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# Nicole's Revenge

Lisette Allen

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## About the Author

Nicole lay on her bed in the darkness. From below she was sure she could hear muffled cries - the tantalising sound of a woman reaching her climax. She pressed her hands over her ears, but her cheeks burned and her mind was filled with tormenting pictures of the woman in the lewd leather harness, licking her lips as she gazed at Jacques. Nicole was ready to drive the ivory phallus deep within her, longing to feel its caress, but she would tease herself for just a moment longer . . .

**By the same author:**

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The Amulet

Ace of Hearts

Risky Business

# **NICOLE'S REVENGE**

Lisette Allen



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Black Lace books contain sexual fantasies.  
In real life, always practise safe sex.

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*It is September, in the year 1792, and France is in the throes of violent revolution. The king is a prisoner in his own capital, and the country is run by the National Assembly which bends to the rule of the bloodthirsty Paris mob. The guillotine is in regular use, and the powerful armies of Austria and Prussia threaten the French borders. Foreign ambassadors have been swiftly withdrawn by their governments, and those aristocrats who have not already fled Paris are either imprisoned or deep in hiding; for flight from the city is impossible now that the gates of Paris are shut tightly on the enemies of the people . . .*

## Chapter One

**A**s dusk fell across the city the rain stopped at last, leaving the streets chilly and damp. The lamplighter had done his work, and at uneven intervals the overhead lanterns swung dimly on their ropes, casting a lurid glow over the shabby façades of the tall, overhanging tenements that leaned in on the narrow alleyways.

The cobbled paths of the Faubourg St Marcel were dirtier than ever, since no-one now was paid to clean them. After the rain of the afternoon, a dirty rivulet of water trickled down the gutter in the middle of the road, sluggishly taking a pile of rubbish with it. There was a stale smell of wine and tobacco and city dirt upon the air, and people were strangely subdued as they sat out around their doorsteps, muttering in low voices, casting anxious glances down the street.

Perhaps their silence had something to do with the ominous murmuring noise in the distance. More than a murmur, it was like an echoing rumble of thunder, menacing, chilling to the blood. The Paris mob was out on the streets tonight.

A sudden commotion from the wine shop down the road caused everybody's head to turn. Always a popular gathering place, citizen Gaspard's wine shop was this evening almost surrounded by a crowd of roughly dressed men in wooden *sabots* and red woollen caps stuck with tricoloured cockades; the *fédérés*, conscript soldiers from the provinces. Some sat on upturned wine barrels, leaning forward eagerly; others, local men, peered over their shoulders, calling out, shouting encouragement, their

tankards of rough wine held high. The reason for their amusement was soon evident.

Two of them were holding a female prisoner, an *aristo* to judge by her clothes, and were laughing openly at her distress. They'd caught her trying to scuttle off home with a loaf of stale bread, under cover of darkness; the bread lay in the gutter, and she cursed them openly. Slender and tawny-haired, her amber eyes ablaze, the girl struggled fiercely in their grasp, even though she must have known that escape was hopeless. Her gown, with its crumpled silk skirts and worn lace fichu, was a sad relic of past finery; her hair had been pinned up, but now it cascaded round her shoulders, and she looked at her captors with all the contempt in the world.

Meanwhile more and more men were clustering eagerly, anxious for sport, till she was completely surrounded. One man, slouching back against the wall, took his blackened pipe from his mouth and grinned at his companion.

'Our fine neighbourhood tribunal has done well tonight, citizen. Looks like we've caught ourselves a little *aristo*, slinking out under cover of dark.'

The other man chuckled, pushing back his filthy red cap from his low forehead. His eyes were alight with lewd excitement. 'Not an *aristo*, Jean; but the leavings of one! This fine lady was a dancer at the Opera. Regard her well, my friend, look at her face, her figure, her lovely legs. No wonder the comte de Polignac chose her for his own!' He leaned forward through the ring of onlookers and tugged at her skirts, revealing one shapely, slender leg up to the thigh; a groan of appreciation went up from the onlookers, and she kicked out viciously, until someone twisted her arm behind her back, and she shut her eyes tightly against the pain.

'The comte is in prison?' asked Jean, unable to take his eyes from this stunning beauty that the dark alleyways of St Marcel had so unexpectedly thrown up for their delectation.

'*Merde*, no!' The other man spat into the gutter and swigged more wine. 'The vile traitor got away to Austria, they say. But he's left his little *poule* behind, for our pleasure! I remember seeing her riding in his carriage; her name is Nicole, Nicole Chabrier. See how she dances now!' And, stepping forwards once more, he reached out his tobacco-stained hand to twist his fingers in the captive girl's glorious, tawny-chestnut hair that gleamed so enticingly in the glow of the street lamp. She whirled round, in spite of the strong arms that imprisoned her, those wonderful amber eyes spitting scorn.

'Take your hands off me, you vile, drunken scum! Go and drown yourself in your cheap wine - that's all you're good for!'

Someone clicked softly, dangerously between his teeth. '*Aristo*,' he murmured. 'Death to all aristocrats.'

The girl caught her breath. No-one guessed how desperately she was fighting down her fear.

'You dare to call me an aristocrat?' she said in a low, vehement voice. 'When my family slaved for generations in the Normandy fields? Working and dying for the great nobles, who never even knew they existed? I'll swear, you *cochon*, that each one of my family worked harder in one day than you've ever worked in your life!'

'But you found easy pickings when you came to Paris, eh?' sneered another, coarse-faced man. He hitched his breeches higher, openly fondling himself beneath the coarse homespun fabric as he did so. 'I'll bet that warming de Polignac's luxurious bed was a lot easier than labouring in the fields! You miss the comte, do you, wench?'

The girl stopped struggling then, and, tossing back her beautiful hair, said, very steadily, 'If Gerard de Polignac came back tomorrow, I'd have great pleasure in throwing him into prison myself.'

There was a sudden silence, almost of disbelief, as if the ragged onlookers couldn't take in what she'd just said.

Some of the men drew back slightly, giving her space, and it was then that she saw him.

In the pool of darkness well beyond the streetlamp's dim glow, a dark-haired man leaned almost nonchalantly against the grimy wall of the tenement, his arms folded across his chest. He was tall, taller than the poor *sans-culottes* who inhabited this warren of alleys and courtyards, and almost respectably dressed, in a dark, sombre coat and high, mud-spattered leather boots. He wore no hat, even though it had been raining; and his long black hair was tied back at the nape of his neck. She could see little of his face, because it was in shadow; but what she did see made her shiver suddenly.

Someone sitting on an upturned winebarrel broke the silence contemptuously. 'What shall we do with her, *mes amis*? Throw her into the Conciergerie with the rest of the *aristos* and the poor, quaking priests?' He took a long swig at his beaker of rough red wine. The wine shop owner was doing good business, and many of the men were openly drunk.

Another called out, 'Later! But first, fellow citizens, let's have some fun! She claims she was a ballet-girl at the Opera. Well, then, let's make her dance!'

Someone, a *fédéré* in a short red jacket, chuckled, 'String her up from the lamp-post. She'll dance as well as she's ever done in her life, I vow! Let's see for ourselves what de Polignac's *poule* can do.'

The tawny-haired girl Nicole twisted violently in her captors' arms to see the soldier who spoke, and spat at him, full in the face.

'*Morbleu!*' The ruffian thus anointed leaped towards her and grabbed her by the shoulders, hurting her. Somehow she wrenched herself free again and clawed at his face, fighting like a wildcat, so that there were murmurs of amused admiration from the avidly watching men. There

was something about her that forced their respect, because she was so wild, so beautiful, so full of spirit.

Almost reluctantly, four of them stepped forward, brawny arms braced, to pull her off their suffering soldier comrade.

Then, they stopped. A sound echoed through the still night air which they'd all missed, engrossed as they were with their captive; no-one had heard it approach except the man who still stood unseen and alert in the shadows. A drumbeat, getting louder, rhythmic and menacing; and along with the drum, the sound of a hundred pairs of feet dancing to its beat, the sound of a hundred ribald voices raised in the coarse words of a song. Then the street was suddenly filled with the tide of people, more women than men; a flood of red caps and tricolours and ragged clothes; whirling, singing, stamping, infecting all in their path with the wild fury of the Carmagnole.

It was the Paris mob in full flow, filling the street, engulfing the crowd of men outside the wine shop so they had no identity, but were just part of this seething mass of humanity, dancing hand in hand with the women, posturing, clapping, baying for blood. The girl Nicole, stumbling and sobbing vainly to get away from those stamping feet, suddenly felt strong arms seizing her, pulling her back into the darkness away from the heavy wooden *sabots* of the prancing women. Looking up into the dark, shadowy face of the man she had seen watching her from the darkness, she struggled anew.

'Let me go, damn you!'

But this man was wide-shouldered and strong, more formidable by far than those half-starved peasants who'd held her earlier, and her struggles were in vain. She shivered visibly as she heard his cool, cultured voice saying softly in her ear, 'You'd rather be out there dancing with them, my Nicole?'

She sagged back against his chest, sickened, and he held her by the shoulders as she gazed trembling at the lurid

scene that unfolded before her eyes.

The mob had parted to make room for some young, gaudily-clad women who were carrying stuffed straw effigies of the king and queen. They were shrieking with laughter, thrusting the two figures against one another in a parody of copulation; a young, striking looking woman called out, 'No, that's no good! Didn't you know our Marie-Antoinette prefers the tender embrace of her own kind?' Grinning, she pulled a young female friend towards her and they embraced openly; the crowd shouted encouragement, until a drunken man leaped forward and pushed himself between them shouting, 'You forget her Swedish lover! Our queen was eager enough for him, wasn't she?' And he grabbed the first woman to himself, ripping at her gown and bending his head to savour her exposed breasts; the woman leaned back in his arms, sighing with pleasure, and before Nicole's horrified eyes the man loosened his trousers and began to copulate with her vigorously, there in the street.

She slumped back in her captor's arms, glad of his support, sickened by the sight. And yet, somehow, the heat of their open lust was starting to course through her own blood, making her limbs strange and melting. Even though she was repelled by the degrading sights she saw, she couldn't drag her eyes away.

They were raiding the wine shop now. The poor owner, Gaspard, after protesting feebly, had turned tail and fled before the mob's jeers; men were rolling out barrels of wine and brandy, and smashing them open until the wine ran like blood along the cobbles. Still the drum beat, still they danced on, swooping and kicking in glee, spinning in pairs and dropping to the ground, drunk with lust. A girl stood on an upturned wine cask, posturing in a strange, erotic dance of her own; a man pulled her to the ground, and kissed her hungrily. Those who didn't have beakers were bending down to lick up the wine as it ran down the gutters; a woman on all fours, lapping at the wine as it gushed from a hole in the

side of a barrel, was seized avidly by a soldier, who lifted up her skirts and slid into her from behind as she moaned her delight.

Nicole trembled in the stranger's arms, unable to tear her eyes away from this dark, primitive celebration, feeling excitement as well as fear at the sight of these vivid, earthy people, revelling in their sensuality, without fear or shame. Oh, what had driven them to this?

People like Gerard de Polignac, she thought bitterly, and all the other aristocrats who had for generations crushed people like them under their red-heeled shoes as if they were the scum of the earth. That was who!

For these poor people, it was a celebration of new-found freedom, of life, of love. And she found it wildly erotic. The beat of the drum, faster now, matched her own fluttering pulse; she felt the heat churning in her stomach, the melting at her loins as she watched the ecstatic coupling of a man and woman only a few yards away. She felt her nipples tingling and tightening, and bit on her lip to fight down the heated sensations that threatened to overwhelm her. The man was behind her, firm and strong; his hands lightly caressed her almost bare shoulders, and she leaned weakly back against him, feeling the hard, sinewy strength of his body, breathing in the cool male scent of him. His hands slipped to encircle her narrow waist, and rose, so slowly that she thought she was imagining it, until she felt the soft caress of his palms against her stiffened nipples beneath the lace of her fichu. She shut her eyes, feeling a sudden wild surge of passion. His loins were hard against her hips. Oh, if only she could have this man now, this mysterious stranger! If only he would draw her down into the shadows and make love to her with wild abandon, touching her with those long, lean fingers that were circling her breasts and driving her almost to the dizzy edge of rapture! Already, her breathing was short and laboured with the approach of ecstasy. She shut her eyes to avoid the sight of the mob, but

there was no shutting out the fierce sensations of pleasure that were arrowing down to her loins from the sensitive buds of her engorged breasts. She could feel his lips against her hair, feel his warm breath on her cheek . . .

Then a harsh, drunken voice called out, 'Hey! We'd almost forgotten de Polignac's whore! Where is she?'

Someone else shouted, 'Yes, let's have de Polignac's wench! Let the noble citizens of Paris see her naked! If she was good enough for him she's good enough for us, eh, *mes amis?*'

Nicole felt the fear ricochet through her heated body. She whirled desperately to look up into the man's face. She saw him then properly, by the light of the swaying lamp above them; saw that he was grim and harsh-featured, with narrowed eyes that were almost black. Gripping her by the wrist none too gently, he grated, 'This way. I have a *fiacre* waiting.'

And before she had time to draw breath, he was pulling her away from the baying mob, dragging her through the maze of courtyards and stinking alleys, until at last they reached the Rue Mouffetarde and he bundled her into a small carriage. Here, unbelievably, all was quiet. Nicole, furious with herself because she was unable to conceal the fact that she was openly trembling, turned defiantly to face him. 'Quite an adventure, monsieur! But now, I would be very much obliged if you would take me home!'

Calmly he signalled to the silent, sombrely-dressed coachman to move off, and said, 'Home? You have no home now, Nicole Chabrier. The mob will scent you out. They'll hunt you down relentlessly, because they don't like it when their prey escapes from under their noses.'

She gripped her hands in her lap. 'Then I'll leave Paris! Stop this carriage and let me out this minute!'

'I assume you've no papers. You'd never get past the barriers.'

She slumped back against the seat, knowing he was right.

He went on remorselessly, 'And what possessed you to be out on the streets on a night like this? In those clothes?' He gestured almost contemptuously at her shabby finery.

She retaliated furiously: 'I have no other clothes, monsieur! And I was looking for food; I haven't eaten properly in days. What was I supposed to do? Starve?'

He shrugged. 'It would be nothing new in Paris these days.'

There was a chilling silence. She gazed, anguished, into his cold, impassive face. He had a lean, almost aristocratic look about him, with a strong jaw and a hawk-like, high-bridged nose, every feature accentuated by the thick, glossy black hair that was drawn back from his wide forehead. His mouth was wide and thin, cruelly sensual; she remembered how much she had wanted him, as he silently fondled her in his arms, and felt faint. He was only a few years older than her, not yet thirty, she would guess; and yet there was a cool self-possession about him that spoke of a world of experience, of things that she could only begin to imagine.

'You obviously despise me,' Nicole said in a low voice. 'Why did you trouble to rescue me?'

He paused a moment, smoothing an imaginary speck of dust from his dark, close-fitting breeches. Then he said, 'You meant what you said, back there? About giving de Polignac up to the people if he should ever dare to return?'

'Oh, yes,' Nicole said bitterly. 'I meant it. I would turn him in, and any aristocratic friend of his, with the greatest pleasure!'

'Then I think, Nicole Chabrier, that I might be able to give you the chance for revenge.' He raised his hand to silence her as she gasped aloud. 'It might take some time, and I can't make promises. But I think somehow that you're just the kind of woman I'm looking for.'

She gazed at him, astounded at this stranger's arrogance. Who did he think he was? Judging by his sombre but elegant

clothes, he was some provincial *bourgeois*, a lawyer perhaps, elected as a deputy to the National Assembly. He must be from the south, from Provence, because his skin looked brown from the sun . . .

Her mind whirled inconsequentially. She felt trapped by this strangely assured, calm, frightening man. Trapped, and yet deeply aroused. She was still hot from the feel of his hard body pressed close to hers, from the insolently casual way he had caressed her breasts. She glared at him defiantly, but inside she knew it was a hopeless defiance. He was right; she couldn't go home again to her poor lodgings in St Victor. She was marked down now, as Gerard de Polignac's *poule*. They would hunt her down with ruthless efficiency, the bloodthirsty Paris mob; cut her to pieces.

But she wouldn't let him know her fear. Tossing back her long tawny hair, she said contemptuously, 'I suppose you've picked me up for your own amusement, have you? Well, you can think again, monsieur! Because believe me, I'm not about to make the same mistake as I made with Gerard de Polignac, especially not with some petty provincial lawyer!'

He smiled. 'I picked you up because I admired your courage. Nothing more, Nicole. Believe me, I have no need to entice women into my bed.'

She swallowed hard. She believed him. He would be fighting them off, this one. But she wasn't going to flatter his vanity. 'You have a high opinion of yourself, don't you?'

'Forgive me, citizeness Nicole.' His dark eyes glinted wickedly. 'But I was rather under the impression that it was *you* who wanted, shall we say, something more, only a few moments ago . . .'

His voice trailed away in wicked implication. He was almost openly laughing; she could see the glint of his evenly-spaced white teeth against his sun-darkened skin. He knew, then! This devil of a man; he knew that she'd pressed herself willingly against his hard body, knew that she'd been

on the brink as he caressed her breasts so subtly while they watched that bestial crowd!

Nicole smiled at him very sweetly. 'Don't flatter yourself, my provincial *bourgeois!*' The *fiacre* was slowing down as they approached the river; springing to her feet, she reached for the door and flung it open, ready to jump.

She stopped, the blood draining from her face as she heard a terrible, curdling scream in the distance. Slowly it died away. Then, hurtling down the street towards them, was a gang of men, bearing flaming torches aloft, shouting and yelling. Their shirts were red with blood.

The man pulled her roughly back inside the carriage and slammed the door shut as the coachman swung aside into the Rue St Jacques. 'They're murdering the prisoners,' he said grimly. 'Turn your face to me, and whatever you do, don't look out again. There's nothing we can do; we'll be out of their way in a moment. That's it, Nicole. Look into my eyes, and try not to listen to them.'

She felt sick as the whirling mob surrounded them. She tried desperately to do as he said, to look into his calm, strong face, not to listen. They were slowed down now, by the people outside; a rough, brutish face leered in through the window, and she stifled a scream. Someone wrenched open the door, shouting obscenities; the man reached across quietly to take her hand, and faced the intruder.

The rough peasant who'd flung open the door gaped openly. Then, to Nicole's utter astonishment, he said, 'Citizen Jacques. It's you. A thousand apologies!' And, closing the door firmly, she heard his voice commanding the mob to let the *fiacre* through.

Nicole couldn't believe it. Who was her rescuer? How did that awful man know him? Why did he have the power to drive quietly through the streets of Paris, on a night like this? They had called him Jacques, and that was all she knew about this man who held her life in the palm of his hand.

Beyond questions, almost beyond weariness, she slumped back in her seat as the coachman wheeled the hired carriage through the darkened, deserted streets of Paris into the St Germain des Prés *quartier*. Empty, boarded-up churches stood like grim relics of a past age at every street corner. This was the quarter, Nicole knew, that used to be favoured by the great noblemen of Paris. Now, their mansions stood shuttered and dark on either side of the spacious streets and squares. Their owners had fled long ago – hunted *aristos* like Gerard, comte de Polignac. Or, if they were still within the walls of Paris, they had more sense than to live in these great, ostentatious mansions, a symbol of their decadent power.

Her eyes drifted shut, but suddenly she sprang up in her seat, because the man was leaning over her, with a piece of soft black velvet in his hands. And as she gazed up at him, still dazed, he began to gently bind it around her eyes. ‘One of my rules,’ he said calmly.

Nicole struggled, trying to push away the frightening, engulfing darkness. ‘No!’

‘Yes.’ For a moment he gripped her hands as she fought, and she was terrified by the steely strength of him. ‘I’m afraid so, Nicole. For your own safety, you see, as well as mine.’

‘No,’ she repeated numbly, ‘no . . .’

‘Do I have to tie you up as well?’

The threat was like a silken blade held to her throat. Faint with fear, she submitted, and all was darkness until she realised that the carriage had stopped.

With almost tender hands, the man removed the blindfold and she blinked dazedly, realising that the carriage had pulled to a halt before a small side gate set in a high, shadowy stone wall. The man called Jacques was already climbing out, dismissing the carriage quietly; he bowed Nicole through the open gateway as if she were some great lady; except that his mouth was twisting crookedly, as if in

some secret amusement. The moon shone fitfully through the lowering clouds and Nicole, gazing around her, gasped in astonishment at what its feeble light revealed.

Even in this near-darkness, she could see that the high wall concealed the secret of a truly palatial residence; the imposing town home of a marquis, perhaps, or even a duke! The gardens that surrounded it were almost choked with flowers; the air was heady with the aromatic scents of late summer as full-blown roses and faded lavender bushes sprawled across the overgrown gravel paths.

And the mansion itself had the strange, dreamlike quality of belonging to another age, a long-vanished era of peace and tranquillity, with its tall, imposing facade and its high, shuttered windows that gazed blankly down on the overgrown gardens. In front of the house was a wide gravelled courtyard, overgrown now with weeds; there was a graceful flight of stone steps leading up to the great main door. A colonnade to the side of the main building revealed extensive standing for the former owner's carriages; some of them stood there still, their paintwork sadly worn and dull. There would be no privately-owned horses now to draw them; they would have been commandeered months ago by the Insurrectionary Commune, for the army.

Suddenly Nicole caught her breath, because she thought she'd seen a face, a pretty, youthful girl's face surrounded by a cloud of dark, curly hair, peeping out of the shadows at the side of the house. She started forward, but almost instantly the face was gone. Jacques' hand was at her arm, gripping her. 'What is it? What did you see?'

'Nothing.' She laughed weakly at herself. 'Nothing at all. Unless it was a ghost.'

He led her slowly towards the steps. Yes, perhaps it was a ghost; the daughter of the great nobleman who had once lived here, and filled this fine mansion with his family and servants. A sense of unbearable sadness swept over her,

that such a beautiful place should be so abandoned and neglected.

Jacques silently took her arm to lead her up the wide, moonlit steps; and suddenly Nicole, almost overwhelmed by it all, shook him off blindly. 'Is this some kind of joke, citizen Jacques?' she whispered. 'To bring me to the mansion of a great lord?'

'On the contrary,' he replied levelly. 'This is perhaps one of the safest places to be tonight. You would rather be out there, with the mob, Nicole?'

She was silent; there was no answer to that. With yet another key, he opened those big front doors. They creaked back on their hinges, opening into utter darkness; there was a smell of dust, and cobwebs, and faded, long-ago finery.

Jacques withdrew a flint and steel from his pocket, and carefully lit some half-burned wax candles in a silver candelabra. They flared up with a startling brightness, and Nicole gasped.

They were in a beautiful, spacious hallway, lined with faded silk hangings and ornate gilt mirrors, relics of a previous age of luxury. Doors led off enticingly; and at the far end a wide, graceful staircase curved extravagantly up to the higher floors. Despite the dust and the cobwebs, Nicole's eyes lit up in wonder. 'Oh, it's beautiful!'

He had been watching for her reaction; he smiled approval. 'I thought you would be pleased with it,' he said softly. 'This house has certain interesting secrets. You see, its former inhabitants were very fond of pleasure.'

Nicole stared blankly up at him. 'You mean dancing? And food?'

He smiled enigmatically. 'Not quite. But I may have a chance to explain later. You will forgive me, Nicole, if I leave you alone in the house? Just for an hour, no more. I have a few errands.'

'What errands?' She was suddenly frightened at the thought of being on her own, remembering the Paris mob

out there on the streets, hearing again those terrible screams.

'Some people I have to see, including some other visitors I'm expecting. And then there is the small matter of supplies; food, for you and I.'

'You'll find nothing at this hour!'

He grinned crookedly. 'My stomach sincerely hopes you are wrong.' And he moved towards the door.

'You'll leave me here, all on my own?' A note of hysterical desperation was starting to creep into Nicole's voice; she could hear it, and despised herself for it. She fought her fear down frantically, and added, in a lower voice, 'How do I know you'll come back?'

His dark eyes gleamed as his hand reached for the door-handle. 'You mean you *want* me to come back, Nicole?'

'I'd be perfectly happy if I never set eyes on you again!' she hissed at him, her hands clenched at her sides. 'Arrogant provincial upstart!'

He watched her assessingly. 'I'll come back all right, don't worry. Here, if you're anxious, have this.' He reached into his capacious pocket and drew out a gleaming, dangerous-looking pistol. 'You know how to use it?'

She caught her breath, and reached out tentatively. It was cold and heavy as she took it in her hand. 'Of course I do!'

'Good. Then I'll be back soon.'

And he was gone, out into the darkness. The doors closed heavily behind him, and Nicole felt suddenly bereft. Then she started to laugh, rather shakily. Here she was, all alone in this great, forlorn mansion, with only a cold pistol for company! Back at her miserable lodgings in St Victor, the landlady would be wondering where she had gone, but old Madame Rimaud wouldn't waste any sleep over her missing tenant. Too many people went missing in Paris these days.

Citizen Jacques - who *was* he? She shivered when she remembered the way he looked at her; half-assessing, half-amused. He was strong and dangerous, a real man indeed,

not like the painted and powdered fops who used to inhabit Versailles. Her skin felt heated when she thought of him; she suddenly imagined his lean, muscular body, dark from the Provençal sun, and a tremor ran through her. She remembered his mouth, wide and wickedly sensual. His kiss, she knew, would be devastating; and as for the rest of him . . . She tingled deliciously.

Fool, she told herself bitterly. Little fool! Men were never what they seemed, nor gave what they promised. Remember Gerard.

Her mysterious citizen Jacques had saved her from the mob. What she must do now was play along with his crazy schemes, use his mysterious power over the rabble, and then get the hell out of Paris. But what exactly had he said? *'I think, Nicole Chabrier, that I might be able to give you the chance for revenge.'*

To get her revenge on people like Gerard and his mincing friends, she would risk anything. Anything at all that the mysterious citizen Jacques might suggest.

Slipping the heavy pistol into the deep pocket within the folds of her skirt, she picked up a lighted candle, and started to explore.

Beyond the hallway was the great *salon*. As she entered it, she caught her breath in wonder. It was beautiful, high-ceilinged and spacious, with heavy chandeliers and ornate carvings and yet more mirrors reflecting its aged splendour. The full-length, high-arched windows were shuttered, though, and a thick layer of dust coated every surface of the beautiful gilded furniture. A few years ago, thought Nicole sadly, this *salon* would have been filled with laughing, glittering people, dancing and talking inconsequentially. Now, those long-gone people were spirited away, to England or Austria. Or they might be dying, out on the streets or in the prisons, at this very minute.

She remembered the men running down the street, their shirtsleeves stained in blood, and the horror of it all shook

her anew. France. Oh, France, she thought sadly. What has happened to you?

Four years ago, Nicole, aged nineteen, had left her mean little Normandy village for Paris, full of ambitions and dreams. Not for her some peasant clod of a husband, and a lifelong struggle for existence. She was going to be a great actress and dancer, was going to marry a great lord! And now, here she was, homeless, friendless, utterly dependent on the dark, mysterious man she knew only as Jacques. Again, she felt the flicker of warning, was aware of a strong impulse to flee before he got back. But she fought it down, because to attempt to pass through any of the barriers was absolute madness, especially without papers. The National Guard would be on particular lookout tonight for any Royalists, and they might even have special orders to look out for de Polignac's woman.

Besides, she wanted her revenge . . .

Slowly, aimlessly, she wandered on, finding a shallow flight of steps that led down to the big, stone-flagged kitchens, and all of a sudden she realised how voraciously hungry she was. The man had said he'd bring food; she hoped he wasn't lying, because the thought of some good, crusty bread and creamy yellow cheese made her mouth water. She hadn't eaten since yesterday, and that had just been a dish of vile bean stew in a backstreet café. She was absolutely ravenous.

Some bottles of red wine lay in a dark recess; she pulled one out, causing the dust to fly. Suddenly realising that she was thirsty too, she found a knife and levered the cork out carefully then drank deeply of the rich, comforting liquid. She felt herself come to life again as the wine heated her, remembered who she was; Nicole Chabrier, talented actress of the *Comédie Française*, ballet-dancer at the Opera! She walked, humming, out of the kitchens and swept up the great curved staircase, the bottle in one hand, candle in the other. She imagined she was a great lady, sweeping up the

steps in all her jewels and finery; she could almost hear the rustle of the silk, smell the rich perfume, hear the whispers, the excitement as people watched her graceful ascent.

She smiled to herself, wandering almost happily along the vast gallery that linked the upstairs chambers, peeping into room after room.

Then, she found the bedroom that must have belonged to the great lady of the house. It was furnished with a great, high bed with a richly embroidered canopy; the walls were hung with silk, and the cabinets and cupboards were of exquisite design, inlaid with laquered porcelain. There was a high, mirrored *bureau de toilette*, on which the abandoned silver brushes and scent bottles still sat. Almost breathless with excitement, like a child in a fairy-tale, Nicole put her candle carefully onto a small gilded table in the corner and sipped slowly at her wine, once more feeling its warmth race through her.

This was wonderful, all this finery, and all hers, even if only for one night! In a sudden outburst of exuberant delight, she began to fling open drawers and cupboards, pulling out gowns, fichus, lace shawls by the handful. And then, in a chest by the bed, she found the undergarments, folded so delicately away: the silk chemises, stockings, bodices; all the wonderful clothes that were fit to be worn next to a fine lady's white, delicate skin!

She lifted them out of the drawer almost reverently, placing them against her cheek, marvelling that such luxury still existed in this city where no-one dared wear anything except homespun or coarse cotton, for fear of drawing attention to themselves. She delved deeper into the drawers, finding faded nosegays of lavender, a packet of letters wrapped up in ribbon, and - what was this? A large, intricately carved walnut box, placed right at the back of the drawer . . .

She sipped some more wine thoughtfully, scarcely aware of its heady potency. Then, catching her breath in strange

excitement, she lifted the lid of the box. It was beautifully lined, with padded pink silk; and inside it, ranged in meticulous order, were half a dozen smooth, cylindrical ivory implements, of varying lengths and thicknesses, all lying in pristine condition in their silk cushions.

Nicole's eyes widened; then she laughed aloud to herself. Of course, she'd seen objects like these before, because some of her friends, dancers at the Opera, had shown them to her when she had not long been in Paris. They'd laughed at her rustic innocence, encouraging her to admire their fine phallic shape, telling her in whispered giggles and innuendos how they could be used to imitate the loving of a man. But the thought of the refined, courtly inhabitant of this palatial room, a duchess, perhaps, coarsely pushing an ivory penis up between her fine legs, was just incredible!

She frowned. What had Jacques said to her, just before he left? *'They were fond of their pleasures, Nicole. You'll see.'*

She suddenly realised, then, that her own secret parts were moist and pulsing as she fingered the smooth, thick ivory of the biggest of the implements. Then, she caught sight of herself in one of the tall gilt mirrors that adorned the walls, and saw that her cheeks were lightly flushed with the wine; her lips were full and tremulous, and her thick-lashed amber eyes were dark with arousal. She shook back her long tawny hair from her face; it cascaded loosely down her back, making her look wild and wanton; a *poule* indeed.

She realised, then, that her dress, the last remnants of the finery that Gerard had bought her, was sadly worn, and hideously muddy from where those hateful men had grappled with her outside the winebar.

Slowly, her eyes shining with suppressed excitement, she started to unlace her bodice and chemise, and let it all slip to the floor. Then she looked at herself again.

In the soft candlelight, her skin was smooth and golden. She'd lost weight in the last few months because food was not plentiful in Paris, especially for a lone girl who'd lost her