

*Before An
Autumn Wind*



Katherine Smith

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LionHearted Publishing,[®] Inc.
P.O. Box 618
Zephyr Cove, NV 89448-0618
888-546-6478

Email us at: admin@LionHearted.com

Visit our web site at www.LionHearted.com

Cover art and design: M.A. Heathman

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ISBN: 1-57343-069-2

Printed in the U.S.A.

For Chris in appreciation of his
unswerving faith and patience.

For Mary Ann Heathman and her
delightful and refreshing approach
to publishing.

Prologue



Paris, 1804

She had absolutely no business being there.

In the meager light she crept to the edge of a shrouded alley. Row upon row of houses stood like old women in judgment over the damp, deserted street. Roofs sagged with age and neglect, and a few bleary street lamps gave a dingy glow off dirty windows. She paused briefly to fish a slip of paper from her pocket.

The mist turned to rain and thin wet sheets of moisture whipped sideways with the wind, blurring her vision and soaking her dark blue cloak. She held up the paper with trembling fingers, then melted back into the darkness, quickly moving from shadow to shadow. A few more paces and she would be there.

Chapter One



Brittony Ashland frowned.

She was being watched. Not such an unusual notion in a crowded ballroom, but this steely and steady appraisal from across the room seemed a bit different. She forced herself to stare at her dance partner's powder blue shoulder as she swung past on the lift of the music. Then stole a look.

Who was he?

She did not know the man, that was sure. He was a recent arrival in Paris, she had learned that much with a few dropped hints and some gentle social probing. No one seemed to really know the tall man who lounged so casually in the corner. None of those she had talked to even knew his name.

Men, she thought with a flash of pure irritation. If the dark-haired stranger wanted to stare, let him. But it was infinitely more awkward to slip out unobserved if she knew an unrelenting pair of male eyes were fastened on her every move. She bit her lip in consternation and absently moved her body in time to the music.

Her young suitor, in blissful ignorance of her dilemma, swept her into the next steps of the intricate dance. Her partner was a soldier, of course, it seemed they all were. Good-natured and fair-haired, he was the second son in a prominent family and had been more than attentive since their first meeting a

few weeks before. He was going to propose to her, Brittony knew this with a dismal feeling in the pit of her stomach. She had been artfully avoiding the moment all evening with a skill honed by nearly two years of Parisian society.

“The music is ending.” His voice held both hope and a *fait accompli*. His fingers tightened around her hand and frank blue eyes stared down at her in admiration. “Perhaps we could find a private place...”

Brittony gave a playful smile, cutting him off by exclaiming brightly, “I’m so warm. The room is terribly close, don’t you think? I wonder if I could have a glass of champagne?” A languid glance from underneath her lashes produced the desired effect. Immediately.

“Of course, of course.” His face showed instant concern and delight at the opportunity to please. He all but shoved her into a vacant chair in his haste to find her refreshment. Small prickles of guilt ran along Brittony’s bare arms as she watched him hurry away and be swallowed by the vast throng.

He was a nice young man. There were scores like him; eager, ardent, charming. Yet somehow she couldn’t feel any spark of excitement, that special something which she was beginning to think was more legend than reality. She wasn’t interested. Not in him, not in any of the others.

Fanning herself idly, she glanced around. In one way, she had not lied. The room was infernally hot, stifling her with the smell of perfume, smoke, and sweating bodies. She would be feeling the urge to escape no matter what the circumstances—and she had an appointment to keep.

The music began again. Brittony stood, gathering her skirts, determined to edge toward the balcony doors with their promise of freedom and sweeter air. Flattening herself against a wall to avoid a passing footman laden with a tray of empty glasses, she wondered if she were still being watched.

Brittony paused at the thought, the pale pink silk of her high-waisted gown gathered in her damp palms. She scanned

the crowd anxiously, but her tenacious admirer was apparently gone or in one of the gaming rooms. Stamping down the uneasy notion that she would be more comfortable if she actually knew where he was, she unobtrusively slipped outside.

It was a beautiful night, a change from the cold sullen rain of the past week. A black sky gleamed with icy stars and velvet air caressed her skin. Somewhere, a fountain sang in a shimmer of watery music. The ugliness of the sprawling city surrounding the mansion did not exist in this garden oasis. Brittony strolled across the flagstones of the terrace in real enjoyment and feigned nonchalance.

She had not seen Robiere in three days. Her fear that he would not keep their meeting became a tangible tightening in her stomach. Brittony was worried. Infinitely worried. And there had been no message in response to her own frantic missive. *God help us*, she prayed, restlessly pacing to the darkened edge of the terrace. Not even the faintest breath of wind touched her cheek.

It was possible that Robiere did not want to be seen, did not want to risk the light and music. Glancing around, Brittony started down one of the shadowed paths. It was cool among the flowers and her skirts sent a rain of petals as she hurried past banks of fragrant blooms. The scent wafted upward, sweet and poignant. Childhood had smelled like that, she thought in a jag of swift, painful memory. The summer grass of the family estate in Berkshire, the breeze off the lazy river, and her mother's delicate perfume. Her fingers clenched tighter in her skirts and she felt a constriction in her throat.

Bittersweet, such memories were. And her father had written again to demand she sail for home. And for the third time, she had ignored the request.

He was undoubtedly furious by now.

A soft sound, a footstep on the path behind her, made her stop and swing around, instinctively taut and ready for flight. She searched the shadows.

“Evening, mademoiselle.”

A tall figure seemed to materialize in front of her. In the gloom of the surrounding trees and plants he looked giant and rather spectral. A shiver of warning crawled up her spine as Brittony recognized the stranger who had been ogling her so intently all evening. Moonlight gleamed off of dark hair and lit his features into a sardonic mask of chiseled angles and shadows. He was not smiling.

She stiffened. “You startled me, sir.”

“This is a liberty, of course. I know we have not been properly introduced.” His voice was smooth and slightly mocking. And profoundly English.

“Indeed,” she agreed haughtily, trying to mask her panic with affront.

He smiled then, a flash of white teeth in the dark. “Does that notion make you nervous?”

“What notion?”

“That I chose to follow you outside even though we have never met.”

It did, of course. Brittony felt her heart dancing like a flame in a drafty room. First the penetrating scrutiny of the ballroom, then this meeting in the gardens. She said nothing.

The eyes that watched her were veiled and unreadable. “If so, maybe you should avoid lonely paths in deserted gardens, mademoiselle.”

She had to get rid of him.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she lent her voice an icy air and made as if to brush past him. To her horror and surprise, he stepped sideways to block her path. She stopped, shocked.

“Sir.” Her voice stammered slightly. She felt a chill, suddenly aware of her vulnerability.

His formal evening wear blended disconcertingly with the background of leaf and shadows. His height became more imposing as he loomed over her. “I’m afraid I couldn’t wait for formality, Miss Ashland,” he said. “The truth is that I came out

here to give you some advice.”

Darkness, warm sweet evening air, the glimmer of stars above. They stared at each other for a long second.

Jonathan Wakefield thought with cynical observation that her expression was priceless. Obviously the young lady before him was headstrong, which he'd heard, and beautiful, which he'd heard also. She was also intelligent enough to realize her danger. Eyes widening like a frightened doe, she'd gone rigid at the sight of his body firmly in her way. The dark isolated regions around them lent little comfort to a woman alone with a stranger.

Considering the volume of the music from the house, they might as well have been alone in the middle of an empty field.

“Advice?” The words sputtered out finally as she gazed upward.

Beautiful, and willing to ride a bluff. He smiled lazily at her face, noting the delicate bone-structure, the dangerous tilt of a stubborn chin, the high brows that arched like wings. Dark eyes? He couldn't make their color but thought them blue. All in all a lovely combination. He nodded and blandly amended his statement, “Good advice.”

“Who are you?” Her voice went high as she took an involuntary step backwards. At least Jonathan thought it was involuntary. She struck him exactly as the type of spoiled young woman who wouldn't want to give an advantage easily. Not that she was as cool as she seemed. Not by a long chalk. He watched dispassionately as her hands made fists in her skirts, crushing the fragile silk.

He spoke slowly, “I'm a friend.”

“You are a stranger who has accosted me in the garden.”

He bowed. “Very good, Miss Ashland. Lesson one, never trust disreputable gentlemen who follow you into darkened gardens.”

In angry amazement, she responded, “It is not your concern what I do.”

“To my gravest ill-luck, it is.”

“What do you mean? Who are you?” She looked even more astonished, her lovely mouth parted and trembled, the moonlight pouring across her hair like silver gilt.

“I’ve told you, a friend. I have also been cursed with the task of trying to persuade you to see reason.” He lifted an eyebrow in a cynical gesture of reproof. “I’m supposed to remind you that while Paris may glitter, your roots lie in the more sedate pleasures of London. In other words, go home, Miss Ashland.”

“Why?” The question was flat. It was as if she sensed his reluctance for his task, his distaste for the entire project.

“My dear child,” his tone was deceptively mild, “England and France are hovering on the brink of all out war. Surely even the elite salons of Paris are aburst with this news?”

Anger sparked the clear depths of those magnificent eyes. She took a deep breath. “I did not ask why I should *leave* here, sir. I merely want to know why you feel an obligation to persuade me to do so.”

She was no simpering idiot. Nor a brainless doll. He eyed her flushed face with due attention and decided that the plain truth would do. “Your father is worried about you,” he said abruptly.

Brittony Ashland stiffened. “You said you were a friend. Of his?”

He shrugged. “Close enough.”

“He sent you to France?”

“You flatter yourself. I’m here on business. Why else would an Englishman travel to Paris at this time? I agreed to at least try to make you see reason. I understand he has made his wishes clear.”

The fountain flowed softly in the background and a night bird sang somewhere.

“How noble you are, Mr... ?” Her voice echoed hollowly.

Jonathan felt the ghost of a smile touch his lips. “Nobility

is an overrated attribute. I simply came to deliver a message, Miss Ashland. I repeat, go home.”

Again it came, that defiant tilt of her shapely chin. “Your duty is done then, sir. Good evening.”

So this was what Richard Ashland was up against. Jonathan watched her once again try to move past him, her shoulders drawn back with intent. He waited a moment before reaching out to grasp her wrist, holding her tightly and without remorse. The moonlight bleached her face like bone. The scent of dying roses hung heavy and sweet in the night.

He said roughly, “This little game Robiere St. Claire is playing, stay away from it.”

She gasped, beginning to struggle. “I’m sure I don’t know what—”

“If you don’t,” his tone was scathing, “you are a little fool.” He released her, watching her back away and rub her slender wrist.

Then he turned on his heel and stalked away. He could tell Sir Richard he had tried. That was all. He strode up the path toward the mansion. As the lights came into view, he stopped suddenly, reluctant to go back inside and face the false gaiety, the overplayed *joie de vivre* of the wealthy crowd, the defiant enjoyment in the face of imminent war. Miss Ashland was welcome to Paris and all that French ambition, he decided irritably.

Damn the stubborn wench.

“Wonderful, wasn’t it, darling?” Aunt Eloise sighed. “Just so wonderful and gay. So many of the old families there.” She settled her plump shoulders against the upholstery of the fashionable coach and squirmed with delight.

Brittony forced a smile, knowing she really didn’t have to participate for her aunt to continue the conversation. Eloise doted on the complexities of social prominence and the intrigues of the wealthy and noble-blooded, relishing each

whisper of scandal like it were a luscious after-dinner treat. Luckily for Brittany, her aunt's frivolous good-nature and social consequence had allowed her to be accepted in the inner circles by the elite of Parisian society. That, and the considerable fortune Aunt Eloise's wealthy husband had left her. Without Eloise, Brittany would have never been allowed the adventure of the past two years.

Adventure...

The carriage lurched through a pungent puddle and Eloise muttered a word which no true lady should know, much less say aloud. Brittany's brittle smile softened a small degree with a twinge of welcome amusement.

The older lady pulled a scented handkerchief quickly from a small lace-trimmed reticule and plunged it over her nose, grumbling about the filthy habits of the French peasants. Brittany barely restrained herself from pointing out that since the revolution not twenty years past, there were supposed to be no peasants. Or aristocrats either. Only citizens.

Yes, Robiere's passion was certainly compelling. And catching. He had indoctrinated Brittany well, charming her easily with his notions of equality and freedom. She shifted her shoulders against the sway of the coach on the cobbled streets and compressed her mouth in worry. Political alliance aside, the St. Claire family was old and respected and Aunt Eloise had been delighted in their youngest son's interest in Brittany. Despite his suspect loyalties. The two had been nearly inseparable since Brittany's arrival in Paris two years before.

Brittany dared not imagine why he had never shown up at the ball that evening.

Where was he?

Her heartbeat quickened as she pondered the incident in the garden while she had waited so nervously for Robiere. The boldness of the stranger made her fume inwardly, yet she maintained a calm facade in response to Aunt Eloise's mindless chatter over food and clothes. The very audacity of some

oafish English stranger to follow her, to give her unwanted advice about her sojourn in France, and then to actually touch her! The man's condescending implication that she was unaware of the political ramifications of her delay in leaving for home had been too much. She had practically drawn blood to keep her tongue still.

When would men not assume women mindless chattel?

"...didn't see him, darling." Aunt Eloise paused delicately and waited for an answer.

"Who?" Brittony asked blankly.

Her aunt looked at her. Despite her chubby, rosy-cheeked appearance, Eloise was still attractive in a childish way at fifty. Her bobbed curls bounced above a pleasant face that did not belie her disposition. But she was not as insipid as she seemed and Brittony had learned shortly after her arrival in France that her aunt was actually quite difficult to fool.

"Robiere, darling." Eloise looked perplexed.

"He didn't attend."

"My very point." Her aunt widened her eyes in a guise that had tricked the less wary into damning confessions. "So... where was he?"

It was an excellent question. One that had kept Brittony awake the night before. He had missed much more than one party. He'd been gone for days. She moved on the seat in a practiced shrug.

"Is he ill?"

"I wouldn't know." Brittony casually arranged her silk skirts.

"You would know." The statement held solid conviction and hope that a suitable match was indeed possible.

Brittony sighed. Her aunt would never relinquish the dream of such an advantageous marriage. Robiere hadn't helped either, encouraging her aunt's aspirations by acting the lover and calling on Brittony so often.

Right now, Brittony felt like murdering him for causing her

such worry.

If he wasn't dead already.

“He said he would be there, but he wasn't,” she spoke lightly, taking a wicked bit of delight in Eloise's chagrined expression. “Perhaps there's a young lady who has stolen his interest away from me? Even now he might be pining for her, standing under her window and staring at the glass with his heart in his eyes.”

“Nonsense.” Eloise looked clearly appalled—and diverted. Her full bosom heaved as she fanned herself violently with her handkerchief. “He fell in love with you the moment he saw you.”

Brittony felt a little sick, hiding her expression in a cough. “Robiere tosses the word love about like a soiled neckcloth. It means nothing.”

“I know a smitten young man when I see one,” Eloise declared stoutly, grunting as they rounded a corner in a jarring lunge. The night flew past the carriage as they rumbled on, all smoking lights and warm damp air. The streets were still crowded with clattering hooves and squeaking wheels.

Brittony's hands momentarily clenched a strap for balance, then dropped to her lap, hiding her nervousness under the folds of her gown. Glancing up, she caught Eloise regarding her thoughtfully, her small mouth pursed like a child which had tasted something sour.

Quickly, Brittony looked away.

“What's wrong, darling? Is it Robiere?” Eloise asked the question slowly, as if with great reluctance.

Dear Aunt Eloise didn't want to know the answer to that question, Brittony thought cynically. The woman would have had to be blind to not know that her willful niece was not always where she said she would be.

“Nothing is wrong,” Brittony lied glibly enough, sparing her aunt the truth. She saw the relief on the older woman's face, and with resignation hated herself for all the worry she had undoubtedly caused since her arrival in France.

After the death of her beloved husband, Eloise had been devastated, even contemplating leaving her adopted country for the serene green of her native England. Brittony's idea for a visit to Aunt Eloise had been greeted with delight by all parties. Brittony was able to escape her mother's over-bearing guidance, and Eloise had a companion and distraction from her sorrow. Of course, Aunt Eloise had expected a young ingenue whom she could launch into society. Her aunt had gotten instead a stubborn and gawky girl of seventeen bent on freedom and an odd notion of female equality.

At nineteen, Brittony now had polish and grace, and it was her aunt who was to be commended. Eloise had coerced, pleaded, and persuaded. Brittony in turn had opposed, stubbornly refused, and graciously declined the idea of fancy dressmakers and elite parties. But Eloise had been adamant about a debut into society. And, in the end, her aunt had gotten her way, but only so far. Brittony might dance, dine and even flirt, but she felt no interest whatsoever in marriage.

The carriage pulled to a halt, rocking gently. The door opened promptly, held by a young footman named Leon. He helped Eloise's not inconsiderable bulk out and down the step and then politely offered Brittony his hand, keeping his face as impassive as possible. Brittony gave him a questioning look but her only answer was a brief shake of his head.

No message, then. Her heart sank a shade lower. Robiere made a habit of sending messages through young Leon, who was trustworthy and passionately republican.

She followed her aunt's bustling figure into the brilliantly lit townhouse, across the polished foyer and straight into the yellow salon where Eloise discarded her wrap and chattered brightly about the party. The inevitable glass of sherry would have to be poured and endured, a habit retained from when Eloise and her husband drank together before bed. Brittony knew better than to resist the ritual.

It had been the small concessions which had won her more

time in France. She narrowed her eyes and accepted the glistening glass of sherry with an idle hand. Return to England would mean a London season and the consequent suitable marriage. She meant to avoid both as long as possible—no matter what some stranger advised—and Eloise was easier to manipulate than her mother. Leaning back in her chair, she let exhaustion tug her shoulders down, taking a delicate sip from her glass and trying to keep Robiere out of her mind.

“... some shipping business, I think,” Eloise chattered on, her button eyes bright with delight over some tidbit of backhanded interest. “You could hardly help notice him, he was so terribly tall and had such unusual eyes. And of course,” a shrug, “he dresses like an Englishman.”

Brittony felt like she had been pricked by a sharp pin, her attention jerked sharply into focus. “Who?”

“Why, the man with Comte de Verlaine. The Englishman with the silver eyes.”

Staring at her aunt, Brittony almost laughed. She had tried to pry the man’s name out of her hostess and gotten nowhere. Why hadn’t she thought to pounce on her aunt right away? To go straight to the pulse of the gossip chain herself?

Very carefully, Brittony set her sherry down on a delicately carved table. “Yes, I saw him. He was... rather hard to miss. Who is he?”

Eloise waved her glass in an airy gesture. “No one knows much. His name is Wakefield. Or something like that—he’s over on business, or no doubt he wouldn’t be here at all. He didn’t look much like he was enjoying himself, did he?”

“I didn’t notice.” It was a lie.

Pettishly, Eloise said, “The English are fleeing Paris like rats from a sinking ship.”

“No one wants to be trapped in the midst of that Corsican’s murderous ambition.”

Eloise looked briefly troubled. “Your words, darling, or Robiere St. Claire’s?”

Brittony stiffened, just slightly. In the candlelight she knew her expression was shadowed and she hid the rebellious tilt of her chin in the pretense of picking up her glass. “Mine or his, does it matter?”

“His father is worried,” Eloise said it frankly, broaching the subject shunned earlier. “You know I would prefer to talk of love, life, and frivolity. Not possible insurrection, treason, or—other unpleasantness. But perhaps you need to hear this. Robiere is so young. He has not been completely circumspect when he speaks of the new regime.”

“He lost an uncle and a grandfather to the guillotine. Yet he still believes in a Republican France.” The words were quiet but Brittony could not hide her own passion for equality and freedom.

“He would do better to believe in such ideals in private.” The older woman, who had dealt with the changing climate of her adopted country for over a decade, spoke with equal dignity.

Brittony took a deep breath and stood, silken skirts swirling around her. “It’s very late and I’m to bed, Aunt Eloise.” She bent to kiss to the proffered cheek, moving off toward the doorway.

“Brittony, my darling—”

She turned in the doorway. She truly was exhausted, her dress sticky and damp from all the dancing and frivolity.

Eloise looked pensive suddenly, pondering the glass dangling in her beringed fingers. “I’m wondering if I’ve been selfish keeping you here in Paris, dear. Your mother is anxious for you to return to England and I can’t help but wonder if it isn’t time for you to go home.”

Brittony nodded and turned away, tired beyond words, her throat jerking with emotion. Too late, she thought as she mounted the gracious curve of the carved stairway. It was past time for her to go home.

Chapter Two



The sound, soft as it was, brought her awake.

No more than the scrape of cloth as someone slid, panting and exhausted, over the sill of her open window. Harsh breathing filled the air even as Brittony registered the intrusion into her bedroom, her heart beginning to pound in panic and fear.

She lay motionless, the coverlet up to her waist, her eyes blinking to focus.

A figure stood, swaying. The moonlight framed each detail in diabolical display: the pallor of a face that was drawn and set, the mess of dark disheveled hair, the bloodied hand clamped to his abdomen.

The nightmarish figure was no stranger.

He began to totter like a drunkard. His knees began to buckle. She choked back a scream, and whispered, “Robiere,” his name a low cry, a prayer.

She scrambled out of bed in a state of *dishabille*, pushing back the loose hair which tumbled around her shoulders. Her arms went around him to try and break his fall, his weight a staggering burden, her grip slipping from blood-covered flesh. Together they staggered, met the edge of the bed and lost total balance, then fell to the floor. She was already crying, she could feel the warm trickle of tears down her cheeks as she hovered above Robiere’s prone body.

A sigh escaped his lips and she smelled the stark metallic essence of his blood bubble forth. “*Cherie...*” the ghost of a smile touched his pale lips, “this is not how I imagined I would gain entrance to your bedroom.”

A choked sob stuck in her throat. *How could he joke when there was so much blood?*

Frantically, she tried to pry his fingers from his wound. “Let me see... let me see...” Her tears fell faster, blurring her vision. Like a warm, autumn rain they dampened his face, his hair, his stained shirt.

He gasped, frothing the words, “I am dying.”

“No.” It tore from her throat aloud in a burst of denial and agony. “No!”

He smiled.

“Who—Robiere, you must tell me who—how could this happen?” Her lips numbly fumbled the words. Shock held her mind prisoner.

“They knew... the general... Mercier,” he tried to explain, his dark eyes imploring, staring up at her without blinking. “I would have been a scapegoat, an example held up to all—like d’Enghien.”

She understood with a chill. Only Robiere was truly guilty, whereas d’Enghien had been a victim, executed for a crime of treason which he had never committed.

“Oh, God.” She pressed on his wound, the dark blood welling uncontrolled beneath her fingers as she sobbed quietly.

“I must warn you,” for a moment he stopped, as if his tongue went thick and uncooperative in his mouth, “... had to tell you, get it out of France, Britt.”

“Don’t worry about me. You need help,” she declared raggedly.

“No.” Again the peaceful smile, smoothing the pain from his boyish features. “A priest.”

“No!”

“I love you.” It was simple, just a whisper. “I could not die

before I warned you.”

She swiped at her rushing tears with trembling fingers, ignoring her blood-stained hands. “How did they know?” she asked helplessly.

“Lamartine. It had to be him. I saw him... at the meeting point. The lying bastard of a traitor.” His breath rasped, coming hard through his nose and mouth. He was as white as her nightdress.

She shook. Her trembling hands pressed ineffectually on the river of dark liquid pouring from his wound.

“I was wrong,” he forced out the words hoarsely. “I was wrong to involve you, to use you... should have insisted... you stay out of it.”

“I wanted to do it,” she burst out passionately, sobbing openly. “Don’t you dare take responsibility for me, Robiere. And don’t you dare die!”

No answer. The boyish smile was fixed on his lips, his dark gaze fastened on her face with an intensity she had never seen before.

The room felt suddenly cold and empty.

He was gone.

There had been nothing else to do.

The pounding on the front door had started almost as soon as Brittony realized that Robiere was dead, and there had been perhaps five minutes between when she knew the police were in the house and when they burst into her room. They had allowed her a dressing gown and nothing else. She had been sent summarily from her own room and sat in the parlor, Eloise fluttering in agitation around her like a singed moth battering a window for escape.

Escape.

“Here, darling.” A brandy snifter was pressed into her hand. Brittony took it, clenching her fingers around the fat bowl of the glass. Eloise wasn’t going to let her drink alone

either, a solid dose of the same substance was poured into another glass and her aunt took a healthy swig that was more for nerves than appreciation of the fine quality of the beverage.

“Drink it.” Her aunt snapped the order. Resplendent in gold brocade and a high-necked nightdress, Eloise looked flushed and furious at the invasion of her home. Even the presence of an undeniably dead man in Brittony’s bedroom had no effect on her rigid affront.

Brittony obeyed, taking a cautious sip. The liquid burned like Hades going down, but it did light a small welcome fire in her belly that made her fingers tingle and her cheeks warm. She coughed slightly, and then took another sip.

“What on earth was he thinking?” Eloise burst out, pacing across the room like an enraged lioness. The satin covered walls were soft with candlelight, the bowls on the polished tables fragrant with fresh flowers. It was a civilized room; a lovely room with elegant paintings and an ancient Chinese vase perched next to the pianoforte. It was not a room that invited talk of murder, or betrayal, or war.

Brittony shifted in her soft chair and said irritably, “You mean as he was dying in my arms?”

“Don’t be pert. Of course, I don’t mean then. I mean to come here... to *crawl* into your bedroom, to compromise you in such a way!” The shrill tone rose.

Brittony’s chin tilted. She was tired, she was covered in blood that stiffened her gown and stained her hands. She was in no mood for a bout of hysterics. “He was not capable of compromising anyone, I assure you, Aunt Eloise.”

The older woman quivered and the brandy in her glass sloshed dangerously toward the rim. “How can you be light about this? Your virtue may not be compromised, but your reputation will be in tatters if anyone finds out he *died*,” the word came out in agony, “in your bedroom. To think your mother trusted me, depended on me.”

“Robiere is dead.” The words fell flatly, though a flash of

pain twisted in her stomach. “I find I cannot concern myself too much about my reputation at this time. Perhaps in the morning I will be more selfish. Give me time. As for my mother, she knows me, Aunt. The fault is mine. You’ll have no trouble convincing her of that.”

Plump lips shook. “Darling, I—”

“I know.” Brittony shook her head and tossed back the rest of her drink, gasping as it scored her throat. It did bolster courage, she decided. Contemplating the empty glass in her hand, she wondered what an entire bottle would do.

She needed courage. She needed more than courage. She needed luck. Or a guardian angel.

“I am sorry,” a chastened Eloise said more calmly “Robiere is dead. His poor father. That boy was his pride.”

His entire family, Brittony knew, would be devastated. They had known loss enough. His father had never been tolerant of his youngest child’s political rabble-rousing. There would be shame for the St. Claire family, as well as grief. *And Stephanie—God in heaven, Stephanie...*

Setting her empty glass aside, she hunched her shoulders and tightly wound her hands together. In his quest to warn her, Robiere had plunged her into one devil of a coil. The police upstairs searching her bedroom would want answers, and she was certain she could not give them.

How much could she say? How fine a line should she dance between innocence and the truth? It was well known that Robiere was courting her. Was that enough to justify the almost superhuman effort he expended to die in her arms?

Her fingers began to ache, she was gripping them so hard. For some reason the words of the cool Englishman with the gray eyes came to her.

This little game Robiere St. Claire is playing...

He had warned her. She had resented the question to her judgment. Now the rules of the game had turned deadly, and she might just be the fool he had suggested she was.

“Mademoiselle Ashland?”

She jumped at the cool voice coming from the doorway. Eloise turned and glared at the man who had spoken, her brandy reduced to a small puddle of gold in the bottom of her snifter.

“Yes?” Brittony did not have to feign her pallor or force her hands to tremble. “Is he—that is, have they?”

“The body is being removed now.” The inspector was a short man with a pencil mustache and clever eyes. He moved into the room, looking around. He was dressed decently, but the lavish surroundings obviously made him ill at ease and he glanced cautiously at an embroidered chair before evidently deciding to remain on his feet. “I have a few questions for your niece, Madame.”

“I trust you will be brief.” Aunt Eloise could sound regal when she wanted. “She has been through an unpleasant and distressing experience.”

“Yes,” he agreed, lifting a brow. “Indeed she has.”

There was a brief but crushing silence. Brittony sat, as composed as she could be under the circumstances, while the inspector seemed to weigh his questions with a troubled face. His duty, she knew, was to find out why a dead man lay in her bedroom, yet the situation was delicate. The St. Claire family would not be his only concern. Sir Richard Ashland, her father, was an important man in British government and outright war seemed a certainty at this point.

He finally chose as a beginning, “Do you know how Monsieur St. Claire came to be wounded, Miss Ashland?”

She could at least answer that question with truth. “No, he did not tell me,” her voice faltered, “he was unable to say much at all.”

The inspector shifted position, his face utterly stoic. “What exactly did he say?”

It was no act for Brittony to blanch visibly and allow her gaze to drop to her clenched hands. Her enveloping robe

covered her blood-stained nightdress. And her rapidly beating heart. "He said he loved me," she admitted in a low voice, "and that he knew he was dying."

"But not the circumstances in which he was wounded?"

"There was no time," Brittony said flatly, and that was also true enough. She could guess, though, how it had come about. Armand Lamartine was a Frenchman recently suspected of being a plant among the republican underground. If he had tipped off the French police about Robiere's insurgent activities, a trap could easily have been laid. They had been suspicious of Robiere for some time and Brittony had even gone so far as to make several contacts in his place to divert attention. It was general knowledge that the Emperor was incensed at the amount of political information leaking across French borders. He would deal swiftly and without mercy with anyone he considered a traitor to the current regime. Robiere, at a guess, in hiding for the past three days, had been wounded escaping arrest.

Poor Robiere. Idealistic and enthusiastic about equality for a people not yet ready to accept it. Like many dreamers before him, he died a martyr to his cause.

"I see." The inspector spoke again in that calm, emotionless voice. "He spoke of his feelings and his fatal wound. Did he give you anything, mademoiselle?"

"Give me anything?"

"Something he carried with him. A document, perhaps?"

It was the real test. The true measure. She knitted her brows and widened her eyes in some surprise. "What document?"

The inspector waved his hand, eyes narrowing. "What the paper contains does not concern you. All I am asking is if he gave it to you. If perhaps he asked you to conceal it for him."

"No-no, of course not," she managed to stammer her response. "He gave me nothing."

"Would you consent to having your person searched at this moment, mademoiselle?" he asked bluntly, no longer the

quiet-voiced officer but a man with a grim job and the will to do it, no matter the repercussions. The aristocracy still wielded social power in Paris but Brittany was not French. Robiere St. Claire being a known dissident did not help her cause. She knew well enough that the search of her bedchamber had unearthed nothing.

Eloise gasped in shock.

Brittany felt her face drain of color, then flush as warmth crept into her cheeks. She stared at him.

“I would be remiss if I did not make sure you are not hiding the document in question. If you have nothing to hide, this will satisfy me and I will be on my way.” The inspector’s voice was soft but his eyes were hard with purpose.

“Are you proposing to do this yourself, Inspector?” Brittany asked ironically, recovering her composure a little with the promise of getting rid of the police.

It was his turn to turn a dull red, the thin face tightening in displeasure. Eloise found her voice and began to sputter, “Of all the... I cannot allow... in my own home...”

“St. Claire was a traitor,” the inspector cut across in scathing tones. “And your niece is English. Her father is considered at this moment, Madame, to be an enemy of France.”

It was because her father was an advisor to the Foreign office. Because his specialty was military strategy. He had been knighted for his service to the crown. Brittany lifted her chin and met the inspector’s gaze with level pride. It had been a horrible evening, Robiere was dead, and she was not going to have hysterics over this particular request. If it would make everyone go away, she would gladly agree.

“I am only wearing my nightdress under this robe, Inspector,” she told him as steadily as she could, trying to ignore her aunt’s agitated breathing and fluttering hands. “I am hiding nothing. But if you wish to search me, search me.”

He gave a sharp nod and rose, going over to the doorway.

A young officer was standing there at attention and the inspector asked him gravely to go get one of the maids. He appeared a few seconds later with a terrified sallow-faced girl who had to be told twice what he wanted her to do and whose hands were shaking as she crossed the room. The inspector closed the door and turned his back to allow privacy for the search. Brittony slipped off her robe with as much dignity as possible and the kitchen maid ran fumbling callused hands up and down the folds of the blood-stained nightdress. Eloise was apparently speechless, still holding her glass in plump fingers and looking positively faint.

“Nothing, monsieur,” the maid blurted out and scrambled to retrieve Brittony’s robe for her. “Nothing but bare skin, I swear it by the Virgin.” She looked desperately at the door to the hallway.

“May I turn back around?” The inspector was polite to a fault.

“I am dressed.” Brittony clutched her robe comfortingly around her.

Turning back, he dismissed the young maid. She scampered for the door with such speed and fright as to be almost amusing, pulling it shut behind her with such haste that it bounced back open.

It would be all over the servant’s hall in minutes, Brittony knew it with some despair. But then, speculation was no doubt rife already.

The inspector bowed. “My apologies, Madame. Miss Ashland.”

There was a sound in the hall. A shuffling of feet and the low murmur of voices. Through the half open door, four men came into sight, carrying a burden between them, draped in a white bedsheet for decency.

Without ceremony, they were removing Robiere’s body.

It was so terribly final. Never again would he tease her, laugh at her, smile that boyish smile. The blood seemed to

drain slowly from Brittony's face, making her feel faint, and she groped for the chair behind her. She had thought herself over the initial rush of grief, and in control.

The inspector did not miss her momentary lapse, taking in the bloodless set of her features, the dilated eyes, the shaking hand that reached for support. She sat down slowly and lifted a tragic gaze.

He said, not unkindly, "St. Claire was from one of our finest families." His face was set and somber. "I will do my best to keep this entire matter as private as possible. For the sake of his father, and yours as well."

Brittony drew a deep breath. "Thank you." She had expected no kindness.

"He was still a traitor." He wasn't finished, the words falling starkly in the silken interior of the room. "And the Emperor is not likely to forget it. Perhaps you would be wise to seek your native country, Miss Ashland."

Perhaps she would, she thought bleakly.

The next day they arrested her.

They did not call it that, of course. She was being officially detained. A few questions, they assured a weeping and utterly distraught Eloise. Brittony would be back in her aunt's care as promptly as possible. Brittony replaced her fork quietly beside her plate and rose from the luncheon table on legs that felt like sodden wood. She had been struggling with her meal anyway, having received a tearful, accusing visit from Robiere's sister that morning.

Stephanie St. Claire had been hysterical, white-faced with rage and distress over her beloved brother's death; a reed-thin spinster who had invested her whole life in managing the St. Claire household and who obviously viewed Brittony as the snake in Eden. She had been more than devoted to her brother, she'd been almost obsessive of his affections. The entire scene had been very ugly and upsetting.

Brittony was still shaking when Stephanie spun herself out of the front door only to have the inspector appear instead.

She had grossly underestimated him the night before, she decided as she stood there. This had caught her unawares.

“It’s raining,” she kept her voice without inflection, turning her head to look out the leaded panes of the dining room window and clenching her trembling hands. True enough, rain fell drearily from gray and sooty skies.

“We will allow you your cloak, mademoiselle.” The inspector was polite and unsmiling. If he was enjoying his task, he hid it well. Two younger men had come with him and they were frankly staring as she calmly ordered a servant to retrieve her cloak from the hall. It was not particularly reassuring when the inspector explained gravely that he had argued against the official move, convinced that if St. Claire had ever possessed the document, he had ditched it somewhere rather than let it be found on his person. The inspector relayed to his superiors that he had been convinced that Miss Ashland didn’t have the document in question. Not only had he personally searched her bedchamber and had her person searched, but she had stepped in St. Claire’s blood which had puddled all over the floor and drenched her nightdress. Yet he had seen no sign of her leaving the room in a panic to hide the document anywhere else.

Apparently they had not listened to him.

The arrest was regretful, he said, but... a Gallic shrug suggested he must follow his orders.

Eloise stood so quickly that she disturbed her chair and it tipped to the floor. “This is beyond excuse,” she whispered.

“It is out of my hands.”

“What nonsense. I’ll send for—”

“Send for whoever you wish, Madame.” His tone turned like ice.

She stopped mid-breath, her plump face showing fear. “Good God, this is my sister’s child. To think I thrust Robiere

at her in hopes of a brilliant marriage.” Her hands went to her face as she moaned.

“Mademoiselle?” The footman shifted uncomfortably, returning to the room and holding her wrap.

“I’m ready.” Brittony stood woodenly as one of the young officers hastened to help settle her dark blue cloak around her shoulders. Her aunt’s agitated breathing rose to gale force proportions as she watched the three men lead her away.

Grave-faced, the footman moved to close the door behind them.

“Stop!” Brittony could hear Eloise order in a quavery voice. “I’m sending a message and I want it delivered immediately.”

“Yes, Madame.”

It was a cell. No matter what they called it, it was a cell.

Dark and dank. The brick floor was uneven and a smell of boiled cabbage and unemptied chamber pots filled the air. Brittony felt her stomach churn as the door closed behind her and the key scraped in the lock. In this place you could not tell if it was still raining outside. No windows, no air. Every day would feel like the breath of winter, no matter the season. Like the world was nothing but desolate skies and chill winds.

She shivered and stood, clutching the welcome folds of her cloak about her, trying desperately not to feel the bite of fear.

Of loneliness.

The space held one rickety chair and an equally decrepit table. She crossed to sit in the old chair, fighting back a surge of despair. She hadn’t bargained for this, hadn’t prepared for it. The game had skidded out of control and there were new rules she did not know how to follow. The inspector had left last night because he seemed convinced of her innocence. Yet he had come back this noon with reluctance and brought her to this awful place.

Why?

Oh God—why?

What did they suspect?

She swallowed convulsively and shut her eyes.

And Stephanie. Ranting with grief, pointing her skinny fingers, staring with accusatory eyes. *Robiere influenced me*, she had wanted to scream in her defense, not the other way around. She was the one under scrutiny now and he wasn't there to help, like she thought he would be... if she ever needed him—

There was a rattle and the grate of the key. The jailer who had locked the cell, his unshaven face alive with undisguised interest and lust, came into the tiny room. Brittony stood quickly and backed away.

“Are you faring well, Miss Ashland?” To her infinite relief, the inspector's voice followed the disgusting man inside. The inspector himself stood in the doorway, taking in her drawn face. He said sharply to the jailer, “Leave us.”

The man limped out, smirking. Brittony stood silent, willing the tears not to come. The inspector said again, “Are you well?”

“No,” she responded unsteadily. “I have been frightened and imprisoned. And I don't even know why.”

His expression did not lighten. “You are about to find out.”

“Am I?” Her fingers tightened on her cloak.

“Come with me, Mademoiselle Ashland.” He acted as if this were a request, when in truth it was not. He even held the door of the cell for her, as if it were an ordinary door. She let him usher her along the cold corridor, only halting when led into a large room, perhaps an office.

Five men sat in chairs against a wall.

Her knees went weak. Her mouth felt dry. All five men stared at her with varying expressions.

She recognized one of them with sick foreboding. Another with true fear. Three of them were strangers.

Her eyes inadvertently met those of Armand Lamartine. Traitor, Robiere had called him. Lying bastard. There was no mistaking the cold ruthless triumph in those glittering dark

eyes. Lamartine had a thin face, a cruel, civilized mouth, and an impassive way of imparting his will over those surrounding him. Robiere had never trusted the man, not even when Lamartine had drifted into the ranks of the republican underground. Brittony had never trusted him either, but for different reasons. He had courted her just after she had arrived in Paris two years ago.

And though the man's family was old and the fortune impressive, even Aunt Eloise had approved of Brittony's instinctive refusal. Lamartine had never once even hinted at a thirst for revenge.

Revenge. If he desired it, he was having it now.

She stood, trembling, and raised her chin.

Chapter Three



The general was a big man with a florid face and a very real air of power and force. His eyes were prominent and light blue, his body settling heavily into middle age, and the epaulets on his uniform glistened in the pale light from one dim window.

He looked like a formidable opponent.

“We regret this inconvenience, mademoiselle.” His words were very correct, though his English had a heavy accent.

Brittony managed a nod, her head feeling as if it were manipulated by puppet strings.

They had not offered her a chair. Indeed, there didn’t seem to be a spare one that she could see. In this room, apparently prisoners were questioned on their feet. She deliberately relaxed her hands and tried to school her expression to polite interest. It was a measure of the depth of her plight that five men sat while she stood.

“I am General Mercier,” he informed her slowly, watching her face for a reaction. “And I believe you know Monsieur Lamartine.”

“Yes,” she agreed with full irony.

The other three men were not introduced. They wore military uniforms in varying degrees of rank and color. One was quite young, with smooth, unblemished skin, fair hair, and

the single epaulet of a captain. The other two were older, sober-faced and unsmiling.

Brittony suppressed a shiver of fear running along her spine like a cold finger. This was not hopeless, she quickly reminded herself. Eloise had influence and she was herself, after all, the daughter of Richard Ashland. If anything happened to her, it would be an international incident.

Of course, if the Emperor was going to invade England, he could choose her as a firing pin.

“We have some questions. I’m sure you are not surprised. The events of last evening are somewhat—shall I say, awkward for you, Miss Ashland. They put you in a position of some suspicion.” Thick eyebrows raised, the general seemed to be pondering an inner question.

“Suspicion of what?” Thank God her voice was even. At least she sounded brave and unconcerned. The fact that her heart was ricocheting against her ribs with tortuous violence was hopefully not apparent in her demure expression.

“Collusion. Of assisting St. Claire in his efforts to undermine the French government. Do you deny this?”

“Of course I do.” She could not keep the cynicism out of her voice. “Even if I were guilty as sin, I am not a fool. Robiere did have republican beliefs, he often spoke of his desire for a truly free France. One that abolished the classes and allowed each man to be counted for his own worth.”

“What drivel,” Armand Lamartine murmured, idly studying his fingernails.

The general ignored him. “And to achieve this ideal he sought to topple the current regime, as the Terror toppled the monarchy in 1792?”

“He was one man, barely more than a boy. How could he topple a government?”

“He was a known republican. He was not alone.”

“Not every republican is a spy, surely?” Brittony lifted one brow in an arch.

“But many are.” The general was not to be deflected. “And we know St. Claire was involved in a plot to steal an important document and forward it toward England. He was shot trying to escape arrest at a known rendezvous. He had been in hiding for some days.”

The room seemed suddenly chill. Brittony was conscious of the weight of her cloak on her shoulders and fought the urge to pull it tighter around her. “What document?”

“That is the business of the French government.”

With a shrug, she said, “Robiere gave me nothing. The first I heard of this infamous document was last evening when the inspector mentioned it.” She flushed convincingly, remembering his request to have her bodily searched.

The young captain shifted slightly in his chair. He was clearly not unmoved by her self-possession. “*Mon General*, if the police searched her room and her person... I cannot see where this is going.”

Lamartine leaned forward. “Don’t be fooled by pretty words from a pretty mouth, Captain.” The black eyes narrowed. “Miss Ashland is every bit as devious as her dead lover. Remember how long we tracked St. Claire and his infamous little society? I have watched the two of them weave their treacherous webs for years now. Brittony and I are very old friends, aren’t we, my dear?”

The implication was clear; that they had once been intimate. He adjusted the lace at his sleeve with a languorous motion of a white long-fingered hand, smiling slightly. Brittony said nothing, feeling quite faint. She had always felt revulsion in his presence, yet never could explain just why. Watching him now, with his sneering mouth and flat black eyes, she began to understand why Robiere had insisted that instincts often worked better than intellect when judging human nature.

Mercier frowned, his heavy face somber. “St. Claire was passed the document, this we know.” He spread his broad hands in a wide gesture to emphasize his words. “He sought

you out even though he must have realized his wound was mortal. I find it hard to believe that he would not mention this thing for which he had sacrificed his life.”

The tension between her shoulder blades began to make her whole body ache. Brittony lowered her lashes and spoke softly, “Robiere was in love with me. He came to my room because he wanted to say good-bye. He—he spoke only words of regret and passion. He did not even tell me how he came to be shot.”

There was silence. The two men who had not spoken sat like statues. Mercier looked dissatisfied, the young captain troubled. She kept her gaze averted from Lamartine.

Eventually, the general said, “Very well.”

Relief flooded through her body. “I can go?”

Her joy was short-lived. The answer was a cold, “I’m afraid not.”

“I don’t understand.” Her throat suddenly clogged with fear.

“We haven’t found the document.” Mercier’s face made it obvious that his duty came first. If this was war, the fate of one young girl would have to be measured against the fate of his nation. Unfortunate, but he was apparently a man of strong principle. “I’m sorry, Mademoiselle Ashland, I have no choice.”

“I must stay... here?”

“Not at all. This is no place for a gently bred lady. The guards are untrustworthy. It is damp and there are rats. Other arrangements have been made.” The pale eyes were unrelenting.

Lamartine was the first to stand, his thin mouth twisted in a chilling smirk. His expression struck dread into her very soul. The blood in her veins seemed to freeze and cease to flow.

“Where are you sending me?” Her whisper was thin and lost in the cold room.

The General also stood. “Suitable arrangements have been made by Monsieur Lamartine.”

“No!” Brittony gasped in horror.

Leaping to his feet, the young captain said in protest, “*Mon*

General...” His fair face was infused with heat. Apparently he too had heard it was rumored that the man had peculiar sexual appetites, including violence against women.

But Lamartine’s black reputation was not believed by all, or else Mercier chose to ignore the dark whispers.

“He and I struck a bargain, Captain.” The general looked toward where the rain streaked the tiny window. His face was implacable. “He delivered us St. Claire.”

And now Brittony was to be handed over to Lamartine. Heavy footsteps sounded hollow on the bare floor as the general left the room. She watched the two other men follow him out. The captain hovered uncertainly, his natural chivalry apparently fighting with his duty. In a moment, he, too, left the room.

A quiet laugh echoed eerily against the stone walls. Lamartine stood with his arms folded, all lean black height and imperious hauteur. His coal black hair was tied back from his sallow face with a length of scarlet ribbon, his long chin emphasizing thin lips and pitiless eyes. He was not yet thirty but looked much older, tiny broken blood vessels threading his pale cheeks in evidence of his self-indulgent lifestyle.

“The insult is to be avenged,” he said, baring his teeth. “Once you refused my offer of marriage, now you will grovel at my feet.”

The room rose and seemed to spin. Brittony held on, willing herself to stay calm, to hold on to her consciousness. She inhaled the dank air and let the world settle. It seemed incredible that this man would have gone to such lengths, including spying, betrayal, and even murder, to get even with her.

“You betrayed Robiere,” she said starkly. “You do not possess a single shred of patriotic feeling, you simply desired revenge. If there is any justice, it will be you who pays for your sins.”

Lamartine clicked his tongue. “Such spirit, my dear. I enjoy a bit of fight. I’m looking so forward to our first night together.” His gaze glittered as he inspected her body with

undisguised animal hunger.

Her voice felt strangled in her throat. She echoed Robiere's dying words. "You lying bastard of a traitor."

"Bastard?" He chuckled in feigned shock and brushed a speck of imaginary dust from his immaculate velvet coat. "Such language from a lady, my dear. And I assure you not. My name and fortune came to me in quite the usual way. You made a poor choice, of course, when you refused to become my wife."

"Mademoiselle?" A voice spoke.

Gratefully, she whirled around. It was the inspector, his face as expressionless as ever, standing in the doorway behind her. "I'll take you back to the holding room until you are ready for your departure."

Lamartine bowed deeply. "Until later, my dear."

The inspector did not move a single muscle in his face, but in his eyes Brittony saw that her fate had been sealed. It was no use to appeal her plight. Numb, she followed him from the room.

The jailer plunked down a tray. "Something to eat, Ma'moiselle." His gaze insolently traveled down to her bosom and fastened there. She ignored him. Eventually, shrugging, he left.

She was cold. Desolate. Afraid.

What on earth had she done? Her eyes squeezed shut and a tear ran down one cheek. She brushed it away.

It was no use to deny her responsibility for her fate. It had started so innocently. Robiere, so boyish and charming, expounding his ideals of equality and listening to her own arguments and opinions with flattering interest. The plight of women in society, he agreed, was no less serious and shocking than the plight of the poor and the common. The Revolution might have attempted to abolish class privilege but it didn't matter in a country where people who held land and wealth

still wielded all the power. Brittony, fired by her own aversion to making the advantageous marriage that was literally the only acceptable future for a young woman in her position, found herself drifting into his circles.

Her family. She couldn't bear to think of them. Would they ever know what had happened to her? Lamartine was wealthy, depraved, and obviously more powerful than she had ever thought. He could hold her indefinitely and the war-torn world around them would never know. She had heard whispers about his past; whispers not put about in the elegant salons or the whirling energy of the ballrooms of Paris. He was accepted because of the ancient lineage of his family and the extent of his fortune. But only the truly reckless courted his company, usually restless young bloods who quested for interesting and less mundane sports. His last mistress had been found dead in her rooms in a fashionable section of town and there were rumors that Lamartine should have been charged with her murder.

Oh God, she choked back a silent sob.

The room started to close in, to smell worse, to be more damp. Yet this could be paradise compared to what was in store for her. She blinked swimming eyes, angrily dashing tears away with the back of her hand. Silken skirts brushed the filthy brick floor as she paced across the short expanse of the cell. Unused to defeat, unused to being helpless, rebellion and hope began to revive inside her. If Lamartine sought to subdue her, to break her spirit, he might be making a gamble with the devil. *Caution at what you wish for*, she thought grimly, *you just might get it*.

She was no idiot. She was resourceful. And he could be counted on to make the same mistake most men did. He would underestimate her just because she was female.

Hope. It rallied her.

There was a bottle of wine on the tray along with some unappetizing soup and a loaf of stale bread. The smell of the food was enough to make her shudder but the wine did not

look too bad. She had been given nothing, not even a sip of water, since she had been brought there. Walking back to the table, she poured some of the thin, sour beverage into the crude cup provided.

She was alone and in trouble, but not yet defeated. Raising her glass in a silent toast, she said aloud, "To you, Robiere. In my own way, I also loved you."

The wine tasted harsh. She drank the first glass with determination, though it did little to quench her thirst. She poured another. If Lamartine was going to drag her off for a midnight journey, she would at least numb her senses. The thought of his hands touching her made her shudder. Drinking more wine was the least she could do for herself, given the opportunity.

The very least.

The wine was drugged. By the time she realized it, too much had been consumed to repair the damage. It was like Lamartine to make sure she would be quiet and acquiescent on the trek he planned. Brittony stared at the cup in her hand, her slim fingers milk-white where they curled around it. Blinking did not clear her vision and the table seemed to tilt and move. The half-empty wine bottle gleamed ruby red in the sputtering light of one greasy candle.

Maybe it was just as well.

The door creaked open and the sound of rusting hinges registered dimly through her fog. She stood, or at least tried, turning clumsily and narrowing her eyes on the figure stepping inside and seeming to fill the tiny room. All she could make out was the tall silhouette of a menacing form.

Her wine cup fell, crashing against the sweating floor with a dull sound.

A curse was sent into the air, but softly.

"She's drugged," a disembodied voice said, "he's bent on taking her out of Paris tonight."

“Laudanum.” The word was snarled in a low tone. “I can smell the horrible stuff. Did she have to drink so much?”

“Wouldn’t you?” The dry cool voice spoke again.

“Probably. Especially if Lamartine was my fate.” It was a grim rejoinder. “Let’s get her out of this atrocious place.”

Brittony blinked again, trying desperately to focus. Hands reached out, grabbing her waist and tugging her forward.

“Can you walk?” A face was thrust very close.

Of course she could. What a question. She nodded. Or at least tried. Her neck muscles seemed to lose the impulse somewhere between brain and execution.

Another soft curse rang out. She felt an arm slide under her knees and another behind her shoulders. Her blue cloak billowed out as she was effortlessly lifted into the man’s arms. The softness of a velvet jacket grazed her cheek and she sighed, relaxing slightly. A smothered laugh stirred her hair.

“Our rebellious kitten has sheathed her claws for the moment. Lamartine may have done me a favor by drugging her. I wondered how much trouble I would have getting her to cooperate.”

“After this afternoon, believe me, she will be grateful. She is brave—but not a fool. No longer does she belong in France...” The voice became distant and Brittony could feel she was being carried. The man holding her smelled like soft leather, bayberry, and faintly of tobacco.

Familiar. Something about his voice teased her memory.

She knew him. She had a feeling she knew them both. Her mind was thick with the drug, flattened and useless.

Nothing mattered except that she was very, very tired.

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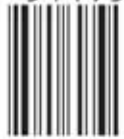
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