

CHAPTER 1



Paris, France
December, 1888

The Duke of Chartres eased himself into his arm-chair and listened to the crackling of the fire. He took a sip of sherry and opened up the newspaper that was lying on a side table. When he saw the headline, his monocle fell in his lap:

WHAT PARIS TALKS ABOUT

Prince Henri d'Orléans Dropped By Many French Royalists Over Opera Singer's Lawsuit. Woman claims the prince drugged her and seduced her.

"Good Heavens!" The Duke threw down the newspaper in disgust. He called for his valet, who promptly appeared from a side door wearing a quizzical look on his face.

"Yes, your Grace?"

The Duke shook an angry fist. "This is an outrage! A scandal! Send for my lawyers at once."

"Is something the matter, your Grace?"

The Duke pointed to the newspaper. "Have a look."

Picking up the newspaper, the valet read the story, his face turning colors and contorting with each sordid detail. When he had finished, he handed the newspaper back to the Duke.

"Are you planning to sue the newspaper?"

"No, I wouldn't waste my time," said the Duke with disdain. "That would only give them more fodder to print. I have no choice but to track down the little tart and pay her off to keep her quiet."

"Hmm...that has never worked in the past," said the valet. "These actresses rarely keep quiet. They often make more money by selling their stories to the highest bidder. I think it would be more prudent to spirit the prince out of the country as quickly as possible. In a few weeks, the story will die down."

"Where do you propose I send the little wastrel?"

"Oh, it will have to be very far away indeed," said the valet. "Someplace where there are no reporters, no newspapers, no race tracks, and, apparently, no opera singers."

The Duke of Chartres buried his face in his hands. It pained him that Henri would never amount to anything. He'd been the black sheep of the family since the day he was born. He was a dilettante, an idler, and combined with his drinking, gambling, and consorting with the lowest element of society, he had become a fixture in the gutter press. He'd long ago been expelled from all the English clubs to which he'd belonged, including the international club, the diplomatic club, and the St. James's. One of the most important noblemen in the country, the Marquis de Beauvoir, who was for many years the Comte de Paris's private secretary, upon hearing of Prince Henri's scandalous conduct, transferred his allegiance to the Bonapartist camp. No, with troubles like these there was no place on earth the Duke could send Henri that would keep him out of trouble. And

with the latest fiasco, when Henri was caught running for his life across a race track, chased by a furious English trainer who called him every insulting name in the book in public view, it was only a question of time before Henri's antics resulted in a tragedy.

The Duke walked over to the fireplace and stared at the flames, lost in his thoughts. Behind him, the valet twitched his whiskers and scratched his head.

"Perhaps there is one possibility you haven't considered," said the valet. "You could send him on a voyage of exploration to a place so far away he won't be able to do any damage."

The Duke's eyebrows shot up. "Brilliant idea! I should have thought of that myself. Where's the little good-for-nothing now?"

"He's playing baccarat in the drawing room with your nephew, the Duke of Orléans."

"Good. Send for my lawyers immediately. I'm going to draw up a legal document that will strip Henri of his rights to inherit the family estate and the title if he refuses to agree to my terms."

"And what terms are those?"

"That he leaves the country immediately and agrees to stay out of trouble for at least a year."

"Very well," said the valet. "And have you given any thoughts as to who should lead this expedition?"

The Duke snapped his fingers. "I've got it. That chap that just returned from India. The one who was featured in the latest bulletin of the Geographical Society. What was his name? Oh yes, Bonvalot. Gabriel Bonvalot. Get me his address right away."

"Very well, your Grace."

Smiling, the valet turned and left. He had no doubt the Duke would be sending the young prince very far away indeed.