

# Warning

### SEX RATING: SIZZLING/SCORCHING

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### **SIREN SEX Rating**

**SENSUAL:** Sensual romance with love scenes comparative to most romance novels published today

**STEAMY:** Heavy sexual tension; graphic details; may contain coarse language

SIZZLING: Erotic, graphic sex; explicit sexual language; may offend delicate readers

**SCORCHING:** Erotica; contains many sexual encounters; may contain unconventional sex; will offend delicate readers

**SEXTREME:** Excessiveness; many instances of unconventional sex; may be hardcore; not for the faint-hearted

## **Kate September**

## La Belle Époque, Book 2

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.

### **Duet of Desire**

Poetry. Fear. Sex. Death. Love. Murder. Music. Hate. Kindness. Revenge. Survival.

Elise Montfort, the haughty young opera diva, is the darling of Paris society with a talent that is only rivaled by her cynicism. Clever and sometimes cruel, Elise only looks out for herself, and with good reason. She has something to hide: a deadly secret from her past that could utterly ruin her.

A darkly erotic love affair with a handsome, mysterious marquis takes Elise to new heights of pleasure and challenges her heart as much as her body. Her jaded, morally ambivalent existence is suddenly jeopardized by the return of a dangerous man from her past who threatens to reveal her secret. Elise finds herself forced to choose between her lover and her enemy, a decision tangled in a web of blackmail, scandal, heart-break and despair. Can one have sympathy for the devil? Only if one remembers that the devil is but a fallen angel.

## **DUET OF DESIRE**

La Belle Époque, Book 2

**Kate September** 



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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## **Duet of Desire**

La Belle Époque, Book 2

### By Kate September

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"Bread and Roses"

As we come marching, marching in the beauty of the day, A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray, Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses, For the people hear us singing: "Bread and roses!"

As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men, For they are women's children, and we mother them again. Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes; Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!

We come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread. Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew. Yes, it is bread we fight for - but we fight for roses, too!

As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days. The rising of the women means the rising of the race. No more the drudge and idler - ten that toil where one reposes, But sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

-- James Oppenheim (1912)

### Chapter 1

The Opéra Garnier glittered like a jewel in the Parisian night. Carriages and new-fangled automobiles disgorged waves of the rich, the fashionable, and the rich who were fashionable, all of whom were attending the grand masquerade ball on the mild April night.

Outside, a motley mix of men and women in drab brown and grays milled about, extending dirty hands with broken nails in hopes of a few coins being given away in order to make them go away.

Inside, a surreal crowd of harlequins, fairies, sultans and seraglio girls mingled and danced in the mirrored galleries and marble foyer. At the center of the whirlwind of gaiety, Elise Montfort watched her admirers flock around her, reminding her of moths to the flame that would burn them in a passionate suttee.

"Ma belle," crooned Raoul, le Vicomte de Berrac as he slipped through the throng of sycophantic males to her side. "You look lovely, as always."

She smiled sardonically at him and teased, "When will you learn that you waste your words with me, *monsieur*? I know all of your tricks already."

"A man must practice, you know, preparing for the day when true love comes along."

"Pish! You'll never find true love. And if you do, you'll have to forsake it for some pudgy heiress."

"You are as cruel as you are beautiful."

"And I could walk through your intentions in my stocking feet and not get wet."

"Do you call me shallow, mademoiselle?"

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"I do, indeed, though it was clever of you to discern that so quickly."

"Why I tolerate such abuse from you is beyond me," Raoul moaned even as he winked at her.

"It's beyond most men." She handed her empty champagne glass to a passing waiter. "That is why women are the superior sex."

"I am beginning to believe there is some truth to that."

"Then you are wiser than most men." She smoothed down the diaphanous white tulle of her skirt and touched her hand lightly to the silver and crystal headdress to make sure it was still perfectly in place. She fingered the white rose tucked into the sash at her waist and smiled. "By the way, did you send me this rose?"

Raoul glanced down at it and shook his head, looking puzzled. "No. It must have been some other pathetically besotted admirer of yours."

"So charming, mon brave."

As she spoke, Elise looked around at the swirling, chattering crowds and felt suddenly oddly disconnected from them. Here were masses of the comfortable bourgeoisie and upper class, with their small scandals and petty sins. They drank champagne and had frivolous love affairs more for status than for pleasure. Yet, what did they truly know of the world beyond their fashionable flats and brilliant suppers? She frowned slightly, struggling for a moment to reconcile her memories of a world that was dark, hungry and more violent than this sparkling panorama before her.

She didn't belong to this set of pseudo-respectable bourgeoisie because of her place as a singer and her humble origins. But she no longer belonged to the world of the poor and hungry, either. The only way she could exist comfortably in society was to assume the role of the bohemian artist, with all its freedoms, permissions...and limitations. She felt a brief pang of undirected anger at such a capricious, judgmental world, but then she shrugged inwardly and forced her to focus only on trying to enjoy herself in that moment. For so many hungry years, she had dreamed of balls with pretty gowns and endless champagne, it seemed a pity not to appreciate it.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Montfort!" called a comically deep, booming voice across the crowd, breaking into her reverie.

Elise fought the urge to sigh and instead pasted a polite smile on her face as Monsieur Jean-Pierre Beaumont, the manager of the Opéra Garnier, bustled over to her with a man following close behind. She looked at the man that Beaumont towed along with him, feeling as though she was seeing something too fantastical to be believed, though his appearance was hardly phantasmagorical. He was tall, his clothes were well cut, and he moved with ease. His face was handsome, despite the cruel lines around his thin lips. But it was the man's eyes that turned her marrow to ice. They were just as she remembered: dark, unfathomable, with a left eye that wandered, giving an eerie impression of always keeping watch on everything.

"May I present you Monsieur Gustave Dufarge," Monsieur Beaumont proclaimed. "He expressed a strong desire to meet the most beautiful woman at the ball. Monsieur Dufarge, this is Elise Montfort, our beloved soprano and star of the opera!"

She curtsied mechanically to Dufarge, and he bowed to her.

"A pleasure, *mademoiselle*," Dufarge intoned, his voice low and gravelly, grating on her sensitive ear in the same fashion it always had.

"You are most kind," she replied flatly. Dufarge's sudden reappearance in her life was a well-anticipated horror for her. She had rehearsed this moment in all its permutations in her dreams for so many years that it was alarmingly easy to mask her devastation with cool aplomb. She knew that Monsieur Beaumont would not have introduced this man to her without some other purpose in mind, and she was cynical enough to know exactly what that purpose was. Her job, just as it had been so many times before, was to lure and seduce this man into becoming a patron of the opera. The thought of it and the sight of Dufarge made her sick.

"Would *mademoiselle* care to dance?"

"But of course." Though her answer came calmly enough, she still felt a shiver of trepidation, knowing what the dialogue on the dance floor would be. She also knew that before she could escape this man again, she would have to learn from him why he had reappeared after all these years. Only then could she formulate a plan for saving herself.

Dufarge held out his hand, and she placed her hand in his. They joined the waltz that the orchestra was starting up.

"How many years has it been, Elise?" Dufarge asked, his arm uncomfortably tight around her waist as he whirled her around the dance.

"Enough years for you to finally have learned to dance without stepping on my toes, *monsieur*."

"You have grown flippant. It is not becoming on you."

"And you are as arrogant as always."

"You were more humble back then."

"I was a fool."

"And now?"

Elise smiled wanly. "Now, I am no longer anyone's fool."

"Then if you are not a fool, you must surely know why I am here." Dufarge's fingers convulsively dug into her waist.

"Indeed, *monsieur*, I cannot account for it at all," she replied evenly, despite the rapid, painful beating of her heart.

"I have made something of myself. I am a man of substantial means."

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"I congratulate you, though I cannot imagine what that has to do with me."

"I have enough money to keep you, now. There is no more running away from me."

"It takes more than money, *monsieur*." She felt her throat close off in terror at the implications of his words.

"I have more than money on my side, and you know it. You belong to me. This time, I will not let you go so easily."

"I do not belong to you, *monsieur*. I will never come back. I meant what I said when I left you."

"Things change," he said softly. "People change."

"You are right. I have changed. I have changed more than you can ever know. And that is precisely why I will never return to you."

"Oh, no?" He crushed her against him. "We shall see about that. You take other men to your bed, but refuse me? Oh, yes, I know all about your little menagerie of lovers who pay for your body. Whore!"

Elise felt a miserable blush rising to her cheeks. People were starting to stare at them, and all she wanted was to run away. She was as private as she was proud, and this sordid, public discussion of her personal affairs was intolerable to her, not to mention the horrible feeling of being trapped by this man from her past. While love affairs were a way of life for ladies of high society, and especially the bohemian women who were artists, singers and actresses, she sought—like all those women—to keep her affairs discreet in order to maintain a façade of propriety.

"Loosen your grip, *monsieur*," she said quietly. "You make it difficult for me to breathe."

Dufarge laughed unpleasantly and only held her more closely.

"May I cut in?"

The voice was warm and rich, and sounded to her like that of her guardian angel. She turned to see a tall, dark-haired man standing next to them. There was a strange, inscrutable expression on his face as he looked down at her.

Elise felt Dufarge tense and knew he was about to refuse. But before he could speak, she smiled up into the face of her savior and said, "But of course. Monsieur Dufarge." She extricated herself from his arms and nodding slightly to him.

The man gently took her in his arms and swept her off into the dance again.

"I hope you will forgive me for cutting short your dance," said the pleasant baritone voice of her savior, nearly melting her then and there, "but your dance card was full, and this was the only way I could secure the pleasure of dancing with you."

Out of sheer relief, she laughed.

"And what is your name?"

"Marc, le Marquis de Drammond," the man replied with a slight smile.

She found that she liked his smile very much, especially the way it created little creases on his face.

"I am Elise Mont—"

"I know. I have attended every performance of yours since the first time you took the stage here."

"Really? You must love opera, then."

Marc smiled thoughtfully. "I have loved it all my life, but it seems new again to me, ever since I heard you sing. Your voice...it is clear and honest in all its emotions"

She found herself blushing with pleasure at the man's words—words that were curiously sweet without the cloying complications of purposeful flattery.

"I am glad that you enjoy my work, but I do not recall seeing you before at any other balls or suppers, *monsieur*. I would think a distinguished man such as yourself would avail himself more of the pleasures of society."

"I find little pleasure in the frivolous obligations of society. I go where I please, when I please, and tonight, it pleased me to come to this ball to meet you."

"Ah, but you could easily have avoided such a frivolous occasion by simply coming to my dressing room after a performance, since you attended them all."

"To what purpose? To share your attention with a hundred other men who care more for your beauty than your talent?"

"Then you think my beauty unworthy of admiration?"

"Not at all, but it is your talent that makes you different from all the other hothouse flowers of society. Your other admirers use your talent to gain access to your beauty, and that disgusts me."

"It disgusts you?" Elise exclaimed, somewhat shocked by his bold words.

"You are a rare treasure, *mademoiselle*, and it disgusts me to see other men to blind to your true worth."

"You are quick to judge men you do not know."

"You are quick to absolve them."

"I absolve no one of the crime of admiring me, and you have yet to convince me that your admiration, beyond these pretty words, has some greater moral value than theirs." She lifted her chin in slight defiance. "Besides, if you have observed so much and been to so many performances, why have you chosen this moment to approach me?"

Mar paused, a strange look of longing coming into his eyes.

"Because I could no longer help myself," he answered finally, a sudden, passionate heat filling his voice and thrilling her in all her secret, womanly places. "The beauty of your singing and the soul that fills it has undone all my resolve to refrain from approaching you."

"Why was such resolve necessary?" Even as she spoke, she felt her mouth go dry with a strange, almost sweet anticipation of his answer.

"I knew that the moment I spoke with you, I would be forever ensnared, body and soul."

"Oh, come!" She laughed, instantly cynical again. "I am not such a temptress as all that."

"No, you are not. You are a woman, and a woman that makes me think of no one and nothing else."

"Oh dear, a marquis undone by a diva?"

"A man undone by a woman."

She noticed that somehow, they had become so closely entwined that she could feel the breath with which he spoke fanning her lips like a ghostly caress.

"I knew that when I finally touched your hand and looked into your eyes that I should want you all the more," Marc continued, and she could feel the rumbling of his voice in his chest as he pressed her close to him.

"You are a man used to getting what he wants, I take it?"

"I am."

"And now you want me?" Her words held the faintest flavor of bitterness as her cynicism reminded her that he most likely was using sweet words to get what all men wanted in the end from her.

"Tell me," Marc spun her around the dance floor, "when you sing, what do you feel?"

"What do I feel?" she repeated thoughtfully, taken aback by his question and sudden change of topic. "No one has ever asked me that before."

"Most people do not understand the true nature of music or the heart of the musician."

"I feel..." her words trailed off as she searched for a way to describe the sense of soaring elation when she lifted her voice in song. "I feel free. I feel that my existence becomes just a big bigger. The music flows around me and through me. I do not make the music. The music makes me."

Marc nodded.

"I see that in your eyes when you perform. You are a very complicated person, I

suspect."

"Aren't we all?" Elise thought of just how very complicated she had suddenly become with Dufarge in her life again.

"True. But not everyone's mystery is worth solving."

"And what if one does not wish to be 'solved'?"

"There is never really a danger of that. The best one can hope for is endless exploration."

The music of the waltz swelled to a joyous conclusion, and she felt something uncomfortably close to regret that this interesting conversation was at an end. Marc bowed to her, and she curtised to him as was proper.

She hesitated a moment. By rights, she should have made her way back through the crowd, nodding and smiling to various important acquaintances. The thought that Dufarge might be waiting for her as well formed a pit of dread in her stomach. She wanted to hang back, to find space to breathe and think in the shadows before plunging in again to the glittering revels and facing the man of her past life and present nightmares.

As if seeming to sense her reluctance, Marc gently took her by the hand and led her off to the side and down one of the smaller galleries that was empty except for various couples engaged in earnest conversation or negotiation of a more intimate kind.

"I should return," Elise said after a moment's silence between them, feeling uncomfortable under the intensity of his gaze, but for a wholly different reason than what she had felt under Dufarge's eyes.

"Do you wish to return to those men?"

"Life is not always a matter of what one wishes, *monsieur*. I choose to see it as a case of *noblesse oblige*. They have come to admire me. It is only gracious for me to return some attention to them."

Marc sighed, a frown appearing between his eyes.

"You do not approve, monsieur?"

"It is not for me to approve or disapprove, *mademoiselle*, but I am entitled to think that you deserve better."

"And if I do not share your opinion?" She thought sadly of all the reasons that this was exactly the life she deserved in all ways.

"I have seen your soul when you sing." He lowered his head to hers so that she had to strain to hear his words. "Your soul is pure."

His words quickened the beat of her heart. She took an unconscious step back from him. His statement seemed to echo the secret belief of her heart, even though reason reminded her that she was anything but pure. Society would agree with her reason, given her working-class background. And she would never be considered truly good or pure

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like other women if society ever found out about the terrible secrets she hid deep in her heart.

But here was this man who seemed to see her as she wanted to be—good and honest woman. That meant he saw past her defenses of cynicism and practicality. No, that would not do! Her defenses were her means of survival, and no one had the right to strip them away from her and put her battle-scarred heart at risk.

"I should get back," Elise repeated coolly.

To her surprise, he captured both her hands in his and raised them to his lips.

"I must see you again."

"I'm sure you shall, at some point."

Marc pulled her quickly, but gently, over to a curtained alcove before she could protest. He slipped his hands from hers and wrapped his arm around her waist, accompanied by the soft sigh and the crinkling, shushing sound of her gown being crushed against him.

She tensed, knowing what was going to come next—a hard, demanding kiss that was designed to leave her with no doubt as to his intentions. But she was surprised when that didn't happen.

Instead, his lips met hers in the softest of kisses. She could feel her lips melting against his as he gently pressed his mouth to hers over and over. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she was torn between wanting to enjoy his kisses and wanting to flee from this strange situation that threatened the orderly cynicism of her existence.

She swallowed hard as he brought one hand to caress the side of her jaw as he slowly, silently deepened the kiss. His fingers were warm against her skin, and the line they traced over her jaw and down her throat made her want to gasp with pleasure. It was as if each fingertip burned her with the lightest of touches, brushing against her skin just enough to awaken her nerves and send shivers through her body.

Clandestinely, Elise opened her eyes to look at Marc as he kissed her. His eyes were closed, his expression was a beguilingly handsome mix of intensity, desire and bliss. She let her own eyes drift closed again as she felt his tongue begin to tease her lips, asking them to part to let him in. Somewhere deep in the back of her mind, she rationalized that she was a bohemian artist, entitled to enjoy whatever pleasure she wanted, whenever she wanted, and with whomever she wanted. Therefore, there was nothing wrong in partaking of the kisses of this handsome, fascinating man, no matter how much he unsettled her, for he did not matter to her—he must never matter to her. She would never have to see him again if she so chose.

With a sigh, she relaxed in his embrace. He continued to kiss her gently, as if testing the pliancy of her lips against his desire. His arm about her waist tightened, pressing her to him so that she could feel the hard solidity of his body along hers. His fingers wandered over her throat, moving slowly as if to savor each moment of contact.

She felt a wave of arousal wash over her as his fingers lightly brushed over her bare shoulder, and she shuddered in his embrace with barely concealed desire as his fingertips traced the line of her bodice across her bosom. It was a daring caress, made all the more tantalizing by his refraining from slipping his fingers down her bodice to touch her breasts.

Though she was no stranger to the pleasures of the flesh, she felt a ravenous, enraptured curiosity to see just what it would be like to make love to this mysterious, intense man. How demanding would he be in bed? Would his kisses and caresses grow more feverish, more fierce as their passion spiraled and reserve unraveled? What would it be like to make love to a man with complete abandon?

She was beginning to feel dizzy from the kisses, a sweet drunkenness that slicked the lips of her sex with honey and made her breasts ache to be touched and suckled. Marc's lips traveled down the side of her neck, leaving a damp tingling trail behind each kiss. She couldn't help herself as she reached up and wrapped her arms around his head, digging her fingers into his thick, dark hair.

"I must see you again," he murmured, his voice vibrating against the skin of her throat. "Tell me when I may see you."

With great difficulty, she cleared her head of the desire-drenched fog that had enveloped it. Gently, she extricated herself from his embrace and smoothed down her dress and hair. She thought rapidly for a moment, weighing leverage and lust, reason and riot.

"I will be at the races at Longchamp on Tuesday," she said quickly, before she could think twice about her words. "Perhaps we shall meet there."

Marc looked at her long and hard, and she felt her composure teetering on the edge of something wild as his feral eyes seemed to devour not so much her body, but everything in her eyes that she sought to hide.

"Until Tuesday, then, mademoiselle."

Elise nodded to him and quickly walked away, back to the grand foyer where her throngs of thoughtless admirers and would-be lovers waited.

#### Chapter 2

The gaily-colored silk flags snapped in the spring winds over the elegant façade of Longchamp, the prestigious racecourse in the heart of the Bois de Bologne. Race day had been favored by perfect weather, with a brilliant blue sky and a sun that finally felt warm after the long months of winter.

Once again, society was gathered together, rested and recovered from the opera masquerade and eager to discuss the intrigues that had resulted from that evening. The ladies occupied themselves with the circulation of delicate innuendos while the gentlemen drank glasses of brandy and absinthe and discussed the merits of various horses.

Elise openly admitted that she was an avid fan of horseracing and ensconced herself at the center of a flock of like-minded admirers. She knew she held their undivided attention with her curvy little figure wrapped in a striking black-and-white striped gown—dubbed "*le zebre*" by Jean Worth, her favorite dressmaker.

Another woman of great fame and talent was in the elite grandstands as well, and Elise hurried over to pay her respects to Sarah Bernhardt. Like most Parisians, Elise had eagerly gone to the cinema a year earlier to watch Sarah in "Le Duel d'Hamlet," marveling at the two-minute film in which the great actress played the ill-fated Prince of Denmark in his famous duel with Laertes. All of Paris had marveled at the "talking" film, and she had been awed by the power of Sarah's performance, strong and vital even at the age of fifty-six.

She had met Sarah several years earlier, when the actress had honored her by coming to her dressing room after a performance and complimenting her on her singing. From that day on, she had come to look at Sarah as a mentor, an example of grace and graciousness. There was an unspoken bond that they both shared, as well. While neither of them ever said much of their humble beginnings, both women knew that they were

extremely fortunate to have escaped an existence of poverty and drudgery.

She approached Sarah and dropped a quick curtsey.

"Mademoiselle Bernhardt."

Sarah looked up from underneath the impossibly broad brim of her cyclamen pink velvet hat, the tall white feathers swaying gracefully as she moved.

"Ah, if it is not my little songbird." Sarah smiled and motioned for Elise to sit next to her. "Be careful not to cheer too loudly today, or else you will lose your voice."

"That is good advice. But I fear that I get so carried away with the excitement of the race that I forget everything, including advice."

"You are young, my dear, and that comes with the territory. But you will learn to take better care of yourself as you get older. The body and the voice are precious gifts, maltreated by youth and treasured by age when it is too late."

Elise nodded solemnly.

"It has been quite a while since I have seen you, little songbird." Sarah smiled indulgently at her. "Tell me, are you still with that textile magnate—what was his name?"

"Monsieur Gavronne? No, we parted ways quite amicably several months ago."

"Ah, I wish I had your talent for 'parting amicably," Sarah sighed. "But I fear my love of drama on the stage spills over far too often into my little...affairs. I suffer greatly, don't you know, every time I end one of these arrangements. I weep for days, sometimes."

"But then someone else comes along," Elise murmured, smiling.

"Oh, my dear, they always do!" Sarah laughed. "And there is always my bank account to comfort me. Yet, I do enjoy those days of indulgent self-pity when I wish I could be some simple bourgeois housewife, with a flat, some dear little children, and a husband who conducted his love affairs most discreetly."

"You would be most unhappy in that life."

"We both would be, my dear, for neither of us was bred for it."

Elise caught Sarah's eye, and something in the woman's clear, piercing gaze made her look down hastily.

"Life is a strange thing, I think," Sarah mused. "How many like me became scullery maids and whores because they were not born to easy circumstances? What unknown talents has the world been denied because these women had not the...the luck, I guess you could call it, that I have had."

Sarah gracefully tipped Elise's chin up with her forefinger and looked at her again.

"We are both lucky and both trapped," Sarah said. "Our bellies are full, and we

have men in our beds. But we are trapped that we will never lead pleasantly ordinary lives. Therefore, we must always seek to be extraordinary. Our talent is the one true freedom we have."

Elise clenched her jaw and nodded, calling up all her discipline not to let the tears prick in her eyes as this woman spoke with an eloquent precision about the very injustices that secretly nagged at her conscience.

"It is not fair." Elise said as she thought of her mother and of the women she had seen begging at the gates of the Longchamp racecourse that day. "It hurts to see all the suffering and to know I can do nothing about it."

"You can sing, my dear. That is what you can do."

"How will that change anything?"

"Every woman who achieves something great pulls the balance of our sex forward one more step. Someday, the world will see that all women are capable of great things."

"But that does not help those who suffer today."

"No, it does not," Sarah conceded. "But Rome was not built in a day. The cruelty of the world will not change with one heart's yearning for something better. It is only when a million hearts yearn for the same thing that we will see true change."

Elise sighed unhappily. Sarah chuckled and patted her hand.

"Enough philosophy. I just go on and on. Truly, I should write a book—a real rabble-rousing manifesto! But that will wait for another day. We are here for the races, are we not? Now go get back to all those young men who are scowling at me because I am monopolizing the pretty songbird."

With an affectionate smile, Elise curtsied to her mentor and went back to her seat, slipping easily back into the role of coquette and diva. Knowing she had an audience, Elise deliberately checked her reflection in a small, enameled compact that she carried in her white, lacy reticule. She smiled, satisfied that everything was perfect, from the kohl ringing her blue eyes to the way her broad-rimmed hat trimmed with white feathers and black-and-white stripped ribbons was flatteringly tilted on the loose pile of her golden curls.

She nodded and smiled sweetly to the eager young man who brought her a small glass of brandy.

"What horse takes your fancy, *mademoiselle*?" the young man asked breathlessly, as if awed at the chance to actually speak to her.

"Why, *Orpheus*, of course!" Elise trained her voice to a perfect, silvery laugh. "Win or lose, he must surely be a great horse for he bears the name of one of my favorite operatic characters."

"Then I shall bet my little all on Orpheus in your honor," the young man gushed.

She favored him with a warm smile, though she was completely distracted and irritated on the inside by a variety of worries and wondering. She had not seen Gustave Dufarge since the night of the masquerade, but she was now on the alert because of his reappearance in her life. His words at the ball weighed heavily on her mind, for she knew that he had it within his power to surround her with a scandal that would make life unbearable in the rarified hothouse of Parisian society.

A more pleasant topic occupying her thoughts with no less frequency than Dufarge was the constant wondering if Marc would really come to the races that day for the chance of seeing her. What was worse, and even more puzzling, was the thought of what to do if she did see him. Would she ignore him? Or would she speak to him—and if she did, would it be publicly or privately?

She had to admit to herself that she had thought more often than she liked about the lingering embrace they had shared at the opera masquerade. There was something different about him. Elise prided herself on her secret, cynical dislike of all the men who courted and admired her for their own self-serving reasons—from the fawning aristocrats, to the hypocritical bourgeoisie, to the laborers who called crude compliments to her at the stage door. But try as she might, she could not find a reason to dislike Marc. Well, she could not find a reason *yet*. But surely there would be one. The question was whether she could afford the time to find out.

"Would *mademoiselle* allow me to place her bet for her?" came an odiously familiar voice at her side.

Elise turned slightly to see that the eager young man had been supplanted by Dufarge. He touched the brim of his shiny, black silk top hat with his gloved fingertips. She could barely bring herself to nod in return.

"You are most kind, *monsieur*, but my wager is already taken care of," she replied coldly.

"Gambling is such a funny thing," Dufarge mused in a low voice, his left eye wandering from her face in a disturbing manner, as if to scan the crowds in the stands. "It is the only sport where a single choice is the difference between a life of ease and losing everything."

She bristled at the implied threat in his words and refused to look directly at him, staring instead resolutely out at the track. She pressed her lips together to keep the sharp, dangerous words on her tongue from spilling out.

"I hope *mademoiselle* knows it is best to be prudent in her choices, both on the track and off." Dufarge's sly smile gave her the sudden, nearly irresistible urge to slap him. Hard. Just like all the times he had slapped her for her impertinent words.

"Prudence in gambling is understanding that one cannot control fate and embracing the risk for what it is. I am quite comfortable in my choices."

"There are some games one should...choose...not to play," Dufarge snarled, taking hold of her arm with his lean, large-knuckled hand.

Duet of Desire

"There is no game that I fear, monsieur."

"You choose to run a grave risk, then."

"Then allow me to offer my services in protecting the *mademoiselle* from any...risk," broke in another familiar voice, though this one came once again as a welcome relief to Dufarge's offensive conversation.

"Monsieur le Marquis!" she exclaimed, more delight than she intended slipping into her voice. "I did not expect to see you here," she added more calmly, firmly squelching the irrational fluttering of her heart, which was more suited to an innocent school girl than a worldly diva.

"Did you not?" Marc replied with an amused little smile as he bowed to her. She felt flustered that she couldn't help smiling back at him.

"The horses are about to run," Dufarge said bluntly, breaking into their dialogue and releasing her arm with a petulant gesture.

She pointedly ignored him and rose up on the balls of her feet in their kid-leather slippers to get a better view from her box of the track.

"What horse carries your luck, *monsieur*?" she asked breathlessly to Marc, striving to convince herself that the wild beating of her heart was due to the excitement of the race and not because of the tall, handsome marquis at her side.

"Orpheus."

"What a coincidence, then! He has my wager as well."

"Then we have, as they say, a common cause."

"Doesn't that term usually belong to something a bit more noble than horse-racing?"

"The horse does not know its purpose is ignoble." Marc rose to his feet as well and craning his head in the same direction as Elise. "It exists only to run, to fly, to outstrip the others of its kind and soar with some kind of primeval greatness."

"You give our support of *Orpheus* such elegance and moral purpose," she teased, watching as the horses trotted to the starting gate, eagerness and energy evident in their every sinew. "But I confess to never giving a thought to those things when I placed my wager."

"You hoped to make money, yes?"

"But of course!"

Before Marc could reply, the starting trumpet sounded, and the gates were flung open.

"They're off!" she cried, feeling the rush of the race in her veins. This was something that was still exciting to her because it was for her alone, unlike sex, which

had become, if she was to be truly honest, disappointing, because what should have been beautiful was tainted with mercenary purpose on her side and degrading lasciviousness from her partner.

"Allez, Orpheus!" she called out with spirit, cheering as loudly as the men, knowing she was drawing stares of disapproval from the more reserved women in the crowd. She could hear Marc cheering as well, his laughs and shouts lusty and strong. She found herself enjoying the sheer spectacle of the muscles and hooves thundering by, the jockeys' silk jerseys gleaming in the sunlight.

"But that is not bad at all," she exclaimed when Orpheus crossed the finish line in second place. "He did very well."

"You did not win, *mademoiselle*." Dufarge rose and stepped in front of her, ignoring the tall marquis at her side.

"That is the game, *monsieur*."

"We must talk, Elise," Dufarge snarled, his hands clenched around the head of his ivory-topped walking stick.

"Not here, not now," she replied through gritted teeth, fighting the urge to scream and launch herself at Dufarge to claw at his detestable face. Her fear had become flavored by a healthy dose of anger, and another word from him would push her over the edge of her icy self-control.

"Perhaps you would care to walk with me to get some refreshment?" Marc interjected calmly, offering his arm to her. She looked up into his eyes and saw a reserved concern for her in them. Her breath caught in her throat at the strangest of sensations in her heart—a fragile, tentative trust that frightened her almost as much as it comforted her.

She, however, needed no second invitation to accept Marc's offer of escape from Dufarge and took his arm with a grateful smile. Without another word to Dufarge, they walked off. At first they headed towards the refreshment area, but she found that he was soon taking their steps in another direction. She thought for a moment about objecting, but raw curiosity made her keep her silence and simply go along with him.

Marc brought them to a small cluster of flowering apple trees near the *rond de présentation*, the show paddock for the horses during the awards ceremony after the races. Not many people were milling about there, the main paddock and racecourse holding the crowds. Only a few stable hands in muddy boots idled around, exchanging bits of gossip and sipping from hip flasks filled with a stinging, cheap liquor.

She stood under the canopy of pink-veined white flowers, wondering what he had brought her here to say, but she could wait. She would let him make the first move in what she was sure was the same tired game that all men eventually wanted to play with her.

"Elise," Marc pronounced her name slowly, almost reverently. "I want to be with you."

She was taken aback by the forthright quality of his words, and for some strange reason, she felt a little disappointed, tainting the relief she felt in escaping Dufarge and seeing Marc again. He was just like the others, she realized, but out of her need to survive, she would brazen it out and see what it got her.

"You are with me now, *monsieur*," she said gently.

"No." With a sudden fierceness he moved towards her and swept her up into his arms. "That night at the ball—I cannot stop thinking about you, and I want to be with you, in all ways. I want to know you, body, heart and soul."

She forced herself to laugh as she pulled out of his arms, carefully adjusting her precariously tilted hat.

"Ah, but such...intimate knowledge...comes with a price." She felt her jaw tighten as she spoke. This attack of nerves was most unlike her, she felt. How many times had she negotiated the same arrangement without a second thought or single feeling?

"Whatever it takes," Marc said between gritted teeth as his eyes devoured her. Elise felt as though she was a cynical gazelle facing down a single-minded lion.

"Really?" She laughed bitterly, hating this sordid judgment of her value, but knowing it had to be done. "That is a dangerous statement, *monsieur*. Tell me what you consider my charms to be worth, and I will tell you if you are right or ridiculous."

"Fifty thousand francs a month," Marc said abruptly, jamming his hands in the pockets of his trousers and pacing over the fragrant carpet of petals on the ground.

For a moment, she couldn't speak, so great was her surprise. That was well above what even her most generous lover had paid her, a mere twenty thousand francs for a month for using her body as he pleased. But fifty thousand francs for several months would provide her protection in more ways than one. In addition to helping to secure her future sure against the day when both her voice and body gave out, Marc's proposal would also provide her with a measure of security against Dufarge, for she believed that even Dufarge would not have the nerve to offend a marquis.

"And what does *monsieur* expect for such a princely sum?" she asked shakily, straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin.

"You." His reply was blunt, but still shook her to the core in a way she'd never felt before. "Your days, your nights. No other man shall touch you. You will be mine and mine alone."

She quirked an eyebrow. "That seems fair. Nothing else?"

He stared at her, but she refused to squirm uncomfortably under his look. This was a business deal, and she was acting as any good businesswoman would.

"Just you," he finally replied, his voice flat and hard.

"Just me," she repeated, studying him solemnly with a sudden rush of trepidation. "And the marquis yet again gets what he wants. What if there is something...that you

cannot have?"

"What do you mean?"

"N—never mind. We are agreed, monsieur."

"Marc. I want you to call me by my name."

"As you wish...Marc."

He looked at her searchingly, and Elise felt her emotional defenses go up. He took a step towards her, but she did not back away. She could not back away now. He had agreed to pay well for her presence, her sense of fairness demanded that she give it to him. But she secretly wondered what he truly wanted of her. No doubt there was desire in his eyes, but there was something else. She took a deep breath and calmed herself.

Without a word, he took her in his arms again and lowered his lips to hers. She forced her body to be soft and pliant in his embrace. It wasn't hard to surrender to his kisses, for they were as gentle and sweet as she had remembered them from the ball. With a small sigh, she opened her mouth to him, and his tongue slipped in, tangling with hers, sparking a bolt of desire that ran through her body like an electric shock.

She felt him pick her up off her feet and move her so that her back was against a tree. For a fleeting moment, she worried about her dress, but she forgot everything when his hand came up and cupped her breast, encased in layers of white silk. His thumb brushed the sensitive nub over and over until she felt a shivering warmth between her legs. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him deeper into their kiss, running her fingers through his hair and sending his hat flying to the ground.

He pressed her against the tree trunk with his body, and she felt his other hand slide down her side to rest on the curve of her hip. She purred deeply in her throat, thinking of all the pleasure to come in this man's bed, but she gasped in shock when she felt his hand grab bunches of her skirt and started to pull it up.

"What are you doing?" she gasped frantically against his lips.

"Making love to you." He moved to lick and nibble the spot just below her ear.

It was hard to think coherently with the man's tongue teasing her ear and his hand flicking at her nipple, but she knew that this was going too far in public.

"Here?" she squeaked, trying to suppress a moan of pleasure.

"Right here." Marc continued to hitch up her skirt so that his hand could now touch the silk of her stockings and the skin of her inner thigh.

"But we'll be seen!" Her protest was lost in the heat of his kiss.

"I don't care." He slipped his fingers between her legs to find her pussy.

Elise couldn't speak any more, for his hand had found the center of her pleasure, and she gasped as he tweaked and worried it, making her writhe. She tried to focus, to think of what she needed to do to please her new lover, but her thoughts were fuzzy

around the edges as she felt him slip his fingers into her sex, sliding in the hot honey that seeped from her slit.

She raked her teeth across her lower lip, her arms locked around his neck. His hand at her breast began to knead and pinch the tender flesh, sending shots of pleasure straight down to her hungry pussy. At that moment, she didn't care how wanton, how shocking this was. This man was consuming her just with his touch, with his burning eyes. She felt his hand slip from her sex and back around her waist, lifting her up off the ground.

Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around his waist and was rewarded with the crown of his cock pressing against her, seeking entrance. With a patience that made Elise ache even worse for him, he slowly slipped his cock into her waiting warmth. He seemed to fit inside her perfectly, completing her as if he were the missing puzzle piece to her body. His body pressed close to hers, pinning her back to the tree and toppling the hat from her head.

No longer were his kisses gentle and searching. She felt as if she were drowning in wave after wave of fierce, pounding kisses with a tongue that matched each thrust of his cock. Her hips bucked and ground wildly against his, and she could feel the snaps of her garters digging into the sensitive skin of her thighs. One of her stockings slipped loose and slid down her leg, and Marc took advantage of it to run his hand over her thigh, brushing his fingers over the back of her knee, inadvertently tickling her and forcing her to bite her lip to keep from squealing with pleasure.

In the far, fuzzy back of her mind, she realized that this was not how things were supposed to happen. She was supposed to be the seducer, practicing her manifold skills on a receptive male who would be far more concerned with his pleasure than hers, but this man, this new lover, seemed bent on driving her to the ultimate sensation.

His mouth mauled hers and traveled over her cheeks to her ears, flicking and tasting the sensitive curves with his tongue. Over and over, he plunged into her pussy, never faltering in holding her up, never neglecting to taste or touch a place that might bring a fresh wave of shivers over her as she abandoned all thought and sought the ultimate release, *la petite mort*, as it was called in polite circles.

When it finally came, Elise trembled as if she was being shaken forcibly. She clung weakly to Marc, who with a low moan reached his own climax within her. For a few minutes all she was aware of was the weight and breath of the man who held her pinned to the apple tree, and who had made such wild, unruly love to her in the most public of places, violating all her personal rules of decorum in dignity in conducting her love affairs. They shuddered together as their bodies slowly calmed down, and he gently lowered her to the ground.

With a shyness that was inexplicable in one as experienced as she was, she bent over and fixed her stockings and her skirt. When she straightened up, she saw that he had also rearranged his clothing back into place and was holding her hat in his hands. He placed it gently back on her hair, ducking under the brim to brush a tender kiss against

her lips.

"Will you always be this sudden?" Elise asked with a shy smile, feeling her cheeks still warm from lovemaking.

"There will never be a moment when I do not want you," Marc replied warmly, gently enfolding her in his arms. "And when I want you, not even Lucifer himself can stop me from tasting you."

But Elise pushed herself out of his embrace, feeling suddenly vulnerable in a whole new way to this commanding man.

"You have had your way this afternoon. But we must get back, or we shall be missed."

"You mean you shall be missed."

"Yes, that is exactly what I mean," she replied with a light laugh that sounded hollow even to her. "But it will be hard for you to be seen with the beautiful and popular opera diva if I am never seen."

Marc's dark eyes narrowed, but he said nothing, only nodding slightly. Coolly, he offered her his arm, and together they walked back to the grandstands as if nothing had happened.

They returned, and she was not ignorant of the curious stares that studied her slightly disheveled and flushed appearance. There was one onlooker whose gaze she dreaded, but by the same token, she knew that she had to deal with him sooner than later if she was ever to truly escape him.

As if on cue, Gustave Dufarge stalked through the crowd to stand before her. She could see anger in every line on his face, in the way he held his shoulders, in the depths of his off-center eyes. Instinctively, she shrank back slightly against Marc, who calmly rested his hand in the curve of her waist. It was just the lightest of touches, but it was somehow reassuring.

"Elise!" Dufarge snapped. "My private box. Now!"

"You will lower your voice, *monsieur*. And I will not accompany you anywhere."

"You will do as I say, you little slut," Dufarge hissed, taking a menacing step towards her until they stood toe-to-toe. "Do you think that I don't know what you were doing just now? That you come back here, dripping from your cunt with his—"

Dufarge didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, for the marquis' lean, strong hand had landed on his shoulder, the thumb pressed into the most sensitive part of his throat. She saw that Marc could easily slip his hand around the man's neck in a far more deadly grip.

"You will leave the lady be, *monsieur*," Marc said calmly. "Or next time, I shall not be so good-humored about your interference."

He released Dufarge with a sharp shove, forcing the man to take a stumbling step back.

"How fitting," Dufarge spat. "An aristocratic pig consorting with filth. You know what they say about pigs and shit—" "

This time, Marc made no pretense of hiding his intentions. He grabbed Dufarge by the throat and threw him to the ground.

"You'll take those words back, *monsieur*," Marc hissed. "No one speaks like that of my lady without tasting blood and bitter regret!"

He dropped onto one knee and pinned Dufarge to the ground, pulling his free arm back to administer a sound blow to the man.

"What lady?" Dufarge struggled under Marc's grip. "All I see is a little whore who used to—"

She threw herself at Marc, latching onto his arm and frantically pulling at him to bring him to his feet.

"No, no, please don't," she begged. "He is nothing. He is not worth it. Leave it be!"

Marc reluctantly rose to his feet and gave her a glance filled with incredulity. She felt miserable for she did not like to beg, and she did not want to shame him by denying him the opportunity to punish Dufarge, but Dufarge's words promised to do far more damage than any punches Marc could throw.

"As *mademoiselle* wishes," he said stiffly, straightening his clothing, staring at her with a pained, puzzled look on his face. "Perhaps we might—"

"Perhaps *monsieur* would be kind enough to escort me home?" she murmured, fighting the distraught tears that pricked in her eyes. "I suddenly do not feel so well."

"Of course."

Dufarge by this moment had regained his feet and glared at both of them, breathing hard, the expression on his face evidence of his laboring under some great emotion.

Elise and Marc turned to leave, and she could not help but wince as Dufarge called after her, "And so we play the game, Mademoiselle Montfort. And so we play the game."

### Chapter 3

Behind the door of her dressing room, Elise could barely hear the indefinable hubbub of the chaos surrounding the last minute preparations for a performance. Her own preparations were mostly silent in these last few moments before she stepped out on stage.

Her routine had begun with the usual vocal warm-ups earlier in the evening, accompanied by the rehearsal pianist in a small, private practice room set aside for the lead singers. She had hummed bars from the upcoming performance, snatches of old songs that she knew and odd little melodies of her own making to stay limber as the maids helped her on with her stiff, brocaded costume and beaded headdress.

As soon as she was dressed, she shooed the maids out of the room and sat quietly in front of her dressing table, looking at herself in the mirror. At first glance, she saw her almond-shaped blue eyes and long golden hair. She saw a straight little nose, delicate chin and heart-shaped lips. The longer she gazed at herself, though, the features of her face grew softer and less defined, a reflection of the way she withdrew into herself to prepare for the music.

In her head, the swells and arpeggios of the score jumbled together in a cacophonous medley, and note by note, the music expanded in her mind to permeate every inch of her body. Her fingers tingled, and her blood rushed through her veins, pulsing in time with a silent rhythm only she could hear.

Gone were any distractions of gossip, lovers, tragedy and scandal. Vanished were the memories of her past and the trivialities of her present. There was no Elise Montfort. There was only music.

A discreet knock came at the door, and she stood up, stretching her fingers and squaring her shoulders. Silently, she went to the door and stepped into the crazy,

kaleidoscope of pasteboard and gaslights backstage. The stagehands, dancers and other singers knew to leave her alone, respectfully stepping aside as she walked by them, her eyes focused on an unseen point ahead of her. She was already singing in her mind, and her voice was eager to join.

The orchestra struck up the opening chords of her aria, and she stepped out onto the stage. She had trained herself by this point not to squint at the momentary blinding light that shone up at her from the footlights. The thunderous applause that nearly drowned out the music meant nothing to her, for she had done nothing yet to deserve it.

Automatically reaching her mark on the stage, she took a deep breath and on cue, with the orchestra, launched into song.

Her beloved mentor Sarah Bernhardt was right. Here, on this stage, was true freedom. No one expected anything of her body or judged her for her background. Here, on the stage, the playing field was level, and she was free to achieve as much—if not more—than any man.

The rush of emotion and power from this familiar thought seemed to expand the range and purity of her voice, lending the tragic aria a magnificence that made the quieter, more sorrowful notes all the more poignant. Safe in her 'character,' she was free to surrender her precious control and pour all of her emotions into the music, feeling the tension in her heart ease as all that was hurtful was released through her voice.

The intricacies of the melody and the vocal acrobatics that the music demanded never failed to thrill her with their challenge. Tempo, volume and tone were her tools, and she was the master craftsman in that moment.

The aria came to an end, and she felt a spiritual elation that surpassed any bodily pleasure she had ever known. She felt light as air, powerful and beyond the pale of mortals for she had striven for heaven with her voice.

This time, Elise acknowledged the applause that almost deafened her. She knew she had earned it. She smiled with genuine happiness, unable to wear the mask of jaded bravura in such a moment of joy, as she curtsied repeatedly to the cries of "Encore!" and the shower of roses that fell on her from the balconies and were strewn onto the stage from the front row.

She glanced up at the exclusive boxes, acknowledging as was customary the distinguished members of the audience. Her smile froze as she saw Gustave Dufarge sitting in the prominent box next to the proscenium. It was too bright and too far for her to make out his expression, but she knew what his purpose was, and that was enough to chill her, despite the heat from the gaslights at the foot of the stage.

Quickly, she turned her eyes back to the audience, scanning them for any familiar face to anchor her back into the moment. In the second row, she saw Marc, standing and clapping enthusiastically, a broad smile on his face. She felt her tight smile soften, and she nodded discreetly to him, noticing how handsome he looked in his tuxedo and white gloves.

With a final curtsey, Elise hurried from the stage and rushed back to her dressing room. It would be a long performance for her that night, knowing that Dufarge was watching her. She shook her head and forced herself to focus again on the music. Nothing could happen until after the performance, and the music was all that mattered in that moment. Music was all that ever mattered, she reminded herself firmly, even though the image of Marc traitorously sprang to her mind's eye as she repeated the mantra and prepared for the next scene.

Three hours later, she sat on her divan, massaging her aching feet. She had shed the cumbersome costume, with its corset, scratchy stockings and tight shoes. She wore a soft white linen robe over her chemisette and loose petticoat. She could hear the calls for "Mademoiselle Montfort!" and "La Bella Diva!" outside her door, but she had given Beaumont strict instructions that no one was to be admitted to see her except for le Marquis de Drammond.

The door to her dressing room opened slightly, and Elise looked up from her tired toes to see Marc slide through the narrow opening, grinning like a schoolboy. She found his smile infectious and grinned back. He tripped slightly as others tried to cram in alongside him, but with great effort, he turned and put his shoulder into shutting the door and locking it.

"Your admirers are quite fanatical," Marc laughed, turning around.

"Rabid is more like it," Elise said wryly.

"Well, I could say something fatuous like, divinity is worthy of worship, but I won't trouble you with that. I'll simply say that you were, as always, wonderful."

"Come rub my feet and tell me that again."

"Are you so tired, my dear?"

"Exhausted. But is it not really from those horrid shoes. It is from the music."

Marc sat down next to her and took one of her feet in his hands and started to rub it gently.

"I saw Gustave Dufarge in the audience tonight," he said quietly.

She tensed up and paused, thinking desperately of how to reply.

"He was also standing outside your dressing room. Beaumont refused to let him in. He did not like that."

"Please, let us not speak of Dufarge." She reached forward and touching Marc's hand. "I saw him as well, but there is nothing to be done about it. He is the opera's patron now and entitled to come to every performance. But I do not wish to spoil my evening with thoughts of him."

He studied her a long moment, as if weighing her words. Then he nodded and resumed rubbing her feet, gently sliding the pad of his thumb up and down her soles.

"You said you have loved opera all your life." She seized on the first topic that came to mind to change the direction of their conversation. "How is that so? Most children cannot stand opera, and rightly so, for their little songs are much better for their little hearts."

"My mother was an opera singer." Marc smiled.

"Indeed!"

"Yes, she was the lead soprano for several seasons with the Opera di Roma. When she married my father, she retired, of course. But she never lost her love of music. I grew up listening to her sing. She tried to teach me, but I'm afraid I have not an ounce of musical talent. Only the ability to appreciate it."

"The son of a singer who cannot sing." Elise laughed softly.

He chuckled and tweaked her toes, leisurely sliding his hands up her calves to brush the backs of her knees.

"None of that, Mademoiselle Montfort," he scolded teasingly. "You'll strip away the rest of my mystique and grandeur if you keep up with those impertinent remarks."

"You don't have any false mystique or grandeur to strip away, monsieur."

"Then I am beguilingly mysterious to you?"

"No, not at all. But that is what makes such a pleasant change from most men who seek to impress me either with their power or their wealth, having nothing better to offer from their hearts."

Marc shook his head. "I loathe such pretentiousness. At a young age, I saw how narrow-minded the ranks of so-called high society could be. I saw how they looked down on my mother, simply because she had earned her living on the stage." He broke into a small chuckle. "Imagine my horror as a child when I discovered that I actually belonged to that same 'high society,' and that it was my father who had to explain what that meant to me. But from then on, I vowed that I would never judge a person by birth or bank account. I would look to see only what was in the heart and mind."

"How ironically noble of you. Yet, you are, as you said, a man who is used to getting what he wants. Is that not the hallmark of rank and those who enjoy it?"

Marc laughed and seized her, pulling her into his lap and kissing her playfully. Elise wound her arms around his neck and returned his kiss gently. It felt nice to be in this man's arms. It felt safe...which meant it was all the more dangerous.

"Such impertinent remarks, my darling. They have earned you an impertinent little reward."

"Oh?"

"Indeed."

Marc laid her back against the divan and moved to cradle one of her feet in his

hand and brought it to his lips. His tongue roved over her toes and caressed the arch of her foot, eliciting a soft moan of pleasure from her.

"Do you like that?"

She nodded, her eyes closed, wanting to focus on the sensation of his mouth and his tongue. She gasped when he began to suckle her toes as his free hand caressed her calf, stroking the back of her knee. Her clitoris throbbed to life, and she bucked gently to encourage him.

"Play with your breasts," he panted, moving his lips up her leg until they reached her inner thigh, licking and tasting her skin.

She obeyed, choking with sudden desire and rubbing her nipples in a circular motion until the soft peaks hardened through the chemisette. Impatiently, she pulled the garment down to bare her breasts and feel her fingers against her own skin.

As she toyed with her breasts, he worked roughly to pull off her petticoat and undergarments until she was naked from the waist down. His mouth descended on her aching nipples, worrying one breast, then the other, with his tongue and teeth as his fingers plunged into her. First with one finger, then two, he plundered her pussy, using his thumb to stroke her clitoris.

Little moans and cries fluttered from Elise's throat as he worshipped her breasts and drew designs on her belly with her own honey.

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"Please!"
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"Please what, Elise?"

"I need you."

"I thought you were tired."

"Please!"

Marc sat back on his heels, and she moved so that she could unbuckle his trousers. He tangled his fingers in her hair as his cock was released. She took it fully into her mouth, hungrily sucking it, determined to make him feel the same frenzied need that now consumed her. His musk was heady, and she inhaled deeply as she swirled her tongue around his shaft and grazed the crown with her teeth. From the way he hardened and his fingers tightened into fists in her hair, she could tell she was succeeding.

Suddenly, he grabbed her shoulders and raised her, taking her wet lips with his own and devouring her mouth, his tongue thrusting urgently into her.

He lay down on his back and pulled her on top of him. "Ride me. Show me your passion, Elise. Show me everything!"

She sank down onto his cock, feeling her insides stretch to accommodate him. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her bottom, just the slightest bit of pain to heighten the pleasure. She began to move, grinding her pussy against him as she rode him.

"Harder, Elise. Show me more. Say my name!"

"Marc," she moaned, her hands moving to her breasts and fondling the bared nipples. "Marc, Marc, Marc..."

"Louder!"

"Please, oh, Marc!"

"Harder!"

She slammed up and down on his cock, gasping for air as each stroke brought her closer to the edge. His hands brushed hers aside and began to squeeze and pinch her nipples, driving her into a state of utter madness.

"I want to hear you!"

She cried out, allowing each breath to become a wail of pleasure as his fingernails dug into her nipples and her swollen clitoris rubbed against the base of his cock. Finally, she could hold out no longer, and wildly, she bucked and ground herself into him until she fell apart from ecstasy. The throbbing was so intense that she almost didn't notice his own thrusts and climax until the end, when he pulled her down to lie on top of him.

"Come to supper with me?" Marc murmured, nibbling her ear. His words seemed to wake her from a lovely, peaceful dream, and she pulled herself back into her pragmatic reality.

"I wish I could, but if I was tired before, I am exhausted now, my dear, though in a very nice way. Remember, too, I have not gotten much sleep the past few nights, either."

"And why is that?"

"You should know, my dear. After all, it is your fault."

"You didn't object at the time," Marc chuckled wickedly.

"A diva should never have dark circles under her eyes," Elise said with mock severity. "It implies that she actually must work. Therefore, I must actually get some sleep tonight."

Marc gently rolled her back on the divan and kissed her brow tenderly.

"Then I will let my little diva sleep tonight. And I will pray that she sleeps well and has only good dreams."

She found her words were silenced by a wave of new and uncertain emotion. She could only smile and nod to him as he stood up and left her dressing room. She gazed at the door for a long while after he had left, lost in thoughts of how wonderful and considerate he was. Their nights together thus far had been filled with one ecstasy after another, but there had also been a sweetness to Marc's lovemaking that both warmed her and troubled her.

She worried that just as her body responded to his in an irresistible sexual orbit, soon her heart might be pulled in by the gravity of his tenderness for her. Worse yet, she didn't know what frightened her more, the fact that she was growing more vulnerable to this man or the fact that she wanted to be more vulnerable to him.

To be vulnerable was to be weak, and Elise knew how the world used weakness for its own amusement. No, she could not afford to be weak, not even with Marc, especially with Gustave Dufarge waiting for her in the shadows holding her dreadful secrets in the palm of his hand.

#### Chapter 4

"No, no, not another bite!" Elise exclaimed softly with a laugh. "Otherwise, I shall begin to think that you'd prefer me fat, like all the other singers."

"I should want you no matter what you looked like." Marc sipped his wine and contemplated her from across the table.

"You are either a hypocrite, then, or very strange, indeed." Elise leaned back against the rich brown leather of the seat.

"I am a man who knows his own mind and does not need the opinion of others."

"Excellent. The last thing I like is a suggestible man," she said with a laugh.

Despite her tart words, she felt very warm and relaxed. It had been a lovely dinner, and she felt extremely well rested and refreshed after having a night to herself where she did nothing but sleep. A note had come to her the morning following the performance, requesting that she join Marc for dinner that evening, and she had happily sent her acquiescence.

They had met in a secluded little restaurant in the Boulevard des Capucines behind the Opéra Garnier. Marc had arranged for them to be in a private booth with a semicircular leather seat and red velvet curtains that were held open for the moment by golden velvet cords. They were still in view of the other diners, but the booth afforded at least a modicum of quiet so they could enjoy a peaceful dinner. They had dined on *cailles aux sarcophages*, savory quail in golden pastry boats, and plenty of good Bordeaux wine had accompanied the food and the conversation.

Marc didn't reply to Elise's comment, but only took another sip of his wine.

She glanced around them and stifled a contented yawn. "I saw the Foubères when

we came in," she remarked casually. "I will have to make sure I stop and say hello when we leave."

"Must you?" he asked, a hint of irritation creeping into his voice.

"It is only polite that I do so. One must maintain *la politesse*, you know."

"No, I don't know," Marc replied, his dark skin flushing. He put his wineglass down on the table, tapping the base of the crystal glass irritably with his finger.

"Ah, but a marquis can afford to affront. A simple singer is not so lucky."

"You have me. You do not need luck."

"If I had a thousand francs for every man who has ever said that to me, I should be fat and happy by now."

"Would you still sing?"

She hesitated a moment, surprised by the question. However, she considered it carefully before answering.

"I believe I would."

At her soft response, he nodded, a smile suddenly lighting his face and the tension in his shoulders perceptibly relaxing. He motioned for her to move close to him on the seat, and with a gracious smile, she acquiesced, relieved that the dark cloud above him had disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

He slipped his arm about her waist and pressed a kiss to her ear. At that moment, the waiters appeared with dishes of dessert and glasses of port. She tried to pull away from Marc a little bit for the sake of propriety, but he simply began to kiss her ear as the dishes were set down in front of them.

Elise's heart raced as she felt the tantalizing conflict of knowing that such a public display was wrong, but somehow relishing the idea that these anonymous waiters were watching her lover kiss and lick her ear, moving with his lips and tongue down her throat to her bare shoulder. She let her eyes flutter closed as the warmth of arousal flooded her. She hear the clink of silverware being placed at the table even as she felt his hand come up from her waist to cup her breast, pinching her nipple lightly through the fabric of her black satin evening gown.

The promiscuousness of being mauled by her lover before the eyes of total strangers took her to a dizzying new height of desire she had never explored before. She was only dimly aware of the footsteps of the waiters receding, but she could still hear the general hum of conversation in the dining room and knew that the diners could see them if they happened to look over at the booth.

Marc's hand continued to roll her nipple through the fabric, his fingertip lightly scraping the fabric over the tip, each touch adding pitch to the fire that now raged between her legs. She didn't dare open her eyes, but she couldn't help but start to squirm, her hips tensing in anticipation. Suddenly, she felt something sweet touch her lips.

Duet of Desire

Instinctively, she opened them and felt his finger slid into her mouth. She tasted the sweet cream from the dessert on his finger and began to slowly, sensuously lick it off as if it was some other, more intimate delicacy that she was savoring.

He began to move his finger in and out of her mouth, playing the game of miming what they both now wanted as she sucked and licked his finger. He continued to dip it in the desert so that each touch of her tongue was intoxicatingly sweet to her. She thought she would go mad from the pressure building between her legs, the insane pleasure of public lovemaking now overriding every scruple of propriety.

Marc grew more brazen in his caresses. His lips suckled and nipped at her earlobe, his tongue lashing out to add to her frenzy. When he pulled down part of her bodice to expose her breast, she gasped with the wicked pleasure of it.

"Shhh." His breath tickled her ear. "Don't make a sound or else everyone will look over here."

His words forced her eyes to fly open, and indeed, she did see the surreptitious glances from various diners who couldn't help but be aware of what was going on in the exclusive booth, but equally, she couldn't help but arch her back as his hand traced circles around her bare breast, gradually zeroing in on her nipple again to tease and flick it. It would be a scandal in the morning, but at that moment, she couldn't care about anything except the breath-taking pleasure that she experienced at this man's hands.

Marc replaced the finger that was teasing her mouth with his lips, turning her so that she faced him. With his newly free hand, he pulled down the other side of her bodice so that now both breasts were exposed. He picked her up and moved her so that she straddled his lap. She weakly tried to turn so that at least her back was to the diners, but he firmly held her so that she was in profile, leaving her bare bosom to the view of anyone who happened to look over.

With one hand, he worried and rubbed one of her nipples, while his hot, wet mouth captured the other one in burning kisses, suckling it noisily as if hoping to draw the attention of everyone around them.

Elise felt her head fall back as she arched into his mouth. At that moment, she wouldn't have objected if he had stripped her naked and taken her on the table. She wanted him so badly, to feel his body bare and hot against hers. The wetness of her pussy now covered her inner thighs, and she thought she'd go mad if she couldn't be filled with him soon.

Still, patiently, he worked and suckled each of her breasts, with small sounds of pleasure reverberating in his throat. She clung to him wildly, her hips starting to rub against him to try and seek some kind of relief. She almost came when he smeared the frosting from the small cakes that had accompanied dessert over her breasts and proceeded to hungrily lick it off.

"You're torturing me," she panted, her voice hot and harsh in her throat.

"Torturing you?" Marc replied between licks. "I haven't even begun, Elise

#### Montfort."

As if to prove his point, he lowered her down to the seat of the bench, and she shivered as she felt the coolness of the leather against the bare skin of her back. He took her arms and raised them above her head so that she was completely open and vulnerable to him. He pulled her legs up into his lap and lifted the layers of black satin and petticoats to reveal her stockings, black lacy garter belt, and her exposed mound.

She lifted her head slightly as if to see what his intentions were—was he going to have sex with her right there on the bench? What was he going to do?

Catching her eyes, he smiled slyly and gently pushed her head back down. She stared up at the patterned white tin ceiling, her chest rising and falling with breathless anticipation. She strangled a moan in her throat as she felt his lips brushing kisses on the curls of her sex.

"Quiet, Elise, or else everyone will hear you and know what we are doing." Desire heated his voice making it thick and hard, his words vibrating against the lips of her slit.

She felt a wave of wickedness wash over her, and her hips squirmed, wanting more from his mouth. He obliged her unspoken wish and slipped his tongue between the folds, licking and sucking the tender flesh until she jumped with pleasure. She writhed with delight, struggling to stay silent, relishing the wantonness she felt.

She whimpered softly when she felt his mouth pull away and raised herself up on her elbows to see what was the matter, but instead, she saw he spread the lips of her pussy and take one of the tiny, cut-crystal glasses of port and tilt it so that it dribbled over her. The cool liquid felt slick against her sex, and she could hardly believe the sensations it aroused in her. The port trickled over her clitoris and run in rivulets down to her opening, teasing her like the faintest, softest fluttering of a tongue.

She stared at him, her bare chest heaving as he locked his eyes on her. The feral light in his gaze both frightened and aroused her beyond belief. Firmly, he took hold of her and laid her back down, pushing her arms up above her head again. she swallowed hard, waiting for him to release her from the pleasurable torment she felt.

His mouth descended on her pussy again, devouring her with a ferocity and abandon that made her feel weak and dizzy with ecstasy. His hands slid around her hips to cup her bottom, spreading the soft flesh and tickling her nether hole with his finger.

Between the unrelenting attentions of his hands and his mouth, Elise came, her pleasure bursting like brilliant, blinding white fireworks in the night sky. Her breathing was ragged, and shivers reverberated throughout her body. Dizzily, she saw Marc move his body into position over her, and his mouth covered hers. Hungrily, she lapped up his kisses, tasting her own tangy honey and the spicy, sweet port on his lips. His hands roamed over her breasts, caressing and kneading them, bringing her to another, smaller climax, like the aftershocks of an earthquake.

Shakily, she reached up and touched his face, her trembling fingers tracing the

line of his jaw, feeling the roughness of the stubble on his skin.

"You are a wicked lover," she murmured dazedly.

"No. I am a man."

"I have never met a man who does such things," she breathed, too lulled and lethargic from pleasure to start to pull her clothing back into place.

"You have never met a true man, then." He brushed kisses on her eyelids and cheeks. "For no true man could resist the beauty of your soul."

"And here I thought all you wanted was my body," she giggled softly, running her fingers through his hair and pulling him close against her.

"I want all of you."

Elise grew quiet and solemn, thinking about his words. There was truth and purpose in them, and it frightened her because she knew there were things about her he would not want...and things she could not give. She saw that he was watching her, as if gauging what was going through her mind. His expression darkened, and he sat up, adjusting his rumpled coat, vest and shirt back into place. Puzzled by yet another sudden turn of mood in her lover, she tried to follow suit, pulling her dress up over her breasts and smoothing down her skirt.

She sat up as well, making a futile attempt to pat her hair back into place. She couldn't help but notice the amused but surreptitious looks that were directed at her by the other people in the restaurant. She glanced at Marc, who had refilled his glass with port and was sipping it meditatively.

"Perhaps we should go someplace a bit more...private for our nightcap?" she suggested softly, trying to mask her discomfiture with a modicum of hauteur.

"By all means," Marc muttered, not looking at her. He gestured, and the maitre d' came running over. Marc ordered his carriage, his coat and the lady's cloak.

# Chapter 5

Head held high, Elise followed Marc through the restaurant to the door where the maitre d' draped her black velvet cloak around her shoulders and showered them both with obsequious compliments.

Marc's carriage waited outside the door for them. She stood in the shelter of the doorway of the restaurant as Marc spoke a few words to his coachman.

"S'il vous plait, mademoiselle."

Elise turned sharply at the hunger-inflected voice. A woman, not much older than herself, stood respectfully but hopefully a few feet down from her. She studied the grimy face, and her eyes were drawn to the woman's thin arms, barely covered by a stained, ragged shawl. One of the woman's skeletal hands clutched at the folds of her rough woolen skirts, and the other hand held tightly to a silent little girl at her side.

The little girl's eyes were wide at the sight of Elise, as if she beheld a creature from another world.

Elise's heart constricted painfully. Without a word, though her vision was slightly blurry from a sudden rush of tears, she strode purposefully over to the woman. As if knowing by instinct or perhaps experience, Elise reached for the secret pocket in the woman's skirts and emptied almost all of the contents of her coin purse into the linty, crumb-filled folds.

"For you and your *petite fille*," she said bluntly. She then took the woman's hand and put the rest of the coins into it.

"For the man who will ask for it," she added, meeting the woman's eyes.

For a long moment, the two women looked at each other. Neither said anything, nor were smiles exchanged—neither those of self-satisfied largesse nor of obsequious

gratitude. Reality was far grimmer than such fatuous gestures, and both women knew it.

The muted, restless clicking of horses' hooves roused Elise from her silent connection. She smiled gently at the little girl and touched her dirty cheek, then hurried back to Marc, who was standing by the open door of the carriage.

She greeted his surprised, delighted smile with a glare that dared him to comment, especially since she had just eschewed a social commitment to speak to the Foubères yet had gone out of her way to speak to an unknown beggar woman.

It was not that she dreaded empty compliment about her generosity from Marc. She knew his character better than that by this point. What she truly did not want were more penetrating question from him about her motives and their inextricable link to her past.

Silently, and she allowed Marc to hand her into his carriage. She still had to admire the luxury of it, and the good taste displayed by its owner. Every material was of top quality, from the leather of the seats to the highly polished brass knobs, but there was none of the gilt garishness that she was used to that other men of the world felt compelled to indulge in. As they rode silently back to her flat in the fashionable *marais*, she found herself brooding on the man across from her.

He switched periodically from staring resolutely out the window to gazing at her. She could not figure him out. Did he desire her or not? And even if he did desire her, did he like her? Or was she simply morally despicable to him because her body could be had for money? And which did she want—his desire or his approbation...or both?

"You are very quiet." She broke the heavy silence, trying to sound teasing.

"I did not realize that you wished for conversation." His eyes roved over her face.

"Well, it is the usual way of polite company to enjoy some subject of mutual interest." Elise laughed, feeling the strain of playing this ridiculous role with such a morose, mercurial man.

"Then speak of the opera," he said suddenly, leaning forward, his whole manner changed. "Speak of music and singing."

"Nothing simpler. "What would you like to know?"

He looked earnestly into her eyes, and she felt a nervous blush spread over her cheeks and down her throat.

"How did you discover you could sing?" he asked softly, capturing one of her hands, encased in a black lace glove, and gently caressing it.

"I believe that everybody can sing. Truly, I do. It is simply a matter of believing that one's voice can soar."

"But that does not answer my question, Elise. How did you learn to sing?"

She gave a quick little nervous laugh. "Oh, well, I have always been singing." She

chose her words carefully. "I can't remember a time when I did not sing, though I never had any music masters until I began in the chorus at the opera."

Marc's eyes narrowed, as if picking up on the very hesitancy she wished to hide.

"Tell me about yourself," he encouraged softly while his fingers stroked her hand. "Tell me where you come from, about your family."

She laughed, the sound harsh even on her own ears, dreading that this question would lead to Dufarge. "There is nothing to tell." The levity in her words was a forced cover for her lies. "Unlike you, *monsieur le marquis*, I come from quite a modest background, and as for my family, well, they are gone now, but just like everyone else, I loved them and despised them at the same time and often for the same reasons."

He chuckled, but the tension in his shoulders told her that he knew she was holding something back. She was immensely grateful that at that moment, the carriage pulled up in front of the door of her building in the *marais*. Quickly, she gathered her cloak and skirts about her, accepting the coachman's hand to help her down from the carriage. She took a quick breath of fresh night air, glancing up and down the narrow street with its quaint medieval buildings, with their small, shuttered windows, flat facades, and heavy iron gates that lead into quiet courtyards.

She brought Marc through one such gate into the courtyard of the building where she lived. They quickly crossed the cobblestone yard in silence, and she procured an old brass key from her now-empty reticule that opened the door to the foyer of the building. They climbed narrow, creaking wood stairs, with her full skirts nearly filling the stairwell. They followed the stairs up to the top floor, where they stopped in front of the dark green lacquered door to her flat.

She opened the door, and they entered. Moving in the darkness with the ease of familiarity, She went around turning up the gaslight bronze sconces on the wall, filling the room with warm, yellow light.

Marc stood in the center of the main room, slowly revolving as if to take in every detail of her modest flat. Elise found herself holding her breath, wondering what his judgment would be of the place where she lived and loved.

Finally, he nodded, turning and smiling warmly at her.

"Your flat is very nice." He made a sweeping gesture with one arm. "And just what I thought I would find. It is simple and elegant, and mercifully bereft of porcelain trinkets and occasional tables to trip over."

She laughed in pure relief.

"I fear my only true indulgence is in my closet." She smiled, making light of the real reason she kept her home simply furnished, contrary to the extravagance that was fashionable. To her way of thinking, there was very little point in working to amass money for the future and then spending it all on furnishing a flat where she spent so little time.

"A beautiful woman is a work of art that is always in progress," Marc teased, coming over to her and sweeping her into his arms. "She has a right to all that is lovely."

Elise smiled and boldly brushed her lips against his chin.

He returned the gesture, tenderly kissing her forehead. She found herself wishing that she could allow herself to feel something for this man, sensing that he could be the most amazing kind of lover if she would only risk her heart with him, but the defenses of experience held strong, and she forced herself to be content with enjoying his company and the pleasure of his love-making.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

He shook his head and gently cupped her cheek with his hand, caressing it with his thumb. She leaned into his hand, relishing the sweetness of the touch, something that was so unlike all her other lovers.

"Would you like to see the rest of the flat?"

"Certainly," Marc replied with a knowing chuckle that brought an unexpected blush to her cheeks. He firmly held one of her hands as she took him through the small corridor that led to her bedroom. Inside, she moved to turn up the gaslight, but he pulled her to him.

"No, no light." His lips brushed against hers. "Only darkness where you can be free."

Elise shuddered with anticipation as she felt his mouth descend on hers, his tongue sliding into her, twisting and tangling with hers in an erotic dance. She felt his hands tugging at the buttons that ran down the back of her dress, and as the dress loosened around her, she couldn't suppress the wave of arousal that ran through her veins. The dress soon pooled around her feet, and she stood before him in her corset, petticoats and stockings, her breasts bare.

Roughly, he pulled off his coat and kicked off his boots, then grabbed her into his arms again, kissing her fiercely, demanding the same intensity in response.

Elise's mind rolled from wave to wave of pleasure as her breasts rubbed against the fabric of his vest and shirt. Numbly, her own fingers fumbled with removing his clothing, even as he feverishly worked at unlacing her corset and petticoats. She trembled as her hands finally touched the bare skin of his chest, and with a soft sigh of delight, she ran them over the broad, firm expanse of his chest and shoulders, reveling in the contour of every muscle, the sense of effortless strength that emanated from him.

She brought her lips to his chest, kissing and licking random spots, purring in her throat as she nipped at his skin with her teeth as her fingers unbuckled his pants and forced them down. She barely noticed when the rest of her clothing fell away, and she was left with nothing on but her black satin garter belt and black silk stockings.

With a swift movement, Marc caught her tightly to him, their skin pressing together with a searing heat. She whimpered with desire as his hands slid down to her

buttocks, firmly cupping them and lifting her off her feet. She obliged his unspoken wish by wrapping her legs around his waist and locking her arms around his neck.

He kissed her long and hard as they stood together like an erotic statue in the darkness. He finally walked them over to her bed, gently lowering her down onto the soft white covers and lying down on top of her. She stretched out, long and languorous, sliding her silk-encased limbs along his legs, her hips rolling with anticipation.

She looked up at him, her eyes searching his face in the darkness. He propped up on his elbows above her, looking at her, a strange mix of tenderness, desire, and what she thought seemed like sadness in his eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but he pressed a finger to her lips to bid her to be silent, then he slipped that finger into her mouth.

Elise sucked and licked his finger, using all her skill to tantalize him with what her mouth could do. She closed her eyes and imagined that it was his cock that she was tasting, her throat growing tight with desire. She felt him shift over her, and a hiss of pleasure escaped her lips around his finger as his mouth closed on one of her nipples. His tongue was rough and demanding, rolling and flicking the pert nub to full, shivering, aching attention. She writhed as he grazed her nipple with his teeth, nipping so that pleasure was heightened by a sharp pinch of pain.

As he moved to minister to her other breast, she suckled his finger hungrily and let her arms slide down his back, caressing him, urging him to do more, to unleash his every desire on her.

She was taken by surprise when he suddenly grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head while searching for a piece of clothing that had fallen near the bed. Elise saw that he found his discarded cravat, and her eyes widened as he took it and bound her wrists together, securing them to the rails of her brass headboard.

"What are you doing?" she asked breathlessly, the anxiety evident in her voice. No one had ever dared to do this to her before, though she knew many men had a fetish for tying women up.

"I want you to surrender to me, Elise." He kissed a line down the inside of her extended arm. "I want you to trust me, to let go of everything and be who you truly are."

She felt a stab of panic as she instinctively knew that she could not bring herself to do that. On stage, yes. That was a different kind of freedom and a safe surrender. In the arms of a man? Never. It was too dangerous. She saw that Marc was searching her face for her answer. His eyes narrowed with both frustration and a kind of sadness as she saw he perceived her unspoken resistance.

"You are helpless now. You are at my mercy. I can do whatever I like to you, and all you can do is feel in response. You have no choice but to surrender to what you feel, now." He stroked the length of her body as he spoke, leaving a trail of desire everywhere he touched.

She shook from both shock and a sudden renewal of desire as he kissed the hollow of her throat and worked his way back down to her breasts. He suckled noisily at

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her breasts, alternating between his mouth and his hand. She bucked her hips up, hungry to be touched, fondled and filled by him. Being unable to use her arms and hands was a new sensation to her, and the vulnerability she felt was tantalizing, as if urging her to abandon her defenses and give in to the soaring combination of desire and emotion. She arched her back to press her breasts into his mouth, the sound of his lips sucking and biting her nipples filling her senses, as if reinforcing her helplessness. She couldn't stop him from kissing and sucking on her breasts even if she wanted to. She had no choice but to let him taste and tease her.

She cooed in pleasure as she felt his hands slide down her back, cupping her bottom and spreading the cheeks. He lifted her hips slightly up off the bed and straightened up. His forefinger slipped inside her sex, as if testing how wet and warm she was. She made a sound of frustration, too dazed with desire to form the actual words demanding that he fill her fully. She heard him chuckle at her impatience and looked up at him, feeling her chest rise and fall with wanton need. Her hands pulled against the binding that held them in place, and she threw her head back against the pillow at the incredible wave of arousal that the resistance of the binding awakened in her.

As if on cue, Marc entered her pussy with his cock and her nether entrance with his slicked forefinger. Elise cried out in rapture at this double penetration, arching her back and writhing in his strong grasp. With every movement, she could feel her arms pulling against the binding, trapping her in a torturous, erotic pleasure with no escape. As he thrust into her openings over and over, she felt something utterly wild rise up in her soul and take possession of her. With primal need, she tried to roll her hips against his, trying to rub her clitoris against him. As if to stoke the fire he had set in her body, he withdrew his finger from her and brought his hand down onto her sex with a light slap, the contact making her sting with pleasure.

"And again." He slapped her sex.

She groaned as she felt her clitoris start to throb with the roiling, building pressure of climax. She whimpered in complaint when he slipped his cock out of her and spread the lips of her sex with his fingers.

"Say you like it," he said, slapping the exposed flesh.

She cried out in pleasure as the stinging of the slap jolted the sensitive nub of her slit. He slapped it again, a little harder this time, and she thought she'd pass out from the bliss she felt.

"Do you want more?" Marc demanded hoarsely, his face dark and contorted with desire. "Say it, Elise!"

"M-more," she managed to say through her kiss-swollen lips.

He slapped her sex again, and her body jerked in ecstatic response. Never before had she been so helpless, so used, so vulnerable to a man's whim. Never before had a man taken such intense interest in her pleasure or driven her to the edge of madness with desire.

"P-please," she stammered, feeling her breath catch in her chest.

"You want me to finish it, don't you?" He leaned down and captured a nipple for a hard, wet suck. "You want to come with me slapping your pussy, your honey all over my fingers, but I'm not ready for you to do that yet. As I said, you're at my mercy." He proved his point by moving his mouth to her other breast and biting it lightly, his tongue flicking relentlessly at her nipple.

"Oh, God!" she cried out. "Please, please!"

He pulled his mouth away from her breasts and delivered several light, stinging slaps to her mound. She felt all the muscles in her body tighten, contracting with the most extraordinary climax she had ever felt. She couldn't even make a sound, for even her throat was constricted by pleasure.

She felt him enter her again with his cock, riding the waves of her orgasm, extending it with each thrust of his until she felt him release within her. He collapsed on top of her, gasping and tenderly kissing her cheeks and eyelids. She smiled in blissful contentment, closing her eyes to hide the wonder that she was sure shone in them.

She lay, lazy and languorous, under the shuddering weight of his body. He reached up and untied her hands, pulling them down and wrapping her arms around his neck. Elise shifted under him slightly, and he rolled to the side, relieving her of his weight. He pillowed his head upon her breast and wrapped a strong, possessive arm around her waist.

She gently stroked his shoulders, looking into the darkness of the room and wondering what she was doing, what this was all about. No man had ever made love to her like that before. Her whole body was limp and warm from pleasure.

"My darling," Marc murmured, his lips against her breast. He moved and pulled her into his arms so that her head now rested on his chest. Carefully, he held her to him as if she was some priceless treasure.

"Mmm?" she managed to reply, the sweet lethargy pulling her toward sleep like an inexorable ocean tide.

She vaguely heard him chuckle.

"Sleep well, my darling, my Elise."

And she gladly obeyed.

## Chapter 6

The first thing that called Elise back from dreaming was not the sunlight pouring into her room through the beige voile draperies. It was the subtle knock of her maid at her bedroom door, signaling the arrival of the breakfast tea. Yvette, her maid, would prepare later the special herbal tea she took regularly to prevent unwanted complications from her various liaisons.

She sat up part way, pulling the sheet up over her breasts.

"Come in, Yvette," she called out quietly, glancing down at the still-sleeping man beside her.

The young maid entered and softly crossed the room, setting the tea tray down on the simple wooden table next to the bed.

"Merci. Prepare breakfast and set it out on the table. We shall be there presently."

Yvette curtsied and scurried away. Elise reached over to pour out a cup of tea but found a thick, olive-skinned arm suddenly locked securely around her waist. He pulled her back down against the pillows and dropped lazy kisses on her lips.

"Well, good morning to you as well." She touched his face gently. "But do not begin, I beg you."

"And why not?" Marc retorted with a roguish grin, his cock pressing against her thigh as a further point in his argument.

She brushed her fingers teasingly against his shaft. "There are things to do today."

"Yes, indeed. Many things, and most of them involve making love to you."

He silenced any further protest with a rough kiss, pinning her down among the soft heaven of the feather pillows.

"Beautiful. So beautiful." His words were crooned against her neck as his hands began to tease her breasts, urging the nipples into swollen nubs with light flicking. "I could spend all day worshipping your breasts."

As if to prove his point, his mouth closed over her breast. He grazed his teeth over the mound and lightly bit her nipple until she had no choice but to writhe underneath him. Chuckling, he moved to her other breast, licking all around it but torturously avoiding the nipple while his hand worried the other wet, aching nub.

"Marc," Elise choked out. "Oh God, if you don't stop...oh, don't stop!"

She was drowning in pleasure yet again as he slipped his hardened, burning cock into her sex. He thrust in and out, then pulled all the way out, making her gasp with hunger.

"What? Why did you stop?"

"I want to see you in the sunlight, my darling."

He ripped the sheets off the bed and pulled her into his arms, carrying her over to the window.

"We'll be seen!" she squealed, shrinking back as he set her on her feet in front of the glass.

"Yes, if people look up, they will see us, but you are mine and no one else can have you, so what does it matter?"

"Because...because..." Her words dropped away as he turned her to face the window and covered her breasts with his hands, working at her nipples, pinching and rolling them.

"Why must you always be in control?" His voice rumbled hypnotically in her ear. "Why not surrender your mask and be who you are? With me, you can be free, my darling."

As he spoke, his hand slid down her belly until his fingers reached her pussy. He splayed open her lips and thumbed her clitoris. She felt dizzy from the jolts of pleasure and the obscene, shameful delight of being on display. If she just allowed him to do what he wanted, she wouldn't have to worry about anything. She could just enjoy her secret pleasure of being on view to the world, naked and free.

With a moan, she leaned against the window, her palms flat against the glass. As if he understood her unspoken surrender, he suddenly moved to press his body against hers, forcing her entire body against the window. Her breasts pillowed against the shockingly cool glass, and her breath made patterns of frost on it.

She felt his hands roaming over her ass, spreading the cheeks. His fingers dipped into her soaking slit and then slid into her rear entrance. A loud moan escaped her as his other hand came around to pinch and worry her clitoris.

"That's right, my darling. Sing out all that you feel."

She cried out as his fingers began to thrust in and out of her tightness, her breasts tingling from the cold and rubbing against the smoothness of the glass. She could hear the noises of everyday life in the street below, and she was filled with a wild, animalistic abandon at the freedom she felt.

Marc grasped her around her waist and turned her to face him, then lifted her up and swiftly impaled her on his swollen cock. He rode her fiercely, savaging her mouth with hungry kisses as her back slid on the thin sheen of sweat up and down the glass of the window.

Elise cried out as she shattered in his arms, even as his own thrusts emptied his seed into her. She trembled and felt weak, almost drained, yet she also felt a strange sense of peace as the throbbing of her climax ebbed.

Still holding her in his arms, Marc carried her back to the bed, where they collapsed in a spent, contented heap. He folded her in his arms and tenderly brushed kisses on her forehead.

"That was beautiful. You are beautiful, Elise."

"Really, we do need to dress and have breakfast now," she said with a little embarrassed laugh, not wanting to linger and talk about what had just happened. Her emotions felt too brittle and too vulnerable to stand up to any of his questions.

"We have all day for things like breakfast."

"Ah, that is where you are wrong, my dear." She extricated herself from his embrace. "I, unfortunately, have other engagements today that cannot be deferred."

As she turned her back to him, she could almost feel his frown.

"I have business to attend to at the opera today." She tried to sound completely at ease. "Then I am promised to have tea with my dear friend, the Vicomte de Berrac."

"Just tea?"

She turned around and laughed merrily.

"Indeed, just tea, oh, jealous one. I am a woman of my word, you know. Now that I am with you, I will be with no one else."

"I was hoping to spend the day with you at last." He watched her closely as she slid out of bed and wrapped herself in a filmy white silk negligee.

"I know, but I must work, my dear."

Marc nodded, though this time, his aspect was not as gloomy.

"Supper, then."

"That would be lovely. Only, perhaps we should dine in a bit more privacy?"

Marc shouted with laughter, his face creasing into pleasing lines. She couldn't help but also admire his lean, firm body as he sat with the sheet low around his waist,

hinting at just a brush of the dark hair that marked a trail down to his cock.

"Then I will call for you after your tea, and you will dine with me tonight." A sly smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"You may come collect me at the opera at six o'clock tonight, then." She wondered with delicious anticipation what heights of wickedness he would reach that night.

"The day shall be very long without you," Marc observed softly.

Elise glanced at him for a moment, then broke into a light laugh that she wasn't sure she meant.

"Oh, I dare say you'll survive," she teased.

\* \* \* \*

Elise always loved the ride from her flat to the Opéra Garnier. There was something about observing the hustle of Paris from the calmness of the interior of a carriage that both relaxed and rejuvenated her. This morning in particular, after her night with Marc, she felt an unassailable sense of well being as she snuggled against the soft leather seats of the carriage. She refused to allow herself to examine the reasons she felt so happy, knowing those reasons would have their roots in emotions forbidden to her, emotions such as love.

She adored watching the flower vendors with their buckets of bright blossoms, catching glimpses of the bakery windows with orderly rows of colorful, glazed pastries, and seeing the people with their lives written on their faces. She recognized those lives, the small measures of happiness, the worry, the careful counting of coins brought home each day to see if there was enough for both bread and rent. Yet, being apart from all of that inside a carriage kept her from feeling swept away by the enormity of the mass of human life and business in the city. It also kept painful memories at bay, memories of the years when she had been one of those tired, hungry faces that kept to the shadows even in the light of the morning sun. Her life was so very different now. She was different too, an alien creature existing in the balance between two worlds, knowing both, but belonging to neither.

The moment the carriage pulled up to the front steps of the opera house, Elise gathered up her private, socially heretical thoughts and donned the persona of the diva. The driver handed her down. She knew that she attracted a variety of looks from passersby as she ascended the steps of the opera house—gawking looks, admiring looks, envious looks, puzzled looks, but like a true diva, she knew it was far more important to ignore all those looks, to appear completely oblivious to anything so mundane as other people's interest in her. She was a diva, it was simply the order of things that she be observed and worshipped. And if they gossiped about her such as her escapades with Marc in the restaurant or at the racecourse, well, that was all part of the tragically divine comedy of her role.

"Beaumont!" she called out laughingly, enjoying the sound of her voice echoing

and bouncing off the marble foyer. "What is in store for me today, you evil little man?"

The portly, harried, white-haired manager scurried down the stairs from his office, the leather of his soles slapping against the steps.

"Ah, *ma belle mademoiselle*!" he exclaimed, clasping his podgy little hands together. "The day is brighter for your coming!"

"You are a wretched flatterer, Beaumont." She laughed, inclining her head regally so that the white ostrich plume in her broad-brimmed green silk hat gently swept in front of her face.

"But it really is very good that you have come, dear, dear *mademoiselle*," Beaumont puffed, offering his arm to her. "The entire cast and staff are assembled on stage, and there is a great announcement I wish to make. Its glory would have been sadly diminished by your absence—not that I would have dreamed of making such an important announcement without you here."

Head held high, a faint air of carefully cultivated, delicate disdain surrounding her, Elise walked into the red velvet and glittering gilt theater. Permitting Beaumont to escort her up on to the stage she was immediately greeted by, several of the supporting tenors rushing over to pay her compliments with varying degrees of skill. She impatiently waved them away, composing herself to receive with equanimity whatever ridiculous announcement the ridiculous Beaumont felt compelled to make.

Her resolution crumbled like a croissant in coffee when Beaumont returned to the stage with Gustave Dufarge at his side. Immediately, she felt Dufarge's gaze on her, and she lifted her eyes to meet it, easily cataloging it among the most pernicious of looks she was used to getting—lustful and covetous, but there was another element to it as well, one that was not so easily brushed aside. There was something dark and dangerous in his eyes, something that promised her suffering at his hands was not yet at an end. She felt cold: chilled in her heart from the evil that emanated from him and frozen in her actions by his menacing appearance in her glittering, make-believe kingdom of the opera house.

"Everyone, everyone, please, please!" Beaumont cried, clapping his hands. "If you would give your attention over here, no, here, yes, thank you! It is my great privilege, pleasure and honor to introduce Monsieur Gustave Dufarge, the Opéra Garnier's newest and most generous patron!"

There was a wave of mildly enthusiastic applause as the palpable belief ran through the crowd that a new patron with more money might mean raises for the cast and staff. Elise clapped politely as well, but without any evident emotion. Her gaze was level and deliberately cold as it met Dufarge's steady and calculating look. She even managed to feel some disdain for the obviousness of his tactics. If that was how he wanted to play the game, then so be it.

"Would you care to say a few words to your ardently grateful admirers?" Beaumont cooed to the tall, sharp-faced man.

"Indeed, that would not be amiss," Dufarge murmured and cleared his throat. It

was all that she could do to keep from rolling her eyes at the strained pretentiousness of his tone.

"Messieurs, mesdames, mesdemoiselles, it has long been my ambition to show my support and admiration for this noble enterprise," Dufarge said, his low, gravelly voice ill-suited to public speaking. "And now, I am eager to place all the means at my disposal toward ensuring the continuation of this magnificent tradition of opera in Paris. I have been to Vienna, I have been to Milano, I have been to Rome, and I must say that none of those operas can compare with the Opéra Garnier!"

Elise clapped again with all the others, but she privately disagreed with him quite vehemently. She had traveled to those very same operas as well, giving guest performances and enjoying yet others as a member of the audience. The secret part of her soul that was enraptured by and devoted to her art had judged each opera company without the prejudice of her own standing in Paris. The Opera di Roma in particular had struck her as quite magnificent and every bit the equal of Parisian opera. She forced herself to focus back on the odious Dufarge, for apparently, he was prattling on again. In an instant, she wished she hadn't been paying attention after all.

"And might I add, that among the other excellent inducements of the Opéra Garnier that tempted me into becoming a patron was the exquisite beauty and talent of your beloved diva, Mademoiselle Montfort. I look forward to using my newfound status in your wonderful community to gain a more intimate knowledge of all of Mademoiselle Montfort's charms."

There was a mixture of gasping, tittering and not-so-subtle murmurs that exploded behind her. She simply stood, frozen to the spot in utter shock. She could feel her cheeks burning, and a painful tingling in her jaw from clenching it too tightly. Her humiliation was only matched by her outrage. Yet there was no outlet for her at that moment. To say anything would be to insult the new patron of the opera and to put Beaumont in a most awkward and compromising position. To say nothing was to take the tacit insult and intimate that Dufarge was correct in his insinuation that she was no more than a high-priced whore.

Dufarge stepped forward to her, his dark eyes glittering, a wicked little smile playing on his lips. He reached out to take her hand, which she stiffly held out for him to kiss, but instead of kissing it, he yanked her to him and dipped her in his arms, planting a long, searching, violent kiss on her mouth.

For an awful moment, Elise thought she was going to throw up into his mouth. Her entire body stiffened in his grasp, and she had to fight the urge to scratch and claw at his face. When he stood her back up and swept her a mocking bow, she struggled between the desire to spit on him or to make a highly offensive gesture that most people would have been surprised to learn that she knew. Instead, she nodded frigidly to him, turned and left the stage, fleeing to the sanctity of her dressing room.

She was not quick enough, though to evade the heavy footsteps that followed her. Dufarge caught up to her in the quiet corridor that lead to her dressing room. He grabbed her and forced her back against the whitewashed wall.

"I am getting tired of you denying me," he snapped, putting his face close to hers.

"I am getting tired of you following me everywhere, asking for something that I will not do!" She struggled to free herself of his grip and turning her face away from him to avoid the stale, milky smell of his breath.

"You are mine, and I will have you back with me, where you belong." Dufarge's nostrils flared with anger. She gagged on the musky, unwashed smell of his fingers as he grabbed her chin.

"I am not yours, no matter what you or anyone else says." Panic flowed through her veins like quicksilver, and she prepared for one more escape attempt.

"No? Oh, that is right, you are the property of that...marquis," Dufarge spat. "How much is he paying you for your body, slut? So, you'll whore around with him because he's an aristocrat, but not with me? Am I still not good enough for you, even though I could probably buy his entire estate and this whole opera house without a second thought?"

"It is not about money, Gustave. Not with you. I left you because I hated you, and I hate you still!"

"Careful of those words. You will pay dearly for them when we are together again."

"Then I will never pay!" she gasped as she violently wrenched herself from his grasp and hurtled through the door to her dressing room.

Once inside, with the door securely locked, she collapsed in a heap of rich green silk onto the white damask divan and took great, panicked gulps of air. She stared blankly in front of her, oblivious to everything, from the passage of time to the lavish, frilled dressing table, the vases of roses and painted screens, or the full-length mirrors that hung on the walls. All she could see was the evil gleam in Dufarge's eyes as he brought his face to hers. It was too familiar of all the other times he had done so, with angry words and blows from his bony fists.

There was a click in the lock, and she turned with fearful eyes to watch the knob slowly turn. She released a breath when Raoul let himself in. She had forgotten than she had given him a key to her dressing room back in the days when they had enjoyed casual rendez-yous's in the intimate little room.

"Bon Dieu! It's only you!"

"You wound me with such words," Raoul mocked, though his eyes were concerned, and he locked the door behind him. "Would you rather I had lent my key to Dufarge?"

She felt a sick, cold chill wash over her at his words. Quickly, Raoul came over and sat down next to her, taking her gently in his arms and holding her.

"There, there, *ma petite*. Don't you worry. Between me and that broad-shouldered new paramour of yours, Dufarge will never get another chance to get close enough to smell your perfume."

"But he—" Elise started to say, shaking and clinging to Raoul's lapels.

"I know, he found you in the passage." He gave her a gentle hug. "I had only just arrived at the opera, and one of the ballet girls told me what had happened and that you were immured in your dressing room."

"Today was an unfortunately unavoidable incident," he added firmly. "But you handled yourself very well, from what I hear. Almost too well. I think everyone would have truly enjoyed seeing you slap him heartily. Pulling his hair would have done, too, I suppose."

She couldn't help but laugh weakly at his attempt to cheer her up.

"Dear Raoul, you do make me feel better," she sighed. "If only pulling his hair was the solution, but Gustave Dufarge is a far more pernicious and complicated problem."

"How so?"

"I...I wish I could tell you the full extent of it, but I cannot. You must simply trust me when I tell you that Dufarge has the upper hand at the moment for he knows certain things that could...that could..."

"That could damage your reputation?"

"Worse, I'm afraid."

"What? How could it be worse? Worse would be prison, and you'd have to murder someone to merit that—what is it?"

Elise felt her lips grow numb and cold at his innocent words that brought back too many memories of things that were tragic then and dangerous now.

"It is nothing." She forced a smile. "Suffice it to say that Dufarge is in a position to make things very, very difficult for me. But I am sure I will find a way out of this predicament."

"You are rather good at worming your way out of things," he chuckled.

"It's called diplomacy, *mon brave*, and there are excellent correspondence courses in it that I suggest you take."

"But to return to the subject of Dufarge, *ma petite*. I do have an interesting bit of information that might prove useful to you."

"Really? Do tell!"

"Well, from what I hear, Dufarge's business is largely selling patent medicines and other such quackery. What is truly interesting though is that there are rumors that all

of that business is just a front for an opium smuggling ring that he runs."

She mused for a long moment on Raoul's words, then nodded slowly.

"It sounds like a line of work he would be in. Too bad we cannot prove anything, for then we could right fire with fire, or rather, blackmail with blackmail."

"Is that it? Is he blackmailing you?"

"Not yet, but he will, once he comes to realize that I won't voluntarily return to him."

"Why were you with him to begin with?"

Elise paused, looking down at the pattern of gold and pink roses on the carpet.

"I was young, and the world was against me. Dufarge seemed to genuinely care for me, and I was hungry in both body and soul. I made the mistake of accepting his kindness, only to find out that there was no love in his heart for anyone but himself."

"Then why does he still pursue you?"

"Because I ran away. It may be me that he wants, but more likely, what he truly wants is to soothe his wounded pride." She looked up at her friend and smiled sadly, then patted his knee and assumed an air of determined cheerfulness.

"Now, let's talk of other things that are more interesting and more important, such as this rumor I am hearing about you and a certain mysterious young woman from the masquerade ball?"

"Now, *ma petite*, it is not like that," Raoul protested, though unable to help but grin broadly.

"And I was born yesterday," she retorted with a good-humored smile. "Tell me everything."

# Chapter 7

"Nom d'un nom!" Elise swore as she fussed about her dressing room. "Where have you put my gloves?"

The maid looked confused, then seemed to brighten as she remembered. "They are in the top drawer of your dressing cabinet, mademoiselle, where you left them this morning."

"Fils du chien! What with these wretched gloves and Yvette being tardy in bringing my gown, I am horribly late."

"But it is a lovely gown, mademoiselle," the maid said timidly. "Surely your beauty will win forgiveness for being a little late."

Elise paused and studied her reflection in the long mirror before her. She had to admit that her new gown from Jean Worth was stunning, the bright magenta silk draped and tucked in all the right places to accentuate her figure.

"I do not like being late." She still felt a bit peevish, thinking back on what a wretched day it had been all in all, despite her and Raoul's best efforts. Dufarge had dogged her footsteps wherever she went in the opera house and had even followed her and Raoul when they had stepped across the street to a café for tea. He had sat at a table across from them, positioning himself so that he could watch her, or at least watch her with his one good eye while the left one wandered over the crowd.

There was a discreet knock at the door, and one of the stagehands cautiously stuck his head inside when she snapped for whoever it was to come in.

"Mademoiselle, there is a carriage waiting for you outside," he said, then quickly withdrew and shut the door again.

"Sacre bleu!" Elise frantically gathered up her reticule and tripping over her gown

as the maid tried to drape a black velvet cloak around her shoulders. She flew through the corridors of the opera house, pausing to compose herself before stepping out the front doors.

"Going somewhere, Mademoiselle Montfort?" asked a horribly familiar voice by her side.

"Yes, and I am late, so you must excuse me, *monsieur*." She did not deign to look at Dufarge, who had suddenly appeared by her side and was leaning against one of the doors.

"I don't have to do anything of the sort," he said with a lazy smile, regarding her from under half-lidded eyes. "In fact, you could have no more important appointment than to dine with me tonight."

She turned to him, feeling a strange new dread in her heart despite her valiant declarations to Raoul earlier. This new mood of near-geniality in Dufarge was almost more frightening than his sour, angry demeanor. She took a deep breath and tried to sound as composed as she could.

"I am sorry, *monsieur*, but I have a prior dinner engagement that cannot be broken." She placed her gloved hand on the door handle.

To her horror, he closed his hand over hers and leaned his face close to hers, his rancid breath fanning her skin.

"I don't think you understand, *mademoiselle*. I am the opera's most important patron now, and therefore, your most important patron. Beaumont should have made that clear to you."

"Beaumont can go hang. Now unhand me and let me pass."

"Tut, tut! Such harsh words. I am sure Beaumont would not approve."

Suddenly, he yanked her into his arms and slid a hand down her throat until it came to rest on her breast.

"Let me make myself clear, Elise. My patronage of your beloved little opera can be taken away as easily as it was given, and there is only one person who can make sure I remain a happy and loyal patron, and there is only one way you can do that."

"Let go."

"I made that mistake once." Dufarge lowered his head to hers, his mouth open in anticipation of her tongue.

Her shove was quick and surprisingly strong, and it took him aback just enough to allow her to wriggle out of his grasp. She grabbed the door and flung it open, rushing down the shallow steps to the carriage that stood waiting for her. Through her tearblurred eyes, she thought she saw Marc's figure standing by the carriage, but she couldn't be sure. A hard hand closed painfully around her arm and arrested her flight.

"We are not finished." The menace in his threat was crystal clear to her.

She looked up at him, utter panic welling up in her throat.

"Yes, you are," said a calm voice by her side.

"This is not your concern, Drammond," Dufarge spat.

"I pay enough to make sure it is my concern." Marc's cool reply soothed her frayed nerves. "I'll thank you not to address me so informally, *monsieur*. Now let go of her."

"How noble!" Dufarge shook her by the arm so that he bobbled in her blurry vision. "Does he know that I was the first one to spread your legs? Does he know about all the times you sucked my cock and—"

Elise had closed her eyes, feeling a mix of mortification and dizziness as this nightmare unfolded around her. She opened her eyes just in time to see Marc's fist crash into Dufarge's jaw, cutting off his words. Marc grabbed her around the waist to keep her from being pulled down with Dufarge as the man stumbled back.

She hid her face against Marc's coat, for she was too afraid to look back at Dufarge. She felt Marc scoop her up in his arms and carry her to the carriage, where he gently placed her on the seat, gave an order to the coachman, and sat down next to her. But she felt her defenses were too fragile at that moment to bear the tender attack of his kindness, and she moved to the seat across from him.

She kept her eyes closed, fighting back the tears of shock and tumult. She felt the carriage lurch into motion and focused on the rhythmic clip clop of the horses' hooves against the pavement. Finally, when she thought she was composed enough, she opened her eyes and looked at Marc.

He was sitting, still and silent, regarding her with a mixture of pity and puzzlement.

"How long have you known Gustave Dufarge?" he asked finally.

The moment seemed oddly balanced, perched between two equally precarious paths, neither of which would bring peace or resolution. To hide yet again, to lie, would be to betray Marc in some indefinable way. To tell the truth would betray her years of discipline.

She was weary of being wary, but to tell Marc the whole truth would be to drive him away, and she suddenly couldn't bear the thought of that. He was waiting for an answer, though, and she didn't have the luxury of time to examine why she didn't want to be without his companionship.

"I lived with Gustave Dufarge for several years when I was much younger," she quietly admitted, choosing a half-measure of truth and a half-measure of omission.

There was an awkward moment of silence between them, punctuated by the monotonous sound of horses' hooves.

"That was eight years ago." She tried to break the strained quiet, feeling an overwhelming sense of emotional weariness.

"And eight years ago, Elise Montfort took the stage at the Opéra Garnier. And almost overnight, she became the sensation of all Paris."

"He never knew me as Elise Montfort," she replied defensively to the implicit accusation in his statement. "In case you hadn't noticed, Gustave is not exactly the operaloving type."

She felt a pinch of relief as he gave her a slight smile, but the ease was short-lived.

"And now that he has found you?"

"What do you think?"

"He wants you back, of course, even though you are with me." Marc's words were tight and his tone controlled.

"I won't do it," she finished feverishly. "But I'm afraid..."

"What are you afraid of?" He leaned forward, his voice full of quiet intensity. "Afraid that you'll go back?"

"No!" she firmly denied, feeling the familiar strangling sensation surround and close off the tap of her emotions. The instinct for survival surged up and asserted that she had already said more than enough. "It...simply complicates how I go about my business," she finished coolly, retreating weakly behind her defenses.

He regarded her for a long moment, as if he knew that she was hiding from him, and she bit her lip.

"And quite the business it is, Elise," he said at last.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"What of love? What of true passion? What price your soul? You have a measure of...financial freedom, but is your heart free as well? Your precious control imprisons you."

"Are you my confessor, now, monsieur?"

"No, not your confessor, but I am a man who loves you."

She laughed harshly, feeling too angry and bitter to care about how he might take her behavior.

"Love? That is the stuff of operas, and most of them end badly when love is involved. How many weeks has it been, *monsieur*? One? Two? It is hardly enough to decide upon liking, let alone love."

"I know you well enough."

She glared at him, her hands balled into tight fists in her lap.

"You still really know nothing of me." She thought with silent horror of all the things in her past that, if he knew of them, would make him turn from her with disgust. "And I pray you, do not try to guess at what you do not know."

"Why not?" he asked, taking her fists into his hands and gently prying her fingers loose.

"Because it will only end tragically, like an opera." She fought the constriction in her throat at the wild, adoring look in his eyes.

"You do not have to hide with me. You do not have to always be in control. You can trust me and be who you truly are."

His gentle tone nearly undoing her, and she drew her hands back from him. It was too much, it was too hard to keep the icy walls of her protective coldness from melting under the heat of his heart.

"I am what you see, *monsieur*," she said, her voice hot and harsh from all the feelings she repressed. "I am a whore, a diva, and a poor girl made good. I am all of that and none of that. Take it or leave it, but leave my heart in peace."

Marc abruptly leaned back against the seat and looked at her. She watched as his expression changed from gentle to something hard and heated.

"So be it," he murmured. "If that is how you want it."

Elise turned her head away from him, noticing that they were approaching the Bois de Bologne. It was growing darker, and the carriage was now full of shadows.

"A lovely dress you wear."

Marc's voice broke through her reverie and forced her to look at him again, but all she could see in the darkness were the line of his jaw and the gleam of his eyes.

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"Thank you."
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"Take it off."

"What? I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me, Elise. Take off your dress."

"Here? In the carriage? But people will see me!"

"Take it off, or I will remove it for you."

"You are mad, monsieur!"

"I told you to call me Marc," he replied evenly.

There was a long moment of tense silence as she weighed his command against her dignity.

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"Take your dress off. Slowly."
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"Why?"

"Because I want to see you," he said simply. "I am hungry for every inch of you, and I want to strip you of that icy, controlling façade you wear during the day."

Elise bit her lip and blinked back tears. She was angry with herself for being so emotional. She had put herself in this situation by taking Marc as her lover, and she had no one to blame but herself. She forced herself to bring her trembling fingers to the laces at the sides of her dress. What was wrong with her? She had stripped for lovers before—made quite a show of it, in fact, but in the darkness of this carriage, with a man who wanted what she could not give, she felt more vulnerable than she had in a long, long time.

"No, take the pins out of your hair, first," Marc suddenly ordered.

She swallowed hard, but obeyed quickly. *That was easy*. She removed the curved tortoise shell pins that held her hair up in a thick bun, long locks of curls tumbling down around her face and brushing her bare shoulders. She heard a soft sigh come from Marc, and her heart jumped. It was as if his very breath filled the carriage with his desire.

Shakily, she went back to unlacing the bodice of her dress, struggling with the recalcitrant knots. Finally, the lacings gave way, and the bodice fell open at the back. She pulled it off, revealing her corset and the off-the-shoulder chemisette that covered her breasts. She glanced over at Marc, and his very stillness was unnerving, like he was some kind of jungle hunter, lying in wait for his prey.

Somewhere, deep down in her soul, she felt a spark of wayward desire. Once again, he was making her show herself, expose her body not just to him, but to anybody who happened to glance into the carriage. The thought sent an abrupt jolt of desire down her belly, pooling in molten heat between her legs.

As she worked the fastening of her skirt and slipped it off, she railed inwardly against the treacherous desire that this man's game was brewing in her body. Quickly, she removed her silk slippers and outer petticoats, so that all that remained was the corset, her chemisette, a flimsy under-petticoat and her stockings.

She leaned back, feeling the cool leather of the seat against her warm skin, gasping as another wave of wanton desire washed over her. She could barely see Marc's eyes, but knew they were fixed on her, and from the tension in his casual posture, she knew that she was not alone in her desire.

She turned slightly as she unlaced the corset, tossing it aside once it was undone. She glanced out the window and saw that they had emerged on the other side of the Bois de Bologne and were now rolling through the streets of one of the picturesque little villages that dotted the periphery of Paris. People in the streets were surreptitiously peeking into the carriage, but only able to catch the most fleeting glimpse of flesh. The thought made her burn with arousal all over her body.

She then determined to torture Marc as he had tortured her. Dignity be damned! She wanted him, and his little game had only made her want him more—almost as much as he wanted her.

Slowly, she lifted the sheer linen petticoat just high enough to reveal the snaps of her garter belt and unhooked her stockings. With a devilish little smile, she slipped them off her legs, casting them on to the billowy pile of silk and linen that filled the carriage with the light scent of her lavender perfume. She then brought her hands to her own breasts, caressing them gently and thumbing the nipples through the fabric to an erectness that made her writhe with pleasure. With aching slowness, she pulled down the chemisette to bare her torso to him.

She was conscious now only of the pounding of her heart and the need to be completely naked. She hurried to pull off what remained, yanking down her petticoat and unfastening her garter belt. Finally, she was completely nude, her chest rising and falling with desire as she locked gazes with Marc across the darkened carriage. She was conscious of a strange feeling of freedom, of being completely unrestrained and unfettered by anything. It was both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

"Elise," he called out raggedly, holding out his hand to her, but remaining otherwise still.

She took his hand and found herself pulled into his arms, straddling his lap. She could feel ever fiber of the fabric of his clothing against her skin, and she surrendered her lips to his in a demanding, all-consuming kiss. His tongue invaded her mouth, undulating and dancing with hers as his hands roamed tenderly over her back, coming down to cup her buttocks. With his hands, he lifted her up so that his mouth could feast on her breasts, suckling, nibbling and nipping at the tender flesh.

She dug her fingers into his shoulders, moaning with need. One hand slipped from her bottom, and fingers plundered the heated moistness of her pussy, his thumb pressing against her clitoris over and over. Her cries of pleasure grew louder and more abandoned.

"They can see you. And if you keep going like that, they will hear you, too."

His words were like matches to dynamite. She writhed against him, trying to rub herself to satisfaction, but wanting to be filled with him. She heard the rustling of fabric and felt him lower her onto something warm and hard. She threw her head back with a cry of ecstasy as he brought her down so that his cock filled her completely.

Elise began to move, clenching the walls of her sex around his cock and riding him as he hungrily kissed her breasts and shoulders. The rocking of their bodies mimicked the rocking of the carriage as it sped through the streets of the village and soon into quieter lanes lined with large mansions.

She twined her arms around Marc's neck, kissing him fiercely as he possessively grasped her waist and moved her up and down on his cock. The sound of their kisses and their breath was all that she could hear. As Marc held her tightly yet tenderly, she felt a tremendous longing rise up in her heart, a different kind of desire. It was a need to connect with someone, to not be so alone in the world, a need that no matter how much she tried to deny it continued to assert itself ever since she had met him.

But she forced it back deep inside her secret soul, reminding herself to simply

enjoy this moment for the pleasure it gave her. She rubbed her cheek against his, feeling the roughness of his stubble against her smooth skin. He began to move her more forcefully and urgently. She willingly obliged, rolling her hips against his, grinding her pussy on his cock as her clitoris rubbed against him.

He feverishly kissed the hollow of her throat, and she purred with pleasure, the sound in her throat vibrating against his lips. Then, she gasped as she felt his fingers snake between their bodies to pinch and worry her clitoris. The sensations were almost unbearable, and she clung to him desperately as she felt her ecstasy blossom in brilliant colors before her eyes.

His rough breathing and hot skin filled her senses, and she moaned loudly as he thrust up into her, releasing himself. Spent, they sat entwined as the carriage slowed, entering a long, horseshoe-shaped drive.

"Elise, oh, my Elise," Marc gasped, nuzzling his lips against the throbbing pulse in her throat.

She found she could not speak. Too many of her emotions were still too near the surface, and the freedom of being naked in his arms still too shocking to her system. Instead, she buried her head against his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his neck. She felt him move, then the softness of velvet brushed her skin. Looking up, she realized he had wrapped her in her cloak.

"Oh....my," she managed to croak with a crooked smile. "This is quite an entrance for me."

He laughed and arranged himself, then took her in his arms again. "And never have you been more beautiful," he said, kissing her tenderly. "You can be assured of the absolute discretion of my servants."

Elise smiled ruefully, then laughed self-deprecatingly. "You are giving me reason to deserve my reputation," she chided him teasingly.

When the carriage stopped his expression was inscrutable, and he remained silent. A footman hurried up to open the carriage door, and he stepped out first, reaching into the carriage to take her into his arms.

"You don't have to carry me, you know."

"I know I don't have to. I want to, though."

Elise looked up at the old manor house before her, pleased with its worn but dignified stone façade. Leafy ivy clung to the cracks in the mortar, and thick-paned leaded glass windows were warm and glowing with the light inside. She decided that she liked this charming old house, with the high stone walls around the small property and quaint garden paths lined with the first spring blossoms. It was not at all what she expected Marc's house to be like.

"I thought you would live in your family's *hôtel particulier* in town, not on a simple country manor," she remarked as Marc carried her over the threshold, a servant

pulling open the heavy, aged oak doors.

"Me? I like the peace and quiet of living out here, and I would prove nothing worthwhile to the unworthy by living in town just for the sake of appearances."

She smiled silently and looked around her. The house was not large, judging by the relatively modest-sized foyer, but everything about it bespoke old elegance, from the marble tiles on the floor, to the polished oak banister on the wide, curved staircase. A mirror in an ornately wrought iron frame caught the reflection of the two of them, his tall, strong body standing in the middle of the foyer with his arms clasped around her black velvet-clad figure, her bare feet peeking out from the hem of the cloak.

"You can put me down now," she said gently, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Like hell. We're going upstairs."

"What about dinner?"

"Dinner be damned," he said with a grin. "I'm going to have my fill of you, first!"

Elise had to admit to herself that Marc was more appetizing than any dish she could think of.

### Chapter 8

Elise's opinion changed somewhat several hours later. Lying naked next to Marc in the large, mahogany four poster bed in his room, she began to think of things that were equally as appetizing as her lover; things like smoked ham, hard-boiled eggs, and rich butter spread on thick, fluffy slices of bread.

She rolled over onto her stomach and stared at he until Marc eyes opened, showing that he was awake.

"I'm hungry."

"Again?" he asked with a sleepy laugh, looking at her with a tender light in his eyes.

"No, for food." She poked him on the nose with her forefinger. "Cold meats, tea, cheese, chocolate, that sort of thing."

He propped himself up against the pillows, and the sight of his lean, muscled chest caused her to have a moment of severe indecision. Then, her stomach rumbled most inelegantly.

"Food," she ordered. "Now."

\* \* \* \*

She was trying her best not to giggle, but it was hard, given the situation. They were sneaking around in Marc's own house, trying not to wake the servants, who had long retired before the clock had struck midnight. She was wearing Marc's white shirt, which came down to her thighs, and he, only his trousers.

As they made their way through the house, Elise caught shadowy glimpses of oil paintings, carved wooden tables, and tall bouquets of freshly cut flowers that were in blue and white Chinese porcelain vases. She silently admired the lack of ostentation and

admired her lover even more for choosing to live in a house where a few things of quality meant more than an entire mansion full of trophies of wealth. So unlike Dufarge, with his unending quest to acquire the trappings of status, but she pushed those thoughts away. They were for the morning, for the day, not for midnight with her lover.

They reached the kitchen, and she watched as Marc placed the hurricane lamp he was holding on the large, thick oak table in the center of the room. He started to move to the wall where a brass sconce held a painted porcelain gas lamp.

"No, don't," Elise said quickly.

"No light?"

"It's more fun in the dark." The strangely intense look in his eyes made her feel like a hot blush was rising in her cheeks causing her to quickly look down at the table.

"This table," she announced softly. "It reminds me of..."

She caught herself just in time and simply smiled. As far as she was concerned, he had no need to know what it reminded her of, and why on earth was she remembering that now? She spent every day of her life trying to forget.

"Of what?" he prompted, just as she had feared he would.

"It reminds me of the pleasant times when I've stayed with friends in the countryside," she lied, marveling at how easily she was able to make it sound like the truth.

"A kitchen table?"

"This is not the first late night foray I've made into a kitchen, my dear. Though, I was a bit better dressed for such an adventure."

He smiled, but she could see in his eyes that he was thinking very hard on her words. She felt the need to distract him from thinking too much, though.

"Oy, 'ere now!" she said, adopting the rough accent of a rustic and playfully rapping the table. "The service in this 'ere tavern is terrible!"

She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw him smile and shake his head, then start to pull various platters and bundles from the larder and pantry.

Her relief was short-lived, however, for as soon as he had laid out a casual buffet that would have fed a small army, he turned to her.

"Elise, you are still hiding from me," he said quietly. "And it is not just the matter of Dufarge."

She dropped the piece of bread she had just covered with butter and slices of pungent, soft cheese. The grey kitchen cat, who lived for just such moments, uncurled itself from the comfort of the cook's rocking chair by the fire and made a dash for the unexpected manna, but she was past caring. She felt that all the color must have drained from her face, for her lips felt cold, and her cheeks tingled numbly.

"W-what do you mean?" she stammered, feeling the familiar clicking into place of her instincts on how to deal with situations like this—deny, defend, denigrate. It was as if her mind were warming up, just as she limbered up her voice before a performance, ready to counter whatever accusation, mistake or fault might be laid at her doorstep. A lifetime of lovers had made her an agile, if reluctant, verbal athlete in the game of *liaisons amoureuses*.

Marc took a step towards her, the smooth muscles of his chest rising and falling with the intensity of his emotion. "Since the moment I met you, I have felt that there is something about you, something that you are keeping from me. Perhaps it is not just me, perhaps it is something you are keeping from the world, but I want you to tell me. You can trust me."

"Just because I trust you does not mean I have to entrust my secrets to you. Besides, I have said enough tonight of things I do not wish to speak of. And perhaps there is nothing more to me than what you have seen."

"That is a lie, and you know it."

She flinched at the anger in his voice.

"I have seen you sing. I have seen your honesty on the stage. Why can you not be honest when you are not performing?"

"I am always performing. And that innocence you seem to adore in me when I sing is simply part of that performance. I know what people want to see, and I give it to them."

"But what about what you want?" He took another step towards her.

Elise held her ground and lifted her chin.

"What I want, *monsieur* is to live my life without the endless questioning of my choices," she said coldly, though she felt like crying on the inside. "If I seem to be a certain way, or to be performing all the time, it is because I choose it. People seem to forget that I am a free agent and can do as I please."

He said nothing, frowning darkly.

"I am sorry that is not the answer you want to hear. But it is the only answer I have to give."

"That is another lie."

"Perhaps it is, perhaps it isn't. But perhaps it is that I am not prepared to give any other answer, for it has never been asked of me."

He remained silent, and she fumed on the inside, torn between anguish and anger. She decided to go on the attack while they were putting it all out there.

"Perhaps I do not wish to give an answer to a man whose moods are as unpredictable as they are inexplicable."

She saw that her icy words had hit their mark. He clenched his jaw a little tighter, and she pressed on.

"You are an amazing lover and a gentleman one moment, and the next, you berate me for no reason!"

"I have every reason, Elise," Marc spat. "I told you who I am, how I abhor the falsity of social pretense. When you play the diva and the coquette, you wear an ugly mask over your heart, and it pains me to see true beauty and goodness hidden like that. You smile at your admirers and go to tea, and you write little polite letters about nothing to people who would be nobody were it not for their wealth and position."

She stood perfectly still, feeling as if she had opened the door of a furnace and was being blasted with a searing, raging heat.

"I have seen glimpses of the heart you try so hard to hide. I know it beats within you, I can feel it. Then you push me away again and again. I want you to know happiness, comfort, freedom and peace, and I watch in agony every time whatever secret you harbor strangles your emotions until they lie silent as if dead. I care for you too much to stand by and let you suffer so. Can you blame me for trying to help you?"

Elise shook and clutched at the kitchen table for support.

"I do not want or need your help, *monsieur*," she said faintly, feeling as if every word cost her heart a drop of blood.

Marc watched her for a long moment, then sighed, the tight line of his shoulders softening imperceptibly, his expression reflecting disappointment. She saw the slight retrenching in his attack, and she felt a pang of inexplicable regret, but she pulled herself together and summoned the bravado that had been her constant and sometimes only companion.

"Come, let us not argue at midnight in a kitchen over things that are not..." her words trailed off, as she was unsure what to say. "Besides, I am hardly dressed for battle," she picked up again, trying to summon a cheeky smile.

Her efforts were rewarded by a slow, sad smile from her lover, and she saw his expression change again as his eyes roved appreciatively over her scantily-clad figure.

"I would say that you are armed to the teeth, *mademoiselle*. Any red-blooded army would surrender at the sight of you."

She laughed, feeling a weight roll off her shoulders that she had managed to temper the man's mercurial mood, while still protecting that which she sought to hide.

"Waving the white flag already?" she teased. "The sons of France are weak-kneed, indeed!"

"Just you eat something, and then I'll show you exactly what the sons of France are capable of," he said with a laugh, reaching out to cup her cheek with his hand.

"Mmmph," she managed around a mouth full of food.

"Indeed," Marc replied with a knowing smile.

\* \* \* \*

Elise awakened to the sound of birds chirping delightedly in the arms of the early honeysuckle. She stretched lazily out beside her lover and smiled complacently, recalling the impassioned, adventurous love-making of the night before. The sons of France were full of surprises, she had found.

She looked over at the long, lean figure of the man beside her, smiling indulgently as his chest rose and fell with the easy, regular breath of sleep, but she herself could not go back to sleep, even though her body felt deliciously warm and worn-out.

Her mind soon began to cogitate over the scene in the kitchen the night before. Her smile faded, and she found herself frowning. She moved restlessly, feeling the smoothness of the heavy linen sheets against her skin. Her body was now as restless as her thoughts, and a tight bud of panic was threatening to make an ugly blossom in her heart.

As noiselessly as she could, she slipped out of bed and padded softly over to a tall, leather wingback chair on which lay a brown silk dressing gown. She guessed it was Marc's, and her guess was proved right by the way it dwarfed her, with the sleeves hanging well below her hands, and the hem brushing the ground, but she didn't dare dress fully. That was a noisy business and required aid. With an amused glance at the neat pile of her clothing—collected from the carriage and brought in by the servants the night before—she slipped quietly from the room.

Making her way back through the charming but unfamiliar corridors and rooms of the old house, she thought she heard the chatter of voices and clink of china from the kitchen. She knew her time alone would be limited, but she felt compelled to seek some solitude in order to sort out her thoughts.

She found her way to a pair of glass-paned doors that opened up onto a quaint garden, with bowers of eglantine, and the first spring hyacinths pushing out of the ground. She looked around the garden, sighing with a quiet content at being in such an Eden, even if it were only for a few moments. Private gardens were still a luxury to her, as living in the heart of the city left little space for greenery in her life, other than the boisterous, crowded public gardens. She thought of all the times when she was younger that she, with all the other beggars and laborers, would wistfully look at the Tuileries and the Jardin du Luxembourg through the iron grates of the fences. It wasn't that the poor weren't allowed in the public gardens, but the police with their threats of loitering and the bourgeoisie with their disdainful silence had made it clear that the poor were not welcome.

Elise bit her lip at the memory of the injustice of keeping at arm's length those who needed the healing touch of nature the most, even as her eyes hungrily drank in the beauty of the old weeping willow with a swing hanging from its branches, a whimsical fountain in which a goggling stone fish spouted water onto the birds taking their bath.

She inhaled deeply of the scent of the fresh earth and was keenly aware of the last of the morning mist kissing her skin with a light chill.

As she wandered through this simple paradise, she switched to musing on the tumultuous affair she had gotten herself into. She couldn't help but smile as she thought of how amazing, talented and thoughtful Marc was as a lover. He was the first man she had played courtesan for who had truly cared for her own pleasure.

Yet, there was that undercurrent of questioning in the way he made love to her and exposed her to the world, stripping her of clothing and reserve in front of the eyes of strangers—be it in a restaurant or a carriage, or her very own window.

It was this very quest for truth that worried her. She shivered slightly at the lingering chill in the air, the last moments of dawn before the morning sun warmed the earth. Everything she had built, everything she had worked for was like a house of cards. The lies about her link to Gustave Dufarge would create a scandal if revealed, but it would be weathered and possibly help ticket sales. She would lose Marc because of it, and she could not deny that she had feelings for him, feelings that would make that loss all the more painful, but even that could be endured and survived in the end.

No, the foundation of her flimsy card house was a secret even more terrible, and the slightest wavering in her discipline of silence would have it all collapse. The lies were so carefully stacked, one upon another, that they were at once both utterly impenetrable and incredibly fragile, held together only by the sheer discipline with which she guarded her secret, and a secret was no longer a secret once one told another person.

But could that person be Marc? She mused on that question as she caressed the brilliant blue morning glory blossoms with her fingertips. He was unlike any man she had ever known...in her whole life, but he was still a man who paid her 50,000 francs a month for her body, no matter what else he said or claimed.

No, that was a disservice to him, she forced herself to admit. He paid her that money so that she could be his and his alone, so that he could talk with her and enjoy her company as well as her love-making.

She sighed deeply and gazed into the white heart of the morning glory, as if it could reveal some greater truth to her.

"I have never loved you more than this very moment, Elise," a soft voice said behind her.

She whirled around, her bare toes digging into the dew-fresh grass. Marc stood by the tall hedge, dressed in his trousers and white shirt, but barefoot as well. She felt her heart give a lurch at the sight of this man who cared so little for the trappings of title and glory that he would run barefoot into a morning garden to find his lover.

Her smile was shaky, and most frighteningly, honestly reflective of that moment of genuine...affection she felt for him.

"Those are hasty words before breakfast, monsieur."

"They are the first words in my heart," Marc replied, eagerly crossing the grass to clasp her in his arms and kiss her chilly eyelids and the tip of her nose.

"They are very nice words."

"I mean them."

"I know."

"When will you say them back to me?"

Elise could feel his heart pounding as she pressed her hands flat against his chest. She had unconsciously known that this moment would come, that everything was building to this question. This man was the only one of her lovers to want to hear words of true love from her, but what good would those words do?

"I do not know when," she said quietly, looking up into his eyes. "I do not know if I am capable of saying those words, Marc."

"Yes, yes you are!"

"You cannot force such a thing, nor rush it. I have never said those words to anyone. To ask me to do so after only two weeks of love-making is to ask too much."

"It was not just love-making."

"No, perhaps not," she agreed softly. "But do not ask me for what I am not ready to give. I beg you."

She looked up at him, pleading with her eyes to not let this turn into another tense stand-off between them.

He gazed down at her intently for a long moment, then sighed and smiled sadly.

"The morning is sweet, and so are you, my darling. Come, breakfast will be ready by now, and we can discuss what we are going to do with our day."

Elise tried to smile, but she felt a pang of dread in her heart at what she had to say. "My dear, I cannot stay with you today," she said. "I have a dress fitting at Worth's this morning, and then I must rehearse this afternoon."

"Forget the dress fitting then. Spend the morning with me." The commanding tone that melted her core every time crept into his voice.

She gave a laugh that was almost half a sob. "Men are so thick!" she quipped, taking his arm and guiding him back toward the house. "Do you know how long it takes to get an appointment at Jean Worth's? And do you know how he would scold me if I missed my fitting?"

Marc rolled his eyes and sighed, evincing both surrender and unhappiness. She regretted that he felt that way, but he could not expect her to abandon everything in her life just for him. Fifty thousand francs paid for the exclusivity of her body, not her life, and her life still had to include time away from him.

"Dranem is singing tonight at the Eldorado," she said gently, speaking of the popular male comic singer at one of Paris' chicest concert clubs. "I dearly love his performances. They make me laugh so hard!"

"And I take it you wish to go?"

Elise nodded vigorously. "The sight of Dranem's short pants and sagging socks, and to hear him singing about 'the little peas' will be just what I need after a day of pompous opera."

Marc shook his head and made a gesture of supplication with his hands, but the smile had returned to his face.

"Heaven help this poor wretch who is doomed to spend his evening at the Eldorado!" he beseeched mockingly.

Elise smiled archly, feeling a wave of relief wash over her.

"You'd best be getting along and eating your breakfast, or you won't have strength for the *spéctacle* tonight, *monsieur*."

"And you won't have strength for the spéctacle afterwards, mademoiselle."

"Heaven help this poor wretch!" she replied with a laugh.

#### Chapter 9

"He did *what* to you?" Raoul spluttered, choking on a sip of coffee as a laugh got caught in his throat.

Elise nodded and smiled wickedly.

"Yes, he did," she said teasingly. "And I enjoyed every moment of it."

"There are times that I think I should worry about you," he said with mock pensiveness, leaning back in the uncomfortably ornate chair.

"I worry about you all the time."

As they both laughed comfortably, she turned her gaze back to the gilt, full-length mirror before her. The mid-morning sun poured into Jean Worth's atelier. Two seamstresses circled her like moons orbiting a bright, peacock blue silk planet. Worth himself was standing back from her, surveying her and tapping his lip with his forefinger, deep in thought.

"I do not like the way the hem is in the front," he announced finally. "It must come down half an inch."

"As you like," she said with a shrug.

"It is not a matter of like!" Worth exclaimed, shocked. "It is a matter of what is right! *Mon Dieu*! The whole dress is out of balance because of the front hem!"

"Well, then fix it," she retorted with a good-humored laugh. "And the world will continue to spin just as it always has."

Worth mumbled to himself about wasting his time with people who didn't take his art seriously. Elise grinned at the man and turned back to Raoul, her smile fading.

"Truly, though, I do not know what to do," she said with a sigh.

"Well, do you love him or not?" Raoul asked, looking at her thoughtfully.

"I don't know! And worse yet, I don't want to know if I know or not!"

"Run that by me one more time?"

"You know what I mean, you half-witted cauliflower!"

"Seems to me that you are scared."

"Well, well, aren't we quick and clever this morning?"

"What are you afraid of, ma petite?"

Elise chewed her lips for a moment, then sighed, lifting her arms to accommodate one of the seamstresses who seemed bent on sticking her with pins like a pincushion.

"I am afraid of losing...myself, my way, my life...of losing everything, really."

"How could love do that?"

"Because everything I have ever loved, I have lost."

"That cannot be the case forever, you know."

"I know, I know, but I still fear love. It is the one thing that can make me weak, and I cannot afford to be weak."

"Why not?"

"Because of the way the world is," she snapped, suddenly irritated at Raoul's questioning. "That's why."

He looked steadily at her, which only grated on her further. She knew her mood was slipping into something sour and snappish, but she couldn't help it. His questions had come too close to the truth she had guarded for so long. She took a deep breath and tried to shake it off, deciding to turn the tables on him.

"Now tell me what is going on with you and this mysterious young lady you have been seeing," she said, grinning as she saw color rise up in Raoul's cheeks.

"She is...amazing," he said haltingly, fiddling uncomfortably with the coffee cup and saucer in his hands.

"Is it love?"

Raoul looked steadily at her. "I believe it is."

"Is she rich?"

It was Raoul's turn to snap. "Does it always have to be about money? What about the heart?"

"What about it?"

"I want to be with someone I love, someone that I adore and who loves me back. I am tired of this hunt for a rich woman to marry just because my brother's gambling has

driven my family's fortune into the ground. Rich or poor, I don't care. I want love."

"A noble sentiment, my dear. But hardly one that will provide a dowry for your younger sister."

"Money is not everything, ma petite."

"But it is a great deal of everything. Believe me, I know."

"You do?"

"Yes. I know what it is like to be without money. And no amount of love will keep you warm when you haven't two pennies to rub together to buy coal or bread with."

Raoul eyed her thoughtfully.

"You never really told me anything of that."

"Naturally, it is not something one discusses at tea parties or balls. But yes, I was poor and hungry once. I will not deny that I was hungry for love even then, but I was far hungrier for bread. So when you say that money is not everything, I am afraid I must contradict you."

"Raise your arms, *mademoiselle*," Worth broke in to Elise's breathless retort, stepping up to her and taking her arms in his hands, and raising and lowering them as if he was having her flap her wings. She couldn't help but be distracted from her diatribe and laugh at the ridiculousness of it.

"Laugh if you like, *mademoiselle*, but at least now your hem won't be the laughing stock of the cafés," Worth chided fretfully.

"Oh, they can laugh at me if they like as long as they pay attention to me."

"Someday, you'll realize that sentiment is foolish and dangerous," Worth said.

"Oh, I doubt I'll ever have the occasion to repine it," Elise said with surety. "I am too hardened to care."

"Let us hope so," Worth replied somberly.

\* \* \* \*

Elise was in her element that night at the Eldorado. The club was full of only the most fashionable of Parisians, some of whom she deigned to nod to, but mostly, her attention was focused on two things: enjoying the comic songs of Dranem and enjoying the company of her lover.

In the lush darkness of the club, she leaned forward and propped her elbows on the small table she and Marc shared in a tucked-away booth. Two half-empty glasses of brandy sat between them, and a candle bathed them in low, flickering light. She couldn't help but remember the last time they had shared a booth in a restaurant, and she felt the restless stirrings of desire, but squelched them and focused on her companion.

"You cannot tell me that you are not having a pleasant time," she said sweetly.

"A lovely time," Marc replied with a sardonic smile. "And it would be even better if we were naked in bed, making love."

"Oh, hush! Don't be ridiculous!"

"You are right. It is ridiculous to think that we have to be in bed to make love."

She found herself blushing with anticipation, hoping that he would find a way to take her right then and there, yet not wanting to experience that first moment of hesitation when propriety battled with passion, but he left her little choice in the matter.

She felt him snake his arm around her waist and pull her to his side with a tantalizing slowness that let her feel every inch of the seat that she slid across. She could feel his hot breath on her skin as he approached his lips to her bare shoulder. Closing her eyes in anticipation, she breathed a sigh of desire and contentment when his lips touched her skin, his tongue darting out to lick the sensitive skin of the side of her neck, leaving a damp trail down her shoulder.

Elise gave a low laugh of pleasure and felt it vibrate deep in her throat as he ran his hands up the sides of her chest, sliding them up her silk-encased waist to just under the soft roundness under her breasts. She felt his own chuckle of pleasure echo in his chest as his hands slipped over the silk to cup her breasts. He leisurely began to stroke and caress the soft globes through the fabric, working in shrinking circles until his fingers finally reached her tingling nipples.

He lavished slow, lazy kisses on the nape of her neck while his hands rubbed, rolled and pinched her nipples until she was squirming, trying to increase her pleasure. Every brush of the fabric against her nipples was a jolt of ecstasy that struck from her belly to her pussy.

She knew that the other people in the audience were casting furtive looks in their direction, and that the sight of her and his brazen love-making was arousing some of them. She could almost smell it in the air. She had to bite her lip to keep from asking him to rip off her clothes and take her with all the fierceness she knew he possessed, but she had to be satisfied with the knowledge that she was on display, that her desire, the one part of her that wore no mask, was there in the open for all to see.

"I want you to moan softly," Marc murmured in her ear. "I want to hear you."

Elise released the soft, fluttering moan that had been stuck in her throat as he pulled down her bodice to reveal a breast. She opened her eyes to see more people looking at them, their glances growing bolder and hungrier. She moaned again as his warm fingers caressed her breast.

She turned her face to nuzzle and kiss him, her tongue lancing into his mouth, jousting with his tongue in a riotously erotic battle.

"I think you're beginning to like this sort of thing," he chuckled into their kiss.

She was about to reply with a clever remark when she caught sight of something that made the blood drain from her face.

"What the hell is he doing here?" she gasped, feeling a spasm of fear and anger tight in her belly and quickly pulling up her dress.

Marc turned around, following her gaze to the imposing figure of Gustave Dufarge who had just entered the room.

Elise bit her lip and looked down, hoping to avoid catching Dufarge's attention, but the sound of heavy, deliberate footsteps drawing nearer made her raise her head again, and she found herself looking up into the sneering face of Dufarge.

"A pleasant evening, Mademoiselle *Montfort*," he said with a peculiar emphasis on her last name that sent shivers down her spine.

She glared stonily up at him, not daring to meet Marc's eyes. She could feel herself gearing up for the battle she knew was inevitable.

"What?" Dufarge asked mockingly. "Not even the smallest greeting for the opera's patron? I thought you had better manners than that, for even if you won't deign to greet a lowly patron, surely you could greet...your husband."

"It is obvious that Mademoiselle Montfort does not wish either for your presence or for your falsehoods," Marc said coldly, sitting still in a casual position, but with all the tension of a cobra coiled to strike. "And if you had any manners, you'd remove yourself."

Dufarge flicked a gaze at Marc, and she felt her heart drop into her stomach, deathly afraid that there would be a confrontation between the two men. She shot Marc a pleading glance. Marc's eyes narrowed in response, and the fingers that held the stem of the brandy glass tightened, but he refrained from saying anything more.

She was dying inside, wondering if Marc believed Dufarge's words or he if thought them a lie as he had said. She couldn't quite comprehend that Dufarge had simply walked in and announced what she had striven to keep hidden for so long, but that shock seemed to pale in the face of the terrible fear that gripped her—the fear of what Marc's private reaction would be to this unsavory news. She suddenly couldn't bear the thought that he would think ill of her or leave her.

Dufarge favored her with a sneering smile and bent over to put his lips close to her ear.

"Channon," he snarled, then straightened up, nodded to her and sauntered away from them.

It took all that she had not to recoil in horror.

She could feel the blood draining from her face, and the world seemed to be oddly distant, no more than a confused buzzing of light and shadow and smoke. With that one word, Dufarge had changed everything because that one word meant that he could ruin everything. It was insult upon injury that he now possessed both of her secrets and was

willing to use them both against her.

She felt dizzy, and an ugly panic rose up in her throat.

"Elise?"

She heard Marc's voice as if from a great distance, and it didn't seem to matter to her. Nothing seemed to matter other than the fact that Dufarge knew her deepest secret, the carefully-guarded, horrible secret that she had hidden from everyone, including her 'husband.'

"Elise!"

Marc's voice was sharp, and his grip on her hand painful as if to draw her back into the world of silverware, marble tables and Turkish cigarette smoke. She swallowed hard and tried to meet his eyes.

"I need to go now," she whimpered. "Please. Now."

Marc nodded curtly and stood up, coming around to pull out her chair for her. She moved mechanically, her mind nearly numb from shock and her heart pounding furiously in her chest, straining at her ribs as if they were made of matchsticks.

Everything was a blur, deformed, grotesque to her eyes, like she had suddenly been cursed with the sight of Toulouse Lautrec. Laughter was raucous and harsh, women's faces were too-heavily made up, and men's mustaches seemed abnormally large and distasteful. She felt nauseous and was only vaguely aware of her cloak being placed around her shoulders and being ushered out into the crisp night air.

Marc's arm around her shoulders held her tightly to him, and he helped her alight into his carriage. She sat down on the leather bench on the far side of the carriage. He climbed in and attempted to sit next to her.

"No, please, stay over there," she said softly, feeling that her control of her emotions was brittle at best. "And...if you don't mind, I would like to return to my flat tonight."

"We can certainly spend the night at your flat, Elise," he said gently, though there was something about the tension in his shoulders that told her that he would soon want an explanation about what was distressing her.

"I...I am sorry, Marc. I need to be alone tonight."

"Why?"

"I need...I...need to think."

"What you need is to tell me what has made you so upset. God help me, but if it is something of Dufarge's doing, I will kill him, and that would solve at least one of your problems quite nicely."

"No!" she cried, clutching at the strap on the wall as the carriage rocked its way through the Parisian night. "No, you will do nothing of the kind."

"Watch me. No one interferes with my woman and gets away with it. My honor demands nothing less."

His words were like an icy knife into her heart.

His honor.

She closed her eyes and felt a wave of sick, cold perspiration break out on her forehead, but she knew she had to remain in control of this situation before it got out of hand...before it could knock down the first domino in a torturous trail that would only lead to her ruin.

Forcing herself to take a deep breath, she opened her eyes and looked at him steadily.

"I am asking you, if you care at all for me, to grant me one night to regain my composure and to think," she said with a calm she did not feel. "It is not a matter of hiding from you, but you must understand that I am my own person, with my own affairs, many of which—for good reason—do not concern you."

"Everything about you concerns me."

"No, it does not. Regardless of how you feel about me, and regardless of the money that you are so kind to pay me, I am still a free agent in my own affairs, and I am asking you for the courtesy of treating me as such. Give me one night."

Marc eyed her unhappily, and she felt a pang of guilt at the pain in his eyes, but her resolve never wavered. She knew she had to have time and space to think. She also knew that if she shared that time and space with him, he would break down her will with his very tenderness, and she would confess everything, and that was something she would not...could not...do.

"One night," he agreed finally, sounding far from happy about the arrangement. "But I must see you in the morning, then."

She looked at him, feeling stricken again at his words. Something deep within her told her that the morning would bring nothing good for either of them, but she managed to nod.

The carriage slowed as it approached her building, coming to a gentle stop. Elise gathered her cloak about her and allowed Marc to help her alight from the carriage. The street was dark and fairly deserted. A faint dampness hung in the air.

"In the morning, then?" he repeated, holding both her hands in his and looking deeply into her eyes.

"Yes, the morning," Elise murmured brokenly, feeling like her heart was crumbling into bitter ashes.

He leaned in and kissed her long and tenderly. His lips brushed hers softly, and his teeth gently caught her lower lips as he drew back.

She turned and fled into her building before he could see the tears that had sprung to her eyes.

#### Chapter 10

"Channon."

Elise whispered that word into the darkness of her flat, feeling the syllables roll off her tongue. The sound was foreign to her. It had been so long since anyone had...

"Channon."

Suddenly, she felt utterly drained, exhausted of all reserve and fight. She dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands. She heard the small clock on the mantle chime midnight.

Midnight, and here she was, alone with her ghosts, forced to face a past that she thought was as dead and buried as her father.

She sighed restlessly, fidgeting in her chair, unable to gather the strength to actually stand up and pace. Her free hand clutched at bunches of silk skirt, and she could feel her heart racing like the wings of a hummingbird.

"Channon."

She let the memories unwind like thread from a spool...

...A little girl with limp golden brown curls was crying. It was supper, but the great wooden table that stood in the middle of the one-room flat she and her family lived in was empty. There was no food to be had. There had been none at breakfast, either. Her tummy hurt, and she wanted food. Her mother hushed her, warning her not to wake her father with tears that would make him angry.

...The little girl was cowering in the corner. There was no place to run. She could not help but watch as her Papa hit her Maman over and over again, even when Maman was no longer moving or crying. She didn't understand why Papa was so angry with Maman, for Maman was an angel with her golden hair and sweet eyes. Maman sang her

lullabies and played little games with string and buttons with her.

...Maman was acting strangely. The little girl begged Maman to pay attention to her, but Maman simply wandered from corner to corner of the flat, touching the peeling plaster of the walls and drawing strange designs in the dust on the window sill. Maman acted as if the little girl was not even there. The little girl cried and cried.

...Papa smelled bad. He smelled like something sharp, and his breath was heavy with the scent. The little girl couldn't really remember a time when he hadn't smelled like that, but that night, it was especially strong. It filled the stale air of the flat and made the little girl want to wretch, but she hid in her corner, just as she always did when Papa began to hit Maman.

...Maman walked like she was sleeping with her eyes open. The little girl wondered what she was doing with the knife in her hands. There was no food to cook, so why would Maman be cooking? And even when there was food, Maman never dared to cook when Papa was sleeping, his heavy snoring shattering the stillness of the flat. The little girl retreated to her corner, watching as Maman approached Papa as he lay on the bed. Something bad happened then. Maman stuck the knife into Papa, over and over. Papa yelled, then gurgled, clutching at his chest and throat. A shiny red liquid squirted all over Maman. The little girl screamed...

...Elise didn't even realize that tears were running down her cheeks until she felt the cool drops slide down the skin of her throat. Her breath was tight and labored as the rest of the memories came in a rush. The *gendarmes*, the vile things that were said about her mother, the mother she had treasured more than anything.

Margot Channon was hanged for the murder of her husband, Paul Channon, and her little girl, little Elise, was both pitied and abandoned by a public that read the story avidly in the papers but did nothing to help the orphaned child.

Elise forced herself to think back to the day of her mother's execution. It seemed that someone—she couldn't remember who, for there were so many strange people of the state who came in and out of her life in those weeks—someone had taken pity on her and had taken her to visit her mother one last time.

Her mother had looked so weary, her skin sallow and taut, with sunken eyes. Her golden hair had been cut off so that the noose could go around her neck more tightly, and she wore the traditional penitent's white shift.

"Elise!" the woman had crooned as she held her tightly. "Elise, my little angel! Never forget that I did this for you. One day, you will understand."

She felt a sob rise in her throat as the memory rolled relentlessly on.

"You must be strong for me, my darling," her mother had said, a strange light in her eyes, as if she was already no longer in the world of the living. "You must make something of yourself. Be brave, little Elise, and remember that I love you."

She remembered screaming as they pulled her mother away, dragging her down

the corridor of the prison to the courtyard where she was to be executed. She remembered screaming until her voice gave out, and struggling with all her childish might against the hands that sought to restrain her from running after the condemned woman.

The memories tumbled out in quick succession now: the orphanage, the mocking of Elise Channon for the crimes of her mother, the hunger, the fear...and the anger. The years did not seem to diminish people's interest in the sordid tale of Margot Channon, and her daughter was viewed as a curiosity but also as somewhat of a bad luck charm. No one wanted to associate with the daughter of a murderess.

"Ah yes, the unfortunate 'fille Channon," the matron of the orphanage often said to people who came to look at children to adopt. "We had to take her on orders from the state and for the sake of Christian charity, but be assured that she is kept well away from the other children so that she cannot corrupt them."

She remembered the night she had run away from the orphanage. She had stolen the pitiful amount of cash that the matron kept on hand for miscellaneous expenses for herself such as boxes of Turkish Delight and bottles of absinthe. She went door-to-door to every shop she could find, begging for work, any kind of job.

"What was your name again?"

"Elise Channon, madame."

"You're the 'fille Channon' aren't you? Fancy you having the nerve to think you could work for a respectable business. I wouldn't take you in for 10,000 francs for fear that you'd slit my throat while I slept!"

"Madame, I beg you, please, I need work. I would never do anything like that."

"Ha! The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, that's what I say. Now run along before I call the police on you."

A hundred, two hundred more conversations like that finally taught her that she could no longer be Elise Channon. It also taught her that those who claimed to be respectable and moral were often hypocrites that cared for no one but themselves. That knowledge consoled her and gave her the courage to try another path.

She had blossomed early, and confident that she could pass for older, she had bamboozled her way into singing at one of the seedier music halls in Montmartre in exchange for food and a straw-tick mattress in the attic of the theater, but when she took to the stage, it was as Elise Montfort, just as her mother had been Margot Montfort before marrying Paul Channon.

In the darkness of her flat, Elise searched her memories for the moment when the child had become the woman, when the soft shield of the memory of her mother's love had given way to a brutal, aggressive cynicism. Was it the moment the manager of the theater had signed her on, buying her story of being eighteen and from Lyons? Was it her first bow on stage, when she had realized that she could truly, truly sing? Or was it when she had accepted her first "commission" after that performance and had learned to

believe that men were gullible and easily manipulated for her own gain?

What had happened to her? Was this what her mother had wanted? Why was she suddenly so lost?

Thoughts welled up of the loneliness, the deep fears and the desperation that surrounded her as that young girl, and she winced mentally as she thought of her foolishness and her weakness that had led her right into Dufarge's hands.

He had been a rough-at-the-edges clerk in a pharmacy who had seen her sing at the grimy, low-life cabaret, and she, a heart-broken, lonely sixteen-year-old. He had promised safety and security. He seemed to love her. He seemed gentle. He even seemed happy on the day they went to the *mairie* office in their *quartier* to get married.

But he was none of those things.

Elise felt her ears burn with the rushing of her blood as she remembered his descent into obsession. She remembered the cruel, taunting words. She remembered the humiliation she endured as he tried to teach her how to please him in bed. She had been so young and yet so old in those forlorn years of being a wife.

She clenched her fists, thinking of the miserable little flat she had shared with Dufarge, the scraping to make ends meet, the fights about his constant spending and constant attempts to acquire things beyond their financial reach in order to boost his status in the world. Dufarge had forbidden her to return to the stage where other men would see her and desire her, so to supplement their meager income, Elise—now Elise Dufarge—had taken jobs at the mills just outside of Paris, working six days a week, twelve hours a day for a few francs. When the mills had to close temporarily, she tried to find work in shops, but without any skills, no one would hire her. So, she sang in the streets to earn her bread, all so that her husband could have new coats and walking sticks and the finest leather gloves.

She thought of the endless fights and the terrifying nights when he took his anger out on her in bed.

And then came the morning when she knew this was not what her mother had wanted for her. She was not meant to repeat the life of her mother. She was meant to be something more.

So she had walked out with the clothes on her back and their pitiful savings in her pocket, disappearing without a word or warning.

And now, without a word or warning, Dufarge had come back into her life, possessed of the ultimate weapon: her true name.

Elise did not bother asking herself what he would do with it, for that she knew as surely as she knew the notes of the scale. He would blackmail her into dropping Marc as her lover and going back to him as his obedient little wife. She shuddered at the thought of the scandal that would ensue if she refused him and he leaked his information to the society papers.

Weary and yet restless, she jumped up from her chair and began to pace. She felt that the darkness was closing in on her, and it was getting hard to breathe, as if the night was squeezing the air out of her lungs. She shook her arms and gasped for air, trying to force herself to think calmly, to reason through the situation before her.

Yet every choice before her seemed to present only misery, and what was worse was that every choice was the result of decisions she had made. There were no options left to her, no route of escape. Elise Channon's palace of lies built out of playing cards was about to collapse.

"Oh, Marc," Elise cried hopelessly into the darkness. "I'm so sorry."

#### Chapter 11

Sunday morning in the Jardin du Luxembourg was quiet, for everyone who would promenade there in the afternoon was either sleeping off a drunken stupor or attending church.

The sunshine hurt Elise's tired eyes, and she took refuge from it in a small copse of trees that surrounded a bench. Wearily, she sat down and waited for her lover.

Soon enough, she heard a purposeful crunch of gravel under heavy boots, and she knew that the moment she dreaded had finally come.

"I received your note and came as soon as I could, my darling," Marc said breathlessly as he reached her, grabbing her folded hands and pulling her into his arms.

she nodded numbly, unable to return his embrace. All she could feel was the hurt in her heart. As if he could feel her misery, he pulled back and held her at arms' length, looking into her eyes.

"You are tired. You did not sleep. What is it that troubles you? Why will you not tell me?"

She swallowed, feeling the birth of tears in her eyes.

"It is over, Marc," she said softly.

"What? What is over?"

"This...us."

His grip on her shoulders became painful as his fingers dug into her skin.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I am rescinding our agreement," she said shakily, choking on sorrow.

"I will make arrangements for the money to be returned to you and—"

"Damn the money! It's not about the money, never has been!"

There was a pause as Elise forced herself to gather her wits, scattered under the assault of Marc's emotions.

"It was about the money for me, *monsieur*." One final lie, one last attempt to hide.

"Maybe at first, but you cannot say that it did not become something more."

"Let go of me, monsieur."

Marc released her as if she was a live coal burning him but continued to possess her with his eyes.

"Is it Dufarge?" he asked softly, a new, dangerous note in his voice that terrified her.

She shook her head vigorously. "No. It is not about you or Dufarge. Nor is it anything that you can remedy. This is about me, and I tell you that it is over between us."

Marc ripped off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture of frustration. He spun on his heel and paced a few steps before returning to stand before her.

"Why are you still hiding from me? Did I not tell you that you could trust me?"

"It is not about trusting you. But clearly, you are the one who does not trust me to know my own business and act for what is best. For if you did, you would not hound me so!"

"I ask you because I love you!" Marc shouted, the veins in his forehead standing out, his eyes wild with desperation.

Elise closed her eyes. His words caused actual physical pain in her heart. Gripping the back of the bench, she sank down onto it and buried her face in her hands. She was trying to be strong, trying to do the right thing. Only she could save Marc from the horror and dishonor that surrounded her and would soon consume her. Why was she doing this? The question ran round and round in her head, like a taunting song daring her for the answer.

The truth was that she did this because she had finally learned to love him when all love was a lost cause.

She heard a rustling sound and felt strong arms wrap around her shaking shoulders.

"Shhh, my darling," Marc said gently, ducking his face beneath the brim of her hat and kissing her hair. "Tell me what troubles you. I swear that it will not change my love for you!"

She let out a strangled cry of grief and pain. Why did he have to make this so

difficult? Why did he have to test her resolve so cruelly?

He pried her hands away from her face and tenderly kissed her tear-damp cheeks. His lips found hers, and she moaned as he gently explored her mouth with his tongue, caressing her face with one hand and gathering her to him in his arms.

Weakly, she surrendered, allowing herself one last moment of comfort with this man she would never see again. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body to his, feeling the bittersweet joy of being crushed against him at this sudden yielding. Sobs rose in her chest and spilled over into their kiss, and his lips found her eyelids, her brow, her cheeks and the tip of her nose.

"Don't leave me," Marc murmured raggedly against her ear. "Don't run away, Elise. Don't give up on what we could have together!"

His words jolted her back into the cold, harsh reality that she had steeled herself to face. Gently, but firmly, she disentangled herself from his arms and stood up. She looked down into his bewildered, grief-stricken face.

"I must go, now."

"It is not over, Elise."

"I am sorry, Marc."

"I will not let you go that easily, you know. Remember, I get what I want, and I still want you."

She was overcome with weariness and heartache. Without another word, she turned and walked away from the only man she had ever loved, the only man she could love, and she left him because she loved him. She would not make him weather the coming storm. She was not so weak or pathetic yet that she would stoop to using his honor as her shield. He would be better off without her, and she would stand on her own, just as her mother had told her to do. She would be strong.

Her heart was breaking, but she would be strong because she would protect the one she loved. For the first time in all the long, bitter years since her mother's death, Elise thought that she finally realized the true meaning of her mother's words.

#### Chapter 12

"Mademoiselle Channon."

Elise had been staring into the mirror of her dressing table, studying the changes in her face—the circles under her eyes, the new tightness around her lips, the set of her jaw. The noxiously familiar voice that broke into her reverie was not unexpected, however. She had known from the moment that she stepped foot in the opera house that he would find her.

"Monsieur Dufarge," she said calmly to her reflection, not bothering to turn and greet him.

"I called on you at your flat, and your maid said that you were here." He tossed his hat on a table and settling himself comfortably onto the divan across from her dressing table. "I thought for certain to find you at home, where our business could be discussed more comfortably."

Elise finally turned to face him. She felt a rush of grim confidence as she regarded the complacent smirk on his face.

"We have no business to discuss, *monsieur*," she said calmly.

"Oh, but I believe we do," he replied, chuckling. "Or perhaps you are right not to call it business, since I don't propose to pay a single penny for your services. An unfaithful wife and the daughter of a whore really doesn't deserve to profit from her mother's notoriety."

"My mother was not a whore."

"It doesn't matter if she was a whore or a nun. All that matters is that Elise Channon, or rather, Elise Dufarge, will do as I please if she wishes to remain Elise Montfort."

"I am not yours to command in any way, monsieur."

Dufarge paused and studied her, narrowing his eyes. "You were never very clever, so I will give you the benefit of the doubt of not understanding the arrangement I am proposing. But as I must spell it out for you, I beg your indulgence if it offends your *delicate* sensibilities."

"You will return to live with me as my wife," he continued. "And I will fuck you when I please and how I please. And you will not utter one word of objection to anything I say or do. If you are foolish enough to protest or disagree, I will reveal to the world that the beloved diva of the Opéra Garnier is none other than Margot Channon's daughter who makes a healthy side-living whoring herself out to the highest bidder, all while dishonoring her marriage vows."

"Do your worst, monsieur. I am not afraid of you."

Dufarge stared at her for a long moment, his expression growing dark and dangerous.

"Do you refuse me?"

"I do."

"Do you realize what you are bringing upon yourself with this stupidity?"

It was her turn to laugh, and she relished the harsh, bitter sound that escaped her.

"Do you really think I give *un cul du raton* about your threats? Do you really think that this scandal that you threaten to ruin me with could be worse than what Margot Channon's daughter has already lived through? You are the one that suffers from stupidity, *monsieur*, not me."

Feeling a surge of power and anger and pride, she picked up her hat and held her chin high.

"Elise!"

There was a moment of chaos and confusion as Dufarge jumped to his feet, knocking over a small table and the chair of her dressing table in his violent anger. He grabbed her and pressed her body to his, gripping her chin painfully in his hand.

"Stupid, stupid, girl!" he snarled. "Am I so repulsive to you that you would sacrifice everything you have worked for to escape my bed? Do you really think your reputation can withstand this scandal?"

He shook her until her head ached from the jostling.

"You're nothing but a whore!" he roared when she still didn't answer him. "I may not have a title, but I have enough gold to buy anything you wanted, but you couldn't be content with that. You considered yourself above me, worthy only of a marquis! Well, now you will pay the price for your foolishness. I will destroy you and relish every moment of it. Then I will forget you once you are back in the sewers that you crawled out of!"

She glared at the man—all the hurt and heartbreak he was responsible for boiling over into her own wrath. She spit in his face and wrenched herself from his surprised grip.

She stormed from her dressing room, carried on a wave of righteousness and satisfaction and praying that it would last until she reached the safety of her flat. She heard him swear and the pounding of his footsteps behind her. But anger made her swift, and fear made her nimble, and she was safely in a hansom cab and moving through the streets before he could catch her.

Once in the solitary confines of the cab, she felt she could breathe again. The energy she had felt in the confrontation with Dufarge began to ebb, and she realized what a dangerous game she had played with him. If she had not been so quick in making her escape, she could imagine all too well what would have followed. He was not a man to take rejection lightly, especially not from a...

No, she was no whore. Never even during the height of her career of trading money for pleasure had she considered herself a whore. Whores had no choice, and she always chose, since choosing was part of being in control of the situation.

And now? Now she was no longer in control. She had placed her bet and cast her dice, knowing she would not come out of this as the winner.

As the carriage rattled through the lazy Sunday streets of Paris, Elise was conscious of a sense of emptiness. There was nothing left for her to do but wait for the coming storm. She alighted from the carriage and hurried inside to her flat.

"Mademoiselle?" her faithful Yvette queried as she entered. "Two gentlemen have been here to see you."

"Two?"

"Monsieur Dufarge came just after you left this morning," Yvette replied, taking Elise's cloak and hat from her. "And Monsieur le Marquis de Drammond was just here. He said he would call again later."

She felt her blood run cold at the mention of Marc. For a moment, her resolve teetered precariously on the edge of a delicious, comforting surrender. She hastily looked down so that her maid would not see the confusion in her eyes.

Marc would call again. And again until she saw him, but she would not see him. She knew that in the deepest fibers of her being, but she loved him too much to allow him to be drawn into the vortex, this black hole that would consume her.

"I am at home to no one. Do not allow anyone in."

"Is everything all right, *mademoiselle*?" the maid asked, worry evident in her voice and eyes.

Elise smiled wanly. "No, everything is not all right. But it is the way it has to be."

#### Chapter 13

Elise thought she had been prepared, but the tidal wave of scandal that came in the following week nearly drowned her senses under a relentless barrage of shocking press reports and the self-congratulatory mockery of the rich and fashionable who pretended to be moral as well.

Whore, cheat, Jezebel...those were just a few of the choice terms that the papers had used to describe her. Other adjectives had included untalented, unworthy and fraud.

Calamity came fast on the heels of humiliation. A note delivered on Tuesday morning, the day after the scandal hit the papers, informed her that—with regrets—she was no longer employed by the Opéra Garnier. She was staggered by the news—her talent was the one thing she had believed was unassailable, and in her cynicism, she had believed that Beaumont would see this scandal as a way of driving ticket sales. Then she had remembered who the most influential opera patron was. She fell ill from the shock and took to her bed for the next two days, crying and hiding under the covers.

She felt miserable, a failure, a coward. She had made a terrible mistake. What had been the point of refusing Dufarge—especially since no note, no call, no word of any kind had reached her from Marc. She had been as wrong about him as she had been about Beaumont. Marc did not truly love her. She had been fooled by his words and his passionate love-making, and her foolishness had cost her everything.

What continued to put her stomach in knots and made her turn away the nourishing broths and bits of toast that Yvette brought her was the fact that she had taken the risk to love again, and she had been hurt yet again.

"Mademoiselle," Yvette pleaded with Elise on Friday, her third day in bed. "You must eat a little something."

"Yes, yes, fine," she mumbled. "Just put the tray on the table next to my bed."

"If you eat, I will give you something nice."

"Honestly, I am not some little girl to be bribed with treats."

"Eat a few spoons of broth, and I will give you two letters," Yvette said with a broad smile.

Elise glowered, but picked up the bowl. "And why should I want more letters filled with accusations and terrible names?"

"Because they are not that kind of letter at all."

"And how would you know?"

"I read them, of course."

Her loyal maid's frank words brought a smile to her face—the first smile in days, it felt like. She obediently ate some soup, then put the bowl down and held out her hand for the letter.

Yvette handed them over, curtsied and left the room. When she was gone, Elise tore open the first one and read it avidly.

"Ma petite,

By the time you receive this letter, I will have left Paris, but my departure is for the best of reasons: love.

I am sickened by Dufarge's actions and greatly distressed by the greedy way Paris has seized on your misfortune, abandoning you to the wolves of Dame Rumor and her minions in the press.

But you should know that you still have one loyal friend. I will write to you again very soon, the very moment my affairs are settled. There is much to tell, but it must wait, as the carriage is waiting for me down below.

Remember this, Elise: love is not bought by money, nor does it wither on the vine like grapes kissed by the first frost. Love endures all the world's horrors, and if you look for it, it will find you.

I remain your devoted friend,

Raoul"

She burst into tears after she finished the letter. She crushed it to her chest, as if she could actually hold Raoul, hold onto his good heart and his strength. She hoped that he was happy with the love he had found.

She opened the second letter and read it as well.

#### Dear Little Songbird,

I knew that there was something I forgot that I wanted to tell you the other day at the Longchamp races (not really, but it's as good a way as any to open a letter such as this). I wanted to tell you that I am the illegitimate daughter of a Dutch courtesan. Not quite in the same class of disgrace as your poor mother, but still quite good enough to be going on with in terms of having a terrible start in life. What I mean to say is that I know where you have been.

Why is it that the world demands that women either be virgins or harlots? Even for so-called respectably married women, the idea of sex—or worse yet, independence!—is supposed to be an anathema, forcing them to pretend to be virginal in spirit, if not in body.

Here I am, rambling again. It comes with age, my dear. I am sure you are having a terrible time of things, and I am equally sure I would not be able to remain as quiet and withdrawn as you have. I probably would have written several spiteful letters to the papers by this time. But that is neither here nor there.

Remember that you can sing, and that makes you extraordinary. All women are extraordinary, including your mother and mine. All women, including you and me, are engaged in an unending struggle to have their worth recognized and their potential realized. And the harder you struggle, the harder the world pulls against you, but eventually, the world must and will give way to us.

This probably has not been of much comfort to you. I meant it to be, but somehow, I must have gotten carried away. In any case, stay strong, little songbird.

Your friend and fellow in struggle,

Sarah Bernhardt

That night, she slept with their letters under her pillow, as if they were some kind of talisman to chase away the nightmares that had kept her from sleep.

Yvette entered her room the next morning with a tray of coffee and croissants. Elise watched sleepily from the bed as the maid pushed back the curtains, letting in the grey light of the rainy day.

"Have your breakfast, *mademoiselle*, and I will give you another note," she chirped, smiling knowingly.

"From Raoul?" She felt a sudden rush of hope, like a drowning man's first gasp of air upon being saved.

"No, not from the vicomte."

"Then from whom?"

"Eat your breakfast, mademoiselle," Yvette said with a laugh. "I'll be back in a

few minutes to clear it away and give you your note."

She pouted but got busy with the coffee and croissants. She wanted to read her letter, damnit! When Yvette returned, she handed the note to her and took away the empty breakfast tray.

The handwriting on the envelope was new to her, and she slid out of bed and went over to the window to have better light to examine it by. Unable to discern the identity of the sender, she opened the letter and read it.

"Mademoiselle Montfort,

You will, I pray, allow me to continue to call you that, since I believe that it is the name that you prefer.

We have never spoken much of things other than hemlines, décolletage, fabric and trim, but when one clothes a woman, one learns as well what her heart wears underneath the disguise of fashion.

I remember 'L'Affaire Channon.' Your mother was a good woman, mademoiselle. You are a good woman, too. You are young, beautiful and talented, with your life still before you. Do not let one man's evil steal that from you. Your mother did, and she paid dearly for it. Too dearly.

What I am trying to tell you with these clumsy words—and words come with great difficulty to a man who works with his hands—is simply this: Do not give up.

Do not surrender to despair. Do not give in to bitterness.

You will survive, but surviving is not simply overcoming. Survival is about becoming something more than you were before your trials.

Keep your heart strong and your head high, mademoiselle, and le Bon Dieu will take care of the rest.

Yours truly,

Jean Worth

P.S. Please remember that you have an appointment for a fitting with me on Monday at 3 o'clock."

She stared at the letter long after she had finished reading it. She raised her eyes to look out the window, absently watching the raindrops slide down the panes and fall on the hurrying parade of umbrellas below.

"Yvette!" she called out.

"Yes, *mademoiselle*?" the maid replied, popping her head into the room.

"Draw me a bath and lay out some clothes," Elise said firmly. "I am going out."

#### Chapter 14

Elise stood on the quay, watching the Seine. A few barges made their weary way along the rainy river. She stood under her umbrella, breathing in the freshness of the rainwashed air.

She would survive. She would overcome. She had enough money in the bank to go somewhere else, a place where she could start over. Her plans were still just forming, but at least she could see that there was a way for her now. There would be no more hiding, no more skulking around her flat or crying into her pillow. Jean Worth was right—Elise Montfort was stronger than that brand of self-pity.

While her brave resolve buoyed her practical spirit, her heart still ached for the love she had lost—a love she had never really even had the chance to taste. If she closed her eyes, she could still remember Marc's hands on her body, caressing her, learning every curve and secret place. She could remember his sweet, passionate words.

But no, he no longer loved her, if he ever had. She was the one who had gone and lost her heart. Well, she wouldn't indulge in that kind of self-pity, either. It would just take a while for her heart to heal, though a small voice in the back of her head feared that it never would.

"Elise!"

The voice that called her name made her heart lurch with a sudden, painful surge of hope, but she firmly reminded herself that the voice belonged to a man who had abandoned her. She steeled herself to turn and look at him.

"Monsieur le Marquis," she replied coolly, looking up at the man who was now at her side.

"I called, and Yvette said that you had just gone out," Marc said breathlessly, his

eyes wildly roving over her face and body. "I ran through the streets until I saw you, and I followed you here."

"Why would you bother doing that, monsieur?"

He clenched his jaw, his hands opening and closing at his sides as if he would grab her and pull her into his arms.

"Because I love you."

Elise laughed, a harsh, disbelieving laugh.

"Oh, really? And if so, why no word, no letter, not a single sign from you during all this time?"

Marc narrowed his eyes at her. "I called every day, twice a day. Yvette told me you were seeing no one, but I still called to make sure you were well enough. She told me every day how you were doing, and I was ready to do anything to help you, had you asked."

She remained silent and looked at him skeptically. She noticed that he looked tired—almost haggard. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the shadow of stubble clung to his jaw.

"You told me that you did not care for me, Elise. But I could not believe it then, and I do not believe it now."

He took her hands in his and pressed them to his heart.

"I do not blame you for not trusting me with the terrible burden you carried," he continued, looking deeply into her eyes. "You have had so little kindness in your life, and so many men have betrayed you or used you that you were not willing to let those defenses of yours down even for an instant."

He raised one of her hands to his lips and kissed her gloved fingertips.

"But I've told you this before, and I tell you this again. You can trust me. You can trust me to cherish you, to love you no matter what. No secret of yours can even make me doubt my love for you even for a moment."

"But—" Elise started to say, bewildered by his words and struggling between her desire to believe them and her resolution never to let herself be hurt by this man again.

"But nothing," Marc said fiercely. "Do you think I care about your past? Do you think that I would blame you for the terrible things that happened? No! All I feel is pity for the little girl that you were and an overwhelming love for the woman you are."

She felt tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, and she didn't trust herself to speak. She could feel herself surrendering again to this man.

"And do not think that I have been moping idly between the hours that I've called on you and stood outside your building, watching for you in the windows. There are events that I have set in motion that will bring good things to you, Elise Montfort."

She gave a half-sob, half-laugh as she listened to him. Jean Worth's words ran through her head, and she found herself wondering if she had the courage to take one more risk, to reach for this love that was being offered to her.

He seemed to solve that dilemma by gathering her gently into his arms and kissing her tenderly. Their lips met and melted together, tongues slipping and tangling in a longing dance. He tightened his embrace, as if he never wanted to let her go, and she held her umbrella over both of them.

She felt the wonderful, familiar coil of desire warm in her belly, but this time it was joined by a rapturous beating of her heart, for she was finally free of the guilt of the past, free to love and be loved.

"Marc," she whispered into their kiss, tears mixing with raindrops on her cheeks.

"My darling," he murmured back, grazing her lips with his teeth.

"Marc, there is something I must tell you."

He looked at her, a slight frown of worry forming between his brows.

"I love you."

The moment she said those worse, she felt that she had set off a bomb that had exploded the world around her. The past fell away from her like charred debris, and the ghosts of the dead dispersed like smoke on the wind. She smiled shyly up at him.

He gave a shout of joy and, wrapping his arms around her waist, picked her up and swung her around in dizzying circles until they were both breathless from laughter. The few people out on the rain-slicked streets looked askance at them, but she couldn't have cared less.

A carriage pulled up alongside them. She at first only noticed it from the corner of her eye, but when he turned and led her to it, she recognized it as his.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he helped her into the carriage.

"Home."

"Home," she repeated softly as he pulled her into his arms. A place to call home, and someone to make it a home with, even if it could never be so in name for she was still married, but all that seemed so insignificant now that she loved and was loved.

"Our home."

Elise laughed through her tears and threw herself at him, kissing him fervently all over his face, hungrily tasting his skin. To her surprise, he kissed her back, but held up a finger to pause her.

"What?" she asked.

"Not in the carriage. Not this time."

She giggled, remembering their infamous carriage ride.

"There are things I want to tell you, first. Things you need to know is about Gustave Dufarge."

She froze at the man's name, the smile fading from her face as her stomach filled with anxious butterflies fluttering in fear.

"He is not the only one who can dig up the past," Marc continued, a satisfied glint in his eyes. "At this very moment, the gendarmes of Paris should be at his door, taking him into custody."

"What do you mean?"

"Your friend, the Vicomte de Berrac, came to see me when he heard the news. He told me many interesting things about Dufarge, including his ideas on where Dufarge's fortune came from. Luckily, I found some connections that helped procure solid evidence of Dufarge's opium ring. Our government does not look kindly upon those who smuggle opium into our country, and officials like nothing better than to make a high-profile arrest that publicizes their cause."

"Arrested?" she gasped, not daring to believe her sudden good fortune.

"There's enough evidence that I have discovered to send him to prison for the rest of his life. For where there is opium, there is thievery and murder. It should suffice."

Elise felt the another weight lift off her shoulders, and she found herself shaking with relief. Marc held her tightly and grinned.

"Dufarge will not find prison a pleasant experience in many unexpected and delightful ways," Marc chuckled.

She found herself laughing with him, thinking gleefully of Dufarge's enforced penance, but she stopped as she realized she was not quite free yet.

"But even with him in prison, we are still married," she said sadly, hating to break the mood of ebullience.

Marc held her tightly as he spoke, "That cannot be helped at this moment, my darling. But I promise you that when Dufarge's trial is over and he is safely behind bars, and when the furor over your scandal has died down, we will work to get you a quiet little divorce from him."

"And should he not agree?"

"I will find a way to make him agree."

"And you still want me, even though I am still married to such a man?"

"I want you more than ever, Elise."

"Truly?"

"Truly. Now that all of that is out of the way, I propose to spend the rest of the carriage ride kissing my beloved...mistress," Marc chuckled at the irony of using such a

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#### term in that moment.

- "That's all you propose to do?"
- "Until I can get you into my bed!"
- "The sons of France are patient, indeed!"
- "The sons of France are going to show you some new tricks when we get home."
- "I can hardly wait," Elise sighed contentedly.

#### Chapter 15

In short order, Elise found herself once more entering Marc's charming house, inhaling deeply of the smell of freshly-baking bread and the scent of the flowers cut from the gardens that now stood in vases everywhere.

He brought her up to his bedroom, where a crackling fire took the chill off the rainy day.

"We're home, my darling."

"So what was it that the sons of France were going to do when we got home?" she said archly, peeling off her cloak and gloves.

"This."

He grabbed her and began tearing at her clothes. Laces were ripped, buttons flew everywhere, and every inch of newly exposed skin was licked, kissed and bitten. She was soon standing naked before him, the heat from the fire warming her skin as her lover's lips set her aflame. She reached to undress him, but he pushed her hands away with a wicked smile.

He knelt before her and cupped her buttocks with his hands, bringing his mouth to her sex. She gasped as his voracious lips and tongue dug into her folds, tasting her and plunging deep within her. He began to kiss and tease her clitoris with the tip of his tongue, flicking at it until she thought she could stand no more. He slipped a hand from her bottom and dipped his fingers in her honey, filling her with first one, then two, then three fingers.

Elise trembled and felt as if her legs would give out from the sheer pleasure of Marc's mouth on her pussy. She tried to rest her hands on his shoulders to balance

herself.

"No, stand, just as you are," he ordered.

Dizzy with ecstasy, she smiled and obeyed, moaning as he took his fingers from her slit and inserted one of them into her nether entrance.

"Louder!" he demanded, his mouth mauling her clitoris, his finger moving in and out of her.

She cried out loudly as her orgasm caught the breath from her lungs and held it captive. She gasped and shook like a sapling in gale winds as her body vibrated with untold pleasure. Her legs finally could support her no longer, and with his hands cupping her, she sank down to her knees and clung to him.

He continued to kiss her, exploring the curves of her ear and sensitive earlobe with his tongue as the waves of her climax ebbed.

"Now, undress me."

He stood up, pulling her to her feet. She eagerly set to her task, her own urgency making her rough with pulling the garments off him. Finally, he was naked as she was, and they stood together for a moment in front of the fire.

"I think we should get in bed," Marc said roughly.

"Not a chance. I'm about to show you just what the daughters of France are capable of."

He raised his eyebrows, but he was unable to voice an objection because Elise had captured his lips in her own, demanding kiss. She hungrily licked her way down his throat until she reached his chest. She ran her hands over the smooth, broad expanse of his chest, caressing it. She kissed each pectoral, then began to kiss her way down his hard abdomen. She glanced up and was rewarded with the sight of his eyes widening and his nostrils flaring with anticipation.

She gave a low, throaty chuckle as her lips reached his ready cock. Kneeling, she slipped her mouth around his cock, sucking on it and swirling her tongue around the swollen head. She let her teeth gently graze the shaft, catching on the crown, and she could feel the jolt of pleasure that shook his tall frame.

She teased his cock, starting up with a slow rhythm and building it up, then stopping and licking the shaft in random places. He growled in impatience when she did this, and she simply proceeded to repeat the treatment.

"Enough!" he hissed and yanked her to her feet. She gasped as he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder, carrying her over to the bed.

When they reached the bed, he threw her down on it and pinned her there with his own body.

"Wretched little tease! The daughters of France are going to get a spanking for

that!"

With those words and a quick laugh, he rolled off her, flipped her over on her stomach and delivered a lightly stinging slap to her behind.

Elise yelped with pleasure as the slap echoed between her legs. Marc lay down on his back and pulled her on top of him, impaling her on his cock, his hands around her waist. With an ease born of great strength, he pumped her up and down on his shaft, his face grimacing with the enormity of his need.

Each movement was pure torture for she as her clitoris rubbed against his cock. He took one of his hands from her waist and spanked her bottom as she rode him. Every slap brought her one maddening step closer to a powerful climax.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes!" she cried out as he spanked her.

"Say it!" he growled, his voice strained.

"I love you!" she gasped. "I love you, I love you, I love you, oohhh!"

They came together in a dizzying, explosive orgasm that robbed her of all her senses except for the awareness of a pleasure like none other she had ever known.

She collapsed onto his chest, and he held her tightly to him. She could feel the pounding of his heart match her own furious beats.

"I love you, Elise," he whispered. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, snaking her hands between his back and the covers.

"Elise?"

"Mmmm," she murmured lazily, too drained by pleasure to do anything else.

"There's something else I forgot to tell you."

She untangled her arms and propped herself up on her elbows to look down into his smiling face.

"And what is that?"

"Do you remember the question I asked you about whether you would still sing, even if you had everything your heart desired?"

She nodded, puzzled as to where this was going.

"Well, if you still feel that way, then I should let you know we will be leaving Paris in a few months."

"What do you mean?" she asked, a slight tug of apprehension squeezing her heart.

"I've made arrangements. I happen to be one of the more influential patrons of the Opera di Roma. I spoke with Signorelli, the manager there. He was astounded and

delighted to learn that Elise Montfort would accept the position of lead soprano with his company."

"I don't understand," Elise said, not quite believing her ears.

"If you want it, that is."

"To sing again?" she murmured wildly. "With the Opera di Roma? As their..."

"Their beloved diva."

"I can't believe it! But how..."

Marc gently caressed her cheek.

"Remember that I told you my mother was an opera singer with the Opera di Roma before she met my father? Signorelli was the manager of the opera when my mother was there. He is my godfather, in fact. So, he was happy to do me this favor...and pleased as anything to steal the most talented soprano of our time away from the Opéra Garnier."

Elise couldn't speak. The happiness that welled up in her throat choked off all the inadequate words of gratitude and wonder.

"We will winter in Rome and summer here in Paris," Marc continued dreamily. "It will be a good life, Elise."

"It will be a good life because it will be with you," she said softly.

And she knew that she meant it with all her heart.

**DUET OF DESIRE** 

La Belle Époque, Book 2

FIN

#### **AUTHOR'S BIO**



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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.

Check out Kate's latest books at www.sirenpub.com/kateseptember

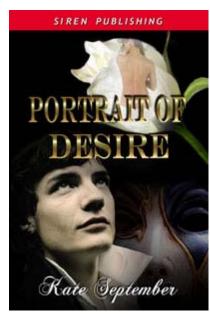
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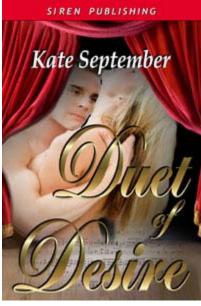
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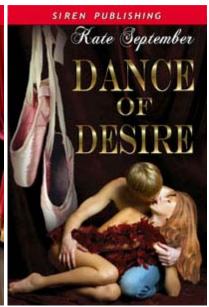
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