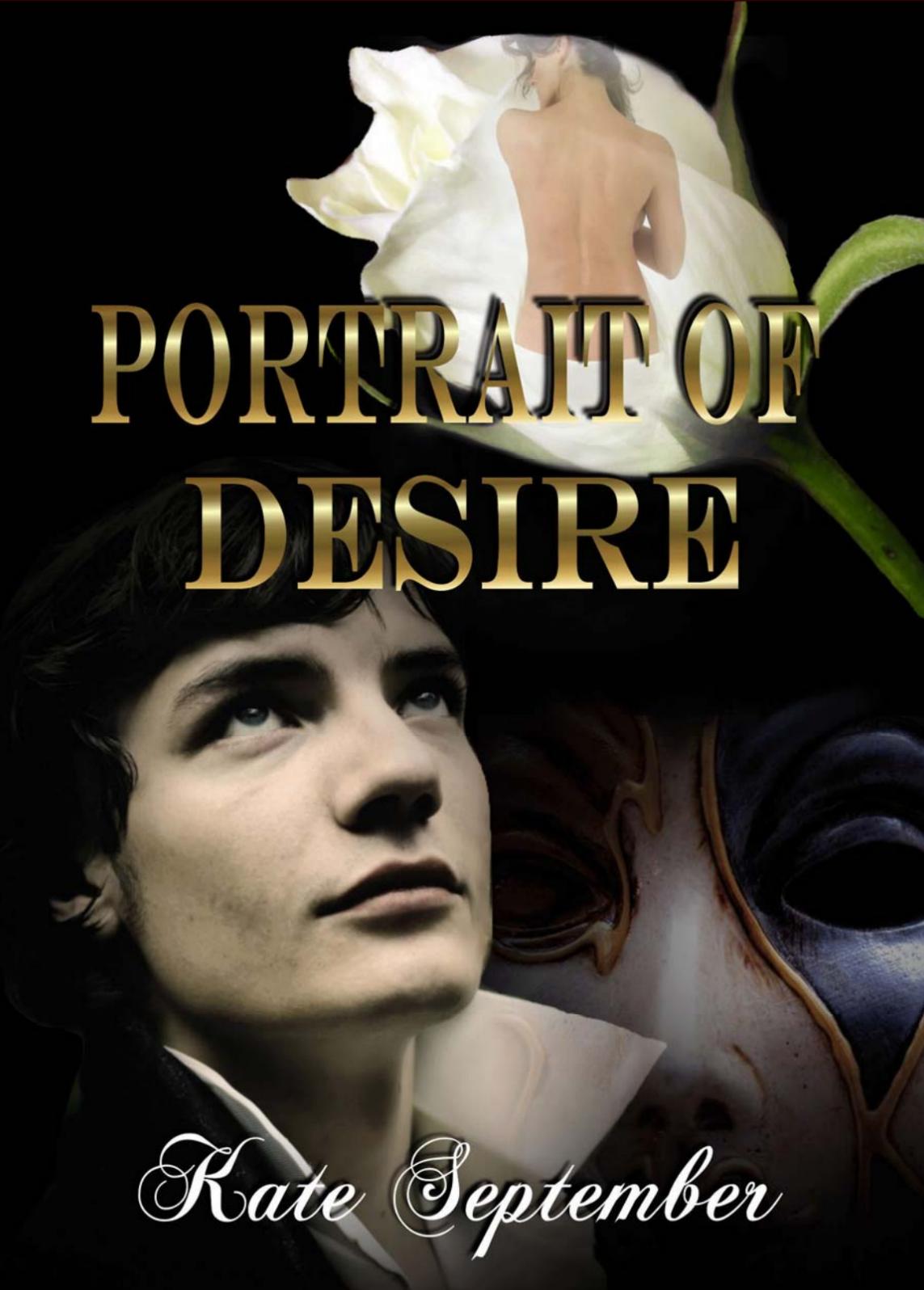


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PORTRAIT OF
DESIRE

Kate September

Warning

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Kate September

La Belle Époque, Book 1

Portrait of Desire : Duet of Desire : Dance of Desire

Paris, 1901. Three women—three muses of art, music and dance—find their lives and hearts swept up in the dangerous, all-consuming embrace of desire. Three men set out to capture these muses and find that the game of hunter and prey does not always go as planned.

Note: Each book is written to stand alone.

Portrait of Desire

Charlotte Benington, a Vassar-educated socialite from San Francisco, is pursuing her dream of becoming an artist. Despite the constant matchmaking machinations of her chaperone, Charlotte has no interest in such ordinary matters as romance, love and, worst of all, marriage. All that changes when Paul de Sainte enters her life.

The handsome, aristocratic, passionate Paul is also an artist, and he sets out to challenge Charlotte's fundamental beliefs about life, love and art. Charlotte finds herself both attracted by Paul's talent and frightened by the intensity of his feelings for her. They are drawn together by a desire that Charlotte tries hard to deny. Events spiral out of control as their attraction grows deeper and more dangerous. Lines are crossed, lives are changed, and love hangs in the balance.

PORTRAIT OF DESIRE

La Belle Époque, Book 1

Kate September



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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Portrait of Desire

La Belle Époque, Book 1

By Kate September

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Chapter 1

“Why can you not paint still life like every other nice young lady?” Jean-Pierre Lafonte, the long-suffering art master for Miss Charlotte Benington of the San Francisco Beningtons, complained loudly.

Charlotte rolled her eyes and didn’t bother taking the brush out of her mouth to reply as she smudged one of her brushstrokes with her fingertip. The female nude she was painting was coming along nicely, but she felt it still needed work to bring it up to the standard of her vision.

“*Alors*, if your parents knew—” Master Lafonte continued.

“They would promptly fire you, depriving you of the generous income I provide you,” Charlotte retorted around the brush in her teeth. “Now, come over here and tell me why I can’t get the golden ivory glow I want. She looks bloody jaundiced.”

With a deep, dramatic sigh, Master Lafonte crossed the small, airy studio that he shared with his private pupil. It was spring and the windows were open, allowing the first warm breeze of the year to clear away the cold, stale winter air. He came to stand behind Charlotte at her easel and appraised her work.

“You need to add more pink to your skin tint,” he sniffed.

“Not brown?” Charlotte challenged, quirking an eyebrow.

“If you wish her to look like jaundiced tree bark, by all means, use brown,” Master Lafonte replied, tracing the contours of his heavily waxed mustache.

Charlotte thought it over, and then said with a teasing smile, “You’re right. I guess there is a reason after all that I pay to put up with your whining.”

Master Lafonte huffed and stalked off to his end of the studio and took up his own brush again, marking his displeasure with vigorous marks on his canvas. Charlotte glanced at him from time to time as they worked, noting his disgruntled demeanor and struggle with the paints. She felt badly for the old artist, knowing that though trained in the classical tradition, he was making desperate, though not uniformly successful attempts to embrace the evolving trends of modern art. It was 1901, after all, and a new century called for new art. At least, that was what everyone in Paris was saying. And people in Paris were the only ones that mattered, as far as Charlotte was concerned. That was her reason behind choosing Paris for continuing her study of art and launching her budding career as an artist.

Charlotte Benington, armed with a degree in art from Vassar College, a stubborn belief in some *avant garde* principles about the rights of women, and the faultless pedigree of one of San Francisco’s leading families, had come to Paris with one mission: to become an artist, but more truly, to become part of this new world, this way of seeing life. She spent her days, not strolling the fashionable arcades and going to teas, but sporting paint-stained smocks and struggling to render her vision onto canvas.

Master Lafonte glanced at his pocket watch and breathed a sigh of comic relief.

“It is three o’clock, Mademoiselle Charlotte,” he said. “Our day is over.”

“Already?” snapped Charlotte. “I just got my tint mixed!”

“Discipline is the hallmark of a great artist,” Master Lafonte said sententiously. “And discipline means putting down the brush when I say so.”

Charlotte snorted but put down her brush and palette, then stood up and carefully removed her smock, revealing her simple white blouse and plain, grey wool skirt with its unfashionably small bustle.

“Will I see you tonight?” Charlotte asked, pinning her broad-rimmed brown felt hat into her bun and putting on her long, dark coat.

“But of course, *mon enfant*,” Master Lafonte chuckled. “I am, as they say, the starving artist and am never one to refuse an invitation to a ball, for there is always supper afterwards!”

“You wouldn’t be so starving if you didn’t spend the salary I pay you on wine and models,” Charlotte teased, dropping a quick, affectionate kiss on the old man’s wrinkled cheek.

“Make sure you wipe the paint off your nose!” Master Lafonte called after her.

Charlotte jumped onto an omnibus that would take her from the narrow streets of Montmartre to the grand boulevards of the Rue du Rivoli where she lived.

As Charlotte grimly expected, Madame Monette Saurier was already waiting for her, her moon-like face staring anxiously out from the tall windows of her salon. The moment Charlotte stepped in the door of the spacious, elegant flat, the matron fell upon her.

“Charlotte!” Madame Saurier exclaimed, taking her by the arm and hustling her to her bedroom where the maids were ready to spring with hot water and towels. “*Mon Dieu!* You will be the death of me! You know that you have a ball tonight, yet you are late as usual, and I’ll warrant there’s more paint on you than there is on your canvas.”

“It’s only a ball, Madame,” Charlotte protested as the maids deftly began stripping her down.

“Only a ball?” Madame Saurier repeated in a horrified voice as she flitted from the tall oak dressers to the painted armoire. She reached inside the wardrobe and pulled out a pale pink dress, bodice and bustle both fashionably exaggerated and requiring extra tight corset lacings.

“No, not that one,” Charlotte protested, trying to avoid the unrelenting washcloths wielded by the maids. “Too girly!”

“But you *are* a girl,” Madame Saurier replied in exasperation, hanging the dress back up, nonetheless. “Which one, then?”

“The blue one,” Charlotte replied as the maids forced her down onto the dressing table stool with its golden velvet cushions.

“Brunettes do not wear blue,” Madame Saurier sighed, taking out the gown.

“But I don’t like pink,” Charlotte said, as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world to disdain the most feminine of colors. “Besides, everyone else will be wearing white and pink.”

“Ah!” Madame Saurier exclaimed, her eyes lighting up, reasoning through this most important decision. “You do have a point there. Yes, wearing a different color is definitely the way to get you noticed. And the blue dress is new and by Madame Paquin, whereas the pink was the first dress you got from Worth when you first arrived last summer. Yes, you do have a point, Charlotte. Now then, you are in good hands with Marie and Sophie. I must retire to get dressed myself.”

Charlotte smiled but sighed as the older woman bustled out of the room. She did have genuine affection for Madame Saurier, and she did realize that her parents could have arranged for her to have a much stricter, more taciturn chaperone while she lived in Paris. But Madame Saurier had come highly recommended from one of her father’s business colleague’s, whose Wellesley-educated daughter had lived with Madame Saurier and successfully made an excellent marriage match, brokered by the formidably social chaperone.

Charlotte looked around the simple, elegant bedroom she had occupied for the past nine months. It felt like home to her, with its soft, comfortable bed draped in heavy white linen bedspreads and ornate brass headboard, and the ivory-finished art nouveau writing desk where she wrote long letters home to her family in San Francisco.

At last, Marie and Sophie deemed Charlotte fit for public presentation. She wore the elaborately beaded, sky blue silk taffeta dress she had chosen earlier. She had stared at her reflection in the mirror as the maids pulled, puffed and pinned her up. Charlotte's artistic sensibility was offended by what she felt was the conventional prettiness of her looks. She would much rather have had an intriguing, strongly marked or even ugly face rather than her soft oval face with its big brown eyes, small nose and full lips. She felt that even her hair, which fell in thick brown curls down her back, was dull and ordinary compared to the fascinating and disturbing concepts and images of femininity in her mind.

Marie and Sophie had piled her hair into a loose pile on top of her head. Charlotte had chosen a cluster of white roses to be tucked into one side of the bun, and she wore her grandmother's simple strand of milky pearls.

"Your gloves, mademoiselle!" Marie called out to Charlotte frantically as she practically bolted from her bedroom. Charlotte turned back and stuffed them into her small crystal beaded reticule.

Madame Saurier, resplendent in black lace and gold satin, was waiting for her downstairs by the gleaming, varnished hired carriage in the cobblestone courtyard.

"You are ready, Charlotte?" she asked, eyeing her with apparent approval.

"Oh, yes," Charlotte replied, amused. It was only a ball, after all—not like her dreamed-of first gallery opening. After all, she was an artist, and to her, true art had very little to do with polkas, mazurkas and waltzes.

Chapter 2

Charlotte fervently wished that people would be sensible and have clocks in ballrooms. That way, it would be much easier to tell how much longer her agony would have to go on.

The ball, held in the *hôtel particulier* of a member of the Sénat de la Republique, was in full swing. The very air seemed to glitter to Charlotte's eyes as she watched the swirling silks, feathers and jewels on the girls catch the light of the brightly burning gaslight chandeliers and sconces on the gilt and mural-covered walls of the ballroom.

To keep Madame Saurier from fretting, Charlotte had gotten down to business right away. She danced four dances right at the beginning, picking relatively handsome young men and exchanging polite but distant remarks with them. Then, considering her duty done, she begged off any other requests and fled to the furthest corner of the ballroom, hiding herself with her third glass of champagne behind a potted plant and staring out the window at the cool spring night outside.

"You do not like dancing?"

The remark made her jump, and she turned back from the window to see a man who had seemingly discovered her hideaway was addressing her.

"Do you?" she retorted, hardly in the mood to humor pathetic attempts to draw her into conversation.

The man smiled thoughtfully. "It depends on the partner," he replied.

"Partner be damned," Charlotte snorted. "It depends on the motive."

The man watched her silently for a long moment. Charlotte stole a glance at him then hurriedly looked down into her champagne glass. From a purely artistic perspective, she had noted that he was quite tall with a square, athletic build that carried his black evening clothes well. He had dark hair, a straight nose, strong jaw and full lips. But the most disturbing thing, the thing that had made her avert her own gaze, was the intensity of his green eyes as he looked at her.

Finally, he laughed, a smooth, knowing chuckle.

“And what is my motive?” he asked her, his voice low and soft.

Charlotte raised her eyes to his, lifting her chin in defiance. She felt cornered suddenly. This tall, imposing man was standing before her, effectively blocking her escape from the corner—unless she chose to climb through the potted plant.

“You’re either bored or lonely,” she replied with a shrug.

The man seemed taken aback by her answer, raising one eyebrow.

“I didn’t expect you to say that,” he said, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“What, did you think I was going to spout off the usual rot of how intrigued you were by the pretty young girl in the corner, or that you felt sorry for me?” Charlotte said, rolling her eyes. “You’re not dancing now, and there are plenty of other young women dying to take to the parquet. Therefore, you’re possibly bored with dancing. Or you dislike dancing and can’t find anyone you like to talk to, so you go about the room trying to find someone without a waltz-addled wit.”

“Indeed,” the man purred, his eyes riveted to her face. “And what is your motive?”

Charlotte laughed nervously but shrugged as nonchalantly as she could.

“Me?” she said. “I just want to avoid the studious earnestness of young men and discourage them from thoughts of courtship.”

“Do you not want to be courted?” the man asked quietly, smiling to himself.

“No, rather not,” Charlotte said hurriedly. “It’s all quite silly and time-consuming, this marriage business. I’ll find someone someday, some man with lots of money to make my family happy, and probably quite old if I can manage it, since a wife in her thirties would still be quite young to a man in his seventies.”

The man’s eyes narrowed with amusement, but there was just a slight aura of menace about him that set off the alarm bells in Charlotte’s mind.

“You did not answer my question,” the man said.

“Why, yes, I did!” Charlotte retorted. “Or weren’t you listening?”

“I asked if you want to be courted,” the man said. “Not if you wanted to be married.”

“There’s a difference?” Charlotte scoffed with a cynical bravado she wasn’t sure she felt entirely at that moment.

“Oh...yes, there is,” he replied, his voice a growl. He took a step closer to her, a move that shot a strange mix of both fear and excitement through Charlotte’s veins.

Just at that moment, Charlotte caught sight of Master Lafonte over the man’s shoulder. Quickly, she drained her glass of champagne and thrust it into his hand and sidled past him.

“Been lovely chatting with you,” she said in relief. “But I see someone I know. Must run.”

She jumped through the barricade of potted plants and nearly ran across the crowded dance floor to escape the strange man.

“You made it!” Charlotte exclaimed joyfully, her relief adding to her genuine pleasure at seeing her teacher. “And you reek! Have you been at the champagne already?”

“Just a few glasses to make my throat un-parched,” Master Lafonte chuckled, tweaking Charlotte’s cheek. “Have you met any nice young men tonight?”

“Not a one,” Charlotte replied, shaking her head and laughing. “Each one worse than the next. I danced four dances, and that was it.”

“How will you ever marry if you don’t dance?” asked Master Lafonte in mock indignation, shaking his head.

“Perhaps the mademoiselle does not wish to marry.”

Charlotte froze at the voice behind her. Her eyes went wide, and the hand that was still in Master Lafonte’s clenched. The old art master threw a quick glance at her, then looked at the man over her shoulder.

“But that is silly, Paul,” he said, sounding quite at ease. “Every young woman wishes to marry. Even if they say they don’t.”

Charlotte bit back a gasp. Master Lafonte knew this man? She felt her heart sink, and the sparkling chaos of the dance floor spun around her.

“Mademoiselle Charlotte, are you all right?” Master Lafonte asked suddenly.

“Oh, yes,” Charlotte replied vaguely. “Just a bit much champagne, I think.”

“Help her to those chairs out on the terrace, Paul,” Master Lafonte said to the man. “I’ll bring more champagne. The only thing to cure a champagne spin is more of it!”

Charlotte tried to protest, but the warm, strong hand of the man closed around her elbow, and she felt his other hand wrap around her waist to steady her as she walked. She was painfully aware of the curious looks that were thrown her way, especially those of other women who seemed disgruntled that the *jeune americaine* was monopolizing the most handsome man in the room.

But she was even more painfully aware of the man’s touch. It was warm and firm, and she felt the tension in his hands of holding back his strength. She felt a wave of unreasoning fear as he guided her out onto the terrace where the chilly spring night cooled her burning cheeks. With a gentleness born of tremendous strength, the man deposited her on a delicate wrought-iron chair that was painted in white and had silk cushions on it to keep the cold of the metal from seeping through clothing.

He sat down across from her, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. In a silence that didn’t seem to bother him, he lit a pungent cigarette and looked at her. Charlotte resolutely looked away and was determined not to speak. Let him go to the

trouble of conversation. She certainly couldn't be bothered to make socially appropriate small talk. But he did not speak. A small, knowing smile tugged at the corners of his full lips, and he watched her through the plumes of Turkish tobacco smoke, like a jungle cat watching its prey through the leaves.

"Well, well, I am back, nobody panic," Master Lafonte said, hustling himself out onto the terrace and taking a seat next to Charlotte. He deposited a bottle of champagne and three glasses on the small decorative iron table between him and his pupil. "And your head, Mademoiselle Charlotte?"

"Much better," Charlotte replied tersely. She wanted to go back inside, to get away from the strange man who kept staring at her.

"So much the better," Master Lafonte tittered. "You'll be ready for more champagne. But my hands are old from holding a brush too long. Paul, if you would do the honors?"

"With pleasure," the man said, smiling and flicking away his cigarette. He stood up and crossed over to where Charlotte and Master Lafonte sat. With practiced ease, he popped the champagne cork and poured the three glasses full. Master Lafonte eagerly reached for his, but Charlotte did not. In fact, she had turned her face away from the man as he worked next to her. But she could not refuse when he took a glass and, bending over, handed it to her.

He caught her eyes in his intense, almost oppressive green gaze, and he deliberately brushed her fingers with his as he handed her the glass. Charlotte took a hasty sip to hide her confusion and the blush she was sure was burning in her cheeks. The man returned to his seat.

"Now, have you two been properly introduced?" Master Lafonte asked, his tone clearly indicating that he saw a good thing and was trying to push it along.

"No, not at all," Charlotte said hurriedly.

"*Eh bien*, perhaps names are not so important in the moonlight," Master Lafonte said with a wink to the man who in turn smiled in cynical amusement. "But we are a civil society. Therefore, Mademoiselle Charlotte, may I present you Paul de Sainte, Comte de Bellecourt. Paul? This is Mademoiselle Charlotte Benington of San Francisco."

Paul stood again to his full height and bowed formally to Charlotte, who returned his salutation with a nod.

"Paul was a student of mine before you arrived," Master Lafonte said to fill the silence.

"Oh," Charlotte said, her voice clearly indicating that this was perhaps the least interesting topic in all of France to her.

"You are a painter, mademoiselle?" Paul asked, his own voice mimicking her disinterest.

"I am," Charlotte replied.

"What is your preferred subject?"

“Female nudes,” Charlotte said boldly, her tone daring him to challenge the propriety of her choice.

“An interesting selection,” Paul murmured. “Why?”

“Why not?”

There was a pause that Master Lafonte hurried to fill.

“I saw Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler on the floor,” the old man said, shaking his head. “He tried to tell me that his idea of brokering art to collectors was not crazy at all, that it was just like selling old books to collectors.”

“He is doing a good business from that crazy idea,” Paul remarked to Master Lafonte, though his eyes never wavered from Charlotte.

“Does he have any Russian clients?” she asked, in part to try and throw off the uncomfortable feeling that Paul’s intense gaze created in the pit of her stomach.

“Are you looking for a patron?” Paul said with a derisive laugh.

“Why shouldn’t I take advantage of taste of Russian aristocrats for Parisian art?” Charlotte retorted.

“Are you sure you’re not thinking of playing to their taste for lovely young Parisian artists?” Paul murmured, a wicked smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not French,” Charlotte shot back acidly.

“You have no idea what you would be getting into, looking for such a patron,” Paul said with an unexpected vehemence.

Conversation came to a standstill for a few moments. Charlotte drained her glass out of sheer awkwardness, then refilled it out of irritation. Her head began to genuinely spin, and she pressed the heel of her palm against her temple.

“I have to say, I don’t think highly of your cure for champagne,” she said to Master Lafonte.

“It works for me,” the old master replied with a shrug, refilling his glass.

“I think I will go in,” Charlotte said, rising. “I think I’d like to go home.”

Paul got to his feet, as was proper when a lady left a man’s presence, but he said nothing, just watching her intently.

“It was a pleasure to have met you,” Charlotte said bleakly to Paul, adding to Master Lafonte, “I shall see you in the morning.”

She gathered up her skirts to step around the chairs and table. One of the roses fell out of her hair as she bent over to free her skirt from the foot of the chair. She straightened up, feeling heat warming her cheeks as she realized she had nearly fallen out of her bodice, and at the very least had given Paul de Sainte a no doubt very pleasing and thorough view of her bosom.

Without another word, she marched inside, chin held high—despite the fact it made her dizzy.

She found Madame Saurier and convinced her that she needed to go home. While the matron bid her numerous and voluble friends goodnight, Charlotte sent one footmen to ready the carriage and another to fetch her cloak. She cast one look back into the kaleidoscope of music and gaiety in the ballroom and turned to weave her way through the crowd in the grand foyer.

“You lost your flower again, mademoiselle.”

“This has to stop!” Charlotte exclaimed, wincing at her throbbing head as she spun around. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you it isn’t nice to sneak up on people? Does bad things to their hearts and makes them begin to question if the bogeyman really was just a figment of their imagination.”

“Shhhh,” Paul whispered stepping close enough to her that she could smell his distinctive, wild scent of leather and musk, such a strange contrast with the proper, constrained costume of a gentleman. The top of her head barely reached his chin, and he felt a giant compared to her in every way. Charlotte gasped as he slid his hand around her waist and pulled her to him. The lyrical sounds of voices and music faded in her ears. All she could hear was the rustling of her dress against his suit and his slow, hungry breath. She braced her hands against his broad chest as if to push herself away, but she didn’t want to create a scene.

Slowly, as if enjoying taking his time, Paul tucked the rose back into her hair, letting his fingers drift down her neck and along her shoulder, his eyes never leaving her face.

“Now look, that’s just not right!” Charlotte hissed, trying to shrug off his touch. “Stop it!”

“A painter with principles?” Paul murmured, grinning sardonically. “How unusual.”

It was only the thinnest veneer of propriety that kept Charlotte from hauling off and decking him right there. She had three older brothers and was confident that she would surprise him with her sweet right hook.

“Something you obviously wouldn’t understand,” Charlotte said between gritted teeth. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m leaving.”

With exaggerated mock courtesy, Paul released her and stepped back. Charlotte lifted her chin and turned on her heel, heading down the wide staircase. Something made her turn back and look up when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

He was still there. Watching her. Charlotte turned away quickly. There was a feral, predatory gleam in his eyes. And the worst of it was that she couldn’t say whether she was more irritated or intrigued by it.

“Are you sure you want to leave so early, Charlotte?” Madame Saurier asked, coming up to her.

“Without a doubt,” Charlotte said with a sigh.

Chapter 3

The next morning was bright and clear, as if spring had filled the city of Paris with golden sunlight and bade every bud to burst into bloom. The flower sellers along the quais of the Seine set up their wares in tin pails of cold river water, and horse-drawn carts crisscrossed the city delivering various newspapers that proclaimed the latest model of Fernand Charron's racing CGV automobile had bested the field, notably Armand Peugeot's new four-speed racing cars, in the automobile races at Longchamps.

Charlotte arrived at Master Lafonte's studios in Montmartre on time, though she counted on her teacher to be fast asleep or nursing a vile hangover. But no matter, she wanted to paint. She had to paint. It was not a question of a fanciful hobby for a young lady. Charlotte felt as if it was paint and not blood that ran through her veins, and that sometimes, her eyes were no more than lenses that distorted the true fantastical nature of the world with a wash of acceptability. Despite the twinges of her own headache, Charlotte was that morning already buzzing with ideas for what she wanted to do with her painting.

"*Bonjour!*" she called out cheerily, stepping into the studio.

"Ah! Mademoiselle, come in, come in," replied Master Lafonte's voice.

Charlotte came in and went over to her easel as she always did. She removed her brown hat and coat, unbuttoning the tight neck of her blouse and rolling up her sleeves. She did not even look up at her teacher until she had already tied on her smock.

"And how is your head this morning?" she teased, turning to wink at him. "Oh!" she exclaimed as she saw Paul de Sainte standing next to Master Lafonte.

The tall man wore a dark suit with a long tan overcoat. He held his brushed silk top hat in his gloved hands, resting them on a polished mahogany walking stick with a brass knob in the shape of a dragon. In the daylight, Charlotte judged his age to be late twenties, and from a purely artistic point of view, she appreciated the line of his clean-shaven jaw and the way his long sideburns and slicked back dark hair accentuated the noble lines of his face.

Yet, she found his eyes as disturbing as she had the night before. And just as he had the night before, he simply bowed to her, his gaze never leaving her face.

“*Monsieur le comte,*” Charlotte said coldly, nodding to him in the barest acknowledgement. Without another word, she removed the cloth that covered her painting and sat down to her palette and brush. She tried her best to concentrate, but the man’s very presence in the room was an irritant to her. She heard his soft footsteps cross the floor of the studio, and she set her jaw, the gentle sound grating on her like metal on glass.

“You have talent, but you will not realize your vision until you relinquish control.”

“May I ask if you have a problem speaking to my face?” Charlotte said, feeling her color rise.

She heard Paul’s distinctive low chuckle, and with a graceful movement that sent his long coat swirling about him, he came around to face her, standing next to her easel.

“Tell me,” he said, looking down at her. “Why do you try to put expressions on these women that are not theirs?”

Charlotte was genuinely taken aback. She stared up at him for a long moment.

“It’s called artistic expression,” she said finally, with a great deal of firmness. “I have a vision, a message I wish to convey, and—”

“Then write a book,” Paul retorted, snorting with contempt. “Painting has never been about creating an articulate message.”

“I beg to differ,” Charlotte replied with a sarcastic laugh. “Many artists sought to make political or religious statements in their art. It is a well-documented fact.”

“And when those paintings are hung in a gallery for the public to view, what do the people see?” Paul challenged. “Three hundred years after the ‘statement,’ it is the art that remains when the message is no longer relevant.”

“Art always has a message, or at the very least a meaning,” Charlotte said, wagging her paint-loaded brush at him to emphasize her point.

“The only meaning it has is the one that you feel when you paint,” Paul replied, a strange light in his green eyes. It was as if the subject sparked an unsullied passion within him. For a moment, Charlotte watched as his face lost the lean, predatory, sardonic mask and softened into the expression of a man who saw the world in lines and pigments...much as she herself did.

“But I believe in the message or meaning I am trying to convey,” Charlotte said, defending her position, even as she felt herself mesmerized by the man’s eyes. “Does that not come through?”

“You judge your message, even as you feel it,” Paul said, shaking his head. His gaze was piercing and unwaveringly upon her. He turned on his boot to look at the canvas, then knelt down by her and pointed up at it.

“How many nudes have you painted?” he asked.

“Three in all,” Charlotte replied, feeling truly curious to hear his opinion despite her intense dislike of him.

“And what did you think of your models?”

“I found them sad specimens of the injustice of society towards women.”

“But you paid them?”

“Of course!” Charlotte replied. “I paid them well.”

“And that made you feel good?”

Charlotte shrugged and said, “It made me feel that I had paid fairly for a service.”

“Did they seem uncomfortable posing?” Paul asked, his voice low and gravelly.

“No, not at all,” Charlotte replied, somewhat confused by where he was leading the conversation.

“They were professional?”

“Very.”

“Then why have to try to ascribe to them such a look of tortured injustice, when that is not at all what your subject felt?” Paul said, his voice almost a whisper in her ear.

“Because I am trying to show what a woman’s conception of a woman is,” Charlotte replied, feeling her confidence return now that she had a grasp of the point he was trying to make. “Men portray women as weak and soft and round. They judge a woman by her capacity to attract a mate for breeding. Women see women much differently. We are competition to each other, and yet the inner strength it takes to survive such competition for mates and resources is never recognized.”

“You speak as if we were savages still,” Paul said with a smile.

“Are we not?” Charlotte retorted. “We are flesh and blood like any animal.”

“But what you paint is plaster and ice.”

“I paint what I see.”

“Then I am sorry for you,” Paul whispered, leaning close to her ear so that his breath tickled her. He straightened up and walked back over to Master Lafonte, who was muttering about the damaging effects of *l’éducation* on girls.

“Good day, Monsieur Lafonte,” Paul said with a smile.

“*Eh bien*,” the old man sighed. “Will you be in town long?”

Paul paused, his glance flickering to Charlotte. “For a while yet,” he replied. Then he bowed and left the studio.

Charlotte sniffed disdainfully and tried to return to her painting. Several times, she picked up her brush. Several times, she set it down. She leaned back in her chair, arms folded across her chest, staring at her painting.

Master Lafonte noticed her sullen struggle and sighed as he picked up his own brush and tried to work on his pastoral landscape.

“Idiot cows,” he mumbled as he studied his painting. “They insist on looking like cows no matter how I try to make them *moderne*. The Impressionists have ruined painting, if you can call smearing paint upon a canvas like some *enfant* painting. And now, as if that is not bad enough, we must contend with *les cubistes* who are all the rage now! How am I to sell a painting of cows that look like cows? Bah!”

“That man is miserable!” Charlotte blurted out finally, having not heard a single word that her teacher said.

“He is a true artist,” the old man replied wearily.

“Then why is he not taking lessons from you anymore?” she retorted.

“Because he does not need to,” Master Lafonte replied with a sad smile. “He never needed to. I think he came to me because...he was lonely.”

“Lonely?” Charlotte scoffed. “He is so full of himself that there is no room left for loneliness.”

“You are quick to judge him.”

“He is quick to be inappropriate with me,” Charlotte replied, even though her heart fluttered strangely as she remembered just how inappropriate he had been the night before.

Master Lafonte smiled fondly at her. “He simply knows what he wants,” he said gently.

Charlotte resolutely picked up her brush and said, “Well, he had better learn what he can’t have.”

Master Lafonte opened his mouth to contradict her, but then seemed to think better of it, which was just fine as far as Charlotte was concerned.

Chapter 4

That night, Madame Saurier dragged Charlotte out to a supper at the flat of one of her friends. Charlotte had protested that she was still too tired from the ball, but Madame Saurier had deflated that argument by pointing out that she had spent the day in the studio, and that she needed to eat supper anyway.

Charlotte sat in an over-stuffed red damask armchair in the flat of jovial, round Madame Foubère, whose husband was a well-known philanthropist and great patron of the opera. The flat was opulent, with rich wall coverings, expensive paintings and ornate birdcages that housed rare specimens—stuffed, so the maids wouldn't have to bother cleaning up the cages.

Charlotte felt like she was squeezed into a cream puff with a corset. Madame Saurier had made her wear the pink dress that she had turned down the night before. Charlotte knew it was a very pretty dress, cut to accent her waist and small bosom. But she felt alien in it and could barely keep from fidgeting and picking at the lace, and she wondered that her fashionably exaggerated bustle fit into a chair at all.

She clutched a glass of sherry in her hand, wondering how soon she could finish it and find another. It really was the only way to pass this kind of evening, even if she did pay for it in the morning with vile headaches. Her stomach rumbled, and she wondered how much longer this agonizing pre-dinner cocktail hour was going to go on. Defiantly, she drained her sherry and set the glass down on the small wood occasional table next to some infinitely expensive and horribly gaudy china figurine with colors that made her bleary eyes hurt.

“Would *mademoiselle* care for another?” said a pleasant tenor voice at her side.

She looked up to see a handsome young man holding two glasses of sherry.

“Thank you,” she replied tersely, taking the proffered glass.

The young man sat down on the edge of the ornate lacquered Rococo settee and leaned forward, balancing one elbow on his knee as he raised his glass in a toast.

“To the only way to get through evenings like this,” he whispered, grinning.

Charlotte couldn’t help but laugh at the way the man seemed to read her thoughts. She raised her glass and clinked it with his, noticing his sandy blonde hair, blue eyes and charming smile.

“And I thought I was the only one,” she commented dryly, sipping the sherry.

“And I thought I should never see such brutal honesty in a young lady,” the man replied merrily. “But, where are my manners? It is only right that comrades in commiseration should exchange names. I am the Vicomte Raoul de Berrac.”

“Charlotte Benington,” Charlotte replied with a smile, extending her hand.

Raoul took her hand and kissed the back of it, his lips warm against her cool skin. “American?” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Your accent is quiet good.”

“I have lived here for nine months now,” Charlotte replied. “And I studied it with tutors and in college.”

“College as well?” Raoul said, surprised. “They allow women to attend college in America?”

“We’re a very sensible country,” Charlotte said with a teasing smile. “And I intend to foment a revolution for women’s rights here in France. So be warned, *monsieur*, the young women of France will soon be clamoring to attend the Sorbonne when I am through!”

Raoul laughed and caught her hand again, raising it to his lips. “And a most charming revolution it will be,” he said, smiling. “If I might ask you one favor with your revolution, I would beg you to abolish dinner parties as well.”

“What, and you’ll find that acceptable as long as I leave the music halls, cafes and billiard rooms intact?” Charlotte scoffed, quirked her eyebrows.

“That would be the plan, yes,” Raoul replied with a smile. “Ah, it seems we shall have to set our dark plans for revolution aside for the moment. We’re being frantically gestured to join everyone for supper, and I, for one, am reluctant to let my soup get cold.”

He stood up and helped Charlotte to her feet, then offered her his arm to escort her into dinner. She found herself smiling and feeling suddenly pleased with the way the evening was going. This young man was obviously not like the others. He didn’t have flowery phrases or bombastic proclamations of income in his introduction. For the first time, Charlotte felt that she might actually understand what people felt when they were attracted to someone else.

Raoul and Charlotte were seated next to each other at dinner. They ignored everyone else around them and spoke eagerly to each other. The conversation flowed so quickly and warmly between them that their food grew cold. Peppery cream of asparagus soup, herbed pheasant, and roasted sweet potatoes with glazed plums all grew cool and were placed before them and whisked away without either of them noticing. It wasn’t until the cheese course that Charlotte realized she was hungry. Spreading an aromatic goat cheese over a generous slice of bread and butter, Charlotte teasingly upbraided Raoul for distracting her from her dinner. Raoul countered that she had kept him from the

nourishment required of a young man who had to sustain and endure the abuse of charming young ladies. Charlotte found herself laughing, and nothing she said seemed to shock Raoul. When the painted bone china demitasse cups with strong coffee were handed round, signaling the end of the meal, Charlotte found herself regretting that the evening was coming to a close. Raoul seemed to feel the same way, for he followed her through the flat to the foyer where Madame Saurier was being loaded with her furs by the servants.

“Allow me, if your principles permit,” Raoul teased as he draped Charlotte’s cloak about her shoulders. His hands lingered for just a moment longer than necessary on her shoulders, and she felt her heart lurch and was sure her cheeks had turned bright pink. He stepped around to face her and captured both her hands in his.

“I want to see you again,” he said, his demeanor suddenly earnest as he looked deeply into her eyes. “I must see you again!”

Charlotte was very sure there was an idiotic smile on her face, given the way her heart was hammering in her chest.

“I...I don’t know when or how...or where,” she stammered. “But I would...I would like to see you again as well.”

“I will find you, Charlotte Benington,” Raoul whispered, smiling as he kissed the knuckles of both her hands.

“Come, Charlotte,” Madame Saurier called gently from the entry to the flat.

Charlotte gave Raoul a final, quick smile, then gathered her cloak about her and left with Madame Saurier.

As the carriage clattered over the uneven streets, Madame Saurier watched Charlotte’s face by the light of the passing streetlamps. Several times, she opened her mouth to speak, then closed it without uttering a word. Charlotte was grateful for this uncharacteristic reticence. After all, even if she was falling in love, she was still first and foremost an artist and loathed such conventional things as romance.

Chapter 5

The next morning was raining, but Charlotte still chose to walk to Montmartre. Somehow, the rain meant nothing. She smiled, hugging the memory of Raoul to her like a pretty secret. She tried to tell herself that she had just met him. It had only been supper, and admittedly, the sherry had gone to her head. But still...she thought of his tall, lanky form lounging on the sofa across from her, his blue eyes as he said goodbye, and the promise his voice held.

“Have you been drinking again, Mademoiselle Charlotte?” Master Lafonte demanded as she swept into the studio, humming a tune under her breath.

“No, it’s too early in the day for that,” Charlotte replied, running to the old man’s side and hugging him. “I simply am in an extraordinarily cheerful mood,” she added, pulling him into a few waltzing steps with her.

“I have painted that look on your face so many times,” the old man laughed. “I could swear it was love!”

“Who knows?” Charlotte giggled, spinning herself out of his embrace. But her boot caught on a sticky piece of tarp and slid out from under her, sending her flying backwards, her arms flailing out to either side to grab something.

But the anticipated crash never came. A strong pair of arms caught her, holding her tightly about her waist and ribs. The grip was firm and unforgiving, and the slight sound of leather gloves cracking made her heart beat faster. There was a stillness to her captor, and a distinctive scent of leather and spice.

“Careful,” Paul de Sainte whispered. Charlotte could feel the rumble of his voice in his chest, his hands pressing her against him. She felt a surge of fear and danger, much like what she had felt the night of the ball when he had caught her to him to tuck the rose back in her hair. For a moment, though, it was thrilling, and Charlotte didn’t move, except for the slight rise and fall of her chest. She fixed her eyes on the rickety old shelves across the room that were piled high with empty paint tins, used brushes, rags and palettes. But that still couldn’t distract her from her strange sensation of Paul’s strong,

gloved hands sliding down around her waist and coming to rest in the curve above her hips. Then, with surprising gentleness, he released her and stepped back.

Charlotte released a breath she didn't realize she had been holding. What was wrong with her? Why did strange, forbidden parts of her body seem to tingle and shiver at his touch? Her hands flew up to her cheeks, and she glanced at Master Lafonte, who was studiously working at his painting.

"Th-thank you," Charlotte stammered, turning to face Paul. Something about the way he had held her was far more disturbing than she cared to admit. And the look in his eyes wasn't helping, either. It was as if he studied her too intensely, with too many thought unspoken in his green gaze.

"Let me sketch you," Paul said suddenly, his lips twisting in a knowing smile.

"Oh, good heavens, no!" Charlotte retorted immediately, retreating to her easel and starting to tie on her smock. "I have my own work to do. If you feel the need to draw, then go hire a model."

"No," Paul said steadily, crossing the room to once again stand in front of her. "I want to sketch you."

"Why?" Charlotte demanded suspiciously, hoping to put him off. She didn't want to be drawn, and she certainly didn't want to give this man license to look at her as much as he pleased.

"Because I need to," Paul replied quietly, and Charlotte felt another deliciously wicked shiver run through her body and nestle between her legs.

"Go on, Mademoiselle Charlotte," Master Lafonte suddenly said. "It is a good exercise for the artist to be a model. It will create empathy within you and give depth to your vision."

Charlotte stared unhappily at the shaggy old master. But he was her teacher, and she was supposed to do as he said in order to learn.

"All right then," she said, trying not to sound too ungracious. "How would you like me posed?"

Paul's darkly handsome face seemed to light up with a strange, passionate energy. The cynicism fled from his eyes, and the line of his mouth softened. He quickly removed his hat, coat and gloves while Master Lafonte bustled about, preparing paper, an easel, charcoal and pencils.

Paul moved past Charlotte and pulled a simple wooden chair into a pool of clear, even light from the studio's north-facing windows.

"Come!" he said excitedly, holding out his hand to her. Warily, Charlotte crossed the studio to where he stood. He moved with a graceful assurance as he deftly undid the ties of her smock and pulled it off her. For a moment, Charlotte had a fleeting image of him standing before her, pulling off far more intimate garments, holding her still simply by his demanding gaze. She shook herself free of the reverie and allowed him to gently press her down into the chair. He knelt by her side and looked into her face, but not as a man looks at a woman, but as an artist looks at his inspiration. Softly, almost reverently,

he raised his fingers to her cheek and positioned her face to catch the light. Charlotte hardly knew where to look, for looking at him was uncomfortable. The gaze of the predator that had unsettled her so much was gone, but the expression in his green eyes was what she would have called tender, and she found that equally disquieting.

Gently, he positioned her shoulders, and the sensation of his warm, strong fingers lightly touching her hands as he positioned them in her lap made Charlotte's heart beat faster. She was far too embarrassed and uncertain to summon the easy righteous anger that had buoyed her in their last encounter.

"Not quite right," he murmured to himself. Suddenly, he pulled out the few hurried pins she used to hold her curly mane in a bun. Her hair spilled over her shoulders and down her back, with errant tendrils grazing her face. Paul brushed the stray hairs out of her face, a soft smile on his lips. Charlotte almost flinched from his touch, but not because she found it unpleasant. It was electrifying and yet gentle. She felt the telltale blush bloom hotly on her cheeks, and she wanted nothing more than to get away from there.

Moving with a strangely energized alacrity, Paul moved back to the easel that Master Lafonte had set up for him. Charlotte took a deep breath and readied herself for what she considered to be an ordeal. Silence settled over the studio, letting the crowded streets of Montmartre supply the background music for the work of the artists. Charlotte could hear the calls of wandering street vendors with their pushcarts, and occasionally the snippets of a bawdy song or raucous laughs of prostitutes taunting a passerby. With the practiced eye of an artist, Charlotte watched the edge of the sunlight travel across the room, trying to guess how much time was passing. But mostly, she watched Paul.

He was seated at an angle to her, his long limbs stretched out along either side of the easel. His hand moved effortlessly over the paper with pencil and charcoal, making gentle sweeping movements as if he was conducting a symphony. He had loosened his cravat and shirt and removed his coat to reveal an elegant dark green vest with a gold pocket watch chain. The cynical, mocking gaze that she dreaded was now turned fully upon her, but to Charlotte's amazement, she saw only reverence and dreaminess in his expression. His eyes would linger on her face, then slowly move down the line of her body in an intimate, appreciative manner. Yet, to Charlotte, he did not seem to be leering or denigrating her. She looked at him in wonder, utterly taken aback that a face that she thought could only be condescending or threatening had become so alive with enjoyment, with a sweetness and tenderness in the lines of his eyes and mouth.

"There," he whispered, finally putting down the charcoal and wiping his hands on a rag that rested on his knee. "Come look."

Charlotte started. She had been so intent on watching him and studying him that she didn't realize how much his work had progressed. A little stiffly, she stood up and, rubbing the back of her neck, went over to the easel. Paul took her free hand and pulled her around to look at his work, not relinquishing her fingers, but instead entwining them with his.

"What do you think?" he asked eagerly.

“I...how did you...do I really...” Charlotte stammered, almost physically staggered by his work. She looked at the sketch and saw herself looking back. Rendering lines to reflect a person’s appearance wasn’t that much of a challenge. But what Charlotte saw in the simple pencil and charcoal drawing was a young woman whose face was lit up with a secret happiness, yet whose eyebrows quirked to show curiosity and the skepticism of the naïve. There was a gentleness, a softness to her posture that seemed to beg to be held in strong arms, yet the slim hands were reposed and reserved. Every line seemed to jump from the paper with life.

“Do you like it?” Paul asked, turning his face up to hers, his expression irresistibly eager and hopeful.

Charlotte looked down into his face and smiled, feeling wonder and inspiration well up inside her, demanding to be spilled onto paper.

“Teach me,” she said breathlessly. “Teach me to see like that, to draw like that, to paint like that!”

Paul’s chest rose and fell with a deep breath. He pulled over another stool next to his. Carefully, he set aside his drawing of Charlotte and clipped fresh paper to the easel.

“Now then,” he said, tapping the paper. “What is it that you see in your mind right now...”

Master Lafonte glanced over at Paul and Charlotte and then back to his own painting. And he smiled.

Chapter 6

“But she is charming!” the plump woman exclaimed, leaning in too closely to Charlotte’s face. “Where have you been hiding this little minx, Madame Saurier?”

Charlotte barely heard Madame Saurier’s reply. She was transfixed by the large mole growing on the woman’s cheek. A simple evening at the opera was turning into a horrific experience. Madame Saurier had come upon a group of friends she had not seen in a while, and was delighting in showing off Charlotte, almost as if she were on the auction block.

“And what a sweet frock!” the woman continued, the huge blue feathers in her hair drooping over to tickle Charlotte on the nose. Charlotte winced, both to keep from sneezing and at the thought of the ‘sweet frock.’ It was a virginal white, with yards of soft silk gauze, lace and ribbons. It was cut too low in the front for Charlotte’s comfort, and she felt her corset was more like a sausage casing than a support garment. The scent of the white roses in her hair was overpowering in the hot foyer of the Opéra Garnier.

After the tumultuous morning in the studio, Charlotte had hoped for a quiet dinner in the flat so that she could think through things, most specifically all things pertaining to Paul de Sainte. Suddenly, after just that one day, things had changed between them. No longer did he stare or make her uncomfortable, and no longer did she treat him indifferently or rudely. All that day, they had worked together in the studio, Charlotte eagerly soaking up all that she could learn from him about his technique and his vision. Paul had easily assumed the role of teacher, explaining and demonstrating with unparalleled passion. Charlotte knew now why Master Lafonte thought him a great artist. He was.

“If you would allow me, *mesdames*,” a familiar voice said behind Charlotte. She whirled around to see the handsome, smiling face of Vicomte Raoul de Berrac. He held two glasses of champagne, and when his eyes met Charlotte’s, she seemed to forget everything except how fast her heart was beating. “I think Mademoiselle Benington is perhaps a bit thirsty?”

Without a word to Madame Saurier or the other women clustered around her, Charlotte stepped through their frothy, frilly circle and happily took Raoul's proffered arm. He handed her the glass, and together, they sauntered off into the crowd.

"I did not expect to see you here," Charlotte said with a smile, sipping the champagne.

"I hoped I would see you here," Raoul replied with a boyish grin. "But that's about all of that I'll say here lest you decide to show me some of that American spirit and slap me in public."

"Slap you?" Charlotte said with mock horror. "Oh, no, I'd punch you outright."

"I should like you to try," Raoul said, cocking his head and pointing to his chin.

"I'll give you a chance to rethink that," Charlotte said dryly. "I have three older brothers."

Raoul seemed on the verge of retorting when the gong sounded to call the audience back into the theater. He looked down into Charlotte's eyes and smiled wickedly.

"I hear the second act is terrible," he whispered hurriedly as they were buffeted by the crowds filing in.

"I hear it is horrible," Charlotte replied in an equally conspiratorial whisper, catching his idea right away.

"Come," he said, taking her gloved hand in his and lifting it to his lips. He then pulled her through the crowd and back through an elaborate labyrinth of staircases and corridors that got progressively darker and narrower until they reached the roof of the opera house. Charlotte, feeling full of delight and wonder, followed Raoul out onto the roof, feeling the goose bumps rise on her skin in the cool spring night air.

"This is amazing!" Charlotte exclaimed, looking out over the roofs of the houses and buildings of Paris, their windows twinkling with candlelight. She could hear the clattering of horse hooves as they drew carriages through the streets below. From the roof, the city seemed like a jewel box, sparkling in the soft April night with the crescent of a new moon waxing in the sky.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," Charlotte added breathlessly.

"The view is lovely," Raoul murmured, taking her in his arms and looking down at her.

"Oh? Oh!" she exclaimed, realizing what he meant. "*Monsieur!* I beg your pardon, but –"

"But what, Charlotte?" Raoul whispered, running his hand along her jaw and bringing her face up to his. Before she could reply, he leaned over and kissed her.

Charlotte felt her heart hammering wildly with surprise and the sudden tingling jolt that shot through her body as his lips met hers. For a moment, she thought about protesting, pulling back and telling him that was not appropriate. But as his lips softly

pressed against hers over and over, and under the spell of a spring night in Paris, she found herself melting into his strong embrace.

She could feel him smiling as he tasted her lips, holding her tightly to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and went up on her tiptoes. Finally, he reluctantly broke their kiss and tenderly caressed her face.

“That,” he said with a grin, “is something I have wanted to do since the moment I first saw you, trying to drown your boredom in a glass of sherry.”

Charlotte laughed, certain she was blushing bright pink.

“And now that you’ve accomplished your goal, I suppose there’s nothing left to do?” she said archly.

Raoul picked her up and swung her around, her white silk skirts fanning out around her as she clung to him. He set her down and kissed her again with more passionate, demanding kisses that pulled at her lips and explored her cheeks and eyelids.

“I have only just begun, Charlotte,” Raoul said earnestly. “Since you believe in good old fashioned American honesty, I’m going to be honest with you. I intend to do everything in my power to make you fall in love with me.”

Charlotte stared up at him, stunned.

“You are teasing me, right?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Not in the least,” Raoul replied, tracing her lips with his forefinger.

Charlotte remained silent, her brow furrowed.

“Are you going to, as you say, punch me?” Raoul asked jestingly, though there was a tinge of nervousness to his voice.

“No, no,” Charlotte said, shaking her head and breaking out of her reverie. “It’s just that...I came to Paris for art. I came here for life and new experiences, for adventure. I...I didn’t come here to fall in love. I’m not sure I’m ready yet. I’m not sure I want to.”

“I didn’t say you had to fall in love with me right this moment, Charlotte,” Raoul said with a ringing laugh of relief. “Just because I kissed you doesn’t mean your heart will automatically yearn for me—though I think I felt it flutter a bit. You can have as much time as you need. But I have a right to pursue you and to do all that I can to make you love me.”

Charlotte gave Raoul a hesitant smile and gently extricated herself from his embrace. She walked across the roof to the giant gargoyle that was perched on one of the corners. Her mind was in a tumult, even as Raoul’s kisses still warmed her lips. The strange sensations that she had felt with those kisses had suddenly thrown into question everything she claimed was her purpose. After all, a man’s embrace was definitely a new experience for her, and one that she wasn’t unwilling to explore further. But going further meant marriage...at least if she were to follow her family’s wishes. And marriage was one thing Charlotte Benington the artist wasn’t interested in.

“France is a free country,” Charlotte replied, not turning around to look at him. “I can’t stop you from doing as you like. And...I don’t think I want to stop you. But...oh, I don’t know. I just don’t know!”

Raoul approached her from behind and wrapped his arms around her waist, burying his face in her hair.

“You don’t have to know, Charlotte,” he whispered. “Not tonight, not tomorrow. But I know that I can make you happy. And I know that I’m going to kiss you again.”

He dropped a kiss on the back of her neck and spun her around in his arms and rained tender, soft kisses on her pliant lips until Charlotte felt almost dizzy with pleasure.

“I hope there are several encores,” Charlotte whispered against his lips.

“And a standing ovation,” Raoul replied, capturing her mouth again and caressing her cheek.

Charlotte was happy to hear later from Madame Saurier that the performance had been a great success.

Chapter 7

Charlotte was very tired, but very happy the next morning as she climbed the stairs to Master Lafonte's studio. Raoul had been so very sweet at supper after the performance. They had talked and laughed their way through all the courses and several bottles of wine. She couldn't think of a time she had seen Madame Saurier happier than at the crowded supper tables at Madame Foubère's flat. Yawning, she let herself inside the airy, light-filled attic room that he rented for his work.

"I trust it was art that kept you up so late that you are yawning this morning," said a hard voice Charlotte was beginning to know well. Too well.

"It was," she replied archly, keeping her expression cool, the camaraderie of the day before gone as if it had never existed. "I was at the opera, and the supper afterwards went late."

Paul was not facing her. Instead, he was sitting at the easel Master Lafonte had set up for him and working on his own painting. If Charlotte hadn't gotten much sleep, it looked to her that he hadn't gotten any at all. The air smelled of long-burning oil lamps and the heavy, drugging aroma of oil paint.

She walked quickly over to a window and threw it open, letting in the warm sunshine and gentle breeze that freshened the air. Turning back, she studied Paul further. He had shed his coat and undone his shirt so that a sliver of his broad chest was visible. His hair looked like he had run his fingers through it in exasperation. There was a shadow of stubble on his strong jaw, and his green eyes had circles under them.

But, Charlotte had to admit to herself, she had never seen anyone who looked so alive, so passionate, so wholly consumed by what was before him. Without realizing it, she smiled at the man, admiring him as an artist.

Suddenly, he looked up, his expression changing from slightly dazed and distracted to almost elated at the sight of her. Charlotte realized that she was smiling, and she quickly looked down to hide her face.

“Well,” he said happily, jumping up and crossing the studio to where she stood. He took her hands in his, and lowered his head to peek at her down-turned face. “Would you like to have your lesson now?”

His comment seemed to ease the tension in her shoulders. She found she could look up at him and smile again, even though the eager, happy smile he returned stirred something deeply disturbing in her.

“Yes, thank you,” Charlotte replied, nodding. Without relinquishing her hands, Paul brought her back over to her easel and set her down on her stool. He pulled up his stool behind her so he could look over her shoulder and have the same perspective on the nude figure she had been struggling with.

“Now then, let’s work on her body today,” Paul said, a ring of authority in his voice. “Some of your lines are hesitant, especially here and here,” he added, reaching past her to point at the nude’s breasts and sex. “And the legs have very little definition. But most of all, there’s no heartbeat in this body. There’s no sense that you’ve captured anything living.”

“But I meant to paint her flat and lifeless,” Charlotte protested. “I wanted you to feel suffocated when you looked at her.”

“You must first have life in order to make it lifeless,” Paul said. “Here, pick up your brush. Let me show you.”

Obediently, Charlotte took up her brush. To her surprise, Paul wrapped his hand around hers and guided it to the easel. She heard him shift behind her, and looking down, she saw him stretch his long legs, encased in their dark pants, on either side of her. She felt his chest press against her back and his breath on her ear. His scent—warm, sharp, leather and paint—was almost drugging to her.

She tried to focus on what he was doing, to follow the movement of his hand as it guided hers. But she could only focus on how strong yet elegant the line of his hand was, and how utterly distracting the paint smudges on his skin were.

“Do you see what I mean, Charlotte?” Paul asked finally, releasing her hand, though not changing his position.

Starting out of her reverie, Charlotte studied the painting.

“How did you do that?” she exclaimed. “How did you know that just a few lines of darker pigment on a wider brush would make the curves look flat, almost concave? It’s like you’re mocking the fact that in life those are full and round limbs by over-exaggerating the lines. It’s incredible!”

Paul was silent for a moment, and Charlotte could feel the tension in the air.

“Put grey on your brush now,” he said quietly.

Her hand shook slightly, but she obeyed. Again, Paul leaned forward and took her hand in his, moving her hand over the canvas in flowing almost musical motions as if he was conducting a symphony.

“A little bit of grey,” he whispered into her ear. “It turns the pallor of the nude cold, as if her life was being pressed out of her by the pressures of her grey existence and grey hopes. In painting you must not just look, you must feel. Colors surround us. Everything we touch, everything we are, everything we experience—it is all the sum of colors and lines.”

His words, spoken low in her ear, were hypnotic. Charlotte could feel the rumbling of his voice in his chest as it pressed against hers. She could feel the enveloping heat of his body around her. Her eyes drifted closed as she couldn’t help but surrender to the sensation of his hand guiding hers in an eerie dance over the canvas.

“Lift up your hand,” he continued, taking her free hand with his other one and extending her arm out to the side. His grip shifted so that his hand cupped the back of it, his strong fingers loosely laced with hers. He gently moved her hand in a sweeping gesture back and forth through the air. “Feel substance and movement in the air. You cannot see it, or touch it for more than a heartbeat, but you can feel it. And that is what you must put into your painting.”

His voice was like a spell that was winding around her. Charlotte felt her head fall to the side against his shoulder, her lips slightly parted as he whispered his words now against her neck. Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths. Every inch of her felt alive and almost possessed of a strange new energy.

“Painting is not something you do,” Paul whispered, rubbing his rough, stubbly cheek along her neck. “Not if you’re a true artist. Painting is something you are. It is within you. You feel it here,” he added, releasing the hand he held in the air, drawing his own hand back along her arm and down her side until it was splayed across her abdomen.

“You feel it here,” he said, moving his hand slowly up her chest, gently brushing over her breasts until it rested over her heart.

“Oh, God, you feel it here, Charlotte,” Paul murmured, as if in agony, bringing in the hand that was holding her brush-hand, cupping her face, and gently turning it to him.

Charlotte dizzily half-opened her eyes, then closed them as she felt the nearness of his face to hers. Her body felt warm and liquid in his embrace, and her mind was incapable of doing anything but wanting to feel his lips paint a burning trail on her skin, to feel his hands learn the lines of her body, to have those green eyes soak up her colors. She felt the damp heat of his breath against her skin, and she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue, wanting what she dared not put into words.

Before their lips could touch, there was a heavy footfall outside the door and the murmur of low voices, men’s voices. Paul didn’t seem to pay any mind to it, but Charlotte jumped up and out of Paul’s embrace, ripped from her reverie and blushing furiously. She looked down at Paul, feeling utterly confused and upset. But it was nothing to the pleading and torment in Paul’s eyes as he met her gaze and held out his hands as if to ask her back into his arms. The look only added to the terrifying tumult of her feelings.

The door opened and Master Lafonte walked into the studio, followed by Raoul.

“Yes, she’s usually in here in the mornings,” he was saying. “In fact, there she is! *Bonjour*, Mademoiselle Charlotte! You have a visitor.”

Charlotte tried to smooth her ruffled hair and smile naturally at Raoul. His eyes questioned her, as he couldn't fail to notice her flushed appearance. She writhed under his scrutiny, but could also feel the blazing, painful gaze of Paul on her as well.

"Charlotte," Raoul said, smiling hesitantly and stepping forward, removing his hat. "I came to...spirit you away for a carriage ride. All work and no play makes for a dull mademoiselle!"

"All play and no work makes for a daub and a hack, not an artist," Paul interjected, getting to his feet.

For a moment, the two men faced off, staring each other down. Paul's expression grew dark and menacing, while Raoul seemed to smile with some secret inner triumph.

Charlotte was dizzily desperate to break up the awkward situation. She grabbed her coat and hat.

"A carriage ride sounds lovely," she said, trying to sound nonchalant. "But only if there's lunch involved at some point."

Raoul looked down at her, his expression now fond and tenderly possessive. "You spoiled my surprise," he said, offering her his arm. "I have a picnic lunch ready in the carriage. Come, dearest, let us go."

Charlotte eagerly took his arm and tried to give him a happy, carefree smile as they left the studio. She needed to think. She really needed to think. But for just a little while longer, thinking would have to wait.

Chapter 8

Charlotte dreaded returning to the studio the next morning. She didn't want to face Paul. She winced at the thought that he probably despised her for running away the day before. And yet, the afternoon with Raoul had been magical.

They had ridden out to the Bois de Boulogne, the great park at the edge of Paris. Raoul had handled the horses with ease, setting a comfortable pace. He took them to a secluded spot in a little grove and spread out the picnic. He hadn't referred to anything he had seen in the studio, and Charlotte was thankful for his reticence. In fact, he didn't even seem to act like anything had been amiss. Instead, he had pulled Charlotte into his arms and plied her with quick, drugging kisses until she had swooned and clung to him.

Charlotte set her jaw defiantly as she climbed the steps up to Master Lafonte's studio. She opened the door and stepped into the room. To her surprise, there was no sign of Paul de Sainte. Master Lafonte was there, mumbling to himself discontentedly about "*les vaches stupides et traditionnelles*" as he dabbed at his painting and stared bleakly at the cows.

"Where is he?" Charlotte blurted out in confusion.

"Which one?" Master Lafonte replied dryly.

"Tchah!" Charlotte snapped. "You know which one I mean."

The old painting master paused, putting his brush to his lips and studying her for a long moment.

"He left after you did," he said. "Said he had some urgent business to attend to and that I might not see him again for a while."

Charlotte stared at him, stunned and confused by his words.

"Not see him again?" she repeated, wondering if it was relief or regret that she felt. Of course, it was relief, she chided herself. If he wasn't coming back, that uncomplicated things quite nicely for her. He had, in fact, made her decision for

her...and good, dear Raoul definitely seemed to be the right decision at the end of the day.

But then again, why was she even thinking about something like that? Three days ago, she had staunchly declared she was not interested in romance, young men, or anything that might get in the way of her career as an artist. Where was her resolution? Where was her discipline?

Dejectedly, Charlotte slumped down onto the stool in front of her easel. She cast a quiet, sidelong glance at it, remembering Paul's lesson to her the day before. The oils were still wet, still fresh—just like the memory of his paint-stained hands on her body.

"Did he say what his urgent business was?" Charlotte asked softly.

Master Lafonte snorted. "Do not be a silly little girl, Mademoiselle Charlotte!" he retorted. "His urgent business was about you, and it would not have been so urgent if you had not run off from him like a spoiled child who did not like to do their lessons."

"That is most unkind of you to say, monsieur!" Charlotte replied hotly. "He was making me most uncomfortable, and I had every right to excuse myself from the situation in whatever way I could."

"He made you feel uncomfortable because he showed you for a moment what it feels like to be a true artist!" Master Lafonte said, his accent turning gruff with irritation. "I saw it in your face, in your eyes, in the heave of your breasts. You felt passion from him. You felt for a moment the magical torture of artistic vision. But you turned from it, sticking your nose in the air like a little princess who does not want to acknowledge anything so sordid as real emotion."

"How dare you!" Charlotte cried, jumping to her feet. Angry tears blurred her eyes so that the world before her swam in an impressionist scene. "I have that vision. I *am* an artist!"

"No, Charlotte Benington," Master Lafonte replied sadly. "You have the *potential* to be an artist. But you are not one yet."

Charlotte stared at him, aghast. Tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. The man that she had come to respect as a teacher and love as a surrogate father seemed to have turned on her. It was all Paul de Sainte's fault! He had no business waltzing into her life and turning everything upside down, just because he claimed some kind of anguished vision and prodigious talent.

"I think I'm going to go home," she said bleakly, trying not to sob out loud. "I suddenly don't feel very well."

Master Lafonte regarded her with a measure of relenting pity.

"Do not despair, dear little girl," he said softly. "There is hope. In fact, I have every confidence that you will learn...that you will become the artist I know you can be. No one ever said it would be an easy road. And you are simply foolish to turn away those who would guide you on the journey."

He sighed gustily and shook his shaggy grey head. "Go home, Mademoiselle Charlotte," he said, waving her out. "Dry your eyes and eat something. I will see you again tonight at the masquerade."

Charlotte swiped at her eyes with the back of her hands. "You're going to that as well?" she asked, bewildered and overwhelmed. "How do you wrangle all these society invitations?"

"I have friends in high places," Master Lafonte replied with an amused look. "And portraits keep secrets. Now go."

Nodding dazedly, Charlotte left the studio. She walked back to the flat on Rue du Rivoli, hardly aware of where she was going. There was so much to think about—too much. Suddenly, her peaceful existence where she could pursue art was irrevocably shattered. There was no going back now to that placid place. Even without Paul de Sainte in the picture, there was still Raoul and the handsome young vicomte's vow to make her fall in love with him. She smiled bitterly as she realized what a good job he was doing. Sighing, she let herself into the building and climbed the winding, wide marble staircase up to the top floor.

When she entered the flat, she tried to skirt the parlor where Madame Saurier was entertaining a morning caller who was none other than Madame Foubère. But the moment that she reached her room, she heard another step on the threshold and turned to see Madame Saurier standing in the doorway.

"*Eh bien*," she said in a voice full of pragmatic sympathy. "Who is it that has made you cry this morning?"

"I wasn't crying," Charlotte lied, turning away and taking off her hat with exaggerated care so as not to have to face her chaperone.

"I was not born yesterday, *ma fille*," Madame Saurier said with a sad laugh. "I know a distressed young heart when I see one. Is it Raoul?"

Charlotte spun around in surprise, then frowned in chagrin.

"No, it is not him," she replied guardedly.

"Then is it Monsieur de Sainte?" Madame Saurier asked in a perfectly calm, knowing voice.

Charlotte's jaw dropped open, and her heart skipped a beat.

"How did you know he was...I mean...no, it's not him...he's..." she stammered, not knowing what to say.

"He called yesterday afternoon," Madame Saurier replied. "He waited for you, but you were gone quite a while, and he had to leave."

Charlotte clutched at the footboard of her bed. This was a nightmare! She could not think of anything worse that could have happened. Why could he not leave her alone? Out of the tumult of her feelings came a simple, effortless conclusion. She knew now she wanted nothing more to do with him. It was Raoul who truly cared for her, who only made her feel cherished and safe. It was Raoul who respected her boundaries and gave

her the room to pursue her art...the way *she* wanted to pursue it, not in the way someone else dictated to her.

“Did he leave a message?” she asked at last.

“No,” Madame Saurier shook her head. “We spoke for a little bit of this and that. He said he was leaving for his country estate tonight and only wanted to see you before he left.”

“Oh, well, that is too bad that he missed me then,” Charlotte replied coolly, feeling the hauteur of righteousness buoy her roiling emotions. Every moment that passed reaffirmed her decision. Everything Madame Saurier said reassured her that she was well rid of Paul de Sainte.

“Such a handsome man,” Madame Saurier mused, though her eyes were watchful.

“I suppose,” Charlotte replied in the bored way she used to before men had become an active source of trouble for her.

Madame Saurier frowned but refrained from saying anything further. She simply admonished her to rest a bit before lunch and reminded her that they would be dressing for the opera masquerade that night.

Charlotte threw herself onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling. She sighed deeply, unable to shake a feeling of sadness, though she repeated to herself that it was only sadness that the situation had become so very complicated. Charlotte didn’t like complicated things—least of all her own life. Sadness turned into a feeling of bewildered irritation as her thoughts went round in circles on the complications of men, life, love and art.

And to top it all off, she was supposed to go to a blasted masquerade ball that night. The only thing to look forward to was that Raoul had said he would be going as well. Then again, Madame Saurier had been particularly excited with the costume she had ordered from Paquin for Charlotte, which made her nervous and took some of the bloom off her anticipation.

Charlotte’s fears about her costume were, in her opinion, fully justified when she surveyed herself that evening in the full-length mirror next to her armoire. Madame Saurier had ordered Madame Paquin to create a “fairy” costume for Charlotte. She looked at herself, a quirked, twisted expression grimacing back at her in the mirror as she studied her costume.

The dress was made of yards and yards of diaphanous white voile shot with silver thread so that the fabric shimmered when she moved. Charlotte didn’t think she’d be able to dance at all, her corset was pulled so tight. The restrictive garment made her feel as if she was being perversely squeezed to death for the sake of pushing her breasts up for display in the low-cut bodice. Bodice, now there was a misnomer, as far as Charlotte was concerned. There was hardly enough fabric to cover her, and the off-the-shoulder sleeves sagged in deliciously lacy loose puffs. Her feet were encased in tiny white silk slippers with delicate heels. The maids had let Charlotte’s curls hang down her back to her waist, loosely tying back some of the hair from her face in a knot secured with combs and white roses. The crowning insult was a pair of silvery silk wings sewn with crystal beads.

“You look beautiful!” Madame Saurier, dressed as a flamboyant sultana, exclaimed from the door.

“I look ridiculous,” Charlotte replied to her reflection, glowering.

“Well, well, I have here your mask,” Madame Saurier said, bustling into the room and thrusting a white silk half-mask with silver ribbons into Charlotte’s hands. “And, even better, I have something that was left for you!”

“Left for me?” Charlotte echoed suspiciously.

“Yes, delivered just now,” Madame Saurier said handing her a small paper parcel.

Charlotte opened the parcel. Inside was a perfect white rose in full bloom. Its fragrance filled the air with a heady scent, and its petals were velvety soft. There was a note in the parcel that simply said: *Wear this that I may know you.*

“Dear Raoul!” Madame Saurier sighed comically as she read over Charlotte’s shoulder. “Such a romantic boy!”

Charlotte smiled gently at the flower and at Madame Saurier’s raptures. She deftly tucked the white rose into the sash around her waist and then tied on her mask.

“I’m ready now,” she said.

Chapter 9

The masquerade was resplendent. The Opéra Garnier was dressed up like the finest *parisienne*, with glittering chandeliers, polished marble floors and the sparkling mirrors in the grand galleries. Charlotte felt oddly dizzy and disconnected from the kaleidoscope of silk, jewels and feathers around her. She grew even more disoriented in the sea of masks. And yet, it was a glorious, heady chaos. The heat of dancing bodies, the lively music, the hum of laughter and flirtation warmed the atmosphere of the room like incense.

Charlotte's first instinct was to run and hide in a corner. But if she did that, how would Raoul know where to find her? Suddenly, a man swept her into his arms and onto the dance floor, spinning her this way and that until she was almost dizzy. He laughed raucously, the wine already heavy on his breath. When the dance was over, she fled from him, finding herself on the edge of a cluster of people seated in chairs.

She had the strangest sensation of wanting to cry. Charlotte Benington never cried if she could help it. But she had also not felt so very, very alone in a long time. She looked around desperately for Raoul but didn't see him. She bit her lower lip, her lace-gloved fingers straying to touch the white rose in her sash.

Her ear finally caught the sound of Raoul's warm laugh. Her eyes frantically searched for him in the crowd. She spotted him on the other side of the dance floor, his lanky physique unmistakable. Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief and started to make her way across the floor to him. He was smiling and approaching a petite brunette dressed in white with a silver mask. Her step faltered, though, when she saw that the woman also wore a full white rose in her sash.

Charlotte was disconcerted, feeling like she was staring at a bizarre mirror image of herself in the small woman who seemed to welcome Raoul's advances with great pleasure.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Elise certainly attracts them all tonight," a female voice remarked as she and her escort brushed past Charlotte.

Elise? Charlotte wracked her brain to see if she could think of anyone named Elise. The only one she could come up with was Elise Montfort, the great soprano who was currently the darling of the Opéra Garnier. But surely Raoul would realize it was not Charlotte. Surely, he would turn away in a moment and come search for her.

But why was Elise dressed so similarly to her? Why the white rose? Why did he stand there talking and smiling to her? Why did he bend to kiss her hand?

Charlotte turned away, pressing her fingers to her throbbing temples. She suddenly felt sick and weak. She felt tears prick in her eyes, which made her angry. Something was wrong. Something was so very, very wrong!

Suddenly, a pair of warm, strong hands gently encircled her waist and pulled her into a dim alcove where lovers hid away behind velvet curtains, and the gay music of the ball was accented by muted moans and sighs.

“N-no!” Charlotte protested, turning to see who her captor was. Her eyes went wide in a moment of pure fear. The man was tall, with broad shoulders and a commanding presence. He wore a black mask over his eyes and nose, and he wore the costume of red death—a red cloak, coat and breeches, a black ruffled shirt and black riding boots. His hair was dark and slicked back, and his eyes were narrowed as he looked down at her.

“Please, let me go,” Charlotte said in a strangled whisper, her hands pushing against the man’s unrelenting arms.

“You wore my rose,” the man whispered.

Charlotte gasped and jerked in his arms.

“Monsieur de Sainte!” she exclaimed, trying to keep her voice low so as not to attract too much attention to them. “I thought you were gone, going back to your estate!”

“I will be very shortly,” he replied, raising one black-leather gloved hand to touch her cheek.

Charlotte’s heart was racing wildly, and she hardly knew if she felt frightened, relieved, happy or angry with this man who towered over her, whose leather-clad touch seemed to echo in all her secret places.

“You’re trembling, Charlotte,” he murmured, pulling her more tightly to him, forcing her to rest her hands on his shoulders or be completely trapped by his embrace. “Do I disgust you so much?”

“N-no, not at all, *monsieur*,” Charlotte replied, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

“You ran from me, Charlotte,” Paul whispered, lowering his face to hover just above hers. His body was tense, and his voice was filled with anger and hurt. “You recoiled from me as if I was filth. You turned from art—and for what? For a picnic in the park with that fop of fashion?”

“He—I–You made me feel...” Charlotte replied, groping for the words which seemed to desert her as he slowly ran one gloved hand up her back, snaking under her hair to touch the bare skin of her shoulders and neck.

“What did I make you feel, Charlotte?” he growled, his arm around her waist pulling her completely to him so that she could feel the heat rise from him, even through their clothes. “Did you feel art?” he added, running his hand down the side of her face and neck, stopping just before it reached the mounds of her breasts that were pressed against his chest.

He leaned in even closer and tasted her throat with his lips and tongue, his kisses hot and wet against her shivering skin. “Did you feel passion?” he whispered.

Charlotte did not move. She could not move. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she was sure he could feel it, if not hear it—it was so loud in her own ears. Her traitorous body trembled from his caresses even as her mind thought of retort after retort.

“No, stop, please stop,” she whispered frantically through clumsy lips. She gathered what wits she still had and pushed with all her might against him, not hoping to succeed in escape, but at least to convince him of the sincerity of her intentions.

Roughly, he grabbed her by the shoulders, holding her at arm’s length away from him. Charlotte caught his gaze and looked away. She couldn’t bear the intense, frightening look of anguish in his green eyes. And yet, the twist of his mouth was angry and almost cruel. Charlotte felt her knees weaken beneath her, and fear gained the upper hand over pity.

“Oh, Charlotte,” Paul whispered brokenly, his grip on her shoulders becoming painful as his fingers dug into her tender skin. “Why won’t you love me?”

Suddenly, he pulled her violently to him, crushing her body with his arm as he fished in his pocket, pulling out a bottle and a handkerchief.

“Wait, no, no!” Charlotte protested, her eyes growing wide with panic as she saw his lips twist into a harsh, bitter, broken-hearted smile. With his teeth, he pulled out the cork from the bottle and spit it to the side. He let the handkerchief soak up the sickly sweet liquid, then tossed the bottle aside into a potted plant.

“No!” Charlotte exclaimed. She tried to cry out, but fear froze her voice. She pounded her fists against his chest and struggled in his grasp to no avail. Calmly, almost sadly, he placed the handkerchief against her nose and mouth.

And then everything went black.

Chapter 10

It was not a pleasant return to consciousness for Charlotte. As she surfaced from the miasma of strange, drugged dreams, she became aware that everything around her was shaking and rattling. She also became aware that none of this was very good for her throbbing head or roiling stomach.

She groaned and shifted, and a pair of arms shifted with her, cradling her. Her eyes flew open, and she gasped as she remembered the last thing that had happened to her. She realized she was in a carriage and that some time must have elapsed, given the eerie blue pre-dawn light. She realized that it was Paul de Sainte who held her, who looked down into her face with a strangely intense tenderness.

“What have you done?” Charlotte croaked, trying to sit up and disentangle herself from his embrace. “Where are we? Take me back immediately!”

Paul remained silent and simply held her more closely, pressing his lips to her forehead. He had removed his mask and hers, but they were both still in costume. The diaphanous skirts of Charlotte’s dress seemed to fill the carriage and looked ghostly in the blue light.

“Stop it,” Charlotte ordered, trying to keep a hysterical edge out of her voice. “Please, don’t. Let me go. Whatever you want from me, I can’t give it to you. Why are you doing this?” Her final words came out brokenly as she fought back sobs of exhaustion and overwrought emotion.

Paul cupped her chin with his hand, encased in a black leather glove. He tipped her face up to his, an almost fanatical look of adoration on his face, his green eyes wild and alive.

“How I long to paint you in this moment,” he murmured, stroking her jaw line with his thumb. “Your trembling beauty, your velvet eyes, the pale pink of life in your cold face. I could drink in the vision of you forever.”

“No, oh, God, no,” Charlotte moaned, unheeded tears rolling down her cheeks. This was some kind of nightmare. She would wake up and be back in Rue du Rivoli. What was he planning to do with her? What did he want? Where was he taking her? How long would she be there?

“Hush, sweet muse,” Paul cooed, pressing his burning lips to her forehead again. “Do not cry. I shall care for you. All will be well. You shall be my little wife, and I will worship you all the days of our lives.”

“Are you mad?” Charlotte exclaimed, summoning the last reserve of her strength and trying to wrest herself from his grasp.

“Yes,” was the chilling, single-worded reply.

Charlotte stared up at Paul, shrinking back from his calm, blank expression.

“I am driven to madness by the way the lines of your body twist and turn,” he whispered, nearly crushing her in his arms. “I am driven mad by your lips that were drawn in full and red by your creator. I am driven mad by the scent of your hair and feel of your skin. And I will remain mad until I have captured your heart and soul with oil and canvas and bound your heart to mine as my wife.”

Charlotte felt herself shaking violently in fear and shock at his words. Her head throbbed and the world rocked back and forth around her. There was no strength left for self-discipline, for icy reserve. Even as he wrapped her in the red cloak from his costume to keep her warm, she sobbed against his chest in agony of spirit. But eventually when the torrent was spent, the warmth and his soothing whisper lulled her over-taxed frame to sleep.

The sun was high in the sky when Charlotte awoke again. Light filled the dark confines of the carriage, warming the worn black leather seats. She opened her eyes but did not move, trying to take stock of her situation before doing anything.

Paul still held her closely, cradling her body in his lap. She felt his cheek resting against the top of her head and the regular rise and fall of his chest. Her head did not hurt nearly as much, though she still felt weak. She was definitely hungry and thirsty.

Once she felt in control of those facts, she moved onto the bigger picture. Paul de Sainte had kidnapped her from the opera masquerade. He was taking her somewhere—probably to his country estate, Charlotte guessed. She remembered confused words from him about painting her, being his little wife, and other nonsense. She set her jaw in determination. There was no way any of that was going to happen.

“We are not far now,” Paul whispered into her hair, shifting slightly. “Perhaps a half-hour more and then we shall be home—home in time for supper.”

Charlotte looked up at him, her eyes filling with tears of frustration.

“Please, let me go,” she whispered. Perhaps if she didn’t fight him, she could convince him more easily.

“I cannot do that,” Paul replied with a sad smile, caressing the side of her face with his gloved hand. He sighed softly and pressed his lips to her forehead.

“Why?” Charlotte begged, wrapping her hands around the lapels of his jacket.

“Because I cannot live without you,” he replied, kissing her tear-filled eyes.

The sensation of his kisses made Charlotte catch her breath. As much as she did not want to be there, as much as she knew she had to escape, she had to admit to her secret soul that there was something thrilling about this man’s touch, his ardor, his passionate madness.

She didn’t know what to reply, what to say. All she knew was that she shook like a late-autumn leaf when his hand caressed her cheek, then held it firmly as he lowered his lips to hers. She tried to pull back, to turn her face away, but his gloved hand held her fast, just as his arm around her body imprisoned her in his embrace.

She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her lips together as if anticipating the worst. But when his full lips finally touched hers, he was gentle, pliant and patient. Like the fall of spring rain, he dropped kisses on her lips until they instinctively relaxed. Kiss after kiss pulled at her bottom lip and tasted her top lip, adoring the corners of her mouth. It seemed to Charlotte that he was feeding off her very breath with every kiss, pulling and sucking out her hidden heart with the way his lips devoured her.

Charlotte was frightened by the sensations his kisses awakened in her. This man whom she wanted nothing to do with had sweet kisses, soft kisses, adoring kisses for her. Every time their lips met, her heart leapt at the feeling of hopeless adoration and masterful strength that emanated from him.

Dizzily, she opened her eyes to look at Paul as he kissed her. His expression was hungry and intense, even as his own eyes were closed. He moved, caressing her cheek, her jaw, pushing back the tangled mass of her hair so that his hand could wander down the side of her throat. Without meaning to, Charlotte let her eyes drift closed, and she felt her body go soft in his grip. She clung to the lapels of his coat as she drowned in wave after wave of dangerous, exquisite torment.

As if prompted by her yielding, Paul’s kisses began to grow in their insistence. Charlotte gasped as his lips plundered hers, pulling at them, biting them and crushing them. She whimpered in her throat as he stole her very breath. Her body began to ache with a new and terrifying longing. She felt shivers between her legs, and instinctively began to return his kisses with greater fervor to try and quench the wicked hunger that ran riot through her body.

She gasped again as his tongue darted out and probed at her lips, seeking entrance to her mouth. Not even Raoul had been that forward in his kisses! Raoul...she tried to think of his face, his kisses, but Paul’s claiming of her mouth prevented all ability to think. In surprise, she had opened her lips slightly, and he had taken possession of her mouth. His tongue swept the inside of her mouth, coaxing her own tongue to dance and tangle with him.

“Sweet,” he growled between kisses. “You taste so sweet!”

The startling pressure between her legs was growing. She squirmed to try and relieve it, but he held her fast in his lap. His mouth demanded more and more from hers

until she was sure her lips were swollen from so much kissing. She felt drunk and scared and secretly excited.

“Will you run from me now?” Paul said raggedly, dragging his insistent kisses down her throat. “Can you turn from me now?”

Charlotte’s desire-addled brain sensed danger in these words, but her aching lips couldn’t form an answer. He wrapped his hands around her ribs and lifted her up from his lap, bringing his face to her breasts. His expression was ecstatic as he let his lips and tongue wander over the globes of her breasts, pushed to prominence by her tight corset. His strength was immense, and he held her up without effort.

At first, Charlotte tried to struggle against this new audacity, but his lips were burning hot against her flesh, and the way he kissed and nuzzled her breasts was a torment she didn’t want to stop. He pressed kisses against the mounds until his lips reached the edge of her bodice. There, his tongue probed her cleavage and swept over her nipples, imprisoned in the constricting corset. The feeling of his tongue forcing its way between skin and fabric and bestowing wet, warm licks on her nipples threw Charlotte into a frenzy, the pressure between her legs growing and throbbing with a pleasure that echoed all over her body.

“Say you love me, Charlotte,” Paul murmured wildly, kissing his way back up her throat to her lips. “Say you love me.”

Charlotte felt tears prick in her eyes, even as her body betrayed her and vibrated at his touch.

“Say it, Charlotte!” Paul begged, a dangerous, desperate edge to his voice as he took her face between his hands.

“I can’t!” she exclaimed, the words bursting from her in a sob.

His face darkened in anger, and even though Charlotte recoiled from him, she saw the terrifyingly immense pain in his eyes. With exaggerated care, he slid his hands down to her arms, picked her up and placed her on the seat across from him. He turned to look out the window, rubbing his jaw with one hand.

Charlotte couldn’t bear to look at him. It was too much—too much to deal with, to take in, to try and understand all at once. Her body was on fire, and her mind was in agony.

The minutes ticked by in icy silence. Finally, Paul spoke, his voice low and gruff.

“We are here.”

Chapter 11

Charlotte turned to look out the window. The carriage was pulling into a long, horseshoe-shaped driveway. At the head of the driveway was a magnificent old manor house. It was almost big enough to be a chateau, with an imposing stone façade, a grand arched entrance flanked by tall, dark green shrubbery. Tall leaded-glass windows lined the walls. Charlotte thought the building must have been several hundred years old, at the very least. She drew in her breath sharply as she noticed that the house's whole staff had lined up outside to greet them.

Carefully, she looked at Paul with a nervous glance. He was watching her, his expression closed, almost menacing. Quickly she looked back out the window. The carriage pulled to a halt, and two footmen ran up, opened the door and placed a footstool for Charlotte to step down on. Gratefully, she took their hands to help her down. Her legs felt cramped and weak, and her head started to spin as she stood up.

Paul got out of the carriage next. The entire staff bowed and curtsied to him. He nodded to them grimly and took Charlotte's hand in his, the leather of his glove cracking with the strength of his grip.

"This is Charlotte Benington," he said, addressing the servants. "She is the future Comtesse de Bellecourt. She will be staying with us for sometime until the wedding."

Charlotte's head whipped around to stare at Paul. She felt the blood drain from her face, and she wanted to scream, to beat her fists against him. But something held her back. Though she would have rather died than admit it, she did not want to shame Paul in front of his servants.

"Madame Sevigny," Paul said, nodding to a portly woman who looked to enjoy plump, rosy health in her midlife. "You will see to Mademoiselle Benington's comforts. We will have supper in the conservatory in an hour."

Madame Sevigny bounced forward, beaming, seemingly unfazed by her master's severe manner.

“But of course!” she exclaimed. She turned to Charlotte and curtsied. “Come, Mademoiselle, your room is all ready for you.”

“What?” Charlotte said in bewilderment, turning to look at Paul. “How do you mean that *my* room...is ready...for...” Her voice trailed off as she became lost in his green gaze. The absolute agony of adoration in his eyes made her want to burst into tears and throw herself into his arms and console him. And yet, it frightened her as well. Love was not supposed to be like that. Love was supposed to make one feel comfortable and safe, to be a comforting familiarity. Paul de Sainte’s love was anything but that.

“Come child,” Madame Sevigny murmured, gently taking Charlotte by the shoulders and turning her away from him. Dazed and frightened, Charlotte allowed the portly housekeeper to guide her through the house, hardly noticing anything around her. They reached Charlotte’s room on the third floor. Madame Sevigny opened the door and ushered her inside.

Blurily, Charlotte noticed that it was a spacious, airy room. A tall, intricately carved four-poster bed made of heavy, aged oak stood along one wall. The bed was piled high with soft, white, downy linens, and it seemed to beckon to the exhausted Charlotte. There were wardrobes and dressers from the same heavily carved oak. The walls were pale blue, and the air was full of the heady scent of the hundreds of white roses in ornate crystal vases that covered every surface.

“The roses...” Charlotte murmured. Images flashed in her mind—the ball where she had first met Paul de Sainte...dropping her flower while trying to get away from him and Master Lafonte...the way he had pulled her close as he tucked the fallen white rose back in her hair. Even now, white roses were in her hair and a white rose in her sash.

“Yes, the roses,” Madame Sevigny replied softly. “He was very specific about those. He wanted your room to be a bower of white roses.”

“How?” Charlotte started to ask, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat and tried to pull herself together. “He has been in Paris all this time. How could he have told you?”

“Oh, no,” Madame Sevigny laughed proudly. “He rode down two days ago—he rides like the devil, his poor horse was so weary! He gave orders and made sure everything was ready for you. Then, he turned back around and rode to Paris. I’m sure the man hasn’t had more than an hour’s sleep in two days!”

Charlotte felt a sudden urge to burst into tears, but she closed her eyes and balled her hands into fists at her side.

“Come now,” the housekeeper added. “Time for you to freshen up and change your dress. Supper will be ready soon, and I think you must be hungry!”

She wanted to ask a thousand questions, but again, a reticence against exposing Paul held her back. Silently, she nodded her acquiescence to Madame Sevigny. The housekeeper rang for the maids, and soon, Charlotte was surrounded by a bevy of women cooing and clucking over her. With quick, gentle hands, they removed her ball gown, bathed her and dressed her again.

Charlotte stared incredulously at her reflection in the mirror as the dress they put on her fit her perfectly. It was a pale spring green silk chiffon, trimmed with tiny, winking crystal beads around the low-cut bodice. A white satin sash encircled her waist, long white streamers falling behind her almost to the floor. Thankfully, though, its lines were less ridiculously exaggerated than the current vogue dictated. There were no bustles or corsets that distorted her posture, and Charlotte was grateful for that. The maids left her hair hanging down her back, only pulling a few strands away from her face and securing it with combs woven with fresh white roses.

Madame Sevigny surveyed the results of their handiwork with pride. She reached over to one of the vases and broke off one of the white roses. Stepping over to Charlotte, the housekeeper tucked the rose into her white satin sash.

"It will make him so happy," she said gently to the girl.

Charlotte wasn't exactly sure how happy she wanted to make Paul de Sainte, but she was too weary and wary to object.

"Now then," Madame Sevigny said brightly. "It's time for me to bring you down to supper. You look like you could use something to eat and drink."

Mutely, Charlotte nodded and followed the housekeeper back through the labyrinth of the house. Charlotte's eye for art and beauty noticed that the house was a veritable museum of precious and lovely things. There were marble statues from Rome, French medieval tapestries, and galleries of fine Dutch oil paintings. Even the rooms and corridors, as old as they were, were designed to maximize the light and feelings of spaciousness.

The conservatory was a newer addition to the house, it seemed to Charlotte. But she welcomed the warmth of the evening sunlight that filled the glass room. Some of the windows had been opened to allow the fresh spring breeze in. All around her exotic plants and flowers bloomed, dazzling her with color and dizzying her with scent. In the middle of the conservatory there was a small pool with a fountain in the form of a cherub. Charlotte spotted golden fish swimming in it—creatures the likes of which she had never seen. In one corner of the conservatory, there stood a white wrought iron table and elaborately cast chairs with shimmering silk and velvet cushions.

The table was set for two people, but Charlotte did not see any sign of the man who she presumed would be her supper companion. Her heart fluttered in anticipation—whether it was pleasurable anticipation or not, she didn't dare ask.

"I'll leave you now," Madame Sevigny said, giving her a broad, knowing smile. "I have to go make sure that the food is on its way."

Charlotte nodded to her as the housekeeper curtsied and left her. She sighed and closed her eyes for a moment, trying to gather and organize her thoughts. She needed to be in control of herself when she saw Paul. She needed to use her wits to understand the situation and find a means of escape.

"You are beautiful in the light," Paul's voice said behind her.

Charlotte spun around to find him standing perfectly still, half-hidden by a cluster of tall plants. He looked to her very much the panther, waiting in the shadows to strike at its prey, watching with narrowed eyes.

"I believe I've spoken to you before about sneaking up on people," Charlotte replied, her voice shaking, but holding her head high.

"Yes, but I like watching you," Paul replied softly, emerging from the half-shadows and coming over to her. The feral look on his face melted into one of happiness as he saw the white rose tucked into her sash. He touched it and whispered, "So that I may know you."

"Well, it'd be rather silly if you couldn't recognize me by now," Charlotte replied, trying to keep him from sinking into that strange, entrancing tenderness that made her ache. Something about his words was eerily familiar, but her tired mind couldn't quite place them.

Paul smiled gently, softly and raised his hand to touch her face, but Charlotte stepped back, determined to remain in control of the situation.

"Now then," she said crisply. "Since you drugged me and kidnapped me, I feel entitled to a few answers. It's only fair."

Paul laughed with indulgent amusement and bowed slightly. "Ask away, sweet Charlotte," he said.

"First off, where are we?" she asked. "I mean, I know we're at your estate, but where is your estate?"

"We are in Bretagne by the ocean," Paul replied, a hint of pride creeping into his voice. "My family has lived on this land for almost 600 years, though this house itself is only 400 years old."

Charlotte nodded, then steeled herself for the next question.

"When are you planning to take me back to Paris?" she said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, hoping that by assuming it would happen, he would answer in a like manner.

"When we are married," Paul replied evenly.

Charlotte rolled her eyes and snorted. "I hardly need point out to you that this little mad scheme of yours won't work," she said acidly.

"What makes you think that?" he replied, as if genuinely astonished at the thought that he might not succeed.

"Oh, just a few hundred faults in your plan," Charlotte retorted. "You don't think that Madame Saurier will notice that I did not go home with her? And what about Master Lafonte? I should be in the studio by rights today. And don't forget the Vicomte de Berrac. Raoul will wonder where I am."

Paul's expression grew black and menacing as she mentioned Raoul's name. Charlotte's eyes narrowed, and she felt a brief surge of power in knowing that Raoul's name could upset his calm.

“Oh, and don’t forget one wee bitty detail, *monsieur*,” Charlotte added with deadly sweetness. “There’s a small matter of my saying yes to becoming your wife. And unfortunately that’s not something I see happening anytime soon. You see, I believe I told you already I don’t want to marry. And I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last man in the world!”

“Why is that?” Paul said between clenched teeth, his eyes boring burning holes into her soul.

“B-because I don’t love you,” Charlotte replied falteringly, suddenly frightened at the intensity of his expression.

For a moment, the tall dark man before her seemed to grow with the power of the rage that emanated from him. Charlotte instinctively shrank back. Paul glowered at her, then turned his back to her. She could see his massive shoulders shaking under his well-cut black coat. When he turned around again, he was impassive and under control.

“Allow me to refute your points, Charlotte,” he said in a cold voice with a bitter smile. “Madame Saurier knows full well what my plans are. I informed her of them when I called upon her the other day. She is a wise woman and understands that you could never marry until you learned to love. She also knows that I alone can teach you what love truly is.”

Charlotte’s jaw dropped as he spoke. “But that’s—I mean—she’s my chaperone!” she exclaimed.

“She is also French and accepts certain truths others are afraid to admit,” Paul replied calmly. “Master Lafonte also knows of my plan. He wants to see you happy in both life and art. He, too, knows that I alone can give you that.”

He took a step toward her and reached out to touch the rose in her sash. “And as for the way I brought you here,” he said with a sad smile, “there was little choice in how to do it. You would never come willingly to me. You ran from me at the moment I tried to tell you of my love for you. It was easy enough to send you the rose, with Madame Saurier to prompt you that it was from Raoul. I sent Elise Montfort the same rose and note. And the young vicomte was easily duped by a note telling him to look for a woman with a white rose.”

“But why Elise Montfort?” Charlotte asked, her head spinning from the revelation of the duplicity of all those she had trusted. All she could do was hook onto to one seemingly insignificant piece of the puzzle to solve at a time.

“She was the mistress of Raoul de Berrac last season,” Paul said tersely, advancing on her. “And they continue to be a cozy pair, regardless of his pursuit of eligible heiresses to bolster his family’s fortune, which is being squandered by his older brother’s obsession with dice and cards.”

She took another step back, but Paul moved too quickly for her. In a heartbeat, she was caught up in his arms again. His face contorted into a mask of tortured passion as he looked down into her face.

“Why me?” she asked hoarsely, looking up at him.

“Because you...you can see what I see,” Paul whispered, his voice turning warm with a longing that seemed to have as much to do with her mind as her body. “For a few hours at a time, you were happy in my company when we painted together. You know what it is to go through the world dazed by line and color and plane. You feel art when you let yourself. And like calls to like, Charlotte. My soul yearns for yours, a companion to love me, a muse I can adore, an artist of the heart.”

“But why could you not leave me where I was and...and...just...talked to me?” Charlotte asked, bewildered tears filling her eyes. “Why did you have to do this?”

“Because I had to get you away from supper parties and balls...and a pesky little gold-digging vicomte who was distracting you,” Paul whispered harshly, the painful intensity of his passion coming through in his voice and the strength of his arms as he held her.

“I cannot love you,” Charlotte said, trembling, the tears running down her cheeks. “I do not want to love you.”

“You can, and you will,” Paul said fiercely, his expression turning menacing and passionate.

He captured her lips in a ferocious kiss, demanding her response. His tongue invaded her mouth, attacking hers and tasting her. He lifted one hand to her neck where he firmly held her face in place. His other arm crushed her body to his, her softness against his hardness.

Charlotte was caught up into the kiss before she realized what she was doing. The way his lips pressed against hers, sucking, biting, caressing, turned her blood into liquid fire in her veins. It was both frightening and strangely comforting to be held so helplessly against the incredible, hard strength of his body. He pressed his hips against hers, and even through all the layers of skirt and petticoats she wore, she could feel his hardness against her tender sex, sparking to life those pleasurable shivers she had hoped had subsided. His hand traveled down to the small of her back, just above the curve of her bottom, and he increased the pressure of his embrace so that their hips were tight against each other.

Charlotte swallowed hard and gasped between kisses as throbs of her newfound desire blossomed between her legs. Every experience with this man seemed to take her one step deeper into learning the true nature of arousal, daring her to look squarely at her own desires, bereft of all propriety.

Her head fell back as she grew dizzy with pleasure, and he took advantage of her exposed neck to trace a line of hungry, stinging kisses down to her breasts. Once again, his tongue slipped down into her bodice and flicked at her nipples. Charlotte couldn't help but let her hips writhe against his, her pleasure growing his with hardness, his illicit caresses.

The intensity of his emotion washed over her in pounding waves, nearly drowning her own thought and reason, just as Paul's mouth returned to her lips as if to silence any word of protest that might spring to them.

The discreet shuffle of servants entering with food made Charlotte jerk out of the tempting stupor Paul's kiss held her in. She opened her eyes wide and tried to pull away from him, blushing fiercely with embarrassment at being seen so by the servants. But Paul was relentless, holding her fast and continuing to plunder her mouth until she reluctantly relaxed in his embrace again.

Breathless, with shining eyes, he finally raised his face and looked at her. The smile of utter happiness on his face was like a knife into Charlotte's heart. How could she bear to be so cruel to this man who—though clearly insane—adored her more than anything? But she had to be true to herself. She did not love him. Pretending otherwise would only bring them both heartache in the end.

His eyes searched hers for a hint of any kind of warm emotion, and when he found only her open distress, his smile faded and he sighed. Gently, he released her.

"Please, join me for supper," he said quietly, gesturing for her to have a seat.

"Thank you," was all that Charlotte could say.

Chapter 12

Paul left her directly after supper, excusing himself by the fact he had estate business to attend to. He calmly invited her to explore her new home, but there was an edge to his voice that seemed to suggest that any attempt to run away was a bad idea.

Charlotte wasn't about to run away, at least not that night. She was still too tired from the kidnapping and crazy carriage ride. Her plan was to investigate the house and the grounds, make plans, get a good night's sleep and *then* run away.

Accordingly, Charlotte wandered through the maze-like house, marveling at the restrained richness of the décor and the intriguing *objets d'art* that filled the rooms and lined the corridors. She found her way outside just as the last of the light was leaving the sky, relishing the ghostly blue wash of twilight on every object. The gardens were already lush and verdant with spring. She genuinely enjoyed walking among the budding flowers and well-tended bushes in careful paths. The gardens backed up onto a forest, and between the gardens and forest stood a tall, deep hedge.

Finally, two days with little sleep began to take its toll on her. Wearily, she stumbled back toward the house. She made her way back to the conservatory, remembering there was a lovely chaise lounge tucked away in a corner surrounded by pots of tall lilies. Gratefully, she sank down onto the divan and stretched out. Too exhausted to think or to plan, she slipped into a peaceful sleep, one hand curled beneath her chin.

She woke to find the sky wrapped in the richness of night, an eerie starlit stillness seeping in through the windows. A pool of golden light drew her eyes, and she started upright when she saw that Paul was sitting on a stool across from her, an oil lamp at his feet. He had removed his coat, vest and tie, unbuttoning his shirt and rolling up the sleeves. His legs were braced apart, and he held a large sketching block balanced on his thighs. The angles of his face were gentle in the soft light, and his eyes brightened to see her awaken.

“W-what are you doing?” Charlotte mumbled sleepily, rubbing the back of her hand across her eyes.

“I’m drawing you,” he replied, the corners of his lips turning up in a delighted, shy smile.

As odd as her entire situation was, Charlotte was still an artist, and she openly admitted that she still admired Paul de Sainte as a fellow artist.

“Let me see?” she said, getting up and crossing over to him.

She moved around to stand behind him so she could see what he had done. What she saw took her breath away. Even his simple pencil sketch of her sleeping figure captured the stillness of the moment and the delicacy of the lines. It was her, but it was a stolen moment where the person looking at the drawing almost waited to see her chest rise and fall with breath.

“This is beautiful!” Charlotte whispered, unthinkingly resting a hand on Paul’s shoulder. “You are truly talented.”

Paul looked up at her, his face full of hope and love. “You like it?” he said in a low voice.

“I do, very much,” Charlotte replied warmly, forgetting for a moment that she was virtually his prisoner, and addressing him as one artist to another. “The shadows sway, the plants feel like lace, and the sleeping figure looks like something beautiful and natural that is growing. There is such feeling in every line.”

Paul captured the fingers that rested on his shoulder and brought them to his lips, reverently kissing her fingertips. Under the spell of the lamplight, hidden away from the world, surrounded by ghostly flowers and hanging vines, Charlotte forgot herself. All she knew was this man was art and magic personified, that through the work of his hands, he could capture her imagination and speak to her soul. She allowed her heart to whisper secret things she could not quite hear.

Instead of pulling her hand away as she might have done in daylight, when the world of servants and sideboards was visible and hemmed in her reality, she brought her other hand to his cheek and allowed herself the trembling luxury of caressing his face.

Paul closed his eyes in ecstasy at her touch, a smile of wonder on his lips. He turned his face to kiss her palm, then opened his eyes and looked up at her. Charlotte serenely returned his gaze, as if she was held in a kind of enchantment by the power of the moment and his love. He encircled her waist with his strong hands and drew her around to his front. He pressed the side of his face against her abdomen, and Charlotte heard him draw in a sharp breath, almost like a hiss.

She cradled his face in her hands and lifted it to hers, touched to see tears of joy in his eyes. She didn’t know if she felt that joy or not. She knew this was not right. But she knew that in this moment, she was not Charlotte Benington, the college-educated socialite with enlightened feminist principles. She was simply a muse thrilling to the call of her artist.

“Charlotte,” Paul whispered, his voice urgent with need, his hands around her waist growing tighter.

“Shhhh,” Charlotte replied, placing her forefinger against his lips. She had no idea what she was doing. But for once, she was just doing instead of thinking. She bent her head to his and tenderly kissed his lips.

Chapter 13

Paul held perfectly still in her embrace. Charlotte's kisses were soft, shy and pliant as she pressed her lips to his over and over. All she knew was that this was a moment of art, where they were surrounded by light and shadow, blue and gold, and the strange alien lines of exotic plants in this hidden jungle where the prey had become the hunter.

Her hands shook as she let them slide down the sides of his warm neck, and she could feel him shudder with pleasure under her caress. Her body felt strange and silky, like liquid light as the prim and proper picture of her life receded further, as she became totally and completely the muse who tormented and delighted. She was an artist of the spirit at that moment, painting the lines of passion and inspiration with each kiss she brushed against his lips.

She could feel the tension in Paul's hands encircling her waist as he tried to keep from crushing her with his embrace. Still kissing him fervently but with a lingering shyness, she ran her hands down from his neck to his shoulders, holding onto them and urging him wordlessly to stand. As he did, she began to pull him back towards the divan where she had slept just moments ago. Not once did he falter or break their kiss, the harsh planes of his face softened by bliss. He tried to gently push her down onto the seat, but she simply silently shook her head and pushed him down instead.

Paul stretched out on the divan, propping himself up against the pillows, his brows rising with surprise as Charlotte gathered her skirts and climbed atop him, straddling his lap. She felt both curiosity and shy pleasure as she studied his face for a long moment. The muse looked deeply and earnestly into the eyes of the artist, as if searching for answers to an unspoken question. She saw that his expression was one of undiluted adoration and raging hunger. In his eyes, she saw a love that was so terrifyingly intense and complete that it brought him more pain than joy...at least until his muse decided to say the words of love back to him.

That, she could not do. This was not about love, this moment. This was about art—the passion of art and the art of passion. Solemnly, Charlotte reached out with her

hands and ran them down the sides of his face and neck, coming together to explore the sliver of hard chest that was exposed by his open shirt. She could feel Paul tremble at her touch, and she closed her eyes as his own hands spanned her back. His fingers combed through her curls, one hand coming to hold the skin of the back of her neck, the other hand resting where her waist curved out to her hips.

Swallowing hard and feeling more than a little dizzy and unsure of herself, Charlotte leaned forward and kissed the side of his neck. Through the layers of her skirts and petticoats, she felt him grow hard against her. She felt herself blush but doggedly continued to kiss his neck, her tongue darting out like a kitten's to lick and leave a damp trail behind each kiss. Her mouth moved lower and lower until she was slowly, reverently, dropping light kisses on the hot, tight skin of his chest.

Paul moaned and instinctively bucked his hips up against hers, his hands tightening their grip on her body. When she snaked her fingers under the fabric of his shirt to explore the firm expanse of his chest, he lost all control. With a growl, he encircled her body with his arms and raised her mouth to his again. Holding her captive against his chest, his lips wrung passionate kisses from her. His hand came up and roughly caressed the side of her face, tracing a hungry touch down her throat to her breasts.

Any time that Charlotte tried to pull back—even to breathe—Paul's hand at the back of her neck pressed her face back to his, his lips punishing hers as his tongue dueled with hers. The clicking sound of their kisses grew wet with the heat of their mouths and the whispered moans from stolen breaths. Gently, but firmly, he pulled her head to the side and began to run his lips down her throat, biting and kissing. Charlotte felt drugged and overwhelmed by his passion. The pressure of his hard cock between her legs, combined with the sensation of being held so tightly yet so effortlessly made her feel even more like a spirit of light and air and desire. She trembled at the strange shivers that ran through her body, shooting out like lightning from wherever his lips touched her skin. What was so wrong for Charlotte Benington felt so right for the muse.

With a hungry growl, Paul pulled one of the sleeves of her dress off her shoulder and let his mouth wander and taste the skin. His eyes were feral green now, his dark skin flushed with passion as Charlotte let out a breathy moan of pleasure and ran her fingers through his dark hair, relishing the freedom of the muse to caress the object of her desire, to learn with her fingertips every line of his body, if she so chose. She arched her back and stretched her neck as if to offer him freely her body. His lips brushed her breasts, encased still in the tight bodice that pushed them up as if for just such a purpose. Charlotte trembled, her fingers convulsively digging into his shoulders as she felt a burning sensation between her legs and the tips of her breasts.

Paul paused and looked up into Charlotte's face. "So beautiful, my muse," he murmured. "You are the picture of my love and my pleasure!" He punctuated his statement with hard kisses to her neck and breasts, and Charlotte responded by cradling his head with her hands, pressing him more firmly to her chest.

"My lord?" came the hesitant sound of a man's voice from the doorway of the conservatory.

The words yanked Charlotte out of her daydream and back into the cold, hard reality of her situation. She wasn't a muse. She was a prisoner. And the shame she felt in that moment almost made her want to die.

"You fool!" Paul roared at the footman. His grip on Charlotte had loosened for a moment in anger, and without even a second of hesitation, Charlotte jumped to her feet, gathered up her skirts and fled from the conservatory.

Blinded by tears of humiliation and driven by the need to get away from this man, Charlotte ran as fast as she could through the house, crossing the grand foyer and sprinting up the wide, sweeping staircase.

"Charlotte!"

The call of the hunter giving chase to his prey echoed throughout the manor, and Charlotte soon heard the pounding footsteps of Paul de Sainte as he ran after her.

"Charlotte! No! Come back!" he yelled as he chased her up the two flights of stairs to the third floor, and then it was a mad dash to the door of her bedroom. It was only the few moments of a head-start that enabled Charlotte to reach her door, fly inside and bolt it firmly shut.

"Charlotte!" Paul's roar was muffled by the door, but the pain in his voice was still crystal clear. "Charlotte! Please don't run! Please, my love, my life! Charlotte!"

He pounded and raged at the door, while on the other side, Charlotte pressed her back to the door as if to brace it. His words poured salt on the wounds of her humiliation. Shaking and sobbing as though her heart would break, she sank down to the floor and buried her face in her hands. What had she been thinking? Had she been out of her mind? How foolish and wanton could she be?

"Oh, Charlotte," came a moan from the other side of the door, and the sound of a body sliding down to the floor, matching her. Charlotte paused in her sobs to listen as she heard him press his hand against the door. She felt guilty for hurting him, for not being stronger herself, for not resisting the temptation he offered her. And now the blame for his heartache and her humiliation could only be laid squarely at her feet.

"Oh, Charlotte, don't cry," said Paul's voice through the door, his own voice muffled by the sound of a strong man's grief.

But all Charlotte Benington could do at that moment was weep.

Chapter 14

Charlotte didn't sleep that night. She moved restlessly about in her chamber, exhausted, trembling, weeping and desperately trying to think.

When Madame Sevigny personally brought tea to her, Charlotte knew for certain that word of what had happened the night before had spread throughout the entire house. The housekeeper's words confirmed her fears, even though they were meant to comfort.

"Now, do not fret, *mademoiselle*," she said with a kindly, conspiratorial smile. "If I were thirty years younger and thirty pounds lighter, I, too, would have tried to seduce the master in the conservatory."

"Oh, God!" wailed Charlotte, despondently emptying several spoons of sugar into her tea.

"Now, now, that is enough of that, *mademoiselle*," the housekeeper said crisply, going over to the wardrobe and pulling out a cream organza gown with purple irises printed on the hem. "A smiling face at the breakfast table is what we want, not a gloomy girl."

"But you don't understand," Charlotte started to say.

"I understand far more than you think, *mademoiselle*," Madame Sevigny replied cryptically. "And if you are wise, you'll take my advice and go to breakfast and be pleasant."

"I can't just ignore what happened last night," Charlotte said firmly, sliding out of bed and moving over to begin dressing.

"Yes, you can," Madame Sevigny said calmly, taking out the petticoats, chemisette and other articles of lingerie for Charlotte. "And until you understand your heart a bit better, that's exactly what I would suggest you do."

"And why is that?" Charlotte asked with a certain degree of reserve, knowing already she wouldn't like the answer.

“Because to do anything else would be cruel to the man who loves you more than anything,” Madame Sevigny replied evenly.

“But what if I do not love him?”

“Then what was it that drove you to do what you did in the conservatory?” the housekeeper countered. “Now, hurry up, *mademoiselle*, or else breakfast will get cold, and that will put Cook in a foul mood for the rest of the day.”

In short order, Madame Sevigny brought a dressed and coiffed Charlotte down to a small dining room that was filled with morning sun and hung with apple green damask on the walls.

“This is only the breakfast room,” Madame Sevigny whispered to Charlotte as she ushered her inside. “Now then, I must go and see about the coffee.”

With that, she closed the door behind her, and Charlotte was left alone with the other occupant of the room.

Paul rose and bowed silently to Charlotte. She thought he looked as determined as she was, although she suspected his motives for playing the game of *politesse* were different and probably more painful than hers.

“Good morning,” Charlotte said, clearing her throat to try and keep her voice from shaking.

“Good morning,” Paul replied quietly. “Please, sit.”

There was a long moment of awkward silence between them as the servants quickly bustled in and laid out breakfast on the table for them, then left.

“I am going to paint today,” Paul said in a strained voice, and Charlotte noticed that there was a strange look in his eyes. “Would you like a lesson?”

“A lesson?” the words burst from her before she could even think. “What misguided genie made you think that what I want right now is an art lesson?”

“And what is it that you want, Charlotte?”

The coldness of his voice might have stayed her, had she been less tired and more sure of herself. But confusion and bitterness mixed in her heart and poured like a deadly cocktail into her words.

“You know very well what I want, *monsieur le comte*,” Charlotte said biting. “I want you to take me back to Paris!”

“And when you reach Paris, what then?” Paul asked coldly.

“I...I will go back to my lessons, and –”

“With Master Lafonte?”

“Well, no. No, definitely not, because he betrayed me, but –”

“And where will you live?”

“With Madame–”

“Saurier?” Paul scoffed with a knowing smile that wasn’t altogether pleasant. “She, too, as you put it, betrayed you.”

Charlotte clutched at the edge of the table until her fingers ached, her jaw clenched just as tightly.

“Charlotte,” Paul said softly, reaching over with one hand and covering hers. “I will make you a promise. Spend one day with me here, without judgment, without rancor. Let me show you what I feel and what I can teach you. And tomorrow morning, if you still believe in your heart of hearts that you cannot be happy here, with me, then I will arrange for you to go back to Paris.”

Charlotte felt mesmerized by his gaze and quiet words. His hand on hers was warm, gentle and soothing.

One day. That is all she had to endure and then she could go free. One day...one, single day. But if that was all, why was she so scared?

“You give your word?” Charlotte said in a tiny voice.

Paul’s face broke into a smile that chiseled away the lines of care that hardened his handsome features.

“Yes, you have my word, Charlotte,” he said with a small laugh, squeezing her hand. “You have my word as a *comte*, a fellow artist, and as a man in love.”

“I sup-suppose that will have to do,” Charlotte retorted shakily, trying to fortify herself for the day-long ordeal with her usual spirit.

Paul gave a shout of laughter and then poured her a cup of steaming, fragrant coffee.

“I am supposed to do that,” Charlotte objected.

“Such a proper attitude for such an unconventional artist,” Paul teased.

“Being a lady and an artist are not mutually exclusive,” Charlotte countered, adding cream and sugar to her cup.

“No, no, that is unacceptable,” Paul laughed. “For you see, if that is the case, that would mean that male artists would have to be gentlemen, and that would take much of the fun out of the thing.”

“Ah, now we reach the crux of the matter!” Charlotte cried, feeling a rush of excitement at the banter between them. “A woman may be an artist, but she must be a lady first and foremost. A man may be an artist without any obligation to conform to the rigors of polite society. I would hardly call it fair, *monsieur*.”

“Now, I will tell you what is not fair, my Charlotte,” Paul said, shaking his head as he poured then drank his own coffee. “Women are inspiring in a way to artists in a way that men can never be. Even the poorest, ugliest woman has something godly about her, some whisper of a muse buried deep within her secret soul. Even the primmest *mademoiselle* knows how a man looks at her, which leaves us shallow men at your mercy. And that reminds me that it is time for your lesson.”

Charlotte followed him willingly enough through the mansion to the room he used as a studio. She couldn't help but remember the thrill of working with him on her painting, the intensity of his vision, the inspiring depth of his talent. Despite her status as a semi-prisoner, she was curious to see his studio, to see what was on his canvases.

Charlotte saw that Paul, like any good artist with the means to do so, had chosen a north-facing room with tall windows for his studio.

"This was not always an artist's studio?" she asked, taking in the details of the room.

"No, it was yet another useless drawing room," Paul chuckled. "That is, until I decided to turn it into a real drawing room."

Charlotte rolled her eyes at his witticism, but couldn't help smiling. The room was large and well-proportioned with extremely high ceilings. A blaze crackled merrily in the marble-mantled fireplace, taking the chill off the spring morning air. The chaos of art-in-progress made Charlotte feel once more on familiar ground. A central easel faced a dais for models, and half-finished canvases lay stacked in haphazard piles around tables laden with precarious towers of paint pots.

"Do you often have models brought here?" she asked, nodding to the changing screen thoughtfully placed by the hearth.

"Rarely."

"Why not?"

Paul shrugged and rummaged through his box of brushes.

"Are you ready for your lesson?" he asked instead, keeping his eyes on his task.

"Yes, of course," Charlotte replied, somewhat puzzled.

"Then go behind the screen and remove your clothes," Paul said evenly. "Then wrap yourself in the silk sheet that is on the stool."

"I beg your pardon!"

Paul looked up at Charlotte's outburst.

"This is your lesson," he said. "I am going to paint you."

"And you will paint me fully-clothed, *monsieur*!" Charlotte retorted, feeling her cheeks burning.

"You are an artist, I know, Charlotte," Paul said with a sigh. "But you are also a muse, unless you tell me that being both artist and muse are mutually exclusive."

"Well, perhaps they are," Charlotte interjected angrily.

"Then you are saying that one cannot be both a woman and an artist," Paul rejoined bluntly. He turned to look at her, and there was a hard, unhappy, uncompromising look in his eyes. "I am asking you to trust me. I said I was going to give you an art lesson, and so I shall. Don't worry," he added bitterly. "I won't do anything that might compromise a promising match for you."

"I don't see why I must disrobe," Charlotte said, trying to surmount her anger and be reasonable. After all, she had promised to do so for that one day—though here it was, only after breakfast and already she was being sorely tested.

"It is not a matter of what you see, but what you feel," Paul said. "Please, do as I say, Charlotte. Trust me."

Charlotte stood looking at him for a long moment, her hands clutching bunches of crinkly organza. She was agonized by the choice between all the roles she so blithely assumed—society belle, student, artist, muse...Each came with demands for her behavior, even her way of thinking. Which would she pick now?

Pressing her lips together, she gave Paul a curt nod and stepped behind the screen. She winced at every rustle of fabric as she disrobed. There was a moment when she hesitated before removing the last of her undergarments. What was she thinking? What was she doing? She bit her lip and firmly reminded herself that she had given her promise to Paul, and besides, she was an artist. To her, nudity was simply another object to be painted, with one human body no different than the next, except that it seemed very, very different when it was her body concerned.

She cleared her throat nervously before stepping out from behind the screen, clutching the silk sheet in billowy folds around her body. She saw Paul's eyes widen for a moment, but to her immense relief, he remained strictly professional, making no remark.

"Come," he said, nodding brusquely to her. "Sit over here."

He gestured to a low divan on the model's dais. Obediently, torn between curiosity and apprehension, Charlotte sat down. To her surprise, he walked over to her and knelt on the floor next to her.

"What are you doing?" she asked shakily.

"I said I was going to paint you today," Paul replied with a sly smile. "And I meant what I said."

"Yes, but what does that mean, exactly?" Charlotte shot back.

Paul drew in a deep breath and held up the paintbrushes he held, fanning them out as if they were a hand of cards.

"You use these everyday," he said. "You brush across canvas, with only thought to the line that the paint creates, to the mix of colors. But a true artist is aware of the intrinsic, intimate art of a brushstroke on canvas. To paint with greater feeling and greater knowledge, you must see brush and canvas as not just tools, but part of the art itself."

"I already know all about 'touch,' and how to change pressure and technique," Charlotte said cautiously.

Paul shook his head vigorously. "That is what they teach daubs and hacks, the ones who cannot truly feel what art is," he said. "Here, let me show you."

He took a stiff, short brush and ran it down her arm, watching her as he brushed from her bare shoulder to her wrist.

Charlotte was frowning, trying to give Paul's intentions the benefit of the doubt and focus instead on the sensation of the brush bristles against her skin.

"That is rough, not pleasant at all," she said thoughtfully.

Paul nodded. "Think of what that must feel like to the canvas," he said. "And then think of what this feels like."

He took a light fan brush and gently swept it in a sinuous line down her bare spine. Charlotte closed her eyes and shivered, feeling the brush caress her like the lightest of lover's touches. Chills ran down her spine, sparking a most inconvenient twinge of pleasure between her thighs.

"That was different, wasn't it?" Paul whispered, his lips close to her ear. Charlotte's eyes flew open, wild with concern. "That is what you use when you love your vision, when every nuance of your picture vibrates in your very soul."

Charlotte felt shy, unable to speak, sensing the muse rising within her, responding to Paul's passion—the same passion she felt for art...and perhaps for...perhaps...

"Every line that you paint has meaning," Paul said softly, taking a thin, short brush. "This brush is for your smallest details, but these lines are no less important than broad strokes and rough strokes."

He ran the brush up the side of her neck, tracing it over the sensitive contours of her ear. Charlotte couldn't help but shudder and gasp as she felt the small, soft bristles caress the curve of her ear like the tip of a tongue. For a moment, she imagined that it was Paul's lips, his tongue, that were creating that sensation, and she felt her nipples harden at the forbidden thought. She shifted uncomfortably on the divan, trying to both satisfy and deny the strange pleasure that was throbbing in her sex.

"Lie back, Charlotte," Paul said, picking up the paint pot and dipping the thick, stiff brush in it.

"What are you going to do?" she asked hesitantly, though she obeyed. The muse struggled with the lady, as she longed to give in without questions, to simply experience what Paul could offer her. The lady clung to the only context she knew, that of proper, polite society. Yet, in the very act of lying down, with only a sheet to cover her naughty nakedness, Charlotte felt the lady drowning in the unashamedly demanding desire of the muse. Her eyes grew heavy-lidded, as she looked up at Paul. She fought the urge to stretch languorously, to tempt the artist with her body, to lure him in with her spirit, her heart. She saw that Paul looked at her with a strange heat in his green eyes. But he made no move to touch her.

"You are a canvas, my muse," he growled. "You have learned that brushes are but an extension of your passion, your hand. Now, you must learn what a canvas feels, how it is exposed to you, at your mercy."

Charlotte felt a delicious, wicked anticipation as she watched Paul bring the paint-loaded brush down to her skin, poised above the base of her throat. A hot, harsh breath escaped her lips as she felt the slick, damp, cool kiss of the brush on her skin. Paul painted a swirling line over her chest, and Charlotte closed her eyes to capture the sensation. The stiff bristles were like fingernails scraping lightly over her skin.

Paul stopped the stroke just when the brush reached the edge of the sheet that covered her. Charlotte held her breath, moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue in anticipation, dreading and hoping what he would do next.

Slowly, he drew the brush down her breast, pushing down the sheet as the brush left a brilliant blue trail over her skin. The stiff bristles of the brush scraped over her nipple, bringing it to a tingling attention. Charlotte felt her heart hammering as she realized that she was bare to his gaze, that this was so wrong yet it was so daring, so right. She opened her eyes and saw that his breathing was labored, and his eyes dilated with desire. He swept the stiff brush over her other breast, a bolder stroke that moved the sheet aside.

“So vulnerable, pristine, just like canvas,” Paul whispered, a tender smile on his lips as he continued to brush the slick, blue oil paint over her skin, swirling it in twirls and tendrils. Charlotte writhed as the rough brush swept over her skin, teasing her, transforming her into living art. Over and over, Paul ran the stiff brush over her nipples until they ached, until she felt that she would go mad if she could not feel his lips and his fingers on them. She arched her back, and Paul reached out and, without touching her skin, drew back the rest of the sheet off her body so that she lay completely bare to his gaze.

“So beautiful, Charlotte,” Paul said. He put down the thick brush and picked up the small, fine brush, dipping it in a deep, burnt orange paint. She gazed at him, feeling drugged from unfulfilled pleasure, suffocated by newborn desire.

He took the brush and made a series of delicate strokes along her inner thigh, coaxing her through the torment of the brush’s whispery touch to spread her legs wider. Charlotte felt her hips roll hungrily with the movements of the brush. Her nipples felt cold and sensitive, covered in paint. She inadvertently brought her hands to her breasts, stopping short just before she touched them, blushing realizing what she was about to do.

“It’s all right, Charlotte,” Paul whispered raggedly as he continued to paint cool, wet designs on her thighs, inching closer and closer to her sex. “Learn the canvas. Learn your own art.”

With a gasp, Charlotte lowered her fingers to her breasts, feeling the softness of the mounds and moaning as she touched her nipples. Her fingers slipped around the peaks, sliding on the paint and creating new patterns from her pleasure. Unable and unwilling to rein in her need for a release she had never known, Charlotte fell into a rhythm of stroking and thumbing her slippery nipples.

She felt a warm, viscous honey seep out between her legs. But before she could feel embarrassed about it, Paul took the fan brush and swept it between the lips of her sex.

“Oooh,” she moaned as the brush touched her clitoris, sending a throbbing pulse of pleasure radiating out through her body. Paul’s brushstrokes were now focused on her, painting her with her own desire. Abandoning all thought for sweet and wicked sensation, Charlotte feverishly tweaked and worried her slick nipples with her now-paint-stained

fingers. She instinctively spread her legs wide so that he could paint whatever pleased him. She felt his brushstrokes go with treacherous softness over and over her clitoris.

“Oh, God!” she cried out as she felt her whole body explode with a starburst of pleasure. From her toes to the tips of her fingers, to her lips and eyelids, every nerve vibrated with a numbing ecstasy.

Dizzily, she tried to focus her eyes on Paul, the consequences of her actions slowly surfacing in her pleasure-drunk mind. She saw that his face was flushed and tight, that he stood above her now. His frame looked tense, and she could see his own desire tenting his trousers. In a moment of panic, she wondered if he was going to fall upon her, to ravish her. The thought both frightened and excited her, stirring her desire from its languor. She knew it would be wrong of him to do that, but she couldn’t get the image of their naked bodies entwined, the paint rubbing into their bodies as they slid together in lovemaking.

But even as she tried to clear her mind, Paul bent over her. She held her breath and felt a vague sense of disappointment when he only dropped the lightest, most chaste of kisses on her lips.

“That was your lesson, Charlotte,” Paul said, his voice full of heat. “I will leave you now and send in a maid to help you clean off.”

“That...that...was all?” Charlotte asked, blushing and bewildered.

“For today,” Paul said with a strained smile. He reached out and touched a lock of her hair that had come loose. Then, he turned and left her alone with her troubled thoughts.

Chapter 15

Once she was clean and safely dressed in her armor of petticoats, corset and gown, Charlotte found herself confronted with a most unpleasant set of facts.

Quickly exiting Paul's studio, she made her way outside to the gardens. She needed fresh air to clear her head of the fumes of the paint and aid her thinking.

What she had done with Paul, if it were ever to be known, would destroy her chances for making a good marriage—not that she wanted one, of course. Her deplorable wantonness put her squarely on par with all the other artist's models who whored with artists and other men. Paul's words about artists not being gentlemen came back to her with a shameful new ring.

She absently noticed the rose bushes were budding, with slips of new white roses peeking through the fresh green leaves. White roses...

What had he meant? Why was he doing this to her? Charlotte knew that he would claim that he loved her, that she was his muse. But still, she wasn't sure. She knew that she could respond to him like a muse, like a woman. What she didn't know is if she could love him, or even if she wanted to love him.

She shivered slightly, trying to shake off the lingering memories of what he had made her feel that morning, of how he had opened a new world of sensation to her with literally a stroke of the brush. She felt her cheeks burning and raised her hands to them.

"Charlotte," said a voice behind her. In the blink of an eye, she found herself in Paul's arms. He crushed her to him, kissing her hungrily on her lips, her eyelids and her forehead.

"Paul," Charlotte said, pushing against his shoulders to try and put some distance between them. "Wait, I can't, I need to understand—"

"There is nothing to understand except that I love you," Paul murmured, silencing her words with his mouth.

If only he hadn't been so intense, so tempting with his words, the steady gaze of his eyes! His kisses robbed her of all reason as his lips moved over her cheek and nibbled the sensitive cup of her ear.

"Paul!"

He pulled back and grinned at her. "Come, Charlotte," he said, taking both her hands in his. "Lunch is ready. And it is not yet warm enough for you to be outdoors without a hat and cloak, my darling."

"I am perfectly capable of deciding if I am warm or cold," Charlotte retorted as he slipped his arm around her waist as they walked back toward the house.

"Then why are your hands like ice, *mademoiselle*?" Paul challenged.

"I was too warm inside," Charlotte lied.

"And I want you to be warm."

"It is not fitting for a lady to perspire," Charlotte said crisply. "In fact, we hardly dare say such an indelicate word."

"And yet you just said it."

"And I am clearly not a lady," Charlotte rejoined. "At least not the lady I thought I was."

"You are an artist, Charlotte," Paul whispered, nuzzling her ear. "And you are my beloved."

"Look," Charlotte said, spinning out of his grasp to face him. "Please, stop with that, all right? I promised you I would give you this day without any reluctance on my part. But must you test me and torment me like this?"

Paul stood still and looked at her, his eyes inscrutable. Charlotte felt embarrassed at her outburst, but stubbornly lifted her chin.

"I merely state the facts," he said with surprising mildness, motioning with a courtly gesture for her to enter the house. "And you are my beloved just as certainly as lunch is ready and waiting."

Charlotte groaned but went inside.

The rest of the day passed in relative tranquility. Paul and Charlotte wandered through the house, with Paul telling stories about the wondrous, rare, beautiful objects that filled each room. She saw portraits of his family, noting that his intense green eyes seemed to be a trait carried down by the men. She learned from Paul that the de Sainte's had always been great patrons of artists and many of them artists themselves. She saw the simple study where Paul managed the family's vast estate and fortune. She even felt sorry for Paul when he quietly told her that his parents had been killed in a carriage accident two years prior, and that aside from an uncle down in Lyons, he was alone.

Charlotte found herself enjoying spending time in Paul's company, though the memory of what had happened between them that morning was never very far from her thoughts. After supper, Paul had challenged her to a game of backgammon, and it had become an uproarious session of trading the cleverest insults they each could think of.

Paul had enlarged her vocabulary of naughty French, and Charlotte had taught him some choice phrases in English, laughing heartily at his thick accent.

The evening had been so pleasant that it came as a shock to Charlotte when Paul walked her to the door of her bedroom and stopped her, a serious, almost somber look on his face.

“Well, Charlotte, what is your decision?” he asked, taking both her hands in his.

Charlotte stood, frozen and silent, her mind a total blank from panic. She had enjoyed the day so much that she had forgotten about the terrible choice she had to make on the morrow.

“Charlotte?”

“I...I don't know,” she managed to say finally.

Paul seemed taken aback, for he released her hands and stepped away from her.

“I...see,” he said finally. Charlotte felt miserable, like she had just stabbed him through the heart, so intense was the pain in his eyes.

“I'm sorry,” Charlotte said softly, reaching out to touch his arm, unable to bear the sadness that seemed to emanate from him.

He drew back and shook his head.

“Don't be,” he said, and turned and walked down the long corridor.

Charlotte watched him as he disappeared around a corner. She fought not to cry, feeling both anguish and angry. It wasn't her fault that he loved her. She hadn't wanted any of this.

She went into her room, certain that for yet another night, she wouldn't get any sleep.

Chapter 16

As the cold rain fell from the pre-dawn sky and pelted against her window, Charlotte felt a chilling resolution creep up on her. She knew what she had to do, and despite the aching fatigue in her limbs, she knew she had to act quickly.

As quietly as she could, she went over to the wardrobe and dug through it until she found a simple cotton skirt and shirtwaist. She found no cloak or hat, but took out a thick woolen shawl and a pair of riding boots. With some difficulty, she changed her clothing, cursing the perverse nature of whoever decided that women's clothing should have entirely too many unreachable buttons.

But even as Charlotte stole down the stairs in the eerie half-light of the rainy dawn, she felt her heart pulling against her, like the sun trying to change the moon's pull on the tides. She knew that what she was doing was right. She had to leave. If she stayed, the forbidden desire she felt for Paul would only continue to overwhelm her, and what happened in the conservatory and in the studio would only be the start of something she wasn't sure she wanted but couldn't resist.

And yet, her heart insisted on feeling pity for the blow she was about to deal Paul by leaving him. How many other women could boast of having a man love them so utterly and completely? How many other men would have the daring to disregard society's strictures in pursuing their love?

Charlotte shook her head as she snuck into the conservatory. She remembered there was a small door there that opened out onto the gardens. Pulling the shawl over her head, she stepped outside into the rain and ran lightly over the gravel path toward the stables.

It was dark and smelled of sweet straw in the stables, with the wuffling breaths of the horses as they stirred at her arrival. She fumbled as best she could in the dark to find the tack for the horses, ignoring the sardonic voice in her head that gleefully pointed out that she was on the verge of committing horse theft.

Struggling with the bulky saddle in her arms, Charlotte walked the length of the stables, peering into the stalls. She needed a fast horse, a tireless stallion. Undoubtedly, when her flight was discovered, Paul would give chase. And she would need to be far, far away if she was to have any chance at all at regaining her freedom.

She stopped and peered into a stall, taking stock of a dappled grey stallion. Though she was no expert in horseflesh, she believed he looked young and strong. With a sigh, she set the saddle down and fumbled with the latch to the stall.

Suddenly, a pair of hands closed around her shoulders and spun her around, pressing her back against the round wood of the high stall gate.

“P-Paul!” Charlotte gasped, completely taken aback by his presence.

“What were you trying to do, Charlotte?” Paul asked quietly. His eyes narrowed, and he closed the distance between them, using his body to pin her to the stall.

“I...uh...I wanted to go for a ride this morning,” Charlotte stuttered, wincing as she realized how pitiful the lie sounded.

“I see,” Paul whispered. He brought one hand up to caress her cheek. His touch was warm against her damp skin. “Riding in the rain sounds much more sensible than trying to ride a horse from Bretagne to Paris, especially without any money or knowing even which road to take. You could have asked me. I do not want you to go, but I gave you my word that I would take you back to Paris.”

He brushed her lips with his, then deepened the kiss, crushing her mouth as he crushed her body in his embrace.

“Is that what you want, Charlotte?” he murmured against her lips. “To leave me?”

“I cannot stay here!” Charlotte wailed, tears welling up in her eyes, even as her body trembled in his arms. “This is wrong, so very wrong!”

“No, Charlotte!” His response was fierce. He pulled back and locked his steady, heated gaze on her. “Love is *never* wrong!”

She looked up at him, agonized as if she hung between two terrible decisions. In that moment, she didn’t trust herself to make the right decision. She didn’t even know what the right decision was any more. She wanted to defy social convention by being an artist. But was she ready to throw away all the social approval by giving in to a love she wasn’t even sure she returned? And yet, how could one not love the power, the passion, the pain in Paul de Sainte’s eyes? He called to her, drew her to him with his words, his art, his very soul.

“Oh, God!” she sobbed, closing her eyes and balling her hands and beating them against his chest in frustration. “I don’t know, I don’t know!”

Paul tipped her chin up and smiled almost sadly into her tear-limned eyes.

“Yes, you do know,” he replied. “You know my heart, just as I know yours.”

Charlotte looked up at him, his face blurred by her tears into an impressionist vision. How could her heart ache so if she did not love him? But she did love him. That was why it hurt so much to think of leaving him.

The thought took her by surprise. Something wild and hungry welled up in her soul, demanding that she look the truth squarely in the eyes. She loved Paul de Sainte, his madness, his passion, his genius. She had never been more alive, more challenged than in these few days she had known him. He was an endlessly frustrating puzzle, he was a visionary, he was a man who would do anything for her love. And she knew, in that moment, that she could no more deny her love for him than deny her calling as an artist.

“I...told you,” Charlotte said shakily, “I was just going for a ride in the rain.”

Paul stared at her, as if searching her words for their true meaning. Then, without hesitation, he kissed her again, urgently, demandingly. His body pressed hard against hers while his hands roamed up and down her sides. Charlotte tried to suppress a shudder of pleasure as his burning lips slid down her jaw line to her throat. His fingers deftly undid the buttons of her collar, exposing more of her neck. Unable to do anything else, she clung to him, fighting her own body’s riotous sensations.

Paul took one of her hands in his and brought it up to cup his cheek as he once again took possession of her mouth. The rain drummed mercilessly on the roof, and the warm, humid semi-darkness of the stable seemed to whisper encouragement to Charlotte, as if promising to keep her secrets. The faint nickering and snorts of the horses was a soft undercurrent of sound, and the smell of fresh hay filled her nostrils.

Without thinking, she stroked Paul’s cheek with her thumb, feeling him shudder with pleasure at her touch. She felt the hardness of his cock pressing through the layers of her skirts, sending tingling jolts of pleasure through her body. Pleasure robbed her of reason, and need stole her indecision. She was the muse once more, made only for love and torment.

Charlotte raised her other hand to Paul’s face, and pulled him fiercely to her, smashing his lips against hers. The effect was like setting a match to dynamite. Paul savagely tore at her blouse, sending the buttons flying off of it and revealing her chemisette and corset. His hips ground into hers as his tongue battled with hers in a delicious delirium. He growled with ecstasy as she ran her hands through his dark hair and then down the back of his shirt, her cold fingers raising gooseflesh on his burning skin.

Suddenly, Paul swung her up into his arms and carried her up the rickety wooden steps to the hayloft where he gently laid her down on a soft pile of hay. Charlotte watched with half-lidded eyes as Paul lay down next to her, kissing and caressing her hands, her face, her neck. How strange, she mused dazedly, that it was to happen like this, that she was to be tumbled in the hay like a common servant girl. The dark hayloft of a stable was hardly the candlelight and rose petal-strewn bed she had been taught to expect.

Yet, she could smell the rain from outside and the fragrance of sweet new hay around her. She felt her lover’s hands tentatively, adoringly exploring every line of her body.

Charlotte closed her eyes and smiled. It was true. Beauty *was* everywhere one looked.

Chapter 17

In a wordless silence, Charlotte felt Paul's lips on her face, tracing a soft, damp line down her cheek and her throat. One of his large hands was splayed across her abdomen, slowly tugging at the ties of her chemisette.

Charlotte kept her eyes closed, just wanting to focus on the feeling of Paul's full lips hesitating a moment above her breasts. She gasped as she felt his fingers creep up to the flimsy neckline of her chemisette that barely covered her breasts. He was achingly slow as he pulled the fabric down over her pebbled nipples. The faint scrape of the fabric across the sensitive tips of her breasts sent a shiver of pure, heart-pounding pleasure through Charlotte. But it was nothing compared to the moment when she felt the heat of his mouth encompass her breast as his tongue swirled around the captive nipple.

Her back arched in response, offering up her breasts to his hungry mouth. He left no spot of skin un-tasted, nipping at her peaks between each kiss and lick. She grabbed fistfuls of hay, her body twisting as he suckled her. The wet sound of his mouth on her breasts echoed the fall of the raindrops, and Charlotte thought that such pleasure must drive one mad.

"Look at me, beloved," Paul growled, raising his face to look at her. Her eyes fluttered open, and she felt a deep blush suffuse her cheeks as her heaving, wet breasts cooled in the air. The look in Paul's eyes was possessive and predatory. He held her gaze imprisoned within his own as he deliberately undid the rest of her chemisette and pushed it aside so that her chest was completely bared to him. Her breath felt hot in her throat, and she couldn't move. Paul lowered his lips to her nipples, his tongue flicking at the tips with short, rough strokes that made Charlotte gasp and writhe.

Suddenly, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her upright, stripping her of the clinging chemisette. The delicious wickedness of being half-naked in a hayloft with a man not her husband horrified Charlotte but tantalized the muse. Her eyes closed as she leaned forward to kiss him. He greedily accepted the kiss, but pushed her firmly back down into the hay. His hand was roughly searching for the buttons to her skirt and undid them impatiently.

Charlotte moaned into his mouth as she felt his hand snake down inside her skirt, slipping under the layers of petticoats and pantaloons to the secret place that endless governesses had told her she must never touch. But how could one not touch that beguiling, consuming tingle that made her entire body shiver?

Paul's fingers slid over the curls of her virgin mound, and he growled as he traced the lines of the wet lips before spreading them to find that most sensitive of spots.

Charlotte felt her hips buck up into his hand. Oh! She wanted more of his fingers, his touch! She wanted him to continue to stroke her, her skirts askew on her hips, her bosom bare and the skin of her back naked against the prickly hay. She cried out as he found a slow, torturous rhythm of rubbing her. His lips silenced her fluttering pleas of pleasure, and his tongue tasted her cries. She could hear the rough sound of his breath in his chest as clearly as she could see the barely restrained dark passion that stained his handsome face.

Suddenly, the tingle between her legs tightened, and Charlotte stiffened as white, blinding pleasure exploded and sent aftershocks to the tips of her toes and through every pore in her skin. This was what she had felt in the studio the day before, but only a thousand times more powerful.

"Oh, God," she said in a strangled whisper, raising a trembling hand to Paul's flushed cheek.

Paul's eyes shone with pleasure and happiness at the sight of her. He kissed her tenderly and blew on her forehead to cool her. Charlotte shivered again and brought her hands to his shoulders. Paul's face strained with pleasure at her touch, and he lost no time in pulling off his shirt to offer her the broad expanse of his chiseled chest. As Charlotte ran her hands over his heated skin, her eyes drowning in his twin green seas of happiness and desire, she felt him tugging at her skirt, pulling down the layers. She moved in cooperation with him until she was naked under his gaze.

Charlotte felt both shy and naughty, and she smiled up at him with wonder at all the sensations in her body. In that moment, she knew the pleasure that models found in baring themselves to the appreciative gaze of a true artist. This was not the whoring she had feared the other day. This was so very different. She knew that somehow, her life, her love, her art was all tied up in this man who now straddled her, the roughness of his black pants brushing against her thighs. She ran her hands over his chest, letting her fingers flick at his nipples the same as he had done to her.

She smiled in mischievous delight at the gasp and growl he gave, then her smile faded into dazed desire as ground his hips into hers. His swollen cock pressed against her sex, sparking her desire again like flint to tinder. His mouth ravaged her lips, slipping to maul the secret place under her ear where her jaw and neck met. He moved down her, licking, biting and sampling her flesh. He paused at her breasts and ferociously suckled each one, making her hips writhe against his hard cock again and again.

Through a haze of nearly unbearable pleasure, Charlotte watched as he slipped further down her body, kissing and nuzzling her as he went. Her eyes went wide with surprise as he lowered his head between her legs, and she gasped when she felt his warm tongue flicking against the swollen folds of her sex. She raised her head to watch him as

he parted her full lips with his fingers and sought to tease out her clitoris with his tongue and his teeth.

Charlotte's head fell back, and she stretched her legs taut, her hands automatically searching out his thick, dark hair and tangling her fingers in it.

"Paul!" she exclaimed as his tongue slipped inside her. It seemed to ignite in her an inarticulate primal need to feel herself filled with him, completed by him, at complete oneness with her mate.

Paul cupped her buttocks and lifted her off the ground, raising her hips in the air as if lifting a sacred chalice to his lips. He dug into her, and Charlotte could hear the quiet sipping sounds as he licked and tasted her. She felt drugged and dizzy as he flicked at her clitoris again and again until she felt the pressure building to that same excruciating point of release.

"Paul, oh, Paul! Oh, Paul!" she wailed as her body responded with the sweetest of spasms. She shook like a leaf in eddying gusts of shivering, shimmering pleasure.

Her lover, his eyes glowing with desire and overwhelming emotion, lay her gently back down in the hay, stretching out beside her. He petted tender, sweet, lingering kisses on her lips as her breasts rose and fell with her lost breath.

"My muse," Paul murmured, looking deeply into her eyes. He leaned over her and kissed her eyelids.

Charlotte cradled his head in her hands and lowered his lips to hers, lashing out with her own tongue to drown his sweetly painful words. The kisses fell between them like heavy raindrops, and she could taste her own tang still in his mouth. With a brazenness she didn't know she possessed, she pulled him on top of her, reveling in his crushing weight.

Paul let out a hollow groan, and Charlotte could see the need raging inside him, she could feel it against her hips. Somehow, they worked off his pants and boots in a frenzy of kissing. His member was hard and hot against her inner thigh, and he plunged into more kisses, his tongue mimicking what his body wanted. She slid her legs along the length of his, feeling the rough texture of muscle and skin against her. Her damp, swollen breasts were smothered by his chest.

Charlotte moaned softly in delicious, slippery pleasure as she gently moved her hips against his cock, tantalizing it with brushes of her lips and damp curls.

"Don't!" Paul said in a strangled voice, the effort of holding himself back written in terrible lines on his face. "You'll unman me, and I'll not...unless you want...oh, God!"

His words dissolved as Charlotte's fingers reached down and caressed his cock, guiding it to the opening of her innocence.

"I want, Paul," Charlotte whispered.

With a half-sob of relief, Paul slowly eased himself inside of her. Charlotte lay still, feeling her virgin walls stretched for the first time to accommodate his length. There

was a moment of resistance, and Paul gave Charlotte a strangely sad look before thrusting hard to break through the delicate barrier.

She cried out inadvertently, her muscles tightening in reaction to the pain. He remained motionless above her, his green eyes watching her intently. Slowly, she forced herself to relax, to become soft and supple again. The pain was ebbing, though she still felt a faint burning. A new sensation was crowding out the pain. She felt filled, joined and complete. She closed her eyes and let out a shuddering breath of pleasure, the pure pleasure of mating.

Paul slowly began to move in and out of her, sliding softly along her slicked passage. He lowered his head to nuzzle and lick the side of her neck. Charlotte felt his cock slither against her clitoris and gasped as it stirred with shivers of pleasure.

Growling with the intensity of his need, Paul took Charlotte's hand and guided it down to the nub, urging her fingers to touch and stroke it. He began to ride her harder as his need mounted and as she found herself coaxing another musical, shivering climax from her sex. With a roar of primal power, of a man asserting possession of his woman, Paul slammed into her hips with his release.

He collapsed on top of her, and she entwined her body about his, their breathing falling into time together.

"My Charlotte," he whispered tenderly into her ear. "My bride."

Charlotte shook her head and said, "No. I will not marry you, Paul de Sainte."

Paul lifted his head to look her in the eyes, distress evident in his own green gaze. "What do you mean?" he demanded, a panicked, dangerous edge creeping into his voice.

"I told you that I did not wish to marry," Charlotte said, trying to keep a straight face. "I am an artist."

"But—" Paul interjected.

"But you were right," she continued, lifting a hand to cup his dark-flushed cheek. "I want to be courted...for the rest of my life. I will be your lover and your muse, and you will be my lover and my teacher."

"Damned, stubborn muse," Paul growled, a relieved, roguish grin breaking out over his face, even as his eyes shone with tears of joy.

Epilogue

Paul de Sainte looked on proudly as Charlotte mingled with the crowd of critics and admirers in the *Salon d'Automne* in the Grand Palais de l'Éxposition. Her second gallery exhibit seemed to be as successful as her first, and her avant-garde style of painting female nudes was fast becoming a trademark of the Bennington style.

Parisian society had been shocked when they had first let it be known that they were living together as lovers, but in that golden, gilded age of deco and decadence, it was a *scandal du jour* that lasted but a week. Charlotte had sent a letter to her parents announcing her decision, and the correspondence had been thick and furious for a time while she worked at convincing her family that this was a good thing.

Paul's eyes roved lovingly over the growing swell of Charlotte's belly. He remembered how they had broken out into peals of laughter when Charlotte realized she was carrying his child. Since that moment, he looked forward to a day when his joy would increase tenfold at seeing his babe in Charlotte's arms and being able to hold them both close to him.

He chuckled as he watched Madame Saurier flutter around Charlotte like a grandmotherly hen, her affection and pride in Charlotte's success—both personal and artistic—almost comically obvious.

"And when is your gallery opening to be, boy?" asked the champagne-inflected voice of Master Lafonte.

Paul looked down at the smirking face of his old teacher and grinned.

"The world is my gallery," he said, his eyes straying back to Charlotte. "And she is my masterpiece."

FIN

Kate September



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Kate September has been writing for as long as she can remember. Her world has been filled with endless stories and an imagination that at times seemed richer and more real than the world around her. Writing for Kate is a less of a process of creating and more a process of composing, trying to capture the flow, lyricism and rhythm of words as the stories unfold themselves.

Kate lives in Boston with her husband and their dog and fish. A special heartfelt thanks goes to Kate's parents and her husband, and the friends and family who have cheered her on, edited, begged for more chapters, and goaded her into writing.

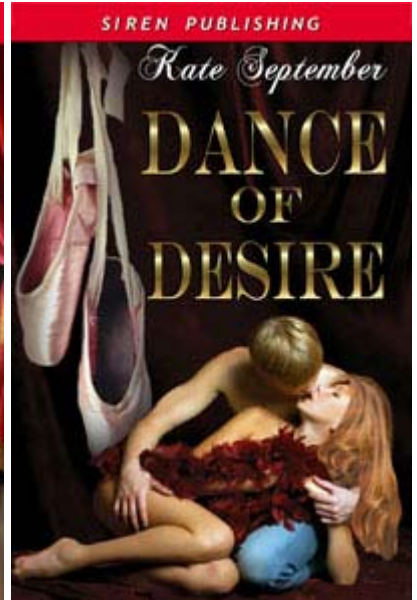
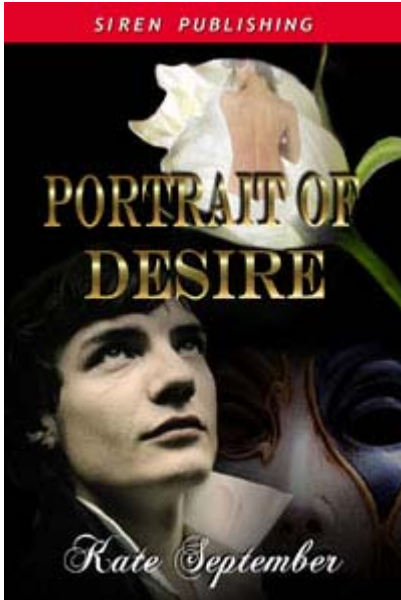
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