



BRIDE
TREE

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SECRETS OF VERSAILLES II

Chapter 7

May 1789. Château de Versailles

Versailles is on fire! That was Viviane's thought the moment she stepped off the rose-strewn marble staircase and entered the Hall of Mirrors, just behind the queen. Light beamed from every corner, setting the massive hall ablaze. Immense golden chandeliers, encrusted with costly glass, cast a fiery glow on both the arched frames of the glass windows that formed one side of the ballroom and the hundreds of mirrors that surfaced the walls on the opposing side. The chandeliers, floating inches above the heads of the thousands of revelers who had gathered to celebrate the onset of spring, blazed in spectacular competition with opulent massive candelabras that were spaced about every ten feet the entire length of the hall.

Viviane's breath caught in her throat at her first glimpse of a royal masquerade. A sea of masks, whose colors could rival a rainbow's kaleidoscopic spectrum, surged and ebbed around the massive floor. The dancers moved in intricate harmony with the lively *minuet*, played by a virtual army of court musicians whose music seemed to fuse with the very air she breathed. The bodies of the dancers twirled in a series of memorized patterns, dazzling her with their skill.

She ran moist hands over a vivacious scarlet gown that clung to her trim figure, then realized that the sweat might damage the luxurious fabric. The garment was a gift from the queen's own closet that the royal seamstresses had managed to adjust in time for the evening's entertainment.

The gown itself was a treasure. Diamonds, sewn into its sleeves and across the bodice, caught the light of the thousands of candles, making it appear that she was surrounded by a cloud of shimmering light. Marie had presented the dress to her this afternoon as a token of her appreciation for Viviane's "unsurpassed devotion." While the sight of the dress had robbed Viviane of speech, a quiet voice in her mind persisted in decrying it as a bribe and not a gift at all.

A hush rolled over the crowd. The musicians stopped their performance as they noticed the queen's presence.

"Marie-Antoinette, Queen of France and of Navarre!"

A smattering of insincere applause followed the proclamation. Marie covered the awkward moment by gesturing for the entertainment to continue. After a collective bow in her direction, the musicians and dancers resumed their intricate marriage of motion and music. Viviane eyes widened as she took in the performance. She knew that each handhold had been memorized by both men and women. To misstep would be a stain on the offender's public image.

One tall dancer, wearing a long azure waistcoat with golden trim, broke away from the crowd and made his way toward the queen. His eyes roamed over her and Marie threw a coquettish smile in his direction. Viviane knew that this man was the celebrated war hero, the Marquis de Lafayette.

"The sight of your loveliness, my Queen, reminds me why I left America and returned to France." His voice, no doubt accustomed to shouting commands on the battlefields, was now gentle. "Nothing there could compare to the glory my eyes now behold."

"Be careful, *mon général*." Marie tittered and flitted her fan before her powdered face. "Much more and you will provoke our king to jealousy."

She inclined her head toward her husband, an overweight monarch whose hooded eyes and short neck reminded Viviane of a stuffed owl. Louis's throne had been transferred from the Apollo Salon and placed on a raised dais for the evening's festivity. It was to be a joyful occasion, but the king's dour expression was more appropriate for a funeral than for a ball.

"Some things," Marie lowered her voice to a whisper, "must only be said... in private."

Viviane stared at the queen, her jaw slack. If, as the Queen claimed, her flirtatious demeanor was all an elaborate act, then she played the part to perfection. The Marquis bowed again, the tips of his ears turning pink. "I am at your service, my Queen."

Despite her astonishment, Viviane found the voluptuous atmosphere rather liberating. The strict moral code of her mother's rustic world seemed repressive when compared to the

glamorous environment that surrounded her. Her spine tingled. She had entered a new phase of life, one free of her mother's watchful eye. Versailles was the cultural center of Europe and here, pleasure was the only rule.

"You have never seen anything like it, I am sure."

The voice that broke into Viviane's thoughts made her start, but she recovered by fluttering her brocaded fan in front of her face. She slid masked eyes to her left. A tall, muscular man wearing a brilliantly white costume, tastefully accented with sequins of gold, stood next to her. A short sword dangled at his waist and his white half-mask could not conceal the warm amusement that sparkled from his dark brown eyes.

"Your pardon, Monsieur, but have we met?" She bit her lower lip. Had he noticed the quaver in her voice?

Marie-Antoinette turned at the sound of the stranger's voice. A thin band of black gauze constituted her mask, but it did nothing to hide the naked hostility in her eyes. Her rigid posture revealed that this man, whoever he was, held no favor from the queen.

"Ah, Philippe, so it is true after all." Marie's habitually cordial tone now had the warmth of a snow-covered stone.

"What is true, Your Grace?" Philippe bowed.

"*L'habit ne fait pas le moine.*" The queen raised her chin while quoting the proverb. "The clothing does not make the monk. You dress like one of us now, yet I hear that you gallivant in the streets, espousing ideas that threaten the very foundation of our kingdom."

Philippe smiled. "I see that our queen has not only mastered our language but has also drawn on the fountain of France's wisdom." He gestured toward Viviane. "This is your new *dame d'honneur*?"

Marie jerked her chin downward in a stiff nod. "Madame Viviane de Lussan."

Philippe bowed. Then turning to the queen, "Forgive, if only for one evening, this wretched rogue the beliefs that offend you and allow me the honor of introducing your head lady-in-waiting to the court."

Marie hesitated a moment. “I must join the king, so she is yours for the evening.” She held up a warning finger. “Philippe. Do not corrupt her.”

“As you wish.”

With a swirl of her skirts, Marie-Antoinette and the remainder of her serving women huffed off to join King Louis on his raised dais. Philippe turned to Viviane who fiddled with her fan.

“Let me introduce myself properly.” His warm voice washed over her. “I am Philippe, Duke of Valence, cousin to the king and royal Prince of the Blood.” His lips twitched in a faint smile. “I saved your life.”



Alexandre leaned against a marble pillar, near one of the domed glass windows that had made the Hall of Mirrors renowned throughout Europe. His eyes narrowed as he watched Philippe, lead the queen’s lady-in-waiting around the dancers to a quiet corner in the hall. He had no trouble identifying his childhood friend. Despite the mask and the years that had come between them, the surge of hatred that moved within him like a wild beast left no room for doubt.

Rage made him want to slit Philippe’s throat here and now, but years of discipline held his anger in check. He calmed himself by mentally rehearsing the facts of Philippe’s life.

One: He was the cousin of King Louis XVI. Should Louis and his two sons die, it would be Philippe who stood to wear the crown.

Two: At age twelve, Philippe had gone to England with his father. There he had been influenced by the itinerant Protestant preacher John Wesley. Alexandre grimaced. He hated the Protestant faith and despised those who fell prey to the lies spawned by its leaders. How a Prince of France could have been so deceived, he could not understand. It proved the extent to which the monarchy had degraded itself. Surely it was God’s will to rid the kingdom of such fickle vermin!

While Philippe had never officially left the Church, he began espousing ideas that were at odds with its core ideologies. At

first, his late father had attributed the boy's newfound theories of salvation by faith and reluctance to participate in religious rites as some sort of rebellious adolescent phase. But the rebellious boy grew into a stubborn man and his inflexible beliefs had sparked an irreparable rift within the royal family.

Three: Due, in part to his twisted faith, Philippe had often urged his cousin, King Louis, to moderate his lifestyle and attend to the needs of his people. Some believed that Philippe was sincere while others, like Alexandre, were convinced that he was simply trying to win the support of the people in a strategic bid for the throne. Whatever his reasons, Philippe's vocal defense of the common man had earned the admiration of most of Paris populace—and the sworn enmity of Marie-Antoinette.

The red wine turned to gravel in his mouth. Alexandre sneered as he considered his next move. The woman with Philippe was obviously the same one that Salomé had almost executed. Philippe had never been one to mingle with the fairer sex, but it made sense that he would seek out the woman whose life he had saved. Still, there was something about the way he carried himself around her that hinted at something more significant than idle companionship. Alexandre's calculating mind began to analyze the prince's posture, drawing on Rezzonico's lessons on subconscious physical reactions that revealed hidden emotions. Parted lips, hands that refused to stay still and his constant fidgeting indicated that he was nervous.

Nervous? It seemed incongruous with the man he knew. *Why?* Realization struck him with the suddenness of a summer storm. Philippe was attracted to the girl!

At first, Alexandre almost laughed from sheer incredulity but, the more he thought about it, the more he realized how plausible the idea was. He knew Philippe better than anyone alive. The man had never married but a woman like *this*—a stunning beauty of a lower social class, impetuous and full of life—that would be the kind to draw him.

Yes. Alexandre stroked his chin as the physical signs continued. Philippe was leaning forward now, head nodding as he listened with rapt ears to whatever the woman was saying. Perhaps the prince himself was not aware of his budding attraction but the signs were unmistakable.

A twisted smile snaked across his face as he emptied his chalice and tossed it to a passing servant. Alexandre touched the beads that hung beneath his ivory costume, cast a mental prayer to the Virgin and stepped out of the corner. It was time for the game to begin.



Philippe stared at the graceful creature that sat across from him. Such poise! And from a *bourgeoise*? Her blond hair in graceful waves to the small of her back and the scarlet of her dress subtly accented the jade of her hypnotic eyes. *How did I not notice her beauty that night in Paris?*

As a man who stood close to the throne, Philippe had been exposed to countless women, some beautiful and others not. Most had sought only the wealth and power that he could provide. Until this moment, nothing had persuaded him to go beyond a casual greeting. But tonight, something had changed. He could feel a subtle shift in the rhythm of his heart whenever their eyes met. It was something he could not begin to comprehend, let alone explain.

“I never had an opportunity to thank you for saving my life.” Viviane’s cheeks reddened. He found her discomfort enthralling. They sat on the plush stools that lined the ballroom floor where couples now whirled in a slow waltz.

“It was not that I did not *want* to thank you,” she lowered her eyes, “it is just that I had forgotten your name.”

Philippe laughed, causing bystanders to turn in their direction. In his peripheral vision, he noticed a few female heads wagging in unison behind half-open fans.

“We’ve just given the court gossips something to ponder.” He inclined his head and covered his mouth with one hand, mimicking a gossiping woman. “Why is a prince enjoying the company of the queen’s new lady-in-waiting who, I have heard, has a penchant for criticizing the royal family *and* forgets the names of those who save her life?”

“Now you are mocking me.” Viviane fumbled with her fan.

“Not at all, Madame.” Philippe lowered his hand and leaned toward her. “In fact, I find myself intrigued by a woman who is

compassionate enough to stop her carriage in a terrible district of Paris to help an orphan.”

She glanced at him, smoothed a fold in her skirt, and spoke in an uncertain tone. “How do you know about that?”

“I returned the next day and spoke to a few who witnessed the debacle.”

“You, a Prince of France, went into that place alone?” Her eyes widened and she licked her lips. “They could have killed you!”

Her concern was touching.

“It is alright.” He squeezed her hand then released it. “Sometimes I mingle with the common people, dressed as one of them. How else will I truly know what they think?”

He shrugged. “Unfortunately, no one would tell me where to find the woman who almost killed you. It is for the best. Any attempt to bring her to justice would exacerbate the tension between the crown and the people of Paris. Her arrest would transform her into a sort of martyr.”

Viviane’s eyes shifted to the queen who sat next to her husband. “Forgive me if I am too bold,” she looked at him again, her expression pensive. “But why does Her Grace dislike you?”

He hesitated before answering. “Our perspectives on the essentials of life are radically different. For example, she believes that God is confined to a specific church whereas I feel that God seeks a relationship with every individual, regardless of their creed.”

Viviane frowned. “You are a Protestant?”

“Would you think less of me if I said I am?” Though spoken gently, the words carried a hint of rebuke. For a moment Viviane remained silent and shifted in her seat.

“When my father died in the stampede of Paris,” a faraway look crept into her eyes, “I blamed God. I thought that I would never pray again. My mother and I were destitute.”

“How did she survive?”

“She became a laundress in Lussan.” Viviane twisted a tendril of her shimmering hair.

“And then?”

“One Christmas, the priest from a nearby village read a passage from the Scripture. ‘To everything there is a season; a time to be born,’ her voice fell to a whisper, “and a time to die.”

She shrugged. “My father died on my birthday. At that moment, everything made sense. I realized that this was a test of my faith and that I needed to keep on believing.”

“Go on.” Philippe rested his chin in his palm.

Viviane took a deep breath. “Instead of hating the Church, I drew comfort from its rituals. Knowing that my works can make me acceptable to God brings me a sense of peace. If am good enough, someday I might see my father again.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “I-I am sorry. I have said too much.”

“No,” Philippe said. “You have shared a part of your soul and for that I thank you. We are more alike than you might think.”

It was Viviane’s turn to laugh. “A prince and a laundress’s daughter? The only thing we have in common is our language!”

Philippe smiled. “The difference between absolute truth and a mortal lie is only one word misrepresented. The difference between noble and *bourgeois* is even less than that.”

“I can see why some would find your opinions objectionable.” Viviane’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

The smile faded from Philippe’s face. “Like you, an event in my childhood forever altered the way I see the world. The social classes and rules that we have established do not reflect God’s laws. The clergy fail to live by every word that Christ left us; the nobles fail to show the compassion God requires.”

He passed a hand over his brow. “Will a man gain access to heaven because of his church affiliation?” Philippe shook his head. “You speak as though your deeds can earn you God’s mercy but I believe that my deeds do not earn God’s forgiveness for if they could, why did Christ have to die?”

He gestured at the swirling masses. “If I truly believe in Christ then my works should show my faith. As such, I have asked my cousin to modify his treatment of his subjects. He has not listened, but suspects that I am trying to win favor with the people to claim the crown for myself. My views have alienated me from most of my family, especially the queen.”

“I see.” Viviane pursed her lips.

“Do you?” Philippe gazed at the scarlet mask that veiled half of her face. No one had ever claimed to understand the loneliness his beliefs engendered. The possibility that she might indeed identify with the pain of his past stirred his emotions. “Madame de Lussan...”

“Yes?”

A question burned in his throat, but though a prince, he hesitated to voice it. The truth was that he longed to see her face. The partial view of her face was like a droplet of water on the tongue of a man dying of thirst. It was torture.

“Will you...” He fell silent. To unmask herself during the ball was taboo. Any spectators could easily draw the wrong conclusions. Yet he needed to see her again. To drink his fill of the beauty that radiated from her skin. To drown in the depths of the twin emerald lakes of her eyes. The words slipped out before he could stop them. As he spoke, Philippe knew that he had crossed an unspoken line, but he felt no regret. Only a tingle of anticipation.

“Will you remove your mask?”



The question was so unexpected that, at first, she was sure she had misunderstood. “What did you say?”

“Your mask, will you remove it?” Philippe motioned toward her face. “I would like to see you as you really are.”

Nervousness seized her. It was not that she had anything to hide. What unnerved her was the distinct impression that, if she unveiled herself at this precise moment, she would open a very personal window into her soul.

A slight tremor shook her hands. A part of her wanted no pretenses between herself and this man whose words wrapped themselves around her mind, but reason resisted the thought of exposing herself to him while those around remained hidden in a world of mystery and deceit.

Philippe saw her hesitation. “Here let me go first.” He lifted the corner of his visor and flipped it upward.

He was not overly handsome, but every aspect of his face depicted a part of his character. A strong jaw, accented by a

subtle beard, provided the impression of determination. His aquiline nose spoke of a noble birth and his dark eyes seemed able to rip through the curtain of time. They were eyes that penetrated the facade of what she now was and exposed the truth of what she could become.

Her hands drifted to the edges of her own mask, her heart threatening to rip its way out of her chest. *Thud*. She touched the edge of the satin. *Thud*. Her fingers curled to lift it off her face. *Thud*. She tugged at its edges—

“May I request the honor of this dance, Madame?”

The sinuous voice ripped both Philippe and Viviane out of the magnetism of the moment. They pivoted as one toward the intruder. A tall dark-haired man who shared both Philippe’s height and build stared down at Viviane. He wore ivory and his hand rested with easy familiarity upon the hilt of a sheathed sword. Unlike Philippe, whose mask had barely covered his eyes, this man’s mask extended from his dark hairline to his lips, leaving only his eyes, mouth and strong chin visible.

“Would you honor me with this dance?”

Viviane looked at Philippe who said nothing, but pinned the intruder with his gaze.

“I-I am no dancer, Monsieur.” She felt flattered that in the space of only twenty minutes, two men vied for her attention but was unsure how to respond. Despite his mask, the stranger’s gaze held a mysterious allure that she found darkly appealing.

“Do I not know you, sir?” Philippe rose, placing himself between them.

The intruder bowed and replied with a flourish of his plumed hat. “With regret, I cannot claim such an honor.” He straightened and stepped around Philippe. “Now, I am sure that a man of your greatness will not begrudge me a few moments with this portion of heaven that has come down to earth.”

His gaze shifted to Viviane. “As to dancing, I will teach you everything you need to know.” He extended his arm.

Viviane's gaze alternated between the two men. She could sense Philippe’s disapproval but, prince or not, what right did he have to dictate the terms of her evening? Even now, couples swirled around the floor and, while her mind conjured up

nightmarish images of herself falling on her face, this stranger's aura of confidence bolstered her own courage.

The tantalizing prospect of pressing her body close to his was exhilarating. *What would Maman say?* She squelched the unwelcome thought. At the moment, home was far away and so was its litany of rules.

Viviane rose and placed her hand in his. "If you insist." She tried to mimic the queen's seductive tone. "But I warn you, you will soon tire of this poor student."

He studied her masked face before replying. "I would sooner tire of life than of you."

She turned back to Philippe with a curtsy. "If Your Grace will excuse me, I will soon return."

Without another word, the mysterious man led her away from Philippe and into the swirling heart of the masquerade.



The musicians had struck up a lively *contredanse* and Viviane gave a mental sigh of relief. It was a relatively uncomplicated folk dance that was common among in country towns such as Lussan. The royal court had adopted it years ago as a carefree respite from the more complex official dances. A line of female dancers stood across from a line of men. The couple at the end of the line danced down to the beginning of the group and their place was taken by the couple to their left. The dance was simple but allowed the waiting couples a few moments for idle chatter.

Her eyes flew to the man whose well-muscled arm curled around her waist. She was grateful for his support as her legs felt like they had turned to wet straw.

"What is your name, Monsieur?"

"Alexandre." He motioned for her to move in front of him.

"Are you from Paris?" They took their place at the beginning of the line and Viviane noted that about five other couples had positioned themselves to their right on the dance floor.

"Yes," Alexandre slipped his hands behind his back. "But you are not."

She stiffened. "And what makes you say that?"

The dance had begun, and they shifted to their right as the first couple began spinning in a tight circle while moving down the line.

Alexandre tilted his head to one side. "You have an exotic beauty that, like a breath of fresh air, tells everyone you meet that you are not of this crammed city."

"Monsieur, surely you exaggerate." Viviane twisted her hands together. *Exotic?* No one had ever described her with such bold charm.

"Please, I am only Alexandre."

Viviane lowered her eyes. Alexandre certainly did not *seem* offensive. In fact, his words touched a part of her soul that, until this moment, she had not known existed.

"What is your name?" He stepped closer and she inhaled the clean scent of earth and trees. Then it was their turn to dance and she curled her sweaty palms into tight balls. Alexandre held out his left arm and she stepped into the embrace, placing her right palm against his. The lively music soon loosened her muscles and, as they circled down the dance floor in a series of pirouettes, a warm glow spread through her body. She told him.

"Lussan." Alexandre nodded as she spun underneath his arm, the long scarlet tail of her gown coiling around her ankles. She leaned backward into his caress as they slid forward in unison. Again, the scent of earth filled her nostrils, sending warmth radiating through her body.

"Then you are like me, a *bourgeois*," he said.

She started, lost her timing and almost tripped over his feet. Alexandre leaned over and caught her in his arms, working the action into his own movement so that the entire near-catastrophe seemed rehearsed. *Smooth. So very smooth.*

"I'm sorry." Viviane felt her chest heaving. He was bent over her, his lips inches from her own. *What would it be like to kiss him?* The thought flooded her mind and she pushed herself upright.

"*Au contraire*, it is I who must apologize for startling you." Alexandre's voice was calm and low.

Everything about him is just... smooth. For the second time that evening, she found herself intrigued by a stranger. While it was unusual for a *bourgeois* to attend a royal ball, it was not

against the law, provided the citizen met the dress code. And he certainly did that!

Viviane's eyes roamed over his body. She was drawn by the dark atmosphere of raw masculine power that radiated from each movement he made. Her head barely crested his shoulder giving her a sense of security. He held himself erect with a confidence that was not often seen among the *bourgeois*. His motions were deliberate, and his words as musical as the sounds that perfumed the air of the ballroom.

You are an exotic beauty...

"Our turn again."

"Oh!" She had been caught staring.

They spun in a series of mini-circles working their way around the dance floor and she looked at the other guests, the painted ceiling, the floor—anything but Alexandre who continued to smile at her, appearing unfazed by a woman ogling him.

"What is your role at Versailles?" She groped for something to say, trying to cover her embarrassment.

"I care for the plants of the king in the Orangery."

Her ears pricked up. "You are a gardener?"

"I work *for* the gardener." He pulled her to him. "I have for several months."

"Is it dangerous for you, as a Parisian *bourgeois*, to work for the king?"

He shook his head. "There are protests but not all of us Parisians are violent. Most hope for simple changes on the part of the king. Others like Maximilien Robespierre anticipate more radical action." She caught her breath as she whirled away. *Robespierre?* Her conversation with the queen rose fresh in her mind.

"Do you know him... this Robespierre?"

He hesitated and let her twirl into his arms before answering. "In a manner of speaking, yes."

Viviane wanted to press the issue, but Alexandre abruptly changed the topic.

"Have you ever seen the Orangery?" The dance pulled them apart but only for a moment.

“No,” Viviane said when she was back in his arms. “The queen’s schedule leaves little time for frivolities.” She wasn’t sure if her heavy breathing was from the exertion of the dance or the man whose touch electrified her.

“I would not call pursuing your passion a frivolity.” Alexandre’s eyes slid to her own.

“And you think that gardens are a passion of mine?” The words were wrapped in a burst of laughter that escaped her lips as he swung her off her feet and spun her in a tight airborne circle.

“I know it,” he said when her feet were once again on the ground.

Alexandre was a mystery—a mystery that grew more intriguing with every passing second. If truth be told, he was right. She had been devoted to horticulture in Lussan and sorely missed the peace that came from feeling the dark soil beneath her bare feet. The fact that Alexandre had not only somehow guessed this but was also connected to one of the greatest orangeries in Europe piqued her interest even further.

They had just completed the second-to-last round when, instead of dancing back to their place in the line, Alexandre took the lead and spun outward toward a less populated corner of the hall.

“What are you doing?” Viviane gasped as she peeked over her shoulder, certain that every eye would be upon them. No one appeared to have noticed.

“Come with me.”

“What?” She stepped back, increasing the distance between them. “Come where?”

“Let me show you the Orangery.” Alexandre squeezed her hand, the glowing firelight of the gilded candelabra playing games of light and shadow over his masked face. “Its beauty is best seen by moonlight.”

Viviane froze. *I shouldn’t.*

“Thank you, Alexandre but I cannot. The queen—”

“The queen is royalty.” He cut off her protest. His voice softened and he ran his gloved thumb lightly over her chin. “She is not from our world and cannot understand us. She will never know you as I can... as I will.”

Viviane caught her breath but did not pull away. “Marie is not as evil as you think.”

His fingers hovered near her unbound hair. “Close your mind to the nobility’s condescending lies. Let me show you the true face of Versailles.”

“I hardly know you...” Her will to resist faltered.

“You know me enough to dance with me.” His voice was warm beneath the mask. Its gilded edges framed his lips. “Surely that is more frightening than a walk through the king’s garden!”

She giggled in spite herself. He was right. Her fear of falling eclipsed her fear of this refined *bourgeois*. Viviane paused as thoughts buzzed in her mind like a hive of bees.

Alexandre enticed her into subservience. She didn’t resent it. On the contrary she found she enjoyed the company of this man who could persuade her to do what she knew was unwise.

There will be no danger. Over five thousand people were on the palace grounds tonight. Surely if he tried to harm her, someone would hear her cries.

A spark of rebellion struck her and silenced the subtle inner voice of resistance. The queen had no need of her and she would be back within the hour. *I should not but I will.*

She tossed her head. “What kind of flowers will we see in the king’s garden?”

Alexandre extended his hand and Viviane placed her small palm within his own. “When in the presence of such an intoxicating rose,” he led her out of the Gallery, “all else will seem only weeds.”

