



# Le Chevalier

Mary Jean Adams

**“Do you love all of these women?”** Alex asked. She didn’t care for the wistful tone in her voice, nor for the tears she had to blink back.

It took a moment for Mont Trignon to respond. “I can assure you I love each and every one of them, and they love me. Does that surprise you?” he said, with a gentleness more characteristic of the man she had yet to know much about.

“No, actually, it doesn’t.” As his gaze searched her face, she had no desire to speak anything but the truth. “It just surprises me that you would court so many women at once.”

A wicked grin touched his lips. “Oh, I am not courting them.”

Alex tried to back away when he took another step forward, but with her backside already up against the wall, she had nowhere to go.

“No, of course not,” she said, glad the darkness of the night covered the heat rising in her cheeks. “I understand that marriage is not always the goal.”

“It is not?” He held his body so close that Alex could feel the heat emanating from him even through her cloak.

“No, it isn’t,” she whispered, her gaze settling on his lips.

“Then what is the goal, ma bichette?” Moonlight caught his hazel eyes, turning them to burnished gold.

She could not voice aloud the response the intensity of his gaze brought to mind.

“Passion.” She grimaced. Apparently, she could voice her thoughts aloud. She squirmed with embarrassment as a slow smile crept to his lips.

“Not love?” he asked, his voice rumbling deep within his chest as he lowered his face.

“That would be nice too,” she managed to say, just before his lips took hers.



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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

## **Le Chevalier**

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## **Dedication**

To Steve — my personal hero  
and the man who makes it all seem possible.







## Chapter One

*Philadelphia, July 28, 1777*

*Merde!* No mission warranted this. The Chevalier de Mont Trignon laid a covert hand on his stomach to quell the itch beneath his stays.

At the far end of the room, an orchestra tuned their instruments. A trio of violinists stroked and plucked, fine-tuning each errant pitch, while a bassoonist drowned them out with deep, resonant notes reminiscent of a funeral dirge.

“When do you meet with the general?” he asked, watching the servants take up the rugs covering the walnut dance floor.

Beside him, the Marquis de Lafayette busied himself selecting a morsel from a silver platter carried by one of the multitude of velvet-clad servants hovering about.

The man held his wigged head high and stared expressionless as Lafayette perused the selection of cold meats, vegetables, and cheeses before selecting a slice of cold beef on toast garnished with a sprig of green onion.

Ignoring Mont Trignon’s question, the marquis took a bite, gazing about at the would-be dancers gathered at the edges of the parquet floor. Even though the marquis did not look directly at him, he could see the slight curve at the corner of his lips while he chewed with deliberate slowness.

Mont Trignon’s sigh bordered on a snort.

Only three months before, he had been sipping tea with his mother and sisters in the salon of their

estate on the outskirts of Paris. Now, he found himself at an American assembly, bored to distraction, and growing more irritable by the moment.

He picked at the lace *engageantes* concealing his muscular forearms and the sprinkle of golden curls peeking from beneath his satin gloves. The lace faux-sleeves made his skin crawl, and he fought the urge to tear the dreadful things from his arms. How did women bear such constant irritation?

Physical discomforts are but of the moment, he reminded himself while poking at the soft underbelly of his forearm with the tip of his fan. He longed for a mental challenge.

A newcomer to America, he had not found it tedious or dull. Like his commander, the marquis, the nascent country called to his sense of adventure, promising both intrigue and action. In this new land, he and the marquis were on equal terms, the titles Marquis and Chevalier having little meaning to a people that valued merit above blood. To his way of thinking, their struggle for freedom from tyranny should be admired, perhaps even encouraged, so long as it eroded England's power.

The thought made him grin despite his slippers biting into his toes.

More difficult to countenance had been the price the marquis demanded for the pleasure of joining him on this venture.

Tonight, the Chevalier de Mont Trignon, all six feet of him, wore a Parisian ball gown made of watered blue silk. The split design displayed his inner petticoat of cream-colored satin embroidered with a fanciful thistle design. His low-heeled slippers were made from the same bolt of satin.

He fanned away a bead of sweat that formed at his temple and threatened to gouge a furrow through the thick powder on his face.

His father, a master spy in the former King's secret service, had trained his son to play many different roles. Yet never had he played the part of a woman until a moonless night a little over a month ago when he and the marquis had slipped out of France on a ship bound for America. The ruse had been a necessity as, had the marquis traveled in the company of his men, King Louis would have been alerted and sent his guard to stop them before they set sail.

With a flick of his fan, Mont Trignon waved off a servant offering a selection of grapes and cheeses. *Mon Dieu!* He could barely breathe let alone eat.

Safe on American soil, and out of the reach of their sometimes too timid monarch, this pretense had become unnecessary. The marquis's request he reprise the character of "Marie" for their first appearance in American society testified to his commander's wicked sensibilities and his questionable sense of humor.

"I am to meet General Washington in a few days," the marquis said at last, licking a finger with a grace that made the *faux pas* appear acceptable. He sipped his wine and watched pairs of dancers filter by, their hands lightly touching. "Will you come with me? Deane has granted commissions to many Frenchmen, and I am certain there would be one for you if I were to recommend you." His dark eyes turned serious. "You know I would be happy to do so."

"That will not be necessary." Mont Trignon turned a disinterested eye on the dancers.

From the steely glint in the marquis's eyes, he had appeared ready to launch into a familiar monologue on the merits of duty and honor. If anything, Lafayette could be persistent, and many a man had found himself enlisted in a cause not his own after a few minutes with the impassioned

commander.

Mont Trignon watched the dancers perform a set of twirls and hand offs, the women's jewels glittering in the soft glow from the sconces lining the walls.

A miserly breeze blew in from the double doors opening on to the balcony, and a fine film of sweat formed on many a brow. The sour smell of an old man's powdered wig assaulted his nose, and Mont Trignon used his fan to sweep the offending odor away before stifling a yawn behind the painted silk.

He found the quaint American dance style, with its lack of imagination and even poorer execution, only a little more interesting than the marquis's appeals to enlist in the American cause.

His parents had cajoled him into coming to America, each for their own reasons, but he had no intention of joining this war. For his father, he would find out what he could about the strength of the rebel forces and the will of the American people. For his mother, well, she could learn to live with her disappointment a little longer.

A pair of dancers skipped off to take their place at the end of a line, and Mont Trignon's view of the dance floor cleared. He caught sight of a woman standing alone, one hand resting on the walnut wainscoting and the other picking at the pleats of her skirt. Had she been there before?

Her dark eyes followed the dancers, noting each movement and exchange between partners. Her head bobbed, with purpose and in time to the beat set by the zealous bassoonist, as though she meant to memorize each note.

When the music ended on a discordant blast from the bassoon, she held her chin high and looked about with an eagerness suggesting great interest in the fashionable Philadelphians who stood about in small groups conversing and waiting for the next

dance to begin.

To the casual observer, she appeared to be one of the many plain women lined up along the edge of the dance floor, hoping to be noticed by a potential partner. But Mont Trignon's skills of observation could never be described as casual.

As he watched, a well-dressed gentleman glanced her way, and she stepped back so the candlelight no longer fell on her face. The man's gaze passed over her as though she were nothing more than a flower on the wallpaper.

Now that was odd, he thought, accepting a fresh glass of wine from a passing servant. He took a sip and watched her reemerge from the shadows to resume her study of the people about her.

If not a dance partner, did she wait for someone in particular? A lover perhaps? Mont Trignon considered offering to fetch her a glass of punch, perhaps strike up a conversation or ask for a dance.

He shifted his stance to relieve the pinching in his toes. If he wanted to learn her secrets tonight, he would have to find another way.

The marquis followed the direction of the chevalier's gaze and chuckled. "So what are you planning to do with yourself while you are here, I wonder?"

"I will do as my father requested and then be back to France," Mont Trignon said, ignoring the marquis's insinuation.

Mont Trignon fought the urge to brush powder from his nose. It itched like a demon possessed, but while a man might be forgiven a good scratch in public, no woman would ever appear so base.

"And as for your mother's request?" the marquis asked, his meaning clear as he cast a glance at the woman, his eyebrows raised.

The chevalier sighed. He found this topic even more tedious than the marquis's thinly veiled

attempts to enlist him in the war.

“My mother will learn to live with her disappointment,” he said, echoing his own thoughts from a moment ago.

The woman on the far side of the room might prove an interesting way to pass the evening, but in no way could a little mouse like her pull him out of the malaise he had fallen into after Nicole’s death.

Nicole had been everything to him—his friend, his wife, and his companion. She had once been his lover, but circumstances had soon after robbed them of that aspect of their relationship. It was not her fault however, and he would have been content for things to remain as they were for the rest of his life, if only hers had lasted as long.

This American woman before him now intrigued him, but she had a provincial sort of prettiness about her that could not compare to Nicole’s fragile beauty. A familiar constriction settled in his chest. It had lessened over the years, but his heart still ached whenever he thought of Nicole.

He had not wanted to wallow in painful memories of the past. His first night in a new country, the time had come to begin again. He would start by focusing on the mystery at hand, dissecting the American woman’s appearance to the last detail.

Studying her, he tapped his folded fan against pursed lips. She had pulled her dark hair into an unadorned chignon at the nape of her neck and wore a modest gown of peach muslin—not her best color to be sure. The simple gown would have been more fitting for an afternoon tea than a ball featuring a slew of well-dressed women in silk and satins.

Her best feature had to be her dark eyes standing out in stark relief against fair skin. They dominated her face, and he had to admit, were captivating if one could ignore the simplicity of the rest of her.

She had not applied face paint, but then she did not need it. Thick lashes swept her cheeks and her mauve lips, full as ripe berries, stood out against the flawless alabaster of her complexion. He smiled. If one could bring a blush to her soft cheeks, he might elevate his assessment of her to *pretty*.

He studied the way the candlelight from the sconce over her shoulder cast a golden halo about her head. Would he still consider her plain if she let her hair down? Would her tresses be a drab brown, or did they have the same mahogany hue as her eyes? Would they fall straight or curl about his fingers? Would they feel like silk against the palm of his hand?

Would her skin feel like satin as he brushed the back of his knuckles against her cheek? His groin tightened as he imagined her porcelain skin beneath his lips, his tongue tickling her ear.

*Mon Dieu!* Mont Trignon gave himself a mental shake. If he wanted to fantasize about a strange woman, surely there were more enticing prospects at hand.

He turned his attention back to the marquis, opening his fan with a practiced flick of his wrist, so he could speak from behind it. "Lafayette, I do not understand why you chose to spend your first night in Philadelphia at a ball—if you can call this event such a thing." He tossed a glance about the gentrified ballroom. "I am not even sure this would qualify as a country dance to a Parisian. Should you not be planning for your meeting with the general?"

The marquis chewed his beef and sipped his wine. Then he said, with a shrug, "What better way to prepare to meet my future leader than to get to know the people for whom we fight."

A smile curled the marquis's lips as a pair of women dressed in rustic finery glanced his way. There could be no doubt as to which people the

marquis would acquaint himself with first.

“Not even on American soil for a month, and you are like the fox in the henhouse,” Mont Trignon grumbled, not expecting a response.

Lafayette caught the eye of a woman standing a few feet away next to a man that might have been her husband; he paid so little attention to her.

She tapped her fan to her lips and cast a veiled glance at the marquis from beneath a sweep of dark lashes all while the man next to her prattled away, oblivious to the silent conversation happening beneath his nose.

A handsome woman, her age had dimmed her beauty but not her vanity. Diamonds glittered between graying strands of black hair piled high on her head. Two spots of rouge dotted her pallid cheeks, and a small heart-shaped face patch accented the corner of her tinted mouth.

The marquis raised his glass to her and then to his lips, his eyes never leaving hers as he drank. Even thick face powder could not hide the matron’s schoolgirl blush.

Mont Trignon covered his mouth with his fist and coughed. “Not much of a challenge.”

The marquis raised a lace handkerchief and spoke from behind it. “But a bit more worthy of my time than that little scrap of nothing you have been eyeing from across the room.”

“At least I doubt she is married.” This was not the first time Mont Trignon had played older brother to his commander’s youthful exuberance. “Just be aware the Americans are perhaps a little more reserved than we French. It would be wise to use some discretion lest you find yourself challenged to a duel by an outraged husband.”

“Nonsense.” The marquis scoffed. “They may hide behind their Puritan ways, but underneath, men and women are the same everywhere. Besides,”



his pursed lips and knitted brow displayed a moment of doubt, "I do not think they allow duels here in America."

"Perhaps, for you, they will make an exception." Mont Trignon took a sip of wine to keep from saying more. He had known the marquis long enough to accept when an argument became pointless. The marquis's Parisian sensibilities extended to his core.

"But perhaps you are right. A more challenging objective is what I need." The marquis's jovial smile disappeared as he regarded his friend. "And you, *mon ami*...you need something to take your mind off Nicole. It has been four years. If you cannot find a woman in France who meets your standards, why not see what America has to offer? Then we can go into battle and on to glory."

Mont Trignon laughed at the marquis's melodramatic talk of glory and his willingness to give his life for any cause, or any woman, worth fighting for.

"Do not try to use my sweet Nicole to goad me into following you onto the battlefield or into the bed of a woman. I came to America as a favor to my father and because I agreed that I needed a change." He looked the marquis squarely in the eye. "That does not mean I desire a new wife or a place in America's history books."

As the orchestra struck up a new tune featuring the questionable talents of the bassoonist, both men cringed.

"If I can assist my father," Mont Trignon said, in a voice loud enough to be heard over the oppressive opening notes, "then I am grateful to be of service. Although I would not mind vexing the English, I have no desire to be a general in the Continental Army or to find a new wife."

"Only you would think I am talking about a wife," the marquis said, in quieter tones once the

violins took over. He took a sip of wine then peered into his glass and sighed. "However well I admire the Americans, I doubt they shall ever make a decent wine. Too much of the English in them I suppose."

Mont Trignon murmured his agreement.

"Nevertheless," the marquis said, turning back to the subject at hand, "your father asked you to come, so what could you do?" He shrugged with a grace born to the French aristocracy. "The poor man pines for the days of Louis XV. He cannot accept that *le Secret du Roi* died with the King."

"Did it?" Mont Trignon asked, brushing a piece of imaginary lint from his embroidered sleeve. He knew when the marquis dug for information, but he would not give him satisfaction. At least not until his ire at the marquis had subsided.

"I hear it did," the marquis responded, before draining his wine glass. He cleared his throat as though it burned and set the empty crystal goblet on a table against the wall. "Although, unlike dead kings, secret societies do have a way of resurrecting themselves."

"Yes, they do," Mont Trignon responded.

A trio of officers, sounding as though they had had more than their share of spirits, drew his attention back to the other side of the dance floor. Their boorish laughter rose above the eager strains of the small orchestra. As they passed the dark-haired woman, she shrank once more into the shadows.

Mont Trignon cocked an eyebrow. Why would she do that? The officers had not paid any special attention to her. As far as Mont Trignon could tell, she had gone unnoticed by everybody in the room except him. She had become as much a fixture as the Queen Anne chair next to her.

So well did the pale peach of her gown blend

into the background, had she chosen a peony corsage to match the puffy flowers gracing the wallpaper, she might have appeared to be a disembodied head.

With the marquis distracted by a room full of women dressed to entice, Mont Trignon had nothing better to do. Why not try to uncover her mysteries? It would be an amusing ten minutes.

Did she know the color of the wallpaper ahead of time? The insipid peach shade did nothing to highlight any natural beauty she might possess. Mont Trignon considered himself an expert where women were concerned, having spent much of his life surrounded by them. In his experience, all women, in the right light, were uniquely beautiful. He judged it a crime to hide a woman's natural assets beneath a dowdy gown that made her look like part of the décor.

He took another sip of his wine, ignoring the vinegary taste of the domestic blend. Something about the way she watched everyone but never made eye contact intrigued him. He could almost believe she wanted to observe without being seen. Had the unfortunate dress color been by design and not by accident?

Always at his most relaxed when he had a puzzle to solve, a familiar satisfaction settled over him. Perhaps ten minutes would not be sufficient time to devote to his study. Like a painting by a great artist, she appeared simple at first, but the more one reflected, the more complex she became.

Except she was not one of the twisted puzzles he had been so fond of as a child, nor a painting by a great artist. A smile curled his lip. A flesh and blood woman, she presented the most interesting puzzle of all.

"I am quite certain I can find something to occupy me while I am here," he muttered.

"Not dressed as you are, *mon ami*." The marquis

clapped him on the shoulder, telling anyone who might be watching the six-foot tall woman in watered blue silk was not who or what she appeared to be.

As the marquis headed toward a more challenging conquest, Mont Trignon glanced around, his heart pounding. At his height, his head rose above most of the men around him. From the moment he arrived, they had been giving him a wide berth, perhaps for fear of finding themselves forced to dance with a woman a head taller and broader of shoulder than themselves. Their disinterest worked to his advantage. No one noticed the marquis's indiscretion.

His heart still raced as he searched again for the woman in the dull peach gown. She had not moved from her post against the wall, and he took a sip of wine to hide his amusement. He watched her dark eyes survey the room, yet never once did they settle on the woman towering not more than twenty feet from her. Whatever she searched for, dressed as Marie, he did not possess it.

The officers who had passed the curious woman earlier made their way back to a small cluster of young women who were eyeing them with inviting glances.

Mont Trignon's latest puzzle took a small step to the right, bringing her to the outer edge of their circle. She made no effort to join them, but the corners of her mouth curled in such a way that he could only surmise she eavesdropped on their conversation.

Could she be a spy? Perhaps even now, she hoped the officers, drunk as they were, would blurt out Washington's secrets, so she could carry them back to King George.

He hid an amused laugh behind his fan. Innocent-looking creatures like her were not the

typical recruits. More than likely, her curiosity had simply gotten the best of her. Or perhaps, as they did for him, formal assemblies brought on an overwhelming sense of *ennui* that could only be diminished by intrigue.

She edged even closer to the men, but they did not notice her. A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. Even if she were not a trained spy, perhaps he should try to recruit her. A plain woman might outdo them all when it came to gathering intelligence.

One of the officers laughed at something, taking a step back, so the heel of his boot landed on her toe. Mont Trignon winced. The man had to have a hundred pounds on her.

In his inebriation, the officer must not have felt the soft, slippered foot beneath his hard heel, so he remained where he stood, forcing her to yank her foot from beneath him. Mont Trignon could not hear the ripping of the fabric over the strident tones of the violins, but he could see the gap form between flounce and skirt.

She scowled at the man's back but said nothing. He must have sensed her eyes on the back of his neck, however, because at that moment he spun around. His wine glass led the way and before he noticed her, he knocked it against her shoulder and spilled a burgundy stream down the front of her dress.

Mont Trignon recovered himself just in time to avoid a most unfeminine belly laugh. Now the poor woman matched the wallpaper perfectly.