



A Vampire in
Versailles

JENNI WILTZ

A VAMPIRE
IN VERSAILLES

Jenni Wiltz

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For Paul

Part One

LOVE

CHAPTER ONE

PARIS 1788
SEPTEMBER

If no one's hair caught on fire, Jean-Gabriel de Bourbon was prepared to consider the night a dismal failure. He would have loved to see one of the provincial countesses light up like a Chinese firework, howl like a wolf, and plunge her head into the punch bowl. Anything could happen, after all, since the party was hosted by a commoner.

The Princess de Tursan had mounted her sconces improperly, resulting in the dangerous proximity of flame and female coiffures. The women promenading around the room were little more than lacquered tinderboxes and Jean-Gabriel knew which one would light up first. *The Duchess de Lavedan*, he thought, spotting the woman by her immense powdered wig, a proud sweep of hair that rose fifteen inches above the already vast expanse of her forehead. She seemed to think the height of one's hair determined one's height in society. At this party, all it would determine was the speed with which one burst into flame.

He watched the horse-faced duchess parade her daughter in front of all the eligible bachelors in the room. Some of the men were granted special attention: a deep curtsy that gave them full view of

the daughter's décolletage. When the pair reached a tall man who wore the colors of the Polignac family, the girl flashed a shy smile and dipped into her curtsy. Not satisfied, the duchess placed a bony hand on the girl's spine and pushed, allowing the man to see all the way to her navel.

Charmed, I'm sure, thought Jean-Gabriel. He stood in his usual place at these parties: shoulder slumped against the wall in a dark corner, legs crossed lazily beneath him, the black heel of his shoe resting carelessly against the yellow fabric-covered walls. *Hardly even a princess*, he thought. Just the daughter of a cabinet minister, married to the impoverished Prince de Tursan because he desperately needed the girl's dowry of a hundred thousand *louis*. That the daughter of a tradesman would attempt to host a proper *soirée* was amusing to him. He tallied her mistakes in his head.

First of all, there was not nearly enough champagne. The perspiring valets swept silver trays into the ballroom, only to have hands reach out like tentacles of octopi and pluck away each flute within a foot of the entrance. The talkers, nearest the doorway, were already on their second or third flutes while the dancers, in the center and far corners of the room, had not yet had their first. Empty flutes lay on the floor, on the mantel, on unoccupied pieces of furniture. *Amateurs*, he thought.

He had not powdered his black hair and wore his lowest-heeled shoes. As a member of the royal family, this *soirée* was beneath him. He hated this crowd of *nouveau riche*, the awkward progeny of shipbuilders and bankers. Men and women alike, they devoured hors d'oeuvres and laughed out loud, half-chewed food flopping like dead fish in their mouths. When they spoke, it was all at once in strident voices that would have turned Jean-Baptiste Lully deaf in an

instant. But he had heard that the Clermont-Prince heiress would be present and he wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Since an unmarried heiress was as unnatural a being as himself, he felt bound to investigate—if for no other reason than to meet the person about whom all of Paris was gossiping. He was hungry, too, and there would be plenty to choose from here. No one would miss a valet or even a comte.

The hunger pains had begun early that evening, much earlier than usual. His last meal, three days ago, should have lasted five. He could feel the ache deep within his skin and knew what awaited him if he did not feed. The pain would pulse gently for an hour or so and then increase in intensity until his entire body throbbed with need. His empty veins would fill with air and push out against his skin, begging for blood. His canines would descend further, slicing through his gums, impossible to hide until he had satisfied his needs. Already, it was painful to smile.

Jean-Gabriel scanned the sea of faces before him. There were a great many comtes and marquises, along with two ducs—created, not hereditary. He saw his own (very) distant relative, Etienne d'Orléans. From the junior branch of the Bourbon family, Etienne was pathetically earnest, forever in search of some previously unrevealed and spectacular talent. The problem was that he was thirty-four and had not yet found it—unless one counted trapping helpless girls at parties and desperately trying to impress them.

Jean-Gabriel chuckled, seeing the glazed eyes of the pretty young woman Etienne had snared. The laugh brought a jolt of pain from his descending canines. *Supper*, he reminded himself. *First things first.*

His eyes alighted on a young man in animated conversation in a corner across the room. Effeminate even for this crowd, he wore a purple satin suit trimmed with rows of weepy lace. Thick powder clung to his hair and his face. He was draped across a salon chair, long limbs crossed primly at the ankles. When he laughed, the cake of makeup on his face creased. His rouge, a despicable orange color, blossomed on his cheeks like measles.

Jean-Gabriel motioned for a valet, who scurried over with a tray of champagne flutes. He plucked one for himself and sent the valet to deliver another, with his compliments, to the painted man. As the valet fulfilled his request, Jean-Gabriel poured the contents of the flute down his throat. Alcohol, he had learned, could temporarily numb his hunger pains.

Jean-Gabriel watched the young man's eyes widen as the valet handed him the drink and pointed at his mysterious admirer. Kohl-rimmed eyes swept his frame and winked in invitation. *Let the games begin*, he thought, flashing a smile that would have dazzled the Sun King as he sauntered across the room.

"It seems I must thank you," the young man said. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Hunger," Jean-Gabriel replied, snatching another flute from a passing valet.

"Excuse me, sir," the valet began. "This is for—"

Jean-Gabriel quaffed the contents in one gulp.

"—the Duchess de Clermont-Prince."

"She is better off without it," he said, dropping the flute on the valet's tray. "That was not a good year. Bring the lady something fit for human consumption."

"Yes, sir," the valet sighed. "Of course, sir."

The young man grinned, flaking the makeup around the corners of his mouth. “Whoever you are, monsieur, you do not disappoint. I am the Comte de Magnoac.”

“Jean-Gabriel de Bourbon.” He watched flakes of powder fall from the man’s mouth to the shoulder of his jacket. *Really*, he thought, *these newcomers must have been raised on a sheep farm.* “And where I come from, monsieur, one stands to greet a relative of the king.”

“I did not know,” the young man said, rising slowly from the chair. “All I knew was that you are the most dangerous man here.”

Jean-Gabriel’s eyes wandered from Magnoac’s face to a thick, pulsing artery just beneath his ear. Blood, like wine, carried the flavor of the earth from which it came. *Terroir*, the vintners called it. “Where were you born?” he asked softly.

“Gascony.”

Jean-Gabriel sighed with pleasure. Gascon blood tasted like freshly cracked peppercorns, hot and spicy. No matter how ridiculous, this creature was worth pursuing just to taste the rich, autumnal flavor of his blood.

“In fact, I have just left home,” Magnoac said, waving a long-fingered hand. “I am staying with my cousin, the Comte de Ville-neuve.”

“The country mouse is all alone? Paris will eat you alive unless you find someone to teach you its ways.”

“Are you volunteering, monsieur? I am an apt pupil. I’m quite comfortable on my knees.”

Jean-Gabriel grimaced and hoped it passed for a smile. At close range, the man’s rouge was atrocious. The shade of orange, ghastly enough by itself, produced a dissonant clash with the indigo of his

jacket. “For how long,” he asked, “are we to have the pleasure of your company?”

“That depends on who will be having me.” Magnoac clamped his hand on Jean-Gabriel’s arm, white fingers streaking the black satin.

Good God, Jean-Gabriel thought. *Even this fool’s hands are powdered.* “Let us find the answer over a late supper, once this dismal *fête* is complete.”

“You make a generous offer.”

“Then accept it. I promise to behave like a perfect gentleman.”

“How disappointing.” Magnoac rearranged his eyebrows in what was intended to be a sly, seductive gaze. He looked like a painted owl.

Jean-Gabriel leaned forward, eyes drawn to the boy’s powdered neck. He ached to draw his teeth across it and taste the peppery Gascon blood. “My carriage will arrive at three o’clock. The driver will bring you to me.”

“I look forward to it, your highness.” Magnoac resumed his seat, draping an arm over the chair’s gilded frame. Dark patches of sweat showed through the gaudy purple satin.

Jean-Gabriel smiled and turned his back. As much as he wanted to assuage his hunger pains immediately, he did not want to be seen leaving with Magnoac so early in the night. Someone would remember and someone would talk.

There had to be something here to entertain him in the meantime. Under the Sun King, the best of French society had strolled in gardens by Le Notre and dreamed of *gloire* in canopied beds beneath ceilings painted by Le Brun. Now, instead of art or music or philosophy, conversation revolved around rumors of the queen’s Sapphic affairs and how much money it took to bribe a tax collector. The

women were ugly, the men were buffoons, and once he had eaten, he would gladly wash his hands of all of them.

He constructed a path of escape through the crowd, specifically designed to avoid the Duchess de Lavedan. With her wilting hairdo and sloped forehead, her resemblance to a horse grew by the minute. Appropriate, he thought, since she was still promenading her daughter like a prized brood mare.

At the last soirée he'd attended, the daughter trotted so closely on his heels that the only way to dislodge her was to pick a fight with the man in front of him. In reaching back to throw the first punch, he'd smacked the daughter's nose with his elbow. Upon discovering her daughter's bloody appendage, the duchess engendered all manner of threats but acted on none of them. It wasn't as if her daughter's nose had been attractive to begin with.

Jean-Gabriel hoped tonight would offer less in the way of both bloodshed and annoyance. He strolled past the doorway and took two flutes of champagne from a beleaguered valet. He tossed the contents of one flute down his throat and put the empty glass back on the valet's tray. The second he took with him.

As he traversed the far wall of the ballroom (taking care to avoid the lethal sconces), he realized he would have to cut through the circle of men surrounding the Duchess de Lavedan. He hung back and listened to them before interrupting.

"And did you hear," the duchess said, "about the Clermont-Prince girl's latest scheme? She has a plan to persuade the king to put aside the Austrian woman and marry her instead. They say the king needs her money, that our treasury cannot compete with the fortune that girl will bring to the man she marries."

One of the men let loose a whistle. “If Orléans and Condé can’t get her on her back, what makes the king think he is any better equipped? If he were worth anything in bed, the queen wouldn’t be sleeping with women.”

The circle erupted in laughter. The duchess threw her head back, placing her massive wig only centimeters from a candle’s flame. Seeing his opportunity, Jean-Gabriel stepped forward. “More mirth, madam,” he said. “I would have you show more mirth.”

The duchess blinked. “How much more, monsieur?”

He turned sideways and held out his hands, approximating the distance between her hair and the candle behind it. “This much.”

The duchess turned to see what was behind her and came face-to-face with the flame. Understanding dawned and the smile fell from her face. “How amusing you are, warning me against danger when it is you who must beware.”

“Are you threatening me, madam?”

“With every weapon at my disposal.”

“A frightening assortment, indeed, if your mulish daughter is any indication. Tell her to be gentle with me. I bruise easily.”

“I would sooner mate her with a pig.”

“You’ve come to the right place. Only the finest swine gather at the home of a finance minister’s daughter.”

Soft twitters slipped from behind ostrich feather fans. There would be a firestorm of gossip now, but it didn’t matter. He hadn’t had this much fun in years.

“You are the one least fit for polite circles,” the duchess retorted. “They say you made a pact with the Devil to earn the king’s favor.”

“If I were working with the Devil, I would hardly have come here with such a charitable purpose in mind.”

“And what purpose is that?”

“I have volunteered to introduce the Comte de Magnoac to Parisian society. Surely that is an unselfish act of the most charitable sort?”

The woman’s cheeks flamed, for she knew as well as he the sort of charity Magnoac desired. “True charity is motivated by a desire for the good of others, not oneself.”

Jean-Gabriel executed a mock bow in her direction. “I see I have misjudged you, madam. Obviously, your husband’s closure of his grain stores to his tenants was motivated by a purity of intent on his behalf, and not the desire to charge triple the price in a week when they are all starving.”

He relished the look of astonishment on the duchess’s face and promised himself he would remember this night the next time he considered declining an invitation from one of the minor gentry. The night, he thought, can get no better than this.

Jean-Gabriel guzzled the last of his champagne and tossed the glass over his shoulder. “I must retire,” he said. “Please thank our gracious hostess and tell her it was a stroke of genius to shrift us on champagne, since an overindulged guest could so easily lose her balance and set fire to herself on the sconces.”

He swept out of the ballroom, humming to himself. At the end of the hall he found the cloakroom, its attendant missing. *That bourgeois princess probably sent her home*, Jean-Gabriel thought, *conveniently forgetting we all want our belongings back at night’s end*. He shuffled through the lacy wraps and woolen cloaks until he found his own, of heavy black satin. He plucked it off the golden hook and was surprised to see a well-dressed young woman hiding behind it.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked. “Digging for money? If you need coin so badly, there are quite a few men here who would gladly pay you for your time.”

“Don’t let him see me!” she said, ducking behind the cloaks as Etienne d’Orléans dashed into the room.

Jean-Gabriel turned his back to her, hiding the swaying of the cloaks as she resumed her hiding place. He greeted Orléans with a pained smile. “What brings you to this lovely cloakroom, besides the grievous lack of attendants to retrieve your wrap for you?”

“Is she here?” Etienne asked, eyes flashing from corner to corner. Matted strands of hair escaped his queue and clung to his sweat-dampened face. Jean-Gabriel eyed his jacket jealously. It was of exquisite silk, dyed a vibrant Prussian blue. The seams, tailored for a less muscular man, strained visibly with each ragged breath. “I thought I saw her headed in this direction.”

“Who? The cloakroom girl? I don’t think there is one. You’d better just collect your own cloak and leave.” Jean-Gabriel clapped Etienne on the shoulder. He hadn’t planned on rescuing the girl until he realized Etienne was the one pursuing her. Tormenting Orléans was almost as much fun as insulting the horse-faced duchess.

Etienne shook him off. “No, not the cloakroom girl—Mademoiselle de Clermont-Prince. I have a matter of vital importance to discuss with her. We arranged a meeting place, but she was absent at the prescribed time.”

“Not so vital to her, then, is it?” Jean-Gabriel laughed, but Etienne’s drooping mouth roused a smidgen of pity within him. “In any case, allow me to solve your mystery.”

Suddenly, Jean-Gabriel felt two small hands reach out and encircle his ankle. *That little pygmy*, he thought. *She'll pull me down if I give her away.* "I did see Mademoiselle de Clermont-Prince, but I believe she was going out to the balcony for some fresh air."

Etienne nodded his thanks and tore off in the direction of the balcony. Instantly, the two little hands released his ankle. "You can come out now," Jean-Gabriel said. "He's gone."

The girl shuffled out from under the hanging cloaks. "Thank you," she said. "It was awful of me to do that, but I just couldn't bear any more tonight." She blushed, darkening the apples of her cheeks. "He has been pursuing me all evening and I just wanted to be alone. Please don't tell anyone."

Jean-Gabriel studied her with renewed interest. This was not how he'd expected to make the acquaintance of France's richest heiress. Her unpowdered hair was the color of a pheasant's feather, an appealing combination of sienna and orange. Freckles dappled the tops of her cheeks, spotting skin that was pale and smooth as an apricot. Unlike most court ladies, she wore no rouge and no face paint.

Jean-Gabriel bent down and plucked a ball of dust from the hem of her dress. "The housekeeping here is atrocious. If anyone asks where you have been, you should tell them you've gone looking for a proper hostess."

She smiled, a slightly crooked effect making it all the more charming. "Do you know Monsieur d'Orléans?"

"We are a distant sort of cousins, I suppose. I am *quite* his senior."

"You don't look that old," she said. "Damn it, I didn't mean that the way it came out."

“Are you asking my forgiveness?”

“Demanding it,” she said. “Otherwise, I won’t sleep tonight. I can’t abide having people upset with me.”

He moved closer to inhale the fragrance that enveloped her. It was light and sweet, like fields of lavender warmed by the sun. He wondered if her blood would also carry the scent of those thin purple flowers. “Perhaps,” he said, “I can find it in my heart to pardon your unimaginable rudeness if you permit me to call upon you.”

She shook her head. “If you’re after my money like everyone else, you can stop pretending to like me. I don’t plan to marry you, your distant cousin, or anyone else.”

Jean-Gabriel laughed. The idea of his marrying anyone was absurd. No respectable woman had considered him a serious candidate for marriage in almost a thousand years. “Mademoiselle, I have several times your fortune in my foreign investments alone. Your paltry few million *louis* mean nothing to me.”

“I’m glad of it. You have no idea how many men profess undying love for me before they’ve even met me, all in the name of money. It’s insulting.” She paused. “I know I should be grateful for my inheritance, but sometimes it feels more like a curse than a gift.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“I don’t think that you do.” Her creamy cheeks flushed as the light faded from her eyes. “I am a possession of the crown, along with my inheritance and title. When I marry, my husband will lay claim to the land I grew up on, the home I was born in, everything my ancestors fought for and won. It will all be taken from me, simply because I am a woman.”

“I see why you have no interest in suitors.”

“My interest in the matter has never been discussed.”

“Then let us discuss it together.”

“Once we are properly introduced, of course.” She held out her hand. “My name is Marguerite de Clermont-Prince. I would be pleased if you would call upon me at Versailles.”

He picked up her hand and held it close to his lips. He could see the faint blue line of a vein on the back of her hand. “I am Jean-Gabriel de Bourbon. I shan’t sleep until we meet again, mademoiselle.”

“If you lack sleep, monsieur, I am fully aware that it is not I who keep you awake. Perhaps your bankers, with reports on your enormous fortune,” she said with a smile. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have to escape without being seen from the balcony.” She made a brief curtsy and swept out the door, the scent of sun-warmed lavender trailing behind her.

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As the library door latched behind her, Marguerite sighed in relief. “*Dieu merci*,” she sighed, sinking to her feet and closing her eyes. Her flight from the cloakroom had taken her first to the parlor, and when the quick set of footsteps behind her had passed, to the library. Only one more set of doors stood between her and freedom. She would wait in the carriage for Madame de Chateau.

Attending this soirée had not been her idea. Madame de Chateau insisted she make regular public appearances with the vain hope that she would meet someone she actually wanted to marry. This one had seemed like an easy task—mingle with the lower nobility who were obviously unsuitable for marriage, thus removing a major obstacle to her enjoyment of these events. But damned if two Princes of the Blood hadn’t shown up to ruin things.

“Marguerite, get up from the floor,” a stern voice barked.

Startled, she let out an unflattering shriek. Her guardian, Madame de Chaleau, stood before her in a familiar pose: arms crossed, toe tapping, brows drawn together in a frown. Madame, at forty, had not lost her looks. The creases on her forehead would vanish when she let go of her frown. “Why are you hiding? Do you not know that Monsieur d’Orléans has been searching for you this past half hour?”

“Yes, I know. Why do you think I am hiding?” she said, and instantly regretted it. “He means well, but he’s no different than the rest.”

“I beg to differ. What use could a Prince of the Blood have for your fortune?”

“It isn’t that,” she said, shaking her head. “He doesn’t see the real me any more than the fortune hunters do. He sees something he wants and nothing more.”

Madame de Chaleau settled onto a brocade-covered chaise, smoothing her billowing skirt with a flick of the wrist. “Marguerite, darling, you know that marriage is the only option for you. Monsieur d’Orléans is obviously in love with you, and he is a *Prince du Sang*. What is so bad about that?”

“I know how it must look,” she said. “If one of Samuel Richardson’s heroines did this, I would scream at the silly girl for turning down a handsome, wealthy prince who is also in love with her. But Etienne spends so much time worrying about how to keep me from loving other people that he never once attempted to make me love *him*.”

“I wish for all the world that you would accept him and be done with it.”

Marguerite stared at the floor and traced the scroll pattern in the rug with her finger. “Sometimes I wish my father had died penniless. This is his money, not mine. I have nothing to do with it.”

“Bite your tongue!” Madame said, pinching the tip of Marguerite’s nose. “Your father would never stand to hear you say that. You are the last of the Clermont-Prince family. Your ancestors fought at Crécy and Poitiers—”

“And my great-great-great-great-grandfather carried the bier of Henri IV, I know.”

“So why would you deny what they have worked for? Be a good girl. Choose a husband. You are lucky to have the choice. I was not so lucky. The Queen was not so lucky. No one is. Except for you, my darling.”

Marguerite got up from the floor and pressed her hands to her eyes. “I know, I know. I am the luckiest girl in the whole bedeviled world.”

“Come,” Madame said, rising slowly from her chaise. “My old bones will see you married yet. Go and find Monsieur d’Orléans. Whether you want to marry him or not, running away from him is extremely rude and I will not allow it.”

“Yes, Madame,” Marguerite said.

When she made her way back to the ballroom, Etienne spotted her at once. She could not help but wish it were Jean-Gabriel de Bourbon standing beside her instead.

CHAPTER TWO

PARIS 1788
SEPTEMBER

The dining room had been prepared exactly as Jean-Gabriel ordered. The candles in the crystal chandeliers were lit and one place laid at the table. The gold-rimmed porcelain was the best Sèvres could manufacture, and the table linens had been woven by nuns from the Cistercian abbey on his Burgundian estate.

His chef, Pierre, filled the table with all the delicacies it could hold. Chicken blanquettes with cucumber, fillets of rabbit, turkey in consommé...and he could taste none of it. He wished he had known what would happen to him that long-ago night so he could have feasted like a king during his last meal. As it was, he had wasted it in pursuit of drink and an innkeeper's daughter. A thin stew was the last thing he'd eaten. He could still recall the salty tang of the gravy coating the turnips and the stringy beef. Were he to eat the same thing now, it would be like eating paper or fabric.

Still, he could not stop hoping that one day he would taste food again, that his body would be tricked into accepting it. Once a year, he ordered his chef to create a feast worthy of the king, and each time so far, the night had ended in disappointment.

On this night, no servants were allowed in the dining room until he called for them. Pierre placed each dish on the table and departed without a word. Jean-Gabriel removed each dish's cover and watched the hot food send wisps of vapor through the air.

He filled his plate with asparagus and rabbit filet drizzled with Pierre's favorite lemon and dill dressing. The rabbit flesh accepted the golden tines of his fork without trouble, and he twirled it around in the melting butter and dill. He pressed his fork down into the meat, crushing it and letting the lemon sauce rise through the slats. Bringing the morsel near his nose, he tried to call forth the memory of what it should smell like. He remembered the richness of butter, but had forgotten whether it was salty or sweet. Tonight, he chose sweet, and forced the idea of a smell into his mind. Concentrating on the memory, he put the meat in his mouth and tried to force his tongue to participate in the memory of his mind. He chewed slowly, letting the lemon sauce splash over his taste buds, waiting for the burst of sweet flavor to register in his brain. It did not happen. Tonight was the same as all the other nights.

He spit out the meat and hurled his plate across the room. "Roland," Jean-Gabriel yelled. His valet, waiting patiently outside the doorway, entered with a nod. "Take it all away," he said. "Is my guest taken care of?"

"He awaits you in the east parterre."

"When you have cleared all this away, you are dismissed. I shall not require your services until morning."

"Yes, sir." Roland shouldered the platter with the offending rabbit filets.

"And Roland?"

"Yes, sir?"

“I shall leave you some.”

“Thank you, sir.” Roland carried the platter out of the room.

Feeling tonight’s failure more than others, Jean-Gabriel clenched his fists at his sides. His veins felt twice as large as usual, bloated with air and nothing else. He stepped over to the window and looked down on the east parterre. He did not know what lie Roland had told the comte, but it must have been a good one—the stupid man skipped along happily in the maze.

He had built the maze four hundred years ago with the idea that stalking prey be a game rather than a chore. His gardener, Armagnac, kept it up beautifully. The comte stopped to sit on one of the maze’s stone benches. Jean-Gabriel watched the doomed man tighten the buckles on his shoes, preening like a girl.

He sighed. An immense weariness descended upon him at the thought of living in this fashion for another thousand years. Always it was the same. The fear, the panic, and then the loneliness of death. Were it not for the ease of the mark this time, he would have left this one well enough alone. But there was no choice. *Let it be done*, he thought.

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The moon shone brightly against the deep blue ribbon of night. The Comte de Magnoac could not remember such a beautiful night in all the years he had been forming these types of assignations. The splendor of this prince’s palace was unmatched by even the king’s country chateaux, or at least what he could see of them from the outside. The exquisite furniture, the priceless paintings, the china, the carpets, the gardens...and now, with any luck, he would permanently inhabit this place.

He had been exceptionally lucky to snare a member of the royal family on his first trip to Paris. Magnoac had expected success, but not quite on this level. It hadn't even been difficult. He was a little nervous, never having slept with more than a provincial duke, but de Bourbon's obvious interest quelled his doubts.

Velvety roses filled his sight, washed sable in the twilight. Of the dozen or so bushes surrounding him, only a few flowers were left on each. Magnoac touched one and sent a tiny avalanche of petals streaming to the ground. He whisked his hand away and tried to kick the fallen petals under the nearest hedgerow.

He straightened his cravat for the fourth time, wondering when the prince would join him. The carriage and driver had been waiting for him just as the prince promised, and the valet treated him to a sumptuous meal as soon as he'd arrived. When he asked about his host, the valet merely answered that he would join them shortly.

Magnoac thought it odd that de Bourbon had not accompanied him here immediately after the soirée, but perhaps that was just how royalty did things. As long as the end result was the same, he did not care how he arrived there. Following the meal, the valet had reappeared to tell him that de Bourbon would meet him in the gardens. "The gardens" was a misleading term for the acres of hedges de Bourbon had constructed behind the palace. He had been wandering for half an hour through the pathways created by enormous hedgerows, over seven feet tall and impeccably trimmed. He did not envy de Bourbon's gardener.

The greenery formed twisting pathways, dead ends, and open enclaves that contained ponds, benches, flowers, and statuary. He had discovered two such enclaves so far. The first was a small but beautiful pool with lily pads and lotus blossoms. The second con-

tained statuary of ancient gods and goddesses surrounded by manicured topiaries.

It was the best place he had ever seen for a secret assignation.

The long wait did not bother him. The mystery only added to the attraction of the rendezvous, and he was quite certain that he would be able to adjust to life in these settings should he and the prince develop a lasting attachment (of which he really had no doubt).

Magnoac patted his hair to make sure it was still in place. The talcum powder absorbed into his moist palm quickly. He spent the next few minutes cursing his stupidity for not bringing along a mirror and an extra tin of powder. He almost missed the slow crunch of gravel that revealed the prince's approaching footsteps. "At last," he said, turning to greet his host.

The prince, illuminated by the bright moonlight, was a figure from his wild night-born fantasies. The neck of his chemise was open, his jacket wrinkled. Black hair hung loose around his shoulders, contrasting with the oyster-white of his skin. Little embers of eyes burned deep inside his skull. "Yes," the prince said. "At last."

Magnoac shivered at the sound of his voice. The air around the prince carried an intoxicating fragrance—something like warm leather that had lain out in the sun all day. He felt his mouth go dry. "Let us begin," de Bourbon said, and vanished from sight.

Magnoac blinked. The prince was gone, yet it was not possible for him to have dissolved into the night. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The hedgerow was still empty. *Perhaps I drank more champagne than I realized*, he thought.

"Most clever, your highness," Magnoac said. "I have always enjoyed the hunt."

The prince's voice came from somewhere to his right, seemingly behind the hedge. "As have I. Let us see who is the hunter and who is the prey."

Magnoac pursed his lips in a smirk. A Parisian, a city dweller, believing he could beat a man born and raised in the country? He turned to the right and spoke to his elusive lover through the hedge. "I must warn you, your highness. I am the best hunter in Gascony."

"Are you?" the voice replied.

"Of course. By morning, you will be quite convinced."

"By morning, my dear comte, one of us will no longer be alive."

"By morning, I—what did you say?"

The prince's laugh echoed as though they stood in a church. During the last exchange, de Bourbon's voice seemed to come from behind him rather than in front of him. Yet it was not possible, for he had heard no more than three footsteps on the gravel. He dropped to his knees to peek under the hedge in front of him. He saw nothing.

That's odd, he thought. *The man certainly does have an unequaled silence of movement.* Perhaps he had taken off his shoes and crept in silence in an attempt to trick him.

He smiled. How easily he guessed the prince's games.

Magnoac got to his feet and dusted off his hands. "I know where you are hiding, my lord. You shall have to do better than this."

There was no answer. Magnoac began to wonder what sort of hunt the prince had in mind. Perhaps his tastes ran toward the perverse or the violent. A cousin had once told him a tale of a Parisian gentleman who liked to beat his lovers nearly to death before sleeping with them. He began to be afraid. "Show yourself," he said.

“Show yourself or I shall begin to doubt the sincerity of your intentions!”

Again, nothing. The comte dropped to the ground to look under the hedge behind him. There were no stocking-clad feet in his view. His heart beat quickly as he considered his options. The prince was enjoying an uncomfortable sport at his expense, and although he desperately wanted the cachet of this prize, perhaps the price was too high. It was time to find the way out.

He had not thought to keep track of his steps on the way in, and after half an hour of wandering, he was hopelessly lost. After a few timid steps in the direction he thought he remembered coming, he broke into a run.

Magnoac fled past the enclave of statuary, turning left, always left, hoping to find the exit. Beyond each turn, a different tableau awaited him. A small stand of topiaries, a sculpted parterre, a small bridge over a false brook...all were surrounded by the impossibly tall hedges, blocking his view of the city on all sides.

He stopped to catch his breath and heard the crunching of gravel behind him. Blindly, he ran again. The satin ribbon holding his hair slipped out of its bow and flapped in the breeze, licking at his cheeks. Shaking hair out of his eyes, he missed a turn and came to a dead end, a solid wall of greenery. Gravel sprayed out from under his skidding heels.

He swore and turned to face his attacker, but no one was there. He heard only the rapid wheeze of his own breathing and the pounding of his blood in his ears. “I do not know what sort of game you play, but I beg you to release me from it!”

His eyes scanned the breadth of the hedgerow and saw nothing. It angered him. He was used to foes he could see and touch. "Come out!" he yelled.

And there he was. Materialized, as though out of air, right in front of him. Dark, smiling cruelly, and still handsome enough to set his blood stirring. "Oh, my dear comte," de Bourbon murmured. "You mustn't shout. Not yet."

Magnoac backed away and felt the hedge prick his shoulders. "Do not come any closer."

"But I thought that is what you wanted," the prince said, his voice silky and deep. His eyes glowed, shrouded by a yellowish fog, as though lit by candles resting within his skull. Two malformed teeth hung over his bottom lip.

"What is this?" Magnoac gasped. "What manner of demon are you?"

"I am merely an unfortunate man who was ill-used by a brother. He cursed me, and there is no recourse. Please, do not be afraid."

The prince gestured for him to come closer.

Magnoac took a breath and tried to calm the wild pulsing of his heart. Looking into the prince's eyes, he felt as though he would fall into an endless chasm, and he did not know what awaited him at the bottom—jagged rocks or feather pillows. He felt his terror recede and was embarrassed by his hasty flight. The last thing he wanted was to appear unrefined and that was just what he had done. "I do not know what to say, your grace. I am unaccustomed to city life and find these things unsettling."

"You are not the only one," de Bourbon replied.

He smiled ingratiatingly at the prince and tried to put himself back in the frame of mind for an assignation. The memory of his

fevered flight flamed in his cheeks. How gauche it must have seemed.

While he tried to think of something witty to say, his eyes drifted down to his shoes and then to the short trunks of the hedge to his left. Something glinted and caught his eye. It was a jewel, attached to a thick golden band. Momentarily distracted, he bent down to get a better view.

The ring was still attached to a hand. The dull, slack flesh blended with the ground in the grey wash of night. Magnoac screamed—a high-pitched, girlish scream of which he had no present mind to be embarrassed. All pretense of calm vanished and he knew the prince was a madman or murderer or worse.

The prince merely smiled, revealing his horrid, sharp teeth.

He tried to flee, but de Bourbon grabbed him, arms encircling his chest like a hunter's snare. With strength greater than an ox, the prince lifted him off his feet and flung him to the ground. His head slammed down on pointed bits of gravel, the impact quaking his spine and legs. Red circles floated before his eyes on a field of black.

He gasped and tried to get up, but a delicate shoe pressed to his chest stopped him. Magnoac tasted blood in his mouth, and something stopped him from yelling for help. His jaw felt like it was in the wrong place. When he tried to say a prayer, it came out a mumble.

The prince, somehow, understood his garbled words. "God listens to no one," he said. "Least of all fools."

Magnoac moaned, wishing for the blackness to overtake him. His consciousness was dulled but intact. He felt the prince hover over him and press a frigid hand to his bleeding forehead. He re-

fused to open his eyes, but he heard de Bourbon lick his fingers, wet with blood, and sigh.

He was afraid to try to move again. De Bourbon slipped wet fingers beneath the collar of his coat and yanked him down the garden path. Jagged bits of gravel scraped his legs as they went. His stockings were in tatters and his calves oozing blood by the time they reached the nearest enclave. The prince again grabbed his collar, this time with both hands, and heaved his body atop a stone bench.

The colors swimming before his eyes faded to black. There was no air in his lungs. He wanted to cough because he could feel a warm liquid coming up, but he could not control his muscles any longer. The liquid remained suspended in his esophagus and any air he took in could not reach his organs. He heaved and wheezed and flopped, trying to force air past the liquid blockage. Nothing worked. His wordless gasps quieted and water streamed from his eyes.

The clouds passed away from the moon and he felt the cool kiss of moonlight. A strange ringing sounded in his ears, like church bells clanging for a new king or for a marriage. Something warm was near his neck—the prince breathing over him. Dulled to all pain beyond that of his wrecked body, he barely felt the tear of his skin as the prince's teeth sliced into his throat.

It felt as though someone had thrown him into the sea and all the water in the world was washing over him, pouring down his neck, over his shoulder, and onto the ground. The water was strangely thick and warm and it made a rushing noise in his ears. There was no power left in him to resist. His head lolled to the side, cheek coming to rest on the cold grey stone.

CHAPTER THREE

SAINT - GERMAIN 987
MAY

Deep within the cold grey stone of Saint-Germain-des-Prés lay the body of a king. The chapel was silent, empty of mourners. They had departed, handkerchiefs pressed to eyes, weeping for the end of Louis V and of the Carolingians. The king was dead and no one knew who would next wear the fleur-de-lys crown. Bells rang ceaselessly, pealing out the tidings, and those who lived in the shadow of the abbey could still hear the strident tones in their ears as they lay in their beds.

The king's body lay with his sword, wrapped in a blue cloth, in a box carved with bas-reliefs of himself, his father, and his ancestor Charlemagne, whose legacy died with him. Tomorrow the mourners would come and carry the bier to St. Denis.

Absorbed by their prayers and shut up in their priory, the monks of the abbey did not hear four cloaked figures enter the chapel. Louis V's body lay at the altar, surrounded by squat candles. They gave off just enough light for the four occupants, three men and one woman, to make their way to the altar. The oldest of the men, black-haired in a tattered woolen robe, lowered a sack from his shoulder to the floor.

Père Jérôme flexed his fingers before bending to retrieve the contents of his sack: candles, a wooden bowl, a book. He arranged the candles in a circle and lit them. “*Prenez-le*,” he said, handing the book to the second man, who shrunk from it, gloved hands retreating into the folds of his cloak.

Jérôme laughed softly in a menacing baritone. “Do not be afraid, *dux Francorum*. To hold the title of Rex, you will have to do worse things than this. Take the book.” The second man, Hugh Capet, took the book.

The third man lay slumped against the steps of the altar. He pressed a hand to his head and tried to rise. The movement was too much for him and he fell back with a pitiful moan.

“Keep him quiet,” the black-eyed priest snapped at Capet. “If we are discovered, it is over for you.”

Capet gathered his cloak and crouched near the pathetic figure on the floor. With a shaking hand, he untied the small wineskin from his belt and poured the rest of its contents into the open mouth. “That is all I have,” he said.

“We must work quickly, then.” One of the candles sputtered, spewing a plume of black smoke into the air and hissing sparks onto the stone floor. Capet gathered in his cloak to keep it from touching the sparks. This was not what he had envisioned when he first spoke to Père Jérôme about the ceremony. There had been no mention of a woman, for one thing.

Just outside the circle stood the fourth occupant of the church, a pale woman with tumbled blonde hair, clothed in a transparent white gown like those worn by the women of Caesar a thousand years ago. She had not spoken a word and no expression crossed her

blank, beautiful face. Capet thought she must be mute or deaf or both.

Jérôme snatched the book from Capet and opened it to a page marked with a scrap of frayed ribbon. Capet looked at the thin rows of writing but could not identify it as Latin or Frankish. “Greek,” Jérôme said, as if reading his mind.

The dirty man on the floor moved and mumbled again. “Hush, brother,” Capet said, looking down at him with a measure of pity. “The powder is already wearing off.”

“How much did you give him?”

“All of it.”

Jérôme raised an eyebrow. “He is strong, then. Perhaps he will survive.”

“What do you mean, perhaps?” Capet asked, drawing his cloak around him. Nothing here offered warmth—neither the stone walls nor the so-called priest nor the mute woman who looked more dead than alive. “He will not be harmed, will he?”

Père Jérôme waved a hand dismissively. “Do I look like I have been harmed? Does she?”

“Then why did you say—”

“Gnosis,” Jérôme snapped, “is the true power of God. It is a fragment of His own light. It burns the soul out of a man and it cannot always find its way back.”

The dirty man mumbled again and Capet hushed him. “His name is Jean-Gabriel.”

“She will like that,” Jérôme said, nodding at the woman. Beneath her transparent gown, Capet could see strange black markings tattooed on her body, covering her from her knees to her breasts.

Jérôme followed Capet's gaze. "Your women give birth to ensure your survival. Mine carry the words that ensure ours."

Capet gulped.

With a quick glance at the priory door, Jérôme began to read aloud. "Divine Sophia, Mistress of the Pleroma, forgive the humble ignorance of your servant and bless each of those in his company. We come to you in the presence of death, in the hope of death, and in fear of death." When he turned the page, the candles flickered. Flame-shaped shadows quivered on the walls, like inky demons leaking through cracks in the stone.

"Take unto thee a new servant to be baptized in your blood. We give you Jean-Gabriel in return for your blessing on the throne of Hugh Capet, *dux Francorum*. He shall be one of us, sent from the seven spheres of wisdom to pollute the blood of ignorance, of infirmity, of flesh. Take him to your bosom and keep him apart from the world of flesh and mortals."

At Capet's feet, his brother stirred again and swore. Capet pressed his boot onto Jean-Gabriel's shoulder. "Undoubtedly the word 'bosom' roused him from his slumber," he said. "Continue, *s'il vous plaît*."

Jérôme smiled wryly and turned the page. "Hugh Capet, with this blood, you purchase the blood of all Frenchmen for a thousand years. You shall be elected king, and so shall your son after you. The blood of France will be in your veins, and this blood of yours shall be in my service for as long as your line remains on the throne. Do you accept?"

Capet, mesmerized by the weight of a thousand years, could only nod.

“Then let it be done.” Jérôme closed his eyes and fell to his knees, robe billowing out over the candle flames. He chanted in a language Capet did not understand, words falling like drops of silver from his tongue. When the prayer was finished, he raised his hands slowly and the candle flames lengthened, as if drawn upward by the very movement of his hands.

“How did you do that?” Capet breathed.

“The magic is embedded in the words,” Jérôme said. “All we must do is speak them.” He glanced at the wooden crucifix hanging over the altar. “Your priests chose the wrong language, *dux Francorum*. There is no magic in Latin.”

Then the black-robed priest swung his head. “It is your turn now, Geneviève.”

At the sound of her name, the woman raised her head. Capet caught a glimpse of molten amber eyes, radiating waves of heat from a fire that must have burned beneath her skin. She swept forward, gliding unharmed through the circle of flame.

Capet’s throat ran dry as she knelt next to Jean-Gabriel, brushing the hair back from his forehead and cradling him to her breasts like a mother with a child. She pulled him across her lap and moved her lips closer to his neck, crooning to him in the same strange language Jérôme had used.

Jean-Gabriel began to stir. Hugh watched her kiss him and trace patterns with her tongue over his ears, his neck, his throat. When Jean-Gabriel’s eyes opened slowly, they were dark with confusion. Pity for his brother returned as Hugh looked down at him. “*Mon frère,*” Jean-Gabriel mumbled, reaching out.

Hugh could not meet his brother’s gaze. He looked instead at Geneviève. She felt him watching and paused suddenly in her

crooning. She turned her head and looked up at him with her burning eyes.

It took him a moment to realize what was wrong with her. Something had happened to her teeth—two of them, obviously malformed, hung over her bottom lip. They were drawn to a point that looked sharper than those of his hunting dogs. As he watched, her tongue slipped out from between her lips and caressed the malformed teeth, making them glisten in the firelight.

The woman's head sank low against his brother's neck. But instead of pursing her lips, she pulled them back and sank her teeth into Jean-Gabriel's neck. Beneath her, Jean-Gabriel's body flopped like a fish in the bottom of a boat. Jérôme moved quickly to hold Jean-Gabriel's legs and keep him from dislodging the woman.

Capet reached for his brother's outstretched hand. "*Mon frère,*" Hugh mumbled as Jean-Gabriel's hand clamped down on his. He turned on the priest. "What have you done?"

Jérôme smiled. "I have purchased your throne."

Hugh watched in horror as Geneviève pulled her teeth from Jean-Gabriel's wound and took his blood into her mouth, swallowing greedily. It spilled over her lips and chin as she moaned with obvious pleasure. The strange amber light in her eyes grew stronger as Jean-Gabriel's grip grew weaker. Hugh felt sick and his muscles tensed, ready for action.

With his free hand, he reached beneath his cloak, fumbling for the small knife he wore in a sheath attached to his belt. "I would not do that if I were you," Jérôme snapped. "You are not king yet."

"But he is dying!"

"He will not be harmed."

"Are you mad? Look what she is doing to him!"

“Had I told you what she would do to him, would it have changed your mind?”

Capet could not answer.

“That is what I thought,” Jérôme said.

Geneviève, satisfied with her lot, licked the oozing wound clean and slithered away from Jean-Gabriel. The arch in her back as she slid across the floor reminded Hugh of the prostitutes that writhed in the beds of the Ile St. Louis brothels. She curled up in a ball and moaned in pleasure, as if the sensation of Jean-Gabriel’s blood coursing through her veins would tear her apart with joy.

Jérôme ignored her. He picked up the wooden bowl and gave it to Capet, who held it with shaking hands.

“Your knife,” Jérôme said. “Slowly.” Hugh reached under his cloak and brought out the small iron-handled knife. Gripping it tightly, Jérôme drove the tip beneath his forearm and drew it across his skin. Sizzling liquid dripped from the cut and fell into the bowl. As he watched the pool of red grow bigger and coat the base of the bowl, Hugh felt his gut churn. The blood smelled wrong, like meat cooked too long on the fire.

When the bowl was nearly full, Jérôme whispered in his unknown language and the gaping slice in his arm began to seal. Before he finished repeating the charm, his arm was intact. “What language possesses such magic?” Hugh whispered.

“When you are not bound to the earth, you are not bound to its rules,” Jérôme said. “Bring the bowl to him.”

Capet did as he was told. The blood had warmed the bowl so that it nearly burned his hands through their gloves. He moved quickly, sloshing the contents over the edge. When Jérôme’s blood

touched the floor, it steamed as though it were boiling, sending small clouds of rancid vapor up into Capet's face.

"Give it to me," Jérôme said. "You hold him up." Again, Capet did as he was told. The priest held the bowl to Jean-Gabriel's lips, pursed them with his hand, and poured the burning blood into the pale-lipped mouth. Hugh felt something rise in his stomach and clamped his throat shut to keep it down.

"No matter what happens," Jérôme said, "keep him inside the circle."

"What is happening?" Capet asked. But there was no time for an answer. Jean-Gabriel's outstretched arm began to jerk. It flailed as though there were something inside it he wanted to be rid of. Soon his whole body followed suit, jerking spasmodically beyond his control. Hugh held the tormented frame of his brother's body and reached for his legs when they kicked out wildly, pulling them back within the protective flames.

The spasms grew stronger, slamming Jean-Gabriel's arms and legs against the stone floor hard enough to break the bones inside them. His chest rose up off the floor and he gasped for breath, eyes wide open and staring at the one person who should have helped him. Hugh locked his arms in place, trying to hold Jean-Gabriel's body together. He pressed his head against his brother's chest, listening to the heartbeat that trilled like a hummingbird's wings.

When there were no more bones to break, Jean-Gabriel's body slumped against Hugh's. The flushed, wine-soaked color had fled his skin, leaving him pale as tallow. "You must remove him from here now," Jérôme said. "He is changing. Consecrated ground will be death for him."

Hugh lurched forward and pulled his brother up, grasping him beneath the shoulders. Blood stained Jean-Gabriel's clothes, neck, lips, and chin. His skin was cold to the touch and already Hugh could see the points of sharp teeth growing over his lips. "How is it," he asked, "that you and she can be on consecrated ground, but I must remove him?"

Jérôme snuffed out the candles and put them in his sack. "You asked for a crown, *dux Francorum*, not infinite knowledge. He will live as long as your bloodline holds the throne. Should it expire, so will he."

"This is not what I intended for him," Hugh protested as he balanced his brother's weight in his arms.

"But it is what you intended for yourself. The crown is yours, Your Majesty." With one last look at the silent priory, Jérôme and Geneviève slipped out of the church and into the darkness beyond. Left alone with a dead king and a dying brother, Capet let his head fall to his chest. "What have I done?" he whispered, feeling the cold from his brother's body seep through his cloak and into his bones.

A Vampire in Versailles

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks for reading! I hope you're excited to find out what happens next to Jean-Gabriel and Marguerite. Here's where you can buy the book to find out what happens next:

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The memory of his lips on her skin unleashed a flood of goosebumps. She closed her eyes and felt them spread, a delicious shiver shaking her to the core. It seemed everything about Jean-Gabriel made her body come to life.

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Jenni Wiltz writes fiction and creative nonfiction. She's won national writing awards for romantic suspense and creative nonfiction. Her short fiction has been published in literary journals including *Gargoyle* and the *Portland Review*, as well as several small-press anthologies. When she's not writing, she enjoys sewing, running, and genealogical research. She lives in Pilot Hill, California.

SOCIAL

I'm shy and anti-social in real life, but pretty darn social online.

