

Versailles 1789

*Little angel, indeed*, Hugh thought that afternoon as he waited for his turn with bow and arrow. He'd never met a person so misnamed. She should have been named *little devil*. Unfortunately, he couldn't quite work out the French for that. He watched the comtesse raise her bow and narrow her eyes along the shaft of the arrow at the painted hay target. He had to admit, she looked angelic enough. Her dark curly hair had been arranged in an artful style and swept back and up. Her straw Bergère hat, worn on the crown of her head and tilted down over her forehead, was adorned with pink silk ribbon and an assortment of pink and white silk flowers. Tendrils of her dark hair spiraled down about her neck and blew across her pale cheek when the breeze rustled the trees. He couldn't help but notice that in the dappled sunlight her dark hair seemed to be infused with strands of red and gold.

Her *robe à l'anglaise* was pink silk with a white underskirt. It was far less ornate than what many of the other ladies wore, being devoid of ribbons and lace and other fripperies. He had heard some of the female guests remarking that the comtesse was only recently out of her widow's weeds. Hugh was of the opinion black would have suited her, since it was the color of Satan. The pink only made her look sweet and pretty. Hugh considered her neither.

The comtesse released her arrow and it flew straight and true, hitting the hay target just to the left of the center.

Everyone clapped politely. Everyone but Hugh. His turn was next, and he moved past the brightly clad French nobles to take the comtesse's place. A servant moved to collect her arrow from the target, but Hugh called, "Leave it."

The comtesse, who had been speaking to some duchesse or other, turned to give him her attention. "Won't my arrow be in your way, Monsieur le Vicomte?"

"No, madame. Not at all." He notched his arrow and raised it. He hadn't planned to join in the activities at the house party. He'd wanted to bathe, change, and rest before departing for Calais. But his valet, who had been traveling with him, had informed him he could not possibly reach Calais in

time to board the last packet to England. He might stay overnight and be on the first in the morning, but that would require saddling the horses and repacking and thus a very late arrival and inferior accommodations. Hugh's man suggested spending a comfortable night at the château of the Comtesse d'Avignon and leaving at first light.

Hugh reluctantly agreed, not just because staying at the château made more sense but because he had promised the Marquise de Beauvais he would do all in his power to bring her sister out of France. Hugh had bathed, eaten, and attempted to nap, but he could not sleep. Too restless to read, he'd joined the house party on the lawn for croquet and now archery. He supposed a boating party was next, as it appeared the servants were readying rowboats near a large pond just past the lawn.

After the tumult of Paris, Hugh felt as though he'd stepped into another world. No one but him was in any way concerned about the unrest in Paris. No one else seemed to hear the ticking clock, counting down the hours, perhaps minutes, until the bomb exploded. These pampered men and women really did not seem to realize they were in mortal danger, and every time he brought the issue up, someone made a witty rejoinder and the conversation moved on. But he hadn't given up on the comtesse yet. He still had the rest of the day and the evening to convince her to leave with him.

Hugh looked down the straight shaft and loosed the arrow. It flew true, landing just to the right of the not-so-angelic comtesse's arrow and perfectly in the center of the target.

The polite applause was subdued as was the comtesse's tone. "Well done, monsieur." She looked at the other guests and smiled brightly. "Shall we partake of refreshments?"

Hugh blew out a breath. It seemed the fairy tale continued.

She led them toward the tables nearby, set with china and silver and attended by liveried footmen in wigs. As Hugh started away, the duchesse his hostess had been speaking to earlier put her arm through his and walked beside him. She was blond and unremarkable except for the enormous ostrich

plumes on her hat and the large jewels on her ears, throat, and fingers. She was in her mid-thirties, so comparable in age to himself.

“I hear you have just come from Paris, Monsieur le Vicomte.”

“Please call me Daventry,” he said.

She made a sound in her throat that seemed to sum up what she thought of this and of all English in particular. “Daventry, then. And tell me, how was Paris? My husband has business interests there and his managers report work is at a standstill.”

“I can well believe it, madame. Travel in and out has been restricted, and when I was there, riots broke out on the streets.”

She put a hand to her jeweled chest. “Goodness. Riots? Whatever for?”

Hugh steeled himself and called on his last reserves of patience. “As I understand it, the people of France are starving.”

“Well, then they should cease rioting and go back to work. No wonder they are hungry.”

They had reached the refreshment tables, laden with all sorts of delicacies. The men and women took plates with small cakes and tarts, nibbling them sparingly while sipping sparkling wine. In the house, a string quartet began to play, the lovely strains of Mozart wafting over the perfectly manicured lawns. It was not difficult to see why the duchesse did not understand the realities of life for the poor in the Faubourg of Saint-Antoine.

Hugh refused a plate, but accepted a glass of wine, drinking it down quickly.

“I shall tell the duc to replace those managers with others. Laziness among the lower classes cannot be tolerated.”

A few of the other guests glanced at the duchesse, but conversation continued.

“I would urge you not to take such measures, madame. If the workers stay home, it is because the streets are not safe. The men and women your husband employs have families as well, and they must feel compelled to stay home and protect those they love.”

“Good lord. You sound like that American ambassador. What is his name?”

“Jefferson.”

“Yes. He goes on and on about equality. Quite tedious, really.”

“I assure you I am no revolutionary. I lost a brother and a cousin in the American war. But even if talk of equality is tedious, surely compassion is always a welcome topic.”

“Compassion! Those peasants reproduce like rabbits. Surely losing a few to hunger or disease will ease the strain on the country’s resources and be better for all of us.” She bit into a frosted morsel of cake.

“If that is how you really feel, then I suppose you deserve what is coming.”

She arched a brow. “And what is that?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but the comtesse was immediately at his side. “Daventry, would you accompany me in the boat? I need a strong man to row.” She smiled up at him, but her deep blue eyes were icy.

“Of course, Comtesse.”

She drew him away from the others, steering him toward the pond. She smelled faintly of apples and champagne, and he placed his own hand over hers, feeling the heat of her skin through their gloves.

“My lord, I thought we had agreed at breakfast that no more should be said on the topic of Paris.” She said this lightly, but her eyes were fierce.

“I don’t recall agreeing to that. In fact, to do so would be irresponsible. Your friends should be apprised of the situation. They would do well to protect themselves and their families.”

Her hand on his forearm tightened, and he looked down at her slim fingers encased in white gloves. “My friends do not want to be warned. They want to have an enjoyable outing, and as this is my first house party since my husband’s death, I ask that you not ruin it with your dire pronouncements.”

Hugh stopped and turned to look directly into her face. His mouth went slightly dry at the fierceness of her expression. She had strength and courage,

misplaced as it was. “Comtesse, I know you have been in mourning. You have been in seclusion. Perhaps you do not fully understand the situation in your adopted country. You and the rest of your class are in danger. I cannot say it more clearly. Your sister and mother are in London. They wish you to join them. Why not go to them until this unrest quiets?”

She shook her head. “I may be part English, but I am also part French. My husband was French. I have land and responsibilities here. It is my country, and I will not flee like a puppy with her tail between her legs. The king and the Palace of Versailles are less than a mile away. I assure you, we are quite safe here.”

She wasn’t safe, and he didn’t know what more he could do to sway her opinion. He would have liked to pick her up, toss her over his shoulder, and carry her away. But as enjoyable as that would be, he was supposed to be a civilized man, and she was an independent woman.

“Then you will not come with me to Calais in the morning?” he asked.

“No. I will stay here and defend what is mine and my family’s.”

He changed direction, pulling her into the shade of a tree and thus out of the view of the other guests. She stepped away from him, her back to the tree trunk. Hugh leaned close to her, boxing her in. It was the sort of thing he wouldn’t normally do to a woman, but she left him little choice. “And how do you think to defend yourself?” The scent of apples and pine tickled his nose, making him even more aware of her. “Do you suppose your servants are loyal to you? You are afraid to speak freely in front of them. Do you have an army hiding somewhere we cannot see? When the mobs of Paris march on the palace and Versailles, how will you defend yourself?”

“It will never come to that, monsieur. The unrest in Paris will be put down, and all will be well.” She gave him a small shove backward and gestured toward the lake. “Now, which boat shall we take?”

Hugh took her hand in his and lifted it to his mouth. He paused, lips brushing over her glove, his eyes meeting hers. Her breath hitched slightly, and

he watched her throat work as she swallowed. “Forgive me,” he murmured. “I’ve had enough of rowing in circles for one day. Excuse me.”

He dropped her hand and took long strides back toward the château.