

Red Rose Publishing

Naughty Elizabeth's
**ROMANTIC
SURRENDER**

Anya Howard

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by Anya Howard

Red Rose Publishing

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Elizabeth's Naughty

Pursuits:

An Education in Love &

Passion

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Elizabeth's Naughty Pursuits: An Education in Love & Passion

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With heartfelt appreciation

To my publisher and friend, Wendi Felter,
and my astute Red Rose editor, Lea Schizas.

And with special commemorative to

Elizabeth Thuringen of Hungary,

forebear, lady and paragon

This book is dedicated to Robert Perry,

beloved teacher in lessons

of passion and discipline

Chapter 1

Introduction to M. Hunt

One night, my roommate Beatrice and I were unbraiding one another's hair for bed when she told me that Mother Superior had just approved the hiring of an American instructor. I nodded and twisted the ends of the strawberry wave at my shoulder, but the truth was this little piece of information quickly slipped my mind. I was still sulking over the unfairness of life—or that unfairness as I perceived it—at the moment.

I was having a difficult time forgetting Charles; one of the first young men who had shown romantic interest toward me. As a driver for the stationary company the nuns did business with, Charles' custom had been to come by once or twice a week on his motorcycle to make deliveries. Beatrice and I were, at that time, working as aides for Sister Edna, who headed St. Bianca's administrative office. This nun was very forbidding, and prone to listening in on the conversations of others. However, I was over eighteen years, considered of age in the land that had adopted me. Even social policy imparted her no choice but to allow me to converse at least a little with the young man.

And I had so adored our conversations! Soon Charles was spending all his lunch breaks with me in the office. Although the desk separated us, he would sit and talk to me all hour long. Even for a young woman with only limited acquaintance

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with the opposite sex, I found Charles undeniably attractive. He was not overly tall, instead slender, with fine lightly bronzed skin and sensitive black eyes. His Romanesque nose was finely proportioned, and his large eyes black as night. His thick black hair was longish and wavy. But it was his lips, so wide and sensuously molded, that were his most alluring feature.

Charles told me that while he had been raised in town his family had arrived from Corsica only three years before. I loved his accent! In fact, I loved his *everything* ... his manners and wit, the way his black eyes sparkled when I told him about my ambitions and interests. And I listened, enchanted, to his descriptions of our seaside town that lay beyond the stone walls of the school perimeters. Though the nuns advised me that my admirer did not have a good reputation, Charles was always polite.

As time went on, Charles began to hint at marriage. He told me he wanted to take me to meet his parents at their home.

"They claim I have no taste in girls," he said, "but they will be quite satisfied to meet you, Isabeau. You are nothing like the ones I knew before."

When I asked the Mother Superior if I might be permitted to go on this visit, she promised to take the request into consideration. In a few days she called me to her office and she told me she'd called Charles's parents and spoken about his request.

"It is their hope his intentions are as honorable as he claims," she told me. She seemed bright about the situation,

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enough so to be smiling that afternoon, which was a rare thing for our Mother Superior. "Nevertheless, they are concerned, Isabeau. You see, Charles has incurred his share of problems with our local officials; petty theft, vandalism, and small crimes. He is presently on probation. His parents would like him to wait a little while so he may prove to them he has broken all ties with his disreputable friends. When they are satisfied that he is worthy of a virtuous young lady, then they promise to give their blessing that he might escort you to their home."

It was good news and I should have been excited. But the yearning to be with Charles—in any environment outside the school and away from the scrutiny of the nuns—was strong. I thanked the Mother Superior and hid my disappointment.

And so, when the next day Charles arrived again, I could hardly restrain my emotions. He knew of his parents' decision, winked, and told me that the wait wouldn't be too long. He suggested the wait might be something to savor, a situation that could only intensify our anticipation to be with one another.

This day Sister Edna had allowed us to sit together on the little couch in the staff lounge. The door of the lounge purposely left open, of course. And it was here that Charles presented me with a small velvet gift box.

Inside was a bracelet, a wide, shimmering gold dangle. I had never expected a gift, let alone something so costly.

"You shouldn't have," I finally managed to say. "This is too much, Charles!"

"But you are lovely," he said, "and deserve lovely things."

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I saw the delight glitter in his eyes. And as he kissed my hand, my skin raised hotly under the tender brush of his lips.

More than ever I yearned to be alone with him. Then he whispered his secret intent, so no one but I could hear it, "Soon I shall have my parents' consent. And after your visit, we'll go into town instead of you returning here. I've already leased a small apartment there. It's not in a select district, but that is for the better. No one there will care how young we are, or about our upbringings. You shan't ever have to come back to the school, my love. You are of age, and I am as well. We shall have no one to answer to except *amore*."

A first prickling of apprehension struck me. "But Charles," I said, "Mother Superior says you have had some trouble. Are you not obligated to keep appointments with an officer of the law?"

He made a dismissive sound. "I do not wish you to be concerned. Be assured I will keep my regular monthly appointments with the officer."

Again, he kissed my hand, this time with more fervor, and I was intensely aware of his firm thigh pressed against my own. "We will be together and that is enough," he continued. "We shall live a bohemian life, you and I. You will have your art, I will have my motorcycle, and together, we will have love. That is all we need, yes?"

The ardor in his voice was enough to convince me. I nodded and felt a blush rise to my cheeks. Charles had a romantic ideal for our future. He said that when his parole was completed, we would move to Monaco. The border was only a few kilometers from our town, and his acquaintances

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there had already promised him a job working as a bartender in a casino at one of the smaller beachside resorts. I was thrilled at this point, yet he asked me to promise not to speak of our plans to anyone. I agreed most readily, and saw him then to the door. As I watched his motorcycle ride off through the school gates, I was delirious with prospect. I imagined how his real kisses would feel, and of the nights alone with him in that little room in town he'd spoken of.

The next day was a Thursday. Charles came by again, and at his most sincere gentlemanly request, Mother Superior allowed me to give him a tour of the abbey grounds. The sky was a bit overcast, the air very humid. We walked together with a temperate distance between us. None of the nuns or caretakers gave us the slightest disapproving glance. Whenever Charles glanced my way, my heart panged with the desire for him to claim my hand. This was improper, of course.

When I had showed him all there was to see, I remembered the flower gardens. The horticultural class cared for it; circles of beds of every imaginable flower grew there. These beds centered around the little fishpond, a natural spring actually, that piped up from an underground grotto spring. Wild pond lilies grew in abundance here; and portly gold fishes stocked the mineral-rich water. It was here we came at last to rest for Charles said he was thirsty.

I took a seat on the stone bench nearby, watched as Charles knelt down, and dipped his fingers into the water. I was admiring his slim back as he ladled enough into his hand for a drink. With thoughtless appreciation, I contemplated the

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snugness of the blue shirt he wore. I sighed, and the tone of it was wanton inside my ears.

It was then I felt the first moist sprinkles against my face. I looked up and noticed the clouds were fast clothing the sun.

"We must head back," I said, "before the rain begins."

But as the hesitant sprinkle turned to a savage mist, my Charles tossed me a mischievous grin. He loped over toward the bench and knelt down before me. He snatched my hands and turned my palms up. His mouth descended upon the flesh; and how warm and moist, and hard was his beautifully sculpted mouth against my skin. Even as the rain chilled my skin, my blood grew hot. More fevered his kisses grew, and taking my arm, his lips swept up the length of my arms. He grasped my waist, burrowing his face against my breasts. His lips nursed the nipples through my blouse. My nipples grew taut and alive with sensation.

I moaned and the wanton sound of it made me nervous. "Oh, Charles, what if they see us?"

He looked up at me, grinning through the mist now. Such a wickedly innocent bronze face! "They are all inside, hiding until nature decides to give them back their sunshine."

He laughed and I laughed, and the sound was music beneath the clap of thunder in the distance. My cobalt wool vest sweater was saturated straight through to my blouse. And then, he kissed me again and said not to worry; he only wanted a taste of me.

I cradled his face between my hands, kissing his brow with much humor. "What do you mean?"

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He lifted his hands to my drenched skirt and then smoothed the damp pleats of the blue on blue plaid fabric. Just this light touch made my body tingle. Then he lifted the hem back to reveal my thighs. I blushed hotly and was shocked when he told me to raise the skirt up to my hips.

"Oh, but I can't," I pleaded. Yet, I found myself glancing anxiously here and there for any sign of others. I wanted to please him; I craved his exploring touch as much as I feared being caught.

"Yes, you can," he encouraged.

I nodded, giggling. When I was satisfied we were quite alone in the torrent, I rose up enough on the bench and pulled the skirt up completely. With that done, he sat me back down, and raised the hem high over my thighs. His solid, long hands stroked my skin.

"You have lovely legs, Isabeau. Lovely legs that are mine, yes?"

I couldn't speak, but felt spellbound by the soft dark glow in his eyes. So I nodded and demurely touched his neck, admiring the flesh of his throat. Rough and smooth, just like his roaming hands.

"And these?" he asked, and before I knew it, his wonderful hands cupped my breasts. With his thumbs, he made little circles over my aroused nipples. How hot they felt as he stroked them.

"Yes," I breathed.

A pleased smile came to him and he bent forward and pressed his mouth to my throat.

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"All of my Isabeau, yes? From the crown of your head to the tips of your toes? Say these belong to me, my innocent Isabeau?"

I moaned in assent and felt one of his hands drift back down to my thighs. He whispered for me to part my legs, and as I did, his fingertips crushed my flesh hidden by the garment. With his other arm, he now grasped my waist and pulled my hips forward on the bench. I felt him trace the seamed contours of my pussy with his fingers and my sex burned beneath his fervent touch.

His face was against my cheek as he whispered huskily, "And this is mine, and only mine, Isabeau!"

A demure but desirous cry sprang from my lips. "Yes, Charles—oh, yes!"

He clasped my waist possessively now and drew me closer. I felt vulnerable on the bench; supported only by his steadfast arm. With his roaming hand, he spread my thighs very wide, and rising tall upon his knees, he massaged my pussy through the panties. My hidden flesh swelled and grew as moist as our rain-suffered clothes. He kissed me hard now. My mouth felt wondrously invaded, and desire rippled through every pore of my being.

"I want you so dearly, my innocent Isabeau," he murmured.

"I want you, too, Charles!"

His fingers strummed the very seam of my throbbing pussy. I felt the juices spurt between my nether lips. Then he backed away a bit, gazing at me intently, the smile on his face mysterious and deliriously frightful.

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"I love the aroma of your desire," he said, so clearly that I blushed for terror that the sweet words would carry to the ears of the nuns. "And soon shall I satisfy that desire."

I touched his face. So tender yet manly at once were his young features. I ached to know him utterly. "Oh, please, Charles!"

For the first time, he now glanced about. The mist had grown steady and dulcet in its descent. His hair haloed his face and neck with dripping black curls as he turned back. Kissing my lips most tenderly then, he glided me back on the bench so that the stone supported me once more. He stood up and positioned himself between my still parted legs. I saw the telltale bulge in his pants now. A giddy, greedy smile came to my lips.

Charles lifted my wet braids over my shoulders. "Kiss me another way now, Isabeau," I heard him say.

As I gave him a curious look, he unbuttoned his pants, and slid them down. Only a little, but enough to see the band of his black shorts underneath. He stroked my face again, then drew apart the folds of the shorts fly. His cock fell forward, long and softly scarlet, and as hard as the stone of the bench. It frightened me for a moment, though I was fascinated. My mouth parted and lips moistened as I stared at it. So smooth was the skin, the length of it garlanded with thick, pulsing veins. The head bulged with his need.

"Kiss me, Isabeau," he crooned, tickling my ear now with his caressing fingers. "Kiss me *fully*..."

He didn't have to ask twice. I sat up very straight and touched the organ. My fingers blazed at the hard heat of it.

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Gently, I scooped his balls out of the shorts as well. They were tense and well formed. I flicked my tongue across them, and my mouth riveted to feel the hard, uneven texture.

But I wanted more, so as I stroked these lovely globes, I kissed the head of his cock. It felt huge against my inexperienced lips. Charles made a pleased purr, and taking my hand, maneuvered my fingers so I was grasping the base. I smiled and slowly eased my hand down the length of him. Steel velvet it was to my touch. Timidly I stroked, looking up for his approval, and happy to find it burnished in his cheeks.

"That is good," he said lowly. "Do not be afraid to kiss it as you do that. Suckle it, just as you did the kiss from my mouth."

It sent another wave of giddiness through me. I did as he wanted and sucked the succulent end of his cock. It was salt and fire to my mouth. Charles began to gently rock his hips in such a way that the head slipped deeper into my mouth. In and out of my pursed lips the length of it moved.

"Do not be afraid to suckle it harder now," I heard him say.

I complied. It stuffed my mouth wholly and I so loved the taste of him. Every time the head slipped in or out of my lips, I nursed it just a little harder. His pelvis moved faster, and my head bowed up and down to meet him. I sucked hungrily now, and noticed his eyes had closed. My hands encircled his backside, and I clenched his flesh. I tore his pants down a ways, and kneaded his ass cheeks as I continued to suck his cock. He moved fluidly inside my nursing mouth. His buttocks

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were firm, the skin resilient and supple. My pussy panged with desire.

In and out of my loving mouth he moved, faster and faster. With his hands, he clasped my face, and I heard a moan pass through him. His hips rocked deeply forward, and his juices erupted. It came so fast that all I felt was his scorching juices jettisoning down my throat. But my mouth felt vibrant with heady flavor.

"Merciful angel," Charles whispered.

Slowly, I released his cock. I eyed the droplets of fluid that clung to the head, and licked these off. I kissed it tenderly, and washed the surface with my tongue. I pulled his pants back up, and watched with a rueful sigh as he worked his organ back into the privacy of his shorts. As he buttoned his pants, a broad smile touched his lips.

"You learn lessons quickly," he said. "If I were your teacher, I'd certainly keep you after class to demonstrate again!"

I blushed fiercely. He knelt and lifted my chin, kissing me sweetly and murmured in my ear, "You are mine, remember this."

I nodded, loving his possessive tone. But I was getting nervous, too, and asked him if I might stand now and lower my skirt. He answered by taking my hands and lifting me to my feet. He lowered the skirt himself and smoothed out the wet fabric.

"How unfortunate we got caught in this little shower," he said, lifting my braids and letting them fall over the front of my shoulders. "I will tell Mother Superior that in my

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eagerness to see everything, we got separated. You shall say nothing more, Isabeau, but nod most modestly."

I grinned at him. "You have all the answers, my love? All the answers, perhaps, but you don't have to guard yourself under the watchful eyes."

He took my hand and kissed it. "No, but I'll watch you very closely once you're out of here," he said with sudden gravity. "And no man had better try and claim what is mine."

The ferocity of his tone sent a new quiver of desire racing through me. The clouds were beginning to part, and the mist was growing languid. He gathered me into his arms one last time that day, and kissed me so fiercely it took my breath away. I stood dizzy under his dark gaze, and returned the fond smile on his face. We took hands and left the pond, making our way out of the gardens. When he had returned me to the administration office, and given his apology and explanation for our wet appearance to Sister Edna, I felt a great sense of deprivation. He left me with the most gentlemanly of farewells and then I returned to my duties.

My body ached and hungered for Charles all day. And my mind delighted in decadent fantasies about him long after I'd gone to bed. In the moonlight that streamed through the window that night, I admired the glaze of the dangle he'd given me. It still hung from my wrist, but I decided to get up and take it off, lest someone made some obscene speculation about it to see me wear it. In the simple little cedar box where I kept my rosary, and the bronze pin with a sculpted St. Francis, I placed my precious dangle. My body ached to see him once again.

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The week went by without his visit. And then, upon the following Monday, the police officers arrived at the school. They demanded to inspect my room. And with the consent of Mother Superior, they went through all my belongings. I was not even there, but in the stable, where I spent my spare hours. While feeding apples and sugar to the new mare that had arrived during the weekend, the sisters came with news the police were waiting to speak with me. I was shocked. Once inside Mother Superior's office, I was confronted by the officers, one of them dangling the bracelet in his hand. They demanded to know where it came from.

So grave was my fear that I couldn't speak until Mother Superior ordered me in her firmest tone to answer the men. I told them then how I came about it, all the while dreading I was only bringing more trouble to my dear Charles. My worry proved just, as the officers proceeded to tell me my gift was part of the loot taken when Charles had robbed a jeweler's shop in town. He'd also taken all the money that had been in the jeweler's safe box the night of the robbery. I was devastated to say the least. But worse, I was arrested, too, and brought to jail on charges of collusion.

The judge was rather sympathetic, however. Knowing my situation, he dismissed the charges with the Mother Superior's vow to keep me as a ward at the abbey school for the next four years. But he warned me that if I were to attempt to leave without proper authority from Mother Superior, he would have no choice but to officially recognize me as a suspicious citizen. Then, the judge claimed, would I

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be under the surveillance of the police, and possibly charged with vagrancy if caught on the streets.

My fantasy of enjoying a bohemian life with Charles came to an abrupt end. I heard he was sent to prison for his crime. Meanwhile, I, too, felt more of a prisoner of the abbey school than ever. Mother Superior was very kind to me, and entered me into the extended educational program, or as better known, the finishing school. I was to be initiated into the primer courses while completing my last year of formal education, and advance then into the main sorority. As the finishing school was usually undertaken by only the daughters of the wealthier patrons of the abbey, my dear Beatrice would be there, too. And Mother Superior pointed out to me there were certain opportunities in being a part of the sorority, such as trips to town to attend the theatre and ballet, and supervised dances with the young men from the Saint Sebastian College.

"Who knows," Mother Superior confided to me, "you might meet a proper young man at one of the dances."

As I loved horses, I decided to study in the field of veterinarian medicine. Someday I would leave the abbey, and had to have a background in some profession. Still devastated by the events with Charles, and lonelier than I wished to believe, I thought more and more about men, and used my experience with self-pleasure every night to relieve my desires. This wasn't quite satisfying, however, for I longed after the whole experience ... the passionate embraces and deep kisses; and to hear ardent expressions of returned desire from a man of my liking.

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In the meantime, curriculum demanded that I take at least one more foreign language course this coming last year of formal education. So during the summer I registered for the English class. Only a couple of weeks into the holiday, Mother Superior announced the old English teacher, M. Deakins, had taken ill and would have to retire. The entire student body was surprised to learn a few days later that the new instructor hired was an American, M. Raleigh Hunt.

As the days went by, I grew more restless. I did not look forward to my upcoming classes, especially after learning the names of some of those teaching nuns whose classes I'd been assigned to. I wasn't fond of Americans in general, as it was popular contention that they were all rude and ill-mannered boors. That Mother Superior had decided upon this M. Hunt didn't really surprise any of us. As old-fashioned as school policy could be, Mother Superior had been born in America, and it was no secret that she looked to culture a more tolerant attitude in her wards toward Americans.

Her sentiments aside, my friends and I did not lose time in making M. Hunt the object of our ridicule even before he arrived.

I was in the stable early one morning, grooming my favorite gelding, Pompey, when Beatrice came bouncing in. Beatrice was an effervescent soul, to say it kindly, who enjoyed nothing more than passing on gossip. And that day she had some juicy tidbits, which she'd heard straight from the mouth of Sister Edna.

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"The new English teacher is not only an American," Beatrice announced breathlessly, "but earned his teaching certificate while in the U.S. army!"

I regarded her with amusement. She was so excited to pass along the news that her braids literally bounced on her shoulders. And obviously she'd run very quickly from the administration office to tell me, for her knee socks were bunched down now around her ankles.

"You had better straighten your uniform," I warned her, "before Sister Edna sees it." Sister Edna was a stickler for tidy uniforms, and as I watched Beatrice pull up the socks and smooth down the pleats of her skirt, I remembered the last time the sister had caught one of her aides with slouched socks. The halls of the administrative office had literally echoed with the shattering sound of her merciless paddle as it reminded the offending young woman to be more careful with her appearance.

"I'm supposed to be on my break," she said pouting. "It's not fair the penguins think they can order us this way. Especially for those of us who have reached our majority!"

"So it'd be ideal," I sighed. "But they do, and that's all there is to it. Now, please, tell me all the details she divulged about this American."

"She was going through his records, quoting to me all his *impressive* citations," Beatrice continued with a roll of her eyes. "He was a security guard when he applied for the position. He'd worked as one since obtaining his degree in English in the military. Can you believe this, Isabeau? This is

his first teaching position! And we are to be the guinea pigs for his first venture in the academic life!"

I snorted as if not caring. Giving Pompey's neck a hug, I exited the stall and closed the gate. Placing his brush on the accessories table, I walked with Beatrice to the front of the stable. The sun was pouring in warm and full. We stood there with our backs turned to the sunlight, and lifted our braids so the warmth fell over the backs of our necks.

"I wish he'd stayed in the service," I said at last to her. "So predictable, however, this hiring of some military man. He's probably as regimental and lacking in personality as most of the nuns."

"And *American*," Beatrice sighed, again rolling her eyes.

"Yes," I said sourly. "And American!"

Beatrice snickered. "He probably wears a Mickey Mouse watch!"

I smiled. "And no doubt, dons only polyester suits!"

"And frequents country-western music bars!"

I laughed. "And doubtlessly doesn't know how to speak our language well, and accentuates the wrong vowels!"

Beatrice nudged me with an elbow. "And doubtless M. Hunt thinks the theatre is a place to go watch bad Science Fiction films and gorge on popcorn!"

"Oh," I added, enjoying the snide conversation, "I imagine he is fat, too, from his American diet!"

Beatrice's face pinched. "He likely eats pasta from cans and buys bread in plastic bags!"

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The image of the uncouth American made me grimace. "I can see him now, visiting the stockyards to drool over the mash set out for the hogs."

Beatrice laughed indecorously now. Sharing her humor, I pushed in the tip of my nose with a finger and grunted like a pig. In a mockingly American accent, I said, "I am M. Hunt, American teacher of English. Snort, snort, nice to make your acquaintance—now show me the way to the microwave oven!"

I continued to make these crude jokes, until Beatrice was laughing so hard her face turned red.

Suddenly, we heard someone clear their throat behind us. Beatrice and I both jumped, turning to see the silhouette of a man in the doorway. He strolled in slowly, and now I could make out his features. This man, dressed in grey wool pants and a pressed, flawless white dress shirt, was a stranger to us. At once I was struck by his intense dark almond-shaped eyes, which regarded me with a penetrating glint. I felt Beatrice's uneasy glance toward me, but I could hardly look away from this stranger. He was nothing like the monks who voluntarily came to help the nuns, or any of the old handymen or gardeners who tended the place. His close-cropped hair and thick mustache were dark like his eyes. But it was more for his robust build and the unreadable mien of his face that I was filled with an unexpected, and very warm feeling ... this, and the fact that he was so handsome, in the most virile of ways.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselles."

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The greeting made my heart flutter. His voice was melodious, and denoted with a slight accent. At the moment, I was too embarrassed to think about the accent. I was afraid he'd overheard my silly comments.

We both managed to give him our polite *bonjours*. But my once bubbly Beatrice seemed very anxious to leave now. I couldn't blame her; we knew nothing about this man.

"Come, Isabeau," she said, "I have an errand to do for Sister Edna. And I think you mentioned needing to file an order for more oats for the horses?"

I didn't know what she meant at first until I saw the suggestive arch of her eyebrow.

"Yes," I mumbled. I had to make myself break away from the gentleman's steady regard. "If you will excuse us, monsieur."

"Certainly," he said, and a subtly pointed inflection in the word made me glad when Beatrice took my hand. We hurried out of the stable and ran across the school grounds to the administrative office. It was a large wing inside the old stone wall abbey, and its interior renovations probably the most modern in the entire place.

Poor Beatrice seemed quite shaken by the time we reached the doors. "Who was that?" she asked.

I could only shrug, but the memory of his handsome face made me blush. "Likely, a new supplier from town. I know old Jacque was complaining last week that his truck was in need of repair."

She looked unconvinced. "But our suppliers are all so *old*," she said. "And this man is so—so—"

"Virile?"

She puckered, but I saw the subtle glow in her cheeks.

"Yes, Isabeau—*virile*."

We shared a laugh then, and I told her that I'd meet her in the dining hall at lunchtime. I watched her skip toward the path that led to the laundry rooms before I turned and went inside the office. Sister Edna stood behind the desk with her glasses slid far down her thin aquiline nose as she opened the mail.

Before I could greet her or even ask what duties she had lined up for me this day, she told me to dust the paintings and photographs in the staff halls.

"And try to do a more diligent job than Beatrice did last week," she said curtly.

It was evident that Sister Edna was in no mood for small conversation. With a polite nod, I headed quickly to the janitorial closet where the feather dusters were kept. I didn't mind dusting as much as I did some of the more distasteful duties Sister Edna liked to burden her wards with, such as cleaning the staff toilets. Still, there were dozens of paintings and pictures in each hall, and all together, there were five halls that branched out from the interior office behind the welcoming desk. The job would take hours. I might even have to delay my lunch, and I regretted this as Beatrice had promised the night before to show me today the letter she'd received from her betrothed, Gerald. He was a student in Brussels, and had met Beatrice whilst on a visit here to see his aunt, Sister Margot. It had been love at first sight, and everyone knew of Gerald's deep sorrow when he left to return

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to Brussels. For months Beatrice had delighted me by reading the sensuously-toned declarations in the letters that arrived regularly from Gerald.

As I started the dusting, I took comfort in knowing that at least Beatrice could share the letter that night when we went to bed. I think she enjoyed sharing the contents as much as I did hearing them.

I was barely halfway finished in the first hall when Sister Celeste came and told me to stop what I was doing. She was a dainty little teaching assistant who always appeared frightened by something. And now, she clutched her rosary very tightly as she gave me an apologetic look.

"You are summoned, mademoiselle," she said.

"Sister Edna?" I asked, with a restrained sigh. "But I am not even done with this first hall."

Sister Celeste lifted a pale finger to her lips. "Ssshh," she warned. "You know her ears are sharp, Isabeau. But no, it isn't Sister Edna. It is your new teacher who wishes to see you."

I frowned. The secular staff had not yet returned from their summer holiday, as far as I knew, and the teacher nuns had gone that day to visit the patients at the local hospital. Confused, I returned the duster to its proper place in the closet, and followed Sister Celeste down the hall that led to the welcoming area. Sister Edna was gone, and the whole place stood quiet. I glanced yearningly out the glass panes of the front door.

"Staff room *eight*," Sister Celeste whispered in her timid voice.

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I entered the western hall. The door of room eight was closed, so I knocked lightly.

"Come in," called a masculine voice.

Opening the door, I was startled by the figure I found seated behind the desk. It was the stranger from the stable. He sat far back in his chair, with his feet propped on the desk as he read a book. He looked up from the pages and he looked me. He pushed the seat back and lowered his legs. With a casual gesture, he motioned to the chair beside his desk.

"Come and sit down," he said. "And leave the door open."

I felt very strange on entering the room. It was a rather bland looking office, but, of course, there were several unpacked boxes sitting just under the open window, which indicated this new teacher had not yet settled in. On the far wall was a long, double-paneled blackboard just like the ones in the classrooms, and before the adjacent wall a magnificent bookcase, almost bereft of any volumes. The only comfortable-looking furnishings were the ornate grandfather clock that stood in one corner, and a leather sofa and heavy glass-top coffee table at the other side of the room. A small incense burner was set on the table. A richly scented smoke drifted into the air from a burning cone.

As I sat in the chair, the gentleman rose from his seat and came round to stand before me. I wondered who this teacher was. I could only suppose he was the replacement for some old instructor who had unexpectedly retired for one reason or another. He crossed his arms and gave me a smile that was as cool as it was tight.

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"I am M. Hunt," he said.

My heart quaked at hearing the name. For several moments neither of us spoke. I felt trapped under his gaze, and alarmed by the awful fear that perhaps he'd overheard the jests I had made in the stable.

Then he said, "You are called Isabeau I have been told, but your name is actually Elizabeth. Is this correct?"

"Yes, Monsieur," I answered, my mouth now terribly dry.

He nodded. "You are an orphan, but your parents were American."

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Strange," he said softly.

When all I could do was frown at this baffling statement, he took his glasses off and laid them on the table. He regarded me steadily. "I mean, Elizabeth, that you speak so politely for an American. And you see, I was very recently enlightened to the fact that Americans are only boorish pigs."

Panic gripped me. I looked skittishly toward the door. I could not believe the folly I'd gotten myself into!

In his unruffled voice, M. Hunt continued, "You can imagine, Elizabeth, how surprising I found this enlightenment on this first day after my arrival."

I was breathing hard as I sought the proper words for an apology. The words, however, eluded my desperate mind. As I raised my eyes and anxiously sucked my bottom lip, I was further intimidated by the raw virility of his handsome features. The smile had vanished from his lips now, and one of his eyebrows arched. The stern look he gave me was so

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daunting that I couldn't bear it. I looked down at my tightly clasped hands and hoped he'd sit back down.

"Oh, M. Hunt," I finally managed to whisper, "please accept my apology! I was so ill-mannered and thoughtless in the stable!"

I heard him draw a slow breath. "I accept your apology, Elizabeth. But, I do believe this is a most appropriate time to begin your education in the English language."

I looked at him timidly. "Truly, M. Hunt?"

He regarded me quietly; his penetrating eyes soft and hard at once. I shuddered, and hoped he did not notice.

"Yes. Do you see the blackboard on that wall, Elizabeth?"

I followed his eyes to the blackboard I'd seen earlier.

"Yes," I said.

To my surprise, he took my hand. His skin was warm and his grip firm as he raised me to my feet and escorted me to the blackboard. There, he picked up the thick piece of chalk lying in the board's caddy. I watched as he wrote some words in small letters across the board.

"Do you know what this says, Elizabeth?"

I studied the letters; but I had no idea as to their meaning.

"No," I answered.

He read the words aloud in English, and then translated, "*I will show proper respect to all my instructors, even M. Hunt, the American.*"

I nodded, but I was terribly disquieted. He spoke it again in English, and then asked me to repeat it myself in English. I attempted, but it was difficult. He told me to try again, and then a third time. Only then did he look satisfied.

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"Good enough for now," he said. "Now, Elizabeth, you shall write this sentence out yourself. You shall write it again and again, until you've written it a hundred times upon this board."

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't believe he wished me to do this, especially when he must have known that I had duties for Sister Edna.

"Monsieur, I do not have the time," I sputtered. "Sister Edna expects me to finish my dusting! And this is work for children, not—not..."

"Not you?" he said. He laid the chalk on the caddy, and set his hands on his hips. He gave me a stern look, causing me to cringe. "You are my student, and I will not stand for disrespect. You will write this out just as you've been told, young lady. And just be grateful I didn't catch any such mocking talk from your friend, Beatrice."

Suddenly, I thought of what Sister Edna would do if she caught me away from my duties, and worse, if she discovered the reason for my being away. The consequences of her finding out what I'd done in the stable were unthinkable. Beatrice had come to bed more than once with her bottom striped, swollen and throbbing after a chastisement from the nun's cane. The poor, weeping girl had been left with little choice but to sleep on her stomach!

I found myself shaking my head beneath M. Hunt's stern eyes. "OH, but I cannot, monsieur! Sister Edna..."

Before I could explain my objection, M. Hunt snatched my hand. He led me over to his desk, and without releasing me, sat back down in his seat. I started to demand to know what

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he was doing, when I saw the determined flare in his eyes. Without a word of warning, he pulled me straight over his lap. I gasped and felt my heart race.

"Monsieur!" I cried.

He cautioned me in his steady tone, "If you do not wish for me to call Sister Edna in here as witness, you will remain silent."

I felt his thighs part a little, so that my ass was up higher. My feet dangled over the floor. With his left hand, he steadied my back, while his right gathered the hem of my little skirt. I was chagrinned to know my panties exposed; but the next moment he yanked these down my thighs. I cried out in utter disbelief. Grasping one of his legs, I turned my head in order to see him.

"Monsieur, please!"

But he did not register my plea. Instead, he regarded my naked buttocks, which he now smoothed ever so lightly with his palm, circles he made over my bare flesh. I flushed painfully and squirmed over his thighs. Never had I know such consuming disgrace. I looked away again, and stared nervously at the hard, cold floor.

"No wonder you are such an insolent young lady," he mused. "Not one mark to indicate someone has taken steps to correct your behavior."

I wanted to plead again, but I was too terrified. All I could hope for was that my silence would gain his forgiveness.

That hope dashed seconds later when he raised his arm. His palm bore down hard across my buttocks. Smarting pain splayed across my flesh. I yelped and squirmed, but it was no

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use. M. Hunt spanked me swiftly and thoroughly now. His palm bore down with increasing fury, so that soon the sound of the spanking rang loudly upon the walls of the office. My backside stung with increasing heat. And though my hips danced in the desperate attempt to dodge each stroke, his aim repeatedly fell surely and squarely across my naked buttocks.

"Monsieur, please!" I wailed. The plea sounded pitiful to my own ears. I began to cry from the blend of pain and humiliation. But my tears M. Hunt ignored.

"I am sorry, Monsieur Hunt!" I wailed. "I am sorry!"

I remembered Sister Edna. Oh, if she saw me punished like this, she would surely punish me herself, too. So I sucked my lips together earnestly as I tried to suppress my cries.

But during the course of this thoroughly humbling chastisement I became aware of how muscular the lap was that I was propped over. I thought of how handsome M. Hunt's face was; how intoxicatingly dark his stern eyes were. Very unexpectedly, the pain of the spanking somehow mingled now with my attraction for him. I sobbed harder for this. And yet, to my disbelief, I felt an anxious twinge between my thighs. My little clit began to harden, and my virginal sex panged with arousal.

When my backside felt quite scalded, M. Hunt's chastising palm stopped. For a moment or two, he was content to let me dangle over his lap, and with fingers, patted my throbbing buttocks. Then he lifted me to my feet and looked at me as sternly as before. With a painful blush, I stooped to snatch my panties back up.

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"No," he said, "leave them down, just above your knees so you may walk. If I see you pull those panties up before I give permission, you will be spanked again. Is this understood?"

I was pouting as I nodded and wiped the tears from my cheeks. But I was too overwhelmed to meet his eyes now.

"Now," he instructed me, "you will go to the blackboard and write that sentence one hundred times, just as you were told before."

I nodded and started to turn and flee to the board, when he grasped my hand. My heart flitted as he corrected me, first in French and then in English, "Yes, sir, Mr. Hunt."

My lower lip trembled, but I was able to repeat the correction. "Yes, sir, Mr. Hunt."

"Good," he said. "Now you may begin."

As quickly as the lowered panties allowed, I rushed to the blackboard. I took the chalk from the caddy and looked up at the board where he'd written his example sentence. I was obligated to rise to my tiptoes in order to write my first attempt beneath it. This made the panties fall to my ankles and I sensed that the hem of my skirt had wandered up. My chastened bottom was exposed again. But I dared not yank it down, for I felt M. Hunt's eyes upon me. I was terrified Sister Edna could at any moment pop in unexpectedly. And just the knowledge of my teacher watching filled me with a new realization—for my sex was swelling now, and a trickle of hot moisture trickled out of my tightly seamed nether lips. A persistent and ever chafing need wracked my whole body. But there was nothing to do to veil this sensation. To disobey M.

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Hunt in order to pull up my panties would surely bring the severest of penalties.

Oh, I thought miserably, if Sister Edna were to walk in, I'd surely die with shame!

I wept harder as the seconds ticked slowly by on the grandfather clock. Never had I known such a sense of contrition. Silently, I promised myself to never again behave with such malice toward a teacher. And never, ever, I vowed, would I dare try to explain my way out of any punishment set by the uncompromising M. Hunt.

Chapter 2

Lessons and Liaisons

The double blackboard filled up a first time, and there was simply no more space to write the sentence: *I will show proper respect to all my instructors, even M. Hunt, the American*. Without turning, I informed M. Hunt in a trembling voice. He came over and counted the numbered sentences, and when he was satisfied that there were fifty-two, he told me to erase them all and continue. By the time I had accomplished this, and then wrote out the last of the one hundred, it seemed I had been in the room a very long time.

I had felt his gaze nearly the entire time, and the chafing frustration had turned into a cruel and wanton need. So many times I'd found myself wanting to rub my pussy, which felt sticky as I stretched up or bent down to write on the chalkboard. When I moved across the floor to begin a fresh column, my panties would start to slip down. I knew what to expect if I pulled them up, so was obliged to handle the situation as delicately as discomfiture allowed.

As I made the last period to the one-hundredth sentence, M. Hunt walked over. My face burned anew to feel his closeness. So tall and formidable this man, and my mouth was parched with apprehension. I could not even raise my head as he inspected my work.

"Very good, Elizabeth," he said. "Now, you will leave these here and adjust your underwear. You are excused ... for now."

I nodded earnestly, and had to blink back the fat tears of contrition that welled in the corners of my eyes.

"Merci, Monsieur."

He corrected me in English, "*Thank you, sir.*"

"Thank you, sir," I whispered.

I pulled my panties up quickly, and shaking, managed a little curtsy. Without even looking up, I ran out. My heart was racing hard. It was only as I entered the shady halls that I realized I had forgotten to give a last convincing apology. I was terrified he might think my earlier ones had only been uttered for his mercy. My buttocks still stung from the spanking.

What if he decided to tell Sister Edna?

The thought made me hurry back to my chores. Mercifully, Sister Edna must have taken one of her customary naps. She had not discovered my delay in dusting.

I did meet Sister Celeste on my way out of the administrative office. I could only look at the young nun skittishly, as I knew my cheeks were probably still red from crying, and my ass felt so swollen under my uniform skirt. She gave me a bland smile as she opened the door for me.

"I *heard*," she whispered. "Does he have a firm and pleasing hand, Isabeau?"

She startled me, as much for the understated strain in her voice as the question itself. I looked at her fully then, and was taken by the mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

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But the only answer I could give was a nod.

"He is a very becoming man, yes?"

I could not respond. But M. Hunt's handsome face crested before my vision. So clarified was the vision I shuddered, my body feeling scorched. I was grateful that Sister Celeste made no further comment or question about the matter. She only beamed, and giving me a wink, told me to get something to eat at the cafeteria.

* * * *

That evening Beatrice was all sympathy and consolation. We'd returned together to the dormitory after meeting for supper in the dining hall. The dormitory was in actuality just a sorority house that stood separate from the abbey/school proper; a long, two story stone and mortar house with a four-sided mansard roof. Once we reached the room we shared, I immediately took a shower. Beatrice came into the bathroom, as was her custom, and began to chat. She was reviving some conversation between herself and Marcella DeLeux—the two had never gotten along—when suddenly she pulled the curtain back and noticed the marks left from my chastisement. At her questioning over how I received them, I gave only the concise version of what had befallen me that day. She was my roommate and best friend, generally we shared every experience and thoughts in detail. But every time I thought to tell her the full scope of what I'd experienced that afternoon, the words failed me. Emotions swept through me to remember being over M. Hunt's knee, of the severe spanking he'd dealt. And then there was the

equally humiliating desire that the situation had unexpectedly kindled in me.

Beatrice, of course, fired off a dozen questions. "Yes, it was M. Hunt. He had overheard us at the stable, or at least he heard me," I told her while rinsing the last of the shampoo from my hair. I couldn't hear her under the running water, and hoped the curt way I had said it would content her. "And so he—he just corrected me. That is all there is to it."

Beatrice left it for awhile. But after I'd come out and had dried she offered to massage some lotion over my backside. I was still naked, lying on my stomach, as she got up and kneeled on the mattress over my legs. My buttocks were still quite sore, but the cool rose-scented lotion spread out under her gentle hands took some of the heat away.

"I do not believe you, Isabeau," she said bluntly.

"What do you mean?" I asked, lost for understanding at the accusation.

"I mean, there has to be more to it than that," she said. "To be spanked so thoroughly, and by a teacher who was a stranger until today ... his hand chastising your bare flesh? Oh, this must have been very embarrassing."

"Yes, certainly it was," I said softly.

"And then be made to keep your panties lowered. Sister Edna could have walked in at any moment. You say that is all there is to it. I think not."

I turned my head and gave her an exasperated look. "There is a point to this observation you make?"

She nodded, looking down very thoughtfully as she continued to massage. "Either you are very angry and very

contrite. Or you are stirred at the same time by this stern M. Hunt."

My cheeks prickled hotly. Trying to ignore this, I gave her a flippant reply, "Don't expect to pass psychology class with your usual breezy grapple, Beatrice."

She poured some more lotion into a palm. "There is no shame, you know. Some muse that it is natural to feel this way. For M. Hunt to fluster the carnal senses during chastisement is a superior chastisement. A control, a discipline, and a reminder of your vulnerability for the passion incited by your chastiser."

"Where do you hear these things, my friend? Surely not from the nuns."

She smiled. "Ah, there are some passages from the letters that my Gerald sends that I do *not* share."

I squealed with amusement. "Beatrice! Here you are attempting to coax me into some confession, when it is you and your decadent suitor who are in need of confession! Such shame, my dear."

"Shame? No. I am no more pious to this faith that is foreign to my constitution than you."

With this said she gave my buttocks a smart slap and moved off my legs. She lay down on her back atop the mattress and crossing her arms behind her neck, looked at me.

"Ouch," I muttered, rubbing the spot she'd slapped. "Wait until it's your turn to bend over M. Hunt's lap!"

"I don't think that will happen," she said. She smiled brightly then, and lifted a brow. "M. Hunt has chosen."

"Chosen? What do you mean?"

"If he wanted to punish me, I am sure he would have already. I am just as guilty of impertinence toward him as you, Isabeau."

I shook my head. "No, it is only that he didn't hear what you said."

She giggled then, which made me flush for all her implications. I opened my mouth to say something in my own defense when a knock sounded at the door.

Sister Anne, the house-mother, spoke from the other side, "Isabeau? Please get dressed and come down to the sitting room? You have a visitor."

Beatrice and I stared at one another.

"Visitor?" I whispered. My breast twanged with fragile hope. Could it possibly be Charles, returned from prison already?

She made a bemused expression. "Isabeau is dressing, Sister!" she called. "And will be there promptly!"

Sister Anne muttered a satisfied confirmation, and we listened as her footfalls indicated she had left. Beatrice moved off the bed and reached for my clothes that were draped over the chair at our little reading desk.

"Who do you think it is?" I asked.

She tossed my uniform on the bed and pulled out a fresh pair of socks from my dresser. Her wink as she turned did nothing to calm my nerves.

"Get dressed," she said with a little smirk. "I can't wait to hear the scandalous details!"

* * * *

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I descended the staircase and found that the front room was empty and nearly dark as the electric lights had been turned off. The only illumination was from a votive candle burning near the statue of the Virgin on the small altar that stood at the interior fore wall. The foyer floor was aglow from lights from the salon, where I could hear the television and the sound of other girls talking and laughing. I crossed the foyer to the door of the sitting room. This long, rectangular room with its cedar hard wood floor was brightly lit as I entered. To my surprise, Mother Superior was here, standing beside the grandfather clock opposite the door. She turned and greeted me with her usual cordial smile.

"Good evening, Isabeau," she said.

I curtsied. She took my hand and led me to toward the end of the room where there were a few furnishings and a trim bookcase. To my utter disbelief there upon the loveseat sat none other than M. Hunt. He had changed clothes; wearing now soft charcoal wool pants and a dress shirt of royal blue. But I only noticed these things; for at once perspiration dewed over my body, and my eyes lowered consciously.

"I have been informed that you have already met our Monsieur Hunt," I heard Mother Superior say. The possible implication did not pass over me, and my heartbeat grew rapid from dread.

"Yes, Madam." I heard M. Hunt rise from the sofa, and I felt near panic.

"It was a pleasure," he said.

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I gaped at him; I could not help it. His face was the epitome of repose; and yet, there was a glint, smoldering yet guarded, in those penetrating dark eyes. It made me wince and tingle, and I had to fight the urge to stare at his hands. Hands that had drawn me over his strong lap; hands that had chastised me and imparted such unaccustomed indignity. Hands that had whetted a frustration inside me that even now panged for its urgency.

"Isabeau?" Mother Superior gave me a pointed look. "M. Hunt just gave you a compliment, my dear."

I managed to nod, and somehow spoke a hoarse *thank you* to my new teacher. This brought a curious purse to Mother Superior's mouth. But it only lasted a moment or two.

"Your new English teacher has excellent news for you," she announced. "He wishes to honor you with private lessons before the semester begins."

Silence resounded heavily through the room. I blinked and stared at my teacher. Whatever reaction he saw on my face brought a softening to his own regard. He stepped toward me and offered an affable smile.

"I have time to tutor one student. And as we became acquainted today in the stable, and as I know your parents were American, I deemed that my attention will be well spent giving you a brief pre-semester introduction into English."

I did not know how to respond, and wondered how to stifle my instinctive protests if I dared to open my mouth. The man was audacious! Obviously, he had not yet forgiven me. But instead of informing Mother Superior of my poor behavior, he sought to further punish me himself. It was cruel!

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"Have you anything to say, Isabeau?" Mother Superior asked in a decidedly cheerful note. "Is this not gracious of M. Hunt?"

I was stunned. Private lessons? What did this mean? As I studied M. Hunt's face, I saw nothing in his expression to indicate that he indulged anything except the most proper of motives. But there in his eyes was the glint that Mother Superior was so oblivious to ... like burning amber it was, and as now he looked me up and down with that sublimely satisfied look, my skin felt branded by his gaze. I remembered how he'd thrown me across his lap. I felt again each stinging, humiliating spanks he had given my bare, uplifted ass. My pussy quivered with the memory, and moisture scalded my tender, hidden flesh.

"Gracious," I said softly. "Yes, Mother Superior."

I implored Monsieur Hunt with my eyes as I said, "Thank you, but do you truly feel that this is necessary?"

His voice held a caveat undertone, "Yes, I do, Isabeau."

I bit my bottom lip, but tried to appear serene, even grateful. But I was close to weeping with frustration. "Thank you again, M. Hunt."

"Mother Superior," he said, "I believe this room will serve for the nightly lesson—if it will not interrupt the other young ladies?"

Mother Superior gave a wane smile. "I wish it would, Monsieur. Alas, most of our young ladies are not overly interested in literature any evening of the week. Except for Isabeau. She has always been a little *bookworm*, as you would say."

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He nodded. "Very good then." He looked at me again, and taking my hand so quickly that I jumped. One of his brows lifted as he raised my hand and kissed it. "Elizabeth, are you so frightened of an old man like me?"

When I did not reply he said with a touch of humor in his voice, "Expect me tomorrow evening at promptly 8 o'clock ... if we do not run into one another before then."

A *thank you* fumbled over my lips. "May I be excused, Mother Superior?" I asked.

She tweaked my cheek, a fond gesture she'd not made in years. "Yes, child."

I was blushing with relief as I left them and hurried back upstairs. Thankfully, Beatrice had fallen asleep under the covers when I re-entered our room. I was spared having to give her my news at least for one night. I don't think I could have found the courage to tell her; for as I crawled into bed anxiety seized me. I had no doubt of how demanding a teacher M. Hunt would be. And yet, my terror was mixed with immoderate appreciation for his virility and good looks. Even the thought of what he would do if I failed to please aroused me in some way. I wept for this feeling. I longed to pleasure myself as I'd done many times before; yet, this, too, seemed forbidden to me ... as if my teacher held some remote possession over my desire and will.

I was over his lap again in dreams that night. He had my wrists pinned to the small of my back with his left hand. He'd found me playing with myself, and spanked me now with his inflexible right hand until my backside was throbbing sore. And, when finally the spanking was over, his hand drifted

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down between my thighs. He tweaked my clit, and massaged it back and forth between his fingers. Delicious sensation spread through my whole pussy, and the longer he tormented my clit, the more intense the sensation focused within it. My pussy grew slick and my pelvis undulated over his muscular thigh. I moaned and begged him to explain why he so tormented me.

"Naughty, naughty little girl," he whispered.

His forefinger slipped into my fount. I cried out, and my body tensed as very slowly he fucked me this way. In and out his finger pumped my sodden sex, flicking my clit every now and then with his thumb. Shivers of fire spiraled up my spine. It was all I could do to restrain my body from displaying my mounting arousal.

"OH, Monsieur!" I cried. Suddenly I was very nervous and tried to keep my voice low, "Please, you will be found ... I will be found ... they shall see what you do! Please, Monsieur Hunt!"

He did not respond, except to focus his attention to my clit. He massaged it roughly now, so that my pussy ached and the little organ itself felt close to bursting. My frothy juices spilt down across his lap and, mortified, I cried with shame and agonized passion.

Just as I was about to come I awoke. The little bedroom was dark except for the moonlight that filtered like milk steam through the window curtains. Beatrice slept beside me in the bed, breathing deeply, slowly. Her face was that of an innocent angel. My heart was racing, and my body trembling and beaded with musky sweat. I tried to go back to sleep, but

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my thoughts were fraught with images of M. Hunt. I wondered where he was; what virile, fascinating things he was doing. Perhaps he was in town enjoying a beer or glass of wine, maybe watching the dancers at the cabaret or taking in an erotic film at the cinema. Or perhaps he was getting for bed in the little cottage that he occupied on the school grounds; shaving his smooth chin or taking a shower.

And I wondered, if by any chance, he had thought of me at all since last we had spoken.

* * * *

All the next day I felt anxious, especially while doing my chores at the administrative office. But I only saw him once, when he went out to get lunch. I was standing behind the office desk stapling memos for Sister Edna when he hurried out. So brisk was his intent that he did not see me.

Sister Celeste entered through the same hallway that he had passed, and stood at the door a few moments; studying it with the most peculiar of smiles. She turned then, and seeing me, gave a little smile, as impious as my dream the night before.

She tiptoed up to the desk and whispered, "Did you have no greeting for our new school master, Isabeau?"

Her tone was annoying, and I remembered her question of the day before. "You are impertinent, Sister Celeste," I replied.

I tried to ignore her then, but I couldn't help but hear long sigh she made. "Ah, but I will not be here long, Isabeau. I am leaving."

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This drew my curiosity, and I looked at her again. "You will be going to another abbey, Sister?"

She shook her head. "I have renounced my vows."

I was incredulous. "Is this a jest?"

"No," she said. She was radiant. "I have met a gentleman, Isabeau. And he is most anxious for us to be married."

Now I understood her impertinence. Why, she was as warm-blooded as most other women. "Oh, that is lovely!" I said. "But will you not meet the censure of the Church?"

She gave a dismissive shrug. "I do not care. I renounce it as well. At least the antiquated dogma. I will be leaving next month, dear Isabeau. Please wish me happiness?"

Sister Celeste beamed, and truly she looked young and vibrant now to me. "I do wish you happiness," I said earnestly. "I had wondered why you had spoken so ... *familiarly*." My face scalded to recall she knew about my chastisement at M. Hunt's hands.

"I have discovered that life is too short and precious to waste on ritual without feeling," she said. "The man I have fallen in love with is a policeman, a stern and passionate man. He is the kind of man in whose arms, and under whose authority, I am most content. It is a reciprocal bondage you see. There is no room in my life anymore for obeisance without expectation of adoration for my capitulation; no patience any longer for service without passion. And I suspect, Isabeau, you are close to embracing a similar outlook."

I stared into her sweet, knowing eyes. Grief panged in my chest. Yet, I dared not confide in her, for to do so would only

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acknowledge the passion that was taking root in my own heart. Such acknowledgement could only leave me vulnerable to the ultimate pain of rejection. And the object of my desire was, surely, unobtainable.

Sister Celeste was kind enough not to pursue the subject any longer. She reached over the desk instead and kissed my cheek. With a pat on my hand she went down the hall from where she'd emerged; with a bounce to her step as light and blissful as any romantically lucky young woman.

My addled nerves made it impossible to really enjoy dinner. But as Beatrice and I shared our meal together in a booth in the cafeteria, she pressed me for the cause of M. Hunt's visit the night before. The other girls at other booths and tables were immersed in their own conversations, and so I told my friend all the details. I expected her sympathy, but was surprised by her blithe reaction.

"It is as I told you. Remember? He only wishes to be near you."

"I can do much better with him keeping his distance."

Beatrice looked doubtful. I scowled at her and she said, "But Isabeau! There is no reason for you to be afraid. He will try nothing so audacious as he did before—not with the nuns in the house."

I muttered impatiently, "No, Beatrice, of course not."

She gave a tender but amused little laugh, "Maybe he will just devise some exaggerated claim of insolence an excuse for Sister Anne to strap you across the Bench."

The Bench. The very word made me shudder. It was Sister Anne's favorite vehicle to administer punishments. A long

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leather-covered bench that stood before a high dressing mirror in the downstairs hall foyer. It stood upon wrought iron legs, a horizontal crosspiece at the front of it that faced the mirror. The student who was unfortunate enough to be laid across the Bench would have her arms stretched far to her side of the crosspiece, and her wrists secured there by leather-covered buckles at either end. Her feet were secured into stirrups at either side of the bench's end, and by leather buckle straps. There was a narrow, leather encased shelf at the upper end, cupped in design so that the chin of the punished was positioned just right so she had to face the mirror while receiving chastisement. This was given usually via a birch switch. Sister Anne kept the switches green and supple by storing them in a canister of spring water that stood on the floor beside the mirror. I had never received punishment at the Bench, but had witnessed others strapped there; their skirts raised and their panties pulled down. Sister Anne had laid many welts across the bare bottoms of those students who had roused her disapproval. And woe to those who had attempted to close their eyes in order not to see their punishment in the mirror! Those petulant ones then had to suffer what Sister Anne called *the round*. She would order the rest of us to form a line, and we were expected to take turns flogging the guilty girl. One swift, sound stroke each were expected to deliver; and there were between twenty and thirty of us residing in the sorority house at any given time. I could not imagine what the sting of the birch switch imparted on the bare buttocks, nor did I wish to. And the thought of

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having to watch one's own chastisement in the mirror was just too daunting to contemplate.

I was horrified. Hot tears stung the corners of my eyes. "You are cruel, Beatrice! I have been miserable all day over this smug man and you do nothing but tease me!"

"Isabeau, give me some credit. Your English teacher is smitten, and his firmness fascinates you. I heard you moaning last night in your sleep!"

I frowned crossly. "I did not!"

"You did."

That was the last thing I needed to hear, and glad when two of our friends, Hannah and Andrea came over to the booth. Andrea sat beside me and Hannah plopped down beside Beatrice. At once Hannah started complaining. Reliable, always-suffering Hannah. This evening she grumbled about her split ends. The other two started to give her suggestions, and I listened and nodded now and then with much feigned interest. Sidetracked by Hannah's problem, Beatrice dropped all talk about M. Hunt.

* * * *

I returned to the sorority house after dinner to wait for M. Hunt. My only company was the grandfather clock with its lulling, heavy ticking. I could hear the other girls in the house at the time; talking and laughing. *None of them have to start lessons before semester begins*, I thought resentfully. Not that I really wanted anyone giggling about my predicament—and several of the girls were cruel enough to do that if they were to find out. I was rapt to any sound outside the door,

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which I'd left ajar. It was not long before I heard the knock on the front door, and Sister Anne went to answer it. Her voice was crankier than usual as she admitted M. Hunt.

"Good evening to you, too, sister," I heard him say, to which Sister Anne replied with a grunt.

There was a sharp note of sarcasm in his voice, "A pleasant one for you, I see."

I braced at the sound of his approaching footfalls. And glancing nervously up at the clock face, I noted that it was precisely 8 o'clock.

He was carrying a briefcase in his left hand, and two books were stuffed under his right arm. At once I noticed the spectacles he wore; light silver frames that complimented the brunette of his trim hair. They lent him a studious look, one more sober and older, too. He was dressed casually this evening; in dark cotton blend pants and a turquoise polo shirt. For the first time I could see his bare arms; muscular without being bulky. Definitely not the arms of a bookworm; but rather strong and virile. It was no surprise he had been a military man. He wore loafers, too, somewhat tatty, but comfortable looking.

"Good evening, Elizabeth."

"Monsieur," I said.

He regarded me a moment, then walked to the drawing area, where the furniture was and set his things upon the low table there. My legs did not want to move, so I just stared as he took a seat on one of the plain wooden chairs.

"Come, sit down," he said, gesturing to the loveseat.

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My heart raced as I moved forward. I prayed he didn't see how anxious my breathing had become. As I sat down he looked over to the door. And there, peeping inside was Sister Anne.

"Sister?" he asked.

She did not answer, but purposely pressed the door a little farther open. And raising her head and giving him a forbidding look, turned and left.

M. Hunt opened one of his books. "I suspect she thinks I'm treading on her territory." And looking up, he flashed me a grin. "Intimidating, aren't I?"

My face panged, and I smoothed down the pleats of my skirt as if indifferent.

"Ah, well," I heard him say in English. He turned the book pages until he reached the beginning of the first chapter. And leaning a bit forward in his chair he said now in French, "The first thing I wish to stress about the English language is that it is a language without conformity to its own rules. To speak it properly is much easier than to understand the mechanics of the language. It is only after the basic articulation is grasped that one should try to understand the nuances of the sentence structures. Without a doubt, English has subtleties of expression not found in other languages—just as French does—and therefore can articulate suggested emotions and ideas in a myriad of ways that you are unacquainted with. This is primarily due to the intricacies of its bastardized conception, of course. But as I said, the rules of spelling are contradictory. And so, I want you for now to concentrate on

the articulation, and try to ignore the contradiction of spelling of the words and phrases which we will commence with."

I nodded and regarded the page his fingers rested upon. Yet, I felt his gaze on me, and could hardly get out of my thoughts how very attractive the turquoise shirt was upon him, or how perfectly masculine were the shapes of his arms.

He showed me two flanking lists upon the page. The words on the right-side list were English, those on the corresponding list in French.

"*Hello*," he said, pointing to the topmost word of the English list, and then to its French definition, "*Bonjour*."

I felt his expectancy and repeated, "*Hello*."

His finger moved to the second word, "*Thank you—Merci*."

This, too, I repeated. He continued down the lists, and seemed satisfied when we had completed them both. A second time we went through the words.

"Very good, Elizabeth," he said. "On the next pages are some common phrases. Don't worry—I won't bite you if you mispronounce them."

I looked up at this, and seeing the pleasant expression he gave, smiled timidly. "Yes, Monsieur Hunt ... I mean Mister Hunt."

"Just call me *sir*."

I was almost afraid to ask. "Sir?"

"Monsieur," he said. "Sir. Not in the aristocratic denotation, but a respectful common way to address a gentleman."

I nodded again, and looked to where he pointed at the next page.

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The lesson continued slowly, and M. Hunt was very patient. Not once did he scold me or raise his voice to correct me. For this I was relieved. After a couple of hours, he said we'd gone over enough for the evening. But he wanted me to keep the student's copy of the book which he had brought, and told me what pages to study the next day. I sighed, and took it without response. But I was not happy. And while though I heard, faintly, other voices in the house, it was not this time envy for the other girls that aggrieved me.

M. Hunt's voice was polite as he bade me goodnight. I held the book as he departed. Although I pretended to be sifting through the pages, my eyes were following his every tall, straight step. Once out the room, he must have let himself out, for he spoke not a word before I heard the sound of the front door open, then close.

I was alone in the room again with only the sound of the seconds ticking on the grandfather clock. Achingly slow they seemed to pass by on the face. Nothing like the rapidly passed time spent with my teacher.

* * * *

The next few days passed calmly. The English lessons continued as that first evening—routinely, cordially, without incident.

But I was having trouble falling to sleep at nights. My every moment was filled with thoughts of M. Hunt. I could not forget the humbling incident the first day we'd met; and as thorough as that humbling had been, I had come to blame myself entirely for it. Now, frustrated by that image, and

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seeing him every night imparted a strange and every-growing anguish. I wanted something from him, something more than the mundane relationship of student and teacher. Never such poignant misery had I known than to look at him while he sat there in the chair across the table from me evening after evening. His eyes usually kept to the book as he spoke, or when he did look at me, his face betrayed no emotion except that of sublime fortitude. I did so love to see his happy expression when he'd compliment me for achieving a difficult pronunciation. The corners of his dark eyes would crinkle then. Soon I was admiring their almond shape, and too, the faint dimple that appeared in his left cheek when he smiled. I studied the firm contours of his wide neck, and noticed, too, how very fine and glossy his hair was. His hands were art—strong and wide—with fingers smooth despite their thickness. His lips were very sensual, and of a shade deeper than was common. His shoulders were quite compact and sturdy.

I think it was his mustache that most gave him his imposing quality. It reminded me of a sage rider from an American western film. It imparted a dangerous mien that was irresistible.

During the next few evenings I gleaned more about M. Hunt than I had expected to. In little remarks and small confidences offered during the breaks that he took to stretch his back, and the times when he stayed particularly late and Sister Anne would bring tea or cordials. In time I knew he had joined the military at the age of seventeen. He had forged his father's signature to the legal form in order to accomplish that. Two years after basic training he had gone on to become

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a radar technician, and later still, gone into some secretive branch of the military. But after a time he'd grown bored with the life. There had been no war at the time, and—as he'd put it—he had long sought to be on the front lines of something. So in his spare time M. Hunt had taken college courses offered on the various bases where he had been stationed. And in time he had earned a certificate in teaching and a doctorate in languages.

But it was his musings over his family that caught my attention most. He was not so close to them, his mother was quite high strung and his father an alcoholic. The details, of course, he did not elucidate on, but it was evident that he while he loved them, theirs was a distant family.

"I entered the military with the unconscious desire to win my father's approval," he told me once. "But it was for my mother that I became a teacher."

"She was a teacher?" I asked.

M. Hunt gave a humorless smile and sipped his cordial. "Well educated. But lacking the patience to achieve what she sought. Yet, this did not stop her from believing that she was smarter than most others. And it was a belief that she never let me forget. Her hopes and aspirations were directed toward my brother, and she spoiled him terribly."

I felt bad to hear this and told him I thought that most unfair.

"It made me a very determined man," he said with a shrug. "And my brother, well, he is a used car salesman today."

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He turned the topic of conversation then and asked me to recite a group of English pronouns. But I could not quiet the compassion that swelled in my heart. I was an orphan, and could not understand how any mother or father could be so callous or unappreciative. I thought it was natural that parents loved their children equally.

Other conversations brought even more information about M. Hunt. Like the music and food he enjoyed. He told me that before he went into the service he was quite the "hippie". Once he mentioned the terribly wicked things he was involved in as a young man. Not great detail did he go into on these subjects, but it was enough to shock.

"Not that I am recommending you do as I did," he summed up. "I would be very disappointed to discover you involved in drugs or looting stores." And with this statement he gave me a look that reminded me of the afternoon in his office. I quailed instantly and nodded.

"No, Mister Hunt," I declared in English, "never!"

"Good. Bad enough for the male of the species. A young lady caught doing such things should be punished swiftly and sorely."

I agreed, though I did not tell him.

There were nights when he spoke about his adventures in the military, and of his long interest with theology and the occult. He was spiritual, evidently, though in a way that held no loyalty to any organized religion. He also loved the game of golf, and had many humorous, and sometimes bawdy, tales of his experiences at the clubs.

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And I was impressed all the more with M. Hunt for this attitude bared open. He held no feminist sympathies it was plain to see, and yet he was dearly chivalrous. I appreciated his maturity and self-styled principles, and liked that he could make me laugh at the most unexpected time with some jest or joke.

I had grown very fond of M. Hunt.

Alas, in the end there was little choice but to focus on my studies, for it was the only thing that kept me from wondering about how it would feel to have his sensuous lips grazing my throat and breasts. A decadent dilemma this was, even worse than the nights alone in bed with only Beatrice asleep beside me. At least in the darkness I could alleviate my passion a little. Alone in the sitting room with M. Hunt all I could do was ache for lessons far more absorbing than the English.

* * * *

It was late on a Friday afternoon that Sister Anne called all the sorority of the house downstairs. She announced that she and two other sisters were taking the senior members of our group into town the following night. A dance had been arranged by the faculty of Saint Sebastian's College, for the purpose of allowing the oldest of the two campus bodies to fraternize. There would be several chaperones, she stressed, but it would be a good opportunity for us to mingle with some respectable members of the opposite sex. Making the announcement seemed to elate Sister Anne, and I suspected the dance meant an interruption to her own monotonous routine. The other girls were very excited and spent all the

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rest of the afternoon discussing their respectful attires for the event. Only Beatrice declined to attend; and this did not surprise me as I knew she was loyal to her Gerald.

I tried to feel excited. During that evening's session with M. Hunt, I told myself that there would be plenty of men at the dance; attractive, lively, and of my own age. But once the lesson had finished and M. Hunt was packing his notes into his briefcase, I was suddenly prompted to find out what his reaction would be.

"I will not see you tomorrow night," I said.

He glanced across the table at me. His eyes were luminous amber in the light. "I suppose you'd prefer to spend one Saturday night with your friends."

A twinge of disappointment stabbed my breast. Nevertheless, I beamed as I told him, "I am going into town tomorrow night. To a dance."

He buckled the briefcase and lifted the books from the table. "A dance? I did not know that the nuns permitted such things."

"They will be our chaperones, of course," I said, rising to my feet. My hands clinched nervously behind my back as I maintained my bright demeanor. "For the young men of Saint Sebastian's will be there."

He was quiet a moment. "Ah. I hope you will have an enjoyable evening, Elizabeth. I will probably be in my cottage, watching television and making a few calls home. I've not called my parents since I arrived in France."

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"Ah," I said. I asked myself what had possessed me to waste time fantasizing over *him*. All those good looks gone to waste ... and here he is in the prime of his life. What a waste.

"I hope you remember to study what we went over tonight," he said. It was a lukewarm statement; nothing to stir my blood, or make me concerned if I did neglect to study the foolish lesson.

So I nodded and we told each other goodnight. As I watched him leave I was gripped with another stab of disappointment. It struck deeper and much more poignant this time. Almost a sadness, this disappointment. I struggled to ignore it. Besides, I chided myself, there was no time to dwell on ridiculous emotions; Beatrice wanted me to hurry back to our room after the lesson for there was a dress she wanted me to borrow for the party. Her father had sent it to her on her last birthday, an exquisite ivory silk dress with ruby-encrusted spaghetti straps and matching burgundy velvet jacket. The ensemble had been tailored by some renowned New York fashion designer. I had thought her mad to make the offer, but then again, she said she had no present plans for it.

She beamed later, as I stood before our full-length mirror with it on. I was fascinated by my image. The dress hem came modestly to my knees, yet it was form-fitting, and a perfect fit. Never had I thought to see myself wearing something so lovely.

"I wish I had a rich father!" I said, nearly weeping. "This is beautiful, Beatrice."

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"No," she said, "*you* are beautiful. And you must borrow my black heels, too."

I turned and hugged her dearly. "You are too good to me."

Beatrice laughed. "You endure me, and love me. More than I can say for my father who thinks he can buy my forgiveness for never visiting."

A frown creased her brow. "Did you tell M. Hunt about the dance?"

"Of course," I said, looking into the mirror. I piled my hair high, then let it fall in ripples of strawberry gold over my shoulders. "I will not have him insisting that I keep my head in books or the recital of English phrases tomorrow night!"

She stood beside me and looked into the mirror also. I saw the impish look in her eyes. "Poor M. Hunt. But lucky boys of Saint Sebastian!"

I shrugged. "They will be all over Theresa with her wide lips, and dark-eyed Mosie. They are striking—beautiful, like models from magazines."

Beatrice reached over and gave my hip a sharp pinch.

"Ouch!" I cried.

She shook her head and wagged her finger at my reflection. "Who says you are not striking in your own way?"

I smacked her shoulder lightly. "This is true of you. Not me. I am just Isabeau. All the same, I do intend to enjoy myself tomorrow."

She nodded and went to fetch the heels. Despite my self doubts I truly liked the reflection that smiled back at me. And for the first time, a little eagerness stirred beneath my

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niggling melancholy. When Beatrice came with the heels, I turned and gave her a tight hug.

* * * *

There was a hall in our seacoast town; many generations before it had been used as a hospice for pilgrims, and later, as a reception hall by a fifteenth century prince. In the seventeenth century it had been given to the citizenry, who some decades later sold it to a rich ceramics manufacturer who proceeded to turn it into a dance hall for the rich and privileged. During the Second World War the hall had been bombed by Nazis, but gradual reconstruction had eventually brought back its former grandeur. The original name of the hall was unknown, but the townspeople now called it Le Phoenix. It was this resilient place that the brothers and staff of Saint Sebastian had reserved for the dance.

Sister Anne and three other nuns—all past their prime—escorted us there in the old lime bus that served as our transportation. Sister Bridget, with her hard squint under her thick spectacles, drove. I sat beside Hannah during the journey. For once she was not complaining, but chattered endlessly as she gazed out the window and admired the cobbled streets and other scenes we passed. It was twilight, and she had rarely seen the town so late in the day.

"Ah, there is Fontaine de Helene," she said, throwing me a look. "Remember when we were here once and threw bread crumbs on the sidewalk for the pigeons, Isabeau? The lanterns make the water glow in the dark!"

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I leaned over and peered out the window. The bus was just turning the circle in the street around where the fountain stood. The two street lights that flanked it from north and south indeed made gave a fiery shade of ivory to the rushing water. The pool sparkled under the fountain's rain and stars.

I was surprised by how Hannah was dressed. While she had worn a nice enough silk black dress and black wool sweater, the front of the dress was grubby. For shoes she had selected a pair of ugly, worn grey slippers that contrasted with the dress. Hannah had been blessed with naturally curly flaxen curls, yet she'd not even bothered to half brush them. Perhaps she had not had a better pair of shoes, but there was no excuse for otherwise neglecting her appearance when she had prettier clothes. Neither did she smell overly clean, and I tried to keep my nose directed downwind of the smell of her body odor. Poor Hannah. She was one who habitually gossiped about other girls, and her gender politics were already slightly prejudiced against the male gender. The terms, *chauvinist pig* and *female empowerment* were rapidly becoming earmarks of her vocabulary. I still had hope that Hannah would get over this stage, however, because I knew how she loved the film actors like Brad Pitt and Stuart Townsend. She kept an album full of their photos cut out from the cinema ads from our local newspaper.

The bus headed up Rue des cèdres. Soon we saw the lawn of the hall, illuminated by paper lanterns hanging from the thick copses all about the structure. The high wood doors of the hall had been opened, and as the bus turned into the drive, bright light was visible straining from over the exterior

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steps from inside. There were half a dozen or more young men standing here and there, and a couple of priests were conversing out on the lawn. Theirs was a liberal order and they donned modern vestments, and I saw at once the two of them were smoking cigarettes. It was this pair that welcomed Sister Anne as she led our ensemble out of the bus.

I was anxious as we were escorted inside. The dance hall was decorated gaily, with more paper lanterns as well as fragrant votive candles set in glasses on tables to the sidelines. There was a stereo system set up at the far end of the hall, and some older man, who was neither priest nor student, was skimming through a collection of CD cases from a wooden crate nearby. Punch bowls and glasses stood on one of the tables to the right, and there was a banquet of food upon the next. Across the room, young men sat in chairs at another table. Most of them wore staunch suits, though some wore casual pants and dress shirts, perhaps a handful with wool vests. For the most part, they appeared younger than I'd imagined, and there was a sterile quality to them with their scrubbed, shining faces and stiffly combed hair. They seemed scared to death to set eyes upon us.

The nuns parted to the sidelines, to a small table where more priests sat. They had a private punch bowl there, and a platter of tortes. Sister Anne had never appeared as relaxed as when one of the priests stood up and offered her a seat. Thus our group was left to mingle with the young men.

Music began to play from the stereo speakers, a soft Hungarian tune with a slow waltzy beat. Hannah, standing beside me, clutched my hand as the others began to spread

out in little groups. Her palm was sweaty and hot, and I wrung my wrist as discreetly as possible to keep my circulation flowing.

She asked in a mousey voice, "What do we do, Isabeau?"

"Let me get you something to drink," I said, and led her to the table where the food was.

I had to literally wrestle my hand free to pour her some punch. It was citrus, but I detected the telltale scent of violets as well. Undoubtedly, this extract the priests had included to hinder any excessive *excitement* in their own young wards. As Hannah sipped from her glass, I looked around and saw that a crowd of young men had formed around Theresa, all rapt it seemed by whatever it was she was talking about. Another crowd had formed nearby around Mosie. Her young wooers argued over who would dance with her first.

"I hate Mosie," Hannah said. Her complexion had grown pasty, and her eyes glared as we heard Mosie's giggle.

"Not one of you has even offered to get me something to drink," I heard Mosie say in an overly sweet tone. It was the same tone she used when she wanted to pay one of us to write her an essay or do one of her chores. But now she beamed about the group of eager young men, and batted her eyes a couple of times so her dark lashes caressed her cheekbones.

Hannah was prone to jealousy, and considering she did little to make herself presentable, I could hardly pity her. But I, too, was aware of Mosie's disposition. Mosie had for a time been engaged to an English baron, but had broken the engagement as soon as he'd come to visit with his more

striking cousin. For a time Mosie thought the cousin would ask her to marry him; but soon enough he had written her and told her of his forbidden but undeniable passion for his father's chauffeur. Mosie had not despaired, of course, and soon began a writing acquaintance with the baron's brother. How that romance-through-postage was faring was anyone's guess.

"Pity the poor man who first discovers how fickle she is," I said.

Hannah seemed oblivious to my comment. She continued to glare at Mosie, and then at Theresa and the young man who had asked her to dance. Several other couples were making their way out to the dance floor, too.

"I don't know why I came," Hannah sighed. I saw her knuckles had turned white about the glass she held. "None of them will ask us to dance. We lack that frail and refined beauty, you know."

I grunted with annoyance and carefully moved away from Hannah. I stepped toward the next table, where a few other girls stood, and a few young men as well. One of these gave me a friendly grin and introduced himself.

"Eric Blackdon," he said with a congenial little bow. "Good evening."

He had a sweet, if rather plain, face. His cheeks were dusted with soft freckles, and his shining auburn hair was combed over to one side. Dressed in an off-the-rack brown suit with a jacket just a bit oversized, he had the look of a little boy playing dress-up. But his light brown eyes were wide, his smile without deceit. He shook the hand I extended.

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"I am Isabeau."

One of his fair brows raised. "Isabeau...?"

A blush crept into my cheeks. I rarely had cause to state my given name. "Isabeau Roberts."

"A fittingly attractive name," he said, and I blushed again.

Another young man came up beside Eric. He was drinking from a plastic cup, and he peered over the rim at me with inquisitive black eyes.

"Who is your friend, Eric?" There was a slight and attractive accent to his voice. I would have guessed Russian or Pole, but I could not be sure.

Eric frowned, but he remained cordial. "Isabeau Roberts—Stanislas Meiglowis."

When Stanislas finally lowered the cup I saw how very good looking he was. Smooth face with a dusky complexion, and sparkling black eyes that contrasted attractively with his brown hair streaked with blonde. Unlike most of his companions, this beautiful hair was not stiffly combed or waxed, but fell in soft waves just over the back of his neck. He was of the same height as his friend, but very much more appealing for his relaxed appearance and exotic features. However, I perceived something remote yet scheming behind his lively smile; something I immediately did not like.

"Good evening, Isabeau," he said. "Beware of Eric—he's a danger to maidens everywhere."

I noticed the slight kick Eric gave his friend's shin. This only made Stanislas cackle, and without another word, he turned and walked toward the dance floor.

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"I am sorry, Isabeau," Eric said. "He's my roommate, but that's not by my choice."

I nodded. "I understand. It's all right, Eric."

Eric's brow relaxed. "Would you care to dance?"

A trill of surprise ran through me. "Yes, I would. But I'm not very good."

Eric extended his arm and as I took it, confided, "Same for me. We'll get along famously."

* * * *

He was right about our mutual lack of skills! But it didn't matter; we had fun and when at last we came off the dance floor, we were both laughing.

We ate some sandwiches and stood by the sidelines making polite conversation with our friends that passed by. A very romantic song began to play and Eric asked me for another dance. The other couples were daring to hold one another a little closer now; but then again, our chaperones were quite immersed in their own conversation at the table in the shadows. Sister Anne was giggling so hard her cheeks were scarlet.

Eric's dancing got better as the evening went on, and his arm relaxed somewhat about my waist. When the melody was over, he took my hand and asked if I wished to step outside.

"Getting a little warm in here," he said. "And I wouldn't mind talking to you where it's a little more private."

I nodded, and glanced again at the sisters. They were all preoccupied with whatever jest that had Sister Anne in tears now.

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The night air was brisk and fresh. Out on the hall steps a large group had formed. Theresa and Mosie were there, surrounded by a flock of young men. Most of these were smoking, and a couple of them looked a little glassy eyed. Eric led me stealthily down to the lawn, and we walked toward the east wing to a small cluster of trees. There was a statue in their midst, a small bust of a gentleman with a fierce face. The words once etched in the marble pedestal had long eroded into nothing but a surface smudge.

I looked up into the night sky. It appeared as black satin sprinkled with diamonds; the cloud-hazed moon the shade of azure.

"There's a bench," Eric said, and I followed him. Small, as old as the bust, it had enough room for the two of us.

"Do you smoke, Isabeau?"

"No."

"Do you mind if I do?"

His politeness was endearing. "Certainly not," I told him.

Eric and I talked for a long while. I found out he was a medical student, and his major was forensics. He had been born in America, and been in European boarding schools since he was nine years old. His parents visited regularly, though they were divorced, and often either or both would take him on long vacations. It was apparent he was genuinely very fond of them. He asked how I came to take courses at the abbey school, and I answered without embarrassment. Not even the fact that I was orphaned and turned over to the nuns when I was only a few days old did I keep from him. No

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pretense or judgment did he yield. It was like talking to an old friend.

Yet, as we talked under that lovely night sky, my mind repeatedly turned to my English teacher. I tried to push the image of his roguish face away; but even as I was enjoying Eric's company, a part of me kept comparing this tender boy to M. Hunt. Guilt heavily filled my chest. How could I compare two males so dissimilar? It was not fair. Eric was sweet and young like me. M. Hunt was a man in his prime, a man who knew so much about the world. But there I was, adoring Eric for all his grace and gentleness; and yet there was no part of me that desired him. There was no anxiousness to taste his kiss or feel his touch.

After a time Eric bashfully took my hand. For the first time I realized I hadn't thought of Charles for a very long time. Now that I did, the memory affected me only as a nostalgic ghost.

"Your eyes have a far-away look," he said. "Are you chilly, Isabeau?"

I shook my head. "No, Eric."

He was gazing at me, studying my face. "Your eyes are beautiful. Green and large—tiger eyes." He leaned over and kissed me suddenly. So gentle a kiss it was and I heard the quick strokes of his heartbeat. Yet, I felt nothing except the firmness of his succulent mouth. As he straightened again, and scooted closer, I saw the blushing radiance in his oh, so serious face.

"I like you, Isabeau," he whispered. "Will you allow me to come visit you at St. Bianca's?"

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I gasped slightly. This I had not expected. It grieved me to see the radiance in his eyes. He was sweet and guileless; but no, I was not interested in being courted by him.

I stammered for a reply when a shriek from the copses through the trees drew our attention. Our heads turned, and we heard now a pleading feminine voice. A male's voice was heard, too, shushing angrily at whoever had cried out.

"No, I feel sick! I want to go back to the hall!"

I recognized the voice as Hannah's. I stood up at once and headed into the trees. Eric caught up and took my wrist.

"We'd better go tell the priests and nuns," he whispered.

"Leave me alone!" Hannah cried out now.

I gave Eric a sharp look and shook off his hand. He followed as I pressed through the trees and entered the thicket. I only had to walk a few yards when the way widened upon a small clearing. Some male's back was turned from us, and he seemed to be towering over some quivering feminine figure backed against the wall. Following the length of her legs with my eyes, I recognized the shoes on the girl's feet—the grey slippers that Hannah had selected for the night.

"Leave her be!" I shouted.

The male spun about. It was Eric's roommate, and his dark eyes narrowed angrily. But one side of his mouth turned up in a wicked smile as he spoke.

"Do you mind, Eric? I didn't interrupt your tete-à-tete with the redhead there."

Hannah began to sob. "Isabeau, he's made me sick!"

Forgetting Stanislas, I ran forward. Hannah was cringing under his shadow, and her skin indeed glowed an unhealthy

shade of white under the stars. But Stanislas shoved me away, and he shouted at her to shut up. My hands balled into fists.

"My friend is going back with me now!"

Stanislas took one stride and pushed me back with such force that I fell onto the ground. "Get your virgin out of here," he ordered Eric.

Eric knelt down quickly and helped me clumsily to my feet.

"Don't just stand there," I said to him crossly, "help me get Hannah away."

His eyes grew round, and he regarded Stanislas hesitantly. "Isabeau is right, let her come away."

"This is not your concern, Blackdon," the bully retorted. "She owes me money. And as she seems bereft of it at the moment, I expect payment in some fashion."

"Money?" I quipped. "She hardly knows you! I don't know what game you are playing, but you better let her come away *now*."

I heard Eric sigh lowly, and he moved before me and cleared his throat. "Let it go, Stanislas. Hannah, come with us."

I saw Hannah start to sink down the wall out of Stanislas's shadow. As I ran toward her, Stanislas grabbed my arm and shoved me headfirst into the wall. The top of my head struck the stone with a bang hard enough to register a flash in my brain. I didn't know I had fallen until my eyes opened and spotted the sky above. Hannah was kneeling beside me, patting my face.

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"You're a dog," Eric was saying. I heard his feet move through the fallen leaves toward Stanislas. As I turned my head, I saw the bully pounce and shove him back.

"You know better than to annoy me, Blackdon!"

Eric just stood there now, quivering almost as hard as poor Hannah. "Leave her alone!" Eric told Stanislas.

Yet, Eric did not move to help either of us.

Stanislas turned and glowered at Hannah and me. He knelt and grabbed her arm and struck her hard in the face. He yanked her, pushing and shoving her away into a corner of the wall.

"This won't take long, and then you can go," Stanislas told her.

My head ached, but I managed to pull myself up. I didn't even look toward Eric. I grasped for the wall to steady myself.

"Let's go, Isabeau," he whispered urgently. "and find some help"

Filled with contempt, I shook him off and roared. This stifled the movement in the shades for a moment. Then Stanislas bolted out, and I saw that he carried a heavy branch between his hands. He snarled at Eric, "This is the last warning, Blackdon! Get the hell out of here!"

Eric was nodding frantically and doing his best to draw me away by the hand. And before I could take one step in any direction a strange silence suddenly infiltrated the little area. The ground quavered, ever so slightly, but I saw the ugly sneer vanish from Stanislas's face. His eyes fell upon something before his feet. There were soft lights twinkling

over the thin grass. Stanislas backed away, his face pale with fear.

His tremulous voice was barely audible, "No!"

The dancing gems suddenly meshed and formed a single glowing stone. The next instant this sparkling stone ruptured into a great spouting fountain of ghostly light. I gasped, and felt Eric's hand squeeze mine. And as I stared dumbly, the fountain rapidly raised and transformed into a milky silhouette, slowly filling with substance and form. A tall man in dark clothing stood there. His back was to Eric and me. I could make out his ripples of hair that glowed like burnished brass over his shoulders and the spangle of a brass ornament atop the cane he held at his side. But the stranger seemed oblivious to us as he faced the cowering Stanislas.

The man's voice was dray and sharp, and inflected by an accent similar to Stanislas's, "Bring the girl out."

I was terrified by now, but forced myself to move forward until I stood beside the stranger. Stanislas dropped the branch and turned obediently. He moved aside the branches in the copse and stumbled through. I looked up at the towering man. His profile was strong, hard, and if he noticed me, there was no indication. His eyes did not blink as he surveyed the copse. Moments later, Stanislas brought Hannah out. He had an arm about her waist, and carefully lifted the branches before her as if concerned now for her well-being.

I ran to her and clutched her waist.

"Can you walk, Hannah?"

She looked at me, her brow crumpled with confusion and distress. "I want to go home!"

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"Put your arm around my shoulders," I told her. Stanislas let go of her, and I helped her move in Eric's direction.

Hannah's feet moved unsteadily. "Move, Eric!" I hissed. He did so with the most pained look on his face. But I did not care; my only thought was to get Hannah away and find out what Stanislas had done to her.

"Drugs," the stranger said behind us.

I stopped and with effort, turned enough to regard him. He was watching us, and as I squinted, I could make out the stranger's expression. Angular and fiercely aquiline his face, with an unreadable expression except for the deep crease over his dark brows.

"What did he give her?" I demanded. "Tell me now!"

The stranger strode to where Stanislas stood hugging the shades of the copse. With a single titan yank, he thrust the terrible young man before me. Stanislas was panting now, with fear I assumed, and wringing his hands like a scared little girl.

"Tell her," the stranger commanded.

"N-nothing really," Stanislas blubbered. "An opiate derivative tablet, mixed with Spanish Fly. Nothing truly strong, I swear!"

The stranger raised the cane. He pointed it at Stanislas, making the boy flinch. "Fool! How *many* did you give her?"

"Only two, I swear!"

Before I could say anything else the stranger spoke, "Something to make her happy and yet vulnerable, a stolen family recipe. Get her some fresh air, a little coffee, or tea, and put her to bed. She'll have a headache in the morning,

but no more harm than that. My nephew fancies himself one of these amoral modern day entrepreneurs, panhandling drugs for monetary assets, but demanding other payment if that isn't forthcoming." The stranger glanced at Stanislas and his mouth hardened. He added with an undertone ripe with scorn, "A rake devoid of deference for the woman he would ravish."

I nodded without comment, and Eric came up and placed his arm about Hannah's waist. Together we treaded wearily through the thicket and under the outer lying trees. We gently sat Hannah on the bench we'd shared before. I told Eric to go at once and bring her a cup of coffee.

He was reluctant. "We should just take her back to the hall. Aren't you afraid that Stanislas will come this way?"

I was so piqued with him. "Do not worry, Eric," I answered tartly, "that gentleman is not afraid to defend us."

By the way he bit his lip I knew my meaning was clear. "I am sorry, Isabeau," he said. "I will bring her the coffee."

I watched as he sprinted away toward the hall. Hannah was slumped against my legs, and weeping into my skirt. "No, I am the one who is sorry," she whispered. "I thought he only wanted me to have a good time ... I didn't know. Oh, I feel so ill!"

A moment later she vomited on the ground. I held her head and comforted her as she wept into my skirt again. I was about to make a baleful comment about Stanislas when a thick wallop of sound erupted from the hinder copse. Again and again, the frightful sound rang, and after a time we heard Stanislas blubber.

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"Please, uncle, no more!"

Hannah and I stared at one another as the heavy resonations continued. I envisioned the stranger whipping Stanislas with that cane he'd held. As terrible as this image was, it brought a twinge of satisfaction. My friend wiped the tears from her cheeks and sniffed a little. As the sounds continued and Stanislas's cries grew into a hysterical sobbing, an exultant smile formed on her lips. Her eyes were bright by the time the beating stopped. I knew at that point, she would be all right.

In my relief, the anger with Eric subsided. And when he'd returned with the coffee and the moon gilding his gentle face I could forgive him. It was easy enough, for after this night I'd never have to see him again.

When Hannah was feeling well enough to walk, we headed back to the hall. I told the nuns she had had too much rich, unfamiliar food. They believed us, and made her sit with them at the table where they fussed about her and made her laugh with their jokes. Eric and I stood outside on the steps of the hall the rest of the evening; not speaking, but inhaling the night air as we drank a little of the sweet liqueur one of the priests offered. It seemed he wanted to say something, at least his expression and gestures indicated it. But he did not, and I was just as content with it that way. When the time arrived for us all to return to the abbey, Eric and I shared our polite farewells.

Beatrice was asleep on top of the bed covers when I slipped back into our room. She was fully dressed, and cradled in her arms was a photograph of her Gerald. I

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returned the photograph to her album by the nightstand and managed to roll her gently until I could draw the covers over her.

A soon as my head hit my pillow, the memories of the night saturated my thoughts. Although there was a bruised bump on my head, it was right at the hairline, and the wisps of my bangs covered it. It was only a little tender, and I rubbed it idly as I thought about Eric.

My thoughts were more pitying than anything else, and in time I was thinking instead about the stranger. Very dashing he was, and the strange way he'd suddenly appeared made me shiver still. Surely, a trick of the night illumination combined with the shadows of the trees. It was the man's features that truly intimidated me. Such breathtaking virility—why, it exuded from his very person. As I continued to think about him I thought he reminded me somehow of a wolf. Dark, savage, and exciting. I got very horny thinking about him, and began to play with myself under the sheet.

And yet, as I rubbed my nipples the image of his steely silhouette was replaced by the face and body of M. Hunt. I craved him; longed so dearly for him to claim my body and soul.

I imagined him lying me down in the same sanctuary of that dark copse outside the Le Phoenix. He was sitting over me, straddling my sides with his knees. Under the dark sky, he unbuttoned my blouse and revealed my breasts. Through the fabric of my brassiere, his skilled fingers kneaded my breasts and nipples. Under his pants, I saw the bulge between his muscular thighs. His massaging fingers scaled up

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my breasts and over my throat. He clasped my face, his thumb etching my bottom lip.

I imagined him telling me to be quiet or he'd have to punish me with his caresses, and then punish me some more when he'd had his fill of me.

I squirmed beneath him, frantic with desire, anxious with fear we would be caught. He lay down, and his right hand drifted down over my breasts. He tugged the cups down, scooped one breast in his hand and kneaded the nipple until it was hard and aching.

"Oh, Monsieur," I imagined crying, "take me now or not at all!"

I heard M. Hunt scold me behind his kisses. His fingertips glided down my belly, and he lifted my skirt and peeled down my panties. He massaged the folds and fount of my sex. It inflamed under his touch. When his lips released my mouth, he began to kiss my throat.

"I will take you as I will," he whispered. "And not a moment sooner."

He stroked my moist pussy. "Oh, Monsieur, I wish to touch you!"

His whisper was husky at my ear, "Not until I say you may, or I shall punish you severely."

He pinched my clit softly. My hips writhed as his finger delved into my fount. As he stroked me into a frenzy of sensation, my fingers brushed his hard cock.

"No, no, no," he warned, and continued to fuck me with his hand until my pelvis literally rocked the earth beneath us.

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This image did not leave me until I brought myself to climax. My cries of passion must have pervaded Beatrice's dreams for she called out her betrothed's name. I lay glistening with sweat, my heartbeat leveling down, and wondered at this spell M. Hunt had over me. He was nothing like the stranger with the exotic dark looks and wolf-like appeal. Yet, in the midst of musing over that beautiful man, my fantasies had turned to my teacher. I lay in bed, sodden and breathless, smiling in the darkness to envision his stern features.

I compared him to the tender Eric, even that ferociously handsome stranger. And I wondered how I could be so obsessed with a man who had such authority over me. I wondered if once the new semester began, if M. Hunt's strict ways would stir the other girls as it had me.

Suddenly a terrible realization came. He would soon be interacting with other students every Monday through Friday. Girls far prettier than me, and those with refinement and wealth. And worse, the ones like Mosie and Theresa with their seductive charms and coy allure.

The soft bliss left by my fantasy was gone, replaced by a poignant sadness.

A tear rolled down my cheek. *So M. Hunt has wasted his spare time instructing me ... so he had held me over his lap and spanked my bare bottom ... so what?*

Soon his eyes would feast upon beauty and privilege that nothing I possessed could compare. And if M. Hunt had spanked me, would he not be all the more quickly tempted to arouse others with his stirring chastisements?

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* * * *

The weekend was unexciting. Beatrice, of course, wanted to know everything that had transpired at the dance. I gave her enough details not to reveal Hannah's secret. Neither did I want Hannah's incident to lead reference to the stranger, which would only turn my thoughts to M. Hunt.

We were standing in the bathroom while I combed the tangles out of her hair. "There will be other dances, Isabeau, and many other young men to meet. And who knows? Perhaps my Gerald will be here for a visit when the next one is held."

"I hope so," I said.

"We will have fun the day he comes back," she said dreamily, "for he knows you are my best friend. He has promised to take us to the film festival in Cannes one day."

I told her that sounded wonderful. And it did. But anything that could get me out of the abbey school and save me from having to share M. Hunt with others was welcoming at that moment.

* * * *

Father Remi arrived to the sorority house the following Sunday afternoon. The good father was loved by all of us. Tiny of stature, bespectacled, and possessed with a perpetually rosy complexion, Father Remi was the kindest priest I knew. Before his health had declined, he had come often to St. Bianca to play with the young children and deliver

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toys and clothing for the orphans. I had been one of those orphans.

He indulged us by sitting down in the front room and letting us pamper him with cakes and candies and brandy. There was a house full of girls sitting on the floor, and we listened for about an hour as he told stories we'd heard a hundred times before. We loved his jests and stories from his childhood in Paris. He had been the only son of a monk who had married a prostitute. A happy marriage, by his account, and a happy childhood, but the unlikely romance of his parents had inspired many an amusing incidence.

It was late afternoon by the time Father Remi asked for someone to help him rise from the sofa. We begged him to stay, but he protested that his legs were falling asleep. We all jumped up at once and almost fought to give aid.

"A bevy of angels here," he laughed, as Beatrice and Lucilia won out for right of his arms. Gently, they got him to his feet, and several of the others ran to be the first to get his cap from the coat rack.

"I will be in the chapel tonight, taking confessions," he said matter-of-factly. "Please do not send me home bored tonight. I visited the chapel in the hospital yesterday, and came away weeping with boredom. And surely you have more creative spirits than those squabbling nurses let on!"

We giggled and saw him to the door. As Lucilia opened it, he turned suddenly and pointed a finger round the crowd of adoring faces. "Ah, where is Isabeau?"

"I am here, Father," I said.

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"Ah! Walk out with me, Isabeau—I almost forgot, but I have something for you."

As I stepped to the door a chorus of voices shouted, "We love you, Father Remi!"

"I love you, my angels," he said, and blew them all kisses. Then he clutched my arm very tenderly, and let me lead him outside.

The afternoon was growing late as I shut the door.

"Walk me toward the chapel, Isabeau."

We took the stone pathway not far from the sorority house and ventured toward the southern portion of the abbey's property. As we walked I said, "We do miss your visits, Father. I am so happy to see you."

"I miss my little ones," he sighed. He gave me a sidelong glance. "But that Sister Edna—is she kind to you girls?"

My mouth skewered a bit. "She has her own ways."

"You know she was in the circus before taking her vows?"

I grinned, surprised. "No, Father."

He looked about cautiously as we walked, as if fearful about being overheard. "Billed as *The Bearded Woman of Tripoli!*"

My feet stopped moving. "No!" I sputtered. "Oh, Father Remi—is this true?"

He laughed. "Saw her myself, Father Ricardo and I. She made her own cigars, too. Out smoked us both during a game of cards."

I giggled behind one hand. "Oh, my!"

"She enjoyed displaying those muscles, too. Her drawing act was to split timbers with an axe." He took a long inhale

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and mused, "I did not mind that so much, you know. Made her bosom swell when she lifted the axe."

I giggled harder now, and he said, "It was her chewing American tobacco that repulsed me. That wasn't part of the act. She had just split a stack of ash logs, and stood there wiping her brow ... suddenly, she leaned over and spit on the ground. But there was this spittle dribbling down her chin, so I offered my handkerchief. She nearly singed my eardrums with her cursing over that! Eh, she claimed she had never been in the fleet, but I was never certain that was quite the truth."

We continued down the walkway for some minutes. At length we reached the meadow upon the right side that elevated to form a knoll. It was upon this knoll that the small marble chapel of Our Lady of Perpetual Rapture stood. It was considered the most sacred spot on the estate, ancient, and the landscape abundant with wild flowers. But I just couldn't stop giggling. "Give me your handkerchief now, Father?"

"Oh," he said, and fished it from the pocket inside his long jacket. Taking it, I blotted the moisture from my eyes.

"You've made me feel much better," I said.

This brought a scrunch to his brow. "So, is she as mean as I feared?"

I shook my head. "No, that isn't what I meant, I am sorry. She is what she is, but not quite *mean*."

He smiled and rubbed my shoulder. "What is the trouble, child? Have you been unhappy?"

I regarded him fondly. "I am not happy. But it shall pass." And looking for something with which to lessen his worry, I

added, "I wish to see the world, I suppose. I look forward to seeing the life beyond the abbey."

"You told me some time ago that you had some interest in veterinary medicine. But you have such skill with the palette and brush. Why not pursue that, Isabeau?"

"An artist's life is not practical, I suppose."

"Practical," he said with a little sneer. For several moments he was quiet, musing again as he looked at me. "I think all you need is something adventurous to encourage your muse."

I remembered my old dreams of pursuing an artist's life. I had always loved to draw, and Sister Avelyna, an artist of no small talent, had taught me much. I had spent summers painting scenes of the abbey and portraits of my friends. Several of my canvases had ended up as gifts to Father Remi.

But I did not know how to answer. Since meeting Charles my ambitions had been re-directed. I seemed to be caught in a malaise stronger than the urge to create.

At last, I could only shrug.

"You will get back to your painting," he said, "You have a blithe nature, Isabeau, and it expresses itself best with contentment. You like animals, but they are not your passion. You only need something to arouse your passion and make you pursue contentment. Then you will be back to your drawing and painting, you will see! I know Mother Superior has plans for many more outings for you young ladies. And who knows, some fortunate young man might snatch you up. Make him a happy bride, and you'll have plenty of time to pursue your art."

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And then one of his brows lifted. He made a little grunt and slapped his forehead. "Ah, I remember now what I wanted to tell you"

"What is it, Father?"

We reached the end of the walk and together took the first stepping stone that led to the chapel stairs. The air was fragrant with scents of the wildflowers that grew so thickly in the grass here. As we proceeded down the line of stepping stones Father Remi said, "A young man came to me at the diocese. He told us it is his aim to court you, Isabeau."

My first reaction was surprise. "Me?"

"You are Isabeau Roberts?"

I nodded, grinning. We reached the chapel steps. There were only thirteen of them, and quite wide, but I wanted to keep hold of Father Remi's arm as he ascended. For the moment, however, he seemed more interested in just gazing at the hedges of lilacs that grew to either side of the steps.

"I remember replanting that lilac the very spring you were brought here from the foundling home," he said, hobbling over to where some of the lush blooms stretched forward for sunshine. He bent and sniffed the petals. "This young man was quite blunt about the entire thing. He told the bishop that it was no request, just a declaration of his intent. He said that he thought it respectable to inform His Grace Bishop, and go through the proper channels for your sake. That was what astonished our bishop —*for the young lady's sake*, as opposed to respect for the conventions of the abbey."

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I pondered on this, and thought for a moment it was Eric he spoke of. But no, Eric was much too retiring to ever be *blunt*.

"What is his name, Father?"

He gave an apologetic grimace. "The bishop would know. It was to him the young man spoke. I am only the messenger, as the bishop knew I was coming to take confessions today. And you know how forgetful the good bishop is. He could not remember the name, either, except he mentioned that it had a foreign ring. I knew for certain that the bishop was rather taken back. He told me he could not argue or even reproach this gentleman, as he was so proper. The bishop's exact description, my child—*proper, yet audacious*. And he is so old, our bishop. No nettle these days in the codpiece."

I almost gasped. Precious, scandalous Father Remi!

At length I said, "I do not know what to say. I cannot guess who this foreigner would be."

He made a blasé gesture with his hand. "It should not matter, my dear. He is obviously of good breeding, and so it behooves you to allow him at least an audience. Promise me that you will do this?"

"Yes, Father, I will. If he has not realized by now he has made a mistake."

"Mistake?" he retorted. "Isabeau, my child, do not speak of my favorite orphan in such a manner!"

Father Remi looked genuinely upset so I kissed his cheek and gave him my promise. "If he comes, I will speak with him, Father."

This made him beam. "I believe he plans to visit the sorority house tomorrow."

He nudged my shoulder and gestured to the chapel. "It is beautiful, Isabeau. One of the most beautiful chapels I have ever seen."

I nodded in assent, though in truth I was only familiar with a few chapels in our own province, those of which had had significance in my history classes.

"Have the nuns told you why this chapel is so unique?"

"No, Father."

"Ah." A little sparkle came to his eyes, "It is more than a chapel. A very long time ago a shrine had stood here, a shrine to a heathen goddess. This area was woodland then, and in that time the Church fathers subjugated the outlying villages. It was reported by several that an angel had come and brought a sacrilegious doctrine to the nine priestesses who tended the shrine. A doctrine devoted to the idea of an Eternal Power referred to as the *Ultimate Reality*. This Eternal, the angel declared, was the wedded and inseparable components of male and female *divine*, and a determined disputer of the official Church doctrines.

"This angel made love to the nine young women, and by each sired a child. These children were reputed to be Nephilims, and later, said by some to be the forebears of several men and women of notoriety or fame.

"The Church fathers were appalled, and yet were terrified to touch the priestesses as there had been too many witnesses who claimed they, too, had seen the angel keeping about the grounds. The women, it was reported, had received

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immortality for their embrace of this angel and the blasphemous revelations he gave. The place was made pariah ground, a place forbidden to the villagers to visit. Nevertheless, the women lived happily, and when their children had grown, it is said that one day a band of angels descended upon the grounds. The women were carried off to heaven by the host. The children moved away to other parts of the world, supposedly at the request of their father to pass his sacrilegious teachings to their future children. The place was abandoned. Thus, the repulsed Church fathers and their local converts came and tore down the shrine. Afterward, when their passion had subsided, they grew frightened by the implications of what the insult that they might have committed against the angel and his immortal lovers. He was a child of the heavenly host, no matter what blasphemy he may have spoken. So the destructive villagers built upon the ruins a chapel, and transmuted the attributes of the heathen goddess to our Virgin Mother. They hoped She would intercede between the angel and God on their behalf. And here the chapel has stood ever since."

I marveled at the story. So romantic, so pagan. The nuns had never mentioned it, but of course they wouldn't want to repeat something that might bring gossip onto the Church. None of them were as laissez-faire as Father Remi. I could hardly hold back my fascinated smile.

"It is an astonishing story, Father."

Father Remi gazed at the chapel for several moments, and I saw that his eyes appeared misted behind his spectacles.

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"It is this, Isabeau," he mused, "I love our Lord Jesus, and the Church is my family. But there have been times when my speculative mind has not pondered if the God we do not see and which affects us all does not truly have a Bride beyond the temporal institution ... and if, as flawed as we humans are, we have simply not seen His true world for all our focus on seeing things as propriety expects."

The confession startled me, and I did not know how to answer. I watched as Father Remi blinked back the tears in his eyes and sniffed.

"Ah, well," he said with a decided lightness, "walk me up the steps and to the door, my dear? I promise you can hurry back to your friends then."

* * * *

I did not actually hurry back, but after seeing Father Remi through the door, I descended the steps again and walked for a while about the chapel grounds. Countless times had I tread the dense grass with its abundant flowers. Never before had I encountered anything unusual, nor did I that day. But just being near the chapel was relaxing. I sat in the grass and as the sun began to settle in the sky, I looked down upon the southern portion. There stood the residences built for the secular teaching staff. Nine pretty little cottages with stonewalls and crème wooden window shutters, and tile roofs of the same color. Each cottage had its own small private yard surrounded by wrought iron fencing. Some of these cottages were very old, and a couple quite new. And just past where they stood was the southern gate, where all vehicles

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passed in and out of the abbey property. Beyond this gate was the road that meandered into town.

I gazed at the distant rooftops in the town, and the towering old oaks that rivaled the age of the most ancient town edifice. After a time I gathered daisies, and weaved the stems and heads into a chain as all the abbey orphans had done as children.

The gentleman Father Remi had told me about filled me with curiosity. But it was a calm curiosity, and to tell the truth, I believed that between old Father Remi and the nearly decrepit bishop, there had been some kind of miscommunication. What man besides Eric could possibly be interested in coming to court a mousey plain girl like me?

After a time I forgot about even this. The sky was glazed a subtle burnt orange by the time I returned to the sorority house, and my spirits were more blithe than they had been in days. That evening I even took from my closet my pallets and drawing paper, oils and brushes and pencils. And late that night, when the house was almost silent, Beatrice agreed to pose for me. I dared to bolt the door; something Sister Anne did not like unless it was known that male carpenters or plumbers were in the house repairing something. Beatrice undressed and lay down on our bed in a seductive pose. Her unbraided hair fell in waves across her fair shoulders, and her cheeks were flushed a pretty shade of pink. I admired her milky, smooth legs, and produced a flower I'd picked at the chapel to lay between her nubile breasts.

A portrait for her beloved Gerald it would be; but it took all my scolding to keep my self-conscious friend from giggling.

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When I asked her what so amused her, she seemed thoughtful but only shook her head.

"Let us keep that my secret for now," she said.

"Very well," I replied. "But please do keep still, or I will put a Mickey Mouse head on top of your shoulders and send that off to Gerald myself!"

* * * *

Beatrice had already left for the administration office by the time I stepped out of the shower. I hated that Sister Edna expected her to show up for clerical work before eight o'clock in the morning. Then again, if Sister Edna was capable of having a favorite, it was Beatrice. No one knew exactly what my roommate's secret was in getting the nun to trust her with personal errands and mail. Sister Edna didn't even like most people walking too close to her. The rest of us were expected to keep behind her if we came across her in a corridor. It was bizarre, and even Beatrice laughed about it. Nonetheless, she said she felt sorry for Sister Edna; that her brusque behavior, Beatrice deemed, came about only because of a profound ignorance of social skills.

Whatever the nun's problem, I did not care for her at all. I thought about poor Beatrice in her office that morning, tidying up after her and running to fetch any and everything the nun wanted at the moment.

There was time enough for me to visit the stable. I wanted to talk with my beloved Pompey; to brush him down with the long, tender strokes I was sure the old stable keeper might not be aware he liked so well. So after drying and getting

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dressed, I ate a hasty bowl of cereal in the kitchen. From the refrigerator I swiped a few apples and slipped down the dark hall from the kitchen that led to the utility room. In the hall was the back door of the house, and opening it, I set out for the stable.

I had fed all the horses and talked with the stable keeper for a while. He was having more trouble with his in-laws and this I listened to politely. When he was finished cleaning the stalls, he said he was going for some water. I knew it was actually brandy; it was known he kept a bottle handy under the seat of his truck. When he had gone, I took a brush from the grooming table and went into Pompey's stall. He must have been happy to see me for he licked my face and made a giddy whinny. Then he was most still as I brushed him from crown to tail, and then started down his long legs. His poor tail was mussed severely, but I soon got the tangles out with the comb.

As I finished with his mane and bangs, I sang to him. A lull-a-bye that one of the old nursery nuns had sang often when I was little and had resided in the crèche.

A lilting voice boomed nearby, "So pretty, Isabeau!"

I gasped and turned to see Sister Rowene standing outside the stall door. Sister Rowene was tall and chubby and one of the most frivolous yet kindest of persons. I considered it a waste that she spent so much time having to supervise the food services. We didn't get to see her much, but she had a way of putting anyone at ease and all the girls loved her gossipy tales.

"Bonjour, Sister."

"I interrupted your singing—forgive me!"

"You must have a reason to come to the stable," I said. "Are you not regularly supervising the lunch menu by this time?"

"Ah, well," she said, "Sister Edna has suffered a bout of anxiety. So I was called for to supervise her office. Silly, yes? I know nothing of administrations. So I sent Beatrice to take poor sister to her room, and came to tell you to come straight to her office."

I nodded and patted Pompey's brow. "I will see you tomorrow then, sweet one," I said and hugged his neck.

As I came out of the stall, I returned the brush to the grooming table. I heard Sister Edna say, "Be sure to wash your hands in the rest room before coming to Sister Edna's office ... the back rest room. Just sneak through the back door."

Now I was perplexed. "Why, Sister Rowene? Is the front door blocked for some reason?"

She covered her face with the steeple of her long fingers. But I saw the raised corners of her smiling mouth. "Oh, bien-aimé! No, it is only that you have a visitor! I want you to look your best."

At once, I recalled the conversation with Father Remi from the day before. My every muscle tensed.

"Father Remi said there was a man that claimed to the Bishop he wished to..." I swallowed the knot in my throat. "That he wished to court me. The Bishop gave permission, and sent Father Remi to tell me to expect him."

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Sister Rowene nodded giddily. "Yes, it must be, child! And a handsome young man. He has come with a proper escort and car!"

My brows lifted. I felt scared and dizzy. "Oh, no," I heard myself mutter, "I do not want to meet him! I am afraid, Sister! I do not even know who this would be!"

She rubbed my shoulder encouragingly. "But he knows you, Isabeau. And if it is as you say, the Bishop told the good father to expect him ... what have you to fear? At least meet him, let him have his introduction? It can do no harm."

Sensible advice. And I was dearly curious, and secretly, complimented that this man had come to ask to court me.

Sister Rowene continued, "Sister Edna could hardly deny the man and the chaperone their request. He is an aristocrat and a benefactor of the Church in town!" She gave my left cheek a little pinch, and said with a confidential air, "I've laid out a brush in the ladies room for you, and a little bottle of violet toilet water! Now do not dally!"

I watched as she turned and left the stable. Her visit had imparted a merry atmosphere to the whole place, one that managed somehow to temper my anxiety.

* * * *

Sister Celeste met me just inside the back door of the administrative building. She urged me into the bathroom to wash up, and stood close by, beaming. She insisted to brush my hair herself, and told me that what a lucky girl I was.

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I sighed as I surveyed at our reflections in the mirror over the sink. "I do not even know who this man is, sister," I said. "But why is it you act like the cat that swallowed the canary?"

She laughed. "I should love Theresa and Mosie to see your handsome suitor! They act like God's gift to the male species. The envy might be too much for them to bear!"

I laughed too. "You *do* speak like one renounced utterly of her vows"

She grinned and set the brush on the counter beside the sink. "You're ready." She watched me leave but did not step out into the corridor with me. I wished she had; my palms started to perspire as I walked. I had to pass by M. Hunt's office on the way. The door was shut, but I could not help but focus my hearing for any sound behind it. But I heard nothing and continued through the dark corridors until I came to the vestibule outside of Sister Edna's office.

There was a tall woman there standing at the double glass doors that looked out on the little private garden bordering the property on this side of the building. She was dressed in a long habit of burgundy with white trim and cap. It was like none I'd ever seen worn. At my approach, she lifted her face and offered a hard smile. Her features were beautiful, her skin as fair of alabaster and her eyes long and violet. I bent my knees to her as was custom for unfamiliar nuns, and walked past her, wondering suddenly why it was I bowed. But as I approached the office door I put aside this question and knocked lightly on the door. Sister Rowene's chirpy voice hailed me inside.

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I entered to find her standing with a man before the horrific painting of the Death of St. Felicity that dominated the eastern wall. The man's back was turned so I could not see his face, but I noticed at once the black cotton pants and black shirt; the shining leather boots on his feet. A mane of rippling dark blonde hair cascaded between his shoulders. I felt a twinge of familiarity to look upon this hair, and before I could figure out why, Sister Rowene dashed over and took my arm. She pulled me toward where the painting hung.

"Here is Elizabeth, Count Danesti."

The man turned, and instantly I recognized the angular, fiercely aquiline face. It was the man I'd seen Saturday night; the one who had appeared so suddenly outside the dance hall. The very one who had intimidated that awful Stanislas and rescued Hannah. For the first time I looked upon his face clearly, and his exotic features unsettled me. He was as handsome as he was tall, with high cheekbones and forehead, and small but piercing hazel eyes. His mouth was long, and his lips fine and depressed slightly in the corners. His chin was sharp, but not overly so, and indented with a soft cleft.

A smile came to his fine mouth. It lightened his sober expression like a glint of the sun through the heaviest clouds. He took a graceful stride forward and lifted my hand, and my breath quickened as he raised it to his lips. A kiss, firm and cool he planted, one that made my entire arm tingle.

"Elizabeth Roberts," he said. His voice was deep, with a stirring accent. "I am Nicolae Danesti, Count of Piatradeturul. Please forgive this unannounced meeting."

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He let go of my hand, and the tingling lingered. My mind was astir with curiosity. The polished Count had come on pretext, surely I thought, and told a tale of convenience to the Bishop in order just to speak to me. No doubt, it all had something to do with Stanislas. But for Hannah's sake I was not going to broach the subject myself. Instead, I'd listen to whatever fabrication he wanted to relay, to find out what purpose it was truly directed.

And so I said placidly, "May I help you in some manner, Monsieur?"

Out of the corner of one eye, I saw the fond smile that Sister Rowene tried to suppress. She thought I was acting demure out of discomfiture.

"We met the other night," Count Danesti said, "when my nephew behaved like a boor."

My heart missed a beat. "We did?"

His looked for a moment at Sister Rowena, and I sensed the hesitation in his bearing.

"Yes, at the hall in town, during the dance," he said at last. "I have heard how a friend of yours spurned his ungentlemanly advances. I dropped in to see how the dance was going, as I am a sponsor of my nephew's fraternity and supporter of the college. It was thus I saw you, mademoiselle, on the property grounds."

With only those few graceful words, he'd addressed Hannah's situation without bringing any hint of disgrace upon the girl. I was startled, and more than ever wondered what he wanted from me. Perhaps, I thought, he'd come to bribe Hannah and me not to discuss the matter; that he feared

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we'd disclose what we knew and bring public disgrace upon his family name over his nephew's behavior.

I nodded patiently. "Very well. How may I help you?"

He regarded me a moment, a moment long enough that I began to feel small beneath his great height. "I have come as a suitor, Elizabeth Roberts."

Hardly could I believe my ears. This performance he was still pursuing? To what course I was afraid to imagine! My voice did not hide the growing impatience and mistrust I felt. Coldly I replied, "But I am no aristocrat, monsieur. What honorable reason have you to court a commoner?"

"I am not an elitist, Elizabeth, and indeed you are a lovely young woman. Although I only saw you briefly the other night, I have not been able to forget you."

I blushed, but tried to ignore the flattered little trill in my breast. "But sir, you hardly know me. And I know nothing about you."

He made a congenial chuckle. "It is my habit to check out the people my nephew associate with. I saw you dance with his roommate, Eric Blackdon. So naturally, I reviewed your background. As for myself, the Bishop knows me, and particularly my family. We have been patrons of the church and surrounding schools for generations." The Count held my gaze mildly and elucidated, "I am the direct descendant of a great Voivode of Piatrادتurul, in Transylvania. My family and I relocated here after the communists made life unbearable for the remaining aristocracy. Now, that the terror regime has lost its hold, I divide my time between the old ancestral home and my estate here. Of course, I maintain offices here, too,

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where I write. I am a lover of history, and have been fortunate to have found a publisher interested in my volumes of intimate anecdotes about the old royal figures. These were gathered from the journals and letters I inherited from my ancestors and my penned volumes have found an audience with the tight circles of the fading European aristocracy. And they pay quite handsomely for these limited editions. But from my offices here, I also supervise the running of the continental branch of the family business."

"Family business?" I asked.

The Count nodded. "The export of crystal and gems. The family mines have always been rich with them. And in Transylvania, the mining and export is a productive activity for the province. There is no unemployment, as every man has a job in which he can support his family, whether that job is affiliated with the mining or with the tourism. Ours is a secure province, I am proud to say." A wry smile touched his lips. "Alas, I wish I could be so secure about my nephew's activities. He was terribly spoiled by his nurse, who practically raised him after my brother and his wife began traipsing about the world. Because of this I have always kept a vigilant eye on his activities, and it was my contacts here that helped me learn all about you, Elizabeth."

I was startled to see the strange nun standing now beside Sister Rowene. I hadn't recalled her coming in, but she looked pleased as the Count spoke to Sister Rowene, "May I have your permission to walk with Elizabeth outside, Sister?"

Sister Rowene grinned and clasped her hands over her bosom. "I can see no harm in that."

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She even opened the door for us, and I took the Count's arm and walked out to the vestibule with him. The other nun followed, but Count Danesti said nothing to her as she then followed us out the double doors. The sun was bright and very warm, and honeybees swarmed about the lilac bushes and late-blooming irises. The Count led me through the arbor, thick with pink roses, and onto the grounds. We had a good view of the stable some distance away, and nearby to it, the supply shack for the maintenance people. Far to the right we could spy the stone wall that meandered down the western border of the abbey.

As we walked, I noticed that the strange sister had wandered away, and turning in my stride, I saw her standing off to herself, watching as she stretched her arms far over her head. And then she sauntered off a little further. It did not seem she was much concerned with what we did.

"I apologize again," I heard Count Danesti say, "for my unannounced visit."

I gave a non-committed shrug. But I did draw my arm from his now, for I knew Sister Rowene was probably spying, and perhaps Sister Celeste, too. And I was not yet sure of my reaction to this Count.

We wandered about the grounds, until finally he paused and mused, "I had no idea this place was so attractive. I suppose my fancies anticipated dreary hovels surrounded by barbed wire."

I couldn't help but laugh. "It is not so bad."

A tight expression came to his face. "But not so good either, Elizabeth?"

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I did not respond to this, but wondered again if his intentions were proper or self-serving. "It is my home."

"So you feel, no doubt. But what experience have you outside these cloistered stone walls?"

It felt almost like a taunt, one that made me instinctively bristle. "I am more fortunate than many, sir."

"Do you refer to the generosity of the nuns for taking you in?"

I nodded. "I was an orphan, of foreign parents. When the government failed to find me any living relations in the United States, I was granted permanent dual citizenship, and the nuns contacted and told of my situation by the officials who worked at the hospital where I was born. I have often thought my fate could have been cruel. I could have indeed had family in the States ... family who did not really want me, but took me in out of some bloodless sense of obligation. But the nuns wanted me, and took me in because that was as they wanted. And I am loved, of that there's never been any doubt."

His eyes held me fast as I spoke this. He looked younger now than when we had been inside; the sunlight softened his sharp features and brought out blue glints in the depths of his hazel eyes.

"I am relieved to hear that," he said. "Elizabeth—I would like very much to tell you something. It may come as a surprise to you, and I do not wish to disrupt your repose. But I think you would appreciate knowing."

I was curious, but nervous now. I looked over the grounds for sign of the nun. She had sat down in the grass not too far away, and to my amazement, had untied the ribbon of her

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cap and removed it from her head. Her hair, blackish brown and very long, cascaded down her shoulders now, and she idly curled the ends of one heavy lock between her fingers. She glanced our way once, and her lips formed a small smile. Lean it was, really, hard and somehow sensuous. I felt a trill once more in my breast, and a warm shadow seemed to loom close by. The feeling of it was seductive, and yet so surreal, that I fancied a feral rumble deep in the earth beneath my feet.

At length I said as steadily as possible, "What is it?"

"I told you how I came to know your name and where you live," he said. He paused a moment, and his brow scrunched a little. "During my research I came across your birth certificate. The names of your parents were recorded, along with the U.S. state and county of their birth. When I read your father's middle name, I was piqued. I was compelled to find out everything I possibly could about your mother and father."

Now I was intrigued. "I've never seen my birth certificate! What were their full names?"

"Your mother's name was Jewel Fisher. Your father was named William Barbat Roberts, and he was his mother's only son. Sophia Barbat. This fine lady was born in Piatradeturul."

Piatradeturul! *No*, I thought, *there is some mistake!*

"No," I stammered, "this is incorrect ... surely."

"But it is correct, Elizabeth," he continued, "I confirmed it through my legal contacts in the United States. William was born in Port Hansson, New Hampshire, the only son of this Sophia Barbat, who is a distant cousin of mine. Research

revealed that she died while William was very young. We are relatives, my dearest Elizabeth. *Kissing cousins*, as the Americans would say."

I could hardly breathe for the shock. I had known so little about my parents, and nothing about their roots. And here this Count Danesti was a relative? It sounded like nothing more than a fantastic tale.

His hands gently clasped my shoulders to steady me. "You are pale," he whispered.

Looking up, I saw the concern stitched in his brow. It was too profound to be feigned. I had doubted his integrity, and now it was plain why he had been so adamant to see me.

My voice was thick and shaky, "And yet you come to court me?"

He inclined his head and said softly, "Distant cousins, as I said. But when I learned this, it came upon me that it was more than attraction I felt upon seeing you that evening. It is fate. The blood of the mother land runs through your veins as does mine."

For several moments, my system riveted from the information. I was relieved, happy, to know more about my parents. And it seemed as I regarded Count Danesti, that he was happy to have been the one to tell me.

"This has been a shock to you, Elizabeth, not something you woke up expecting to hear," he said. "I will escort you back now, and you can ponder over it to your leisure."

I nodded, numb and tingling at once. But at last, I managed to smile at him; and he seemed nothing more than

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a very sweet and quite attractive man. No monster now, feeding me fabrications created to protect his own reputation.

He murmured then, a deep, poignantly virile sound that warmed the shock away. "But you will consider seeing me again? To discuss our family ties, and to pleasure me with your company? I am still very attracted to you, Elizabeth. I would like very much to know you much better."

I blushed and lowered my eyes. How could I say no to such a gentlemanly request? And yes, I did want to find out as much about my ancestral background as possible.

But then I felt a slice of regret in my stomach. Oh, this man was genteel and very desirable, but he was not my dear, strict M. Hunt. Tears nearly came to my eyes to realize the time was nigh that I put my handsome teacher from mind.

"Yes, certainly, Count Danesti."

A satisfied beam lit his face. "Thank you, Elizabeth. And it is *Nicolae*."

"Nicolae," I repeated.

With a nod, he looked across the green. A fleeting chilly look crossed his expression, and following his gaze, I saw the strange nun again, now with her hair piled back and her cap in place. She approached us now—her stride was almost stately—but she said not a word. With her flanking my other side, we returned to the administrative building. In the vestibule, Count Danesti kissed my hand.

"I will call upon you this evening," he told me. "About nine o'clock?"

"Yes," I said. "You will have to come here first, and get consent to visit the sorority house."

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A twinkle glinted in his eyes. "I think that will be accomplished easily enough."

I thought I heard the nun speak something, something in Rumanian surely, but Count Danesti did not acknowledge it. He again kissed my hand and bowed, and left through the inner entrance door, with the nun trailing silently at his feet. I was elated and nervous. The back of my hand felt hot where he'd kissed it. I heard Sister Rowene step lightly from Mother Superior's office. She touched my shoulder, and I turned to see her gleeful face.

"Oh, Elizabeth, is your fierce gentleman coming back?"

My voice sounded far away to even myself, "Yes."

I should have been delighted, but her question made me think of my English teacher again. This time I couldn't fight the burning tears that came to my eyes. So I just nodded, and asked her if I could go back to the sorority house to take a bath. It was going to be a long, hot one, and perhaps, I hoped, by the end I would be all cried out of the last vestiges of senseless passion for M. Hunt.

* * * *

The sorority house was quiet and filled with soft sunlight pouring through the many windows as I closed the door and started toward the stairs. But just as I touched the banister I heard my name spoken from the direction of the foyer. I turned to see Sister Anne standing in the gold-gilded shadows there. She gestured for me to come to her, and so I wiped the last tears from my cheeks and approached. I noticed at once the uncertain twist of her mouth.

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"M. Hunt is waiting for you," she said.

My heart sank. This was the last thing I needed. But hopefully, he had come to tell me that something had forced him to cancel our lesson that night.

"Please ask him what he wants, Sister, and explain to him that I am on my way to bathe."

She made a hesitant murmur. "You had best speak with him yourself, Elizabeth."

I winced silently. "Yes, Sister."

Sister Anne's head tilted at little as she regarded me. "You have been weeping?"

I made a dismissive gesture. "It is the season for allergies."

"Ah," she whispered. "Your teacher is in the study."

I nodded and walked past her. The study door was slightly ajar, and the hinges moaned as they always when opened during the daytime. M. Hunt was standing in the drawing area, pacing the floor behind the furniture. He was dressed casually, in dark sable-colored pants and a deep golden shirt and sable tie. His shoes shone as if just polished.

But what drew my curiosity were the flowers lying on the little table between the loveseat and other chairs. Deep crimson roses with their long stems wrapped in silvery tissue.

A prickly foreboding crept over my skin. I took a deep breath and said, "Mister Hunt?"

He stopped in his tracks and looked at me. There was a marked glint in his dark eyes. He walked around the furniture and came toward me. I felt scorched beneath his determined gaze. He was breathing rapidly, his jaw was set hard, and I

noticed how his hands contracted and released restlessly at his sides.

"Elizabeth," he said softly, "the intention of my visit today was to ask you to consider my desire to court you. I had told the Bishop that I would not be dissuaded." He cleared his throat, and added huskily, "but it seems my intention was a foolish one."

A sharp pang stabbed my breast. I think I gasped, though of this I'm not sure. But my legs felt like they were crumbling to dust as I covered my gaping mouth with my finger tips.

His voice took a steely steadiness, "On my very way here, I heard the gossip that you were in the Mother Superior's office with some *man*."

I looked to the roses on the table and felt fresh tears flood my eyes. "Why? Why did you not tell me before, Mister Hunt? *Why?*"

Again his hands clenched, and his brows arched. "What do you mean?"

I quivered with emotion, and now the tears that fell were hot and angry. It still wounded to know that he'd soon meet the other girls who would be in his class. Young women like Mosie and Theresa with their flawless good looks. I could not hope to ever compare or rival that.

"Can you not see? I—I have dreamt of this..." I pointed to the roses. "If you had only given one indication—just one—I would not have agreed to see the gentleman tonight. No matter whom he is! You—you do not know how I have longed ... longed for *you* ... and for you to long for me!"

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He exhaled, and I felt the agitation vanish from his mood. "Oh, my god," he said. "Elizabeth ... I was reluctant to show my interest. I am supposed to be your teacher, only. I should have, yes, revealed my interest much sooner."

My thinking had twined with riotous emotions. I growled at the next tear that spilled. I wiped it away violently, bruising my cheekbone.

I sputtered angrily. "No, you are not very learned in the subject of thinking ahead!"

As I took a step back, he sighed heavily. "You are right. I am the one with experience ... *please forgive me!*"

My breathing was too rapid and the walls seemed to tighten around me. I felt the strength being robbed by my angst and disbelief; and I sensed the mocking laughter of the angels that seemed to resonate in the silence between myself and M. Hunt.

I continued to back toward the door. When he moved forward, I raised a shaking hand.

"No!" I hissed. "I do not want to pine like a silly child anymore! I am going to cancel my English classes for this semester, and never, never do I wish to see you again. You can have any woman you want, Raleigh Hunt. As soon as you have laid eyes upon the others—*the beautiful ones*—you will forget me."

"Is this what you fear? Oh, Elizabeth." He took a step closer, and his face lined with what appeared real anguish. "But I have met them all already. Do you not know I was here yesterday afternoon? They said you were escorting Father Remi to the chapel, and I made them promise not to tell you."

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I decided to come today as I'd originally planned. They were here, and every last one, and your roommate, Beatrice, vowed no one would break that promise. And no, I have no interest in any of them. Only you!"

I remembered Beatrice's giggling the night before; and alluding to some secret when I had asked her to be still for her portrait. *Oh, I thought, if only I'd been here then!* But now Count Danesti was scheduled to take me out, and my sense of reality still reeled from the news about my parents. It was all too much, too much...

"Please just go," I begged. "Please, Mister Hunt."

By the way he looked at me I knew he was wounded. But he would get over it; unlike I could if I opened my heart to him just to have him snatched away by another.

After several moments he said, "Alright, Elizabeth. But I meant what I said—I am not interested in anyone else."

He took a deep breath then and walked past me. Through the door, I heard his steady steps, and then the opening of the front door of the dorm. The study echoed cruelly with my aloneness. I looked once more at the roses upon the table. And then, wracked with emotion, I fled upstairs.

* * * *

I threw myself on the bed of my room, and wept hard, without coherent thought, until I was asleep.

It was afternoon when I awoke. They would think I'd forgotten my duties in the administrative building altogether. The voices of sorority sisters sounded from downstairs. Not

many of them, not yet, most of them were likely still busy with their respective chores.

I sat up and gazed sadly out the window. The clouds were thicker than usual; giving an almost winterish quality to the sky. I thought about Raleigh. Yes, I could well envision him going to the Bishop to announce a desire to court me. It would not have been a request with him—no, he would have been determined, without shame or apology. How could I have for a moment thought it could have been anyone besides him?

I smiled; I could not help it. To the pretty clouds, I whispered in the English he had taught me, "Downright brazen ... downright brazen and shameless Raleigh Hunt."

But then I remembered the Count and my heart felt heavy again. Oh, he was so handsome, so exotic with his regal clothes, accent, and old-fashioned mannerisms. And without going to the Bishop he'd daunted Sister Edna just to get to speak with me. Oh, that was romantic, was it not?

And that was what I'd wanted ... a real romance, and hopefully more. Meaningfully more.

I knew then the course before me. I had no choice, lest I go mad for the consequences of vacillation. Getting out of bed, I went to the bathroom and washed the dried tears from my face. I changed into a fresh blouse and uniform, even put on a clean pair of socks, and took from the closet my spare loafers. The leather was still lustrous because I'd never worn them before. These I put on my feet, then unbraided my hair and brushed it full. I braided it anew and hurried out of the room.

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Beatrice was standing at the bottom of the stairs as I flew down. But even as she asked where I was going, I did not have time to chat.

"For your own reputation —*you have not seen me this afternoon,*" I whispered pointedly.

She frowned a bit, but didn't try to stop me as I crossed the room to the front door. There were a few others congregated there, but they were in the midst of their own discussions and did not speak. I glanced back only once, to ascertain if Sister Anne was about. But she was not. Even if she had been, I would have made an excuse for my leaving. Nothing was going to stop me. Not timidity, not fear, not any sense of obligation either virtuous or mundane.

So I just opened the door and left, and raced along the stone pathway in the direction I'd taken the day before with Father Remi.

Chapter 3

Surrender to Love

I might have stood for a long time trying to decide which gate to enter had I not seen the decal in the window upon one of the cottage doors: A small, unassuming American flag shouldered upon the outstretched wings of a Bald Eagle. My heart raced as I opened the gate, and as I walked to the door, perspiration dappled my skin. Taking a securing breath, I knocked. The minutes seemed to stretch out like hours as I waited. No light could I see behind the blue lace window curtains, and not a single sound issued from inside.

My heart plummeted. For this disappointment, I had risked being seen coming here ... I began to cry again. This time, it was not for sadness, but the certainty that I was the stupidest girl alive.

Just as I started to run back to the gate, I heard the door open.

"Elizabeth!"

My heart stopped a moment. I turned about and looked up into M. Hunt's face. Bright with astonishment it was. He had changed into beige pants and a white tee shirt. His eyes were wide, and I had never seen anything as attractive as the great smile he bore.

I said not a word, but leaped forward and threw my arms around his neck. Impetuous I was, but I did not care anymore.

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"Forgive me," I wept. "Please, please forgive me!"

His arms wound about me tightly. He lifted me up and kissed my cheek. Against my ear, his whisper was like trembling satin, "You came!" Again he kissed my cheek, then swung me around and set me upon my feet inside the house. I released him only then, and watched as he shut the door. We stood in a dark cedar walled foyer, and the heady scent of the wood filled my senses. When he turned back, he embraced me again, and nuzzled his mouth against my ear.

"There is nothing to forgive!"

He lowered me again, and his lips swept over my mouth. Purest, sweetest fire was his touch, fire that penetrated me body and soul. I clasped him, as he was precious life itself. But more than this was my M. Hunt; for his was the balancing compliment of my very soul. My affection for him had gone deeper than the need to find the thrill of romance. My desires had been much more than the arousal of lust.

His hands glided down my spine. He clutched my buttocks, skimmed my hips. His lips released my mouth and delved down my throat, so that the fire peppered my flesh, slowly spirited through my spine.

His voice was low and fierce, "I love you, Elizabeth!"

Happiness blended with the ardor that coursed inside me. "I love you, too! Oh, how I love you!"

"I will always be faithful," he said then, embracing me possessively. "You have no reason, no reason at all, to ever doubt that."

"I was seized with fear," I confessed. "You are all I want ... and yet, when I realized that soon you will teach the others

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... I could not see anything except your eyes drinking in their charms! Some of them are such beauties, much more attractive than I will ever be."

He laughed softly. "My silly goose," he said. "I will turn in my resignation tonight if that will make you more comfortable. As it is, I'd prefer to take you away from here, anyway. I have enough credentials and training to find work wherever I like, and I will not have you worried for my teaching at a girls' school. You have nothing to be afraid of ... *my beautiful, my desirable love!*"

I giggled with joy, and chided myself for not seeing how he'd felt all along. "No, I cannot ask you to give up your position. But I am touched you would do so."

"Of course I would. And I will not have you unhappy. We will figure something out..." He raised my chin with his fingertips. So strong, so gentle was his touch! "But I will punish you for slighting yourself. That I will not stand for—do you hear me?"

I blushed painfully, and fidgeted nervously where I stood. But I was happy, completely so. "Yes, sir."

The warm gleam in his eyes was intoxicating. "Good girl," he crooned.

His mouth grazed my lips once more. My insides stirred and my hands tingled as they massaged his muscular arms. Such a delicious set of contradictions he was with his gladiator's body and cultured mind. The most perfect of men to me. I kissed his throat and savored the virile taste of his firm flesh. When suddenly he bent and lifted me up in his arms, I moaned wantonly.

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Down the length of the hall, he carried me, to the door that stood halfway open. This he kicked lightly so that opened. Into the room he preceded—the boudoir of his cottage. The walls here were paneled with lighter wood, the ceiling open to cottage's sturdy beams. The light of the evening sun peered through the single window and splayed over the bed. The gold satin quilt there glazed, and the maple spindles of the headboard glowed richly.

He stood for a few moments at the bedside. I shuddered under his sober, hungry gaze.

I licked my needy lips. "Please, please..." I whispered.

"You are a virgin," he said. "I've never deflowered a virgin."

I leaned forward and kissed his cheek. The flesh scalded my mouth. "I want you to be my one, my only, my beloved!"

He laid me gently on the mattress. And bending over me, he took my face between his hands. "Be my bride, Elizabeth? Before God—whatever He is—and the angels that brought you into my life ... avow yourself to me now? I will not have the bloodless penguins say that you are licentious."

The word felt luscious to repeat, "Licentious..."

"I mean it," he said, caressing my face now with his kisses. "I want to marry you. Promise, here and now, that you will be my wife."

I was dizzy with joy. "Yes," I said, stroking his dark, silky hair. "Yes, yes!"

He smiled widely and kissed me fully. "I love you so."

"And I love you, sir."

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His kiss became fervent. His scorching lips drifted down my throat, and tilting my head, he kissed me upon a spot that sent shivers of pleasure coursing through my breasts and compelled my hips to undulate. Then my Raleigh stood up, and unbuttoned his shirt, and taking it off, he threw this on a chair by the wall. How wide and strong his chest was, all covered with swirls of chestnut hair. His arms were magnificent, as muscular as I'd thought. He removed his shoes and socks, and took off his pants and undergarment. My thighs blazed to behold him. So powerful were his legs. And from below the nest of darker chestnut at his loin was his beautiful cock. Long and thick it was, of a soft red shade and rose hard; altogether splendidly fearsome to my feasting eyes.

He caught my wrists, and sitting me up, pulled me to my feet. With his strong hands, he removed my vest, and threw this on the chair, too. Next, he unbuttoned my blouse and removed, and then his hands wound about my waist and he unbuttoned my skirt. Kneeling, he drew it down my legs very slowly. As I stepped out of the fabric, he tossed these things atop the other items on the chair. He kissed my stomach and with his lips made little circles upon it as he pulled my panties down, too. Then he lifted my feet one by one to remove my loafers. After, he removed my socks, too.

He held my hips between his hands. "Pretty from head to toe," he mused.

I loved the feel of his shoulders just brushing my pelvis. I laid my hands upon them, and the strength that exuded from him set my hands aflame. And then he kissed the dark blonde

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pelt over my mons. His tongue darted through the hair and touched the seam of my pussy. The flesh swelled, and my clit fluttered.

"Ooh," I cried.

He stood back up and lifted my breasts. He seized the right, stroking the nipples between forefinger and thumb. It throbbed, and the left ached for attention. I cried again, and my hands sought his hard cock. It was sculpted warm marble to the touch. The head throbbed against my caress. His mouth moved to my left breast, which he suckled as he continued to stroke my right nipple. A shameless moan issued from my moistened lips. I stroked the length of his cock now with both hands. Droplets of moisture exuded onto my fingertips from the wondrous head.

Suddenly M. Hunt stood straight up. "Lie down, my beautiful one," he murmured.

I obeyed happily, and he lay beside me. My arms went about his neck and I kissed him hungrily. His fingers drew over my thighs and hips. Parting my thighs, he touched my exposed pussy, very lightly so that the tender folds throbbed.

"Oh, take me now, now, sir!"

His laugh was sweet, but his touch became more aggressive. He massaged my nether lips, tweaked, and teased my clit. Waves of sensation possessed me; I could not restrain my hips from arching high under his daunting ministrations.

"You are drenched fever, my little student," he whispered.

He kissed me deeply then and, and rising to his knees, positioned himself between my thighs. My pussy ached as he

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spread my legs. He raised my buttocks slightly and the head of his cock juttet against my fount.

"Mine," he crooned. The next moment his cock thrust into my sex. It hurt, but it was the kind of pain that made me yearn for more. He draped over me then and plunged full inside me. Smart, riveting pain flooded me. Yet nothing could have felt more right. As his hips moved and his rock-hard cock plummeted in and out of me, I embraced him fast, and relished the feel of his cheek against mine.

His thrusts became deeper, more determined. My hands lowered so I clasped his firm buttocks. They flexed with his every movement. Gradually a new sensation replaced the initial pain I'd felt. My nether muscles contracted about his cock, and the sensation turned delightful. Higher, more resounding it became. My nipples grew hard and throbbing against his rocking body.

Suddenly he shuddered and his cock penetrated to the hilt inside my sore sex. He murmured ardently against my face, "Oh, my love!" In moments, he was lavishing my face with kisses, and rolling onto the bed, he pulled me into a hearty embrace.

"Love of my life, you please me greatly," he said.

I was rapturous with joy. As we lay there together upon the love-dewed sheets, I could not help but gaze into his adoring eyes. My handsome, my strict, my, oh so virile beloved!

* * * *

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Later, Raleigh got up, put on his pants, and took me to the bathroom that was behind one of the other doors down the hall. Before the mirror, we stood together, and I smiled happily at our reflections. My cheeks, throat, and breasts were heavily blushed, and a decadently satisfied smile burnished his face as he embraced me. He seemed hard pressed to stop touching me, feeling my breasts, caressing my thighs and buttocks, stroking my hair. But at length, he took a washcloth and water and cleansed the virgin blood from my nether mouth and thighs.

When he was finished, he kissed me again, pinching my nipples lightly so that they swelled and ached intolerably. I jumped up and hugged him. "Ooh, please ... take me again. I want you so, sir!"

"I love you calling me that," he growled lowly. And gathering my hair in his hands, he inhaled deeply. "And I will have much more of you soon enough. But right now I want you to get back into the bed. I'm going to bring you something."

I nodded obediently. "Yes ... yes, *sir*."

I returned to the boudoir and sat on the bed patiently. I heard him move through the house, and after a while, he came back. He had brought a plate with a sandwich and some strawberries with a large dollop of cr me on top. Sitting beside me, he handed me the plate and told me I should eat.

"Why is it I have the feeling you've not eaten since breakfast?"

I grinned sheepishly. "You know me fairly well, sir."

His eyes lingered over me while I ate. I could hardly stop looking at him either. But I did at last notice that night was close on the sky's horizon, and I realized that Sister Anne would soon be wondering where I was if she hadn't already.

"Why the frown, my pretty?"

"I have to get back to the sorority house soon," I said. I did not want to get back, but to stay would bring discredit upon Raleigh. And then I remembered that the Count was coming that evening! "Oh no," I said frantically. "The Count is due at nine o'clock!"

I looked at Raleigh ruefully. "I do not wish to go out with him, but if I don't go back they will start searching, and I will not deliberately bring you any scandal! What shall I say to him when he comes? I have no desire to *date* him now."

Raleigh's arm went about my shoulders. "You won't ... you are my bride in the eyes of the sacred. And I will escort you back, and tell Sister Anne exactly that. Just as I said before, I will not stand for any of them to speak reproachfully of you."

I sighed, very contented, and lay my head against his chest. How solid he truly was, inside and out.

"I need to tell you something, sir."

He stroked my hair. "Yes, anything."

I told him then the information the Count had confessed to me earlier about our mutual ancestry. When I was through, he lifted a brow. "I am glad you know more about your parents and family. But he will not be coming to see you in the future unless he gets my permission. I won't stand for this, no matter what the man's connection to your family may be, or what social position he may boast."

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I wanted him again so badly that I could hardly swallow. But when at last I finished the food he'd brought, he took the plate and set it upon a nightstand. He stood up and pulled me to my feet. How powerful and safe his hands felt about mine. I smiled and jumped up for a kiss. He suckled the breath from me, making my heart beat fast.

"We have a little matter to take care of," he said.

At first, I didn't know what he meant, until I saw the stern crumple that came to his brow. His hands glided to my waist, and he turned me about.

"You do know what I'm talking about, my pretty?"

I shuddered. "Yes ... I think..."

His face was close to mine and his voice silken, "You are a most desirable young woman, Elizabeth. And your charms are the only ones my eyes will drink their fill of!"

I tried to nod, but my body quivered with alarm.

"Bend at the waist and reach for your ankles. Clasp them securely, my little student."

As I bent over and clasped my ankles, my hips were arched now, my bare ass thrust high. My face burnt with humiliation. He patted my buttocks, only lightly, and then crossed the room. Nothing could I see except my hair spilled over my feet, and my hands that clutched my ankles. But I heard a drawer open, and moments later closed again. He returned, standing behind me and I made out his widely straddled legs just to my left.

He laid his left palm upon the small of my back, and said steadily, "Never again will you disparage yourself." The next moment some hard, slim surface tapped the folds of my

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elevated pussy. I whimpered with fright and tossed my head to shake the hair from my view.

"Be still," he cautioned. "It is a paddle that has waited a very long time for just the right little bottom to chastise."

I tried very hard to be still, but I was frantic. I stared at the floor, whimpering again, as he turned the paddle and laid the wide part against my buttocks. It felt long and slender, and uncompromising against my flesh. And then he said, "It has perforations to accommodate swifter strokes."

He moved the paddle in a circular motion over my skin. His left hand slid languidly down my spine and over my hips. Then he reached between my thighs.

"Part those legs."

I obeyed, and his fingertips pressed against my nether lips. He stroked the folds, delving a finger into my sex. My body shuddered with excitement. As he continued to stroke me, my clit began to twitch and my body ached with sensation. I moaned and felt close to crying for the mounting, tormenting pleasure he so adeptly wrought.

His finger suddenly plunged deep into me. My pussy contracted, and in and out his probing finger worked, deeply, so slowly. It was agony, this managed desire and humiliation he delivered.

"Are you feeling frustrated, my little Elizabeth?"

"Yes," I moaned.

"Yes? Yes, what?"

"Yes, *sir!*"

He murmured approvingly. "But you know not to let go of those ankles, yes?"

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I began to cry, and the tears fell only to cling to my spilled hair. "Yes, sir!"

He continued to stroke me, until my hips began to rock against my will. When at length he did stop, it was to slap my swollen sex. The sound was so shamefully wet.

Then his left hand settled upon the small of my back again. I was thoughtless with passion, until the next moment when the first resounding crack of the paddle struck my backside. I wailed at the unexpected sting and my buttocks tightened. But this did not stop the paddle from descending again. He paddled me with a torrent of crisp, hard, painful strokes. My feet bounced over the floor as I held desperately to my ankles. And with my ass fully saturated with pain, I wailed as loudly as the walls echoed with the paddle's stern deliverance.

The paddle finally stayed. But Raleigh kept its wide face pressed against my simmering flesh.

"Spread your legs," he commanded, "widely apart."

I complied at once, and he drew the paddle away. He touched me now, drawing a finger across the drenched slit of my pussy. Several wincing spanks he gave me here, that made a humiliating slip-slapping sound.

"Wet, heated little pussy," he murmured. He tweaked my clit again, making it throb mercilessly.

"You have the tiniest clit, Elizabeth. Tiny clit, tight pussy." A moment later, he pulled away again, and gave me another half a dozen sound spanks with the paddle.

Over my cries he mused, "And a tight, quite appropriately reddened little butt."

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I heard him toss the paddle onto the bed. His arms then encircled my waist, and he kissed my waist.

"You may stand now," he said softly, and he helped me rise straight up again.

And he turned me around, holding me about the waist. I was still crying and couldn't make myself meet his eyes. I tried to massage my buttocks, but he removed my hands and forced my arms against my sides. He swept my hair over my shoulders and kissed my forehead. How tender those lips, and I shuddered now with a mixture of aching affection and chagrin.

"Now, tell me true," he whispered. "Would you have me any other way besides the same disciplinarian you found me to be that first day?"

The question gave me the strength to look at him. His demeanor was loving, the dark regard patient.

"No," I answered, and shook my head earnestly. "No, I would not."

He kissed my head again, and took a handkerchief from his pocket. With it, he dried the tears from my face and lips, and put the cloth away again. His lips turned up lustily at the corners, and taking my breasts into his hands, he took turns licking the nipples of each until they were pink, erect, and shining wet. Then he blew on them so the sensation was unbearably sweet. I moaned, begged him for a kiss.

One of his hands cupped the back of my neck. It was a kiss that grounded me like lightning. His other hand lowered so he could stroke my pussy again. In only moments, my hot juices trickled over my thighs. He began to rub my clit with a

thumb, making my body tingle all over. I undulated against him and savored the prickle of his chest hair against my nipples.

Our mouths parted, and he said, "Bend over the bed now, and hold to the mattress."

I was dizzy as I turned. Before I could even place my hands, he took my wrists and bent me over. I grasped the mattress and felt his hands massage my ass. Across the mattress lay the paddle. A long instrument of finished wood that frustrated me inexplicably to behold. The next moment, I heard some soft movement, and felt Raleigh's warm, naked flesh against me. Clasp my waist between his hands, his hard cock pressed against the seam of my buttocks. A nervous ripple meandered through me.

"Some sweet day," he crooned, "I will take pleasure with every part of you..."

The promised filled me with pleasing trepidation. He inclined my back forward so that my forearms supported my weight. I turned my face and saw him from the corner of my eye.

"I want those pretty legs straight, that little rear high!"

I quivered to obey. He stroked my pussy again, and slapped my wet fount, making my clit almost painful with sensation. My buttocks moved back and forth, my chastened flesh thrashed against his cock. He clutched my waist and drove into me. At this angle, the head of his rigid organ lunged straight to my taut core. With long, slow thrusts, he fucked me. Each slow movement of his hard, thick cock only inflamed my yearning.

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"Faster, oh please!" I begged.

"Ssshh!" he admonished, and gave me a little spank.

My hips rocked to meet his determined thrusts, and after a time his torso and thighs were hammering against my flesh. My upturned hips bobbed with the escalating pleasure. Without warning, a wondrous rapture flooded my stuffed sex. My moan was an anguished cry. I could not move for the riveting orgasm, and Raleigh held my hips possessively. His thrusts were fierce now, but soon I felt his hips stiffen. His cock crushed my reeling core and his own climax burst into me. My pussy contracted repeatedly, drinking every bit of his shuddering essence.

Raleigh draped over me and hugged me, lavished my throat and face with kisses.

We got into the bed then and cuddled. My head lay upon his chest, and he didn't say anything, neither of us did, for a long time. He stroked my hair and I played with the dark curls around his nipples. This made him laugh lightly. Time and again, he kissed me and told me how well I pleased him. His face glowed a deep bronze, and I admired it as I reflected on the simple, overwhelming realization that I loved this man more than anything in the world.

"Monaco," he said, "we'll go to Monaco for our honeymoon." He kissed the lock of my hair curled about his fingers. "You will love seeing the world, Elizabeth. There is so much I plan to show you."

I sighed languorously. But a thought concerned me. "But how about your family? Do you think they will approve of me? Of us?"

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I felt a rumble in his chest. "As if that matters," he said, laughing. "And they'd better be on their most genteel behavior when they meet you. Or that will be the last time they'll see me."

"I do not wish to make contention between you and your family, sir."

He squeezed me tightly. "There has always been contention there. Have no doubt; their reaction is theirs to make, Elizabeth. I love you, and they can accept it or not."

I felt the same about the nuns. As dear as the abbey and everyone there was to me, I had made my choice. And no one or anything, not even possible censure or shame, would make me follow a different path than this future Raleigh and I planned.

For a while we lay there and talked about the future and nothing else. But at length, the afternoon had slipped away entirely. It was night, and I told him it was surely time for me to return to the sorority house.

"Before poor Sister Edna has another apoplectic fit!" I added.

Raleigh flipped me suddenly over on my back, and pulling my wrists over my head, kissed me hard. "Very well. But you'd better be a very good girl tonight." He roamed his fingers between my legs, touched my sticky wet pussy. "This is mine to play with—not yours."

I flushed. It was sweet suffering to promise this, but I did, "Yes, sir."

We got our clothes then. Once we were dressed, Raleigh took something from the bureau beside the window. It was a

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silver chain, from which dangled a cross with a large pearl in the centerpiece. The arms and base were set with long, rectangular red gems with fiery facets. I thought it was some crucifix, until he clasped it upon my neck.

"It is a relic," he said, "from Norway. Those are real rubies."

I lifted the relic and gazed at the lovely stones, the pretty silver filigree backing. I could not believe he'd give me something so costly. "This is too much, Raleigh!"

"No," he said. "It is yours. Called the Arms of the Skald, it was fashioned in remembrance of a Scandinavian pagan martyr. She was a skaldess of Baldur, named Edoss. Her husband was chieftain of a village, and one day, while he and their little son were visiting the chieftain's brother in a neighboring kingdom, the crusader host attacked the village. It was their custom and aim to force the chieftain to embrace the new religion. When they could not find him, they tortured Edoss in the effort to make her reveal where the chieftain was. But Edoss would confess nothing to the invaders, and so they crucified her. Legend tells that she died at noon the next day, and in that moment Baldur's wife—the goddess, Idun—appeared on the ground beneath the cross. The goddess cursed the crusaders and carried the dead woman's body to the paradise where Baldur awaits resurrection. The story goes on to tell that when news reached the chieftain that his wife had been murdered, his grief was so great that Idun had mercy upon him. She took him without mortal death in order that he would live for eternity with his wife. Thus, it is said

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that whoever wears the Arms of the Skald is protected by the gods of true love."

The poignant story brought warm ripples up my arms. "Oh, I love it, Raleigh. I will wear it. Thank you!"

He pulled my hair over my shoulder and kissed the nape of my neck until I was squirming with passion. I moaned and my pelvis undulated wildly against him. I wanted him as badly now as ever.

But he murmured with some measure of pride in his tender voice, "No, no, my sweet. You remember who makes you feel this way. It is time for us to leave."

* * * *

I could not forget, not while we dressed nor as we walked, hand in hand, to the sorority house. Under the blouse, the relic weighted cool and solid between my breasts. Wearing it helped me to feel a little courage as we arrived. And it was a blessing, I knew, as Sister Anne was standing outside the door, glaring at us as we came up the pathway. I had seen her angry before, and so she was now, and as we approached the light atop the lintel she opened the door and called inside.

"Tell Mother Superior that M. Hunt is here, with Isabeau!"

She did not close the door back, but left it ajar as her head turned and her pursed-mouth glare fell upon me.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "You left without word, and everyone has been concerned. That Rumanian suitor yours awaits at the office for permission to come take you for a drive, and none of the other girls claim to have seen

you since very early today! We were just about to go search the grounds!"

I felt Raleigh's arm lace about my shoulders. "I will explain everything," he said, *"inside."*

Sister Anne gave him a distrustful look. "Where did you find her?"

Raleigh opened his mouth to speak when the door opened completely. Mother Superior stood there, along with Sister Rowene. Their faces showed evident relief.

"Ah," Mother Superior smiled. "I knew she would be back. What happened to you, Isabeau? You did not show up at the cafeteria for meals, and Sister Rowene thought you had come to bathe and relax before your outing with the Count."

I was nauseous with anxiety. Thankfully, Raleigh was there, too, and for the first time in my life, I did not feel alone against the imposing nuns.

He gave Mother Superior a meaningful look. "We—you, Elizabeth, and I—need to speak alone."

She nodded. "Very well. We can speak in the study."

Sister Anne made a vexed grunt. "But I expect an explanation from mademoiselle Isabeau!"

Mother Superior looked annoyed. She grabbed Sister Anne's arm and pulled her inside the house. "Go with Sister Rowene to see about your other wards."

Sister Anne's face blanched with shock. It seemed all Sister Rowene could do to lead her into the front room. When the way was clear, Raleigh gestured me inside, and he followed me in. As Mother Superior closed the door, I saw at once the numerous girls hanging about the staircase. There,

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at the top landing stood Beatrice. I caught the knowing beam on her face, the wink that told me she knew why I had returned with M. Hunt. But I had not long to think about it, for Mother Superior took us promptly to the study.

The three of us were alone there, with the door closed, and Mother Superior looked frankly more worried as I had never seen her.

"Has something befallen our Isabeau?" she asked at once.

Raleigh would not tell her until we were all seated in the drawing area. I sat beside Mother Superior upon the love seat, as he sat in one of the chairs across the table.

"Mother Superior," he said so calmly I was astonished, "you need to call Father Remi, and tell him that he must come to the abbey tomorrow."

She was still perplexed, and touching my temple with her cool fingertips, her tone betrayed her growing alarm, "What has happened?"

I saw Raleigh was about to explain, but I gestured mildly and he kept his silence.

"We wish to be married, Mother Superior. I would like to arrange the ceremony for as soon as possible. No later than by the next weekend."

She blinked hard. "Married?" Her mouth gaped and she looked at him next, her face now as pale as poor Sister Anne's had been. "But she is just a child!"

"I love Elizabeth," Raleigh told her. "And she loves me. We already exchanged our pledges before God."

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Mother Superior took a deep breath and exhaled. She quickly regained her composure, and looked at me steadily. "Is this true, my dear?"

At my nod, she asked me, "And this is what you want?"

"Oh, yes," I said, and the joy felt like it would brim over me. "More than anything, Mother Superior! I love M. Hunt with all my heart."

A tender glow touched her lips. "I suppose I can tell everyone you are safe, yes?" She shook her head thoughtfully. "This would not be the first time, you know. When I was a girl, my best friend wed our art professor."

She patted my hand and kissed my cheeks. "I was her bridesmaid. They have remained happily married all these years, and have quite the large family. Their firstborn daughter is my god child."

Mother Superior looked at Raleigh again, and I saw her eyebrow rise slightly. "As you both confess love, am I to conclude that there has been no impropriety during your private liaison today, M. Hunt.?"

One corner of Raleigh's mouth turned up slyly. "I am certain your best friend's husband was no less the gentleman."

For several moments, they regarded one another, and at last Mother Superior said, "I am familiar with your records, and there is nothing questionable in your past. No scandal at all. Yes, that should answer my question."

Raleigh spoke firmly but courteously, "It should, Mother Superior."

Mother Superior gave a blithe shrug and said to me, "Very well. I will call Father Remi first thing in the morning! And the date is set; we will arrange a celebration, yes?" With a little chortle, she added, "Sister Edna will be more sour than usual to hear this ... perhaps we will forget to invite her?"

I giggled. "Ah, but I could not do that."

"I will put her to work helping Sister Gretta baking a cake. It might sweeten her disposition." Mother Superior then asked Raleigh if he planned to stay on as teacher at the abbey school after our wedding.

"I am not sure," he answered, his eyes seeking mine. "Elizabeth and I are going to discuss it, and I can give you a definite answer in a few days."

"That is acceptable. And after the ceremony, the other girls can help Isabeau—pardon me, *Elizabeth*—pack her things. The two of you may dwell at your residence here until suitable quarters can be found in town. You do wish to dwell with your husband after the ceremony, my dear?"

"Yes," I replied, and felt my cheeks pang. I dared not look at Raleigh, lest she see the passion broiling just beneath my composure.

She seemed satisfied, and giving my hand a last squeeze, got to her feet.

"I will go tell Count Danesti that you have changed your mind. I fear he will not be happy. Such an impassioned man ... though his demeanor lacks much to ask for when he wants something." Her nose wrinkled distastefully. "I believe he is a man experienced with easy persuasion, for he spoke to me as

if I would just allow him to come to the dormitory without supervision."

I had almost forgotten my newfound kinsman! "Mother Superior," I said, "please ask the Count to come by tomorrow evening? When he may speak with me and ... my husband?" The word *husband* made me blush again, and I felt Raleigh's lusty gaze upon me. "The Count told me some very astonishing news today—that along with an interest in courting me, that we are distant relatives."

Mother Superior's mouth gaped again. "Ah, it is no wonder you wished to speak with the man in more private surroundings. Yes, certainly. I feel that is the right thing to do, to tell him face to face. Unfortunately, Count Danesti seems rather impatient. When Sister Anne could not find you, he demanded to search the grounds to look for you himself. I believe it would be better that he meet the man you have chosen—only not tonight."

I was contented about the matter. Yet, her hinted mistrust toward Count Danesti gave me some concern. Mother Superior was always a very levelheaded woman, not given to perceiving rashness in anyone unless there was truth in her suspicion.

But there were more important things of consideration in my thoughts, and my heart swelled when she told us goodnight. "I will go speak with Sister Anne now. You are free to tell your fiancée goodnight, M. Hunt."

I watched her leave, and looked across the table at him. He was grinning, and his dark eyes glinted. "She is nothing like the dreadful harpy I had imagined"

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He got up then and came over to me, and taking my hands, lifted me to my feet. Although the voices of others drifted in from the doorway, his stalwart arms wound about my waist.

"I probably will have trouble sleeping, and will blame it entirely on you, young lady. One afternoon's taste and now I've got to give up the bachelor's life!" He hugged me fiercely and laughed, and I was lost in the heavenly virile smell of him. "No," he said, "I am honestly very happy, Elizabeth, more than I can ever say."

He kissed me. "You won't change your mind by morning?"

I held ardently to him. "No, oh no! I love you, and I want you, Raleigh Hunt."

"And I love and need you, Elizabeth."

For a very long time, we stood holding to one another. I thought of nothing, but let myself cling to every dulcet beat of his heart against my breast. For the first time I knew that this was the man who complimented and balanced me body, soul and passions. Raleigh had done more than introduce me to passion, however; he was the other half of what made both of us whole. No matter what trials awaited us, never would I willingly relinquish him for anything or anyone.

His hands discreetly skimmed over my hips and over my skirt. He gave my buttocks a little squeeze. His husky voice drove me mad with desire, "And very soon you will be mine entirely—to educate and discipline and enjoy at leisure."

I moaned with frustration, and my nipples swelled against his hard chest.

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"I'd better tell you good-night now," he whispered, "before I throw you down right here and have my way with you!"

He released me then and kissed my cheek. "Get a good night's sleep, my pretty one. Oh, tell Mother Superior that I'll be in town early, but not for long."

I held his hands, kissed them fervently, savoring the taste of him. "Where are you going?"

His eyes glinted. "To buy our rings, of course." He lifted my left hand and caressed the lower phalange of my third finger. "A bit smaller than my pinky. If yours is not the right size, we will have it fitted perfectly later. I will bring them over for you to see tomorrow."

I felt close to tears. "Alright."

"Good. Now, let me go before a cold shower won't do me a bit of good. I love you, Elizabeth."

We kissed again, and I watched as he turned and walked out. At the door, he turned once more, and blew me a kiss. When I heard the front door shut, my head spun with elation. I made my way out of the study, into the front room. I heard the voices of other girls from the salon. The three nuns were there, not far from the front door. It appeared that Mother Superior and Sister Rowene were just about to leave. I paused and told Mother Superior thank you again.

"You have a long day ahead," she said. "I hope you sleep well, Elizabeth."

Sister Rowene's cheeks were rosy, and she looked like she was about to pop with excitement. I told her goodnight, and Sister Anne, too. The woman said nothing for several moments, only regarded me with her mouth pursed and her

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brow scrunched angrily. Never had I seen her looking so displeased, and forgetting myself a moment, panicked like a little girl accused of the worst of transgressions.

All at once, the woman stepped forward and embraced me. "I will never stop worrying about my girls, Isabeau," she said, patting my back so gently, "and pray you understand why I was agitated. But I wish you much happiness, I truly do!"

Her words touched me deeply. I thanked her and kissed her cheek, and thanked her again. When she had kissed both my cheeks, I told them all good-night again.

Upstairs I went, and found Beatrice sitting before our dressing table.

At seeing me, she leapt to her feet. "There you are! What in the name of heaven have you been up to? Do you realize how tasked I was to pretend I had not seen you this afternoon? Sister Anne would not believe me, and threatened to whip me! I think she would have, too, had Mother Superior not come to the door!"

I drew a breath and wondered where the best place was to start sharing all the stunning revelations of my day. But I saw her eyes narrow, and she frowned and looked me over head to toe. She reached out and touched my hair. Her lips slowly formed a tight little *O*.

"You're hair is not braided," she said, "and that is an unusual crucifix ... and why, your cheeks are red as apples!" Her eyes widened. "Dear Mother of God ... Isabeau, you have been with a man!"

I tingled and jumped with all the excitement that felt so close to erupting. "Oh, Beatrice! It is more than that—M. Hunt has asked me to marry him! And I accepted of course!"

Beatrice squealed. "Marry!" She slapped my arm. Not hard, but enough to show she was both thrilled and disappointed. "How could you not tell me you were going to meet him—*your him*? I knew you were in love, even as you deceived yourself it was nothing! How could you leave me out? And while you left me here to ponder with whom my best friend was spending her afternoon, you were out getting proposed to!"

Then we both started laughing, and she hugged me so fiercely that for a moment I could not breathe. When finally she released me, she said, "I trust I am the first person you have told!"

I cried happily. "Come with me while I take a bubble bath, and I will tell you everything!"

* * * *

Beatrice sat on the commode while I bathed. I had not realized how exhausted I was until immersing in the hot, bubbly water. As I told her my tale, she listened raptly, sharing with me the box of bon bons recently arrived from her Gerald. She did not say much about Nicolae, except to caution me that there may be more to his intentions that revealed. I could tell she was slightly concerned, but there was too much else to tell her, and frankly, I wanted nothing more than to forget Nicolae for the time being. I told my reasons for having decided to seek Raleigh out and confess

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my love. To this, she nodded and said it had been time I confronted my feelings.

"And now you are to be wedded," she remarked. "See what courage can bring you?"

I lay back in the water with my neck against the end of the tub, and ran my wet fingers across the white foam that billowed around my breasts. "Will you be my maid of honor, Beatrice?"

"I had best be," she quipped. "But now I will have to ask you not to be my maid of honor when Gerald and I wed, but my matron of honor. Old, matronly Isabeau." She giggled. "I should say Isabeau Hunt. No, *Elizabeth* Hunt. No, again ... Mrs. Elizabeth Hunt."

She offered the box again and I snatched up a dark chocolate. She was grinning, and asked me how it had felt to make love for the first time. I didn't tell her every intimate detail, but enough to make her eyes widen as she clung to my every word.

When I was finished, I reflected upon it and how very dear Raleigh was to me.

"It would not have been so beautiful, did I not feel so close to him," I admitted.

Beatrice gave a long, envious sigh. "Yes, I think you are right. I expect that will be the way it is when Gerald and I are husband and wife."

She gave me a sharp, inquisitive look. "But Isabeau," she said, "tell me true ... do you regret not having been with this genteel Nicolae just once before M. Hunt swept you off your feet?"

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The answer came without doubt or hesitation. "No. No regrets at all."

I was tired and yawned, and yet my soul was as exhilarated as the first moment Raleigh had kissed me. "I am the most fortunate woman in the world, Beatrice ... I honestly feel so."

Again she sighed, but she was beaming for me. We ate the rest of the bon bons and discussed my wedding the next day, and the dresses we would wear.

"I have that light blue silk Georgette dress, the cascade, with the matching wrap. I want you to have this," Beatrice said. "It will be my wedding gift. And the black heels, the ones my father found in Venice. You always liked those."

I loved her so! We talked for what seemed hours. At last, I pulled the plug and rinsed myself off while she brushed her teeth. She yawned then and said she was going to bed.

After I had dried and dressed, I called to her once more, "You should wear the burgundy lilac dress, Beatrice! And your pearls ... you always look so chic in pearls."

But she did not respond. I peaked out the bathroom door and saw that she was curled up on her side under the blankets. So I brushed my own teeth and followed her lead. As I turned off the light, my eyes were already tearing from fatigue. As I lay down, I touched the relic that lay between my breasts.

I was startled when Beatrice raised and looked down at me in the shady moonlight. I could see that her mouth was twisted a little ruefully. "You know that I love Gerald," she

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whispered, "but there are times I yearn for passion right here and now. It seems forever since last we kissed!"

My heart weighted for her. "Beatrice, I apologize. I should not have gone on so about Raleigh."

"Do not be silly," she chided me. "I suppose it is better to know that such passion is possible. I just long to know it, too, without this damnable waiting."

She sighed and lay back down. I wanted to reassure her that it would not be so long before she and Gerald were together. But I feared she might take it as being condescending. I kissed her cheek and told her goodnight instead. Closing my eyes, I ran the pads of my fingers across the rubies upon the relic. Now they felt as warm as my still smarting bottom. I couldn't help but to smile and wondered what further lessons my dear Raleigh had in store for the future. I was anxious for those lessons, and to be consummately empowered under his love. A lifetime with my soul mate was about to commence. It was all I could do to force my passions to quiet to a simmer. But, eventually, they subsided enough that I was able to sleep.

I had a restless night, and got up the next morning with my mind and body astir with thoughts of Raleigh.

For a time I forgot my frustration as the other girls in the sorority house were now all aware of my engagement. They besieged me in the dining hall and hardly let me eat at all. They were sweet, of course, very happy for me. Even Theresa congratulated me eagerly—though Mosie was evidently subdued. She sat off away from the others, listening in only politely, and I noticed the tight purse of her as the others in

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turn plied me with eager questions about my romance with Mr. Hunt and made me giggle with their shared conjectures about his experience with the opposite sex. Of course, part of me was very complimented to be the object of their envy; but they were, overall, so happy for me. This particularly struck me, and I had never realized how dear they were to me. Soon, I was to leave and begin a new life. I did not know until that moment that although I would not trade my future with Raleigh for anything, still I would miss the abbey school. This was my family, I thought for the first time; the only family I'd ever known.

It was a few minutes after eight o'clock by the dining hall clock when at last I was able to break away from them. Beatrice had already taken off for her chores at the administration office and I had nearly an hour before Sister Edna expected me. So I headed to the stable, anxious to see Pompey. But he was not there this morning and the stalls were empty. Then I remembered the stable keeper had scheduled a truck to pick up all the horses and take them to the veterinarian farm on the high coast. This was an annual two-week custom as the farm held a large breeding grounds, and Mother Superior deemed this a sensible holiday for the animals. But I was a little sad at the prospect of not seeing Pompey again before my wedding.

I swept out the stalls as I reminisced over the times spent with Pompey. Other memories of the life spent at St. Bianca's came flooding back as well. Happy, warm memories for the most part. Soon the sadness had passed, and I was satisfied to know that the abbey would always be a part of me.

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At length I put the broom aside and sat down on a clean stack of hay near Pompey's stable. I inhaled the smells—all rude and beautifully earthy at once—and wondered if, perhaps someday, Raleigh and I would a horse or two. It would be wonderful, yes, and I started to imagine a little house of our very own, with gabled windows and surrounded by pear trees. I dearly wanted rose bushes, too, and vines sprawling thickly over the house.

Lost in these fancies, I was startled by a voice that interrupted my thoughts.

"May I come in, Elizabeth?"

It was Raleigh's voice and I was elated at once.

"Yes, certainly!" I said, looking to the stable door. I didn't remember closing it, but it was, and I realized then how lost in thought I'd been. The light in the stable was soft and cozy as I glanced about for Raleigh. I felt a presence nearby, and it was doused with a heady virile fragrance. Yet, something about this touched me as different about Raleigh and I wondered if he'd bought a new cologne.

"Remove the relic."

I was confused, and touched the necklace he'd given me.
"No, please. I love it so."

There was a heavy moment's silence. Then the inflections of Raleigh's voice changed, and he sounded fierce, impatient.
"Take it off, Elizabeth."

My skin prickled uncomfortably. "Raleigh? Where are you?"

"I want to watch you," he said.

I wasn't sure what he meant. "Come, come sit with me!"

"Unbutton your blouse," he commanded. "I want to see your breasts."

I giggled with embarrassment. "Mister Hunt!"

"Unbutton it now."

His voice was sensually luring. Blushing, I unbuttoned the top button of my blouse and then a second. I hesitated then, dreading the thought of someone coming in on us.

"All of them."

I was very nervous now, and the presence seemed to come very close. The virile fragrance sent waves of sensation coursing through me. As I felt an invisible hand skim the length of my hair, my reluctance fled beneath a maddening carnal desire that filled me head and soul. I unbuttoned the last of the buttons, and my breasts ached for attention. I lifted my breasts from the confining white bra, and was compelled to massage them and pinch my nipples lightly. They hardened and grew hard with feeling. I was aflame with passion now. Raleigh was not there, but I thought I could taste him now, and my nether mouth grew wet for his touch. The rest of the world receded into oblivion as my mind seemed to feel his strong hands skimming over my shoulders.

"You want me, yes?"

I answered with a deep moan, and he told me to lie back on the hay. The hands glided the length of my legs.

"Peel down your undergarment."

I complied, my hips undulating over the rough hay, and heard an approving murmur just above me.

"Beautiful," the voice said. "You are wet and inflamed with yearning, Elizabeth, aren't you?"

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"Oh, yes ... please!"

He taunted, "What, my dear?"

"Take me, take me now!"

"No, Elizabeth," he said with sweet cruelty. "You are to satisfy yourself while I watch."

I pouted and raised my hips in a pleading, immodest gesture. Yet it made no impression on him. "Do it, Elizabeth. Knead your pulsing clit with your fingers ... and stroke that hungry little mouth."

I touched myself as he bade, and touching the dew from my slit and patting it over my throbbing clit. Then I alternately rubbed the organ between my first two fingers, then dove them deep into my pussy. Over and over again, I stroked and prompted myself; massaging my breasts and nipples with my other hand. My clit swelled and I rubbed it harder, harder. At length I came, and moaned with this release—again and again as each wild spasm spiraled through me.

"Isabeau!"

The sharp voice cracked my luxuriant rapture. Breathless, I looked and saw the stable door was open, and Sister Edna stood just inside. Her mouth was agape and her eyes shone with outrage. I gasped, and embarrassment infused with the last vestiges of my orgasm. With a yank, I snatched my panties up and standing up, let my skirt fall over my hips. I couldn't help but try to back into the stable shadows as I tried to button my blouse. My hands trembled so hard I pulled one of them off the fabric.

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Sister Edna advanced like a starving tiger. I was backed into a wall, with nothing to shield me from her wrath. I began to sob; understanding suddenly that I had been seduced by some force I couldn't explain. All the same, I'd enjoyed the seduction—and however was I going to explain the cause to the loveless Sister Edna?

"Oh, you incorrigible girl," she seethed, "how dare you!"

"Please let me explain!"

Sister Edna grunted and flourished a reprimanding finger at my face. "Oh, I need no explanation! Mother Superior has told me of your engagement to the English teacher. You think now you are at liberty to behave any way you wish!"

I began to cry in disbelief. "Oh, no Sister, no! It is nothing like that!"

"You will call me a liar as well? You who are out here ... fondling yourself here, with no compunction about who might come in on you. For shame, Isabeau, for shame!"

She pinched my earlobe between a forefinger and thumb and tugged it so I was obligated to either fight or follow. I chose the second choice, of course, weeping as she paraded me out of the stable and into the open light of day. There, standing with her arms folded over her breast and grinning smugly, was Mosie. I knew without even being told who had brought Sister Edna here, and I could guess Mosie's motives.

Sister Edna ignored her as she led me away, fussing loud enough, however, that her shrill voice surely carried my shame over the four corners of the grounds. "I am going to humble this arrogant carelessness you have adopted—halt it

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in the very nub. I imagine this gift will be one that our M. Hunt will not only appreciate, but find most valuable!"

* * * *

I couldn't imagine what penalty Sister Edna planned until we reached the sorority house. Only after she had knocked on the door and Sister Anne opened it did she release my ear. Sister Anne stared at us questioningly, but said nothing as she stood aside to let us in.

I hated Sister Anne to see my embarrassed tears, especially with the blush of my spent pleasure still burning my cheeks. But I was relieved that the hall foyer was empty. I wanted to bolt to my room, but imagined Sister Anne would surely let me speak in my own behalf where Edna had not.

"What goes on here, Sister Edna?" she asked.

"Isabeau is going to embrace the Bench," Sister Edna replied starchy.

"Whatever for?"

Sister Edna's lips pursed. "I caught her engaged in ... an unseemly act."

Sister Anne threw me an unconvinced look. "Our Isabeau?"

"Yes, Elizabeth," Edna snapped. "Or should I say Elizabeth—as Mother Superior now wishes in order to please the girl's fiancé. But either way, she is not so innocent as you all have tried to convince me!"

"What kind of unseemly act, Sister Edna?" Anne pressed. "Surely you will not try to convince me you found her engaged in an unseemly way with a man?"

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Sister Edna looked almost pained. "No," she said. "No, of course not."

Sister Anne sighed and looked at me directly. "Explain to me, Elizabeth, what she's talking about."

I did not, could not, talk about it around Sister Edna. "Please, may I go to my room?"

"See?" Sister Edna sneered. "She knows she did wrong."

"I am not convinced, Sister. And I will not have you constantly trying to get these girls in trouble over trifling—"

Sister Edna's face turned a livid red. "She was pleasuring herself in the stable!"

Sister Anne sounded shocked and patient at once, "Is this true, Elizabeth?"

My heart painfully and I wiped the tears from my face. "Yes, Sister. And I need to speak to Father Remi!"

Sister Anne shook her head slowly and said, "I am informed Father Remi is coming this evening. You may speak to him then." Just as I felt a twinge of relief, she addressed Sister Edna. "In the meantime, please accept my apology, Sister."

I was crushed. "But it isn't as Sister Edna says—least not as she thinks!"

"Did you do it?" Sister Edna demanded shrilly.

"Yes, Sister—"

"And you knew anyone could just walk in, yes?"

"Yes, Sister, but—"

Sister Anne corrected me sharply, "Be quiet, Elizabeth!"

I fell silent and watched with disbelief as Sister Anne folded her hands before her and stood aside. Sister Edna

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beamed wickedly, and snatching my hand, dragged me toward the doorway that led to the hall foyer. She dragged me to the Bench facing the full-length mirror on the wall. Anyone coming through or coming down the stairs couldn't help but see this dreadful table of punishment, and worse, whoever was unlucky enough to be constrained on it. Sister Edna stood me roughly at the end, and glancing at the mirror, I saw the panicky that flooded over my cheeks.

The nun pointed at the stepping stool kept under the Bench. "Pull that out and step up."

I was too appalled to respond, and that was when Sister Anne came in. She bent and pulled out the stool herself.

"Go on, Elizabeth," she said, "and extend your arms across the crosspiece."

I knew from the example of others that if I disobeyed they'd just force me up and cuff me themselves. So I stepped onto the bench and stretched over the long bench. They placed my feet into the stirrups, and bound my ankles with the leather cuffs. I couldn't bring myself to extend my arms over the crosspiece, and looked at them pleadingly.

"I can explain, Sisters!"

They said nothing, but either took one of my hands and stretched my arms out over the crosspiece. I was sobbing as they buckled the cuffs around my wrists. Sister Anne then gently turned my head and nestled my chin over the narrow cupped shelf at the upper end. Right before me was the reflection of own tear-stained cheeks. I saw the smoldering glee on Sister Edna's face. At my right hand Sister Anne

reached down, as she stood up again I saw the green birch in her hands.

"Keep your eyes directed to the mirror," she told me. "If you try to avoid watching the birching, I will order *the round* when the others come back from their daily chores."

It was punishment enough to endure what was expected; I surely did not want my sorority sisters to take turns whipping me! I opened my eyes, and to my horror, Sister Anne handed the birch over me to Sister Edna, who caressed the length of it with her fingers. The corners of her mouth turned up in a wicked little smile. I knew this nun, who had never had the opportunity to spank me, was going to take as much satisfaction out of this as possible. I sobbed harder and thrashed my arms and feet against the restraints.

"Not her!" I wailed, "Not that heartless woman!"

"Elizabeth," Sister Anne tut-tutted, "must you be insolent, too? I am so disappointed!"

She lifted my uniform skirt over my hips, and then she grasped the waistband of my panties. She peeled them halfway down my thighs. My buttocks were exposed, and I could not help but clench them. Sister Edna made an amused murmur, and drew the tip of the birch ever so languidly across my left thigh. It tickled, I couldn't help but buckle where I lay, and when she tickled my right thigh, I laughed even as fresh tears spilt over my face.

"I wonder what your M. Hunt would say now, Elizabeth?"

I growled at Sister Edna's smug reflection. The next moment she lifted the birch, and with a snap of her arm, whipped it across my buttocks. The sting took my breath

away, and just as I drew more air, the birch bore down again. She flailed my buttocks with sound, rapid strokes. Squealing harder with each blow, I looked for mercy to Sister Anne's reflection.

"Eyes ahead, Elizabeth," she said stoically.

Chagrined to the very bone, I sobbed as Sister Edna continued to punish me. She did not only flail my buttocks, but my thighs, too. Never had I been so breathless; never was I so embarrassed to see my own reflection. The tears poured and my face was swollen red in shame. I was beginning to fear Sister Edna might never stop when a loud knock from the front door stayed her hand.

The Sisters exchanged a look and Sister Anne went out. Sister Edna returned the switch to the canister, but now she took something from one of deep pockets of her habit. She held it above my head so I had no choice but to see it in the mirror: a narrow handled paddle, with a board as wide and indented with two circular rows of penny-sized holes.

"No, please!" I begged. "I'll be good, Sister Edna, I'll be good!"

But the next moment she was spanking my ass with the paddle. The loud blows resounded harshly in my ears, and this new punishment made my already sore skin truly sear. I cried loudly, and bucked so desperately over the bench that I did not see that we were no longer alone until Sister Edna stopped, and turning her head, addressed someone at the entryway.

"Good," she said, "I am glad you are here, Monsieur."

Monsieur? I gasped and turned my humbled eyes toward the floor. I was silently thankful when Sister Edna lowered my skirt. My panties remained down to my thighs, but at least my naked, throbbing backside was covered.

"What is this about, Sisters?" The perplexed voice belonged to Raleigh; and my shame nearly made my heart stop in my chest.

"Your fiancé is being punished for very unseemly behavior," Sister Edna answered him coolly.

There was an amused lilt in Raleigh's voice, "Unseemly behavior? Whatever did she do?"

"I will let her tell you herself when her time here is over. But for now, we will leave her to think about it, with only her reflection for company."

I felt Raleigh approach the Bench. Although I tried to silence my sobs, I couldn't, and I knew he was contemplating me buckled to the Bench. I did not want to look at him, let alone confess to him later why they had punished me. And yet, my body responded as I feared most: my clit spasmed, and hot moisture trickled frustratingly from my nether mouth. The want for him was as acute as the throbbing of my bottom.

"Very well," he said, his voice deep and luxuriant with stern promise. "We will have a good, long talk later, Elizabeth."

When I did not answer, Sister Edna tugged one of my braids. "Look at your betrothed, Elizabeth, and give him a respectful answer!"

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I raised my eyes to the mirror, and on seeing Raleigh's sober, handsome face, my whole sex prickled and felt frothy hot. It was all I could do not to squirm decadently right there on the Bench. To my relief, Sister Edna turned and taking his arm, led him back toward the front room. Their conversation was low, but at length I heard the front door open and close again.

Sister Edna returned only long enough to say she was leaving me to think about what I had done, but that Sister Anne would escort me later to the administrative office to carry out my day's chores.

"And I will keep you very busy today, Elizabeth," she added. "Far too busy to dally over other frustrations."

She left then, and the sorority house was quiet except for the faraway sounds of Sister Anne humming to herself. For a long time, I was cuffed on the Bench; my ass sore and my nether mouth secretly wet and chafing. I couldn't bear to look at my reflection, and closed my eyes against the mirror. I did contemplate, as Sister Edna had planned; but it was not over any pleasure I had indulged in. Something had provoked me in the stable; something unworldly and forceful upon my consciousness. It had deceived me; and looking back now, I knew it had been annoyed when I hadn't removed the necklace. Then there was Mosie ... I knew she had something to do with it, though how I could not fathom. It was all too coincidental, though, her showing up with Sister Edna. She had to have been the one to inform the nun what was happening in the stable. I had no doubt that Mosie had taken satisfaction to know I would be punished for it.

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The only consolation to me while I waited to be released was that Mosie was not around to enjoy the sight of me on the Bench.

Chapter 4

Ecstasy & Rapture

Sister Edna indeed kept me very busy that day. I had to rearrange her bookshelves and dust everything, then sweep and mop her office. She didn't allow me to go to lunch, but had a plate brought for me. After this she had me clean all the office bathrooms. I didn't talk to her; and thank goodness, except for assigning chores, she had nothing to say to me. But around four-thirty Father Remi came in, and told her he wanted to talk with me. He led me out to the staff veranda and we sat together on one of the stone benches.

I thought he was going to censure me for what had happened that morning, but his manner was happy.

He patted my knee. "I have been asked to perform a marriage soon."

I beamed, and for a few moments, all the aggravations of the day slipped away. "Will you, Father Remi? Will you wed M. Hunt and me?"

"When your teacher asked me, I had to ask him something: if he truly loves you. Ah, my angel, the light that came to his eyes. It spoke more than the reassurance of his words. Let me ask you now—how very well do you love him? And by this, I mean as well as hold affection for the man, are you—as the ballad writers speak of—also *in love* with him?"

Father Remi continually amazed me. "Yes, Father," I answered, "I love Raleigh so much it pains to think of not sharing life the rest of my days with him."

A grin came to Father Remi's face and he gestured to my face. "There it is ... the same light in your eyes I saw in his. I will take much satisfaction in marrying you, yes."

I was rapturous, and hugged the dear man. "Oh, thank you, Father! Thank you!"

"Besides," he chuckled, "we cannot have your suitor unnerving the poor Bishop again, can we?"

I flushed with the happy remembrance of Raleigh's confession he had gone to the Bishop. So determined, this wonderful man who loved me!

"Isabeau," Father Remi said more soberly, "I know in your heart you do not hold the Catholic faith. And I want you to know that I love you all the same, and wish you nothing but happiness all your life long. It is for this I wish to do the ceremony, and for no other reason."

I was speechless for several moments. Looking into his tender eyes, I said, "You knew, but you never reproached me?"

He nodded. "Remember when we spoke at the Chapel?"
"Yes."

"As that day, I still believe God and His Bride dwell beyond the ritual customs of propriety."

"Father Remi," I grinned, "I think you are more pagan than you confess."

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"If I am, it is our secret, child. Sister Edna might lose her ration altogether to think otherwise, and run, raving like a lunatic, back to the circus!"

We both laughed, and then he said, "That is a lovely and unusual cross, you wear. Is it from your betrothed?"

As Father Remi touched the pearl centerpiece curiously, I was overcome with the memories of what had happened that morning. For a moment, it seemed the seductive presence overshadowed the both of us. I shuddered.

"Isabeau," he said, "why do you look so grave?"

I knew I could tell the Father anything, and was just about to tell him the embarrassing incident of the morning and ask him what he thought about the presence I perceived ... when suddenly I felt another presence. It was as unworldly as the one that had seduced me, but warmer, more familiar in a way I could not explain. It beckoned me in words not heard by human ear to ask the good Father something else.

"Father Remi," I said, "what do you know about my birth family? I mean, specifically, my father's people ... do you know if she was..." My voice trailed for reluctance to even speak of the inexplicable fear building inside me.

He took a thoughtful look, as removing his spectacles, began to clean them with a fold of his robe. "Elizabeth, I was told today that a Count Danesti paid a visit to you. I suspect this man has revealed something of your lineage, am I correct?"

I nodded, eager and fearful at once.

Father Remi sighed. "He should not be allowed to see you again ... not, leastways, until you decide it is well for him to see you. I will give the Sisters instruction to bar him."

"Why, Father? We are family, this Count Danesti and I, yes?"

Father Remi nodded. "Your father was American. But his people, his mother's people, were from Europe, specifically Romanian. Of an old and now powerless aristocracy. It was a line that boasted, rightfully, of Kings and saints. I can get you more information from the Bishopric, if you care to know about them."

I detected he wanted to say more but was hesitant. "Father," I said, "are you trying to tell me that the family had an ill-reputation?"

He gave the lenses of the spectacles a look-over and placed them back on. His regard was uneasy. "Were you told that the glorious reign of the Barbat ancestors, Elizabeth, and of the legends that surround them?"

"No." I was intrigued. "What legends, Father?"

"I am not sure how much is legend and how much is fact. But I know Count Danesti's reputation, and I am sure the family details that he holds most dear is not a legacy as glorious as history would recall. By all means, find out about the saints and royalty without infamy. But the others ... ah, these are details, my dear, that in all sensibility, you will be best to research with a friend, or better yet, that fiancé of yours."

"Why do you say this, Father? And how do you know the Count?"

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Father Remi looked at me tenderly and inhaled deeply. "When your mother and father were killed, I was approached here by a woman, Elizabeth. She was your mother's sister, Juliet. She begged me to come to the hospital and take you—to bring you back to the Abbey and have you placed in the orphanage."

I was heartbroken. "My aunt? My own flesh and blood turned me away?"

"It was not her wish, Elizabeth. I asked why she could not care for you herself and she told me she feared her brother-in-law's family. She said that if she kept you that in time, these people would find you and take you, by force even if it came to that. And when I asked if she feared them—and feared what their influence might mean to her newborn niece—she told me an alarming tale. It is not one I can share, as I gave my vow never to repeat it. But I assure you, before all the angels, Elizabeth ... it was not something a sane person could have revealed easily. That afternoon I visited the Bishopric and investigated what she had told me. I was left without a doubt that there was valid reason for her fears."

A nettling tingle stretched up my spine. "You mean from Count Danesti's family?"

"I mean, Elizabeth, from Count Danesti."

I frowned. "You mean the former Count Danesti? My kinsman who came here is young."

Fretful lines darkened Father Remi's face. "All I can tell you, Elizabeth, is that the Barbats are not to be trusted. They are an old and ambitious family that have survived the ages and remained prosperous through means the blithe person

could never follow and remain civilized. Their ambitions and dreams are *unique*. If you want to know more about the family, do not consult him for information. And whatever you do, do not see him again."

I knew he would not divulge whatever it was my aunt had told him. I was confused and disheartened over this information he had been able to share. Yet I tried to remember that otherwise, my life had taken the most fortunate of turns.

"It is to be expected," I sighed with a smile, "I suppose like all orphans I wanted to believe I was descended from some noble people. Now I find out I am and only with the realization they are not so noble."

"Nobility is a quality of conduct, my Elizabeth," Father Remi said. "I have met prostitutes and beggars much more noble than some of the aristocrats and wealthy bourgeois businessmen I have encountered."

I thought again about that morning, and because of the guarded warning Father Remi had implied concerning Count Danesti, I suddenly had the impression that my kinsman had something to do with the heedless lust that had overtaken me. It did not sound just this thinking; but all the same, I could not help but suspect him. I was more frightened than ever.

"Father Remi," I ventured in my own attempt to keep secrets, "is it possible for another person to manipulate the mind of another—force them to do something they would not ordinarily do?"

"Has someone been trying to make you do something against your will, Elizabeth?"

"I am not sure," I answered. "But I did something, yes, without heed to my own good sense. I felt seduced from reason ... by something or someone I could not see."

Father Remi was thoughtful. "As a priest I should say only the devil and human weakness can seduce us. But having seen some very mysterious things in this life, I must admit I feel there are forces can compel the unwary. If you have been manipulated before, Elizabeth, just the knowledge that forces do exist which can play with our reason can spare you from it happening again." He touched my chin affectionately. "Tell me true, child; has someone harmed you in this way?"

Embarrassed, I lowered my eyes. "Not really harmed, Father. But I do suspect that my love for M. Hunt was used against me."

"I see it discomfits you to speak of it."

I nodded and in my mind flashed the memory of the voice in the stable, and of Mosie smirking at me as Sister Edna led me out. I don't know what I was angrier about: the seduction or Mosie's probable involvement.

"Then I urge you to remember these forces exist," Father Remi comforted. "The knowledge is the best defense we have against them." He looked at the necklace at my throat again, and very gently touched the pearl. He said with a tender smile, "And I should not be surprised if tokens of affection are always a bonus."

I looked at him questioningly, fondly.

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"I should let you finish your duties here now." He rose then, and looking across the grounds, smiled brightly. "I need to speak to your Raleigh Hunt, and tell him I will be doing the service. And you, my dear, I suspect will have Sister Edna's wrath to avoid until then."

I laughed and stood as well. "You think she is a bitter old harpy, Father?"

"Let us put it this way: if anyone around here needs to be switched at the Bench, it is probably Sister Edna."

I couldn't help but laugh, even as his divulgence made me blush.

"Oh, she told me," he said lowly. "But let us pretend that in my debilitating old age I've already forgotten?"

I nodded and watched fondly as he walked down the veranda steps that steps that led to the lawn. Before Father Remi ambled off he turned and waved, and for the first time in hours, I felt the shades left by the voice in the stable clear a little.

* * * *

By six o'clock Sister Edna dismissed me, and happily I escaped the administration office for the day. To avoid being besieged again with questions from my roommates I didn't take dinner at the cafeteria, but went back to the sorority house and asked Sister Anne if I could rummage through the pantry. She gave me a cup of soup from the pot simmering on the stove and a slice of warm rye bread, and even invited me to sit at the nuns' table in the kitchen. She sat on the

bench on the other side and stirred some cookie batter in a bowl as I ate.

"Elizabeth," she told me, staring at the moving spoon, "when you are finished, I think it best you go to your room for the night."

"But M. Hunt is coming to see me, yes?"

She raised her eyes. "He came again while you were working. I told him I think it best that he wait until morning."

I felt a sting of annoyance. "Why, Sister Anne?"

"Sister Edna is coming tonight to go over the monthly budget and supply list. I do not think it best for you if they are here at the same time."

I was puzzled; if this had anything to do with Sister Edna punishing me today, Raleigh had hardly seemed angry about it.

"I don't understand," I sighed.

"Your M. Hunt was agitated when he left the first time. He took issue with me that I did not ask him to switch you himself."

This news made my cheeks smart. I did not reply, but finished my meal hastily as possible and took the bowl and plate to the sink. Only then did I find the nerve to beseech with Sister Anne.

"Sister Anne, Raleigh is coming to show me our wedding rings."

She spoke with her familiar indifference, "They will hardly be tarnished by tomorrow, will they?"

I was so astonished I could hardly think of what to say. Hot tears sprang to my eyes, and my voice raised and

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trembled as I spoke, "And to think, last night you wished me happiness!"

At once, her face registered regret. "Oh, my Isabeau, it is not that I do not care." She put the bowl on the table and started toward me. But I turned and ran out of the kitchen. Maybe I had no choice but to wait for the morrow to see Raleigh ... but I'd also had my fill of heartless nuns for the day! As I raced for the staircase, I'd never known such raw anger in my life.

* * * *

I was soaking in a hot bath when I heard a sound rap at the bathroom door. How long exactly I'd been in the water was unknown, as it seemed I'd drifted to sleep with my head against the tub. The water was now cooler and the foam of the bubble bath dissipated. Looking up, I saw Beatrice's face at the half-opened door. She looked tired, and more than a little frustrated.

"May I borrow one of your pens, Isabeau?"

"Certainly," I said. "What are you doing? I have not seen you since breakfast."

She rolled her eyes and growled. "Sister Edna and her monthly budgets. She thinks I ought to be downstairs fetching pen and paper and tissues every few minutes! Her delicate nose cannot tolerate the smell of cinnamon that the sisters used in their cookies today. Oh, I am so tired of being ordered around I could tear my hair out!"

"I am sorry, Beatrice," I said sympathetically, "Why do you not go to Mother Superior tomorrow and request a transfer of

jobs? This woman simply does not appreciate you. I am certain Mother Superior will listen."

Beatrice stepped into the bathroom and nodded. "You know, I am going to do just that! I am not Sister Edna's servant, and any time she's in a bad mood she threatens to give my job to that worthless Mosie. For all the times that nun has called me lazy, she ought to have Mosie try to do the job. Then the good sister can find out what real laziness is!"

"Good!" I smiled.

Beatrice smiled back. "Did your Mister Hunt bring the rings?"

I pouted and muttered, "No. Sister Anne will not let him in tonight while Sister Edna is here."

"I thought he was coming this morning?"

I covered my face to hide any telltale chagrin. "He did ... but I was busy."

"*Busy?*" Beatrice said. "What could keep you too busy to speak to your fiancé?"

I sighed, and quickly splashed my face to hide my emotions. "I don't wish to talk about it."

"You and Mister Hunt have not quarreled already?"

"No, no." I shook my head, and looked at her as dispassionately as possible. "It is not that."

"You shall divulge everything," she promised with a chuckle. "I will coax it out of you before the morning! But I must bring that pen to Sister Edna now before she sends out a search party. See you later."

She blew me a kiss and pranced out the door. I hear her rummage through my belongings at my dresser, and a few

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moments later she shouted, "Found it, thank you!" And the next moment I heard her go out and close the door gently behind her.

I finished my soak and then rinsed off. After drying myself, I took my nightgown from a hook and slipped it on, and then I went to put on my treasured necklace from Raleigh. But it wasn't on the marble accessory ledge on the wall. I moved all our items there, the hairspray and brushes, the perfumes and lotion. But it wasn't there. I was certain this was where I'd put it before getting into the tub. I walked out of the bathroom and looked over my dresser. It wasn't there, not even in the drawers. It wasn't lying on the bed, nor inadvertently dropped into my skirt pocket; and I hadn't even accidentally dropped it in the clothes hamper. With a growing panic, I searched the room. But no where, no where could I find the necklace!

I threw on my robe and opened the door. Beatrice was standing on the other side, her hand just at the knob. Her face was beaming.

"You will not believe it, Elizabeth!" she gushed. "When I went back downstairs Sister Edna was being so rude and bossy to the Sisters that I just could not stand it any longer. So I told her then and there that on the morrow I will be requesting a transfer of chores! She was so incensed that her face turned livid, and told me not to even bother asking Mother Superior. She said she was just looking for a reason to get rid of me ... and you should have heard Sister Anne light into her over that! Sister Edna left so angry—oh I wish you had been there to see it!"

"That is excellent," I said. "This must be a great relief!"

Beatrice must have seen the concern on my face. "What is wrong, Isabeau?"

I told her about my missing necklace, and she suggested we go downstairs and look for it. We were joined in the search by Hannah and Antonia. The entire front room we searched, as well as the foyer, the salon, and the sitting room. Sister Anne found us in this last room, rummaging through the cushions of the furniture.

"What are you four doing?" she asked. I explained about my necklace and Sister Anne, nodding, helped us on the hunt. When we had rummaged through everything without success, we proceeded to the kitchen. Here again we did not find it, and so Sister Anne suggested we go upstairs and ask the others about it.

I felt guilty about this; someone might take the question as an accusation, but there was nothing else to do. Of course, none of my sorority sisters knew anything about my necklace, and some of them even volunteered to search their own rooms. At length, the looking turned out fruitless. My necklace was gone.

It was nearly midnight by the time I ended up with Beatrice outside our own room again. I was on the verge of tears.

Sister Anne tried to console me. "It could not disappear from the face of the earth, Isabeau. In the morning, you and Beatrice should search the stable, and the administration office, and the cafeteria. It will turn up, my dear, I have no doubt."

She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. "Ssshh, do not cry," she said, and blotted the tears from my face with the cloth. "You do not wish to see your M. Hunt with your eyes puffy and red."

I remembered our conversation in the kitchen earlier and was more despondent than ever. "You shall only find another excuse to forbid him coming!"

"No, Isabeau ... I will let him in as soon as he arrives. I promise."

Sister Anne's word was irreproachable, but I couldn't stop crying. Perhaps it was the exacting day's events; maybe it was just that I feared disappointing Raleigh over losing the necklace. Either way, I was exhausted and did not argue as Beatrice led me into the room and put me to bed. Pulling the covers up to my shoulders, she turned out the lights except for the one in the bathroom. Sitting beside me a moment she stroked my hair.

"Sister Anne is right," she murmured. "Now stop weeping and go to sleep. I am going to bathe then join you here. We have much to celebrate, yes? Think about those this!"

She kissed my cheek and headed off to the tub. I was too tired to cry any longer even if I wanted. But even as I drifted off to sleep I felt consumed with guilt over losing the necklace. I reproached myself silently: I did not deserve Raleigh; I did not deserve a man who loved me—truly loved me for the individual I was and nothing else.

Sometime that night I dreamt of Raleigh. It was no pleasant or arousing revelry, however: it seemed I was standing in the study of Raleigh's residence. Everything felt

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cozy and safe around me, and the moonlight lent a bluish luster on the wood floors and furnishings. I took delight in the quaint smells of the cottage; especially the lingering scent of my Raleigh imparted everywhere. I had just begun to wander out into the hall passage when I perceived Raleigh's soft snoring. Elated, I moved toward the bedroom. I crossed the threshold and glimpsed him there on the bed. He was nude except for the sheet pulled up to his stomach, and my very core tingled with the desire to kiss his muscled arms and chest.

It was then something sounded at the window. It was at once a sharp yet hollow rap, and when I looked to the pane, I saw what at first appeared as a wreath of pale smoke on the outside. The rap came again; and the smoke seemed to solidify and take outline. It was face that seemed to look through the glass, a face I knew—pale and strikingly handsome ... but one that terrified me utterly now.

I watched as Raleigh roused and turned his head on the pillow. He was listening when the rap came again. Startled, he sat up and looked around. When the rap came, again Raleigh's brows scrunched. He reached to turn on the bedside lamp when he noticed the face at the window.

I saw the terror that seized Raleigh; knew how conscious thought promised it was only an illusion. He blinked and looked again.

Danesti's face glowed with the shades of human coloring, as well as a warmth that defied the cold intention in his heart. Raleigh controlled his unease and turned on the lamp. Even with this on Danesti's features did not dim, nor did he turn. I

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sensed Raleigh's disbelief turn to wariness, and that he was ready to run for the pistol he kept in the top drawer of his dresser at the first indication of necessity. But Raleigh was as mystified as me as Danesti again rapped on the pane. I desperately wanted to speak to my love and ask him to tell my kinsman to go away, but I had no voice.

"Who the hell is there?"

Moments passed in utter silence, and then suddenly there was a knock at the front door. Raleigh was startled, and glanced at the dresser thoughtfully. In the end, he decided it was best to leave it. He threw on a robe, tied it, and padded out of the room. Straight through me, he walked, and flipping on the switch for the hall light, he proceeded to the front door. My ethereal feet ran after him, and we both stood there in the foyer another knock sounded.

Raleigh's voice held the steady, authoritative tone used from years of military training, "Who is it?"

Danesti's voice matched the martial tone with a seductive assurance, "Mr. Hunt, please open the door. I need to speak to you about Elizabeth."

Raleigh frowned and turned the knob slowly. He opened the door halfway, and I saw my kinsman standing on the outside. As tall and imposing a figure Danesti cut, he wore simple dark modern apparel, which lent him a rather genial appearance.

"Who are you?" Raleigh asked.

"I am Count Danesti, Elizabeth's kinsman. I have learned that there has been some matter of confusion regarding my visit to her. I would like to discuss this with you, Mister Hunt."

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Raleigh's regard pored slowly over him from head to toe. I perceived the guarded trust he harbored, but I also knew he wanted this matter settled.

"Come in then," he said, and opened the door fully.

The Count smiled graciously and walked over the threshold. Raleigh closed the door, and in that instant I felt my kinsman's wrath inundate of the entire house. Raleigh turned and gestured to the door of the sitting room.

"Step in here and have a seat," he offered.

Just as Raleigh took a step past my kinsman, the Count grasped his forearm and shoved him Raleigh into the wall. His back hit with a thud, and immediately he growled and lunged toward Danesti. My kinsman leapt back with a cartwheel, and spiraled into the air. His feet landed about three feet up the facing wall. There he stood, like a human ledge, glaring down at Raleigh who stared, dumbfounded. Danesti reached behind his belt, and seized two stilettos hidden there. These he brandished at Raleigh, with a sneer as cold as the dead.

Before Raleigh could react Danesti jumped down, and with the sharp tips of the blades raised, literally flew forth at Raleigh. My love was again backed into the wall. Now my kinsman had the tip of one stiletto aimed at Raleigh's genitals, and with a feral hiss jabbed the tip of the other just into his throat. A drop of blood spilled down Raleigh's throat. I could hear my scream and felt myself sail toward Danesti. With invisible legs, I tried to kick the back of his knees. When this proved fruitless, I tried to claw his back. But my efforts were useless, and all I could do was watch helplessly as Danesti tormented Raleigh.

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"Ordinarily, I do not waste my time killing petty, trifling mortals when I am not hungry," he hissed. "But you have managed to manipulate my young kinswoman into entertaining the notion she has romantic feelings about you. And what are you to interfere with my affairs ... a decadent schoolmaster, with nothing to offer her but the mortal and mundane shades of real passion."

Raleigh's face was unreadable; but the next moment he jabbed his forearm up, knocking the stiletto at his throat from Danesti's hand. His knee went up and forward, and he thrust Danesti back. With a quick turn, Raleigh escaped the wall and ran toward the bedroom. But Danesti flew after him, assailing him in the hall, and leaping atop his shoulders, brought Raleigh to the floor. There Raleigh struggled with him, until Danesti caught his face between his pale hands. Their eyes locked, and in that moment, my angry Raleigh was cast under my kinsman's power. I came up behind them, and felt Danesti suckle Raleigh's mortal self-will as easily as a cat would drain a saucer of milk. In desperation, I attempted to throw my arms around my kinsman's neck and pull him away.

"You are dead, schoolmaster," Danesti murmured, "your life is mine."

As I watched helplessly, Danesti lowered Raleigh to the floor and knelt over him. His mouth lowered. I heard the amoral chuckle that racked my kinsman, and I watched as he opened his mouth. In horror, I tried to cast myself between the two of them. But I could not even feel Raleigh's body ... only the careless vapor Danesti had left his mind. It was then I saw the fangs that were my kinsman's eye-teeth; razor

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sharp and dripping with a reddish saliva. As his mouth drew toward Raleigh's throat, I screamed.

In the next moment, a great bright light encompassed the three of us. It warmed me on a level outside and beyond the mortal shell, and a commanding presence shone over Danesti's face. He looked up, and I saw what his disbelieving eyes beheld: a host of female beings surrounding us. Just beside Raleigh's prostrate body stood one I recognized: the nun who had accompanied Danesti when he had visited me. She looked more real and yet ethereal at once.

"You!" Danesti seethed. "What affair is this of yours?" He looked at her companions; and there was a glimmer of feral fear in his eyes. "What is this to any of you?"

As in answer, the woman he recognized, the left hand of the nun flashed forward. I perceived a crackling hiss as her ethereal flesh palm slapped his brow. Danesti screeched, and releasing Raleigh, his body shuddered as if in great pain.

"Go from here," the nun declared, "go, and leave your kinswoman and her lover be. If you do not, we will gather what remains of your soul and carry it into a place where you have no power over mortal men or even the shadows of the mortal world."

Danesti hissed between his teeth, "You do not have the power to take me anywhere!"

Even as she held him in control with only the touch, the nun replied coolly, "I have the power to restrain you here, do I not?"

At that moment, Danesti screamed and I saw grayish vapors wreath his head. When it dissipated a little, he

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managed a nod. She drew back her hand, and the Count scrambled back toward the foyer on hands and feet. He reminded me of a great spider as he came to the door. As he raised, he turned back and gave the circle of ethereal women one last baleful look. For a moment—perhaps not even that long—he also seemed to see me there in the hall. His face registered a wane smile that touched me coldly.

And then he turned and opening the door, stepped out. I watched his human form evaporate into mist the color of the night. The mist sped from the doorway and again the stars in the heavens glimmered faintly upon the landscape.

I felt lethargic as I turned to look at Raleigh. The women and walls and the floor were blurred images now. I seemed to kneel, and as I tried to touch Raleigh's face, was relieved to see that he was breathing.

The next thing I perceived was the sensation of someone stroking my hair. It aroused my senses, and thinking Raleigh was there in my dream, I moaned immodestly and reached for him. The form I felt, though, was not his; but soft and curvaceous, and there was something fantastic about the warmth it embraced me with. Like some aura familiar but very long mourned. And the longer it remained the surer my state of consciousness. My eyes opened and I was frightened to see sitting on the side of the bed beside me the nun who had confronted Count Danesti.

Or rather ... it was she, and yet she was more beautiful than even when she'd driven him away. Dressed in a gown of luminous silver and white, and her hair was unbound now and

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drifted in long waves over her shoulders. She gifted me with a smile that comforted away my trepidation utterly.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"My Elizabeth," she said. "My sweet Elizabeth. I just want to tell you how happy I am for you, and to assure you that your kinsman will not be intruding on your life any further."

The hairs on my arms stood up and for the first time I began to glean who she was. Tears welled in my eyes at the possibility. If she'd but answer one question, it would confirm the earnest hope.

"How do you know Count Danesti will not plague me and Raleigh?"

"Danesti neither treads the earthly plane nor heaven itself," she answered, "but has made himself home in a place between the two. This existence is known to you as the state of vampirism, though there are a myriad of names for it. And because he neither human nor angel, I was allowed to intervene this once, my daughter, from the realm that is beyond the fleeting life perceived by mortal senses."

I knew an instant's sorrowful anger. Yes, this was my mother. She had died and left me, gone on to a place where I had not been able to follow. A place, I understood now to be Life Eternal.

"Please forgive me, Elizabeth. I did not accept the truth myself until the moment of death."

She inclined and kissing my brow, the whole room suddenly vanished beneath the glow of another realm. One that transcended the little house and the lands, the very mundane itself. Here, heavenly angels were just like those

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from Father Remi's story ... and I knew this place of fertile, endless fields was no story. Everything here was as it should be, I realized, brimming with eternal fecundity and endless desire. Life beyond the dream that is mortal existence, imbuing it all was God and His Bride who, together, created it. I knew suddenly that if only I dared to throw away all the delusions learned in the mundane, then I, too, could say goodbye forever to the mortal nightmare and join Their eternity.

"And I know you too well," my mother said, "and this you aren't prepared to do until your Raleigh is ready to throw away the delusions as well."

We were joined by a young man. He was smiling tenderly and I knew he was my father. I blinked hard, fearing this all but a dream. But as my eyes opened they were still with me.

"The love you share is stronger than the delusions of the mortal world," he said to me. "You do not need confirmation of your heritage to be happy, Elizabeth. You have love, and that is, as trite as it may seem, all one needs."

I nodded tearfully, knowing it all true. My mother added with a note of solemnity, "The necklace, Elizabeth, the one Raleigh gave you. It holds the power to repulse evil on the mortal plane; not just for the wearer, but for those they love and their families. When you get it back, please keep it always near you or in your home."

"I will," I promised. "I will!"

Her smile almost blinded me. "And you will never shy from your true desires? Be true to yourself as you are now—body, soul, mind and desires. This is why Raleigh loves you so, my

daughter. And it is in this self-acceptance that will bring you contentment even you are faced with the trials and tests of life."

I nodded. "I promise. Oh, Mother, Father! I wish I could have known you!"

"But we are with you, Elizabeth," my mother promised. "Always."

My father nodded. I was giddy with the love that flooded from them, and put my arms around them. Solid they felt in all ways, with a vitality that defied the fleeting corporeal world.

My father whispered in my ear, "Dawn is upon you, my sweet. Why don't you get up and go see Raleigh as I know you wish to do?"

I smiled and looked to the window. Indeed, the first rays of morning light were just stretching through the windowpane. I felt my parents slip away then, behind the curtain that separates the real eternal from the mortal world. Yet, I had no doubt they were close, and would never truly be far away. One day, if I kept myself from falling for the deceit of mortality, then the curtain would part for me, too; and everlasting life and passion would be my inheritance.

Beatrice was asleep, looking like an angel with her hand curled in a ball under her cheek. I did not wish to disturb her, so I got out of bed, and very quietly dressed. My hair I brushed out quickly, not even taking time to braid it. Before leaving the room, I kissed Beatrice's cheek and pulled the blankets up to her chin. Her eyebrows lifted in her sleep and she murmured something I couldn't understand, but I

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thought she looked very happy. I left the room and made my way to the staircase that led to the third floor. The little corridor here brought me to Sister Anne's bedroom.

I knocked and waited. When I heard nothing inside the room, I gave it a sound rap.

"Sister Anne? Please open the door."

The knob turned from the inside and Sister Anne opened the door slowly. She was dressed in a coarse, undyed gown and the little bonnet she always wore to sleep in.

"Elizabeth?" She shielded a great yawn behind her palm. "What are you doing up so early? You are fully dressed—have you not slept tonight?"

I nodded quickly. "Yes, Sister, but I need you to allow me to go out."

"Go out? Whatever for, girl? You should stay in your room until the accustomed hour—"

"Oh, please Sister Anne!" I begged, nearly in tears. "I had the worst ... dream." I knew what I'd witnessed in Raleigh's cabin was more than a dream. But poor Sister Anne would hardly conceive otherwise. "I have to see if my fiancé is well!"

She sighed heavily, but her regard was not harsh. "You are most love-struck," she said, "and this little separation has given you nightmares. Ah well, I will not have it said I am without compassion for my girls. Let me get my shoes and I will escort you to his residence. You will see M. Hunt is just fine."

* * * *

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Sister Anne and I had just come upon the stone pathway when we heard Father Remi shouting from the way coming from the administration facilities. We turned to see him not a hundred yards away, and Raleigh was accompanying him. My heart soared; Raleigh looked hale and handsome as ever, and I could see the smoldering grin he tried to conceal. Father Remi was very excited, it was apparent, and though he clasped Raleigh's arm for support, his step was spryer than I had seen in many a year. Sister Anne was more befuddled than before, and as they approached, she looked ready to reproach the good Father.

"What are you doing out here this time of morning, Father?" she fussed. "Didn't the doctor tell you yesterday not to be out without your cane?"

Father Remi chuckled. "This is the first time I have seen you without your habit, Sister Anne," he quipped, and her face turned crimson.

He hugged me suddenly, so hard I was startled. "Are we prepared for a wedding, my Isabeau? Your M. Hunt is most insistent I marry you by this evening!"

I stared at Raleigh, too relieved to make much of Father Remi's words. I wondered if this wonderful man would always be surprising me.

"Are you quite well?" I asked.

He replied in English, "Well and not willing to take any further delays, my wayward little pupil."

I flushed, and Sister Anne, looking a little less stressed at least, touched the chain of her rosary. "I suppose if we are to hold this wedding tonight, I need to get the preparations

started. Elizabeth, come have some breakfast while I wake the other sisters."

"Ehhh," Father Remi said, "Isabeau and M. Hunt should be given a little while to speak in privacy. Let me come help you in the sorority house."

Sister Anne looked reluctant. "You mean out here? Alone?"

"What else would I mean?"

She shook her head and crossed her arms, "I do not feel that would be appropriate."

Father Remi, with an unaccustomed agility, stepped forward and clasped the nun's shoulders. He spun her about, and swatted her bottom. She and I gasped at the same time.

Father Remi held out his arm. "We will go, woman, *now*." Sister Anne took his arm, though her face was glowering. I watched in utter fascination as they walked together to the sorority house.

Raleigh drew closer and slipped an arm around my shoulder, and I heard him chuckle. I looked up at him, and felt helpless and warm in the most wonderful way.

"I was terribly worried about you," I said and hugged him fiercely.

He kissed the top of my head. "Worried about me? I'm not the one who got bound to Sister Anne's Bench yesterday."

I laughed despite myself. "Oh, but I had the worst night, Raleigh! I sensed you were in dire danger."

The scrunch of Raleigh's eyebrows told me he was troubled, too. "Elizabeth, I had the most unusual dream. I dreamed I was being attacked—by your kinsman, the Count, no less. It seemed so very real. It was foggy after he

attacked, though I think you were there, though I don't remember seeing you. There were other women; and I had the sense they were angels. One of them spoke, though I can't recall what she said. It seemed she drove your kinsman away. And when I woke up, I was lying in the hallway. How I got there, I can't describe. I do know that on waking up I was overcome with the need to head to the sorority house. Compelled, rather, from a voice that seemed out of that very dream. I think it belonged to the woman in the dream. I'm sure it was all caused by a little anxiousness on my part to talk to you today. Nevertheless, I acted on it and started out."

I was still concerned, and touched his throat. I did not see any marks, nor feel any as I looked over the skin. "You are alright then?" I asked.

"Yes, of course." He grinned. "I think it was my unconscious making an excuse for me to hasten over here. And, of course, on the way I ran into Father Remi."

I smiled. "He's known for early walks. Has trouble sleeping, I believe."

"Well, he wanted to see these..." Raleigh reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a leather-cased box about the length of a cigarette tin. He opened the lid and showed me the two gleaming wedding bands lying crossed upon one another on blanket of lace—one large enough for Raleigh's ring finger, and another, smaller.

"Oh," I gasped. "They are beautiful!"

"You like them?"

I nodded happily. "Is it your wish to marry me tonight?"

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He grinned and closed the lid. Returning it to his pocket, took out an even smaller box. To my surprise he knelt on one knee before me there on the path. He lifted the lid and inside a slit on the crushed velvet was a diamond ring. It was an old-fashioned cut, with a good size diamond mounted on the center dais, and flanked to either side by rows of four smaller stones.

"Will you marry me tonight, Elizabeth Roberts?"

I was so shocked I could hardly find the words to speak. "You should not have, Raleigh. This is too much to spend!"

"You let me be the judge of that," he reprimanded. "But answer me, please ... will you make me the happiest man in the world and marry me?"

"Yes," I said, trembling with emotion. "Of course, of course I will!"

He kissed my hand then and stood up. Removing the engagement ring, he took my hand and slipped it on my finger. It was beautiful—and I could not help but admire it!

"What did I ever do to deserve you, Mister Hunt?" I hugged him dearly.

He clasped me tight and nuzzled his mouth against my ear. "I want you ... right now!"

I giggled. "Ah, but there is nowhere but your cabin, and that is quite forbidden to me until Father Remi declares us man and wife!"

"I recall hearing that it was the stable where you were caught pleasuring yourself," he whispered. His strong hands slid down my waist, and he plumped my ass through my skirt. "Do you not agree that it would be right if your bridegroom

was shown the place where this wicked little act was carried out?"

His lips fell upon my mouth. Deep and sensuous was his kiss and my body tingled with painful desire.

"Oh god," I murmured, "yes, I will take you there."

I took his hand then and with a smile and led him swiftly to the stable. As we opened the door, we found the place almost deafening quiet; the horses were still gone on their holiday and the stable keeper was not around. We came in and Raleigh closed the door and lowered the inside bolt. No one could just walk in on us, and he turned toward me then and gave me a look that scorched my senses.

"Show me where Sister Edna found you yesterday, young lady."

He followed me to the haystack close to Pompey's pen. It did not seem to have been disturbed since I'd been dragged out the day before by the angry Sister Edna. I blushed a moment to think of it, though now I had a clear grasp of what had happened. Danesti had compelled me, using some auditory trick to deceive me into thinking Raleigh had come, and then manipulated my unexpected consciousness. Otherwise, there would have been no way I would have thought of coming in here and masturbating—at least not without closing and latching the door just as Raleigh had now done.

Now I sat down just as I did then, and lay back with my head pillowed over the hay. I looked at Raleigh, and the attentive, stern look on his face made my juices flow.

"I remember telling you that pussy is mine, not yours. And yet you apparently forgot that yesterday. Did you forget, or did you just deliberately disobey me?"

I decided there was no good reason to stress him with the truth about Danesti, not just yet anyway. This was, after all, our special day. So I only pouted, hoping he would forgive me for masturbating, whatever the reason.

"Hmm," he said, "I think you should show me what it was exactly Sister Edna found you doing."

I pulled my panties down to my knees and unfolded my thighs. I unbuttoned my blouse and pulled the bra down over my breasts. I massaged them with one hand while with the other I began to stroke my slick, heated nether mouth.

"You naughty, naughty girl," Raleigh murmured. He knelt now in the hay at my feet and watched as I continued to stroke myself. After a time, he drew my panties off my legs altogether and laid them down. He licked his lips and taking my hand from my breasts, suckled the hard nipples. I moaned and my sex panged.

"Fuck yourself," he whispered, "fuck that sweet pussy." He sat back on his haunches, and I obeyed his command. With two fingers, I fucked my hungry pussy with slow, deep strokes. He watched, arousal bright in his face; and my body grew desperate for his touch.

I undulated wantonly over the hay, and the rough hay on my bare ass only seemed to escalate my need. "Oh, Raleigh, fuck me, fuck me now!"

He sat up on his knees and unbuckled his pants. His cock was stiff and aroused. I couldn't help but touch it. So long

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and big he was, my mouth watered to stroke the hard length back and forth. Raleigh opened my legs and lowered himself over me. The head of his cock sizzled my wet pussy. The next moment he plunged into me.

Hard he fucked me, and the deep, possessing strokes whipped my sensations. I came quickly, and through the riveting orgasms, I felt his hips move faster and faster. Then he stiffened a moment and embracing me, his climax flooded into me.

"Oh god," he murmured, and we one in body and rapturous sensation.

Later, he enfolded me in his arms and lavished me with kisses. Then we lay together in the hay for some time, holding hands and talking about our future.

At one point Raleigh said, "Mother Superior has offered me a renewed salary if I stay on after we are married."

"Do you mean more money?"

"Yes," he laughed. "A quite considerable raise."

I turned over on my stomach and touched his face. I was shocked. "I would not think they'd want us here after we are man and wife."

"I got the definite feeling she thinks that my staying here—a man married to one of the pupils—can only be an asset. Why, I do not know. St. Bianca's, is a place, I am just beginning to realize, a place of the most pleasant, if unexpected, surprises. Of course, I told her I am taking you on a honeymoon, and whatever I decided would be a decision for both of us." He looked at me earnestly and stroked my cheek. "We will not stay, if this is your wish. I do not wish you

to ever fear I may be looking at one of the other girls as I have looked at you."

Oh, I loved him more passionately than I have imagined! "I trust you, my love. I always will. We can stay if you wish to retain the position. I can continue my education.

He smiled. "That is a benefit, yes. I would like you to study whatever interests you, my angel, and will always be supportive."

I kissed him lightly on the mouth. "Only do me one favor?"

"Anything."

"If for any reason you feel one of the other students needs corporal punishment ... send them to Sister Edna or another teacher?"

He laughed heartily and sat up. "I promise! All my spankings are reserved for your little ass only!"

Suddenly, he grasped the ends of my hair and rolled the length of it around his left hand. "And this one I owe you for yesterday!" With his right palm, he spanked me soundly. I whimpered, my buttocks clenching hard under his punishing hand. Sister Anne's switch had delivered no smarter strokes than this! And yet, the spanking renewed the passion inside me. Deep, pleasurable spasms gripped my nether mouth, and my clit throbbed silently, madly. I moaned as much with desire as regret.

When Raleigh stayed his hand, he inclined and kissed the exposed back of my neck. Hot gooseflesh peppered down my spine. He inhaled and there was a carnal timbre in his voice, "I love you, and I adore disciplining you!"

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A plaintive moan was all the answer I could summon. I obeyed as he told me to stand and put my panties back on. I was unsteady with passion and love, and a little flame tortured my clit. The knowing look on his face assured that he knew full well how he affected me; and that he took pride in this power he possessed.

Epilogue

Beatrice was waiting anxiously in the sitting room of the sorority house when we came in, and practically attacked me with her fervent news. But it was news I was very happy to hear.

"Tonight you will be a bride!" she cried. "And this morning I received a call from Gerald! He is in the country, and is on his way from the train station as we speak!"

I squealed in delight for her. Raleigh watched, bemused, as we stood jumping up and down. We must have made an embarrassing sight for him; but he only congratulated Beatrice on her news.

"So Gerald will be here to see you stand by as my maid-of-honor," I beamed. "Oh, look Beatrice!"

I showed her the engagement ring and now it was Beatrice who squealed. As she gushed over it, our glee was suddenly interrupted by an angry shout from the hall foyer. It was Mosie's voice, this much I knew, and Beatrice and I exchanged inquisitive glances.

"Let me up, nun!" Mosie seethed. "You will not like it when my parents know of how you dare treat me!"

Whoever she was addressing did not answer with words. The next sound we heard was the distinct sound of a birch switch strike bare flesh. Mosie let out a high, angry yelp. I glanced at Raleigh, who was grinning faintly.

"Do you know who that is, Beatrice?" he whispered.

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"Yes," she laughed softly, covering her mouth, "we all do. It is perfectly perfect Mademoiselle Mosie. I wonder what she did?"

Raleigh draped his arms around my shoulders and three of us listened as the whipping continued. Mosie's yelps turned into bellowing sobs. When at last the birch stilled, she screamed in rage, "You will regret this day, Sister Anne! Now get me off here!"

Sister Anne's retort was cold, "You may stay here all day as far as I am concerned. And I will be happy to call your father myself and tell him what you have done!"

With this, Sister Anne dealt Mosie ten more resonant strikes. But this sound was nothing to the noise which the incensed and indignant Mosie made over the birching. I did not know what transgression she'd committed; but I was pleased to know she was in the same predicament she'd helped get me into the day before. She was sobbing wildly when Sister Anne finally walked out into the sitting room. She was dressed in her old habit now and carried something gingerly in both hands. Seeing us, her face lit up.

"Isabeau, come here, child!"

I approached and she stretched her hands open. Cradled in her palms was my necklace!

"You found it! Oh, thank you, thank you, Sister!"

She gestured me to turn, and as I did, she clasped it gently around my neck. As she pinned the clasp I felt great relief. How solid, how right it felt against my skin.

Raleigh and Beatrice approached. "Where did you find it, Sister?" Raleigh asked.

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Sister Anne grunted and rolled her eyes toward the hall foyer. "It was discovered by Mosie's roommate. Mosie had hidden it inside her pillowcase. She denied it at first, claiming it was her own. But Beatrice and I both recognized it, as did some of the other girls who saw you wearing it in the cafeteria."

It was that moment I knew that Danesti had approached Mosie. He had discovered my love for Raleigh and had become outraged to learn we were to be wed. Somehow Danesti and Mosie had contrived together to have Sister Edna find me in the stable ... precisely where he had seduced and misled me in his invisible guise. My guess was that at the time he still planned on having me to himself, which explained his subsequent attempt to kill Raleigh.

The relic at my throat comforted me, though. It had its own powers, and coupled with the love Raleigh and I shared, my vampiric kinsman held no chance of ever separating us. I put Danesti out of my mind and smiled at Sister Anne.

"Thank you again," I said. "And bright news must be the call for the day. Beatrice's betrothed is on his way even as we speak."

"Yes," Sister Anne said, and patted Beatrice's cheek. "We have a big day ahead, my sweet. Why do you not go upstairs and tell the others it is time to get to breakfast. You and Isabeau have much, much to prepare for. As we all do, of course."

Beatrice kissed my cheek. "I will talk to you in a little while," she said, and looking impishly at Raleigh, "Make her behave, M. Hunt ... at least until the nuptials!"

"Go, you wicked girl!" Sister Anne laughed, and swatted her backside. I watched with a sense of great affection as Beatrice fled then, humming a cheerful tune, up the staircase.

Sister Anne made a little gasp. "I have a note for you, M. Hunt!" She rummaged a hand through one of her deep habit pockets. At last, she fished out a folded piece of stationary and handed this to Raleigh. "From Mother Superior."

He opened the paper and as he read the note, I saw the corners of his mouth turn up mischievously.

"Father Remi is waiting in the kitchen," she said. There was a glint of moisture in her eye. "I will see you later, my dear. And I can hardly wait to embrace you as a married woman!"

My chest swelled with emotion and I kissed her dear cheek. "Thank you, Sister Anne."

She waved at us both quickly and walked out then. Raleigh and I were alone, though I imagined this could not long last. From upstairs, I heard the sounds of doors opening and voices exchanging good mornings. And from the hall foyer Mosie's muffled sobs continued. At this I smiled, and hoped silently that she was every bit as embarrassed as she'd helped make me.

I was still curious about the note. "Can you share your news from Mother Superior?" I asked Raleigh, and laced my arms around one of his.

He gave me a sidelong glance. "Oh, I don't know if you really want to know."

"Oh?" I said nervously. "Has she changed her mind about the salary raise?"

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Raleigh shook his head. "No, my little pupil. And I will tell her today that I accept. This is news about something else ... something that may give you a little nervousness, being this is our wedding day. Perhaps it is best I tell you after the ceremony."

He had me more curious than ever. With a little stamp of my foot I cried, "Oh, you are vexing! Will you tell me or not?"

With a chuckle, he handed me the stationary. I was further confused in what I read in Mother Superior's familiar handwriting:

Monsieur Hunt,

I have this morning contacted the administrative furnishings house in Florence, and am happy to inform you that the piece of furniture that you are interested in is available. I have taken the opportunity of ordering it for you, and it should arrive in a month's time. Please do not concern yourself with the bill. It is my pleasure to purchase this, on behalf of the St. Bianca teaching staff, as our wedding gift to you and our beloved Elizabeth!

Affectionate wishes,

Mother Superior

"A gift?" I said. "How very sweet!"

"You may not feel so once you see it."

I felt a prickly little heat on the back of my neck. "You, sir, have a devilish tone in your words ... whatever is this piece of furniture?"

Raleigh pulled me into his arms. His hands roamed over my buttocks, and he clasped them hard, pulling me so tightly against him that even through our clothing I felt his hard

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erection pressing against my mons. His lips grazed hotly over my ear, and again I felt the maddening flame between my thighs.

"When I saw you spread and cuffed over Sister Anne's Bench, I came to a conclusion," he purred. "What first home furnishing would be more appropriate for the home we will share together? Certainly, I can think of nothing I will get more satisfaction in using than such a bench of our very own."

I rocked my hips so my frustrated sex writhed anxiously against his hard cock. "Oh, Mister Hunt," I moaned in English, "you are the most exacting and vexing of teachers!"

He laughed softly and answered, "And you, my Elizabeth, are exactly the vex I want!"

I kissed him deeply, with all the fomenting, scorching passion his love compelled.

The End

About the author:

Author Anya Howard (aka Desiree Erotique) credits her encouraging husband for her erotic and romantic inspirations. Together with their children, she and Robert live in the hills of Northeast Tennessee. Anya was thrilled this year to be offered a home for some of her manuscripts at Red Rose Publishing, and on the heels of this news was offered a two-book deal with Kensington Aphrodisia. Her favorite genre to write is BDSM Erotica, though in her other personas she's been known to pen some children's stories, write articles at the Novelspot author's forum and even author comic strips—but *Sssh, don't tell her erotica readers!*

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She has 2 stories coming out with Kensington Aphrodisia in the coming year, in addition to the stories she has coming out with Red Rose Publishing.

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