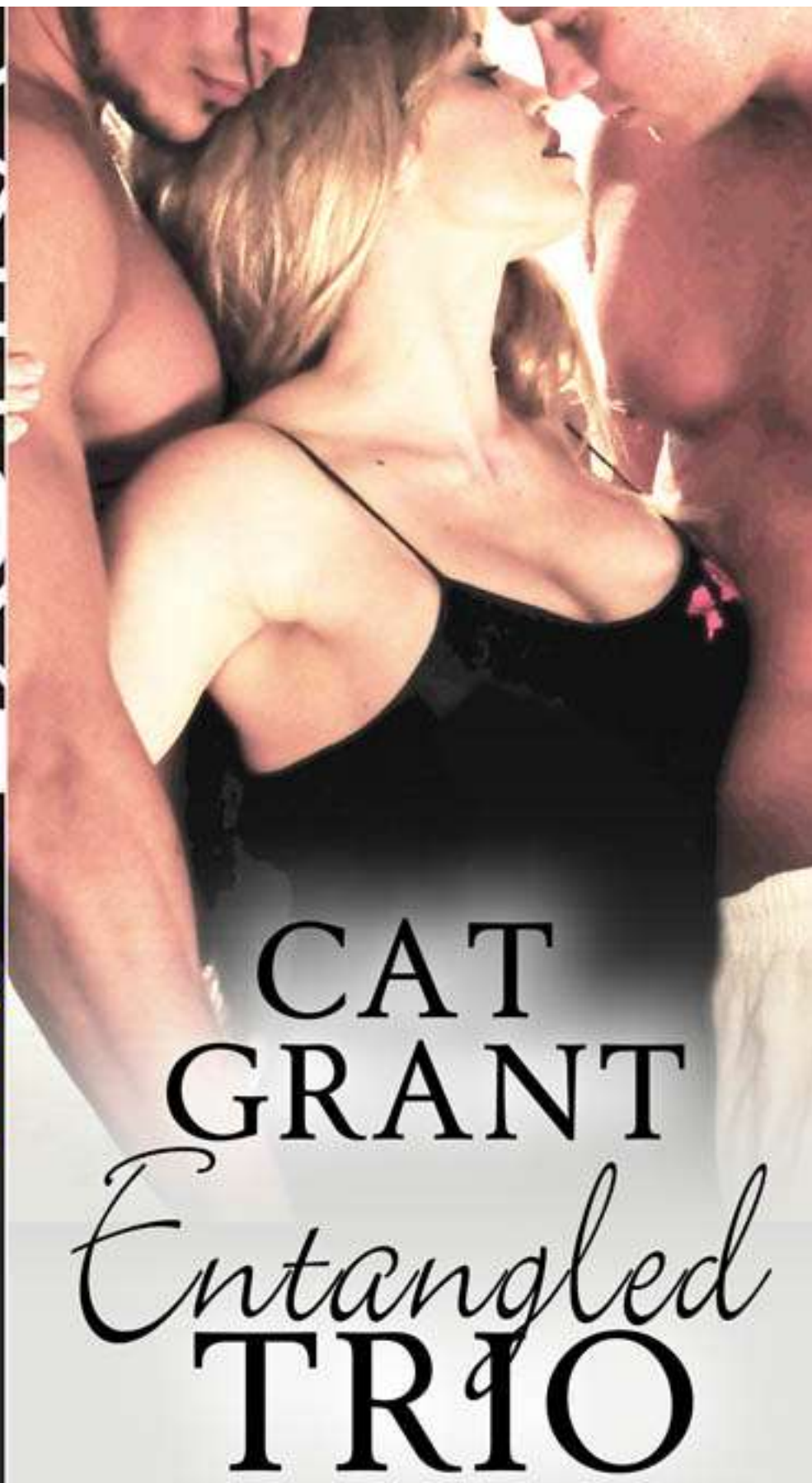


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*Entangled*  
TRIO



## Entangled Trio

Cat Grant

Renowned mezzo-soprano Colette DuPlessis is carrying on a torrid affair with her costar, handsome young tenor David Lewis. David wants Colette as more than just a short-term fling, but she must return home to Paris—and her husband, conductor Aleksandr Petrovsky.

Though she and Aleks have an open marriage, Colette vows never to see David again. But when her new costar cancels right before opening night, she has no choice but to suggest David as a replacement.

It doesn't take long before Aleks notices the amazing chemistry sizzling between David and his wife—and realizes he's attracted to the gorgeous young singer himself. He and Colette quickly make it their mission to seduce him.

The three of them explore the far reaches of pain and pleasure. But Colette and David both soon learn they must guard their hearts closely, or risk losing themselves within this entangled trio.

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Entangled Trio

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*Entangled Trio*

**Cat Grant**

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### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## Chapter One

The warm water pouring down Colette's skin felt like slick, decadent heaven after singing her heart out onstage for the past three hours. Moaning softly, she pushed her head under the spray and massaged her scalp with her fingertips. The heavy, itchy brunette wig she wore every performance never failed to give her a headache, but she couldn't very well play Delilah, temptress of the Philistines, with blonde hair.

It didn't take long before every muscle in her body went pleasantly limp. All she wanted right now was to slip on a silky nightgown and tumble into bed. Closing nights always left her exhausted. So much energy focused and channeled into one last performance, then the rush of taking that final bow as the audience jumped to their feet, cheering and shouting "Bravo!" And then the curtain came down, and it was all over. Six long weeks of rehearsals and performances, gone by in a flash.

A familiar hollow ache curled in Colette's stomach. This was her least favorite part of closing nights—the inevitable emotional drop that made her want to curl up in a ball and cry. Ah, well, it would pass. A glass or two of champagne at the farewell party always lifted her spirits.

She was about to shut off the water and climb out when a muffled noise from her dressing room made her spin around and nearly lose her footing. Gripping the shower rail, she righted herself just as the bathroom door swung open. One look at the tall, slender figure standing on the other side of the foggy glass made her breath sail from her lungs. She knew who it had to be before he poked his head in the shower, but that didn't stop her heart from thumping—in relief and more than a touch of exasperation.

"David? For God's sake, are you insane? What possessed you to—"

His huge, white-toothed grin faded, but only a little. "Sorry. Thought you wouldn't mind a surprise, seeing as it's our last night and all. Don't worry—nobody saw me come in." He jerked his chin in her direction. "Want some company?"

He stood there in his robe and Act Three costume—a skimpy loincloth that left very little to the imagination. Not many tenors could pull off the brawny strong-man look, but luckily David Lewis was both young enough and fit enough to do the role of Samson justice. His gorgeous, sinewy arms and well-muscled torso had attracted as much notice as his beautiful voice. His adoring fans—of both sexes—mobbed the stage door after every performance, squealing and begging for autographs as if he were Mick Jagger.

The attention didn't seem to faze him though. He merely laughed it off and refused to take it seriously, even when the opera house staff fawned over him like they did with all the lead singers. In fact, from the day they'd met six weeks ago at the start of rehearsals, David's own attention had been focused squarely on her. She'd been both amazed and touched the first time he'd fetched her a scarf when her throat became chilled. Then a few days later, after a particularly strenuous run-through of the score, he'd brought her a cup of her favorite chamomile tea. He'd even added a dollop of the organic



honey she adored so much. They had quiet, intimate dinners, long conversations about music, their favorite roles and the exciting cities they'd visited. He'd worshipped her with his eyes, treated her like the goddesses she portrayed onstage. It had been ages since anyone had pursued her like that, showering her with such sincere and unabashed adoration. She'd found it flattering—and incredibly arousing.

Even now, blood rushed into her cheeks and inspired a deep, moist itch between her thighs. Fortunately, he had just the cure for it. Nodding at David's costume, she purred, "Get that ridiculous thing off and get in here."

The robe was easy enough to discard, but the loincloth was another story. It wound around David's waist and between his thighs, but he couldn't seem to find where it unfastened. And judging from the rather impressive bulge in front, it appeared to be growing more uncomfortable by the second. "Shit!" he muttered. "I knew I should've paid closer attention when Martin wrapped me in it."

"What are you waiting for? Just tear it off!"

"Are you kidding? He'll kill me." The San Francisco Opera's wardrobe master was a crusty, formidable figure who didn't take abuse of the company's property lightly. Woe betide any singer who sent back a costume with so much as a loose button. Even stars like Domingo and Alagna feared his righteous wrath.

Watching him struggle with the stubborn scrap of cloth soon became frustrating—not to mention chilly. No point standing here in a draft. She shut off the water and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around herself as she stepped from the shower. David's arms snaked around her waist, pulling her close, his lips fastening on that sensitive pulse point throbbing steadily in her throat. The musky scent of his perspiration filled her nostrils, making her head spin. She clung to him with a sigh, nails digging into his shoulders.

"You were amazing tonight," he whispered in between kisses. "I've never heard you in better voice. And you looked so fiery and radiant in the last scene—"

"You should talk. You're the one who literally brought the house down. Almost on top of me, in fact." She held up her right wrist, where a stray chunk of broken plywood and Styrofoam painted to look like stone had scraped off a small patch of skin.

His pale blue eyes went wide. "God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that!"

"It's just a scratch. Believe me, I've had worse. This isn't the first time I've dodged falling scenery." The concern lingering on his face caught at her heart, but she shrugged it off and coaxed him back down to her, hungry for his warm, wet mouth on her skin. It felt so delicious, she wanted it to go on forever...

Then she remembered she was flying home tomorrow. Home to Paris—and Aleks. Wouldn't do to show up covered in another man's love bites. "I know a better use for those beautiful lips of yours," she murmured, sliding onto the edge of the cool white marble vanity. Her towel dropped to the floor.

The air was thick with steam, wispy, humid tendrils that turned David's naturally wavy brown hair into a riot of springy curls. Still in his loincloth, he looked like a deliciously debauched Cupid, sans wings and bow. His gaze fastened on the thick, moist thatch between her thighs a split second before he knelt to bury his face there.

Grabbing a handful of hair, she ground herself against his mouth. He opened wide and sucked hard on her clit, sliding a finger deep inside her, working her G-spot in tandem with hot, moist flicks of

his tongue. Every inch of her body now slick with fresh sweat, she rode his mouth and hand until she couldn't hold back a moment longer. Head thrown back, she let out a soft cry and came right into his mouth.

David took his time licking her clean, then stood and leaned in to kiss her. Colette savored the bittersweet flavor of her own juices still clinging to his lips. It was nice being pleased by a clean-shaven man for a change. Aleks' beard always chafed when he went down on her.

"Another inspired performance," she murmured. "You've been waiting for this all evening, haven't you?"

"Y-You know I have..." He sounded as if he'd just run a marathon—and was more than willing to do it all over again. Poor darling had given her relief, while taking none for himself. "God, Colette, I need you so bad—"

A soft rap on the bathroom door made them both jump. "Madame DuPlessis? Are you all right in there?"

It was Katie, her dresser. She'd gone to return Colette's costume to the wardrobe department, but Colette had asked her to come back to help her dress for the party. But now, thanks to her impromptu romp with David, she needed another shower.

"I'll be out in a few minutes," Colette called, holding a finger to her lips to shush David. "I'm wearing the black gown in that garment bag hanging in the closet. Would you get it ready for me, please?"

"Of course, Madame."

They held their collective breath until Katie's footsteps faded away, then David whispered, "How the hell am I supposed to get out of here without her seeing me?"

"Wait until she and I both leave, then slip out. Take your time getting ready. We don't want to show up at the party within five minutes of each other."

"All right." He sighed. "Although I don't know who you think we're fooling."

"Do as I say, *mon cheri*. We need to be discreet."

She climbed back in the shower for a quick rinse-off, then threw on her robe and wrapped her wet hair in a towel. David shot her the world's most forlorn look as she blew him a quick kiss before stepping out into her dressing room. He really was quite sweet. They hadn't even said their final goodbyes, and she already missed him.

It was a relatively spacious dressing room compared to the cramped backstage facilities at older opera houses like Covent Garden or La Scala. A small couch stood against the far wall, flanked by a black baby grand piano where she warmed up before every performance. She sat down at the nearby vanity table to dry her hair, then styled it in a simple chignon and put on fresh makeup. No need to be elaborate tonight, thank God. A light dusting of foundation and blush, a kiss of lipstick, a dash of mascara and she was done.

"I watched from the wings again tonight, Madame. It was your finest performance yet," Katie said breathlessly. "I only hope I'm half as good if I ever get the chance to sing here." She was a local conservatory student working at the opera for class credit and practical experience. Normally Colette appreciated her smiling face and boundless enthusiasm, but at times the latter proved a bit trying. With a pang, she realized Katie reminded her of herself twenty-odd years ago, a starry-eyed hopeful studying at the *conservatoire* in Montreal. Hard to believe now that she'd ever been so guileless and naïve.

“Remember to always sing from your heart. Audiences can tell when you’re not giving your best,” Colette replied, a soft shuffle and bump from the bathroom drawing her nervous glance. Fortunately, Katie was busy smoothing the wrinkles from Colette’s gown and didn’t seem to have noticed. Still, they needed to hurry up and get out of here so David could leave.

Pasting on a smile, she rose to let Katie help her into her gown. It was the simplest one she owned, a floor-length black silk sheath that looked equally stylish no matter which accessories she wore with it. Tonight she added a simple pearl choker, matching earrings and a pair of low-heeled, black suede pumps. The sable coat Aleks had given her for Christmas last year put an elegant final touch on her ensemble.

She gave herself a last appraising look in the mirror, hoping no one else could detect the weariness lurking behind her eyes. After over a decade of singing lead roles in major opera houses around the world, she should’ve been used to this awful exhaustion that always claimed her at the end of an engagement. While her love of performing remained as passionate as ever, these long separations from her husband had grown depressing and tiresome. Filling the lonely hours with brief dalliances helped, but only for the short term. It all felt so futile and empty, but what was her alternative? Give up the international career she’d worked so hard for and remain in Paris year-round? Aleks certainly wasn’t about to give up *his* career.

Katie gathered up Colette’s purse and makeup bag and followed her to the stage door, where a sleek black town car waited to whisk her away to the party. The foggy, bitter December chill had chased away all but a handful of intrepid admirers, holding out their programs and autograph books with hopeful smiles. Usually Colette relished any chance to play the diva, but tonight she didn’t have the energy to engage in idle chit-chat. She scribbled a few quick autographs, then gave the crowd a wave and sank gratefully into the limousine’s plush back seat.

The car glided ten blocks north along the wet, misty San Francisco streets. It would be snowing in Paris by now, and a twinge of homesickness reminded Colette of how much she missed it. Glancing out the window, she briefly considered asking the driver to take her back to her apartment. Her plane left at noon tomorrow, and she hadn’t finished packing. But it would be unconscionably rude to skip the party, and that was one facet of traditional diva behavior she refused to embrace. The opera world was small and insular, and no doubt she’d be working with some of these same people again quite soon. Wouldn’t do to gain a reputation as a haughty prima donna who was too good to break bread with her colleagues.

The car pulled up in front of a tiny, out-of-the-way bistro that looked vaguely familiar. It wasn’t until Colette walked through the front door that she realized she’d been here with David a couple of weeks earlier. It had a warm, welcoming atmosphere, but only about a dozen tables—and no sign of her party. Was she in the wrong place?

Fortunately, the host recognized her. He took her coat and ushered her down a long hallway that led to a private dining room near the kitchen. With a half-forced smile, she greeted her fellow cast members—except for David, who hadn’t arrived yet—Michel, the conductor, and a few of the orchestra musicians. There were about twenty people in all, gathered around a long table littered with half-empty wine bottles and the remains of several appetizers. She caught snatches of conversation in French, English, Italian, German, even a little Russian. Aleks had taught her some of his native tongue, though she was hardly fluent.

Heaving an inward sigh, she took the empty seat beside Nicholas Lytton, the British baritone who'd sung the role of the High Priest. He poured a glass of champagne and nudged it in her direction. "You look like you could use this, dear heart."

"I could indeed," she replied, taking a long, grateful sip. "Does it show that badly?"

"What, that you'd rather be in bed?" He shrugged, raking a hand through his short, gray-flecked hair. "I'd venture to guess we all feel the same. Speaking of which, where's our young Samson?"

She shot him a sharp look. "I'm sure he'll be along shortly."

"Really?" He lowered his voice. "I could've sworn I saw him heading toward your dressing room earlier."

*Oh merde!* "And I thought we'd been so careful."

"You have, my dear—but unfortunately, Mr. Lewis needs a bit more practice in playing his cards closer to the vest. Anyone with a pair of functioning eyes could see he's been a lost cause ever since you two started rehearsing the seduction scene."

Colette remembered that day vividly. She and David had been singing Samson and Delilah's sensuous love duet, blocking out the movements their stage director had given them, when David suddenly fell to his knees. At first it startled her, but he'd kept on singing, so she simply assumed he'd gotten caught up in his acting. But one look in his eyes told her his passion wasn't the least bit fake—and a quick glance at the rise in his jeans confirmed it. She'd taken him to her bed for the first time that night.

Another sip, this time accompanied by a sigh. "So *everyone* here knows?" she asked.

"They probably suspect, though I doubt they care enough to start telling tales. Not that any of us have room to throw stones." The corners of his eyes crinkled. "I wouldn't worry about it."

Easy for him to say. If there was one thing Colette detested, it was gossip. The thought of becoming the object of sniggering innuendo made her shudder. Aleks wouldn't be too happy about it either.

She'd just opened her mouth to reply when in walked David. He smiled, waved and made his way around the table, shaking hands and bestowing hugs. When he finally reached Colette, their eyes locked. Then she turned her head, offering her cheek for a kiss. His silky-soft lips lingered there a second or two longer than strictly necessary. She hoped no one else noticed the warm flush spreading across her cheeks, or the pulse in her throat throbbing like a nervous hummingbird.

It didn't help that David took the seat directly across from her, then poured himself a glass of champagne. Colette's heart nearly skidded to a halt when he reached for her hand, the pad of his thumb gently skimming her wrist. The tiny scrape he'd put there smarted and tingled at his touch. She couldn't keep from squirming in her seat.

"No bandage?" he remarked, one corner of his mouth quirked up in an infuriating half-smirk. "Maybe I should kiss it better."

What was he thinking, flirting with her so openly? Perhaps he'd decided that since this was their last night, they had nothing left to lose. She glanced down at the small pink mark on her wrist with feigned detachment. "I have no idea where that came from." *And I'm warning you, drop this now*, she telegraphed with a pointed look. Whether everyone already knew about their affair was irrelevant. He was mocking her, and she didn't like it.

David simply shrugged, then started chatting with Michel as if nothing were amiss.

God, this was insane. She wasn't cut out for these types of games. She'd explained the need for discretion to him from the very beginning. She thought he'd understood. All her past lovers had. They'd been happy to take what she offered and never press her for more. None of them had ever done what David was doing now, silently challenging her, taunting her with every casual flick of his eyes.

None of them had ever gotten under her skin like this.

She finished her glass of champagne, shaking her head when Nicholas tried to pour her another. Alcohol dried out her throat and made her sleepy, even under the best circumstances. When the waiter came by she was tempted to order a small salad, but her stomach was too twisted up in knots. She couldn't stand it. She needed to get out of here.

Luckily, David rose a few minutes later and headed down the hallway to the men's room. It was the coward's way out, but better this than another hour of strained silence and furtive glances. Colette sprang up and said her goodbyes as quickly as possible, then grabbed her coat and darted from the restaurant. Her car waited for her across the street. She climbed in, heart stuttering in her chest when David emerged from the bistro's entrance and sprinted in her direction, trying to wave her down.

"Go! Now!" she snapped. Her driver was already pulling away from the curb.

\* \* \* \* \*

The two-bedroom apartment she and Aleks used whenever they were in town lay in a quiet, upscale neighborhood not far from the opera house. Colette had never been so happy to throw on her robe and brew herself a cup of chamomile. It usually did the trick whenever she had an upset stomach, but the doorbell's insistent buzz interrupted her before she'd taken her second sip.

Of course, it had to be David. He'd visited her here half a dozen times over the past few weeks. Now she could've kicked herself for not insisting they meet at his hotel.

The bell rang again. And again. Then he started knocking, loudly and persistently. She'd hoped by now he would've figured out she didn't want to talk to him, but it seemed there was little chance of that. Better get rid of him before her neighbors called the police.

She set her cup down on the round mahogany side table and heaved herself off the couch with a groan, then marched over to the door, sucked in a breath and opened it. She'd expected him to be angry, but he looked more sad than anything else. Crushed, actually. Like a puppy whose owners had gone off on holiday and never came back.

"You didn't tell me goodbye," he said softly, accusingly.

"I'm sorry. I thought it was for the best."

"Why the hell would you think that?"

His voice was rising. Not good. She needed to quell this outburst right now. "It's my fault. Somehow I must have given you the impression that this was... That I could offer you more than what we've had these past few weeks." Another breath, and then, "It's over, David. You need to understand that."

He stared at her, shoving his hands in his pockets. Finally he shook his head. "No. I don't understand it, and I don't accept it."

"But...I explained to you from the beginning that this couldn't be permanent—"

"Yeah, I know. But I remember everything you said—and everything you did—all those times we fucked. I remember the way you held onto me in the mornings, like you couldn't bear to let me go. People don't do things like that if they don't fucking *care*."

The apartment door down the hall cracked open and a gray head poked out. Oh wonderful. Exactly what she'd hoped to avoid. Tamping down a sigh, she grabbed David's sleeve and yanked him inside.

She managed to get the door shut before rounding on him with her deadliest glare. "Why are you being so stubborn about this? You do realize I'm *leaving* tomorrow?"

"To go back to your husband?"

"Yes! I told you that weeks ago. I'm happily married."

"Now I *know* that's bullshit. Happily married people don't have affairs."

"What do you know about it?" she snapped. "Have you ever been separated from someone you love for months at a time? Do you have any idea how lonely it is?" He didn't have a quick answer—luckily for him, since she was poised to slap him if he tried. "You provincial Americans with your holier-than-thou morality. How *dare* you judge me!"

Now he looked as stunned as if she actually had slapped him, minus the angry red imprint of her hand across his face. "I'm sorry. But I care about you, Colette. I can't just flick my feelings off like a light switch."

"What makes you think I can?"

"Then..." He reached for her hand, carrying it to his lips to press a soft kiss to her palm. "Give me one last night with you, so we can say a proper goodbye. *Please*."

She should've seen this coming. On some level she *had* seen this coming, and she'd let him in anyway. Did that mean she actually *wanted* him to stay? But this wasn't about what either of them wanted. She had to make him understand what had happened between them was now firmly in the past.

"We can't," she said softly. "I'm sorry. I have someone waiting for me, and—"

"And I'm not him. Believe me, I get it. But what if I could give you something he can't?"

"What do you mean?"

He sank to his knees, just like at rehearsal a few weeks ago. Then he lifted the hem of her robe and planted sweet, delicate kisses on both her feet. An instantaneous surge of arousal tore through her, stiffening her nipples, making the room shimmy before her eyes. Trembling, she flailed out with one hand, latching onto a nearby armchair to steady herself. "H-How did you...?"

"I remember how you reacted the first time I knelt down in front of you. It's the reason you wanted me, isn't it?"

Every last drop of blood in her body had rushed into her face—at least, that's what it felt like. He'd seen her naked plenty of times. He'd fucked her in any number of positions, and she'd loved every second. He'd made her see God, the angels and entire new universes when she came. All that, and yet he still had the power to make her blush. He'd found the one secret she had left—the longing to be in control. The one thing Aleks would never let her have.

"Take me, Colette. Do whatever you want with me. It's what I've wanted from that first night."

She reached out and grabbed hold of his chin, tipping it upward so that he met her eyes. "Have you ever done anything like this with anyone else?"

A moment's hesitation, then he licked his lips. "Once or twice."

"With women? Men?"

"Women. Both times."

"Different women?"

He nodded.

"And you didn't want to repeat the experience with either of them?"

"It was...really intense. It scared me."

But obviously not so much that he didn't want to do it again. Well, if it proved a disappointment, at least the morning-after awkwardness would be short-lived. Truth be told, she wanted this as much as he did. The mere thought of having him at her complete and utter command had started a river running between her thighs. Her clit ached so badly, she'd probably come at the tiniest flick of his tongue—not that she was about to let him touch her yet. He'd have to earn that privilege.

And he might as well start now. "Take off your clothes." But when he started to get up, she shook her head, her lips spreading in a tight smile. "Stay where you are. I have to admit, you look rather fetching down there."

He smiled back, then peeled off his jacket and began to unbutton his crisp white dress shirt. First the cuffs, followed by the neck—one button, then another, revealing a sweet pinkish-cream patch of skin at the base of his throat. His fingers shook so badly it took him twice as long as it should have to get them all undone. At last he shrugged out of his shirt, his chest rising and falling much more rapidly than it had a few minutes ago, pebbled gooseflesh popping up all over his arms, shoulders and back. Obviously turned-on, yet still apprehensive. Good. She'd give him something to be nervous about.

"You're not finished," she pointed out sharply. "Off with the pants."

"It's going to be a bit tricky if you won't let me stand up."

"Take them down as far as your knees then."

Swallowing hard, he unbuckled, unzipped and slowly slid down his jeans and boxers. Already at full attention, his cock sprang up, the tip smeared with shiny pre-come. It was a lovely cock, thick and rosy, long enough to fill her up but not so big that accommodating him caused her pain. She ached to take it in her mouth—but not yet.

Circling around to the back of him, she took a moment to admire his firm, well-muscled derriere. He ran practically every day, and it showed. Too bad the skin was so pale, but she had the perfect remedy for that.

"Hands and knees," she ordered. But rather than complying, he turned to give her a puzzled glance. She brought her palm down hard on his left cheek, the resulting smack echoing in the room's still air. Despite his obvious surprise, David didn't cry out, just sucked in a sharp, gusty breath and fell forward onto his hands, presenting his ass to her.

"May I have another, Ma'am?" he asked softly.

He caught on quickly. She liked that in a man. Running her nails over the bright pink mark she'd left, she smiled at his tiny gasp, then started pinching and caressing the round, tender flesh. He had those adorable little dimples at the small of his back, right above his buttocks. It looked as if angels had kissed him there. And why not? It was a backside well worth kissing.

She couldn't resist. Crouching down, she pressed her lips to one dimple, then the other. Once she'd lulled him into a false sense of security, she pulled back and slapped his ass hard with both hands. This time he let out a startled yelp.

"Two at once," she purred. "Aren't I generous?" And two more for good measure, right on top of the handprints she'd already left. Both cheeks had taken on a nice, rosy glow. Her palms were the same shade, stinging from repeated impact, her back already becoming stiff from bending over. No doubt David was well on his way to a beautiful case of rug burn on his palms and knees. Best to continue this in a more comfortable location.

"Get up," she ordered, nodding at his pants as he did so. "Take those off, but bring them with you."

He gave her another puzzled look but nevertheless followed obediently as she led the way into the bedroom. He started to climb up on the bed, but she stopped him with an abrupt shake of her head.

"We're not done yet. Over there." She pointed at the wall. "Brace yourself against it."

He hesitated a moment, then placed both hands flat against the wall while holding the rest of his body away from it, his ass once again prominently displayed. But this time when she drew her nails across his flesh, he let out a sound somewhere between a whimper and a strangled moan.

"Do you want to stop? I don't hear a safe word." Which wasn't surprising, since they hadn't agreed on one. His skin felt a bit warm but hadn't swollen to the critical point yet. However, if she kept smacking him so hard, her poor hands would be even more bruised than he'd be tomorrow. "When you've had enough, say 'mercy'." She spied his pants lying on the bed and tugged his belt free. Then, clasping it by the buckle, she snapped the thick leather across his buttocks. The impact, along with his loud gasp, fired a lightning bolt of fresh arousal straight to her clit. A vivid deep-red stripe blossomed on his skin. "I still don't hear it."

Hanging his head, he sucked in air like a drowning man about to go under for the last time. Or was that actually a sob?

She slid her hand onto his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Do you want to stop, *mon cheri*? Tell me."

"Only if...if you want to."

So sweet, so brave. She'd witnessed this kind of reaction to a beating before, though she was usually on the receiving end. It could be traumatic—or, if handled correctly, an incredibly cathartic experience. Perhaps he'd had enough, and she shouldn't try to push him further. But he was already halfway there, a stone's throw from amazing ecstasy. It would be a shame to shy away from it—especially when they'd never have another chance.

"Three more," she whispered into his ear. "One after another, no stopping. Count them off for me." Standing back, she readied herself for the first blow, and down came the belt. It landed right below the first stripe with a loud thwack that split the air like a gunshot.

"O-One."

"Very good. And again." Another precise hit, striking in the soft, sensitive crease between his thighs and buttocks. Breath hissed through his teeth. His arms and legs trembled, taut with tension, but still he held on.

"Two...Ma'am."



She didn't give him a warning this time, just pulled her arm back and swung. The blow knocked him into the wall, ripping a ragged cry from his throat. Colette dropped the belt, wrapped her arms around him and helped him stagger to the bed. He stared up at her, eyes bright and shiny, relieved laughter spilling from his gorgeous lips. "Three," he rasped. "God, that was fucking amazing."

Ah, endorphins—the only way to fly. In truth, she was rather envious. It'd been weeks since Aleks had taken her in hand. No wonder there was this awful wave of heat now rushing through her, setting her every nerve ending ablaze. He'd had his release. It was time for hers.

Sweat prickled through her pores, slicking her from neck to waist before she could tear off her robe. She'd intended to straddle David's face and let him bring her to orgasm with his mouth again, until he rolled over beside her, his still-rampant erection pressed against her belly. Obviously his ecstasy hadn't been quite *that* ecstatic. Fine then. She'd much rather have his cock.

Every instinct told her to simply climb on, but she held her lust in check long enough to fish a condom from the bedside table and hastily roll it on him. On a whim, she grabbed the silk belt from her robe, looped it around his wrists and through a wooden rung in the headboard. It wouldn't hold if he struggled too vigorously, but she had a feeling this would be a short ride.

"Don't you dare come before I do," she said, positioning herself over his cock, then sat down slowly. It slid home like hot, hard heaven, the deep-seated ache inside her threatening to spill over. She tried to slow down, but it was no use. Her arousal had kicked into overdrive, long, shuddering spasms shaking her the moment she began to move.

David's eyes went wide. "Colette, please... I can't hold on—" Gazes locked, they climaxed together, moaning and thrusting until Colette slumped forward, collapsing in a spent, sweaty heap on top of him.

A few minutes later she realized she hadn't untied him yet—and he hadn't uttered a word of complaint. Scooting up to the headboard, she tugged his bonds free then gave him a soft kiss on the lips. "Thank you," she whispered. "You were wonderful."

"Sorry about... Well, you know. I did my best."

Oh good God—as if she had any cause for disappointment! Smiling, she kissed him again. "You did indeed."

## Chapter Two

David brought her tea in bed the next morning. Moroccan mint this time, strong and hot, just the way she liked it. It glided down Colette's throat smooth as honey, curling warmly in her stomach—which, as if on cue, had just started to grumble. Forcing a smile, she propped herself up on her pillows and took another long sip, hoping he hadn't noticed.

"I would've made something to go along with the tea, but your fridge is bare," he said. God, he looked good enough to eat, standing there in his jeans and rumpled shirt, the ends of his hair still damp from the shower he'd obviously taken while she slept like the dead. That luscious pink triangle of bare skin at his throat tempted her to yank him down beside her and bury her face in his fresh, clean scent. "I could run down to that bakery on the corner if you want."

"No, that's fine. I'll eat once I get to the airport."

"Suit yourself." He lowered himself gingerly onto the edge of the bed, biting his lip. "Ow!"

At first she let out a giggle, but his uncomfortable fidgeting swiftly changed her nervousness into genuine concern. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, this is nothing. I'm surprised you didn't hear me yell when I stepped in the shower. It's looking a bit purple back there this morning." He smiled a sweet little crooked smile, accompanied by a shrug. "Let's just say sitting down's going to be an interesting experience for the next few days. But that's fine. It'll give me something to remember you by."

So much for no morning-after regrets. Now she wished she'd never let him in last night. She should've just slammed the door in his face. Instead, she'd made it twice as hard to say goodbye—for both of them.

"Hard to believe it's only a week 'til Christmas," he went on.

Her eyes widened. "Is it really?"

Now it was his turn to laugh. "What's the matter, haven't you looked at a calendar lately?"

"I tend to lose track of time during an engagement. When all I have to think about are rehearsals and performances, everything else fades into the background."

"Do you have plans for the holidays?"

He'd never asked anything like that before. She'd always made a point of steering their conversations away from personal matters and back to music or travel or some other safe, generic subject. But it seemed silly to hold back now. What was the harm in answering a perfectly innocent question?

"Usually my husband and I have engagements scheduled, but this year we've decided to take some time off. We're going skiing in Switzerland for a few days."

"That sounds relaxing."

"I hope so. What about you?"

"Flying home to see my folks. I haven't seen them since last Christmas."

"Where's home?"

"Madison, Wisconsin."

Midwestern America, down to earth, solid and wholesome—just like David. She couldn't help smiling. "Your family must be very proud of you."

"Mom is, but Dad... Well, he's never understood the whole singing thing. Doesn't seem like a real profession to him."

"Have you shown him the very real checks you collect for your performances?"

"I would, but he'd still think I was making it up." When she finished the last of her tea, he promptly reached over and took the empty cup from her. "What does your father think of your career?"

There was something she hadn't thought of in a while—and the sudden jab of pain at the memory reminded her why. "I wouldn't know. I haven't seen him since my mother and I moved from Paris to Montreal when I was a child."

"That's too bad. But now I know where you learned such perfect English. You hardly have any accent at all. Wish I could speak French as well as I sing it."

"With all the traveling you're doing, you'll pick it up quickly."

"No kidding. I've learned three new roles for three different houses in the last six months. Being a professional opera singer's like spending your life in class."

Shivering, she tugged the fluffy goose-down comforter to her chin. Discussing their actual lives like this made her feel more naked than the first time she'd disrobed in front of him. "I'm bringing a score along to study while I'm on holiday. My first *Carmen*. I'm singing it in Paris at the end of January."

"Wow! That's the crown jewel of the entire mezzo-soprano repertoire. You must be excited."

"Terrified, more like," she admitted.

"Why? You'll be wonderful. You've got a great flair for playing seductresses."

In more ways than one, obviously. "David..."

"I sang my first Don José a few months ago. Now I wish I'd waited to sing it with you." He took her hand and planted a kiss on her palm, just like last night. It sent a familiar sharp *zing!* of desire snaking through her. She closed her eyes until it faded. "You're amazing," he whispered. "I'm going to miss you."

"Chances are, we'll see each other again very soon."

"I hope not. I mean, how am I supposed to handle it? Do you expect me to act as if nothing's ever happened between us? I'm not sure I can."

God, he was so sweet, so sincere. He adored with his whole heart. It was what made him such a fine, sensitive singer. But she never should have chosen him. She should've done what she usually did, and picked someone who'd have no problem walking away. "We'll greet one another as old friends, and behave accordingly."

"Easy for you to say."

No, she thought as he leaned over to kiss her goodbye. Her fingers tangled in his thick curls for the last time. No, it *really* isn't.

\* \* \* \* \*

Colette slept a bit more on the plane, but still awoke feeling as if someone had dropped a piano on her. Groaning, she heaved herself from her first-class seat and ambled downstairs to the baggage claim and customs area, where she waited in line for her handbag and luggage to be inspected. Since she had nothing to declare it went fairly quickly. Soon she was rolling her valise out to the curb, letting out a huge, grateful sigh at the sight of Henri, hers and Aleks' driver.

He darted over the moment she emerged through the double doors, hands extended to take her bags. Closing in on midnight, and he still had a smile on his face. "Welcome back, Madame. How was your flight?"

"Uneventful, and over. Right now that's all I care about." She forced a halfhearted smile. Fresh weariness creeping into her bones, it was all she could do to remain upright until Henri opened the dark blue Mercedes SUV's door for her.

Neither of them spoke again until the car had cleared the endless traffic snarled around De Gaulle airport and began speeding toward the city. "Maestro had a concert tonight, Madame. He said he will be home quite late."

Or in other words, he didn't expect her to wait up for him. She couldn't even if she tried. There was a time when that would've made her sad. A time when returning home to the City of Light—and her husband—would've filled her with excitement, regardless of the hour. But not tonight.

Tonight Paris' glittering streetlamps cut through the damp winter fog with an unpleasant glare that made her head throb. Even the sight of her stately nineteenth-century apartment building coming up on the *Avenue Georges Mandel* did little to lift her spirits. The musty, humid air outside wrinkled her nose as she stepped from the car, and the brief elevator ride up to the fifth floor felt interminable.

But once she entered her own front door, it was as if a five-hundred-pound weight had tumbled from her shoulders. Home at last, with everything exactly where it should be. Same elegant country furniture and petit-point rug. Same comforting view of the neighborhood peeking from behind the half-drawn cream damask drapes. Same stout, middle-aged Simone beaming at her from the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a towel.

Colette couldn't stop herself from beaming right back. "You two are going to spoil me," she said as Henri stepped in behind her, quickly setting down her bags so he could help her off with her coat. "I've told you before, you needn't stay so late on my account. It's no hardship to take a taxi from the airport and put myself to bed. I manage it just fine when I'm out of town."

"All the more reason for us to pamper you when you're here," Simone retorted. "Are you hungry? I have some nice soup ready, or I could whip you up an omelet."

She'd eaten on the plane, but that was hours ago. Jet lag usually put a damper on her appetite, but if she went to bed on an empty stomach, she'd only wake up in two or three hours completely ravenous. Best to have a little something now.

"A bowl of soup sounds lovely," Colette replied. "Let me wash my face and change out of these clothes first."

One look at the oh-so-inviting king-sized bed with its warm, fluffy comforter and plush pillows nearly did her in, but she grabbed a nightgown from the polished oak armoire and plodded on into the bathroom. A cream-colored marble vanity with two sinks, a shower and tub big enough for an orgy, spotless white floor tile heated from below to chase away the post-bath chill—hers, all hers. Colette

thoroughly enjoyed her creature comforts. On nights like this she found them doubly comforting, even if she was too tired to take full advantage of them.

Still, it felt so good to splash warm water on her face and rinse off the mask she'd applied that morning, San Francisco time. She dabbed on a light moisturizer then slipped into her nightgown and robe. She found the latter hanging on the back of the bathroom door, right where she'd left it six weeks ago. It was her favorite Chinese blue silk, warm and shimmery-smooth. Aleks had brought it back for her from last year's Asian tour with the *Orchestre de Paris*. Simone should've hung it up in the walk-in closet by now, but Aleks must have told her not to. The thought of him wanting to see it hanging there every morning made Colette smile.

Her bags stood off to one side in the bedroom, waiting for Simone to unpack them. That was one good thing about domestic help—not to mention having a hot, home-cooked meal ready for her after a ten-hour flight. Guided by the heavenly aroma, Colette padded quickly into the kitchen. Simone had already set a place for her at the kitchen table, complete with a small basket of warm, sliced bread and a glass of wine.

Colette sank down gratefully, picked up the glass by its stem, swirled it and took a sip. White burgundy, decadently rich and fruity. Considering her fatigue, she probably shouldn't indulge, but it was too good to resist. Then the soup arrived, still steaming from the pot. Country vegetable, thick enough to eat with a fork. So she did, using the bread to soak up every last drop of delicious, savory broth.

Afterward, she stared into her bowl, goggle-eyed. "I can't believe I actually finished it."

"I can." Simone snorted, giving her a swift, appraising up-and-down stare. "You've lost weight again. Must be that awful American food."

"More like me sweating off a pound or two every night I was onstage. Those heavy costumes were sheer hell." Of course, all the bedroom exercise she'd gotten on this trip probably had something to do with it too, but she wasn't about to confess that to her housekeeper.

Simone put the dishes in the sink to soak, poured herself some wine and sat down at the table. They often dined informally like this, just the two of them and sometimes Henri, when Aleks wasn't at home. It reminded Colette of her childhood in Canada, when she'd sit at the kitchen table doing her homework and talking with her mother while she cooked dinner. "It's been a somber time around here while you were gone," Simone went on. "The maestro's missed you terribly. Oh, he always does, but this time was different. He seemed...depressed. Withdrawn. He spent hours in his study with the door shut. That's not like him at all."

No, it wasn't. Aleks usually left his office door wide open, filling the apartment with music whenever he sat down to run through an orchestral score at the piano. He also had a tendency of filling the air with choice Russian invective when he talked on the phone with his agent or the orchestra's manager. Most of the time Colette was grateful she could only understand every fourth or fifth word.

Alarmed, she sat up straight. "That's strange. He seemed perfectly fine when he came for my opening night. And I've spoken to him on the phone at least once a week since I left. Nothing sounded amiss."

"He's his old self when he's in company. It's when he's alone that the Russian bear comes out. But now you're home, I'm sure everything will be back to normal."

*Oh wonderful*, Colette thought, stifling a sigh. *Thank you for upsetting me for no reason.*

\* \* \* \* \*

When she awoke the next morning, Colette vaguely remembered stumbling back to the bedroom, yanking off her robe and falling into bed. Everything after that was a blessed blank. Nevertheless, she was both puzzled and disappointed to discover the sheets beside her rumped and still warm from Aleks' body. Even when he got in late, he'd usually wake her for sex, especially when it was her first night home after a trip. Tired as she was, she'd still been looking forward to it. So where was he?

In the dining room, having his morning coffee, reading the newspaper. Wearing his plum-colored silk robe and slippers. Behaving as if it were any other day. As if she hadn't just returned from a six-week absence.

A huge, toothy grin split his face the moment he saw her standing in the dining room doorway. When he held out his arms she ran to him, raining kisses on his lips, his cheeks, his eyelids, rememorizing his face.

He'd always had a few fine lines around his eyes and mouth, but now—was it her imagination, or had they deepened? His hair had definitely grown longer since she'd last seen him, curling softly around his earlobes. He'd let his beard grow out too, as he normally did in the winter. It was fuller and bushier now, with a few flecks of gray, but no less satanic, thank God. His dark good looks and sparkling, devilish green eyes were what had first attracted her to him well over a decade ago. That, and his huge, gorgeous devil's prick.

Which reminded her... "Why didn't you wake me when you got in?"

"I tried, but you were far too exhausted. I thought it best to let you sleep."

"Too bad. You know how much I love drowsy sex."

"In this case, it would've been tantamount to fucking a corpse. Not something I find erotic, my angel." He spoke the endearment in Russian, which warmed her heart—and made her nipples stand at attention. Judging from his sly smile, he knew exactly what effect his beloved low, husky voice was having on her.

As if that weren't enough, she felt his hand slide up through her hair and gently cup her skull. Then his grip tightened, taking a small handful of hair with it, until her head bent back and a soft gasp of ecstasy escaped her lips. God, he was brilliant at this. Every time he did it, she went limp. Instantly submissive.

"Have you forgotten something, angel?" Aleks murmured, letting go of her hair, his hand gliding to her shoulder to give her a tiny nudge.

He didn't need to drop the hint twice. Falling to her knees, she planted kisses on both his feet, just as David had done for her the other night. That remembered image, coupled with the overwhelming rush of her own submission, made her clit throb and her breath quicken. She slowly lifted her gaze to him, pleading without words.

"I've missed having you at my feet." His fingers toyed with her hair, caressed her now-burning cheek. "You look so beautiful down there."

Another triggered memory. She'd used almost the same words with David. A fresh wave of heat swept through her, leaving her drenched and shaking. Good God, what was Aleks waiting for? If he didn't touch her soon, she'd tear her clothes off and do it herself. "P-Please..." she whimpered.

And there was that sardonic twist of his lips, telling her just how much he relished making her wait. "So impatient. Perhaps I should take you right here on the table."

Oh, and he'd do it too—in fact, he had done it once, months ago. Over the seven years they'd lived here he'd fucked her in every room and on every piece of furniture, even the piano bench in his study. They'd made such a racket, Simone and Henri had come running. Despite her rampant arousal, Colette wasn't eager to experience that kind of humiliation again.

"The bedroom would be much more comfortable," she whispered finally. "And we wouldn't disturb Simone—"

"Simone's been married three times. I doubt there's anything we've done that she hasn't."

"Aleks, *please*. Don't be cruel. I need you so badly..." He didn't like for her to beg unless he ordered her to do it, but she couldn't stop herself. Couldn't he see she was about to go up in flames? Didn't he want her as much as she did him?

He cradled her face in both hands, and for a moment she thought he was preparing to slap her. Instead, he stood, offering his hand to help her up, then led her back to the bedroom.

Off came his robe the moment the door swung shut. The smooth silk slithered from his powerful shoulders to pool on the floor. Colette's hands froze on the belt of her own robe as she stood transfixed, taking in her husband's well-muscled body. His strong arms had learned well how to master and cherish her over the years. A torso that could've been carved from marble, if not for the heavy dusting of crisp, dark hair that her fingers ached to bury themselves in. Solid, sinewy thighs, and the magnificent cock rising between them, already fully erect.

All else forgotten, she sank to her knees again, palm wrapped around his thick shaft, easing back the foreskin to expose the plump, rosy tip. His pre-come's salty-bitter flavor exploded on her tongue like the finest wine, and she licked at it eagerly, sucking the head into her mouth, then slid down slowly, taking as much of him as she could without choking.

A few minutes of licking and flicking was all either of them could stand. With a frustrated grunt, Aleks pulled out and began slapping her face with his cock, several times on each hot, flushed cheek. It was one of Colette's true regrets that she'd rarely been able to bring him off this way. He liked to thrust into her mouth during oral sex, but doing so risked injuring her throat. They'd tried to find different ways to make this kind of play pleasurable for both of them—every once in a while he'd masturbate himself to the brink of climax, then let her finish him off—but she loved cock-slapping the best. It was so unutterably delicious and filthy.

"A diva in the concert hall, a lady in the parlor and a dirty whore in bed"—that's what Aleks told her he wanted before they were married. He'd spent the last ten years teaching her how to be *his* kind of dirty whore. It was a class she'd never grow tired of.

But evidently Aleks didn't feel the same—at least, not today. "Enough," he grunted, pulling her abruptly to her feet. "Get those things off and get on the bed."

She obeyed quickly, a frisson of thrilled apprehension snaking through her as she watched him roll on a condom and slick it generously with some water-based lubricant from the bedside table. His

size sometimes made intercourse difficult for her, but she was already so wet from their foreplay, she should've told him not to bother.

"Turn over," he ordered, throwing her a pillow. Oh God. He wanted her on her stomach, which meant he intended to fuck her hard.

They'd done it this way more times than she could remember, so it took her no time to position herself near the edge of the bed, with the pillow supporting her head and chest and her ass in the air. Breathing deep, she tried to relax, until Aleks' thick fingers glided between her thighs. One, then two, slid inside her just long enough to give the sensation of amazing fullness. She had hardly a moment to miss it before she felt the blunt, wide tip of Aleks' cock at her opening, and then, with one sharp thrust, he pushed all the way in.

Yes, it hurt—ached, more like, as Colette's body strained to accommodate him. She drew in one breath after another and held on, fingers twisting in the comforter as she hovered on the knife's edge between pain and pleasure, and finally spilled onto the other side.

Aleks' hands skimmed up her back, kneading her shoulders to help her relax. Her soft, relieved sigh must have told him she'd already achieved that state, because he started moving faster, ramming her deeper into the pillow. Propping herself up on her elbows, she thrust back, meeting him stroke for stroke, the force of their fucking pushing her farther and farther up the bed.

All of a sudden she realized he'd climbed up behind her and draped himself over her back. His weight bore her down, pinning her between him and the mattress. Still, he kept thrusting, fucking her like a wild animal—desperate, barely in control.

But Aleks was *never* out of control.

Her climax crashed into her like a runaway train, demolishing her with a heady, ecstatic rush of power. Aleks followed a few seconds later, his ragged cry stifled by sinking his teeth into her shoulder. Marking her. Making her his again.

They lay together for a few silent, sweaty, exhausted moments, until at last they summoned up the collective urge to laugh.

"Looks like you really did miss me," she said with a smile.

"Did you doubt it?" Scooping up her hand, he finally noticed the small scrape there. It had scabbed over, but still felt a bit tender. "How did you get this?"

For a moment, she went completely, utterly blank. "O-Oh! Well, when Samson pulled down the temple on closing night, I got hit by a piece of it."

"Are you sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You usually have such a good memory. I wouldn't think you'd need to struggle to recall something that occurred a day or so ago."

She should just tell him about David, and what happened between them her last night in San Francisco. That was hers' and Aleks' most immutable rule—no secrets. But the words stuck in her throat and refused to budge. Moreover, she realized she didn't *want* to tell him. Not now, anyway. Not on her first day back.

"Don't badger, Aleks," she murmured. "Can't you see I'm still tired?"

He nodded, but the glint in his eyes told her he wasn't the least bit fooled. "Of course. Welcome back, angel." And then he sealed her homecoming with a kiss.





## Chapter Three

They left for Switzerland on Christmas Eve and arrived in the charming mountain hamlet of Zermatt in time for dinner. Colette burst out in delighted laughter when she saw the sleigh Aleks had hired to collect them at the train station, drawn by real reindeer. Bundled up in thick furs, they bounced along the snowy streets to their private chalet at the foot of the Matterhorn.

Wooden and rustic-looking from a distance, on the inside it was as comfortable as any modern home. The living room, dining room and kitchen took up the ground floor, with the master bedroom and bath up above. The entire north-facing side of the house was fashioned out of tempered glass, offering a breathtaking view of the mountains. Even now, well after sunset, Colette couldn't tear herself away from it. Finally Aleks had to take her gently but firmly by the hand and lead her to the dining table, where their chef stood ready to serve them dinner.

Later, they curled up together in front of the fireplace, relaxing and sipping mulled wine. But when several long minutes went by with nary a peep out of either of them, Alex prompted, "What's wrong, my angel?"

"For once, absolutely nothing." She let out a contented sigh. "It's been so long since it was just the two of us. We practically have to make an appointment to see each other these days."

"The price one pays for a successful career, I suppose. Would you rather go back to being struggling, starving novices, like we were when we first met?"

"Frankly, yes." His raised eyebrows told her she'd better elaborate. "In fact, I've been thinking of asking Dieter to cancel my engagements in the States next year."

"But...you're scheduled to sing Octavian at the Met next spring. Why would you want to cancel that?"

"Because I'm tired, Aleks. The constant traveling is getting to me. I don't like being away from you for weeks at a time. Every time I come back, we have to get to know each other all over again. And as far as our...arrangement goes, it's not working for me anymore."

"Does this have something to do with the young tenor you worked with in San Francisco?"

All she could do was stare at him. "H-How did you know about him?"

"Angel, you're a superb singer and actress, but that beautiful face of yours can't keep a secret—at least, not from me. I could tell by the way you two looked at each other that he was the one." A tiny sigh, and then, "Did he keep you amused?"

"That's just it. I don't want to be *amused* anymore. It used to be exciting, knowing we had each other's permission to ease our loneliness when we were apart. But it hasn't made me happy in a long time. Can you honestly say it's made *you* happy?"

"Not lately, no," he replied. "There was another young protégé who looked promising, but nothing came of it. And truthfully, I couldn't even be bothered to care."

A few years ago his admission would have shocked her, but not because of the sleeping-with-men part. Aleks had been living a discreet but active bisexual lifestyle when they'd met. He'd always had an insatiable appetite for both men and women, though when they married he'd promised never to take another female lover. She was all the woman he needed.

But his rise to prominence as principal conductor of the *Orchestre de Paris* had brought him fame, money—and dozens of handsome young musicians throwing themselves at him. The more talented ones he took under his wing, serving as their musical mentor, introducing them to the right people. Over the years he'd cultivated valuable connections in most of Europe's major concert halls and opera houses, not to mention the top classical recording companies. He'd had a hand in launching the careers of several bright new stars—and Colette was fairly sure he'd fucked them all.

It used to bother her in the early years of their marriage, but not anymore. If Aleks was going to leave her for some twenty-something violinist, he would've done it long before now. Still, she found it alarming to hear him say he'd grown weary of the chase, even if it did put them squarely on the same page.

"Did he turn you down?" she asked softly.

"Is it that apparent?"

"Well, Simone did say you've been upset about something lately."

"So naturally it's because someone's dealt a blow to my fragile male ego." He chuckled bitterly. "And who's to say she's not right? At my age, I should probably get used to rejection."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. You're forty-three. Hardly ready for retirement."

"Neither are you. Which means I want you to give more thought to cancelling those American engagements. Our marriage is important, but so is your career. Most opera singers don't hit their peak until they reach their forties. You still have a few more years to go."

"I can't do this for a few more years. I don't want to be separated from you for seven or eight months out of next year. I want to work in Europe, so I can fly home on my days off between performances. And I want us to be exclusive. Monogamous."

Cupping her chin, he studied her expression for a long moment. "This is truly what you want?"

"Yes. With all my heart."

"Then how can I refuse?" He broke out in a wide smile that rivaled the bright golden light spilling over them from the fire—not to mention the heat flaring to life inside both of them. They couldn't tear each other's clothes off fast enough.

Colette's head was spinning from both the wine and sheer happiness by the time Aleks eased her back down on the thick sheepskin rug. She could've sworn she heard him murmur, "Merry Christmas, angel," right before he parted her legs and dove hungrily between them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aleks awoke her with a soft kiss the next morning and led her downstairs to the sun-filled dining room for coffee and delicious *blini* he'd prepared himself, served with sour cream and black currant jam. Light and buttery, they melted on Colette's tongue like snowflakes. She loved it when Aleks cooked

traditional Russian dishes, though he was normally too busy with work to get in the kitchen very often. Ravenous though she was, she forced herself to slow down and savor each bite, not to mention the view of the gorgeous, steeply scarped mountains outside their window. Merry Christmas, indeed.

Afterward, he cleared their dishes then returned to the table with a fresh pot of coffee and a sly smile on his face. "I know we agreed the trip would be our gift to each other this year, but I have a surprise for you."

As if the luxury of his company for the next few days wasn't enough. With a mock sigh, she replied, "That's very sweet, but there's nothing else I need."

"What would you say if I told you I'll be conducting your *Carmen* next month?"

Time froze as she stared at him, waiting for some clue that he was joking. But he wouldn't joke about this, not today. Not ever. Not when he knew how much this role meant to her. "B-But I thought Pappano was scheduled to—"

"He was, but he had to drop out a couple of weeks ago. And luckily, my old friend Popov at the *Paris Opéra* owes me a favor." Aleks and Sergei Popov, the opera's general director, had known each other since their student days in St. Petersburg. Another case of Aleks exploiting a personal connection for the sake of career, in this instance his own. "I thought you'd be pleased."

Suddenly she realized her mouth was hanging open in shock rather than delight. "I am, I'm just...a bit stunned. I had no idea you were planning this."

"That's why it's called a surprise, my angel."

"But what about your obligations with the *Orchestre de Paris*?"

"There are only seven performances of *Carmen*, spread out over three weeks. It shouldn't be that difficult to integrate them into my schedule."

"Not difficult? You already work so hard I'm amazed you haven't landed in the hospital."

He reached for her hand, clasping it tightly. "Is this your way of telling me you'd rather I didn't accept the engagement?"

Was it? She and Aleks hadn't worked together in almost five years. They had no rule against it, but it was difficult enough getting them in the same city, never mind the same concert hall or opera house. But now it appeared that a dream project had fallen into their laps. A role she'd been longing to sing her entire career. An entire month of seeing Aleks every day at rehearsal, plus another three weeks of performances. Dear God, she'd be insane to turn that down!

"Of course I want you to accept, but..." Despite Colette's success, inside her lurked this tiny, nagging voice telling her it was only a matter of time before the rest of the world discovered she was really a no-talent fraud. It was ridiculous, but she still couldn't shake it. "I'm afraid of disappointing you."

"Impossible. You'll be magnificent. The finest *Carmen* since Berganza."

"Oh, wonderful. No pressure there at all."

"You worry too much," he said, rising and pulling her along with him, right into his arms. "Fortunately, I know a remedy for that." Then he led her back upstairs, eased her down on the bed and proceeded to fuck her into oblivion.

\* \* \* \* \*

The savory aromas of garlic, rosemary and sage tickled David's nostrils the moment he walked through his parents' front door. Smelled like his mother's famous holiday rib roast. He dropped his bag in the foyer, pulled off his coat and hung it in the nearby closet, then strode down the hallway to the kitchen. Same scene he remembered from every Christmas they'd had here while he was growing up, with his mom bustling about trying to get everything on the table before the rest of the family expired from hunger.

"Hey," he said, waving to her from the doorway.

She swung around, then set down a pan of dinner rolls and came over to give him a hug. "We'd given you up for lost. Thought you were coming in yesterday."

"My flight got cancelled. Spent the night sleeping in a chair at JFK waiting for another one." Every muscle in his body still ached from it—and from the bruises Colette had given him a few days ago—but nevertheless he managed a punch-drunk grin. "But here I am. I made it."

"And you couldn't have called to let us know you'd be late?"

"Hey, give me a break. I didn't even know I was on a flight 'til twenty minutes before it took off. I had to run from one end of the concourse to the other. And when I finally got on the plane, they made me turn off my phone—"

"Okay, okay. You're off the hook—this time," she said with a wink. He couldn't help noticing how much older she looked than the last time he'd seen her—more gray now than brunette, more tired, with deeply etched lines tugging at her eyes and the corners of her mouth. Only fifty, but she could've easily passed for a decade older. David knew things had been rough for her and Dad these past couple of years since the recession hit, but until now he hadn't realized just how rough. "Go on in the living room and say hi to everyone. We should be ready to eat in a few minutes."

David took a step in that direction, then hesitated. "How's he doing tonight?"

She shrugged. "How do you think? The garage's business is down another twenty percent from last year. Every week he braces himself to get a pink slip along with his paycheck. Good thing I decided to stay on at the market. No matter how broke people get, they still have to eat." She waved him off. "Go say hello to him and get it over with."

Steeling himself, he followed the buzz of voices and laughter across the hallway to the living room. It was crammed full of people—aunts, uncles and cousins he hadn't seen since last Christmas taking up every chair, gathered around the fireplace and brightly lit tree. His parents always insisted on a real tree, cut down from the woods behind their house. David found the familiar sharp scent of pine rather comforting, until his father's bleary, beer-dulled gaze locked on him from across the room.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. High and Mighty Opera Singer!" he boomed, then knocked back his last slug of Bud. "So kind of you to grace us with your presence!"

*Oh shit.* Exactly what he'd been dreading his entire flight. "C'mon, Dad, lighten up. It's just me." David laughed, and thank God everyone else except his dad joined in, though the sound echoed tense and brittle in his own ears. He slowly navigated through the crowd of relatives, exchanging hugs and handshakes, finally ending up face-to-face with his father. But when David reached out to give him a hug, his father fell back a step.

Okay then. If that's how he wanted it. David stepped away, shoving his hands in his pockets. Was it his imagination, or had the old man sprouted an extra chin? He looked flushed too. He'd always

had a ruddy complexion, which the beer had no doubt enhanced, but tonight he'd taken on a slight purplish cast beneath the vivid spots of red on his cheeks. But that's what happened when you only saw people once a year. They changed.

"I made it back as soon as I could," David continued. "Flying out of New York's tricky around the holidays."

"In that case, I don't know why you bothered." He ambled over to the bar to get himself another beer—without offering David one. "You should've stayed home with all your fancy, famous friends."

"I don't know that many famous people."

He grunted. "Even if it's only one, that's still more than I know."

David opened his mouth to reply, then thought better of it. No point goading him. He was already two sheets to the wind, with number three coming up fast on the outside. Best to stay out of his line of fire until the evening was over.

His mother called everyone into the dining room a few minutes later. David sat next to his grandmother, who clasped his hand in her thin, bony one and murmured to him in a soft voice he had to lean in close to hear. Ninety-six years old and, despite her physical frailty, still bright-eyed and sharp as a tack.

"I saw your broadcast from San Francisco on PBS. My, what a provocative opera! I was a bit surprised at what you were wearing—or rather, what you *weren't* wearing—in the last act."

He laughed. "It's an unusual costume, that's for sure. Good thing I had help getting in and out of it."

"And your costar was quite glamorous. A beautiful lady with a lovely voice."

Just who he didn't want to be reminded of. *Damn!* Now he couldn't stop wondering what Colette was doing right now—and with whom. "Yes, she is. And she's every bit as beautiful offstage too."

"I'd like to propose a toast," came his father's blustery tone from the head of the table. Wobbling to his feet, he held up his beer bottle. "To my prodigal son—thanks for remembering to stop by. We little people appreciate it."

David's hands curled into fists under the table, but he took a deep breath and forced another smile. He was amazed his face hadn't cracked in half by now. "That's funny, Dad. I get it. We all got it—the *first* time."

His father's smirk faded abruptly. "What's the matter, you too good to laugh at my jokes?"

"Will you stop it? It's *me*, Dad. I'm the same person I've always been. Quit trying to make such a big deal out of my career."

"Fine. I'll keep that in mind for next time—if there is a next time."

"What, you don't think I'll be back?"

"You wouldn't be the first ungrateful asshole to forget where he came from on his way to the top."

For a second, David couldn't believe what he'd just heard. This went beyond his father's usual pointed needling. *Way* beyond. Standing slowly, he tossed his napkin on the table. "You know what? Fuck this—and fuck *you*, old man. It's not my fault your life's so miserable you have to get hammered every night. I don't know what your fucking problem with me is, but it's *your* problem, not mine." He

glanced around the table, taking in the rest of the family's shocked faces. "Sorry to ruin everyone's dinner. I'll get out of here and leave you all in peace."

His mother followed him out to the foyer, grabbing hold of his coat sleeve as he tried to put it back on. "Get back in there and tell him you're sorry."

"For *what*? I didn't do anything!"

"Other than cursing at him in his own house! Humiliating him in front of everybody!"

"What about *him* humiliating *me*? Or doesn't that matter?" One look at her haggard, desperate expression, and he had his answer. "After all these years, you're still making excuses for him. Well, I've had it. I'm not taking any more of his abuse." He buttoned his coat and picked up his bag. "If he wants to apologize, he's got my phone number. Not that I'll be holding my breath."

"David, *please*. Don't go."

He'd just started toward the front door, but her plaintive tone made him come back to plant a quick kiss on her cheek. "Sorry, Mom. I have to." Then he turned and walked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aleks had given their chef the holiday off, so later that evening they bundled up in their coats, scarves and boots and ventured out into the village. Barely an hour after sunset, and the sky was already the clearest, deepest blue Colette had ever seen, dusted with bright stars. The fresh, clean alpine air was so cold it almost froze her lungs. She and Aleks linked arms as they strolled through the cobblestoned streets, marveling at the utter silence. Zermatt lay high up in the Alps, with the train the only way in or out. There were no cars here, just sleighs and foot traffic. It was as if they'd been hurled back in time to the nineteenth century.

Surprisingly, a number of restaurants were open tonight. They settled on a small, intimate place with sturdy wooden tables and a long bar with an impressive number of beer steins perched on it. The host came over and greeted them in rapid-fire German, showed them to a table near the fireplace, then took their order.

They lingered over a pot of fondue chased down by a light, crisp Riesling. After, as they did a slow circuit of the town before heading back to the chalet, Aleks remarked, "Is something wrong? You haven't uttered a word since we left the restaurant."

Why did he keep asking her that? With a stifled sigh, she glanced up at the mountains looming above them. "I'm just enjoying the ambiance and the quiet. It's so peaceful here."

"It is indeed." No sooner had he spoken the words when he spied a newspaper vending machine on a nearby corner and darted over to buy one. Colette's lips went tight, but she'd decided not to say anything until he looked at her, forehead crinkled. "What is it?"

"We're on holiday, Aleks. Can't we go even a couple of days without the outside world intruding?"

"It's just a newspaper."

"My point exactly."

"Fine, then." Now his lips tightened, but he marched back to leave the paper on top of the vending machine. "Shall we go?"

They arrived back at the chalet a few minutes later, with Colette shivering from a distinct new chill that had nothing to do with the temperature. She headed upstairs by herself to wash her face and put on her nightgown and robe, but when she fished in her purse for her hairbrush, everything in it spilled onto the floor. Wallet. Makeup bag. Cell phone...

Which looked like it had a voice message on it. Well, whatever it was, it could wait.

Except she didn't put it back in her bag. She sank down on the edge of the bed and stared at it, then hit the button to see who'd left the message.

*David.*

As if she hadn't already suspected as much. She would've thought he'd have better sense than to call her, especially today. God, why hadn't she blocked his number when she had the chance?

She should've erased it, but instead she hit the "play" button. "Hi, Colette. It's... Well, you know who it is. I wanted to wish you merry Christmas." A short pause, and then, "I really miss you, you know. I think about you every day. And every night." There was a muffled noise that sounded like coughing or nervous laughter, followed by, "I shouldn't have said that. Sorry. Don't worry, I won't call again. I was just hoping to hear your voice."

The line clicked off.

This time she did erase it, then hastily flipped back a couple of screens to delete his number. Her thumb hovered between the "delete" and "call" buttons for a second or two—until she heard a clomp-clomping up the stairs, and Aleks poked his head in the doorway.

"I'm sorry about our disagreement. You're right—we came here to relax, not read newspapers." He smiled. "Would you care to join me on the sofa for a glass of wine?"

Her startled heart tripped like a snare drum, though she managed to force a weak smile. "Give me a few minutes to change, and I'll be right down." She breathed deep as his footsteps faded, decisively hitting the "delete" button at last. There. It was done.

But she still felt awful. Anxious. *Wrong*. As if Aleks had caught her in the act. As if she'd betrayed him simply by listening to David's message, when it wasn't her fault. It wasn't as if she'd *asked* him to call.

But she'd been thinking about him too, and that was her fault. And now that she'd heard his voice again, there was little chance she'd get it out of her mind—at least, not tonight.



## Chapter Four

After an entire week of blessed peace and quiet, returning home to noisy, gloomy Paris felt like a distinct comedown. Colette put on her best smile and tried to ignore the strange restlessness pricking at the back of her mind as she and Aleks settled into a regular routine. Each morning he went off to rehearse with the *Orchestre de Paris*, while she sat down at the piano and tried to concentrate on learning her new role. Rehearsals for *Carmen* started in another week, and she was nowhere near ready.

It shouldn't have been so difficult. She'd learned Carmen's two major arias, the *Habañera* and the *Seguidilla*, years ago at the *conservatoire*, but there were still duets and a host of other ensemble pieces to memorize. She'd even have to sing and dance at the same time, and she'd never been terribly confident about her dancing. Never mind that *Carmen* was one of the best-known operas of all time. Parisian audiences knew it like they knew the alphabet—which meant there was no room for mistakes. *None.*

Every day she spent studying the role of Bizet's fiery gypsy left Colette more convinced that she had no hope of pulling it off. How could she compare with Callas, Price or Berganza? Oh she could hit all the notes, but what did she have to *say* about the role that hadn't been said before? Finding something fresh and new in the century-old opera seemed not only elusive, but downright impossible.

At last the first day of rehearsals arrived. Colette's hands trembled as she styled her hair and applied makeup, then put on a simple A-line plum wool dress and plain black flats. It was bound to be a long day, so she might as well be comfortable. Henri drove her and Aleks to the *Opéra Bastille* and dropped them off at the stage door, where general director Sergei Popov shook Colette's hand, slapped Aleks on the back and led them to their side-by-side dressing rooms.

"We don't normally put the conductor and prima donna so close together, but in this case..." Popov grinned, practically bouncing on his feet. "I cannot tell you how excited we all are to have you here. I'm sure this will be an outstanding production."

"And I'm sure that was more for your benefit than mine," Colette murmured to Aleks once Popov had moved out of earshot.

"Stop it." Aleks' expression went suddenly as dark as the January storm clouds outside. "Never let me hear you talk that way again."

She'd just turned to hang up her coat, but his sharp, no-nonsense tone made her swing back to face him. "All I meant was—"

"I only work with the best. And if you cast doubt on your own talent, you not only insult yourself, but me as well." Then he reached for her hand, carrying it to his chest. The slow, steady thump of his heart beat dully against her palm. God, how could he be so calm at a time like this? "Do you trust me, my angel?"

He usually asked her that in the bedroom, after she'd sunk to her knees before him. She would've given anything to do that right here and now, but the dressing room door stood half-open,

with people darting up and down the hallway outside. “Of course,” she whispered finally. “I trust you without question. But it still feels as if I’m standing atop a hundred-story building, poised to fall.”

“Then let yourself fall. I will always be there to catch you. It’s part of a conductor’s job, after all. And a husband’s too.” A soft kiss on her cheek, and then, “Come along, Carmencita. Time to meet the rest of our cast.”

They took the elevator down to the rehearsal hall in the opera house’s basement, where the orchestra, adult and children’s chorus and the other principal singers awaited them. Colette had only previously worked with soprano Nicole Maurel, who was singing the role of peasant girl Micaëla. They’d gotten along famously when they’d done *Rosenkavalier* in London last spring. But she was taken aback to see Alberto Bernini sitting in the chair next to hers. She’d long admired the veteran Italian tenor, but good God, he had to be at least fifty! A bit long in the tooth to play a romantic lead like Don José.

Colette simply smiled, shook his hand and opened the score on the podium in front of her. It was ridiculous of her to write him off when she hadn’t even heard him sing yet. If it were Domingo she wouldn’t be having misgivings—and he was in his sixties.

Aleks tapped his baton on his own podium to bring the room to order, then launched into the score. The orchestra worked like a well-oiled machine, hardly requiring any correction—not surprising, considering they played this opera every other season. Most of the inevitable fits and starts had to do with the children’s chorus, which sounded a bit ragged. Aleks had to take the choral director aside for a short conference, then sent him and his charges off to rehearse on their own.

At last he moved on to working with the principals. By now Colette’s nerves were well and truly jangled, but when Aleks signaled the start of the *Habañera*, she opened her mouth and sang as if it were her last chance to sing anything ever again. Wrapping the notes in a rich, smoky purr, she glided through the aria’s four seductive verses, with the chorus coming in on the refrains. For a split second she was afraid she wouldn’t make the final B-flat, but out it came, sailing above their heads like a shooting star.

The room burst into spontaneous applause—orchestra, chorus and cast alike. Even Aleks gave her a smile and a nod before signaling for Nicole and Alberto to stand and begin their duet. Relief nearly buckling her knees, Colette sank into her seat gratefully, sipping water while she thumbed through the score to find her next cue.

Then she closed her eyes and listened. Amazingly, Bernini was in as fine a voice as he’d ever been, his mellifluous lyric tenor pouring from him like a golden stream. But that was before he hit the duet’s first high note—or rather, tried to. His voice wavered, wobbled and finally cracked.

The poor man looked mortified but recovered quickly. He even managed to hit the missed note dead on in the duet’s subsequent verses. No doubt it was just first-day jitters. *It could’ve happened to anyone*, Colette told herself. *Even me. Especially me.*

\* \* \* \* \*

“I thought it went fairly well today,” she remarked to Aleks over dinner at home that evening. “At least I didn’t faint from sheer terror.”

“See? Didn’t I say you had nothing to worry about?” He picked up his glass of wine and swirled it, then took a healthy sip. “There were a few other things that seemed a bit rough though. Unnecessarily so.”

“Believe me, I’ve witnessed much worse at first rehearsals. But I did feel for poor Alberto. It’s embarrassing to miss a note like that in front of everyone.”

“Did he seem a bit...stiff to you during the *Seguidilla*?”

“His singing sounded perfectly fine.”

“That’s not what I meant. You were supposed to be seducing him, but he behaved as if he were petrified. Literally. A good breeze would’ve snapped him in two.”

She sighed, setting her fork down. “Aleks, you haven’t conducted opera in a long time. It’s not like a symphony or a concerto. Things aren’t going to be perfect after you’ve run through it once, or even two or three times. In fact, it’ll probably never be perfect—there are just too many variables. There’s music rehearsals and staging rehearsals and costume fittings and—”

“I see your point. So I’m being too difficult a taskmaster, am I?”

“You could ease up a bit. At least for the first week.”

“Very well. Since this is your field of expertise, I bow to your better judgment.” A tiny smile, and then he returned to scowling into his Pinot noir.

Colette took a few bites of her salad, chewing slowly. Finally the continued silence became too much to bear. “There’s something else bothering you, isn’t there? Tell me.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Aleks...” She did her best not to sound exasperated, but it truly was an effort. “If it concerns the production, I want to know.”

He sighed and put down his glass. “I’ve heard some rumors about Bernini. Namely, that he has a drinking problem. And a gambling problem. And a mistress-with-two-children problem.”

Her eyes widened. “Well, I can’t speak to the other things, but he didn’t seem drunk today, just nervous. Like at least one other person in the room.”

“I shouldn’t have told you. I knew you wouldn’t take it seriously.”

“There’s nothing to take seriously. They’re *rumors*. And even if they are true, it still doesn’t make them any of our business. People could tell plenty of stories about us, you know.”

Now he gave her a sharp look. “Indeed.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The next couple of music rehearsals went much better. Colette finally let herself relax and enjoy playing with the score, making the role her own. Aleks was right—as far as her own performance went, she had nothing to worry about.

But that was before staging rehearsals started the following week. That evening she arrived home exhausted and with a pounding headache, then marched right into Aleks’ study, dropping into the chair in front of his desk.

Aleks glanced up from his seat at the piano, instant concern crinkling his eyes. “What happened?”

“Bernini doesn’t want to do anything. Every time Sophia asked him to emote or move around the stage, he just glared at her.”

He sighed, ambling over to perch on the edge of his desk. “Perhaps I should have a word with Popov.”

“It won’t do any good. Alberto’s one of those old-school singers who thinks all he needs to do is stand there and bathe the room in his beautiful voice. And it is still beautiful. He won’t disappoint on that score, but...”

“But he’s too old for the role, and he knows it.”

She nodded wearily. “And I can’t be sure, but I think I smelled wine on his breath after lunch. He did seem a bit unsteady from that point onward.”

“Well, there’s no question then. I should definitely speak to Popov.”

“No, Aleks—please don’t.” Panic gripped her, but she forced it back down. She was *not* about to see this production go down in flames. “Popov will only upset him and make him dig in his heels. The last thing I need is to have to play love scenes with a tenor who thinks I’m trying to sabotage him.”

Aleks thought about it a moment, then finally nodded. “Fine. But if he shows up for any of my rehearsals in that condition, he’ll have to deal with me. And I’m not nearly as diplomatic as Sergei.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Things settled down for the next week or so, albeit amidst the usual packed schedule of rehearsals and costume fittings. Colette was used to such a grueling pace, but she still fell into bed every night feeling as if she’d been hit by a train. Aleks’ rough lovemaking would coax her back to life for a few precious, ecstatic minutes before she finally tumbled headlong into sleep.

Their stage director Sophia Palminteri had grown tired of Bernini’s temperamental antics and took him aside for a little chat—and, Colette suspected, thinly veiled threats to report his afternoon drinking to the management—because suddenly he’d become the spirit of cooperation. He did everything asked of him, though it didn’t improve his acting. All he really wanted was to stand there and play directly to the audience. By this point Colette had resigned herself to the reality that this would hardly be the greatest production of *Carmen* ever—but perhaps, with a bit of luck, it might not be a complete disaster.

Two days before the final dress rehearsal, she trudged into the opera house auditorium, plopped into a plush red velvet seat and promptly nodded off. Jerking awake a few minutes later, she realized she was still alone, and stole a glance at her watch. Sophia and Alberto were both late, which wasn’t like either of them. They were supposed to be rehearsing the final scene today, the climax of the entire opera. So where were they?

Half an hour later, they still hadn’t shown. Concerned, frustrated and even a bit piqued, Colette headed backstage, nose wrinkling at the pervasive odors of fresh paint and sawdust, dodging stagehands and scenery flats on her way to Sophia’s office. But she had to pass Popov’s office first—and

the echo of two enraged voices screeching in Italian and Russian-accented Italian told her she need look no further.

Rapping on the office door, she poked her head inside. "Hello?"

Sophia and Popov halted in mid-scream and wheeled to face her, their furious grimaces immediately replaced with solicitous frozen smiles. "Ah, Madame DuPlessis, what can we do for you?" Popov piped.

"I was waiting for Sophia in the auditorium. Has the rehearsal been rescheduled?"

Popov looked as if he were about to reply, until Sophia pushed her thick-rimmed glasses up on her nose and shot him a poisonous glare. "Colette, I apologize," she said. "I was just about to come find you. There's been a bit of a problem. Alberto has...left."

"Left?" Colette repeated, her gaze flicking from Sophia to Popov and back again. "To go where?"

"Home to Milan," Popov supplied. "He's fallen ill."

"That's the official story," Sophia interjected sourly. "The truth is, his wife's leaving him. She found out about his girlfriend and the two *bambini*—only about five years after the rest of us."

So much for it being just a rumor. "But...he'll be back in time for opening night, won't he?"

"No," Popov replied. "His engagement's been canceled, by mutual agreement."

"*What?*" Stunned, Colette lowered herself into a nearby chair. "Are you joking? We open on Friday! Five days from now!"

"Don't worry, we'll find someone else," Popov hastened to add. "Any tenor worth his salt knows the role of Don José."

"The problem is finding someone who's available for the pittance you're willing to pay," Sophia spat.

"If you'd kept production costs down like I begged you to do, we wouldn't be in this predicament!"

"You expect me to put on *Carmen* for pennies, you petty Muscovite tyrant! Why, I should walk out of here right now!"

"Go ahead, you Sicilian witch! I won't be bullied by you or anyone..."

And they were off again, rattling insults in furious, spit-flecked Italian. Colette just sat there, hands over her ears to drown out their shrieks, her brain throbbing. All their hard work of the past few weeks circling the drain, and nothing she could do about it. Disappointment rolled over her in a huge, crushing wave, leaving her on the verge of tears.

Of course Popov would scrounge up someone else, but last-minute substitutions were nearly always catch-as-catch-can. There was no guarantee whoever he got would be any good. God, now she could've kicked herself for complaining about Bernini. For all his dramatic shortcomings, at least he'd had a beautiful voice.

Then suddenly the perfect solution popped into her head. No, not just perfect—ideal. It might not only save the production, but elevate it to a level of brilliance.

Slowly Colette rose to her feet, banging on Popov's desk with her fist to get his and Sophia's attention. "I know of someone."

They both gaped at her, goggle-eyed. "Who?" they asked practically in unison.

"The tenor I just worked with in San Francisco. He already knows the role, and I'm fairly sure he's available."

“What, you mean David Lewis?” Sophia’s heavily mascaraed eyes lit up like a pair of streetlamps. “Ah, he’d be wonderful. So handsome. And that fabulous voice!”

“I can’t afford to pay him a top-ranked star’s fee,” Popov interjected, looking genuinely relieved, albeit a bit apprehensive. “But I’d be happy to cover his travel expenses and give him first choice of engagements next season. If you think he’ll do it under those circumstances...”

“I’m sure he will,” she replied with a nod. Of course, Aleks wouldn’t be happy about this at all. Well, too bad. Sooner or later she and David were sure to meet again. Better for it to occur here in Paris, where Aleks could see with his own eyes that he had no reason to be jealous. And if he was anyway, he’d simply have to get over it. “In fact, if you like, I’ll call him myself.”

## Chapter Five

David's limousine picked him up at De Gaulle airport Wednesday morning and whisked him directly to the opera house, where a visibly nervous Sergei Popov met him at the stage door and showed him to his dressing room.

"I'm afraid there will only be time for one orchestra rehearsal, then this afternoon Sophia will walk you through the production," the general director rattled along in breakneck French, his accent so heavy David had to listen hard to decipher it. "The dress rehearsal is tomorrow evening, and Friday night we open. I really am terribly sorry to bring you in at the last minute—"

"Don't worry, I'm sure everything will be fine," David replied in his own not-so-rapid-fire French, forcing a smile. "We're all professionals here, right?"

"And thank God for that," came a familiar smoky tone from the doorway, and in walked Colette, beaming at him like sunshine on a summer morning. She looked absolutely stunning in black wool slacks and a creamy-white cashmere turtleneck, her blonde hair pulled back in a chic ponytail. She came up and threw her arms around him, brushing a soft kiss across his cheek. "I can't tell you how grateful we are that you're here, David. You have literally saved this production. Maybe not from failure, but definitely from mediocrity."

"It can't be that bad, not with you singing the lead." Truth to tell, he'd almost turned down the engagement. The awful pain that had torn through him when he'd heard Colette's voice on the phone had him convinced no good could come of seeing her again, at least not so soon. But when she told him how desperately she needed his help, he'd caved in five seconds flat. God, he was such a pushover for this woman. "Besides," he added, lapsing into English after Popov gave them both a wave, then scurried off down the hallway, "you knew I was a foregone conclusion."

"Not so! I try to never take anything for granted—or *anyone*." She studied his face for a moment, her smile fading. "You look tired. Did you get any rest on the plane?"

"A little. I can keep running on adrenaline for a few more hours." Despite his residual wooziness, the warmth of her body was starting to have an all-too-predictable effect on him. He backed away reluctantly, moving toward the bathroom. "Give me a minute to freshen up and I'll be good to go."

Cold tap water splashed on his face revived him a bit, but did nothing to put out the fire below his belt. *Jesus Christ*. Rock-hard from a hug and a kiss on the cheek. How was he supposed to get through the next three weeks of smelling Colette's perfume and holding her in his arms every performance? What the hell was he thinking, getting on that plane?

But there was no backing out now. He was here. He'd accepted the engagement, signed the contract. No matter how bad it got, he'd just have to grit his teeth and endure it. An entire production was counting on him.

Luckily, a couple minutes of imagining himself tumbling head-first into the orchestra pit or losing his voice in the middle of an aria finally killed his erection. Painting on his best smile, he emerged from the bathroom and followed Colette downstairs to the rehearsal hall.

The orchestra was already assembled, the air punctuated with the familiar groans and wheezes of instruments tuning up. The only other singer in attendance was a petite brunette, the score on the podium in front of her flipped open to José and Micaëla's Act One duet. Nicole something-or-other. He'd seen her backstage at the Met a couple of times. Colette quickly made formal introductions then led him up to the conductor's podium at the front of the room. "David, I'd like to present—"

"Aleksandr Petrovsky," David croaked when he realized who was in front of him—only one of the most fucking amazing musicians in the world. Then David's gaze zoomed in on the matching wedding bands on Petrovsky's and Colette's ring fingers, and suddenly his stomach plummeted through the floor. Hand outstretched, he stood rooted to the spot like some idiotic statue, staring into Petrovsky's piercing green eyes. How the hell could he have forgotten who Colette's husband was? And why hadn't it occurred to him to ask who was conducting before he'd accepted this job? "I-I never thought I'd be lucky enough to work with you."

It was the wrong thing to say. He knew it the moment the words had left his mouth. Petrovsky got showered with empty flattery every day of his life. And here he was, the no-name replacement tenor, doing the same damn thing. But what was he supposed to say? "*Hey, great to meet you! Hope there's no hard feelings over me banging your wife!*" A hot, prickly flush crept up the back of David's neck. Way to make a first impression!

Fortunately, Petrovsky was far too professional to sneer in his face, but gave him a polite nod in lieu of a handshake. If he knew about David's past relationship with Colette, he gave no outward sign of it. Did he know? Or did he just not consider it relevant to the task at hand? "Good to have you with us, Mr. Lewis. Shall we get to work? Time is short."

As if he needed to be reminded. Damn, but Petrovsky was one unflappable customer. Well, if he could ignore the elephant in the room, David would simply have to do the same. He and Colette took their seats next to Nicole while Petrovsky gave some direction to the orchestra, then turned to face the singers. "Let's begin with Don José's Act Two aria. Mr. Lewis, I trust you're prepared?"

Nothing like hitting the ground running. David knew he should've taken a few minutes to warm up at the piano in his dressing room before heading down here, but seeing Colette had sent all rational thought flying from his brain. Good thing he'd had plenty of time to restudy the score on his flight over. "Anytime you're ready, maestro."

The first few bars were rough. Every note exposed an uncomfortable tightness in his tone. David gripped the podium with both hands, petrified that his wobbly knees would betray him, until an encouraging glance from Colette gave him permission to relax. Don José's *Flower Song* was David's favorite piece in the entire opera, and not just because he could count on a standing ovation at the end of it. One of the most heartfelt, sensual declarations of love ever set to music, it never failed to make his voice open up and soar.

Without thinking, he turned to Colette and sang it directly to her, like he would during an actual performance. Was it his imagination, or did she sit up the tiniest bit straighter, the roses in her cheeks deepening? By now the music had him firmly in its clutches, an endless river of sound pouring out of



him, sweeping him along to the climactic final B-flat. It floated in the air like soft rain and dissolved just as quickly.

Silence followed the orchestra's concluding notes, then came a swell of applause. Even Petrovsky looked impressed. He waited for the room to fall quiet again before asking, "Why did you sing the B-flat *pianissimo*?"

"That's how it's marked in the score, maestro." However, it didn't stop most tenors from hitting the note full-force, then standing back to collect their bravos. David had never particularly cared for that approach. It was a cheap, showy ploy to get applause. Still, it was how most audiences were used to hearing the aria performed. If Petrovsky insisted on him doing it that way, he supposed he'd have to.

But the maestro didn't respond further, other than to shoot Colette a pointed look. When they exchanged smiles and nods, David had the sudden awkward feeling he'd just passed some kind of secret test.

His embarrassed flush slowly migrated into his cheeks. He hastily undid the top two buttons of his dress shirt and gulped down some water, hoping no one else had noticed.

He got a small respite from the tension by throwing himself into the Act One duet with Nicole. She had a sweet, silvery voice that melded well with his, and by now he'd warmed up enough to do an adequate job. When they finished, the conductor set down his baton. "That will be fine, everyone. Thank you for coming in on such short notice. You're all free to go."

David's jaw nearly hit his chest. What the hell was Petrovsky doing, dismissing the orchestra when they still had pages of music to cover? When this was the only orchestra rehearsal they'd scheduled for him? Alarmed, David marched to the front of the room and waited behind the concertmaster and leader of the woodwind section for his turn to speak to the maestro.

"Yes, Mr. Lewis?" Petrovsky's tone was brusque to the point of rudeness. In fact, he'd already thrown his score in his bag and started for the door. David had to sprint to keep up with him.

"Why did we skip the final scene? I thought we had at least another hour of orchestra time—"

"Which is quite expensive, especially when unnecessary. You obviously have a fine grasp of the role and a good working rapport with Colette. Your time will be better spent with Sophia, learning the staging. I'll see you at dress rehearsal tomorrow night." He strode on ahead, disappearing around a bend in the corridor.

"Don't worry, it's not you," Colette said, coming up on David's right side. "He's running off to another rehearsal with the *Orchestre de Paris*. He didn't expect to be double-booked this week, but the fates had other plans."

"Well, rehearsal or no rehearsal, I'll get up onstage and give it my all, I promise."

"Of course you will." Slipping her hand into the crook of his arm, she drew him down the hallway. "Let me tell you a secret. If Aleks likes the way you sing, he says nothing. If he doesn't, he looks like he's ready to vomit."

"Then I guess I should be glad he likes me." They both laughed. It was a relaxed, comfortable sound. David let out a sigh. Maybe the next three weeks wouldn't be so awful, as long as he didn't have to walk on eggshells every time Aleks was in the room. "So have you told him about—"

"Yes, he knows," she replied softly. "Aleks and I have no secrets from each other."

"And he's still okay with us working together?"

"It was either engage a singer we knew would do a good job, or take our chances with whoever Popov could get on short notice. Aleks is a musician and an artist first. He knew there was no other option."

"Wow. That's what I call open-minded."

"To be honest, I didn't actually tell him who our new Don José was until *after* I called you. But he still agreed you were the best possible choice."

"I hope you both think so after Friday night."

She smiled. "I have no doubts."

\* \* \* \* \*

The dress rehearsal went off fairly well, with only a few minor technical glitches. David's costume still needed altering—Bernini had about fifteen pounds on him, which meant David spent the evening traipsing around the stage in a Spanish army corporal's uniform that fit him like an old potato sack—but at least he hadn't walked into the scenery or missed any of the prompter's cues. When the final curtain came down, he heaved a relieved sigh and trudged back to his dressing room to collapse.

He'd gotten his second wind by the time his dresser came by to help him out of his costume, then he padded in to take a shower. No sooner had he emerged from the bathroom, still knotting his robe around him, when a soft rap came at the door and Petrovsky poked his head in.

"You did remarkably well tonight, under the circumstances," the maestro said. "Thank you."

A bit qualified for a rave, but he'd still take it. "Thank *you*, maestro. I just hope I get my legs under me by tomorrow night. Everyone else has been rehearsing this staging for weeks, but I feel like I'm dodging traffic out there."

"Coming in on a production at the last minute is always stressful. But Colette said you were picking it up quicker than anyone had a right to expect."

"Well, it's not my first time," he admitted, sinking down on the edge of a small couch directly across from the baby grand piano that swallowed up most of the room. "I made my Met debut on a day's notice after Alagna canceled a performance of *Manon*. Just a few years out of Juilliard and there I was, onstage singing a love duet with Renée Fleming."

"I imagine that made you a bit nervous."

"Absolutely fucking terrified."

They both burst out laughing. Finally Petrovsky stepped inside, shutting the door behind him to drown out the post-show hustle and bustle in the hallway. "I remember my first year conducting. I had to run back to my dressing room every intermission to change shirts. They were always soaked through with perspiration."

"I know the feeling. I just rinsed off about five pounds of flop-sweat." *Oh God*. He could've bitten his tongue the second he said it. Talk about an indelicate turn of phrase.

But Petrovsky just shrugged and sat down on the piano bench. "Audiences have no conception of what goes into a great performance. They want the excitement, the high notes, the triumphant bows at the end. But they don't know about the years of hard work, the sacrifices. The personal cost." He

shook his head, eyes crinkling. They were nice eyes, deep sea-green with a ring of dark blue around the iris. Stormy and intense when he was at the podium, they'd now gone amazingly soft, even dreamy. "Which is why it's always a pleasure to meet a true musician like yourself. There aren't many singers who'd choose integrity of the score over applause."

Genuinely touched, David had to remind himself to close his mouth. "It...um, throws off my concentration when the audience interrupts a performance to clap or shout bravo. There'll always be another high note. That's what we tenors get paid for, right?"

"Indeed."

The door opened again, and this time Colette peeked inside. She'd changed out of her long, wavy brunette wig and Act Four gown into her regular clothes. "There you are, Aleks. Sophia said she saw you heading this way." Her wide-eyed gaze bounced from Petrovsky to David and back again. "We should let David get dressed and go back to his hotel. I'm sure he must be tired."

"Or he can join us at our apartment for a late supper. I, for one, am famished." He flashed them both a mouthful of long white teeth. It would've looked positively shark-like if not for his obvious good humor. "You two must be hungry as well."

David's glance locked on Colette's, and they both laughed nervously. Petrovsky couldn't mean... No, of course he couldn't. It was just a friendly invitation to dinner. Colette had made it clear what had happened between them was in the past. And that was fine, really. He'd accepted it. Seeing her with Petrovsky these past two days had proven what she'd told him was true—they were happily married. And though David's heart still died a little at the realization, he wasn't about to do anything to screw that up.

But he wasn't about to turn down the invitation either—especially since he was indeed starving. "Give me five minutes to get dressed, maestro, and I'll be happy to join you."

"Aleks, please." Still smiling, Petrovsky stood, hand extended. "We're colleagues, after all."

\* \* \* \* \*

Aleks slowly circled the dining table, refilling everyone's glasses with a lovely 2008 Viognier while David regaled them with stories from his childhood that had Colette nearly doubled over with laughter. Aleks couldn't help smiling himself as he sat down to sip his wine and listen.

"My old dog Buddy was sweet, but dumb as a bag of rocks. He thought everything was made of food and kept jumping on stuff, trying to eat it. My dad had pretty much had it with him. One more chance, he said, then it was off to the pound. So when I got home one Christmas Eve and found the tree snapped in half, it didn't take three guesses to figure out what happened. Plus, Buddy was still gnawing on the tinsel."

By now Colette had her hand over her mouth, her eyes round as dinner plates. "So what did you—"

"What any desperate sixteen-year-old would do, I guess—grabbed Dad's axe and went out in the woods behind our house to chop down another tree. Then I dragged it inside and finished getting it decorated about five minutes before my folks got home from work."

“Oh my God! And they never suspected it wasn’t the same one?”

“Dad kept giving it the stinkeye all through dinner, but by the time we’d finished eating he was full of beer and didn’t care anymore.” He sat back with a grin and a shrug. “And through it all, I never tipped my hand. It was my first great performance. That’s when I knew I had a real future in show business. Or forestry.”

Colette kept giggling between bites of the delectable *cassoulet* Simone had prepared for them. It’d been ages since Aleks had seen her so unabashedly giddy. She never laughed this easily with him. The thought sent a sharp, swift pain lancing through his heart. He often wondered if his temperament was too intense for her. She had such an open, loving disposition. She deserved to laugh like this every day.

As for the young tenor... Well, Aleks definitely saw the attraction. Good-looking and funny, a combination he himself could never match. Factor in that beautiful voice and amazing body—which he’d gotten a glimpse of when David stripped off his shirt during Act Two of tonight’s rehearsal—and Aleks couldn’t fathom why Colette hadn’t run off with him weeks ago. Had the tables been turned, he certainly would’ve been tempted. Even now, his burgeoning erection pressed against his fly, making him shift restlessly in his seat.

“Quite a leap from a small town in Wisconsin to the international opera stage,” he commented, taking another sip of wine while willing himself to calm down. It wouldn’t do for David to become aware of the effect he was having on him. Aleks needed to maintain the upper hand on and offstage, lest the production suffer.

“Oh, I sang in the church choir and did school musicals my entire childhood. Then when it came time to apply for college, music seemed like a logical choice for my major. It was just a fluke that I won the scholarship to Juilliard.”

“Not a fluke at all,” Colette protested. “You’re far too modest.”

Aleks nodded. “Your voice truly is something special. And you have considerably more acting talent than most of your peers.”

“Well, thank you. But I’m still nervous about tomorrow night. Sophia’s supposed to run through the production with me again in the afternoon. Hopefully by then I’ll have the blocking down.”

That prompted Colette to sigh. “To be honest, I’m disappointed in what Sophia’s come up with for the characters’ motivations. I don’t want to play Carmen as the stereotypical wicked, promiscuous gypsy who entices poor José to his doom. She’s much more complex than that. But Sophia seems content to merely scratch the surface.”

“I’ve always thought of Carmen as opera’s first liberated woman,” David mused. “It’s all right there in first line of the *Habañera*—‘Love is a rebellious bird that no one can tame.’ She’s a free spirit who loves when and wherever she wishes, and falls out of love just as easily. No wonder the opera scandalized everyone when it premiered in 1875.”

Intrigued, Aleks leaned forward. “And when José turns possessive and tries to tie her down, that’s when she loses interest—and he loses his mind. He can’t imagine why she wouldn’t want to be his forever.”

“He stalks her, but she won’t back down. Which makes her defiance in the face of death at the end even more heroic,” David said. “Every modern woman who’s had to fend off a psychotic ex-lover can relate.”

"My God, that's it," Colette murmured, a slow smile spreading across her face. "I've been looking for a new way to play the role, and it's been right in front of me the entire time. A truly feminist interpretation. But do we dare? Sophia will murder us if we deviate from her directions."

The spark in her eyes was positively infectious. Aleks couldn't help grinning as he aimed a conspiratorial glance across the table at David. "To the devil with Sophia. She'll be gone after opening night, then you two can suit yourselves. Popov despises her, so I doubt he'll give you any trouble. Especially if you fill every seat in the house."

"And standing room too, I'll bet," David added, rubbing his hands together. "God, I can't wait. This is going to be *fun*."

Their dinner party broke up a short while later. Colette said good night and went to get ready for bed, while Aleks played the gracious host by walking David to the door. "I'm glad you joined us tonight," he said with complete sincerity. "Colette's needed some cheering up. These past few weeks have been difficult for her."

"I can imagine. Carmen's not exactly an easy role, but it must've been doubly difficult trying to learn it under such adverse conditions."

"Well, that's all over, now that you're here." On impulse, he threw his arm around David's shoulder, pulling him into a hug. After a moment of surprised awkwardness, David hugged him back.

"Thanks, Aleks," he murmured. "See you at the theater tomorrow night."

For a second Aleks thought he saw a flash of something—gratitude, coupled with admiration and perhaps a touch of genuine arousal—in David's pale blue eyes, right before he stepped through the doorway and was gone.

The bathroom door stood half-open when Aleks reached the bedroom. He found Colette standing in front of the mirror brushing her hair. Despite the warmth radiating from the heated floor, her nipples still showed darkly through her nightgown, hard little points tenting the smooth blue silk. Was it due to his presence, or something else?

She melted into his arms as he came up behind her to bury his face in her throat, giving her the edge of his teeth. Sadly, he couldn't bite her hard enough to leave a mark—the off-shoulder peasant blouse she wore for Act One left her bare from neck to décolletage. But that didn't mean he couldn't plant a little souvenir elsewhere.

"Did you enjoy the evening?" he murmured.

"You know I did. Thank you for inviting David. It was a pleasant and enlightening conversation."

She'd taken on that cool, composed ladylike demeanor she knew he longed to shatter. Arm snaking around her waist, he tugged her around to face him, then shoved her back against the sink and brought his mouth down on hers. One hand glided up to grab a rough fistful of her hair, pulling until she gave a tiny broken gasp and crumpled against him, lips parting under the insistent thrust of his tongue.

His cock rose in triumph, still trapped inside his trousers. Fumbling with his other hand, he managed to get the zipper down and let his erection spring free. But when he yanked up the hem of her nightgown and slid his fingers between her soft, moist thighs, he froze.

"One kiss, and already wet as the ocean," he whispered. "Is that for him, or for me?"

She blinked up at him with hazy, dilated eyes. "I... I don't know what you mean..."

"You still want him, don't you?" When she hesitated, he tightened his grip on her hair, bending her head back. "*Don't you?*"

God, he loved it when that first tear escaped the corner of one eye and rolled down her cheek, the first precious gift of her submission to him. “I-I can’t help it,” she replied, her tone hoarse, ragged. Desperate. “Please don’t be angry with me...”

“Oh, I’m not angry, angel. In fact, I find it quite arousing.” Grabbing her hand, he placed it on his cock to show her he wasn’t lying. Her fingers closed around him and began to stroke. His breath caught, hissing out between gritted teeth. A fine, distracting ploy, but he wasn’t about to come like this, spurting all over her hand. Not tonight, anyway.

With a grunt, he pushed her ahead of him into the bedroom. She crawled onto the mattress, watching as he got a condom from the bedside table and rolled it on, her eyes wide and bright, a soft pink flush of excitement painted over her delicate skin.

“Get that thing off,” he ordered, nodding at her nightgown while he stripped off his own jacket. But his shirt studs were a different story. They twisted in the sweaty fabric and steadfastly refused to come loose. His fingers had gone clumsy, rubbery, unable to push buttons through holes. The devil with it. Kicking off his shoes, he climbed onto the bed and onto his wife, pinning her down with his body.

His hands latched onto her wrists, engulfing them in his grip. Sweet, delicate wrists that begged to be tied down, lashed to the headboard. But he couldn’t leave marks there either. Reluctantly, he let go. “Put your hands up above your head. Leave them there.”

She obeyed, her breath quickening, breasts rising and falling, already dappled with sweat. He bent his head to lick a stray droplet off one nipple, then sucked it into his mouth, biting down hard as he kneed open her thighs and plunged inside her.

Any stranger walking in on this particular scene would think it looked like rape, but the harsh light in her eyes told him how much she wanted it. How much she craved it. He remembered the first time he’d taken her like this, smacked her ass until it was bright pink then bent her over a chair, fucking her until she sobbed and begged him for mercy. He remembered how she’d dropped to her knees once they were done, kissing his feet. She’d called him Master back then, not husband. From that night forward, she’d been utterly his.

That is, until now. “Do you think of him when I fuck you?” he demanded.

Her moment of hesitation gave him his answer. “A-Aleks, *please*. I don’t want to—”

“Does he make you come the way I do? Does he make you scream his name?”

She was weeping in earnest now, her face contorted in a heady mix of shame and desire. Beautiful. Broken. All traces of the cool, composed diva completely obliterated. Could that callow young tenor really reduce her to her basest elements like this? Tear her down until there was nothing left but the need to give herself over to ecstasy?

As if on cue, her spasms started, rolling through her like thunder, sweeping him along in their wake. He thrust harder, hands sliding under her ass while he emptied himself into her. Her thighs tightened around him in response, holding him a willing captive until her own climax played out, then at last he rolled off onto his back, panting and positively wrecked.

Once they’d recovered she moved closer to him, her bare, sweat-slicked body pressed against his fully clothed one. His hand tangled in her hair, stroked her flushed cheek. Ah, holy Christ, just who was he intending to fool? All these years he’d tried to convince himself she was his slave, when the opposite was the real truth.

“You still want him, don’t you?” he repeated.

"Aleks, don't. Please. No good can come from talking about this—"

"Why not? It's plain that he's not out of your system. If you want him, you should have him."

She shook her head, clutching him tighter. "I told you, I don't want to be unfaithful anymore."

"How is it being unfaithful if I'm in the room with you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you think he's ever sucked cock?"

"*What?*" She sat up straight and stared at him. "How should I know? He's never mentioned any male lovers."

"But that doesn't mean there haven't been any. With that gorgeous face and body, I'd be surprised if he hasn't at least...dallied on the other side."

"Aleks, not everyone's as polymorphously perverse as you. David's a sweet young man from the Midwest. He hasn't even been singing professionally for very long."

"A virgin, perhaps. Which makes the prospect even more exciting."

"What prospect?"

"Of us taking a lover. The *same* lover."

"You mean..." There was that spark in her eyes again, its heat spreading into her cheeks, making her breath quicken. The same spark he'd caught a glimpse of in David's eyes. He was sure of it now. "The three of us? Together?"

Grinning, he nodded. "I can see you like the idea."

"Oh, but it's ridiculous! David will never agree to it."

"He will if he's approached the right way."

She wavered, temptation warring with propriety, but her parted lips and freshly pebbled nipples told him which side had tipped the scales. "And what way would that be?"

Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her on top of him and claimed her mouth in a slow, deep kiss. "I'll leave it in your capable hands, my angel. I'm sure you'll think of something."

## Chapter Six

Colette dropped by David's dressing room before curtain on opening night. Between here and San Francisco he'd seen her in makeup and various costumes countless times before, but tonight there was something different about her—an inner fire that blazed forth from her eyes and made her skin glow beneath her bronzy, gypsy-colored foundation.

"What do you think?" She pirouetted, showing off her billowy calf-length black skirt and dark wig. Its thick, wavy tresses hung all the way to her waist. "Do I look like Carmen?"

"You *are* Carmen." So much so, he couldn't stop staring. "I've never seen such an amazing transformation. Adrienne did a fantastic job with your costume."

"Yours too." She looked him up and down with an approving nod.

"Yeah, well...at least now it fits."

"In all the right places."

*Oh God.* Definitely not the right time to start blushing. Her stepping closer for a hug didn't help either. "If I drop dead of a heart attack out there, I'll know who to thank," he joked weakly.

"Oh stop. You'll be wonderful, and you know it." She flashed him an encouraging smile. For a second he was tempted to kiss her, but then he remembered not to muss their makeup. "I've thought of a few little bits of business to add tonight. Promise you'll follow my lead?"

As if he weren't terrified enough. "Look, just don't pull the rug out from under me, okay? I'm barely holding it together as it is. Besides, won't Sophia throw a fit?"

"Let her. This is our show." She moved toward the door. "See you onstage. *In bocca al lupo.*" *In the wolf's mouth.* The opera world's version of "break a leg".

"How fucking apropos," he muttered, then sat down at the piano to finish warming up. It was either that, or run in the bathroom to *throw up*.

The stage manager called places fifteen minutes later. David marched to the wings, waiting for his cue as the orchestra struck up the overture, and then it was off to the races—damn near literally. The first twenty minutes flew by in a blur until Colette made her entrance. She swept onstage with a haughty toss of her head, laughing and mocking the men's chorus, all of them pleading for Carmen to love them. Then came the *Habañera*, more overtly sexy than he'd ever heard her sing it before, each note a smoldering, seductive purr. It was all he could do to keep up José's façade of feigned disinterest until the moment she sashayed up to him and flung the fateful red flower in his face.

Heat rose in David's cheeks, but luckily the duet with Nicole acted like a bucket of ice over his head—five minutes of sweet, insipid crooning with a woman he wasn't the least bit attracted to. Then came the act's final scene, with José charged to look after Carmen, now under arrest for attacking a fellow cigarette girl. Looping rope around her wrists brought back vivid memories of their last night together in San Francisco. When Colette's gaze locked on his, he knew she was thinking the same thing.



With a wicked smile, she launched into the *Seguidilla*, backing him into a corner, then onto a chair, all the while never missing a note. True to his word, David tried to play along, even when she climbed into his lap, her firm, round ass bouncing against his crotch.

Holy shit, did she *want* him to get a hard-on onstage in front of everyone? In front of *Aleks*?

Just as she got up, he spied an officer's uniform cloak hanging on a peg within easy reach. He snagged it and slipped it on, though he wasn't supposed to. Well, too bad. If she could go off-script, so could he—even if it did look weird for her to be seducing a guy who'd just put on *more* clothes.

He got through the rest of the act on sheer adrenaline, nearly collapsing in relief when the curtain rang down. Then he swung around to face Colette. "What the hell were you doing out there? I thought you said 'little bits of business'. You changed the blocking for the entire last scene!"

No sooner had he said it when Sophia emerged from the corridor leading from the control booth, stamping and snorting like an enraged bull, bearing down on both of them.

Colette took one look and fled, skirts lifted to her knees as she sprinted to her dressing room. Sophia shot him the world's sourest glare, spat out a few choice words in astringent Italian, and followed suit.

He stared after them for a long moment, then sighed and retreated to his own dressing room. No way was he getting in the middle of *that*.

Fortunately, José didn't make his entrance until halfway through the second act, so he had plenty of time to rest and regroup. When they got to the scene where Carmen dances for José's pleasure and amusement, he was ready. Colette swung her hips and beat a small tambourine, skirt hitched at her belt, showing off her shapely calves and bare feet—all perfectly fine and according to plan.

Then she lifted her foot, tracing it along the inseam of his right leg from knee to fly. *Jesus*. Evidently she'd made it her mission tonight to drive him absolutely fucking crazy—and damn if it wasn't working! A few people up in the balcony probably saw him mouthing, "You bitch!" through their binoculars, but he didn't care. Colette usually went the extra mile to give her performances a feeling of authenticity, but this carried method acting a bit too far.

Finally it came time for the *Flower Song*—and a chance to get some of his own back. As scripted, Colette sat in a chair with him standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders, both facing the audience. But halfway through the aria he slid to his knees and sang the rest from that position, gazing imploringly up at her. She hid her startled expression well, but the fresh roses in her cheeks told another story. He ended with his head in her lap, her fingers tangled in his hair, combing through gently—until she dug in hard with her nails.

"Bravo," she whispered once the curtain had fallen again, giving him a sly wink before dashing offstage.

If Acts One and Two were the good times, Act Three was a distinct about-face. No more dancing, laughter and seduction. José and Carmen, now living as fugitive smugglers, not only fall out of love but actively despise each other, snapping and spitting with every exchange. Thankfully, Colette left off with the ad-libbed horseplay and delivered an incredibly moving fortune-telling scene, the cards laying out the tragic end of Carmen's and José's love affair. David drifted into the shadows upstage and listened, marveling at the depth of her interpretation, every phrase revealing fresh new colors. She really was an

amazing singer and actress. And to think he'd almost turned down the opportunity to work with her again.

The third and fourth acts were both relatively short, so this production performed them together with a short break in between to change the scenery—which meant the principal singers had to stand in the wings and let their dressers do a quick-change. David blinked hard when he turned around to see Colette in a strapless black lace gown with a striking slash of scarlet down the front and a delicate matching mantilla perched atop her wig. He'd seen her in it once before at dress rehearsal, but damn if it still didn't take his breath away.

"One more scene," she murmured, giving his hand a squeeze. "Be sure to kill me gently."

When it was over, David wasn't exactly sure what happened. From the moment he'd stepped back onstage, the music ripped through him like wildfire, an uncontrollable surge of frustrated passion and lust. He begged, pleaded, fell to his knees again, all to no avail. Colette stood before him, a remote, beautiful statue, unmoved by his plight. "Between us, all is finished," she sang in French. "You will never have me again."

It was enough to drive a man insane—and so he went insane, brandishing a knife in her face, wrestling her to the floor, his cock a steel bar in his pants. "I was born free, and I will die free," Colette sang. "Kill me now, or let me go!"

He let her up, but no sooner had she moved away when she pulled off the ring he—no, not he, José—had given her, flinging it in his face. And that was it. A red veil of rage washed over his field of vision, and he drove the knife into her.

The stage went pitch dark, the audience bursting forth with applause and bravos.

And there was Colette's hand again, grabbing hold of his, pulling him to his feet. "Well done," she said, giving him an all-too-brief kiss on the mouth right before the curtain came back up.

At first it was just the two of them standing there while the audience clapped and stamped their feet, throwing flowers and ripped-up programs. Then the rest of the cast joined them, followed by Sophia, now evidently quite happy to take credit for Colette's improvisations, and at last by Aleks. David got called back for two more bows, Colette for three. It was closing in on midnight by the time the cheering stopped and everyone staggered back to their dressing rooms, exhausted but jubilant.

David got out of his costume and took a quick shower, emerging a few minutes later in his towel to find Colette waiting for him. Wrapped in a plush white terrycloth robe, she sat at the piano, playing a few notes from the score laid open on top of it.

"You were brilliant tonight," she said softly, rising to come over to him. "Especially in the final scene."

He considered asking her to step out until he got dressed, but what was the point? It wasn't as if she hadn't already seen him in a lot less. "I can't take credit for that. Felt as if I blacked out or something. I cruised through the last few minutes like I was in a trance."

"That's good! It means you were really feeling it."

"I don't know what I was feeling. It was like somebody else took over. Like José...possessed me, I guess."

"In that case, I should be grateful it wasn't a real knife." She smiled. "Was this your first time?" Eyes widening, he sank onto the couch. "You mean this happens to you often?"

“Not always. But when it does, that’s how I know a performance is going well. Of course,” she added, sitting down beside him, “I knew it was going well for you long before the last scene.”

His laugh sounded more like a nervous cough. “I had a feeling you were enjoying my predicament a little too much.”

“You enjoyed it too. Don’t pretend you didn’t.” And then she peeled off her robe to reveal herself wearing nothing underneath—well, nothing except a sheen of fresh perspiration and the faint scent of talcum powder left over from three costume changes. All of which he was experiencing up close and personal, since she was now straddling his lap. “You still want me, David. You’ve wanted me from the day you arrived. And I want you.”

God, he couldn’t *believe* this—except one part of him could. The part she’d been teasing all fucking night. “Have you lost your mind? Anybody could walk in here—”

“I don’t recall that being a problem for you when it was *my* dressing room.”

“But what about Aleks, for Christ’s sake?”

“Oh don’t worry about me,” came Aleks’ voice from the doorway—and thank God he’d already closed it. “It was my idea.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Poor David had such a slack-jawed, astounded look on his face. It was hilarious, and absolutely delicious. Aleks strolled to the piano bench and sat down slowly, savoring the fresh lust in Colette’s eyes—not to mention David’s obvious discomfort, now tenting the front of his towel.

“Don’t be so amazed,” Aleks said finally. “She had my permission to fuck you in San Francisco, you know.”

“No, I didn’t,” David snapped, his gaze flicking from Aleks back to Colette. “Not at the time, anyway.”

“Well, now you do. And if in fact you still want my wife—as I can see you do—feel free to have her, with my compliments.”

Now he looked as if he were about to choke. “Oh really? Just like that?”

“With a caveat or two.” Aleks waited for that to sink in. “First, I want to be in the room when it happens.”

He didn’t think David’s eyes could get much wider, but they did. “Now I know you’re joking.”

“Not at all. I’ve never seen her get fucked by another man, and frankly, I’d like to. I want to see if someone else can bring her to the same level of ecstasy I can.”

“You’re crazy. Both of you!”

“Don’t judge, David,” Colette purred, stroking his face. “Who knows? You might enjoy it.”

It was such an amusing treat, watching the wheels turn in his head. Watching him squirm as Colette teased him, wriggling in his lap. Now he glared at her. “That’s why you’ve been teasing me all evening. Trying to get me so turned-on, I wouldn’t dream of saying no.”

"Looks as if it's working." Colette smiled and lifted herself up, yanking away his towel. David's erection sprang forth like a toy surprise, the tip smeared with shiny, sticky moisture. Aleks' mouth watered, desperate for a taste.

All she had to do was sit back down, and he'd be inside her. David must have realized it too, because he grabbed her waist with both hands to keep her from doing just that. "I-I don't have anything..."

"Ah, don't worry, *mon cheri*. I do." Fumbling in the pocket of her robe, she pulled out a shiny silver packet and tore it open with her teeth. "You want this, don't you? Tell me."

A soft, ragged breath, a flutter of his eyelids, a flick of his glance at Aleks, then back at Colette. A tiny nod. "Y-Yes. God yes."

Colette mounted him and rode him hard, head thrown back proudly, hips flexing with each thrust. She loved fucking him, couldn't get enough of it—every tortured groan and slap of her ass against his thighs made that abundantly clear. But the poor boy was already so over-stimulated, Aleks had a feeling he wouldn't last long. To his credit, he tried, literally hanging on by his fingernails, dug deep into the couch cushions. But the moment he started thrusting back, giving as good as he got, it was all over. With a raw groan, he slumped back on the couch, drenched in sweat from forehead to waist, panting as if he'd just finished a marathon. Absolutely fucking gorgeous.

"I wasn't quite there yet, *mon cheri*." Nevertheless, Colette smiled as she dismounted, grabbing David's towel to wipe down her face, then his. "But don't worry, there's always next time."

He stared at her, still trying to catch his breath. "N-Next time? You mean..."

"Why don't we continue this conversation at our apartment? Our bed's infinitely more comfortable than that couch," Aleks interjected—although how he'd make it there without bursting was another matter. His own cock had turned to granite while he'd watched them fuck. It took every last shred of will to keep from walking to the couch, unzipping and plunging between David's luscious lips. Wouldn't want to scare the poor boy off—not before the evening was over, anyway. And on that note, he rose. "Shall we go?"

"You owe me an orgasm, remember?" Colette teased, leaning in to nip David's earlobe. "Don't make me bill you for it."

"I couldn't afford the interest," he replied with a chuckle. Then he looked at Aleks. "You said there were a couple of caveats. What's the other one?"

Not exactly a challenge, but definitely a moment to rise to. Willpower now scattered to the winds, Aleks crossed the room in three long strides, half-amazed when David stood to face him, swaying on his feet. A split second of hesitation, then Aleks' hand sank into David's thick brown curls, seizing a sweat-dampened fistful as their mouths collided.

It was a heady kiss, full of heat and promise. Full of hunger on both sides. Dear sweet heaven. This young man had just fucked one of the most desirable women on the face of the planet, and still he wanted more. Aleks should've suspected as much. It was always the quiet ones who surprised you.

A slow grin spread across David's face as they broke apart. "I had a feeling that was it."

"D-Did you?" Aleks rasped. God, now *he* was gasping for breath.

"Well, yes and no. But I'd hoped." Another kiss, longer and sweeter than the first, but no less intoxicating. Aleks actually started to tremble. "Give me a few minutes to rinse off and change, then we'll get going, okay?" And with that, he turned and headed into the bathroom.

Aleks stared after him, then back at Colette. They were both too astonished to say a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Colette kicked off her boots and quickly shed her slacks and sweater, then curled up on the king-sized bed with a smile. "I believe I'm in a mood to be entertained. Carry on, gentlemen."

David's mouth went instantly dry. The adrenaline hangover from their previous encounter had worn off sometime during the limousine ride back to the apartment, leaving him jittery and wondering what the fuck had possessed him to say yes to Colette and Aleks' proposal. Then Aleks started to undress him, those strong, steady hands that wielded a baton with such amazing expertise now deftly unbuttoning his shirt, and it all became clear.

"Your heart's pounding," he murmured, his palm pressed to David's bare chest. God, it felt so warm. His fingertips had these tiny, rough calluses that tickled David's skin and gave him the shivers. And because it was Aleks, that just made it twice as sexy. David's eyes drifted shut as he drank in this first touch, savoring it. "Have you ever done anything like this before?"

"You mean a threesome, or sex with another man?"

One corner of Aleks' mouth quirked up. "Both."

"I went to college in New York, remember? There isn't much I haven't done. But it's been awhile, so..."

"We'll be gentle," Colette interjected. "Won't we, Aleks?"

"Oh absolutely." So he said, but there was a mischievous glint in his eye that told David he'd best be prepared for anything. The mere thought made his cock throb.

He started to unzip his pants, but Aleks knocked his hands away and took over. He quickly skinned down David's jeans and shoved him onto the edge of the bed. Then, flashing a devilish grin, Aleks sank to his knees, nudged David's thighs apart and swallowed his cock to the root.

For several blissfully endless moments, David wondered if it was possible to die of pleasure. Aleks' mouth engulfed him like the world's warmest, wettest velvet, sucking him with a mastery that put his skill at the podium to shame. He coaxed David ever so slowly to the brink and then eased off, gripping his cock at the base to stave off his orgasm.

"Jesus, you've got to be kidding." David barely recognized his own ragged, desperate tone. "Don't stop now!"

"I have no intention of stopping. But you might as well lie back and enjoy it. I'm not nearly done with you yet." Then he slid both hands under David's ass, tilting his hips back, and plunged the tip of his tongue into David's hole.

Talk about seeing stars—literally. Head spinning, gulping down air, David crumpled onto the mattress, his fingers buried in the snowy white comforter. Then Colette's soft, familiar hand caressed his shoulder, her lips close to his ear.

"Your mouth looks lonely. Perhaps I should give it something to do." She moved swiftly, straddling his chest, maneuvering herself into position with her silky-wet cunt right over his face. Taking

care not to cover his nose, she lowered herself slowly, popping her clit between his lips like a succulent slice of ripe fruit.

Her honeyed flavor exploded onto his tongue, but it was a little difficult to concentrate on sucking and licking her with Aleks doing the same thing to him. Still, he couldn't have been doing too bad of a job, because it didn't take long before Colette started grinding against his mouth in earnest, her hand clutching his hair as she gasped and groaned. David opened wide and waited for it, his eyes locked on hers at the moment of her climax.

She moved off once her tremors subsided, then collapsed on her back beside him and leaned in for a kiss. "I taste good on you," she murmured, glancing down at the foot of the bed to take stock of her husband's progress. "I think we've tortured our poor David enough for one evening, don't you? Shall we finish him off together?"

"A fine suggestion, my angel." Lips now pressed into a thin, cruel line, Aleks gestured for David to pull his legs up and out of the way, then drew back with both hands and brought them down hard on David's buttocks. The impact tore through him like lightning, a jolt of liquid heat surging straight to his cock, just like the night Colette had beaten his ass in San Francisco.

*One, two.* The blows rained down again, vicious, open-handed smacks that ripped startled yelps from David's throat. His eyes stung, but he blinked back tears, steeling himself for more. This was Aleks' way of seeing how much he could take, and David wasn't about to disappoint him, even if his ass was on fire and his dick felt ready to burst. More blows fell, one after another, until David had lost count.

"Enough," Aleks spat at last, rising and wringing his hands. "And I thought Colette was a masochist."

"Wh-What happened to you two finishing me off?"

"Oh, that's still in the cards. After I make myself more comfortable." Off came his unknotted bow tie, gold cuff links and shirt studs, followed by his crisp white tuxedo shirt, revealing a powerful, well-muscled upper body dusted with springy black hair. David looked on in rapt silence, his libido cranked so far into overdrive he could barely form a coherent thought, much less say anything. But when Aleks dropped his pants, David's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. Between his legs hung the thickest, meatiest cock David had ever seen outside of a porno movie—and it was pointed right at him.

His panic must have been pretty apparent, because Aleks and Colette both started to laugh. "Don't worry," Colette reassured him. "Once it's inside you, you'll love it."

Aleks skewered her with a pointed look. "I'm not going to fuck you, David. Not tonight anyway. But you *are* going to make me come. You and Colette have already had your turn after all." He climbed up on the bed and knelt by David's head, rubbing the plump tip of his cock over his lips. The musky, spicy odor of male perspiration and pure sex rolled off him in a heady wave. "Open up. I want to see how it looks spearing that gorgeous mouth of yours."

He didn't need to ask twice. Wrapping his fingers around Aleks' shaft, David sucked on the head, which was all he could comfortably take. Luckily, Aleks didn't try to force it, just gave a few shallow thrusts and pulled out, then slapped his cock across David's cheeks and chin, anointing his face with sticky, fragrant streaks of pre-come. David had never seen that outside of a porno flick either, but damn if it didn't feel every bit as hot as it looked on video.

He reached for his own cock, but Colette had already grabbed hold and started stroking him. In all the times they'd fucked, she'd never done this for him. Her amazingly strong grip barely had time to register before he let loose with a groan and spurted all over her fingers.

A few precious seconds to catch his breath, and then he turned his attention back to Aleks. David swallowed down the tip of him again, sucking hard while Aleks jerked himself off into his mouth, filling it at last with salty cream.

They crumpled to the mattress, a sweaty, sated tangle of arms and legs. It took a little while before the world stopped spinning and David came to the slow realization he was lying between them, spooned up against Aleks with Colette curled in front of him. They had their arms wrapped around him, their lips pressed to his skin.

It was...comforting. Warm. Intimate. What he imagined being cherished felt like. He didn't actually know. He'd never felt this way before.

Still, it was probably best to err on the side of caution. No one had said anything about staying the night. But when he started to get up, Aleks' hand closed firmly over his arm. "Be still. You're not going anywhere."

"I should get back to my hotel."

Colette lifted her head. "Absolutely not."

"But don't you two want to stretch out and be comfortable?"

"We're perfectly comfortable. Aren't we, Aleks?"

"Of course we are, my angel."

"See?" She smiled. "You're staying, and that's the end of it."

"But—"

Aleks heaved a mock sigh and reached over to stroke Colette's cheek. "Give up the fight, David. When my angel wants something, I've learned it's best not to deny her."

Then David recalled how the evening had begun, and decided it was indeed a sound policy.

\* \* \* \* \*

David awoke by himself the next morning, with the comforter pulled up over him and the rumpled sheets beside him still warm. Stretching slowly, he cataloged each lingering achy twinge in his muscles with a smile and a chuckle. His body wasn't going to let him forget last night for a good long time.

Rolling carefully to his feet, he padded into the bathroom to relieve himself and jump in the shower. The hot spray hit his skin like another open-handed slap, then slowly worked its way into him, loosening his sore muscles and helping him relax. Afterward, he dried himself with a decadently soft white cotton towel and went back into the bedroom, where he found his clothes folded neatly on a chair. He wondered which of his lovers had done the folding while he slipped them back on. Then, stomach grumbling, he followed the heavenly aroma of fresh coffee into the dining room.

Colette sat at the table wrapped in a pretty blue silk robe, hair pulled back in a twist, sipping from a delicate porcelain cup while she flipped through the newspaper. Her face lit up like Christmas morning when she saw him. "Glad to see you're finally up."

He stole a glance at his bare wrist. His watch must still be in the bedroom. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Almost ten. I thought it best to let you sleep. You truly gave it your all last night. On and offstage."

He laughed nervously, though it struck him as rather ridiculous. After everything he'd done with this woman, there was no point being embarrassed anymore. "Where's Aleks?" he asked, reaching for the coffee pot.

"Oh, he had another *Orchestre de Paris* rehearsal. But he should be home in time for dinner." She handed him a basket containing some delicious-smelling baked goods. "Have some brioche. Simone bakes it fresh every morning. Or if you'd prefer something more substantial, she can whip you up an omelet."

"This'll be fine, thanks." More than fine, actually. The flaky pastry melted on his tongue like butter, light yet decadently rich. "God, I'm glad I don't eat here every day. I'd gain twenty pounds in a month!"

Colette laughed. "Oh I'm sure you'd find some way to work it off." She handed him a section of the paper, the page folded back to a review of last night's performance. "The critics have spoken. They're calling it the sexiest *Carmen* since Emma Calvé."

"Wasn't that back in the 1920s? I think standards may have changed a bit since then."

"What's a review without a little hyperbole? But they also have some very nice things to say about you, and the orchestra's playing. Aleks will be pleased."

He skimmed it quickly, stumbling over half the words. Hopefully his French would improve a bit before it was time for him to leave. "Good to know someone appreciates all our hard work. Although it usually isn't the critics."

"Popov called earlier. He said people are lined up out the door at the box office, buying up tickets for the rest of the run. That's the kind of appreciation I prefer."

"Me too." They clinked their cups and drank. A short silence fell over the room. David sat back in his chair, idly drumming his fingertips on the table. "Mind if I ask a personal question?"

She gave him an *oh please* eye roll. "At this point I'd say you've more than earned the privilege. Go ahead."

"Well... What's the attraction between you and Aleks? Aside from you both being musicians, you just seem so different. Temperament-wise, I mean. And he's older than you, right?"

"By eight years. And I do think that's part of it. I didn't have a father growing up, so I went a bit wild during my teenage years. My poor mother didn't know what to do with me. I'm so grateful I discovered music. The discipline of studying helped ground me. And then when I met Aleks, it just felt like fate. He's given me the strong hand I've always craved."

David's sore ass throbbed in silent reply. "Now I know where you learned how to spank people. Does he do it to you too?"

"Oh frequently. I adore it. In fact, I feel naked if I'm not wearing a few of Aleks' marks." She sighed and took another sip of her coffee. "But I didn't mean to suggest that I see him solely as a father



figure. I had a father, although I don't really remember him. My parents divorced when I was five, right before my mother and I moved to Canada." She shrugged. "Even after I returned to Paris, I didn't bother seeking him out. He had no interest in being part of my life. He didn't try to contact me once in all the years I was away."

"Consider yourself lucky. Mine's a hopeless drunk. I hate going home for holiday visits anymore. This year he got royally sloshed on Christmas Day and picked a fight with me in front of the entire family. Aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, everybody. So I left."

"Oh, David. You were by yourself on Christmas?"

"It wasn't that bad. I went to the movies, then out for a nice, quiet Chinese dinner. Better than being trapped in that house with a father I can't stand. Which is too bad, because the rest of my family's pretty nice."

"Aleks and I have made our own little family, just the two of us. My mother died while I was still at the *conservatoire*, and all Aleks' relatives are in St. Petersburg. He hasn't seen them in years."

"That must be rough."

"It is what it is. Sometimes we have to take our families where we find them." She smiled and reached for his hand. "If you'd like to check out of your hotel and stay here with us, you're more than welcome. I've already discussed it with Aleks, and he's in complete agreement."

Touched and amazed, all David could do for a long moment was stare at her. "You sure about this?"

"Of course we are. Aleks and I enjoyed our time with you last night. There's no reason it has to end, especially since you're here for three more weeks."

An affair then, not just a one-night stand. David hadn't expected anything like this, but now that the offer was on the table, he wasn't about to turn it down. The frisson of fresh desire now snaking through his body told him how much he still wanted them, and they obviously still wanted him. It was nice to be wanted—wonderful, even.

"Okay," he said finally, rising to give her a soft kiss on the lips. "I'll head over and get my things."

## Chapter Seven

David was back within an hour and a half, a small valise and laptop bag in hand. Not a lot of luggage for a three-week stay in a foreign country, Colette mused, even as she smiled and pointed toward the bedroom.

“Go put your things in there. Simone will unpack your bags and put it all away.”

David’s eyebrows arched in surprise. “Are you sure? I don’t mind doing it myself.”

“Nonsense. You’re a guest, and guests don’t do housework here.” With a nod, he went off to do as she’d told him. She poured them both more coffee once he’d returned, then remarked, “Our days are free, now that rehearsals are over. Is there anything in particular you’d like to do?”

Now he blushed bright pink. “You mean, aside from the obvious?”

As touching—and arousing—as she found the suggestion, she knew she couldn’t allow herself to give in to it. Overindulgence led to satiety, which led to boredom, and she had no intention of letting that happen. David was like a fine wine, best to be sipped and savored, not drunk down in one long, greedy gulp.

“That’s sweet,” she murmured, reaching over to draw her fingertips across his stubby cheek. “But we mustn’t tire ourselves out. I was thinking we should go out for a little while, take some fresh air.”

“Fine by me. I’m happy to do whatever you like. But you already knew that.” He grinned.

“There’s no reason we can’t do what you like as well. What about a museum, or a film, or...”

“Museums are good. I’ve never been to the D’Orsay or the Louvre.”

“Really? You’ve visited Paris before, haven’t you?”

“Only once, for a weekend. Not long enough to take in any of the sights.”

“Then we should remedy that immediately,” she replied, pushing back her chair.

“Okay. But I should probably shave and change into a clean shirt. Unless you want to be seen with a guy who looks like he’s been dragged through a knothole backward.”

God, his Americanisms were priceless. She burst out laughing. “By all means, go make yourself presentable.”

It was close to noon by the time they were out the door, the chill, humid January wind stinging their cheeks as they waited briefly on the curb for Henri to bring the car around. Piling gratefully into the backseat, Colette slipped her gloved hand through David’s arm and rested her head on his shoulder, drifting in heavy-lidded bliss until they reached the Musée d’Orsay on the city’s Left Bank.

Colette had been here countless times before. There was nothing she loved more than to stroll through the various galleries, stand in front of her favorite paintings and let herself be caught up in their magical individual universes of vivid hues and brilliant brushstrokes. But experiencing the place through David’s virgin eyes proved an even bigger delight. Like a child at Christmas, he wandered from room to room, painting to painting, gazing at everything as if it were a huge gift he couldn’t wait to unwrap.

"That was fucking amazing," he said three hours later, when they'd finally stopped to rest at a tiny café down the street. "I mean, I've been to the British Museum and the Metropolitan in New York, but this was... Well, it was like watching a bygone era come to life right in front of me. Every painting was so alive and vibrant."

"And some of the collection's in San Francisco right now while the D'Orsay does renovations. We'll have to come back in a few months so you can see the rest of it."

He grinned. "I have no problem with that at all."

They ordered coffee and sat chatting about art and music and anything else that caught their fancy. Then David leaned in, pointing at a tall, cadaverous-looking man in a trench coat, white gloves and beret walking by outside. "What do you think his story is? Bank robber, or a really depressed mime?"

Colette gave him a look. "Who says he's either one? He could just as easily be the bank president."

"Nah. He looks like a bank robber to me."

"And how would you know what a bank robber looks like?"

"I'm only guessing. He's a *French* bank robber, after all. But who knows what he's got hidden under that coat?"

And that started it. They spent the better part of the next hour making up fantastic stories about all the passersby. David had her giggling uncontrollably at his more risqué suggestions, whispered sweetly into her ear. He really was quite captivating. She turned her head to smile at him, only slightly startled when he leaned in and kissed her deeply. She gave a tiny sigh and relaxed into it, her hand sliding up into his hair, giving it a gentle tug.

And where did that annoying, chirpy little bird come from? Oh, not a bird after all, she realized, the last few moments of pure heaven suddenly dissipating as she fumbled in her bag for her phone—which stopped ringing the second she touched it, then slipped from her fingers and skittered under the table.

"I've got it," David said. He went down on his knees to grab it, handing it to her with a smile. She'd expected him to get right back up, but he didn't. Instead, he scooped up one of her boot-encased feet and cradled it in both hands, then planted a kiss right on top. An unmistakable gesture of submission—and in *public* yet!

A wave of heat swept through her, leaving her instantly dry-mouthed. It took several moments—and a very long sip of water—before she regained her composure, then signaled for David to sit back down.

"That was very touching, *cheri*," she murmured finally. "But I wouldn't have asked it of you. Not out where everyone can see, anyway."

"I know. But I wanted to do it." He reached for her hand and kissed it. "I wanted to show you how much I adore you. How badly I want to belong to you."

"Do you, now?" Her phone buzzed, indicating a voice mail message. She hit the "play" button and listened to it. "It's Aleks. He's home, wondering where we are. We should get back."

David nodded. Was she imagining it, or did his expression betray a tiny flicker of disappointment? Of course it was too bad their afternoon had to end, but there was still an entire evening ahead of them, and three more weeks of evenings besides. "I'll go take care of the bill," he said.

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"Popov called this afternoon," Aleks announced once the three of them sat down to dinner. "The remaining six performances of *Carmen* are sold out."

"Oh fantastic!" Colette crowed, winking across the table at David, who countered with a half-incredulous grin. "Although it's not as if I weren't expecting it, considering who my colleagues are."

"You're too kind, my angel. And as usual, entirely correct."

"Wow." David set down his fork and reached for his wineglass. "Guess this means they're not going to fire me, huh?"

"Why in the world would you think that?" Colette asked, exchanging a quick, concerned glance with Aleks. "You got a standing ovation on opening night, for God's sake!"

"I know. But I just can't help thinking sooner or later the opera world's going to figure out I'm this hick kid from Wisconsin who's pulled the wool over their eyes. Every performance I get this sick feeling in my stomach waiting for someone in the audience to stand up and denounce me as a fraud. It's like that old dream about finding yourself in a public place stark naked. I know it's stupid and it'll never really happen, but I can't stop dwelling on it."

The genuine anxiety in his voice tugged at Colette's heart. No wonder they were so drawn to each other. In terms of background and temperament, they were practically twins. "It's called imposter syndrome," she said softly. "And you're not the only one in this room who suffers from it."

"Indeed," Aleks added.

David swallowed hard, gazing at each of them in turn. "But you're both so accomplished and cosmopolitan—"

"And it's all an act," Aleks stated flatly. "I grew up in one of the poorest sections of St. Petersburg. My father ran a grocery that had nothing but sausage and stale bread to sell half the time. No one thought I would ever make anything of myself, including me. That was before I developed a passion for the piano around the time I turned twelve. Add in a fierce work ethic and a high motivation to get out of Russia, and you get what you see here." He shrugged, smiling a little half-smile. "Still, every time I walk out to take a bow, I think, 'Do you know who you're cheering for? Misha the greengrocer's boy! And if he could see you all now, he'd piss himself laughing!'"

Now David laughed. "Okay, I get it. We really aren't that different."

Colette smiled. "Definitely not."

They lingered over their meal for another hour or so, talking and emptying a bottle of fine Pinot noir. Not long after the clock struck nine, they rose and drifted down the hallway to the bedroom. Colette pushed David down on the bed and began kissing and undressing him, her lips and fingers burning to touch every exposed millimeter of his smooth, gorgeous skin. But when he tried to do the same for her, she shook her head, pinning his arms at his sides.

"What was it you said about wanting to belong to me?" she reminded him. "Well, tonight you're my toy, and I get to play with you any way I want. Which means I touch you, not the other way around."

"Whatever you want. Ma'am," he added hastily, his eyes darting around the room. "Where'd Aleks go?"

Colette followed David's gaze to a chair a few feet away where Aleks sat, looking quite relaxed and comfortable as he sipped the glass of wine he'd brought with him. "Oh, don't mind me," Aleks said. "You two look so beautiful together, I thought I'd sit and enjoy the view."

Which meant David was truly hers—at least for a while. "Good," she murmured, giving him a firm slap on the ass. It coaxed a cute little startled yip out of him. "Just wanted to make sure you're awake. Up on your hands and knees, please."

"Yes Ma'am." He scrambled to obey while she got up to get some supplies from the bedside table, then grabbed a riding crop from the umbrella stand in the walk-in closet. It was one of her favorite toys, with a star-shaped slapper on the end that left lovely raised marks. They'd look so pretty on David's creamy skin.

She dragged her nails over his ass first, leaving thin pink welts. Then she smacked him a few times with her bare hands, just to get the blood pumping for both of them. He was grunting and groaning in earnest by the time she graduated to whacking him with the crop, his buttocks soon decorated with a bright pink constellation. Every muscle in his arms, legs and back had gone rigid with the effort of holding himself still.

And one particular muscle between his legs too. Now sweaty from her own efforts, she threw down the crop, quickly stripped off her clothes and climbed up on the bed behind him, draping herself over his back. He let out a whimper when her stiff nipples grazed his skin. It made her smile. "If I had a strap-on, you'd be in big trouble right now." Another whimper, which swiftly swelled into a full-throated moan when she reached around to grab his erect cock, giving it a couple of hard tugs.

"M-Ma'am...*please*..."

"Be still. You belong to me, remember? Which means your orgasm also belongs to me. You come when I say you can come. Understood?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Good. On your back now."

She waited for him to get comfortable, then scooped up the tube of lubricant she'd taken from the bedside table and squirted a generous dollop into her right hand. An evil, self-satisfied grin spread across her face as she knelt on the edge of the bed and plunged two slicked fingers up his ass.

He cried out and went stiff again, tightening up on her hand. "Shhh," she crooned, stroking his trembling thigh. "Relax. *Breathe*. Let the sensations move through you. Acknowledge them. Accept them."

Closing his eyes, he sucked in several long, shuddering breaths. Then he looked up at her, nodding. "O-Okay. I'm okay."

She began moving slowly, with a gentle rocking motion that soon had him moaning again, albeit this time more with pleasure than pain. If nothing else, his cock certainly appeared to like what she was doing. It stood straight up, bright pink and proud, bouncing against his belly. David kept staring at it, licking his lips, obviously longing to bring this delicious agony to an end.

By the time she'd added a third finger, he'd completely given himself over to it, meeting her thrust for thrust, groaning in disappointment when she had to pull out to coat her hand with more lube. Back in with a fourth finger, and then she tucked in her thumb, rolled her knuckles slowly and pushed. Her hand slid inside him all the way to the wrist.

"If you'd like to come now, sweet boy," she whispered, "go ahead."

He'd started to spurt before he finished wrapping his fingers around his cock, spraying so hard he hit himself in the chin and shoulder. She left her hand where it was until his spasms stopped, then gently extricated herself and padded into the bathroom to rinse herself off and wet down a towel.

David's final pangs of ecstasy had left him shivering, so she climbed up on the bed and tucked the fluffy down comforter around him, kissing him and rubbing his arms and shoulders until the shaking stopped. Then, slowly and with infinite tenderness, she wiped the sweat from his face and wrapped her arms around him, cradling him close.

"You did well," she said. "I'm very proud of you." But when he started to kiss her breasts, she shook her head. "No need. Your submission's given me all the satisfaction I require tonight."

His bleary, lust-addled gaze was rather adorable, though he seemed to be having a hard time wrapping his mind around what she'd just told him. "Y-You mean, you don't want me to—"

"I don't need to come every single time. In fact, postponing it will help make our next encounter that much sweeter."

"I agree," Aleks said, rolling onto the mattress beside them. Somewhere along the way from his chair to here he'd managed to lose his clothes, except for tight white briefs that showed the prominent outline of his erect cock. With a grin, he leaned in to kiss Colette and David in turn. "Speaking of which, you'd best get your sleep tonight. You may belong to Colette, but Colette belongs to me. Which means next time, that sweet ass of yours is *mine*."

Strangely enough, David didn't look terribly apprehensive. But then who would, bundled up here in a nice warm bed, in the arms of two loving Dominants? Sighing softly, Colette melted against her lover and her husband and slowly floated away, basking in the best of all possible worlds.

## Chapter Eight

Aleks had an *Orchestre de Paris* performance the next evening and didn't arrive back home until quite late, long after Colette had taken David to bed. To David's surprise, she'd turned amazingly gentle, pinning his arms above his head while she rode him—just like that night in San Francisco, minus the spanking. One look at the livid purple marks their last encounter had left on him evidently convinced her he'd had enough for a while, though David couldn't help feeling a tiny bit disappointed.

He held his breath when he heard Aleks come in, anticipation quickening his pulse as he listened to the soft rustles and grunts Aleks made while he stripped off his tux. Then came the inevitable splash and trickle of water running in the shower. Colette slumbered on at David's side, oblivious to the anxious excitement holding him in its grip.

Aleks' footsteps slapped the bathroom floor, becoming a muffled thump once he entered the carpeted bedroom. David had expected Aleks to climb in on his side of the bed the way he usually did, but instead he rolled over next to Colette, wrapped his arms around her and immediately began to snore. Black spots danced in front of David's eyes as the air rushed back into his lungs. God, this waiting was going to kill him! Why couldn't Aleks just *fuck* him already? Couldn't he see he was dying for it?

Moans, groans and strangled sobs coaxed David from sleep the next morning. The sounds came from the bathroom, its door yawning half-open. He knew he shouldn't eavesdrop, but under the circumstances it was pretty much unavoidable. He closed his eyes and tried to go to a different place in his mind, but his rising cock wouldn't let him. It was Colette making most of the noise, he realized. She sounded...wild. Desperate. Practically in pain.

Curiosity mixed with concern drew him up and over to the bathroom door, though he hesitated before peeking inside. They hadn't invited him, after all. He couldn't make out much through the fogged shower glass, but the unmistakable slap of wet bodies and their ecstatic cries reaching an ear-splitting crescendo told him enough. Then the noise faded away, except for the soft, ragged hitch of labored breathing.

The water shut off. Aleks' hand snaked outside the shower door, grabbing a towel from the nearby rail. "Here you are, my angel," rumbled his low, sexy murmur. David trembled at the sound of it. "That was quite delicious. I trust I wasn't too rough?"

"Oh God, *never*." She sniffled a bit, then actually started to giggle. "Thank you, Aleks. What a lovely way to start the day."

When the door began sliding the rest of the way open, David bolted. He crawled back into bed and yanked the comforter over his head, waiting with a pounding heart for Aleks and Colette to get dressed and head out to the dining room. Then he rolled onto his back to deal with his still-throbbing cock.

A few hard, quick pulls was all it took. At the last moment he remembered Colette hadn't given him permission to pleasure himself, but by then there was no stopping it. He bit down hard on his lower

lip to keep from crying out, rocked by an orgasm that left his ears ringing and his mind awirl, wondering what the hell he'd just witnessed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're quiet this morning," Colette remarked, pouring David his second cup of coffee. "Is something wrong?"

She couldn't help noticing how he hesitated before replying. "No, I'm fine. Just trying to save my voice for tonight."

"Oh." She set down her own cup. "Do you mind a bit of advice?"

He shook his head.

"Pampering the voice is all very well and good, up to a certain point. But we've only got so many high notes in us no matter what we do. You know that, don't you?"

"In that case, shouldn't we save them for the stage instead of the shower?"

His pointed tone sent a blush climbing up her cheeks. "You heard us in the bathroom this morning."

"It was a little difficult to ignore."

"I'm sorry. We didn't mean to wake you."

"Don't worry about me, I just...well, I hope you're okay."

Oh good God. At times she forgot how young he was. Despite all his protestations to the contrary, he really was still quite naïve. "I'm fine, *cheri*. I'm sitting up. I'm smiling. All in one piece."

"So I see. But after some of the noises I heard you making, I had to wonder."

"What, you've never indulged in vigorous lovemaking before?"

"Before I met you, you mean? Sure I have. But I've never actually made my partner cry." He stared down into his lap. "Is that what Aleks is going to do to me?"

"Only if you ask very nicely." His startled expression made her laugh. "Oh please, don't look so shocked. He's my husband, after all. He fucks me roughly because I want him to, and because we both derive a great deal of pleasure from it. Of course he won't be that way with you. Like most men gifted with...generous endowments, he's learned how to be gentle. Trust me, when the time comes, you'll enjoy it."

"What if I don't want him to?"

Stunned, she stared at him, her heart suddenly trapped in her throat. "What do you mean? Is this your way of saying you regret our arrangement? That you want out?"

"Not necessarily. But I'd like to know if I gave up the right to refuse when I walked through your front door the other night."

A fair question—and one she should have addressed long before now. "I apologize, *cheri*. The three of us have been having so much fun together, negotiating limits completely slipped my mind. Of course you have the right to say no. Neither Aleks nor I ever intended to force you into anything." A deep breath, and then came the hardest part. "If you want to leave, we won't stop you."

"I don't want to leave..."



*Oh thank God.*

"But I don't want to get in over my head either."

She nodded. "All right. Do you remember the safe word I gave you in San Francisco?"

He thought about it for a few seconds. "I think it was 'mercy', right?"

"Yes. Feel free to use it whenever you need to, with me or with Aleks. Unless you'd rather pick another word?"

"'Mercy' is fine." He reached for her hand. "Look, I don't want you to think I don't trust you, but—"

"But you need to feel safe. Of course we understand. And while what Aleks and I do may inflict hurt, we never want to inflict *harm*. Physically or otherwise."

"I know." And with that, he fell to his knees, kissing each of her feet in turn. "Forgive me for doubting you."

Relief and sheer happiness nearly doubled her over. This sweet, beautiful young man had truly caught her by the heart. She didn't even want to contemplate how sad she'd be once he was gone.

"Look at me." He obeyed, but she still reached down to grab his chin, forcing his gaze to remain fixed on hers. "Tell me something. Did I cross a line with you last night?"

"Maybe a little one," he admitted with a soft smile. "To be honest, it never occurred to me that you'd want to do...*that*. But once you started, it felt really good. Incredible, even."

"Believe me, when Aleks finally fucks you, you'll feel the same way. In fact, once it's over, you'll wonder why you were so nervous."

He sucked in a shaky breath. "I just wish he'd *do* it already. I want it so badly, I can taste it."

Oh poor, dear boy. The anticipation. The jangled nerves. The unbearable sensation of wanting to burst out of one's own skin. Colette remembered it well. It was a feeling to be treasured and savored for its own sake, not simply as a prelude to something even more incandescent. But sadly, David was in no frame of mind to entertain that notion right now.

Then a thought popped into her brain. A sly, devious thought she had no intention of sharing with David, though she knew he'd appreciate it later. "Aleks does things in his own time," she said with a smile. "You'll just have to be patient."

\* \* \* \* \*

The second performance of *Carmen* went considerably smoother than opening night, at least for David. No longer deathly afraid of missing a cue or bumping into the scenery, he'd finally granted himself permission to let loose, meeting Colette's sexy byplay with a few bits of his own invention. This time when she sat on his lap in Act One, he wrapped his arms around her and held on. And in Act Two, during the scene where Carmen dances for José, he ramped up the sexual tension by pushing Colette to the stage floor while he kissed her. The audience broke out in spontaneous laughter, clapping and whooping their heads off.

But this time José's dark presence didn't return to possess him during the final scene. Instead, David felt in complete control, performing with a power and focus he'd never experienced before. He

concentrated on Colette and simply let it all rip, circling her like a tiger hunting its prey, singing his heart out until the final notes and the final curtain. Just like last time, Colette squeezed his hand and gave him a quick kiss right before the curtain flew back up on their final bow.

"You were magnificent. Not that I'm surprised," she whispered afterward as they headed off to their dressing rooms together. "Hurry up and get dressed. Aleks made us dinner reservations at Trianon."

His stomach growled at the mere mention of food. He'd had a bowl of soup and an apple before the performance, but damn if he wasn't ravenous again. "Okay. Give me half an hour."

He got out of his costume and into the shower, rinsing off quickly. But when he stepped out in his towel, there was Aleks, still dressed in his tux, sitting at the piano waiting for him. "What's the matter, did Colette kick you out?" David asked with a grin.

Aleks stood, grinning back. "Actually, I have a surprise for you."

"Oh." Realization dawned. *Shit! He wants to do it in here?* "Um, did you lock the door this time?"

"What are you talking—"

"If you want to do it here, I guess it's okay. The couch isn't too uncomfortable. But I was sort of hoping we could relax in bed at home."

Now Aleks shot him a sour look. "Don't be silly. I'm not going to fuck you for the first time on some dressing room couch. What I came here to tell you is that Dieter Horst, Colette's and my European booking agent, will be joining us for dinner. He's quite keen on discussing possible representation with you."

Talk about coming out of left field. "In that case, maybe I should sit this one out. Not that I wouldn't mind meeting him, but I already have an agent back in New York." Whom he hadn't called or emailed since he'd arrived in Paris. Poor Merritt probably thought he'd fallen in the Seine and drowned by now.

"Your choice, of course. But if you're serious about a career in Europe, Dieter's your man. He's got connections in all the major opera houses and concert halls. Colette's career took off after she signed with him."

"Thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

"Actually, you'll do more than that. Because you *are* coming to dinner with us, whether you particularly want to or not."

"Oh really? Because Colette says so, or because you do?"

"Both." He smiled again, showing his teeth—only this time, he reminded David more of a wolf than a shark. "In fact, Colette's loaned you to me for the evening. You're to consider my orders the same as hers." That barely had a chance to sink in before Aleks pointed toward the bathroom. "In there. I want to give you a little surprise."

"What, another one? Didn't you just say—"

"I said I wasn't going to fuck you on the couch. I didn't say I wasn't going to fuck you." They stepped inside, Aleks' smile quickly fading. "Colette told me you couldn't wait, but you don't look terribly excited about the prospect to me."

"This just isn't how I'd imagined it happening, is all. Not exactly what you'd call romantic." David shrugged, then let his towel drop and turned to face the vanity, bracing himself against it with both hands. "Whatever. Let's do it and get it over with."

But Aleks didn't move. He stood there with his back against the door until the creeping chill in the air made David start to shiver. *What the hell?* Finally he swung back around. "Look, if you've changed your mind, can I go get dressed? I'm freezing my ass off."

"Sweet boy, listen to me—"

"Stop calling me that," he snapped.

Aleks' eyebrow arched. "Colette calls you that all the time, and I don't recall you objecting."

"I can accept it from her, but not from another guy. I'm twenty-eight years old, for Christ's sake! I'm not a boy!"

"No, you most certainly are not." Three steps forward, and Aleks' arms looped around David's waist, his mouth coming down hard. They'd kissed before, but not like this, with a fresh, wild fury that set David's mind awirl and turned his breath to fire in his lungs. Tonight Aleks kissed him with all the pent-up passion of a man who'd denied himself a particular pleasure for days, and who was still holding his desire in check—but not for much longer.

At last they had to break apart or die of suffocation, but Aleks' lips wouldn't stay still. First he trailed down David's throat, his beard prickling and tickling, then up to his shoulder, where he worried the skin between his teeth before biting down. David twisted around to get a look at it in the mirror. The imprint of Aleks' teeth stood out on his flesh like a brand, sending a wave of fresh arousal snaking through him. It smarted a little, but David didn't care. He'd never been into the whole biting thing before, but it made for some intense foreplay. Or maybe he only found it sexy because it was Aleks.

Who smiled down at him as he smoothed a stray lock of David's brown hair back from his face. "Good to see you getting into the spirit of things. Turn back around."

Time for the moment of truth. David obeyed, hands gripping the vanity like before, eyes floating shut as he steeled himself for the initial pain of entry. Instead, he felt a lube-slicked fingertip encircle his hole, then slowly push inside. Aleks' fingers were much thicker than Colette's, so it took David a few moments to breathe through the discomfort and wait for it to fade. Then the finger withdrew, replaced by something cool, rounded and rather wide—so wide it made David cry out in surprise, then give a tiny relieved gasp as the rest of it glided in without a problem. "Wh-What the hell is that?"

"Ah, just an amusing little toy of mine. An anal plug. Stainless steel, very clean, very elegant. If it's uncomfortable, I can always add more lubricant."

Actually, aside from that first pinch as it went in, it didn't hurt at all. "That's okay. Feels a little weird though. Like I have to..." Jesus, what a time to start blushing again. "Well, you know."

"That's normal. There should be just enough pressure to let you know it's there, nothing more. You can go ahead and get dressed now."

"*What?* You mean I have to wear this thing for the rest of the evening?"

"That's exactly what I mean." Aleks gave him a cool, steady look. "Will that be a problem? If so, perhaps we should take it up with Colette."

*Oh great.* Exactly what he didn't want. "Look, Aleks, I'm sorry. I misunderstood. I thought you brought me in here to—"

"I told you, I'm not going to fuck you. Not here in your dressing room, anyway. But I do plan to thoroughly ravish you once we get home, and wearing that plug for a couple of hours will make things easier for both of us. It's not my intention to cause you unnecessary pain." He smiled again. "But it most

definitely *is* my intention to make you come so hard you forget your own name. Does that sound like a fair bargain?"

"When you put it that way..." David grinned even as his knees went wobbly from all the sweaty, naked images of himself and Aleks twisting through his mind. Just a little longer, and this exquisite torture would be over. He'd already waited days. He could wait a couple more hours.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three and a half hours later, David was ready to curse both Aleks and Colette with every four-letter word he could think of. He settled for taking another sip of Veuve Clicquot while he tried to ignore the sleek, slippery knob of stainless steel up his ass. It hadn't bothered him until they sat down on the restaurant's overstuffed leather banquette, but now every time he shifted, it jostled the plug and pushed it in deeper, where it rubbed against his prostate. Which meant he'd had an erection stiff enough to pound nails ever since they arrived.

Trianon was a nice place—elegantly appointed, with recorded string quartet music playing softly in the background and waiters in gold and red livery scurrying every which way, pristine white towels draped over their arms. Okay, not just nice—positively luxurious. If not for his current condition, David might've appreciated it more. But now all he could think of was getting the hell out of here.

Luckily, his dark slacks and the long scarlet tablecloth disguised his hard-on, but it didn't stop Colette from scooting over next to him and sliding her hand all the way up his thigh. "Oh dear. You *are* in a state, aren't you?" she purred.

He stared across the table at Aleks and Dieter, absorbed in conversation and paying no attention. Not that it really mattered. They'd lapsed into German half an hour ago, so he couldn't follow what they were saying anyway. With a frustrated sigh, he turned back to Colette. "You're enjoying this way too much."

"Don't pretend you're not."

"An hour ago I was. Not anymore." He threw down his napkin and started to slide out of the booth. "I'm going to the bathroom to take care of it."

Her hand on his leg tightened into a vise grip, nails digging in hard. "Sit back down," she ordered sternly, all playfulness now gone. "Relax. We'll only be a few more minutes."

"That's what you said an hour ago."

"Trust me, *cheri*. My patience is wearing thin as well." Drawing herself up, she flashed Aleks and Dieter a brittle smile. "Gentlemen, much as I hate to bring this lovely dinner party to an end, David and I are both rather tired."

"Of course you must be, after tonight's performance," Dieter said, knocking back the last of his fourth or fifth glass. He was a tall, thin, balding man with thick glasses and an apparent fondness for pricey French champagne—at least, when his clients were buying. "But Colette, we must sit down again this week before I return to Berlin. Salzburg is anxious to have you back for *Figaro* next summer."

"Tell them to refresh their memories. I sang Cherubino there two seasons ago."

"Then what about Charlotte in *Werther* for Cologne?"

Colette shook her head. "Lovely music, but the role's not suited to me at all. Far too melancholy."

"But good for your voice!"

"Not really. I studied it when I was at the *conservatoire*. The range in the third and fourth acts lies a bit high for me."

"That was years ago. Why don't you give it another look? Mezzos and sopranos sing the role equally often these days."

"And you could even sing regular soprano roles if you really wanted to," David interjected, now squirming from all eyes at the table fixing squarely on him. Just what he needed—not only a piece of metal up his ass, but everyone staring at him as if he were the village idiot. "Your top notes are rock solid. I've heard you hit beautiful high C's when you warm up."

"And a steady diet of them gives me a splitting migraine," she replied. "No thank you. I'll stick with my very comfortable mid-range, and leave the high C's to Fleming and Netrebko."

"Eboli in *Don Carlos* then," Dieter persisted. "The original Paris version. Pappano's dying to do it."

She sat up straight. "Where?"

"The Met, next season."

Now she sighed. "Dear God, how many times do I have to say it? No more engagements outside Europe. I've had it with tramping all over the globe. In fact, I'd cancel *Rosenkavalier* in New York this spring if I wasn't sure Thielemann would never let me hear the end of it."

"Ah Colette, Colette, Colette. You're shooting your career in the foot. Surely you know that."

"I honestly don't care anymore. Being home and happy is far more important to me. Besides, if I were going to become a major star, it would've happened by now."

Dieter shot Aleks a plaintive glance. "You've tried to talk sense into her, I expect?"

"My angel follows her own heart," Aleks replied. "It's not for me to dissuade her."

Dieter gave a resigned shrug. "Very well, then. At least I tried."

Aleks had already paid the bill, so they all slid from the booth and walked up to the foyer to get their coats. David heaved a sigh of relief as the pressure inside him eased a bit, though he still had to yank down his sweater to cover the bulge in his pants. He pasted on a smile when Dieter turned to say goodbye to him, hoping it didn't look too distracted or insincere.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Lewis. I understand you're satisfied with your current representation, but if that should ever change, please feel free to call me."

"I will, thanks."

Colette came up beside him, tucking her arm in his as they strolled out to the car. "I'd consider it if I were you. He doesn't hand out offers like that lightly."

"I'm doing just fine with the agent I've got, especially for someone who's only been singing professionally for a few years."

"Of course you're doing fine," Aleks retorted once they'd piled into the limo's back seat. "You're a tenor. The opera world is your oyster. There are far more good roles for you than for a mezzo like Colette. You'll sing Don José for the next thirty years, if you're smart enough to keep your voice in good repair that long. And even if you're not, you'll still probably get a good twenty-year run, until some new young Turk forces you out." Loosening his tie, he stared out the window at the blur of city lights rushing

by. "Everyone pokes fun at old warhorses like Alberto Bernini, but I respect him. He's a survivor who's had to work his ass off for every break he's ever received. And there you sit, after brushing off a chance to work with the best agent in the business, thinking you've got it all figured out. You have no idea how lucky you are that Dieter even gave you a second look."

Jesus, this was too much. First the butt plug, then having to sit through that endless fucking dinner, and now he had to deal with Aleks' attitude too? "Oh c'mon! He only pretended to be interested because you and Colette dragged me along with you."

"Not so," Colette said softly, sliding a gentle hand onto David's shoulder. "Dieter wanted to meet you even before he knew the three of us were friends. He has a great eye for spotting fresh young talent. If you doubt that you caught his attention on your own merits...well, don't."

Something in what she'd just said made him stare at her, though it took a moment for David's champagne-fogged brain to sort it out. "You mean, he knows about...?"

"God, no!" Aleks sat straight up. "Dieter's as conservative as they come. Although it probably wouldn't matter that much to him even if he did know, considering all the money Colette and I make for him."

"We don't go advertising our unconventional lifestyle," Colette said. "That's why I was rather put-out with your antics at the farewell party in San Francisco. Aleks and I would never behave that way. For us, discretion has always been key."

"Rest assured, we would never expose you to public scrutiny or embarrassment," Aleks added.

David laughed. "You mean, aside from making me sit on a butt plug in a public restaurant all evening?"

"Just a bit of harmless fun." Colette smiled. "Think of it as our way of showing our affection for you."

Momentarily stunned, David stared down at his hands. "Thanks. It's been a long time since anyone's said they cared. Although I can't quite figure out what I've done to deserve it."

"Perhaps it's simply enough that you do," Aleks replied with a wink.

They arrived home a few minutes later. Henri dropped them off at the curb and, arms linked, they strode through the apartment building's lobby and took the elevator upstairs.

The bedroom had never looked more inviting. David's initial instinct was to dive face-first into his pillow, but Colette and Aleks had other ideas. Aleks behind him and Colette in front, they wrapped him in their arms and stood there in the center of the room, swaying slightly, exchanging kisses.

"That's what I call a thump," Colette murmured, pressing her hand to his chest. "Don't be nervous, sweet boy. We've got you."

He turned his head and there was Aleks, lips parted and ready for him, tongue sweeping inside David's mouth for one of the hottest, sweetest kisses he'd ever experienced. Good thing they were holding him up, or he might've fainted. But it didn't stop his head from swimming, or his entire body from literally throbbing for more.

They undressed him, then let him settle back on the bed while they shed their own clothes. David had forgotten he was still wearing the plug until Aleks lay down beside him, rolled him onto his side and slowly, gently pulled it out. He'd expected it to pinch the way it had going in, but this time he hardly felt it at all, except for the empty ache inside where it had filled him up.

Colette finally came to bed, sliding in on David's other side, handing Alex a small tube and a shiny silver strip. David's eyes bugged out when he saw it. "Jesus! How many times are you going to fuck me?"

Aleks and Colette both laughed. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," she said. "You need to relax first. This won't be much fun for anyone with you so wound up."

If by "wound up" she meant "still hard as a fucking rock", he'd have to agree. His erection had subsided a bit during the ride home, but as soon as they'd started touching him, it sprang to attention again.

He'd been hard for so long, he couldn't remember what *not* being hard felt like. God, he'd give anything to come, but a tiny brush of her hand made him gasp, and not in a good way. "Shhh," she crooned. "Close your eyes, *mon cheri*. Breathe. Let us take care of you."

Their hands swarmed all over him, smoothing and caressing, followed by their lips, dusting feathery kisses over every bare millimeter of his skin. Then they rolled him over to give his other side the same treatment, Aleks concentrating on his neck and shoulders while Colette straddled his thighs and dug her knuckles into the knotted muscles at the small of his back.

"Oh my God..." David slurred, over and over. "That feels fucking *incredible*..."

"And we haven't even gotten to the best part yet." With that, she scooted up to sit on the area she'd just massaged, then started to roll her hips, grinding him into the mattress. The soft, warm cotton sheets felt like sheer heaven on his cock—too much heaven. Too much relief, sluicing over him in a heady, drowning rush that left him breathless.

It wasn't until he'd rolled onto his back again that he realized what had happened. "I-I've never come like that before. It was really..."

"Relaxing," Colette finished for him, leaning in for a kiss. "Obviously."

And she wasn't kidding. His muscles had turned to lead, weighing him down into the covers. Which would've been a problem if he'd actually *wanted* to move, but right now he was perfectly fine just lying here, drifting in this sweet golden afterglow. That is, until someone scooped up his right foot and sucked his big toe into a deliciously warm, wet mouth, a soft yet firm scrape of teeth pulling along its underside. He'd know the feel of those teeth anywhere.

Jesus, his cock couldn't be getting hard again. Could it?

He continued to lie there, breathing and moaning while Aleks kissed his way up his leg, then up his trembling torso, all the way to his lips. Aleks' powerful body radiated heat like a dark sun, his musky, primal odor filling David's nostrils, making his heart pound again.

"Time to climb the mountain. Up to the top, so you can come back down again," Aleks whispered, bestowing another head-spinning kiss. "Tell me you want it."

"G-God yes! Fuck me, Aleks. *Please*."

A moment or two for Aleks to get himself ready, then he knelt between David's splayed legs and slid his big, gorgeous cock deep inside him. And it didn't hurt. David was amazed by how much it didn't hurt. Oh, there was this incredible achy sensation, but no real pain. An ache that felt as if it could go on forever, filling him to his limit, over and over.

He wanted more, and Aleks gave it to him, faster and faster, his balls slapping David's ass, the force of his thrusts pushing them both up the bed. And suddenly Colette was there, her strong fingers

encircling David's cock, pulling and stroking until a supernova went off inside his head, and the world imploded in a blaze of white.

He floated back to earth cradled between them again, all warm skin and bright smiles. "See?" Colette murmured. "What did I tell you? I knew you'd enjoy it."

Still half-dazed, David had no idea what to say. So he blurted the first thing that popped into his head. "I-I love you both so much."

Oh Christ, he'd done it now. Colette and Aleks traded shocked, silent glances, and David's heart promptly sank. *Shit!* He should've known better. Why the hell couldn't he *not* say something for once?

"We love you too, sweet boy," Colette said at last. "Don't we, Aleks?"

Aleks grinned and kissed them both in turn. "We do indeed."



## Chapter Nine

Colette's next two weeks flew by in a whirlwind of performances, intimate evenings for three and daily outings with David. Museums, films, leisurely sightseeing tours all around the city, even a day trip to Versailles. After over a decade in Paris, Colette found experiencing it through David's eyes a true joy. Everywhere they went became the dawning of a new world for him, no less exciting than when they fell into bed with Aleks each night, eager to give each other unimaginable pleasure.

One morning the sun peeked out from behind its usual gloomy gray cloud cover, so they put on their coats, gloves and boots to take a stroll around the neighborhood. Cars and bicycles crawled by, dodging piles of melting snow. The air had a fresh, clean taste Colette knew wouldn't last long even in the brisk winter chill, so she drank down deep breaths, looping her arm through David's with a smile.

"This is a nice neighborhood," he remarked. "I've always thought of Paris as a big, bustling metropolis, but then there are sections like this that have a real small-town feel. Calm and quiet. Is that why you and Aleks chose it?"

"And because it holds special significance for us opera singers." She pointed to another apartment building about a block ahead. It was of the same vintage as hers and Aleks' building, though it looked a bit down at heels these days, with peeling paint and slightly rusty bars on the upper floors' windows. "That's where Maria Callas lived for the last few years of her life. In fact, it's where she died too."

"Really? Can the public take a look at it?"

"Only on the outside. Other people live there now." She sighed. "Actually, when I first moved back to Paris, I knocked on the door and asked the lady who lived there at the time if I could look around. She seemed a bit annoyed, but let me in anyway. They'd completely redecorated the place, of course. I was so disappointed."

David laughed, stepping back to make way for an elderly lady hauling a rolling cart filled with groceries. "That took a lot of nerve. I don't think I'd have the courage to go that far."

"If I'd been more sensible than starry-eyed, I wouldn't have either. God only knows how many other people must've bothered the poor woman, all because she happened to rent an apartment a famous person once lived in. She probably wished me to the devil, and knowing what I know now, I couldn't blame her."

"Why? Have people bothered you and Aleks at home?"

"Only a handful of times in all the years we've lived here. Parisians generally prefer minding their own business. But I've seen more than a few frightening crowds gathered around stage doors, mostly in the States. For some reason, American fans seem to have a difficult time respecting boundaries."

"Well, I'll bet someday in the very, very distant future, your admirers will make pilgrimages here and lay flowers at your door."

She burst out laughing. "God, I hope not! I'd be happy if they'd just buy tickets to my performances. Who cares how much they love me when I'm dead?"

"So you don't want a big recording contract either? Or your picture on the cover of *Time* magazine?"

"Not really. It's always been about the music for me. I feel blessed that I'm able to make a living doing what I love, but other than that..." She shrugged. "What about you? Any burning desire to be famous?"

"*Hell* yeah! I want to be the next Pavarotti. Or Domingo. I'm not picky." His huge, toothy grin could've lit up the Champs-Élysées. "I want people lined up around the block waiting to hear me sing. I want to sell so many records, I blow Bocelli out of the water. Maybe then my fucking father will finally sit up and pay attention."

"Is that the only reason?"

That seemed to bring him up short. His smile faded, his brow crinkling. "Isn't it enough?"

"Don't misunderstand, it's quite an admirable goal. But doing it to prove yourself to someone rather than because it brings you personal fulfillment sounds a bit...empty. At least to me."

He stopped and stared off into the distance, then down at the sidewalk. "That's the difference between you and me, I guess. I'm still trying to figure out the personal fulfillment part."

His words threw her for a moment, but she forced a laugh. "You're not sure you're fulfilled? Then what have we been doing these past three weeks?"

Now he looked so stricken, she wished she hadn't said anything. "Oh God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's all right. I know it wasn't a personal remark. I was just teasing."

She started to walk on, until he tugged her under a nearby awning and wrapped his arms around her. "I adore you, Colette. You know that, right?"

"How can I forget, when you remind me every day? Not that I'm complaining." No, indeed—even though the mere thought of having to let him go soon pierced her heart like the world's cruelest blade.

"You make me happy. I hope I make you happy too."

"Of course you do, sweet boy. Never doubt it."

He let out a relieved breath, then cupped her face in both hands and kissed her. It was the kind of heady, passionate kiss she could've tumbled into and never been heard from again, if only she'd relax and let it happen. But the fact remained that everyone in this neighborhood knew her as Madame Petrovsky. And while Paris was indeed a sophisticated town, a married woman kissing her lover not two blocks from her own front door was still a bit beyond the pale. Plus, Aleks wouldn't like it.

She pushed on David's chest until he fell back a step, blinking in confusion. "What did I—"

"Not out here, *cheri*. Discretion, remember?"

He went bright pink. "Sorry. I just can't stop putting my foot in it today, can I?"

God, he was so impulsive. Even after three weeks, she still found it endearing. But one day he'd have to learn to curb himself, keep his actions and emotions in check, at least while they were out in public. One day soon, but not today.

"Good thing I know of a place where we can do all the kissing we want," she said with a wink, then tucked her arm in his again and steered him toward home.

\* \* \* \* \*

David walked through his dressing room door on the night of *Carmen*'s final performance, and froze. There on the vanity table sat a bouquet of white roses and purple lilies in a gorgeous cut-crystal vase. At first he thought it was from Colette and Aleks, but the card bore Popov's bold, nearly-illegible scrawl. "Thank you for your professionalism and your marvelous singing. We look forward to having you back for *Trovatore* next season. With respect, Sergei." Smiling, David leaned in for a whiff. The roses had a sweet, delicate scent that reminded him of Colette's hair right after she washed it.

There was something else tucked inside the card's small white envelope—a folded square of pale blue note paper from Popov's assistant. It had David's agent Merritt Langham's phone number scribbled on it, along with "Please call!" underlined twice for emphasis. *Oh terrific*. No doubt Merritt was royally pissed at him. David meant to call, he really did, but time had simply run away from him. He hadn't even picked up his cell phone in over a week. Damn battery was probably dead. No wonder Merritt had to resort to calling Popov's office.

Well, it was too late to call back now. He'd do it tomorrow, no excuses. Tonight he had more important things to think about—like going onstage and singing his heart out.

First his dresser came to help him into his costume, followed by the makeup artist, who combed back his hair and painted on a face they could see way up in the balcony. Afterward, David stared at himself in the mirror while he adjusted his cuffs and made sure his jacket hung straight. Hard to believe this was the last time he'd wear this costume, or tread the boards in this particular production. His last chance to sing José to Colette's Carmen, at least for the foreseeable future. He intended to savor every note.

But from the second David stepped onstage, it was as if he'd been swept up in a tornado. The next three hours sped by, until the final curtain fell, accompanied by a solid wall of exhaustion slamming into him. Teetering on his feet, he turned to Colette and whispered, "Feels like we started five minutes ago."

She gave him an equally weary smile. "I was just thinking the same thing."

The curtain rose again and the audience leaped to their feet *en masse*, sending up a roar that made David's eardrums ache. The ovation lasted through the rest of the cast's bows, as well as Aleks'. Then David and Colette came out together again, and the applause surged anew. Bouquets of flowers landed at their feet. David plucked a red rose from one of them and presented it to Colette, kissing her hand.

"How chivalrous," she murmured, though he had to lean in close to hear her. "God, when are these people going to stop? I can barely stand up!"

Colette got called back five times, David four. The stage manager rang down the curtain for the last time with people still whooping and applauding, the noise finally fading out when he brought up the house lights.

"I haven't seen an ovation like that in a very long time, not even in the concert hall," Aleks said as David and Colette staggered past him into the wings. "Excellent work, both of you." They stood

staring at each other, then broke out in punch-drunk grins and threw their arms around one another before heading back to their respective dressing rooms.

Of course, there was an after-party—which David would’ve been perfectly happy to skip—but if Aleks and Colette had to put in an appearance, so did he. It was at a small, out-of-the way restaurant, like the last cast party he’d attended back in San Francisco. Aleks and Colette held court at the head of the table, laughing and chatting with Nicole and a few of the orchestra musicians. Apparently they’d gotten their second wind between the opera house and here, and although the three of them had ridden over in the same car, it seemed to have blown right past David. Wrung out, he sank gratefully into the last empty seat at the far end of the table.

Conversation whirled around him in snatches of French, German, Italian and at least two or three other languages he wasn’t familiar with—not that it mattered, since French was the only one he could follow. Speaking it every day with Colette and Aleks had given his fluency a boost. However, listening and comprehending were one thing, joining in was another. Everybody was so animated tonight, rattling on like human machine-guns. By the time David dreamed up a witty reply to one anecdote, they’d already moved on to another subject.

The food was fine, but nothing special compared to Simone’s heavenly home-cooked cuisine. Still, he forced down a few listless bites of *salade Niçoise* before pushing his plate away to concentrate on the excellent champagne.

Bad idea. The more he drank, the more his exhaustion weighed on him. After two glasses he was blitzed to the gills and ready to leave, but every time he tried to catch Colette’s attention, she waved him off and kept talking. She and Aleks were in their element here, the sun and moon everyone else circled. A little over an hour ago they’d considered him their equal, but evidently now he was just another planet in their orbit, insignificant and ignored.

Well, fuck that. With a disgusted grunt, he got up from the table and dragged himself out to the bar, where he ordered a glass of mineral water—and almost landed in it face-first. At last he folded his arms on the counter, resting his poor alcohol-addled head.

A few minutes later a familiar warm, strong hand gripped his shoulder. “Are you all right?” Aleks asked. “You’ve been fading ever since we arrived.”

David sat up, though it took a major effort. “Thanks for noticing. I might as well be off in another country for all Colette seems to care.”

“Ah, don’t begrudge her for playing the diva just this once. Triumphs like tonight’s performance don’t come along too often, you know.”

“And I was part of it, but it looks as if that’s already slipped her mind.”

“Of course it hasn’t. And rest assured, I haven’t forgotten either.” He’d leaned in to whisper the words right into David’s ear, brushing his lips over the lobe. The soft, prickly scratch of his beard gave David an unexpected shiver. “Henri’s waiting outside with the car. Why don’t you go on home, and tell him to come back for us in an hour? I promise we won’t stay any later, even if I have to toss Colette over my shoulder and carry her out of here.”

“That’d be worth staying for, if I wasn’t ready to drop right this second.” He heaved himself off the barstool, Aleks’ hand at his elbow. “Okay, you win. See you at home.”

He made it to the car under his own steam, but it took every last shred of energy to keep from conking out during the ten-minute ride back to the apartment. Up in the elevator, through the front

door, into the bedroom, then the bathroom. He stripped off his clothes and left them where they fell, splashed some water on his face, brushed his teeth. Then the bed beckoned, its warm cotton and goose-down embrace crooning the world's sweetest siren song.

He lost consciousness as soon as he stretched out, his last thoughts lingering on Colette and Aleks, and how this was the first time he'd fallen asleep here without them.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now that we don't have performances to worry about, is there anyplace you'd like to go?" Colette asked at breakfast the next morning. "Outside of Paris, I mean."

David glanced up from his brioche, blinking blearily. His brain still felt foggy from the champagne last night, despite getting ten hours' sleep. "Actually, I need to get back to New York pretty soon. My landlord gets a bit twitchy if I don't hand him a check every first of the month."

"Oh." She slumped in her seat, clearly disappointed. "How silly of me. Of course you have your life in the States to attend to. We've been living in our own little fantasy world these past three weeks, haven't we?"

Smiling, he reached for her hand. "I've had a great time. Too bad it has to end."

"It doesn't. Not if we don't want it to."

"What do you mean?"

"You're welcome to stay here with us, if you like. Indefinitely."

Talk about being knocked for a loop. He blinked again, taking a long sip of strong black coffee. "You're serious?"

"Completely. The notion's been hovering at the back of my mind for a few days now. There's no reason we can't make our arrangement work on a more permanent basis. The three of us seem eminently compatible."

"Have you already discussed it with Aleks?"

"Not in so many words, but I doubt he'll object." She smiled. "He truly likes you. And besides, what man in his right mind would refuse such a sweet, beautiful lover in his bed every night, with not only his wife's permission but her outright approval?"

Flattering though it was, David still had to sit back and ponder it for a minute. He'd never considered leaving the United States before—but then, what exactly was he leaving? A crappy studio apartment and a family he only saw once or twice a year anyway. He could run his career just as easily from Paris as New York.

So if Colette and Aleks really did want him to stay...well, that settled it. It was good to be wanted. So good, David's heart was ready to thump its way out of his chest.

"Guess this means I should get back to New York and pack," he said. "If I'm moving in, I'll need more than one suitcase and a laptop."

Suddenly all smiles, she jumped up and threw her arms around him. "Oh I'm so delighted! You don't know how much I was dreading having to say goodbye to you." She shook her head. "This is wonderful. Even if I can't quite believe it."

"You didn't think I'd say yes?"

"I didn't want to take it for granted, especially after the way I ignored you at the party last night. I'm sorry, *cheri*. I got so caught up in chatting with people, I didn't notice how exhausted you were. Aleks got a bit peeved with me. He practically dragged me out of there by my hair around two in the morning."

Now David grinned. "Did anybody get pictures?"

She rolled her eyes at him, then cast a much more critical glance around the room. "Perhaps we should think about moving to a bigger place. Aleks' study is bound to get crowded with three of us needing the piano for practice. And I wouldn't mind a larger dining room and maybe another bath—"

Her enthusiasm was so giddily infectious, he burst out laughing. "Sounds great, but aren't you mixing up the cart and the horse? Let's get me settled before we start making future plans."

"Fair enough." She sat back down and refilled her coffee cup. "But speaking of future plans, you now have no excuse not to sign with Dieter. Believe me, you won't be sorry. He'll do more for your career than Merritt Langham ever could."

Which reminded him, he still needed to give Merritt a call. No point putting it off any longer, although now the prospect filled him with dread. Considering Merritt's prickly temper, it was probably best to fire him long-distance rather than face-to-face, even if it did feel like the coward's way out.

Luckily, he'd remembered to recharge his phone this morning. When Colette went to talk to Simone about planning that evening's dinner, David stole into Aleks' study, plopped down on the piano bench and dialed Merritt's number. No sooner had he hit the "send" button when he realized it was still the wee hours in New York. But before he could hang up, a very gruff, groggy "H'lo?" rumbled over the line.

"Hey, Merritt. It's me, David." God, could he sound any lamer? "Sorry it took me so long to call you back, but—"

"Oh please, don't bother apologizing. It's only four in the fucking morning here." A disgusted sigh, followed by the rustle of bed covers. "Shouldn't complain, I suppose. If not for all your stellar reviews, I would've thought you'd fallen off the face of the planet. Paris must still be as wild and ribald as I recall from twenty-odd years—" His posh British accent suddenly cracked, split in half by a hacking, phlegmatic cough that reminded David of all the times he'd seen him chomping a cigar. "Sorry. Good thing we finally connected. I've got offers to discuss, one of them pretty damn urgent. Ever been to Buenos Aires?"

Every word, every excuse and explanation David had rehearsed flew right out of his head. "Argentina? Why would I want to go there?"

"Because Pappano's mounting a new production of *Don Carlos* at the Teatro Colón. The full five-act original version in French. Alagna was supposed to do it, but now he's sick and can't make the trip, so they're scrambling to recast the role. Rehearsals start a week from Friday. If you're game, I've got the contract on my desk."

"Are you kidding? They're just offering it to me without even—"

"David, I don't think you understand what a splash you've made. Haven't you read the latest reviews? Everyone's raving about your Don José. My phone's been ringing off the hook with new offers for you. Hence all my frantic messages."

*Oh Jesus.* And to think he could've known about this days ago, if only he'd stopped fucking Colette and Aleks long enough to check his voice mail. "But *Argentina*? How long would I be gone?"

"Four weeks of rehearsal, then eight performances spread out over another month. First-class airfare and accommodations. Fifteen thousand per performance."

David's chin nearly hit his chest. That was a top-ranked artist's fee. No other house had ever offered him anywhere near as much. "Holy shit."

"That's what I thought you'd say."

"But it's still one hell of a long trip."

"Look, if you don't want to go to South America for two fucking months, fine. I don't blame you. But Pappano's planning to bring this production to the Met next season. Impress him, and he might ask you to sing it there too. He's one of the opera world's biggest movers and shakers. Work with him, and your career's on its way. But what do I know? I'm just a lowly agent."

David could practically *hear* Merritt's Cheshire-cat grin spreading across his fleshy lips. "You're a damn snake-oil salesman, is what you are."

"I speak only the truth. And the truth here is, this is the best offer I've seen come across the wire in ages. Most tenors have to work their asses off for ten years before a plum like this lands in their laps. Frankly, you're an idiot if you don't do it."

"Well, don't hold back, Merritt. Tell me how you really feel."

"Haven't I always?"

And the truth here was—yes, he always had. Even when David wasn't making him a dime, Merritt always had his back. For all his bluntness and crude language, he was a straight shooter, unfailingly honest in both word and deed. Now David hung his head, feeling like a first-class heel for even thinking of firing him.

But as for the offer... *Shit!* Talk about the world's worst timing. However, Merritt was right. It was the engagement of a lifetime. A true career-changer. He really would be an idiot if he turned it down.

Aleks and Colette would understand. They were professional musicians, after all. They knew how the business worked. When opportunities like this popped up you had to grab them, because there was no guarantee they'd ever come around again. Two months wasn't that long in the grand scheme of things. It would zip by in a flash, just like the last three weeks. Then he'd be back, ready to start their lives together.

"You realize I don't even know the role yet," David said finally.

"Then get a score and study it on the long plane ride down. You'll have another four weeks to make it perfect."

"Okay, fine. But you'll have to overnight me the contract and the airline ticket here in Paris. I'll fly directly to Buenos Aires out of De Gaulle."

"You're not coming back to New York first?"

"I won't have time. There's some stuff I need to take care of here." Best not to let Merritt dwell on that, so he pushed on. "If I wire you the cash, would you pay my rent for the next two months? I'd rather not come home to find everything I own sitting out on the sidewalk."

"Don't worry, you can owe me until you get back. I'll email you with details on the other offers. Be sure to let me know about them in a *reasonable* amount of time, yes?"

He laughed. "I get the hint. Thanks, Merritt. Talk to you later." Then he hit the "end" button and shoved the phone in his pocket with a sigh. So much for the easy part. Now he had to think of a way to break this to Aleks and Colette.



## Chapter Ten

All Colette could do for a long moment was stare, her coffee cup nearly slipping from her hand. David couldn't have said what she thought he just said. Could he? "I-I don't understand. This morning you were ready to move in with us permanently, and now you're *leaving*?"

"Only for a few weeks," he replied, his gaze flitting from her to Aleks and back again. "It's an engagement, Colette. The lead in *Don Carlos*. I'd be ten kinds of foolish to turn it down."

"So you just decided to take it? Without even asking us first?"

"What do you mean, ask you? Are you saying I need your *permission*?"

Dear God, what was wrong with him? Was he really that obtuse, or just pretending to be? How could he change his mind so capriciously, without even a thought for how she felt? "If we were married, you would've discussed it with me beforehand, wouldn't you? I discuss all my prospective engagements with Aleks."

"But he doesn't tell you which ones to accept, does he?"

"Of course not. But this affects all of us, for God's sake! Why can't you see that?"

"My angel, don't you think you're overreacting a bit?" Aleks interjected. "Perhaps David's made a mistake here, but let's give him the benefit of the doubt. This is new territory for all of us."

"Fine." She sighed, turning back to David. "Just tell Langham you've changed your mind, and there's an end to it."

Now it was David's turn to stare at her. "I can't do that."

"Why not? Have you signed the contract?"

"No. But I've given my word, and I'm sure Merritt's already called the *Teatro Colón* to tell them I'll do it. I can't back out now."

Colette bent her head, her eyes stinging. Anger and devastation washed over her, both warring for dominance. While her professional side understood David's decision, her personal side felt as if she'd been gut-punched. For ten years she'd endured awful separations from Aleks for the sake of both their careers. The empty, lonely ache in her heart during those times had become her definition of sheer hell. She'd thought that was all over, but now here it was again—same problem, different man.

No. Just *no*. She couldn't do it again. She couldn't take the garbled long-distance phone calls, or lying awake every night staring at the ceiling. Or the niggling fear that David might not come back. *Oh God*. Now she knew how Aleks felt every time he'd put her on a plane to San Francisco or New York or God knows where else. How had he kept from losing his mind?

David fell to his knees before her, reaching for her hand. "Look, I'm sorry. Don't cry, okay? It's only for a few weeks. I'll be back by the tenth of April, and then we—"

"You're not going. I refuse you permission."

He jerked back as if she'd just slapped him. "Colette, c'mon. This is my *career* we're talking about, not some silly bedroom game."

"You weren't calling it silly when I had my hand inside you. And I thought you *wanted* to belong to me."

"And I thought I had the right to say no." He stood. "Well, I call 'mercy' on this. Where my career's concerned, you have no right to dictate terms. Do you honestly think I'm only going to sing in productions with you for the rest of my life?"

"You make it sound like such a horrible fate."

"Oh stop playing the temperamental prima donna! It's not horrible, and you know it. But it's not what I want."

"Ah yes—your ambition to become the next Pavarotti. Good luck with that. But I think you'll find that fame in our profession's nowhere near as glamorous as it looks from the outside. All those bravos from adoring fans only go so far. An empty hotel room doesn't love you back. Then again, I doubt yours will be empty for very long."

"That was cruel, Colette. And really beneath you." Still, his pale blue eyes looked more sad and disappointed than angry. "I guess there's nothing else left to say. I'll pack my stuff and go to a hotel tonight." Then he turned and walked out of the dining room.

"I'll go talk some sense into him," Aleks said, getting up to follow him.

"Don't." Colette caught him by the sleeve. "Let him go. He's obviously made up his mind."

With a sigh, he gave her hand a quick kiss, then held it to his chest. "Angel, listen to me. You know you'll regret it if you let him leave with your harsh words still ringing in his ears. Go tell him you're sorry, at least."

Tears burned behind her eyes, ready to spill forth. "I-I don't know if I can..."

"Do it for me, if nothing else."

Oh how sly and devious Aleks could be when it suited him. Now he'd just played the one card he knew she could never refuse. Sucking in a shaky breath, Colette nodded and followed him back to the bedroom.

David's valise sat open on the bed, shirts and socks already piled in it. He emerged from the bathroom, shaving kit in hand, and stopped short. "I'll be out of here as soon as I can."

"We have something to say," Aleks began. "Neither of us wants you to go, but we understand why you have to. Please know you will always be welcome here. Won't he, angel?"

It hurt to nod. It hurt to smile. But Colette did both, her heart nearly shattering when David came to her, wrapping her in his arms. "I'll be back soon," he whispered. "I promise."

"I know, *cheri*. But then in another few weeks or months, you'll have to leave again. And I can't bear it. I'm sorry." Another deep breath. "When you return, feel free to visit us as a dear friend. But nothing more."

David's gaze flicked to Aleks, then back to her. At last he nodded, swallowing hard. "If that's the way it has to be."

They walked him to the front door and exchanged their final embraces. Henri brought the car around for him, and Colette and Aleks watched as it pulled away from the curb and crept down the snowy avenue, finally fading away in the distance.

Afterward, Aleks took her to bed and fucked her hard, until the tears finally flowed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wet-blanket humidity whapped David in the face as he dragged himself and his luggage out to the cabstand at Ezeiza International Airport. Jesus, it had to be at least eighty-five degrees, and all the clothes in his bag were for winter in Paris—nothing but turtlenecks and long-sleeved shirts. Idiot that he was, he'd forgotten about the reversal of seasons. Down here, February was high summer.

So he stood sweltering in his wool slacks and fleece-lined jacket as he waited his turn for a cab. By the time he finally piled inside an air-conditioned Mercedes SUV, he felt as if he'd taken a bath fully clothed. Then came the challenge of telling the cabbie where he wanted to go in his rudimentary high school Spanish. In the end, he pulled out the hotel map he'd picked up in the airport's baggage claim area and pointed.

Merritt wasn't kidding—the *Hotel Sofitel* was indeed pretty damn luxurious, all black and white art deco in the lobby, with impeccably trained staff. At least the front desk people spoke English. The bell captain himself escorted David up to his room—or rather, his suite, complete with king-sized bed, an enormous sitting room, a Steinway piano and a very pleasant view of the Plaza San Martin. There was also a wet bar, not to mention a huge bathroom with a shower big enough to hold an entire family. No object ever created had looked more inviting.

He stripped off his sweat-drenched clothes and climbed in, sagging against the cool tile while the water pounded down on him. Then he toweled off with plush Egyptian cotton, threw on one of the hotel's monogrammed Turkish terrycloth robes and strolled out onto the balcony.

Traffic sounds were the same the world over, a cacophony of beeping horns and screeching brakes that normally would've woken him right up, but not after thirteen-plus hours in the air. It'd take him a few days before he got over the jet lag. That was what he hated most about air travel—the lingering grogginess and disorientation. His surroundings still seemed vaguely unreal.

Except for the bed. Bone-weary, David sank onto it gratefully, eyes drifting shut the moment his skin kissed the smooth cream-colored cotton sheets. It felt like five minutes later when he jerked awake, the room now fully dark, his stomach snarling like a jungle cat. He reached out next to him from pure habit, but grasped only a handful of rumpled covers.

Oh this was fucking ridiculous. He should just call Aleks and Colette and beg their forgiveness, promise anything to get back in their good graces. He flicked on the light and grabbed his discarded slacks, fumbling in the pocket for his cell phone. But his heart lurched when he saw "No Service" flashing in the menu bar. *Fuck!* It had never occurred to him the damn thing wouldn't work down here. He'd have to go buy a new one tomorrow, along with some summer clothes.

Or he could use the room phone. And he would have, if the utter futility of what he'd just contemplated hadn't just smacked him like a fist. What was he going to do, cancel the engagement now that he'd made the flight down? Shoot himself in the foot with Pappano, and screw any chance he had for a top-flight international career? He'd made his choice back in Paris. Like it or not, there was no reneging now.

His stomach rumbled again, prompting him to reach for the room service menu on the bedside table. Damn thing was fifty pages long, mostly because it was printed in five languages. He picked up the

phone and ordered a salad and a pot of coffee. Might as well get in some practice at the piano. Rehearsals started in three days, and he didn't have his role committed to memory yet.

Half an hour until his meal was ready, the room service operator informed him in heavily accented English. With a sigh, David hung up and wandered out into the living area. All this space, just for him. The thought alone made him ache inside. Good thing he'd have work to keep him busy. It was already starting to look like a very long, lonely eight weeks ahead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aleks sat at his desk studying a Schubert symphony while Colette worked at the piano, vocalizing and brushing up on her Octavian for her next engagement at the Met. Normally he loved listening to her, but today she seemed distracted, her voice weighted with melancholy. Not difficult to figure out why.

At last she stopped playing, then turned to stare out the window. He got up and went over to her, sitting down beside her. "I haven't seen you this blue in ages."

Sighing, she gestured toward the open score on top of the piano. "This used to be one of my favorite roles, but now... My heart's simply not in it. How am I supposed to play a seventeen-year-old boy in love when I feel so wretched? I should just call the Met and cancel."

"Don't. You'll be fine once you get there. Besides, you've always loved springtime in New York."

"But another six weeks away from you? Pure torture."

"Angel, please. You're just making things harder on yourself—"

"I've been thinking perhaps it's time I retired."

He stared at her. Surely she couldn't be serious! "Colette, you're only thirty-five. You've got ten or twenty good years of singing left in you, at least."

"No matter when I leave the stage, now or twenty years from now, there'll be dozens of other singers ready to take my place. I doubt anyone will miss me."

"But what will you do with yourself? You'll go mad without something to keep you occupied."

"Oh, redecorate the apartment. Visit museums. Learn to cook. Write a memoir even I wouldn't want to read." She shrugged. "We'll have plenty of time for leisure travel during the orchestra's off-season."

"It wouldn't be enough, my angel. And I suspect you already know that." He took her hand, clasping it between both of his. "Please, for my sake, don't cancel the Met. Your opening night's on a Friday, isn't it? I'll fly over and we can make a weekend of it. We'll visit the Cloisters, the Guggenheim, your favorite Chinese restaurant. Then if you really do decide to retire, at least we'll have given New York a proper send-off."

She thought about it a moment, then nodded. "In that case, I'd better get back to practicing."

"Let it go for today. You've still got two weeks before you have to leave. Why don't you come out to my concert this evening? You haven't left the apartment in days. The fresh air will do you good."

A slow smile spread across her lips. Ah, now he had her. There was nothing she loved more than putting on a stylish gown and taking a seat in his private box. She'd always relished playing the glamorous conductor's wife—in fact, far more than her usual role of haughty opera diva.

"Well, all right." Now her sigh was more mocking than sincere. "If you insist."

He grinned. "I'll send Henri back with the car to pick you up around seven."

\* \* \* \* \*

Colette strolled through the Salle Pleyel's mezzanine, sipping a glass of champagne as she listened to the buzz of voices swirling around her. She'd forgotten how relaxing it was to attend a performance she didn't have to sing herself. She stopped near the staircase to watch the throng circulate. Men in tuxes, dark suits, jackets and jeans. Ladies in everything from formal gowns to denim skirts and flip-flops. If David were here, they'd be leaning in conspiratorially and whispering to each other, making up stories about various figures in the crowd. The things he came up with never failed to make her giggle.

But not anymore. *Damn!* One thought of him, and her mood took an immediate nosedive. And she'd been having a nice time up until now. Aleks was right. She needed to get out of the house more often. Brooding at the piano every day wasn't doing her a bit of good.

She finished her champagne then wandered back to the bar for more. A different bartender waited on her this time—an older man with a shock of iron-gray hair and a wide, bright smile. He looked very familiar. "Ah, Madame DuPlessis! So good to see you here again. Are you enjoying the concert?"

Colette had to rack her brain for a moment or two before his name popped up. The man had been a fixture here for ages, knew everyone, and obviously never forgot a face. "Very much, Marcel. But it's Madame Petrovsky tonight. I'm in disguise, you see," she added with a wink. "How have you been?"

"I can't complain. Then again, perhaps I could, but who'd want to listen?"

She laughed. "Good point."

He got her a fresh glass and filled it to the brim. "There you go, Madame. Say hello to the maestro for me." And then he flashed her another smile and moved on to the next customer.

Well, he certainly seemed happy. One man with a simple job to do—filling glasses and putting smiles on people's faces. And he appeared to be the best at it. Perhaps that was the key—finding one's niche and being content with it. As much as she'd loved performing, it had never made her particularly happy. The constant pressure to do better—more challenging roles, higher fees, the most prestigious engagements—was demoralizing and largely futile. She'd grown weary of it long before the grueling demands of travel had worn her down.

Of course, she could go on singing for another ten years, or fifteen, or twenty, but what would be the point? Unlike David, she had nothing to prove to herself or anyone else. But if being a professional singer wasn't her true niche, then what was?

The bell rang, signaling the end of the intermission. Colette set her half-full glass on the bar and headed back to her seat in Aleks' private box. The plush, overstuffed seat greeted her like a warm embrace. Then the house lights dimmed and out strode Aleks, dashing and sexy in his tailored Savile

Row tux. His glance sailed over the audience, settling on her for a moment. He gave her a quick smile before turning to the orchestra and launching into Mahler's *Fourth Symphony*.

It was one of Colette's favorite pieces—light, pastoral and perfect for tonight, with nothing in it to tax her overtired brain. She shut her eyes and let the notes sweep over her, until the fourth and final movement began. A silvery lyric soprano voice piped up, instantly capturing Colette's attention. She leaned forward in her seat, eager to catch every phrase and nuance issuing from the petite young lady onstage. Not a large voice, but certainly a well-trained and enchanting one, albeit with the tiniest hint of breathiness on her top notes. Good God, why wasn't this girl singing opera? With that sweet voice and elfin, heart-shaped face, she was ideal for *soubrette* roles such as Sophie in *Rosenkavalier* or Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

The performance ended in a swell of applause, the audience jumping to its feet. Colette darted through the departing crowd heading down the mezzanine stairs and through the lobby, heading backstage. The security guards at the entrance knew her, and let her pass without question.

As usual, it was utter pandemonium, musicians, stage hands and other technical staff dashing in every direction. At last she made her way through the labyrinth of corridors and reached Aleks' dressing room. He'd left the door open while he sat chatting with the orchestra's concertmaster and a few other string players. His face lit up the moment he saw her. "Did you enjoy yourself? You looked so comfortable sitting there, I thought you were going to nod off."

"Don't be silly." Pasting on a smile, she shook hands with everyone, then sat listening to them talk for another few minutes, until they finally took Aleks' hint to leave. "Who was the soprano tonight?" she asked once they'd filed out. "She was quite good."

"You mean Sandrine? Yes, I was rather impressed, especially since she's only been out of the *conservatoire* a few months. Would you like to say hello?"

"Yes, please."

They found her in the women's section of the orchestra's communal dressing room, pulling on her boots. She'd already changed out of the long blue gown she'd worn onstage into jeans and a thick wool sweater. With no makeup on now except for a touch of clear lip gloss and her hair skinned back in a ponytail, she looked about twelve years old.

Her big brown eyes practically popped out of her head when she saw them approaching. "Is something wrong, maestro?"

"Not at all. You did well tonight. In fact, I have someone here who'd like to meet you. Sandrine Herveaux, this is my wife, Colette DuPlessis. Colette, Sandrine."

The girl stood to take Colette's hand. Her face had gone white as paper. "Colette DuPlessis wants to meet *me*? But I'm nobody!"

"We were all nobody once." Colette smiled in what she hoped was her most disarming fashion.

"Oh Madame, your Carmen was amazing!" she gushed. "I stood through three performances. And every time at the end, when José—"

Best to cut this off before it became a litany of her favorite moments. "You're very kind. You also have a very lovely voice. Aleks says you recently left the *conservatoire*. Are you studying with anyone now?"

“Yes, Josephine LeGros. Or rather, I was. She recently retired and moved back to Switzerland to be closer to her children.” She clapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m babbling, aren’t I? I’m sorry. It happens when I get nervous.”

Now Colette was doubly impressed. LeGros had been one of Europe’s finest vocal coaches for well over thirty years. This young lady must really have something if she’d taken her on. “What about opera roles? Or are you focusing on concert repertoire right now?”

“Honestly, I’m focusing on whatever jobs I can find. I auditioned for the opera chorus this season, but I didn’t get in. They said I was too young, and didn’t have enough experience. But how am I supposed to *get* experience if no one will hire me?”

A deep font of energy and ambition obviously lurked beneath this sweet exterior. Reminded Colette a bit too much of herself a decade or so ago. “That’s the eternal conundrum, isn’t it? But if what I heard tonight is any indication, you’ll do well indeed. Good luck finding a new teacher, although I doubt you’ll have much problem there either.”

No sooner had she and Aleks started to walk away, when the girl called after them, “Unless you’d like to take me on, Madame.”

Colette looked at Aleks, then back at Sandrine. “I don’t teach. I never have.”

“Oh.” Sandrine’s expression crumpled. “That’s too bad. With your technique and years of experience, I’m sure you must have a lot to offer.”

Colette knew flattery when she heard it, but good God, this girl had it down to a science. And it wasn’t the empty sort either. Sandrine knew exactly what she was doing. Colette could see the fire burning in those huge brown eyes, that drive to be the best. To get to the top. All the great ones had it. David had it. Colette had even had it herself, once upon a time.

“Just because you haven’t taught in the past, that’s no reason not to start,” Aleks murmured into her ear.

She gave him a skeptical look. “Nonsense. I don’t have the patience for it.”

“Perhaps not, but it can’t hurt to try. Especially since you’ll probably have plenty of time to fill fairly soon.”

He had a point. He usually did. And, strangely enough, the idea intrigued her. Maybe this would be her new niche. But if she dismissed it out of hand, she’d never know.

She reached inside her handbag, pulling out a small cream-colored card with their phone number on it. “If you’re serious—and don’t you dare waste my time if you’re not—give me a call tomorrow and we’ll discuss it.”

Sandrine’s eyes got wide, but they didn’t bug out like before. Evidently she’d figured out it was time to tone down the act. “Thank you, Madame. You won’t be disappointed.”

“I don’t expect to be,” she replied, taking Aleks’ arm as they turned to go.

## Chapter Eleven

"Nice tan." Merritt sat back in his squeaky brown leather desk chair, giving David an up-and-down glance. "Looks like two months in sunny Argentina agrees with you."

David had to move a stack of files and various other papers from the chair in front of Merritt's desk before he could sit down. Merritt's office was wall-to-wall paper, piled all over the credenza and the top of his desk, multiple shelves crammed full of books and three-ring binders. Framed newspaper clippings and photos of him with his clients decorated the walls.

With no other place to put it, David set his burden on the floor, then plopped down with a sigh. "It was a nonstop battle between sheer boredom and utter chaos. I spent most of the time sacked out on the chaise on my balcony when I wasn't at the theater. When it wasn't pouring down rain, that is."

"So you didn't take in the sights with some comely *señorita* in tow?"

Oh that was funny. Except David didn't feel like laughing. "You're kidding, right? I was too damn tired. Hit the ground running the first day of rehearsals and didn't stop 'til closing night. Pappano's an amazing conductor, but he's also one hell of a slave driver. Everybody's ass was dragging."

"Well, you must've impressed him, because I've got the contract for the Met engagement right here. Opening night of the season next September."

An honor usually reserved for top-ranked stars. David should've been thrilled, but instead all he could do was blink. It had to be the jet lag. Another day or two, and he'd be doing handsprings. "That's great."

Merritt's bushy gray eyebrow arched. "Do try not to get too excited. You might rupture something."

"Give me a break, Merritt. I only got off the fucking plane yesterday."

"Then why are you here, instead of at home with your face buried in a pillow?"

"To pay you back for the rent you advanced me. And pick up my mail." Which he'd had forwarded to Merritt's office. Not that he'd expected anything but junk mail, a couple magazines and various bills, but at least it was an excuse to get out of the house and breathe some fresh air. Well, as fresh as it ever got in grimy, polluted Manhattan. "Now I just need somebody to come clean my apartment. It's got three months' worth of dust caked all over everything."

"To hell with that. You can afford a much better place now." Merritt opened his desk, pulled out a plain white envelope and handed it to him.

Inside was a check. David's fees for the Buenos Aires engagement, minus Merritt's fifteen percent. Over a hundred thousand dollars. The figure blurred and swam in front of David's eyes, making him blink again. It was too damn surreal. "I didn't think they'd wired it to you already. Wow."

"Not bad, eh? Still think I don't earn my keep?"

"When did I ever say that?"



"You didn't, but you were damn well thinking it. I told you when you signed with me it'd be a few years until all the hard work started paying off. Well, there you are. The first installment." He grabbed a couple of files from the stack at his elbow. "San Francisco wants you back next fall, for *Carmen* with Denyce Graves. Then there's *Trovatore* in Paris. I've got new offers from La Scala and Covent Garden here too. You can take your pick."

David's head spun. He was so used to having to fight for every engagement he'd gotten in the past. Seeing all these offers laid out before him like a banquet was pretty overwhelming. "Can we hold off a few days? I need some time to decompress first."

"Not a problem. But while you're here, shall we go ahead and get the Met contract squared away? We already know you want to do that one, yes?"

Merritt pushed the papers toward him, and David gave them a quick once-over. It was their standard guest artists' contract, for six performances at twenty thousand dollars per. Even more than he'd been paid for Buenos Aires.

He scooped up the pen to sign, his hand trembling. But other than that, he couldn't make it move. All he could think of was what'd happened last time he'd agreed to an engagement on the spur of the moment. He hovered over the page for another second or two, then set the pen down. "I-I'll take care of this next time, all right?"

Merritt stared at him. "Is something wrong? Those are the terms we negotiated."

"I thought it was supposed to be fifteen thousand per performance, not twenty."

"You're complaining about them offering you too *much* money?"

"No, just having a hard time wrapping my head around it." He rose, knees wobbling. "You're right, I shouldn't have come in today. I'll be back before the end of the week to sign this and go over the other offers, all right?"

Merritt looked a bit exasperated, but nodded anyway. "Fine. Whatever you want."

David collected his forwarded mail from Merritt's assistant and caught a cab home to his grungy little below-street-level studio at West 75th Street and Columbus. It was a relatively pleasant day, the sun peeking down through scattered gray clouds holding a slight promise of rain. He shivered in his heavy jacket as he paid the driver and climbed out, even though it had to be sixty-five degrees. After two months of Argentine heat and humidity, it'd be awhile until his body readjusted.

He averted his eyes as he came through his apartment door, willing the mess left over from before he'd taken off for Paris to disappear. No such luck. There were still newspapers strewn over the coffee table, along with a couple of music scores he'd borrowed from the performing arts library. God, he didn't even want to *think* about how much he must owe in late fees. The air still smelled stale and musty, but luckily nowhere near as rank as when he'd arrived home last night, thanks to leaving the kitchen window cracked open. Faint footprints popped up on the dusty carpet everywhere he stepped, his one armchair creaking in protest when he set his box full of mail down on it. He'd lived here since his student days at Juilliard, and it showed. Every stick of thrift-store furniture was on its last pins.

He'd rolled out of his sofa bed this morning and left it unmade, not bothering to fold it back up. What was the point? He'd only be back in it in a few hours. Or maybe even a few minutes, if his droopy eyelids had their way. But first, he'd better take care of that annoying little red light flashing on his answering machine.

Five messages in all, three from Merritt, about matters they'd already discussed. One from a rather testy librarian at Lincoln Center, wondering why he'd had the scores for *Il Trovatore* and *Die Walküre* checked out for over two months. The third was from someone he only heard from on his birthday and around the holidays.

"David, this is Mom. I've been trying to get hold of you for almost a month, but your other phone keeps telling me your message box is full." Her voice crackled with concern and even a touch of anger. "Please call as soon as you get this message. It's important."

The line clicked off.

*Shit.* He knew he should've deleted Merritt's dozen or so messages off his cell once he'd listened to them. Then again, it wouldn't have mattered, since he'd just spent two months in a country where the fucking thing didn't work anyway. And of course, he hadn't bothered calling his mother to give her the number of the new phone he'd bought in Argentina. Not that it made a damn bit of difference. She was still going to chew him a new one, so he might as well man up and take his medicine.

He dropped onto the edge of the bed and hit his cordless land-line's speed dial. It rang three times before she picked it up. "H'lo?"

"It's me, Mom. Sorry it took me so long to call you back."

"Oh my God, David! Are you all right?" She sounded tired. Tired and scared to death and relieved all at once. "I've been trying to get in touch with you for over a month!"

"That's what your message said. I've been out of the country for the last few weeks, on an en—um, you know, working."

"What's the matter, don't they have phones where you were?"

Now she sounded pissed. Didn't take long for things to get back to normal. "Look, I'm sorry. What did you need to talk about that's so important?"

The line went silent, then she sucked in a shaky breath. "I-I'm afraid I have some bad news. We lost your father a few weeks ago. It was a heart attack. It happened at work."

For a few seconds, he couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Then the impact hit him like a punch to the midsection, nearly doubling him over. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. All the awful things they'd said the last time they'd seen each other. Everything he wished he could take back. Now he'd never have the chance.

"David, are you still there?"

"Y-Yeah. G-Give me a minute." Staggering to his feet, he went into the kitchen and filled a glass of water from the tap, then drank half of it down in one gulp. "Okay, I'm here."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you like this. Are you all right?"

"I will be in a few minutes, just..." He sank down on the kitchen chair, rubbing a hand over his face. "I-I guess you've already had the funeral?"

"Yes. It was a nice service. Your uncle gave a very moving eulogy."

*Because you weren't there to do it* went unsaid, but still hung in the air between them. "I'm sorry, Mom. I would've been there if I'd known."

"I'm sure you would," she replied acidly.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you made it pretty clear there was no love lost between you when you stormed out of here at Christmas."

She just had to go there, didn't she? "We didn't always get along, but that doesn't mean I'm glad he's gone."

"He regained consciousness in the hospital a few minutes before he passed. He asked for you. He wanted to say goodbye."

A fine blade of pain tore straight through his heart. God, why was she telling him all this? It's not as if it made any difference now. "What do you want me to say, Mom? I wish I'd been there, but I wasn't. I can't turn back the clock and make it better. Any of it."

"I don't expect you to, but... You don't know how hard it was watching you and your dad fight your entire life. Every time it looked as if you were about to find common ground, some new wrinkle would come along to screw it up. Seems like your whole relationship was nothing but a series of missed opportunities." She sighed. "I found a letter for you in his things. I mailed it out last week. You should be getting it any day, if you haven't already."

He got up and padded over to the armchair to riffle through the box of mail he'd picked up at Merritt's office. Toward the middle of the pile he found a small white envelope with his mother's thin, spidery scrawl on it in blue ballpoint ink. "I've got it right here. Haven't had a chance to read it yet."

"I don't know what it says. It was sealed when I found it, and I didn't open it. But if you want to talk about it once you've read it, I'm here."

"Okay." He went over to the bed and sat back down again. "I should let you go."

"I'm glad you called. I was worried." She sniffled. "Next time you leave the country for weeks at a time, would you give me a call first? You're all I've got now, you know."

As if he wasn't about to cry already. "I will, I promise."

"All right, then. Take care."

David sat there for several minutes staring at the envelope before he finally opened it. There were three handwritten pages inside, black ink on yellow legal-sized paper. He took a deep breath and let his eyes drift shut for a moment, then opened them again and began to read.

## Chapter Twelve

April evenings in New York still carried a bit of a chill. Aleks zipped up his jacket and strolled out the Met's stage door, then around to the front of the building. Lincoln Center Plaza bustled with people tonight, leaving performances at the brightly lit Alice Tully Hall and New York State Theater. He paused by one of the Met's tall marquees to watch the crowd and drink in some fresh air. Five minutes, then he'd head back inside.

He'd just turned to do so when his glance landed on a solitary jeans-and-leather-jacketed figure cutting purposefully across the plaza a few feet away. He'd know those strong shoulders and that wavy brown hair anywhere. "David? Is that you?"

David halted and wheeled around, breaking out in a surprised smile. "Well, you're the last person I expected to see. What're you doing here?"

"It's Colette's dress rehearsal for *Rosenkavalier*. She opens tomorrow night."

"Oh I forgot about that. So she didn't cancel, huh? I seem to recall her being on the fence about it."

"She was, but I persuaded her." They moved closer, until they stood right in front of each other. Close enough to touch. Close enough to kiss. Aleks' gaze lingered on David's lips a moment too long for comfort before he finally looked away. "How was Argentina?"

"Busy." Was it Aleks' imagination, or was that a resigned sigh?

"Not fun?"

"I didn't have much time for that, with eight performances on the schedule."

"Too bad. I've never been there myself, but I hear it's an exciting city."

"I prefer New York. Or Paris." David smiled again, but it didn't reach his eyes. In fact, his eyes had a rather glazed, tired look about them, even a bit pink around the edges. As if he'd been crying. "Maybe I'll see you there when I come back for *Trovatore* this fall. Say hello to Colette for me."

He'd walked out of their lives once. Aleks wasn't about to let them make the same mistake twice—either of them. "They're about to start the final act. Why don't you come in and watch? Afterward you can go backstage and say hello to her yourself."

David hesitated a second or two before turning back. "Are you sure she'd want me to?"

"Why on earth wouldn't she?"

"Because...every day I was gone, I picked up my phone to call you. All I wanted was to tell you how sorry I was, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't dial the number. After about a month, I figured the two of you were still so pissed at me, you probably didn't care if you never heard from me again."

Dear, sweet, tenderhearted man. No wonder he and Colette had fallen so quickly and deeply under his spell. "David, I was never angry with you. And whatever anger Colette felt faded a long time ago. But she will definitely be piqued with both of us if I let this opportunity pass by. So come along. I refuse to take no for an answer."

This time when David smiled, it not only reached his eyes but lit up his entire face. Ah thank God. Aleks hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath until it rushed out of his lungs. Relief had never looked—or felt—so good.

\* \* \* \* \*

The last act ran about eight minutes over, and Colette felt each of them keenly. Octavian was one of the longest roles in her repertoire. She was onstage for the entire running time of the three-and-a-half-hour opera, except for a few minutes in the middle of Act One and the beginning of Act Two. By final curtain, she was drenched in sweat and so wrung out she felt as if she'd just walked the world's longest tightrope. She lurched back to her dressing room, yanking off her powdered wig as she went. Good thing she'd never learned any Wagnerian roles, or no doubt she'd be dead by now.

The door cracked open, and Aleks poked his head in. "Still alive, my angel?"

"Barely. Remind me again why I let you talk me into this?"

He just grinned. "I have a surprise for you."

"Please tell me that means we're going to dinner. I deserve a reward."

"Perhaps you'd like an appetizer first." Then the door swung open, and in walked Aleks, followed by David, both sporting huge smiles.

Colette's jaw fell open, her heart turning somersaults in her chest. "Oh my God! Where in the world did you come from?" she cried, leaping up and throwing her arms around him.

"I was returning a couple scores to the performing arts library—or rather, dumping them in the night drop. I've had them so long, the head librarian's gunning for me. Anyway, I'd just turned around to head home when I ran into Aleks out on the plaza."

"Home? You live near here?"

"A few blocks north. Talk about a coincidence, huh? Of all the nights I could've walked by..." His smile got wider, the glint in his eyes more appreciative. "Nice costume, by the way. You look good in silver jodhpurs."

She couldn't help grinning back. "Well, you know what they say about mezzos. All we ever play are young boys or old bags."

"Or Delilah. Or Carmen." His voice caressed the last word, his eyes crinkling.

A hot flush slowly prickled up the back of her neck and into her cheeks. Where in blazes had her dresser gotten to? This damn costume felt like a sweaty suit of armor, glued to her from neck to knee.

"Why don't you come to dinner with us?" No sooner had she said it when Amelia finally bustled in, babbling apologies, and started to help her out of the offending garment. "Aleks and I would love to hear about your trip."

David looked down at himself, frowning at his jeans. "I'm not really dressed..."

"You look fine," Aleks interjected. "We're not going anyplace elegant."

"Give me half an hour to get out of this and take a shower, and I'll be ready to go," Colette added.

David's gaze flicked from her to Aleks and back again. "Whatever you say."

They cooled their heels in the green room while she got ready, then it was off in a taxi to Grand Sichuan in the East Village. David glanced wide-eyed around the noisy, well-lit restaurant with red-jacketed waiters scurrying to and fro and garish paintings of tigers and koi on the walls. "I never would've pegged you as fans of Chinese food."

"One can only eat so much *foie gras*," Aleks replied with a wink as the hostess showed them to a relatively quiet corner booth. "Besides, they make the best prawns with garlic sauce in the city."

And hot and sour soup. And curry chicken. And spicy bean curd. All Colette's favorites. Zesty, delicious dishes she never allowed herself before performance nights, but this was a special occasion. David was back. She sat enraptured, nibbling bites of chicken and sipping green tea as she listened to him describe the glorious *Teatro Colón*.

"It's completely renovated, inside and out," he said. "Took them four years. They've even got a few new technical gizmos that'd make the Met jealous."

"Sounds wonderful," she replied. "Too bad I'll never sing there."

"Why not? I'm sure Dieter could get you an engagement if you asked him."

"Dieter hasn't spoken to me since I told him I'm retiring at the end of this year."

David did a double-take, his fork dangling from his fingers. "You're kidding."

"No, not at all. Performing in opera is terribly grueling, and you know I hate all the time spent abroad. I'll finish this engagement, then I'll be back here for *Don Carlos* in September. I'd originally turned it down, but where else will I ever get the chance to do the original French version? And Pappano's conducting, after all. But once that's done, so am I."

"Well, I won't say I'm not sorry. But if it has to happen, I'm glad we'll get to appear together one last time. I'm singing the lead in *Don Carlos*—or I will be, once I sign the contract."

"Oh wonderful." She beamed. "I'm glad too."

"So what are you going to do, move to the country and take up gardening?"

She laughed. "Nothing that drastic, I'm afraid. I plan to simply stay home and teach. I already have one very promising pupil."

"That's great. But is it really what you want?"

"It is. Tonight when I walked through the backstage area before rehearsal started, all I could think was, 'I won't miss this'. The chaos, the confusion. The stress of a new production. Who needs it? Maybe I'll consider recitals and concert work later on, but for now I'm perfectly happy to return to private life as plain old Madame Petrovsky."

"There's nothing plain or old about you, my angel," Aleks murmured.

"No, there certainly isn't," David agreed.

Now she blushed again. "Well, thank you. But you both know what I mean. I want to enjoy the important things in life, instead of being a slave to my schedule."

"I know what you mean about the important things," David mused. "The last few weeks have been a real eye-opener for me in that regard."

When he didn't immediately elaborate, Aleks prompted, "You're not going to leave us hanging there, are you?"

"You don't want to hear it. It's just a lot of navel-gazing and hand-wringing."

"Oh please," Colette scoffed. "We're all artists here, which means we're used to diva behavior. So go ahead, wring your hands. We're ready to listen."

He scooped up his bowl of tea and drained it, staring down at the table. "My dad passed away while I was in Argentina. I didn't find out about it until I got back."

*Oh God.* That explained the telltale sadness in his eyes, the tiny lines tugging at his mouth that she assumed were due to exhaustion, but now took on an even deeper significance. She should've picked up on these clues before, but she'd been so glad to see him, they'd flown right over her head.

"David, we're so sorry," she murmured, reaching for his right hand at the same time Aleks reached for his left. "That must have been difficult."

"Thanks. And yeah, it has been. Especially since..." He stopped to take a breath. "He left me a letter. He said a lot of things in it. Things I wish he'd told me while he was still alive. L-Like...like he was proud of me." His voice cracked. Dear, sweet God. She had no idea he'd been going through such turmoil. She clasped his hand tighter. "He said he wanted to tell me plenty of times, but I'd gotten so far above him, he didn't know how. But he was still my dad, you know? Why couldn't he just *talk* to me?"

"My parents have also had a difficult time dealing with my success," Aleks put in. "They're simple people. They've lived on the same street their entire lives. They don't understand my life at all. It baffles them, and to a certain extent, it threatens them too."

"Maybe that's it. Dad was a truck mechanic. He worked on big rigs. I know he was disappointed when I dropped auto shop class so I could double up on voice lessons. And then when I got the scholarship to Juilliard, he blew his stack. The thought of me making music my career confused and infuriated the hell out of him. He just couldn't accept that I wasn't like him, and I never would be."

"But he was proud of you," Colette reminded him softly. "You always thought he wasn't."

"Which means everything I ever did to get his attention, to try to prove myself to him, was all bullshit. This big career I kept trying to convince myself I wanted...it's nothing. It *means* nothing."

"That's not true," Aleks said.

"Not true at all," Colette concurred. "You're a great talent, David. You deserve every success."

"Well, if I could turn the clock back to February and relive the last two months, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Walking out on you two was the worst mistake I've ever made." He swallowed hard, squeezing their hands tight. "I loved you both. I still do. Can you ever forgive me for putting you through all that hell?"

The very words she'd hoped to hear from the moment she'd first set eyes on him tonight. Hoped to hear, but never actually thought she would. A wave of pure joy left her suddenly lightheaded, her pulse beating an erratic tattoo.

"Sweet boy," she murmured at last, glancing at Aleks, who nodded in agreement, "we already have."

Aleks paid the bill, then they hailed a cab. Colette sat between them on the ride back to her hotel, the three of them clasping hands in a valiant attempt to hold their rampant desires in check. If she'd had her way, she'd tear all their clothes off and start fucking them right here in the backseat, cab driver be damned.

Somehow they made it up to her suite unmolested, their plush surroundings barely registering on their mad dash to the bedroom. David had already yanked off his jacket and started on his shirt when Colette put out a hand to stop him.

"I don't recall giving you permission to undress," she purred.

"Oh." He dropped his hands instantly, a smile spreading across his lips. "Sorry, Ma'am."

"That's better." She turned to Aleks, who'd finished unbuttoning the front of his white silk dress shirt and moved on to his cuffs. "What do you think? Fuck the poor boy and put him out of his misery? Or spank him first, then fuck him?"

"Oh definitely spank him first, my angel. Then we can both fuck him."

As if her nipples weren't already hard as diamonds and her clit throbbing. But none of that mattered, not when she had David right here, ready to do anything to please her. "Very well then. Go ahead and strip," she ordered.

He had everything off in an eye-blink, and then she gestured for him to turn around so she could inspect him from head to toe. His rising cock showed how much he enjoyed being the object of attention. His skin was darker than she recalled, tanned a lovely honey-gold all over, except for a wide milky strip across his crotch and upper thighs.

"I love tan lines, but this is a bit uneven." She pointed. "Why in front, but not in back?"

"I did some sunbathing on my balcony in Buenos Aires. I didn't have swim trunks, so I improvised with a hand towel."

"That's what I call resourceful. Turn." She waved him around to look at the back of him. Miles and miles of gorgeous smooth skin with nary a mark in sight. Like a blank canvas waiting for the first kiss of paint. Or in this case, the palm of her hand.

Which she ran over his buttocks, cupping and squeezing, kneading the soft, warm flesh. Then she trailed her nails over his skin, pleased at the thin pink welts they raised, and his barely suppressed shivers. Still as responsive as ever. She motioned for him to crawl up onto the bed on his hands and knees, and present his ass to her.

Pinching next, then tapping with her fingertips, which soon led to firm, full-handed slaps. Oh he let out such lovely grunts and groans, the sounds of pure pleasure. She paused long enough to reach up and slide her fingers into his hair, gripping a rough handful near the scalp before easing his head back. He went along without resistance, already completely submissive. "Looks as if you've missed this. Haven't you, sweet boy?"

"Y-Yes Ma'am. God yes!"

"That's what I like to hear. And who do you belong to?"

"You, Ma'am. You and Aleks."

Who was sitting in a nearby chair, now fully naked, avid interest and bemusement writ large in his expression. "Good to hear I'm not forgotten," he remarked pointedly.

She shot him a sharp look. "Of course you're not. In fact, why don't you come over here and help me warm up this lovely ass you're going to be fucking in a few minutes."

She took his left side, Aleks the right, bestowing hard, stinging smacks that soon left her fingers smarting and gave David a rosy, nearly identical glow on both cheeks. His breath had quickened by the time they stopped, his cock hanging thick and heavy between his thighs. She reached underneath and gave him an experimental tug, letting go when he emitted a loud, almost pained gasp. So close for only a few little slaps.

"Sounds like someone's been a good boy. No other playmates while we were apart, *mon cheri*?"

"N-No Ma'am."

"So you've saved yourself for us. How sweet." And how incredibly touching. Her eyes actually stung a bit. Though she'd relished the notion of stretching out the teasing portion of their evening a bit



longer, she could tell David had already reached his limit. No matter. There would be plenty of opportunities for lingering later. Time to bring this interlude to a mutually satisfying conclusion.

She padded over to the bedside table and fished out a pair of foil-wrapped packets, tossing them to David and Aleks. "Suit up, gentlemen. The grand finale awaits."

Fingers trembling, she stripped off her sweater and slacks, bra and panties, before climbing onto the bed. Both men watched in rapt fascination, then suddenly realized there was something they'd forgotten. They tore open their condom wrappers to attend to it. After, when David twisted around to face Aleks and pull him down for a long, deep kiss, Colette felt such a surge of heat pour through her, she was certain there must be steam trickling from her ears.

"Bravo," she murmured. "But I'm feeling neglected. Can we remedy this situation, please?"

They crawled up to meet her, blanketing her skin with kisses and caresses. Aleks plunged his tongue into her mouth while he played with her nipples, twisting and pulling, hot shards of pure sensation zinging straight to her clit. A nudge to David's shoulder told him that's where she wanted him. He happily obliged, sliding down to nestle between her thighs. They had her so close to the edge, it took only a few swift licks and flicks of David's tongue before she shuddered and cried out, pulsing hot and sticky right into his mouth.

She began to float in sweet, languorous aftermath, but her own taste clinging to his lips revived her. Then the sight of him sharing that taste with Aleks instantly ramped her desire back into overdrive. Their commingled breath wafted over her skin, two sets of lust-brightened eyes now trained on hers.

Poor David looked a bit desperate, his chest rapidly rising and falling, his neglected cock swollen with arousal—and he hadn't even touched himself, except to roll on the condom. Aleks could easily last awhile longer, but it was unfair and cruel to keep David hanging. Time to give their sweet boy some relief.

A gentle tug, and he rolled back on top of her, the tip of his cock poised at her entrance. "It's all right," she whispered. "Come in where you belong."

They hadn't done it with him on top in quite a while. Not since San Francisco, since before the night he'd fallen to his knees and begged her to take him in hand. She'd forgotten about that slow, delicious ache as he eased inside and began to move. She'd forgotten about the adoring look in his eyes, as if she were the last person in the entire world.

Flattering, yes. But she wasn't the only one here, and he needed to be reminded of that. "Why don't you give him something else to concentrate on?" she whispered to Aleks.

The evil glint in his eyes told her he'd taken her meaning. He grabbed something from the bedside table then scooted down behind David and planted his face between his cheeks. David let out the world's longest, deepest moan, every muscle in his body going instantly taut.

Then, of course, he started thrusting harder. Oh no. This would never do. "Not yet, *mon cheri*." She placed both hands on his waist, holding him until he finally slowed down. "You come when I say, remember?"

"J-Jesus, Colette... You're killing me..."

He'd dispensed with the formalities. Ah well, she could hardly blame him. She didn't know of any other man who could hold it together this well with his cock buried in a nice, warm cunt and another man's tongue up his ass.

Or rather, another man's lubed fingers. Aleks had graduated to step two—which, from David's slack-jawed expression, had just taken him to a brand-new level of sweet agony. It didn't take long before he started thrusting again—backward this time, onto Aleks' hand.

"You want that big, gorgeous cock inside you again, don't you?" His only reply was a ragged gasp that left her suppressing a chuckle. "I don't blame you." She glanced over his shoulder at Aleks, who looked a bit on edge himself, sweat dappling his skin from forehead to waist. So much for willpower and restraint. "Let's give our boy what he needs, shall we?"

She could've sworn she felt Aleks enter him as vividly as David experienced it himself, and not only because of his loud groan or the ecstatic look on his face. Not even because of the extra weight pushing her deeper into the mattress. It was more of a feeling of completion, of true unity. All three of them, joined in mind and spirit before, now entirely in body for the first time, parts of a whole coming together—true, resonant and *right*.

David hovered above her, fucking and fucked, the conduit melding them into one. He took everything they had to give, his breath coming in deep, racking sobs, barely holding on. God, he was so strong, so beautiful. He made her proud. But even she knew when enough was enough.

"Let it go, *mon cheri*," she whispered finally. "It's time."

It started as a tiny ripple that soon roared tornado-like through all three of them. Wrecked and breathless, they tumbled to the mattress in a tangle of sweaty limbs. Luckily, David and Aleks had the presence of mind to roll off her before they finally collapsed, groaning and gulping down air as they cradled her between them.

"You're coming back to Paris with us, yes?" she asked once they'd all floated back to earth.

David gazed up at her, his head now pillowed on her belly. "No arguments here. I guess this means next year I'll be singing exclusively in Europe. Not that I mind, but—"

"You can sing wherever you like. I've learned my lesson. No more interfering with your career."

"Colette, it's okay. I don't want to be away from you—either of you—for weeks at a time anymore. Buenos Aires cured me of that."

"Then you won't go to Buenos Aires again. But New York is fine. You can't have an international career without the Met, after all. Even San Francisco—"

"There are these little inventions called the airplane and the telephone," Aleks cut in, propping himself up on one elbow. "There's no reason we can't talk every day while you're out of town. And with Colette retiring, there's no reason she can't travel with you sometimes, or come visit you for a few days. And the orchestra does give me time off every now and then. I'm confident we'll work it out."

David looked at them both, his face wreathed in a dreamy smile. "Okay, I'll stop worrying. I mean, we're together, and we've got love on our side. Which means there's nothing we can't handle, right?"

"No, indeed," Aleks murmured.

"There's not much I can say to top that," Colette replied. So she drew her two men close and kissed them in turn, sealing their union the only way she knew how.

*The End*



### Author's Note

Part of the fun of writing fiction lies in creating one's own universe. That said, let's put straight a few facts from the real music world:

British-born conductor Antonio Pappano is indeed one of modern opera's biggest movers and shakers. In 1996 he led a production of the original five-act version (in French) of Verdi's *Don Carlos*, at the *Théâtre du Châtelet* in Paris—but sadly, never Buenos Aires or New York. He is currently the music director at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

American lyric soprano Renée Fleming never sang *Manon* with my hero David Lewis, but she has indeed performed the role many times at the Met and elsewhere.

Estonian-American conductor Paavo Järvi is the current music director and principal conductor of the *Orchestre de Paris*.

Nicolas Joël is the current general director of the *Paris Opéra*.

Even if you've never attended the opera, chances are you're familiar with Bizet's *Carmen*. It's one of the most accessible operas in the modern repertoire. Some of its more memorable tunes, including the Act One overture and Carmen's *Habañera*, have become part of Western popular culture. Not bad for an opera that was a complete and utter failure when it first premiered in 1875!

If the music here has piqued your interest, I can recommend a few recordings.

For *Carmen*, my favorite DVD performance is the recent Live in HD Metropolitan Opera broadcast, starring tenor Roberto Alagna and the fabulous Latvian mezzo-soprano Elina Garanca. These two burn up the stage together. Quite possibly the sexiest *Carmen* I've ever seen!

On CD, my favorite performance is, in a word: Berganza. The great Spanish mezzo Teresa Berganza. Her recording (with the equally great Plácido Domingo as José) is available on Deutsche Grammophon.

If you're looking to expand your horizons beyond one CD recording, I also recommend the incomparable Maria Callas' reading on EMI. She's one of a handful of sopranos who've attempted the role, and she does a fine job.

For the other operas mentioned, I recommend the *Théâtre du Châtelet* production of *Don Carlos* with Roberto Alagna, Thomas Hampson and Karita Mattila, conducted by Antonio Pappano. It's available on DVD from Kultur Video.

There's also a ravishing DVD production of *Der Rosenkavalier* from Baden-Baden, starring Renée Fleming, Sophie Koch and Diana Damrau, conducted by Christian Thielemann. Available from Decca.

And if you'd like to read a first-hand account of the day-to-day life of a real opera singer, I highly recommend *The Inner Voice* by Renée Fleming (ISBN 978-0143035947). It proved an invaluable resource for me in writing this novel.

## About the Author

Multi-published author Cat Grant lives by the beautiful sea in California with one persnickety feline and entirely too many books and DVDs. She's now hard at work on another hot, sexy tale for Ellora's Cave.

Cat welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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