveyed the horror-filled faces of the strangers in her home.

"She's repulsive!" one woman complained.

"What an awful smell!" said another.

"Send her away, Montgomery," came a man's haughty tone.

Eloise eyes rapidly scanned the softly lit chamber 'til she found the human named Montgomery. The human epitomized pure elegance, she liked his bold sense of style. He lounged on her settee like a king. On his head sat a blonde periwig, its curls neatly arranged over his shoulders, a cravat of Venetian lace was tied neatly at his neck and between thumb and index finger he held a lace handkerchief, which he waved to and fro. His gold-colored justacorps was unbuttoned, revealing the gold embroidered waistcoat of ivory silk and matching breeches beneath. His boyish features bore none of the distress that appeared on his guests' faces, in fact, he conveyed a look of utter boredom.

The sound of his intoxicating life's essence pumping through his veins was almost a deafening roar in her preternatural ears. *You smell divine. Your taste would be delectable.* Eloise squashed the desire to hurl herself at him and satisfy her bloodlust.

Calm yourself, Eloise, you must feast later... Remember, you're not alone.

"Wench, are you lost?" he asked, in a voice that sounded far off.

Mesmerized by his boyish complexion, she studied him closely. His skin was flawless and

ivory, dimples accentuated his cheeks and an amused smile touched his generous mouth. His angular jaw was strong and powerful, the only feature in his face that portrayed his determined nature. A pair of finely-arched brows rose high over clear sapphire-blue eyes, his look probing. Pretty wasn't the most appropriate way to describe him, but it would suffice for now.

Instinct told her women flocked to him and that he loved to pleasure them. His eyes twinkled with barely-hidden amusement, telling her he knew she found him desirable, knowing that he indeed was. *Monsieur, you are indeed a flea-bitten scoundrel, and a man-whore to boot. I'm thankful I find women more to my liking.*

She moved to stand in front of him but before she could utter a word, he asked, "Why do you invade my home, filthy ragamuffin?"

"This is my home, I should be asking that very question, *Monsieur* thief." She placed her hands on her hips and tapped her shoe on the floor for emphasis.

She's rather harsh on the nose. How many lice are living that nest she calls hair? His thoughts were valid, but were provocative nonetheless.

"I'm an advocate of the eastern style of bathing." He looked her up and down and his mouth twitched ever so slightly. Have you ever thought of taking a daily bath?" He coughed. "It

works wonders, and freshens the skin." He shook his head. "I suppose not. You look like you have no home, a bath would be the last thing on your mind." He laughed and his cohorts joined in, much to Eloise's disgust.

"Perhaps she could bathe in the Seine?" A male sniggered from somewhere behind.

Eloise turned and glared at him. *Why you rotten little whoremonger!* "Monsieur, no amount of perfume could cover the scent of your rotting flesh... I consider myself fortunate a bath will cure my problem, can you say the same?" The man paled somewhat, his dark eyes filling with surprise, his mouth agape.

"Enough of your insults, woman," The beautiful creature before her interrupted, obviously offended that she insulted his disease-ridden guest. "Pray tell, how did you come to gain entrance to my home? What do you want?"

"'Tis my home and I want it back!" Eloise wished she'd thought before she blurted out those words, as she'd sounded infantile and insane.

"You're very droll, I'll grant you that." He sighed. "Now the truth, did you wander in from the village, or another estate?"

She just shook her head, not knowing how to answer, everything a shock to her, her weakened state making things worse.

"How did your clothing come to be so

bedraggled? They are clearly *à la mode*." He tapped index finger against his chin, the polished oval sapphire that adorned it shone in the light "Did you steal them from your mistress's linen press perhaps?"

Again, she shook her head.

His eyes swept over her once more. *She has the most stunning copper curls I've seen. They would be impressive after a good wash. She's in great need of some nourishment. The poor creature is obviously mad.* His thoughts surprised her to say the least.

"My apologies," he pressed his hand to his chest, "I am Lord Christian Montgomery. I bought this property over a month ago. The previous owner, God rest her soul, is dead. You couldn't possibly be her, unless you have some magical power of resurrection." More sniggering followed his words.

"I'm Mademoiselle Louise de Mann's cousin, Eloise, Countess de Mann. I was accosted and my carriage stolen four days ago. Hence, my tattered appearance."

He rolled his eyes and began to swish his handkerchief again. "She had no relatives," he paused for a moment, "Eloise."

"I'm Louise's cousin, I swear to you."

"And what happened to your servants, pray tell?"

"They were killed by the thieves. This château

was willed to me. I have documents to prove it. 'Tis my family home I tell you."

"Show me your proof and I'll kindly hand over the deeds to this estate, after you've reimbursed me the monies spent bringing it up-to-date, of course." He paused, his vibrant blue eyes moving over her face. "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Have proof, madam?"

"Indeed I do-did."

Another sigh. "Where are these documents?"

"I lost my copy when the thieves stole my carriage." She shrugged. "They took everything."

"How convenient for you."

Eloise realized how lame her words sounded, but the truth would have sounded even more absurd. Claude and Charles must have been in the rip-off together! She'd have her revenge on the wormy little lawyer she'd entrusted with her legal papers, too!

"Monsieur Charles Leblanc, the lying old wart who sold you my chattels, has another copy a—"

"Monsieur Leblanc never mentioned it," he rudely interjected. "Point of fact, he informed me the monies from this estate were to go to charity, because there were no living heirs. King Louis gave me his blessing, also."

Eloise had had enough. "'Tis my property and I want it back, Englishman."

"As I've stated, show me proof and 'tis yours."

"This will be put right, *monsieur*!"

"Hmm." He looked about him before cocking his head and giving her a bored expression. "And how do you propose to do that?"

"I'll journey to Paris and confront *Monsieur Leblanc* post haste."

"Go and fetch your proof," he paused, " if you can." His mouth curled into an insolent smile.

"I... I—I will," Eloise knew he didn't believe a word she spoke. "I will!"

"You cease to entertain me, go." He motioned to the doorway.

"You, a man, dare to speak to me as though you're above me. You have no idea who you're talking to."

"So now you're admitting that you're not a countess?" he asked.

Eloise pushed him against the backrest of the settee and leaned over him. Not prepared for the shock she felt when her eyes met his she let out an involuntary gasp. She was drowning in their sapphire-blue depths. His close proximity made her flesh come alive and his heady masculine scent, mingled with eastern cologne of frankincense and myrrh, ravished her acute senses. Her breath caught when she made to speak. *This can't be happening!*

"I'll not allow you to waste another moment of

my time, you madwoman," he said, breaking the spell. His brows rose, mocking her and his mouth twitched, mocking her. "Leave the way you came."

"Silence, you insolent cur!" His words had shattered her tenuous self-control. "Such audaciousness can get one into much trouble. I loathe your kind. You're insignificant in every way." She tore the cravat from his neck.

Her actions stunned him, not that he showed it. *What woman possesses such strength!* His thoughts washed over her.

She clasped his jaw and buried her face in his warm, pulsing neck. Mists of desire mingled with her intense hunger. Her teeth grazed his inviting flesh and she shuddered, feeling him do the same. Her knee pressed against his crotch and she felt the evidence of his potent desire there. Human males are so weak!

"*Don't you dare!*" Queen Claudia's voice roared through Eloise's foggy mind. "The human is an important man!" Telepathy had its disadvantages.

Eloise rapidly pulled back, her eyes meeting his as she rose to her feet. "You're not my type," she hissed between gritted teeth.

Regaining his composure, The Englishman waved at the doors again. "Weary of you now, please leave. "Oh," he paused, "and take your awful stench with you, wench."

Eloise blinked in amazement. *Weary now? Weary now!* She couldn't believe his nerve! Since she'd become immortal, no one had dared speak to her thusly. *You have a backbone and a whole lot of arrogance, mortal. Are you brave, or merely dim-witted?*

"My clever little creation, my precious child, you can't allow blinding anger to destroy you, or our clan. Leave now, before 'tis too late. Feed and then come to us, we'll resolve this matter," Claudia telepathically soothed.

"I'll return to you, Christian," she said, in the same seductive tone she used to mesmerize her prey. A knowing smile touched her lips when his façade momentarily slipped. She walked toward the doorway, giving the small group of cowering aristocrats sneering looks in passing. At the threshold, she turned back and said, "I bid you *adieu, Monsieur Intruder*. For now." She walked off.

chapter 4

a little confusion

For a moment, Christian thought she was going to bite his neck. *Stranger things have happened. Did my sight deceive me, or were her eyes yellow?* His cock throbbed as though he hadn't had a woman in weeks. He dragged in a shuddered breath, confused and panicked.

Christian's guests excused themselves and left the room in a disciplined, dignified fashion. He construed they were as shocked as he and needed to recover. He motioned to a servant to refill his glass. He drank down several glasses of cognac and dismissed him. Settling back against the lounge, he took stock of the night's disturbing events.

What's wrong with you? Since when has your cock risen to attention for scruffy, half-starved urchins with nasty odors? Calm your raging lust, old boy. In all likelihood, the wench has a multitude of diseases.

You're not my type. He shuddered at the memory of her soft lips and seductive voice. Not her type! What was her type?

Cecilia hurried toward him, her movements hurried and her features suffused with red.

What does she want now?

He groaned loudly. She bore none of the ladylike behavior he'd paid her tutor to instill in her. She stopped before him, and from the looks of her, he could tell she was about to make another public scene. Fortunately for Christian, he only had the servants to dismiss, on this occasion.

"I'm not impressed, Christian," Cecilia snarled, her features getting redder by the moment. She waved a hand at the doorway. "Have you been servicing her?" Her brows rising. "Well?"

"Not now, madam."

"If not now, when?"

Merciful God, please spare me! Christian rose and promptly ordered the servants from the chamber. Cecilia had to go, no question.

"Don't ignore me!"

Christian waited for the servants to leave the room before he turned his attention to his shrewish mistress.

"Who was that horrendous woman?"

"I don't know, madam."

"You don't know?"

"That's what I said."

"Well, what was she doing here then?"

Christian sighed. "Madam, you're becoming tedious."

"Tedious?" Her golden brows rose high. "I'm not the one having countless affairs. That's rather tedious!"

Sensing Cecilia's rage, Chloe began to bark at Christian, much to his irritation. The dog's little body stretched out over Cecilia's satin-clad arm and she made a wild snap at him, almost falling from her resting place, her sharp little teeth missing his arm by an inch or two.

"God's teeth! If your damnable mutt bites me one more time, I swear I'll tan your hide for it, Cecilia."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me and see."

She began to pacify the furry little creature, cooing soft, soothing words at it. After a time, Cecilia appeared to have collected her wits. "What did she say to you?"

"Nothing of importance."

"Pardon?" She scowled.

"I'll not discuss the matter with you."

"How dare you! You treat me no better than a common street whore."

"Mind your tongue, Mistress Cecilia, your behavior of late, has me rethinking our agreement. I..."

"Really?" Cecilia raised her chin defiantly. "I've been with you for eight months and you've barely murmured a word of complaint, 'til we relocated here."

"Barely?" He felt the urge to laugh. "You're a virtual shrew."

"And you, my lord, are untrustworthy!"

Christian observed her tight features and a pang of guilt struck him. *Be damned to hell, I never promised her celibacy!*

"I—I feel I deserve the right to question you on this matter," she affirmed tightly.

God's teeth, this is becoming such a chore.

"And I feel you've become a little too attached to me. Perhaps we should end this agreement." Anger made him careless, but 'twas too late to soften the blow.

"No!" Tears flooded Cecilia's cheeks.

Christian forced himself to appear untouched by her melodramatics.

"Where would I go? What would I do without a benefactor?"

"You have many noblemen standing in line waiting to fill my shoes."

"H-how can you be so cruel? What a thing to say to one who loves you so deeply!" She sobbed loudly.

Of all the things he'd expected to come out of her mouth, this wasn't one of them. *Now you're*

trying to encumber me! She'd told him he'd never have to worry about her behaving thusly. A blatant lie to be sure.

"I..." He cleared his throat. "I'll not marry you, regardless of how you feel, and you know this."

"Indeed I do, you tell me often enough."

"Here, wipe your face."

"Thank you." She took the proffered handkerchief, dabbed her eyes and then blew her nose.

"Then why mention such an unsavory thing, Cecilia?"

"U-unsavory?" She hiccupped. "I do love—"

"Don't!" he reached out and took her hand. "Shhhh..." He placed a finger to her lips. "I hired you to be my mistress. I pay you to lighten and brighten my days as a wife would, without the emotional attachments a marriage brings with it, because I do not intend to marry in the near future. Can you appreciate my decision?"

Cecilia produced a brittle smile. "Of course." Of course, she didn't and that was obvious.

"I'm relieved to have your understanding. You know how important 'tis to me."

"Yes, indeed," she returned, lowering her gaze.

"It grows late, I'm going to retire." He looked her over "And you, madam?" He knew the unspoken words rang loudly in her ears. 'Twas time for her to regain his good favor and the

notion excited him.

"I...yes. I—I should like to retire in your bed, my lord."

"Go and have yourself prepared and come to me when you're ready." His eyes searched hers. "I trust you know what is expected of you."

"I'll endeavor to put things right." She leaned into him, her lips puckered for his kiss.

Christian wasn't feeling quite so benevolent. He stepped back, raised her trembling fingers to his lips and kissed them. "'Til then, madam." He dropped her hand and walked away.

chapter 5

FRUSTRATION and INTRIGUE

Ignoring her Queen's words – a habit she knew exasperated her no end – Eloise hurried up the grand stairway and slipped into the main apartments. Securely closing the doors behind her, she tiptoed through the antechamber and into what was once her bedchamber.

Anger filled her when she viewed the elaborately carved four-poster bed. Silver, blue and sable brocade replaced the gold and crimson covers and drapes that once adorned it. A blue and silver motif took the place of the cherry-red design that once dressed the high walls. A nondescript blue and sable mat substituted her much-loved cherry Aubusson carpet.

"You want proof! I'll give you proof!" she muttered, imagining all the nasty things she could do to coerce Lord Montgomery into selling her home back to her.

Her eyes fixed on the matching marquetry armoires. The highly wrought ebony, tortoiseshell, pewter, brass, ivory, and stained horn mythological design was the mark of Boulle, her favorite cabinetmaker. She hurried over, flung the doors open, and was greatly disappointed to find both held male attire.

Tears welled in her eyes and she blinked them back. *My creations are gone! Where are my gowns? That insufferable Englishman has a nerve!*

It mattered little he'd unwittingly invaded her home, she blamed him all the same. She pushed the feelings aside and focused on the human that caused her dilemma, her unfaithful guardian. *How dare you do this to me! I will have my retribution, you petite imbecile! The pièce de résistance will be me wringing your neck like a goose!*

The sound of footfalls sent Eloise into a panic and she tried to blink, but failed, her powers weakened from lack of nourishment. *Oh, why didn't I dine before doing this!* She groaned. *That would have been far too simple and you dislike simple.*

She closed the doors and hastily looked around for somewhere to hide. She caught sight of the painted screen opposite the bed. Half-naked angels, wings outstretched, stared back at her. "Don't mock me," she muttered. She'd only just managed to scramble behind the screen when the doors burst open. Lord Montgomery and two

male servants entered the bedchamber.

Lord Montgomery seated himself before the veneer and gilt-edged dresser. A servant removed his ostentatious wig and placed it on its stand. He sighed in relief, obviously thankful to be free of the cumbersome fashion statement. He gazed at his somber reflection in the mirror, taking in his boyish features and thick ash-blond crop of hair. It needed a trim to be sure. He couldn't abide it looking scruffy, not that anyone else would see it as such.

Such trivial thoughts, can't he think of anything other than himself? At least then, I wouldn't be so bored.

"Michael, fetch me some cognac."

"Yes, my lord."

Lord Montgomery settled back and allowed the first servant to cleanse his face and neck. His thoughts turned to her, much to her delight. She read his thoughts without seeing into his eyes and this startled her, because it meant they had a strong connection. Many immortal couples had this bond, as did the majority makers and their chosen ones...

Did Charles Leblanc swindle us both? Damn it, Christian, she's a thieving waif, who's in great need of some nourishment and a good bloody bath! Forget about her, you'll never see her again!

Will I ever see you again?

She smiled. *You can count on that, monsieur.*

He began to revive the moments where she almost bit him... His thoughts wrapped around her and pulled her in.

You entice me with your burnished copper curls and mesmeric green eyes, almost as much as your smell repels me.

He laughed. 'Twas a soft rich sound, which floated over her in caressing waves.

You're not my kind of woman, not in the slightest! You're a dirty, smelly, liar, or a madwoman...

He sighed.

And you're long limbed, pert-breasted, copper-haired, cat-eyed, full-lipped, and swan-necked. God's teeth! This isn't happening to me! Get out of my head, woman!

He groaned loudly.

Admit it, old boy, she's entranced you.

The mouthwatering scent of his life's essence assailed her. The urge to come out of her hiding place, dive on him and feast 'til her hunger was sated, almost overwhelmed her.

I need sustenance and fulfillment, and he can sate both needs. Oh, why didn't I listen to Queen Claudia?

"Because you rarely do," came her maker's irritated reply

Mon Dieu!

"He won't help you. Now hurry back, we're all waiting," came Queen Claudia's reply.

I'll come as soon as I can.

"Do try, my child."

I will.

The servant eyed his lord and master closely, a frown marring his forehead. He dumped the washcloth in the basin. "Are you all right, my lord?"

Lord Montgomery opened his eyes. "Yes, Jean. I'm hale and hearty."

"You appear to be out of sorts."

"I'm a little disconcerted by the peasant woman who intruded upon myself and my guests, that is all."

"I see."

Where did she come from and what did she want?

Lord Montgomery rose to his feet. "Continue, man."

"As you wish, my lord." The manservant went about undressing him.

Eloise left her hiding place and carefully tiptoed across the floor, throwing quick glances in his direction as she went. Footfalls outside sent her into hiding once more. She almost knocked the screen over in her haste and quickly stayed it with a trembling hand. Her foot landed in the wooden washtub, much to her utter disgust. She couldn't believe her luck.

This isn't happening!

The servant named Michael crossed the floor, carrying a tray of liquor. He was dressed much the same as the uppity butler. Her eyes followed him

'til he came to a halt before his lordship.

He was naked!

Oh my, such a fine looking creature.

Tall, long-limbed and broad-shouldered, he was indeed a dream. His superbly sculpted back, buttocks and muscular legs delighted her eyes.

""Tis about time. I began to wonder where you'd gotten to," he uttered.

Eloise had almost forgotten how seductive she'd found the English language, 'til she heard it come out of his beautiful, full-lipped mouth. The servant promptly poured a tumbler of cognac and handed it to him. His lordship then turned and gave her an eyeful of his prized assets.

She gasped in amazement.

"Mon dieu, he's hung like a horse," she muttered beneath her breath, her eyes hungrily feasting on him. She wondered what he did to look so strong and vigorous. Such men weren't real, not to her. She gnawed at her lower lip, her mind rebelling at the notion she desired him. He reminded her of an animated statue from ancient Rome, or Greece. Such beauty in a male was indeed rare. His cropped hair tried vainly to curl, and would have, had it been an inch longer. He bent and placed his empty tumbler on the dresser.

Oh my!

If she were looking for some male company, he'd definitely be it! She sighed. If only Jacques

hadn't ruined everything. Would it take another hundred years before she allowed another male the privilege of garnering her affection?

The servant named Jean held out a blue and silver embroidered banyan and Lord Montgomery slipped into it and tied the silk sash, shaking his head when Jean offered the matching cap. "I'll not wear such an absurd item." He motioned to Michael. "Pour me another."

"But —"

"Pardon me?"

"I—I... You..."

"Cease your mumbling and get on with it, man."

"Madame Cecilia will be angered if y —"

"Refill my glass."

"But L —"

"Are you disputing my authority?" A pair of pale brows rose in indignation.

Eloise grinned impishly. The man obviously had difficulty taking instruction.

"*Madame* Cecilia doesn't pay you for your services, or lack thereof, I do. I'd appreciate it if you'd remember this fact."

"Yes, my lord." The man bobbed his head.

"And while we're on the subject, remember she's also my servant, I pay her to pleasure me, I don't pay her to think, her place is in my bed, and one should always know one's place. Servants

don't manipulate their masters, regardless..."

"I... I—yes, indeed."

He is more insufferable in private, than in public, if 'tis at all possible. What an abominable creature! And you didn't treat Claude thusly? the irritating little voice inside her head questioned.

The servant poured a glass of liquor and handed it to him. "Thank you, you both may go."

Eloise breathed a sigh of relief. *Now hurry to bed, so I may leave.*

Cognac in hand, he walked to the oak writing desk and seated himself, removing a document from within. He placed a pair of wingless glasses on his nose and peered through them at the pages before him. He muttered to himself as he dipped a quill into the inkpot in front of him.

You're not such an addlebrained aristocrat now are you? She smiled at the picture he presented and wondered how many of his so-called friends saw him like this, surmising very few did.

"Oh Lady, so fair so bold, your skin so soft, so pale, so cold... Your lips, so perfectly shaped, so cool, render me an utter fool. Would the heat from my mouth be permissible?" He thought for a moment and then a dimpled smile appeared. "Hmm... Your outer beauty could easily be displayed, if only you took the time to bathe." He shook his head and laughed softly. "Christian, 'twill never do!" He crumpled the paper in a ball,

tossed it on the floor, beginning again.

She captivated him and this fascinated Eloise almost as much as he did. The part where he made sport of her didn't, though!

"Your beautiful copper tresses entice, making one witless of the lice..."

Why you ignorant little worm! She was sorely tempted to ignore Queen Claudia's order and tear his throat out.

"Your breasts, perfect and upright, if only you possessed such heirs and graces. Your breath, a secret weapon, could kill William of Orange's army at a thousand paces."

He howled with laughter, like the witless fool he was. The notion to leave the chamber before she dispatched him left her when a beautiful blonde woman entered the room. Her beauty was comparable with Queen Claudia's.

His lordship blew out the candle before him and removed his glasses.

The woman untied the sash at her waist and slipped the pink and gold dressing gown off her shoulders, presenting him with her flawless body. He appeared mesmerized by his paramour's actions, but he didn't fool Eloise, his mind read like a well-worn book.

"Good evening, my lover," the woman whispered.

"Is it, Cecilia?" he inquired, his tone mild.

"Indeed."

"Why? Because you're here?"

His words and tone of voice reminded Eloise of Jacques, and she immediately pitied the girl. *In his mind you're part of his history, and in yours, he's part of your future, but for all the wrong reasons. I don't know who's the shallower one!*

"Well, I—I would hope so. Are you still angry with me?"

"A little."

A lot! Eloise read, smothering her laughter.

She stopped before him and removed his dressing gown and it slid to the floor with the softest whisper. He took her hand and guided her over to the bed.

Eloise groaned inwardly. This just isn't my day!

He was still as a statue while the woman stood on tiptoes and pressed her curves against him, plying hungry kisses to his lips, face, and neck.

Eloise could well imagine her lips on his throat, drinking him, reveling in his sublime taste, knowing he would indeed taste exquisite, because his scent drew her like no other. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to blink once more, with the same results. *I need to dine!*

"Arrgh!" His guttural groan drew her attention once more.

"Do I please you?" the woman asked, her fingers stroking his cock.

"Wench, I could only be more pleased if you were to use your mouth," he answered in a strained tone.

"Oh!" Sucking on his cock obviously wasn't his paramour's thing. She was shaking her head vigorously.

"Uh-huh." He nodded.

Eloise couldn't believe his nerve. But then again, if she was in the woman's place, she'd suck on his magnificent cock and love every minute of it. *You would never forget my ministrations.*

She groaned. *Now, where did that come from?*

The woman kissed her way down his rippling torso and abdomen. She knelt before him and licked him like a delicious treat. She drew back. "Is this what you want?"

The woman kissed her way down his rippling torso and abdomen. She knelt before him and licked him like a delicious treat. She drew back. "Is this what you want?"

"Take my cock into your mouth, wench. That's what I want." His shaft jerked to attention when she kissed it. He growled in appreciation, burying his long fingers in the woman's tresses, forcing his cock inside her mouth.

Eloise was getting hot and excited. She'd forgotten what 'twas like to truly want a man. This one brought back all her old desires tenfold. She had no problem getting wet for him. She moaned

in frustration.

"Arrgh! Suck harder."

His lover pulled away. "I can't do it."

He tugged on her hair and brought her to her feet. "Bend over the bed and present your behind."

"Forgive me, but I cannot."

"Do as I say or leave." The woman bent over the bed, her derrière and sex in full view. "Much better."

"I crave your forgiveness," she whispered.

"My forgiveness?" he asked in a cool, contemplative tone. He caressed her soft white bottom with attentive fingers and then suddenly spanked one cheek so hard the woman cried out.

Eloise couldn't see his face properly, but knew he took pleasure in this act and flinched as he paid the other cheek the same attention. She moved to the left to get a better view, enjoying the scene a little too much. *You can spank me anytime.*

"Don't!" the woman whimpered.

"You have been very badly behaved, Cecilia."

"It won't happen again, Christian."

"What happens when you're defiant?" A smile curled his perfect lips as he surveyed her reddened cheeks. "Well?"

"I get punished."

"Why am I spanking you?" he asked his horizontal paramour.

"Because you have a penchant for it, you naughty little boy," Eloise whispered, grinning from ear to ear.

"I've been disobedient," the woman answered.

"Appallingly so." He spanked her again.

"Very, very, rebellious." Her rosy behind waved in air, her dripping wet sex on display.

"Yes. You know I dislike public displays, don't you?"

The woman nodded. Eloise caught the delighted look on the woman's face. *You're loving this as much as I!* She laughed inwardly.

"Speak up, Cecilia, I can't hear you." Another slap, a whimper, and his complacent smile.

Eloise shuddered with excitement at the thought of being in the woman's place. *Madame, you are depraved!*

He walked over to the dresser, his glory waving in mid-air as he went. Collecting an ornate wooden box, he returned to the prostrate female. Her posterior still bore the imprint of his hand. Kneeling, he bent his head and plied kisses to her hurts.

"Think before you allow your emotions to rule you, Cecilia."

"I will. I promise."

"I hope that you will." He kissed between her the cheeks of her behind and moved lower to savor her sex, feasting on the copious juices there.

She raised her bottom, spread her legs wider and brought her heels up, giving him better access. Her fingers moved to caress her swollen clit, while his mouth hungrily and methodically loved her.

Eloise was so wet that her juices inundated between her thighs. *When I leave here, I'm going to feast and then find a lusty bed partner. I need relief!*

"Oooh! Arrgh...arrrrgh!" The woman on the bed climaxed, her toes curling and her body jerking.

Lucky you. Eloise had cause for envy.

He opened the case, removed the small bottle of olive oil, and began to massage the lucky woman's long limbs, derrière and back, each stroke followed by a kiss, nip, or bite. He removed an elaborately-fashioned dildo of wood and lubricated it with olive oil. He rubbed the tip against her behind and lower, dipping it into the crevice between her golden curls. A delightful moan left her and she pushed back coming onto her knees and taking its length, her hands buried in the silk brocade.

The woman pumped wildly while one hand stroked her nub of desire, her panting loud and harsh. Eloise rolled her eyes when she climaxed, thinking her behavior a little too contrived.

He removed the wooden toy and with a growl, he grasped his lover's hips and pulled her back

against his groin, his hard cock pressing against her behind. "Tell me how much you want to feel my cock."

"Mmmm."

He leaned over her, his mouth against her ear. "Tell me."

"I yearn for your heat inside of me, Christian. I want it now. You know how I like it, and the way to pleasure me most."

Eloise cringed when he literally entered his lover from behind. Ouch! Punishment for making him look a fool, she surmised.

'Twas obvious the woman reveled in the act. She thrust back against him, taking all he had to offer, and there was a lot indeed!

This was the first time, since Jacques, that Eloise had been drawn to a male, not that the female wasn't lovely, she simply paled in significance alongside him. He made her wet, and that was a feat within itself!

Play, but don't allow him into your affections. You know the rules, and they've served you well, you have no reason to ignore them now. Entertain yourself with this one 'til he sells you back your château.

No time for voyeurism. This is the perfect occasion to make my escape, before I lose control and rape him! Eloise stepped around the tub and turned. To her great horror, the screen groaned and fell to the floor with an almighty thud.

"What the *devil!*" He turned. "You again!"

"Oh my God!" the woman exclaimed.

Now how am I going to explain myself? He already thinks me a liar and a thief, and to add to that, a pervert!

"Is nothing sacred?" The look of disbelief on his face was almost comical. "Are you some ghastly apparition conjured up by my overactive imagination, wench? Dear God, what have I done to deserve this? Am I not a good Christian on Sunday?" With a forceful tug, he yanked the cover from the bed.

His lover pouted at him, about to vent her anger. "Not one bloody word from you, woman." His tone brooked no argument. He tied the coverlet about his lean hips, then turned and walked toward Eloise, the bedcover dragging on the parquet floor behind him. The look in his eyes brought forth an involuntarily shudder.

Should I throw myself on a wooden stake, or await his rage? What could he, a mere human, possibly do to me? Eloise almost smiled at the thought.

"Have you seen enough?" he asked coolly, the expression in his eyes belying his tone. "Did I make you wet?" His mouth twitched.

"Yes, I've seen quite enough," Eloise raised her brows and looked him up and down. "No, you didn't make me wet, although, your whining paramour succeeded in doing so."

Another look of disbelief met her words. 'twas as though he couldn't wrap his head around her not being attracted to him. He moved closer. "What have you to say for yourself, malodorous urchin?"

Close up he was edible! Eloise's mouth moved but no words came forth. He smelled of sex. She inhaled his raw male scent, wanting nothing more than to bite him.

"Madam, you've invaded my privacy," his brows drew together, "have you nothing to say about the matter?"

I..." Her throat closed up. "I—"

"You lying, cheating bastard!" His lover shrieked, cutting off Eloise's words. "How dare you!"

He groaned long and loud, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and index finger. "Be silent, you nagging shrew!" he snapped, scowling at the suddenly feral blonde. "Now listen very carefully to what I have to say. I've already told you I don't know this... *This* woman." He motioned with a hand. "She appears to be a disturbed thief and a voyeur to boot."

"You worthless pig! You whoreson!" the woman screamed.

"Mind your tongue, or you can leave my premises this night."

"Don't keep lying to me! I've had enough of

your lies, Christian!"

He raked the fingers of his free hand through his pale hair. "If this is so, then you know where the door is."

"Why is she hiding herself in your chamber, if she doesn't know you? How did she know this was your chamber? What is she to you?"

"Precisely nothing. I don't know her."

"Liar! Don't avoid my questions!"

"Cease with the dramatics, madam."

Eloise could see this would be a long drawn-out process. The woman was undoubtedly neurotic. She didn't like the human female one iota. One of her past lovers had a similar disposition. Mayhap that was why she disliked this woman. She wondered how he tolerated such a discourteous creature.

"Why is she here then? Answer me that, you contemptible cur!"

"How should I know? Ask her why she's here."

Eloise smiled as a rather nasty thought took hold. *Ask me anything at all, you contemptible sow.*

His lover came and stood before Eloise, hands on hips. "Who are you? Why are you here? Who is your mistress?"

Eloise shrugged. *Time to repay you for being so rude, Monsieur Montgomery.*

"Please excuse my appearance, I was accosted and my carriage stolen, it took me days to get

here. I was about to take a bath when you appeared." She contrived an embarrassed look, which she directed at Lord Montgomery. "Forgive the scene downstairs. I know we didn't part on the best of terms last time." She smiled tentatively for affect. "I—I wouldn't have come up here if I knew you were entertaining. I—I only meant to surprise you."

"Surprise me?" He gave her an incredulous look. "God's teeth, woman, why are you doing this to me?"

She barely contained her amusement.

His lover looked from one to the other, her eyes accusing. "You do know her. You denied it to avoid a tongue-lashing, you charlatan! I was only gone one week and you dallied with this—this creature!"

He just shook his head, a resigned look on his face.

"Explain your relationship," the woman demanded of Eloise.

"That would be none of your concern, you're a servant, not a wife." Eloise shook her head when the woman raised her hand to strike her. "Not wise, *mon chère*."

Fear flashed in the other woman's eyes and she dropped her hand. "I'm not a servant."

Eloise bent forward, widening her eyes in mock surprise. "*Chère*, you could have fooled me. Why

don't you ask what you are to him?"

Lord Montgomery snorted loudly. *Well, thank you!* She read his silent fume.

"Christian and I are to be married," his lover proclaimed, raising her chin another inch, trying vainly to make herself taller. "He has no use for any other woman."

"What the devil!" He exclaimed.

"Obviously, 'tis in your mind, *chère*," Eloise returned.

"We will discuss this later." He sounded more than a little upset.

"We will," his lover retorted.

"And while you're at it, ask him about those elaborate gowns he removed from the closets, and the endless supply of shoes, jewels, and so on. I would stand here and explain all, but I must go and visit with one of our mutual friends." She could tell he was shocked she knew these things and wondered how. *A Countess indeed, a con artist, more like, or mayhap a former chambermaid.* His thoughts washed over her.

"You left your clothing here?" the woman asked. Eloise nodded. "What kind of friend are you exactly?" She'd obviously made up her mind, but decided to ask nonetheless. Eloise didn't mind wasting a little time.

Eloise looked Lord Montgomery over. "What kind of friend do you imagine me to be?"

"Not one word," he warned.

"Were you his lover?"

"Enough!" he interjected.

"I'm asking her, not you!"

"Monsieur Montgomery obviously doesn't want me to discuss the matter with you. Therefore, I will honor his wishes."

"Woman, if I'd bedded you, I'm certain I'd remember." He laughed bitterly. "Moreover, if I had, you'd be wearing a contented smile."

Lord Montgomery's lover turned and slapped his face. "After all I've done for you!" She marched off and collected her pink and gold dressing gown. Slipping it on she left the chamber, her head held high.

"I trust you enjoyed yourself, madam?" He rubbed the red welt on his cheek. "You're not my kind of woman."

"Not of your kind? Oh, but I'm exactly your type of female, *mon cher*. I'm your fantasy. I'm everything you ever dreamed of, and more. Everything." She passed her tongue over her lips.

"Enough of your drivel."

"Is that what you call it, *monsieur*?"

"Get out, before I call the servants to remove you."

"Not man enough to do it yourself?"

"Don't tempt me, madam."

"I already have."

"Out!" he bellowed.

"I'll be back..."

"Bring proof of ownership upon your return, or don't bother coming."

"Don't fret, I will. I bid you *adieu*, for now." Her laughter followed her as she walked from the room.

chapter 6

hungry DESIRES

Eloise stood in *Monsieur* Charles Leblanc's sparsely furnished office, holding the poorly written script she found tacked to the door in her hand. She rummaged through the desk draws but there were no documents of any kind. She wasn't the only one he'd swindled! She watched the cockroaches chase each other back and forth across the grimy floor, over the desk and the faded blue and red floral-covered chairs. She could scarcely believe her dilemma. "What am I to do now? How am I ever going to get my home back?"

She knew mesmerizing him into selling *Château de Mann* wouldn't work, as that would wear off once he was away from her, then he'd cause such a public fuss, and that she didn't need.

Lord Christian Montgomery's superb form popped into her head. *You could always seduce him, and make him want to sell,* a little voice inside her

head whispered.

* * * *

Eloise loathed clan gatherings almost as much as she had when she was human. The silence was overwhelming as she made her way through the crowded chamber. She was only one week late in coming this time.

She hastily looked about her and then quickly lowered her eyes. It appeared every one of them had reconvened, their curiosity overpowering them. Her guardian had absconded, a rarity indeed! She hated the way their eyes followed her every move, waiting for her to look directly into them, trying to steal her thoughts.

Well, you vultures will have to wait an eternity for that!

Queen Claudia's embrace had given her the power over lesser immortals and made her a target for many of the elders, who still scrutinized her every move, waiting for her to fall, craving the glee of such an event. Was it simply her paranoia? She didn't know anymore.

In attending this affair, she had the luxury of seeing Queen Claudia, Allegra, Gabriele, Shiro, and Jamal, when he carried news from the New World... The others she could take or leave, especially Marcus.

She caught sight of Gabriele and Allegra. They were pawing each other again. She wondered at the longevity of their devoted relationship, envy working its way into her heart.

How do they do it? In all likelihood, I'll never know the answer to that question. I'm not meant for love.

Sadness washed over her and she pushed the fleeting weakness aside. She thought back to when Gabriele had made his choice... He was obsessed with Allegra. Allegra—she smiled at the thought—tried vainly to convince her she wasn't in love with the striking, obsidian-eyed immortal. That didn't last long, though.

They ceased necking and looked at her, their lips curling into ready smiles. "Bonjour," she telepathically conveyed.

"Welcome, my dear," Allegra's voice entered her head.

"At last," Gabriele added.

"Indeed, I had wished to avoid the vultures, *mon cher*."

Gabriele grinned. "Never fear, you're not to their taste. A little too sour," he returned.

Eloise stiffened. "Don't try to be quaint, Gabriele, you fail miserably."

"Do you consider yourself to be less than bitter?" he asked.

"No. I'm becoming my mother!" Eloise hoped she wasn't.

"No, never!" Gabriele returned, his laughter filling her head.

Allegra and Gabriele complemented each other perfectly, tall, pale-skinned and raven-haired, Allegra's soft femininity fitting with Gabriele's raw masculinity.

A picture of her English intruder filtered through her mind. "Christian," rolled off her tongue and softly fell from her lips, the word as beautiful to her ears as the man was to her eyes.

When your mother looked upon you, she knew you'd grow to be graceful... She stopped herself. *Get out! Get out of my mind, damn you. 'Tis not enough you invade my home, you insist upon invading my mind! I'll not allow you far... don't bother trying to seduce me.* Eloise laughed at the stupidity of her thoughts.

As she glanced up, she looked straight into Shiro's exotic, almond-shaped eyes. *Oh, damnation!*

The product of a Japanese father and a Chinese mother, Shiro was indeed a striking sight. As usual, he was clothed in an oriental style jacket and loose fitting pants of sable, his black hair was dressed in a braid that reached well past his lean hips. He no longer bore the long, thin beard, and Eloise had to admit he looked much better without it. He looked good for a five hundred year old immortal, not that he was her type. She didn't need a master, and assassins just weren't her thing! A close friend, he was indeed that.

She thought of Sophia and remembered the woman's reaction to Shiro. *He would have you beg forever, and you would happily do it. A smile curled her lips at the thought. You wouldn't be able to resist the pull of your enthralling creator.*

"My personal life is just that," Shiro telepathically announced.

Indeed, Shiro, and my thoughts are my own, too, she telepathically replied.

"You think so loudly, my clumsy waif, I doubt there's an elder in this room, who hasn't heard your absentminded meanderings."

"Oh?"

"You should have bedded the Englishman you were daydreaming about and been done with it." Shiro's piercing gaze was triumphant. "Mind you keep your heart intact, bondage isn't for you, dear heart."

"Shiro, you beautiful creature, you're misguided. I don't want to marry him, he fascinates me, is all."

"You don't want him?" A cynical smile touched his firm mouth. 'twas a beautiful and cruel mouth.

"I..." She thought to lie to him, but gave up the notion. "Oh, I don't know."

"We'll discuss this later."

"Must we?"

A smile touched his mouth. "I insist."

"And we'll have a tête-à-tête regarding the

treacherous guardian I ended up with, at your word, remember?"

"Eloise, I train them. I'm not responsible for one's character, or lack of it, whichever." His tone was decidedly bored. "You are being immature."

"You're correct, I'm acting my age."

"When you're both finished!" Queen Claudia almost screamed, breaking their telepathic conversation.

Oh dear!

Seated on the settee, looking as beautiful as ever, Queen Claudia tossed her silver locks over one slender shoulder, her sapphire-blue eyes piercing Eloise with their intensity. "I've been waiting one week. Explain yourself, my wayward creation." Her eyes flashed golden fire, as they turned yellow.

"I..." Eloise looked about her and swallowed hard. "I would prefer a private audience, My Queen."

"And I would like to take a walk in daylight, beneath the smoldering rays of the sun, but we can't always have what we want."

"My guardian..."

"Drugged you, so that he could take flight to some far away continent without you obstructing him." Claudia motioned her closer.

"Yes, that underhanded —"

"He absconded, because you are an overbearing

mistress. You made his wretched existence unlivable."

Put like that, Eloise felt like a complete shrew.

"'Tis not Claude's fault your legal advisor fiddled you and sold your château to that Englishman. He would have done this, regardless of whether Claude stayed or not."

"But—"

"Hush. I'm well aware of Charles Leblanc's treachery and that's why Shiro removed him, before you could do any noticeable damage."

'Tis little wonder he was nowhere to be found!

"I only wanted retribution, My Queen."

"And in your rage, you would have slaughtered him on the spot. Am I right?"

Eloise flushed. "I...well...yes."

"Of course."

"H—he deserved nothing less."

Claudia placed a long white index finger to her lips. "Shhhh! Now come closer." Eloise came forward and bowed low at Queen Claudia's feet. Claudia beckoned with the same index finger. "Come closer." Eloise leaned in. "And such a blatant action would have exposed us all, you foolish female! I'm most unimpressed. One more mishap and you'll be sent into exile with that damnable Sophia."

Eloise was shocked. "How could you do this to me?"

"You deliberately ignored my summons. You mistake my consideration for stupidity, a folly to be sure, Eloise."

"I am —"

"My favorite, hmm?"

Eloise nodded, her gaze averted. There was no point lying, Claudia would be most offended.

Claudia's eyes narrowed. "You're not above reproach. Many of the clan members want you punished for your disobedience, thinking me weak for allowing you to flout my orders. What have you to say for yourself?"

"I have always..." The words died in her throat.

"Of course you've always ignored me," Claudia telepathically returned.

"I'm sorry. Truly, I a —"

"The elders have spoken," her Queen announced aloud.

Eloise held her breath, her eyes darting to Gabriele. His shuttered look unnerved her. She regretted her foolish behavior and wished she'd listened to her voice of reason.

"You'll allow the human to live in your family home. After all, he paid a small fortune for it. Like it or not, you'll have to find an agreeable way to convince him he wants to sell." The look in Claudia's eyes spoke volumes. "I'm sure you'll not find the task too difficult.

"I... I understand." Eloise's traitorous body

tingled all over at the thought of being agreeable toward the Englishman. His superb form mesmerized her mind's eye. She pushed his image away and forced herself to focus on what Claudia was saying.

"Shiro collected much of the monies from your legal advisor, before he silenced him. This should help you out of your financial dilemma."

"Thank you," Eloise answered, sounding meek, but feeling far from it.

However, she didn't fool Claudia and she knew it well. "You'll not touch a hair on Lord Christian Montgomery's fair head, or his lover's. Is — this — clear?" she enunciated.

"Yes, perfectly." Eloise felt like a disobedient child before her Queen's wrath.

"And you'll leave Claude's punishment to Shiro. After all, guardians are his responsibility."

"But Claude was my —"

"Since he has fled, 'tis Shiro's duty to punish him."

Eloise made to speak.

"Besides, you cannot blink to the New World, now can you?"

Eloise shook her head. An immortal could only blink to a location they'd visited previously, and she'd never journeyed to the New World. Shiro, on the other hand, had been to many distant lands. 'twas he who had delivered Sophia to the

New World, after he'd embraced her against her will... A fact he never forgot. His one regret...

"He will be dealt with fairly," Claudia added.

They all appeared to pity Claude and this left a bitter taste in Eloise's mouth. *I'm not some evil witch!*

"Don't fret, my child, Shiro has a new, more agreeable guardian for you."

Eloise glanced at the exotic immortal and he inclined his dark head. "Thank you," she telepathically relayed.

"'Tis my pleasure," his voice entered her head.

"Mayhap she can help you choose the servants for the château you leased neighboring Lord Montgomery," Claudia added.

Eloise colored. *Is there nothing I can hide from her?*

"I know all." Claudia laughed.

"Indeed."

"Well, that's all I have to say. Have you any questions?"

"Why did you leave me inside that coffin?"

"You were in deep sleep, there was no reason to wake you."

"And what of my home?"

"'Twas too late, he'd already bought it."

"Oh."

"I'm truly sorry," Claudia stated.

"Are you?"

Marcus laughed resentfully. "Of course, she is," he interjected.

Eloise hadn't noticed him 'til then. "I didn't ask you."

Marcus tugged on his pale beard. "Petty. Very petty, but then you've not been anything else."

"You make one behave in such a fashion."

"I'm glad to be of service," he said dryly.

"Remember, no bedding my wife whilst you're here," Marcus added quietly. His blue gaze filled with satisfaction as Eloise averted hers. "I needn't remind you of our agreement."

Eloise contrived a wide smile. "Why Marcus, do I detect some jealousy?"

No answer.

"Is this because I can fulfill her and you can't?" she added, reaching out and stroking his baby-soft skin. "Mmm?" He scowled, much to her delight.

"Inelegant whore."

Eloise knew she lacked the finesse one gained when one entered the infinite realm of darkness, but the barbed comment stung nevertheless.

Claudia sighed. "You may go and mingle, Eloise." She waved a dismissive hand at her. "Shiro wishes your company, also."

"Thank you, My Queen." Eloise turned and stumbled, falling against Jamal, who steadied her, his dark eyes laughing at her. Seeing Jamal was the closest she'd gotten to Sophia, since becoming

immortal. Once Sophia's guardian, Jamal was now immortal, her first embrace.

The Egyptian smiled warmly. "Your clumsiness is rather endearing, Eloise."

She patted his cheek. "Jamal, you lie badly." He laughed, the sound rich and warm. "How have you been?"

"The *New World* is a fine place for us immortal's."

"And Sophia?"

"As if you care about her well-being." He stepped back and straightened his cravat. Glancing up, he said, "I see you're still waiting for an answer."

"Of course, *mon cher*."

"You know she doesn't care about yours."

"I know."

"Hmm."

"I'm on my way to visit with Shiro, walk with me, Jamal." He fell into step with her as they climbed the grand stairway. "Now tell me what I want to know."

"She gets lonely, but is very comfortable with immortality now."

"I see." This piece of news surprised Eloise and not in a good way. "Do you imagine Queen Claudia will allow her back now?"

His expression hardened. "Not at this time... Although, I don't see why."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Are you really? She has the affections of the assassin and your closet friends. What would happen if she were to return?"

"No, I'm not sorry, if you must know. I abhor her, and I'm glad she isn't coming back. Shiro is too good for her and Allegra doesn't need her."

"They have you, yes?"

Eloise felt a blush creep up her face. "I'm being rather petty."

"Indeed, but you are female, therefore exonerated."

"Do you miss it?"

"Being here?"

She nodded.

"Not as much as I miss Egypt, but alas, I am obligated..."

"Oh." She stopped and they made eye contact. "You can't leave 'til she's settled, can you?"

"No." He sighed. "That won't happen 'til she returns, or chooses a mate."

They stopped before a set of gilt-edged doors, Shiro's chamber while he was a guest in Claudia's home. Eloise knocked. "I'll speak with you later," she told Jamal.

"Please do, I'll be here one week."

"Come," Shiro called from somewhere beyond. When she entered Shiro smiled. "I see you can't resist acting like a human, Eloise."

"I enjoyed the walk. And 'tis good manners to announce oneself."

"Indeed." He motioned a cushion on the floor opposite him. "Sit."

Shiro sat opposite her, crossed his legs and rested his hands on his knees. Seating himself so had something to do with his inner energies. Eloise just couldn't remember exactly what. *Doesn't he believe in the comfort of a settee! Why should he? He's extremely comfortable.*

Her pink and white striped skirts bunched around her and dusted the timber floor. She knew he derived some depraved pleasure from her encumbrance. She wiggled on the small pillow, disgusted by the countless plump cushions surrounding him, their silky softness beckoning. She'd rather impale herself on a stake, than beg him for one!

His exotic eyes appraised her intently. She noted the way the amber sparkled inside the obsidian pools. "Madame Astrid de Roux is only nineteen years of age, you'll find her an agreeable guardian," he explained.

"I'll take your word for it, *mon cher*."

His sensual mouth curled ever so slightly. "Will you just?" His words were playful. "Do I detect a sour undercurrent in your tone?" One fine brow lifted.

"Mayhap you do."

"She's well-trained and competent."

"Claude was rather incompetent, but was obedient. I never doubted your ability to train a guardian, *mon cher*."

"Ah, but this guardian hungers for the ultimate reward—immortality. She knows that one can only receive this honor by being an outstanding servant."

Eloise eyed the petite woman. She stood quietly in the corner, meek and withdrawn. She knew Shiro's guardians were this way, but disliked it immensely all the same.

"You've outdone yourself," she uttered, her control fraying.

Seeing her ill-disguised anger, he just smiled. "I merely instill obedience and respect. Your last guardian was treated worse, and to what end?"

Eloise felt her face color, his words striking a chord of guilt within her. *Oh, I'm a hypocrite!*

Shiro motioned to the woman. "Guardian."

Her startling green eyes darted up to his face and just as quickly dropped to the floor. She bowed her head so low her raven hair spilled down to cover her soft, olive features. She came forward and knelt at his feet. "Yes, exalted one."

"Unbraid my hair."

"Yes, exalted one." The girl rose, knelt behind him, and proceeded to undo his mane of raven hair.

"She's now yours to command. She'll do whatever you ask," he told Eloise, in that quiet, self-assured tone of his.

"I'm not in the habit of pawing my help."

He laughed quietly. "Your mind is perverse indeed."

"You implied —"

"Did I just?" He stroked his sculpted cheek and jaw

"Indeed."

"Are you certain?"

"Oh. I must have a perverse mind then, *mon cher*."

The guardian's long fingers unraveled his hair as he spoke. Eloise found its length fascinating and wondered when he'd last had it cut.

"Are you perverse enough to spend the evening with me, Dear Eloise?" Again, his fine brows rose.

"I—I..." Eloise choked on her words. The thought of being the recipient of Shiro's love play sent heat roaring to her center. She'd heard he was indeed an exceptional, if somewhat out of the ordinary, lover. She needed to ease her frustration, after watching that delicious Englishman couple with his mistress, but did she really want to play servant to this immortal?

One night couldn't hurt, the naughty little voice inside her head entreated. *What could he possibly submit you to in one night? He may be dreamy to boot,*

but do you want what he offers? Absolutely not! Never!

"Well?" he prodded.

When she looked into Shiro's eyes, she found amusement there. *How like him!*

"Don't play games with me, Shiro."

"You are a dear friend, an equal... I would never expect you to play the submissive for more than one night."

Her felt her cheeks heat. He couldn't resist showing her how easy she was to read. "If that's all, I'll be taking my guardian and leaving."

"Stay."

"Why?" She straightened her shoulders.

"We have much to discuss, so try to relax."

She knew Shiro meant to speak about Lord Montgomery. Her eyes moved to the guardian, who now stroked his lengthy, free-flowing hair. "Girl, leave the room," she ordered.

The girl bowed her head. "Yes, mistress." She turned and left, her soft footfalls barely registering in Eloise's preternatural ears.

"Tell me about this human you desire so intensely," Shiro urged.

Eloise closed her eyes and groaned. "He has invaded my home and my mind. Imagine that?"

"I don't want to. Why don't you tell me?"

"He's arrogant, obnoxious and self-indulgent to the point of ridiculous. He personifies all that I loathe in a man, *mon cher*."

"He's in your head, because he epitomizes everything you want in a male. You just haven't identified with this yet."

"No. I believe I'm fixed on him, because he's invaded my home, and nothing more."

"You disappoint me. Be true to yourself, Eloise."

She sighed in exasperation. "Damnable human."

"Your desire for him is rather strong, then."

"Yes. No! I—I don't know..."

Shiro lounged back on the silk cushions and patted beside him. "Come here."

Eloise shook her head. "With you...impossible."

You've nothing to fear from Shiro, he's safer than the Englishman.

Shiro's laughter met her ears and she knew he'd been prying. "What's the matter, Eloise? Are you afraid of me?"

"I most certainly am not!" Her tone was a little too sharp to be believable.

"Remove your clothing and come here, then."

"I'm not one of your pathetic followers, Shiro. I'll not be dominated by y—"

"For tonight you will be."

She gasped in shock. "I think not."

He moved rapidly, relieving her of her gown and undergarments in seconds, leaving only her

lace edged chemise.

He bent his head and sniffed her neck. "Lavender and musky excitement. Your female scent it rather arousing, more arousing than I'd imagined.

"W—we shouldn't." Her body throbbed and she wanted nothing more than to feel him deep inside her. His knee brushed the apex of her thighs and she ground her sex against it, a soft whimper drifting from her slightly parted mouth.

"Are you certain we shouldn't?"

"You play unfairly." Eloise tingled where he touched and she forcibly stemmed another excited whimper.

Why must I need a male's touch, after all this time!

He leaned over her. She fell back on her elbows, her neck arching as she looked into his eyes, which were almost gold now. "You agreed to stay."

His long, slender fingers traced a path over her exposed thighs and they instinctively parted. She took a calming breath. "T—to talk..."

"And the thought of my cock buried inside you was?"

"A momentary lapse of control." She focused her gaze on his mouth. Such a hard mouth, however, those lips looked delicious. Only a fool would refuse to taste them.

I want him, if only to ease my bizarre need, for that

unbearable Englishman.

"Allow me to give you a prelude to what he will have you do." He deftly removed her hairpins and fanned her curls about her shoulders.

"I..." Eloise fought the desire that thrummed through her body.

"You crave the loving of a man, allow me to remind you of what you've been missing."

"And what makes you think I crave the touch of a man?"

Her words came in a husky flow and her chest heaved with every breath. *Not too convincing, Eloise!*

"No, 'twas not," he answered her thoughts. "I read the need in your eyes."

"Reading a weaker immortal's mind? Whatever happened to common courtesy?"

"Come now, we all take advantage of our mind-reading gifts, some of us are more fortunate than others."

That was an understatement! Shiro was easily as capable as Queen Claudia. She on the other hand, could only read a few fledgling immortals.

"I'll try not to look into your eyes." When he laughed, she added, "So, tell me...since you're privy to my deep-seated needs."

"You can't forget how excited you felt when he touched, her. When he spanked her... When he coupled with her... You wanted to be in her

place." His lips moved over her cheek. "You suddenly wanted a man to slake your need. You still want that. You've always wanted that, but hid it, preferring to pretend only women could satisfy you, hiding from the pain..."

"Not true!"

"Be true to yourself." His wiry strength pressed against her, his fingers burrowed into her curls and he tugged. "I can ease your frustration, give you fulfillment, and never hurt your heart. I am safe."

"'Tis been long since I've had relations with a male, I don't think I know how. I—"

"Don't think, just feel."

He bent his head, his lips whispering along her neck. She shuddered beneath his ardent onslaught. His teeth grazed her flesh and she groaned when they pierced her skin. Sharp pain flashed through her and just as quickly died, erotic fire replacing it. His masterful manipulation played her senses as though she was a musical instrument. Pain sliced through the pleasure and worked an icy path through her body again, building 'til she thought she'd go mad from it. It reached the plateau and then fell through waves of delicious, molten heat, pain and pleasure ebbed and flowed, and soon she was moaning and crying at once.

"Let go, allow me to take you away," his voice

filled her head, seducing her with its melodic tone.

Hot pleasure stabbed through the pain and spread through her limbs, suffusing her entirely. Musky warmth pooled at her sex and drenched her chemise where his knee rubbed. She clung to him, her nails digging into his silken garb, her body straining to become one with his as she surrendered to his whim. He continued to suck at her neck, drawing her essence and savoring it, while he fed his insatiable hunger. The fire kept building. It curled through her limbs and burned in the pit of her belly, causing her body to tighten and her insides to clench forcefully. Eloise shuddered as the aftermath release crashed over her. His teeth left her throat. Only a slight sting remained.

"Say the words. I can give you what you crave most, right now." His dark eyes burned into hers and his lips curled into a knowing smile.

She cupped his neck and pulled his face down to hers, licking the smear of blood from his lips. "How?"

"I'll show you."

"What of our friendship?"

"We are friends, that's what makes this easier. I'm relieving your frustrations, Eloise," he whispered against her mouth. His tongue played over her lips and then dipped inside her mouth. He adeptly simulated the act he wanted her to

participate in with him.

She drew back and pushed the hair out of his face. "And your frustrations, Shiro?"

He laughed softly. "Indeed, I am very self-seeking."

She studied his exotic features. "I never realized how beautiful you are."

He smiled. "But not as beautiful as your favorite human, correct?"

She didn't reply, but knew her reddened cheeks were answer enough. His laughter confirmed this. *Damnation!*

Shiro rose up and transformed into the perfect likeness of Christian Montgomery. Her pulse raced and her body responded immediately.

"Is this what you want?" He even sounded like the Englishman.

She shook her head vigorously. "No. 'Tis too strange. I don't want you to be him, only he can be that..."

Shiro changed back into himself. "I understand."

"We won't speak of this after the fact, agreed?"

"What are friends for?"

"'Tis agreed, then."

Shiro pushed her chemise down over her breasts and his eyes feasted on them. His thumbs and index fingers played with her breasts, plucking at her sensitive nipples. "They are

lovely." He bent his head, his teeth sinking into her budding flesh.

Pain became pleasure and desire engulfed her once more. Heat traveled to her sex. His tongue rolled over her flesh, it soothed and excited at once. She groaned and raised her hips to meet his, they ground against hers. A shuddered moan passed her lips. His throbbing heat pressed against her mons through the silken fabric. She gripped his buttocks and rubbed herself against his hot, hard heat.

"Take me."

"Patience is not one of your virtues."

"I never claimed 'twas."

"Indeed." He moved against her.

"Now."

"Soon."

If 'twas not for his obvious desire pressing against her, she'd have believed he wasn't affected. She grasped his head and pulled his mouth down to hers. "Now!"

"When I say." His lips played over hers and his tongue entered her mouth, undulating and dancing sinuously.

Shiro's scent filled her senses, drugging her with its intoxicatingly spicy fragrance. Eloise's need to feel him inside her overrode her sanity. "Take me now. You can pretend I'm Sophia if it helps."

Shiro abruptly pulled away, anger and pain playing over his features before he guarded them. "You're not Sophia. Are you?"

"N-no."

Shiro rose. "I told you to never speak of her in my presence. That was obviously too much to ask."

Eloise was stunned. She mentally kicked herself for her thoughtlessness. "*Mon cher*, forgive me."

"Leave me."

"Please forgive me."

"At this moment, you ask too much."

"But you are my friend. Whatever will I do without you?"

He sighed. "I haven't forsaken you. I need to be alone right now. "

Eloise climbed to her feet, her gaze averted. "This shouldn't have happened. I— I..."

"Indeed. 'Twas a mistake, but we'll rise above it. Now go."

"Will we?"

Shiro nodded. "I wouldn't say it, if it weren't true."

"I bid you *adieu*, *mon cher*."

"Farewell, for now..."

chapter 7

visitation

Eloise stood gazing down at Lord Montgomery's sleeping form, her eyes devouring his masculine beauty. *Why do you captivate me, my intruder? Is this fate? Are you my curse?*

He rolled over and muttered something barely audible in his sleep. He kicked the covers from his muscular form and tossed about. She smiled as her eyes skimmed over his nakedness. "'Tis little wonder why you draw female attention. What splendid dimensions you have."

He opened his eyes and stared blankly at her, his mind obviously trying to comprehend the fact she was in his bedchamber in the middle of the night. She bent over him and passed a hand down over his cheek. He flinched from her touch. She hadn't fed and realized how cold she must have felt.

"Begone!"

"You dreamed me here and now you want me to leave?"

"Don't be absurd. I didn't dream you here, I'm wide awake, wench."

She leaned in and nuzzled his cheek. Frankincense and myrrh greeted her senses. His love for exotic scents was something else they had in common.

"Madam?"

"Yes, you did dream me here."

"Woman, you torture me with you nonsense."

His breathing became shallow and his chest heaved. Blood roared through his veins, singing to her, enticing her. She moved over him, her sex pressing against his heated erection. She licked his throat and his head fell back, unknowingly offering it up to her. She slid her hands along his arms and laced her fingers through his, securing them above his head. Her teeth sank into his yielding flesh and blood spilled over her tongue, delighting her taste buds. He writhed against her and his moans flowed into each other as she sucked. Liquid fire filled her veins and erotic simulations transferred to his as she sucked. She felt the wetness of his climax against her aching sex and wished she had more control, but there was always next time. She feasted 'til the edge wore off her hunger and then withdrew her

incisors.

He tried to move, but she still had him pinned down. 'twas obvious he was embarrassed. "Begone, sinful creature!"

"How can I possibly leave, when you keep me here?" She licked up traces of blood on his neck.

"You seep into my world, to drive me mad with your nightly visits. I know what you're doing. I'll not crumble, you demonic seductress."

She found his description rather amusing. "Oh, I'm more than phantasmagoric, *Monsieur* Montgomery."

A mixture of confusion and comprehension crossed his face.

"I come because you call to me. We share a bond."

"No. You come to seduce me, because you want the château. I'm not a fool, madam."

"You fled England, leaving your home and your family, because of your misguided loyalty to King James. 'Tis not fair you steal my home. 'Tis my family home, whether you care to believe it or not."

"With proof 'tis yours. Now leave."

She sighed. "Eventually, you'll beg me to stay..."

He began to laugh. "I never beg, wench."

"Oh, I could make you beg, *monsieur*." She released his fingers and slid down his chest. She

plucked at his nipples, bent and loved them with her mouth 'til they beaded and then bit one.

"Ooh." His body responded instantly, his hips slamming against her.

"Christian," called the feminine voice from the other side of the door. "Are you all right?" A succession of loud rapping followed. "Christian!"

Eloise pulled away and was about to blink, when his mistress burst through the doors and spotted her. She couldn't have this one seeing what she was and so she climbed from the bed, fixed her hair, and then, as gracefully as she could, walked past the speechless blonde. She stumbled at the door and fell face-first. Tears of humiliation stung her eyes. But he wasn't laughing.

"Are you all right?" She heard him move.

"Don't bother yourself, *monsieur*," she replied, picking herself up. She felt his eyes on her, but dared not turn. "*Adieu*."

She hurried from view, the woman's screaming reverberating throughout the wing. Eloise blinked to the bedchamber of her temporary home.

chapter 8

resentment

Cecilia, Beaufort, and Mistress Hammond chattered excitedly. Christian drew back the crimson curtain and stared out the carriage window. Cecilia's words grated on his nerves and to make matters worse, her precious mutt sat on her lap snarling at him.

"I hate to intrude, Montgomery, but would you care to share?" Beaufort asked.

"Share?" Christian flushed guiltily at his friend. "My thoughts are rather gloomy and not worth expressing."

"Hmm." Beaufort cocked his and grinned, one dark brow arching. "Tell m—"

"I've almost had enough," Cecilia interjected.

Christian feigned indifference, examining the curls on his blonde periwig. "Of what, pray tell?" He dropped the faux ringlet and glanced at her.

"Of everything." She motioned about her. "Of

this."

He inwardly cringed at the contrived look on her face and fleetingly wondered why it bothered him. Her behavior was acceptable in the circles he moved in. Fact was he was the worst offender of them all. So why did it all suddenly bore him? Why did he want to throw off this stuffy persona and just be himself? He pushed the mildly confusing thoughts aside, not wanting to deal with them.

"Are you listening?" Cecilia gestured wildly with her fan. The dog's head moved back and fourth as it eyed the feathers, about to pounce. "Bad, Chloe!" She swiftly tapped the dog's nose and it retreated, burying its face in her satin and lace skirts, its whimpers and whines filling the small space and almost deafening the four occupants. "I can't bear it. I simply can't."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, woman!" Christian threw up his hands.

Cecilia gasped, apparently shocked. "How can you carry on so? Everyone knows that Frenchwoman visits your bedchamber late at night. How much more do I have to bear?" Beaufort gave her a sympathetic look, much to Christian's disgust. He was about to reply, when she added, "To make matters worse, my poor bones are aching and can't take much more of this unbearable journey." She fluttered her lashes at

Beaufort.

"Would you like me to signal the driver so that you may get out?" Christian asked.

"I—I beg your pardon?"

He derived a small amount of pleasure from her genuine alarm. *Serves you right, you whining shrew.*

"I pray you, repeat your words."

"Do you wish to alight the carriage, madam?"

"Since that foul-smelling sack of bones entered your chateau, your entire demeanor has changed. Your obsession with her is too much to for me to bear. You barely have time for me anymore. " Cecilia dabbed at her eyes with a silken handkerchief. "She is an ill-mannered peasant. I don't understand you. I simply won't tolerate this kind of neglect. I won't!"

Christian sighed loudly. *A beauty, you may be, however your looks don't make up for your hypocrisy and lack of depth!*

He'd caught her coming out of Lord Randolph Beauchamp's bed chamber one evening and Beaufort had informed him Cecilia had offered herself to him, on more than one occasion, but he wasn't petty enough to throw that in her face.

"Aren't you going to say anything to me?" she asked.

What could he say? He could no longer deny his obsession with the mysterious Frenchwoman.

Her alabaster skin beckoned his touch, night after night. The notion of making love to her was never far from his mind, even though her motives made him leery.

Cecilia openly scowled at him. "Well?"

"I have nothing to say in response to your words, madam." He imagined Cecilia's notions of maneuvering him into marriage were rapidly dissipating.

She leaned forward. "Of course you don't," she whispered through gritted teeth.

He caught Mistress Hammond's eye and silently cursed "Cecilia has a point, you've been behaving rather oddly since that dreadful creature visited last week."

Christian wanted to reach over and throttle her.

"This has nothing to do with you, Mistress Hammond. Don't mention that creature again," Cecilia said, scowling at the other woman.

"Don't be absurd. You made the matter my business by speaking of it," Mistress Hammond retorted. "'twas merely an observation. I'm not blind you know."

"Cease with your goading," Christian cut in. "We've a long journey ahead of us, bickering only makes it more tedious."

"We've heard enough squabbling for one day," Beaufort added, winking at Christian. "Let's all get along."

"I wasn't the one bickering," Cecilia replied.

"Whining was more like it," Mistress Hammond muttered, twirling her silver-blonde locks around one finger.

"Be silent!" Cecilia returned, her sapphire-blue eyes filling with resentment.

"Don't tell me to be quiet!"

"Both of you be silent, or I'll put you out of the carriage here and now!" Christian roared. Both women looked shocked.

Christian went back to staring out the window, the fertile countryside passing by without his notice.

"I know the woman was no peasant. A peasant doesn't wear fine garments like that," he heard Mistress Hammond say.

Again, he wondered at his intruder's station in life. "*I am Countess Eloise de Mann...*" Her words washed over him, causing his pulse to race. Emerald-eyed and copper-haired, the countess was indeed his type of woman.

* * * *

Eloise's rented villa gleamed from floor to ceiling and smelled of fresh lavender, the stale, musty scent that previously pervaded it now gone, thanks to her new guardian/butler, Astrid. Astrid had handpicked the servants and instructed them

well; she herself waited on Eloise. This arrangement suited Eloise just fine, since she didn't want too many humans knowing about her state of being. Protecting her secret was indeed her guardian's priority. She'd never have another male guardian again. Trusting men hadn't done her any good in the past.

The pompous Englishman appeared inside her mind's eye, his beautiful blue gaze windows to his soul. She shrugged off the arousing image, hating her new weakness.

I don't need another man in my life! How else will you convince him that you're indeed the owner of Château de Mann? You must seduce him into selling.

"You could always kill him," she muttered aloud.

I would perish in Queen Claudia's wrath, before another dawn broke over the horizon!

"'Tis not like I have an alternative," she whispered. She'd convinced herself that her nightly visitations were part of her elaborate plan to coerce Lord Montgomery into selling *Château de Mann*.

A light tap on the door broke her reverie.

"Mistress?"

Eloise turned and smiled at Astrid when she entered her bedchamber. "Mon chère, you've done marvelously. Shiro was right, you're indeed worthy."

"Thank you, mistress." Astrid bowed her dark head, her eyes on the parquetry floor.

"We are to be friends, look at me."

"Yes, mistress. You are too kind..."

"Nonsense." Eloise smiled. "Cease with your timid behavior. I'll have the feisty woman inside you out off hiding in no time. A woman's strength is to be admired, not oppressed."

Two pairs of green eyes locked in silent understanding.

"We need each other," Eloise stated candidly.

"Yes, we do."

Eloise knew the thought of immortality brought with it tangible excitement and that Astrid longed for that moment with all her being.

"I would like you to prepare a special bath with lotus oil."

"Yes, Madame."

"Lay out my emerald green and sable manteau, emerald robe, and sable jupe."

"That gown is your best work, Madame."

Eloise felt herself beam. "*Merci*, I try."

"Do you desire to adorn your person with jewelry?"

"Indeed. I should like to wear my emerald necklace and matching earrings."

"Shoes?"

"Sable satin."

"Hair?"

"À la fontage, of course."

"Of course. Are you venturing someplace special, Madame?"

Eloise smiled. "Indeed. I'm attending a *commedia del'arte* at the *Hôtel du Guènègaud* with Madame Allegra and Messieurs Gabriele and Shiro."

Eloise sincerely hoped Shiro had forgiven her. She'd rebuked herself many times for her rash words.

"How exciting, Madame. I just love *Molière's* plays!" Astrid was saying.

"*Mon Dieu*, I'll be bored to tears."

Astrid frowned. *I never willingly do anything that bores me.* Eloise read her thoughts and laughed.

"I don't dislike plays. Heaven knows I've seen the original too many times to remember exactly how many." More laughter followed her words. "Seeing as you adore such things, I'll take you along next time."

"Oh, *merci*!"

"'Tis my pleasure."

The guardian angled Eloise an odd look. Eloise could hear her thoughts as though she'd spoken them aloud. "Say what's on your mind."

"Ah..." Astrid looked away.

"I'll not bite. Well, not you at least."

"Why go to all the bother, Madame?"

Eloise gave Astrid an amused glance. "You see,

being one of the kindred isn't always a positive experience...one can become quite jaded after a time."

"I see."

"Do you really?"

Astrid flushed prettily. "No, I don't, please enlighten me."

"I'm pursuing a human."

"Why don't you use your abilities to ensnare him?"

"Him?"

"I just assumed..."

"And you assumed correctly." Eloise gazed at the candle before her, the animated flame drawing her attention. "The reason I don't just mesmerize him, my dear human, is that I am not allowed to... Well, I am a little," she amended. "Although, not enough to suit my needs. Again, we are faced with the dull elements of immortality—rules!" Eloise groaned. "The human lives in my home."

"Oh, him."

"Oh, indeed." Eloise flopped down on her sumptuous crimson-covered bed.

"I should have known, as that's where you spend your evenings."

"My ever watchful guardian."

"He still won't sell?"

Eloise shook her head. "So I'll seduce him instead."

"Is he handsome?"

"Yes. He's very pretty." Eloise laughed to herself and Astrid joined in.

"Then this shouldn't be a problem for you."

"It shouldn't, but I fret, because I may become..." Eloise's words faded away. She feared voicing them, not wanting to admit she found him more than a mere trespasser in need of coercion. His stunning blue eyes taunted her.

"Do you like him?"

Like would be putting it mildly!

"Do you," Astrid repeated.

Eloise waved a dismissive hand in mid-air. "Never mind my ramblings. Please see to my needs."

"Very well, Madame. Do you need anything else?"

"No, that's all."

"Yes, Madame." Astrid turned and made to leave.

"Oh, and Astrid, thank you."

"You're welcome." The guardian turned and left the chamber.

chapter 9

tease

Christian rapidly lost interest in the comedy that played out before him on the stage below. He felt eyes upon him, watching him, the sensation almost unbearable. His gaze swept the garland-covered viewing boxes, searching for the one who drew his complete awareness. His heart raced when his eyes fixed on her.

Eloise!

The object of his fascination and his dreams nodded, a cool smile covering her luscious, kissable lips. Her name was on the tip of his tongue when her seductive voice floated through his mind, jolting him further. "*Monsieur Thief, what a surprise to see you here.*"

Christian groaned inwardly, his cock hardening at the melodious sound of her voice. *Is she following me?* Remembering to breathe, he sucked

in a ragged breath. *She's everywhere!*

"It would please me if you were to sell my home back to me," her voice entered his head again.

A vision of her riding him, taking his rigid length deep inside her, flashed through his mind and he effectively shoved it away. *I thought 'twas just a dream. I must be going mad! Either that or I am cursed!*

"Don't fight it, you want me, I see it in your eyes." Her soft, tinkling laughter filled his ears.

This can't be real! 'Tis just another of my delusions.

"I missed you after I left last eve, Monsieur Montgomery. Did you miss me?"

I wish she'd leave me be!

"You don't really want me to. Do you?"

Ignore her. 'Tis not her problem you place voices with her image. 'Tis a public playhouse, she has as much right to be here as you.

Suddenly, she leaned over him, her teeth grazing his neck, her breath fanning his skin. "You're looking rather delectable tonight, *monsieur.*"

She smelled of lotus blossoms and lilies. Her skin felt like silk, smooth and undeniably soft, the muscles beneath taut.

'Tis too vivid!

"'Tis meant to be," was her telepathic reply.

Christian had experienced many hallucinations since first seeing her, but not when he was out in

public. He'd never imagined such primal couplings, 'til her. She conjured up wild, rapturous fantasies nightly. He yearned to take her uninhibitedly, driving into her 'til he sated his desire for her. Perhaps then he could get on with his life, without her constant attack on his senses.

"You've been a very naughty boy."

She's reading my thoughts!

"God's teeth!" he muttered beneath his breath.

"I can read humans thoughts, but only when I look into their eyes, but because we're bonded, I hear you more easily. Sometimes you can block me out, again, this is because we're bonded. 'Tis all rather confusing I know."

Go away!

Cecilia turned and gave him an inquiring look. "Christian, are you all right?" He nodded absently.

I wish to God I wasn't so enthralled by that creature. He closed his eyes and took a grounding breath and when he opened them, she was gone. First, the dreams and now this, my obsession has turned me into a madman!

"Christian?" Cecilia hesitated for a moment, her eyes moving over his face. "Are you feeling unwell?"

"I'm perfectly all right."

"You don't look fine to me."

Christian rose so suddenly he drew attention

from everyone in the booth. "I need to take some air," he said, to no one in particular.

Cecilia opened her mouth to protest, but Christian didn't wait to hear her words. He knew his rapid departure would leave her appalled, but everything he did had that effect on her, so it mattered little.

Christian hurried down the walkway, his need to escape overriding all else. This feeling was entirely new to him and he didn't like it one bit! Control was his forte, 'til this extraordinary woman invaded his life.

Hordes of women begged his favor and fought to get their hands on his body and his possessions, their behavior perfectly dandy with him, since he didn't want any one woman too close, preferring to keep his sanity and his soul. So, why was this one eating him up inside? Mayhap 'twas simply because he hadn't bedded her. He smiled. No, that wasn't it at all! "You aren't like the rest of them, that's why..." he murmured softly.

"Who isn't like whom?" a purring voice asked.

"Christ!" he cursed softly.

How had she come to be here so quickly? He turned and looked at her, his breath leaving him in a rush.

"Monsieur?" She arched her swanlike neck, her fine brows lifting.

"Good evening, *Countess*." Christian cleared his

throat. "The answer to your question is you, madam. You are like no woman I've ever met."

"Is that meant to be a compliment?" she asked.

His eyes moved over her. She wore a gown of emerald and sable and her copper curls were dressed in the latest fashion: two fat ringlets falling past her delicate features and resting on her cleavage. Her smiling mouth promised pleasures beyond his wildest imaginings, and God, he wanted to know the touch of those elusive lips, the very same lips that haunted him in his nightly dreams. A shudder ran through him.

"Well, aren't you going to be a gentleman and answer me, *Monsieur Montgomery*?" The way his name fell from her lips excited him. Her honeyed voice alone gave him an erection.

"No, madam, 'twas not meant to be a compliment."

"I see." She smiled widely, reminding him of a cat that had gotten the cream.

He knew, without question, she'd read his thoughts. For the first time in his life, he didn't care that someone had penetrated the walls of his mind.

She studied him for a moment longer. "Are you enjoying the play, *monsieur*?"

Christian was in no mood for small talk. "Are you following me, wench?"

"Don't flatter yourself, *monsieur*." She laughed.

"Then why are you here?"

"To view the play, of course."

"Have the decency to tell me the truth."

"'Tis merely a coincidence. I know you wish it were otherwise. Would you prefer it if your close proximity wreaked havoc on my senses?"

"Err, uh..."

"Would you like me to say you look edible and smell it, too? Oh, I'm finding it most difficult not to ravish you right where you stand, so be on guard."

Ignoring her sarcasm, Christian got to the point. "Did you visit with Lord Charles Leblanc?"

"Indeed."

"And?"

"He's vanished."

"Oh, really? How convenient for you, madam."

"Indeed. Again, a coincidence."

"And you expect me to believe you're an heiress, a Countess no less, without proof? You'll forgive me if I doubt you, now won't you?"

"I'll dispense with the banter and state what's on my mind, *Monsieur* Montgomery."

He nodded clasping his hands behind his back.

"I'll give you double what you paid for my château, and in addition, I'll reimburse you the renovation expenses." She stopped talking and pinned him with an intense look. "Well, what do you say?"

He shrugged. "What can I say? I'm lost for words."

"'Tis my family home, it means less than nothing to you."

"I beg to differ, madam." He began to pace back and forth. "I like it."

"I see. I should have known you'd be like this." She looked rather angry, gold spots danced within her green eyes and color suffused her lovely face.

"'Tis obvious you want *Chateau de Mann*, and can pay for it. Heaven only knows why you want it," he paused, "unless you're speaking the truth." He stopped in front of her. "I've become quite attached to my new home." The Christian of old, would have jumped at the chance of making such a hefty profit, now he was more concerned with getting beneath the perspective buyers satin skirts and more. He almost laughed at his pubescent behavior.

"If you're apprehensive about relocating, I know of several homes for sale a—"

"Not at all, I simply have no wish to relocate, unless you've acquired some evidence of your supposed inheritance... Have you?" he asked, knowing she hadn't. She'd have waved the documents in his face the moment they'd met and that was not the situation.

She shook her head. "No. There's no written word to prove my inheritance."

He laughed and she looked away.

"Well then, there's your answer."

"Having lost your family and your home, I thought you'd understand my predicament," she replied.

"Madam, don't claim to know my emotions."

"So you don't miss your parents and your brothers?"

"Been investigating me, have you?"

"Indeed. Henry is twenty-nine and Charles is thirty-two; both turned their backs on you, along with your parents, when you openly sided with the Catholic king. When he fled, you followed, at your family's behest. You feared losing your head, but not as much as destroying your family's lives. You sacrificed your comfort for them. Your sweet, biddable mother knows what you have done. You are her favorite son, after all."

Christian hid his surprise well and silently commended himself. "No, madam, I'm not that profound, I simply saved my neck. My parents are prominent, upstanding people. The foolish actions of their youngest son simply caused some minor embarrassment."

"You lie badly."

"I play tennis and am an accomplished swordsman, I like to have my cock sucked, and variety in the bedchamber simply thrills me, in case you were wondering."

"Sarcasm becomes you, *monsieur*."

"Good evening to you." He half bowed and turned away, knowing she'd stop him.

"I could make it worth your while to sell!" she called after him.

He forced his features into an unreadable mask, then turned and looked her up and down, trying vainly to hide the interest that he knew sparked in his eyes. "What are you implying?"

"I'll give you what you crave."

"And what would that be?" His eyes locked with hers.

"My body. You can do whatever you want."

"I can have that anytime, wench."

"But not with me." She smiled suggestively. "Besides, I'm not just any woman, but you know that..."

Christian wondered if she came to him like one of those fabled creatures of the night, instead of in dreams, and quickly dismissed it as madness. He stroked his jaw. His cock ached at her words and he didn't want her to know the extent of his excitement. "And you imagine to know my needs?" He forced a careless tone.

"Indeed, and I don't imagine." She ran an index finger down his cheek. "I know."

"Huh."

"Dreams can come true, *Monsieur* Montgomery, as I will demonstrate..."

Christian held back a groan, his cock like steel now. "Enlighten me on how this shall benefit us both?"

"Come." She smiled knowingly at him. "Let's find someplace where we'll not be interrupted and I'll show you just what I can do to convince you."

"Where?"

"There's an empty booth there," she motioned down the walkway.

He was surprised and it must have showed. "I saw this from where I sat," she added, by way of explanation.

"No need to explain yourself," he found himself saying.

"As you wish."

He offered her his arm and she took it. Her touch was warm, unlike in his dream the previous night and the nights before it. Her exotic scent curled itself around him, making his head swim. Everything about her drove him to distraction.

"I should walk away, madam." He paused for a moment. "But you have mesmerized me with your eyes and pouting mouth. I'm fool enough to want what's forbidden, and you're that."

"I am that, *monsieur*."

He surveyed her. "Will I regret knowing you?"

She shrugged. "Most men do."

chapter 10

hedonistic behavior

They entered the booth.
“You’re not going to defend yourself, are you?” he said, breaking the silence.

She turned and pressed against him, her eyes locking with his. “Will you consider selling *Château de Mann* to me if I please you perchance?”

“Hmm...”

“All I ask is you consider it, nothing more.”

His cock throbbed against her belly and he knew she could feel it through her thick satin skirts. She moved against it, as though validating his thoughts. “Very well, I will reflect on it.” His tone sounded croaky in his ears. “I—I am being sincere, Countess.”

She smiled. “I know. Merci.”

For some inexplicable reason he believed her at that moment. He stroked the back of her hand, brought it to his mouth and kissed it. “Now I desire

nothing more than to taste your charms, or rather, have you taste me..."

"Patience isn't one of your strongest qualities, *monsieur*."

"I remember those words from my dreams..."

She smiled at his declaration.

"What is it about you? You haunt my dreams nightly, madam." He picked up a curl and it clung to his finger. "You, in your crimson robes of silk and flowing locks of spun copper, sweep into my bedchamber and torment my yearning soul. Torturer that you are, you float back out the window from whence you came and disappear into the night, as a bat, leaving only your exotic perfume of lotus blossoms and lilies. You never mind my smoldering desire, leaving me to crave you even more." He slid his lips over her jaw. "So, feed my fire and watch me burn, while my obsession for you chars my very soul."

"Such tormented words, *monsieur*." Her quavering voice evidence his touch affected her considerably.

He pulled back. "I hunger for you beyond what one considers normal. I've never tasted madness before."

The Countess looked stunned by his admission. "Revel in your passion, for you are an intense creature and—"

"I fear it has taken me over. Night and day, all I

can do is think of you. God's teeth, I don't know why I'm divulging this to you."

"You're obsessed, not mad, mayhap a little eccentric. I do so enjoy the unconventional. Dull-witted, uneventful males can't hold my attention. Beneath that fake exterior you are awfully profound, *monsieur*."

She pushed him back on the padded seat and proceeded to unfasten her underskirts and hoops. Her hands shook and her chest heaved.

He watched, with open desire, the little voice inside his head reminding him not to forget where he was, and that gentlemen didn't commit shameless sex acts in public places. He pushed it aside.

"You shan't be needing this." She removed his periwig and placed it on the nearby seat.

"I suppose not."

She smiled as she ran her fingers through his cropped hair. "Why do you wear that contraption, *monsieur*?"

"'Tis fashionable madam." She gave him a sarcastic look and he grinned. "I do like to keep up appearances."

"Indeed you do," she mocked.

She lifted her skirts and straddled him. Her soft flesh pressed against him invitingly. He could feel her heat through the fabric of their confining attire. She took his hand, pulled it beneath her

skirts and pressed it against her sex.

"Oh, you're scorching, wench. " She stretched her thighs wider, her natural musky scent tantalizing his senses. "Yes, open your sweet petals, so that I may enter your sweetness." He rolled his thumb over her clit.

"'Tis Eloise." She began to undulate against his stroking fingers. "Feel how wet I am for you."

Her panting, painted mouth descended and his rose... Her heaving bosom throbbed against his chest.

"Oooh... You set my cock aflame, Eloise."

Their lips brushed, their breaths mingled, and their tongues mated.

Christian grasped her hips and gyrated his, grinding them against her softness, wanting to bury himself deep inside. His gaze moved over her swanlike neck as she arched it. He nipped at her earlobe and she shivered. "Feel how hard you've made my cock."

"One can't help but be aware, *monsieur*."

He kissed her jaw and throat, his lips and tongue gliding over her flawless skin. "Christ, I've dreamed of this."

"Be careful of what you desire...of what you dream..."

Christian groaned. "If only I could have chosen to desire, or not to. 'Tis like an addiction."

"Yes, but we're not masters of our own

destiny."

Suddenly, her lips were on his, hot, hungry, and demanding. She unbuttoned his justacorps and pushed it open, revealing his white shirt. She drew back, her luscious mouth parting in a self-satisfied smile. "I do like a man in his own skin."

"Do you indeed, madam?" The look she gave him made his cock throb harder.

She unfastened several pearl buttons, her fingers trailing a path over his chest. "Given that we're in public, I'll only undo you a little, for modesty's sake."

"There's nothing modest about you, Eloise."

Her fingers stroked and plucked at his nipples, making them tight. Her mouth followed the path of her fingers and her tongue flicked across an erect peak, batting it back and forth. The sensation was delicious indeed.

She bit into his flesh and sucked. "Arrgh, God's teeth!" The icy pain that sliced through him began to subside, a scorching heat taking its place. It licked at his belly and pulled. "Whatever you're doing, don't cease."

She licked at his neck. Her hands moving down his body and she worked on relieving him of his breeches. Her mouth moved over his, he nipped at her soft flesh before hungrily drinking her sweetness.

She pulled away, slid down his body and knelt

on the floor. She pressed his thighs wide and began to kiss and stroke them.

Her fingers curled around the shaft of his cock and slowly pulled up and down. Her other hand moved to massage his balls. Soft, wet and hot, her mouth brushed over the head of his cock. "Arrgh!" He thrust up, wanting every inch inside her mouth.

"You like that?" her voice invaded his mind. Her hot lips suctioned and slid down 'til they were flush with his groin.

"Oooh... I more than like it."

"'Tis beautiful, *monsieur*," came her telepathic reply.

"Are you referring to my cock, wench?"

"Indeed."

Her fingers ceased fondling his balls and ventured lower to massage the tight opening of his buttocks. He stiffened as they prodded. "What are y—"

"Please, permit me to give you pleasure, *monsieur*."

"I've never..." Christian sighed in resignation. "I'm at your mercy."

"Trust me a little."

"'Tis obvious that I am," he half muttered. Her manipulating finger eventually slid inside his ass, causing it to burn. The discomfort went away after several slow, deep strokes. The sensation became

quite enjoyable, he pushed against her finger and she added another. He gasped. Her tongue whirled over his throbbing cock, flicked back and forth and stroked up and down, tasting it completely.

He watched her crimson lips glide down to swallow him to the whole, her tongue's sinuous caress making his limbs weak. Waves of ecstasy ripped through him, tightening his gut, increasing in intensity with every stroke. "Oh! Oooh! You're a goddess."

He closed his eyes and savored her ministrations. Her mouth took him deeply, sucking him hungrily, her fingers stroking his ass in rhythm. He bucked and strained against her touch. His muscles clenched and flames licked at his insides, fanning out over his entire body.

"My mouth loves the feel of you and now I want to taste you," penetrated his passion-filled mind. His seed gushed into her mouth. She swallowed and continued to stroke him, greedily milking, accepting all of him.

"Where did you learn to do that?" He strained for her touch when her mouth slid from his flaccid member.

She laughed softly. "I won't tell you, simply because you wouldn't believe me if I did, *Monsieur Montgomery*."

Oh, she is too much!

"Attempt to enlighten me and we shall distinguish whether I believe you or not?"

"I was once a whore."

"A whore?"

"Yes, a consummate whore." She went back to kissing his pulsating flesh.

"But you said you were..."

"'Tis a long story. Mayhap I will tell you some day."

He hoped there would be a someday.

She knelt at his feet, stroking his balls with her tongue. By performing this simple act, she succeeded in capturing his undivided attention. In such a position a man could be forgiven for thinking she was this delicate submissive. Mayhap in the boudoir she was, and then, only if it pleased her to be so. This he knew instinctively.

"Was that acceptable?" she asked, her mouth gliding up over the top of his left thigh. "Well, was it?"

"Oh yes, more than acceptable, but you know that."

"Ah, but a lady likes to hear these things."

"Oh, I see."

She rose and he pulled her onto his lap, pushing her skirts back. He stroked her thighs and hips, his eyes following his fingers.

"It has been so long... I wondered if I still had the touch."

"You do indeed. It would be a crime against mankind if you were to stop." He stroked her fiery, disheveled curls.

"Are you ready to sell my home back to me now?"

She has a sense of humor, too!

"Madam, you've moved me in ways I can't quite explain and don't fully understand yet, but the answer to your jest is no. Besides, we haven't finished yet."

"Well, you can't blame a lady for trying. And I'll try again and again, *monsieur*."

"Christian." He laughed easily. "A lady you may be, but never behave thusly whilst we're ah...intimate."

"Oh, I don't intend to ever do that with you, Christian," she returned. She looked positively embarrassed. "Don't fret. I certainly don't want to be your mistress."

Her words stung more than they should have. Christian sighed. "I already have—"

"You're a pleasant interlude, nothing more."

"Pleasant? Hmm." He gave her a mock frown. "Please don't go cold on me now."

"Oh, very well...an exceedingly thrilling interlude."

"One you'll want to sample again and again, I trust?"

"Yes, I know I'll want to." She laughed.

"I knew you were attracted to my person and I'm never wrong about the desires of women."

"I want my home back, and if sharing moments like these will aid me, of course I'll bed you."

"Well, you certainly put me in my place, wench." He wagged his finger at her, "My home."

"Au contraire, my family home."

"So you keep reminding me." He saw her attention moved from him to the entry. "What is it?"

She placed a finger to her lips. "Shhhh, footsteps."

"I don't hear them."

"Of course you don't."

She moved rapidly, retrieving her discarded skirts she turned, bent, and brushed a light kiss on his mouth, then vanished.

"We will finish this later..." echoed inside his mind.

"Where did she go?"

chapter 11

an unwanted quarrel

his gaze connected with hers across the way. *Now, what theory would Isaac Newton have for that? I'm going out of my mind! How did she do that?*

"If you're fortunate enough, I may tell you one day."

"What are you?"

"You would never believe me. Now dress yourself, you have visitors."

Christian didn't have time to bat an eyelid, let alone dress himself! Cecilia entered with her was Mistress Hammond right behind her.

"You! You are perverted, Christian!" Cecilia shrieked.

Eloise could have warned me earlier!

"What is wrong with you?"

"I can explain." No one would believe him. Point of fact, if he were in her place, he wouldn't either! This

incident emphasized the need for this relationship to end.

"Oh, please do enlighten me. I'm certain I'll find your justification enthralling." Cecilia folded her arms over her breasts and stared at him pointedly. Her dog stood at her feet, growling at him.

"Oh dear." Mistress Hammond's laughter washed over him.

God's teeth! How am I going to explain this! He sat there, his justacorps and shirt unbuttoned and his pants around his ankles, cock on display. By all appearances, he looked as though he'd been pleasuring himself! Mistress Hammond eyed his cock and licked her lips. He bolted off the seat and began to redress himself.

Chloe leapt up, attached herself to his breeches, and pulled, snarling all the while. "Christ! Get your dog off me!"

Cecilia whirled on Mistress Hammond and motioned to the door. "Get out!"

"See what you drive him to do?" With that said, Mistress Hammond tossed Christian a look of compassion and then departed with a swish of her skirts.

"Chloe! Come here now!" The little dog released the leg of his breeches and jumped into Cecilia's arms.

Christian let out a relieved sigh and turned

away. He caught sight of her — Countess de Mann sat in the booth opposite, breathtaking in her fashionable attire.

"That whore!" Cecilia glared over at her.

Countess de Mann's painted mouth curled into a polite smile and she nodded her head.

"You! Y—you!" Cecilia sputtered.

"Calm down, Cecilia." Christian hoped to soothe her anger.

"I—I've never been so humiliated, and you're asking me to be calm! How could you be so thoughtless? What in God's name is wrong with you?"

"I've been having an affair with the Countess since arriving in France. Please forgive my lies."

"Look at me, look at her! What could you possibly see in her?"

"Very shallow of you, Cecilia."

"And you're not?"

"'Tis over between us."

Cecilia opened her mouth to retort and he waved a hand at her. "Please have the good grace to see that."

"You're being absurd. That horrid Dutchman would see my head on a pike before I could bat an eye. I can't return to England. I need financial support. You being a traitor and all, placed me in this quandary. You can fix it."

"Of course, I'll support you 'til you find another

paramour, my dear."

Cecilia glowered at him. "I hope you catch the pox and your manhood drops off!" Unable to help it, Christian visibly flinched at her words. "'Twill happen! I pray it does very soon! You disgust me! I... I hate you! You hear me! I positively hate you, Lord Montgomery!"

Christian tried to look disappointed. He knew only her pride was wounded. "Harsh words, wench, but I understand. I would react the same way if I were in your predicament."

"How dare you!" she snarled. She bared her teeth like a wild animal about to attack, mirroring her dog perfectly. "Y—you buffoon!"

"Madam, please calm yourself"

"I... " She placed her fur ball down and hiked her skirts up. Chloe used the opportunity to pounce on him once again.

"Cecilia." He shook his leg and motioned the dog.

"Oh, to hell with you! I can have a far wealthier lover than you! Moreover, Chloe adores him. Please drop dead and save the world from further suffering, you imbecile! Come, Chloe!" Cecilia turned and fled the booth, her head held high and Chloe yapping at her side.

What could he have possibly said? This had been inevitable since arriving in France, and heaven knew Cecilia was better off without him.

Christian glanced over at the booth again. He was disappointed to find the Countess gone.

What's your story? Why are you afraid to show your vulnerabilities?

He groaned inwardly. Frustration was something he found hard to deal with, especially since he usually had his choice of mates to relieve such things. Now, he only wanted her to slake his raging hunger.

Was it real? He touched his neck and flinched. Can she be a vampire? Can it be possible that I've conjured this up, that I'm totally depraved? Was it real?

His gaze moved over the stalls again and his eyes met a pair of hard black ones. A shudder ran through him as the man's eyes lightened to a bright gold. He fleetingly wondered where the foreigner was born, his exotic appearance striking. This same man sat with the Countess and several others, when he first noticed her.

"You hurt her and I'll tear your throat out and bathe in your blood."

"God's teeth! He bloody spoke to me!" Christian uttered loudly, the voice inside his head startling him greatly.

"Of course, you foolish human." Those startling eyes held his in their magnetic pull.

"Human?"

"'Tis what you are."

"Then you too must be a vampire."

"You will learn soon enough."

"And Eloise – Countess de Mann?"

"You will not speak of this to any human." The exotic creature vanished, breaking the spell.

chapter 12

sweet dreams

Oh, why do I bring these things on myself? Christian's face ached. He was tired of feigning expressions of delight. Mistress Hammond had been in his ear most of the afternoon and evening, much to his utter dismay. Christian had given up all hope of escaping her, since she sat opposite him. Her bright smile and sparkling eyes matched the diamonds in her ears. Her silver-blond locks were fashionably dressed, cascading over her velvet-covered shoulders emphasizing her cleavage. He had to admit she looked lovely.

"A fine meal indeed," Lord Grey murmured, pushing his empty plate aside.

"Oh, yes," came a feminine reply.

Christian held in a sigh and surveyed Madame Charlotte de Lourent and Lord Patrick Grey, both sat to his right. They had been lovers for the past

two years. Grey and Christian had been friends ever since they studied together in Florence. Although Grey wasn't a handsome man—his complexion too ruddy, his brown hair too light, and his blue eyes too pale—his charm drew women like moths to a flame. His sizable bank account helped when his magnetism failed. He had paid a handsome sum for the privilege of Madame de Lourent's company.

Madame de Lourent flicked her luxurious blackish-brown ringlets over one shoulder, her big brown eyes shining brilliantly when they met Christian's. Her full mouth curled up at the corners. "You look splendid tonight, *Monsieur Montgomery*."

"Thank you for your kind words, madam." Christian forced a polite tone.

"A fact, not flattery," she replied, her brows wriggling suggestively.

"You're a refined lady, to be sure. I would steal you away from Grey, if he weren't my dear friend," he replied, knowing what she wanted to hear.

God, spare me from boredom!

Madame de Lourent waved a hand at him and giggled girlishly. "You're a shameless flatterer."

Christian smiled at her trite words. "I'm guilty of paying you an honest compliment, nothing more." She tittered at that, her lashes fluttering

rapidly.

Dear God, slay me now! Everything seemed so stale since the *Countess* had come into his life.

"Mayhap you're ensnared by beauty."

"Beauty is such a fragile thing, Madame de Lourent. 'Tis a useless quality, unless one possesses the profundity to complement it."

"And, *monsieur*?" She raised a brow.

"God rarely blesses women with both..."

"I beg your pardon?" Her mouth hung open.

"And you have both," Christian added, enjoying the play of emotions on her face.

"Oh." Her smile wavered.

Grey laughed. "Montgomery, your tongue is loose tonight. Beauchamp's charm has worn off on you, I see."

Christian cleared his throat. "Since he isn't here to entertain y —"

"Who is Beauchamp?"

Grey smiled at his mistress. "Lord Randolph Beauchamp is mutual friend and old university companion of Montgomery's and mine. He was to attend the festivities this night, but ah...has been detained."

"Oh, I hope 'tis nothing too serious," Mistress Hammond interjected.

Christian noted the interest in her eyes.

Grey laughed. "Heaven's no, he's simply entertaining a new wench."

"Oh." Mistress Hammond didn't look too happy.

"I forgot to mention he's also a privateer," Grey added.

"I know. I have known him for many years."

"I was directing my words at Madame de Lourent, Mistress Hammond."

"Oh, I see. My apologies, Lord Grey."

"One is very fortunate if Beauchamp shows his face before dessert. It appears that Beaufort has followed his example. True, Montgomery?"

"Indeed. Everything is less restrictive here in France, however, 'tis unusual for Beaufort to be late," Christian replied.

Grey cleared his throat and nodded his head to the left. "Speak of the devil."

Cecilia swept into the room ahead of Beaufort, minus her dog.

"Aren't you in the least regretful?" Grey asked.

"No. I imagine he is, though," Christian murmured.

Dressed in the finest manteau of crimson, cream and sable, she looked breathtaking. He thanked God he was immune to her brand of charm. Adam Beaufort obviously wasn't, a pity indeed.

Good riddance to you, my dear shrew.

"Greetings, Montgomery."

"And to you, Beaufort." Christian raised his wineglass to him and then sipped. On occasion, he

enjoyed a fine wine or two. "Glad you could find the time to make an appearance." Beaufort's face flushed and he nodded in answer.

The dinner guests began greeting the latecomers.

Mistress Hammond smiled like a cat that had gotten the cream. "I do hope you both had a pleasant afternoon."

Cecilia scowled. "Indeed, Mistress Hammond, a most pleasurable one."

"Oh, really?" Mistress Hammond's brows rose in inquiry.

"Point of fact," Cecilia's cool blue eyes connected with Christian's, "I'd almost forgotten how much I adore being pampered...Adam reminded me."

Be Damned! Christian almost choked on his wine. *Lying strumpet!*

"A good evening to you, Mistress Hammond," Beaufort interjected, in an obvious attempt to divert the conversation. "You're looking rather eye-catching this evening," he added.

She fairly beamed. Christian knew Cecilia wasn't one to allow another woman the attentions of her lover and pitied his friend, knowing what was to come.

"Eye-catching? Why are you being so gracious to her?" Cecilia demanded.

"I—"

"And what about me, how do I look?"

Beaufort stood mouth agape and red-cheeked. "I—I..."

Beaufort was far too soft to handle a woman like Cecilia and it showed. Her tyrannical behavior was at its worst, and if Beaufort continued this route, emasculation would surely follow.

"Have you lost your tongue?" Cecilia asked.

Beaufort looked at Christian, his mouth working, but no words issued forth. Christian rested against the finely carved cedar backrest and feigned nonchalance, smoothing his periwig and sighing in complaint. He didn't want to get involved and he wasn't the only one, it appeared the confrontation was awkward for all seated. *Well, she certainly misplaced her etiquette tonight!*

Cecilia scowled at Beaufort. "It doesn't take that long to think of something sincere."

Christian simply couldn't resist. "With you it does, my dear."

Cecilia's gaze swept over Christian, her loathing obvious. "I wasn't speaking to you, Lord Montgomery."

"Why don't you calm yourself, wench? You're making my other guests uncomfortable with your intolerable behavior, and I can't have that," Christian said firmly.

"I'm waiting." She looked at Beaufort and then the chair.

Beaufort seated her. "You're the most beautiful woman in the room, and you know I believe that. I was being polite," he said quietly at her ear.

"Oh? Is that all you have to say?"

"N-no. I... I planned to ask you to marry me this very —"

"Am I hearing things?" Cecilia looked about her.

"Will you?" Beaufort beseeched. The display was rather pitiful and it sickened Christian.

"Will I do what?"

"Marry me?" Beaufort replied in a low tone.

Cecilia's brow furrowed. "I'll have to consider it first."

She'll have to discover how much you're worth! Bed her, but don't be foolish enough to marry her. Two months isn't near enough time.

Christian didn't want his best friend stuck with this unbearable shrew for the rest of his life. But what could he do about it? He had to control the urge to kick Beaufort beneath the table.

Can't you see she's making a fool of you? Can't you see how unwise you look!

"You must understand, I need time to consider such a life-altering decision," Cecilia added. She smoothed her golden hair.

"I thought... Well, since you've already been married once —"

"I envisioned my marriage proposal to be a

romantic affair, since the first was not."

Grey cleared his throat noisily. "I wonder where Beauchamp could be?"

Christian shook his head. "He can have our company anytime he chooses." He waved his hand about, the silk handkerchief he held between thumb and index finger brushing his lace-covered wrist. "But a special lady's, well..." Laughter followed his comment.

Cecilia's high-pitched voice rang out over their laughter. Rapidly growing tired of her nagging tone, Christian wished he'd given in to his desire and stayed up in his room. Then he would've been free to fantasize about the Countess.

Are you who you claim to be? Are my impressions of you real, or are they a figment of my deluded mind?

"Did you hear me?" Grey's voice broke through Christian's reverie.

"Sorry." Christian frowned. "You were saying?"

Grey grinned. "I've heard rumors about you and that Frenchwoman."

"Countess de Mann," Christian corrected dryly. "What have you heard?"

Grey leaned in and whispered in quiet tones, "I hear tell you were caught masturbating..."

Christian felt the color rise up his cheeks. "Pardon?" the word came out in a high pitch. Somewhat shaken, Christian loosened his cravat.

Grey cleared his throat. "At the theater, you were masturbating while watching the Countess across the way."

"That's absurd. I would never..."

"I'm with you, my friend. I said you wouldn't be that adventurous."

"Huh, so now I'm dull?"

Christian glanced up and caught the wide smile on Mistress Hammond's face. *Damnably woman!*

"Hell! Even I would carefully consider the consequences of such actions. I simply meant the Christian I used to know, would never be caught in such a predicament," Grey gripped Christian's shoulder, his blue-gray eyes dancing in amusement. "But what of the new you? Are you saying you would...or did?" he asked, his brow cocked.

Grey's attention shifted to Lord Randolph Beauchamp as he sauntered into the room, Countess de Mann on his arm.

Her green eyes clung adoringly to his and she appeared to hang onto his every word. The primeval urge to tear him limb from limb almost overwhelmed Christian. Cecilia's triumphant laughter washed over him like icy water.

Dressed in a chocolate, sable and cream manteau gown, her copper curls arranged in their usual way—ringlets cascading over her silk-covered shoulders—she looked radiant. Oh, how

he liked the texture of her skin. The thought of Beauchamp touching it almost sent him over the edge to insanity.

Why is she doing this to me? Has she no one else to bother? Why does she continue to harass me? She's not getting her hands on my home now, no matter how much she offers!

Christian knew he was being petty but couldn't help it. If this was the beginnings of love, he wanted no part of it! He disliked feeling bitter, among other things. He blamed her for his emotions, since she was the one who invaded his life.

He watched his guests' utter exuberant greetings, their laughter flowing freely.

Was I just another conquest?

Beauchamp seated her and then himself. "Montgomery, don't scowl, old boy." He took a sip of wine. "I'm not that late. There's still time for dessert." He looked Eloise up and down.

"Good evening to you, Beauchamp. Are your manners late as well?" Christian managed to utter without choking on the words.

"Forgive my disrespect, I've been onboard ship too long and have forgotten how to conduct myself. A good thing you're here to remind me, Montgomery." Beauchamp laughed. "Greetings, my old friend. I have brought along a guest, as you can plainly see, I hope you don't object?"

"Of course not."

"Countess —"

"We've already met," Christian interrupted, a little too sharply. Beauchamp's brows furrowed.

Eloise's green eyes slowly moved over him and his gut clenched. "*Monsieur* Montgomery, I hope you've fared well since our last meeting," she said innocently.

"Of course." Christian felt color stain his face. "And you, how are you progressing?"

"As you can see..." Eloise turned her palms up, her fingers curling, her long nails biting into the soft flesh of her palms. "I am in good spirits. Your friend has been very attentive," she said.

The memory of her hands on his skin flashed through Christian's mind and his cock immediately throbbed to life.

"One cannot help but be so," Beauchamp added.

"How gracious of you, Beauchamp." Christian pushed the dinner plate away and pick up his wineglass, draining it.

Bastard! Louse-ridden bastard! If you touch her in front of me, I'll... He forced the maddening thoughts away.

Dark hair and eyes, bronze skin and wiry build, Beauchamp epitomized rugged male beauty. He exuded a raw masculinity that caused women to flock to him in droves. A privateer, he had

perfected his whoring and weapon skills. Christian didn't need to wonder what she saw in him.

She gave him an amused smile. *Don't invade my thoughts, woman, they're sacred!*

"It didn't take you long to understand how to communicate with me, Monsieur Thief," she telepathically returned.

'Tis not very difficult, considering...

"Really?"

Madam, are you in the habit of bedding a different man every night? Have you any respectability? Christian fumed.

"Jealous?"

That's preposterous! Certainly not!

"I see you're rid of Cecilia."

We weren't suited.

"Indeed." She smirked.

I barely know who you are, let alone what you are! What are you?

"Don't you know, monsieur?"

Would I ask if I did?

Beauchamp placed a bowl of trifle in front of her and she shook her head. "I'm not hungry."

"You must eat something."

"No, thank you."

"Look at you?"

She turned her head and pinned Beauchamp with an icy look. "What are you implying?"

"I mean you're fragile and shouldn't starve

yourself, milady."

"Ah, *Monsieur Pirate*, you are most considerate. I'm not hungry, but thank you."

"Just one spoonful?"

"I believe Countess de Mann already stated that she wasn't hungry," Christian interjected.

"Good of you to interrupt, old boy," Beauchamp muttered dryly.

"Really, I can answer for myself, *Monsieur Montgomery*."

"I'm sure you can, madam." Christian motioned a servant to refill his wineglass and then bid him to leave the decanter before dismissing him.

"Countess de Mann, tell us why you stumbled in here dressed like a peasant and smelling like a body long dead several months ago?" Mistress Hammond interrupted.

The copper-haired beauty glanced at Mistress Hammond and smiled graciously.

"Now is not the time or place, Mistress Hammond," Christian said. The woman cringed and tore her gaze from his.

She pinned Eloise with an intense look. "And were you delirious when you stated 'twas your home?"

"'Twas once was my family home, and will be again, Mistress Hammond."

"Really? Enlighten us on when this will occur,

Countess de Mann.

"I imagine you should ask Christian. Ah, *Monsieur Montgomery* that question."

He shrugged. "'Tis a private matter, Mistress Hammond."

"Oh."

Christian cleared his throat noisily when several of the guests directed curious looks his way. "'Tis nothing to do with you, or anyone else here, for that matter. Please find another subject for discussion."

"Oh." Mistress Hammond appeared none too pleased by his words.

"Please refrain from discussing this matter further," Christian asserted.

Mistress Hammond inclined her head, hiding her obvious annoyance. "As you wish, my lord."

"I do Indeed," Christian stated firmly.

He poured several glasses of wine, handed Beaufort and Madame de Lourent a glass each and rose to his feet. Glancing at Eloise, he said, "You must invite me to your rented Château, Countess. I hear tell 'tis a wonder to behold."

"'Tis indeed. Although, not as wonderful as this château," Eloise replied.

He forced a smile "Would you care for a drink?" He held the glass out to her. She took it, her fingers lightly brushing his. Flames ignited in his gut and his heart began to race.

"M—merci, *monsieur*."

Their eyes locked. "You're most welcome," he replied.

Christian reseated himself. Incapable of resisting her charms he glanced back at her. Everyone else faded away as he lost himself in her hypnotic green eyes.

"I had this dream, *Monsieur Montgomery*," she telepathically explained. "You were drinking from my sex, and 'twas so mouthwateringly good... I'm wet at the thought."

Christian almost choked on his wine, his cock steeled, pressing against his breeches. *What is she trying to do to me!*

"You bent me over a table face first, and told me to stay. You spread my legs and then ran your hands up the backs of them 'til they held the globes of my behind. I could feel your breath against my skin and wanted your mouth on my flesh, which now throbbed intensely at the thought. Suddenly, your tongue was all over me, hot and extremely adept. Your teeth nipped at my tender lips. I cried out in pleasure. Can you imagine it?"

Oh, yes! Christian sucked in a ragged breath.

"Spreading my thighs wider, I pushed back against your scalding lips. You pleased well with your mouth. Your tongue stroked my clit amorously, back and forth, back and forth. 'Twas,

hot, oh so hot, your teeth intermittently nipping at my delicateness, causing a delicious sensation to thrum throughout my body. I could scarcely catch my breath. Then you pushed two fingers deep inside me. My sex throbbed against their heat and the scorch of your ravenous mouth. My legs grew weak and thrilling fire roared up my belly and spread throughout my body. I wanted it to go on forever, but alas, I flowed into your mouth and 'twas over."

Christian wanted to escape, but his embarrassing predicament wouldn't allow such a thing!

"You rose and leaned over me, nuzzled my cheek, and then you asked me if I enjoyed it. I couldn't believe you still needed to know, after my earth-shattering climax. Of course I did. I could feel the rigidity of your cock through your breeches against my bottom and wriggled. You let out a strangled groan and moved off me. I laughed cheekily, finding your discomfort amusing and you laughed back, swatting my behind. I liked it."

She took a sip of wine and then licked her blood-red lips. Christian inwardly groaned, knowing what was about to come.

"You removed your breeches and then you grasped my hips and pulled me back, your steely cock entering me swiftly. We both groaned in

unison. You thrust into me enthusiastically and I bucked on your thick rod with likewise abandon, my fingers stroking my bud of desire. 'Twas too delectable and my sex clenched your cock violently. You spilled inside me, your ragged breathing mingling with mine. Subsequently I woke up, my body throbbing and my juices had dampened my thighs..." She sighed. "I had to pleasure myself after that."

I'm in hell!

She smiled. "I hope you enjoyed my dream as much as I did, *Monsieur Montgomery*."

God's teeth, you torture me!

"I smell your desire, 'tis as strong as my own." Her tongue darted out and rapidly traced her bottom lip.

He knew she wanted to kiss him passionately and yearned to fulfill her needs. The urge to reach across the table, cup the nape of her neck and draw her lush mouth down to his almost overwhelmed him.

"What are you thinking?"

Not stealing every thought?

"No, *monsieur*, which is a trifle inconvenient."

Christian smiled. *I want you. I'm thinking you should come to my bedchamber and not Beauchamp's. I'm thinking that you need my brand of lovemaking. And Christ, I'm in need of your company tonight... Did you read those thoughts?*

"Yes, but only because you opened yourself to me." She smiled. "'Tis more than *Château de Mann* that I hound you for... You have always been fascinating to me, and I can't deny my attraction any longer, not since you've proven your bond with me. Men don't usually excite me, you're the first to captivate me as Jacques once did..."

You must tell me more about Jacques some day, madam.

"I'm divulging my secrets. I don't know what's come over me. It must be the wine. I rarely drink it, as 'tis not good for me. I drink it purely for appearances only now."

You wanted me to know, madam. Moreover, I want to know everything about you, touch every part of you, mind, body and soul. You make me so hungry... Will you come to me?

"I have teased you mercilessly. How can I refuse?"

Will you invite me to into your home sometime, Eloise?

"But you're in my home." She smiled widely. "You want to come to my rented home?"

Of course, that's what I said before.

"I shall invite you to my grand ball. 'Tis about time you met my closest friends..."

How gracious. I have heard tell of your ball.

"A late invitation I know, but...well, you know."

Indeed.

"I'll go now and return to you later."

How will you come to me?

"I will explain when you're ready. Now, I really must go." The telepathic link was broken.

I will await you with bated breath, madam.

She turned to Beauchamp and cleared her throat. "I am feeling a little poorly. I shall return home and rest."

"You have been rather quiet tonight, I wasn't certain... I'll come with you."

"No. Please stay and enjoy yourself. I'm not good company at present, *Monsieur* Beauchamp."

Mistress Hammond's eyes lit up at that, making Christian realize she had her eyes on the rugged privateer.

"But..."

"I insist."

Beauchamp looked at Christian and frowned. "Very well. It would seem Montgomery has caused your mood."

Christian shrugged, giving Beauchamp his best confused look.

"Not at all, *monsieur*." She rose.

"I will escort you to your carriage, 'tis the least I can do, my dear," Beauchamp murmured, rising to his feet as well.

"Thank you."

"I bid you *adieu*, *Monsieur* Montgomery."

"A pleasure to see you again, madam."

She gave Christian a parting smile and left.

chapter 13

a pleasant tête-à-tête

Eloise stared into the darkness while she waited for her carriage to arrive at the entrance.

"I can come along with you," Beauchamp offered.

"No, really, you mustn't trouble yourself." She smiled. "Besides, Mistress Hammond has her eyes firmly set on you. I know you like her, too."

He flushed guiltily. "Am I so transparent?"

Eloise nodded. "Indeed."

"I can't remember ever liking another woman that way..." He sighed. "Forgive my behavior."

"We made poor lovers, you and I, as you well know. Our hearts and minds weren't in it."

"Agreed. I thought 'twas just me, 'til I saw you and Montgomery."

"I'm sorry for bruising your self-esteem."

“‘Tis perfectly alright, milady.” His dark eyes shone brightly.

“You’re a handsome devil and she will positively adore you.”

“You’re a lady among peasants, milady.”

“How quaint.” She laughed.

“I’m not as charming as the debonair Lord Montgomery. Hmm?”

“Forgive my sarcasm, I didn’t mean...”

“‘Tis perfectly all right.”

“I am rather fond of your dear friend.”

“Being rather blunt, all and sundry noticed the two of you. Staring and saying nothing.” He laughed. “You both behaved rather brazenly.”

Eloise’s black carriage stopped before the entryway. Four horses, the color of night, whinnied and neighed loudly, announcing their impatience to be away.

Monsieur Beauchamp took her arm and they walked down the stone stairway. “I’m delighted to have met you, milady.”

“You’re a decent man.”

“Oh?”

“Of course. She laughed. “I won’t let that get out, ’twill be dreadful for your rakish reputation.”

“Indeed.”

“A word of warning...”

“Yes?”

She beckoned and he leaned close. “She is a

fiery spirit and likes to be handled by a man with strong hands..."

His eyes narrowed. "Mistress Hammond?"

"Indeed, *Monsieur* Beauchamp. The reason why other men failed is because they were weak."

"Thank you." He took her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it. "I am in your debt, mysterious lady of the night."

"And one day I'll collect..." Eloise smiled.

"We have an agreement."

She looked deep into his eyes. "We do."

The door opened and Astrid popped her head outside the crimson interior. *Monsieur* Beauchamp raised his brows but said naught.

Astrid beamed at her. "You are early, madame."

"Yes, indeed" Eloise climbed inside, the driver closed the door and off they went, gravel crunching beneath the carriage wheels.

"Farewell, milady."

"Adieu! I wish you well," Eloise call out the window.

"Is everything all right?" Astrid asked.

"I needed to be away..." Eloise closed the window.

"Why? If it pleases you to answer, of course."

"I wanted to be away from Beauchamp, not that he's a bad person, quite the contrary." She laughed softly. "You see, I am returning to be with

Monsieur Montgomery later tonight."

"Is this wise?"

"But, of course."

"What if you forget?"

"I haven't forgotten in the past. Please don't concern yourself. *Monsieur* Montgomery wouldn't dream of harming me."

"You like this mortal man very much. "

"I need to seduce him into selling my home back to me, nothing more."

"You've convinced yourself of this, mistress."

"So now you claim clairvoyance?"

"Don't be angry, mistress. I've watched you and you moon about like a female in love. You spend night after night going to him, watching over him like some obsessed creature, returning only moments before the sun's rays greet the horizon."

"I'm not in love with the Englishman. I may like him, even lust after him, but I don't love him. Understand?"

"If you say so."

"Don't use that smug tone on me."

Astrid laughed and Eloise joined her.

"It wouldn't be a bad thing, you know," Astrid murmured.

"What are you referring to, pray tell?"

"If you and Lord Montgomery were to fall in love."

"Heaven forbid." When Astrid's brows rose, Eloise admitted, "Mayhap I like him more than a little."

"You could move back into your home and pay naught," Astrid added, her eyes wide.

"Mon dieu. You're deluded."

"If you say so..."

"I do." Eloise erupted into laughter again, her spirits high.

"After all, you should know. Right?"

"Hmm..."

Eloise gave Astrid a mock frown. The both laughed again.

chapter 14

RECIPROCATED PASSION

In spite of her unerring self-control and good wisdom in the past, Eloise now questioned her judgment. She'd misplaced her rationality the moment she scrambled from that horrible tomb. She hardly found Claude's punishment fair, in light of the problems she'd incurred since.

You can't blame him for everything you do, Eloise.

Invisible, she watched Christian pace the floor. Dressed in his favorite banyan of blue and silver silk, he looked very manly. She inhaled his heady, exotic Eastern cologne. The candlelight captured the golden lights in his hair, which was now long enough to curl. She wanted to run her fingers through it.

A glass of cognac in hand, he whirled the amber-colored contents and stared into it, his sapphire-blue eyes filled with unanswered

questions. She couldn't blame him for that, just as she couldn't blame him for her infatuation.

He glanced around the bedchamber, and she read his thoughts: *Where are you? What are you, my lovely copper-haired woman? Do you come to me at night, or is that simply part of my madness?* He passed a hand over his throat and shuddered. I need to know.

Eloise made herself visible.

He gazed at her briefly and then looked away. "Countess, I was under the impression you weren't coming." He gulped down his cognac and placed the glass on the silver tray beside the half-empty decanter.

"I am true to my word."

"Indeed."

"I wouldn't tell you to expect me and then not appear."

"Yes, appear is the appropriate term."

"Pardon, *monsieur*?"

"Appear. Tell me how you manage to do that, wench."

"'Tis a gift." She smiled.

"You have many of those. Would you care to enlighten me?"

"I don't have enough time left."

"Why did you come?"

"Because you asked me."

"No. Why did you come?"

"Oh. I... You fascinate me, Christian. Men don't usually fascinate me. They haven't since Jacques."

"Ah, the mysterious Jacques." His look was one of inquiry.

"He was my husband."

"And he left you gutted." His gaze filled with softness. "Is my assumption correct?"

She nodded.

"Now I understand."

"Understand what, pray tell?"

"Why you're afraid to allow me too close."

"I'm here now, Christian."

"Yes." A smile played over his sensuous mouth. "Yes, you are indeed. 'Tis to coax me a little more, hmm?"

"In order for us to become better acquainted, you must learn to trust me a little, *monsieur*."

He sighed. "And you must learn to trust me, Countess."

"'Tis Eloise."

His eyes moved over her lingeringly, the desire within smoldering. "You will tell me what is real and what is not, before I do something akin to becoming utterly besotted with you, Eloise."

"Of course. Very soon..."

She turned and caught her image in the mirror. Dressed in a flowing white chemise, her riotous copper curls floating about her slender hips. The candlelight behind afforded him a glimpse

beneath her silky trappings. She wondered what he thought. "Are you disappointed?"

"You're beautiful. More so because of your fragility, and I mean that in more ways than one."

"*Merci*. Most men like a more curvier shape," she added, mentally kicking herself for acting addlebrained.

"Then they are blind."

She watched him watch her in the mirror. "Let us assuage our burning desires...become one, before dawn," she whispered.

"You don't know how much I've desired to have you in my arms," he said hoarsely.

Eloise unlaced her chemise and peeled it from her shoulders, her eyes not leaving him. She enjoyed his thorough perusal. A scorching inferno ignited in the pit of her belly and worked its way to her sex where it pulsed to life.

He stood, mouth agape, staring at her. She read his thoughts: *So pale and so lovely...like strawberries and cream.*

"You can touch me," she offered.

"Yes... Yes, I—I know." As the gown silently slid to the floor, his eyes trailed the path it exposed. "I can touch any part of you this night."

"Don't you want to touch me?"

"My cock strains to be inside you. I crave you like a parched desert craves water. How can you ask, Eloise?"

"I'm female, we like to hear these things." She cupped her breasts, her fingers moving to pinch and stroke her nipples. They hardened immediately. "Come taste my budding flesh. Stroke my desire." She parted the lips of her sex and caressed, her fingers coating in her sticky juices. He shifted abruptly his mouth half open. She dragged her fingers from their heated haven and slipped them in her mouth, tasting her musky flavor.

"*God's teeth!*" he muttered on a choked sigh.

She sucked them deep, imagining them to be his beautiful cock. His mouth opened further as she slid them back and forth. "You torture me incessantly, wench."

She turned from the mirror to face him. "'Twas my intention."

The lips of Eloise's sex brushed together and wetness dripped down her thighs. She squirmed beneath his scorching gaze. *Mon Dieu! Do something! Touch me, before I go mad!*

"You make me feel like a schoolboy again." He sighed. "I want to couple with you like a savage beast and yet, I want to love you tenderly...savor every exquisite inch of you." He waved a hand in the air. "My mind is awlirl."

Heaven knew he had the same affect on her. He made her feel shy and utterly feminine. Oh, how she liked that feeling! The notion of him as an

immortal flashed through her mind and she gasped in shock. She shoved the alarming thought aside.

"Eloise?"

"Yes, Christian?"

"I like my name on your tongue."

"And I like saying it."

Instead of blushing, bite him and be done with it!

She wanted to scream at him to take her, since he seemed all too happy just to look, and that was driving her wild.

"What do you want from me, goddess of my dreams, tormentor of my soul?" he asked, in a quiet tone. He reached out and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand, the barest smile on his lips.

Eloise was tempted to tell him all about herself and what she wanted, but her voice of reason stopped her. "I want to bed you, for now," was all she could manage.

"I have dreamed of this moment more times than I can count."

"Then touch me." She could see the outline of his cock through his silk dressing gown. She longed to caress him with her fingers and mouth, and feel his silky heat throb to her touch.

A shudder passed through her. When did they begin to meld? Was it the moment she laid eyes on him? Allegra warned her when she found the

"one" she would fall in love instantaneously. What rot, Eloise had thought at the time, but now she wasn't quite so sure.

"Undress me, Eloise," he commanded.

His command surprised and excited Eloise. She untied his dressing gown, their bodies almost touching. She pushed the garment from his broad shoulders and it sailed to the floor, greeting her discarded garment. "You're beautiful," she whispered, running her trembling hands over the hard planes of his body.

"No, madam, you are." He cupped her face and kissed her tenderly, his firm mouth slowly painting hers with its ardent brush.

Eloise shuddered violently, lust making her eager for a taste of his blood. Never had she craved a man like this!

Their tongues moved in unison, gracefully stroking, imitating what was to come. His hands slid down her back and cupped her derrière. He pulled her to him and ground his iron-hard erection against her moist heat. Eloise clung to his shoulders, her body moving in harmony with his.

I'm lost in this human! Hunger clawed at her insides and threatened to overwhelm her. *I'm so lost!*

"Do you like that?" She nodded mutely. His mouth moved over her jaw, his stubble grazing her skin. "Answer me." He bit into her flesh.

"Oh, yes." Her clit throbbed with every brush of his hot, teasing cock.

"Lusty wench." His lips claimed hers once more. She moaned inside his mouth, her hips pumping in unison.

Christian's lips moved over her throat. "I do so like a lady who gives her all." He nipped her earlobe. "I dream of you biting me, 'tis the strangest thing."

"Oooh. You simply thrill me."

"Tell me what you want and I will," he whispered.

"Do you really want to hear what I need...desire from you?"

"Yes. Tell me," Christian urged.

"I want you to love me with your tongue, 'til I spend all over it, and then I want you to lick my juices from me while I watch."

"'Twill be my pleasure."

He rained kissed over her breasts. One flick of his tongue had her nipple hard as a pebble. He moved to the other and to her surprise, he bit it hard. She gave a startled cry. His heated mouth gently loved the delicate peak 'til it pulsed with pleasure. He returned to the other and repeated the process and she almost swooned with delight. He gradually made his way down her body. "You have a very attentive mouth, *monsieur*."

"Your body is exquisite." His mouth brushed

over her quivering belly. "Perfect."

Eloise fought the desire to drag him up her body and sink her teeth into his heated flesh. Roaring, not unlike a tidal wave, filled her ears, she feared she was losing her self-control, and wished she hadn't come to him without feasting beforehand.

"Open your legs wider."

She barely heard his request.

"Open your legs."

Eloise obliged him and he rewarded her with a thorough tongue massage. She gripped his shoulders when her head began to spin and her legs grew weak. His fingers entered and filled her heated sex, easily adjusting to her wild movements. Stroking and plunging, plunging and stroking...

Soon, all she could hear was her own ragged cries as she surrendered to another shattering orgasm. Still, his fingers pushed past her gripping muscles, driving into her innermost core, urging her to ride another tide of ecstasy, which made her toes curl.

"Open further," he growled planting small bites on her clit and nether lips.

"Oooh!" Her nails dug into his shoulders. He forced another finger into her and pushed harder, faster. Suddenly her body pulsed and contracted sharply and pleasure- pain ripped through her.

He devoured her, savoring her as though she was a rare treat. His tongue snaked over her throbbing clit, rolling and curling, his fingers moving in a circular motion, touching that special place inside.

Eloise was utterly lost and didn't care who heard her rapturous cries. His mouth was a treasure indeed. The thought of making him hers entered her head once again. "If only..." she whispered.

Christian rose to his feet and pulled her into his arms. "If only what, Eloise?" His brow rose in question.

"You have a fabulous mouth, *monsieur*."

"I am flattered, beautiful wench. Come." He led her over to the bed and they lay down together. He leaned over her and gazed down at her, his fingers playing through her curls. "I adore your hair, 'tis my favorite hair color." He dipped his head and kissed her nose. "You're a mesmerizing creature."

"You know how to please a female, *monsieur*."

"Of course," he uttered smugly. He spread his legs and leaned back on his elbows. "Come and suck on me, taste my desire, feast."

"With pleasure." Eloise knelt between his legs, spread the lips of her sex and stroked her insides. She laughed triumphantly when his member hardened further.

"Greedy wench," he uttered thickly.

"To lubricate my hands," she said, her fingers curling around his thick shaft. He groaned and thrust up, her hand rotated and pumped slowly, stimulating his slick muscle. She kissed his balls, her teeth lightly nipping before she took them into her mouth and sucked.

She gripped him firmly, stroking and pumping in rhythm with his hips. Her mouth sucked and her tongue skillfully caressed his love sack.

"Arrgh!" His grip tightened and his body stiffened.

She ceased loving his balls and cock. "Not yet." She dipped her head and licked at his silken cockhead. Juices seeped from the small slit, tantalizing her tongue. She flicked her tongue over the sensitive flesh beneath and followed the throbbing vein 'til she reached the root of his cock. His hips bucked in mid-air while her tongue flicked.

"Oh Oooh! Suck me!" She drew the head of his cock inside her mouth and then pushed it back out again, her tongue lovingly curling around it when she came up. The expression on his face was blissful.

"Oh yes, that's it!"

He bucked and groaned, trying to fill her teasing mouth with his muscle. Just when he'd begged enough, she sucked his cock deep down

her throat. She began to massage his balls with one hand. He stroked her hair, his hips thrusting faster and harder. Her mouth swallowed him smoothly, while she sucked and her tongue whirled about his pulsing shaft with each retraction, thoroughly enjoying her task.

His choked cries filled the bedchamber and his hot juices spilled into her mouth. Eloise diligently swallowed before she withdrew, licking her swollen lips.

"Mmm... You're not like other women."

"Oh, I know." She smiled at him.

"Hmm. When are you going to tell me your secrets, sweet wench?"

"No time now...I want to enjoy this experience."

He nodded. "I understand."

She kissed her way up his splendid body and placed her head on his chest.

Christian held her gently and stroked her hair. "You're an exquisite, irresistible creature." He sighed. "I could fall deeply, madly in love with you."

Eloise warmed to his words, but she dared not hope for such a thing. "Y-you flatter me, Christian."

"'Twas no flattery, you light my world in ways I never thought possible. You inspire the poet in me. I can't imagine a place I'd want to be without

you. You're the only woman I've thought of bedding since you first entered my home and proclaimed it yours. 'Tis odd for me. I'm simply overwhelmed with visions of you."

"I'll admit you've been driving me mad." He stopped stroking her hair. "In a good way," she added.

"I... I want..."

"Yes?" She sat up.

Their eyes locked and silent understanding passed between them.

"For now...I want to take you from behind. I want you on your hands and knees."

"I do like it that way, *monsieur*." Eloise positioned herself on her knees and before she expected it, his cock slid deep inside her, spreading her wide. She clutched the silken bed linen, his forceful thrusts embedding his cock completely with every thrust. The sting of his hand on her ass cheek made her yelp when he intermittently slapped one. His movements slowed and then stopped.

"Don't stop."

He slowly withdrew.

"Ooh." She sensed he watched his cock retract, the notion making her throb harder. "So tight."

She felt him move away. *No!*

"Come here," he said. She turned and looked at him. "Now." Christian fell back on his heels and

patted his lap. "Can you ride, wench?"

She grinned and nodded. "Like no other, *monsieur*."

"Well then, wench, ride me like no lady should."

His gaze burned into hers. Eloise moved over him and took his cock to the hilt. His hands stroked her back. She rode him gently at first, her hands stroking his torso. His groans of pleasure urged her to abandon her control and soon she was slamming down on him hard. His hands gripped her hips and he drove into her even more fiercely, his ragged breath fanning her neck.

Eloise felt her incisors extend. Turning her mouth into Christian's neck, she bit into his sinewy flesh, giving in to her lust for blood. He cried out and tried to pull away, but she held him fast, drinking from his throbbing flesh. His groans of pain transformed into rapturous sighs and he climaxed deep inside her.

She stopped drinking and planted hot, open-mouthed kisses on his lips. He tuned onto his side and pulled her with him. "No more. I'm exhausted," he murmured against her mouth.

She laughed. "I have to go now."

"No." He pulled her hard against him. "Don't abandon me now. Stay and keep me warm."

"I can't." Eloise dearly wished she could have, but dawn was coming.

"So you're going to vanish out the window like some creature of the night?" he kissed her neck.

"Yes..." Their eyes locked. "You'll receive an invitation to my ball, six nights hence, you must attend."

He smiled. "With such a lovely hostess, how can one refuse?"

"'Tis settled, then. You may bring your friends, of course."

"Very well."

"Adieu, monsieur."

"Adieu, mademoiselle."

* * * *

She vanished before his eyes, leaving him holding thin air. *You will answer my questions upon our next meeting, sweet temptation.* He passed his fingers over his neck. *Did she bite me?* He was too tired to think about that right now. *Tomorrow...*

Christian rolled over and thumped the pillow into shape, placing his head on it. He caught sight of a wolf, which then transformed into the male he'd seen at the playhouse in Paris. He tried to shake the sleep from his muddled mind, but failed miserably.

"W-what... What are you?" Bright yellow flecks burned within the creature's dark eyes. "What is she?"

"Eloise will tell you soon...that's if you're fortunate enough to know her kiss," the creature telepathically relayed.

"I've been fortunate enough to know that, and more..."

"Not the kind of kiss I suggest."

"Tell me."

"I can't."

"I'll not betray her. I'd die first." 'Twas a strain for Christian to focus and so he closed his eyes. His hand moved over the bite on his neck. "Is this what you mean?"

The creature sighed studying the puncture wounds on his throat. "Almost."

"Almost?" Christian asked.

The creature bent over Christian, firmly clasping his chin. "You will remember naught as real." He looked deeply into his eyes. "'Tis simply another of your peculiar dreams."

"Please, I need to know what I've fallen in love with."

Teeth grazed Christian's neck. "It has to be this way."

"What are you doing?" He tried to free himself from the being's vise-like grip, to no avail.

"You will only speak of this with Eloise."

Raw pain raced through Christian, stealing his breath and his will to cry out. *I'm done for!*

"No, you're not done for. You mean a great

deal to Eloise and I want her to have opportunity to choose the outcome...whatever that may be. Sleep, human. Sleep..."

chapter 15

CHOICES

Allegra frowned. "You fed from Lord Montgomery more than once, and didn't erase the incident from his memory. Why?"

Eloise stared out the window, her mind on the Englishman. She couldn't seem to get him out of her head. No matter how hard she tried.

"Eloise?"

Eloise let out an exasperated sigh. "I don't rightly know why." She shrugged. "Mayhap I unconsciously did it to stop myself from running away from him..."

"Why are you so afraid? He's only human, after all."

"I've fallen for a male." Eloise laughed. "I've broken my rule."

"And more importantly, the kindred rule." Allegra played with her inky curls.

"We all were bitten and remembered the incident afterward."

"'Twas entirely different," Allegra defended.

"Why? Because your immortal husband was one who did the biting, *chère*?"

"We were the only humans at Queen Claudia's estate, aside from Lord Michael... Do you remember what happened to him?"

Eloise gasped. "They wouldn't kill *Monsieur* Montgomery. They can't! He... He wouldn't tell."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"I'd stake my existence on it!" The thought of anything untoward happening to Christian, did strange things to Eloise's insides.

Allegra nodded tucking a stray curl behind her ear. "You may have to, my dear."

"Gladly." Eloise tapped her shoes on the parquetry floor, something she did when she was nervous. She dusted an invisible particle from her lace bodice and then rested back against the settee. "I trust him implicitly."

"I see. Who are you trying to convince, Eloise?"

"Don't you agree with my choice?"

"Your choice?" Allegra raised her brows.

Eloise laughed, realizing what she'd just said. *Who am I trying to fool?*

"Oh, so now you want Lord Montgomery as a

life-mate?" Allegra did a dreadful job of hiding her smile.

"There really isn't any reason to justify lying to you, or myself anymore, yes, I believe I do. Christian's the only man I've wanted since Jacques."

"Has he passed the tests?"

Eloise thought of the three tests all humans had to pass, before receiving the kiss of immortality. "One... But I haven't really tested him yet."

"Loyalty?"

Eloise nodded. "That's another reason why I didn't have to erase his memory. I didn't realize 'til now."

"Hmm. Your behavior has been rather odd as of late."

"*Mon Dieu.*" She rolled her eyes at Allegra. "I'm an eccentric vampire, of course I'm odd!"

"Don't trivialize my words." Allegra looked away. "There's nothing trivial about this, my dear."

"Forgive me?" Eloise asked, batting her eyelids cheekily.

Allegra copied her previous eye roll. "You're forgiven this time. Did you tell Queen Claudia of your plans?"

"I didn't know I actually had any, *mon chère.*"

"You've been going to him nightly?"

Eloise nodded. "Yes. At the beginning 'twas to

seduce him, but I inevitably grew to love him. He's too tempting to resist."

"Of course, I understand your infatuation. Gabriele and I were drawn to each other that way." Allegra smile dreamily. "We still are."

"But you knew what he was when you fell for him, Christian only has the vaguest impression of what I am."

Allegra shrugged. "The human knows you can read his mind, that you bite, drink blood, and can disappear at will. He probably imagines you're some kind of witch. Without a broomstick, of course." She laughed. "He's not dim, so imagine his distress."

Eloise groaned at the notion. "*Mon Dieu*, I never thought!"

"You never think and that's the problem with you," came a taunting male voice.

Allegra looked from her to Shiro. "I will leave you both to discuss the matter."

"Thank you." Shiro nodded. He watched Allegra disappear and then returned his attention to her. "You are correct, the human won't utter a word..."

Eloise's heart raced. "You didn't..."

"Don't cry rivers of blood, the human still lives."

Eloise breathed a sigh of relief. "Don't be angry."

"My anger is not the issue."

"It matters to me, *mon cher*."

"Never forget to ask if you can take a human. Queen Claudia is livid and that fool Marcus is baying for your blood. 'Tis why I'm here. You must remember the pecking order, Eloise."

"I see." Eloise visibly flinched at Shiro's clipped tone and for some silly reason she felt like crying.

"Eloise." His voice softened. "You're dear to me, but I can't allow you to flout our laws. I wouldn't be doing my duty as an elder and protector of this clan. This clan has survived for centuries, because we don't tolerate recklessness."

"Are you going to assassinate me?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're a foolish female...but fortunate enough to have elite friends."

"*Merci*." Relief almost overwhelmed her.

"Listen, don't interrupt." Shiro paused a moment. "If you don't make him one of us, then he must die." He frowned, studying her closely. "But you knew that. Why did you do it?"

Eloise shrugged, lowering her eyes. "Mayhap I want him..."

"Want? You're not a fledgling anymore. I am disappointed in you."

"I can see." Eloise hung her head lower. "But he will never tell."

"You already mentioned. Although, I'm not

convinced."

"Shiro, why question my judgment now?"

"Fortunately for you, and him, I rectified the problem after you left last night," Shiro continued, ignoring her words. "'Tis not the first time I've conversed with him."

"I see." Her jaw tightened. "And did you erase his memory of you?"

"No."

"No?" She considered him. "You contradict yourself. You're a hypocrite."

"Correction, I'm an elder who gave advice to your human lover, because you lacked the foresight to do so." She shifted uncomfortably. "What are you going to do?"

"I will save him."

"I know I said we'd never mention her name, but 'tis important." He turned away, clasping his hands behind his back. "I recall saving Sophia...I hope you have other plans, for his and your sakes."

"I intend to enlighten Christian. 'Twill be his choice whether he wants to spend eternity with me or not. I'll not beg."

"I'll leave the matter in your capable hands." Eloise was about to speak, but Shiro shook his head. "Don't bother to explain."

"Thank you."

"He will attend your ball?" When Eloise

nodded, he continued. "Lord Montgomery must be presented to Queen Claudia, for welcome, or sacrifice, whichever. All the elders will attend. Please be prepared..."

"Yes, of course, *mon cher*."

"And Eloise, if you choose not to embrace him, don't blame me for his death. 'Tis my duty."

Eloise cleared her throat "I'm well aware of that."

chapter 16

affirmation

Christian was relieved his guests decided to journey to *Versailles*, leaving him alone to consider the bizarre happenings, or his illusions, whatever they were. He usually appreciated the company of others, so this was a first for him. Eloise had somehow changed his point of view, and not for the worst, either.

Christian whirled the remaining cognac in his tumbler, his gaze on the amber liquid. Raising the tumbler to his mouth, he gulped down the contents and then surveyed his writings once more. The words became a blur, his mind drifting back to her, as it always did these days.

Did you bed me, madam, or was it my imagination? If it was just a dream, I hope you can please me half as much. He shuddered. *Did you bite me?* He stroked his throat, but found no telltale signs of such a thing. *Who was the creature that visited me last night?*

Are you like him? Why is he so protective toward you? What is he to you?

Christian wondered, for the hundredth time if he were going mad. With a sigh, he promptly refilled the tumbler and then pushed the decanter aside.

Dipping his quill in the inkpot, he resumed composing his poem...

He almost spilled his cognac when she magically appeared before him, her copper curls dancing wildly about her slender hips. "H-how? What are you doing here?" He fumbled for words. Dressed in a silk nightrail her charms caught his hungry eyes. She was indeed a temptress.

She took his glass and placed it down on the table. "Don't you want me here with you, Christian?"

"Always," he blurted. The curve of her breast mesmerized him. Stifling a groan, he closed his eyes. "My mind has dwelt on you all day. I'm addicted."

"I see."

"I—I can't take anymore."

"I understand." She stroked his hair.

"Christ, I am completely obsessed with you!" He rubbed his forehead with unsteady hands. "One moment I believe I'm sane, that you're some ethereal creature sent to bewilder me, and the next, I fear I'm going mad." He waved a hand in

the air, laughter falling from his lips. "How very droll." He sighed. "Tis not like me. I—I don't... I—"

"I understand, Christian."

"This is for you." Christian handed her the poem. "Read it later."

She sat on the edge of the table and placed the poem down. "Thank you, I will." She took his hand. "Look at me."

He gazed up into her eyes. "I barely know you and yet I'm entirely consumed by you. When you're gone, I'm lost in thoughts of you and can't wait to see you again. I want you with me always."

Eloise stroked his cheek. "I have something important to divulge, I..." The words died in her throat. "This is more difficult than I imagined. I need to summon the strength."

"I pray you, let this be the answer to my repetitive questions."

"My words will ease your torment. However, they're rather shockin—"

"I doubt much can shock me these days, wench." He pushed his chair back and rose. "Before you reveal this vital information, we must get comfortable." He took her hand and led her over to the four-poster bed.

She sat on the brocade coverlet and rested back against the pillows. She sighed wistfully.

He lounged beside her and eyed her questioningly. "I'm all yours."

"I only tell you this so that you may know me. Please hear all my words, before you take your leave."

"Of course, I'm a gentleman, after all." He folded his arms across his chest. "Please continue."

"I... I am one hundred and eighteen years old. I'm immortal, a vampire. I was twenty-four year old when I was made."

His sharp gasp hung in the air, causing her to pause.

"I know we're supposed to be mythological creatures, but alas, we're real."

He felt the blood drain from his face.

"I was dying when Queen Claudia offered me the gift of immortality. Obviously, I accepted. I'm quite powerful for a young immortal."

"You drank from me...I thought I was imagining things."

"Yes. We immortals need to drink blood to survive and when we mate."

"I've heard the legend. But you have a heartbeat."

"Don't believe everything you hear, or read."

"Enlighten me."

She smiled. "Crosses and garlic don't bother me and I have a reflection, as you know. I can

transform into a bat, move more swiftly than the human eye can detect. I can't fly over water. Hmm..."

Christian laughed. "And you're an adept mind reader."

"Indeed."

"Who's the creature that attended the play with you?"

She gave him a perplexed look.

"The exotic one that visited me last eve? The wolf," he prompted, unable to hide the shudder.

"Oh. Shiro is an elder, the original guardian trainer and the clan's assassin. He's also a dear friend."

Christian nodded. "That explains his threat to tear my throat out if I hurt you."

Eloise laughed. "He's extremely protective."

Christian absorbed her words with quiet calm, relief being his strongest emotion. He wasn't losing his mind after all! "My home—the château?"

"I own this château." Her eyes sparkled brightly, yellow flecks dancing with the green. "It's been my family's home since before I was born and mine since sixteen hundred and twenty-two." She paused, her look contemplative. "We can't enter a home if we're not welcomed. Because I owned this one, I was free to come and go as I pleased."

"And that you did," he murmured, grinning.

"I'll take you to the crypt and show you my coffin." Her eyes lightened further, almost yellow now. "The one I climbed out of, after my guardian betrayed me." She went quiet for a moment. "He drugged my prey and when I fed I became unconscious. To any human we look dead, and so they entombed me in the crypt. I was there for over eight months."

"Oh. That explains our first meeting."

"Indeed."

"You were bedraggled and smelled dreadful!" He laughed. "At first, I was shocked by my immediate attraction to you, but now I know why. And you were going to bite me, weren't you?"

"One could scarcely forget. You smelled so inviting I desperately wanted to drain you, but Queen Claudia forbade it. Now, I'm glad she did."

"As am I. You said Claude was your guardian. What does a guardian do for an immortal, madam?"

"We hibernate during the day, some elders can roam about, but are weak and must stay in the shadows. Sunlight can kill us, you see. Our guardians protect us, and if they do their job well, they become immortal."

"And Claude?"

She scowled. "He escaped to the New World...Shiro spared him. Apparently, I was a

cruel mistress."

"Were you?"

"Yes, I can't deny it." She sighed. "I didn't trust men, you see. Point of fact, you're the first male I've bedded by choice since Jacques."

"What did he do to you, Eloise?"

"He pretended to love me to meet his own ends...and in the end he broke my heart. Anyway, enough of that, I have something more important to divulge." She placed an index finger to her lips when he made to speak. "I will tell you all about Jacques later on."

"Very well. Tell me about your gifts – abilities."

"We stay forever young. We feel pleasure and pain more acutely." She smiled. "As you know, we can mesmerize and speak into one's mind. When we fall in love we lose the ability to read that person, unless they allow us to, or their mind is open."

Christian smiled, remembering her words at his dinner party.

"We bond with our life-mate almost immediately. There can only be one chosen one."

"I'm confused." He paused. "You can only fall in love once, or have one chosen one?"

"Both. The kindred mate like swans...some do share, but they remain with the same mate eternally."

Christian reached out and caressed her cheek

before taking her chin. "Tell me, Eloise, am I more than just some bothersome intruder?" Her features softened.

"At first that is what you were, but now I... I..."

"I love you, Eloise."

"Oh, Christian, you do?"

"Very much." He leaned in and brushed his lips over hers. Heat curled through his body as she surrendered to his kiss. When he broken the kiss, he asked, "We did ah..." He coughed. "Did we have sexual relations?"

She looked disappointed. "How could you forget such a thing?"

"I didn't. Well, I mean I wasn't quite sure. Did you vanish, or was it my imagination?" Her soft laughter warmed him.

"Yes. Your mind isn't playing tricks on you. We've coupled many times. Now, back to my, ah...abilities." She took his hand. "I can blink." Suddenly, they were somewhere dark and musty. "In other words, I can move to a destination in my mind at the blink of an eye, but I can only do this if I've been to that place before."

"I can't see."

Eloise laughed. "I'm so sorry, we immortals have perfect night vision. One moment, I'll be back."

Christian squinted into the darkness, trying to

make out the shadows. Suddenly she reappeared, candelabra in hand, offering it to him. "Thank you." He turned and studied the crypt. A shudder ran through him when he saw the open, broken coffin. "It must have been frightening."

"Yes, very."

He turned and she moved back.

"We don't like naked flame too close, it can injure us badly, and sometimes end our existence."

"I'm sorry."

"No harm done."

"Tell me about your weaknesses."

She observed him for a moment. "If I do then I must kill you, or make you my mate."

Christian stared at her, wondering if he'd heard her right. "Your mate? Am I worthy of such an exalted position? Do you want me?"

She cleared her throat. "Indeed, but exclusively, I won't share. I love you too much, and 'tis not in my nature."

"I don't want to share, not anymore."

"To be with me, you must become an immortal, you understand. One must give up life, as one knows it. "

"Ask me." He placed the candelabra down and she stepped closer.

"I love you ,Christian Montgomery, will you be my life-mate?"

Christian's heart ached, blinking back the tears, he wordlessly nodded.

"Do you promise to love and respect me forever? Will you give yourself only to me?"

"Yes, for all eternity."

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. "You won't regret your decision." She kissed his throat. "You won't, my love."

He planted kisses all over her face. "I want to be with you, and I'll give anything for the chance, simply because I don't want to live without you. I'd die for you." Crimson tears streaked her face and he kissed them away. "I give you this property, 'tis yours. I want only you."

"Oh, you have passed the tests." She looked relieved.

"I don't understand."

"You passed the kindred's tests. You accept us, you're trustworthy, and you're willing to sacrifice." She drew him closer. "You passed mine, too. Oh, there's so much for me to tell you, and for you to tell me."

"We have forever."

"Yes."

"When do we begin?"

"Now." She blinked and they reappeared in his bedchamber. "Are you certain?"

"I've never been more certain about anything in

my life," he whispered.

She pushed him back onto the bed, moved over him and removed his breeches and underclothes. She bent and drew his cock inside her mouth and sucked vigorously. He moved in harmony with her luscious lips, filling her hot mouth repeatedly. Just when he thought he'd burst, she ceased her sweet torture and moved up his body. She sat astride him and he pulled her chemise over her head and discarded it.

Her heaving bosom fitted perfectly in his greedy hands, her nipples hardening against his strumming fingers. She tore his shirt open wide. "I need you."

He rolled her beneath him. Their mouths meshed and their hands stroked, their bodies heaving and undulating, pulsing and straining. "I'm yours, Eloise."

Her nether lips glided over his shaft as she rubbed herself back and forth, lubricating him. His moved is hands over her pale arms, his fingers intertwining with hers. He slowly sank into her moist heat, his eyes locking with hers. Her sex gripped tightly and she emitted a husky cry. He pushed deeper, giving her everything, savoring her sobs of delight. She danced in tune with his movements, her hair flailing wildly about her. "I love you."

Suddenly, her teeth were at his throat. Sinking

deeply, she drank from him. Pain became pleasure, his head began to swim and he drifted into rapture. She rolled him over and moved on top of him.

"Drink my blood, join me in the realm of immortality, make me whole again, my love." Her soft tone came from far away, but he heeded her words, drinking 'til blackness claimed him and he gladly sank into its welcoming arms.

* * * *

"Tomorrow I'll be with you. Tomorrow, we'll be one..." Eloise kissed Christian's ashen cheek. She rose from the bed, went to the table and picked up his poem.

My Beloved Eloise
I love you in dreams
I love when I'm awake
I love you in all ways
I love every facet of you...
You evoke...
Fill
Incite
Persuade
Excite
Seduce
Torment
I will always crave you...

The water quenching my thirst
The one feeding my addiction
...overflowing my emotions...
You complete me
My twin-soul
My eternal love
Be mine
I am forever yours,

Christian

the end

author's note

Immortality's Caress is an Erotic Romance Vampire series.

Sub-genre: Historical

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about the author

monica M. Martin is of Irish, Scottish and New Guinean descent. She was born in a small town called Longreach, which is located in Outback Queensland, Australia. She now resides on the east coast of Australia with her family.

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