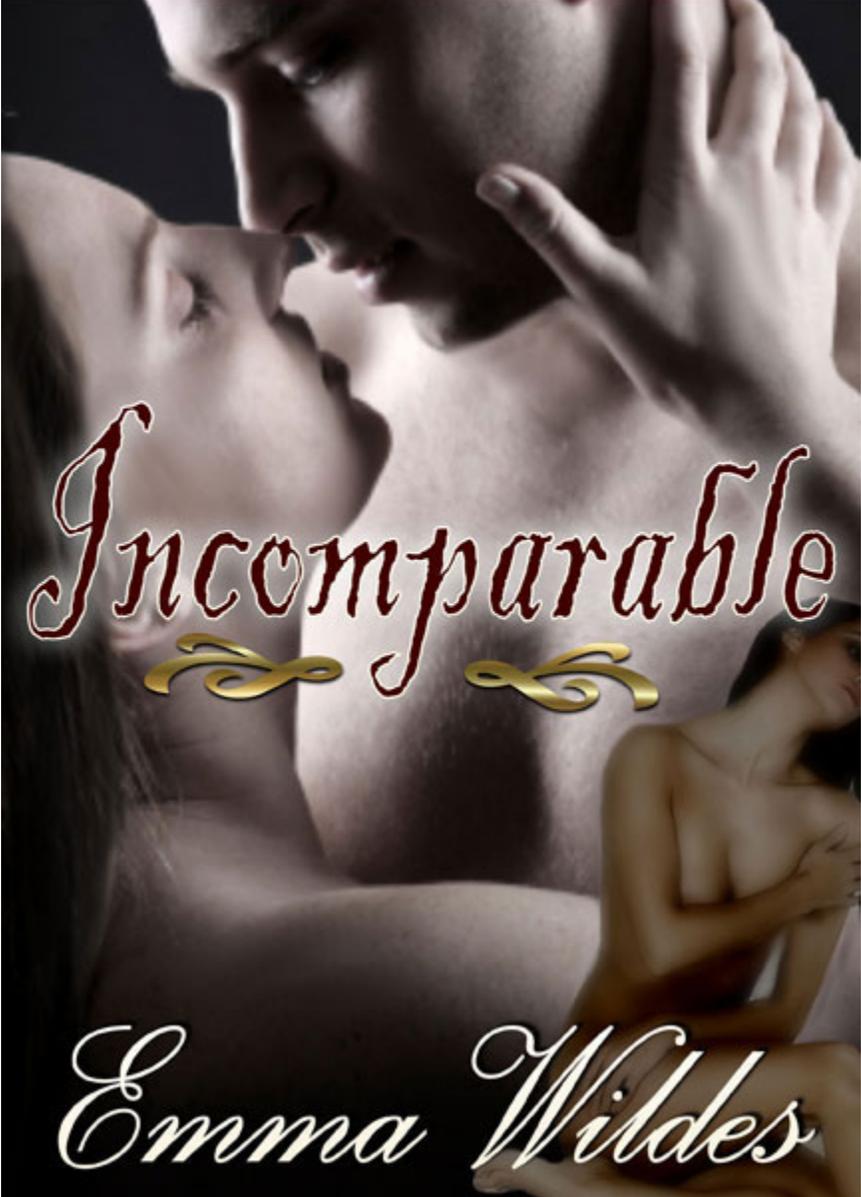


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*Ménage Amour*



*Incomparable*

*Emma Wildes*

# **INCOMPARABLE**

**Emma Wildes**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

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**INCOMPARABLE**

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# INCOMPARABLE

EMMA WILDES  
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## Chapter One

“Our own charming Leon a spy. Can you believe it, Countess?” Madame Vichy flicked her fan shut, her small dark eyes bright, leaning forward. “Why, everyone is so very shocked, the ballroom is abuzz. He is such a gentleman, such a loyal subject of France...or so we all thought.”

It was true. One of the guests had arrived and announced that Leon Medes, a respected banker and youngest son of a wealthy nobleman, had been arrested earlier that day. He was apparently charged with espionage against his own country, and the entire mansion hummed with whispers.

“Many people are not as they seem,” Lara Moore, Countess Edgerton, murmured, moving her fan languidly. “Goodness but it is warm in here. Please excuse me. I must get some air.”

Edging through the throng and gaining the open terrace doors, she slipped outside. Her hands shook and her stomach felt as if someone had knotted it into a tight ball. Taking a deep breath, she fought to regain her composure.

Above her, the sky was a black velvet blanket sprinkled with tiny diamonds, the summer air like fine wine, warm and smooth. Walking over to the balustrade, she leaned against it for support and reminded

herself sharply that falling apart at this particular moment was the last thing she needed to do.

“Are you quite well, Lady Edgerton?”

The sound of the familiar, smooth male voice made her straighten and turn to summon a polite smile with supreme effort. A few paces away, she saw a man in impeccable evening clothes, the diamond winking in his snowy cravat a match for the glittering stars above. His eyes were very dark, as was his hair, and that coupled with the insufficient light gave him an almost supernatural air. Lara said, “Good evening, Monsieur de Comte. I was not aware you were in attendance. I...yes, I am well enough. It is just a bit warm in the ballroom.”

*Of all people*, she thought with an inward frisson of dismay.

Anton Garcin, Comte de Roussel, smiled, his teeth gleaming white. “Ah, yes, the excitement over Medes’ arrest has raised the temperature inside, hasn’t it? How unfortunate for his family. I imagine he will be hanged quickly. The emperor is not fond of spies. As an Englishwoman living in Paris, you must have mixed feelings. After all, he was passing information to your government.”

She fought a shiver that fingered her spine, yet Lara somehow kept her smile in place. “We were not well-acquainted, but it does seem a shame.”

“I am sure you think it a very great shame.”

There was something in his voice she didn’t like; a lilt of subtle sarcasm.

“Whenever someone loses their life, even if they deem it a worthy cause, it is a tragedy.”

“Now, Countess, you must do better than that.” As he stepped closer, he arched a brow, the words said softly. “Even out here in the shadows, I can see the panic in your eyes. And I think,”—reaching out, he grasped her arm,—“yes, as I suspected, your pulse is racing.”

All Lara could do was stare up at him, his long fingers firm and unrelenting around her wrist. Roussel was one of those too attractive

men she always avoided—tall, dark, and athletic, the impressive lineage of his aristocratic family exceeded only by his vast fortune.

In her experience, the handsome *comte* always had a willing female on his arm, and the facile charm of his smile could summon more at any moment.

It did her reputation as a cool, aloof widow no favors to be seen in the company of a known womanizer. She had made it a point to keep their previous social encounters brief and polite, always finding an excuse to end their conversation. He had pursued her for a while after her arrival in Paris, but then seemed to understand she did not wish further acquaintance.

“M...monsieur,” she stammered. “I appreciate your concern, but I think perhaps I should go back inside.”

He made no move to let her go and the masculine scent of his cologne mingled with the fragrance of the roses in the gardens below the terrace. “You do not appreciate my concern at all, I venture to guess. Tell me, Lady Edgerton, what will you now do with the paper you were supposed to give to Leon Medes this evening?”

Lara felt the blood drain from her face, but she said sharply, “Comte, I do not know what you are talking about and I would appreciate it if you would release me.”

Instead of complying, he moved even closer, looming over her and she had to tilt her head back to look up into his face. Without warning, he slid one long-fingered hand into her low-cut bodice, his touch deft as he explored her breasts, ignoring her gasp of outrage. He found the piece of vellum with ease, and pulled it free. “An unoriginal storage place,” he said dryly, “but absolutely delightful. I will keep this.”

Her mind whirled, a sudden dizzying sense of her own danger making her feel almost weak as she watched him slip the note into his pocket. “I—”

“You, what?” he asked pleasantly. “Please don’t try to tell me that was your list for the dressmakers or a thank you missive penned for a

gift. I know you are an intelligent woman. That is one of the many things I admire about you. You must realize I have suspected for quite some time that you were aiding Medes and his colleagues. You came to France for just that purpose. And were an excellent choice if I may say so. A beautiful, young widow, cultured and well educated, charming but distant. I imagine you haven't taken a lover during your sojourn here because of your covert activities. It would be unfortunate if someone got close enough to grow suspicious, would it not?"

During his speech, Lara felt the noose being adjusted around her neck. Being caught was always a possibility. She had known that when she embarked on this mission. It was a stark reality now.

He went on relentlessly, "And I fear I am not the only one. Jacques Lacroux is speculating openly now that Medes is in custody, and your name has come up. Surely you know how dangerous he is?"

*Lacroux*. Fighting the urge to swallow, she asked quietly, "What will you do?" Comte de Roussel was powerful and well regarded by Bonaparte, and as far as she knew, a loyal Frenchman.

The man holding her smiled then, that infamous seductive smile that usually made every woman in sight melt. "My carriage is waiting. We will go inside and make our excuses to our hostess, saying you are unwell, and that I am escorting you home."

At twenty-four, she was not an innocent young girl anymore and the look in his eyes was unmistakable. She had seen men look at her with that same gleam often enough to recognize it. "But I take it I will not be going home, after all, will I, monsieur?" she asked coolly. "It is easy enough to guess the price of your silence. Tell me, how are you better than Lacroux?"

In the shadowed light, she thought the *comte's* mouth tightened a fraction, but he merely said, "Perhaps you should consider, madame, that being under my protection will make you infinitely less vulnerable. I am Roussel and I have a great deal of influence."

Gazing up into his starkly handsome face, she knew without a doubt he was perfectly correct. However, she disliked being coerced and he was giving her absolutely no choice.

How many women would rather hang than sleep with a darkly attractive man?

“You could have any woman in France,” she said without inflection. “Why are you doing this?”

“My motives are...complicated. Shall we go?”

\* \* \* \*

The woman sitting across from him was a little flushed, but otherwise she wore her typical expression of serene self-possession. Long dark hair, so glossy and thick, was gathered in an intricate, heavy knot at her nape, her fashionable blue gown designed to show off the opulence of her breasts and narrowness of her slender waist. Her features were delicately lovely—ebony brows gracefully arched above long-lashed dark blue eyes, her cheekbones were high, and her mouth was pink and invitingly soft.

Everything about Lara Moore was intensely feminine and infinitely alluring. She would be passionate in bed, Anton mused as he overtly studied her. He knew women and under that cool exterior, there was hidden fire. He hardened simply thinking about the night ahead, his groin tightening.

He was very tired of wanting her and being thwarted in all the avenues of proper pursuit.

The carriage rocked, going around a corner, and minutes later, they alighted, the entire journey having been made without a word. The Hotel de Roussel was well lit, an enormous grand residence with many wings. Escorting her up the steps and inside, he saw her take in the delicately hand-painted ceilings in the vast main hall, her gaze traveling over the mosaic floor to the huge curving double staircase.

Her mouth curved. “Do tell me,” Lady Edgerton said with cynical amusement, “that you do not live here all alone.”

“I have a set of apartments, as do other members of my family, but most of my relatives are currently at our country chateau to avoid the summer heat. Please, I’ll have one of the servants take you upstairs.”

“Where no doubt you’ll be joining me.” There was a glimmer of resentment in her tone, her beautiful eyes veiled by those lush lashes.

“No doubt,” Anton agreed smoothly. Giving instructions to one of the footmen, he also ordered wine to be brought to his bedroom, and anything else the lady might require.

A young maid came to take his guest upstairs and he watched her go before heading down the hall to his study. Once there, he took out the note she had been carrying, breaking the seal and seeing it was a list of names, all wealthy men who contributed money to the republican cause. Carefully burning the slip, he waited until he saw it curl and crisp in the hearth, before he left the room.

“Little fool,” he muttered to himself as he climbed the stairs. There wasn’t a man on the list who didn’t have a great deal to lose, and by virtue of just possessing it, she was in grave danger. Not to mention that Lacroux was a vicious man, an agent of the emperor who had an enmity for all women, his aberrant interest in the lovely countess remarked more than once in the high circles of society. If it had been Lacroux and not himself who had caught her with the list, she would be on trial in days.

Anton looked forward to showing her that perhaps it was better to occupy his bed rather than risk her very lovely neck by dabbling in espionage.

It wasn’t often—well, perhaps never—that he’d had an unwilling woman in his bed, he thought in amusement as he entered his bedroom and closed the door behind him. The countess was seated in a chair by one of the windows that faced the gardens, a glass of cool wine in her slim hand, her face bland.

“This room is not what I expected, Monsieur de Comte,” she said caustically. “Given your reputation, I thought somehow there would be mirrors and red velvet hangings, like an expensive bordello.”

He glanced around at the spare interior, the space large, the furnishings plain and simple, as he liked them. “The bed is huge and comfortable,” he pointed out mildly, tugging his stickpin from his cravat. “I just sleep here. I cannot imagine needing a jumble of fancy furniture. And I believe my reputation, Countess, is a bit exaggerated.”

“I suppose I am going to find out. Shall I take off my clothes?” It was impossible to miss the sarcasm in her tone.

“It’s best that way in my opinion,” he responded, a little amused at her hostility. “I will be happy to help.”

“I’m sure.” She took a small sip from her wine glass, her gaze steady as she watched him discard his cravat. “Does it not bother you that I am here under duress when there are literally dozens of Parisian belles who would gladly warm your sheets?”

“Ever since your arrival in Paris, you have avoided me, *chérie*, have you not? Even when I exerted myself to charm you, you immediately walked away. At first, I was puzzled, but then I decided it was because you were a little bit afraid you might find me ...irresistible, shall we say? I am uncertain of your level of resistance, even now. The truth is, I am making it easy for you to have what you secretly desire.”

He must have struck a chord, for two spots of color came up into her cheeks. “You are very arrogant, monsieur.”

“And you are very beautiful, madame.” Shrugging out of his jacket, Anton smiled lazily, his fingers going to unfasten his shirt. That movement seemed to fascinate his lovely guest for she continued to stare, her glass suspended in her fingers.

When he pulled it off and tossed it on the floor, she convulsively set aside her wine and stood. Presenting her back, she said curtly, “You will have to undo my dress, but I can do the rest.”

His erection was already rigid, bulging in his tightly fitted trousers, stretching the confining cloth. Obliging her request, he unfastened her gown, smoothing his hands over her pale shoulders as he pushed it off and it pooled around her feet. He pulled the pins from her hair immediately, letting the silken strands drift over his hands, the heavy mass falling to her waist in ebony waves.

Urging her to turn around, he said, "Allow me," and tugged the tie loose on her chemise, letting it fall open, his gaze going to the enticing exposed flesh there, her breasts visible. They were firm and high, the nipples, a tantalizing coral color.

Reaching between that open cloth, he cupped them both with his hands, savoring the luscious weight of her flesh, rubbing his thumbs over the soft crests. "How long has it been, Countess, since you've lain with a man?" He watched her expression as he stood there and fondled her, gauging her reaction.

Like a lush, young maiden from some naughty fairytale, with her tumbled dark tresses and creamy skin, to his surprise she answered easily, "Since my husband's death, several years."

"Do you miss it?" He already had his answer, her nipples puckering under his gentle ministrations, turning into enticing small hard buds in his palms.

"I am flesh and blood." She swallowed, her heavy-lidded gaze focused on where his tanned fingers molded and stroked her mounded fullness.

"It will be my honor," he said truthfully, "to be the one to remind you of the joys of the flesh."

"I am sure no one could do it better," she murmured cynically. "Women do nothing but whisper about you and your...prowess. You are the most celebrated lover in France, my lord. It becomes tedious conversation if you want the truth."

"Aren't you very curious to know if they are right?" He felt the evidence of arousal in the heaviness of her breasts with triumph. He'd spoke the truth earlier. He had always known Lara Moore wasn't

indifferent to him. At least after realizing her insurgent activities, he knew why she didn't dare let him get close.

Tilting her head back, she gave him a challenging stare. "You have made it clear I have no choice but to be here."

"I would never force you, which you know, so the truth is, you had a choice. You just made the correct one." Anton swept her up in his arms, laying her on the bed and stripped off her chemise, also removing her shoes and stockings.

Once she was nude, he studied her body with undisguised, thorough inspection, taking in everything from the top of her dark shining head to the delicate arch of her instep. Her breasts, slightly flushed and erect from his handling were full but not overblown, her stomach flat, her legs long and slim.

She was, in a word, exquisite. "You are even perfect here," he said, skimming a finger over the dark pubic hair at the juncture of her thighs, his gaze salacious. "A trim equal triangle, so small and inviting, the hair soft and perfumed with your scent." His fingers dipped lower, slipping between her legs, finding the warmth of her cleft, feeling the betraying moisture of beginning sexual arousal. "You are already damp, my sweet. Do not tell me you don't wish to be here."

Superimposed on the white linens, the English countess he had desired for the past year looked at him with eyes that held both a glimpse of magnificent fury...and unmistakable need.

"Perhaps we should proceed then if I am so eager," she said sardonically. "Let me pay my debt of silence like a Marseilles whore, by spreading my legs and giving you what you want badly enough to stoop to blackmail."

She didn't wish to want him. He knew that already. So with unruffled calm, he merely replied, "Very well."

As he removed his breeches, he was well aware of her gaze, fixed on his rigid erection where it rose hard against his stomach, the pulse at the distended tip matching the pounding of his heart. The sight of

her finally lying in his bed had a predictable effect on his body, his hunger for her raw and amazingly intense.

He rarely exerted himself over women, and had certainly never wanted one for so long and with such determination. She was right, actually, he could snap his fingers and have a dozen lovely ladies come at his bidding, but somehow he had become obsessed with this cool, distant young woman.

When he remembered his reaction to the realization of what she was doing, he knew it had gone a little past obsession. She was undoubtedly the most stunning woman he'd ever known, but that couldn't account for his horror over the possible consequences if she were ever caught and tried as a spy. Lacroux didn't help matters. The man was not normal and he had fixated on Lara Moore.

Anton had determined he would not only have her, but protect her.

All tumbled raven hair and enticing curves, Lara lay quietly, her dark blue stare focused on his blatantly swollen and erect cock. She murmured, "Are you a masterful lover, Comte, or is it just your magnificent size that impresses all those fawning women?"

"You think I am...particularly large?"

"Yes," she admitted a little breathlessly, watching him lean over the bed.

Anton laughed, aware that women thought he was well endowed. He asked softly, "Does it intrigue you? Are you anxious to feel this,"—he touched the tip of his engorged penis with a forefinger—"inside you, Countess? Here, let me join you and I will oblige you in every way possible."

She said nothing, but neither offered any resistance when he lay down on the bed and pulled her into his arms. She felt like paradise, so soft and smooth, with the scent of violets drifting from her skin.

Not immediately kissing her lips, he instead skimmed his mouth along her jaw to the sensitive spot behind her ear, breathing in her essence, testing the exquisite texture of her graceful neck, nibbling on the softness of her earlobes. He kissed her perfect downy brows, the

slim length of her nose, the tip of her chin, until she moved slightly, restlessly, and he knew she offered her mouth.

The kiss was languorous and long, a matter of taste and exploration, and he did nothing with his hands except hold her, letting them both concentrate on the feeling of their mouths melding together, of his tongue stroking hers, smoothing over her lips, gliding back into her mouth as he changed the angle.

Lifting his head finally, he told her, “You taste like a mixture of sweet wine and heaven, my aloof countess.”

“And you are very, very good, Comte,” she responded in a whisper, looking into his eyes, her parted mouth damp and invitingly pink. “You are going to make me enjoy this against my will, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Anton didn’t equivocate, ignoring the hint of despair in her tone. She was already pliant in his arms, and her gaze had darkened with arousal. He didn’t point out that she was enjoying it already and he had barely begun to make love to her, indicating it was not going to be difficult to seduce her body, even if her mind rejected the idea of bedding him.

Reaching up a slim hand, she touched his hair, a tentative slide of her fingers into the thick strands. “How much *enjoyment* will I be required to experience before you promise you will not expose me?”

Since his goal was to ultimately keep her from ever participating again in her dangerous games, he murmured seductively against her mouth, “As much as you can stand, *chérie*.”

She sighed as he moved lower and he sensed surrender in the way she arched beneath him when his mouth found her breast. Licking her nipple, he brought it to a jeweled peak, gently sucking on it as it hardened, hearing her sighs turn into soft low sounds of pleasure. He took his time, doing the same for the other breast. When he shifted, going to use his knee to part her slim thighs, she opened willingly without that subtle pressure, spreading her legs wide to allow him to

settle between them. Her hands went to his shoulders and she rubbed his bunched muscles, obvious anticipation in her expression.

Beguiled and intensely aroused by her capitulation and need, Anton experimentally touched the throbbing crest of his penis to the heated and now very wet folds of her labia, rubbing those swollen, inviting lips in erotic, teasing strokes, but not penetrating.

Lara's eyes were half-closed, her beautiful breasts quivering with each erratic breath she took, her glossy hair spilled beneath her luscious body.

"I have imagined being poised on the brink of this paradise many times." He teased her hot sex with his shaft, his voice thickened and his body tense with controlled desire.

"Please." She breathed the word..

"You need this?" He rubbed again, the sensation of hard flesh against soft tissue beyond compare, the anticipation of what he was about to do enhancing his pleasure.

"Yes." The grip of her hands on the small of his back was imploring, trying to force him closer. "Do it."

"As you wish, madame."

He entered her slowly, savoring the flush of heightened color on her flawless skin, and the dreamy expression of sensual enjoyment on her lovely face. Heated, silken walls gave to his inexorable entry, her vaginal passage tight but stretching to accept him and he was unable to suppress a low sound of satisfaction, the pleasure incredibly intense. When he was almost fully embedded, he stopped, a fine sheen of perspiration covering his body. "Can you take more? Some women are smaller than others. I don't want to hurt you."

Lara lifted her hips in almost frantic invitation. "Yes, more...God, you are enormous. It feels...incredible."

Smiling in triumph, he leaned forward and kissed her, sinking in to the hilt, swallowing her low cry of carnal bliss. Whether it was her two-year abstinence or simply her innate passion, he found as he began to slide in and out that her inner muscles gripped his cock with

urgency, her knees lifting and falling apart to allow him complete penetration, and she moaned breathlessly at the slick friction. Her sexual fluids coated his erection, granting him greater access and intense pleasure.

Though he was vastly experienced and sophisticated when it came to erotic love play, her sudden and impetuous climax caught him off guard. It came so quickly. Within seconds of his penetration, she convulsed around his surging thrusts, crying out, tremors racking her slender body. Her nails dug into his back, and he saw the pulse beating in her slim throat as she arched and gave a low, keening scream of unrestrained release. She tightened around him, her vagina pulsing, rippling with small spasms around his shaft, her body shaking in unabashed orgasmic release.

His unattainable English countess, Anton thought with complete satisfaction and utter carnal elation, was infinitely attained.

## Chapter Two

Slowly coming awake, Lara rolled over, growing aware of the extravagant softness of the mattress beneath her, the silken coverlet, and the scent of sandalwood mingled with fine brandy. Dappled sunlight spilled over the rich carpeting

*Oh, no.* Her mind registered her presence in an unfamiliar room, and her dismayed memory suddenly conjured vivid, shocking recollections of the night before. Sprawled nude amid the luxurious sheets, she opened her eyes and stifled a groan.

She had become, without a doubt, yet another victim of the Comte de Roussel's incomparable seductive charm.

And she had experienced the undeniable sexual virtuosity whispered over in every salon and drawing room in Paris.

How many times, she pondered with her face heating, had he so easily brought her to that tumultuous glorious peak during their first joining? At least four, all of them before he had surrendered to his own arousal and finally climaxed inside her sated body, obviously able to control his need while she had been abandoned and importunate.

That pattern had continued through the night. He would coax her expertly to arousal with his hands and mouth, moving smooth and deliciously hard inside her with his splendid erection until she felt she would shatter into a thousand pieces, waiting until that last perfect second to join her, their orgasmic release simultaneous and intense. The last thing she remembered was drifting to an exhausted sleep in his arms, his mouth skimming her neck, one of his skillful hands smoothing her bare hip.

Damn him, his celebrated reputation was well deserved.

At one time, he had been the denied suitor and she in control, but that balance had shifted. Irrevocably, sometime during the very easy convincing of her traitorous body, the darkly attractive Anton Garcin, had assumed all power over her. It was unsettling, unwanted, and she wasn't at all sure what to do about it.

"Madame?" The quiet voice was unassuming and polite, through the closed bedroom door, accompanied by a light knock.

Raising up and pulling the sheet to cover herself, Lara called, "Yes, come in."

A young maid entered, crisply uniformed, carrying a tray. "Good morning, my lady."

It made her feel naïve, but Lara was a bit mortified to be there among the tumbled sheets, so obviously one of the notorious *comte's* conquests, even in front of a servant who probably found it quite normal to bring breakfast to a strange woman in her employer's bed. "Good morning," she managed to say evenly.

"If there is anything you need at all, or if the food is not to your liking, please simply ring." Setting the tray by the bedside, the girl curtsied, her face almost carefully expressionless.

It would be impossible for the food to disappoint her, as there was enough to feed at least five people. Lara eyed the creamy eggs, a variety of meats, assorted breads, ripe fruits, and a pot of both chocolate and coffee with bemusement. "If you would bring hot water in a half an hour or so, I'd like to bathe."

"Certainly, madame."

Not knowing how to ask except bluntly, she said, "Where is the *comte*?"

The maid answered readily enough. "He rides early every morning without fail, and then usually is in his study working most of the day." After a small hesitation, she added, "He is a very busy man, madame."

Lara lifted her brows. It seemed the rakish *comte* inspired loyalty in his servants, even a young maid. Of course, she *was* a female, so maybe it wasn't all that surprising after all. She said smoothly, "I am sure he is. I hope not too busy to arrange for my departure. As soon as I am bathed and dressed, I would like to leave."

"I'll make sure he is informed if you wish."

"Please. And you may tell the chef that this looks wonderful but not to be offended if I don't eat it all." Lara laughed ruefully, never a snob with servants, looking at the huge repast.

For the first time, the girl smiled tentatively. "I believe I made the mistake of telling him you were very slender, my lady."

"I certainly wouldn't stay that way for long if I ate like this every morning. Thank you...what is your name?"

"Mignon, my lady."

"Very well, thank you, Mignon."

Reaching for the coffee and pouring the steaming beverage into an exquisite porcelain cup, Lara leaned back and sipped thoughtfully. The *comte* was not the only one who had pressing matters to attend to. Once she was back at her apartments, she needed to send word that the list had been lost. It was pressing her luck certainly to ask Roussel to give it back, no matter how well he might have enjoyed her.

Or was it *she* who had enjoyed *him*?

With an inward, embarrassed groan, Lara reached for a flaky roll and lavished it with butter. She was just taking the last bite when the door opened.

This morning the *comte* was dressed informally in fitted boots, black breeches that clung to his lean thighs, and a white shirt open to show his strong neck. Striking always in tailored evening clothes, he was almost more so dressed casually, the white lawn of his fine shirt emphasizing the impressive width of his shoulders and a contrast to his bronzed skin. His hair, so dark and thick, was slightly wavy, framing the masculine perfection of his bone-structure, and those thickly lashed intense dark eyes. His mouth too, Lara thought, the bit

of roll still in her fingers, was part of his magnetic allure. It was firm, yet well shaped, and when he smiled at a woman the way he now smiled at her, he exuded sensual charm.

“I am told that you wish to leave.” He looked slightly amused at the amount of food on her tray. “Though it might take you all day to eat that, so perhaps you should just stay in bed.”

“Apparently, the servants were discussing my physical characteristics and your chef thought I needed fattening up a bit.” Not at all comfortable with how his compelling male beauty always struck her keenly, Lara spoke more tartly than she intended.

“A woman as beautiful as you, Countess, is rather noticeable, I’m afraid” He raised a brow at her tone. “And if I recall, I found your body perfect as it is.”

“I thought all your lovers were beautiful,” she countered, almost surprised to hear the clear resentment in her voice.

“You are incomparable.” He seemed unruffled, as usual.

“The question is, Monsieur de Comte, did you think all the ones who came before me incomparable, too, when you first took them to bed?”

He laughed then, and it changed his face, giving him a boyish air. “This is a switch. I have to coerce you into my arms, *chérie*, and now you sound worried I will tire of you.”

Disconcerted by the possible truth in that statement, Lara reached for her coffee, taking a quick sip. Finally, she said in truth, “I resisted you in the first place because I did not want to become one in a long list of women who have been discarded. I do not give myself indiscriminately to every handsome man I meet, and have moral reservations over a casual affair.”

Crossing over to the bed, he sank down and plucked the cup from her fingers, setting it aside. He leaned over to kiss her, moving his warm mouth slowly against hers, one hand cupping her cheek.

Lifting his head and looking into her eyes, he said softly, “I know you are not promiscuous. I don’t think I would want you so much if

you were. I am infatuated with your beauty, and after last night, enchanted by your passion. I am also—” he grinned again, sitting back, picking up her cup and giving it back to her—“very glad you find me handsome.”

His facile avoidance of what she had just said was irritating. Lara snapped, “Do you intend to continue to hold the threat of exposure over my head, monsieur?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, please call me Anton. I think, considering all the intimacies we have shared, you are entitled to my given name.”

“Monsieur de Comte,” Lara said deliberately, looking him in the eye, “you did not answer my question.”

He sighed expressively at her stubbornness and shrugged his broad shoulders as he stood. “Tonight, I will escort you to the Guimond *fête*. I know you wish to go home and...rest,” he said suggestively, “though I very much like seeing you naked in my bed. I have already arranged for my driver to take you back to your residence. I will call for you at ten. You will spend the night here, of course.”

“I see. You have decided to make this a very public affair.” Only barely resisting the urge to throw her half empty cup at him, Lara fought to keep her voice even.

“Yes, indeed,” he agreed with a graceful polite bow. “Everyone in Paris will know you are my mistress.” His smile was suddenly cool, lacking his usual charm. “But look at it this way, Countess, it is much better than hanging.”

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Anton ran his hand in practiced concentration over the cannon bone, feeling the restless stallion shift his weight. “Damnation,” he muttered. “I am afraid you are right, Bernard.”

“When it comes to horses,” his trainer said without rancor, “I am always right. You just didn’t want to believe me.”

“I certainly didn’t.” Standing up, Anton sighed. “I guess I will run Pegasus instead. Unfortunately, he doesn’t have the same heart.”

“His speed, though, is incomparable.” Bernard argued the point with the familiarity of their long acquaintance, not a social equal yet not just an employee, either.

They were the same age and Anton had always spent a great deal of time in the stables even as a child. Bernard had been the son of the head groom, and though as boys they had very little in common besides their deep love of fine horseflesh, they had naturally fallen into an easy friendship.

As a grown man, Bernard now ran the entire huge stable, training horses that ran in races all over Europe, horseracing being Anton’s ruling passion, contrary to public opinion that had him only interested in bedding beautiful women.

It was an expensive hobby, but his horses won often enough to balance out the cost, and since he was a very wealthy man, he could afford it even when they lost. In a life filled with many demands on his time, from both his vast holdings and his social position, he indulged himself with his horses.

*Incomparable*. He had used that word that very morning to describe his delectable and reluctant new mistress. Anton murmured, “I won’t be going. I have become suddenly...tied up.”

Bernard, swarthy and stocky, with the hands of a laborer but the touch of an angel when it came to horses, stared, openly surprised. “You will miss the meet?”

Lara’s possible danger, much more acute than she realized, was something to keep in mind. He nodded. “I don’t wish to leave Paris at this time.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Bernard said, “*Diable!* She must be very good, the beautiful English countess.”

Anton wiped a bit of straw from his sleeve. “Who said it was because of her?”

“It seems a logical assumption. You wanted her a year ago when she arrived here, and according to what I heard this morning, you finally got her. I was told she slept in your bed almost until noon and left here wearing her ball gown from the night before.”

That was good. The sooner news spread that she was under his protection, the better. “I might have kept her up a bit late,” Anton admitted dryly. “If you saw her, you’d understand.”

“Raven hair, they say, and skin like morning cream. So fair, she is like a princess from some romantic fable.” Bernard chuckled. “You always were a lucky devil, Anton. The question is, what took you so long?”

“I needed leverage.” Anton watched as a young stable lad came to lead his prize stallion away, the uneven gait confirming the animal’s injury. “Lady Edgerton does not take lovers.”

“She took you.”

“I took *her*,” Anton disagreed cynically. “She needed quite a bit of convincing.”

“Did she?” Bernard gave him a speculative look. “So this one, she is different? Are we going to end up with an English *Madame de Comtesse*?”

What was the proper protocol when you forced a virtuous woman into an illicit affair against her will? He would venture that she had gone to her husband’s bed a virgin, and she stated quite plainly she wasn’t comfortable having a liaison.

He felt a little guilty, but not enough to keep from wanting her. It helped to know she had so passionately succumbed to his forced seduction and that he could perhaps save her from disaster, but he wasn’t sure if either point entirely excused him.

Anton shook his head, remembering the look in her eyes that morning. She had been deliciously glorious amid his sheets, her dark hair gleaming, pale shoulders bare. But she had been also angry, both with him, and he guessed, with herself for yielding so easily the night before. She might want him, but she didn’t *like* him.

He said, "Even if I wanted to make such an offer, I doubt somehow the lady would even consider it, Bernard."

\* \* \* \*

"Roussel, you understand, madame, is dangerous. I hope you know what you are doing."

Not sure she wanted to admit that the man in question already knew of her nefarious activities, Lara smiled coolly for any observant eyes. "I realize he isn't just a handsome fop, Louis. If he was, he would not interest me."

"He is nothing like a fop, and this new development worries me. The Comte de Roussel is intelligent, make no mistake, and no one's fool. You were more wise when you refused him." Holding out his hand as if offering her a glass of champagne, the young man kept his expression neutral, but his dark eyes were sharp. All around them, people milled, and the ballroom was crowded and loud.

The fact everyone whispered already over her overnight stay with Anton, not to mention her very public arrival on his arm this evening, grated on her nerves. In one evening, she had gone from distant and untouchable to mired in the scandalous *comte's* web. "He is my lover, not my confidant," she said defensively. Then with reluctance, she admitted, "Though, perhaps it would be best if I did not...participate unless you absolutely needed me."

Louis Cartel, Leon Medes' young cousin, even more ardent a republican than his unfortunate relative, agreed at once. "From the possessive way he looks at you, I expect Roussel will demand a good deal of your time." His gaze was amused and tinged with male speculation. He added in a low murmur, "I know I certainly would. Good evening, madame."

Respect, Lara thought with resignation as he bowed away, was so dearly earned and so easily lost. At a guess, there was not a man in the

crowded ballroom who did not look at her differently now that everyone was agog over her affair with the infamous *comte*.

“Is it wise to even exchange a passing glance with Cartel, much less speak with him, even if so briefly?”

The sneering question made her look up. She saw Jacques Lacroux stood very near, his pale silver eyes baleful as he gazed at her, his fingers gripping a glass of champagne as if he would shatter the delicate stem. He was thin to the point of gauntness, attired in elegant evening clothes, with the lean hungry face of a wolf. His hair was long and blond, drawn back in a queue, emphasizing his pallor.

Haughtily, Lara said, “I do not know what you mean. He is very a nice young man—”

“Who would like nothing better than to topple Bonaparte from his throne, especially if he could give the emperor the shove himself.”

She pointed out with as much calm as possible, “Many people feel that way.”

“But not all of them pass valuable information to the enemies of France. Beware. I am watching you, waiting for that slip that will allow me my triumph. I will see you grovel at my feet, Countess, make no mistake.”

Coldly, she replied, “Monsieur, you overstep yourself. Once again, I am sorry I rebuffed your advances when I first arrived here, however, your enmity is...misplaced. It wasn't personal,” she lied. “I was simply not ready to accept my husband's death.”

“Of course,” a cynical smooth voice interrupted, “that has fortunately passed.

“Come, Lara, dance with me, I haven't touched you since we arrived. Good evening, Lacroux, but I am sure you will excuse us.”

Handing his glass to a passing footman, Anton did not wait for agreement but instead grasped her waist, swinging her gracefully into the whirling mob on the floor. He was a superb dancer. She had watched him enough times over the past year to know that already. Lara lightly grasped his muscled shoulder and lowered her gaze to

conceal the alarm in her eyes, but she knew he felt the trembling in her body.

How much, she wondered, did the enigmatic *comte* know?

They moved together to the music, a host of interested stares upon them, the fluttering of fans taking on epic proportions. Wondering if he deliberately held her a little too close for convention just for the inquisitive throng, Lara was actually relieved when he whispered in her ear he felt they had dutifully put in an appearance and was ready to leave, if she was agreeable.

Once they were in his carriage, rolling away from the sprawling mansion, she hoped he wouldn't mention the confrontation, but that was a foolish dream.

Across from her, his long legs extended so they brushed her skirts, her lover smiled without humor. "I offer you my protection, my beautiful Lara, but even I cannot shield you completely if you are careless. Cartel is too young to be completely circumspect. There are many who know his politics. It is no wonder Leon was caught when men like Louis Cartel are involved. He can't be more than twenty.

"Tell me, do think it is that much of a secret, their little ...organization? Do you want me to name them all? I know each one. If that does not scare you, it certainly should. All it would take is for one of them to be caught and confess all, including the names of those who aid them. So far, Medes is not talking, I am told. But who knows, some men break more easily than others. Lacroux is not unique, there are many fanatics who believe in this new regime." After a small pause, he added, "He is just more intent on you personally."

Lara fought a shiver.

"I see it does frighten you, which is all to the good," he said in a soft voice, his arresting dark eyes veiled by ridiculously long lashes. "However, I am only telling you this to make sure you understand all you need to do is stay completely away from any contact with your *colleagues*. Instead, you can spend your time more...pleasurably."

“In your bed, of course,” Lara retorted, unsure if he baited her, but not willing to test him further.

“Of course. I promise to share with you my impressive *size* whenever you wish.”

What she wished, of course, was that his *size* wasn't tempting in any way. But remembering the way he had stretched her so wide and deliciously the night before made that impossible. Her face heated when she recalled how she had so eagerly spread her legs, welcoming his erotic invasion, and how she had cried out at the sheer joyous release he had brought her. She felt branded by his touch—her breasts tingling at the memory of his heated mouth suckling her nipples, dampness suddenly flooding her cleft at the heavy promise in his gaze.

“The moment we get home, *chérie*, since you look like you can't wait,” he said as he correctly read the change in her expression, “I will take you at once, for my hunger equals yours. Then I will spend the rest of the night making love to you slowly and sinfully. You will like every moment if I recall properly your sensual enthusiasm of last evening.”

“I can wait indefinitely, monsieur.” Lara coolly attempted the lie, doubting somehow she achieved any kind of conviction in her voice, for suddenly his mouth quirked at the corner in amusement.

“Are you so sure?”

“Absolutely.”

As if in answer to that declaration, the carriage suddenly rocked to a jolting halt, the sound of shouting outside very clear. Seconds later, the hatch opened and the driver's face appeared, his hat slightly askew. “Forgive me, Monsieur de Comte, but there is an accident ahead. It looks to be difficult to clear away. A large coach collided with a wagon of vegetables, bound no doubt for the early morning market. Already people are gathering. I think we should turn around and go a different route, though it will take time. Waiting here might take hours at a guess.”

“Go around by all means, Gaston,” the *comte* declared with a careless wave of his hand. “I have the beautiful countess to keep me company, so the delay does not chafe me.”

“Yes, of course, Comte.”

When the hatch flipped shut, Anton lifted one elegant brow and the carriage began to lurch as the driver fought to turn it around in the narrow street, allowing them to proceed the opposite direction. “How frustrating this delay. Of course, I suppose it need not be.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lara asked, all at once wary of the heated glimmer in the eyes of the man across from her, all too aware of his lean, muscled body, of his powerful masculine beauty, and of the simmering erotic promise in his smile.

“These seats are actually quite roomy, don’t you think, my gloriously deceptive English lady?” Before she even quite realized it, Lara found he had joined her, crowding the upholstered seat, leaning over her as she tried to retreat in the small space. “Lie back,” he ordered softly, “like this. We have time, let us spend it pleasantly instead of talking of treason or Bonaparte’s venal ambitions.”

Grasping her hips, he tugged her backward until she reclined on the seat, his hands sliding under skirts, his palms warm on her legs, caressing her bare inner thighs above her stockings and garters.

“Anton,” she gasped in protest, making him laugh.

“I like,” he said softly, his hands straying upward, finding her sex with his long fingers, stroking her folds lightly and causing another rush of warm wetness there, “the sound of my name on your lips, Lara. Say it again, just to please me.”

If there were any treason, it was in her wayward senses, Lara thought, feeling that light practiced touch, a sudden anticipation flooding her body. Within moments, she was nude from the waist down, the flurry of her skirts shoved up above her hips, those same caressing, talented hands running along her bare legs.

Anton brushed her center again with his fingertips, a caress that sent the blood thrumming through her veins. He adjusted himself so

that he leaned between her open thighs, lifting her legs with her knees bent, pushing them apart very wide.

Backwards on the seat, she complied, holding her legs open, feeling exposed and vulnerable, yet excited at the same time. Her cleft throbbed, her labia swelling and softening in anticipation. “Anton,” she whispered.

In the darkness of the carriage, his smile was a gleam. Almost conversationally, he spoke as he stared at the vulnerable weeping place between her legs, “You are quite wet already. Tell me, do you want me to make love to you right now, or fuck you?”

The coarse word was not something she hadn’t heard before, but certainly not something a lady was *supposed* to hear. Without doubt, no one had ever said it deliberately in front of her. “What?” She gasped incredulously, for he was the consummate gentleman at all times.

“Last night,” he explained as his hands caressed her inner thighs, strong and yet gentle, his gaze heatedly focused at the apex of her open sex as the carriage began to rock forward, “I wanted to make slow, passionate love to you, but...I’m afraid you wanted me to fuck you, at least that first time. There is a distinction, you realize. Making love is a deliberate sharing of mutual pleasure. Fucking, on the other hand, is more basic, a greedy need for release if you will. Tell me, Countess, are you wanting to share, or are you needy?”

Held open so blatantly, feeling the aching seep of wetness between her legs under that penetrating intent look, Lara swallowed, closing her eyes. She did feel ravenously needy if the truth be known. Ever since this morning, when she had woken and remembered how it felt to lie in his arms and feel his touch...not to mention the glorious penetration of his spectacular erection, she had been unconsciously looking forward to this moment.

“Fuck me,” she exhaled on a breath, “and then like last night, make love to me later.”

“Can I use my tongue first?” His compelling smile grew wicked.

Now she truly didn't understand him. Knitting her brow, she whispered, "I don't know...just please," she begged and would probably feel humiliated later, but didn't care, "do something to me. Now."

"Oh, certainly."

Before she truly understood his intent, he lowered himself between her bent and spread open legs and she felt him lightly kiss her most intimate place, his breath whispering across the heated, sensitive flesh. A small cry caught in her throat as he suddenly pressed his mouth against her aching cleft and began to tantalize the tender tissue between those folds with long strokes of his tongue, going from her swollen nub to her female opening and back again, tasting all of her.

"Oh, God," she cried, arching back, not able to believe the sensations evoked by his scandalous intimate kiss.

"Remember, darling, call, me Anton," he murmured, chuckling, his fingers parting her labia, holding her open as he lowered his head again. This time, when he laved her with greater force, she felt as if she ascended to heaven, the sensation was so carnally intense, so blissful and abandoned. Opening her legs wider, uncaring of the fact that they racketed along the streets of one of the largest cities in the world, she moaned and arched, reaching for an accelerating paradise. "Yes...oh, yes."

His hands slid lower and cupped her bare bottom, cradling her as he nuzzled her pubic hair, licking, pushing into her vagina with his tongue in a glorious imitation of what he would do later with his cock. It was decadent, but something in that very decadence excited her immeasurably.

Her orgasmic peak built, holding her in a sexual prison, nothing on earth important suddenly but the skillful teasing of Anton's mouth between her legs. In turn, he licked and then sucked gently. She shook, her body trembling, out of her control, and tiny, exquisite spasms rippled through her womb and passage.

With a small scream as she climaxed, Lara threw back her head and arched into his hungry mouth. Gripping her buttocks, he held her place and kept her on the brink for what seemed a rapturous eternity, his mouth hard against her pulsing cleft, her thighs taut and open in his large hands as she shuddered over and over.

Finally, he withdrew and she lay there, uncaring of her dishabille, her thighs slick with the liquid evidence of her intense release.

Vaguely, she realized Anton unfastened his trousers, releasing his erect shaft.

Her body still humming, she put her hands up against his chest in protest as he moved over in obvious intention, saying in weak protest, “Anton, no, I can’t now...”

“Yes, my love, you can,” he kissed her lightly, his mouth damp with her fluids, his large penis inexorably prodding the burning opening between her open legs. Pushing through to penetrate and stretch her, he began to rapidly thrust in and out. To her amazement, it felt wonderful despite the tremors that still rippled through her, his entrance both insistent and relentlessly splendid.

That she found pleasure again so quickly was a revelation, and Lara slipped her arms around his neck as he moved in slick, arousing friction, matching the sway of the moving vehicle.

It was resplendently, vividly sinful to feel such wicked abandon. He felt huge, large yet velvety smooth and hard as iron at the same time. His shaft plunged into her time and again, his impatience apparent in the way he breathed so unevenly in her ear and the rub of his open trousers against her tender thighs.

She expired in abject sexual joy once more, her orgasm swift and insistent, a small cry filling the carriage. Lara felt the man above her go rigid as he ejaculated, flooding her passage with scalding semen and shuddering in her arms. He held there deep inside her, his hands braced on the rocking seat, both of them uncaring of the sound of horses and the cobbled streets under the wheels.

When she could speak, Lara murmured, “If that’s fucking, you are welcome to do it to me anytime, Monsieur de Comte.”

He laughed, his half-rigid cock still inside her. “Anton,” he reminded her for the third time, kissing the side of her neck.

## Chapter Three

It was very late and the candles had burned low, giving the huge bedroom an ethereal glow. Lifted up on one elbow, Anton lightly touched the cheek of the woman lying next to him. “Tell me,” he urged, trying to read her expression, “about your husband.”

Lara stirred, her lashes lifting over her dark blue eyes. The tumbled black satin of her hair spilled over the pillow and sheets, framing her ivory shoulders. “I am not sure,” she said with a small smile, “that I have the strength to speak. You are insatiable this evening, Comte. What is it you want to know?”

*Did you love him*, was what he wanted to ask, but it seemed an unreasonably personal inquiry, one he wasn’t sure he had the right to ask. So instead, he said, “I suppose I am naturally curious about the man you chose to marry. Surely, with your beauty, you had your pick of any man in England.”

“You flatter me, my lord.”

“Not at all,” he declared honestly, taking in the breathtaking splendor of her firm, high breasts, the unblemished smoothness of her pale skin and long, slim limbs. “I have never seen a woman more lovely. You enchant me.”

“Since you certainly would qualify as a connoisseur, I thank you for the compliment,” she murmured dryly. “But the truth is, my marriage was arranged at my birth. My father had a good friend and long before I was conceived, they vowed to each other if one had a son and the other a daughter, there would be a match.”

She shrugged against the bed linens. “I knew Peter my entire life, always accepting our betrothal. He was nice enough, if a bit spoiled.

His father was very wealthy and I think allowed him a bit too much liberty. It killed him in the end, as he drowned in a sailing accident, unwilling to listen to the men who told him the sea was too rough that day. He insisted he felt in the mood for a sail, and sail he would. The sea, however, took issue with his overconfidence.”

“And at twenty-two, suddenly you found yourself a widow. Do you miss him?” Very lightly, Anton stroked her perfect shoulder, watching her face.

There was a silence in which she seemed to contemplate her answer. “It sounds unfeeling to say no,” she finally admitted, “but I don’t. He was selfish in many ways. I was something he owned, and since he had always known we would marry, he certainly took me for granted. There was no courtship, which when I was younger made me feel a bit cheated, if you will. And when I failed to conceive a child immediately, he made it clear he felt I was to blame. His death set me free.”

“I am guessing,” Anton said quietly, her answer pleasing him as he uncharacteristically disliked the idea of her former husband completely, “he was also selfish in bed?”

Her blue gaze was direct and a little cynical. “If you are asking if I ever experienced anything so...vividly pleasurable before you, the answer is no. I am sure with your sophistication you’ve already realized that. Peter tended to come to me and take his satisfaction quickly, sometimes doing little more than shoving up my night dress.”

As he leaned forward to lick her delicate jaw, Anton whispered, “I shoved up your skirts in the carriage this evening. Did I remind you of him?”

Her breathing changed a fraction at his touch, the exhale of breath subtle but unmistakable. “No. He certainly never...never—”

“Tasted your delicious, wet snatch?” Anton supplied mischievously, smelling the fragrance of her silken hair, one arm going around her waist to pull her closer. He’d seen the shock in her expression earlier when he’d used a crude word and liked teasing her.

“It was so sweet and running with your desire. Hot and silky and entirely female. What a fool he was to never have feasted on something so delectable. I look forward to eating there often.” He found he swelled just thinking about it, his erection growing, lengthening.

“You are outrageous,” she murmured in demure reprimand as he moved his mouth to just below her ear. “For a well-mannered man, you seem to forget yourself, monsieur.”

However, he noticed with satisfaction that when he urged her body next to his so they lay nestled together, she yielded willingly. “I promised to make love to you all night,” he said huskily, “and it is hours until dawn. I might be outrageous, but I am a man of my word.

“You promised to make love to me *sinfully*,” Lara reminded him, the languorous note in her voice as arousing as the soft feel of her in his arms. “I cannot imagine what that means.”

“What about this,” he murmured, shifting her, rolling her over so she lay on her stomach, her tempting bottom kneaded by his hands, his fingers dark against firm, pale buttocks. He used his hands to push her legs open, “You’ll like this, *chérie*.”

Grasping her hips, he positioned his straining erection against her cleft, already lubricated with the discharge of their earlier intercourse, the slick tissue giving wonderfully as he slowly invaded her tight female passage from behind. Her glorious hair, so extravagantly lovely and black, spilled over her back, the sight enticing as he began to push deeply in and withdraw in measured strokes. “The sensation,” he said hoarsely, ecstasy flooding his senses, “I am told is somewhat different when I mount you this way. You must tell me if this is true.”

Relishing the firmness of her bottom against his stomach as he held her in place for his erotic invasion, Anton moved over and over, controlling himself with skill learned in almost two decades of sexual experience, holding back until she began to moan, her bottom lifting in needy supplication as she pushed back to receive his rigid cock.

When she shoved upward and went still, rippling around him, her body trembling, he allowed himself to explode with such force that he groaned, pushing his face into her hair. As he buried himself deep, he felt the hot insistent rush of sperm erupt from his body, the sensation so uniquely superb that he shuddered time and again.

Gasping and sated, he finally withdrew, easing out from between her legs and collapsing at her side. Lara still lay on her stomach, her thighs streaked with slick rivulets of running semen, her breathing choppy. She looked incredibly beautiful in the flush following orgasmic climax; all desirable woman with her voluptuous body and half-closed eyes.

He was beyond enchanted, he thought, his heart still pounding as he lounged against the pillows. Defining his feelings was disturbing, as he'd always assumed once he'd had carnal knowledge of the elusive English countess, he would be able to walk away as he had from so many other women.

Somehow, he was not sure that was possible this time.

\* \* \* \*

Holding up the crimson satin, the modiste smiled with a cat in the cream expression on her face, her small eyes narrowed and delighted. "This, with the darkness of madame's beautiful hair, will make him go mad for her."

Anton was amorous enough as it was, Lara thought with jaded cynicism, but saying so would do nothing but fuel the already rampant rumors flying around the elite social circles of the city. "I do not wear red," she murmured instead. "Give me the cream silk, and the blue brocade."

"And new lingerie, yes?" Disappointed, but still trying, Madame Dupont suggested hopefully, "Perhaps something so sheer, you will look like an angel, barely veiled, come to this earth just to tempt the hot-blooded Roussel, yes?"

“Madame, I am ordering the gowns and paying for them myself.” Patient and polite, Lara smiled to take the edge out of her words. “Whether The Comte de Roussel will like what I select is not the issue. Please, just the two gowns for now, and slippers and stockings to match. I also need a new chemise, something in Belgian lace, if you would oblige me.”

Unfazed by the rebuff, the woman shook her head. “The *comte* sent word to me himself. He will be paying your bills from now on, and you have his *carte blanche* to order whatever you desire, Countess. So, perhaps the red, with the bodice cut so,”—she drew a scandalously low line across her own ample bosom—“just for him. You need not wear it in public, but perhaps on those evenings you dine in and desire an intimate encounter with your oh-so handsome lover, you could thus display your bountiful charms. He will not be able to take a bite of his food if he should so see you.”

Incensed that Anton would do such a thing as actually contact the most popular seamstress in Paris and announce he was essentially keeping her, Lara could hardly speak for a moment. Used to complete independence and a reputation for virtue, it was mortifying to realize her personal life was being discussed so freely. Standing there in her stockings and a thin, lacy shift, she wished she could simply turn on her heel and leave the room, but that didn’t seem possible half-dressed as she was.

Oblivious to her distress, Madame Dupont bustled across the room. Perpetually harassed and always untidy, she nevertheless was patronized by every woman of consequence in Paris. Retrieving pins and more tape, she turned, beaming. “Leave everything to me, Countess, I promise you a wardrobe that will make his knees weak. The virile *comte* is a man of exquisite taste. Let us indulge him, shall we? You are so beautiful together, I am told, you so fair...he so sublime...”

“Madame,” Lara began in a strangled voice, then stopped, remembering that just that morning she had received a very discreet

note saying that Leon Medes had been taken to a hasty trial and easily convicted. Perhaps, even if it was a little humiliating for everyone to know Anton had bedded her, it was best to seem the compliant mistress. He had promised to protect her.

God help her, maybe she *did* need him.

“Whatever you think,” Lara murmured without inflection. “I guess if you feel he would like the red, I’ll take it. And the lingerie, too, of course, if it would be pleasing to him.”

Madame Dupont gave a delighted cackle. “Excellent.”

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It was most certainly like being in a duel, the riposte and thrust similar but in this case, only verbal. He’d been in the stuffy, little office for twenty minutes, trying to get around to the question that was impossible to ask outright. Anton leaned back in his chair and sipped his cognac, smiling with bland nonchalance. “Your proof, then, is so reliable, you will execute a son of one of our finest families? Remember your own remarks when it came to d’Enghien, Minister.”

Fouche looked unruffled. “I still think that was a mistake, but this is not the same situation.”

“Medes is a popular man, and a romantic figure.”

The room was austere, the lighting dim. Enigmatic and saturnine, the minister of police simply smiled. “I am curious to know, are you asking as a fellow aristocrat, Monsieur de Comte, or as a friend of the Medes family?”

Brows lifted, Anton responded, “Neither. I am here as a citizen of France, of course. I also have many financial affairs handled by the very bank Leon ran so efficiently.”

“Ahh...and so you are personally concerned that justice is served, is that it?”

“Shouldn’t we all be?” Anton said pointedly. “Please tell me the Terror wasn’t for nothing. In this new France, it is put forth that a man can expect a fair trial. It seems to me that this Medes affair has been handled too quickly.”

“And as a man with the ear of the emperor, you are here to police this situation?”

It would never do to insult someone like Fouche. Anton laughed lightly. “No, of course not. The courts are supposed to do that. I am here to—”

“Obliquely find out if Medes has in anyway given evidence that might implicate your very beautiful English lover, Lady Edgerton?”

Not known for his frankness, the very bluntness of the minister’s speech was so surprising that for a moment, Anton was nonplussed at how to react.

Fouche went on in that same pleasant voice. “You are concerned, and justly so, that we—I dislike the word torture, so let us use *influenced*—Medes. In the course of such questioning, most men break down, do they not?”

“After the third day, as so the saying goes.” Recovering his poise a little, Anton set aside his snifter, wondering what kind of game they were now playing. “It seems rather barbaric to me, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, to me also, but effective. Mind you, I did not say we did anything of the kind. I simply stated what I believed to be your concern. Lacroux cries Lady Edgerton’s name at every turn, certain she is a planted spy sent by the enemy.”

A small chill had seized him. Since Fouche had already brought up her name, it seemed his worries were justified. Anton said curtly, “Lacroux is unstable, and you know it, however well he serves you. Lara is English. I would not want her falsely accused simply because of her nationality. Our countries are ever at odds with each other.”

“Our countries are ever at war.” Fouche chuckled. “Come, Monsieur de Comte, let us be blunt. It is obvious to me that you have discovered something that makes you suspicious also of the lovely

countess and you are enamored enough of this young lady to bestir yourself to try and assess her danger. I suspect that if I were to have proof enough for an arrest on the charge of espionage, I would find myself in a battle that involved your influence in the highest circles.”

“You have my assurance, Minister, that Lady Edgerton does nothing but occupy my bed. Is that not enough?”

There was a brief silence in which the room seemed to grow even stuffier, the stench of stale tobacco and old books filling the air. Then Fouche sighed, sinking back in his chair. “Take her out of Paris,” he suggested with a languid wave of his hand, his eyes hooded and unreadable. “To the country, perhaps, for a while, at least until this affair with Medes and his little group is over. I do not intend to stand by and allow such an operation right under my nose. I serve France, and it is not prudent to allow information to leak across her borders, even if it means more unpopular executions.”

Anton lifted a brow. “And if I do take her to my country chateau, she will be safe?”

“I can see you are very enamored indeed, Roussel. Let me say this, I am not as concerned with a foreign woman as I am with traitorous Frenchmen.”

“What about Lacroux? I do not want her slandered at every turn. That man is a dog and I should have killed him years ago when I had the chance.”

“The minister’s gaze was speculative. “I don’t know this story.”

“Ask him.”

“I will. And as for your beautiful countess, I will do my best. I do not, as ever, control our sovereign.”

That being as close, at a guess, to getting the minister’s assurance, Anton stood and inclined his head. “We will leave at once.”

## Chapter Four

The valley was verdant and bordered by meadows, the river that moved with lazy grace through the middle hung with willows. To Lara's surprise, it was only a half day's carriage ride from Paris, and to her further amazement, the house, when they pulled into the long drive, was nothing like the grand chateau she had expected. Considering the size of the *comte's* Parisian mansion, the villa was quite small, charmingly set amid groves of fruit trees and informal gardens.

"This is mine alone," Anton said by way of explanation when they came to a rocking halt. "A place where I can escape the rigors of the city and relax. I keep no servants here. A woman comes to clean each day, and when I am in residence, her sister cooks for me. We will have the utmost privacy."

Surprised a man of his sophistication and wealth would ever choose to live simply, even if it were for short periods of time, Lara murmured, "You are more complicated than I thought, monsieur."

His familiar smile was spontaneous and dangerously attractive. "Here, we can fully explore the myriad ways of satisfying our sexual desires, Countess. With no one to disturb us, I plan on instructing you on the fine art of infinite pleasure and carnal bliss. I have a feeling you will be an apt pupil, my sweet."

One brow lifting, Lara smiled back coolly. "I see now this must be where you bring your amours, Anton. For a moment, I thought there was much more to you than your infamous reputation suggests."

"I have never brought a woman here. Not even my family is invited here, *chérie*. Shall we go in?"

A little chastened and also flattered, she took his hand. Allowing him to politely assist her out of the coach, Lara was escorted inside, finding the interior of the house as attractive as the outside, with gleaming wooden floors and bright windows, the furnishings simple and unassuming like his bedroom back in Paris.

He must be telling the truth, she decided, seeing how pleased he looked to be there, discarding his cravat and tailored coat immediately. He took her to a small salon where he poured them both a glass of chilled wine that had been left with a small repast of cheese and a loaf of bread.

Settled in a comfortable chair, gazing out the window at the vista of flowers and leafy trees, Lara felt suddenly safer than she had in a long time, which was disturbing. She hadn't even realized she was so nervous and unsettled over the possibility that he was right and the danger of imminent arrest hung over her head. Not to mention Lacroux. The man repulsed her in every way imaginable.

But Anton had just the opposite effect.

She looked at the man sitting across from her, his long fingers gracefully holding his goblet. His good looks were striking in their masculine appeal, his long, lean body lounging in a chair that seemed inadequate for his height and muscled strength, and she felt a glimmer of something else—something that had nothing to do with safety or contentment and everything to do with his unconventional promise of sexual license.

Just thinking about what might lie ahead made her nipples stiffen and rise against the fabric of her gown.

Madame Dupont had worked with dizzying speed, spurred, no doubt, by the notion of the *comte's* deep purse, and she had some additions to her wardrobe that she was sure Anton would find interesting.

In fact, tonight when they dined, Lara decided, she would wear the red dress.

\* \* \* \*

Anton lit the candles in the dining room himself, using a taper and only two candelabras to illuminate the modest space. The table was gleaming teakwood, purchased during a trip to the Orient, and the carved chairs unique—a gift from a former lover, a duchess who had been a decade and a half older and extremely generous, in bed and out of it.

He'd only been twenty and she had taught him with patience and enjoyment about how women's bodies worked, his previous sexual encounters being geared more toward his own adolescent lust. Learning how to stimulate a woman's breasts until she achieved orgasm from just his touch, how to find her clitoris and abrade it perfectly with his fingers or tongue until she writhed with the physical joy of it, and the more difficult task of gauging exactly when to press deep against her womb as she climaxed to increase her pleasure. All of it had been done in the bed of a royal descendent.

Marie had been a Bourbon granddaughter, married at a young age to an aging roué who wished his wife to be more whore than regal duchess, and had initiated her accordingly. Anton kept the chairs because they were beautiful, but also because he would always remember Marie with affection and gratitude.

Deftly uncorking a bottle of wine, Anton eyed the cold buffet of sliced veal, assorted cheeses, glistening fruit, and a dense chocolate torte, with an approving eye. He disdained ceremony while at the villa, and liked things simple. For dinner he had done little more than wash the stain of travel away and changed into a white shirt, fitted trousers, and boots, eschewing his normal formal dress.

Glancing at the doorway, he wondered just what was taking Lara so long. She too, had retired upstairs to change before dinner, in the bedroom she would use for everything except actual sleeping. That, he thought with deep inner satisfaction, she would do with him.

If he allowed her to sleep at all.

A soft rustle of silk told him she was coming down the stairs at last. When she appeared in the doorway, Anton froze in the act of pouring her a glass of wine, his gaze riveted suddenly, the rest of the world fading to oblivion.

Beautiful at all times, this evening Lara was...beyond imagining.

Her dress was the color of old, rich wine. It contrasted with her creamy skin, blood against ivory, the combination both lurid and alluring. It was fitted perfectly to her slender waist, flaring out over her hips, and the bodice was so low across the upper curves of her full breasts that the flesh mounded high in opulent offering, pale and succulent.

The deep plunge of her cleavage was intriguingly dark, making him long to bury his face there and inhale her delicate scent as he kissed those smooth, tempting curves. Her hair, exquisitely raven black, was worn loose in a smooth shining fall down her elegant back, which was also bared almost to the dimples above her buttocks, another glorious contrast in colors.

His body responded instantly, desire spiking deep into his groin, his cock stiffening on cue to the vision before him.

She looked like every man's fantasy of a courtesan, exhibiting herself for his use, seduction the only purpose for such indecent attire. When she moved into the room, smiling with sensual confidence—secured no doubt by the expression on his face—her breasts swayed provocatively, giving him a bare glimpse of the upper coral circles of her areolas.

“Good evening, Monsieur de Comte,” she murmured, a spark of humor in her blue eyes. “As you can see, I took your suggestion and did not dress formally for our *intimate* supper.”

The emphasis on the word intimate did not escape him and Anton felt his erection swell further. “I have never been so glad,” he responded, finally realizing he still held the wine bottle poised over her glass. Never taking his gaze from the extravagant display in front

of him, he poured, heedless that he splashed a little on the pristine tablecloth.

“Please, my lady, allow me.”

He seated her, holding her chair as she sank into it in a whisper of violet perfume and red silk. Staring downward as he adjusted it forward, so she sat comfortably at the table, he could tell she wore absolutely nothing under the gown. Already rock hard, Anton stifled the urge to lift her in his arms and storm upstairs, taking her at once with urgent and sudden need. He instead walked around the table and sat opposite, carrying the wine bottle and smiling ruefully as he went to fill his glass. “Your entrance, Countess, is a triumph. As you can see, my hand is not quite steady. If you had walked into a ballroom back in Paris—or any other city in the world for that matter—in that dress, civilized men would kill each other for the privilege of dragging you off and ravishing you.”

“I believe you have yourself to thank for this particular garment,” Lara informed him, her smile tinged with wry amusement. “Your reputation as a hot-blooded lover is so well-known that Madame Dupont felt this style would intrigue you.”

“It does,” he admitted, holding her gaze. “As long as you wear it for me only.”

“So you not only dictate my place in your bed, but now you own me, as well?” she asked quietly.

He’d like to, he realized, which was an odd feeling. He never felt possessive over his lovers, at least not before this glorious Englishwoman. “It is nothing that simple,” he said honestly, his voice hushed, “but rest assured, what I want is for you to be happy. I want the cloud of possible trouble off our horizon...and mostly, I *want* you.”

“Well,” her slim fingers went around the stem of her glass as she lifted it, “tonight you will have me, Anton, rest assured.”

If he wasn’t already rigidly erect, he would be at that declaration.

Glad her face had lightened back to the teasing flirt, he arched a brow. “In any way I wish? How adventurous are you, Lara?”

Her smooth brow knitted. “I have no idea. You know about my marriage and you have been the only other. Whatever I know, I learned from you.”

*The only other...*he liked the idea of it, that she had been essentially an innocent in the ways of pleasure when she had come to his bed. Being her teacher was definitely his privilege. “I have a few ideas for this evening’s entertainment.” He lifted his wine. “Here, let us toast to mutual delight and unbridled pleasure.”

Lara lifted her glass, taking a sip at the same time, her eyes veiled. “Are you hungry?”

She inclined her head. “It looks wonderful. I am famished, actually.”

“I will happily serve you, my love, if you will do me one small favor.”

Her fine brows lifted in inquiry. “I beg your pardon? What favor?”

“Pull your bodice down, so I can see your breasts entirely.” Anton felt the heavy throb between his legs, wondering if he could actually make it through dinner. “It doesn’t look like it will take much.”

Her lashes lowered, but not before he saw the shimmer of excitement there. She liked being on exhibit before him as it gave her a sort of sexual power. That was easy to sense. “As you wish, Monsieur de Comte,” she said huskily, “but I am complying only because I am very, very hungry.” Hooking her fingers in the neckline of her dress, she eased it down a fraction, exposing her nipples, those luscious crests firm and erect.

“A bit more.” He heard his voice only abstractly, all of his attention on the female presentation across the table.

Lara complied, pulling the fabric lower until her breasts were completely revealed, their soft weight thrust upward by the cloth beneath them, so high and splendid that he caught his breath. “How is

that?” she asked demurely, as if she wasn’t half-nude at the dining room table, her flesh more potently delectable than any food he had ever tasted.

“Perfect,” he replied truthfully, spearing a piece of veal and placing it on her plate. “Fruit?”

“Yes, please.”

Lifting a pear, the sweet aroma heavy in his nostrils, the weight of it cool, Anton said, “Your breasts are so warm and ripe and delicious. When I taste them, it is like eating ambrosia and sucking on your nipples better than the finest dessert. Here, my dear, this pear looks and smells delightful.”

His words had the desired effect for her body reacted immediately, her bared nipples darkening and growing very tight. As if to do him one better, she accepted the piece of fruit and brought it her mouth, taking a small bite and chewing delicately. A tiny bit of the juice filled the corner of her pink lips and he fought the need to reach across the table and lick it away.

Then she did it herself, her tongue languidly searching that intriguing spot, sliding along her full lower lip.

Experienced he might be, but it almost undid him.

Looking into her eyes, he said, “I have a feeling this might be the most wonderful, excruciating meal of my life. Are you certain you are hungry for food right now?”

“Ravenous,” Lara answered, her quivering breasts thrust up over her plate as she speared a piece of meat.”

“*Diable*,” Anton muttered and began to eat.

\* \* \* \*

Anton’s bedroom was not as large as at the Hotel Roussel back in Paris, but the bed was just as wide, the hangings simple dark gray silk, the rug under her feet lush and patterned in an oriental style. Lara’s heart had begun a slow, steady increase in rhythm, her

anticipation acute, the circuitous hint of something unique to come very intriguing. How much she enjoyed her own sexuality was a bit of a revelation, but if there was one thing about her virile French lover, it was his unabashed appetite for excess in bed. In the time since he'd coerced her into his arms, she had already had intercourse with him many times and he had never failed to bring her to the brink of ecstasy.

“So, lovely Lara, do you want to play a game? From the appearance of your absolutely breathtaking breasts, I would say you are ready for some relief, as am I.”

He was right. She ached, pulsing in both her tight nipples and between her legs. Dining with him half-naked had been both erotic and difficult. “What kind of game?” she asked, a little wary despite her need.

Anton looked amused, the bulge in his trousers belying the nonchalance of his pose as he stood next to her, gazing down into her face. “A game of submission. I will go first, if you wish, granting you every sexual command, obeying without pause. Then, when you have climaxed,”—his dark eyes were heavy and his lashes slightly lowered—, “it will be my turn. You will do whatever I say, no objections no matter the order. Whoever is in charge is most strictly so, agreed?”

She hesitated, since he had always assumed command during their erotic encounters, not certain she could bring herself to ask for what she wanted. In the back of her mind, she still tried to rationalize that she was there only because he forced her to be. If she requested he do certain things to her body, she was then as culpable, and as shamelessly depraved.

However, she needed him to make love to her immediately.

“I agree, but only if you are in charge first,” she said, lowering her lashes.

He touched her chin with a long finger, tilting her head up. “You will do my every bidding?” he asked. “On your word?”

His dark gaze was almost scalding, it was so intense. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Keep in mind I will do yours as well, once I am...finished.” He laughed lightly, his fingers sliding across her cheek. “Very well, I have no objection to beginning. Take off your dress, if it even can be called a dress. I think it is more a Satan’s tool, designed to send a man into madness, but whatever it is called, get it off now.”

“Yes,” she agreed, reaching for the fastenings.

“Call me master,” he instructed. “Let me hear it. I want to know I have a humble and compliant sex slave.”

*Sex slave?* Not subservient by nature, Lara hesitated, her dress already to her waist. However, the promise in his tall, muscled body was not something she could ignore and the impressive bulge between his legs sent a shiver of memory down her spine. “Yes, Master,” she said meekly, letting her dress slide to the floor.

“I suppose,” he sounded theatrically bored, despite his obvious arousal, “you want me to fuck you again, Countess?”

“Yes.” As she stood there nude, the word was nothing but an exhale. She did. Very much.

“Yes...what?” There was delicate warning in the question.

“Yes, Master.”

“What if I wanted something from you first? I think my cock is hungry for your pretty mouth.” His long fingers went to his trousers and he unfastened them slowly, letting his erection spring free, the tip slick already with drops of semen. “Come here and suck this,” he said softly. “On your knees now, and show me how talented your tongue is. If you please me, I will put this,” he said as he stroked himself lightly, running his fingers from testicles to the seeping tip and back down, “inside you.”

A flame seemed to have ignited inside her. Dropping to her knees as requested, Lara inhaled his musky male scent and his penis jutted forth in stark carnal offering. She touched it, grasping the thick shaft,

watching in fascination as more fluid seeped from the hole in the distended tip.

Tentatively, she licked the very top, amazed when the organ jerked in her hand. His fingers slid into her hair.

“Suck me,” Anton instructed, the timbre of his voice lowered audibly. Then he said huskily, “Good God, have you any idea what it is like to see you on your knees and your mouth so close?”

She had some idea, since she sensed his tension, both in the way he held her head and in the pulse of his manhood under her fingers. Emboldened, she took the very tip into her mouth, and then slid down as far as possible.

The usually formidably, self-possessed *comte* gasped in a hiss of sound.

Smiling inwardly, Lara began to suck carefully, rubbing him with her tongue, running it up and down the hard, silky length in her mouth, unskilled but not ineffective, for he cursed after just a few moments and his fingers clenched against her scalp. She tasted the salty weep of semen in the back of her throat.

Moving up and down, she learned the length and texture of his erect sex, swirling over the bulging crest, sliding down until she nearly choked.

Raspy breathing filled the air. All at once, he groaned, his hands slipping to her cheeks as he said hoarsely, “That damned dress, I was too close already...stop or I’ll come in your mouth.”

Not certain she wished to stop, triumphant that she finally had him in a situation where he quivered and shook in an open loss of control, she ignored the tug on her hair and continued, sucking harder, wondering if it was anything like what she experienced when he put his mouth between her legs.

“Lara...I mean it, Jesus...I don’t think I can stop...even now...oh, *diable*, it is too late...”

She felt it with an inner amazement, the sudden fierce rush of sperm into her mouth, making her almost choke, his long-fingered

hands cradling her head as he groaned his orgasmic release. It was all she could do to swallow the thick substance, but it wasn't unpleasant, just too much at once. Leaning back on her heels, she freed his half-rigid erection, licking her lips to catch the droplets that had escaped.

In front of her, Anton stood with his breeches open, his eyes darkened, his face flushed. Without warning, he scooped her up suddenly in his arms and carried her to the bed. "Now," he said, his voice still not steady, "it's my turn. You were a most obedient slave, my sweet. Tell me what you want. I am anxious to do anything in my power to please you. God knows you just pleased me beyond measure."

\* \* \* \*

She looked like an exotic goddess from some ancient fable, her lips still glistening with his sexual discharge, her satiny hair disheveled. Not quite able to believe how quickly and forcefully he had spent himself in her mouth, Anton was relieved she was not one of those women who felt ill at the very thought of oral sex, much less at swallowing the result.

Her smile was slow, exuding female power, and she stretched her slender body like a cat, reclining on the dark river of her loose hair. "The game has turned? I can command anything?"

"Oh, yes." Trying to imagine something she would request that he didn't want to do was impossible. Stripping out of his clothes so hastily he heard his shirt rip, Anton waited, his arousal already growing again.

As if empowered by his recent precipitous ejaculation and loss of control, she lay there, looking at him with heavy-lidded eyes, slowly letting her legs fall apart. "Lick this," she ordered as she ran her fingers along the line of her cleft, the subtle gesture making him quicken, "but touch me nowhere else. Not with your hands or body. I

just want your mouth here.” Her finger graphically touched her labia, stroking lightly, making him take in a swift breath.

“Of course,” he agreed readily, not so sure he could comply. Her breasts had beckoned him all evening and he was dying to touch them.

As he sank down on the bed, he made the mistake of reaching out to try to stroke her inner thighs, but she immediately chided, “No hands. I want only your mouth and tongue. Otherwise, you are not welcome. This is for my pleasure, not yours.”

“Yes, as you wish.”

Her thighs were wide open, and he positioned himself there, lying on his stomach between her legs, his mouth grazing her heated core. More experienced, chagrined at his earlier reckless loss of restraint, he vowed inwardly to make her beg, obediently beginning to lightly lick those soft, fluid lips. She moaned at once, opening wider, lifting her hips.

Tasting her arousal, his nostrils flaring at her female scent, he continued to only brush that intriguing line, running his tongue along the cleft of her folds but not probing farther. Up and down, he licked a carnal path, tasting but not feasting. Arms at her sides, her eyes closed, Lara lay and let him minister to her body, growing tense ...and frustrated.

Smiling, knowing full well she needed him to increase the pace, to find her sensitive nub and touch it, he restrained himself, supplicant and on his stomach, doing her bidding but not fulfilling her needs. His tongue was busy but never delved into the tender tissue beyond her labia, and her moans turned into pants.

“Anton,” she said hoarsely, arching.

“What, my love?” He kissed her dark thatch of pubic hair.

“I have a feeling,” she gasped, “that you are teasing me on purpose. That negates the game, doesn’t it?”

“If you tell me exactly what you want, I will do it. You said to lick you here, and I have complied.” As if to prove his point, he lightly ran his tongue once more across her soft, pliant folds.

“Please...God in heaven, Anton, you know what to do, no one better.”

“Don’t ask me, tell me. Remember our game?”

“Make me climax,” she ordered heatedly. “Now.”

“Certainly.” He delved deep into her cleft, finding her swollen nub and sucking on it, tasting the nectar flowing there as she cried and shook almost at once. Her body tightened and her hands flew into his hair, holding him there hard with his mouth pressed between her legs, her slim thighs quivering. He continued to gently nibble and tease her until she went lax, her legs limp and open.

With a grin, he rose up and moved over her. “The balance of power has shifted again, my sweet.”

Eyes half-closed, she murmured, “You will have to excuse me, but I don’t have the strength to obey any orders right now.”

She did look superbly replete, her skin damp and pink with orgasmic afterglow. Anton laughed. “Let me use your body for my pleasure, then. You need do nothing but lie there and enjoy it. I am hard again...my cock forgets I am thirty-four and not eighteen when I am near you. Here, can you feel it?”

His erection rubbed against the softness of her smooth stomach and he nuzzled her neck, smelling her fragrant silky hair, finding her mouth and kissing her tenderly. Her arms did come up around his neck and she sighed into his mouth. With a feeling of almost wonder, he began to make love to her with slow reverence, marveling at her beauty, but even more so at how perfectly their passions seemed to match. Each response, even so much as a caught breath, inflamed him.

*Was this love?* he wondered, as he entered the softness and heat between her legs, pleasure flooding his senses as he began to thrust inside her.

Lust, he told himself quickly, dismissing the notion. More intense than any he'd known, but still just lust.

But later, when they were both exhausted and satisfied and she slept peacefully next to him, he lay there and watched the moon hang outside the window, listening to the soft sound of her breathing in the dark. Unsettled yet physically content, he pondered his complicated feelings for his gorgeous English countess.

He wanted her.

The truth was, he felt like he *needed* her. Perhaps Bernard was correct and she was different...the mate of his soul, not just his body. Certainly she was everything he'd ever imagined wanting in a wife—intelligent, refined, beautiful, passionate...

And if he married her, she would be protected forever from prosecution for her part in the covert activities of Medes and his group. Even if the entire lot of them testified she was an accomplice, no one would hang his wife. Damn Lacroux to hell, she would be beyond his malicious touch.

However, she might also be barren. In four years of marriage, she had not conceived. And he was the Comte de Roussel, with titles and estates that should be passed on to a male heir. If he married a virgin and his wife failed to bear his child, that was one thing, but to marry someone proven unlikely to conceive was another. He was a practical man, and had responsibilities both to his family and his position.

It was a devil of a dilemma.

## Chapter Five

It was a beautiful day, the sky dazzling, the perfumed air fragrant with both the smell of flowers and the less elegant odor of horse manure. Holding her parasol lightly above her head to protect her complexion from the pouring sunshine, Lara watched as a superb black thoroughbred pounded past where she sat, his muscles rippling powerfully in his shoulders, his coat sleek and shining. The crowd erupted in cheers as he passed the finish line easily ahead of the other horses on the track, shouting their approval for his incredible speed and beauty.

“That was one of Anton’s horses,” the woman sitting next to her pointed out. “Neptune, I believe is his name. The *comte* is fond of naming his racers after the gods. Rather appropriate I think, since he looks a bit like a Greek god himself, wouldn’t you say, Countess?”

Glancing over sharply, Lara tried to read the expression on Helena Marmont’s face. Shapely and attractive, there was something unusual about her looks, perhaps the tip-tilted shape of her eyes and the fullness of her mouth that rendered her still striking without being actually pretty. Her hair was brown, her features regular, and she was, at a guess, about thirty.

The wife of one of Anton’s friends, they had been introduced briefly once before back in Paris, but Lara hadn’t realized they lived only a few miles from the villa and that’s why Anton had chosen to buy it. During his stays there alone, he’d told her, he often went to dinner at their estate.

Henri Marmont was older, a courtly gentleman with beautiful manners and an apparent shared passion for horseracing. Both men

were down in the paddock area, and she had been left with Helena in the stands.

“Anton is undeniably handsome,” Lara agreed neutrally, wondering with a pang if Anton had ever slept with this woman, hence the comment. Somehow, she didn’t think he was the type to betray a friend, but considering his reputation, it was the first thing that came to mind.

Helena chuckled. “And undeniably bemused. I have never seen him like he is with you. Except,” she laughed again, “perhaps with his horses. We won’t see either him or Henri until this meet is over. They are like little boys and so puffed up when they win, it is almost comical. I warn you, over dinner this evening, they will rehash each race and argue vehemently. You must just ignore it.”

Was he bemused with her? Lara wondered. He was certainly a wonderful lover and a considerate companion, but he was charming to everyone, even the servants. “I am looking forward to seeing Marmont,” she murmured politely. “I love old country houses. I grew up in Derbyshire, on my father’s estate, and didn’t go to London until I married. My husband liked the bustle of the city and insisted we live there.”

“Then why did you choose Paris, Countess, after his death?” Helena looked at her curiously.

It would hardly do to admit her uncle was deeply involved in the War Office and had approached her, knowing her lack of enthusiasm for London society once her mourning was over. Neither was he above using her beauty to aid England’s effort against Bonaparte.

“I needed something completely different, but not to be lonely.” Lara shook her head. “When you are widowed, everyone assumes in your grief you should sit and mope over your loss. I obediently did so for a year. It was time for lights and color and new people.”

With perceptive insight, Madame Marmont said, “It sounds like your marriage was loveless, but it isn’t my business. I am happy for both you and Anton. He needs more than just another passing liaison

whether he realizes it or not. You might be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, but you are also bright. He is a lucky man.”

The compliment was a little unusual coming from another woman, and for a second, Lara was unsure what to say.

Amusement evident in those almond-shaped, light brown eyes, Helena said dryly, “I am told by Henri that I am outrageously outspoken. But, quite frankly, women also have eyes and the ability to appreciate beauty in any form. I have never seen skin so flawless or hair so luxuriantly dark and thick. Anyone can see why Anton is infatuated with you.”

“I...well, thank you, Madame.”

“Call me Helena.” The other woman reached over and took her hand, squeezing lightly. “I hope we can be good friends. I am sometimes bored to tears when my husband is with his horses and I know the *comte* is a very busy man. Henri tells me he intends to stay for a while, having his steward come up from Paris each week, so he can keep up with his affairs. Perhaps we could ride in the mornings. The valley is lovely.”

“I would like that,” Lara said truthfully. Helena was right, Anton spent hours every day working in his small study, and at times she was a little lonely for company, though she did enjoy the luxury of being able to sit and read, and the peaceful setting was delightful.

“It is settled then...oh, look, I did not lie about his obsession, now did I? Here comes your lover, eschewing his horses for the moment. You should be flattered.” Helena Marmomt laughed, her eyes bright. “Especially since he is winning today...oh, dear, I suppose Henri will be in a frightful mood over his bay losing.”

Watching Anton climb through the stands to approach them, Lara felt her heart beat a little faster. Bareheaded, his dark hair gleaming in the sun, he smiled and nodded at acquaintances as he passed, but his gaze was focused on her.

*What will we do tonight*, she wondered, feeling slightly flushed. They had now been in the country three weeks. She had been his

mistress for over five...and he had never failed to make each sexual encounter between them uniquely exciting in some way.

“Did you see Neptune?” He bowed before her and very publicly raised her hand to his lips. “He is going to be my next champion.”

Smiling over his enthusiasm, Lara nodded. “He’s magnificent.”

His gaze softened then, darkening in sensual appreciation. “So are you,” he said gallantly.

People all around them watched, but then she was well aware that wherever the Comte de Roussel went, he was noticed. Heaven knew she *noticed* him.

“My goodness,” Helena Marmont murmured emphatically, watching them, fanning herself, “it is warm today.”

“Yes,” Lara agreed, looking into Anton’s eyes, “it certainly is.”

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Henri’s study was shrouded. The windows were open to the summer night, the cognac excellent. Dinner had been delicious, the company delightful, and after a long day at the races and the triumph of his horses, Anton felt expansive until his longtime friend murmured, “Things in Paris are very unsettled right now. It is just as well you brought Lady Edgerton here, out of the line of fire, so to speak.”

Straightening a fraction from his comfortable sprawl in a well-used chair, Anton tamped down on a ripple of alarm. “Why?”

“Cartel was arrested, plus two more. Lacroux is telling everyone they are talking, implicating her.”

Henri was more his father’s contemporary, twenty years his senior, and someone who well remembered the revolution. Yet, Anton always admired him and when his father had died, turned to him often enough for advice. “What will happen, do you think? Should I be taking steps?”

“You took them, I believe, when you went to see Fouche and then whisked the lady away immediately.”

“I tried,” he admitted. “Damn Lacroux, this is more about an old vendetta between us than it is about Lara. It’s true, he approached her upon her arrival a year ago, but so did scores of men, most of whom now I would venture to say would leap to her defense, even though she refused them.” His smile was wry. “Including, of course, myself.”

Henri, gray-haired and dignified, lifted a brow. “Yet you prevailed, as usual.”

“She is exceptional.”

“Yes...she is. I like her,” Marmont declared in his thoughtful way. “And despite her beauty, she seems remarkably unspoiled. I won’t ask if the rumor is true. If she was spying for her country, I don’t even wish to know it. I am just wondering what you will do with her now.”

Outside darkness had fallen, the stars twinkling above, the country air fresh and clean. “I don’t know,” Anton admitted finally. “I have considered offering marriage.” The words came out starkly, something he had never uttered before.

Marmont said gently, “But?”

“She was married before. There were no children.”

“Ahh, I see the problem. Tell me, what happened with Lacroux?”

In the garden behind the house, Anton suddenly heard a ripple of bright laughter, unmistakably Helena’s, and then an answering laugh, soft and musical. Lara was enjoying herself and it pleased him.

Abstractly, he said, “It was at least five years ago that I came upon him in the hallway at a weekend party at a country house, raping a young maid. I had not met him before that gathering other than to nod, but had never liked him for all that.

“When I heard her screaming and realized that she was resisting him, I pulled him away and hit him so hard, he lost consciousness. That undoubtedly saved his life, for had he been able to fight back, I would have gladly killed him right then and there. As it was, he must have regained his senses while I was helping his unfortunate victim to

her quarters below stairs, for he skulked away. Since the girl pleaded with me to not say anything to anyone, there was little I could do.”

Henri looked disgusted, shaking his head, reaching for the brandy. “You should have castrated him as he lay senseless. Rape is a heinous crime based on violent anger, usually toward women in general. The man is an animal.”

“A dangerous animal. He wants Lara.” Anton narrowed his gaze. “And you are correct. He hates her with a violent passion. You should see the unmitigated, lustful emotion in his eyes when he looks at her. It frightens me because I cannot gauge how far he will go. I have heard some fairly disturbing rumors about him. This is an enemy that plays without rules.”

“Guard your love well, then,” Henri said soberly, his expression lightening when another burst of laughter drifted through the open window, he added dryly, “And not just from Lacroux. I am sure you noticed how Helena looks at her. She is already infatuated.”

In the past, Anton had always found the Marmont’s marriage amusing. Though they got along amiably and seemed good friends, he knew that Helena sought female lovers, preferring women to men, and that Henri never minded as long as she was discreet and ran his house efficiently.

“As much as I like Helena, I am not at all sure I want to share,” he stated quietly. “With another man, never, I’d kill him first, but with another woman...the concept is somehow entirely different.” He took a sip from his glass, enjoying the fine brandy.

“See, and you have always wondered why I allow it.” Henri chuckled. “You cannot tell me with your vast experience, Anton, you have never been in bed with two women before.”

“I have,” Anton acknowledged dryly, “more than that actually in my wild youth, but they all wanted serviced by me, not each other.”

“But when you were busy with one, did the others not play with each other?” At one time, Henri had been also considered a rakehell of the highest order, accepting casually the favors of many women.

“And didn’t watching two lovely women in each other’s arms excite you? I have always found it stimulating. They are so soft and beautiful, and there is nothing of possession when they make love. A male penetrating a female is mating, an act that can result in procreation. But women in bed together is just simple pleasure.”

Curiously, Anton lifted a brow in amusement. “Are you trying to convince me, Henri, to allow your wife and Lara a romantic interlude?”

“I love Helena and want her to be happy. She has a healthy sexual appetite and likes what we do together, but women truly excite her. What is the harm?”

“Well, for one thing, Lara, I believe, would take some convincing. She is a passionate woman, but not experienced.”

“After over a month in your bed?” Henri laughed. “I think that would qualify as experienced for any woman.”

“I have no idea if she would find the notion intriguing or disgusting.”

“When Helena asks—and I know her well, she will approach you first since she respects our friendship—I guess you should be prepared to give her an answer. Once again, I cannot see the harm. If your lovely lady is passionate, as you say, she would enjoy it, I am sure. My wife is infinitely generous in bed. But don’t, be offended if she reserves her talents for the countess alone. In her own way, she is completely faithful to me.” Henri chuckled again.

The truth was, if he admitted it, the idea intrigued him. Helena was attractive, and the notion of her touching Lara’s beautiful body was arousing. Anton leaned back in his chair and swirled the brandy in his glass. “I might mention it, though I make no promises to Lara’s reaction. In the meantime, please, if you hear anything else about Paris or Lacroux, please contact me at once.”

\* \* \* \*

The morning was clear and pleasant, and where they walked their horses, the path wound around a small clearing full of summer flowers and long grass. Birds sang everywhere and Lara was reminded of her childhood near Matlock, when she had once upon a time dabbled her toes in the river and ran amuck in the fields near her home.

Her face tilted to the sun, she took in a deep breath. "It's lovely here. The air is like pure, clean wine."

Next to her on a small sorrel mare, dressed in a blue riding habit with her brown hair in a simple braid, Helena smiled charmingly. "The weather couldn't be more perfect, could it?"

"No." Lara guided her own mount, an older bay, once one of Anton's racers now kept for pleasure riding, around a small bush hanging into the path. The animal was bigger than any horse she had ever ridden before, but Anton had selected him for her, and true to his word, she had never been on a horse so well mannered. "I suppose it has to rain every once in a while, but I love days like this, all sunshine and blue sky."

Helena gave her an oddly intent look, still smiling. "You are like me then, a creature of light and happiness. From the moment we met, I knew we would end up...intimate friends."

It was nice to have female companionship. In the past year, Lara had kept to herself, except on a purely social basis, and even before that, once she passed childhood, many women treated her with envious spite.

Helena seemed to genuinely not resent her looks, but instead was complimentary and friendly. "I am glad you and Henri live so close," Lara said with warm sincerity. "Anton is wonderful, but he has many duties and no woman can expect a man to be at her side constantly."

"Nor would she want him there." Helena laughed her signature peal of genuine amusement. "I would kill Henri if he were with me all the time, though I am very fond of him. We don't have the simmering

passion that lies between you and your lover, my dear, but we get along famously in our own way.”

It was true. Lara had noticed during the race meet—and their dinner afterward at the Marmont estate—that Helena, a good two decades younger than her husband, treated him like a favorite aging uncle. “He is still very handsome,” Lara said truthfully. “Even with his hair completely silver, he is distinguished and attractive.”

“But nothing like your sinfully beautiful *comte*.” Helena sighed dramatically, a mischievous smile on her face. “I imagine the two of you in bed together is a glorious sight, him so bold and ardent, and you so very lovely and submissive.”

Thinking of their game the other night, Lara could not fight a blush. She was finding that Henri was right about his wife, she was outrageously outspoken and often said things that bordered on being scandalously personal. “Anton is ardent, that is true. I don’t suppose anyone who has heard of his reputation would think otherwise.”

“He is virile, by all accounts,” Helena conceded, “but sometimes gossip is inaccurate. The truth is, he has always been discerning when it came to his mistresses and certainly has never brought one here before. You are special to him and when he looks at you, the desire in his eyes is like a hungry fire. I am jealous.”

Not at all certain how to take the last remark, Lara changed the subject then, asking about the roses in the Marmont gardens, flowers being something she took a deep interest in. Helena looked amused at the ploy, her brown eyes crinkling as she smiled, but she answered readily enough and they rode in comfortable companionship to the river and back up to the villa, chatting and amiable. When Helena rode back toward Marmont with the promise of meeting her the following morning, Lara dismounted and gave the groom her horse, heading back up toward the house.

She had found that when Anton said he kept no servants at the villa, he did not include the stables, and a full retinue of grooms and

trainers saw to his string during racing season. The stable was not terribly large, but extremely well appointed, no expense spared.

Going up to change and wash, Lara put on a day dress of pale green sprigged muslin, brushed her hair, wound it into a demure chignon, and went down to join Anton for luncheon on the terrace, as had become their habit on sunny days. She found him already there, at an ornate garden table covered with mosaic tiles, sipping cool wine, the light breeze ruffling his dark hair. Arrested as always by his masculine good looks, she stood a moment and watched him as he lifted his glass and drank.

*She loved him*, she thought with an almost inner despair. The realization had been growing in the past weeks and had little to do with his ability to bring her great physical fulfillment. That mattered, of course, and making love with him was a wonderful communion of their bodies, but it was the man himself she was drawn to on many other levels. He liked to tease her, to argue politics, to indulge her tastes in food and wine and a thousand other thoughtful little things.

Anton never treated her as a possession that occupied his bed and spread her legs to allow him sexual release, but instead as a person who had intellect besides beauty.

She wondered with acute pain if she weren't barren, he might actually marry her. But her body might be perfect on the outside—or so she had been told—but apparently, inside there was a flaw. In fact, her female cycles were often erratic and always had been. Not terribly so, just off several weeks now and then, so that during her marriage, she and Peter would start to hope, and then be disappointed and morose when her flow came.

Anton saw her standing there and rose politely, a smile breaking over his face. Coming to take her hand, he gallantly lifted and kissed it. "How was your ride, *chérie*. Madame Bourges will bring out our food soon, but I told her we wanted a glass of wine together first. Please come and sit with me."

Swallowing hard, she looked into his eyes and fought the urge to blurt out her feelings. “It was fine,” she said instead, keeping her voice steady. “Helena is very nice and also...entertaining, I suppose would be the word. I find her slightly unconventional.”

Anton’s gaze was unreadable. “How so?” He guided her to the table and seated her, reaching for the wine so he could pour her a glass.

“She says the oddest things.” Lara accepted the wine and inclined her head in thanks. “And is really not like other women I have known.”

“What odd things?” Anton leaned back in his chair, stretching out his long legs. “Tell me.”

The reference to the two of them in bed foremost in her mind, Lara took a quick sip and shook her head. “I can’t recall specifics,” she said evasively. “And forgive me, I did not mean to sound critical of Henri’s wife in any way. I like her very much.”

Anton lifted a dark brow in an elegant mannerism she had come to know well. His lips quirked slightly. “The question is how much.”

“I beg your pardon?” Lara saw something puzzling in his expression, an undecipherable mixture of speculation and reserve.

With a slight shake of his head, Anton set aside his glass. “Have you ever met a woman who desires other women, my sweet? To be frank with you seems the only way, so I will be blunt. I am afraid you inspire lust not only in men, but women, as well. Helena is very attracted to you. Even before I introduced it, I wondered if she would not be smitten by your incredible beauty.”

Remembering the flowery compliments and the direct way Helena looked at her, brought heat into her face. If Madame Marmont had been a man, Lara acknowledged, she would have interpreted everything quite differently. “But she is married,” she protested, not certain how to feel.

“She accommodates Henri, but she is certainly not the only woman to yield to convention and marry when her desires lie

elsewhere. However, the true question is, what do you want to do about this...incipient lust? Henri hopes you will indulge his wife and extend your friendship to include passion.”

It seemed an incredible conversation to be having when the day was so innocently lovely, the air perfumed by the informal gardens around them, birds singing everywhere. “He wishes such a thing?” she managed to say incredulously, clutching her wine glass and staring at Anton. “And what of you? How do you feel about this...this unnatural desire?”

“What is unnatural about wanting a beautiful woman?” The answer was neutral, his dark eyes veiled. “Most men enjoy watching two women together. Do not worry, I will be there also.” His smile was deep and wickedly sensual. “There are, after all, certain things she cannot do for you.”

Not certain if she was horrified or intrigued, Lara simply sat there, speechless. Finally, she asked, “Are you suggesting the *three* of us would be in bed together? And furthermore, you want this?”

“I want what you want, Lara. It would be enjoyable, I’m sure, but Helena would be there because of you, not me. You like sex, *chérie*, that is undeniable, and this would be simply that. An adventure, if you will. My feelings for you include generosity when it comes to your pleasure.” His gaze darkened at once. “Not with another man, however,” he said curtly. “Never. Make no mistake. I would kill you both.”

The sudden feral heat in his expression caused a certain primitive elation inside her. Whatever lay in the future, he felt possessive of her, and she reveled in it. Lowering her gaze, Lara murmured, “I know well everything you have done for me, Anton. You have protected me, taught me the ways of passion, even left Paris and coped with the difficulties of running your interests from here, when you should probably be more available to your businesses and family. I will do whatever you wish.”

“Does the notion repulse you?”

It didn't, she just wasn't certain what to expect. "No. I suppose I am just the product of a conventional upbringing. I had an aunt who always seemed to have a different female companion and I heard whispers, I suppose, but everyone always seemed to think it sinful, so I did, as well."

"It isn't." He said the words firmly. "Nothing that happens in bed between consenting adults is sinful. Did you not take me in your mouth the other evening? That is considered sinful by many, but we both liked it very much. And when I pleasure you with my tongue between your legs, you most certainly seem to *sinfully* enjoy that."

She did, it was impossible to deny.

His brows lifted and he idly poured more wine. "So if Helena approaches me, you are willing?"

"Anything," she replied softly over the rim of her wine glass, meaning it, "for you."

## Chapter Six

Anton frowned, listening only abstractly to the rain trickling down the windows, reading the missive in his hand for the third time.

“*Diable*,” he muttered, setting it aside, not certain whether to rejoice or feel even more afraid. According to his sources, Lacroux no longer worked for the minister of police, but had dropped out of sight. There were allusions to excessive violence used in the arrest of Louis Cartel—violence his influential family objected to strenuously—hence Lacroux’s loss of position.

In short, Lacroux was now both out of control and on the loose.

“I am interrupting, I’m sure.”

Looking up, Anton saw with only measured surprise that Helena Marmont stood in the doorway of his study, damp droplets still gleaming on her brown hair, an uncharacteristic uncertainty in her expression. Standing up politely, he said, “Not at all. Please come in.”

“Madame Bourges said you were working. She was on her way out as I rode up.”

“Her sister, I understand, is ill. Can I take your cloak?”

Helena made a face. “I suppose I am dripping. It is soaking outside...what awful weather. Lara and I have not ridden together in nearly a week.”

“And you miss her,” he said suggestively, taking the sodden garment from her shoulders and setting it by the hearth. “And couldn’t go another day without seeing her. Am I right?”

For a moment, Helena was quiet, sinking into a chair, her brown eyes wide. Then she said with rueful resignation, “Henri said you already knew how I feel about her.”

“It is hard to miss.” Anton said prosaically as he sat back down behind his desk. “In fact, I have spoken with her about it.”

“I know.” Helena, dressed in a drab riding habit that concealed her fabulous figure, laughed mockingly. “She is actually an admirable actress, but it was clear after the first day we rode together that somehow things had changed between us. I doubt she is flirtatious even with you, that isn’t her nature, but let us say we became infinitely more aware of each other.”

“Sexually?” he asked delicately, lifting his brows.

“Definitely,” she answered, perched on the edge of the chair, unperturbed. “Do you mind?”

“I am not sure,” he said, leaning back. “I have been with more than one woman before, but my feelings were never involved.”

“I am afraid mine are, also,” Helena said, her brown eyes darkening. “Though it is difficult, when one lusts so deeply, to tell the difference.”

“True.” He waited. They were both in accord...yet on opposing sides.

Finally, Helena finished fidgeting with her wet skirts enough to ask, “Anton, please, don’t be cruel. What did she say?”

“She would do anything I ask.” Concealing his male pride was not an option; he simply could not do it. He grinned, a corner of his mouth lifting.

“Will you ask, then?”

“She is upstairs, napping. I think it is all the rain, but she has been tired lately.”

“Perhaps we could go wake her.” Helena’s eyes were suddenly alight. “Mrs. Bourges is out and Henri is in Paris for a few days. I’ve all afternoon.”

His body stirred treacherously at the notion of seeing Helena and his lovely English mistress together. “She is not enthusiastic over this,” he warned and then added, “but she is very sensual and infinitely responsive. I think she will like it.”

“God in heaven, Anton, let’s go upstairs.” Her expressive brown gaze was excited and her chest lifted quickly as she breathed. “Almost as much as I want to touch her, do I want to watch you together. I suppose I am a voyeur at heart, because I adore...watching.”

The truth was, he looked forward to this interlude. Sex play was always diverting, and he had already discerned that Lara also liked variety. She never objected to new positions or anything he did to her, however wickedly different. He murmured, “Then watch you shall, dear Helena. All right, let us go up. Wait until you see what she is wearing. Madame Dupont did some inventive things with her wardrobe before we left Paris. I suspect you’ll be pleased.”

Since Helena had been at the villa countless times, she knew the way and he followed her, already growing erect. Helena was not conventionally pretty, but she had a voluptuous figure and her vitality was attractive. He was looking forward to *watching* himself.

Lara was asleep on the bed, on her side, one hand under her cheek, like a child. There all resemblance to anything except an exotically desirable woman ended. Wearing only a chemise made out of a material so fine it was completely sheer, she might have been nude, the material bunched around her slender thighs, her nipples and breasts visible, as was the intriguing darkness between her legs. Anton heard Helena take in a deep breath.

“It is almost unnatural for someone to be so alluring,” she murmured heatedly. “Anton, please, help me undress. God in heaven, I am already so wet, I cannot believe it.”

For the first time in his life, he thought wryly as he unfastened buttons, he was helping a woman undress, so she could have sex with someone else. However, Helena was worth watching disrobe, her loosened hair a gleaming brown with fine gold highlights, her breasts large and pink-tipped, her body curvaceous but not quite plump. Her gaze avidly fastened on the woman on the bed, she stripped without regard for her clothes, tossing everything carelessly aside. “Join us whenever you wish,” she whispered breathlessly, “but I cannot wait.”

Sinking into a chair by the window, so he could pull off his boots, Anton observed as she approached the bed, crawling in carefully by Lara's slender body, settling next to her and stroking first the tumbled glory of her ebony hair. Then she carefully lifted the hem of the chemise, pulling it up so Lara was fully exposed from the waist down, her pale smooth buttocks revealed.

Sliding her hand between her thighs so she cupped her cleft, Helena began to wake Lara with her fingers, the slightest of motions as she leaned forward and kissed her shoulder lightly. Her graceful caress slid into Lara's dark pubic hair, toying with her, penetrating and invading her body.

Lara stirred, and mumbled sleepily, "Anton, stop it."

"No, darling," Helena responded softly. "Here, roll over. To your back, please. I promise you won't be sorry."

Gently easing the other woman into a prone position, Helena pushed her legs apart slightly for better access, fondling her sex. Lara's eyelids began to flutter in surprise as she struggled to wake, a sigh escaping her lips as Helena stroked her intimately.

At full mast already, his shaft hard and heavy, Anton continued to undress slowly as Lara finally wakened fully and came to the confused realization over who was touching her. Her gaze flew around the room and fastened on him in the act of taking off his trousers, seeing his erection with widening eyes, then looking back at the woman with her on the bed. "Helena." She gasped.

Anton smiled darkly, walking toward the bed. "Do not forget, I am here too, my sweet."

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This wasn't particularly fair, was Lara's first thought. She was at a distinct disadvantage, only half-awake and not given a choice. Both of the other people in the room were looking at her with undisguised hunger and already naked and aroused.

“Just relax,” Helena, next to her on one elbow, urged softly. “You are so warm and beautiful. Like wet velvet. I can feel your nub is swelling already. Touching you is so arousing for me, you have no idea. Doesn’t this feel good?”

Lara shut her eyes briefly and swallowed, only too aware of Helena’s hand between her legs. “I...I don’t know.” The truth was, the woman caressing her seemed to know exactly where to touch and how much pressure to use. She felt herself softening, her labia swelling at the erotic friction, her thighs involuntarily falling farther apart even though she found it embarrassing to be touched in such a way by another woman, especially with her lover watching with such a heavy, dark stare.

“Surely you do,” Helena gently chided, her brown eyes alight, her hand moving rhythmically. “Now, don’t tighten or become self-conscious. I want to give you pleasure and Anton feels the same way...let us use your body as we will, and you won’t regret it.”

“You make me sound like some sort of toy,” she protested, but she knew she was weakening, pleasure beginning to weigh her limbs. She was getting wet, too, moisture beginning to weep from her cleft.

“The most perfect one possible,” Anton murmured, sitting down on the other side of her, opposite Helena. Gently, he pulled her sheer chemise upward, and off over her head, tossing it away. Cupping her breasts in both hands, his thumbs grazed over her nipples and they hardened instantly, a jolt of sensation going straight to that sensitive spot between her legs.

A low moan locked in her throat as he began to play with her breasts and Helena continued to circle the small bud that defined her desire, Lara let her lashes drift shut, her breathing growing uneven. Anton leaned forward to kiss her, his mouth firm and warm, and everywhere it felt like there were hands touching her, gliding over her skin, exploring her dips and hollows as Helena brought her inexorably to climax.

It happened almost against her will, the hot rush into her cleft making her release a small cry and arch into that relentless caress, her body shuddering as Anton leisurely suckled one erect nipple, heightening the ecstasy.

Had she not already been flushed, she would have been blushing furiously anyway when it was over. Helena laughed with her signature richness, a breathless note in her voice as she said, "That's a good start, I think...God, you are beautiful when you come. Lara, please, I want to kiss you."

Anton moved obligingly away and all at once Helena was urging her close, into her arms so their breasts were pressed together, and their legs entangled as she slipped one leg between Lara's open thighs. It was distinctly odd to see the same shimmering need in Helena's brown eyes that shone in Anton's heated stare, and even more disconcerting when her mouth touched hers, parting her lips.

Passive, allowing the kiss, Lara was a little surprised to find she wasn't repulsed, but did enjoy the smooth femininity of the woman embracing her, her breasts warm and rounded, her mouth silky and the exploration of her tongue gentle. Not exactly participating but not objecting either, she let Helena do whatever she wanted, their kisses punctuated by Helena's murmured compliments and reverent caresses. When she rubbed her crotch against her thigh, Lara felt the wetness between Helena's long legs and her nipples were pebbled and hard.

Helena finally, breathlessly lifted her head, glancing to where Anton had settled back in the bed, lying next to them and braced back against the pillows, merely watching the byplay. "Good God, Roussel, the rumors do not exaggerate. You have the biggest cock I have ever seen." A small smile twitched her lips. "Very impressive if, of course, one likes that sort of thing. Right now, it looks as if you could use some...relief, I know I could. Would you care for a turn? I will take care of myself."

“My desire for Lara is a permanent thing, I have found, but of course, I will gallantly cooperate.” His grin was wickedly and openly carnal. “Henri would have my head if I let you expire from denial.” They both shifted, Helena falling back, Anton suddenly looming over Lara, kneeling between her legs, pushing them farther apart with his knees. His long fingers probed, finding her female entrance and she took in a breath at that light practiced touch, two fingers sliding inside her. Helena was right, his erection was magnificent as always, pulsing against his stomach, his testicles high and full. “Wet and ready,” he murmured, “how convenient.”

Removing his hand, he moved forward and entered her swiftly, with one hard thrust. Lara gasped and threw her head back, her hands flying to his broad shoulders. He pumped into her with long steady strokes, the sensation incredible as her passage stretched and tingled at each invasion and withdrawal. Lara lifted her hips to meet him, feeling so at one that they could be the same needy creature, climbing to a common goal of tremendous and explosive pleasure.

Lara moaned, supplicant, accepting, rising against his body, her legs around his waist to allow the deepest penetration. Anton gazed into her eyes, his dark hair disheveled against his taut neck, as if willing her to know it was him possessing her. The expression on his face was a mixture of tenderness and unmitigated lust, a half-smile on his beautiful mouth.

Lara gazed back, willing him to see the love in her eyes even as the gale force of her orgasm hurtled through her body, a low scream ringing out as she convulsed, her hands gripping him frantically as if he was the port in the glorious storm seizing her body.

He surged at the same time with a low groan, stiffening and filling her with hot fluid, bracing his weight off her body as he pressed his face against her neck and pulsed inside her body time and again. His chest heaved against her bare breasts.

Next to them, Lara vaguely heard Helena moan in climax, her hand between her legs. “Oh, yes, yes.”

She'd almost forgotten Helena was there, Lara realized ruefully, her arms around Anton's lean body, wanting to keep him inside her. Actually, if she were honest with herself, wanting to keep him forever.

\* \* \* \*

Anton lounged back contentedly on the pillows, one arm around the woman breathing so quietly next to him, his free hand touching the silken strands of her hair, lifting it so it spilled over his chest.

Across the room, Helena had finished dressing and now fussed with her hair, trying to weave it into an acceptable knot. "Oh bother," she said finally, turning from the glass and laughing in her audacious manner. "I don't care if I look a sight. This afternoon has been wonderful...I feel marvelously...sated. Good heavens, is she asleep again? She already napped earlier."

Gorgeously nude and completely lax against him, Lara breathed regular and soft. With quiet amusement, he said, "Can you blame her? That was hours ago. I believe we wore her out."

Despite an afternoon of sexual excess, Helena's gaze narrowed in undisguised appreciation for the woman sleeping next to him. "It's not quite fair to the rest of us females. She's too perfect. She even sleeps beautifully. I snore and wake up puffy and in a mess."

"She is beautiful inside, as well." After a short hesitation, he said, "Actually, I am wondering if she could be carrying my child. She says her cycles are not regular, but we have been lovers for over two months now and her flux has not come. There are other signs too. She has been ill once or twice during the mornings lately, and fatigued beyond what seems natural for her. What's more, she nearly swooned the other day after standing up quickly."

"I am sure you are pleased at the notion." Helena's mouth curved, her gaze clearly wistful. "You should see yourself when you look at her, Anton. The way you make love to her is beyond description; the

two you entwined and in tune, the expression on your face the subject matter of thousands of poems and ballads, all of them about true love. I think you must face the fact that she has captured your heart.”

“If she proves to be pregnant, I will marry her.”

Disgustedly, Helena shook her head. “Men are so stupid, no wonder I prefer women. Marry her anyway or be the biggest fool on earth. One does not always find that person who stirs both our desires and our hearts. Look at me. I love Henri, but not in the same way he loves me. We are soul mates, but not bedmates. Yes, we have fashioned a certain happiness and contentment, but did I not just spend all afternoon with another lover? Lara would not stray from you, she wants no other.

“Anyone can receive pleasure from a practiced touch, but she wouldn’t seek me out, or anyone else. She loves you and loves making love with you. That is enough for any woman. You will be her life—you and your children, if you are so blessed. Trust me on this, marry her quickly and spend your life trying to be worthy of her.”

Not certain if he should be entertained or moved by such an impassioned speech, Anton opened his mouth to reply, then shut it, simply lifting his brows.

The woman across the room smiled, a hint of resignation in her expression. “Do not worry, I will not implore you for another session as this afternoon. She did it because you requested it, and I know she enjoyed it to a certain extent, but I was simply an extra on the stage, not a star in the play. Your passion simmers like a hot summer afternoon and all you need in that bed is the two of you. However, I am grateful and will always remember it.” A dimple appeared in her cheek. “Of course, you will have to forgive me if I use the future *comtesse* in my fantasies, Anton. I know you agree, she is incomparable.”

He said softly, “Yes, I do know. I have used that word myself to describe her.”

## Chapter Seven

He she reached for another pastry, Lara couldn't help but notice the amused expression on Anton's face. "I'm starving," she said defensively, then sighing, she conceded, "It is my third one, I suppose."

"By the time you have this child, you'll be too large for me to carry you upstairs and ravish you."

Frozen with the sweet halfway to her mouth, Lara stared at the man sitting across from her at the breakfast table. She stammered, "You also think...that is...I have been praying it's true."

His smile was all lazy male grace, his dark eyes steady. "I am a worldly man, though I have never nurtured a pregnant lady before. However, even if it weren't for all the other signs, my sweet, you could rest assured I would notice that your breasts are getting larger and more sensitive. How could I not come to the same conclusion you have yourself? I suppose my only question is, why didn't you say something to me?"

Her eyes filled suddenly with tears, the onslaught of emotion unsettling. "I didn't dare to dream it. I was afraid if I said something, it would curse my hopes."

In an instant, she found herself lifted and settled into his lap, enfolded in his arms, his mouth pressing against her temple as he cradled her tenderly. "*Our* hopes," he corrected, whispering against her hair. "I have always been careful to make sure conception did not happen with other women. Perhaps, since I took no precautions from the beginning, I knew in some way how different my feelings were for you. So, you are happy about the baby?"

“Infinitely, universally, and joyously happy,” Lara admitted, blinking her sticky lashes.

“It will have to be legitimate. I am Roussel,” he said authoritatively. “I do not run around siring bastards. My son will need my name and one day will have my titles and estates.”

Loving the secure feeling of being in his arms, Lara hiccupped a laugh. “Your son? I believe I would like a girl.”

He grinned, his eyes teasing. “I’ll indulge you and our second child can be a girl.” His expression softened at once. “You agree? You’ll be my wife?”

“I agree,” she said instantly, wanting to admit she loved him, but not certain how to say it.

“You’ll be French.” He made a face. “Though I certainly have never met a Frenchwoman named Lara.”

“Monsieur de Comte!”

Not hearing anyone approach, the breathless interruption was a surprise. Lara glanced up and saw a disheveled young man, hatless, his jacket stained and mud covering his boots, dash onto the terrace. In his trembling hand, he held an envelope. “I am sorry to interrupt,” he mumbled almost incoherently, seeing Lara perched as she was in Anton’s lap, color coming into his face. “But I was told to give this to you at once. It’s about Pegasus.”

“What about him? He won yesterday, Bernard sent a messenger.” Taking the missive as Lara stood and moved back to her own chair, Anton scanned the contents, the blood first draining out of his face, then two high spots of color coming back to stain his high cheekbones.

“*Diable*,” he said lethally, “what kind of madness is this? My horse is ill unto death, and they suspect a grave infection of some kind. Two of my other horses are sick also and Bernard thinks maybe this disease will run rampant through my stable.” He stood abruptly and nodded to the young messenger. “I will leave at once. Have them saddle a mount. I’ll take Zeus. He’s the fastest.”

“Yes, monsieur.” The young man bowed away and ran back the way he came.

“How terrible,” Lara murmured sincerely, knowing how he loved his racing bloodstock. “I am sorry, Anton.”

“And I am sorry, *chérie*, to leave you at what should be a tender moment between us.” Lifting her hand to his mouth, he kissed her fingers, but his expression was abstract, worry evident in the tension in his body. “I will be back tomorrow or send word. If you need company, send for Helena. She will always be glad to entertain you.”

“I know,” Lara said dryly.

For an instant, his expression lightened. “Not that way,” he said firmly. “Save your delectable charms for me from now on.”

“Yes, Monsieur de Comte,” she said demurely. Then, more gravely, she added, “Travel safely and come back to me soon.”

“I will.”

He was gone in minutes, calling out orders in his cultured voice, collecting little more than his cloak before he rode away like a whirlwind.

Lara still sat on the terrace, the remnants of their breakfast on the table. Aside from her concern over her future husband’s beloved horses, she felt deliciously content and happy. This coming child had changed her world, not just because of Anton’s proposal. She felt whole again, not so flawed, not at all the restless woman who had decided to risk her life spying for England because she felt she needed to give something meaningful to the world around her.

“Well, well, this is a bucolic picture, is it not? Roussel’s English whore basking in the sun, no doubt dreaming of the next opportunity to spread her legs.” The mocking, repulsive voice came from behind her, startling her out of her lethargic contentment, sending a deep chill down her spine. “Luckily, that will be very soon indeed.”

Standing and whirling around, to her horror Lara saw that Jacques Lacroux stood only paces away, obviously having crept up from the shelter of the gardens. He was the lean, ravenous man of her

nightmares, attired in plain country garb, his glittering gaze utterly without mercy as he stared intently at her. The expression of livid hatred on his face was borne out by the twist of his mouth as he leisurely examined her body with undisguised lust.

He was too close for her to run. Lara managed only one choked cry before he lunged forward and caught her roughly, his hand going over her mouth. In her ear, he hissed, "I have been waiting for this since the first time I saw you, Countess. So female...so regally proud, with every man in your range fawning at your feet. You spying bitch...you want it, all women do. I will stick you so hard, you'll scream. I want to hear you beg and whimper..."

God, I have dreamed and plotted for this. Your lover won't ever touch you again, I'm afraid. You are mine now. He's a fool, so easily mislead, valuing his horses over your charms. When he returns, you will be used and dead."

Terrified, in disbelief, Lara struggled, protective of the precious life inside her. This baby also belonged to Anton. He obviously wanted it, and no one was going to take it away from them.

Biting down hard on his hand, she tasted blood and heard his outraged cry as he released her. Hampered by her long skirts, she only managed to run a few paces before she stumbled and felt Lacroux grab her again, this time yanking her long hair.

She screamed then, a hollow cry of despair, the stable so far from the house, she wasn't sure anyone would hear her. Mrs. Bourges was inside but half-deaf, and the older woman was hardly someone who could help her.

Tossed to the flagstones of the terrace, she tried to crawl away, seeing Lacroux loom over her, his free hand going to his trousers, fumbling with the fastenings. "English slut," he laughed as he spoke, the sound hideous, "you reject me but accept Roussel? I will teach you what a real man feels like when he rides you."

Fighting nausea, Lara was held immobile by his relentless grip on her hair, expecting at any moment to feel her skirts pushed upward.

“No,” she cried in despair, determined if nothing else to live and save her child. “God help me.”

“Well, perhaps not God, but I certainly will...good morning, Lacroux. Have you lost your way? I believe this is my property, where you are not welcome, and that is my future wife, who obviously does not welcome you, either. Let her go and stand up. This time you will not slink away like a dog.”

Hazily, Lara registered Anton’s cool speech in stunned disbelief. Her assailant was also surprised and his fingers tightened in her hair, making her wince and gasp. “Anton.” His name was a prayer on her lips.

“Roussel,” Lacroux snarled, rising and trying to drag her with him. “You left.”

“I am not stupid. There are guards posted all around this estate. I wish now, in retrospect, I had done the same for my Parisian stables, but animals can be replaced. You took long enough to crawl out of the woodwork, Jacques. I was beginning to get bored waiting for you. Now, let Lara go and let us settle this. After all, this isn’t really about her, is it?”

“She’s a whore. All women are whores.” Lacroux sputtered, but his fingers loosened. Lara hung there, still captive, watching where Anton stood just a few feet away, her gaze fixed on his lean figure, hope replacing the fear in her heart. He looked implacable and every inch the arrogant aristocrat. His jacket was gone, the width of his shoulders impressive under his white shirt.

“Like the little maid?” Anton asked almost conversationally. “I refer to the one you raped, the one who bled as virgins will do, you bastard. I should have killed you then. Now, don’t make me say it again, let Lara go. Fight me man to man. That way you have a chance, though I doubt it actually. I could literally tear your heart out at this moment.”

Snearing, Lacroux shook her. “Why fight? I hold what you desire.”

“I am a man who believes in preparation and I knew you would come here. There are men right now aiming their rifles at you, make no mistake. At my signal, you will fall dead.”

“I do not believe you. You are not that clever, Comte.” The reply was scathing and Lara’s knees buckled her heart was pounded so hard.

Looking bored, Anton lifted one dark brow. “All right, if it must be this way. I wanted to make sure I gave you a fair chance, though why I should have such scruples is a mystery...Valentin!”

The roar of the shot and the whiz of the bullet by Lara’s cheek were both loud and the sudden slackness of the man next to her barely registered. Anton moved so quickly, he caught her before she crumpled to the ground, lifting her easily, murmuring in her ear, “I am so sorry, my love. Are you all right?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” she whispered, and then fainted for the first time in her life.

## Epilogue

“You must relax, Monsieur de Comte, for you are wearing a hole in the expensive carpeting for nothing.”

Glancing over at Bernard, sitting so calmly in a chair and sipping his cognac with a knowing look in his eye, Anton swore, a low oath that rang into the room. “Do not tell me,” he said through his teeth, “that when your wife labored to give you...what is it now—”

“Six children,” Bernard supplied helpfully. “And another due in a few months.”

“All right then,” Anton restively reached for his own glass and took a huge drink, feeling the fiery liquor slide down his throat. He rasped, “So when your wife begins her pains, you do not panic, wanting the child but fearful of losing her?” Running his fingers raggedly through his hair, he paced again toward the fireplace.

“Of course I am fearful. And helpless, which is what is driving you to madness. But I have also found that walking back and forth across a room does nothing to ease her pain or deliver a healthy child.”

With a wry glance at his old friend, Anton went still, sighing suddenly. “At this moment, I am trying to make a pact with God, swearing I will never touch her again if he will grant me both her and the babe. I suppose I am condemning myself to perdition, aren’t I?”

Bernard chuckled, his eyes twinkling. “I have seen Madame de Comtesse. Do you actually think you could hold up your end of the bargain?”

“Right now, yes,” Anton answered, and then reluctantly laughed, “but I have seen her, too. It would be impossible. *Diable*, I just wish someone would come and tell me what is happening.”

As if answer to that prayer, there was a sharp rap on the door. Crossing the room, Anton flung it open, seeing the portly doctor there. His heart felt as if it flew upward and lodged in his throat. “What it is?” he demanded hoarsely. “Is it over? How is my wife?”

Smiling, the man nodded, still wiping his hands on a cloth. “I am pleased to tell you, monsieur, that the next Comte de Roussel has been born.”

Closing his eyes briefly in elation, Anton felt instantly guilty. “Lara wanted a girl...but I am pleased with a son. Is she well?”

“Very well,” the doctor said dryly. “She also has her wish, as well, Comte. Your wife has given you two children at once. You have both a boy and a girl.”

“Twins?” Overwhelmed, Anton practically staggered to the desk and groped for the cognac bottle.

“Twins, yes.” The doctor watched with a world-weary amused expression. “I told her the last time I saw her I expected as much. That’s why for one so slender, she was so big and why the babies came early.”

“Everyone is healthy?” Anton dimly heard Bernard ask.

“Yes.”

*Twins. God in heaven.*

“I need to see her—they,” he suddenly interrupted, fighting a rush of joy and relief that swamped him. “My family. Now. At once. I will not be denied.”

“Go on up, monsieur,” the doctor nodded, “she is understandably tired, but was asking for you.”

He took the stairs two at a time, marveling he did not break his neck since he had consumed a great deal of liquor and had very little sleep. There was a small crowd of servants in the hall and he nodded

at the smiles and murmured congratulations, pausing at the doorway with almost fearful anticipation, before stepping inside.

Lara lay in the bed, looking exhausted but utterly beautiful, even with her hair damp and disheveled and her face white with fatigue. Both children lay in her arms, their tiny faces visible above the blankets that wrapped their little bodies.

She smiled suddenly. “Anton, look, you do indulge me. I have a daughter and you have a son.”

He found he couldn’t speak even as he walked across the floor, his legs suddenly wobbly. “*We* have a daughter and a son,” he corrected, his gaze going from one child to the other. “My God, they are so beautiful.”

Lara laughed. “I think there are very pink and wrinkled and undoubtedly look like every other baby ever born, but I agree. Very beautiful.”

“I love you,” he said intensely, dropping to his knees by the bed and looking into her eyes. “Since the first moment I saw you across a crowded ballroom, I have loved you. Not with good sense or reason or mindful of our vast differences, I just...do. You are my life.”

“I know,” her blue eyes were filled with a dreamy contentment. “And it looks,” she said with a hint of mischievous amusement, “to be a busy one, Monsieur de Comte.”

Taking her hand and lifting it to his lips, he whispered against her fingers, “I cannot wait.”

## THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Emma Wildes is the author of over thirty novels. She has been an Eppie finalist six times, a Write Touch Reader's Choice award winner, a Lories winner, and received first place for the 2007 Eppie in historical erotic romance. She lives with her husband and three children in rural Indiana. Visit her at [www.emmawildes.com](http://www.emmawildes.com)



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