

CHAPTER 1

Devlin Rhodes jumped down from the ten-foot high stone wall, landing lightly on his feet. The mastiffs trotted up to greet him, their fierce wrinkled faces set in adoring expectation. As he had for the past week, he pulled two steaks out of the knapsack on his back.

He unwrapped them, letting the great hounds smell both the meat and the hand that offered it. After allowing them a tantalizing bite, he tossed the steaks behind a tall bush. Tails wagging, they padded after them.

"Eat hearty, *garcons*." He'd trade one of his jewelry stores to see the so-rich, so-snobbish Lady Charlaine Callista Kimball's face if she saw her vicious hounds literally eating out of the hand of her most detested rival. What a pity she'd never know he'd been there.

If everything went as planned.

Shrugging with the Gallic fatalism that was one of the few things he'd inherited from his French mother, Devlin continued across the immaculate garden that Queen Victoria herself would envy. But then, rumor had it that the Queen had asked her own gardener to help plan this masterpiece of substance over style. Rumor also had it that Charlaine Kimball was one of her favorite subjects, with a similar puritanical bent to Regina Victoria herself.

Devlin grinned to himself. He loved nothing more than shocking the lofty pretensions of the aristocracy. Tonight's work would ease some of the pain this particular class had caused him and his mother.

Clad in black from head to toe, Devlin moved with rather than against the night. He slithered from a stately linden tree to the bushes trimmed to resemble forest creatures. Here an owl watched him with big eyes; there a stag seemed poised to take flight from a pursuing huntsman. At another time, Devlin might have paused to enjoy the clever blending of stone statue with blooming flora and fauna.

However, Lady Charlaine was also known to be a very private individual. She had several night watchmen about the place. Had Devlin not made it his task to learn their schedule, he would not have known that he had exactly five more minutes to scale the mansion before the early morning watch came on.

He moved with a stealth unused for some years, but the soft-footed sureness easily returned. His eyes, startling blue in the grime of his face, constantly darted, looking for movement, or a twig on the ground. Anything that could reveal his presence--or his purpose.

He'd missed the old game since he became respectable. Store by store, he was slowly gaining acclaim even against the competition of the likes of Kimball's and Tiffany's. He had too much to lose to continue this delightful, but dangerous, sport. Tonight would truly have to be the last time.

When he came to the fountain centering the vast grounds, he paused to rinse his hands, dry them on his breeches, and then pull on his kidskin black gloves. He contemplated the statue in the fountain with an ironic smile.

Most appropriate. Diana stood there, her tunic slipping off her shoulders as if she'd just exited her bath. But her bow was held at the ready, her eyes trained severely on the all-too-human man kneeling at her feet, gazing up at her.

Devlin had come by his education the hard way--book by book. But his memory was retentive, and he recalled the story of Diana and Acteon, who had spied upon the virgin goddess in her bath. She turned him into a stag; he was ripped apart by his own dogs.

"Charming," Devlin muttered, turning away with a shiver he could not squelch. He'd have to go into Diana's private quarters. His confederate in the household had informed him that the safe was there.

He continued on his zig-zag path to the house that glowered above the trees. Though he was as alert as ever, his mind was filled with curiosity about the woman who had challenged him.

If she'd known him better, she would have realized that, like his older cousin, Devlin Rhodes never shirked a challenge. Even if it meant endangering the comfortable existence he'd at last won, he would prove to the noble ice Princess whom no man could win that her estate was not burglar-proof. Besides, he wanted to see what his dear cousin had sent her in the last shipment so he'd know what he was up against.

Why did she hate men so? She surrounded herself with women, and probably did business with Cecil Rhodes only because she had to. He had the best diamonds, after all.

Bitterness burned the backs of his eyes. The familiar vow returned to him. Someday, Cecil Rhodes would regret refusing to acknowledge the first cousin born of his uncle's youthful indiscretion with a young French girl.

Devlin slipped into the shadow of the ivy-covered wall. "Someday, *cousin*, has arrived," he whispered aloud. Devlin plunged his hand into the thick ivy, found the rope and pulled it out. Slapping the rope against the wall to free it from the ivy all the way to the fourth-story tower at the top, where it was anchored, Devlin gripped the rope with both hands. He set his feet flat against the wall and began to climb.

The ivy made it tricky. Still, his rubber-soled shoes found purchase every time he slipped. The spring night was cool, but his back was trickling with sweat by the time he finally reached the casement window high at the top of the round tower.

Partially resting his weight on the ledge, he shoved the window gently. It resisted, then swung inward before the heavy curtains stopped it. He released his pent-up breath. So far, so good. His ally had kept her side of the bargain.

Devlin eased the curtains aside and dropped, sure-footed, into the room. Moonlight streamed through the crack in the curtains, revealing the plush flower-patterned carpet smothering the floor. As he tiptoed forward, he saw that the flower motif was repeated in the silk wallpaper scattered with orchids. Hot-house orchids, their pearly petals so perfect they looked carved, filled an exquisite cut glass vase. They nodded their regal heads from a long table behind the couch before the vast marble fireplace. Lamps glowed with muted colors even in the dim moonlight. The exquisite stained glass art pieces could only be of Tiffany's manufacture.

Devlin scanned the room, but, oddly, saw no pictures. A huge gilt mirror covered one wall, but it would be too cumbersome to give access to a safe. Devlin advanced another soundless step, but he couldn't see past the middle of the room, so he tugged the curtains a bit wider.

Bookcases lined one wall. He crept nearer to examine them. A sound made him freeze.

A sigh, soft as the breeze whispering through the open casement. Devlin had assumed this to be a sitting room, but now he saw the dim outline of a vast four-poster bed. He glanced at the shelves, at the bed, hesitating.

Curiosity won. Surely he had time for one glimpse of the woman all London buzzed about, the woman who, like the Queen she consorted with, ruled her empire with a feminine but iron hand. Devlin crept over the carpet, but the pile was so thick his treads would have been muffled even if he'd worn boots. As he rounded the bed, moving away from the brighter patch, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Two steps away, he froze. The air left his lungs in a whoosh.

A goddess did indeed slumber in the moonlight, but she was no huntress. She was Aphrodite herself.

Long hair fell over the side of the bed in shimmering waves to the floor. The red tresses caught every stealthy ray of moonlight and cast it back; he could only wonder what her hair looked like at noon. Her eyes were closed, but her lashes were sable fans against her flawless ivory skin. Her dark brows arched wickedly above, flying away to her temples with a reckless disregard for fashion that he found enchanting.

She slept on her back, one leg half out of the covers, bare to the knee. Her ankle was slim but sturdy, a pleasing segue to the shapely calf and hidden thigh that must complete the stunning limb like the crescendo to an aria. He couldn't see her breasts, but the covers mounded over her chest in a way that proved she was very much a woman, in spite of her attempts to live, and act, like a man.

Devlin swallowed, mastering the stirring at his groin, and tore his gaze away. Despite the fact that they both owned jewelry stores, they were as far apart socially as the moon and the stars. He'd learned at an early age that wanting what he couldn't have only made his poverty hurt more. Besides, he wore no mask. Not that she'd recognize him. But if their mutual contacts should one day bring them together....

Quietly he searched the bookcase, nudging at corners, carvings and books. Finally, when he pressed on a medallion on one end, part of the case slid open on well-oiled springs.

A safe gleamed behind it. Devlin took his glove off with his teeth, pulled a stethoscope out of his pack and slipped it around his neck and in his ears.

Turning the dial in his sensitive fingers, he listened to the teeth ticking off each number until a distinctive hollow click sounded. Mentally filing the number, he proceeded, working left and right, until he had all four digits. In ten minutes, he had the safe open.

Quickly now, for he heard the covers stirring, he pulled out the contents, the familiar solid feel of stones and gold comforting him. Then his fingers felt something unexpected. He pulled out a rectangular wrapped object. Deftly, he opened the oil-skin rag. A book? What book could be so valuable that it had to be stowed with a King's ransom of jewels?

Devlin barely had time to glimpse an exquisite binding inset with jewels before a hiccup came from the bed. Dropping all willy-nilly into his pack, he buttoned the knapsack closed and shouldered it. He pulled his glove back on and latched the safe. The bookcase slid home just as quietly.

He'd almost made it back to the window when a cold feminine voice said, "Stop right there or I'll shoot you where you stand." Lady Charlaime Callista Kimball came forward into the moonlight, her thin gown revealing a voluptuous form.

However, Devlin's appreciation was somewhat spoiled by the incongruous accessory she wore. The tiny pearl-handled pistol glittered with a gimlet eye in the moonlight.

He let his gaze linger insolently on all the shadowy curves and valleys he itched to discover with his hands. What he wouldn't give for a blazing noon sun. Still, she was intimidated enough to hunch her shoulders, but she merely succeeded in emphasizing a lissome flow of hip to thigh.

Grinning, Devlin leaned against the wall beside the casement and crossed his feet at the ankles, hoping she couldn't see the pack on his shoulders. "You really don't need to threaten me, you know. I'll gladly stay in your bed chamber with you as long as you like, *cherie*."

"Do not call me that," she said through her teeth. "Doubtless you will not find me dear when I throw you to my dogs."

A lesser man might have backed away at the threat that so closely fit his earlier whimsical speculation; Devlin Rhodes merely quirked a well-defined black eyebrow. "Please do. I have not found the time to play with them today."

That set her back for a moment, but he had to admire her aplomb when she said coolly, "Indeed? This I must see." She started to wave him downstairs, noticed her bare feet poking beneath the hem of her gown, and seemed to abruptly recall how she was dressed. Even in the moonlight, he saw her blush. Savagely she jerked up a dressing gown from the foot of her bed.

She looked at it, then at him, and finally down at the gun in her hand.

He had to smile at her dilemma. Indeed, it would be difficult to put on such a heavy garment while trying to hold a pistol on him all the while. He bowed gallantly. "I shall be delighted to hold the pistol for you."

She glared at him. She nibbled that full, sensuous lip.

"That, too, I shall be even happier to do," he said softly, his gaze caressing her mouth. "I have a feeling you do not utilize the gifts God blessed you with so richly."

"OOH!" She held the dressing gown over her form and backed to the door, that pistol still leveled at his chest. Awkwardly holding the gown over her with an elbow as she fumbled for the knob, she opened the door, backed outside and locked it. He heard her light steps hurry down the hall, then she called, "Henrietta! Fetch my watchman!"

That was the only encouragement he needed. How fortuitous that she thought he'd entered through the door. He would just go out the way he came in....

To his dismay, by the time he secured his knapsack soundly on his shoulders and got in position to climb, several moving torches were bobbing around in the gardens far below. Devlin heard footsteps tromping up stairs far below in the hall.

Trapped. He gave a last desperate look at the room, but all the obvious hiding places were too small. Unless...He eyed the bed. It's doubtful even her own men would search the Ice Princess's reputedly virgin bed. Quickly, before he could change his mind, he picked up the heavy glass bowl filled with flowers and water, carried it to the window and threw it outside with all his might.

A satisfying thud sounded as the heavy weight hit the ground. One of the torches bouncing nearby stopped. "There he be! This way!" a man called. The torch leaped toward the sound.

Devlin shoved the casement window wide, pulling the rope out of the shielding ivy. For good measure, he tossed one of his gloves at the foot of the tower. Then, pushing the pack beneath the bed, he dove beneath the down covers. The feather bed was so soft that his form barely made an impression under the mound. He settled back, alert for the tiniest sound.

He was not scared; he was not tense. In fact, the rakish grin that lingered in the minds of all who saw it stretched his mobile face.

The emotion tapping against his ribs was far more heady than fear.
And far more dangerous....

In the hallway foyer, Lady Charlaine Callista Kimble tapped a small, bare foot impatiently on the priceless black and white Carrara marble floor while her men searched her room. Her head watchman came back down, respectfully tugging his cap.

"Sorry, ma'rm, ain't a whisker sign 'o him. From the looks o' things, he climbed out the same way he come in. One of my men heard him land, but couldn't find no sight o' him." The grizzled man was obviously a veteran of the class war between gentry and poor working sod, for his words rushed the faster the longer she took to respond. "I thinks we should fetch the bobbies-
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"Never mind. I do not want this insolence bandied about. I shall find the scoundrel myself. Now leave me." Charlaine waited until the man scurried out before venting her anger. She kicked a chair leg, sending a priceless Louis XV gilded chair skidding across the marble, leaving a deep scratch in the shining floor. She turned away disdainfully, knowing her army of workmen would have the marble replaced before the sun had set. The fact that her toe ached only added to her rage as she tromped back upstairs. Doubtless her father would castigate her for losing control, but she'd long since stopped caring what he thought. At least she'd learned to vent her rage in private.

Charlaine almost tripped, so intent was she on vowing retribution on her intruder. She grabbed the bannister with a most unladylike curse that would have shocked the queen.

A robbery! Why, in all the years the Kimballs had owned this estate, no one had ever dared to break in. Who was this fellow of the dancing eyes and the nimble fingers, who could sprout wings and fly? For surely that is the only way he could have escaped.

She slammed the door to her suite behind her and turned up the gas light beside her bed to appraise her haven with jaundiced eyes. No man had ever set foot in here, including her own father.

Until tonight.

Again, the image of those flashing white teeth and laughing blue eyes haunted her. The man's thick black hair tumbled with abandon across his broad, intelligent forehead. His brows were untidy accents to the rest of a perfectly symmetrical countenance. Handsome nose, not too big, not too small; wide, perfectly shaped lips. And his physique! His form-fitting clothes gave her active imagination plenty to work with. Odd, that she could picture the scoundrel so vividly, but what he lacked in breeding he made up for in boldness. Part of her had to admire his audacity. She seldom found men attractive, in fact avoided eligible young bachelors when she could, despite her Queen's urging to the contrary. But then, she seldom came across men so handsome.

For, if she should fall in love and marry, according to English law, she would lose all she'd sweated and sacrificed to build. To distract herself, she stirred the dying coals in her fireplace to roaring life, pausing with an arm on the mantel to again appraise the only place that ever saw the real Charlaine Kimball.

Here, she let down the cold mask she displayed to most of the world. She laughed and played cards with her few friends, and her trusted maid, Henrietta. She read on wintry evenings, feet tucked under her, before the roaring fire. She sewed her exquisite embroidery designs. Her latest had been a heart-shaped pillow with her name at the bottom.

If, on occasion, she sighed in her self-imposed isolation, well, that was the cost of carrying on the Kimball legacy. It had taken her many years to accept, but she finally knew that she was truly her father's daughter, the only Kimball left to carry on an old, proud line. In her twenty-five years, she'd learned that, in the business world at least, the ruthless won, the

compassionate lost. Durwood Arthur Bryant Kimball, her father, had taught her that lesson well, by both example and design. To his everlasting regret and constant reminders that she should have been a boy, she responded by doing her best to become just like him.

If, at times, she hated her own metamorphosis, well, of that she told no one.

She stood straight with resolve. If ever she again saw the man who had dared invade her privacy, he would rue the day he saw her at such a disadvantage. And tomorrow, she would set her workmen to ripping out the wallpaper and the carpet, and carrying the furniture to the attics. When the room was once more pristine, she could obliterate all memory of the invader.

As she pulled the screen over the fire, dusted her hands off and turned toward her bed, the rogue thought crept under her guard: Could she obliterate her memory of the scoundrel as easily? She scowled at her own weakness. Girlhood longings were for the poor and the weak. She was neither. Indeed, she was the great-granddaughter of a pirate.

As she passed to the bed, she glimpsed herself in the mirror. That creature there, all soft curves and smooth skin, was the antithesis of her image of herself. She should be tall, with a deep voice and wiry build, the better to rule her empire. How she wished she could have been born in an earlier time as a boy, to learn at the side of her revered ancestor, the former pirate, Drake Kimball. Since she was in leading strings, she'd heard the stories of how he'd bested his enemies, restored the family fortune with no advantage but his wit, and founded a dynasty with one of England's boldest ladies, Callista Raleigh.

What would her legacy be? She stared at her too-perfect features a moment longer in disgust, then she flounced away to the bed. For a surety, no heirs would give her immortality in their own family tall tales. She would have no grand romance to add to the family--

She drew in a sharp breath and rushed to the hidden safe. The jewels were insured, but the precious illuminated book passed down from Great-Grandfather Drake Kimball, where her own grandfather and father had added stories of their own stormy courtships, was irreplaceable. Her fingers trembled as she spun the dial and swung open the safe. Her vision swam before her. She reached inside, as if her eyes deceived her. But no. The safe was empty.

"Blast and damn his black, thieving heart! You shall pay for this, and richly, I vow on the blood of my ancestors!" She slammed the safe shut and kicked the bookcase panel closed so hard that half the books fell out. She had to jump back to avoid them falling on her feet. She would tear London apart, send her best detectives to every hell hole and fence in the city until she found one rather ordinary jewel thief. They would bring him before her, and he would bow on bended knee, begging for mercy.

She made a scoffing sound. Mercy? Indeed, she would treat him just as gently as men had treated female captives through the ages. She kicked a few of the unoffending books, and then threw a Dresden shepherdess against the wall for good measure. The satisfying crash made her feel better for all of five seconds. She was still breathing heavily when she finally returned to her bed, turned up the gas lamp and prepared to read the night away, as she often did when she had trouble sleeping.

She stuffed the pillow behind her head and tried to pull the covers over her legs. Odd. The heavy down seemed caught on something. She tugged harder, but the down pulled taut and did not budge. Most odd. Come to think of it, the bed did not feel quite right. She got up on her knees and leaned toward the end of the bed to see what the covers were stuck on.

She felt the opposite side of the bed move and turned in that direction, her eyes wide with shock, but she was too late. The covers themselves seemed to take life, rising to envelope her in

a crushing hold. She found herself sprawled, flat on her back in her own bed, the intruder she'd thought long fled now master, where only she had been mistress a few scant seconds before.

No man had ever been so close. She felt every inch of his tall, muscular frame weighing her down into the soft bed. Oddly, the pressure was not unpleasant. Something about his planes and angles seemed to fit her curves just right, but the primitive feeling horrified her conscious mind. As did the odd stiffness pressing into her lower abdomen.

Innocent she might be, but she knew what *that* meant. He must have watched her standing before the fire in the thin gown. The fact that he found her as physically pleasing as she secretly found him only added to her frustrated rage.

She was so stunned and still, staring up at those bold blue eyes, that his big hand eased its pressure over her mouth.

"Promise me not to scream, and I will let you up."

She nodded slightly. He eased his palm away and started to move aside. She took a deep breath, but the scream had barely started before that tough, capable hand swallowed it. His toothsome grin made her quiver, deep inside. He settled on her comfortably, pushing her deeper into the bed.

"Your choice, *cherie*. I much prefer this position over a chilly spring night." He squirmed atop her, grinning wider when her eyes fluttered closed. He cocked his head to one side and raised his torso so he could contemplate her pleasing shape. With his free hand, he flicked at the high neckline of her sweeping night gown. "Even your choice of bed attire is cold and proper." He leaned to whisper in her ear, "Save when you stand in front of the fire. There, I suspect, is the real Charlaime Kimball. Your hair tumbles down your back like liquid flame, but it is still cold compared to the passion you suppress within."

The things he was saying to her were horrible, unthinkable. Why could this scoundrel, on their first meeting, see so easily beneath the mask others took for granted? She began to buck beneath him, frantic to get away, to be safe again.

But, like a gift, he offered another first. Holding her chin in one strong hand, he drew his muffling palm away. She had no time to scream, for another substance, softer, warmer, immediately latched onto her mouth.

She had been kissed before, but those were furtive affairs ended coldly by her. This time, when she tried to draw back, she had no where to run. She could only lie, captive to him and the feelings he aroused. Those lips were so warm, so sweetly gentle. She would have expected a rough and tumble man like him to be brutal, to demand her surrender.

Not he. He assayed, testing her like a prospector seeking something far more valuable than gold. And he seemed to find it, for he slanted his head for a deeper angle and rubbed his lips against hers, growling his own pleasure. She felt his heart rate accelerate, and her own heart followed, as if he led her in some pagan dance.

She gasped into his mouth, but that only urged him to greater trespass. The tip of his tongue dipped into her open mouth like a hummingbird seeking life's nectar. As if only she could supply it, only he could take it. Share with me, he seemed to say. We will each be the richer for it.

Her defenses slowly crumbled under the persuasive assault. His skillful mouth aroused in her such feelings as she had never known, no, nor even dreamt of. No one would know if just this once, she were weak, if she explored the great unknown of what it meant to be a woman with a man.

When the teasing tip of his tongue retreated, she struggled her hands free and cupped the back of his head to slant her mouth under his. He had one of his own first lessons in order: She was a fast learner. Boldly, she followed his example, dipping her tongue into his own warm mouth scented of brandy and peppermint.

She felt his shock, but then his careful construction of her passion ended as he focused on an erection of another kind. He showed her the dance and retreat for a full minute. When she was limp beneath him, her head swimming with his scent, his touch, his taste, he drew away slightly.

Murmuring French endearments, he lowered his mouth to her throbbing neck and stabbed his tongue into the scented hollow of her throat. And then his hands, his big, capable hands, skillfully worked at the buttons of her bodice.

A niggling doubt winnowed through the pleasant fog of arousal. Something was wrong. If only she could think.

"*Ma coeur*," he whispered into the vee of skin he was slowly exposing.

The realizations hit her like a sane blast of winter air: He spoke French so well because he *was* a damned frog; she was not the first, no, nor would she be the last, to wilt under this expert seduction.

She was a Kimball, not some harlot to play a lightskirt beneath a frog libertine!

He'd reached the fifth tiny button. He was taking his time, as if he were not a hunted thief, but a welcome guest. As if she were not the favorite of royalty, but a common chit he could have his way with and discard.

Gall at his arrogance revived her formidable willpower. She caught his big hands as they moved to pull her bodice aside. He paused and looked down at her. "*Ma chere*, what is amiss?"

So tender his tone, as if she really were his dear. She flung his hands aside and caught his wide shoulders to push him away. He balked, catching her wrists in his hands and holding them above her head. He was gentle, but inexorable.

Like the tide. Like the sunrise. Like the seasons. The thoughts came unbidden, but she squelched them. A force of nature he might be, but she was a creature who liked her comforts civilized.

Her tone was cool, as if her voice alone could master her own fevered flesh. "An experiment, mainly. Quite pleasant, but in the final analysis, you fail. You may let me up now, if you please."

He froze, obviously surprised by her calm. Then he smiled. A crooked, knowing smile that acknowledged her secret battle with herself. "Ah, but what if I do not please?" He tilted her chin back and lowered his mouth.

"Then I shall scream loud enough to shake the rafters," she said into his lips. She turned her head aside. But the breath to scream would not come. Only because he was on top of her, pressing her into the feather mattress with his heavy weight.

Or so she told herself even as he eased away, as if challenging her to do as she threatened.

Nothing stopped her from screaming. Nothing, save those sultry blue eyes that made icy composure impossible.

"One day, *ma chere*, you will scream beneath me with a different emotion." The soft words had the nature of a vow, all the more troubling since she didn't understand his meaning.

He glanced around, tugged the velvet cords off her bed curtains and proceeded to tie her to the bedpost. He used a strange knot that held her but gave slightly when she pulled at it.

Still, to be tied up in her own bedchamber, to her own bed she'd unwillingly shared with this bold stranger....Outrage gave her strength.

He stifled her scream with a large hand. "Promise me you will not call them for five minutes, and I will not gag you." He eased his hand away.

"Scoundr--"

Back came the hand. That long length of sheer masculinity settled back atop her. "As you wish. I will stay." His eyes filled half her world, then three quarters, and finally she saw nothing but him, felt nothing but him.

When he pulled his hand away to kiss her, she said breathlessly, "Very well. I promise not to scream for five minutes."

The kiss landed on her neck, blending with a heavy male sigh that sounded like regret. "Pity. Never have I enjoyed a battle of wills more."

Finally, his weight lifted. She heard him rummaging about, even though she couldn't see him.

She had to wound him somehow. "How do you know I will keep my word?"

"Because you are a woman of fortitude and honesty, or so say all who do business with you." His voice was muffled, as if he had bent over something.

How could he know so much about her, when she had never seen him, or heard of him? Was he involved in the jewelry trade somehow?

While she speculated, he came into her field of sight again. That maddening smile stretched those expressive, sensual lips. "Besides," he added softly, "the Ice Princess will never admit to the world that she was bested in her own chamber by a mere, ah, what was it you called me? Ah yes, a frog." He cocked his head and appraised her. "T'is you who looks a bit green about the gills, my sweet. But fear not. We shall meet again."

At the window, he turned. With only the moon to bless his parting, he threw her an airy kiss that landed like a brand. He'd stuck something else in his bulging pack, but she couldn't tell what it was.

Even as she glared at him with fury, part of her knew she would never forget the sight of him at this moment. His black hair blew in the breeze from the open casement. His brilliant blue eyes sparkled even in the moonlight.

He stepped over the sill and paused astride it, surveying her as if he were master of this domain, she, its mistress only until his return. "You are wasted alone up here, my ice Princess. But not for long. Two things I promise you: When the time is right, I shall return your treasure to you. And one day, you will melt beneath my kiss, and beg me for what we almost shared this night. Until then, I will not kiss you again, no matter how much you beg."

"You arrogant frog, never, ever will I beg you for anything! Not in your dreams--"

"But in yours, yes?" He had the temerity to wink. And then, with a lithe twist of his fit body, he had dropped out of sight.

But not out of mind. Even as she stewed, pulling at her silken bonds, part of her knew she would never forget him.

He had not tied her tightly, and she was free within fifteen minutes. She hesitated, torn between the window and the door.

A last sight of him, perhaps? Or a shout to warn the household?

Again, her baser instincts won, to her shame. She ran to the window.

The garden below was brilliantly lit by the moon. At first, she saw nothing unusual. And then, a breeze rustled the hedges. There, where her statue of cupid stood, his bow and arrow on the alert, was her heart-shaped pillow.

Her mouth dropped open as she stared.

The blighter had stuck it on the end of cupid's arrow!

Charlaine threw on her dressing gown and ran down the stairs, so anxious to fetch the pillow before anyone else saw it that she didn't pause to put on slippers. Her tender feet barely felt the rocks gouging them. She lunged for the pillow, almost falling in the pond. The delicate silk tore, but not before she saw the message he'd inscribed in the fabric.

"*Adieu*. But not good-bye. Dream of me, *chere*, as I will dream of you."

Even as a thrill ran up her spine, her eyes narrowed in fury. She marched to the trash pile behind the storage shed and buried the pillow beneath a mound of garbage.

Then, her pride assuaged by the symbolism, she returned to her sanctuary.

But somehow, she knew it would never feel the same. He had spoiled it for her. She touched her tingling mouth, the rogue thought coming: When she saw him again, would she kiss him or call the guards on him, as he deserved?