

PROLOGUE

Maison de Fantasie at last slept. At 12:10 am, Madame Claudine turned out the final light of her shop. She smoothed a wrinkle from a pink silk teddy in a display nearby, then, with a satisfied smile, gave a final look around the feminine sensual boutique. Yes, all was well. As was her custom when she left, she kissed the tips of her fingers and touched the discreet silver lettering on the door. “Bless you.”

Another woman pleased, another fantasy met. The magic of Maison du Fantasie had been especially charmed tonight.

“Madame Claudine?” A hesitant voice, feminine and cultured, stopped her before she could finish locking up.

Madame Claudine, wearing her poise like a mantle, pivoted slowly, searching the French Quarter night for the source of the voice. A woman emerged from the shadows.

Forties, Madame guessed shrewdly, her years of experience in assessing women immediately cataloguing the stranger. Well kept and coifed, pampered. That silk suit had set someone back at least a thousand dollars. “Yes, I’m Madame Claudine,” she answered.

Silently the woman held out a business card. The card was scarlet, embossed with silver lettering. It was a card Madame knew well.

“The invitation is for midnight on a Friday,” Madame said gently, not taking the card. “We have passed that between time. You may come back in a week.”

The woman shook her head. “I’m not coming here for a fantasy. I’m returning the card.”

“Are you sure?” Sorrow for the woman washed into Madame Claudine. There were always a few who could not bring themselves to surrender, to risk, to dare. Each one made her sad for the lost chance at a vibrant life, for a freedom and daring the woman would never know without using the card.

“A woman who cared very deeply for you gave you that card. A woman who believed you needed it.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve kept it for twenty years.” Her words tumbled faster. “I simply can’t. I have a good life. A peaceful and ordered life. I like it. My husband is a good man, but he wouldn’t understand. My fantasy . . .” She paused to inhale. “I don’t want to destroy all I have by discovering I want something else.” She thrust the card toward Madame Claudine. “Take it. I don’t want temptation any more.”

“As long as you realize that you are giving up any chance of changing your mind later. You will never receive another invitation.” At the woman’s firm nod, Madame Claudine took the card, the sorrow now hard knot. “You may pass it on , you know. Is there no one you would like to give the card to instead?”

“I know, and no.” The woman turned to go, paused, then spun back. “I had a baby when I was fifteen. A girl I named Emily. I gave her up for adoption.”

“You want to give the card to your daughter?”

“I don’t know where she is. But, Emily would be twenty-five now. Give it to someone like her. Someone with the whole world ahead of her, if she’ll only take the chance.” With that, the woman disappeared back into the sultry New Orleans night.

Heavy-hearted, Madame Claudine eyed the card in her hand. So, the chain would take a different turn now. “A new line awaits,” she said aloud and with and with a false bravado, then waited, watching and listening.

Perhaps it was too late. Perhaps the magic was dimming. Perhaps the line would end here.

The fruity scent of bergamot, her favorite incense, still lingered in the shop. Fingers of moonlight reached through the transom above the door, highlighting the playful sexual toys and velvets and crystal perfume bottles around the store. The moonlight glinted against the metal of finger cymbals and she took a step toward them, but stopped when the moonlight disappeared.

Faint voices, intoning a musical chant, sounded at the edge of her hearing and the beam of moonlight shone upon a rack of books.

A book! It was a good omen. She stepped closer, until she could see which book was chosen.

She slid the leather-bound book from the shelf. “Ah, excellent,” she breathed with a sense of renewed hope as she flipped through the book of very erotic, very mysterious poetry. She slipped the card between the pages of the book, then replaced it upon the shelf. She kissed the tips of her fingers, touched the book’s spine. “Bless you.”

Then, she looked in the expanse of the shop and spoke to the magic that surrounded her. “The line will begin anew.”

And this time, she meant every word of it deep in her soul.