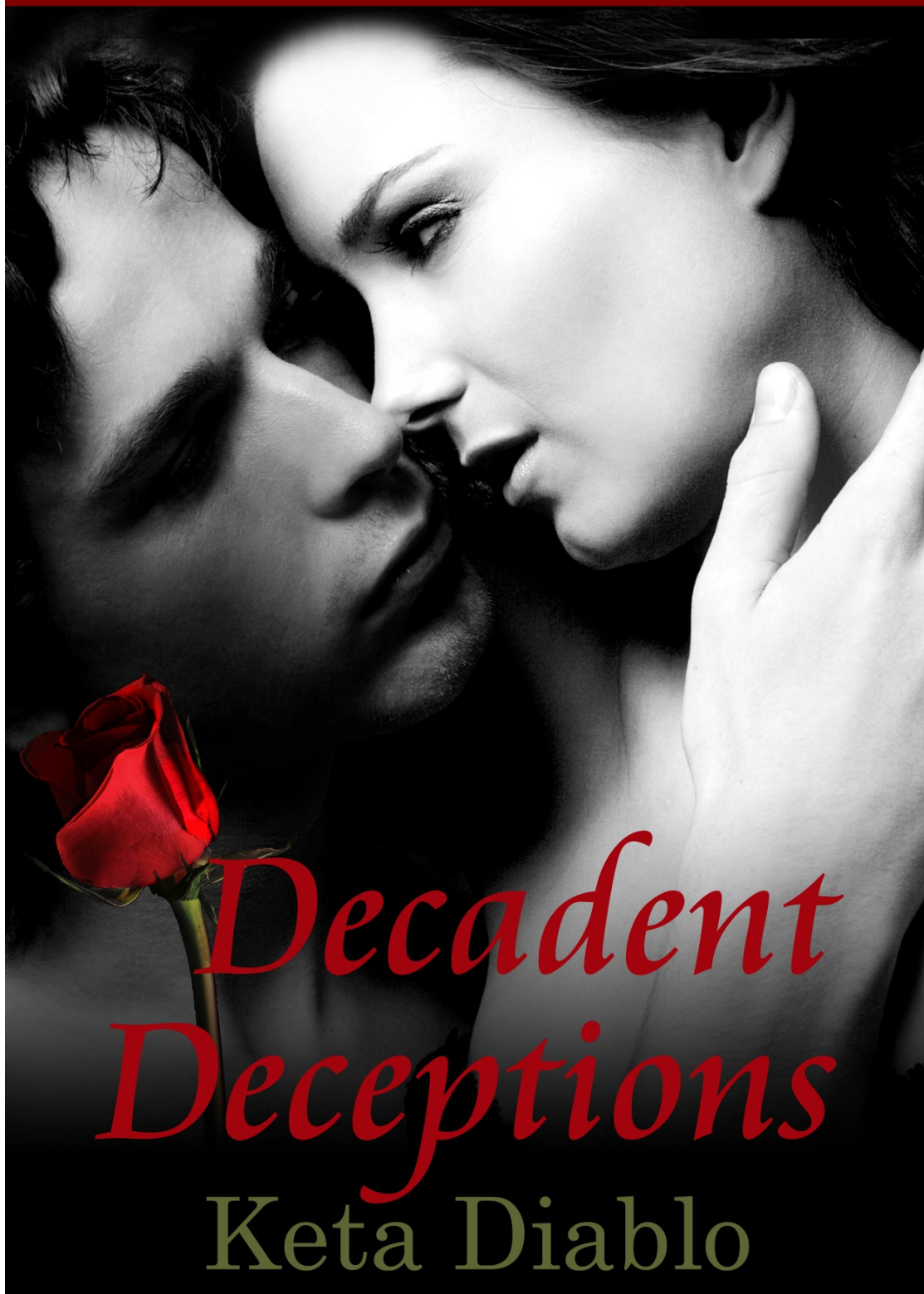


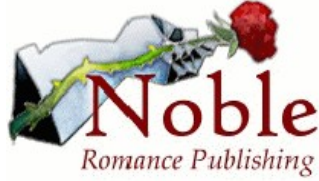
*Noble Romance Publishing*



*Decadent  
Deceptions*

Keta Diablo

## **Noble Romance Publishing, LLC**



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Decadent Deceptions  
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### **Book Blurb**

Daring and desperate to win Morgan's love, Olivia Breedlove embarks on a reckless folly. But everything backfires when Morgan remains one step ahead of her and the game ventures down a path of duplicity and murder.

A decade ago, Morgan was a heartbeat away from taking Olivia's virginity. Her father, Thaddeus, intervened and threatened to meet him over pistols if he so much as looked at his daughter again. But now, Thaddeus is dead and Morgan has no intention of ignoring the ravenous hunger he's harbored for the blasted woman for ten years.

One way or the other, he will quench this burning desire and make her his forever.

### **Chapter One**

*Spring of 1856*

*Savannah, Georgia*

Seated on the settee in their father's study, Olivia Breedlove reached for her brother's hand. "This isn't a conversation either one of us expected to have so early in our lives, is it?"

"No, dear, but this shouldn't take long," With a gentle squeeze of her hand, Cain nodded to Graham Wilkerson, the family barrister. "Proceed if you will, Wilkerson."

He adjusted his spectacles, his demeanor grayer than the sky outside the nine-paned window. "In the name of God, Amen. This seventeenth day of July, One Thousand, Eight Hundred and Fifty-Two, I, Thaddeus Breedlove of Savannah, in the State of Georgia, being of sound mind and in consideration of the mortality of my body, knowing that it is appointed to men once to die, do make and ordain this to be my Last Will and Testament. That is to say principally—"

"Forgive my impatience," Cain said, "but since we buried our father two weeks ago, could we dispense with the usual burial delineations?"

"Certainly, Mister Breedlove, I shall go directly to the instructions pertaining to how he wanted his property divided."

A tired smile tugged at Cain's lips as the man turned the page.

"I give and bequeath to my son, Cain, and to my daughter, Olivia, all my earthly goods, including my manor, *L'Esperance*, for their own personal use to be divided equally between them in full of their portion."

"Everything seems well and good so far," Cain said with a wink.

Wilkerson looked over his glasses. "There is a codicil to the will, sir."

"A codicil?" Cain asked. "What, exactly, is a codicil?"

"An appendix, if you will, pertaining to Miss Breedlove, sir."

Surprise gave way to alarm. Whatever was about to fall from the man's lips, Olivia knew it didn't bode well for her. Cain pinned Wilkerson with a look of bewilderment. "I . . . I see. By all means, continue."

The barrister cleared his throat. "I do hereby make and ordain that my daughter, Olivia, must marry within six months of my death in order to share in her full portion thereof."

Trying her best to keep her voice passive and failing miserably, Olivia said, "What!"

"There is more," the barrister said, swallowing hard. "Further, the husband of her choosing must be free from scandal, financially sound, and a respected member of the gentry."

Olivia pressed her lips together to contain the rage surging up her throat. "He can't do that!" Looking from Cain to Wilkerson, she whimpered, "Can he?"

"He has left you an out, if I may continue, Miss," the man responded sheepishly.

Her tone belligerent, she replied, "Knowing my father never left a stone unturned, I'm certain he did."

"Well, get on with it, man," Cain said with a full measure of tension in his voice. "What does it say?"

"It states that if Miss Breedlove fails to live up to the codicil, she may remain at *L'Esperance* for the rest of her natural days and receive an annual stipend from the estate."

"An annual stipend?" she asked, much harsher than she'd intended. "What is the amount of the stipend, Mr. Wilkerson?"

"He did not specify an amount, Miss, but rather stipulated you would be dependent upon your brother's benevolence."

Biting back an indignant scream, she turned to Cain. "How could he possibly do this to me?"

"Surely there must be some mistake," Cain said with a glance to Wilkerson. "My father loved Olivia with all his heart."

"I assure you, there is no mistake, sir. If I may be so bold, allow me to explain."

Cain threw up his hands. "By all means, I wish someone would."

"Your father and I engaged in several lengthy discussions on the matter. In the event of his untimely death, Miss Breedlove's future weighed heavily on his mind—more so after your mother died." Wilkerson looked directly at Olivia, smiling benignly, his tone softening. "While he lived, Thaddeus believed he could control your penchant for independence, your headstrong ways." A pause ensued during which Olivia fidgeted in the chair. "He thought this might be an incentive for you to settle down and raise a family of your own," Wilkerson added.

Stunned, she bounded to her feet. "He means to control me from beyond the grave?"

Rising quickly, Cain placed a hand on her forearm. "Let's take a day or two to digest it. In any event, you needn't worry about my benevolence."

Sick. She was going to be sick.

Notably discomfited, Wilkerson gathered his papers amid her contemptuous flight across the room to look out the window. "I have the original on file at my office, so I leave you with a copy, sir. Under the circumstances, I believe we should discuss your father's financial portfolio and bank accounts at a future date."

"Yes, thank you, Wilkerson," Cain said with a nod and ushered him to the door. "I'll be in touch."

Olivia studied the scenery outside while Wilkerson's words settled over her like a dark cloud. A man of impeccable repute, her father had arrived in Savannah twenty years ago with her mother, Lizette, a French beauty, and his two children. At age seven, Cain was a handsome little boy, and she, a precocious five-year-old, the apple of her father's eye.

In the years that followed, the romantic notions of Southern life flourished as Savannah prospered from the cotton trade. Merchants set up shops, warehouses expanded, manufacturing began and trade boomed. Savannah's wealthy residents built gracious mansions on sprawling acreage outside the city proper, and in this regard, her father would not be outdone. Instead of the fashionable white-columned Greek revival style, Thaddeus and Lizette Breedlove opted for a twenty-four room Italian Renaissance Villa of mammoth proportions. Christened *L'Esperance* by her mother, the French word for hope, the manor was, indeed, a masterpiece of its time.

Everything changed when her mother, and the premature infant she carried, died in childbirth. Her father, although recently appointed to the District Court of Georgia, did his best to nurture and love his children, despite his long hours away from home. Various and assorted nannies and schoolmasters assisted in raising Thaddeus's offspring, each and every one handsomely rewarded.

Judge Breedlove, throughout his long and industrious career, focused on one goal and one goal alone—to secure longstanding prosperity for Cain, Olivia, and their future

offspring. Having obtained that goal, Olivia believed her father journeyed to his Maker in peace, knowing that even from beyond the grave his dictums would be upheld and enforced.

The soft tread of footsteps broke her reverie. "I know it seems terribly harsh, Liv, but I'm certain he wanted what is best for you." Cain encircled her in his arms.

"Easy for you to say, you've chosen a mate and you weren't on a time limit to do so." Olivia pulled away from him and paced the room.

"I don't like that look on your face, Liv."

"What look?" she asked, chewing on her lower lip.

"The one that says wheels are turning in your head."

She raised her chin a notch. "Well, you don't expect me to take this with a grain of salt, do you?"

"Wilkerson will go to the ends of the earth to see Father's will is followed to the letter," he reminded her.

"Who says I won't follow it to the letter?"

"Liv, you're overwrought at the moment. Best to leave it for a day or two, and we'll discuss it again."

With a derisive snort she said, "Oh, we'll discuss it again, you can be sure of that. "Don't think for one minute that I'll just lay down to his demands and rush into a marriage of misery."

Heaving a long, drawn-out breath, Cain smiled. "I'd expect nothing less from you, my dear, spirited sister." He walked toward her and delivered a kiss to her forehead. "I'll see you at dinner tonight."

She nodded.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," she replied. "I'll be in my room, nursing my melancholy, should you need me."

Making a quiet exit, Cain closed the door to the study, leaving Olivia alone with her dismal musings. "Six months," she muttered. "How can one possibly choose a husband in such a short time?" She didn't want a husband, wasn't looking for a husband—unless it was the man who sent her heart into cartwheels and left her privates aching

with need. She knew all too well, to even think he'd look her way was pointless. To Morgan, she was nothing more than what she'd always been—a pesky friend from childhood.

Straightening her spine, Olivia left her father's study and sought the comfort of her room. She couldn't allow this to happen. She had to think of something and soon. By the time she reached the upstairs landing, a plan took root.

"It might work," she mumbled under her breath. "It just might."

## Chapter Two

"Are you out of your mind, Liv?"

Aware of the taxing battle ahead of her and the tenuous chance of victory, Olivia steeled herself. "Don't be such a prude, Cain. Think of it as an adventure."

She had anticipated her brother's reaction at the announcement of her desire to visit a brothel. The fact that Morgan Gatewood had stopped by this morning would not deter her. In fact, since she'd designed the outlandish scheme to capture his attention, the timing couldn't have been better.

Cain shook his head and slapped at an annoying fly in his line of vision. "If anyone recognized you, much less heard of your sojourn to *L'Amour Immortelles*, you'd be ruined. *I'd* be ruined!" Petitioning his best friend with an importunate gaze, he said, "Morgan, say something, do something."

Seated across from her on the wide, sweeping veranda with his ankles crossed at the end of his long legs, Morgan personified ambiguity. The man who held her heart in his hands had always seemed darkly remote, more so since returning from abroad six months ago. Dressed in a casual white linen shirt and snug-fitting tan buckskins with knee-length Hessian boots, he appeared exceedingly virile today.

Morgan was six years old when his parents, Rance and Dyann, left Louisiana for Savannah, and soon thereafter purchased the plantation bordering L'Esperance. How devastating it must have been to hear the local gossipmongers drag their son's name through the mud ten years ago. Her name, too. Morgan had compromised Judge

Breedlove's daughter, they had said, kissed her—among other things—right under the Judge's nose, in her late mother's rose garden, no less.

Furious didn't begin to describe her father's disposition when he threatened to send her away to Aunt Dottie's in Chattanooga—permanently—if she even *looked* at the irresistible man again. The thanks for saving her from total ruination went to Cook. Unflinching loyalty and determination ranked high on the black woman's list in regard to the Breedloves, particularly after their mother's untimely death. Olivia swore the woman had a sixth sense and had made it her life's mission to ensure her charge arrived at the marriage bed not only virginal, but untarnished.

The scene that followed still had the ability to shred her heart into tattered ribbons. Cook had retrieved her father, and suddenly he appeared, bearing the look of a man on the brink of lunacy. Immediately, a lengthy inquisition in the library took place between Morgan, her father, and Olivia. White-lipped, her father, judge and jury, ran through a gamut of questions. Had Morgan taken liberties with her? Had he comprised her in any manner? Did she remain virginal? Morgan had answered dubiously to the first two questions and *yes* to the last. The gavel came down, swift and hard. Under no circumstances could they be seen together again. Her father spat the next words, his body going rigid. "I simply can not allow my daughter to associate with one of Savannah's notorious voluptuaries." At the time, Olivia didn't know the meaning of the word, but the tight, white lines around his mouth imbued its inference. "While I find little fault with your gregarious appetite for carnal liaisons, Gatewood," he had added, "I have plans for Olivia, and they do not include marriage to a libertine."

Resembling an iconic statue, Morgan had stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his expression unreadable when her father banged his fist on the desk and delivered his final words through clenched teeth. "Stay away from my daughter, Morgan, or by God, I'll call for my second and meet you at dawn."

Her father didn't dislike Morgan Gatewood. In fact, Olivia imagined he admired the man—provided he stayed away from her—far away. She'd never forgotten the encounter with Morgan, the way her lips melded so perfectly with his, the way her skin burned in all the places he'd touched her or the sudden sensation of collapsing under his



wicked onslaught. He had never attempted to seek her out again, or kiss her—much to her dismay.

She'd also never forgotten that Morgan—like Cain—was a prolific debaucher of women. The details of their self-indulgent ruttings were delivered straight from the horse's mouth—her brother's. Why Cain had shared Morgan's peccadilloes with her was beyond comprehension. And every sordid aspect stabbed her to the quick.

To Olivia, Morgan was a study in magnificence—albeit a sinfully decadent study. She'd spent hours, awake and asleep, dreaming about his pewter eyes, chameleon-like and bedeviling. Long, midnight hair framed his finely chiseled facial bones and generous, symmetrical mouth, his upper lip in perfect balance with the lower. The stuff of myth and legend, everything about Morgan personified beauty.

Several years ago, Morgan left Savannah, claiming he harbored a desire to see the world and acquaint himself with exotic cultures and distant locales. Olivia was crushed. Now he was back, more alluring than ever, his aloof aura a dismal reminder she meant nothing more to him now than she did then—merely a childhood acquaintance. And Olivia was still crushed. Notoriously close-lipped about his financial affairs and business dealings, he'd shared nothing about what he found or learned on his journey, and Olivia knew better than to ask.

Squinting against the harsh rays of the sun, Morgan graced her with a smile. "Surely there must be another way to secure a suitable husband, Liv."

With a sardonic chuckle, she met his silver eyes. "I think my father made it perfectly clear in his will. The man must be a well-respected member of the gentry with a plump portfolio and bank account to match the Prince of Serbia's."

The Adonis of her dreams replied, "And you must marry him within six months or forfeit your inheritance?"

"You needn't gloat, Morgan."

"Histrionics are not your strong suit," Cain said. "Father specified you must marry a man unencumbered by scandal, surrender your wild ways, and hopefully raise a large brood of children."

Sarcasm laced her words. "Or rely on your benevolence for the rest of my natural days."

"It was rather mean-spirited of the old codger," Cain said. "But this plan of yours is utterly ridiculous."

"He left me little choice." She scoffed. "How would you like to have a mere six months to choose a life mate, knowing you might be shackled to a bumbling lummoX for the rest of your life?"

"Ah," said Cain. "You wish to sample the goods prior to purchasing, is that it?"

"Heavens no! I don't wish to sample, merely observe." She wrinkled her nose. "Conjoined at the hip to a man who doesn't know the first thing about pleasing a woman is unthinkable." Glancing from Cain to Morgan, she continued. "Besides, what I know about amorous escapades you could stash in a thimble. Firsthand, that is."

Cain bounded to his feet. "This is insane. You mean to choose a mate based on his sexual prowess?"

"Partially, yes," she said. "I know only what you have shared with me about your self-indulgent romps, and how can I possibly capture a man's heart, much less hold it, if I know nothing about his likes or dislikes?"

Morgan laughed. "Trust me, men have few dislikes in the department of fuck—fornication."

Rising from the chair, she said, "You're such a cold-hearted toad. You don't give a fig whether or not the woman is pleased, but think only of your own gratification." Her spiteful gaze intensified. "Precisely the reason I mean to choose my own lover, preferably one who cares about my—"

"Licentious cravings?" Morgan infused swiftly.

She walked toward him and didn't stop until his sinfully handsome face loomed inches before hers. "You think to mortify me, Morgan, harangue me into giving up this quest?"

Happy for once she'd shown him his place, her small victory faded in light of his arrogant retort. "On the contrary, have at it, Olivia." He hesitated. "And don't ever presume to know what I do or don't do in the bedchamber."

*Wicked.* She despised the imagery her brain conjured from that one simple word, and an act from the Holy Ghost couldn't eradicate the erotic scenes. Blast the man.

"Should you find a suitable candidate by merely observing," Cain said with a lift of his shoulders. "What then?"

"Persuade him, subtly of course, to ask for my hand." She resumed her seat, continuing on a drawn out sigh. "Then we'll marry the same day you and Lark take your vows, dear brother, and I will be wealthy in my own right."

Morgan's heavy-lidded glance hitched her breath. "What makes you think you'll find your prince wenching at *L' Amour Immortelles*?"

"If you and Cain cut your teeth *wenching* there, why wouldn't I think the majority of your blueblood friends also patronize the establishment?" Without waiting for a reply, she put a finger to the corner of her mouth. "What does *L' Amour Immortelles* mean, anyway?"

"It's French for Love Everlasting," Morgan replied, low-voiced.

"We're getting off the subject." Cain wagged a finger in her direction. "You have a particular chap in mind, don't you?"

Morgan's head shot up so fast it startled her.

"No one in particular," she managed to say. "I won't know until I see him . . . engaged."

"Darling sister, you could have your choice of men. Tell me who you have in mind, and I'm certain he'll do cartwheels once he learns of his good fortune."

"You're not listening," she said. "He could be a Greek God in looks and stature, but that tells me nothing about his competence or ineptitude, does it?" Cain and Morgan exchanged glances while she tapped her foot against the smooth, flat stones of the veranda. She paused, and then asked, "Are you going to arrange it or must I *visit L' Amour Immortelle's* unannounced and request a meeting with the proprietor on my own?"

Cain's dark eyes searched her face. "My God, you're perfectly serious!"

"Quite."

He tossed his hands up and looked at his friend.

"I'll make the necessary inquiries," Morgan said dryly. "Under one condition."

Her chin jutted outward. "What condition?"

"You'll observe and nothing more." Topping off his words, he said, "I want your word you won't indulge in or act on impetuous fantasies."

"But . . . ."

"You heard him," Cain said, hands on hips. "You're not to speak a word of this to anyone, including my fiancé. I'll go along with this ill-fated scheme, but you must agree to be under Morgan's tutelage in all respects. He'll make the arrangements; you'll appear incognito, and *watch*, only."

Her heart raced. She knew all about *peep rooms*—from Cain and Morgan, of course—had read numerous accounts about voyeurs and now she was about to join their ranks. She'd braced for a horrendous fight, but now that victory was within her grasp, ripples of excitement coursed through her.

With a cross of her heart, she said, "Done. When will you speak to the proprietor and confirm a date, Morgan?"

He rose from the chair with the loose-limbed agility of a jungle cat, his gaze raking her head to toe. "I plan to visit the establishment tonight. I'll speak to Madame Rousseau and orchestrate an appointment within the week."

"Madame Rousseau. Is she the owner?"

"No," Morgan said. "She manages the brothel."

A commotion near the French doors drew their attention. Cain's fiancée, Lark Hudson, glided onto the porch, her honey-colored hair, interspersed with pale white kisses from the sun, cascaded down her back in soft curls. Cornflower blue eyes sparkled like shiny gems against her flawless, translucent skin. A frequent visitor at *L'Esperance*, she and Olivia had become fast friends.

His composure regained, Cain rushed to Lark's side as she gave each of them a long, inquiring look. "Have I intruded, darling?" she asked, her tone sweeter than a songbird's, reminding Olivia how well her name suited her.

"Not at all, love. In fact, we are discussing the wedding."

Lark sketched a warm smile. "Speaking of which, you promised to drive me into Savannah to Miss Brouillard's Dress Shoppe this afternoon."

"I haven't forgotten," he said with a wink. "Care to join us, Liv?"

Her head still reeling from the previous conversation, she replied, "No, but thank you for asking. I think I'll take Sinbad out for a ride."

Cain leaned in and kissed her cheek. "See you at dinner tonight."

With a ghost of a smile, Morgan bowed at the waist, his erotic mouth turning Olivia's knees to marmalade. Sweeping past her, he paused and whispered in her ear, "I'll be in touch soon."

Chills rustled down her spine. Beneath that seductive cadence dwelt a rock-hard body, and she wanted to touch it, taste it, feel it slamming into her.

They walked from the veranda, and Olivia closed her eyes against the lurid images Morgan's presence summoned.

*Good God, what in the world have I gotten myself into?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan mounted Valor, chasing clouds across the countryside as if the hounds of hell nipped at the steed's heels. Damn the little termagant! So deeply into carnal thoughts of her, he still hadn't figured out how she had maneuvered him into this ridiculous sham. He should have stayed in France, or at the very least stayed away from *L'Esperance* and the bewitching Olivia Breedlove.

*Cursed*, the little voice in his head screamed, *from the moment you kissed the dark-haired enchantress ten years ago*. He'd tried everything imaginable to rid himself of this insatiable lust for her, bedded countless women to dispel her from his heart, and the sum total of his endeavors amounted to failure. On the cusp of declaring his love, assuming the persona of a jackass, he'd fled to France three years ago. Even thousands of miles had failed to dilute the all-encompassing hunger that consumed him every time the woman stood within striking distance. Now, Thaddeus was dead, rendered incapable of commanding him to stay away from his virginal daughter. And stay away from her he would not.

He had only to close his eyes and she found him, flaunting that rich, sable hair streaked with ribbons of amber. Resembling a thick veil of silk, it framed her elfin face in reckless abandon and tumbled down her back in a waterfall of sun-kissed glory. Her

exotic green eyes beckoned him to kiss her exquisite, cherry-blossom lips and run his hands across her pearlescent skin until she writhed beneath him. High and well-defined, her cheekbones framed her small, slender nose. Perfection didn't begin to describe Olivia's beauty. Aside from her physical allure, something about her beguiled him. Hell, everything about her beguiled him. Doomed like Tristan sailing the seas forever in search of Isolde, Morgan had accepted his penance for loving Olivia years ago.

He did all he could do to keep his expression placid, his demeanor cool, when she announced this morning she had every intention of visiting *L' Amour Immortelles* to expand her knowledge—or lack thereof—on fornication. His silent applause for her audacity faded amid the hard, cold facts—if one desired to expand their carnal curriculum vitae, including fucking, one only had to visit *his* place.

Even Cain had no idea he had purchased *L' Amour Immortelles* the year before he sailed abroad and had surrendered it to Madame Rousseau's fastidious management until he returned. He had hoped to keep it confidential, like all his business ventures. The brothel turned a nice profit, affording him the finer niceties of life, and now the waspish she-cat was about to invade his private domain. He couldn't allow her or Cain to discover *he* owned the brothel, that *he* was the very man with whom she demanded an audience. He would speak with Madame Rousseau immediately and cajole her into playing along with this masquerade. The woman could not, under any circumstances, disclose his identity, reveal to Liv that he'd gone beyond frequenting the finest brothel in Savannah, but had actually purchased it.

Lassoed like a wild mustang by Liv's heartfelt pleadings and cat-like eyes, he seemed incapable of refusing her request to select a husband of her choosing, one who knew what he was about in the bedchamber. Didn't he desire the same, hope against hope he wouldn't wake up one day shackled to a woman who swept into a faint at the sight of a man's cock? By the time Cain had taken leave of his senses and agreed to assist her, he had little choice but to act the cool goose and acquiesce to the debacle. Christ! And he'd agreed to tutor her, would be forced to listen to lurid descriptions of what she'd observed during her visits, and no doubt expected to offer commentary.

He slowed Valor to a walk and wondered whose heart pounded faster, his or the stallion's. He despised how he lusted after the woman, had lusted after her for years. A

distant memory of the very first time—the *only* time—he held her luscious body in his arms crept from the recesses of his brain. The August sky hung low and hot the day he and Cain grabbed their poles and headed for the river. Suddenly, Liv strolled up behind them on the path, uninvited, but not unwelcome, particularly after she announced Cook had packed chicken and biscuits in the basket she carried.

What possessed her to walk into the swift current soon after they dropped their lines, only a fool could reckon. Cain called out with a stern admonishment to extricate her foolish ass immediately, but his request had little effect. Morgan's stomach had lurched, and a prickling at the nape of his neck ran the length of his spine. Strange, even today he remembered the minute incidentals, and terror gripped him all over again.

She'd waved to them, her willowy body teetering against the ashen waters licking about her thighs. Like a leaf caught up in an eddy, she toppled, only her flailing arms visible above the water. From the bank, he dropped the pole and dove in, horror freezing his heart. He would never reach her, would never find her in the murky shadows of death.

Cain's voice had reached his ears through a waterfall of anguish and hopelessness. "Save her, Morgan, save her!"

Fetid water sucked him under amid a whirling cloud of sludge. He searched, his eyes burning, his arms thrashing wildly about him. His hand found a clump of her long hair, and he dragged her to the surface, a thankful prayer and a curse leaving his lips simultaneously. She fought against him like a demon possessed as he pulled her against his chest.

"Yield!" he'd screamed. "Or you'll drown us both." His legs pushed against the raging current, his numb arm doing its best to propel them toward shore.

Long minutes later, with her gasping and choking, he'd grabbed a hold of her trousers with one hand and the same lock of hair with the other and heaved her onto the muddy bank.

Out of breath and sorely out of temper, he'd loomed over her quaking body. "Are you utterly insane?"

Her hair, dark with muck, her emerald eyes pooled with tears, she'd said only one word. "Morgan."

His damp fingers whispered over her cheek, stroking, caressing, and he knew, from that moment on, that he could never dispel her from his soul. The bond between them could never be severed; the mind-numbing feeling of almost losing her would be seared into his brain for all eternity. He quit his dream-like musings and pondered more pressing matters, like how in the hell would he manage watching that sensual mouth of hers describe every decadent detail of what she'd witnessed? *And she would.*

Unabashedly candid, Olivia Breedlove possessed a devil-may-care attitude about anything and everything in her life. The woman didn't know the meaning of refined modification when it came to speaking her mind. She said whatever flew into that beautiful head, to whomever she pleased, and the hell with propriety. Her father had known it, thus the reason he'd stipulated in his will it was time for her to settle down with a respected member of the gentry. Thaddeus hadn't been able to tame her in life, but by God, he'd do his best in death.

In the next moment, Morgan physically withered sitting atop the horse. What if she found what she sought, the man who could deliver the heart-pounding mating her young, supple body so desperately craved? What would he do then? It would be too late for him to tell her he loved her, had loved her from the moment he'd kissed her on that moonlit night so many years ago. He'd returned from abroad to profess his undying love, get down on his knees if need be and admit that every time he looked at her, something hot and achy surged up his chest until he thought he might choke. Now she'd made it perfectly clear she was on the prowl for a husband and he was not in the running.

He had to get a hold of himself. Never had he allowed the softer sex to penetrate his calm demeanor, but the die was cast, and he no longer had a choice in the matter. Forced to go along with this charade, he prayed she wouldn't find what she desperately hungered for at *L'Amour Immortelles*. If she did, he'd have to find a way to thwart it.

Or return to France and wallow in his misery forever.

He dug his heels into Valor. The sooner he had a little tête-à-tête with Madame Rousseau, the better.

### **Chapter Three**



The following morning, Morgan handed off the reins to a livery attendant and glanced skyward, the oppressive heat enveloping him like steam from a Turkish bath.

One of the many black servants at *L'Esperance* met him on the porch. "If ya is lookin' for Miss Olivia, she is in dah garden," the woman said and nodded to the right.

Morgan peered between the branches of a hickory. Dressed in a fashionable lavender gown and displaying an ample amount of cleavage, Olivia sat on a bench near her mother's prized roses, reading. He closed his eyes against the beauty that stopped men in their tracks, him among them. A familiar piquant mixture of jasmine and white tea blossoms wafted around him, more potent than poisonous vapors infused by a viper's fangs. Unbeknown to the confounded woman, her secret weapon brought him to his knees after one teensy whiff.

An overt clearing of his throat prompted her to place the book in her lap, fold her slender hands and look up at him. "Morgan, I can only assume you've brought me good news."

He had a powerful urge to slap that smug look from her face. "Indeed, I have fulfilled my obligation and met with Madame Rousseau."

Her eyes grew wide. "And?"

"Everything is arranged. I insist on accompanying you the first time."

"The first time?" She blinked and came to her feet slowly while placing the book on the bench. "Does that mean you've scheduled more than one appointment?"

With acid amusement he said, "One can hardly choose a husband after one showing. I assumed—"

She stepped toward him with a devastating smile. "I knew I could count on you, knew you'd understand."

Loath to admit it, he did empathize. Placed in her situation, he'd insist on doing the same, but it irked him beyond imagination that in two days those angelic eyes would feast upon strangers fornicating. *Among other things.*

He bowed slightly, straightened and waited for her to speak again.

"I'm forever in your debt, eternally grateful."

Thankfully, his breathing returned to normal and he managed to respond. "Yes, well, think nothing of it. How do you plan to disguise yourself?"

"Oh," she said. "That's the corker! Cain suggested I attire myself in men's clothing, and I couldn't agree more. My best chance of not being recognized is to wear men's attire." Acknowledging the little choking noise from his throat, she looked at him sharply. "Are you all right, Morgan? What's the matter, don't you think it's a splendid idea?"

How could he tell her it had nothing to do with what she would wear, but rather the sudden impending image of her peering through that little peephole? He rocked back on his heels and said, "Leave it to our little ingenious Cain."

"What day will you arrive to escort me?"

"Friday evening, say, nine o'clock?"

An instant blush found her cheeks, and he had the strange feeling she had conjured an erotic image in her mind. "Will you be staying with me the entire time or . . . ?"

"No," he said with a knife-edged finality. "I'll escort you to Madame Rousseau's suite, and she'll manage the rest."

"You told her to expect a woman?"

He ground the words out. "Yes, she will expect a woman of the gentry who desires to observe an amorous liaison."

Her tone grateful she asked, "What did it cost, Morgan? You need only tell me what you had to pay, and I'll reimburse you on Friday."

He dismissed her question with a wave of his hand. He didn't want her damn money; if she ever found out it fattened his pocketbook, there'd be hell to pay.

"Oh no you don't, dear friend. I can't possibly allow you to pay for my shameless inquisitiveness."

*Dear friend?* Wielding a dull knife to cut out his heart to serve it *à la friteuse* would have sufficed. "Is that what you call it? Your *inquisitiveness*? I thought it fell more along the lines of depravity."

Green eyes narrowed. "You don't approve, after all?"

With another wave of his hand, he forged ahead. "Forget it, it doesn't matter whether I approve or not. I gave my word to Cain I'd see it through to the end whether or not you're shocked out of your pristine bloomers."

Her delicate chin tilted up. "I assure you, I've seen it all."

"Is that so? Where?"

"Books. You do remember my father has an extensive library, including a vast collection of nude pictorials . . . French and Italian."

With a sick knot in his stomach, he met her gaze squarely. "One hundred dollars."

"What?"

"One hundred dollars to observe."

"That's exorbitant! What does it actually cost to—?"

"Less than it costs to engage in voyeurism, and that should be of little significance since you don't plan to offer yourself up as a *fille de joie*. Or do you?"

"Of course not!" she replied indignantly and in the next breath, "What did you call them?"

"A prostitute."

"Yes, I know that, but did you use a French term?"

He could have kicked himself for overlooking her uncanny perception, and why did he get the feeling pistons and pulleys worked overtime in that pretty little head as she scrutinized him? "About the money . . ."

"I'll have it on Friday."

Her eyes warned him another question from that kissable mouth struggled for release. "What? You'll burst if you don't spit it out."

"Will they . . . will the people in the room know I'm, well, you know, watching?"

"Do you want them to?"

She clutched her throat. "Most certainly not, but I can't help but wonder if that is an option."

"It is, but that will cost another fifty dollars." He studied her intently. "Should I arrange that, too?"

"No, no, thank you. I'd prefer—"

"To spy on people while they're rutting."

A little gasp spewed from her throat, but like the Olivia he knew, she recovered quickly. With a bold step forward, she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him, without warning, without pretense. His head swam. Christ, those sweet, sensual lips

melled into his passionately, as if they had done this a thousand times in the past, but in reality, it had only been once—a lifetime ago. She clung to him and pressed her firm, ripe body against him. His fingers splayed and tangled in her wild mane as he drew her deeper into the kiss.

On and on it went, her sweet breath mingling with his, their tongues entwined. Amid the little soft moans from the back of her throat, his resolve disintegrated, his kiss reaching a demanding plateau. Still she did nothing to stop him. Overcome by an irresistible urge to feel her beneath him, he backed her toward the bench, intent on taking her here, now, on that hard, cold surface or the ground, he didn't care which. The rigid length of his cock pulsed between them. More than anything in the world, he wanted to shove it into her . . . into every orifice imaginable.

The soft echo of a woman's voice filtered through the labyrinth of trellises and twisted vines. "Liv, darling, where are you?"

Olivia jerked from his arms and staggered back, her voice hoarse. "Oh, forgive me, I shouldn't have . . . ."

"Olivia!"

"Here, Lark, near the roses." She buffed her lips with her fingers and then straightened her dress. "You must leave quickly," she said, pointing toward a narrow path. "Please, Morgan, Lark will suspect something if she sees you."

Caught up in the moment, he took her chin in his hand with only a vague awareness of the robin's twill overhead, the rustle of nearby branches, and the scattered gravel crunching beneath someone's feet. "The next time you start something with me, be prepared to have it finished."

The sound of footsteps heightened with every passing second. "Please," she said, her voice degenerating to a nervous twitter. "I'll expect you on Friday at nine o'clock."

Releasing her reluctantly, he turned and walked from the garden.

\* \* \* \* \*

Olivia had little time to collect herself before Lark entered the inner sanctuary of the garden. Her soon-to-be-sister-in-law had the most befuddled expression on her face.

"Who was that?" She pointed to a fleeting image of Morgan's back disappearing behind a six-foot hedge.

Feigning ignorance, Olivia replied, "Who? Where?"

"Liv, dear, I know, at times, you think me quite dense, but I recognize broad shoulders when I see them." She scanned Olivia from head to toe. "Oh, dear me, look at your dress. Have you been pruning rose bushes? Don't we have servants to take care of that sort of . . . ?"

"I don't believe you are dense, Lark, and no, I wasn't pruning rose bushes."

"I'm happy to hear both."

"Both what?"

"That you weren't pruning roses in that lovely dress and that you don't find me dense." She looked over her nose, her voice perfectly calm. "For example, I've known for years that your brother is a notorious rogue and has been tumbling women since early puberty, and . . . ."

"And what?"

"I'm eternally grateful for it."

"You are?"

"Of course," Lark said flippantly. "I'll soon be wedded to a man who comes to my bed with more experience than Casanova."

"Lark!"

She lifted her chin. "What? Women should not enjoy copulation, experience sexual gratification?"

"Yes, yes, they should," Olivia said. "I just wasn't sure you also believed they should."

A sly smile formed her lips. "Also, Liv?"

"That's not fair, you tricked me!"

"And you're avoiding the question. Now," she asked again, tilting her head toward the pebbled walkway, "since there are few stallions taller than an oak and the color of pine pitch, I'm certain I spied Valor near the stables as we rode in." Lark tapped her foot against the paved rock. "I swear, I don't know what has gotten into everyone. I sense something is amiss, but questioning your brother is pointless."

"Is it? Well, that's because nothing is amiss, Lark. You have much to occupy your thoughts these days so please don't worry your pretty little head about insignificant issues."

"Insignificant issues? What does that mean, and was that, or was that not, Morgan rushing from the garden like a nest of hornets were on the attack?"

"Yes," she replied sheepishly. "It was Morgan. He stopped by looking for Cain and found me instead." Olivia shrugged and hoped the lie would pacify her.

"I find that quite strange. We met him in town an hour ago, and he said nothing about stopping by." Lark leaned forward and studied her intently, the puzzled expression returning. "Your face is chafed, and your lips are swollen."

Olivia's hands flew to her mouth as she slouched onto the bench. "All right, I'm not very good at lying." She blew a lock of hair from her forehead and confessed. "It was Morgan and I . . . I kissed him."

A giggle flew from Lark's lips. "You did?"

She nodded.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"After nursing feelings for him for ten years, what was it like?"

Olivia exhaled a drawn out sigh. "Breathless, utterly breathless, like the first time." Then she frowned. "Oh, Lark, there is a mystery, a wonder and a wildness about the man. I can no longer think straight when Morgan comes around, and the worst of it is, I'm nothing more to him than a childhood friend."

Lark settled onto the bench beside her and took her hand. "Trust me, dear, the look in Morgan's eyes is anything but friendly when you enter a room."

Olivia shifted until their eyes met. "If only that were true."

Lark kissed her on the forehead. "It's true."

"Did Cain ever tell you about the time Morgan saved my life?"

Lark shook her head. "What happened?"

"I was twelve, Morgan fourteen. Foolishly, I decided to cool off in the river while he and Cain fished on shore. The current took me under faster than a hoot owl can blink. Hopelessly, I struggled, knowing, remotely, my efforts were futile. Out of nowhere,

Morgan appeared, and his strong arms pulled me from my watery grave. I don't remember much after that, except for the look in his eyes."

"What look?"

"He hovered over me while I lay sprawled in the mud. A mixture of anguish, fear, and something I didn't recognize at the time lurked in those half-crazed silver eyes. I loved him at that moment and realized I would until the day I died. Years later, the night he almost ruined me in Mother's garden, I saw the same look in his eyes, minus the fear and anguish."

"Love," Lark said. "Didn't I tell you? Now the question is, what does he plan to do about it?" With a mischievous glint in her blue eyes, she pulled back. "More to the point, you have less than six months to bring him around, so what are *you* going to do about it?"

Olivia chewed on her finger. "I'm working on that."

Lark snapped her fingers. "I knew it! My intuition has never failed me. Well whatever it is, don't do anything to compromise your reputation *until* he asks for your hand."

*If she only knew.* "My *reputation* is the least of my worries right now, thanks to Father. Curse the man and his blasted will."

"He wanted only what was best for you," Lark said. "Although I do admit, he had a queer sense of practicality—forcing you to choose a mate within six months or lose your inheritance." With a finger to the corner of her lips, she asked, "Did you remind Morgan about the ball next week at *L'Esperance*?"

"It completely escaped me."

"No matter, I'll tell Cain to remind him."

As if Lark had mentally summoned him, Cain appeared, his brow furrowed. "What in the world's taken hold of Morgan? I called out to him, but he mounted that monstrous stallion and stormed off. Did he have an encounter with a disgruntled badger?"

Exchanging glances, Olivia and Lark broke into laughter. "I would imagine about now," Lark said, "he wishes he had."

Her brother shot her a concerned look. "Apparently, it's a private joke and I'm to be kept in suspense." He craned his neck toward the manor. "I've been sent to retrieve you; Cook is ready to serve lunch."

They rose from the bench and followed Cain back to the manor, Lark's lips pinched against laughter and Olivia doing her best to reign in her battered emotions.

## Chapter Four

After an interminable week of waiting, Friday night had finally arrived. Cain sneaked the attire for her disguise into her room shortly after dinner. He placed the items—a stiffly starched white shirt, black suspenders, a pair of pinstripe black trousers, and one pair of outrageously enormous shoes on a chair. Olivia knew she'd have to stuff the latter with newsprint. For the final touch, he plopped a wide-brimmed straw hat on the pile.

"You can't be serious," she stated flatly.

"Perfectly. Pull the hat down low when you're meandering through the corridors."

"Tell me about the brothel," she said, hoping Cain could prepare her for the excursion.

"*Immortelles* caters to the elite of Savannah. Located three blocks from the District Court building, it's a three-story structure nearly the size of a city block. Inside is a parlor, an elegant dining room and, most assuredly, the most attractive of the city's estimated two-hundred *soiled doves*."

"Two hundred?"

"Yes," he replied. "Prostitution is not a crime, you know." With his hand on the door latch, and about to leave, he turned to her. "Lark is unduly suspicious these days. Just this morning she said, 'Something noxious is in the air.'"

"Perhaps she was referring to the manure in the fields," Olivia said with a smile.

Cain ducked into the hallway and called out, "I think not."

After adding crushed white tea roses and oil of jasmine to the water, Olivia took a leisurely bath. Then she brushed her long hair until her scalp tingled, tied it in a knot at the top of her head and donned the clothes. Resembling inflated gunnysacks, the trousers



hung from her hips, not to mention their ungainly length. She stepped into the shoes, hoping they would help, but in the end, scrunched the britches around her waist and secured them with a leather belt. The oversized shirt wasn't much better. She rolled the sleeves up and tucked the extra fabric into the trousers. Facing the full-length mirror, she did a little half-spin and frowned. Good heavens, she resembled a country bumpkin and could no more pass for a member of the gentry than Cinderella.

The mantle clock chimed eight times. In another hour, the Bedouin sheik of her every thought would arrive. She could either spend it reading her most recent purchase—two volumes of poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, including *A Drama of Exile* and her favorite, *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*—or daydream about Morgan. She chose the latter.

At precisely a quarter of nine, she rose from the bed and pulled her long cloak from a hook near her armoire. With a final glance in the mirror, and satisfied her attire was suitably concealed, she plucked the straw hat from her bed and left the room. She tiptoed down the stairs with the unassuming presence of a church mouse, confident Cain and Lark had left an hour ago to play whist with the Marchands. Only the servants remained in the manor, and there wasn't one among them who would dare to question or stop her, except Cook. She tiptoed past the kitchen with her heart in her throat and, after opening the massive front doors, slipped onto the porch. Thank God punctuality ranked high on Morgan's list of priorities, for as she looked down the long drive, his black-lacquered coach appeared.

Moments later and seated across from the decadent creature, Olivia noted her heart kept time with the wheels of the coach as it scurried away from *L'Esperance*.

His hoarse, mellifluous drawl drew her gaze. "Let's have a look; open the cloak."

She unbuttoned the garment, allowing it to fall from her shoulders. "Well, what do you think?"

"I think you look outrageously absurd, couldn't fool me even if I was falling-down-drunk."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence," she said sarcastically.

"Still time to back out, change your mind."

"Not on your sweet life, Morgan. Have you any idea what pains I had to go through to get this far?"

Detachment fit the man like a glove, never more so than now as a shoulder rose and he said, "Suit yourself."

"Would it be an imposition on your cold heart if I asked what to expect upon our arrival?"

"Voyeurs, in the true sense of the word, find the element of surprise highly stimulating. Besides, I wouldn't know where to begin." In a smug tone that told her he enjoyed watching her squirm like an eel, he added, "Prepare those innocent eyes for everything and anything."

She wanted to claw that superior look from his face with razor-sharp talons, but remembered her objective and opted for passivity. "You will be waiting for me . . . ?"

"Yes."

She flinched when he snapped out the word.

"Set your pocket watch for midnight, and I'll do the same."

Several long minutes later, the coach halted. Morgan climbed down and assisted her out. She could do nothing about her quaking knees, but stuffed her trembling hands into the pockets of her cloak. The coach lurched forward again, and she cried out, "My hat, Morgan, I left it on the seat!"

The horses came to a stiff-legged arrest at his whistle, the driver deftly turning the transport around in the middle of the street. Morgan retrieved her hat, exchanged it for the cloak, and then led her through a side door of *L'Amour Immortelles*.

When they stepped inside, her eyes stung. Unaccustomed to the smoke and the sweet, sickening aroma accompanying it, she held back a gag. To her left, a grand parlor flooded her vision. Even in the dim light, the room dripped sensuality. Decorated in rich fabrics of scarlet and eggplant, numerous tapestry settees lined the walls. Pink-shaded oil lamps flickered throughout, and an assortment of tapered candles cast seductive shadows in every darkened corner. Intoxicating scents wafted around her—flowers, woods, meadows, and one hauntingly familiar aroma.

"Do I smell jasmine and white tea roses?" she asked, turning to Morgan.

"Quite possibly. Madame Rousseau is a connoisseur of perfumes and oils."

He grabbed her elbow and ushered her down a long, narrow corridor until they arrived at a pink door. She steadied herself as he rapped lightly three times and then the door opened. Petite, and younger than Olivia had imagined, Madame Rousseau's russet hair and expressive brown eyes contrasted nicely with her fair, flawless skin. The woman welcomed her with a warm smile before addressing Morgan, "I'll take over now; you can return in an hour."

For a brief moment, Olivia had the sudden urge to fling herself into Morgan's arms, confess she'd made a horrendous mistake and wanted to go home, but stubborn pride prevented her from acting on the impulse. Thank goodness the feeling passed, for the next time she looked up, the prince of her dreams had vanished.

Madame Rousseau engaged in conciliatory small talk for several minutes and then led her down another long, dark corridor with more doors than Olivia could count. At the end of the hallway, the woman stopped, turned the knob, and pushed the door open. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the murky light provided by the single wall lantern with a pink shade, replicas to those in the parlor. The woman pushed aside a tiny curtain on the wall where two small holes had been drilled into the wood paneling.

"Please, Miss." She pointed to a cushy wingback. "Sit here."

An odd tingle of excitement raced down her spine as she lowered herself onto the chair.

"I shall leave you now and return in one hour."

Not trusting her voice, Olivia nodded.

Madame Rousseau studied her briefly. "Should you decide to leave the room prior to my return, turn left after you exit and follow the corridor until you come to a door. Once you've passed through it, take another right and that will lead you to my suite. I'm certain you'll recognize the pink door."

"Yes, very well." Olivia squeaked out the words. "Will someone enter soon?"

"Shortly," Madame Rousseau whispered and with a reassuring smile left the room, closing the door behind her.

Olivia stuck her nose to the wall and scanned the room through the peephole. A canopy of billowing red silk framed the four-poster bed, and nude portraits of men and women, their limbs entwined, graced the walls. Soft light from tapered candles on the

nightstand enhanced the carnal ambience, and the heady fragrances of patchouli, mandarin leaf and a sweet, spicy aroma reminiscent of cinnamon overpowered her.

Jumpier than a skittish colt, Olivia jerked back as the door to the room opened. Playful laughter preceded the woman leading the man to the bed. She eased him down gently by placing her hands on his broad shoulders. Long in limb, every muscle tightly knit, deep furrows marked his olive skin, reminding Olivia of an old salt that had lived too many days beneath a pitiless sun. The man wrapped his gold-capped tooth around the pipe in his hand and drew from it slowly. A dense, gray smoke and the same sharp aroma Olivia noticed upon entering the brothel drifted through the room. With a smile, the woman took the pipe from him, laid it between her scarlet lips and inhaled.

Her breasts firm and full, her waist narrow and her legs long, the dove exuded sensuality. She removed the green satin gown, one slow button at a time, allowing it to pool gracefully at her feet. At her come-hither smile, he rose from the bed and removed the rest of her clothing—the crimson bustier, the pale white stockings and black garters cinching her thighs—until she stood naked.

The man drew her into his arms and delivered a slow, languid kiss to her lips, easing her down gently to the mattress. His hot gaze wandered over her, not with disrespect, but with reverent appreciation. He joined her on the bed and suckled her breasts hungrily. A fire erupted in Olivia's stomach and spread upward as his rough hands skimmed the soft flesh of the woman's belly and parted her milky white thighs. His fingers disappeared, the dove's eyes closed, and her head lolled side to side. Strange sounds left her lips, pained moans, throaty ahs, and a strangled syllable that sounded remarkably close to yes, yes, and yes.

Olivia watched them with wide eyes, intuitively aware something wondrous occurred when the woman's toes curled and a string of staccato mutterings filled the room. A prolonged silence followed, during which no one spoke, but breathed heavily. This included Olivia. Finally, the courtesan opened her eyes, gave him a gratuitous smile and watched him slide languidly down her body. With his face between her legs, his fingers digging into the flesh of her buttocks, the woman clutched the bedrails for dear life and bucked against his mouth. Like a demon had taken hold of her soul, unintelligible

mutterings spewed from her throat as her body stiffened, and long moments later fell into a withered limp.

Olivia squirmed in the chair, wondering briefly if her predilection to voyeurism would evolve into a lifelong affliction. The thought flew from her head like milkweed floss when the man rose, rolled his trousers down his hips and kicked them across the room. Inching her way to the edge of the bed, the woman took his engorged member in her hands and stroked it. The sensual, languid motion of her fingers sliding up and down the thick shaft sent quivers through Olivia's body. The man watched her intently with his eyes half-closed, his mouth open. She licked the thick-ridged tip of his erection and with her mouth stretched wide, took it in and swallowed it. His hips jerked toward her lips in perfect sync with the thrusts of her mouth. Riveted, Olivia focused on the woman's inverted cheeks as she plunged and withdrew, repeating the technique until the man's eyes rolled in their sockets. With his jaw clenched tight, he cupped the back of her head and rocked his hips frantically, his moans of pleasure echoing in the room. Whatever magic her skilled fingers possessed, they had the desired effect between his legs. The man roared—twice—and his body jerked spasmodically. She withdrew her mouth quickly, rose up on her knees, and cupped her breasts around the pulsating member. His body stiffened as spurts of liquid spewed from his penis and covered her breasts.

Aroused beyond comprehension, some internal organ between Olivia's navel and privates clenched and then ached. She waited to see what would happen next, surprised that he walked to his trousers and stepped into them. Apparently, the woman had satisfied his every need. One puzzling question remained—why hadn't they fornicated? A wad of bank notes from his pocket found the nightstand while she plucked her finery from the floor and, very impersonally, dressed. After they left the room, vivid imagery of the man caressing the woman's sex with his mouth flashed through Olivia's brain. Not to mention the titillating scene of *her* pleasuring *him* with her mouth. Good heavens, she'd never seen or imagined anything so perverse and wicked.

Olivia checked her pocket watch. In another thirty minutes, Madame Rousseau would return for her. The minutes passed slowly while she concentrated on pacing her breathing with the full realization her body had become an alien thing. Vacillating between rushes of cold tremors and searing heat, blood pumped through her veins and

produced a sound in her head similar to a bass drum. Her eyes stung and her throat was dry, but above it all, she grew keenly aware that the scene had left an indelible impression on her brain—awakening not only her senses, but every cell and fiber in her body.

The door to the room opened again, and in bustled a woman dressed in servant attire. With rapid efficiency, she tore the sheets from the bed, redressed it in a fresh set of gold satin, and tidied up the room. Scooping up the money from the nightstand, she tucked it into her apron and quit the room. Olivia wrung her sweaty palms and folded them in her lap, the anticipation of what would happen next rendering her dizzy. Her curiosity was soon appeased. A buxom woman with long, silver hair entered. Clasp ing a dark-haired gentleman by the hand, she led him to the bed. Olivia recognized the man immediately—Preston Trousdale—one of Cain’s acquaintances! Gasping, she covered her mouth and shrank back into the chair. The probability she might recognize someone ranked high, but now that she had, voyeurism took on an entirely new meaning. Despite her dilemma, curiosity overtook her and she leaned forward to resume her prior position.

The epitome of genteel manners, Preston managed to shock Olivia’s befuddled brain when he ripped the woman’s black silk nightgown from her curvaceous body and flung it aside. Raw lust blazed in his smoky eyes, along with something dark and frightening. In all the years she’d known Preston, never had she seen such a malevolent look in his eyes. She shivered, as if a goose had walked over her grave.

In the next second, Preston removed his clothing, pushed the woman onto the bed into a sitting position and looked down at her. Olivia spread her fingers over her face, peering between them, mesmerized by the huge member springing to life in front of the woman’s painted lips. The courtesan took the pulsating shaft into her hands, strumming it like a fine musical instrument. With his head thrown back, Preston closed his eyes and groaned as if wounded, then cupped the back of her head and guided it to his sex until her lips parted. She took it into her mouth, slowly at first, and then sucked greedily, increasing the tempo. She withdrew for a moment, licked and nipped the mushroom-shaped head and then took the full length down her throat. His legs spread and braced, and with his hands clasped tightly to the sides of her head, he rocked his hips, matching her frantic movements.

His naked body captivated Olivia—his tight buttocks, narrow waist and broad shoulders—not to mention the throbbing member between his legs. With a disquieting sigh, she wondered what it would be like to copulate with Preston. Of all possible thoughts running through her mind, this shouldn't be one of them. She'd never thought of the man in a sexual way, but truthfully, she'd never thought of any man in a sexual way, except Morgan.

An animalistic groan erupted from Preston's throat, but unlike the first woman, she didn't jerk her mouth from his erection, and Olivia didn't see the liquid spurting from it. Good God, had she swallowed it? Olivia held her breath with the sincere hope the lovers hadn't concluded their business already. Suppressing her instinct to leave the room, she pressed her nose to the wood paneling and waited.

Preston didn't disappoint her. He walked to the night table and opened the drawer. Olivia strained to see what he was after. Four scarlet silk scarves materialized as though pulled from a magician's sleeve. He returned to the bed, secured two around the silver-haired vixen's ankles and stretched them wide, fastening them to the bedposts. He trailed one up her leg, over her buttocks and shoulder. The woman's body trembled. Preston took his time, tied the other scarves to her wrists and secured them one at a time to the bedposts at the head of the bed. He stood back with his head tilted to the side and looked at his handiwork, cupping his hand around his erection. He stroked the shaft and watched it respond to his touch with a series of jerks.

Apparently, he wasn't done setting the scene. He reached for a pillow near her head and slapped her bottom. On command, she lifted her hips, and he slid the pillow underneath her. Walking to the night table again, he opened another drawer. Olivia didn't have the experience to figure out what he was up to, nor apparently the imagination. She threw herself back against the chair and closed her eyes. She couldn't watch. Could she? *Yes*, her inquisitive, pathetic brain said. *Yes, you will watch*. Settling into an awkward position with her shoulders pressed to the wall, her eyes wide open against the peephole, she held her breath.

Preston plucked two items from the drawer—a riding quirt and a paddle. The woman strained beneath her silk shackles and looked over her shoulder, watching his every move. Preston stood behind her, and evidently still not happy with his creation, he

reached for another pillow on the bed. He slapped her left cheek with the quirt, and she rose fast. In a heartbeat, he stuffed the second pillow under her belly, her bottom fully exposed and high in the air.

The image was so perversely erotic; Olivia couldn't have dragged her eyes from the scene with a command from God. She knew what to expect now, and so did the woman. She squirmed on the bed, shifting her hips left to right. Preston brought the quirt down on her right cheek, quickly crossing over to the left and then the right again. The woman hissed and tried to wiggle from his reach.

"Did I tell you to move?" Preston asked.

She shook her head.

"I'm going to give you another three smacks, and if you even twitch, I'll double it."

A shudder tore through the woman scant moments before Preston snapped the quirt against her naked flesh. Three quick, consecutive spanks and on the last one, she tried to deflect it. He set the quirt down and massaged the red welts on her pale bottom.

"Such a shame," he said. "Now you get six."

She whimpered.

"You want them, don't you, sweet?"

With a groan, she nodded.

"That's what I thought." He smiled and picked up the quirt. "Count them off while I deliver them and know that when I'm done, I'm going to spank your ass with the paddle. Good and hard, the way you like it."

Her silver hair tumbled forward as she clutched the scarves with her hands, the muscles of her forearms taut like her butt cheeks.

Preston snapped the quirt fast, pausing briefly between each smack. Olivia sank into the bottom of the chair, overtaken by a cascade of titillating thrills. She clenched her legs together, aware of the warm, damp feeling between her thighs. Unwittingly, she must have closed her eyes briefly to gather her composure, for when next she looked, Preston had untied the scarves, and sitting on the bed, he had dragged the woman over his lap. With one arm firmly placed across her back, the paddle in hand, he delivered a succession of hard whacks to her butt. The woman bit her moist bottom lip and squirmed



frantically beneath him, crying out, "Yes, yes, yes." He stopped, set the paddle down, and with his eyes peeled on her red bottom, inserted a finger into her sex, probing her hard.

Olivia let out a long, frustrated sigh, aware of a restlessness she'd never experienced in her life. She wanted to touch herself, but mesmerized by the sight in front of her and fearful she'd miss Preston's next move, she remained rooted.

And the best was yet to come. He yanked her by the hair, pulled her from his lap and tossed her onto the bed face down with her feet touching the floor. Preston's face emerged hazily into Olivia's focus, his eyes glazed over with lust, his jaw clenched tightly.

In the blink of an eye, he took the woman from behind. With his hands holding her buttocks firm and immobile, he rode her hard, reminding Olivia of a stallion she'd witnessed mounting one of her father's mares. A tremor tore through Olivia as the woman grabbed onto the head rails and slammed her backside into his thighs, matching him thrust for thrust. Their bodies one, they found a rhythm, a fluid, frantic tempo that lapsed into a timeless cadence of surrender and retreat. Preston clenched his jaw and drove into her time and again, his thick fingers digging into the pink flesh of her bottom. Hoarse grunts exploded from his throat, followed by a string of *ohs* and *ahs*. With his eyes closed and his hands stroking her velvety hips, he collapsed on top of her and panted like he'd run for blocks. An interminable amount of time passed. Finally, he pulled his sex from her and rolled onto his back, his body limp against the mattress.

Olivia licked her dry lips and swallowed buckets of air. Good Lord, voyeurism had indulged her every fantasy and then some. Reality returned with a jolt. How would she ever erase the image of Preston's ruttery from her mind the next time they met socially? Dispelling a surge of panic, she reasoned Preston had no idea she had been watching him. She smiled. No one in their sanest moment would believe such a thing.

Her gaze wandered to the performers in the room again. After dressing, Preston paid the woman, cupped her chin between his thumb and index finger, and with a smile, whispered against her ruby mouth. The woman rose from the bed as the door closed, plucked her shredded garment from the floor, and covered her nakedness the best she could.

Even in the dim light, Olivia recognized Madame Rousseau when she entered the peep room. "The hour is up," she said.

On legs made of rubber, Olivia rose and followed her down the corridor, squashing the wide-brimmed hat over her brow.

"Morgan mentioned you managed the brothel, Madame. It is possible I could meet the owner and thank him for allowing me to visit?"

The woman seemed taken aback. "I'm afraid it isn't. He is indisposed." She paused. "Perhaps another time."

Thankful silence prevailed for the remainder of the short journey, Olivia spent the time gathering every scrap of her scattered wits, hoping her tongue would cooperate when summoned. Her brain teemed with convoluted, erotic images. Stepping through the door of the woman's suite, Morgan's icy, gray eyes wandered over her. She couldn't begin to decipher what he must be thinking.

"It was everything you had hoped it would be?" Madame Rousseau finally asked.

"Yes, quite," she replied, her voice a whisper.

"Christ, you're paler than a water lily," Morgan said, clutching her elbow—a little too roughly Olivia thought. He led her from the room. "My carriage is out front."

In a sensual fog, Olivia followed him through the brothel like a leashed hound, fighting waves of dizziness brought on by his rapid pace. Biting back outrage, she tried to extricate herself from his grasp. "Morgan, slow down! I'm not a piece of baggage, and my legs are wobbly."

"Good, perhaps now you'll realize the recklessness of this folly and find a husband the conventional way!" he said, tightening his grip.

He opened the coach door, shoved her inside and rapped on the hood. Taking a seat across from her, Morgan smiled when the carriage lurched forward and toppled her in the seat.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" she asked.

"It's outlandish, that's what's wrong with me," he said low-voiced. "I wish I'd never agreed to participate in this idiotic ruse."

"This is a fine time to rescue your morality!"

"Morality?" He shook his head, nearly spitting the word. "I assure you, Olivia, there is nothing moral about me or my beliefs."

She shrank back into the seat.

"Look at you," he said. "A sorry imitation of Jack Sprat and whiter than cotton bolls. I hope you have learned your lesson."

Every nerve in her body tingling, she struggled to exude a haughty air. "On the contrary, I thoroughly enjoyed myself and plan to keep the second appointment."

Morgan glowered at her and turned to look at the window. She wondered if she'd suddenly grown horns. As the coach rounded a corner, a silver shaft of moonbeams illuminated the inside. She couldn't help but notice the twitch in his jaw. It had twitched in the same manner when they were children, a dire warning he was about to explode.

## **Chapter Five**

Nothing stood between Morgan and Olivia in the carriage except pale moonlight and a vacant air that hissed with tension.

Olivia waited as long as she dared and then attempted to relieve the awkward quiet. "You'll never believe it, Morgan, I recognized someone tonight."

His head turned sharply as he looked at her. "Who?"

"I don't believe I'll tell you. It might spoil things."

"What do you mean, spoil things?"

"It would no longer be my private little secret, and besides, it's one thing to watch someone—"

"Spy on someone, you mean."

"Oh, have it your way," she said emphatically. "I was about to say, it's one thing to observe someone fornicating; it's another to reveal their name."

"Who was it, Olivia?"

"Not telling you." She ran her hands down the front of Cain's shirt. "Oh, nothing in the world compares to desire or love," she said, deftly changing the subject.

"There is one thing better."

A short laugh left her lips. "What might that be?"

"*Unrequited* lust, desire or love."

Olivia stared, arrested by the raw male potency emanating from the man. Had he just challenged her, knowing she hungered desperately for what she'd witnessed tonight? Damn the cad. He didn't think she had the courage to take this to the next level. Or did he mean he didn't give a fig's leaf if she relinquished her virginity to another man? At that possibility, her heart sank.

"How poetic," she said without missing a beat, still trying to decipher the meaning of his words. "Do you read poetry?"

"Hardly." His gaze narrowed. "Why . . . do you?"

"I adore Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love sonnets."

"So Cain tells me."

At his dour response, she continued. "Do you want to know what I observed?"

"No."

"But I have questions."

"Ask your nanny."

"Pardon?"

"You heard me."

"You know perfectly well I no longer have a nanny, and why are you behaving so rudely?"

"I'm tired."

"Well, bear with me, we're almost home. The questions couldn't possibly make a man of your repute uncomfortable, and I'm thoroughly baffled."

He blew air through his lips. "Very well, what is it?"

"Why is it so smoky in there, and what's that sweet smell accompanying the smoke, and—"

"Opium."

"Opium! Good heavens, Morgan, you took me to an opium den?"

"No, I took you to a *fucking* den, at your request I must remind you."

She blushed and directed him back to the subject at hand. "The woman smoked it."

He shook his head. "You really are such an innocent, Olivia. Of course she smoked it. They all do."

"Why?"

"It's pleasantly stimulating, enhances the sex."

"Oh, I had no idea."

"What else? You said *questions*."

"The first couple—"

Obviously caught off guard, his eyes widened. "You watched more than one?"

"Two," she said, feeling quite superior. "And therein lays the problem. The second couple, including the man I recognized, performed exemplary, comparable to the pictures I've seen."

He rolled his eyes.

"I mean to say, they progressed as I imagined." Here, she paused. "Until he spanked her."

Morgan swallowed hard. "You enjoyed that, didn't you, Liv?"

"Most certainly not."

"Did you imagine he was spanking you?"

Concentrating on controlling her breathing and mistrustful of her voice, she shook her head. His inflection had changed on the last question along with the sensual line of his lips when he pressed them together.

Recovering from the sudden rush of dizziness and all in favor of goading him further, Olivia continued. "Then, they, you know, did it. Beyond ravenous, he flung her onto the bed and took her from—"

He shifted in the seat, his voice thin. "What is your question about the first couple?"

"Well they never consummated it. He merely . . . ." She licked her bottom lip, Morgan's proximity searing her senses. Talking to him about such intimacies and feeling the way she did about him unnerved her, yet she pushed onward. She'd touched a chord; she sensed it, her intent from the beginning. Pressing on with her heart in her throat, she blurted, "He pleased her without using his penis—thoroughly, I might add—and he still paid her."

"Thoroughly, did he?"

"Without question"

"Continue, Olivia, I know you're going to tell me every tawdry detail, whether I want to hear them or not."

She leaned forward, softening her voice for effect. "He suckled her first and next, placed his head between her thighs." She searched his eyes to read his thoughts, but his magnificent features were staid. "Finally, he licked her—"

"Enough, I get the picture." He lifted his hand between them. "What, exactly, is your question?"

"While there can be no doubt she was wholly, unconditionally satisfied, what did he get out of it?" Shifting back into the seat, she paused. "I mean, why did he squander good money to do such a thing without, you know . . . ?"

"Without fucking her, Olivia, isn't that what you mean?"

Her nipples hardened, and a shudder raked her. "You needn't be so crude. I just wanted to know why he bothered."

"Because he likes that! Jesus!"

"Don't be such a ninny, Morgan, you're no such thing, but you did promise Cain you'd tutor me, take me under your wing, so to speak."

"I'm reneging on that part of the bargain," he replied briskly. "I don't want to tutor you, hear all about your voyeurism. I'll make sure you get to the next appointment in two weeks and safely home again and that's all. I don't want to hear every blasted detail of what you saw. Do you understand me, Olivia?"

"Perfectly," she said.

The carriage rounded a corner on two wheels, eliciting a scream from one of the horses. "Something must have spooked one of the—"

The transport swerved. Hurtled from the seat, Olivia ended up on the floor at Morgan's feet. He reached for her and pulled her into his lap until her legs straddled his hips, her breasts pressed firmly against his chest. Whatever had happened outside, the driver apparently had everything under control.

How Olivia wished *she* did.

Their eyes locked and time stopped on the periphery of some distant plane. Morgan's hand tangled in the long hair at the back of her head, and he drew her to him, his mouth demanding and ravishing. Her heart quickened. His tongue parted her lips and swept through every crevice as if to memorize the taste of her. She pressed her body against him, reveling in the feel of every hard muscle of his chest and the strong thighs beneath her. He quit her mouth and bestowed breathless, titillating kisses along her neck and throat, sending tremors through her blood.

"You like that, don't you, Olivia," he whispered against her ear. "And this," he said, slipping a hand down her pants to massage the juncture between her thighs with his fingers.

She clenched her teeth and stifled a moan, her pleasure peaking in a delirious state. *Oh, God, yes*, she almost moaned aloud.

His fingers caressed the outer folds of her sex, bare flesh against bare flesh. Mindlessly, she twisted beneath him and clung to his shoulders, her nails digging into his taut skin. She had to stop this or soon he'd take her on the seat of the coach. She strained her hips away from him, but he would have none of that. His erection prodded her belly, and his free hand slid to the small of her back. He held her immobile and forced her to acknowledge his physical desire. Guiding her hips in a slow rotation, and with his fingers still stroking her sex, Olivia's body throbbed and quivers of ecstasy surged through her.

"Morgan, please, you must stop," she groaned.

"Isn't this what you wanted? Isn't it why you went to *Immortelles*?"

"No . . . I mean, yes."

"Touch me, Olivia."

God help her, she wanted to.

"Do it," he said.

She allowed her hand to wander between their bodies and close around his manhood through his trousers. She gasped, the sensation of touching him both shocking and delicious.

"Say it, Olivia. Say you want me inside you. Give in to your desire. Admit you lust after me like I lust after you."

It was perversely erotic, she on his lap with him caressing her most private parts and she stroking his manhood.

The carriage stopped abruptly. He removed his hand from her pants and gently set her back onto the seat with an all-knowing smirk. For Olivia, it was like a dream. It couldn't have happened, yet why did she burn all over, hunger for more?

She straightened her clothing and tried to recapture the same haughty air she had assumed earlier. "Well, here we are," she said, placing a hand on his forearm. "Thank you, Morgan. I really do appreciate your assistance."

His smirk evaporated, and he looked as though he'd like to strangle her.

"I'm confident that at the conclusion of this adventure I'll recognize more of Cain's friends. Yours too," she said, continuing smoothly, pretending nothing had passed between them, yet dying inside. "I'll be able to come to a sensible decision."

"Think nothing of it," he said, and she knew he was doing his best to control his anger.

A beaming smile preceded her next words. "Oh, one more thing; who owns *L'Amour Immortelles*?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Why?"

"I asked Madame Rousseau if I could possibly meet him or her, and she said it wouldn't be possible. She seemed rather secretive."

"Did she?"

"Yes. Is it a secret?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I'm just a client, remember?"

"Well, no matter," she said with a flourish of her hand. "Perhaps one day I'll have the privilege of thanking him or her for the opportunity." She waited for a reaction from him. Lacking one, she changed subjects again. "Don't forget that next week Lark and Cain are hosting a ball at *L'Esperance* in celebration of their engagement. You do plan to attend, don't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it." This time there could be no mistake about his morose tone or expression. "Just think, Olivia, you might run into the man you recognized tonight."

"I'm confident he'll be there, he always shows."



With a frown and still seated on the plush burgundy cushions, Morgan held out his hand and assisted her from the coach, his distinct masculine scent invading her senses. She wiggled past him and stepped to the ground. The touch of his hot hand on hers burned her to the very core. Dear God, she couldn't maintain this charade much longer. Her heart drummed in an arduous beat, and she turned to him one last time, doing her best to keep her voice level. "Just think, Morgan, won't it be fun? You'll be looking at every man present, wondering who it is, and only I know his identity."

He snatched the hat from the seat and literally tossed it in into her hands. "You might need this to scare the crows from the garden, Olivia."

It dawned on her at that precise moment that he hadn't called her Liv once during their conversation. Throughout their childhood, he had always called her Olivia when disgruntled with her about one thing or another.

"Good night, Morgan," she said over her shoulder, her voice dripping honey while she scurried toward the steps of *L'Esperance*. Pulling the cloak tightly around her, Olivia could barely breathe by the time she entered the manor and closed the door behind her.

"No man should be that handsome," she mumbled, her blood on fire. He radiated pure animal magnetism, and she, heat, just looking at him. Smug satisfaction enveloped her. Morgan had done all he could to keep from looking at her, had tried desperately to keep his expressions and his tone complacent, yet she had seen through his *façade* from the moment they left the brothel. He could pretend nonchalance all he wanted, but truthfully, he was demonstrably upset with her for visiting *L'Amour Immortelles*, and it could only mean one thing . . . he did have feelings for her.

Treading softly past the kitchen, she breathed a sigh of relief that the lanterns had been extinguished and all appeared quiet. The floor creaked behind her.

"What is ya doin' sneakin' by my kitchen dis time of da night, Missy?"

Tension knotted her neck. "God's teeth, Cook, you frightened the demons out of me!"

"'Bout time someone shake 'em loose from ya. What is ya doin' moonin' over Mastah Gatewood again? An' doan tell me dat wasn't his carriage jess leavin'."

"Oh now, Cook, Morgan just brought me home from a social in Savannah, that's all."

"Doan ya go lyin' ta me, Miss 'Livia. Why yer Pappy must be turnin' over in his grave, dah way ya chasin' afta dat wicked man."

She stiffened. "I am not *chasing* after Morgan Gatewood, I assure you. We are friends and nothing more."

"Is dat why ya nearly swoons every time dat silver-eyed devil walks inta dah room?"

"I most certainly do not." She lied.

If animals could resemble humans, Cook's face took on the visage of a crafty hawk about to sweep down on its prey. Her neck arched back, her chin drooped, and her ebony eyes narrowed. "An' why is ya wearin' dat wrapper in dis hot weather?"

"Rain," she said, nearly strangling on the word. "Morgan sent me back into the manor to retrieve it because the sky looked threatening."

"Lord above, dare ain't nothin' more threatenin' to ya on God's troubled earth dan dat handsome scoundrel."

Olivia managed a feeble, "Yes, ma'am."

"Off ta bed wid ya now," Cook said, her kind eyes troubled. "Ah jess doan want ta see my lamb hurt again, is all."

She had been hurt, mortally, the night Morgan acquiesced to her father's dictums ten years ago. Cook had been the one to soothe her tears and hold her long into the night while she cried a river of tears over the man. If it hadn't been for Cook's intervention, Morgan would have finished what he had started. She had been thoroughly kissed, groped and nearly ravished by him . . . deliciously so.

Olivia delivered a peck to her cheek. "Don't fret about me, Cook. Morgan no longer holds the power to hurt me."

A little humph scratched the back of her throat as she shuffled off. "Doan say Ah didn't warn ya."

With her mind in a state of turmoil, Olivia walked briskly up the stairs, and once in her room flopped down onto the bed. She had to garner Morgan's attention somehow.

And she would, or die trying.

## Chapter Six

Morgan waited until Olivia slipped through the front door of the manor and closed it behind her. He rapped on the ceiling of the transport and slouched down into the seat, the magnitude of his temper equivalent to seismic waves during an earthquake. Who the hell did the blasted woman think she was? Not only had she actually gone through with her excursion into voyeurism—shocking the piss and vinegar out of him—she had the temerity to expound on the details and question him, no less. Had she actually used the words *titillating*, *suckled* and *penis*? Christ, he'd been so hard at the time it hurt, and damn if he wasn't still hard and hotter than a volcano on the brink of eruption.

The excruciating sensations of her riding him, grinding those delectable hips against his, sent a stream of riveting shocks through his body. Her intoxicating mouth crazed him, and her ripe, plump breasts pressed into his chest brought him to the brink of exploding in his trousers. He had awakened her desire in a heartbeat, her sex all warmth and moist when he touched it. Her fragrance lingered on his fingers, and God, he'd never get enough of the glorious scent. He wanted to ravish her, body and soul, plunge deep inside her and never climb his way out. She remained the bane of his life, an illness he had lived with for years, since the day he pulled her from that damn river.

And what should he do now? He'd been so sure she'd inform him upon entering the coach she'd seen enough, would ask him to inform Madame Rousseau she wouldn't return to *Immortelles*, but instead, she'd had the audacity to tell him she thoroughly enjoyed it, had every intention of keeping her next appointment. A frantic anger rose in his chest. He didn't know what he wanted to do more to her at the time, beat her or fuck her. No. Not true, he knew exactly which of the two he preferred at the time—fuck her. He still wanted to fuck her, fuck her until she gave herself freely to him and admitted this wild, crazy love between them.

Recalling she'd recognized someone at his club, he groaned. Who could it have been? He'd have to speak with Madame Rousseau and ask her to find out who had frequented *Immortelles* tonight. She would say, 'Who didn't?' Nonetheless, he wanted names—names of every cock-strutter who paid for a courtesan's services. He didn't care if it took the woman hours to assemble a list; he wanted their goddamned names.

Liv pretended to enjoy the game of cat and mouse on the ride home, yet despite the murky light in the coach, he'd seen the pulse at the base of her throat launch into rapid beats. On more than one occasion, she licked her bottom lip—a dead giveaway for Miss Olivia Breedlove—which meant she was overwrought, extremely agitated. Apparently, it had slipped her mind he'd known her since she was five, had spent endless hours studying every nuance, every inflection in her voice until he knew her better than she knew herself. He'd made it his life's mission, and now it was about to pay off.

The next time she visited *L'Amour Immortelles*, he'd make sure she was exposed to the basest, most carnal scenarios imaginable. Titillating positions fascinated her, did they? He had just the people in mind—a man hung heavier than Goliath and a woman who delivered sexual gratification in spades, who'd have her running from the peep room with her emerald eyes popping from their sockets. Christ, if she thought to one-up him in this little game of charades, she had another thing coming.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seated on his porch in a wicker rocking chair, Morgan rubbed his temples as thoughts of Olivia threatened to exacerbate his pulsating head. The strain of the last several days had affected his mood and his temper—and the rum he'd consumed last night hadn't improved either one. His gaze wandered to a dense copse of shagbark hickory that separated the guest cottage from his parents' manor. The trees made it the perfect locale for a bachelor retreat. Ten years ago, he'd moved his personal belongings there and felt quite at home among the massive, airy rooms. The quarters afforded him privacy on the occasions he had arrived home accompanied by his most recent lover. Ironically, he hadn't brought a woman home since returning from France. It seemed a ludicrous undertaking while his thoughts and his heart belonged to Liv. The woman should just take scissors in hand and castrate him.

The events of the other evening ran through his mind with the turbulence of a maelstrom; in fact, he'd hardly slept a wink in two days. He had every intention of riding into Savannah this morning to speak with Madame Rousseau. Afterward, he'd wrangle a way to meet with Cain in private. And he wanted, no, *needed* to see Olivia again, despite the sting of her duplicitous tongue. Whatever game she played, he'd get to the bottom of it. And then he'd beat her at it.

Cain suddenly appeared at the end of the long drive. Morgan tossed the remainder of his coffee over the railing and watched him through the pale morning light while he brought his mount to a halt.

"I'm glad you're home," Cain said, dismounting.

With detached awareness, Morgan replied, "Where else would I be at ten in the morning?"

"My God, man, you look ghastly!" Without waiting for a response, Cain continued. "What the hell happened the other night? Liv is not herself these days."

Aware of the pungent aftermath of rum in his throat and the sting of pine needles behind his eyelids, he replied tersely, "Enlighten me, I'm too hung over for riddles."

"I ought to have my head examined by a credited physician for agreeing to this." Cain kicked at the dirt near his feet. "I've never seen her more cheerful, strolling through the manor singing and humming, no less."

Morgan clutched the railing until his knuckles turned white. "Humming?"

Cain nodded. "After luncheon today, Olivia excused herself from the table with a smile that would bring Lucifer to his knees."

Inwardly, Morgan shriveled. He had seen that heart-stopping smile a thousand times.

"I know her, Morgan, and I tell you, ever since she returned from that den of inequity she struts around like someone just shagged the life out of her!" He ran his hands through the hair at his forehead. "You escorted her home the other night; what did she tell *you* about her visit to *Immortelles*?"

A knot twisted in his stomach again. "What do you mean *you*; did she expound on every torrid detail with you, too?"

"I wish you wouldn't answer me with another question. This is getting out of hand. If Lark finds out I encouraged Liv in this regard, there's no telling what she might do." Cain trampled a patch of grass in front of the porch. "Fracture-brained idiot that I am, it's possible she might call off the wedding."

Morgan drew the words out slowly. "What did Liv say?"

"I found her alone in the garden yesterday, reading love sonnets by Elizabeth Browning, of course. Hoping the experience had squelched her desire to pursue this further, I stepped into the subject delicately."

A shriek from a nearby raven echoed in the wind and pricked Morgan's already strained nerves. "Get on with it, man."

Angst or something similar contorted Cain's face. "After I beseeched her to quit this foolish quest, she replied, 'Absolutely not. I thoroughly enjoyed myself the other night and have every intention of visiting *Immortelles* again in two weeks.'"

"Nightmare," Morgan whispered.

"Nightmare. Is that all you have to say?"

"No, here's what I have to say. You should have thought about that, yet you caved in to her wishes. Did you really believe she'd frequent the place one time and forget about it? For some, voyeurism is more addictive than laudanum, even opium."

"I don't know what I thought, but it hardly matters now." Cain stopped his frantic gait long enough to look at him. "I made a valiant attempt to turn her from it—this second visit—and she roiled against it vehemently."

In Morgan's mind, he envisioned her green eyes darkening and her full lips pursing. "What exactly did she say?"

"She said, 'It is common knowledge that you and Morgan have rutted with more females than I can name. Why shouldn't women be afforded the same privilege?'"

"Christ!" His pulse swished rapidly through his ears. "What does that mean?"

"How the hell should I know? It would appear she's thrown down the gauntlet. There's no telling what Liv will do now, but whatever she has in mind, I want it stopped. Everything is about to blow up and Lark will soon find out." Visibly paling, Cain said, "And Cook has been giving me the evil eye. Damn if the woman isn't spawned from a long line of soothsayers. Just this morning she said, 'Mastah Cain, if'n I get a whiff ya an' dat silver-eyed hooligan is leadin' Miss 'Livia astray, I whip ya myself wid a hickory branch.'"

Notwithstanding the snare drum roaring in his head, Morgan laughed. Olivia and Cain had never been able to put one over on the old black woman.

"I'm happy you're amused that my ass is on the line."

"Not to mention your good name," Morgan said. "What do you propose to do, forbid Liv to leave the manor, lock her in her room?"

"Now there's a thought," Cain said with a sarcastic snort. "Wouldn't work, once she makes up her mind, ocean waves at high tide can't turn her from it."

"Did she tell you she recognized someone the other night, a man?"

A groan flew from Cain's lips. "No, she didn't. Who was it?"

"Her lips are sealed."

"Sealed? You mean she plans to protect his anonymity?"

"From me, anyway, but she assures me *he* will be present at the ball you're hosting next week."

"Please tell me no one recognized her."

Morgan leaned heavily on the railing. "I'm confident no one did. I escorted her directly to Madame Rousseau's suite and from there, down a dark corridor into a peep room."

"A stroke of luck. The more she frequents the establishment, the likelier it is someone will recognize her." Another groan. "Do something, Morgan, think of something to bring this to a screeching halt."

Silence filled the vacant air while Morgan mulled it over. "I'll speak to Madame Rousseau; perhaps she can have a little talk with the proprietor and they can arrive at a plan."

"Excellent idea." Cain smiled, but seconds later, a dour expression marred the affect. "What kind of a plan?"

Morgan stretched his neck against the pseudo-noose encasing it, tightening and tightening until he thought he might choke. Everything had backfired, and turning Olivia from her course after the other night would be more difficult than turning back time. *What is the cunning little piece of baggage up to?* Not knowing the answer to that question sent waves of panic coursing through him. "I don't know, but I'll think of something."

"Good, and the sooner the better. Lark is closing in on me faster than a fox near a hen house, and sooner or later she *will* wrench everything from Liv."

The minute Cain was out of sight Morgan changed his clothing and mounted Valor. Through a forest of gnarled branches, he meandered along a twisted path until he met the main road leading to Savannah. With any luck, Madame Rousseau would know what to do.

## Chapter Seven

Morgan had been so lost in thought he almost failed to see Olivia ducking into the mercantile across the street in town. Almost. Silently he thanked his lucky stars. He intended to have a drink prior to calling on Madame Rousseau, but now that fate had intervened and placed the Goddess of his breath in his path, he altered course. Pushing the door open amid a melodic chiming of bells, he searched for her down every aisle. Finally he found her among the bolts of fabric, her brow creased, her selective eyes glancing between the terra-cotta and its sibling cinnamon.

"Why don't you purchase both?" he said from over her shoulder.

She turned and looked at him, her searching gaze a mixture of surprise, and dare he think, subtle delight?

"Morgan, what-whatever are you doing here?"

"I desired a drink and intended to follow it up with a visit to *Immortelles*."

"*Immortelles*?" Her eyes widened, and a blush rose in her cheeks. "You frequent the establishment in the middle of the afternoon?"

"Under a blue moon, in the afternoon, whenever the fancy strikes."

"You're incorrigible," she said, her eyes sparking.

"You misunderstand me. I mean only to observe, not partake."

Giving him the direct cut, she placed the fabrics back onto the shelf and said, "Good day to you, then."

Denying her a chance to bolt, he grabbed her elbow, ushered her to the back of the store and backed her into a wall. With his hands at the sides of her head, palms flat against the hard surface, he said, "Join me."

Bewilderment masked her features. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Don't look at me like that. You know you're itching to return."



A stillness fell over her.

"Why not with me?" It wasn't easy to torment her while she looked at him with those green-spoked eyes, but he wanted to be near her, had an overwhelming urge to watch firsthand her sudden interest in carnal lust. "Unless, of course, you're afraid," he said goadingly.

His words effectuated the desired response. Her spine stiffened and her chin swept up. "You're the one who should be afraid," she said smugly. "Especially since you can't control, shall we say, a certain *growing* interest whenever a woman merely falls into your lap."

It was clearly a taunt, and oh, how he wanted to toss her onto the floor, take her like a common camp follower and show her she had been equally affected. Realizing any such action would put an immediate halt to his pending suggestion, he gathered his wits.

Catching her chin in the firm grip of his hand, he pressed on. "Yes or no, do you have the courage?"

"You're mad," she said on a half-laugh. "People will see us; it's broad daylight."

"No, they won't." He pointed to the back door. "That leads to the alleyway, and one block away is another back door to the brothel. I assure you, not a soul will notice us slip out of here and slip into there." She glanced around the room furtively. "I double-dare you," he said with emphasis.

"You're certain no one will know?"

He crossed his heart, and without waiting for her to change her mind, led her through the back door and into the alleyway. Arriving at *Immortelles* within minutes, he ushered her through the door and down the hall to a room. It had all happened so quickly, he had a hard time reconciling that his plans were to speak with Madame first. Instead, he found himself about to enter a peep room with the woman who made his blood clot.

"Don't tell me." She paused at the door, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "You have a standing appointment to voyeur? You can just walk into the brothel in the middle of the afternoon and go directly to a peep room?"

"I told you, I planned to call on Madame today. I sent a missive this morning," he said and pushed the door open. "It has all been prearranged."

"You prearranged it?"

With a nod, he pointed to the chairs, about to offer a lame answer when she said, "How convenient, two peepholes."

"There are those who adore having company while they engage in voyeurism."

"I'm not one of them," she said with narrowed eyes. "In fact, I find it a little crass."

"Pretend I am not here."

"And how am I supposed to accomplish that with the holes mere inches apart?" She looked at the seating arrangement. "And the chairs nearly on top of one another?"

"Sit," he said calmly, directing her into the plush cushion.

She shot him a lethal glare and slumped into the chair. He was delighted with the layout. He eased himself down beside her and inwardly smiled. They were shoulder-to-shoulder, thigh-to-thigh. Perfect.

"Must you be breathing down my neck?" she asked, the familiar scent of tea roses and jasmine wafting over him.

"I can hardly enjoy the performance from the mezzanine."

The door opened moments later. Morgan didn't know the man, but that fact wasn't unusual. Hundreds of transients passed through the brothel monthly, in addition to the regulars. If women thought this particular John handsome, it would be in a rugged way. The rough-hewn features, textured skin and dark, wavy hair that hung a bit unruly around the collar of his shirt definitely lacked polish. He cut a fine figure, however, with wide shoulders, trim waist, and underneath the trousers, Morgan imagined, strong, well-muscled legs.

From the corner of his eye, he studied Olivia, and at the same time cursed the betraying blood pumping to his cock. That's all it took, one look at her face or her exquisite profile, the slightly upturned nose and high cheekbones, long lashes and rose-petal lips, and the cursed member between his legs saluted the ceiling. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea. How in hell could he watch a man and a woman make love and not imagine—wish with all his heart—it was he and Liv?

Worse than that, she seemed intent on the man, her lashes half-shuttered, her bottom lip parted expectantly. What did she think at this moment? Damnation, he didn't want to go down that road. What if she imagined he waited for her, hoped that soon his

hands would caress her body, his rough mouth would brush against her naked, dew-kissed skin? Christ! What had he been thinking? There was no point in pleading a sudden headache or inventing feeble excuses as if he'd forgotten some important appointment. Olivia Breedlove would see clear through his lies and raise the victory banner. No, come Heaven or Hell, he would draw on a lifetime of reserve, force his runaway heart to calm, turn his eyes away from that temptress's face and watch the performance.

The woman entered—Annie, his most skilled courtesan. She had the capabilities and the body to call forth the thunder while pleasing a man. Or so Madame said, and so did his ledgers. Her willowy legs went on for miles, and her firm, pert breasts and sensually dark nipples contrasted sharply with her pale, flawless skin. Hair the color of chocolate tumbled around her patrician features in wild abandon, begging a man to crush his hands in it. She undressed, and Olivia licked her bottom lip.

And he reminded himself to quit looking at Olivia.

The man disrobed, right down to his birthday suit, and smiled the legendary smile of a master at seduction, a skilled craftsman about to ply his trade. Olivia squirmed in her chair and leaned forward. Morgan wondered if she recognized it, the gift that set this John apart from other men on the street. If not, she would soon.

Annie walked to the man, her hips swaying with nimble grace, her lips parting to accept his mouth. With his eyes closed, he ran his hand along the side of her neck and slipped it down to fondle her breast. His thumb and forefinger found a nipple, and he stroked it deliberately, tweaking it until she moaned her pleasure. Drawing him tightly to her, she wound her arms about his neck. He caressed her, gliding his fingers around her waist and over the soft flesh of her buttocks. Slipping his hand between their bodies, he found her mound of dark curls.

His fingers entered her, coaxing a wanton response. She threw her head back, and her lips opened, allowing a string of moans to escape. Annie purred her bliss as she arched her back and spread her legs wide, affording him full access to explore her thoroughly.

"Exquisite, isn't she," Morgan whispered.

Olivia cast him a sideways nod, her eyes half-closed, her breathing erratic. As for Morgan, his chest burned, his cock pulsated, and he accepted that it probably leaked, as well.

The man walked to the chair near the bed and settled into it, drawing Annie into his lap so she faced him. He took a breast in his mouth and suckled her, eliciting a strident stream of broken cries from her lips. His hands stroked and caressed her naked buttocks, his fingers entering her from behind. She arched up, bearing her weight on her knees while she straddled him, gyrating wildly above the wicked assault of his fingers inside her as his mouth sucked hungrily on her hard, peaked nipple.

Despite his vow, Morgan looked at Olivia, the blood pounding hard in his brain. Her lips parted slightly, she drew a shuddering breath, and her pale, staid face contrasted sharply against the flames of desire in her moist, jade eyes. He wanted to touch her, kiss her, but knew if he did, in the next moment he'd toss her under him and take her, without remorse, without regret. And she would let him. He saw it in the deep fathoms of her pupils, heard it in the decadent whisper of lust enveloping them.

Olivia looked away quickly. Was she terrified she might reveal her innermost fantasies, horrified to think he could see into her exposed soul? Morgan withdrew his gaze, too, and returned to watching the couple in the room. The man clasped Annie's hips and plunged into her. In a restless state of delirium, her sweat-damp body rode him hard. With a shiver, she threw her head back, her long black hair cascading down to her waist.

Olivia rose from the chair to a stream of fractured moans from Annie, and with the look of a trapped minx, made a bolt for the door. On his feet in a heartbeat and knocking over the chair in the process, Morgan caught her wrist and spun her around.

"Let me go," she said with ragged breath. "I've seen enough."

Her unearthly beauty nearly felled him, not to mention the white-hot flames of desire licking every cell and pore in his body. "You're such a little hypocrite, Liv. Voyeurism is perfectly acceptable, providing no one knows you engage in it . . . or enjoy it, is that it?"

"I must have been out of mind to agree to come here with you."

"Why? Does it strike too close to the heart?"

"Oh, you really are a despicable, heartless scoundrel, a lowdown bounder who preys on helpless women."

He couldn't help the laugh, despite her outraged expression. "You? Helpless? If I remember correctly, you were the one who begged Cain and I to assist you in this sullied endeavor."

"Sullied endeavor!" she said. "Why is it that men can bed every woman from London to Luxemburg—married, maiden, or widowed—and no one bats an eye?" She trembled. "They frequent brothels and gentleman's clubs, drink far too much, gamble their estates away, and society looks the other way." She pushed him. "Huh, why is that, Morgan Gatewood, and, more to the point, how dare you refer to this as a sullied endeavor!"

"Liv, I'm—"

"Turn me loose this instant." She yanked her elbow from his grip. "And thank you very much, I shall find my own way back to the phaeton."

"Find your way back to the phaeton, like hell; not until I'm done with you."

"Done with me?" she whispered.

He recognized fear in her voice amid the desire and rampaging hunger screaming around them. Still holding her wrist, he pulled her to him and crushed his mouth to hers. His hand found the back of her head and pressed her deeper into the kiss, his tongue sweeping through the warm, wetness of her mouth. She whimpered, unleashing a restrained urgency he had held in check for ten long years. The time had come for her to understand he would no longer stand on the sidelines and worship her from afar, would no longer hunger for her like a caged beast.

This woman in his arms with her magnificent green eyes and exquisite body had haunted his every fantasy, walked with him in his dreams, awakened in his bed kissed by morning sunlight. He would stand for no more.

He backed her toward the wall until she flattened against it, still kissing her amid the damn mewls spewing from her throat. Reluctantly, he withdrew his mouth, allowing their breaths to mingle as he cupped her breast and ran his thumb across her hard, sensitized nub. She squirmed and tried to push him away.

"Put your hand down," he said, and much to his surprise, she not only obeyed, but moved it to clutch the hair at the nape of his neck.

In the background, Annie's voice reached a high-pitched cadence of animalistic groans, an aphrodisiac to his agony. He focused on the temptress in his arms, inhaled her scent, dying to touch her pussy, not just on the outside, but wanted to feel the slick, warm heat convulsing around his finger. A poor substitute for his cock, but the need to be inside her in any manner, shape or form brought him to the brink of madness.

He shoved the frilly dress up over her narrow hips, his hand lingering on her firm thigh over the ruffled pantalets women were fond of wearing. Blast the inconvenient layers of garments. Her hand moved from his hair and joined with her other to cling to his shoulders. Her breath came in little bursts as he slid the undergarment down to her ankles and ran his hand over the firm plane of her abdomen, moving lower still until he touched the downy tuft he searched for. She pressed her thighs together in an automatic response against his bold assault.

"No," he said. "Not this time, Liv. You're not going to shut me out."

She wet her lips and dug her quivering fingers into his shoulders. "Morgan, do not, please . . . ."

"Yes," he said. "You want me to, and you know it." Damn, if he wasn't breathing harder and faster than she was. "In five minutes you will beg me for more."

"I won't." She panted, her eyes brimming with heat and bewilderment.

Barely brushing her clitoris with his fingertip, he watched her eyes grow wide and her teeth bite down on her bottom lip. He moved his finger around the swollen bud, slowly rubbing it, applying small amounts of pressure, but refrained from entering her. Her hips rotated, and she nearly collapsed against him.

"Stand up straight and spread your legs, Liv." Motionless, she clung to him. He forced his fingers to stop moving. "Do it, or I swear I'll stop for good." She whimpered into his chest. "Spread your legs, now."

Christ, what would he do if her sanity returned at this inopportune moment? He couldn't stop himself now and most certainly couldn't let her know it. Much to his relief, her thighs relaxed and her feet moved, each in the opposite direction. He didn't want to afford her time to think; he wanted her to oblige him and allow him entry. Resuming his

prior assault to the outer folds of her sex, he was rewarded by a shuddering tremor and a primordial moan.

His finger dipped in, but only an inch. "Do you want this now, Liv?"

Her sex tightened around the tip of his finger, beckoning him with a will of its own. He entered her a little more, but still she would not answer him. He rubbed his thumb over her clitoris, the sensual, methodical rhythm eliciting a full-throated groan from her lips. "Beg me, Liv, tell me you want to feel it inside you all the way."

She pushed her body closer to his, her hips writhing against his hand. Moaning aloud, she drowned out Annie's frantic cries for release behind them.

"Come on, baby, you can say it."

"Yes," she said, "I want to feel it inside me."

"And you shall have your wish," he said, pushing through in a slow, deep stroke.

Her body convulsed. She was small and tight. Aware she hurt, but half-crazed by the feel of her insides pulsing against him, he hurt, too, only with a different kind of pain. He couldn't remember when he had been so hard and hot. His cock screamed out in agony with the despair of not being inside her. He needed to get a hold of himself or risk spurting in his trousers. This wasn't about him; not this time. His sole intent was to bring her pleasure, release. He wanted her to remember this forever, lay awake at night and crave his touch, hunger for him the way he hungered for her.

Her head rolled back and forth on the wall. With her eyes half-shuttered, she gyrated beneath the motion of his hand. Dampness flooded his finger, and the muscles of her pussy tightened again and again around it. He pulled out momentarily and entered her again with two fingers, pitching her into a frenzy of shrill whimpers. She thrashed wildly against him and cried out his name. Her body stiffened. In his delirium, he felt her hot, wet sex clench around his fingers, and he sent a prayer skyward he was her first. And last. Even if he had to tie the confounded woman up and kidnap her.

When at last she convulsed around him, another series of cries left her luscious lips, and she wilted against him, her body still quivering. He waited patiently, wondering what words would come from her mouth. He didn't have to wait long.

"Oh, my God," she whispered and pushed away from him.

Their eyes met, and he watched myriad expressions cross her lovely features—wonder, disbelief, and shame. Long minutes later, her dazed eyes returned to their normal color, and her breathing slowed. She searched his face, anger banking in her eyes like hot embers.

"I hope you're satisfied," she said. "You got what you wanted, seduced me into begging like a common whore."

"Whores don't beg. They give more than they take and . . . willingly." He brought his hand to her cheek. "It's what you wanted too, Liv. You'd admit it if you weren't so damned stubborn."

"Take your hands off me! I may have lost my head in a moment of passion, but it won't happen again, I assure you."

He shouldn't have laughed, not when she was so serious, so twisted with conflicting emotions about what had passed between them, but he couldn't help it. She was such a little hypocrite. She wanted him inside her, and not just his fingers. He had proven it, and she refused to admit it. Even now, she trembled with longing, her face flushed with passion, the sweet scent of her sex drifting around them.

"Oh, it will happen again," he said, "you can count on that."

Without responding to his words, she pulled her undergarments up and straightened her dress. Oblivious to the fact she took his heart with her, she stormed out the door.

## **Chapter Eight**

He closed his eyes, allowing his senses to feast on the aromatic blends. Glaring sunlight hurt his eyes and burned his pale skin, but it was nothing compared to the way his heart burned for her. He strolled among the twisted arbors and masses of blossoms for over an hour, talking to her, knowing she walked with him, her slender hand tucked into his.

He arrived early every morning and waited for her to appear, skipping like a forest nymph over the narrow wooden bridge, stooping to run her hands through the underground spring. It was her favorite spot.



His, too.

He studied the multitude of roses to his left. Not one among them black—his calling card, a symbolic token of his love for *them* and a dark remembrance of his mother's love.

The hot sun bored into him. Blazing waves of hatred and revenge crawled over his skin. He dropped to his knees, choking back sobs. Why did she have to die and leave him alone in the world?

His mother's voice called to him from some distant plane. "Kill them all," she said. "Save them from the wretched death I suffered. Do you want to watch them die like you watched me die?"

He clutched his head, cupping his hands over his ears. *Stop the voices. For God's sake, stop the voices.* Desperate to make it to the bench, he struggled to his feet, his legs heavy with exhaustion, his breath shallow. She needed the rose—a symbol of their love.

In a graceful gesture, he placed the rose on the bench.

*"For you, my darling, Liv. For you, my Venus."*

\* \* \* \* \*

Olivia entered the reading room and found Lark immersed in a book. Almond-shaped blue eyes met hers before her brother's fiancée closed the novel, the spine clearly visible, and folded her child-like hands.

"What is it exactly that fascinates you so about *The Scarlet Letter*?"

"Hawthorne," Lark said dreamily. "I'm captivated by his thoughts on guilt and sin."

Olivia coughed, feeling as if congealed oatmeal suddenly lodged between her diaphragm and her throat.

"Egad, Liv, you remind me of a cat that swallowed a bird, feathers and all." Lark sent her a look of testy impatience. "If someone doesn't tell me what is going on, I might be forced to keep company with the scullery maids."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because they seem to know everything that goes on around here."

"Not everything." Olivia cringed and dropped onto the settee. This clearly was the moment to cleanse her soul and offer up confessions. Her mantle of deception weighed heavier than an ox's yoke, and who better to share it with than her future sister-in-law, the only woman she knew who could outfox a fox?

One golden-arched brow rose. "Whatever it is, it can't be all that bad."

"All what bad?"

"That look on your face, and," she said, her gaze dropping to the flower in Olivia's hand, "wherever did you get that lovely rose?"

Olivia studied the thinly veiled petals and scrunched her brow into a frown. "I found it on the garden bench this morning."

"I've never noticed black roses among your mother's collection."

Olivia turned the stem slowly between her thumb and index finger. "That's because she never cultivated them."

Mimicking Olivia, Lark studied it judiciously. "Interesting."

"Why is that?" she asked distractedly.

"The Victorians communicate through flowers, particularly roses."

"Communicate?"

"Yes, particularly concerning taboo topics that their straight-laced society forbids. To express their sentiments or express emotion, they send roses."

"It is rather tragic-looking," Liv said, drawing it up to her eyes. "What exactly does a black rose represent?"

Her tone somber, Lark whispered, "Death or vengeance."

Liv gasped and set it down quickly.

"Of course, there isn't such a thing as a truly black rose. If you look closely, it's a deep, deep red."

"I don't want to look at it closely."

"Regardless of its meaning, however did it find its way onto the bench?"

"I'm sure I don't know, and at the moment, how it arrived there ranks low on my list of dilemmas."

"What, exactly, is your most pressing dilemma this morning, dear?"

After a prolonged silence, Olivia launched into a disjointed ramble. "They profess to idealize chaste femininity and the sheltered innocence of women, yet live their lives quite the contrary, vis á vis running through lovers at a shocking pace. And what's more," she said, "I can't profess to tell a fish how to swim if *I* don't know how to swim."

"Who are *they*, dear?"

"Men, of course. Waffling at the onset, Cain eventually consented, believing I wouldn't go through with it, and Morgan agreed to assist, knowing full well what I was about and he did nothing to stop me. If he cared, he would have protested vehemently, but he did not. In fact, he brought his carriage around, escorted me there, and waited a full hour until Madame Rousseau returned me to her suite."

"Madame Rousseau? *The* Madame Rousseau?"

"The same." Olivia rose, her gait harried while she carved out a path on the tapestry rug. "On the ride home, Morgan seemed aloof, outwardly at least, presenting the calm detachment he prides himself in, but I wasn't fooled, Lark. That little muscle in his jaw twitched." She stopped momentarily and rolled her eyes. "After all these years, you'd think he'd know."

"Know what?" Lark asked.

"That I recognize his rage three miles off." She picked up her pacing again, this time her strides long and purposeful. "I didn't let on, of course, but goaded him further by asking him questions about what I had seen and—"

"Liv, will you please stop tearing up the rug and start at the beginning. Did you say Morgan escorted you *to L'Amour Immortelles*?" She paled. "And did you say Cain agreed to it?"

"Precisely."

"But why?"

"To observe."

A low croaking sound spilled from Lark's throat. "You watched people make love?"

Olivia nodded. "Among other assorted acts of carnal alliances."

Lark pressed her for more. "And?"

It took Olivia the better part of thirty minutes to disseminate the graphic details of her first visit, including the liaison between Preston and the silver-haired goddess. Lark's reactions alternated between bewilderment, inquisitiveness, amazement and finally, blatant shock. In light of the choking and gasping coming from her friend and the countless number of horrified expressions, Olivia quickly decided against spilling her intestines about the second visit. Every time she thought of it, something hot and achy surged up her throat and her internal organs throbbed. The pleasure Morgan had brought her was indescribable, so much so that she had actually begged and admitted she wanted him inside her. Mindless with primitive desire at the time, had he followed through on his threat to stop, she would have done more than beg. Good Lord, the thought terrified her. By the time Olivia slumped onto the settee again, Lark had fully recovered and broke into a fit of giggles.

"I assure you, it's nothing to laugh about," Olivia said firmly.

Moments later, Lark rose and placed her fingers to her temples. "And your brother, my fiancé, believes I'm greener than a frog in these matters. While I admit I'm untested *and* untried, I'm not that naïve. He should have confided in me, particularly since on several occasions, I pressed him to tell me what in the name of God is going on."

"What did he say?"

"He played the dunce."

"Don't blame Cain. Only at my insistence did he agree, and how could he possibly tell you knowing how you would feel about such a reckless venture? I'm sure he hoped after one visit it would all disappear quicker than a cloud of vapors." Summoning her wits, Olivia proceeded. "You can imagine how he must feel now, knowing I have another appointment in two weeks."

"What!"

She nodded. "You have no idea how difficult it is to keep up this façade in front of Cain and Morgan."

"Yet you're going to return?"

"I have no choice. Morgan said he hoped I had learned my lesson, and I said on the contrary I thoroughly enjoyed it and had every intention of keeping the next

appointment. I held my breath, prayed he'd put a stop to it, realized it had gone too far, but . . . ."

"But what?"

"He did not," she said, reminding herself every word was true, notwithstanding the fact she actually accompanied Morgan to *Immortelles* a second time. "He said he would escort me to the next appointment and home again."

"Oh he did, did he?"

"Yes." Olivia threw her a pained look. "Blast the rakehell."

Lark paused, her gaze riveted on Olivia. "This calls for drastic measures."

With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, she asked, "What kind of drastic measures?"

Lark studied the branch of a hickory dashing against the window pane in perfect rhythm with Olivia's foot tapping the carpet. "I'm thinking."

"Equally frightening, there is another matter," Olivia said, interrupting her friend's thoughts.

Lark turned to her abruptly. "Good heavens, what?"

"Morgan spoke of unrequited lust, desire and love. He challenged me, all but pushed me into taking it to the next level."

"Oh, no, he couldn't possibly want you to engage in such acts with another man." Without waiting for Olivia to reply, she said, "I've seen the way he looks at you."

"I know what I heard."

Obviously overwrought, Lark huffed. "Morgan leaves us no choice."

A vivid image of Morgan sitting across from her in the coach ready to strangle her flashed in Olivia's mind. "I think my intestines just wound their way into a bow knot."

"Oh, it will never get that far," Lark said. "But you must act right away."

With the feeling she stood in a quagmire of quicksand, Olivia croaked, "Act on what?"

"My plan; force the laid-back bounder to admit he loves you."

Olivia's heart banged against her ribs as she sensed a shocking plan fighting for release in Lark's cunning mind.

"As for your brother," Lark said with blistering sarcasm, "it's time he learns a lesson he won't soon forget."

"You must believe me, Cain does not frequent *Immortelles*, wouldn't think of compromising your relationship."

"Oh . . . ." She blew air through her lips. "I'm confident he's forsaken such pleasures, but just the same, he has lied to me, and I can only wonder what else he might be inclined to lie about in the future."

Liv buried her head in her hands. "This is my fault."

"Don't worry, dear, I'm not going to call off the engagement, but why not let him think I might."

Olivia stared at Lark with utter disbelief. "You're going to tell him you know about my visit to *Immortelles*?"

"Yes. Time is of the essence, and how will Morgan know what you're planning next if I don't tell Cain?"

"What *am* I planning next?"

Gliding across the room with the grace of a gazelle, Lark stopped in front of the mahogany desk and opened the drawer. "Come, darling." She motioned after retrieving the stationary, inkwell and quill. "A scandalous letter to Madame Rousseau should force Morgan's hand."

A wave of nausea washed over Olivia, the labyrinth of duplicity sprouting roots and limbs at an alarming rate. The lighthearted caper had assumed the momentum of a tidal wave at sea, and stubborn pride prevented her from fleeing from it. Things had simply progressed too far for her to back out now. She straightened her spine and crossed the room, slumping into the chair with a sinking heart.

"Don't you see, it's the only way now? You must force Morgan's hand, and Cain must be made to realize there can be no secrets between us if our marriage is to work."

"Very well," she said, picking up the quill, consciously dispelling the dark foreboding coursing through her.

Under Lark's guidance, Olivia penned the letter—ten times. And ten times she tore it up. An hour later, every word perfect and the ink well nearly dry, Lark read the missive aloud for the last time. Dismissing her nagging doubts, Olivia stuffed the

parchment into an envelope and stamped it with *L'Esperance's* personal seal. After summoning the footman, she asked him to take it to *L'Amour Immortelles* at once and deliver it directly into Madame Rousseau's hands.

The man left the reading room with a horrified look, propelling Lark and Olivia onto the settee in a fit of laughter.

## Chapter Nine

Morgan dismounted Valor and tied the horse to a post outside of *L'Amour Immortelles*, shriveling under an onslaught of rain. He entered the establishment and walked toward a quartet of scantily clad courtesans playing a game of whist in the parlor, instinctively aware of the dark shroud hovering over the room.

Catching sight of their tearstained cheeks, he asked, "Molly, Belinda, what's wrong?"

"Oh, Mister Gatewood," Molly choked out on a sob. "Abby is dead."

"Dead?" Inhaling quickly, Morgan asked, "What happened?"

"The servants found her this morning in one of the rooms in back," Belinda said. "They must have overlooked her body the other night on their rounds." She covered her mouth, the anguished cry spewing from her lips. "Doc said she's been dead for several days."

His muscles tensed tighter than riggings on a ship. "What did she die from?"

Molly brought her hand to her neck. "She was murdered, her throat cut."

In a surreal lapse of detachment, Morgan thought perhaps someone had punched him in the gut. "Murdered? Is the physician certain?"

Heads nodded in unison.

"Where is the body?"

Belinda dabbed her eyes with a well-worn handkerchief. "The coroner picked it up an hour ago."

Fighting the horrific images in his mind, Morgan closed his eyes briefly, opening them only when the images scattered. "I'll be back after I speak to Madame Rousseau."

He glanced over his shoulder and looked left to right. "In the meantime, let's make sure all the doors are locked. Will you check them for me?"

The women nodded and left the table, fanning out in all directions to secure the entrances and exits. After shucking his wet overcoat, Morgan marched swiftly to Madame Rousseau's suite and knocked on the pink door.

Moments later it opened, and she stepped aside, allowing him entry. "By the look on your face, someone told you what happened."

He gritted his teeth. "How the hell was a dead body overlooked?"

Madame Rousseau shrugged. "I don't know. Someone enticed her into that back bedchamber, one we seldom use."

Morgan made a point of scratching his head. "Who would want to kill Abby, such an unassuming, quiet young woman?"

"I've been racking my brain all morning." She walked to the sideboard and poured two drinks. "He left a calling card."

Taken aback, he stammered. "Wh—what kind of calling card?"

"A rose beside her on the pillow."

"Fucking great," Morgan growled low. "The *Gazette* is going to love this."

She handed him a glass of whiskey, her gaze lingering on his unshaven face. "I must say, Morgan, you look dreadful, not a smidgen above a foot soldier in the French Foreign Legion."

"Thank you for that," he said offhandedly. "Insults are renowned for stroking one's ego."

"It's just that I've never seen you so . . . ." She cocked her head. "So disheveled and tense looking."

"In case you hadn't noticed, it is raining outside. I am here about another matter which seems quite insignificant now in light of what happened to Abby."

Madame waved her hand in the air. "Well, there's nothing we can do for the poor girl now. It must have been someone she knew, perhaps a secret lover or a demented admirer."

"Do you really believe that?"



A befuddled frown creased her brow. "What else could it be? Some men become enamored with the women, jealousy sets in, and they act rashly on their fantasies."

Morgan shook his head. Gut instinct prevented him from swallowing her theory, but nonetheless, Abby was dead. "Spare no expense for a funeral and make certain her next of kin are notified."

She nodded and looked at him with obvious curiosity. "Does this other matter have anything to do with Miss Breedlove and her sudden fascination with *Immortelles*?"

"It does, unfortunately," he said on a groan. "I want the name of every patron who stepped through our doors last Friday night."

Madame Rousseau swept a lock of russet hair out of her face and shot him an incredulous look. "You can't be serious."

"Dead serious. We do make them register, right?"

"Of course, but I'll need time to go through the logs. What is this all about?"

"Miss Breedlove recognized someone, and I want to know who." He downed his drink, sauntered to the cabinet and poured another.

"You want names so you can narrow it down?"

"Precisely, and in light of what happened to Abby, don't you think it is imperative we know the name of everyone who entered the establishment that night? One is a murderer."

"Of course it's important, but I assumed you wanted it kept quiet. As it is, I had to bribe the physician and the coroner. Morgan?"

Caught up in his thoughts, he heard his name drifting toward him from a faraway place. "Yes, I'm listening."

She smiled sympathetically. "Poor, poor man."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She shook her head. "One would have to be a complete numskull not to see it."

He shrank before her perceptive gaze and asked, "See what?"

"You're in love with the woman." Without waiting for an answer and bearing the look of an all-seeing-all-knowing gypsy, she said, "One had only to look at your face as you dragged her out by an elbow the other night."

"Good God, am I really that transparent?"

"I'm afraid so." She chewed on her lower lip and nodded.

"She hasn't the slightest inkling, or if she does, refuses to come to terms with it." Visions of her thrashing under his fingers seized him. He had relived the scene a thousand times—couldn't stop it from tormenting him. How could the woman be so blasted blind to his feelings for her? Or, for that matter, her feelings for him?

Madame Rousseau placed her hand on his arm. "Why don't you just tell her and be done with it?"

His voice tangled with disbelief. "She isn't ready to accept it. Given her impetuosity and mule-headedness, there's no telling what Olivia Breedlove is capable of. She forces herself to think of me as a brother, a friend, nothing more. It is a safe place for her to hide."

"How can you be sure?"

"Number one, she asked me to assist her in this endeavor, knowing we have unfinished business between us . . . business that predates the last ten years." Without waiting for a response, he said, "She's up to something, playing some type of dangerous game, and is in way over her head. In any event, we have a muddled mess on our hands. I've just spoken with her brother, and we've decided it would be best to squash this masquerade in its entirety, before her next appointment. Her reputation will soon lay in tattered threads."

She folded her hands across her bosom. "A difficult undertaking given the circumstances, now that she's—"

"Thus, the reason I'm here . . . ." Stopping in mid-sentence, he spun around. "Circumstances, what circumstances?"

A faintly sympathetic tone laced her words. "Perhaps you should sit down."

"What has happened now?" His eyes searched hers. It was then he noticed the parchment in her hand. "And what is that?"

"I believe they call it a missive, a letter."

Battling impatience, he said, "Yes, I can see that. Who is it from?"

"Miss Olivia Breedlove."

The floor moved beneath his feet. Warning bells blared in his head. Why would Liv send a letter to Madame Rousseau? Afraid to ask, but knowing he must, he pushed

on. "What outlandish request has she made of you now? Does she wish a standing appointment, desire to book herself in from now until kingdom come?"

Smiling, her shoulders shaking with controlled laughter, Madame Rousseau replied, "That would be an easy, not to mention profitable, request to fulfill. Shall I read her letter aloud?"

"By all means, I can hardly contain my curiosity."

She cleared her throat and began, holding the cream-colored parchment in her outstretched hand.

*"10<sup>th</sup> July 1856 L'Esperance*

*"Dearest Madame Rousseau,*

*"First, I would be remiss if I did not offer my sincere gratitude for affording me the opportunity to call on L'Amour Immortelles several evenings past. I believe I mentioned my visit was everything I had hoped it would be and more.*

*"I understand you have been informed I will be returning to Immortelles two weeks from today. You will take note I have enclosed a substantial amount of funds in the sincere hope that it will more than amply cover not only your time, but your obligatory prudence in the matter I am about to propose.*

*"To put it delicately, and after considerable forethought, I have decided to not merely observe, but rather partake of the very commerce your establishment espouses. In other words, Madame Rousseau, I wish to indulge, albeit inconspicuously and anonymously."*

"Did she say indulge? Indulge in what, for the love of God?" Morgan couldn't recall a time he'd experienced such anger or hopelessness.

Holding the letter against her bosom, Madame Rousseau waited patiently while he collected his wits.

"Proceed," he said stiffly.

*"If I might be so bold, I would be eternally grateful if you would facilitate a meeting between me and one of your clients, an experienced, discreet client. The man you choose must know nothing about me, and therefore, must not reside in Savannah. I have no desire to alter or relinquish my chaste status, but rather wish to familiarize myself with, shall we say, everything but fornication."*

The whiskey spewed from Morgan's mouth in a fine spray.

In a cynical tone, Madame Rousseau asked, "Should I retrieve the smelling salts?"

"Arsenic would be preferable."

After a little "Ahem," she began again.

*"I realize this is an unusual request, thus the generous recompense. In the same vein, I do not expect compensation in return. You may keep whatever funds are customarily required for such services. Relying wholly on your judicious discretion, I can not stress how imperative it is not a soul knows, Madame. I hope you will, by return post, inform me on what date I may return to your fine establishment to bring to fruition my fondest desires."*

*"I remain your obedient servant, Miss Olivia Breedlove."*

It hit Morgan hard, similar to having the air knocked from his lungs. He saw red, then white as the anger surged up his throat. "I'm going to horsewhip the conniving little witch!"

"An interesting concept, but a bit unreasonable." Madame Rousseau snickered.

"Who does she think she is sending such a request?" Morgan prowled through the suite with the momentum of an enraged panther. "She wishes to partake of our commerce, and did she say she desired an experienced lover? Christ!" A bedside lantern swayed precariously when he flung out his arm. "She wishes to familiarize herself with everything but fornication?"

Her lips pinched, her eyes closed, Madame confirmed his statements. "I believe you have it verbatim." She stole a peek from beneath her lashes. "What do you suggest I do?"

"Hold her down while I whip her."

"Morgan, do be serious. Knowing you are in love with the woman, I can hardly precipitate a sexual liaison between Miss Breedlove and another man."

He snorted. "If you did, I might have to horsewhip you, too."

"How do you wish me to respond?" she asked again, choking back laughter.

"I'm thinking . . . I'm thinking." He tapped his fingers against his forehead. "So she desires to have her fondest wishes brought to fruition, does she?"

Madame Rousseau nodded.

"Then, by God, she will not be disappointed!" Morgan tilted his head toward the oak secretary braced against the wall. "Sit, Madame. I shall dictate while you write."

## Chapter Ten

Although the entire county knew about Cain and Lark's betrothal, tonight's engagement party symbolized the announcement formally. In her room, Olivia gazed at the full-length, pale green gown lying across the bed and hoped she had made the right choice. Since sending the letter to Madame Rousseau, indecision ran rampant. Sudden noises sent her heart into thunderous beats, and her future seemed dimmer than a street lamp at high noon. She didn't know how she would get through the evening. Lark intended to confront Cain tonight about his deception and participation in the ruse, knowing he would panic and tell Morgan about the letter. Olivia had spent the last three days wearing out the carpet in her room and her nights on bended knee, praying Morgan would put an immediate stop to the charade. Lark read men better than maps, and *she* said he cared for her. Oh, how she clung to the woman's words.

While waiting for Bessie to arrive to arrange her hair, Olivia heard a knock at the door. "Come in."

It wasn't Bessie, but rather the footman, the very man she'd sent to *L'Amour Immortelles* with the letter.

He stretched his arm toward her, envelope in hand. "This just came for you, Miss."

Nausea swirled in her stomach. "Thank you, Redmond." She nodded and took the envelope from him.

"You're welcome. Will there be anything else, Miss?"

"Yes, please ask Bessie to come to my bedchamber at once."

"Certainly."

Redmond had no sooner turned away, than she closed the door. Her hand trembled as she tore open the envelope and slumped into the chair at her vanity, scanning the neatly scripted words.

*12 July, 1856*

*L'Amour Immortelles*

*My Dearest Miss Breedlove,*

*I am in receipt of your most recent letter. I can only imagine how very difficult it must have been for you to write me about such a personal matter. Please rest assured you have my utmost understanding and my complete confidentiality.*

*After considerable reflection, I believe I have arrived at a satisfactory solution, one I hope will more than fulfill your fondest desires. I have, Miss Breedlove, the perfect man in mind for this delicate matter. A perfect match for you, he, too, prefers to remain anonymous, expends boundless energy protecting his identity and his real name. For all practical purposes, you need only know Arnaud Joubert is a Frenchman who speaks very stilted English. Isn't it deliciously decadent, Miss Breedlove—a French lover who will do his utmost to assure not only your anonymity, but his?*

*I have taken the liberty of writing to Monsieur Joubert. I hope he will agree to make an appearance on the very night you are expected. I will contact you by return post should there be a conflict.*

*May I suggest you arrive early for a glass of sherry?*

*Faithfully yours,*

*Madame Rousseau*

The letter dropped into Olivia's lap to the sound of a prolonged groan echoing in the room. The road to retreat had never appeared more obscure. Madame Rousseau had done exactly what Olivia had requested of her. Olivia tried to imagine walking into that room to meet a French lover, a total stranger. A part of her hoped Morgan would find out and stop this madness, another part couldn't help but wonder how it would feel to partake in the salacious deeds she'd witnessed. Well, she could do nothing about it now; powers greater than her would decide her fate. In any event, she'd never back down, and hadn't she always said what is good for the goose is good for the gander? Morgan had all but dared her to take her fantasies to a higher level with his discourse on unrequited lust and desire, and she had no intention of allowing Morgan Gatewood to wave the banner of victory in her face.

When Bessie entered the room to arrange her hair, Olivia placed the letter back into the envelope and tucked it inside her bureau drawer. Tonight, she would play the part

of the consummate actress and enjoy herself immensely, come what may. She couldn't wait to see the look on Morgan's face once Cain informed him of her plans.

An hour later, with her long hair swept up in soft curls atop her head, interspersed with several tiny strings of pearls, she rewarded Bessie with a grateful smile. She stepped into her gown and waited patiently while the servant secured the tiny buttons in back.

"Ya looks pretty as a picture, Miss," the girl said, handing her a pair of satin Moroccan slippers.

"What would I do without you, Bessie? You are a miracle worker."

"Yes'm," she said, shuffling off.

Olivia drew a deep breath and left the room, nearly colliding with Lark and Cain at the top of the stairwell.

"Lark, you've arrived?"

"Only moments ago."

Her future sister-in-law gave her a conspiratorial wink and linked their arms together. Lark exuded elegance in a billowing gown of dusky pink silk trimmed in Belgian lace at the low-cut neckline and again at the hem. Cain looked equally dashing in a snowy white shirt, black waistcoat and matching trousers, his knee-length boots polished to a high gloss.

"Redmond informs me numerous guests have already arrived," Cain said. "The drive is filled with broughams and carriages."

Below them, the vestibule overflowed with Savannah's most prominent citizens, her father's colleagues from the bench and Rance and Dyann Gatewood among them. At the bottom of the stairs, Cain and Lark stopped briefly to speak with Judge Rawlins and his wife while Olivia greeted Morgan's parents.

"Dear," Mrs. Gatewood said with a peck to Olivia's cheek, "you grow lovelier with each passing day."

Olivia curtsied, hoping they couldn't detect her warring emotions. "Nice to see you again."

"How is everyone faring at *L'Esperance*?" Morgan's father asked.

"Very well, sir, thank you."

She couldn't help but notice the strong resemblance to Morgan at the moment—the man's height, the broad shoulders and silver eyes. Her resolution to have a grand time wilted quicker than a sun-starved flower—and this, after only one glance at his father. Mrs. Gatewood was tall for a woman, and slender. Her dark hair, pulled back into an elaborate chignon, accentuated her sapphire blue eyes and flawless skin. Rance had known her father on a professional level, and Dyann and Olivia's mother had been fast friends before her mother's untimely death. There could be no doubt Morgan's parents knew about the decade-old scandal involving her and their son, but much to their credit they never mentioned it. On the contrary, they had always treated her with kindness and grace.

Morgan's father took her hand, his familiar, penetrating eyes capturing hers. "Rumor has it our Morgan spends an excessive amount of time at *L'Esperance* since returning from France."

*So he was in France?* "Yes, well he and Cain have always been close," she said, wringing her sweaty hands.

"I see." The man studied her so intently she wished she had the capability of evaporating like morning dew. His voice softened. "I'm aware of your late father's wishes concerning Morgan's friendship with you. It became a delicate subject between us."

"You needn't have concerned yourself, sir," she replied, her face suddenly hot. "Morgan and I are simply friends, nothing more."

He squeezed her hand gently. "Please understand; we did not share Thaddeus's strong opposition to such a union, but, of course, felt obligated to honor his wishes."

"Thank you for your kind words, Mister Gatewood, but my father expended needless energy in that regard. Morgan and I are not well-suited."

"Not well-suited, dear?" Mrs. Gatewood's brows rose. "On the contrary, you make a lovely couple."

Cain and Lark suddenly appeared, saving her a blushing response. Olivia curtsied and promised the Gatewoods she'd seek them out later. Upon entering the ballroom, Cain veered off to greet a group of university acquaintances while Olivia and Lark elbowed their way through the throng of guests to a small table surrounded by potted palms.



Certain not a soul could hear them, Olivia pushed Lark into a chair and settled in across from her. "A letter arrived from Madame Rousseau today," she said, aware of the tremulous vibration at the base of her throat.

"So soon?" Lark took her hand in hers and leaned in. "I take it by the look on your face you're not ecstatic over the contents?"

"I don't know what I expected." Olivia glanced at an impeccably attired footman passing by with a tray of clinking beverages—sherry and champagne for the women, brandy and whiskey for the men. "The woman did exactly what I asked of her."

"Marvelous!" Lark squealed.

"Easy for you to say." She frowned. "You're not the sacrificial lamb about to have its throat cut."

"Oh, come now, dear, I'm certain it won't progress to that." Lark narrowed her eyes and searched the room, reminding Olivia of a Pinkerton agent on a covert assignment. "I plan to confront Cain once our engagement is formally announced and then I'll give him exactly five minutes to flush out Morgan."

The plaintive notes of a waltz from the musician's platform drew Olivia's gaze. "Have you seen him?"

"No, but Cain expects him to arrive soon." Rubbing Olivia's hand, she asked, "Now, do tell, what did Madame Rousseau's letter say?"

Her voice nearly a whisper, she began. "I'm to meet a French lover who speaks only broken English—a man by the name of Arnaud Joubert."

"A Frenchman." Lark sighed wistfully. "One who couldn't possibly know who you are, much less glean information from you. I must commend Madame Rousseau for her foresight."

"He doesn't want me to know anything about him, either."

"Perfect," Lark trilled and removed her hand from Olivia's to clap gleefully. "Obviously, he's not from Savannah."

"You're talking as if I'll actually meet him, engage—"

"Fiddlesticks, Liv, I'm merely speculating on how ingenuous it is should things go awry."

Olivia swallowed hard and scanned the room, her head reeling as an entire platoon of dancers swept past them. "I don't think we should discuss the subject further this evening. I'm finding it hard to manage my emotions."

"Well, collect yourself, dear. The night is young." She nodded at something over Olivia's shoulder. "And James Linden is worming his way toward us."

Olivia straightened her back and plastered a smile on her face.

Less welcome than a swarm of hornets, James suddenly appeared. He bowed at the waist, deftly plucking Lark's hand from her lap and kissing it. He repeated the process with Olivia. "Pray tell, why are the loveliest ladies in the room hiding in a corner?"

"Enjoying the calm before the storm." Lark rose from her chair with a little chuckle. "Well, I'm off to find Cain. Enjoy yourselves, children."

His brows nearly meeting in the middle, James asked, "What was that all about?"

"Oh, you know Lark, she imagines intrigue at every turn."

"Yes, she is rather indomitable." With a wink and a smile, he said, "I think your brother has finally met his match."

"And then some," she replied, meaning every word.

"Now that I've wrestled the crowd to find you, would you join me in a waltz?"

Relieved to be occupied with something other than her tormented thoughts, she took his hand and followed him onto the dance floor. Tall and lean, with hair the color of honey, and eyes the color of black-eyed Susans, James had evolved into a fine-looking man. James and Cain had been childhood acquaintances, and Olivia had known for years the man was sweet on her. He also had a checkered past. Rumors abounded that his mother was once a courtesan in Washington and James was a byproduct of her amorous liaisons. The woman supposedly blackmailed the notable legislator into marrying her.

His husky voice broke her reverie. "What about you, Liv? Isn't it time you think seriously about settling down?"

"Why must I?" she said belligerently. "I'm not going to barter away my happiness because the clock is ticking."

"I've always admired your nonconformist attitude." Without waiting for a retort, he continued. "Just make sure one day you don't wake up and discover it's too late."

Relieved to finish the set with James—a man clumsier than one-legged Pete—Olivia thanked him and discreetly blended into the crowd. From the sidelines, she watched her brother step up to the musician's platform. A sudden hush fell over the room when Cain beckoned Lark to his side.

"Ladies and gentleman," Cain said, his voice rising above the crowd. "Most of you know we are gathered here tonight in commemoration of an important event in my life." He turned to Lark. "In *our* lives."

Lark appeared a trifle nervous but smiled, her eyes filled with adoration.

"I'd like to present my future wife, Lark Hudson."

The crowd broke into cheers and a round of applause. Olivia couldn't help but notice what a striking couple they made, opposites in every sense of the word. Lark's blue eyes, honey-gold hair and pale white skin complemented Cain's dark locks and snapping brown eyes. Olivia's future sister-in-law was sweetness and light, her beloved brother, intense and staid most of the time, yet somehow they had discovered common ground.

She wondered how it would feel to have a man love her unconditionally and love him in return. Despite Lark's rhetoric about teaching Cain a lesson, Olivia knew it was just that, windy rhetoric. Her brother and soon-to-be-sister-in-law had been in love for longer than Olivia could remember.

Cain drew Lark into his arms and kissed her passionately, eliciting a series of bawdy whistles from the men and schoolgirl giggles from the single ladies. About to step forward to offer her congratulations, Liv had a second's warning before Morgan appeared in her line of vision. He raised his glass to the happy couple, kissed Lark on the cheek and shook hands with Cain. Olivia swallowed hard as Morgan turned to her with a nearly indecent look. His dark eyes, with their circumspect intensity, undressed her right there in front of everyone.

The shallow pulse beating in the hollow of her throat picked up velocity, and her heart dropped to some unknown area below her bellybutton. Dressed in caramel-colored trousers, a dark brown silk shirt—open at the neck—and fawn-colored leather boots that hugged his muscular calves, Morgan struck a magnificent pose. His long hair fell just above the collar of his shirt, framing his clean-shaven face and tanned skin.

His silver eyes held hers and his sensuous mouth curled into a smile, a *knowing* smile. Nonplussed, she looked away quickly. Damn, what hold did the man have over her emotions? She burned hotter than a falling star tumbling from the sky every time he graced her with a look, a smile, a kiss. She didn't even want to think about the last time he'd kissed her in the garden and sent her world spiraling toward the galaxies. Most certainly she wouldn't give a thought to the last time he delivered her to the gates of Heaven at the brothel.

He'd felt it too at the time, whatever it was. The look of desire in his eyes when he had grabbed her arm and told her next time he'd finish what she'd started was unmistakable. What she'd started ranked right up there with combustible flames rolling across the countryside, devouring everything in its path, and she wanted to get burned—scalded, branded and scorched by those big, hot hands caressing every inch of her naked flesh. She had only to think about the look in his eyes as he backed her into the wall in the peep room and . . . Heaven help her, had she really cried out his name and whimpered like a wounded animal? In those moments, she'd ached with so much need she almost flung herself at his feet after he finished wringing those wanton responses from her body. And asked him for more. And he would have given her more in a heartbeat.

*Fire, that's what he is, hot, forbidden fire, and I'm the kindling. Good God, Olivia, grab hold of yourself.*

A familiar male voice pulled her gaze from Morgan. "Liv, I've been searching everywhere for you."

She willed the wild palpitations of her heart into submission and looked into the blue eyes of Preston Trousdale! Images of him slamming into the silver-haired goddess from behind while the woman clutched the bed rails and bawled louder than a cat in heat tore through her mind. "Preston, how nice to see you so soon."

"So soon? We haven't seen one another in eons."

"I . . . I know." She stammered, tucking a wayward wisp of hair back in place. "I should have said after such a long time."

"You look ravishing, Liv." He led her onto the Italian marble dance floor amid the first strains of a waltz. "Honor me with a dance."

She stole a covert glance at Morgan. The smile had left him, replaced by a grave expression as Preston drew her into his arms. Dare she hope a spark of jealousy had been fanned to life? The thought pleased her. She leaned into Preston, looked into his eyes and delivered her best smile. Light on his feet, her partner guided her around the floor with nimble grace while she did her best to dispel the visions of his well-muscled, naked body beneath the fancy attire. Rounding the turn, she caught a fleeting glimpse of Lark and Cain. In deep conversation and tucked between a pair of towering palms, her brother reminded her of a mink caught in a trap. On the sidelines, Morgan studied the couple judiciously. Her hands broke into a cold sweat, and Preston's voice drifted over her as if through a funnel—something about calling on her the following afternoon for a jaunt through the countryside.

"What do you say, Liv? We can catch up on old times."

"Tomorrow, yes, I'll let you know by the end of the evening. I seem to remember Lark saying something about a family picnic."

"I swear, Liv, you're a million miles away tonight."

She smiled up at Preston again. "I'm sorry. My thoughts wandered to Lark and Cain for a moment. Don't they make a magnificent couple?"

"I couldn't agree more." Without waiting for a response he asked, "Are the rumors true? Did your father stipulate in his will that you have six months to find a husband or rely on your brother's support for the rest of your life?"

"Six months is a long time." She lied. "And I have no intention of relying on Cain's charity in my old age."

"I'm happy to hear that, Liv." He smiled and pulled her closer.

## **Chapter Eleven**

After congratulating Lark and Cain, Morgan withdrew to a dark corner where he could watch Olivia at his leisure and watch a hundred other hot-blooded males in the room watch Olivia. Truly a vision in the off-the-shoulder, filmy green dress, a near perfect match to her haunting, cat-like eyes, the woman stirred every sense known to man. Slightly tall for a woman and lithesome, she possessed alluring curves in all the

right places. Lightning raced through Morgan's veins and his heart clenched just looking at her. Her luscious mouth—ripe and pink, her lower lip prominent and pouty—heightened his arousal, eliciting from him an insatiable urge to kiss it into submission.

He should have finished what he had started ten years ago when he had the chance, despite the wrack and ruin it would have created. Regardless of Thaddeus's strong reservations about his illicit lifestyle, the man would have insisted on marriage. And Morgan wouldn't be leaning against a wall at the moment, mooning over her with the look of a love-struck calf. Instead, he'd be holding that delectable body in his arms and fantasizing about all the wicked, delicious things he would do to her *after* the celebration ended—beginning with the wicked thing he did to her at the brothel.

He noted the look in her eyes moments ago, sensed the electrified current stretching across the distance between them. Her desire, like his, was palpable. What game did the little minx play, sending a letter to Madame Rousseau asking to partake in sinful delights? He'd be more than happy to accommodate her. A thousand times he had fantasized about her young, supple body writhing beneath him, calling out his name in the throes of passion. The thought that it might be writhing beneath another man nearly drove him insane. His cock sprang to life watching her and with it, a thought. He didn't want to horsewhip her at all, but rather toss her down on the floor, shove that dress up over her hips and take her right there in front of God and everyone. The devil curse him.

She seemed particularly interested in Preston Trousdale at the moment, batting those long, spiky eyelashes in his face like a green debutante. Morgan didn't care for the man, never had. He had only to think of Abby now, her throat slashed, her blue eyes closed in death, and Preston's name reverberated through his head. The man had a propensity toward aggressive sex, thus the reason he more than amply compensated every dove he tumbled. Focusing on Preston's face, Morgan studied it with concerted effort. The skin prickling at the nape of his neck warned him the man could very possibly be a murderer.

His gaze wandered to the goddess of his every fantasy again. Oh God, how he wanted to rip those pearls from her hair, yank her head back until she cried out for mercy and devour those luscious lips. He mentally prepared for battle, a battle he didn't intend to lose.

Cain suddenly appeared and tugged at his elbow. "Morgan, I must speak with you at once."

Unable to tear his jealous eyes from Olivia and Preston, he replied, "Well you have me, so speak."

"Lark knows everything. She nearly tore my head off, said you and I should be drawn and quartered for aiding and abetting Olivia in this wicked scheme." Cain's fingers moved idly to the hair at his forehead, and he pushed it back. "She's threatened to call off our engagement if it isn't stopped forthwith."

*Damn the cunning little bitch.* "Olivia gave her word she wouldn't discuss it with anyone."

"Well, obviously she has, and it's much worse than we ever imagined."

Dread rumbled through his gut. "What do you mean?"

"She's written to Madame Rousseau. She has decided not to merely observe, but desires to take it to the next level."

*What the hell is that impetuous creature up to? She told Lark, who naturally told Cain. Does she want someone to slap a stopper on it or is she trying to make me mad with jealousy? Christ, the blasted woman has my stomach in knots with her calculated scheming.*

"Morgan, are you listening to me? This is disastrous. She is planning to offer herself up as a harlot."

"Over my dead body."

Cain expelled a weary sigh. "Good, Morgan, that's good. I'm so relieved to hear you say that."

A lengthy pause ensued. "Speaking of dead bodies, a prostitute met an untimely death the other night at *Immortelles*."

"You mean murdered?"

"I doubt she volunteered to have her throat slashed."

Cain made a choking sound. "Have you any idea who killed her?"

"Not yet, but Trousdale and Linden made an appearance that night, and whomever the reprobate is, he left a calling card—a black rose."

"What!" The color drained from Cain's face.

Morgan fixed him with a stern glare. "Why do I have the sickening feeling a black rose suddenly holds significance?"

"Lark has a fondness for roses, has done extensive research pertaining to the significance of their color."

"And?"

"I've dabbled in the study of roses, too, and I told Lark that while it's true the black rose has been synonymous with death and mourning, often retribution against a foe —"

"Christ," Morgan said. "Death . . . retribution?"

"Hear me out," Cain said, raising a hand. "A black rose can also signify the beginning of new things, a journey into unexplored territory. Yet, in this case . . ."

"What? In this case, what?" Morgan said in an impatient, uncivil manner.

"Whether it means the first or the latter, and you can call me an overwrought paranoid fusspot, it doesn't bode well for Liv that someone left a black rose on the garden bench—her favorite bench."

Gooseflesh rippled down Morgan's arms. "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Good God, man, if I told you every time someone sent Liv flowers, my jaw would ache." He hesitated briefly. "In light of everything now, what do you plan to do to stop her?"

"Kill her, if I must."

"Now see here, Morgan."

"Not in the true sense, of course, but . . ."

"But what?" Cain said irritably.

He tore his gaze from Olivia and looked into Cain's eyes. "Get a hold of yourself lest someone realize something is amiss. Tell Lark you've told me and I've promised to take care of it."

"I have your word?"

Cain's voice filtered into Morgan's brain through a fog. He fumed, his attention on Olivia as Preston swirled her around the dance floor. The man seemed to have more arms than a damned millipede. On the last turn, his lecherous fingers rested against her shoulder blade, and moments ago, slid down to lay just above her waist. Now, they had



moved to the hollow of her back. What he wouldn't give to pummel the shit out of the man this very moment.

"Hello . . . ? Is anybody there?" Cain prodded further. "*When* do you plan to take care of it?"

Cain's words grated on his nerves. Morgan pulled his jealous gaze from the couple and pushed himself from the wall. Having his fill of the groper, he called out over his shoulder, "Right now, so perhaps you don't want to watch."

\* \* \* \* \*

The music had stopped, and so had Olivia's heart. Morgan walked toward them from the far corner of the room, and Preston babbled about calling on her tomorrow—fragments of words her benumbed brain couldn't absorb. She couldn't take her eyes off the flash of hard muscle pushing his way through the throng, his eyes locked with hers in a deadly battle of lust and power. For a moment, she wanted to bolt, flee to a safe place where Morgan Gatewood couldn't manipulate her emotions or evoke the powerful feelings that left her gasping for air. He moved with the cunning grace of a sleek, dark panther after its prey, ambling forward with a loose-limbed agility that both terrified and thrilled her.

"Preston." Morgan acknowledged the man, his nod so slight he'd obviously already dismissed Preston from his thoughts. His luminous eyes still on her, he said, "I want a word with you, Olivia."

Preston looked at him askance, his tone flippant. "Well, she's promised me the next set, my good man, so perhaps you should come back later."

"Perhaps *you* didn't hear me. I need to speak with Olivia."

Undercurrents cracked the air, so thick she tasted them.

"See here, Gatewood." Preston huffed. "You can't just barge in whenever you wish and make demands."

"Preston," he whispered, engaging the man with a cold-steeled glare. "Unless you desire pistols at dawn, leave us, now."

Preston's brows rose. "Pistols at dawn; isn't that rather drastic?"

"Knives will do, if you prefer." Morgan said.

His voice quavering, Preston bowed slightly. "Liv, I shall return the moment this bully takes his leave of you."

She smiled feebly and with her eyes followed Preston's hasty retreat into the crowd. "I'm dumbfounded by your rudeness, Morgan."

"Really? Well, I'm in a rude, foul mood."

"That gives you no cause to take it out on others."

"If you had any idea how much I'd rather take it out on you this very second, you'd run faster and farther than your delectable little legs could carry you."

She gasped. "You've never seen my legs so how would you know whether or not they're delectable."

"I had a good feel of them the last time we were together and I have a vivid imagination." He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her along with him.

"Where are you taking me? Where are we going?"

"To the stables to retrieve a horsewhip."

"You wouldn't dare!" A disturbing shiver of excitement coursed through her just hearing the words.

He halted abruptly, turned around and pinned her with a look of fury. "Do not, under any circumstances, goad me, Olivia. Right now, there's no telling what I might do to you."

*So it's back to Olivia again, and the muscle in his jaw is twitching faster than a horse's rump.* He moved so fast, people passed them by in a blur of color, and she had trouble keeping pace with his long strides. The deafening sounds of conversation and laughter roared in her ears, competing with the mad beating of her heart. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied his mother. The woman's chin fell to her bosom and her face took on the color of goose down. Dear Lord, she didn't know how the woman would bear up under another scandal.

Breathless, Olivia made a feeble attempt to yank her hand from his. "Stop! What in the world has come over you? You have no right to treat me in this manner."

"I have every right," he said, dragging her forward again. "You gave your word you wouldn't tell a soul if I agreed to assist you in this ill-fated endeavor."

"Lark, I only told Lark, and only because she became highly suspicious."

They had finally reached the outside patio, but apparently he had another destination in mind. Several minutes later, he turned left past a row of hedges leading to the gardens. Not until shrub roses and flowering dogwoods surrounded them, did he stop and turn to face her.

Illuminated by shafts of moonbeams, his eyes pierced her very soul. "You, madam, are in a most precarious situation."

She withered like a violet beneath a scorching sun. "I tell you, Lark insisted something was amiss. Under the circumstances, I thought it best to do the honorable thing and tell the truth."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Honorable? You don't know the meaning of the word." He poked his finger into her chest. "Not after that letter you sent to Madame Rousseau!"

She turned her face from his. "You don't know what it said." In the next instant, she snapped her head back to face him and whimpered, "Do you?"

"Enough to know you're no longer content observing but have taken it to the next level." He took a step forward. "Isn't that a fair summation of your letter?"

"Yes," she mumbled weakly. "But how did you know the exact contents?"

"I know everything about you, Olivia. I make it my business to know." He dragged the words out. "Every. Single. Solitary. Thing."

She backed up, yet he continued to advance. She raised her arm to stop him, and he pushed it aside, his erotic mouth stopping mere inches from hers. Her voice weaker than a new babe's, she asked, "Why do you make it your business?"

He ignored the question, studying her as though he saw everything underneath her dress. "I do believe you're suffering from aberrant fetishes, Liv."

She couldn't breathe. If only he'd stop hovering about her, reminding her of a phantom moth. "Aberrant what?" She managed to squeak out.

"Sexual fetishes, obsessions."

He ran his thumb over her bottom lip, scattering rational thought like primed tree sap. A tingling aroma of musk and something reminiscent of myrrh assailed her senses,

mingling with the raw, masculine scent of man. A deep chasm opened beneath her feet, sucking her down . . . down . . . down. "Morgan," she whimpered.

"Because if you are," he said, his lips touching hers, "I can help you with that. Do you want me to, Liv?"

"No," she uttered feebly, wondering how soon it would be before she fell into a swoon or a sweep. It didn't matter which.

"Yes you do, you've wanted me to take you ever since that night in the garden ten years ago. Say it, Liv, say you want to feel me throbbing inside you, not my fingers, but my cock."

"I do not." She panted, her voice sinking faster than an anchor. "I . . . I—"

"Want me inside you."

He licked her lips in slow, sensual strokes and they parted of their own volition allowing him entry. She responded wantonly to the kiss, her hands clasping the front of his shirt, her soft moans surging up her throat. His mouth was hard and brutal. She knew it was an expression of his anger, exacerbated by the heat and desire slithering around them. His tongue probed the depths of her mouth, sending shock waves through her from head to toe. He caressed her breast through the thin fabric, and the little voice in her head screamed at her to stop him, stop this, but she seemed incapable of sane thought or reason. Only Morgan existed, and she'd waited a lifetime for this moment. Skillfully, he slipped the dress from her shoulders, followed by her chemise, until her naked breasts quivered against the cool night air. A gasp of mutual shock and delight flew from her lips when he tugged her peaked nipple between his thumb and index finger.

"You fancy that, Liv, don't you?"

"Stop, Morgan . . . please."

She could have saved her words, for in the next breathless moment he increased his demanding assault on her lips and forced her head back until her neck nearly snapped under the pressure. Need and hunger pumped through her veins like warm honey.

"You don't want me to stop, you want to experience every depraved act known to man," he murmured against her lips. "You want me to make you beg again, don't you, Miss Breedlove, right here, right now?"

The sensations were indescribable, and a groan resounded in her head. Olivia prayed it wasn't hers. His mouth embarked on a path of scorching kisses down her throat, moving next to her bare shoulder, lower still, until he found her naked breast. He took her nipple between his teeth and nipped it gently, then drew it in fully and suckled her. Spasms racked her entire being. A blissful moan escaped her lips, and moisture pooled between her thighs.

"Oh, wh-what are you doing?"

"Finishing something I started long ago."

She squirmed beneath him, trapped in a web of hot, decadent desire. She wanted more from him, wanted him to end this agony of carnal yearning. She *did* want to feel Morgan Gatewood inside of her, God help her. The man was wicked, unabashedly wicked, and she was drowning, going down not for the third time, but the fourth. Appalled by the shameless response of her traitorous body, she slammed her eyes shut. She must stop him or he'd take her right here in the garden. And the despot wouldn't think twice about it. She'd no longer need to worry about *L'Amour Immortelles*, the letter or anything else. It would all be over. Oh, blessed relief.

And she'd be ruined; no man would have her.

She pushed against him and struggled for her sanity. "Turn me loose, Morgan, this very instant!"

As if burned by a hot branding iron, he stopped immediately and gazed into her eyes. Slowly, he set her back on her feet and pulled the dress up over her shoulders again. Desire, raw and intense, shone in his silver eyes, and she imagined the same heat reflected in hers. She had trouble letting the air out of her lungs or sucking it in, and he labored in the same manner.

His voice hoarse, he said, "Don't expect an apology from me; you've been asking for that and more for a long time."

"Oh, you really are a despicable cad, a black-hearted debaucher of the highest repute! You drag me out here on the pretense of speaking to me and then . . . and then you assault me."

"If I intended to ravish you, Liv, you'd be flat on your back beneath me right now, moaning louder than a bitch in heat, begging me for more. But I think I'll make you wait

until you are crazy and wild with lust for me like I am for you, make you yearn and crave it until you *do* beg."

She hated him at that moment. Hated him for how he made her feel, for all the years of longing, for the thousands of nights she'd cried herself to sleep. Most of all, she hated him for the power he wielded over her. In a split second her survival instinct kicked in. Without conscious thought, her hand whipped out and connected smartly with his cheek.

For a brief moment, his eyes turned cold and hard. Seconds passed in slow motion. He grabbed her wrist and yanked her to his chest. "If you ever slap me again, I'll flay your backside so you won't be able to sit for a week."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Don't ever underestimate what I will do to you, have wanted to do to you, ever since I got a taste of your delectable charms. Do you know I spend hours, days imagining you straining beneath me, clawing and scratching at me like a wild cat?"

Lost. She was lost in those angular features, the hard cut of his cheekbones, the straight, aristocratic nose and wide, generous mouth that only moments ago nearly had her groveling at his feet, begging him to take her.

With a frustrated groan, he released her abruptly and stepped away. "It isn't safe at *Immortelles*, I tell you."

"You and Cain agreed *Immortelles* was the best place—"

"Not anymore."

An extended pause followed. "Why? What's changed?"

"Everything now, because of Abby."

"What?" she asked, dazed. "Who is Abby?"

"She worked there."

"You said, *worked*."

"She was murdered the other night, the same night you arrived there."

"Oh, dear God." She clutched her throat briefly, allowing the meaning of his words to sink in. Then she rallied. "I can only assume you knew her on a very personal level. How else would you be privy to the information?" She shook her head. "You never cease to amaze me, Morgan."

His eyes narrowed, his tone threatening, he said, "You will send a missive to Madame Rousseau and cancel that appointment or—"

"Or what? Is it pistols at dawn for me too?" Trying to quell the hysterics surfacing, she drew a deep breath.

He leaned in, his words colder than a north wind. "In your worst nightmare, you don't want to know *or what*."

The veiled threat flooding her with anger, she straightened her back and faced off with him like a rabid bat. "You're not my father and you can't make me!"

"Is that a no, Olivia?"

"That's a definite no."

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. His jaw clenched, his gray eyes shards of ice, anger radiated from him in perceptible waves. "You witless little termagant, you're about to walk into a cauldron of perfidy."

"Stop! You're hurting me!"

His face white with anger, he snarled. "This is nothing compared to what I'll do to you if you don't cease and desist *now*!"

"What do you want from me?" she cried, her head rolling as if it might come loose from her neck.

Angry words tumbled from his lips. "I want to hear you call out my name while I fuck you, like you did when my fingers were inside you!" The very air ceased to stir as he whispered, "I want you, all of you."

Rendered mute, she stared at him. For a few brief seconds, the words played in her head softer than a sonata, and the earth spun on its axis. *I want you. All of you.*

"There," he said, expelling a long breath. "Is that what you needed to hear?"

Their gazes locked and held beneath the misty blue twilight, the dreamlike spell broken only by distant laughter drifting toward them. No doubt a pair of lovebirds looking for the perfect location to engage in a clandestine interlude, Olivia thought in the back of her mind.

Barely able to contain the tumultuous emotions overtaking her, she tried to wrench free of him. "Let me go, Morgan."

His head turned toward the voices and back to her. "Look, my words are falling short. I didn't mean it like it sounded."

His eyes, mysterious and unblinking, continued to stare at her, and she wanted to fall into them, lose herself forever in the gray depths.

"It's more than lust. Every time . . ."

She searched his eyes, and her legs crumbled beneath her again, as they had at the brothel when he'd touched her, like they had moments ago.

"When I look at you . . ."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Someone, maybe you, has summoned forth the lightning." He looked away from her, and she knew he struggled for the right words. "Goddamn it, and the thunder and the tides of the ocean and everything in between."

The tiniest of smiles moved her lips. It was a pivotal moment for them. She should be exuberant, giddy with happiness, but the word love hadn't been mentioned. Without it, she couldn't survive, didn't want to. Yes, he wanted her, but he had wanted and taken dozens of women. Once he took her, it would be over, and she couldn't stand the thought of him leaving her life again after she gave herself to him heart, body, and soul. And that is exactly what she would be doing.

"I know you're frightened of me, of us," he said. "And I know you don't understand any of it. Sometimes I don't either, but I can make you feel safe. I can take care of you." The voices coming toward them grew louder. "Say something, anything."

"You left my life twice; once ten years ago and again when you went abroad." Tears stung her eyes. "For three years, Morgan, three years of not knowing . . . wondering."

"Here, my darling," the strange voice said, closer now. "No one will find us among the trellises."

Olivia tried to withdraw from his arms.

Go then," he said acidly and released her so quickly she nearly toppled to the ground. "Two days, Liv, you have two days to contact Madame Rousseau and end this."

Wondering if her wobbly legs would transport her back to the manor, she turned from him and left the garden, wiping the tears from her face with the tips of her fingers.



Olivia knew that hours would turn before logic ruled again, and possibly days might pass before she knew whether her tears sprang from anguish or joy.

## **Chapter Twelve**

He stood in a corner of the great ballroom and kept vigil, waiting for another glimpse of her. It was always about her.

Olivia Breedlove.

She walked toward him, and his heart raced.

Him. And only him.

His knees shook.

Their eyes met only briefly, but surely she recognized the love in his eyes. Finally, she understood his adoration for her; finally, she realized destiny had intervened and placed him in her path. Seconds passed in slow motion. His dry throat ached. He wanted to touch her, to gaze into those lovely green eyes.

A pain shot through his heart at the sight of her holding out her hand to another man, a pain so debilitating, so acute, as if she'd just stabbed him clear through with a dull-edged knife. The light in her eyes should have been for him, not for someone who would never love her the way he did. What would it take for her to admit she belonged to him, now and forever?

She accepted the man's hand and followed him. Had she met him at that immoral, shameful whorehouse and offered her perfect body to him? He'd followed her that night, too, like a thief in the night, just as he had a thousand times. Even dressed as a boy, he'd know that face, recognize those luscious curves, the saucy little step that belonged only to her.

The muted strains of a waltz and subdued laughter echoed in the room, but above it all her voice called to him. Every time he closed his eyes, the soft inflection possessed him and he saw her face.

Soon, my Venus.

Soon you will be mine and only mine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan kept his distance, but followed Liv and made sure she returned safely to the celebration. The moment she'd passed through the door leading to the ballroom, he slumped into a chair on the patio and kicked over a potted plant near his feet.

He couldn't believe he'd allowed things to get so carried away . . . again. Never had a woman been able to get into his head the way she could. He had closed his eyes against that damn intoxicating scent wafting around him, mingling with her susceptible naiveté. Even now, it lingered in the air and clung to his senses until he thought he might never rid it from his soul. In a flash, he rose from the chair, stuffed his hands into his pockets—where they should have been all along—and paced.

He shouldn't have kissed her. One taste of those sweet, ripe lips again and everything had skidded downhill faster than a wayward cannon. The blasted woman drew him like a drug he couldn't get enough of, and no elixir on earth could render him immune.

Shocked by the little ahs coming from her lips and the defenseless way she clung to him for dear life, he thought she would rather die than submit again. But submit, she did, like the day in the brothel. He stifled a groan. If she hadn't stopped him, he would have taken her in the same manner he took a whore. Sooner or later, Morgan knew, it would come back to this insatiable hunger to possess her, to squash the overwhelming need to drive his cock deep inside her until she cried out for release. A thousand times he had imagined her hot, silken depths sheathing him, her firm, lithe body bucking against him, naked flesh against naked flesh. Christ, he should be locked up. Or fuck her and get it over with.

How he had hoped when he returned from France she had forgiven him for making her the pith of scandal. Quite the opposite, she had made it perfectly clear she would soon choose a husband and he didn't qualify, much less deserve to run in the race. She held something against him, was terrified of surrendering completely, despite his reassurances he could and would take care of her. Certainly, his failure to stand up to her father ten years ago still stung her pride and his sudden departure three years ago added to her mistrust of him. Complicated didn't begin to describe their situation.

He had tried to frighten her into giving up this absurd quest, even threatened her, but rather than acquiesce as most women would, she defied him, all but challenged him. Now her life could be in danger. Christ, what did the woman want?

The strains of another waltz drifted onto the veranda. He couldn't duck out now, no matter how much he wanted to. Cain would be waiting to speak to him, and Olivia would consider his sudden disappearance a monumental victory. No, he'd return to the party and act nonchalant, despite his raging emotions.

Surrounded by a bevy of would-be-suitors, Olivia stood at the far end of the hall, looking cooler than a trout swimming upstream. James pulled her from the cozy group and led her onto the dance floor, drooling over her like a rabid weasel. He didn't trust Linden either. Covert and secretive, the man sprang from a dubious past. Rumors abounded regarding his aberrant inclinations in the bedchamber, both depraved and cruel in Morgan's opinion.

Buried in mercurial thoughts, he pushed them aside when Cain found him within minutes of his reemergence. "What the hell happened? Liv bolted through the veranda doors madder than a bear with a sore head."

He nodded toward Olivia and the dumbstruck idiot gazing into her seductive eyes. "She is amazingly resilient, is she not?"

"Morgan, did you convince her to cancel the appointment?"

He stroked his chin, regarding the man's question. "Negative."

An audible groan from Cain raised some local interest. "What are we going to do now?"

"*You* could try convincing her."

He laughed. "She's never listened to me." Under his breath, he said, "Come to think of it, she never listens to anyone."

An oath left Morgan's lips. "Therein lies the problem."

"We still have time," Cain said. "I suppose it's possible she'll come to her senses."

Irritably, Morgan replied, "Don't place money on that."

Lark motioned to Cain from across the room and pointed to an enormous four-tiered cake at the head table. "I must go or next I'll be spurned by my fiancée."

"Remind me to ask you why they call it marital bliss." Morgan sneered, and then Cain laughed. "In any event, I won't be around for a spell."

"Why? How persuasive can you be if you're in absentia?"

"My point, exactly. Ultimately, the decision must come from Liv. If we harangue her, she'll dig in."

"You're right, of course." Cain blinked several times. "You know her so well."

"Frightening, isn't it?"

Lark waved again, frantically.

"I'll stop by one day soon." Cain held up his hand. "Cross your fingers."

Morgan engaged in small talk with a trio of young debutantes, kissed the gloved hands of two recent widows, and paid his respects to a cluster of dowagers fixated on the quadrille. From across the room, Olivia stole several furtive glances, blushing profusely when he caught her red-handed. Her eyes were darker than burning embers and at the moment, enigmatic didn't begin to define the contradictory woman. Hot and cold, willing and resistant, lunacy struck a dissonant chord in his flummoxed brain.

Making his way to the exit, he tried to convince himself a few days without gazing upon her face wasn't so very long. He'd gone three years without seeing her, three tortuous years until he admitted he was hopelessly, irrevocably in love with the stubborn little fool. He couldn't do it. He would never last. In fact, he had an overwhelming need to see her again right now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Olivia struggled to drag her weary body up the stairs after the last guest left. Once in her bedchamber, she shucked her dress and undergarments. Lethargically, she lifted a nightgown over her shoulders and slipped it on over her head. Tired and distracted, she almost climbed into bed with her slippers on but remembered at the last moment and flipped them off. She pulled the covers and sheets back and sank beneath them. Her thoughts wandered to Morgan and their encounter in the garden. As her body cried out for him, her yearning gathered like a storm. She touched her breasts, bringing her nipples

to a quick, hardened response. With her eyes closed, Olivia thrashed her head against the pillow, wallowing in her need.

On the threshold of her lust, in the drifting moments of twilight, into the room came a noise. Someone had opened her door. She sat up in the bed and stared at the silhouette—a man whose form she had committed to memory.

"Morgan," she whispered.

Noiselessly, he moved toward her and loomed over her like a dark archangel. God, how she wanted him. Without speaking a word, he removed her nightgown and ran his finger down her throat and between the cleft of her breasts. Her body trembled uncontrollably, and he'd barely touched her. His mouth took hers and filled her with the depth of his desire. She exulted in it, needing more.

His warm breath seared her skin as he slid down her body. She moved restlessly beneath him and rose up to the knowledgeable tongue licking her lower belly and parted thighs. Breathlessly, she waited for his hand to find the hair at the apex of her legs, for his fingers to search out the sensitive core of her being. A throb of pleasure leaped through her blood when at last he entered her. His measured thrusts brought her to whimpers. More. She wanted more.

He removed his fingers and lowered his head, replacing the touch of his fingers with his lips. Liquid fire washed over her at the sensation of his tongue laving the swollen tissues. Gently, he took her bud between his teeth, pitching her into a frenzy of undulations. Shudder after shudder took her to the realm of ecstasy, and she reveled in the wondrous feel of his tongue entering her sex, taking her higher and higher. His hands cupped her bottom and drew her in deeper. Her voice splintered around the fierce flames of desire consuming her, and her body convulsed, arching up to meet the wicked assault. Under a flash of lightning, she broke and cried out his name.

Awakened in a deluge of passion and craving more, she realized it wasn't real. Morgan hadn't come to her, worshipped her, tasted her. It had only been a dream. With a ragged cry of frustration and need, she buried her face in the pillow and wept.

### **Chapter Thirteen**

The manor was deadly still as Olivia drew her bath. Cain and Lark had left *L'Esperance* to attend a social gathering after she had crossed her fingers behind her back and promised Cain she had no intention of *frequenting L'Amour Immortelles* tonight. She had even convinced Lark she'd abandoned her foolish quest, specifically now that Morgan had washed his hands of the entire affair. Washed his hands of *her*.

More than ever, Olivia realized the repercussions from her reckless actions might destroy her. Now that the hour was upon her, how could she not? Wearing a lacy chemise and a pair of light cotton pantalets, she sat down at the vanity and brushed her long tresses into a glossy sheen. After parting the long mass down the middle and securing it with a thin, gold net, a whisper of perfume—jasmine oil and crushed tea roses—found a home at the pulse of her throat and at each wrist.

Her gaze wandered to the bed and lingered on the simulated Zouave ensemble. Bold and daring didn't begin to describe the apparel she'd chosen to wear to the audacious peccadillo awaiting her. She'd purchased the attire soon after Colonel Elmer Ellsworth took his Chicago Zouave cadets on national tour. After parading down Main Street on the Fourth of July, Savannah's most notable millineries and haberdasheries overflowed with assorted versions of their colorful uniforms. Olivia's ensemble, an ecru silk blouse, a pair of chestnut brown Chausseur pants, and a burnished nutmeg jacket with fancy leather trim, cost a King's ransom and was worth every penny. A deep, rich gold, the snug-fitting vest complemented the hairnet and her mother's filigree locket.

With nostalgic awareness, she reached out for the necklace and opened it. Her father had commissioned a renowned artist to paint their miniatures and presented the locket to her mother shortly after they moved into the manor. Her resolve not to cry failed as she closed the cherished remembrance and turned it over, running her hands across the engraved letters—*L'Esperance*.

*What they must be thinking this very minute.* With a prolonged sigh, she slipped it over her head, forcing thoughts of her parents from her mind.

She stood in front of the full-length mirror, barely recognizing the young woman who stared back at her. Oh, she loved the attire, the way the lush fabrics touched her body, the way the blousy trousers rustled with fluid grace when she did a little half-spin,

but the woman inside them had become an alien creature, a shameless, illusory being living a lie.

She closed her eyes, reveling in Morgan's words, but saying *I want you, all of you*, didn't come close to professing undying love for her no matter how many times she stretched it, twisted it, and wrung it out. Clearly, he had not put a stop to this renegade debacle, had not confessed his love, and most certainly had not asked for her hand in marriage. He knew the midnight hour approached, and the wool-headed cad had disappeared quicker than steam from a sauna after Cain and Lark's engagement party, and she hadn't seen him since.

Just the thought of the incident at the brothel sent her heart into a thunder of beats and rendered her knees weak. Little doubt remained that Morgan could, if he desired, take her to soaring heights and quench the insatiable hunger he'd awakened in her so long ago. And she knew that hunger well, an unbearable yearning to have him, and only him, drive his hard body into hers and possess her completely. Now he was gone, no different than a fleeting dream nibbling at her conscious mind.

Dissecting the man's conflicting messages became a lesson in psychology. Morgan prided himself in detached aloofness, yet after he kissed her in the garden she had made it a point to study him. He had struggled to control his breathing and briefly closed his feverish eyes against the prevailing magnetism between them. Sweet Mother of Jesus, she couldn't think about this for one more minute. The dark knight of her youth would put a stop to this madness. Wouldn't he? God, how she prayed he would save her from herself, and soon.

A knock on her door broke her reverie. She took one last look at her bedchamber, doused the lantern, and opened the door. There, in the hallway at her feet, lay another black rose. The walls closed in on her. Redmond stood at the threshold and followed her gaze, his brow creased into a frown. Someone had been in the manor. Dear God, this couldn't be happening.

She looked down the hallway, left to right, with the blood pounding in her head. "Did you see anyone on your way up the stairs, Redmond? Did you hear the front door open or close?"

"No, ma'am." With gloved hand, he bent down and picked up the stem, holding it out between them. "Lovely," he whispered, looking at her. "Perhaps your brother left this for you upon his departure from the manor."

"No, Cain did not, would not—"

"What are you suggesting, Miss, that a stranger entered the house? However would they manage to make it past the servants and get this close to your bedchamber without being detected?"

She placed a hand on her forehead. "I'm sure I don't know, but obviously someone did."

"Shall I send for your brother, ma'am?"

"No! I mean, it's just a flower, and I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation as to how it arrived at my door," she said, but doubted her words. "I don't want it." Warily, she looked down at the rose. "Please dispose of it."

"Certainly, Miss." He tucked it behind his back. "The carriage awaits you. Do you want me to send it away?"

She shook her head. "That won't be necessary, Redmond."

He bowed and waited for her to pass in front of him. Following her down the stairs, he asked, "Will you be late tonight, Miss Breedlove? Should I ask Bessie to wait up for you?"

"No!" Her cheeks burned. "The hour will be late, and there is no need for anyone to wait up for me."

"Very well, ma'am."

Outside, Redmond opened the door to the carriage and assisted her into the seat. Once settled, Olivia gave the valet a nod, and the carriage lurched into motion. Her heart pounded against her ribs, and her deep breaths made her lightheaded. She couldn't arrive at *L'Amour Immortelles* in this state. Someone meant to harm her, or worse, kill her. Cain's words of two days ago stormed through her mind: *He cut her throat and left a black rose on the pillow*. What the dickens was this all about, and what did it have to do with her? Had someone seen her that night at *Immortelles*, recognized her even though she had worn men's clothing?



The silliest thought popped into her head, and she nearly swooned. *Morgan!* Other than Cain, he was the only one who knew about her disguise, and he had plenty of time to kill someone while she was occupied with . . . . Heaven help her, she couldn't go down this road. Not Morgan, heart of her heart, the one man she loved more than anything in the world. *Please God, don't let him be a depraved, maniacal murderer.*

Akin to leaves caught up in an eddy, her hands trembled. The carriage had almost arrived; she recognized the landmarks through the coach window. She couldn't back out now, rose or no rose. She drew a deep breath and beckoned calm. Not one to imbibe in spirits, tonight she would make an exception and take Madame Rousseau up on her offer to indulge in a glass of sherry, perhaps two.

Halted near a side entrance, the driver opened the door of the carriage and ushered her into the brothel. She recognized the corridor immediately and headed for Madame Rousseau's suite, inhaling deeply. Moments after she knocked on the door, it opened.

"Miss Breedlove," Madame said, stepping aside. "Do come in."

Candlelight suffused the elegant room, and a four-poster bed graced one wall, flanked by a pair of mahogany nightstands with claw feet. Dimmed oil lamps provided a warm, cozy atmosphere. Several paintings adorned the walls, scenes of modern life, with men and women dressed in Parisian fashion, although a number of the women appeared nude—courtesans, in Olivia's uneducated opinion.

"I didn't notice the paintings the last time I visited, are they new?" she asked.

The woman shook her head. "Perhaps the last time you honored me with your presence your thoughts rambled elsewhere." Glancing from picture to picture, she continued. "Influenced by Diego Velazquez, Edouard Manet is all the rage in Paris presently." She took her gaze from the paintings and spoke directly to Olivia again. "A benevolent friend purchased them at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* and was kind enough to loan them to me."

Olivia wondered briefly who the benevolent friend was. A lover, perhaps? Madame Rousseau was indeed French, right down to the ground, and seemed to have an affinity for anything and everything possessing a French flair. Possibly the woman had even suggested the name for the infamous brothel.

Delivering her to a small, circular table with two café chairs, the woman said, "I'm happy you have arrived early. May I offer you a glass of sherry?"

Olivia nodded, folded her shaky hands in her lap, and waited patiently while Madame walked to a sideboard and filled two tall-stemmed flutes with an amber-colored liquid. Madame set one down in front of Olivia and settled into the other chair.

Olivia sipped slowly, allowing the smooth, mellow liquid to trickle down her throat. "I must confess, I am rather apprehensive. Do you know Mister Joubert personally?"

She smiled warmly. "I do, Miss Breedlove, although I am not allowed to divulge information about our patrons."

"But I'm not a regular—"

She took her hand. "No, I did not mean to insinuate that you are a courtesan, however, you can see the delicate nature of the matter." Leaning across the table, she said, "I promise you'll not be disappointed. Monsieur Joubert is a highly skilled lover and most discreet. He has no desire to delve into your personal life and demands the same in return. I should tell you that he will be masked—to protect his identity—and speaks only broken English." She paused. "It is unfortunate, for his French is impeccable and," her eyes widened, "his erotic words, according to the doves, most scintillating."

Olivia gulped down the sherry and asked for another. "He is aware that I have no plans to consummate the—"

"Yes, most definitely. Again, his expertise is well-rounded. He is committed to effectuating an encounter that is beyond pleasurable for the woman." Her voice a whisper, she continued. "In other words, Miss Breedlove, he is an expert at arousing one's senses."

Olivia downed the second glass quickly. "I see." *Good Lord, what am I doing here, sitting in Madame Rousseau's suite discussing such personal matters?*

"Now," the woman said, "Monsieur Joubert will arrive shortly. I think we should see you to your room."

"So soon?" Olivia asked, wishing she could disappear into the clouds with the finesse of chimney smoke.

Madame Rousseau patted her hand. "Are you having second thoughts, little one? Perhaps I should summon a willing partner for Arnaud . . . ?"

"No, that won't be necessary." Olivia's gaze darted left to right and then she looked at the lovely woman again.

"There is something that will alleviate the apprehension you're feeling, mademoiselle."

"What are you suggesting?"

Madame Rousseau walked to a nearby sideboard and opened a door, retrieving a long pipe. Moments later she returned, lit the pipe with a long taper and handed it to Olivia. The same sweet scent Olivia detected on her first visit filled the room.

"The effects of opium last about four hours, but the drug produces relaxation and relief of anxiety." The woman paused briefly. "Not to mention a feeling of pleasure and intense euphoria."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly . . . ."

A smile curved Madame Rousseau's lips. "I assure you, no harm will come from indulging. On the contrary, it will enhance your experience."

Olivia breathed deeply. "All right, if you believe it might alleviate—"

Cutting her off, Madame Rousseau said, "I must caution you against inhaling too much the first time. Place the pipe between your lips and draw slowly until you feel it enter your lungs."

Olivia followed her instructions and experienced an immediate rush. Several minutes later, her head spun, and sharp needles pricked the flesh on her arms and legs, but soon serenity claimed her. Everything was suddenly right with the world—the word *rosy* came to mind. Her future no longer appeared dismal, and the mind-numbing panic she'd experienced upon arrival seemed more trivial than last week's gossip.

"You are ready now, ma petite?"

Olivia emitted a chuckle. "Yes, Madame, if only I can convince my legs to transport me there."

"Come, I will escort you."

Olivia pulled herself up from the chair by hanging onto the table, and not without great concentration or effort. Lighter than a cloud, she floated to the door. "Let us be about it, then."

It was not for Olivia to question how, but moments later, she found herself in another elaborately furnished room. In the murky candlelight, deep scarlet, eggplant purple and lush gold rose in her line of vision—draperies, cushions, bedcovers—meshing until she had a difficult time distinguishing one color from another. No matter, content to sit on the armless lounge chair and study the brilliant hues, she likened herself to a limp dishrag.

Madame Rousseau turned to her one last time. "I shall return in two hours, Miss."

*Two hours? Was the woman mad?* "Very well, thank you, Madame."

She quietly closed the door behind her, leaving Olivia to bask in a wonderful cocoon of rapture.

Long minutes later, Olivia bolted at the sound of the latch turning. Despite the sherry and the opium, notwithstanding the hazy film clouding her brain, her faculties launched into full alert. A sound, similar to that of a mouse caught in a trap, spewed from the back of her throat when *he* walked through the door.

The black bandana around his head—gypsy style—matched the dark hair covering the collar of the man's white silk shirt. In the muted gray light, she experienced a great deal of difficulty deciphering where bandana ended and hair began. Open at the neck, the shirt revealed a well-rippled chest covered in soft, inky curls. The black trousers hugged his tight-knit form comparable to a second skin, revealing every ridged muscle and bulge. Covering his eyes, a simple black loo mask did nothing to conceal his roguish persona. His gaze wandered over her quivering form, prompting her to swallow the lump in her throat.

From beneath half-shuttered eyelids, she watched him walk to the bed. Good Lord, a lynx couldn't have navigated the distance with more grace. Her hands broke out in a cold sweat. She knew of only one man whose every fiber and tendon shifted with nimble agility upon entering a room. *Morgan*.

Dear God, how could she have misjudged him so? She'd felt certain he would never let it go this far, would have wagered her inheritance that he would have stepped in

by now to save her. But he hadn't. Apparently, he'd left her to her fate, and now she was well and truly stuck.

Arnaud slithered down to the bed—no other word came to mind for his movements—and studied her. Long moments passed in silence, and just as well, for when he finally spoke, she had trouble understanding his profuse accent. "Ah, *mon chou*, Madame informs me thees is your very first time?"

She nodded.

"You have come to zee right man if you wish to enter a world of dark and forbidden pleasures."

Her heart launched into a triple beat. He was confidence personified in mannerism and speech, adding to her discomfiture. She shouldn't be surprised at that, after all, Madame Rousseau had said he was a master at this lovemaking thing, and he certainly seemed within his element at the moment.

He spoke again. "Stand up, *ma chérie*, I will see what I have purchased."

She rose on shaky limbs and faced him.

He twirled his index finger around in a circle. "That eez right, let me see all of you."

Like a puppet on a string, she obeyed his command and turned in a complete circle until she faced him again.

"Ah, it is little wonder I find you most magnificent! You are perfection itself, *mademoiselle*."

The man's words possessed an omnipotent power over her, or was it the effects of the drug and alcohol?

"Now," he said, his husky voice drifting across the room, "although I admire zee flair, too many clothes. Take zem off, slowly please, beginning with zee vest."

Blood pounded through her ears. She couldn't do this. Could she? Mesmerizing, his voice flowed through her head, similar to a gentle wind scudding through the pines. He was everything a woman could want in a lover, powerfully built, self-assured and commanding. She wanted to bolt, but struck captive by his aura, the unmistakable primeval scent of pure male, her legs refused to listen.

His tone took on an emboldened inflection, "Zee garments, *ma petite*."

She released the clasp at the top of her jacket, removed it, and laid it across the chaise. Then she slipped from the vest. Watching her with narrowed eyes, he tilted his head back and nodded toward the blouse. She shivered.

"You are cold, *ma chérie*?"

"A little," she croaked, thankful her voice hadn't failed her completely.

"Soon your blood will be warm, your body hot."

"Oh!" She rasped, nearly choking on the word.

"Zee rest now, trousers and blouse."

After shucking the brown trousers and next the silk shirt, she stood in front of him in her thin cotton chemise and pantalets. He crooked a finger, motioning her forward. Another pause from her caused him to frown.

"Come, *mon chou*."

She walked toward him, the room spinning faster than a whirling dervish. Damnation! The sherry and the opium had launched into the full throes of potency, playing tricks on her befuddled brain. For a moment, something agonizingly familiar about the man knocked the air from her lungs. It could have just as well been Morgan. *Don't go there, Olivia. Morgan is no doubt in an adjoining room, all arms and legs with some buxom doxy.* She reached him, and there he stood, immense and prevailing, no less beautiful than an Arabian sheik. He lifted the locket around her neck, opening it to stare at her parents' faces, then turned it over and ran his long, nimble fingers across the engraving.

"Thees is your name, '*L'Esperance*'?" he asked, the perfectly arched brows rising. "It means *hope* in my country."

"No," she said emphatically. "That is not my name. It's . . . it's the name of a place." A long breath left her numb lips. "A very special place."

"Ah, but we must not talk of names and places," he said and pulled her into his arms, his breath warm against her ear. "We speak only of love."

He pressed his lips down on hers in a hard, possessive kiss. Olivia reeled from the intoxicating potency. It was like walking through flames, like touching moonbeams, like free-floating through a great abyss. His tongue passed over her bottom lip and pushed

into her mouth. Mingling the taste of whiskey with sherry, the languid strokes of his tongue probed sensually and lulled her into an achy oblivion.

"*Je t'adore*," he whispered against her mouth.

She didn't know what the words meant and didn't care. He could tell her goats sprang from unicorns and she'd agree wholeheartedly at the moment. Everything about the man was heady, his voice, his scent, especially his lips. Good God, she couldn't do this. The faint scent of myrrh drifted around her, and she thought of Morgan—touched him, tasted him, wished with every wild thump of her heart it was him. This man embodied Morgan. She swayed on legs made of rubber. Lord, the man knew how to kiss. Unknowingly, had she walked into a storm of fire? He shifted his weight, and she collapsed against his chest.

"Have you indulged in too much spirits and opium, *mademoiselle*?"

She placed her hand to her temple. "Yes, I have." A hiccough escaped. "I think I might be sick."

How he had managed to drop her chemise to her waist breached comprehension. She sucked in a shuddering breath when he cupped her breast, his fingers toying with the hard, peaked nipple. "Oh, sir, please, I don't feel at all well," she said and moaned.

He twined his fingers into the long hair at the base of her neck and forced her to look at him. In that brief moment she gazed into his eyes. Gray . . . no, silver. Heaven help her bewildered mind. Every thought she had, everywhere she looked, Morgan rode the crest of her fantasy. How had that blasted man wormed his way into her heart, her very soul? Hopeless, that's what she was. Ruined, doomed and hopeless.

"If you are sick, thees is the best place for you, *ma petite*." He scooped her up into his arms and carried her to the bed. On top of her in a heartbeat, his hands, well-acquainted with a woman's attire, deftly removed her pantalets and skimmed across the naked flesh of her abdomen. His stilted words charged through her veins in a rush of erotic titillation. "You are bewitching, enchanting. I will bring you such pleasure, you will beg me to possess you, *mademoiselle*."

"No! Stop!" She wailed, her senses working overtime. "I do not want you to bring me pleasure and I most certainly do not want to beg."

His tongue went into her mouth again, and he probed deeper.

She yanked her head away. "Oh, no, you must stop. What are you doing with your tongue? I'm sick, very sick. Please release me."

"Not until I have tasted every inch of your silken flesh, partaken of zee sweet nectar here," he murmured, placing his hand over the mound of curls between her thighs.

"Oh, no, sir, you can't. I've changed my mind."

"You do not mean it, *mon chou*; you are a little nervous, but no need. Arnaud will make you forget about everything. Submit, and I will take you to a place of magic."

She squirmed beneath him, struggling to free herself from the hard body that pinned her to the mattress. Through those skin-tight trousers, his engorged member pressed into her thighs, and his lips toyed with the soft swell of her breast again. Desperation mingled with pleasure when he ran his hands across her belly and over her hips and thighs, his fiery touch coaxing her entire being into a quiver. Oh, God, he was so very good at this.

She couldn't go through with it.

Morgan's face rose behind her eyelids, competing with the little voice in her head that told her if she allowed this man to touch her much longer, their roles would reverse and she'd beg him to take her. With strength she didn't believe she possessed, she delivered an elbow to his ribs, then scrambled out from under him. He let out a yowl and clutched his side.

She'd almost made it to freedom when a strong hand came out and grabbed her ankle. "I have paid good money to taste zee sweet juices of your desire, *ma chérie*, and I will do so now!"

She clawed at the bed sheets, at anything within reach to free herself from his vise-like grip. Her hand connected with the oil lamp on the nightstand. Clutching the base with the strength of a crazed animal, she twisted her body around and brought the object down on his head. A sickening thud reached her ears, and the pungent smell of kerosene spiraled up her nose. Olivia glanced down at the still form. Blood oozed from a deep gash in the man's forehead and seeped into the satin sheets.

"Oh, my God." She moaned. "I've killed him."

Swallowing the bile in her throat, she scrambled from the bed and stood beside it, her mind racing against time. Bleeding profusely, and on his stomach, the man lay



perfectly still, and Olivia couldn't tell whether he drew breath. She rushed to the chaise, donned her clothing and snuck another peek at his pale, still form. Good Lord, what would she tell Madame Rousseau? She had to confess, beg her forgiveness, and Arnaud's, if he was still alive. Oh, she was such a witless numskull. Why had she decided to embark on this wild, irrational adventure? God would punish her severely, banish her forever like the Apostle John. Or worse, she'd spend eternity among the fires of Hell. A sob tore from her throat as she sprinted down the corridor and knocked on Madame Rousseau's door.

Moments later, it opened. "Whatever is the matter, Miss Breedlove? You are whiter than a ghost."

"Oh, please don't speak of ghosts," she cried, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I think I just killed Mister Joubert."

"Killed him! How?" Madame Rousseau turned abruptly and fled down the hallway, clutching her long dress in her hands and calling out over her shoulder, "Remain in my suite until I return!"

Pacing to and fro, Olivia buried her face in her hands and wept.

Madame returned after a lengthy absence. Her face stern, her back stiffer than a fence board, she said, "Well, Monsieur Joubert is alive, but seriously injured."

After the woman's curt assessment, Olivia clutched her throat. "Oh, thank goodness."

The full brunt of Madame's displeasure raked her over. "I have sent for a physician, and the fee will be substantial—"

"Whatever it is, ma'am, you have only to send notice and I will cover the fees. I didn't mean to harm him . . ."

Madame's eyes narrowed above the anger in the thin line of her mouth.

"I tried to tell him I had changed my mind," Olivia said. "Tried to explain I no longer wished to participate in such intimate—"

"Forgive me for being so callous, Miss Breedlove, but you should have come to that conclusion *before* you entered that room. I don't have to tell you we have a very prestigious client that has been *whacked* on the head, if you will, and nearly killed." She

shook her head. "At the very least, he will be maimed or scarred for life, and what do you imagine Monsieur Joubert will think about that *if* he ever comes to his senses?"

"I know." She wrung her hands. "I assure you I'll pay for any and all expenses, physician's bills, whatever is necessary."

"Well," the woman said disdainfully, "I think it best you return to your home now, and for Heaven's sake, don't breathe a word of this to anyone."

She nodded.

"Do you hear me, Miss Breedlove? It just won't do to have *L'Amour Immortelles* making headlines in tomorrow's *Gazette*. If word of this gets out, there's no telling how the establishment might suffer."

"No, you have my word, Madame." Pinching them between her thumb and index finger she said, "My lips are sealed."

Madame continued to stare at her, the visible tension slowly dissipating. "Very well."

After all the chaos, Olivia suddenly remembered her own tenuous situation. "And you must promise not to divulge my name or anything else about me to Mister Joubert."

The woman's eyes rolled in their sockets. "It is doubtful that in light of what has occurred Arnaud Joubert would desire to know anything further about you, Miss Breedlove."

"Yes, that is understandable. Will you please send me a note the minute you hear how the gentleman fares? I won't sleep a wink until I know he is out of the woods."

Madame Rousseau offered a curt nod and with frank finality, dismissed her. "Good evening, Miss."

"Good evening, Madame Rousseau, and I am truly sorry."

Although she looked perfectly composed stepping into the waiting carriage, nothing could be further from the truth. She instructed the driver to take her immediately to *L'Esperance* and slumped down onto the seat with a stifled wail. Her pickled brain examined the events of the evening. Although foggy, two distinct memories remained lodged in her mind: the blood seeping into the gold satin sheets and the way her skin burned beneath the man's skillful hands. How could she ever forget the way her breasts throbbed against his wicked tongue or the scalding heat of his arousal against her thigh?

Reason and logic suddenly returned. Good Lord, she'd almost killed a man! With a groan, she banged her head against the side of the coach and allowed a curse to fall from her lips.

She wept for the remainder of the ride home.

## Chapter Fourteen

He stepped from the shadows and mounted with his insides in knots.

Had she been crying when she left that den of sin? Why had she gone again? Had she met a lover? The ground rose up to meet him, and he struggled to stay in the saddle. *I must do it soon, save her from a horrific fate.*

Then she would be his.

All his. And no one could ever take her from him again.

His Venus.

He thought about his mother dying in that whorehouse, no different than a mangy dog on the street. His mother had lost everything—her hair, even her eyelashes—by the time the dark cloak of death came for her. With helpless wrath he had watched, could do nothing as her lovely body disintegrated, until only skin and bones remained. The headaches arrived, followed by loss of vision and hearing. No longer could she hear his words of anguish, see the horrendous pain in his eyes as he stood over her frail, paralytic body.

A boy of ten couldn't possibly have understood what was happening to her—to the one person in the world who had loved him unconditionally, promised never to leave him.

"It was *syphilis* that killed her," the doctor had said.

The word meant nothing to him at the time. He knew only that she was gone and he was alone.

He had to save Liv from such a death. She'd be proud of him when he told her he had saved Abby. Poor, poor Abby, so gullible, so trusting. It had been so easy to lure her into that back room. Even now, he recalled her dove-gray eyes widening as he pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and held them out to her.

He made her strip first and lay on the bed face down. His hand burned over her naked back and moved higher, garrote clutched in his fist. Not until it was around her neck did he flip her over and revel in the horrified look of shock and terror in her eyes. He tightened it—tightened it until the light left her eyes. Then he cut her throat. Killing became more than just saving them from that moment on. Never had he felt such thrill, or been so hard, as he had in that moment, knowing he held the power of life and death in his hands. Now, he needed to kill again and again.

Liv would not meet the same fate his mother had, dying in a wretched whorehouse from the ravages of syphilis. Liv would die beneath him like Abby. He would watch the light fade from *her* eyes too. She was a whore, and all whores must die.

The coach stopped in front of *L'Esperance*. His Venus exited quickly, dashed up the steps, and opened the massive door. She was gone again.

Gone from him.

Unfazed by the light drizzle falling from the night sky, he leaned against a massive hickory tree near the garden. From there, he observed her moving about in her bedchamber. She lit the candle in the same manner she did every night. He knew her well, felt the breadth of her joy and the depth of her despair. He had spent days absorbing the subtleties of her body language and expressions, became an expert at deciphering the meaning of each and every one.

She disappeared from view, but images of her still loomed in his brain. He imagined her slipping a nightshirt over that delectable body and sitting down at the vanity to brush her long, thick mass of hair. He envisioned it shimmering beneath the soft glow of candlelight. He wanted to run his hands through it, brush his fingers over her fine porcelain skin. For now, only in his mind, but the day would come when he could do all those things to her.

Beneath the tree, he waited, searching the window for another glimpse. Suddenly she appeared. Back and forth, she paced. So in tune with her, he sensed her worry. What had she done to cause such angst? Oh, God, what does any woman do at such a vile establishment? He pushed the anger down his throat and closed his eyes.

She would pay for her betrayal, and so would another whore.

Tonight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lark found Olivia in the study the following morning sitting in a chair beneath the window. "Good heavens, Liv, you're whiter than Cook's hair."

Unbidden tears streamed down her cheeks. "Oh, Lark, you would be, too, if ruin and damnation menaced your horizon."

"Oh, no." Her friend groaned and sat in the chair beside her. "Please tell me you didn't keep that appointment last night?"

Olivia wiped the dribble from her nose with the back of her hand and nodded. "I've made some of the worst decisions in my life trying to win Morgan, and now . . ."

Lark closed her eyes briefly and opened them on a sigh. "What happened? You didn't lose . . . ?"

"No, my virginity is intact, but I nearly killed the man."

"Killed the man? You mean the French lover?"

"I couldn't go through with it once I arrived in that room. I tried to tell Mister Joubert—after his wicked tongue wrung me out like a dish rag—that the sherry and the opium had rendered me sick."

A gasp came from Lark. "Wicked tongue?" Another gasp. "You smoked opium?"

She nodded again. "I thought it would settle my nerves and afford me the courage to go through with it, but—"

Lark's forehead furrowed deeper than a plowed field, and she asked, "What on God's green earth took command of your brain, and, more to the point, what exactly happened?"

"Arnaud Joubert wouldn't listen. Perhaps he was too far gone. He insisted he paid good money for my services and expected me to uphold my end of the bargain." A pained moan fell from her lips. "He was right, of course, but at every turn I saw Morgan, heard his voice. Everything happened so quickly." Vacillating between hysterical laughter and impending doom, she placed her fingers to her temples and closed her eyes. "If I recall, he was on top and me beneath him." She let out a fluttering breath just thinking about it. "He wouldn't take no for an answer so I-I broke an oil lamp over his head."

"You didn't!"

"Most assuredly, I did. Madame Rousseau said he was alive, but gravely injured." Opening her eyes, she looked at Lark. "I do wish you'd stop choking and chortling."

Lark's voice became frail. "Pray continue."

"There's more, equally as horrid."

"I have my doubts," Lark whispered.

"In the *mêlée*, I lost Mother's locket. I've looked everywhere this morning—searched the carriage and the drive—and it's undeniably disappeared."

Lark's gasps evolved into groans. "Not the one *with L' Esperance* engraved on the back?"

"Yes, and I'm terrified beyond reason." A pause followed while Olivia did her best to control the tremors seizing her. "If it broke during the scuffle, quite possibly Mister Joubert found it, and now he'll be able to trace me through the locket."

"Perhaps he doesn't know about *L' Esperance* since he lives outside of Savannah; quite possibly he'll assume it's a person's name."

"No," she said regrettably. "He asked me about the locket and, functioning like a drunken sailor, I told him it bore the name of a very special place."

Lark clutched her throat. "This is dreadful! The man could be demented, bent on revenge." She rose and paced a small area in front of the window. "I must tell Cain; he'll know what to do."

For lack of a better suggestion, Olivia nodded, her voice taking on a whiny, pained tone. "I do wish you'd stop that frenzied gait."

"Cain must call on Madame Rousseau immediately." Paying no heed to her admonishment to stop pacing, Lark turned to her. "Perhaps *she* found the locket."

Olivia's voice quivered like candlelight. "How I pray she did."

Lark closed the distance between them and kissed her on the cheek. "You foolish, foolish girl. We are fortunate you didn't kill poor Mister Joubert. I'm certain the spinsters and dowagers of Savannah would never recover from such a scandalous incident, nor would your reputation."

"I know," she said, cupping her palms over her face. "It could have been much worse." Olivia lifted her head and called out as her sister-in-law headed for the door.

"Lark?"

She turned. "Yes, darling?"

"Morgan didn't show, did nothing to stop it."

"The spineless cad." She shook her head. "He promised Cain he would, and I can't tell you how disappointed I am in Morgan. I would have bet my mother's pearl brooch he wouldn't have allowed things to progress this far."

"Then she could have joined our misery after losing it."

Abruptly, Lark pivoted and clutched the door handle. "I will ask Cain to call on Morgan after he's concluded his business with Madame Rousseau."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Olivia staggered slightly. "It should be perfectly clear Morgan wants no part of this." Much less, he never mentioned the word love in all their discussions. Her fractured heart couldn't take much more. He'd left her life after her father threatened to call him out and again when he went abroad. Now it would seem he had left her again, despite all his talk about calling forth thunder and lightning every time he looked at her.

"I don't give a fig what Morgan Gatewood does or does not want," Lark said. "He gave his word as a gentleman you would not be compromised in any manner."

*Gentleman.* Sharper than a barb, the word pricked her dull senses. Morgan was no gentleman, and damnation if it wasn't one of the things she loved most about the man. "I wasn't compromised."

"No, thank the harp-strumming angels for that, but you stood within a hair's breadth of having your face splashed all over wanted posters. I can see it now: Miss Olivia Breedlove, wanted for murder."

*A murderess!* "Oh, God, in all the chaos, I forgot to tell you what else happened."

"There is more?"

She sniffed. "Someone left another black rose in front of my door last night."

Lark's angelic face transformed into a mask of horror as she walked toward her. "Tell me this isn't happening!"

Olivia's insides twisted, and try as she might to dispel the sickening dread enough to speak, she could only manage a nod.

"Cain must be told immediately, and it's time we summon the constable."

"No!" A strangled cry fell from her lips. "Think about it. One thing will lead to another, and he'll wrench the truth from me." Hideous visions loomed—thumbscrews, confessional booths, peep rooms.

Lark drew her into her arms. "There, there now. Cain will know what to do."

"Oh, dear God, what if by some miserable, outside chance it's . . . ?"

"It's what?" Lark asked with raised brow.

"Morgan," she whispered.

"Oh, do be serious, Liv. Morgan is a debaucher and oftentimes a cad, but a murderer he is not."

"Of course, you're right, but I just don't know what to think at this point."

"Precisely why I'm going to speak with Cain forthwith."

Olivia returned to her dismal musings the minute Lark left the study. Her reputation—not to mention her entire future—teetered on the brink of ruin. A demented stalker knew her every move, and she had almost committed murder. Perhaps her father should have sent her to Aunt Dottie's long ago and none of this would have happened. She would have forgotten about Morgan Gatewood, married a nice gentleman from Chattanooga and . . . been bored out of her mind by now. Now her life was in shambles, and Morgan hated her and would, from now through all eternity.

It couldn't happen. She wouldn't allow it to happen.

## Chapter Fifteen

Cain looked at the sky and wondered if he'd arrive at *L'Amour Immortelles* before the heavy, gray clouds overhead unleashed a torrential downpour. Two years had come and gone since he'd visited the establishment and he didn't relish arriving in broad daylight. He must have had his head up somewhere it didn't belong the day he'd agreed to Liv's current fiasco. But then, no one had ever been able to rein her in, tame the stubborn, spirited girl—certainly not their father, and least of all him. Heaven help the



poor chap who won her heart. He'd need more than two hands to manage the impetuous, strong-willed woman.

Morgan came immediately to mind. Perhaps there might have been a chance for that union had his father not interfered. A dark, mysterious soul, Morgan possessed more phases to his character than the moon. Even as a child, arrogance and aloofness shielded him like impenetrable armor around those outside his inner circle. Women loved the man, nearly frothed at the mouth to win his favor, but to date, not one had captured his heart—or his immense pocketbook. At times throughout the years, he had studied him in Liv's presence as Morgan regarded her with an unnatural intensity. His gun-metal eyes reminded Cain of a veritable white-hot flame—unrequited and unquenched.

He blew an exasperated sigh and brought his horse to a halt near the side door. Tying his mount to a nearby post, he noticed Valor, Morgan's mount, chomping on a patch of barley grass several rods away. The steed's presence set him back for a brief moment. A notorious rogue, Morgan often frequented *Immortelles*. In fact, in the past they had haunted the brothel together, arm-in-arm and well into their cups. Had his friend become besotted with a soiled dove? No, impossible, although that would help account for his absence in the last several weeks.

With a shake of his head, Cain pushed the door open and entered a murky corridor. To his left sat the parlor, to his right, Madame Rousseau's suite, if memory served him. Drawing a deep breath and bracing for an awkward conversation, he walked briskly down the hallway, nearly colliding with Morgan at the intersection of the corridors.

Flustered, Cain backed up a step and asked, "Morgan, whatever are you doing here at this hour?"

"I might ask the same of you, Cain."

"I'm here on a personal matter."

Morgan replied, "Yes, well it doesn't get more personal than this."

"For Christsakes, not that kind of business. You know I gave that up the day Lark finally agreed to marry me."

Morgan delivered one of his cool, discerning once-overs. "So what are you doing here?"

"The bottom has fallen out, no thanks to you, I might add, and now Olivia finds herself in a particularly problematic quandary. Which would you rather hear first, the chilling or the devastating news?"

"Let us hear the chilling."

"Someone left another rose for Olivia the other night."

One eyebrow lifted. "Black?"

Cain nodded. "In front of her bedchamber door."

"Shit!"

"That isn't the worst of it. Lark said Olivia's so benumbed, she mentioned your name as a possible suspect."

Morgan drew back, his eyes hard.

"She isn't thinking straight these days, floundering horribly. Please know I'm not buying it for a minute."

"That's refreshing to hear."

Now that his eyes had adjusted to the dim light of the corridor, Cain took in Morgan's appearance. "Why are you wearing that bandana, and how in the hell did you acquire such a grotesque shiner?"

"It's apparent the cat is struggling to get out of the bag, so if you will follow me, I'll enlighten you."

"I'd love to hear about your most recent dalliance and the sordid details of your encounter in the boxing ring, but I came to speak with Madame Rousseau."

"I did not acquire the black eye boxing, and whatever it is you need to discuss with Madame Rousseau, you can discuss with me."

"It's a little late for that, Morgan," he said with a lift of his nose. "You gave your word you'd put a halt to Liv's foolhardy venture into voyeurism, and now we have a muddled disaster on our hands."

"Cain, if you'll come with me, you'll discover there is no need to air your family's dirty laundry in front of Madame Rousseau." Morgan's tone cryptic, he continued. "And I have some distressing news of my own to impart."

Cain narrowed his eyes, wondering why his hands suddenly felt cold and clammy. "Very well."

Morgan led him down the corridor and stopped in front of a massive set of French doors, obviously the entrance to a room Cain had never frequented, much less seen during his many visits. The doors to the individual bedchambers in the brothel were oak, the six-panel version, and not nearly as ostentatious as the inlaid mahogany version Morgan inserted a key into and *unlocked*.

"Good God, man, have you your own private bedchamber here these days?"

Morgan opened the doors, stood in front of them, and with a flourish of his arm directed Cain to enter. He pointed to a chair in front of a sturdy oak desk. "By all means, be seated."

Cain took in the room. Adorned in a paper of tan and chestnut stripes, the walls spanked masculinity. A tall oak cabinet sat in one corner of the room next to a massive window. Bureaus and bed tables had taken a hiatus, the same for billowing draperies. The space looked oddly out of place minus the usual bed. A workplace of some sort, the room was efficient yet elegant.

"*L'Amour Immortelles* must be doing exceedingly well, and apparently, so is Madame Rousseau."

"Sit," Morgan said, nodding toward the chair again. "This suite does not belong to Madame Rousseau."

"The owner of the brothel then?" He flopped into the chair. "The mysterious *nom de plume* no one has ever had the pleasure of meeting?"

"You've met him, Cain."

"I have?"

With an arch of his brow, Morgan nodded.

Realization dawned slowly. "*You* own the brothel?"

Morgan clapped.

"All this time . . . ." Cain slapped his forehead.

"Thus, the only reason I agreed to Olivia's sudden fascination with voyeurism and carnality and consented to watch over her."

Cain arched his neck back and emitted a bittersweet laugh. "Well, it has progressed way beyond voyeurism. Liv swore to cancel the appointment, and after your

promise to intervene, we assumed the fiasco had met its death. Now, it would seem it hasn't."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because," Cain uttered, his voice suddenly shaky, "she arrived here intent on sampling the wares." He groaned. "Disastrous. Once in the bedchamber, she decided she didn't have the stomach for it, tried to convince the client—some depraved Frenchman—it had all been a mistake and she intended to extricate herself forthwith." Here he paused with a derisive snort. "And where were you, Morgan, since you just told me moments ago you had every intention of watching over her?"

"I was operating under the assumption that you and I agreed not to push Liv in this regard. Outwardly." He added the last under his breath. "Taking into consideration, of course, her temperament and recklessness." Glancing to the window, he said thoughtfully, "Staying away from her has been most difficult." Diverting Cain back to the events, he asked, "Tell me what happened with the Frenchman?"

"A struggle ensued, that's what happened," he replied, wondering what the comment about *staying away from her* meant. "We've talked about Liv's impetuosity, not to mention her temper once she's riled. It would appear she clobbered the poor fool over the head, nearly killed the man."

"So you came to ask Madame Rousseau about his condition; you wish to make amends on your sister's behalf?"

"No," he replied somberly. "Liv lost our mother's locket in the mayhem. If it's in the scoundrel's hands, he holds the ability to track her and discover her identity."

Morgan pulled something from his vest pocket and dangled it in front of him. "You mean this locket?"

An enormous rush of air left Cain's lips. "Oh, thank God you have it in your possession. We've been terrified to even think this Joubert character found it and would resort to blackmail or seek retribution."

"Oh, but he intends to."

"What?" Cain asked. The caustic expression on Morgan's face disturbed him. He'd seen it many times, and whomever it was meant for, it didn't bode well for the person.

"You must stop him, I must stop him. Surely there must be a way to dissuade him, pay him off, if need be."

"It's gone too far, and I assure you he doesn't want money."

His throat aching dry, Cain asked, "What does he want?"

"Her."

"Wh-what? Is he mad?"

"Quite. Bewitched, beguiled, have your pick."

"Now see here, Morgan, I know Liv carried it too far, but she is an innocent after all. She sorely regrets her actions and has promised never to embark on such a venture again."

"How can you be sure?"

"She gave me her word."

"Ha!" Morgan tossed his head back, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "In the same manner she promised to cancel the appointment? No, my dear friend," he said with a shake of his thick, dark locks. "I think it's time someone teaches Miss Olivia Breedlove a lesson."

"Perhaps, but not this Arnaud Joubert. We know nothing about the man. Why, he could harm her, kill her once he discovers her name and place of residence."

"Cain, do you intend to spend the rest of your life picking up the pieces of Liv's reckless debacles? Don't you have a wedding to plan? Wouldn't you rather concentrate on making babies with this woman you love so dearly?" Nonchalantly he continued. "Besides, Joubert already knows her name and where she lives."

Their entire lives Morgan had championed them, watched their backs through thick and thin. Never would he stand idly by and allow a man to blackmail a woman, much less abuse her. Somewhere between the flippant laughter and the casual inflection in the man's tone, realization set in. "My God, you're him, aren't you? You're Arnaud Joubert—the bandana, the black eye, the cavalier attitude."

"I assure you, there is nothing cavalier about my attitude."

Cain shifted in the chair. "What do you intend to do? I can tell by the look on your face that you're plotting something. I must remind you, Liv is my heart, and I won't stand by and watch you humiliate her or harm her. She's aware of the recklessness of her folly

and confesses she has slept little since her visit to the brothel. Why, just to look at her one would realize how she suffers."

"I told you what I intend to do—teach her a lesson she'll never forget."

"Morgan, don't force me to call you out. I simply can't stand by and watch you ruin Olivia. What is this really about?"

His face steadfastly somber, Morgan held Cain's gaze. "Love, my friend, and if you interfere, I'll lash you within an inch of your life. Do I make myself clear? It's time someone brings your sister to heel, and I'm the one who is going to do it. I should never have gone along with this farce, but now that she's taken it to the extreme, she must, and she will pay."

"Morgan, please, she is a fragile creature, a tender soul beneath the feisty veneer, and I love her with all my heart."

His silver eyes—the left shadowed by a mottled purple bruise—softened. "In that case, we have more in common than I had imagined, don't we?" He narrowed his gaze. "Are you going to take issue with that like your father did? Think carefully about your answer, because you should know, whatever objections you might have, it won't matter one whit. I've wanted Olivia for ten years, lusted over her, waited an eternity for a chance to prove it, and I will not be buttonholed by you or anyone else."

"Damn, what a blind fool I've been! It was there all along."

"I imagine it was if one had their eyes open."

Cain rubbed his chin. "I don't take issue with it, providing you don't intend to engage in a dalliance with her and then return to your former lifestyle. Liv was devastated after you met with our father ten years ago and is not one to stand for—"

"Believe me," he said, shaking his head, "I, of all men, know your sister would never play second fiddle to another woman, much less tolerate a mistress. And in case you've forgotten, she's the one harboring a penchant for frequenting brothels these days. In any event," he said, removing the bandana to reveal a dark line of stitches, "I can't have my wife engaging in such indecent behavior."

"Your wife?"

"My wife, as in matrimony, marriage, wedded bliss."

"You said you didn't believe in wedded bliss."

Morgan lifted his shoulders. "I never said I didn't believe in it, I merely laughed at the irony of its ability to turn a man inside out on the path to achieve it."

"You're serious," he said grimly. "You're going to ask Olivia to marry you?"

"I will ask, beg if need be, but in the end, whether she agrees or not, she *will* marry me."

After lengthy fidgeting, Cain rose from the chair amid of a flood of relief. There would be fallout—immense fallout—but nothing Morgan couldn't handle. "Where do we go from here?"

"You will soon find out. If you must tell Lark, do so, but swear her to secrecy. In the meantime, tell Liv that Madame Rousseau is not in possession of the locket and there is only one thing to do now . . . wait."

Cain shriveled. "How will Liv bear up under the strain of waiting, not knowing what is coming next?"

"As sure as fleas take to dogs, she'll bear up. It's a temporary affliction, this distress and remorse she's experiencing, and minor in comparison to someone stalking her."

He blanched. Just hearing the words made him sick to his stomach. "You said you had some news—not that my poor heart can take much more."

Morgan delivered the words slowly. "The killer struck again."

"Another prostitute killed?" Cain felt the color drain from his face. "Oh, no, tell me it wasn't the same night Liv met Joubert . . . met *you* here?" He corrected himself.

"The same. Molly left behind a two-year-old daughter."

"I can tell by the look on your face I don't have to ask about his calling card."

"Blacker than the man's heart. This time, he placed the rose in Molly's hands."

"I must get Liv out of Savannah!" Cain pounded his fist on the desk. "Get her away from *L'Esperance* until this madman is captured and locked up."

"Precisely the reason I must take drastic measures now," Morgan replied distractedly. "Take her to a safe location."

"She'll never agree to it."

"Do you honestly believe I give a shit?" Morgan said. "The confounded woman can't be trusted. She's already assumed the persona of Elizabeth Burgin, escalated her fantasies to an intolerable level, and nearly killed a man in the process."

"Remind me, are we acquainted with this Elizabeth Burgin?"

"Not unless we also spied for Washington during the war."

"The voyeurism." Cain rolled his eyes. "I get it now." There was no sense trying to move Morgan off this path. The firm set of his jaw, not to mention the hard glint in his eye, warned him from it. In the end, he simply asked, "Where are you taking her?"

"If I told you, it would no longer be a secret. Until I can find out who is trying to harm her, it's best no one knows where she is."

"I'm her brother; surely you don't think I would do anything to harm Olivia."

Morgan's voice softened. "Of course not, but you might tell Lark and she another, or someone might overhear you talking about it. I can't take the chance. The moment I know she's safe, convinced no one has followed us, I'll send word. Agreed?"

Cain nodded.

"One more thing. I'll need several days to pull this together. In the meantime, keep a close eye on her."

"You can count on it," Cain said.

Morgan ushered him to the door, reinforcing the need to button his lip around Olivia. Moments later, Cain dug his heels into the gelding's sides and turned the horse in the direction of home. Although Morgan's plan of blackmail and retribution disturbed him, they paled in light of another murder. An indefinable thread connected Olivia to the killer, starting the first night she visited the brothel. Had someone recognized her? That, in and of itself, wasn't enough to launch one into a murderess rampage unless . . . the person covertly loved her, became so consumed with jealousy and rage they could no longer see straight.

One thing Cain accepted with every fiber of his being: Morgan would never harm Olivia. He'd been such a dunce. Why hadn't he seen it all these years? His horse turned down the long drive to *L'Esperance*, and he braced himself.

He would need a drink before facing Liv, perhaps two.



## Chapter Sixteen

Olivia awoke to golden rays of sunshine dancing across her bedchamber floor. If the sun could speak, it would tell her she'd slept far past morning. After all the fitful nights of late, she wouldn't complain. Three days had passed since Cain returned from *L'Amour Immortelles*—three tortuous days—and she hadn't heard a whisper about the locket. Desperation mounted, and she prayed someone would stumble across it on a boardwalk in Savannah or find it nestled in the grass outside *Immortelles*. Remotely, she knew it was a ridiculous thought, but it didn't prevent her from hoping. Secretly, she resigned herself to never laying eyes on the cherished piece again and did her best to reconcile another loss in her life. Not that losing the precious locket equaled the loss of a loved one—her mother, her father and now Morgan—but she allowed herself a pity cry nonetheless. It was silly to categorize Morgan with her parents, for one could not lose what one never had.

Lark entered her room moments later, her petite hands clutching a breakfast tray—a bowl of Cook's hominy with fresh cream, sourdough biscuits smothered in apricot preserves, and chocolate tea. Olivia spied an envelope resting on top of the linen napkin, and her eyes widened.

"Lark?"

"I hope you fall into vapors *after* you eat your breakfast," said Lark. "It would be a shame to waste the food."

"Is that what I think it is?"

"It came an hour ago." She set the tray on the bed beside Olivia. "The coach was emblazoned with *The Planters Inn* crest."

"The Planters Inn!" she shrieked.

A laconic nod preceded Lark's words. "Do you think it's from the mysterious Arnaud Joubert?"

"I don't want to think." Olivia made silent note of her friend's troubled expression. "He must be a guest at the prestigious hotel."

"Not necessarily," Lark said with an all too familiar disingenuous tone. "Perhaps it's from another guest." She held up crossed fingers. "However, The Planter's Inn is located near the brothel."

Olivia stared at the envelope, certain it possessed fangs lethal enough to inflict mortal injuries.

"There's only one way to find out, dear," Lark said quietly. "Should I leave and allow you to read it in private?"

"No, don't leave me! If it is from Mister Joubert, I'll need someone to scrape me from the floor." Olivia set the tray aside and scrambled from bed, tearing the letter open as she walked to the nearby window. She scanned the missive and immediately crumbled onto the window seat. "It's from *him*."

"Well, what does it say?"

She gripped the parchment in her shaky hands and read aloud.

*"1<sup>st</sup> August 1856*

*"Ma petite,*

*"I write to inform you the locket is in safe hands. Forgive the tardiness of my missive, but I'm certain you can appreciate I have been laid low with the most painful of headaches. I am happy to convey my injury is not fatal and the physicians expect me to make a full recovery. Yes, ma chérie, I forgive your impetuosity.*

*"Now to the matter of the unconcluded business between us. I must be frank, mon chou; I am bewitched, living only for the day I might feast upon your beauty again. Though our encounter was brief and somewhat awkward, every hour of every day is consumed with shameless thoughts of you and what I would do to you were you willing.*

*"I am in agony, ma chérie, and only you can ease the torment in my heart. A spiteful man I am not, but when one suffers the ramifications of rejection, one understands the depth of despair. Surely if ever a man was rebuked without the chance to prove his ardor, it is I.*

*"You will find me at The Planters Inn, room 2022. Arrive this Saturday at noon and arrive alone. You have my word as a gentleman you will not be harmed. Should you spurn me again (and I pray with all my heart you will not), my recourse is limited. However, there are always those who make a living disseminating scandalous gossip.*

*I'm confident they would pay a goodly sum to learn the details of how I came to possess the locket.*

*"Think, ma petite. It is heady power to hold my tremulous heart in your small hands, is it not?"*

*"I await you, mademoiselle.*

*Arnaud Joubert."*

Black rage surged up her throat. "The despicable blackmailer!"

"I best fetch Cain."

"No!" she said, her voice vibrating. "Not yet, I must think."

"What is there to think about?"

"For starters, who helped him write the letter?"

Bewilderment crossed Lark's expression. "That's right, Madame Rousseau said his English was quite inferior."

Tapping the missive against her forehead, she rose from the window seat. "Oh, Heaven help me, something is amiss here, and my recollection is murkier than swamp sludge at the moment." She groaned. "Madame Rousseau is French."

"Mystery solved," Lark said.

With another groan, Olivia assumed the pace of a demonic whirlwind and crossed the room. "The man professes adulation and yet he would expose me to the *Gazette*, stand by and watch me ripped apart limb by limb by Savannah's crème de la crème, shredded by wicked gossipmongers?" She walked briskly to the window again and placed her head against the pane. "I'm ruined, Lark, forced to leave the city, my home, everything I love."

"It is rather dismal."

Her head turned sharply toward her friend's voice. "I must get that damn locket back, I must."

"Liv, you're not actually thinking about succumbing to his demands, meeting him at The Planters Inn?"

"What choice do I have? If I go down, so will Cain, and you, too, now that you'll soon bear our name."

Lark paled. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Don't you see? I must go and convince him to surrender it to me."

"Let Cain go. Perhaps Mister Joubert will accept a substantial monetary reward and might be more amenable to dealing with a man."

With unrestrained fury, she said, "Did you not hear his contemptible instructions? He said to come alone!"

"The man is mad, utterly insane to send such a missive, and there's no telling what he might do to a woman without an escort." Lark clucked her tongue against her cheek. "It's too risky, not to mention all this nasty business about murder and black roses."

"There have been no recent incidents, and there is no proof the murderer is connected to the same person that left me the roses."

"Are you out of your mind, Olivia, or do you consciously choose to walk around with your head in the clouds? Cain said a rose was left next to both victims—a black rose! Now what are the odds of it not being the same person stalking you?"

"What do you mean *both* victims?"

"Of course, you wouldn't know since you haven't seen Morgan, but he told Cain another prostitute was murdered the other night."

"Good heavens!" Her voice took on the innocent pleadings of a child. "Help me, Lark. Go with me to retrieve that locket. If you're so concerned I might be walking into the arms of a murderer, then accompany me."

Placing her hand to her throat, she replied, "Oh, I couldn't possibly. If Cain discovers what we are about or—"

"You can't desert me now! You're my last hope, and I need you in case . . . ." She swallowed back her panic and continued. "In case something goes awry."

"Oh, Liv." Lark closed her eyes. "What have we done?"

"Not *we*, my friend, *me*."

"That's not entirely true. I convinced you to pen that letter to Madame Rousseau, believing in my heart Morgan would come forward, stop it from occurring." Lark took a turn pacing. Moments later, she stopped and looked at her. "All right, I'll do it."

Olivia rushed across the room and embraced her. "You will?"

"Foolishly, yes."

"I love you, Lark, and am forever in your debt." Chewing on her thumb, her mind racing, she formulated a plan out loud. "We'll take the phaeton, tell Cain we're off for an afternoon of shopping for the wedding. You'll wait in front of the hotel while I call on Joubert. If I don't return in a reasonable amount of time, you must get help."

"Oh, dear me. What kind of help?"

"You'd have to find Cain at that juncture." Lark's face turned white, but Olivia went on. "He'll be irate at first blush, but when he realizes my life is truly in danger, he'll come to his senses and my aid."

"What if it's too late?"

"Don't even think it. I won't allow myself to be placed in a life-threatening situation. I'm sure I can handle Mister Joubert. Recognizing the folly of his capriciousness, realizing he can purchase twenty locketts with the money I offer him, he'll come around. I just know he will."

"It might work."

"It will work, it must." Olivia took her hand. "Four days, dear, it's only four days. I know you can muster up until Saturday. Then it will be behind us."

They embraced, and Lark left her bedchamber, promising to meet again at the evening meal.

Olivia climbed into bed again, nibbling at her cold breakfast, her head pounding harder than a snare drum. Hours later, she awoke with a start, her heart thumping, her nightshirt drenched in perspiration. She'd dreamt of Morgan, sensual, erotic dreams that left her quivering with desire. His dark face hovered above her as his hard body drove into hers time and again until she cried out his name.

Like he'd said he wanted her to.

Desolate by the time she rose from bed, she rang for Bessie. Perhaps a bath would ease her troubled mind. With the tub near to overflowing, she lowered herself into the scented water and closed her eyes. What had become of the resilient, independent woman she knew? Perhaps she had overestimated her strength, her ability to handle whatever life threw at her. She had her doubts now about the wisdom of embarking on this debacle. Her initial intent to win Morgan's love had backfired, her life was in shambles, yet somehow she had to rally.

And she would, after she dealt with this rascal Joubert.

She sent a prayer skyward, two really—one, by Saturday afternoon, the locket would be in her possession, and two, Morgan would miraculously arrive on her doorstep informing her he couldn't live without her.

A miserable groan fell from her lips. The likelihood of either happening seemed more remote with every passing minute.

\* \* \* \* \*

At breakfast Saturday morning, Olivia fidgeted like a child in a church pew, despite Lark's reassuring glances. The four days had passed tortuously, with her mind running through a gamut of emotions—rage, guilt, remorse and sheer terror. Sitting across from her at the table and in a splendid mood, Cain read aloud the local gossip: Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly had enjoyed a lovely mid-week picnic with Mr. and Mrs. Goodwin and family, and the Brightons seemed ecstatic after being delivered of twins. On and on he droned, ad nauseam. As Cain recited each name, Olivia couldn't help but wonder if hers would be glaring back at her in next week's edition. Finally finished, he turned the page to the business section. Olivia stared at the flapjacks drowning in maple syrup, the thick slices of ham and buttery biscuits. She hadn't eaten a bite in days, and only this morning Lark had given her a wide-eyed look and said, "Good God, Liv, you're thinner than a fence rail and pastier than cow's milk."

She wanted to kill Arnaud Joubert for putting her through this anguish. Lark was right, the man was a lunatic, thus the reason she'd retrieved her father's derringer from the desk drawer this morning and tucked it into her reticule. She'd hold the unscrupulous cad at gunpoint to get the locket back, if need be, shoot the misguided bounder if he so much as laid a hand on her. If he thought her a lily-livered coward, he had better think again. The blackguard should have let sleeping dogs lie.

Lark navigated the phaeton during the ride into Savannah while Olivia alternated between wringing her hands and sending frantic prayers to the clouds. The sticky air and relentless sun covered them, typical of the oppressive heat this time of year. Dressed sedately in a dove-gray cotton day dress, buttoned up to the collar, she had secured her

shoulder-blade length hair at the nape of her neck with a black net. She didn't know which was heavier, her hair or her heart.

"Liv, darling, please stop fidgeting so. You're pitching me into near hysterics, and the bay senses your unease." Lark stole a sideways glance. "A dab of rouge on your cheeks and lips wouldn't have hurt—you're ghostly looking."

"Are you madder than Joubert? I hope he finds me wholly unattractive and believes the whiskey and opium he consumed played tricks with his heart, not to mention his eyesight."

"Don't hope too hard, dear; you're stunning, even without the powder and rouge."

"Well, perhaps I should roll around in the mud like that hog," she said, pointing. "Maybe then I could convince him he's made a terrible mistake."

Lark stopped the transport in front of a large green sign that read *The Planters Inn*. "It's just ahead now. Want to change your mind?"

She shook her head.

With a click of Lark's cheek and a slap of the reins, the bay lurched forward, and moments later the phaeton stopped in the middle of a cobblestone circular driveway. "We're here."

Olivia's voice trembled. "I can see that."

"How much time must pass before I begin to fret in earnest?" Lark asked. "And how long until I'm in the full throes of panic?"

Olivia stepped from the transport, clutching her reticule. "Thirty minutes on the first, three-quarters of an hour on the last." Bolstered by Lark's firm nod and reassuring smile, she walked up the wide steps and entered the building.

The foyer loomed ahead. Urns of flowers—pale pink rosebud orchids and white chrysanthemums embellished with a thick flourish of foliage—graced the intricately carved sideboards. Arched windows with an Italian flair held up the twelve-foot ceiling, and below them a burgundy carpet canvassed the floor. The walls, papered in gold and eggshell stripes, blended in with the upholstered furniture in assorted shades of amber, fawn, and russet brown. At the far end of the room, a quartet of men smoked cigars while their wives enjoyed a game of whist at a nearby table.

Olivia issued a subtle nod to the desk clerk and walked up the wide staircase at a foot-dragging pace. On the second level, she bypassed a number of rooms and inhaled deeply in front of room 2022. A ten-foot placard that read *Welcome to the Gates of Hades* would have been appropriate at the moment. With knuckles clenched, she rapped twice and waited. Her throat dry, every ligament in her spine stretched taut, she knocked again.

"*Entré, mademoiselle*," the familiar voice called through the door.

*Joubert!* She turned the knob and pushed the door open with two fingers, expecting to see him standing there.

"One moment, *ma chérie*." The honey-lacquered voice drifted through the French doors that separated the rooms. "I am almost finished."

Tentacles of ice spread throughout her limbs. "Finished with what?"

"Alas, I am not presentable."

"I'll wait in the corridor until—"

In a smooth tone, he said, "No, it is not necessary; I will be but a moment."

Olivia noted her surroundings. She stood in the bedchamber, while the lecherous Frenchman remained in an adjoining room. Behind the massive four-poster bed, heavy brocade draperies met in the middle, deterring the harsh rays of the sun. Her gaze wandered to the tapered candles on the bureau, the pulse at the hollow of her throat a perfect match to their quavering flames. God's teeth, what was she doing here? Her resolve to retrieve the locket suddenly paled next to the tenuous predicament she found herself in. Olivia swallowed back the hysteria bubbling up her throat, every scene since embarking on this foolhardy path unraveling like a Shakespearean play in her mind. She had made reckless decisions and foolhardy choices to garner Morgan's attention, and all had failed. What a fool she had been, believing that beneath his cool, remote exterior resided undying love for her.

A surge of blood pedaled through her veins the moment she spied her mother's locket on the nightstand. The delicate gold chain gleamed beneath soft candlelight. She retrieved the wad of bank notes and the derringer from her reticule. Intent on snatching the necklace and exchanging it for the money, she would leave without the unsuspecting



snake in the grass realizing it. With the stealth of a cat-burglar and only a mustard seed of courage in her arsenal, she tiptoed to the bed and reached out for the necklace.

## Chapter Seventeen

Morgan stood between the open French doors, vacillating between unadulterated rage and agonizing desire. With her back to him, she reached for the bait on the nightstand. "Ma petite, surely you do not think to leave without concluding our business?"

Her spine stiff, she turned ever so slowly to face him, slipping one hand behind her back with an unnatural jerk. With an owl's blink, her eyes widened, and a strained whimper fell from her lips. "Morgan? Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Magnificent." He groaned inwardly. With his breath in his throat, he drank in every detail—her porcelain skin, full pouty lips and high Gaelic cheekbones. He clenched his hands into fists, struggling to maintain control. God, how he wanted to strangle her, but violence against a woman had never been his way. He didn't really want to throttle her. He wanted her spread-eagled on that bed, her mouth open, accepting the thrusts of his tongue, her graceful hips arching up to meet him. He wanted to hear her say, "I love you, Morgan." The depth of passion he possessed for Olivia Breedlove terrified him, made it nearly impossible for him to keep a clear head.

"Waiting for you," he drawled.

Her chest rose and deflated with each rapid breath. "I don't understand. How did you know, and what have you done-done with Arnaud Joubert?"

"I'm afraid he's indisposed, permanently, so you'll have to deal with me now."

A distressed groan fell from her lips as she searched his face, her gaze stopping abruptly on the wound above his eyebrow. "Your forehead . . . the black bandana. Oh, God!"

"You mean this bandana," he said, holding it between his thumb and index finger, "and this one?" He stuffed them into the pocket of his trousers and watched her gaze dart about the room, seeking an escape route.

"You won't make it to the door. I'm ten times quicker."

Fire banked in her eyes. "How could you?"

"How could *you*?"

Her tongue sharper than a two-edged sword, she said, "Would this be a good time to interject that you are a black-hearted bastard, lower than a guttersnipe?"

"And you, Miss Breedlove, are a scheming bitch, an utterly magnificent one, but a scheming bitch, nonetheless."

She gasped and slammed her mouth shut, drawing her lips into a thin, taut line.

"What do you have behind your back?"

She cut him an icy stare. "None of your damned business."

He closed the distance between them in two strides and stood in front of that sweet, kissable mouth. "I told you once, I make everything about you my business." He held his hand out. "Give it up, *now*."

She placed the money and the derringer into his outstretched palm with a glorified huff.

He couldn't help the chuckle. "Had you planned to shoot the poor, unsuspecting fool?"

"I wish I had," she said. "The moment I saw his duplicitous face."

"After you ransomed the locket, paid Joubert off?"

"Why not?" she replied in a chilling tone. "Men are so easily duped."

Her lack of fear stunned him. And excited him. What in the hell would it take to bring her down, wipe that haughty look from her face, and force her into compliance? Her beauty from a distance was compelling, up close it was breathtaking. He forgot, but only momentarily, her caustic retort, something about men being easily duped. His voice nearly a whisper, he answered, "Especially by lying, conniving sluts like you."

Disbelief transformed her lovely features a second before her hand came out and connected sharply with his cheek. Caught off guard by her nearness and the damned intoxicating scent clinging to her pale skin, he didn't have time to deflect her blow. Belatedly, he reacted. Seizing a handful of hair at the side of her head, he yanked her to him. "What did I tell you would happen if you ever slapped me again?"

She struggled against him, her feet lethal weapons, her hands sharp talons, ready and willing to claw his eyes out. He backed her toward the bed with her fighting him

every step of the way. Dropping onto the bed, he dragged her over his lap and held her head down with one hand, shoving her dress over her hips with the other.

"You bastard, you can't do this! You're not my father!"

"No, I'm not," he said and removed her pantalets in one swift movement. "Had I been, I would have done this years ago, saved us all a lot of trouble."

His hand came down on her bare bottom, and she yelped, cried out pitifully as he delivered a succession of hard, stinging slaps. Writhing beneath him and choking back sobs, she screamed, "I hate you, I hate you!"

With the pale skin of her buttocks a bright crimson, he forced himself to stop. Mesmerized by the provocative form of her derriere, his cock sprang to life. He was so hard he could barely breathe, and if he didn't get a hold of himself he would spill his seed quicker than a pubescent schoolboy. Drawing her up by the back of her collar, he flipped her over and pinned her down with his legs. Her face was dampened by tears, her skin flushed, and his chest ached pitifully from wanting her. There was nothing he desired more than to plunge his throbbing cock deep inside her and fuck her into submission, but he knew he would hate himself for it. She had to submit willingly, own up to this wild, crazy thing between them. He plucked the bandanas from his pocket and secured them around her wrists and then attached them to the bed rails.

"Oh, my God, you are mad, utterly stark raving mad." Her voice caught on a hiccup. "What are you planning to do?"

He removed her kid leather boots, her stockings, and grabbed the front of her dress and ripped it down the middle, sending the buttons scattering across the floorboards. Her chemise joined the other items moments later.

"I'm going to show you how much you hate me."

"Morgan, stop, please." With her eyes cloudy from desire or terror, he didn't know which, she cried, "I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't know it was you."

"Don't play your sad violin for me, Liv. It won't work." He brushed his fingers across her lips tenderly, but seethed with anger. It had gone too far, beyond too far.

A half-sob, half-moan left her mouth. As she watched his every move, tears slipped down her cheeks. "Why are you doing this?"

His eyes locked with hers. "Don't you know?"

She shook her head.

"Unrequited lust and desire." He kissed her brutally, grinding the words out against her mouth. "And, unrequited love."

His gaze roamed over her perfect, naked body, the firm, ripe breasts, narrow waist and slender hips. Her hair hung loose from the net and cascaded around her shoulders into a veil of gossamer silk. Fully aroused, he failed to concentrate on his mission as his hand drifted between the soft swell of her breasts, caressed the flat plane of her abdomen, and lingered at the portal of her sex.

"Oh!" She moaned.

Her lithe body jerked, and her eyes closed as he massaged the folds of her cunt. Christ, she was so hot and wet that it was all he could do to stop himself from taking her right now. He slipped one finger into her silky depths, and she whimpered like a wounded animal, filling him with a sense of gratification.

"Still hate me, Liv?"

The restless movement of her body belied her hateful words. Her hips arching up to meet his fingers, her voice low and breathy, she said, "Damn you, Morgan, damn you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Olivia fought the demon laughing in her ear. Everything around her, above her, beneath her was Morgan, the sweet, wicked prince of her dreams. He lowered his head, his lips nipping hungrily at the hard peak of her breast. His moist, hot mouth traced a liquid trail of heat across her throbbing mounds. God, he was Satan incarnate. Her breath hitched as he laved her nipples with his tongue, the shuddering exhilaration racing through her until her limbs grew lifeless and weak. The little voice in her head returned. *Yes! Yes! Yes!* It screamed. She sank further into the mattress, her sighs of pleasure spurring him onward.

He nudged her legs open and resumed his tortuous attack, stroking, kneading her sex until little gasps and moans surged from her throat. Her body jerked when he inserted two fingers and caressed her with calculated purpose, his erotic words against her ear

playing a *cavatina* in her head. Moisture gathered and pooled between her legs, and her chest burned. Heat rushed to her cheeks as he withdrew his fingers and licked them.

"Liv, pure, undiluted, heavenly Liv." His raspy voice, a sensual caress to her ears, ran through her in a river of heat.

Olivia stared at him, the scalding flames of arousal consuming her. Only Morgan had the unabashed audacity to do and say such a thing, and it thrilled her down to her toes.

Carried beyond herself, she scarcely heard the husky, far-off voice.

"I'm going to untie you now. You slap me again and you'll live to regret it." He cupped her chin in his hand and forced her to look at him. "Do you understand, Liv?"

She cried out from the pressure he applied.

"Say it!"

"Yes," she uttered weakly.

He slid his body down hers, running his tongue over the quivering flesh of her abdomen until he arrived at the juncture of her thighs.

"Oh, God, don't, Morgan—"

"It will be much easier for you." He groaned the words against her feverish skin.

His tongue flicked over her sex, sending her into a state of near oblivion. She strained and arched her hips upward to meet his mouth, not knowing what she sought, knowing only she wanted more . . . and more. A crescendo of moans echoed around her, and God help her, she knew they came from her own mouth, but she seemed incapable of stilling them. Knowing she lay on the heart-stopping verge of something euphoric, she held perfectly still as he paused and positioned himself over her again. Nearly mindless and in no mood for further punishment, much less torment, she cried out in agony. She wouldn't allow him to leave her in this restless, frantic state. Grabbing a lock of his hair, she pulled him down, forcing him into a hungry kiss. The scent and taste of her sex on her lips stirred her carnal senses.

He broke from the kiss, his tongue moving in a sensual search of her ear. "Don't worry, we're not done yet."

His hard, throbbing member touched the entrance of her nether lips and nudged gently.

Finding her mouth again, he said, "I have to tell you, this is going to hurt."

"What?" she asked in a panicked haze of confusion.

"Only briefly, but I promise the pain will subside."

"You're going to hurt me intentionally?"

"Not intentionally; it's just the way it is the first time." The deep, passionate kiss he bestowed allayed her fear. "Trust me, Liv. The pain will pass, and I'll make you forget it ever happened."

Her name descending from his lips sent a hot fever through her body. She was on fire and wanted him inside her, all of him. He pressed himself in an inch or two and stopped.

He breathed hard and asked, "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

"There's no turning back now. I couldn't stop if you pummeled me to death."

In the ensuing silence, she found her tongue and her courage. "Morgan, are you going to talk it to death or finish what you started ten years ago?"

He plunged deep inside her with an animalistic groan. A searing pain burst through her loins. Olivia pressed her face into the hollow of his throat and cried out, incapable of stopping the tears trickling down her cheek.

"I'm sorry, baby," he murmured, his voice slurred with passion.

He kissed her, his body so still she wondered if it was over already. Soon the burning ache subsided, replaced by a new kind of sensation she found immensely pleasurable.

"Tell me when."

Brief moments passed while she adjusted to the width and length of him. "When," she gasped, helpless to resist this new erotic hunger he'd awakened in her.

"Say you want me, Liv."

She did, God, she did, but it was so hard to say.

"I'll stop if you don't say it."

"I . . . I want you."

He moved inside her, drawing her into a restless shift beneath him. His patience ranked right up there with his punctuality. Savoring every moment of pleasure, she

sensed he loved her with infinite control and restraint. A new, budding elation ripened inside her, beckoning her body in a way she couldn't explain. The pulsating warmth of him excited her beyond her wildest imagination, and she responded like a wanton to this new form of delicious torment. His feverish kisses obliterated sane thought, his restless hands like hot branding irons everywhere he touched her. She loved him and hated him in the same breath. Of their own volition, her arms crept up around his neck, and she returned those kisses with unbridled fervor.

He moved without restraint, withdrawing and plunging, every time deeper and harder than the last, until he'd pushed her up against the headboard. She assumed he was a skilled lover, but nothing had prepared her for the power he held over his body—and hers. Mindless beneath him, she strained and writhed in wild abandonment, arching up to meet him thrust for thrust, crying out his name.

He kissed her nose, her cheeks, her lips. "You drive me insane."

Sweat streamed from the dark locks of his forehead, yet time and again he drove deep inside her, hard, forceful, demanding, joining her in another realm. Higher and higher she climbed. She thought surely she would float away like star dust and be devoured by this unnamed form of bliss. Something lay just beyond her reach, something indefinable and evasive. She raked her nails down his chest, hovering on the brink of madness. Then it happened. Pinpricks of white light exploded behind her eyelids, and her body arched and strained, reaching for that unbearable joy.

His voice hoarse, his breathing labored, he whispered, "Just let it come, baby."

The mad thundering of his heart rippled beneath her palm. She tasted the dampness of his skin against her lips. He cupped her naked bottom and drove into her with one final plunge that sent her soaring into a boundless abyss. With a groan, his lips claimed hers again and he collapsed on top of her.

His breathing returned to normal long moments later. Stunned into silence over what had passed between them, Olivia couldn't move, couldn't think. Caught up in a tangled web of contradictions, mind-numbing ecstasy and mortification, her mental and physical capabilities had reached their limits. Her entire life had turned this day. Never would she be able to dispel him from her heart, her soul . . . not after this. A solitary tear

slid down her cheek. He had not said he loved her, had not actually said, "I love you, Liv."

Morgan wiped it away with a gentle finger and then a curse fell from his lips. Tenderly, he gathered her into the warm curve of his body.

\* \* \* \* \*

Olivia emerged slowly from the warm cocoon of bliss, realizing she wasn't in her room but rather a strange, foreign bedchamber. It all came flooding back; Morgan's mouth taking her to dizzying heights, his rough hands skimming over her hot flesh. She recalled her nakedness and clutched the sheets. Her clothes lay in a crumpled heap, shredded. A shameful groan tumbled from her lips, and she shrank deeper into the mattress. She closed her eyes against the sound of the door opening and moments later felt his weight on the bed beside her.

"I brought food and clothing for you," he said, trailing his thumb down her cheek.

Oh, God, if he would just go away, she could dress and leave this place. Bolting upright, she said, "Lark is waiting for me outside!"

He drew his beautiful mouth into a lazy grin. "She left a long time ago."

"What do you mean, *a long time ago*?" Dread rumbled in her empty stomach.

"She promised to wait for me, fetch Cain if I didn't return in forty-five minutes."

"Trust me, it's been taken care of."

She stared into his silver orbs. Anger churned in her stomach. "You knew! You knew all along I would show!"

"You're so predictable, Liv, not to mention idiotically fearless." He paused. "But all that's going to change now."

Dragging the sheet with her, she scooted backward until her bottom rested against the head rails. "What are you about now, Morgan? Whatever it is," she said, showing him her profile, "I'm not interested."

He yanked the sheet from her hands and leaned in. "Oh, no? You seemed very interested an hour ago."



Humiliated by her nakedness, and in response to his insinuation, Olivia's hand shot toward him.

He caught her wrist, his icy gaze raking over her. "If you had any sense, you wouldn't."

"Oh, you're insufferable. I wasn't about to slap you, I want the sheet back."

"You won't need it where you're going."

The finality of his words frightened her. "What do you mean, *where I'm going*? I'm going home, and you can keep the damn locket since you seem to have become so enamored with it."

"Wrong on both accounts," he replied glibly. "I don't want the locket, and you're not going home."

"Wh-where am I going?"

"To my parents' summer cottage, with me."

The throbbing tightness in her belly made her painfully aware of the desire she'd harbored for him a short time ago, and she wanted him still. God help her. And Morgan looked at her as if he'd like nothing better than to take her over his knee again. Flustered, she turned away and selected her words carefully. "You can't just kidnap me, force me to . . . ."

"I can and I will," the bully said. "Who is going to stop me?"

"Cain won't allow it! When he discovers you took me against my will, he'll come for me."

"Maybe," he said with a shrug. "Can you live with his death on your head?"

"You'd kill Cain!"

"I'll kill anyone who tries to keep you from me now."

She clutched the bedrails with both hands, her outrage obvious. "I won't go! You can kill me, too!"

He was on her in a heartbeat, wrenching her fingers from the bed, his powerful body pinning her to the mattress. "I've drawn a bath. One way or the other, you're leaving this bed. You will obey me or live to regret it."

Ready on her tongue sat a spiteful retort, but remembering the painful sting of his hands on her bare bottom, she swallowed it.

"What's it going to be, Olivia? Are you going to walk into that room on your own or shall I carry you in over my shoulder?"

A long pause filled the empty space between them. With his mouth inches from hers, she couldn't think, couldn't breathe. God's teeth, what should she do? Morgan never made idle threats, yet if he won this battle, she was doomed to a life of flesh and blood servitude. Powerless against his hedonistic sexuality, she resorted to using her wits *and* her mordant tongue.

"Name your poison," he said, livid with impatience.

"No," she squeaked, realizing how weak the word sounded.

"No?"

She shook her head and followed it up with a flinch when his hand came toward her. He didn't hit her but scooped her into his arms and carried her into the adjoining room. An enormous, anchored copper tub steamed with scented water reminiscent of jasmine and tea roses. Despite her shrieked outrage, he dumped her into the tub. Moments later, she emerged, sputtering a string of vile oaths. Pushing a clump of heavy, wet hair from her face, she clenched her jaw and pinned him with a hateful glare. Her bottom hurt from the spanking, and every other muscle in her body cried out in protest. Much to her shock and dismay, he plucked the washcloth from the side of the tub and next the sliver of soap, rubbing them together until he'd worked up a good lather. With great tenderness, he lifted her arm, washed it and repeated the process with the other, moving on to her back and shoulders.

"Why are you doing this?" She sobbed, feeling more helpless than a wing-clipped dove.

"To make you feel better."

This new form of torment was alien to her and she said, "You know perfectly well I'm not talking about the bath!"

"Oh, why am I kidnapping you, you mean?"

With another sob, she nodded.

"It's quite simple, to bring you to heel. If one desires acceptance into all the appropriate social circles, one must adhere to certain proprieties. You won't be welcome anywhere if you continue in this direction."

"You're a fine one to talk. Your reprehensible reputation has preceded you for years. Why, you've probably bedded half the women in Savannah!"

Dropping the rag into the water, he came around and stood over her. He had never looked more handsome. The white linen shirt, open at the neck, revealed every ridged muscle of his chest and several raised, red welts—scratches left by her in the heat of passion.

His eyes still dark with desire, he dropped to his knees. "More than half, but that's all behind us now."

She had to get away from him! If only he'd stop looking at her so intimately. Her voice quavering, she asked, "Why, what's changed?"

His eyes held hers in a caress. "I can't allow my wife to frequent brothels."

She pierced him with a look of shock. "Your wife! Are you utterly daft? I wouldn't marry you for all the gold in Sierra Nevada, not if you were the last man on earth after what you just did to me!" Delighted to see the familiar little muscle in his jaw twitch, Olivia smiled like a Cheshire cat. Finally, she had penetrated that cool exterior.

"Which did you object to more—the spanking or the fucking?" He grabbed her wrist. "You have only to tell me and I'll accommodate you again."

Her short victory faded. She lowered her head and mumbled feebly, "I really do hate you, Morgan Gatewood."

"That may be. It won't be the first time people have married for reasons other than love." He released her arm and walked from the room, only to return seconds later with several large packages. "Your clothes, madam. You have ten minutes to get your pretty little derriere out of that tub." Then he left again, calling out over his shoulder, "Luncheon awaits you, so unless you want it tossed out the window, I suggest you hurry."

She wept through the rest of her bath, stepped from the tub, and wrapped a thick, cotton towel around her body. Glancing at the packages he left for her, she opened them and flipped through the selections one at a time. Morgan had thought of everything, right down to stockings and several pairs of shoes. Someone must have helped him, for there was no way he could have known she adored saffron, swooned over nutmeg, and purchased everything on the shelves in deep shades of brown. She chose a chestnut linen

skirt interspersed with amber fibers, a filmy ecru blouse, and a short waist-length jacket of muted gold.

In the heat of passion, Morgan lost his head, took her virginity, and the only way to correct the faux pas was to marry her. He hadn't said he loved her; in fact, he said people often marry for reasons other than love. She couldn't marry him under those circumstances, and there wasn't a soul who would go up against Morgan Gatewood, not even Cain.

"David against Goliath, the lamb against the lion," she muttered under her breath.

She'd have to use her brain to counter his brawn and his intemperate will. Shaking off the doom and gloom surrounding her, she straightened her spine and entered the bedchamber. So the enigmatic, heart-stopping prince of her childhood thought he could bring her to heel through marriage, did he?

If it took every ounce of her strength, she would not go down without a fight.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

The Gatewood's summer cottage resembled a lithograph from one of Olivia's father's books titled *Early Century English Carriage Homes*. A three story structure, the building's façade consisted of red brick on the main level and dove-gray on upper levels. The outside entry, framed by two circular arches, led to a sweeping veranda, and six-paned windows ran the height of the turret on the left with another dozen stretching across the length of the exterior. Meticulously landscaped, the grounds bespoke of great wealth. A surplus of flowering magnolias and sourwoods, interspersed with exotic perennials hid behind a three-foot hedge of boxwood. Overall, it was a picturesque, quaint structure.

Two servants claimed responsibility for the overall upkeep, Howard, and his wife, Nan, who insisted the bulk of their labors stemmed from the monstrous Mastiff roaming the property. Bandit took an immediate shine to Olivia, and vice versa. Nan said the dog didn't really belong to anyone in particular, but rather came with the property when the Gatewoods purchased it five years ago. Powerfully built, the hound had a black mask around his eyes and nose, which framed his massive head.

"He's loyal to a fault," Nan said, "a gentle giant despite his enormity."

Morgan ventured off toward the stables to tend to Valor, and Nan showed Olivia to her quarters on the second level, the Mastiff in close pursuit. Her *quarters* consisted of a suite of three rooms: a spacious bedchamber, a boudoir, complete with a marble vanity and gold gilt-framed mirror, and a sitting room. Curiosity compelled her to pick up the bottle of perfume on the vanity and remove the stopper. As the familiar scent of jasmine and white tea roses drifted around her, the depth of Morgan's attention to detail stunned her.

"Mister Gatewood's suite is across the hall." Nan excused herself, promising to return in several hours with supper.

Olivia wandered back to the sitting room and rifled through a stack of books next to the chaise. Everything Elizabeth Barrett Browning had ever written rested in her hands. "Damn the man!" She huffed after the initial shock fizzled out. "What is he up to?"

First the clothing—in all her favorite colors—next her special blend of perfume, and now the books. Only a very considerate man would have gone to such pains. *Or a demented stalker bent on murder.* Groaning, she slumped onto the chaise, hating herself for remembering the way his hands touched her, the exquisite feel of him inside her. Even now, her skin flushed hot and her body throbbed with aching need. She'd thought voyeurism addictive, but it didn't hold a candle to Morgan Gatewood's possession of her.

With Bandit curled up near her feet, she laid her head back and closed her eyes. She was so tired, so very, very tired.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nan delivered supper to Morgan's suite with a warm smile and closed the door behind her when she left.

He glanced at Olivia, sitting across from him, her hands folded in her lap, her magnificent green eyes downcast. "You found a friend." He glanced at the hound snoring contentedly near her feet.

"We orphans stick together."

A stab of sympathy pierced his heart, but he quickly dispelled it. He couldn't let his guard down and function on diminished faculties now that someone meant to harm her.

"Surely, there must be something here that piques your interest," he said, lifting the silver domes.

"I'm not hungry."

"How about artichoke soup, roast beef, and potato soufflés?"

She shook her head.

"Maryland biscuits, brandy peaches or plum pudding?"

"No," she said. "Nothing!"

Dark circles shadowed the translucent skin beneath her eyes. Morgan sighed.

"You'd rather starve yourself to death than spend time with me, is that it?"

Her head came up. "There's a thought."

"My presence upsets you, does it?"

She turned and looked out the window. Damn, the woman was a conundrum—hot and reciprocal one minute, giving him the direct cut the next. She could pretend detachment all she wanted, but he couldn't have been mistaken about the look of longing in her eyes the many times he'd caught her watching him. She had responded to him with wild abandon, returned his punishing assault with complete submission. It wasn't enough, he wanted more from her than merely a physical response to his ravishment—he wanted her heart, her soul. He wanted her to admit she loved him.

Changing the subject against her feigned indifference, he tried another approach.

"I have a list of names from the night you recognized someone at *L'Amour Immortelles*."

That drew her gaze. "Is there no end to your resourcefulness?"

"Not when it comes to you."

"How did you wrench it from Madame Rousseau?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I didn't have to *wrench* it from anyone." He paused briefly and then continued. "I own the brothel."

She took a sharp breath of air and immediately gathered her composure. "A libertine couldn't ask for more."

He should have anticipated her thoughts on that subject. "I don't fuck my employees, Olivia, I take care of them."

"Ha!" she said. "I suppose you expect me to believe you tuck them all into bed at night with a peck to the cheek?"

"No." He smiled. "But I make sure they see a physician frequently to have compulsory pelvic examinations." He poured a cup of chocolate tea and slid it across the table. "If they're out sick or their children are ill, they're paid for a full night of services regardless."

"They have children?"

"Some do, yes."

She sipped the tea, studying him over the rim while he tried to assess her thoughts through the closed window of her soul. Long moments later, she said, "You set me up, planned all along to spy on me under the guise of escorting me to *L'Amour Immortelles*."

"I regret I wasn't honest with you about the brothel from the onset." He proceeded cautiously in light of her sour expression. "How about you; do you regret you weren't honest about carrying it to the next level?" Showing him her profile again, clearly, she'd drawn the sword. "Hmm, Liv?"

"No, I have no regrets, and I couldn't care less whether you do or not."

"What can I do to make it up to you, convince you to give me a chance?"

Gripping the edge of the table, her eyes like smoldering embers, she turned to him. "Take me home, now!"

"Not going to happen. Your life is in danger."

"You can't save me. If someone intends to kill me, they'll find a way."

"Thank you for your confidence in me. Why don't you surrender your damned stubbornness and tell me who you recognized that night?"

She rose from the table and stormed off, calling out over her shoulder, "Why don't you go to hell!"

He caught her seconds from the door and spun her around amid a string of snarls from Bandit. "Heel!" Morgan commanded, and the dog dropped into a reverent crouch. "Someone means to kill you, you stupid little fool," he said, turning back to her.

"Perfect. Then all our problems will be solved." She crossed her arms over her chest and said, "I'll be out of your life and you'll be out of mine."

"Is that what you want?" His stomach churned. What if she meant it? Win or lose, he had to know the answer. Drawing from a lifetime of reserve, his voice tranquil, he said, "Look at me and tell me you want me out of your life."

A lengthy silence lapsed. She looked toward the ceiling and next the wall, as if weighing her words. "Why?" she finally asked. "Why did you agree to my father's demands?"

*So that was it? He had hurt her deeply when he didn't stand up to her father.*  
"What would you have me do, injure or kill your own blood? At fifteen, I maimed my first man in a duel, and there were countless others by the time I was eighteen. Thaddeus was no match for me, especially at his age. Or would you rather your brother had stood in for him?"

"You cast me aside as if I was a trollop you dallied with one afternoon."

"Evening, it was nighttime when I . . . ."

"Nearly raped me."

"It was either walk away or meet your father over pistols." He wiped a tear from her cheek with his finger. His words strangled with emotion, he pressed further. "You have no idea how many times I've relived the confrontation in his study, wished more than anything I had stood up to him and told him it was too late."

"Too late for what?" she whispered.

"Too late to stop this wild, crazy love I had for you, have for you still."

Her face swam in his line of vision. Images of her crying out his name, matching his every thrust nearly felled him. She brushed the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hands, that damn alluring scent beckoning him. Fragility and vulnerability emanated from her, prompting him to capture her lips with a gentle kiss. Rather than the open hostility he expected, she responded with a passion born of need and unrestrained desire. His cock jerked to life, as it did every time she favored him with a look or touched him.

When he pulled from the kiss, her head fell into his chest. "Let me go home, Morgan."



If he had any God-given sense he would, but he simply couldn't now that he'd tasted the sweet nectar of her love, spilled his seed in her. "No," he said. "I cannot."

He braced for her wrath, but instead, she stepped away from him. Her eyes smoldered with an aching need, not for him, but for his body. He could take her again, right here, right now, feel her slick, tight cavern sheathing him as he sank deep inside her . . . and he'd spend the rest of his life panting after her like some mongrel hound after a bitch in heat if he succumbed to that sultry summons in her eyes. He wanted more from her than naked lust and a meaningless primeval mating that in the end would destroy whatever chance they had to make this work. He loved her, and she loved him. Until she came to grips with it, by God, he wouldn't touch her again. She stared at his face, the unspoken invitation hanging in the balance between them.

He turned away from her quickly, his heart pounding against his ribs. "Leave, Olivia, now."

"Morgan, this is all so new. I waited forever for you to tell me you cared."

"I thought I just did," he replied, keeping his back to her and struggling with the desire to take her again. "What about you, Liv, do you love me? God knows you wanted me, want me still."

"I-I'm so confused. I-I—"

"Keep running, Liv, I'm sure that will clear up your tangled emotions."

Her skirt rustled in the stillness of the room, and the door handle turned. When he turned around she was gone, leaving him to drown in her intoxicating scent. Seconds later, Bandit skulked toward the door and followed her.

"Traitor," Morgan whispered.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

That night, Olivia dressed for bed knowing sleep would elude her. Visions of Morgan directly across the hall stormed through her mind. She imagined him lying across the bed, his magnificent tan body stretched out against the stark white sheets. Images of his handsome face filled her mind, the rippled muscles of his chest, and the hard length of him driving deep inside her. She couldn't continue to live in the same house with the

man. And he knew it. It was all part of some grand scheme he had concocted to force her into submission, force her to marry him. Yet, wasn't marriage to Morgan what she had wanted all along? Escape was impossible. Morgan would find her, and the punishment would be severe. She held no illusions about what the man was capable of. An anguished wail bubbled up her throat and spewed from her lips. Time to face the fact she had no desire to escape from the one man who'd stolen her heart so many years ago. The one man who had the ability to dredge up a painful need to touch him, taste him, feel the reckless abandon only he could draw from her.

After tossing and turning for an hour, she rose, crossed the room and slumped onto the window seat. A full moon bathed the yard in a pale, white mist. Shifting shadows scampered across the lawn and then ducked behind a magnolia in front of the cottage. Olivia's heart stood still and she sucked in a hiss of air. Who would be out this time of night? More to the point, what did they want?

She rose quickly and scurried across the room, opening the door to the hallway. A sliver of light crept into the corridor from Morgan's room. He'd left the door ajar. Her fingers trembled uncontrollably as she pushed it open. Morgan stood by the window, naked from the waist up. His golden skin shimmered beneath pale strands of moonbeams. He turned, scrutinizing her with a look that told her he sensed her need, her desire. It was then she remembered her disheveled appearance, the long white nightgown, her hair tumbling loose down her back, but she no longer cared. She wanted to deny the veracity of his power over her and would if she could dispel this powerful attraction between them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan blinked, and his breath hitched in his throat. "What are you doing here, Liv?"

"I saw something outside and I'm frightened."

He didn't know how much longer he could restrain his warring emotions. For hours, he'd fought an internal war, vacillated between kicking down her door and pleading outside it to let him in. Congruent with the essence of his love for her was the

helplessness he felt because of it. Now that she was here, standing in front of him, a wave of dizziness coupled with an intense hunger threatened to knock him from his feet.

He struggled to keep his tone neutral. "I'm sure it was nothing; Bandit would have warned us if a stranger was near."

She looked down at the dog sitting calmly beside her.

"Besides, you have more to fear from me than you do from someone outside the manor."

She lifted her chin, her small toes pointed inward, her green eyes piercing him.

The sound of crashing water roared in his ears, or was it his wild blood? "You take one more step into this room, Liv, and you'll be on your back in a heartbeat."

She cleared her throat, her small voice quavering. "I need you, Morgan."

It was as if a soft, soothing rain washed over him. How long had he waited to hear her say, *I need you, Morgan?* Closing the distance between them in a flash, he shooed the dog from the room with a terse command and swept her into his arms. He laid her on the bed and untied her nightgown, acutely aware of the raging desire in his loins. She inhaled deeply when he ran his fingers down the length of her throat and clutched the nightgown in his hands. Battling impatience to feel the smooth texture of her skin, he ripped the garment down the middle without hesitation.

Covering his face with kisses, she whispered against his lips, "Are you going to rip everything I own to shreds?"

"Most likely," he said, rolling his trousers from his hips and kicking them across the room. "See what you do to me, Liv? I am a man possessed, consumed by an incurable lust for you."

"I never thought to hear it from your lips."

"How about this from my lips, I love you . . . I'm irretrievably, irrevocably in love with you."

"You are?"

"Yes, now can you say it or must I wrench it from you through other means?"

"What other means?"

"You know what other means." He grew very still. "Say it, just once, Liv."

"I love you, Morgan Gatewood. You," she said, poking her finger into his chest.

He looked at her nakedness and growled, captivated by her smooth, alabaster skin, her perfectly formed breasts, and the dark mound of curls between her thighs. He took her mouth in a kiss of liquid heat and then trailed kisses down her throat.

Her voice husky and beyond alluring, she said, "I want to touch you, please you the same way you please me."

A frisson of sexual excitement surged through him. "Are you suggesting what I think you are?"

She nodded.

He rolled onto his back, studying her through a dream-like trance. The thought of her exquisite mouth wrapped around his cock pitched his heart into a triple beat. She rubbed his budding erection with the palm of her hand, her eyes widening with every low growl from his throat. Seemingly bolstered by this new form of power over him, she ran her hands up and down the rigid shaft, watching it expand and lengthen.

"Sit up, Morgan," she whispered breathily.

Only a foolish man would wait for a second invitation. He pushed himself up and, resting on his elbows, watched her position herself between his legs.

Intense pleasure rushed up his spine, spreading out to every limb when she ran her tongue over his sensitized tip. She licked her lips and took him slowly into her mouth. His cock throbbed and pulsed with a life of its own as she sucked and tugged, finding a rhythm to match a skilled courtesan's.

Long moments later, she pulled her head back and looked up at him, triumph blazing in her dark green eyes. "Does that feel good, or do I need more practice?"

His breathing erratic, his bollocks tightened with pain, he rasped. "Witch."

A bold smile parted her lush lips, and then her tongue licked each side of him, hovering near the tip again. His body ached with anticipation. What would she do next? Her teeth nibbled at the swollen head, toying with him. She took him in her mouth again and sucked him greedily, drawing from him an unbearable longing. Morgan stared and his body jerked spasmodically from the sight and sensation. Christ, it was indescribable. If he didn't stop her, he would end up spurting in her mouth at any second. He didn't want to end the blissful torment, yet the overwhelming need to feel her womb contract around his cock compelled him to stop her.

Wheezing with raw desire, gently he pulled from her mouth, reached down and drew her up to him. "Forgive me, love. If you keep that up, it will be over in a heartbeat."

"Killjoy." She teased, looking at him with hot desire.

"My turn now," he whispered against her mouth.

"I'm all yours; take me."

"I intend to, but not in the same manner." He nudged her legs apart and found her sensitive nub, stroking it with his thumb. Beneath the silver light of the moon, her eyes glossed over with intense need beneath.

She moaned her pleasure and rocked her hips against his hand. "What do you mean . . . what are you about now?" Covering her nipple with his mouth, he suckled her until her spine arched up into his assault. "Oh, God, Morgan, how do you do this to me?"

"Do what, baby?"

"Make my body want yours so badly it hurts."

He gazed into her eyes. "I know you want me, but do you trust me?"

She nodded slowly.

"Liv, do you trust me wholeheartedly?"

She bit her lip, her eyes searching his. "I don't know what you mean. Just love me, Morgan."

He slipped a finger inside her wet, warm sex, stroking and probing, bringing her to a heightened frenzy until her nimble body undulated beneath him. She cried out as he pleased her, moving his finger in and out slowly until she was on the brink of orgasm.

"Oh, no you don't," he said, licking her ear. "Not yet."

With little effort, he flipped her onto her stomach and pinned her with his body. Nuzzling his face in her neck, he kissed her hot skin. "Remember the night you told me about your first visit to *Immortelles*? Taunted me until I was so hard and hot for you I almost took you in the coach?"

He couldn't see her face, didn't know what she was thinking, but suddenly her body grew very still. "You did?"

"It took every ounce of control to sit there calmly and pretend your words didn't faze me." He ran his hand down the length of her spine and across her smooth bottom.

"Do you know what they call women who tease men?"

"Morgan." She moaned, her body quivering.

"No, not Morgan. They call them cock-teasers."

"Don't torment me." Her words escaped between short, rapid bursts of air.

His fingers found the lips of her sex again and her body jerked when he massaged the swollen tissue. "Jesus, Liv, you are so tight, so wet and ready for me, aren't you, baby?"

She groaned into the pillow.

He aroused her with a prolonged, circular motion and at the same time whispered in her ear. "I told myself right then and there I would take you that way, from behind, the first chance I got."

Her spine stiffened. "No! You can't mean to—"

"Yes, I'm going to take you that way now."

"I'm not ready," she said on a shivering whisper.

He removed his finger. "Trust me, Liv, you're more than ready, and I have something that will help." The aroma of lavender wafted over them. "Oil," he said.

She moaned as he rubbed the tepid oil between her butt cheeks, returning again with his finger to the orifice above her sex. "Oh, God, you can't do that, it won't fit."

"Remember what I said about trusting me? I'm going to make you completely mine so you'll never think about another man again. It will hurt at first and then it will drive you mad."

A shudder claimed her as he entered her laggardly and slid into her anal cavity with a low growl. A plaintive moan escaped her lips, and her hips bucked against the intrusion. He buried only the head of his shaft, waiting for her to adjust to the width. Her muscles contracted around him, the sensations so euphoric he had to stop and catch his breath. She grabbed onto the sheets and sank her hips into the mattress, but he followed her down and pushed into her slowly. She cried out, and her muscles instinctively tightened again, driving him into a wild frenzy. The scents of oil, sweat and sex mingled, eliciting another primordial groan from him.

He clutched her hips and held her immobile. She undulated, writhed and strained despite his firm grip, pushing back against him like a cat in heat. He exulted in the power, realizing he had taken her beyond herself. She didn't want him to stop but spurred him

on, her body glistening with perspiration, her hips rocking hard against him, her mouth crying out his name.

He had never been so hot, was so consumed with want and need he thought he might die from it. Liquid fire coursed through his blood. He moved in and out with precision-like thrusts. She whimpered shamelessly, betraying how much she wanted him, wanted this. His pleasure peaked on a delirious plateau. The breath left his body, then rushed into his lungs. Her tight anal muscles relaxed to accept him deeply and fully. She shook and trembled under him, and her hands clawed the bed sheets as prisms of cascading lights danced behind his eyelids. He took her like a beast, reveling in the sight of her sheathing his cock while he drove into her. She sobbed his name, and it echoed around him, dissolving any control he struggled to maintain. Tears ran down her face and shimmered in the pale silver moonlight. Her body went rigid, and she exploded around him in a wave of tremors.

With a final thrust, he buried himself deep inside her, his release rendering him weak and breathless. He collapsed on top of her damp body, his sweat blending with hers.

Long minutes later, he rolled off of her and drew her into his arms. She said nothing, and for a moment he wondered if he had hurt her. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, my God," she said. And then said it again. "Incredibly all right."

His breath erratic, he said, "I apologize for my rough treatment of you. I'm not always such an animal, but my desire for you renders me incapable of rational thinking."

"Hmm," she whispered, her eyes drifting shut. "Lunacy just moved to the top of my list."

He laughed and kissed her forehead. "It's been a long time since I've been with a woman."

"You expect me to believe you've lived the life of a eunuch while you owned a brothel?"

"It's true. I had no desire to touch another woman, much less think about making love to one."

He felt her smile against his damp skin. He couldn't remember the last time she had smiled at him. More than anything he wanted her to trust him, love him with all her heart. "That pleases you, does it?"

She nodded.

"I have more to confess."

"Yes."

He clasped her tighter. "I left for France to get away from these crazy feelings I have for you."

"For three years? What was I supposed to think?"

"I had no choice. Your father was still alive, and the only way I could honor his wish was to leave the damn country."

She sighed. "I believed you thought of me as a sister."

"It seems we've been at cross purposes, since I assumed you regarded me as a brother." He stroked the hair at the side of her head. "Now that your father is gone, I no longer feel obligated to stay away from you, and I won't."

"Preston," she whispered.

He yanked on her hair, forcing her to look at him. "Goddamn it, Liv, did you just call me Preston?"

She shook her head.

"What the hell then? Oh, my God, it was Preston you saw that night?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Thank you, baby. I thought so, but I couldn't be sure until you identified him."

"Do you think he's the killer?"

"I'm not sure, but I hired someone to watch him so he can't get to you."

"You hired someone to watch him?" she asked incredulously.

"After Cain and Lark's engagement celebration, I hired Pinkerton agents to watch him *and* James Linden."

"What a blind bat I've been. Even then, you cared."

"Cared? I've loved you from the moment I kissed you ten years ago."

Her fingers searched through his silky strands of hair. "What can I do to make it up to you?"

"Marry me, Liv, please."



She blew a long breath and banged her head against his chest. "My father would turn over in his grave. You know what he stipulated in his will. You are hardly considered a respected member of the gentry."

"Fuck your father's will," he said, an unpleasant memory surfacing. "I've paid my debt over what I did to you and I'm wealthier than your father ever was."

"I don't think he was concerned about money, but rather my reputation."

"Why won't you accept me?" He would no longer allow Thaddeus's demands to come between them. Morgan's love for her was too powerful. "I'm from a good family, and you know there's not a man or woman in Savannah who would dare speak out against our union."

"You own a brothel, for God's sake."

Reaching for her hand, he entwined their fingers. "No one knows about that, and I've made arrangements to sell it to Madame Rousseau."

"You have?"

"Yes, I can afford to keep you in the manner in which you are accustomed, and you can tell your brother to keep the damn inheritance—the entire amount."

"You mean, I went through all this for nothing? I don't need my inheritance after all?"

"Definitely not if you agree to marry me."

"You're a notorious debaucher of women—old habits are hard to break," she said lightheartedly.

"For every woman I took to my bed, it was your sweet lips I kissed, your voice I heard, your scent drifting around me."

Her body went still. Something was spinning around in that pretty little head.

"What are they?" he asked, long seconds later.

"What are what?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Your terms."

"How did you know?"

"I know you so well I can read your thoughts."

"Frightening."

"Marry me," he said again.

"You have to get by Cook first."

"Piece of cake," he said, scrunching up his face. "What's the second condition?"

"Celibacy."

"What!"

She dazzled him with a beautiful smile. "If you can remain celibate until the wedding, I'll marry you."

He pulled her head back gently and studied her face. "Jesus! You're dead serious."

"Quite," she said.

"You're not talking about other women now, are you?"

"Nope."

"I was afraid you'd say that. All right, but what's the rationale behind your demand?"

"I need to know you're marrying me out of love, not lust."

"When will Lark and Cain marry?"

"Four months from now."

An oath left his lips. "Four months?"

She nodded.

A humorless shriek left his lips. "I'll have to convince them to move it up to next week."

She giggled.

"I can't kiss or touch you?"

"Yes, you can kiss me, touch me, do everything but—"

"Fuck you senseless?"

"Morgan!"

"All right," he said smugly. "I accept your challenge, madam."

"Why do you sound so sure of yourself?"

"I can't wait until I hear the words coming from that lovely little mouth."

"What words?"

"These words," he said against her mouth. "Morgan, please."

Slapping him playfully, another giggle found her. "It won't happen."

"It won't?" He rolled her onto her back, his fingers drifting to the curls between her legs.

She looked into his glazed eyes and shook her head.

"How about when I do this," he asked and slipped a finger into her sex.

She trembled. "I've lost already." She panted, her legs opening for him of their own volition. Heady with desire, she wondered if it would always be this way. Morgan had only to touch her and she became a limp rag in his arms.

He thrust in and out of her with measured strokes. "Our agreement doesn't begin until tomorrow."

"It doesn't?" she shuddered.

"Not unless you want it to start right now."

Her eyes clouded like a stormy sea, and she met his hot mouth with hers, gasping as his thumb stroked her clitoris. Undulating beneath his fingers, she grabbed a shank of his hair and hissed against his lips, "Take me, Morgan, please."

## Chapter Twenty

The torchlight flickered inside. Shadows leaped against the walls.

Hers.

His.

The cold air bit into his arms, his face, but he ignored its sting. Emotion welled in his heart.

Revenge. Hatred.

He'd ridden for miles in the moonlight, tracked her to this godforsaken place where *he'd* brought her. Had she gone willingly, or had he forced her?

He hated her. She had killed his love with a dull knife, stabbed it into his heart. She was dead—nothing but a whore who no longer existed.

Like Abby and the other unnamed bitch he'd killed.

*Like his mother.*

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and expel the voices. Mostly *hers*, the slut that brought him into this world.

"Kill her," she raged. "Kill her now."

He watched the stars. How they shone and twinkled, like the light in Venus's eyes.

His Venus.

"Steal the light from her eyes. Do it now while you have the chance."

Frustration and anger rose in his chest to join the hate and vengeful need. She thought she could leave him. Thought he'd never find her.

She didn't understand. Never had. She was inside him like a spirit. He held her close at night. Inhaled her scent, tasted her sweet lips. And no matter what, she could never escape.

He should have taken her when he had the chance. But he'd found her now. He could find her if she went to the ends of the earth.

His cold hands found his pockets. And the garrote, *and the knife*. He ran his fingers across the serrated blade and savored the warm, sticky blood on his cold flesh.

His gaze was locked on the window where she slept.

With him.

The thought brought him to his knees. Pain roared in his head. He covered his ears and rocked back and forth on the hard ground.

He was so cold.

"Take her, my son. Take her life now." The eerie whisper wrapped around him in a warm cloak.

"I will take her, Mama, and I will kill her. I swear by all that's holy. Then I will come to you, Mama. No one will ever separate us again. Wait for me, watch for me."

His voice broke on a sob, and he hated himself for it.

"Weakling," she accused.

"White-livered milksop," she whined.

"Coward," she screeched.

"Stop! Please stop!"

He stood and walked to the hedge, climbing over it while brushing the tears away.

Tomorrow, Venus would die.

\* \* \* \* \*

A rain-kissed breeze drifted through the bedchamber window as the sun rose. Morgan slept beside her, his arm draped across her chest, his leg entangled with hers. For some odd reason, it became fiercely important to memorize every feature of his face. Even in sleep, he was a study in perfection—the angular planes of his cheekbones sharp and defined, the perfectly shaped eyebrows and generous mouth—and all hers now. Not wishing to wake him, she extricated herself and whispered, "Mine forever."

Banished from the room last night, Bandit, the faithful mastiff, now whined pitifully outside the door. The poor thing surely needed to relieve himself after all this time, and she would dearly love to see the flower garden she'd noticed on the way in yesterday.

With one last glance at the bed, she opened the door and grabbed the hound by his leather collar. "Come, boy, let's go greet the sun."

Olivia made her way to the kitchen, met by an enticing aroma of freshly brewed coffee and sourdough biscuits wafting through the manor.

Nan greeted her with a smile. "Morning, Miss. I didn't expect to see you up and about so early."

"Still in my nightshirt," she replied sheepishly. "I thought I might wander through the flower garden and cut some fresh blossoms for the table."

Nan handed her a sharp-edged knife and poured her a cup of coffee, adding an ample dose of heavy cream. "Take your time. Breakfast won't be served for another hour yet." She turned to look at Bandit pawing at the door. "Found yourself a friend there, Miss Olivia."

"I don't mind," she replied. "He is rather comforting to have around."

Olivia meandered through the yard until she found the cobblestone walk leading to the garden. A profusion of dew-kissed blossoms greeted her—white lilies, blue stars and Queen Anne's Lace anchored the center, surrounded by red honeysuckle, yarrow, and purple clematis. To the right, asters and coneflowers stood guard, to the left, spiderwort and ageratum. Meticulously arranged, the flowerbeds were a beautiful sight.

Bandit let out a shrill bark and took chase after a gray cottontail as it sprinted toward the forest at the far end of the yard. Olivia's gaze followed the hound until he disappeared from sight and then she headed for the clusters of lilies. How wonderful they would look in a vase next to the eggplant coneflowers.

As she turned toward the flowers with knife in hand, the faint sound of a twig snapped beneath someone's foot. She smiled. Morgan had awakened and meant to surprise her. Feeling unusually playful, she ignored the subtle tread of footsteps, another and another, advancing behind her. An eerie feeling overtook her, and the fine hairs at the nape of her neck rose. It was too quiet. Her senses launched into full alert, warning her stomach a sickening dread would find it soon. Without turning around, she searched for Bandit at the edge of the forest and prayed he would suddenly appear. Straightening her spine, she spun around quickly, and gasped.

"You!"

"Hello, Venus."

"What are you doing here?"

"I've come to take you away. To save you from a wretched death."

"Save me? I don't understand."

"You will soon."

Oh, God, of all people, what was he doing here? Why had he followed her? "How did you know where I was?"

"I always know where you are." He extended his arm and offered her a black rose.

Her stomach sickened. "Oh, God, it's you, it's been you all along."

""Yes, darling, I had to kill them, don't you see?"

"Had to kill them?" Trembling, she clutched the knife in her hand. The crazed look in his eyes terrified her. He meant to kill her, too.

"I couldn't let them die the way my mother did, writhing in pain, their beautiful bodies ravaged until nothing but skin and bones remained." Tears clouded his blue eyes. His voice almost a whisper, he held out his hand. "We must leave this place now, before it's too late."

"You won't get away with it. Morgan will find me." Bracing for battle, she raised the knife in the air, every muscle in her body screaming out in fear.

His face crimson with rage, he screamed, "Blasphemy and damnation! Do not speak his name! He has no place in our lives!"

Redmond lunged through the air and tackled her to the ground. Their bodies rolled and tumbled as he fought to take the knife from her. Dust spiraled up her nose, and her elbows and knees burned with scrapes from the rough cobblestone. She was a poor match against the strength and momentum of his big, powerfully built body. Within seconds, he had disarmed her and pinned her beneath his bulky frame. Hot breath fanned her cheeks, and cold fingers dug painfully into her skin as he grabbed the front of her nightshirt and ripped it down the middle. Frantic with terror, she struck blindly, kneeling him in the groin. He rewarded her with a punishing blow to her face, and white lights exploded behind her eyelids. *This can't be happening.*

"You betrayed me!" he said.

Too stunned to fight with the knife at her throat, she remained still. Her life flashed behind her eyelids, and Morgan's face. *Oh, God, please don't take me away. So soon . . . so soon.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan awoke and ran his hand down the sheets at his side, searching for Liv's warm body. *Damnation, where has that fool woman run off to so early in the morning?* At the thought of their all-night lovemaking, a ghost of a smile parted his lips. He was utterly bewitched by the woman, hopelessly in love with her, and she had finally agreed to marry him. The sensual fog enveloping him lifted, replaced moments later by an odd feeling of panic. No harm could come to her at the cottage. He had made sure no one had followed them, and few people in Savannah knew about the secluded guest home. In a surreal state between impending doom and inane vulnerability, he wondered if he would live every day with an overwhelming compulsion to protect her from harm. Yes, he knew he would. There was nothing to do except speak to her immediately and inform her that until the madman was caught, she must stay within arm's reach at all times. They had come too far for something to happen now, and the thought of her no longer in his life

elicited a pain he'd never believed imaginable. Liv was his life, meant everything in the world to him, and soon she would be his forever.

Fighting off increasing panic, Morgan rose from bed and slipped on his trousers. Nan would be in the kitchen by now, hopefully, enjoying a cup of tea with the magnificent woman who had captured his heart. Shirtless and barefooted, he wandered into the kitchen.

"Morning, Mister Gatewood," Nan said with a smile. "Breakfast will be ready soon."

A breath he hadn't realized he held escaped from his lips. "Have you seen Olivia this morning, Nan?"

"Yes, sir, she left about thirty minutes ago," Nan said, adding with a cheeky chuckle, "armed with knife and accompanied by the hound."

"Knife?"

"To cut flowers, Mister Gatewood."

Terror froze him for several seconds. "Thirty minutes ago. Shouldn't she be back by now?"

The sudden look of concern on Nan's face did little to relieve the dread claiming him. Morgan sprinted across the kitchen and out the back door, running faster than he'd ever run. Every muscle and nerve in his body warned him of imminent danger. How could he have let his guard down? She told him she saw something in the yard, yet he was so consumed with lust for her he'd discarded her claim, and believed she'd seen nothing more than shifting shadows. He wanted to pound his fist into a tree, scream his rage to the heavens. The morning air was deadly still, too still. He vaulted toward the garden, his lungs scorched from lack of oxygen. He heard a blood-curdling scream. Oh, Christ, Olivia!

Impotent rage blinded him at the sight of the man holding her to the earth. Cold, hard steel glinted beneath the morning sun, the tip of the knife pressed against her delicate throat. Morgan lunged through the air, grabbed the man around the waist and propelled them both into a nearby cluster of purple blossoms. Out of the corner of his eye, Morgan was aware of Liv scrambling to her knees. Beyond rage, he delivered a succession of punishing blows to the man's face.



"Stop, Morgan," she rasped. "He's unconscious."

"I'm going to kill the bastard!"

"Morgan!"

Through a haze he turned toward her voice. Blood trickled from the corner of her lip, and a large purple bruise had already formed above her cheekbone. Lifting himself from the man's still body, he rushed toward her and took her into his arms. "Christ, are you all right?" he asked, his voice hoarse with relief.

She nodded feebly. "It's Redmond, Cain's valet."

"Don't talk right now." He cupped her face in his hands. "Let me check for broken bones."

"I don't think anything is broken."

He scooped her into his arms and rose, scanning the area for Bandit. "Where is that damn dog when you need him?"

Her eyes glazed over with pain, she stared into his. "He took after a rabbit and hasn't returned—"

"Never mind about that now, I'll get you to the cottage and send for a physician."

"She doesn't need a physician." His voice colder than granite, Redmond suddenly stepped in front of them and blocked their path. "A tactical error, my friend," he said, the gun in his hand pointed at Liv's heart. "Never leave a man bent on revenge unattended."

Without hesitation, Morgan replied. "You might get off one shot, but it will be the last thing you do before I rip your heart out."

"Put her down and back away." The revolver quavered in his hands. "*Now!*"

In that infinitesimal moment of uncertainty, a thousand images of Liv flashed through Morgan's brain. He couldn't lose her, nor could he turn her over to this maniac.

A crazed look flashed across Redmond's features. "I must save her from a wretched death." His eyes rolled in their sockets, and his mouth took on a malevolent twist. "She belongs to me, not to you."

"Morgan," Liv said through tears, her voice weak. "Put me down."

Redmond cocked the gun. "Do it!"

Gently, Morgan lowered Liv to the ground and stepped in front of her, shielding her battered body from the man's line of fire.

"Not a problem," Redmond said. "I saved the first bullet for you."

Out of nowhere, Bandit flew through the air, his fangs sinking into the soft flesh of Redmond's forearm. A sharp retort broke the eerie stillness, followed by a strangled scream as the dog slammed the man into the hard-packed earth. Blood arced and streamed through the air when the powerful Mastiff severed Redmond's jugular vein. Morgan closed his eyes against the bloody scene.

"Heel! Heel!" Morgan shouted moments later, bringing the dog under control. "Don't look, Liv," he said, scooping her into his arms again and sprinting toward the cottage. Howard met them at the end of the path, shotgun in hand. "He's dead, back there by the garden." Morgan nodded over his shoulder. "Get that scum off my property."

"Yes, sir," Howard replied, walking briskly in the direction Morgan indicated.

Nan called out from the kitchen door. "Good heavens, what happened?"

Morgan swept passed the woman and cleared the table with one swipe of his arm, laying Liv down gently. "Stay with her, Nan, while I go for Dr. Borders."

"Yes, sir, she'll be in good hands."

He stroked her face. Jesus, he didn't want to relinquish her. "Go, now, Mister Gatewood," Nan whispered, looking at Olivia's still form. "No harm will come to her."

He released her completely, stealing one last look at her pale face. Her eyes closed, her mouth slack, she reminded him of an innocent child in slumber. He hadn't seen or felt any broken bones, but what about internal injuries? The thought crushed him.

With helpless wrath, Morgan fled from the kitchen and retrieved Valor from the stable, racing across the countryside like a crazed demon. Rage clawed at his gut, rage against a dead man who deserved nothing better after killing Abby and Molly, and rage against his own idiocy. All the wasted years, years he could have spent with Liv if he had only stood up to her father and admitted his love for her. Numb from shock, he brought Valor to a stiff-legged halt, jumped from the mount and knocked on the door.

"Doc, Doc Borders! Is anyone home?"

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

The air was cool outside Morgan's bedchamber window. Doctor Borders had just dispensed a heavy dose of laudanum to Olivia and declared that a week's rest in bed would cure her. Through a vaporous fog, she learned of her condition at the same time the elderly doctor delivered a full report to Morgan, "No broken bones, nothing internally disarranged, only minor scrapes and bruises."

Even in her decreased state of awareness, she heard Morgan's tremendous sigh of relief whisper around her. He ushered Borders to the door and returned to sit beside her on the bed. Catching a strand of her hair in his hand, he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "How do you feel?"

"Cousin to a rag doll run over a dozen times by an ox cart."

"I have just the thing that will make you better," he said, holding up a jar of liniment. "Nan's concoction, and she swears by it."

She plugged her nose as he removed the lid. "It's odious, reminds me of swamp water."

"Lay back, baby, allow me to bring relief to those aching muscles."

Gently, he untied her nightgown and opened it, leaving her breasts bare. When his hand coasted gently across her tender skin, she couldn't help the quick intake of breath.

"Does that hurt?"

"No." She sighed and closed her eyes. "It feels heavenly."

Soon, his hands encircled her waist, and she felt the sweet need of desire blossom within her. She opened her eyes and looked into his. "If you keep this up, you know where it's going to lead, don't you?"

"Shameless, aren't I, forcing myself on an invalid?" His hand burned over her thigh, moving lower until it found the moist, silken depths of her sex. "Want me to stop?"

Her legs mushier than putty, her lips too, she croaked out a feeble, "Utterly shameless."

"You have only to ask and I'll stop."

"I might have to horsewhip you if you do," she said, expelling a long sigh.

Morgan's lips moved in, silencing her. After thoroughly kissing her, he pulled back. "If we're going to get the whip out, let me give you a lesson first on how to use one."

Clinging to him like a child, she couldn't help the chuckle.

On a more serious note, he whispered, "Ah. This is so unfair."

"What's unfair?" she asked, finding it difficult to concentrate on his words.

"You are injured, and I've never desired you more."

"Injured? If I'm not mistaken, I heard Dr. Borders say broken bones and internal injuries didn't exist."

Raising one perfect black eyebrow he asked, "Is that an invitation to continue?"

"It's a demand for services, milord, and if you stop now, I shall hate you through all eternity."

"What about our bargain?"

She placed a hand to his cheek. "You've more than proved you love me."

He gave her a wide-eyed look and pushed her gown farther open, exposing the full length of her naked body. "Who am I to turn away from a damsel in distress?"

Gone was the frenzy, the wild, crazy lovemaking that had brought her to the gates of heaven, but she found no fault with this new gentle torment. Morgan loved her with exquisite tenderness, picking up where he'd left off last night. Olivia basked in the sensual delight of his skillful hands skimming every bruise and achy muscle until she was mindless with heat and desire. Riding the tides of passion, drenched in sweat and love, Olivia clutched his shoulders as the world turned on its axis. His lips close to her ear, he whispered, "I love you, Liv, my heart, my soul."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lark and Cain visited three days later, her soon-to-be-sister-in-law fussing over her like a mother hen, her brother begging her forgiveness for agreeing to such a foolish venture in the first place.

Cain's brown eyes hardened. "Redmond, of all people. Good God!"

After a moment of silence, Liv shook her head. "Don't blame yourself, none of us could have known."

"That's the problem," Cain said, "what do we really know about any of the servants working at *L'Esperance*?"

"Or anywhere, when it comes to that," Lark said.

"What caused him do such a thing?" Liv asked reflectively.

"Wilkerson has done some investigating, a little too late, I know," Cain said with sarcasm. "It seems Redmond came from a very dubious background. His mother died in a whore—in a brothel when he was a young lad."

Lark, the epitome of effervescence intervened. "Must we continue to talk about this? It's all behind us now."

Morgan's gaze strayed to Liv snuggled into a bevy of plump pillows behind her back. "I need a drink, Cain, and I'm certain Lark and Liv have an endless list of topics to catch up on."

Taking the cue, Cain rose from the bed and leaned down to kiss his sister on the forehead. "I'll return shortly. Save some spicy tidbits for me, will you?"

"The spiciest." Liv winked.

Lark plopped gently onto the bed the moment they left the room. "Is it true? Cain says Morgan and you will marry the same day we do?"

"It's true," she said joyfully. "Everything happened so fast, I don't know where to begin."

"At the beginning, of course, love."

\* \* \* \* \*

Warm winds blew, and the sun shone the day Lark and Cain and Olivia and Morgan married. Morgan had tried his best to convince everyone to move the wedding to early October. Failing in that endeavor, he attempted to cajole Liv into a quickly arranged ceremony with a Justice of the Peace. She had waited an eternity, she explained, to marry with friends and family in attendance and celebrate the joyful occasion on the same day Lark and Cain married. In the end, Morgan had no choice but to begrudgingly acquiesce.

Merriment and laughter shook the rafters at *L'Esperance* as the celebration wandered into the wee hours of the morning. Carried beyond themselves with joy, Rance and Dyann Gatewood welcomed their new daughter-in-law with open arms.

Liv studied Morgan as he exited the study and walked toward her with a smile that stopped her heart. "Whatever riled the men in there," she said, "I hope you plan to share it with me."

Morgan shook his head and clucked his tongue against his cheek. "My father is placing bets on who will produce the first child, the Breedloves or the Gatewoods."

"Scandalous," Liv said.

"Quite," Morgan replied, "But I'm afraid you'll have to adjust now that they are family and love you to distraction."

"Oh, I will adjust quite well." She took his hand and led him toward the stairway. "Come, we must not disappoint my new father-in-law."

"I'm eternally at your service, madam," he said, his voice filled with love.

**~The End~**

#### **About the Author**

Keta lives on a historical, environmental lake where the cold wind blows and snowflakes in the winter are as prevalent as mosquitoes in the summer. Only a mile from a quaint resort town, tourists come in caravans to shop, water ski, and cruise the lakes from sunup to sundown.

As a reporter for a local newspaper, when she's not covering County Board meetings and various City Council Meetings, she reads, dabbles in genealogy, and writes . . . and then write some more.

Keta writes erotic historical romance and erotic fantasy.

\* \* \* \* \*

If you enjoyed Decadent Deceptions by Keta Diablo, you might also like the following books from Noble Romance Publishing:

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