

THE PAINTED LADY by Avery Sterling

EXCERPT

“This door was locked.”

Alderic was perched on her pillow, one arm resting behind his head. “No lock can keep me out of something I wish to explore, Madame,” he replied. He swung his legs off her bed and stood up in one swift motion.

She lifted her chin at him. “You are out of character this evening, monsieur.”

“Why the shroud, Madame? Are you covering a terrible wart of some sort? Scars from the pox, perhaps?”

She grinned. “Maybe.”

He used both his hands to flank her, trapping her between his body and the vanity. “Or maybe you know what an arousing enigma it makes you?”

“You are prying, monsieur,” she said. “I wish you to leave now.”

“I can do that,” he said, the corner of his mouth upturning just a bit, “as soon as I collect my winnings.”

It was difficult to appear unmoved as his hand lightly grazed the line of her jaw. “Why did you not collect earlier? That would have been far more appropriate,” she said.

He chuckled. “You speak of propriety in a bordello?” Then his humor faded as his thumb fiddled with the diamond dangling from her ear. “You were shaking. You are frightened of me, Madame.”

“Monsieur Beaumont.” Delaney scoffed. “I am a madam, and I’ve known many men. I do not fear you.”

“You are only playing, Madame,” he said as his eyes captured her, searching hers for a long moment. “What is underneath all that color, I wonder.”