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PART ONE
FRANCE AND NEW ORLEANS
18141815

Chapter One

Nothing in Gabrielle La Farge's young, sheltered life had prepared her for this moment. There were many, she knew, who would consider the man standing beside her handsome. But his brooding good looks and cold gray eyes truly frightened her. Most girls her age would jump at the chance to marry a wealthy young man such as Philippe St. Cyr, or so her parents had informed her. Gabby only knew that she had no desire to become mistress of a plantation or wife of a planter in far off Martinique. But the choice had not been hers to make. She squeezed her eyes shut, her thoughts drowning out the priest's toneless chanting as she relived in her mind the events leading to this dreadful moment, events as crushing as Napoleon's defeat in October as his third army was driven across the Rhine by their allied invaders . . .

It had been barely a week ago that Gabby had been summoned into Mother Superior's small chamber. At first she thought that she had once again displeased that pious woman by some willful misbehavior, but try as she might could bring no such incident of late to her mind. In fact, since she had resigned herself to a religious life, she had been more content than at any other time during the ten years since she had come to live with the good sisters of St. Cecilia.

Ten years, Gabby fumed silently as she considered her bleak existence at the convent. And in all those years she had neither seen nor heard from her parents. In the early years she had fought bitterly against confinement and even yet there were times she longed desperately to break out of the somber gray walls of the convent to run and laugh, to let her hair

blow free in the wind. The hours she had spent on her knees in the chapel as penance for her youthful spirit and willful behavior were too numerous to count.

As the years passed with no word from Gilbert and Lily La Farge, Gabby began to despair. She would never leave the convent. She was destined to remain behind the walls until she died a withered old woman. She realized she could never face life on the outside on her own, for despite her nearly eighteen years she was as innocent as a child in the ways of the world. Finally, she had forced her mind to accept the inevitable. She was now prepared to join the order and become the bride of Christ. In less than a week, St. Cecilia's would become her home for the rest of her life.

The door to Mother Superior's chamber stood open and Gabby entered hesitantly, for some unexplained reason her heart beating furiously in her breast.

At first, nothing registered but shock and disbelief as Gabby slowly recognized the couple standing to greet her. Ten years had not changed Gilbert and Lily La Farge a great deal. Gilbert had put on weight but was still handsome with his large-boned frame and florid good looks. His hair was touched with silver now but the effect distinguished rather than aged him.

Lily, at thirty-six, could still be considered beautiful, although she could not hope to compete with her fresh-faced daughter whose dewy complexion still held the first bloom of youth. Lily pursed red pouty lips as her bright blue eyes took in the perfection of Gabby's willow-slim figure, fully a woman's beneath the coarse gray habit, thinking how the years had transformed her daughter from a gangling girl all arms and legs whose hint of beauty was barely visible into an astonishing lovely young woman who now stared at her through compelling violet eyes surrounded by thick feathery lashes. Though her hair was completely hidden by her wimple, her features, from arched eyebrows to full lips, were

finely drawn and provocative.

"Well, daughter," blustered Gilbert, annoyed by Gabby's silence, "must you stand there mouth agape? Is this how you greet your parents?"

"I'm . . . I'm surprised to see you," stammered Gabby, shaken by their unexpected appearance at a time when she thought herself totally abandoned by them.

Gabby shifted uncomfortably under the couple's close scrutiny. "You've changed, Gabby," Lily said, eyeing her daughter critically. "You've become a beautiful woman. Hasn't she, Gilbert?"

Turning to her husband, Lily was shocked and not a little jealous by what was clearly visible in his eyes. That he, too, thought the young woman before him lovely was all too evident by his leering look that was anything but fatherly.

"More beautiful than I would have imagined," agreed Gilbert placing his hand lightly on Gabby's upper arm in a motion that soon turned into a caress. It was difficult for Gibert to believe that this budding beauty standing before him was his daughter. He cleared his throat nervously. "Are you not curious why we are here?" he asked, his hand still resting on Gabby's arm.

"After ten years I suppose I should be," answered Gabby caustically, forgetting in a burst of resentment all she had been taught in ten years about obedience and respect.

Gilbert's hand tightened hurtfully and Gabby winced at the sudden pain. "Don't be disrespectful," Gilbert warned. "It was for your own protection that we left you with the sisters. After the Bastille fell we became enemies of the people. You were far safer in a convent than in hiding with us. I knew not what the future held at that time. You should be grateful you had a good home."

"But it's been *ten years*, Papa," she accused, unable to hide the hurt she felt from their neglect.

"And I trust your education has been completed in those

years," Gilbert retorted. "Your mother and I have made plans for your future."

"My future!" gasped Gabby. "My future has already been decided. I shall soon be eighteen and my novitiate completed. I intend to take the sacred vows and join the convent."

"I'm sorry, Gabby, but that is not possible," remonstrated Lily. "Tell her, Gilbert," she urged, turning to her husband.

"In good time, *cherie*, in good time," replied Gilbert as he took a large, white envelope from his pocket and wiped the beads of perspiration from his brow. "Have you heard the latest news from Paris, Gabby?" he asked in a placating tone. After Gabby's negative answer, he continued. "Paris has fallen; Napoleon has abdicated and has been banished to Elba. But his most stalwart supporters, myself included, have not given up. I have pledged all my resources and energies to see Napoleon restored once more as the illustrious Emperor of France."

"What has all this to do with me, Papa?" puzzled Gabby impatiently.

"Patience, daughter, haven't you learned anything in ten years? I would have thought you had been cured by now of the willful streak you displayed as a child." Gabby flushed at her father's rebuke but waited as patiently as her nature would allow for him to continue. "Soon your mother and I will depart for Italy along with a large group of Napoleon's staunchest supporters. Once there we will plan together for his return to power and triumphant march to Paris. But before we can leave France there is the matter of settling my debts."

"But I still don't . . . ?"

"Be still!" ordered Gilbert. "If you but give me a chance I will explain. During the citizens' uprising I lost a considerable fortune. Later I invested heavily in Napoleon's campaign. I now find myself in financial straits and unable to

meet my obligations and fulfill my pledge to Napoleon."

"Not to mention your debts of honor," interjected Lily. Gilbert's withering glance warned her to silence.

"I must also see to your future before I leave Paris," Gilbert continued smoothly, displaying an uncommon amount of parental concern.

"But my future is secure," Gabby insisted. "I already told you that I intend to pledge my life to *le bon Dieu* just as you have pledged yours to Napoleon."

Gilbert's scathing glance scalded Gabby. "I have arranged for your marriage." Gabby clutched at her throat and gasped with dismay. She felt as if the whole world was closing in on her.

The irony of fate! Just when she had reconciled herself to living a devout and prayerful life her parents had appeared and shattered her fragile peace. "I have no desire to wed, Papa," Gabby cried in desperation. "Please do not force me into a marriage I do not want."

As if on cue, the door opened, admitting a tall, sunbrowned man whose cold gray eyes immediately sought and found Gabby. "Who am I to marry?" she whispered in a strangled voice, unable to tear her gaze from the man whose handsome dark features instilled terror in her wildly beating heart.

Smiling broadly, Gilbert La Farge motioned forward the tall, broodingly handsome man whose sun-darkened skin proclaimed him to be anything but a native of Paris. Turning to Gabby, he said, "Gabrielle, this is Philippe St. Cyr from the island of Martinique. If you meet with his approval, you will become his wife regardless of the fact that you have no dowry."

Gabby gritted her teeth, desperately wanting to lash out angrily at her father and the arrogant stranger whose approval meant nothing to her. She had no way of knowing that Philippe St. Cyr demanded only two things of his future wife,

she must be virtuous, and she must be obedient to his will.

When St. Cyr had first met Gilbert La Farge at the card table in a certain club in Paris, he had taken an immediate dislike to the braggart who lost large sums of money and indiscriminately handed out his IOU. He personally held a small stack of these worthless notes. When in the course of conversation, Gilbert had learned that Philippe had come to France in search of a wife, preferably a convent-educated one, his eyes had become overbright as they thoughtfully contemplated the man who he also learned was a wealthy planter from Martinique as well as the owner of a fleet of ships. Philippe, for the most part, had ignored the man's fawning presence until Gilbert had drawn him aside and quietly spoken to him about his daughter. After much persuasion he had finally agreed to a meeting with the girl.

Now, as Philippe bowed before the petite Gabrielle, he was not at all certain she would do. Though no doubt she was virtuous, having been cloistered for the past ten years, she displayed a spark of defiance that set him on edge. And her beauty startled him. He had thought himself finished with beauty and spirit. What he desired was an obedient, well-bred wife who would bear his children and become mistress of Bellefontaine, his plantation on Martinique. Once her duty was fulfilled he would demand nothing more from her. He had the delectable Amalie to satisfy his passion and intended to seek his wife's bed only to beget his heirs. To keep his beloved Bellefontaine he must have sons.

How was it then that he found himself lost in deep, shimmering pools of violet? Where was his willpower? Hadn't he told himself over and over he was finished with seductive beauty and spirit? When he spoke, his voice sent chills along Gabby's spine. "Mademoiselle La Farge," he acknowledged as he bowed over her slim hand, lightly brushing it with his lips.

A shudder passed through Gabby at his touch. "Monsieur

St. Cyr," she replied softly, remembering her manners.

"Your father has told me much about you and I can clearly see he did not exaggerate.

"I'm surprised he could remember anything about me," she murmured in a moment of pique.

Gilbert bristled at her remark but focused his attention on Philippe. "I told you she was well worth the trip out here," he boasted smugly. "Well, St. Cyr, what do you say? Do we have a deal or don't we?"

"I would like to hear what Mademoiselle Gabrielle has to say about your plans to sell her to me," Philippe said, oblivious of Gabby's feelings.

"Papa!" cried Gabby, drawing back in disbelief. "Surely Monsieur St. Cyr jests. You would not sell your only child!"

"Now, now daughter," soothed Gilbert, glancing reproachfully at Philippe. "Those are not the words I would choose. Monsieur St. Cyr has generously offered to cancel all my debts and to finance my venture in Italy in gratitude for supplying him with a suitable bride. And you, *ma chere*, are immensely suitable."

The knuckles of Gabby's clenched fists whitened as her whole body stiffened in defiance, negating in an instant ten years of discipline. "I am sorry, Papa, but I refuse to marry Monsieur St. Cyr! I choose to remain in the convent," she declared hotly.

Gilbert lashed out cruelly and the blow to Gabby's face resounded loudly in the small room. Philippe stepped menacingly toward Gilbert but at the last minute prudence intervened, and, shrugging, he fell back, deeming Gilbert's punishment justifiable in view of his daughter's rebellious nature.

"Gilbert, really!" Lily gasped. "Must you use violence? The chit will do as she's told whether she likes it or not."

"Of course, you are right, *cherie*," replied Gilbert guiltily. "I'm sorry, daughter, but I will not tolerate disobedience. I

have given my word to St. Cyr that you have been well taught by the nuns. Do not make a liar of me." Though his voice was soft, his words left little doubt that he would brook no interference with his well-laid plans. Gabby knew that no amount of pleading would dissuade her father from his course. She would become the bride of Philippe St. Cyr, if he would have her, and leave her beloved France. Still smarting from her father's blow, she lowered her head to hide tears of frustration and pain gathering in her eyes.

"Well, St. Cyr?" Gilbert repeated impatiently. "Does my daughter please you? Will you have her?"

Studying the girl through slitted eyes, Philippe saw that she now appeared submissive to her father's wishes. Perhaps she would do after all, he mused, his eyes drawn to the steady rise and fall of firm, upturned breasts beneath her drab garment. Even though he had not expected her to be so lovely, she would be a pleasant diversion on the long voyage ahead. Her young femininity was appealing and hard to resist, even to one who had forsworn such inducements. With the right clothes . . . His eyes drifted over the shapeless robe and ugly wimple concealing her hair. A sudden urge struck him and he was powerless to stay his words.

"Remove your headdress, Gabrielle," he ordered brusquely. Violet, mist-filled eyes stared at him uncomprehendingly as he raised her head. When she made no move to comply, he stepped forward and drew his breath in sharply as a cascade of silvery strands, pale as moonlight, tumbled down her back in a multitude of springy curls from beneath the cloth he had just plucked from her head. The sight strangely unsettled Philippe as he drew in his breath sharply. He found it difficult to still his wildly beating heart.

Gilbert smiled to himself. He was as good as on his way to Italy, he thought smugly. Although St. Cyr had expressed a desire for a virtuous, obedient wife, making no mention of beauty, he was a man, and what man would not want a young

and beautiful virgin such as Gabby gracing his bed?

When Philippe finally found his voice. Gabby knew that her prayers had been in vain. Her future had been decided without a thought to her own feelings or needs. "We have a deal, La Farge," Philippe said, reluctantly tearing his eyes from the vision before him. "The amount agreed upon will be deposited in your bank as soon as I return to Paris."

Lily flashed a pleased smile at no one in particular and Gilbert rubbed his hands together gleefully. "When do you wish the wedding to take place, St. Cyr?" he asked.

Involuntarily Philippe's right hand moved to his jacket, smoothing the imperceptible bulge made by the slim document he had sewn in the lining only this morning. Now that his mission was half completed he knew he must waste no more time. Ignoring Gabby, he said, "One of my ships now lies at anchor at Brest awaiting word from me. I see no reason to delay the wedding as I am anxious to reach New . . .uh . . . Martinique." He paused to ascertain whether anyone had noticed his slip of the tongue, and satisfied that no one had, continued, "The wedding shall take place in three days." Not once did his eyes slide to the small, wilting figure in the gray habit.

"The ceremony will take place in three days, at noon," announced Gilbert. "My daughter will be ready."

"*Bon!*" answered Philippe. "I will send a messenger ahead informing the captain on the *Windward* to be ready to depart Brest the moment I arrive aboard with my bride." Then suddenly remembering Gabby he turned his granite gaze in her direction. "Until then, Mademoiselle Gabrielle, *adieu*," he said before turning on his heel and striding from the room, leaving Gabby breathless and shaken.

"How could you, Papa?" she exploded the moment Philippe was gone. "And you, Mama? How could you let Papa sell me to that insufferable man?"

"We did no more than other parents would do for their

children," replied Lily who had grown quite bored with her daughter's tantrums. "In these trying times we have done our best to provide for you. We can no longer remain in France to see to your welfare. You aren't the only girl whose marriage has been arranged, and quite admirably, I might add."

"Come now," cajoled her father, "there are worse things that could happen to a young girl than becoming the wife of a rich, important planter. One of them is hiding your beauty behind the walls of this convent." His glittering eyes roamed freely over his daughter's ripening figure. "I had no idea you had turned into such an enchanting creature. *Mon Dieu*, but St. Cyr is a lucky fellow!"

Lily bristled with jealous indignation. She thought Gilbert much too preoccupied with his daughter's looks. St. Cyr's money had earned him the right to deflower the girl himself no matter what Gilbert's intention.

Chapter Two

Gabby shifted restlessly in her stiff satin wedding gown while the priest's toneless words bound her for life to the stranger who stood beside her. Her own voice wavered nervously as she repeated the sacred vows that could never be broken. Philippe scowled darkly at the shudder that passed through her body at the moment they were pronounced man and wife. Surely this was a bad dream and she would wake up safe and sound in her narrow cot in the convent. How she hated Philippe's arrogance, his possessiveness, his brooding good looks!

Suddenly the silence around them pierced her brain. Without warning her husband's hands were on her shoulders, pivoting her to face him. She turned ashen at his touch when she realized that Philippe was claiming the kiss that was now his by right of ownership. He had caught her unprepared with her mouth slightly open in surprise as he brushed his lips against hers. But when he felt the soft, warm breath escaping in frightened gasps from between her lips his cold reserve vanished for a moment as his kiss deepened and his darting tongue thrust fleetingly into her open mouth. Quickly gaining his composure once more, he abruptly released her, but not before scowling at her with a puzzled frown.

Gabby was shocked by the kiss. Though she had not participated in it herself, she did not find it too unpleasant once she had gotten over the initial shock. Surely Philippe could not kiss her like that if he did not feel something for her, she thought naively. Raising her head, Gabby met his eyes and was shaken to her very depths by the look of pure

animosity directed at her, as if he held her accountable for his unexpected show of emotion.

Afterward Philippe led her into the small circle of servants and family friends hastily gathered for the occasion, but she was too numb to respond to their congratulations. Things had moved too fast for her. After all, this was only the second time she had ever seen the man she must now call husband. Her mind turned inward to that time three days ago when she had first seen him standing beside her parents in Mother Superior's chambers. She had thought him cold and arrogant then, his calculating gaze raking her insolently, and he had done nothing since to change that opinion.

Philippe's voice jolted her back to reality. "You seem far away. What are you thinking, *ma petite*?" His endearment seemed only to mock her and did nothing to dispel her dark thoughts.

"I'm thinking, Monsieur, that I wish myself back at St. Cecilia's," she blurted, finding it impossible to lie to him.

"My name is Philippe," he admonished softly, yet sternly. "I am your husband and you must not call me Monsieur."

"*Oui*, Philippe," she corrected dutifully, yet seething inwardly at his rebuke.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" he asked, leading her toward the small buffet table set up in the chamber.

"*Non*, Monsieur, I have no appetite."

His hand closed hurtfully on her arm but at her small cry of pain immediately released his hold, his mouth drawn into a thin, white line as he frowned. She rubbed the bruise his grip had caused and vowed to remember henceforth to use his name. *Mon Dieu*, what manner of man was he? she thought, her mind stumbling over the unfamiliar oath.

"If you will excuse me then, I must speak privately with your father before we depart. I suggest you go to your room

and change from that hideous wedding dress into something more appropriate for traveling."

"I'm sorry if my dress does not please you," Gabby shot back caustically, "but I could not do much better with only three days' notice to prepare for this wedding. You forget, I am newly arrived from a convent where such fripperies were unnecessary. If you desired me to be fashionably dressed, you should have allowed more time for a dressmaker to be hired and a proper trousseau made!"

"*Touché!*" Philippe smiled with a slight bow as he turned to join her father in the study.

Gabby breathed a sigh of relief as she watched Philippe's broad shoulders disappear from sight. She supposed, given different circumstances, she might find him attractive. From the back, she noticed how the fine cloth of his jacket clung to his wide shoulders and the way his well-cut trousers molded the muscular length of his thighs and legs. Even the midnight tendrils of hair curling at the nape of his neck would probably appear charming to another woman. But his cold, unrelenting eyes and the unmoving line of his mouth left her little doubt that he was a man who would demand complete submission to his will. Given time he would overpower her own indomitable spirit, manipulating her to his own purposes. She was not too naive to realize that she would eventually become the docile, obedient drudge he wanted, producing his heirs until she became worn and old beyond her years. On that unhappy note, she left the room to change her attire in preparation for the long journey ahead.

As Gabby passed her parents' bedroom on the way to her own room, she recalled the intimate conversation she had overheard the night before. She had been unable to sleep and was on her way downstairs to get a book from the library. The door to her parents' room was ajar and the only reason she had stopped to listen was because she heard her name

spoken.

"Are you sure you are doing the right thing by allowing Gabby to marry that fierce St. Cyr fellow?" she heard her mother saying in a sudden burst of latent maternal misgivings.

"*Cherie*," her father answered in a placating voice, "St. Cyr is a rich man and she could do much worse. Besides, think of all the beautiful new Italian gowns you can buy to drape around that enticing body of yours." There was a significant pause before Gabby heard her mother's gasp.

"Ah, Gilbert, do not stop, please!" Lily's voice was low and throaty, the consistency of warm honey.

"You see the wisdom of my words, do you not, *cherie*?"

This time Lily's voice held a quality Gabby had never heard before. "*Oui*, Gilbert, *mon amour*, *oui!*" she moaned as her rising passion took over. "You are right, as always. I agree to whatever you say, only don't stop what you are doing."

"Never, *cherie*. But for your passion, I would have tired of you long ago."

Once again Lily's cries of pleasure filled Gabby's ears as she pressed her hands over them to blot out intimate sounds that caused her heart to beat wildly in her breast. She had been embarrassed to be privy to her mother's submission to the dictates of her body. Silently Gabby vowed never to allow any man to bend her to his will by controlling her senses.

Gabby tried hard to shake off the disturbing thoughts that the scene of the night before had aroused in her as she changed from the despised wedding dress whose prim lines could not hide the supple body beneath to another equally unbecoming traveling dress of brown velvet. She had just finished fastening the long row of buttons down the front of the dress when her mother appeared, arriving somewhat breathless and more than a little flustered.

"You are a lucky girl, Gabby," Lily gushed as she smoothed her honey-colored locks into place. "Your

husband can be such a charming rogue when he wants to be." Her bright blue eyes grew hazy as she regarded her daughter with envy. "And extremely handsome in a devilish way. He could prove to be a resourceful and vigorous lover. I just encountered him coming out of your father's study and he asked me to speak to you."

"Speak to me, Maman?"

"About your wifely duties."

"Just what are those duties?" Gabby asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Did the nuns teach you nothing?" Lily exclaimed in exasperation.

"I know little of what occurs between men and women," Gabby admitted shyly.

"How can an innocent like you hope to please a virile man like Philippe St. Cyr? I wouldn't be surprised if half the women on Martinique were clamoring for his attention," Lily said, her eyes taking on a dreamy quality. "It's fortunate he wants you only for the purpose of producing his heirs, for I doubt he will derive much pleasure from your childish body."

Gabby eyed her mother with distaste. The number of Philippe's conquests were of no consequence to her. But what if she proved barren? Would he then cast her aside? she wondered. She would put no foul act past him.

"Maman," Gabby said, slowly thinking out her next words, "I suppose I am somewhat of an innocent, but I have a right to know just what Monsieur St. Cry expects of me in the marriage bed. The nuns were completely silent on the subject and there is no one else to ask but you."

Lily stared thoughtfully into her daughter's lovely face. Privately she thought herself a more fitting match for her virile son-in-law than her pale, inexperienced daughter who was likely to swoon at his first intimate touch. She shook her head to rid herself of the image of Philippe's powerful, nude

body in full arousal. "Your duty is clear, Gabby," Lily finally said. "Your husband undoubtedly possesses vast experience as well as vast appetites, and will expect nothing but complete submission from you. He knows you are a virgin so will no doubt expect you only to accommodate him. If he wants more than that, he will teach you."

"Accommodate!" The word tasted like gall in Gabby's mouth, and told her little. "How must I accommodate him, Maman?" she asked, desperation making her bold.

Lily regarded her daughter as she would a backward child, then shrugged her dainty shoulders in disgust. "Philippe will do exactly as he pleases and you will do exactly what he tells you," Lily announced obliquely. "But for your own good, do not fight him, let him have his way with you. He is not a man to be put off."

"You mean I . . ."

"Enough! Enough! My head aches from your endless questions," Lily snapped, wanting nothing more than to escape from her daughter's vexing ignorance. "Come if you are ready I will accompany you downstairs. Your husband bade me hurry you along." Reluctantly, Gabby followed her mother from the room and moved slowly down the staircase to join her husband.

Philippe watched Gabby's graceful descent and unwittingly his heart skipped a beat. She was so young, so innocent, as beautiful as a fragile flower, as fresh and dewy as a summer morn, yet so unaware of her own loveliness. Only the full, sensuous lips gave a hint of what might lie hidden beneath the vulnerable exterior. He felt a familiar tightening in his groin and a quickening in his blood that made him wish they were already aboard the *Windward*. There was no denying that he wanted the virtuous little chit. But he must be on his guard, he told himself. Never again would a woman enslave him with her beauty and spirit. Cecily had taught him well.

"Are you really to leave, *ma petite*?" he asked when she had reached his side. At her nod he propelled her through the door followed closely by her parents.

"Where will you spend the night, *mon ami*?" Gilbert asked, leering first at Gabby and then Philippe, leaving them little doubt as to his meaning.

"Except to eat and change horses and drivers, we will travel straight through to Brest. I have wasted enough time in France and am anxious to return to my plantation," answered Philippe blandly.

"Harumph!" snorted Gilbert derisively. "I certainly would not wait so long to bed my prize."

A small muscle twitched in Philippe's cheek as he fought to hold his temper in check. He felt nothing but contempt for a man who would sell his own daughter to finance a venture that was doomed to failure. Disdaining to answer, Philippe handed Gabby into the carriage and signaled the coachman to proceed.

Philippe watched with cool amusement while Gabby fit herself into the farthest corner of the scat. "I will not bite you," he said as he reached out and pulled her into his arms. Then, as if to prove his words, his lips closed on hers, seeking the tender shape of her mouth, molding it to his. Her eyes opened wide as his tongue forced her lips apart, slowly exploring with maddening thoroughness, and his hand cupped a soft undercurve of a breast.

When he released her she was breathless, a becoming flush staining her cheekbones. She was shocked at this invasion of her senses, more probing than she had ever known. Did he mean to consummate their marriage in the carriage? she wondered. Whatever was in his mind was beyond her limited knowledge of men. "Please do not shame me before your coachman," she pleaded, her violet eyes wide with fear.

"How could I shame you now that we are wed, *ma chere*?" he answered dryly. But he released her just the same and

settled himself comfortably into the cushions, promptly ignoring her as if she had never existed.

They spent three days and nights in the carriage, stopping only for meals, to change horses and to relieve themselves. Gabby had never been more miserable in her entire life. No amount of brushing could dislodge the layer of grime that covered their clothing. She had no idea why Philippe insisted on racing the horses at breakneck speed along the winding road to Brest. Fall rains had turned the dirt road into a muddy quagmire, but still he pressed on relentlessly, cursing when a wheel became hopelessly stuck in the gluey mud.

Once, when Gabby's head lolled wearily, Philippe drew her into the crook of his arm where she slept comfortably for hours. When she awoke to find herself still in her husband's arms, she drew away to huddle once again in the far corner of the coach, much to Philippe's amusement.

Gabby could not help but wonder at Philippe's preoccupation during their journey. Often his hand would stray to a place on his jacket just over his heart. She thought at first he was experiencing some sort of pain but it became increasingly evident that the pain was nonexistent for sometimes he took the reins of the carriage himself, propelling the horses forward at a pace that left her breathless as well as bruised from the constant jolting. Protecting herself from being thrown from the seat became a fulltime job.

Their fourth day on the road proved to be a day neither Gabby nor Philippe would soon forget. It was nearly dusk and Philippe had been dozing, muttering strange names in his sleep. Gabby knew from remarks he had made earlier that they were near to a village where they would eat and change horses and was gazing absently about the window thinking only of her aching bones and a hot meal. They had just entered a place where heavily wooded hills rose on either side of the road and she vaguely wondered what would happen if