

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

TAKING A RISK ON LOVE

K. Mason

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

TAKING A RISK ON LOVE

By **K. Mason**

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two men, dressed in frock coats, with waistcoats underneath and lace cravats around their necks, stand facing each other. Both men have long dark hair, tied at the nape of the neck. The man on the right, whose face is clearly shown and who looks slightly younger than the other man, appears unhappy, as though he's explaining something to the man on the right. Behind them on the wall is a large, ornate, gilt edged painting, under which is a candlestick with three lit candles.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I would love to read a story set in a historical, or at least close to historical, setting in 18th century France, full of court intrigue, backstabbing and duels. I'd like them to be fashion-conscious for the times, but not too effeminate in personality.

Enemies to lovers?

Maybe one of them is an artisan baker, or party planner for the court?

Or an assassin sent to the court from another country?

Please no:

Military/Navy/Soldiers

No BDSM

Crossdressing as part of sex

Over the top angst

Please include:

HEA or HFN

explicit sexual content

Historically appropriate attitudes to sex

Thanks, <3

Sincerely,

Kat Merikan

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: student/tutor, France, duel, masquerade, inappropriate use of a chaise longue, outdoor groping, completely improper behaviour, wig abandonment

Word Count: 16,415

Acknowledgements

Firstly, thank you to K.A. for creating the prompt and giving me something new to think about and research.

A huge thank you to all of the organisers and volunteers of the Love's Landscapes Event for all the hard work you do.

As ever, thank you to my very wonderful beta readers and cheerleaders for their support when I was writing, particularly to Kaje, Kat and Elci for keeping me off the ledge when I started to believe I'd bitten off more than I could chew with this one.

And finally, to my research assistants, Master Alex and his subs, Lucas and Kat, for bravely acting out the smutty bits and taking notes, so that I was sure that they did actually work.

Author's Note

This is a new historical period for me to write about, and I have to admit the research was a bit of a crash course. The story was written in six weeks and as such there are going to be mistakes; these are mine alone and I hope that they don't detract the reader from the story.

TAKING A RISK ON LOVE

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Yves found his eyes straying regularly towards the ornate, and in his opinion extremely ugly, turquoise and gold clock on the mantelpiece. Watching as the hands moved ever closer to the hour mark. This week's edition of *La Gazette* lay open on the desk in front of him. Not that Yves had any interest in the propaganda from the court at Versailles, which it usually carried. But it was the only paper carrying articles about the recently re-discovered Roman city of Pompeii. At two minutes to the hour he gave up all pretence at reading. Staring fixedly at the clock, he silently urged the second hand to move faster. If the clock struck the hour before Christophe arrived for his morning lesson, then he had won their ridiculous wager. More importantly he wouldn't have to attend the masquerade being hosted by the Marquis de Guise at his residence, l'hôtel de Rohan, the following evening.

As the clock face counted down the seconds, Yves found himself holding his breath. Less than a minute to go and the bells of the Couvent Ste Croix de la Bretonnerie on the opposite side of the road would begin to peal. Forty-five seconds. Thirty seconds. From outside the room, Yves heard the sound of someone approaching down the corridor, at speed. Twenty seconds. The footsteps were falling faster and getting louder. Fifteen seconds. Yves looked from the clock to the closed door and back. Ten seconds. The footsteps stopped suddenly outside the door and the decoratively carved brass doorknob began to turn. Five seconds. Yves slumped back into his seat with a sigh as the door was pushed open and Christophe, more or less, fell into the room.

"*Merde!*" Yves swore under his breath, as Christophe shut the door behind him. The bells of the convent's chapel calling the sisters to prayer drowned out the chimes of the clock on the mantelpiece.

"*Bonjour, Yves,*" Christophe greeted him with a smile as he pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the desk. Adjusting the lace cuffs of his shirt, which extended below the sleeves of his moss green silk overcoat, he lowered himself onto the cushioned seat. Wisps of long brown hair had escaped from the clasp at the base of his neck and were framing his slightly rounded cheeks.

"Good morning, Christophe," Yves muttered with ill grace as he folded up the newspaper.

“Are we to continue with our translation of the *Aeneid*? I believe we were discussing the murder of Priam and the escape from Troy,” Christophe asked with feigned enthusiasm. Leaning forward he rested his forearms against the edge of the desk. His smile widened and his eyes sparkled as he sensed Yves’ annoyance.

“Of course.” Yves reached back to the shelves behind him for the large, leather bound volume of Virgil’s poem. He slid the book across the desk top towards Christophe. “We have two hours for study this morning. Then you have a fencing lesson with *Monsieur Olivier* before *le déjeuner*, which I understand from Henri will be taken with your father and *Madame Violette* in the informal dining room.”

Christophe’s groaned dramatically, letting his head thump down on the desk. “I don’t suppose there is any chance of me persuading you to join us for dinner?”

“None at all,” Yves replied with a smile. Whilst dinner with the Baron de Tulle was no hardship, his mistress was a vapid socialite whose interest extended only as far as the latest fashions, amusements, and gossip. What’s more, she did not approve of Yves. In her view, as the son of a vintner, he was of the trading classes and certainly not good enough to act as tutor and companion to her lover’s son.

“Please.” Christophe raised his head and stared at Yves with a pleading expression. “I’ll make it up to you. I’ll do anything; just don’t make me suffer through another dinner of having the virtues of ‘suitable young women’ whose acquaintance I should make pointed out to me.”

“Anything?”

“Yes, anything, name your price.”

“You’ll let me off this ridiculous wager? You won’t make me go to the masquerade tomorrow?” Yves countered immediately.

“No,” Christophe replied quickly, shaking his head. “That was part of a wager, it wouldn’t be right to renege on the outcome.”

“In which case, I’m afraid you are on your own for dinner. Now, shall we start with the translation?”

Yves sat back in his chair and watched as Christophe traced the long slender fingers of his left hand gently across the text, whilst with the right he dipped his fountain pen into the inkwell and slowly wrote out the translation.

It had been six months since Yves had taken up his position as both tutor and companion to Christophe. At nineteen, Christophe did not really need a tutor, but a bad attack of smallpox when he was twelve had left him very weak and with some damage to the sight in his left eye. As a result, his education had been put on hold for nearly two years while he recovered. His father had brought him to the Paris townhouse when he turned eighteen, leaving his mother and three younger siblings at the family home in Tulle. Though Christophe had made some friends amongst the sons of the noble families in the fourth *Arrondissement* where they lived, the Baron had become concerned at their somewhat wild ways and that they might be leading Christophe astray.

Yves had come to Paris from the family home in Bordeaux when he was just sixteen. Initially to complete his studies at *l'Académie française*, and afterwards employed by the *Bibliothèque du Roi*, as an archivist and assistant in the compilation of the great Encyclopaedia. During the ten years he had been in Paris, Yves had led a solitary life. He had rented a studio apartment on the second floor of a modest townhouse, in the not so glamorous area of the city, and outside of his work kept himself very much to himself. Whilst he had many acquaintances, he had very few friends. After six years though, the work he'd been doing was beginning to bore him, so it was something of a relief when his new patron, Charles de Breton, had suggested him as a tutor and companion for his friend Philippe de Valliot, Baron of Tulle's son.

Yves picked up the newspaper and turned his attention back to the article on Pompeii, but his mind kept wandering. Even the scratching of the metal pen nib across the paper distracted him. More than once he caught himself studying Christophe instead, noting how his head tilted to one side as he worked, his plump lower lip caught between his teeth as he concentrated on the translation. When Christophe suddenly glanced up at him, Yves flushed, heat rushing to his cheeks at having been caught staring. Quickly he looked away, but not before catching sight of the crooked grin that suddenly lit Christophe's face.

As the clock on the mantelpiece marked the passing of the first hour, Christophe laid his pen down with a sigh.

"Where are you up to?" Yves asked, folding away the newspaper he still hadn't managed to read more than a paragraph of.

"Aeneas has just returned to Troy for his wife, but she's been killed. Then there was something about her ghost telling him his destiny was to travel to the west and found a new city."

“Very good, and what do you think this represents?”

“That they’d all had a little too much wine. There are no such things as ghosts.”

Yves raised an eyebrow at this outburst, trying hard not to laugh. “It’s all symbolic, Christophe, much of the poem is to do with duty, piety and respect. It also deals with fate, and the predestination of man. What Creusa’s ghost is telling him is that he is destined to found a new city, that he has a duty to his family, his people, to do so. What do you think the omens that preceded...” Yves’ speech trailed off abruptly. “Christophe, are you listening to me? Christophe?”

“What? Oh—sorry—Yves.” Christophe blinked suddenly as he stammered out the words.

“Am I boring you?”

“Of course not,” Christophe lied cheerfully. “I was just wondering if you were this serious about everything. Or whether it was just the things you were passionate about.” There was a sparkle of mischief in Christophe’s eye as he said this. “What else are you passionate about Yves?” Christophe leant forward over the table towards him as he asked, his voice seeming unusually low.

“I don’t think that is really an appropriate question, Christophe. Do you?”

“No, it probably isn’t.” Christophe sat back up as he spoke, not looking at all abashed by the rebuke in Yves’ voice. “I’d still like to know though.” Christophe gave him a wicked grin as he finished.

“Back to the text, please.” Yves tried to sound stern, but choked slightly on the words; the look on Christophe’s face suddenly made him feel like a rabbit caught by a poacher’s lantern.

The lesson continued, but neither man’s heart was in it, and occasionally Yves caught Christophe staring at him, a speculative expression on his face. When caught, Christophe would smirk before looking back down at his translation. It was something of a relief when they were interrupted by a quiet knock on the door, which opened without waiting for either man to respond.

“Henri,” Christophe greeted the butler with slight inclination of the head.

“Pardon me for the interruption, but *Monsieur* Olivier has asked me to advise you that your fencing lesson will take place in the courtyard. He wishes your presence at eleven sharp.”

“Thank you, Henri,” Yves replied and the butler backed out the room again. With a glance at the hideous timepiece, he continued, “It’s ten to the hour now, we’d best call it a day on your lessons.”

Christophe wasted no time in placing his translation sheet into the book to mark its place and close the volume. Sliding it back across the desk he rose to his feet.

“I will see you after dinner then, Yves?”

“I hadn’t planned anything.”

“No. But we have a masquerade to attend tomorrow, and you need to be properly attired. We’ve an appointment with my tailor this afternoon and then I thought we could take coffee at Le brasserie Procope afterwards.”

“I have evening clothes, I don’t need...”

“No, Yves. I insist,” Christophe said with determination. “So, if I can’t persuade you to join us for *le déjeuner*?” Christophe paused looking at Yves hopefully, but he only received a shaken head in response. “Very well. A carriage has been arranged, I will meet you in the entrance hall at two.”

Christophe didn’t wait for a response, exiting the room and leaving Yves to slump ungracefully back into his seat with a sigh.

The heels of Yves’ boots echoed as he paced the marble floor of the grand entranceway to the de Valliot’s townhouse. A liveried footman, in station beside the carved wooden front door, watched him with a bored expression. Christophe was late. Again.

“Sorry!” The breathless exclamation from above preceded the sound of footsteps rushing down the sweeping staircase that led from the upper floor apartments. Christophe stepped off the bottom step and almost collided with Yves as he completed his fifth circuit of the hall.

“Sorry,” Christophe repeated, holding onto Yves’ forearms to steady himself. Yves couldn’t resist the opportunity of looking him up and down. He’d changed out of his morning attire and was now wearing a light blue woollen suit with a black embroidered edging on not only the jacket, but also the waistcoat and breeches, which also sported four elaborate silver buttons rising from the knee. As Christophe stepped away, Yves noticed a flash of deep red silk that lined the jacket. He looked every inch the young, privileged aristocrat

he was. Yves couldn't help compare Christophe's elegant clothing with the unadorned, light grey linen suit that he wore. It left him feeling dowdy and uncomfortably underdressed.

"Ready to go?" Christophe asked with an excited smile. Yves nodded and followed after him as he headed towards the door, which was opened for them as they approached.

They descended the steps and crossed the small formal courtyard that fronted the townhouse. At the gates, a carriage decorated in the Baron's colours and pulled by two dark bay horses waited for them. The driver was already seated on the perch; reins in one hand and whip in the other. Another liveried footman waited by the body of the carriage, opening the door as they approached.

"*Monsieur* Aubercy's, Rue du Jardinnet, please," Christophe instructed the driver before stepping up onto the footplate. As he did the tails of his overcoat fell forwards over his hips, leaving Yves with a view of his breeches, pulled tightly over his arse and thighs. For a second Yves had to fight the totally inappropriate urge to step up quickly behind him and put his hands where they most definitely shouldn't be; to test the firmness of the muscle under the woollen covering. But being in sight of the driver and footman held him in check.

Mercifully, the journey wasn't a long one. Christophe had insisted that they sit side by side on the leather covered bench seat. Every bounce of the carriage as it travelled over the cobbled streets made some part of their bodies brush against each other. These persistent, barely there touches—be it of leg, shoulder, or hand—seemed to send a jolt of wanting through Yves. He mentally cursed himself for his weakness, regretting that rather than continuing with his own studies, he'd taken his coffee out on the terrace where at a discreet distance he could watch Christophe at fencing practice in the courtyard below.

Stripped of his outer garments, his fine white linen shirt had clung to his body like a second skin after the third bout. Whether on the attack or parrying the thrusts of *Monsieur* Olivier's sabre, Christophe was graceful in his movements. It looked almost like a dance rather than a lesson in swordsmanship and self defence. By the end of the hour Christophe was breathing hard. His hair had completely escaped from its binding and hung limply round his flushed face. As he shook *Monsieur* Olivier's hand, he looked up to the terrace. Catching sight of Yves, Christophe had smiled widely, his

eyes seeming to sparkle in the sunlight. Yves suddenly found himself wondering whether Christophe would have the same look of flushed exhaustion after he'd given himself up to pleasure in bed. Realising where his thoughts had taken him, Yves felt uncomfortable. He was Christophe's tutor and paid companion, he had no right to even think such a thing about him.

Monsieur Aubercy's establishment was part of a row of high-class, discreet shops, which looked more like private homes. Yves followed Christophe through the front door and into what appeared to be a gentleman's parlour. In the centre of the room was a suite of elaborately carved dark wood furniture with rich burgundy upholstery. Against the wall a matching ornate sideboard, and between the chairs and chaise longue a nest of small tables. Spread out over these were swatches of fabric, the only clue as to the trade carried out.

"*Un moment,*" a man's voice called through the open doorway at the far side of the room. Christophe settled himself into one of the armchairs, looking completely at home, while Yves moved quietly round the room looking at the artwork, which decorated the walls. It wasn't long before a short elderly man came through the doorway. He was dressed very simply in an unembellished cream suit, a pair of small gold rimmed spectacles balanced on the bridge of his nose.

"*Monsieur Aubercy.*" Christophe rose to his feet to greet the tailor with a formal bow of his head.

"How many times must I tell you, Jacques is fine, *Monsieur de Valliot,*" the tailor chided.

"Jacques, then. But only if you return the favour and call me Christophe." Christophe spoke warmly. "This is my friend, Yves Lagarde."

"*Monsieur Lagarde,*" the tailor said with a slight bow to Yves, who acknowledged him with his own nod.

"You got my message?" Christophe asked.

"Of course, I started work on your request straight away." He looked Yves up and down slowly as he spoke. "I think you will be pleased. Come this way please." Without waiting to see if they followed, Jacques turned and started towards the back room.

"Request?" Yves asked as they followed, Christophe just shrugged, a slight smirk turning up the corner of his mouth.

The backroom of the shop was obviously the room where the work was done. Bolts of cloth of all colours lined the shelves, which ran along one wall from floor to ceiling. Two full sized wickerwork mannequins stood in the centre of the room. One was bare, but the other was dressed in an elegant black velvet court suit with a white waistcoat underneath. The clothing was highly decorated with embroidered feathers and beading from hem to neckline, silver with turquoise on the suit itself and black on the waistcoat. A pair of plain black breeches and white embellished stockings finished the ensemble.

“Is this it?” Christophe asked, pointing to the dressed mannequin.

“*Mais oui*,” Jacques replied with a nod. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful, just what I wanted.” Christophe walked around the garment where it hung. “Thank you.”

“Now we just have to check the fit and finish it. You said it was needed for tomorrow night?”

“Yes, for the Marquis de Guise’s masquerade. It’s going to be the social event of the season.”

“Very good, now, Christophe, if you would like to go take a seat in the waiting room, there should be some wine in the decanter on the sideboard should you wish refreshment. Then *Monsieur* Lagarde, if you could just strip down to your undergarments you can try it on and I can adjust it as needed.”

Jacques turned from Christophe to Yves and gave an encouraging nod as he spoke.

“What?” Yves demanded.

“I need to check the measurements Christophe gave me were correct, and that the suit is a proper fit, *Monsieur*.”

“Measurements? What measurements? Christophe?” Yves turned to his pupil who was moving quietly to the exit.

“Hmmm?” Christophe said vaguely.

“Measurements, Christophe. How did you get my measurements?” Yves demanded.

“Oh, well, I didn’t have the exact measurements. I got my valet to borrow one of your suits from the laundresses and we measured that.”

“You stole my laundry?”

"I didn't steal it, I borrowed it. I never intended to keep it," Christophe explained. "After all, you're wearing it today."

"I put this suit in for laundering last Friday, when exactly did you do this?"

"Monday."

"Monday? We only made the wager on Sunday. There was no guarantee that I would be going to the masquerade with you, yet you went to great lengths to obtain this, this..." Yves stopped speaking and waved his arm at the suit, seemingly lost for words. "Costume," he continued eventually.

"Oh, there was no doubt that you'd be going with me to the masquerade," Christophe said definitely.

"There wasn't?"

"No, never. It was something my mother taught me well. Never, ever bet more than you can afford to lose and never take a risk when a certainty is available."

"And I was a certainty?"

"Yes, you were," Christophe said with a smile then turned to leave the room.

"*Monsieur Lagarde?*" Staring after Christophe, he hadn't heard Jacques approach, and jumped at the gentle hand laid on his arm.

"Yves, please call me Yves," he said as he let Jacques lead him back towards the mannequin.

Stripped of his outer garments, and standing only in his stocking feet and small clothes, Yves felt distinctly uncomfortable. He stood in the centre of the room whilst Jacques moved about him, taking various measurements and jotting them down in a small leather bound notebook.

"He did very well with his estimate; there shouldn't be many alterations to make," Jacques said with a smile. "Now, we shall try the suit on, if you could put your undershirt back on."

As Yves went to collect his shirt from where he had placed it, he noticed that Christophe was seated in the chair closest to the back room. He held a small glass of dark red wine in one hand but his gaze was fixed on the doorway. Yves caught his eye before Christophe could look away and wasn't sure which of them blushed harder.

The breeches, like the waistcoat, were made of satin and slid gently up over Yves' thighs, fastening at the centre with buttons concealed by a front fall panel. The waistcoat itself was a snug fit over the coarse linen shirt that he was wearing.

"You have a finer shirt than this?" Jacques asked as he deftly pulled the folds of the garment so that it fell properly.

"If he hasn't, then I've a silk undershirt he can borrow." Yves looked up to find Christophe leaning against the wooden doorframe.

"I can't..."

Yves began at the same time as Jacques said over him, "*Bon*, that will work very well, you are around the same size at the shoulder and neck, it is the seat and leg that you differ." As he finished speaking, he held out the frock coat behind Yves. "Arms, *s'il vous plait*."

Yves obediently fed first his right arm and then his left into the armholes, and Jacques settled the back onto his shoulders.

"*Bien*." Jacques stood back to look critically at his work. "Just a couple of adjustments to the waistcoat and to take up the cuffs and let down the hem of the coat are needed. Turn slowly, Yves, so we can see the whole picture."

Feeling slightly stunned, Yves revolved slowly on the spot, his arms still held out to the side.

"Jacques, thank you. It's exactly how I described," Christophe praised the tailor who gave a polite nod of acknowledgement. "You'll put the bill on my account?"

"Of course," Jacques replied.

"How much is this costing?" Yves asked, letting his arms drop to his side. "I cannot let you..."

"No," Christophe said firmly before Jacques could speak. "This is a gift."

"It's too much," Yves said weakly, knowing that he was making only a token protest. In the privacy of the townhouse he'd argue against accepting such a generous present, but in front of the tailor he would not embarrass Christophe.

Between them Yves and Jacques removed the new court suit and Yves redressed in his own clothes. Christophe, Yves noted, had not returned to the

outer room, but remained in the doorway watching. Yves knew he shouldn't sanction this impropriety and send him from the room, but part of him was enjoying having an appreciative audience as he changed. Jacques, who had obviously long since mastered the art of not seeing things that he shouldn't, simply ignored both of them as he continued with his work.

They left the shop, having agreed that Jacques' manservant would deliver the finished garment to the townhouse tomorrow afternoon, and walked the short distance through the quiet streets to Le brasserie Procope. A sign over the door proudly proclaimed that it was Paris' oldest coffee house.

The ground floor of the coffee house was open plan and given over to irregularly set hand carved wooden tables, each surrounded by several overstuffed, brightly coloured, armchairs. At one end of the room a large stone staircase led to the upper floor, where smaller rooms were available for more intimate discussions between customers. At the back of the room was a long bar, where the coffee was made, and doorway to the kitchen area at the back. Even at shortly after five in the afternoon the ground floor was crowded. As Yves and Christophe stood by the entrance, scanning the room for either a vacant table or friends they could join, the *Maitre d'hôtel* bustled over to them.

"*Bonsoir monsieurs*, are you meeting someone, or do you wish a table for yourselves?"

Before either man could reply a woman spoke from behind them. "They'll be joining my party."

Yves and Christophe turned. The speaker was a tall, middle aged, woman who wore a fashionable pale blue day dress and a darker blue fitted riding jacket. Her hair was covered by a powdered wig, carefully styled with ringlets cascading down past her shoulders.

"*Madame Le Breton*," Yves greeted her with a formal bow. "Christophe, may I introduce *Madame Le Breton*, the wife of my patron. Alexandrine, this is *Monsieur de Valliot*, son of the Baron de Tulle, my companion and pupil.

"*Madame*," Christophe greeted her with a polite bow. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"You as well, *Monsieur de Valliot*, I have heard much about you from Yves." She laid her hand fondly on Yves arm as she spoke. Christophe turned towards him and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, all of it good, I assure you," she said with laugh. "Now, you will join me won't you? I am hosting a small party in

one of the upstairs rooms; I am expecting my husband and several of our friends to join us for dinner and discussion.”

“Christophe? Would that be acceptable?” Yves hoped that Christophe would agree. Yves had long wanted to introduce him to his patron and friends.

“Of course, we’d be delighted to join you,” Christophe responded for them both.

“You are in the blue salon, *Madame*,” the *Maitre d’hôtel* advised. “Upstairs, third door on the right. One of the waiters will be with you shortly.”

“*Merci*,” Alexandrine replied, moving past Yves and Christophe and leading the way up the stairs.

The blue salon was, well, blue. From the wall coverings and upholstery, to the fine porcelain on the table.

At the opposite end of the room, overstuffed chairs were arranged informally and Alexandrine sank down into the nearest, indicating for Christophe and Yves to join her. The waiter quietly entered the room, bearing a large silver tray on which was a decorative porcelain coffee service. Behind him came Yves’ patron, Charles, and with him two other men, both of whom Yves had met before. Yves and Christophe both stood to greet them.

“Yves, dear boy, I didn’t realise you were dining with us this evening.” Charles greeted him even as he bent down and kissed Alexandrine on each cheek before nodding politely to Yves and Christophe, who both gave a formal bow.

Yves said, “Charles, it’s good to see you again. And no, I wasn’t expecting to join you; we arrived at the same time as Alexandrine and she invited us for dinner.”

“Very good, very good.” Charles turned to the other two men. “François, André, this is the young man I am sponsoring at the *Bibliothèque* to assist with the Encyclopaedia. He is taking a sabbatical at present to act as tutor and companion to the Baron of Tulle’s son.”

“I believe we met at *Monsieur de Secondit*’s home last month,” André interrupted with a warm smile. “You spoke with some intensity on the subject of education for the poor.”

“Indeed.” Yves nodded politely. “Though I fear I may have overstepped slightly with the forcefulness of my argument that night.”

“Nonsense, young man.” François clapped Yves on the shoulder with unexpected familiarity. “You must stand up for what you believe in and be prepared to defend your position. Now, who is this young man with you?”

“André, François, this is Christophe de Valliot.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” Christophe said quietly. His tone that was far from his usual confident manner and Yves shot him a concerned look, but Christophe just shook his head.

“Who else are we expecting this evening?” André asked as he lowered himself into a vacant chair. Taking the opportunity, the others did likewise.

“I’ve invited *Monsieur* Rousseau, but he wasn’t sure he could make it. *Madame* de Puisieux, who said she would bring two of her charges, and *Monsieur* d’Ambrose should be here shortly,” Alexandrine advised. “Shall we have coffee while we wait?”

The conversation around the dining table was lively. In particular when *Madame* de Puisieux began to speak of her belief that a female was in no way inferior to a male, a subject about which she was in the process of writing a book. The party split fairly evenly on the subject, with Andre, Charles and one of the young women, being the most vocal in their support. It had amused Yves immensely that Alexandrine, who was something of a feminist herself, took the opposing view, supported by François. Yves joined in the lively debate, but at the same time watched Christophe, who had hardly said a word, unless directly addressed, all evening.

After the dessert course, rich cherry compote in a pastry case served with sweet custard, had been cleared away, Yves pushed his chair back and rose to his feet.

“Shall I pour another round of coffee?” he asked the table. When all except Charlotte, the quieter of *Madame* de Puisieux’s charges, had accepted the offer he turned to Christophe. “Will you come and help me?”

“Of course,” Christophe rose and followed him across to the sideboard.

“Is everything all right?” Yves asked, his words covered by the clinking of the fresh cups as he set them out on the matching saucers.

“Of course.”

“You’re sure? Only you’ve barely said a word all evening.”

“I’m fine, Yves.” Christophe smiled at him rather wickedly. “To be honest, I am having a great deal of fun watching you. I like seeing this side of you

outside the classroom, the passionate side of you. It does make me want to find out though, what else you are passionate about.”

“Christophe!” Yves exclaimed, glancing round behind him, but no one was close enough to have overheard.

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t embarrass you in front of your friends.”

“I never thought you would.” Yves laid one hand on Christophe’s forearm as he spoke. “I was just worried you weren’t enjoying yourself.”

“I am, truly. I like your friends. I find myself a little out of my depth with some of the subject matter, but it has been a very interesting evening.”

It was shortly after ten before the party broke up. As hosts for the evening, Alexandrine and Charles stood at the doorway, seeing their guests out.

“It was a pleasure to see you again, Yves.” Alexandrine kissed him on both cheeks before she turned to Christophe. “And to meet you.”

“The pleasure was mine, *Madame*.” Christophe bowed formally, and Alexandrine laughed as she reached forward to bestow a double kiss, similar to the one she’d given Yves.

“Charles.” Yves shook his patron’s hand. “Thank you both for a lovely evening.”

“You’re welcome. Now, hopefully we shall see you again soon.”

“I hope so too. Unfortunately I am being forced to attend the Marquis de Guise’s Masquerade tomorrow night and will be wanting civilised company soon after to make up for it.”

“Forced?”

“He lost a bet,” Christophe said dryly.

“Oh dear, never mind Yves, I am sure it won’t be as bad as you fear,” Alexandrine said sympathetically.

“Of course it won’t,” Christophe agreed as their coach drew up. “I’ll make sure he has a wonderful time.”

Yves rose late on Saturday morning, enjoying a solitary breakfast in his rooms before heading to the library for a few hours, to catch up on the progress that had been made compiling the Encyclopaedia. Roped into assisting with

some research whilst he was there, he lost track of time and didn't return to the de Valliot's townhouse until well after lunch.

The first thing he saw when he entered his rooms was the suit, carefully placed over the back of the wooden chair in front of his dressing table. A new pressed silk shirt, and the stockings, which were white but with black embroidery that matched the pattern on the waistcoat, were on the seat of the chair. On the dressing table itself sat an off white wig with small close curls and a set of pins to fix it in place.

Yves sunk down on the end of his bed with a sigh. He couldn't see any way of getting out of going to this stupid masquerade, short of running away and hiding. He was sure the whole event was going to be trying for him, not least having to make polite conversation to the other guests, most of whom, if they knew, would look down on him for his background and occupation. Then there was the dancing. Yves' education hadn't included how to waltz and the thought of making a complete sight of himself as he stood on his partners' feet, or worse, fell in the centre of the dance floor filled him with dread.

A knock on the door broke him from his musings. "Come in," he called, and Christophe strode into the room. A servant followed him, carrying a washing basin, water jug, and clean linen towel over one arm.

"Please put those on the end of the dressing table," Christophe ordered, watching as the servant did as he was bidden before withdrawing from the room.

"You've had a good morning?" he asked as the door closed behind the servant.

"Yes, thank you. What about you?"

"*Monsieur* Olivier had me practicing my fencing drills for two hours this morning. I swear one day my right arm will drop off." Yves smiled at this over dramatic statement as Christophe pulled up one of the armchairs from the far side of the room and dropped into it. "Then I was forced to dine with father and *Madame* Violette, again."

"More matrimonial suggestions?"

"Oh yes, and instructions on who I should seek out to dance with this evening, and who to avoid. It seems that she is trying to set me up with the Comte de la Rochelle's eldest daughter, Thérèse, who is a terrible bore. All she cares about is breeding these horrible little white, yappy dogs." Christophe

grimaced theatrically. "There was also a lecture on how it was highly improper for me to be taking my tutor with me to such a high status event."

"Well, I am more than happy to let you go alone," Yves suggested with a grin.

"Happily, for once father didn't agree with her. He thinks that you need to get out more into society, and possibly that your presence might prevent my friends from talking me into doing anything improper. Anyway, they've set off to spend the weekend with the court at Versailles; they are not expected back until Monday afternoon."

"What time do we leave this evening?"

"I've organised our carriage for eight, our evening meal for six. I have to nip out and pick up our masks this afternoon."

"Masks?"

"Well it is a masquerade, of course there will be masks."

"Surely the Marquis will arrange for suitable discreet masks to be available when we arrive?"

"Of course, but where is the fun in discreet? You want to stand out don't you?"

"No, definitely not! I want to blend into the background and just get through the evening without incident."

"It will be fine. I promise you," Christophe said sincerely.

"We shall see. Now, I am going to rest for a while and then I shall see you for dinner."

"Very good." Christophe rose and bowed his head. Yves fell back onto the soft mattress with a theatrical sigh before Christophe had left the room. He couldn't help but feel the entire night would be a disaster. Never mind that he might be able to prevent Christophe's friends from dragging him into something improper, Yves worried that with a few glasses of wine he would find himself acting on some of his own improper thoughts about his companion. And he wasn't sure that those actions wouldn't be reciprocated, and then where would they be?

The carriage drew to a halt in the queue in front of the high sandstone walls that surrounded the grounds of l'hôtel de Rohan. Sitting stiffly in his seat as they waited to disembark, Yves was growing more uncomfortable by the minute.

"Relax," Christophe said gently, leaning sideways into Yves' body. "It's a masquerade, not an execution."

Yves' throat felt dry, yet his hands were clammy. "I think I'd rather go to an execution, even my own," he replied.

"You'll be fine." Christophe's gloved hand brushed against the satin material of the breeches that covered Yves' thigh.

There was no time to respond as the carriage door was opened by a liveried footman. Christophe laid a hand on Yves' shoulder and squeezed gently before stepping down onto the pavement. Yves took a deep steadying breath, picked up his mask from the seat opposite, and followed him out of the carriage.

They passed under the archway entrance to the grounds and followed the other partygoers along the wide walkway, which led to the grand entrance of the *hôtel*. Though it wasn't fully dark, lit torches had been placed at regular intervals alongside the cobblestones, to light the area.

"Time to put our masks on," Christophe said pulling Yves to one side, out of the queue of guests waiting to enter. Yves turned the golden feathered creation over in his hands but made no move to put it on. "Here, let me help." Christophe dropped his own mask to the ground and took Yves' mask from him. Lifting it, he reached towards Yves' face and hooked the small clasps into the powdered wig. The mask sat lightly on Yves' nose, the lower feathers tickling his cheeks. "There you go, Icarus," Christophe said running his hand up over the golden feathers that reached above Yves' head. His eyes fixed on Yves'. "Beautiful," Christophe seemed to breathe the word rather than speaking it. Yves felt his cheeks heat and quickly looked away.

Christophe reached down for his own mask, which he settled over his head, attaching it behind the ears. Made of copper beaten to an extremely fine sheet, it had been cut and twisted to represent the burning flames of the sun. The mask covered not only the upper part of Christophe's face but came down over his cheeks. Yves' gaze was drawn to the full pink lips and strong chin, the only part of his face not hidden.

"Ready?" Christophe didn't wait for a reply, turning on his heel and heading for the door, giving Yves no option but to follow.

They gave their names to the doorman and passed into the large, airy entrance hall. Fluted stone columns, painted white and topped with ornate carvings, were placed at regular intervals along the length of the hall. Intricately carved stonework ran around the top of the walls, just below the high, arched, glass ceiling. Gathered around the foot of the *Escalier d'honneur*, the other guests waited to ascend the stairway to the first floor, where the important function rooms of the house were located. The air was heavy with the sweet scents of lavender and orrisroot wig powder, combined with rose, orange flower and jasmine perfumes which most of the women had liberally used to disguise their body odour.

Yves found himself standing in silence next to Christophe, who was talking politely with an elderly woman in a plain black and gold jewelled mask, her hair covered with a tall, powdered wig. As far as he could tell, she was a total stranger. He couldn't help but wonder again what he'd let himself in for.

At the top of the stairs, the guests passed through an arched doorway, which led into the ballroom. At the entrance, where guests would usually have been announced, waiters stood holding silver trays holding glasses of punch. Christophe reached for two, passing one to Yves, as they moved forwards. At the far end of the room, on a small stage, an orchestra was playing a waltz. On the dance floor itself, couples whirled around in the formal dance. Around them an audience of men and women of various ages, all masked and some in highly creative costumes, watched. Occasionally, one would stride onto the dance floor and cut in, leaving the original dancer to return to the edge of the floor. Low settees and chairs had been set out against the walls, most of which were occupied by the older guests. The room was hot and noisy, and Yves found himself looking anxiously around for an exit.

Christophe and Yves made their way around the room, stopping to talk to other guests as they did. When they reached the far end of the room, Christophe was greeted with enthusiasm by a group of young men of his own age.

“Go join your friends,” Yves urged.

“Come with me?”

Yves eyed Christophe's friends warily. They were much younger than him and appeared in very high spirits. As much as he enjoyed Christophe's company, he found his friends to be extremely trying. “No, you go ahead. I will be fine here. I shall watch the dancing for a while.”

“If you are sure?”

“Yes.” Yves nodded and watched as Christophe disappeared into the crowd.

Yves slowly made his way around the edge of the room again, smiling and nodding whenever anyone caught his eye.

“Hello, gorgeous.” Yves jumped as a young man wearing a brightly coloured mask trimmed with peacock feathers appeared suddenly at his side.

“*Bonsoir*,” Yves said with a formal bow. He tried to step back as the man crowded close to him but his exit route was blocked by an elderly matron, who tapped him on the shoulder with her fan even as she tutted at him in annoyance. “*Pardon*,” he apologised to her quickly.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, I am Pierre des Roches.”

“Yves Lagarde,” Yves replied.

“I don’t know the name; your family isn’t from Paris?”

“No, but I am here as companion to *Monsieur* Christophe de Valliot.”

“Oh, you’re Christophe’s Yves. He’s told us all about you.” Yves didn’t like the tone in Pierre’s voice or the way that he was looking him up and down.

“There you have the advantage of me I’m afraid. He hasn’t spoken about you at all.” It was a rude thing to say, but Yves didn’t really care. Pierre made him feel uncomfortable, as though he was being appraised for something improper. “Will you excuse me?” he asked bluntly, not waiting for a reply as he moved away down the room.

He liberated another glass of wine from a passing footman and quietly joined a mixed group of slightly older couples who stood by the dance floor. After a while he ghosted away to join another set, moving each time further down the room towards the orchestra and watching the dancers each time he stopped.

Eventually he came level with an alcove, in which stood a marble statue of Eros. Slipping quietly in beside the statue he watched the room and wondered how long he must wait before he could find Christophe and beg for them to leave.

“Hello, again.” Pierre appeared suddenly in front of him. “Still alone?”

“Pierre,” Yves acknowledged with a stiff nod.

“Christophe shouldn’t leave you alone like this.” Pierre leered as he spoke. “You could get into all sorts of trouble.”

"I assure you, I am quite capable of keeping out of trouble," Yves said coldly.

"That's such a pity." Pierre laughed, reaching forwards and stroking his hand down Yves arm. "Getting into trouble can be so much fun."

Yves looked pointedly at Pierre's hand, where it rested over his own, and then up into Pierre's face. From his somewhat smug expression, he was obviously expecting Yves to let it pass rather than making a scene in public. Yves stepped back out of reach and carefully tucked his now free hand behind his back with a glare at Pierre.

"I'm not interested," he said politely but firmly.

"Pity, I think we could have had rather a good time," Pierre said lightly as he turned and walked away.

Deciding that he couldn't spend the entire evening hidden behind a statue, Yves slowly moved back up the room, nodding occasionally to people he thought he recognised. Behind the entrance a large set of doors stood open, leading to a long hallway. The first room on the right contained a large table with a vast array of food upon it. The centrepiece was an interpretation of the l'hôtel de Rohan itself, made out of cake covered in icing and spun sugar. A long sideboard took up most of one wall, upon it a row large glass punchbowls filled with liquor alongside intricately carved ice sculptures. Guests helped themselves, buffet style, before retiring to one of the small tables set out around the room to eat, but he didn't spot Christophe anywhere.

On the opposite side of the corridor was the games room. Four blue baize covered billiard tables took up most of the room, young men played in pairs or foursomes, amongst them Christophe and three of his friends. They didn't notice Yves as he looked in the doorway. At the far end of the room, a number of guests, male and female, sat in small groups, playing cards. From the clink of coins and the occasional glint of silver it appeared that the stakes were modest.

Yves eased out of the doorway unnoticed and kept walking until he reached an open door, which he slipped through and found himself in the formal gardens. To his left, on a small terrace, a string quartet played softly. He walked slowly down the pebbled pathway, away from the house, torches lighting his way. As he passed the flowerbeds, the air was filled with the scent of lavender and roses. At the far end of the pathway a fountain threw water high into the air, from the statue of Venus, which stood at its centre. Sculpted hedges surrounded the gardens, low stone benches hidden in recesses between them.

Several couples had taken advantage of the privacy afforded by the shadow of the hedges, the occasional giggle or slap sounding out of the darkness to give them away.

The bench in the last alcove before the fountain was empty, and Yves made his way over to it, sinking down gratefully on the cold, hard surface. Leaning forwards and looking back towards the house, he could see a handful of couples were now dancing on the terrace. A few couples walked about the top end of the garden, some with chaperones just feet behind them. Thankfully though, at this end of the garden, he was alone and hidden in the shadow of the hedge. He reached up and unhooked the feathered mask from his face, dropping it to the seat beside him. He'd already had quite enough for one evening, but Christophe was engaged with his friends and it would be rude to interrupt and ask to leave. Leaning back carefully against the hedge he closed his eyes and simply listened to the sounds of the garden around him.

Yves woke with a start at the sound of someone clearing their throat just in front of him. Slightly dazed, he automatically started to rise to his feet, ready to apologise for his rudeness. A hand pressed lightly on his shoulder, pushing him back down to the bench.

"There you are; I thought you'd run out on me," Christophe said with a lazy smile as he pushed Yves' mask to the far end of the bench and took a seat beside him.

"No, I just needed some air. I was getting overheated in the ballroom."

"And it had nothing to do with des Roches trying to corner you every five minutes and flutter his eyelashes at you?"

"You saw that then?" Yves shook his head and sighed. "I know he's your friend, but..."

"But those eyelashes are a sight to behold, not to mention that vulgar beauty spot he's plastered on his cheek. I suppose we should be thankful that his father took him to task after the last ball and made him promise that he wouldn't wear a gown."

Putting his hands behind him on the bench and leaning back he looked up into the sky. "It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" he continued as he stretched his legs out in front of him. Yves tilted his own head back to look up.

"Yes, it is," he replied. Above them a crescent moon hung low in the sky; stars shone brightly in the darkness. Christophe shifted slightly beside him, and

Yves jumped as Christophe's hand unexpectedly stroked gently down the side of his face.

"Not as beautiful as you." Christophe's voice had turned husky.

"Christophe, what..." Yves tried to pull backwards, but he was already leaning against the hedge and the fine strands of his wig caught in the branches, effectively immobilising him. Christophe turned towards him, placing one leg over Yves' calves and trapping him in his seat. Leaning forward, he snaked his hand round the back of Yves' neck.

"Not as beautiful as you," Christophe repeated, sliding across from his seat so he was straddling Yves' lap.

"What are you doing?" Yves whispered.

"This." Christophe leant in closer and covered Yves' mouth with his own.

Christophe's lips were warm and soft against his own. Shocked at the sudden onslaught, he found himself responding. In the back of his mind he could almost hear his rational voice saying, *'no, stop. This is wrong'*. But that voice was overruled by the rest of his body.

Without further thought, his arms slid round Christophe's waist and pulled him closer. Yves' mouth pressed back harder, his tongue darting out and tracing the seam of Christophe's lips, demanding entrance. As Christophe yielded, Yves sunk himself into the kiss, heedless of the sudden painful pull of the pins which had held his wig in place as it detached from his head to hang like a dead rat on the branch behind him.

Breaking apart for air, Yves slid one hand up Christophe's back and loosened the lace jabot around his neck before trailing kisses along his jaw. Christophe whimpered slightly as Yves swirled his tongue lightly around, tasting the skin just below his ear. Christophe's hand moved up into Yves hair and grasped tightly as he tipped his own head to one side. Taking that as an invitation, Yves continued his way down the column of Christophe's neck, alternating feather light kisses, with sharp nips and deeper kisses that pulled hard against the fragile, pale skin and leaving marks in their wake.

Yves jumped as Christophe's other hand worked its way between them and palmed the length of his prick, which was hard and pressing against the placket of his breeches. Yves slid the hand that was still around Christophe's waist down to the upper curves of his backside and pulled him forwards, trapping

Christophe's hand between them. Christophe bucked against him, increasing the pressure on both their groins. Yves' body responded, his hips jerking him upwards. Christophe pulled on his hair, leaning down and claiming Yves' mouth with renewed passion. Together they squirmed on the hard stone bench, lost to everything around them.

Fingers fumbling at the buttons of his breeches made Yves pull back, quickly disengaging his hand from Christophe's arse and straightening his legs so that Christophe slid away from his lap. Christophe moaned with frustration as he rose to his feet.

"Yves," he whined, his hand going to the front of his breeches and pressing hard against his erection.

"Not here," Yves said softly as he rose to his feet.

"Home?" Christophe asked hopefully.

As Yves nodded his agreement, Christophe bent and snatched up their masks in one hand. With the other he grabbed hold of Yves' and tugged him forward across the gardens, leaving Yves' wig still dangling from the hedge. Dodging around the edge of the waterfall, they rushed along the path, occasionally crossing the carefully planted flower beds, and ducked around the side of the house. By the time they reached the main gate, they were both slightly out of breath. Releasing his grip on Yves' hand, Christophe approached one of the footmen and asked for their carriage to be brought round. Christophe was bouncing impatiently on the balls of his feet and casting longing glances at Yves, who was hard pressed not to grab him and continue where they'd left off.

The footman barely had a chance to open the door and lower the footplate before Christophe all but pushed Yves into the carriage. As the driver snapped reins and as the horses moved off at a sedate walk, Christophe launched himself at Yves. Cupping Yves face with his hands, he looked deeply into Yves eyes before bringing their mouths together into a long, fevered kiss. Yves hands roamed freely around Christophe's body, unfastening the buttons of his waistcoat, pulling the fine silk shirt out of the top of his breeches, and sliding underneath. Slowly he caressed the soft skin that covered the defined muscles of Christophe's abdomen. One hand reached around to the small of his back, fingers splayed across his spine, while the other slipped lower, digits playing around the indented navel and moving onwards, tracing the trail of hair that grew coarser the further down it went.

As the carriage slowed and came to a halt outside the front gate of the townhouse, Yves pulled back and broke their embrace. They were both breathing heavily, their clothes completely askew.

“Here,” Yves said, leaning forward as he started to tuck in Christophe’s shirt and refasten his waistcoat. Christophe smiled lazily and allowed Yves to straighten his clothes before turning to his own. He was just smoothing down the front of his breeches, and hoping his rudely straining prick wouldn’t be noticed, when the footman opened the door. Yves pushed the strands of his hair that had come loose from their bindings back behind his ears while he tried to compose himself, then stepped down onto the footpath and made his way towards the house, Christophe following close behind him.

A butler opened the front door as they approached. “Good evening, sirs, did you have a pleasant time?” he queried as he let them in.

“*Oui, merci*,” Christophe replied politely.

“Do you require anything from the kitchen before you retire?”

“There is wine in our rooms?” Christophe asked, and the footman nodded. “In that case, no, thank you. It has been a long day; I think we shall retire straight away. Please ask that we are not disturbed before ten tomorrow morning.”

“Of course, *monsieur*,” the butler replied with a bow before shutting the door behind them and returning to his post.

“Come along, Yves.” Christophe strode purposefully across the hallway towards the west wing of the house, leaving Yves to follow behind him.

Safely out of sight of the butler, Christophe reached back and took Yves by the hand, hurrying him down the corridor towards the staircase that led to his suite. That brief walk from the carriage to the house had given Yves time to have second thoughts. Whilst part of him wanted to take Christophe to bed, to worship his body and make him explode with pleasure, another part of him quietly reminded him that this was wrong. Christophe was his pupil, he was employed to be his companion, and to take him to bed would be a breach of his father’s trust in the position he had given him. And it wasn’t only the ethics of the situation; if found out, the disgrace could completely ruin Christophe’s prospects, not to mention that they could be arrested.

“We can’t,” Yves said stopping suddenly and grabbing hold of the decorative newel post. Christophe whirled round on the second step. Leaning forwards, he hooked his free hand behind Yves’ head and pulled him closer.

“We are,” Christophe said with determination, his breath ghosting across Yves’ lips before he brought his mouth down on Yves’.

The kiss stole Yves’ breath. Hard, demanding, and passionate. This time, it was Christophe who took the lead, his tongue pushing between Yves’ lips as he tried to speak, invading behind his teeth, and stroking against the roof of his mouth. Yves had no choice but to lose himself in the kiss, his own tongue duelling with Christophe’s as they stood at the foot of the stairs. Christophe’s hands tangled in Yves’ hair, tightening and pulling against the roots. Yves hooked his arms around Christophe and pulled him closer. With the difference in height caused by the stairs, Christophe’s groin pressed against Yves’ stomach, the hard rod of his erection tenting the fall front of his breeches. Yves’ own prick stood completely to attention, painfully hard in his small clothes.

Pulling apart, Christophe took Yves by the hand. “Come on,” he said, giving a gentle tug. They walked up at a sedate pace for the first flight, but as soon as they turned to the second Christophe sped up, until they were running up the rest of the way.

Christophe’s rooms were on the third floor of the west wing of the house. Pushing open the door, Christophe led Yves into a stylishly decorated sitting room. No sooner was the door shut behind him than Yves found himself spun around and pinned against its hard wood, caged by Christophe’s body.

Christophe’s face was flushed, his eyes sparkling. Wisps of his hair were escaping from under the powdered wig he wore. His head was tilted slightly upwards, accentuating the long line of his neck, normally hidden by a carefully tied cravat. Small, dark bruises were beginning to blossom on the pale skin where Yves had applied pressured kisses.

“What do you want?” Yves voice sounded rough.

“Take me to bed?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, dear God, yes. I’ve wanted you for weeks.”

“I want you too,” Yves admitted.

“Then, please, what are you waiting for?”

“Have you done this before?”

“Yes, no, some.” Christophe’s face flushed as he spoke.

“Tell me,” Yves coaxed, bringing his mouth to Christophe’s neck and licking upwards from his shoulder to behind his ear.

"I've been pleased by someone else's hand." Christophe's skin pimpled beneath his tongue as he circled the tip just below his ear.

"And did you return the favour?" Yves bit down gently on the fleshy earlobe, making Christophe tremble.

"No—I—he, we didn't want to get caught."

"Would you like me to do the same thing? Take you in hand?" Yves continued to nibble and lick his way back down Christophe's neck

"Yes," Christophe breathed the word.

"What else would you like to do?" Yves bit down heavily on the cord of muscle at the base of Christophe's neck.

Christophe gave a small yelp but didn't answer. Instead he surged forwards, his hard body pressing tightly against Yves'. Christophe's thigh ground against Yves' groin, the pressure only serving to send Yves' own need higher. Tilting his head down, Yves captured Christophe's mouth with his own even as his hands moved up and started to unpin the wig, freeing Christophe's hair so it floated loose around his head. Christophe groaned into Yves' mouth as he tangled his fingers in the freed strands and tugged gently against his skull. Yves bent and shifted slightly to one side, lining up the plackets of their breeches, before surging forwards away from the door with his hips. Christophe pressed against him, at the same time breaking their kiss.

"Yves," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm not going to last."

Yves growled in response and pushed Christophe backwards. He steered him across the room with a hand still in his hair, until his backside met the rolled end of the chaise longue. Releasing his grip, Yves pushed Christophe's frock coat off his shoulders and tackled the buttons of his waistcoat, which quickly followed the outer garment to the floor. Under Christophe's appreciative gaze, Yves stripped himself down to his shirtsleeves and breeches before reaching for him again. Christophe's hands gripped the furniture as Yves unbuttoned the fall front of his breeches, easing both of them and the small clothes beneath them down over his hips to his knees. Christophe's hard dick strained upwards from a nest of dark hair; the foreskin had rolled back to reveal the glans, a bead of pre-cum leaking from the slit. Yves reached forward and stroked his hand down the erect shaft, fondling the lightly furred ball sac that hung heavily beneath it.

“Want to see you too.” Christophe reached forward with one hand, but Yves stepped back.

“Patience,” he said with a wicked grin, though his hand went to the front of his own breeches as he spoke. He didn’t have the patience to draw this out, and while he undid the fastenings at his waist, he toed off his shoes, and then stripped off his breeches, leaving himself standing in just his stockings and shirt. His own prick stood out from his groin, peeking from under the hem of his top.

Yves stepped forward and pressed himself against Christophe, grinding their hard, naked cocks together. Christophe reached out and held onto Yves’ shoulders, their mouths fused once more in an impassioned kiss. When Christophe’s hips began to rock rhythmically against his, Yves pulled away and spun Christophe around, bending him forwards over the back of the chaise longue.

Palming his own prick, he spread the pre-cum leaking from his own slit over the glans before stepping up behind Christophe, pushing between his thighs.

“Close your legs,” he growled as he placed one hand on Christophe’s hip, the other on his shoulder, pinning him in place.

Yves began to thrust back and forth in the hot press of Christophe’s thighs. He could feel the slight scratch of the coarse hairs against his shaft. Each time the exposed sensitive tip of his glans hit Christophe’s ball sac it sent a jolt through him, heightening his arousal. With each thrust, Christophe groaned and whimpered.

“Harder, faster,” he babbled, and Yves obediently picked up speed, at the same time grabbing at Christophe’s hair and tugging.

Christophe reached out and gripped the carved wood at the back of the chaise with one hand, his knuckles whitening as he hung on. With his other hand he reached below him and began to stroke himself.

“*Fuck!*” Yves exclaimed, rising onto his tiptoes and gripping tighter to Christophe’s hip. His pelvis slapped against the globes of Christophe’s arse, his own balls starting to tighten as they prepared for release. Christophe’s hand sped up to match Yves’ new pace.

“*S’t e plait, s’t e plait, s’t e plait,*” Christophe chanted.

Giving a final hard thrust, Yves surged forwards and decorated Christophe's balls with his spend. With a cry Christophe followed him, coming over his own fist in messy spurts.

Yves collapsed heavily over Christophe's back, panting for breath. Beneath him, Christophe shuddered. For a while neither man moved. When Christophe began to wriggle, Yves pulled himself upright, disengaging his now limp dick from between Christophe's thighs as he stepped back. Christophe still lay slumped over the end of the chaise; Yves winced slightly at the clearly marked handprint over his hip.

"Are you all right?" he asked

"Hmmm," Christophe muttered sleepily.

"Hey!" Yves cracked his palm lightly across his upturned arse. Christophe stood upright and turned to face Yves, a tired smile on his face. "Are you all right?" Yves repeated.

"Yes, oh yes. Thank you."

Yves laughed as he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Christophe. "Oh, no, really, I should be the one thanking you." Searching out Christophe's mouth with his own, he kissed him slowly. "We should clean up and get to bed," he said after they pulled apart.

"Will you stay with me?"

"For a while, yes, I'd like to hold you."

Christophe smiled as he led Yves through to his bedroom, their clothes still scattered around the sitting room floor.

As he descended the stairs from his rooms the next morning, Yves' thigh muscles ached, reminding him of the unaccustomed exercise of the night before. The house was quiet, and his footsteps echoed round the cavernous hallway as he crossed to the dining room and slipped through the open doorway. A single servant stood by the sideboard, which held ornate silver baskets filled with a selection of pastries and breads beside dishes of ivory butter and dark cherry preserve. At one end stood a decorative tea service, next to which was a rather plainer pot with a large dark wooden hand on one side, which held hot chocolate.

“*Bonjour*,” Yves greeted the servant politely, and received a slight bow in response. “I’ll serve myself, thank you,” he added as he moved to the fully set table and lifted a small porcelain plate and cup. He filled the plate with a selection of the pastries before moving to the chocolate pot. Holding the handle he tipped it forward and watched as the thick dark liquid flowed slowly out the narrow spout into the fine china cup.

The long windows, which ran from floor to ceiling, at the end of the room were open. A fresh breeze was coming in from the garden, bringing with it the scent of honeysuckle from the terrace just outside. Yves carried his breakfast through to the garden and sank down into one of the decorative wrought iron chairs around a small matching table.

Idly, he broke up a crescent shape *kipferl* roll, its poppy seed covering spilling through the gaps in the table top, and dipped the pieces into the hot chocolate before eating them. He’d disposed of two rolls in this fashion before he heard the sound of voices behind him. Rising, he took his cup back into the dining room to refill it.

“Good morning, Yves,” Christophe greeted him with a broad smile.

“Christophe,” Yves acknowledged with a formal polite nod of his head, which made Christophe frown. Yves shook his head slightly, his eyes darting to the servant still standing by the sideboard. “I am taking breakfast on the terrace.” Yves moved to refresh his cup of chocolate. “If you’d care to join me?”

“Thank you, Yves, that would be very pleasant.” Christophe picked up a couple of rolls and spread them thickly with butter and jam. Holding them in his hand, he frowned at the sideboard until the servant calmly and efficiently bought him a plate from the table. Yves shook his head with a concealed smile and headed back out to the terrace whilst the servant poured Christophe a cup of tea.

Yves settled back into his chair and watched a small garden bird peck at the dropped poppy seeds under the table. It flew off quickly as Christophe stepped through the window. The servant followed him, carrying his breakfast, which he set down on the table. Christophe chose the chair closest to the one in which Yves sat. Neither spoke until the servant had retreated back into the dining room.

“Did you sleep well?” Yves asked softly.

"I did, but I wished you'd stayed. I missed you when I woke."

"It wouldn't have been proper."

"Proper?" Christophe raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"You know what I mean. If your valet had discovered us, it would have been all over the house, if not the neighbourhood, before midday. Then how long would it be before the news got back to your father?"

"*Mon père* would hardly have been in a position to say anything. After all, while his wife stays in Tulle, he lives openly with his mistress in Paris."

"Not the point," Yves said, shaking his head. "Aside from the scandal it would cause, firstly, it is a breach of trust. I am his employee and you are his son. And secondly, well, I am not the right sex for a mistress. We should not have done it."

"You regret it?" Christophe's face fell, and he pushed his plate away towards the centre of the table.

"No, Christophe. That wasn't what I said," Yves said gently. "I don't regret what happened, but it was wrong."

"Why? Why was it wrong?" Christophe asked hotly. "After all, you were only saying the other night that people should be free to chose their own path, to love where they wish."

"I did say that, and I do believe it. But those are ideals, what we should strive for. They are not the reality of how we live today."

"That still doesn't explain why you think it was wrong."

"Christophe," Yves sighed. "I am older than you, in a position of authority over you. It would be said that I led you astray, corrupted you."

"Really? Because that isn't the way I remember it happening."

"It would be how it was presented. This may sound selfish, but should your father find out then I fear he would terminate my employment immediately, and even with my patron, I would struggle to keep my position with the library, or find another job. Reputation is everything after all."

"Reputation be damned! Yves, I want you. Not just as a teacher, but as a friend, and yes, as a lover."

"Christophe, I—" Yves broke off as the butler slipped through the window.

“Excuse me, *Monsieur* Christophe, but you have a caller. He was most insistent on seeing you immediately. I have put him in the morning room.”

“Thank you, Henri, did he give you a name?” Christophe asked rising to his feet.

“No, *Monsieur*.”

“Very well, I will go see him.”

Abandoning the rest of his breakfast, Yves rose to his feet and followed Christophe out the room and across the main entranceway of the townhouse.

A dark haired man, dressed in a brown court suit with cream waistcoat and undershirt, stood by the fireplace, admiring the gilt framed picture above it.

“*Bonjour*,” Christophe greeted him politely, bowing as the man turned towards them. Yves followed suit with a stiff formal bow, remaining standing just behind Christophe. “May I be of assistance?”

“Christophe Philippe de Valliot?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Christophe replied

“I am Aubrey de Carville, I believe you know my sister, Charlotte?”

“I’m sorry, *Monsieur* de Carville, I do not think that is the case,” Christophe replied.

“You deny that you know her, yet she assures me that you promised last night that you would speak to me today about your betrothal.”

“Betrothal?” Christophe’s voice rose with surprise. “I am not promised to anyone, let alone your sister.”

“My sister would not lie to me. She assured me that you were secretly affianced last night, when I caught her coming in from the gardens at the Marquis de Guise’s masquerade in a state of dishevelment.”

“I was not in the gardens with your sister last night,” Christophe interrupted with a glance towards Yves, who was fully aware whom Christophe had been with. Aubrey continued as if Christophe had not spoken.

“Luckily, I was able to get her to our carriage without being seen so that her honour, and yours, was not compromised. But I must insist that your engagement is announced forthwith, and the marriage preparations put into place urgently. ”

“Engagement? Marriage? I am sorry *Monsieur de Carville*, I must repeat, I do not know your sister, and I have most certainly not entered into any agreement with her regarding matrimony.” Christophe was shaking his head as he spoke.

“My sister would not lie to me!” Aubrey said hotly.

“Well, she is certainly being less than truthful. I was not with your sister last night, or any other night.”

“But you do not deny you were in the garden with someone?”

“No, I do not. I will not reveal who that person was, but I can assure you it was most definitely not your sister.”

“I do not believe you,” Aubrey said bluntly. “You have dallied with my sister, made her false promises, and now you deny even knowing her. You have destroyed her chance of making a decent marriage for a frolic in the garden. You have shamed her and you have insulted her honour and that of my family.”

“I’ve done no such thing!” Christophe was almost shouting.

“I challenge you to prove that you speak the truth,” Aubrey pulled off his left glove as he spoke.

“Now, there is no need for this,” Yves began, in a vain attempt to diffuse the situation.

“No, I will have the satisfaction.” He threw the glove at Christophe’s feet. “I challenge you to a duel; pick up the challenge *Monsieur de Valliot*, lest you be thought a coward as well as a dishonourable knave.”

Yves knew that Christophe couldn’t tell Aubrey the truth, why he couldn’t have been the one to dishonour his sister. Yves desperately wanted to explain the situation, but for all his education he couldn’t find the words, at least not without completely destroying Christophe’s own reputation. Even if he could, would he be believed, the word of a lowly tutor over that of a woman of noble birth and good breeding?

Before he could say anything, Christophe bent down and retrieved the glove, handing it back to its owner. “When, and where?”

“Tonight, at sunset, île des Cygnes.”

“Weapons?”

“Pistols.”

“No,” Yves interrupted firmly. “I believe, that as you challenged, Christophe gets to choose the weapon. In which case may I suggest, the sabre. After all, we are not fighting to the death. Shall we say to first blood?”

“Who are you to involve yourself in this?” Aubrey asked rudely.

“I am Yves Lagarde, I am Christophe’s companion and tutor, and I believe I shall be his second for this duel, if, of course, you insist on going through with the whole ridiculous charade.”

“It is neither ridiculous nor a charade. My family’s honour is at stake. Should I win, I expect *Monsieur* de Valliot to do the honourable thing and marry my sister,” Aubrey said stiffly. “Sabres it is. Till sunset.” He nodded and strode out the room.

Christophe collapsed down in to the chair and buried his head in his hands. Leaving him to himself, Yves followed Aubrey to the door and watched as the butler ushered him out of the house. Signalling for him to come over, he ordered a small glass of Cognac and two coffees to be brought to the morning room before returning to Christophe.

“What do I do?” Christophe asked looking up from his hands.

“You have two choices, you ignore the challenge and *Monsieur* de Carville will ensure that everyone in society knows what his sister has told him you did, or you go to île des Cygnes tonight, accept the challenge and prove that you didn’t.”

“I might not win.”

“You can win. Did you not look closely at our visitor? He was running to flab. I doubt that he is used to handling a sabre, he certainly won’t have received the training that *Monsieur* Olivier has put you through.”

“Pistols would have been easier.”

“A faster death maybe, but with a sabre the odds are more in your favour.”

“Of course, duelling is illegal, and if we get caught, then the outcome matters not, because we shall both be in gaol.”

“It is highly unlikely that at sundown we will be disturbed on île des Cygnes.”

“I am not sure if that’s a good thing or not!” Christophe exclaimed unhappily.

The door opened to admit Henri, carrying a tray of the requested drinks. After he set it on the sideboard, Yves picked up the glass of Cognac and pressed it into Christophe's hand before settling on one of the other chairs.

"Are you sure you don't know Charlotte de Carville?"

"Absolutely! You doubt me?"

"No, of course not," Yves said, reaching out with one hand and laying it on Christophe's knee in a conciliatory gesture. "I am just struggling to understand why she named you."

"Chance? Maybe she saw us and knows that I can't admit who I was with."

"Possibly, and obviously she had been out there with someone she shouldn't have been."

"Dammit, Yves! What if I lose and she traps me into marriage? I think I'd rather be run through with a sabre than marry a woman."

"Don't be so dramatic Christophe, it won't come to that."

"You can't be sure. I must fight for my life it seems."

Yves rolled his eyes at Christophe's statement and watched as he swiftly downed the contents of the glass, wincing at the burn as it hit the back of his throat. Rising to his feet, he began to pace the floor, hands clasped behind his back. Yves sat back in the chair, replaying the events from the garden the night before.

"I think we are missing something here," Yves said eventually.

"I am still at a loss to understand how she came to pick on me as her companion in the garden."

"Charlotte, Charlotte. Are you sure you know no one of that name? It seems familiar."

"Maybe it is not someone I know, but someone you know."

"If that were the case, why did she not name me as her intended?"

"No disrespect, Yves," Christophe stopped pacing and looked Yves up and down before smiling wickedly. "While I find you unbelievably attractive and would elope with you in a heartbeat, let's face it, you are hardly suitable marriage material for one such as de Carville."

"I suppose I am not, but I still say it makes no sense. You must know her, or a close friend of hers."

“No, really, I can’t recall anyone of that name and my friends are virtually all male. The places we go do not encourage female customers, or at least, not of the type that this Charlotte must be.”

“Do any of your friends have younger sisters? Cousins maybe? Were you introduced to anyone last night?”

“I met a good many people, but once I’d done a round of the ballroom I retired to the game room to make a foursome for billiards with Jean-Jacques, Armand and Denis. There were a few women at the card tables, but they were all much older matrons. What about you? You were in the ballroom for much longer than I.”

“Yes, hiding behind a statue and trying to go unnoticed.”

“You hid behind a statue? Why on earth did you do that?”

“To avoid Pierre des Roches,” Yves said dryly. “He’s a very determined young man, but I am not one for the painted, simpering type. Each time I seemed to lack for someone to talk to he was at my elbow. After I’d finished speaking to *Madame* de Puisieux, who I have to admit I was surprised to find in attendance, I slipped into an alcove behind a rather good statue of Eros.”

“I wish I could have seen that.” Christophe laughed, and Yves couldn’t help but smile back at him. Suddenly Christophe stopped laughing. “*Madame* de Puisieux, the two girls she had with her at Le brasserie Procope, what were their names?”

“Her charges? Helene—” Yves paused, “—Charlotte.” Christophe spoke at the same time.

Christophe looked hopefully at Yves. “That must be her. We should go round and confront her, get her to retract her slanderous comments, tell her brother the truth.”

“No, we’d never get an audience with her,” Yves said reasonably. “I am pretty certain her brother will have her confined to her rooms and turning up to their home may result in them calling the *gendarmes*.”

“You’re right.” Christophe’s shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Yes, I am, but while we might not get to speak to her, I have an idea.”

“What? What do you intend to do?”

“Trust me.” Yves rose to his feet and moved over to Christophe, wrapping his arms around him in a tight embrace and risking a lover’s kiss to his lips. “Ask Henri to arrange a carriage for me whilst I go and change.”

“Where are you going?”

“To talk to someone who might help. I suggest in the meantime, you practice with the sabre. Just in case.”

The sky had darkened by the time the carriage drew to a halt on rue de l'Université. Christophe and Yves disembarked in silence, Yves carrying a large wooden case containing two sabres. They walked slowly down the street and crossed the pont des Cygnes to the island itself. Beneath the bridge the swans that gave the island its name drifted on the current of the Seine like pale ghosts. There was a chill in the air, not unusual for a September night. Above them clouds obscured any sight of the moon or stars.

The only building on the island was a lodge, where woodsmen stored logs for use as firewood during the winter months. Beside the lodge was a clearing between the trees, where Aubrey de Carville stood waiting for them dressed in just his breeches and shirt. With him was an older, broader man, who carried his outer garments over one arm.

“Good evening,” Yves said calmly, walking in front of Christophe into the clearing.

“You came then.”

“Of course.” Observing proprieties, Yves gave a formal bow, which both Aubrey and his man responded to automatically. “We have brought the weapons for the duel, if your man would care to come and make his choice for you whilst *Monsieur* de Valliot prepares himself?” Yves laid down the wooden box he carried and unclipped the clasp, opening it to expose the two blades which lay side by side in dark red velvet.

“Go ahead, Jules,” Aubrey ordered. As Jules stepped up to the weapons, Yves turned back to Christophe, who was beginning to unbutton his overcoat.

“I'd rather be undressing you in other circumstances,” Yves said quietly. Christophe gave a tight smile but didn't respond. Quickly they removed Christophe's outer garments, Yves folding them neatly and placing them on the ground.

“You have chosen?” Yves asked as he returned to the centre of the clearing, where Jules was weighing a blade in each hand.

“Yes, this one.” He slashed the blade in his right hand in the air before returning the other blade to the box. Returning to Aubrey, he reversed the blade

and offered the sabre handle first. Yves picked up the box containing the remaining sabre and carried it back to Christophe.

“Ready?” Yves asked once Christophe held the weapon; he only received a nod in reply.

Yves led Christophe back to the centre of the clearing, where Jules stood with Aubrey behind him.

“First to draw blood is the winner, no forfeits,” Jules instructed

“Agreed. We withdraw to the edge of the clearing while they fight. Three minutes only, then if there is no winner we break for a further three before resuming.”

“Agreed.”

The two seconds turned, and Yves laid his hand briefly on Christophe's arm as he walked past.

The duellists stood in the centre of the clearing, a couple of metres apart, facing each other. Christophe's blade hung loosely in his right hand, whereas Aubrey gripped the handle tightly, the blade at ninety degrees from his body.

“*En garde*,” Jules called from the beyond the fighters, who both raised their weapons and took up the correct stance. As they both lunged forwards a woman's voice rang out sharply from behind Yves.

“*Arrêtez!*” The two men stopped short, their blades crashing harmlessly against each other, before they turned to where *Madame* le Breton had entered the clearing. Trailing behind her, Yves recognised the frightened looking young woman as Charlotte de Carville.

“*Madame*, what is the meaning of this?” Aubrey asked dropping his blade and rushing over to his sister. Pulling her away from *Madame* le Breton and placing a protective arm around her shoulder.

“I am here to stop this duel, and to prevent you from making a huge mistake.”

“To stop me from making a mistake?” Aubrey looked grossly offended by Alexandrine's words. “I assure you there is no mistake here on my part. I am defending the honour of my sister, my family.”

“Your sister's honour is not yours to defend, *Monsieur*. What she chooses to do with her honour, or her body, is entirely up to her.” Alexandrine spoke

bluntly, making Charlotte flush with embarrassment. "What would this duel achieve? To force two people who barely know each other into a marriage for the sake of propriety and the family name? Did you even question what your sister told you?" The question was clearly rhetorical as she continued without waiting for an answer. "And what if there was a slip of the blade, these are real weapons gentlemen. One of you could easily have died. What then of your sister's honour, the name of your family?"

"*Madame*, my sister would not lie to me," Aubrey said coldly.

Alexandrine simply shook her head and turned to Charlotte. "The truth this time, my dear," she said softly.

"I wasn't with *Monsieur de Valliot*." Her voice reminded Yves of how very young she must be, barely sixteen he guessed. "I don't even know who he was, I was dancing you see, and I was passed from partner to partner. After a waltz, my partner asked me to walk in the garden with him to cool down. I'd had rather too much to drink, and it seemed a good idea, so I agreed."

"You don't even know his name?"

"No, when you caught me coming back in and challenged me, I said the name that came first to my mind. You see I'd seen him, with his friend there." She pointed to Yves. "They were on the bench on the opposite side of the fountain. I didn't know two men could."

"So you see," Alexandrine cut in suddenly, "you were about to fight a duel with the wrong man. *Monsieur de Valliot* had nothing to do with your sister. I would suggest that you forget this duel and take your sister home. Perhaps if you don't want her making such mistakes again, you should keep a closer eye on her. Though my recommendation would be to let her make her own mistakes and help her learn from them, not fight her battles for her."

"Thank you, *Madame*," Aubrey said stiffly. "I will take your advice. *Monsieur de Valliot*." He turned to Christophe and gave a curt nod, ignoring Yves completely.

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said tearfully to Christophe, who smiled and shook his head at her.

"Come Charlotte, let's go home." Still with his arm around her, he walked towards the edge of the clearing. Jules, who had silently gathered up Aubrey's clothes, followed them into the darkness of the trees.

“Thank you, Alexandrine,” Yves said with a smile at his patron’s wife once they were alone.

“You are welcome. She had no idea what her brother intended, and I have to say, was quite horrified that she could potentially be married off to someone who suffers from ‘the English disease’.”

“Ah, yes, about that.”

Alexandrine put her hand up to stop him.

“It is not uncommon, Yves, you are not the first I have known who prefers his own sex to the fairer one. However, these things are not well thought of in polite society, and I fear that young Charlotte will spread her new found knowledge around.”

“I should leave in that case. I wouldn’t want to damage Christophe’s prospects. If not back to the library, then I can always return to my family’s business.” Alexandrine raised an eyebrow at him as he spoke, a slight smirk playing across her lips.

“And you propose to do this without a thought to what I might want?” Christophe said abruptly from behind him, where he was buttoning up his waistcoat.

“But what of your reputation?” Yves whirled round as he spoke. “Your father will not permit me to continue teaching you. I doubt he’ll even let you see me again.”

“I won’t let him do that. I will leave with you.”

“What, so we can both live in poverty? Or do you have a trade you can take up that you’ve not told me about? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I am not being ridiculous.”

“Gentleman,” Alexandrine interrupted with gentle firmness. “I may have a solution to your problem. Obviously, you need a break from society here in town and you don’t want to be apart. So, when your father returns from Versailles tomorrow, Charles and I will call upon him and make a suggestion. It is not unusual for young men of Christophe’s standing to take a tour of Europe with a companion to take in the culture of other countries. A year or so should do it, by the time you return someone else will be the centre of society’s gossip mill and you and your indiscretions will long since have been forgotten about.”

“You think you can persuade my father to agree?”

“Oh, dear boy, believe me, I can be extremely persuasive when I want,” she said with a husky laugh. “Now, I must return home. There is no need to escort me to my carriage, my bodyguard is waiting just within the trees.”

“Thank you, Alexandrine, I am not sure how we shall ever repay you,” Yves said with a polite bow.

“No payment is necessary.” She swept up to him and kissed him with familiarity on each cheek then moved on to do the same to Christophe before fading into the trees.

“So, you feel like seeing the sights of Europe with me?” Christophe asked as he walked up to Yves.

“You’d get into terrible trouble without me,” Yves replied taking him into his arms and kissing him soundly.

Epilogue

Two years later

In the late afternoon the hillside meadow lay in the shadow cast by Mount Vesuvius, which loomed above the ruined city of Pompeii. In the distance below them, the sea of the Bay of Naples seemed to almost sparkle in the sunlight. Yves and Christophe lay side by side on the woollen blanket which covered the prickly, dry grass, the remnants of their picnic at their feet.

In the privacy the open space afforded, they had removed their top coats and cravats, their waistcoats were unbuttoned and the linen undershirts creased and rumpled as a result of their after lunch activities. They held hands, their fingers twined together like a complicated knot with no beginning and no end.

“So, where next, *mon cher ami*?” Yves asked.

“I’m not sure.” Christophe rolled onto his side to face him.

“Well, we’ve visited London, Madrid and Vienna, been climbing in the Alps, seen Pisa, Venice and Rome on our way here. There are a lot of countries left to explore. We could even go and visit the new world.”

“I think I want a home.”

“To Tulle? Or to Paris?”

“No, not go home. I want a home, with you. We’ve travelled so much in the last two years, I find myself wanting to set down roots.”

“Oh.” Yves rolled up onto his side, their faces only inches away from each other. “A home?”

“Yes. I want us to have our own place, a villa, here if you’d like. Somewhere we could sit out in the evening and watch the sun set, before going to bed, together.”

“Yes, I’d like that too,” Yves admitted softly.

“We should have a vineyard,” Christophe declared.

“And how do you plan for us to do this?” Yves smiled fondly at his lover.

“I was talking to one of the old men in the tavern last night,” Christophe admitted. “He was telling me that he has no sons, just a daughter. She is engaged to a merchant in Sorrento who has his own business and has invited him to live with them when they marry.”

“And this man wouldn’t happen by any chance to have a vineyard?” Yves raised an eyebrow at Christophe as he asked.

“Well, yes. He also has a villa, it’s just a modest property but it would suit us well. The vineyard is a going concern. I have the money from my family to purchase it, and after a few years, if we put in the work, it will pay for itself.”

“You appear to be very set on this.”

“Well yes, I thought it was a good opportunity. For us, for our future.”

Yves reached over and pulled Christophe into his arms, their bodies fitting together with an ease borne of familiarity. On the slope of an Italian hillside, where they would make their home and run a successful vineyard, they celebrated their love.

The End

Author Bio

K works by day in the legal profession, at the insistence of the many critters that let her live in their house on the understanding that she provides them with food, warmth and entertainment. When they allow her any spare time, she reads (anything that is put in front of her), knits (mainly socks), bakes (usually cupcakes), and occasionally scribbles stories. She hopes one day to be allowed a large shotgun and a decent recipe for rabbit stew to deal with the damn plot bunny!

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