

She couldn't bring herself to look at him. All evening she met his gaze, openly challenging him, but now it was only when she focused her eyes on the flames that she found the courage to speak.

"Why did you invite me here?" she whispered.

"*En vérité?*" In truth?

"Yes, please. *En vérité.*" She forced herself to look at him.

"Because ever since you arrived, I have been dying to know how your lips would taste, what the touch of your skin would feel like."

She was appalled to feel an inner surge of answering desire. She lifted her chin. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not in the habit of responding in such a manner to strangers."

"But we are far from strangers, *mademoiselle*. You are a guest in my home, in my chamber, by the fire, sharing a brandy with me."

She didn't know how to respond. He was right, and yet so very wrong. This was not how it looked. But propriety was about appearance. Measured so, this was indeed a very improper situation. She had accepted a forbidden invitation. What had she been thinking? It wasn't only the prospect of seeing the Victor Hugo that convinced her to enter. It was the glimpse at his soul.

He shared something with her, something she understood. That kinship drew her like a moth to his flame.

She drank the rest of her brandy too quickly, and felt it rush to her head. She just wanted to escape before things got too far out of hand.

Seeing her gulp down the dark liquid, he chuckled. "I hope I don't make you nervous."

"I am sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, but I shall not be swayed from my principles."

She got to her feet and he did, too.

"You know, I admire you," he said, "for your courage in resisting me. But we both know your lot in life."

Despite the warmth of the fire, she felt a chill. "Do you intend to force me? Is that your kind of courage?"

"I could. No one would question me on the matter."

She started to retort.

"But," he added, "I rather enjoy the chase."

He set his snifter on the little table next to his chair and went to her. She fell back a step, unsure of what to expect. She braced herself for a rough touch, but all he did was remove her brandy glass and place it on the fireplace mantle.

"Since you've been bold enough to enter my room, you could at least grant a man his parting wish." He took her

hand. “One taste, one small taste, and I promise to bid you goodnight.”

Zoé looked down at his hand touching hers. How did she get here? Her heart pounded and she breathed in deeply, exhaling slowly. She had never kissed or been kissed by a man on the mouth. She only exchanged polite pecks on the cheek with her father in greeting.

“I’m very curious about what’s under this robe,” he said.

Before she could object, he untied the sash and her robe fell open. With a gasp, she pulled the robe shut, but too late. From the blazing blue heat of his gaze, she knew that he saw her dark nipples peeking through the delicate fabric of her virginal white gown, and perceived the contours of her body underneath.

“I must go,” she said.

“No, don’t.”

She tried to step around him. As before, he blocked her.

“Haven’t you ever desired something so badly that you would do anything just to have it?” he asked, moving her hair from her shoulder to her back.

“No.”

“Let me kiss you, and you shall.”

“I don’t—”

“Let me show you the pleasures you hide from.”

Looking into his eyes, then his face, taking him in and urged on by the effects of the brandy, she touched the silky hair that fell around his shoulders. The brandy, the flames, his presence and his desire: it was all so very intoxicating. Her heart raced as she felt his hand slide down her hip.

And now she was truly afraid – not just of his desire, but her own. He ignited an inner ember she was barely aware of. He turned a spark into a flame. She was deeply aware of her own longing. For one intense moment, she wished they weren’t bound by principles and etiquette. Then she caught herself and knew she was in grave danger.

She drew her hand back, feeling betrayed and trapped by her own weakness, a weakness unleashed by the brandy, and seduced by the idea that this man of privilege, of noble birth and lineage, this man who could have any woman he wanted, actually wanted her.

He smiled at her confusion and pulled her into his arms. “You bewitch me,” he whispered and gently bit down on her lower lip.

“*Mon seigneur*, we can’t.” She willed herself to be strong, to see him for who he was, to not give in to his advances. There was still time to escape.