

Eternal Hunger

Chapter 1

Amanda

2010—Venice Beach, California

I feel the child move, which rarely happens during the day, or while I sit at the bar inside Michel's, watching my vampire lover mix drinks, talk on his cell phone, and flirt; but as I lie in the darkness of my tiny bedroom, in my even tinier cottage, butted up against the Pacific Ocean, I feel a tugging sensation, my womb moving in rhythm with the waves. Although I do not show, I am six months pregnant with the child of a vampire—not Michel, with whom I share bed and board, but his best friend and my former lover, Christian Du Mauré.

It's complicated. I suppose I'm lucky to have gotten out of New York safely and to be living here in Venice Beach with Michel. He doesn't express it, but sometimes I wonder if he feels as I do, abandoned and confused and so afraid of the future. So stupid, we were, to think that the past was behind us, neatly filed away—done with—forgotten ... but the past is never really “done with” or “gone,” is it? The past lingers just beyond our reach, ever present and watchful.

As a child, I read L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*. To this day, the first line resonates with me: “The past is a foreign country—they do things differently there.”

How stupid you are, Amanda Perretti, I tell myself.

I once believed it to be true, but now I know better. The past is a powerful specter that took Christian away from us, burned our town house to the ground, and forced Michel and me to flee New York and settle here, in California, so uprooted and disconnected from all we knew that it begs pause.

Now Michel owns a converted warehouse, aptly named Michel's, and seems to have found a way to carry on by doing what is familiar to him: replicating his life in New York and living among mortals.

My nightly routine finds me sitting on my favorite barstool, watching him bartend and try to blend into the mortal world he loves so well. Michel, though, was never able to blend in anywhere, whether at the court of Louis XIV or in a bar in SoHo. He's too exquisite a being, with long, dark curls, emerald green eyes, high cheekbones, and porcelain-like skin that generally glows but darkens to appear almost human-like when he has taken blood.

He and I have carved out a tenuous existence here in California, a truce of sorts, as we figure out what comes next, and although neither of us talks about the trauma of fleeing New York City with literally the clothes on our backs, losing Christian, or anticipating the birth of my child, that trauma seeps into everything that we do.

Michel may be a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old vampire, but in this case, age does not bring wisdom. He appears to be as scared and lost as I am, and so we wait and wonder about the fate of the one person we love above all else, the glue that holds us both together, the possible father of my unborn child.

Yeah, it's complicated.

Christian, where are you?

Chapter 2

Christian

2010—*Château des Singes*

It was the smell that woke me. Dampness, mold, abandonment ... long-forgotten places.

I inhaled in jagged breaths, forcing myself to remain calm. I was no longer pinned to a wall but laying prone on a rotted mattress on a rusted bed frame. Chunks of pale blue plaster littered the floor. Sitting up slowly, I felt light-headed.

If I were mortal, I would have vomited.

Where was I?

The lone bed was dwarfed by the high ceiling, a promontory among concrete and debris.

How long had I been here, wherever *here* was?

On the far wall was a broken and faded mirror. Not a bad place to start. I took stock of my appearance in a sliver of what had once been a gilded eighteenth-century looking glass. I was dressed in blue jeans, boots, and a green sweater, none of which were mine, yet all in good taste. My hair was clean, free of dried blood.

Not bad, though I wondered who had taken the time to clean me up and dress me like a modern man.

I was not hungry yet, just confused as I tried to piece together the events leading up to this moment. There had been a heavy curtain of falling snow. Josette calling my name. A

handsome face gazing up at me through torchlight, giving the memory a tinge of warmth, despite the darkness.

Ghislain. Yes, that was his name. He was connected in my mind to images of monoliths and angels. How baffling.

Just enough sunlight fell through the French windows, illuminating painted wall panels, and me.

Yes—sunlight.

Imagine me, Christian Du Mauré, a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old vampire, able to walk in the sunlight. Not bright, summer sunlight, which I could not really remember experiencing, but more muted autumnal rays, which give the illusion of warmth yet cast long shadows.

I had my mortal lover, Amanda Perretti, to thank for such a gift. It was her blood that contained such power and had saved my life.

Amanda.

Would I ever see her again?

I had abandoned her, along with my best friend, Michel, in New York City. What a coward I'd been, for I could do no better than leave them a note. What a disappointment I had turned out to be to the two people I loved the most.

My gaze fell on the faded painted wall panels behind the mirror, on which the sunlight landed. It took me a moment to recognize the image still showing through.

Monkeys.

The Château des Singes—the house of monkeys.

Centuries ago I had come here. Though its location had been a secret, it was rumored to sit in the forests on the Normandy coast. Michel and I had wandered through enough Parisian salons to hear talk of the lurid parties, human sacrifices, and the like that had gone on here.

At the time, I had ignored such talk, chalking it up to nonsense, but I knew now that anything was possible, and so I tried to recall everything that I could remember about this place. Memories of long carriage rides with my maker, Gabrielle, and Michel began to assail me. God, we had been so young, even for vampires.

I studied each wall panel, trying to put together the time line of events, but my mind was still foggy. I checked my pockets on the remote chance that I had my cell phone. They were empty. Across from the bed, decrepit French doors opened out to a hallway. I risked it.

Out in the corridor, the diagonal blue-and-white-tiled floor stretched before me like an ocean. I continued walking down a main hallway, passing through more doors with rooms to my left and right. Some of them were actually furnished, while others held only a chair tipped on its side or a rotting divan.

When we'd come here before, the Château des Singes had been a stunning monument to French sensibilities, but now it had been abandoned for centuries. My guess was that it had been built in the seventeenth century, when houses were more ceremonial and less practical for everyday living. Nonetheless, large groups of mortals had come here during the summer months because, as with Versailles, aristocrats summered outside of the dirty, noisy city of Paris.

I wandered farther down the hallway, dodging concrete piles and jagged glass, until I reached a magnificent white marble landing and a massive staircase with a wrought-iron railing of the most delicate design. The setting sun streamed through the many sets of broken windows that faced the front of the house.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I landed in the foyer. Despite its grandeur, there was something about this house that made my skin crawl. I made my way through the carcass of an age long past, and asked myself how I could ever have forgotten?

Chapter 3

Christian

1786—Château des Singes

The Château des Singes stood in a thick forest on the outskirts of Paris, waiting like a wild animal to pounce as our carriage transported Gabrielle, Michel, and me on a winter's evening. Traveling northwest out of the city, we passed darkened villages set back amongst dense forests. The humans lived in small cottages, weatherworn and hemmed in by large maple and oak trees. Though I had grown to love Paris and rarely ever left the city, my curiosity was piqued by this journey.

My mind wandered while our carriage raced through the French countryside. Gabrielle prattled on about the owners of the château, the Pilou family, who had built the château in the seventeenth century. Not much was known about them, neither where they'd come from nor where they'd gotten their riches, but they mingled freely with vampires, and, as Gabrielle put it, they supplied us with privacy and more mortals than we could ever have imagined.

I glanced across at Michel, knowing what he was thinking. He could not wait to get to the party. I, on the other hand ...

Lately, I had been distraught, and even a bit jealous of Josette, my mortal lover, and her husband, for he could give her what I could not: a child. In early December, she had given birth to a daughter, Solange, and now rarely left their apartment in Paris. Not that Josette did not relish being a mother—but now she had another being to take her away from me.

We vampires could father no children. The dreams I had had to let go in exchange for wandering the earth forever had destroyed me in some ways. I was trapped in a body that would never age, despite my changing opinions or desires.

“What is it, my love?” Gabrielle smiled, taking my hand in hers. Her dark dress flowed out around her like black rose petals melting into the darkness, while her breasts glistened milky white like alabaster. She had to sense my distance and lack of interest, for although I found her beautiful, I was so much in love with Josette that I had lost all interest in my maker.

“Just thinking.” I smiled back, slipping my hand away under the pretense of brushing my hair from my eyes.

“We have quite a ride ahead of us.” She winked, running her hand up my leg.

I dared not look at her.

Eventually, she turned her attention to Michel and slid across the carriage to sit beside him. She pulled him towards her in an embrace, while he tugged at her bustier, breaking the laces. When she bared her fangs, he obeyed and threw his head back in surrender so that she could pierce his neck and latch on. As she was our maker, neither of us could refuse her our blood.

I stared out the window, watching the forest fly by. Behind me, Michel moaned as Gabrielle drank from him, and I could not help turning to watch when she loosened his trousers, laid him back on the seat, and slowly lowered herself onto him.

If I had still loved her, I would have joined them, but I did not love her anymore, and so I closed my eyes and drifted off, while their thunderous orgasms shook the carriage.

It was not a good sign that I was so bored with this life. I loved the power I wielded over most mortals, but there had to be more to life than parties with Gabrielle and illicit sex.

It was nothing I could talk to Michel about, for he lived for parties, sex, and blood, which he craved like nothing else.

I wanted a solitary life, but Michel would never hear of it, and the thought of separating from him was not one I could entertain. We had been best friends since we were children in the early eighteenth century. I dared not sabotage something that meant the world to me.

Michel was pulling up his trousers and Gabrielle putting herself back together when I saw lights in the distance, blinking through the massive oaks. We slowed down and turned right down a dirt road through an open field. Like a monolith, a three-story mansion jutted out of the landscape. Two side wings flanked the main hall with evenly spaced windows and a slate mansard roof. The house had a balanced, stately look.

As I later learned, however, appearances could be deceiving.

Large manicured hedges framed the long gravel driveway. Although beautiful, the Château des Singes was not very welcoming.

We joined the line of carriages creeping up the driveway. A sentry opened each carriage door, bowed, and escorted the occupants up to the house.

When it came to be our turn, Gabrielle was escorted out, and we were ignored, but not before she asked our coachman to return an hour before sunrise, which, in December, gave us hours of darkness to wile away.

We followed her up to the massive front door, where she presented an envelope to the pallid doorman, who was dressed in fashionable knickers, a frock coat, and a white powdered wig.

“You will never forget this night, I can assure you,” Gabrielle promised us.

She was always good on her word.

Once inside, a sweeping white marble staircase with a wrought-iron banister emptied into a massive foyer lit by numerous torchieres. Mortals wandered past me with their clinking wine glasses and all colors of beautiful silk dresses. A middle-aged couple stood on the staircase, surveying the crowds. I assumed they were our hosts, Monsieur and Madame Pilou.

There was nothing petite about Madame Pilou. Even as she stood on the landing above, surrounded by massive ceilings and marble, she was a big woman, with a bovine face overpainted with rouge and lips so red she looked almost clown-like. She clearly was trying to hold onto her youth, though by a thread, I dare say. The man beside her, likely Monsieur Pilou, was tall and lanky, with sharp features and dark, predatory eyes that scanned each female guest. He appeared wolf-like to me.

Indeed, I might have been one of the undead ... but the Pilous made me uncomfortable, despite their stately home and seemingly good breeding.

Josette, however, would have loved it all. No doubt Monsieur Pilou would have been captivated by her, too.

I joined the flow of the crowd behind Gabrielle and Michel, following them down a long corridor lined with paintings and numerous torchieres, which emptied into a massive ballroom. I must admit, I always compared the works of other painters to my own. I found the painters of my own time boring, at best.

Suddenly, the crowd stopped moving. I heard music and slipped through the masses until I reached the ballroom.

My breath caught in my throat. The room was beautiful, illuminated by two large chandeliers and a massive fireplace opposite the doorway, with a large mirror over the mantle. One wall was all mirrors, in imitation of Versailles. The candlelight reflected off the silk material

of the women's gowns and their glittery jewels. All the mirrors caught and threw the candlelight back onto the guests, so the room had a warm glitter.

A quartet of mortals, hidden next to the fireplace, played beautiful music. The room was bursting with melody and laughter. Vampires were quiet, predatory creatures, and mortals, all words and laughter.

I was never much of a dancer, not like Michel, from whom I had become separated and who had already found a young mortal to dance with. Gabrielle was nowhere to be seen. I scanned faces, looking for her, to no avail. Women in dresses of all colors swirled past me, not a distraction but a kaleidoscope. I finally found my way to a corner just to watch.

Josette would have loved all the gaiety. I suddenly found myself angry with her for not being more careful. For having a child she had not wanted. How irresponsible ... but no, it was not really that; it was simply something else to take her away from me, from our love affair.

I would only have danced tonight with her, but she was in Paris, and who know what would become of us.

I had had enough.

But as I turned to go, I noticed a man standing by the far fireplace, and the door to my memory opened for a moment. He was tall and unusually dressed, more rustically, not in silks, frock coats, and high-heeled shoes. His intense eyes studied me rather than the passing scene.

When my gaze met his I sensed a familiarity between us. I knew him from somewhere—but where? I had only been a vampire for thirty years, and this place was the farthest I had ever travelled ... yet I knew him, somehow.

I watched him as the lyrical music filled my senses, along with the smells of sweat, blood, and wine. So many sensory impressions made me dizzy, and I began to become aroused by the heartbeats around me. I had purposefully fed earlier, but suddenly I was ravenous.

I moved into the hallway before I lost control. When a young mortal woman came towards me I grabbed her before she could pass and pulled her against me, and as she smiled up at me I dragged her into a dark alcove. She embraced me, ready for a kiss, but all I wanted was her blood. Plunging my fangs into her warm neck, I closed my eyes and fed, draining her along with all my anger and frustration.

“Let her go before you kill her.” A raspy voice filled my head above the music. How was that possible?

Reluctantly, I released the girl. Her eyes had glazed over. I caught her before she fell to the floor.

Shaking his head, the tall figure urged the girl into the ballroom, where she was enveloped by the crowd, and turned his attention back to me. His hair, the color of fire, hung to his shoulders. He was something more than a vampire. His energy confused me, making it difficult to understand what he was or what he was doing here. His dull brown cape smelled of the earth, and his boots were scuffed and old. No one seemed to notice how out of place he seemed, or if they did, they said nothing. Could no one see him except me?

“Have we met?” I asked. All other sounds fell away, and I found myself lost in his dark blue eyes.

Then he took my hand like a child and led me out of the ballroom. His touch was unsettling, almost as if I were humming a tune, but the lyrics eluded me. He was a stranger, yet we connected—there was that familiarity about him—and so I allowed him to take me back into

the foyer, up the incredible staircase with the magnificent wrought-iron railing, and down a long hallway painted sky blue with murals of monkeys lining the walls.

There were monkeys everywhere.