

Book Three in the Award-Winning Series

Master of Illusion



Angel of Song



Anne Rouen

Angel of Song

Book III

in the Master of Illusion Series

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Angel of Song
Master of Illusion Book 3

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Dedication

Angel of Song is dedicated to the memory of my adored grandfather who served on the Western Front with his unit, the 3rd Australian Field Bakery, from 1916 until the end of the war. He left for France a Master Baker and came home in 1919 a pâtissier *sans pareil*. He appears in the pages of this book as Jack.

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Prologue

4 December 1929

‘All right, all right,’ called the publisher. ‘I am coming. There's no need to break the doorknocker.’

‘Apologies, Monsieur, it's cold out here. Special delivery. Sorry about the lateness of the hour.’

‘Another manuscript by this anonymous author?’

‘*Oui*, Monsieur. She said you did not need to know her name.’

‘She? *Une femme*?’

‘Yes, Monsieur.’

‘Ah ... She is not worried about remuneration?’

‘No, Monsieur, she said not. She said that she has learnt that there are things that money cannot buy. For her, the writing of it—the journey, you understand—was worth more than any monetary recompense.’

‘Indeed?’

‘But she did say one more thing, Monsieur. She said this is the last manuscript, and when you have finished it, you will know who she is ...’

The publisher laughed. ‘Not want recompense, indeed!’

He signed for the package, glancing down at the title. ‘Book Three: Angel of Song.’

In spite of himself, he could not resist. Tearing off the wrapping, he settled down to read.

Chapter One

Undercurrents

Nine am, 21 September 1913

Last evening we were all so happy, so contented with our lot. Yet, this morning, Angel is distressed. And I am at a loss to know why.

‘*Sacré mille ...*’ The marquis du Bois, reading his paper over morning coffee, started and frowned, concentrating on a small segment hidden away at the bottom of the page. He put down his cup with a crash. ‘*Mon Dieu!*’ he breathed, returning to the segment, perusing it with even greater concentration. ‘Why have I not seen this coming? But then, have I not? Have I not, indeed?’ His troubled eyes went to the pile of correspondence littering the table.

His protégée, pausing before the mirror in the hall to adjust her hat to a slightly more dashing angle, swept up the skirts of her riding habit and ran lightly to put her head around the door of the salon.

‘You are not riding with us, this morning, Angelpapa?’ she asked, eyeing him doubtfully, since he was still in his dressing-gown.

He lay the paper aside, his expression lightening as his gaze rested on the young woman he was pleased to think of as his daughter. ‘I think not. Not this morning, my angel. Tomorrow, perhaps? You are looking remarkably fresh after your night of dissipation.’

Angelique flew over to his wheeled chair to put her arms around him and drop a kiss on his brow. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you—Oh, a thousand, thousand thank yous—for my ball, last night! It was wonderful! It was ... Oh, it was ... beyond description!’

‘It was my very great pleasure, my darling.’ He eyed her flushed cheeks and

shining eyes, quizzically. 'I suppose this, er ... enthusiastic response means that I will soon be receiving a visit of ceremony from a certain *distinguished* young gentleman?'

She made a parrying gesture, murmuring, 'I do not know. But,' her voice strengthened, 'I loved my dance with the marquis du Bois! Did you enjoy it, Angelpapa?' She whirled around with an invisible partner, humming the tune of the *Emperor Waltz*.

'Of a certainty, all nine, no, ten steps of it. Indeed, it made my night, my dear.'

She smiled delightfully. 'You see, I told you that you could do it: that I would make you dance with me!'

'So you did, my dear, so you did. And is there anything else you wish to tell me?'

She presented an innocent face. 'But, I do not know what you mean!'

'Is that so?' he drawled. 'Well it does not matter.'

'Oh,' she went on, 'it was all such fun, last night! I know Mama cannot speak, but I am sure she enjoyed herself. Did you have fun, Angelpapa?'

He thought of himself sitting beside Katarina—she who could no longer speak or show expression, he who could hardly walk—watching the others dance: Madame Dupont and the duc de Belvoir, the comte de Villefontaine and the duchesse, Angelique and the young marquis de Beaulieu. And then, Angelique had come, insisting he dance with her while her partner sat with her mother. They were pitifully few, the steps he could now manage. Yet, just a few months ago, he had taught her to waltz himself.

He smiled wryly. 'Fun,' he mused. 'I would not have put it in quite that way myself. Let us just say that I found it delightful, most entertaining ... But fun?' He cast up his eyes. 'The fatuous expressions favoured by the youth of today!'

She tossed her head. 'Oh, *passé de mode*! You are not usually so old-fashioned, Angelpapa!'

There was a glint in his eye. 'If events play out as I expect they will, you may discover just how *démodé* I can be, my dear child.'

'Oh, suitors!' She giggled. 'I danced with so many! But whatever you say, I think we all enjoyed ourselves. Did you see my papa waltzing with the duchesse de Belvoir? Did they not make such an elegant couple?'

‘The duchesse and the comte are both very accomplished dancers,’ he agreed. ‘They received many compliments on their stylish waltzing.’

‘Papa said that he liked dancing with her very much. He said that, besides being a good dancer, she is a very gracious lady. Etienne told me afterwards that his mother, too, enjoyed herself.’

‘Indeed?’ he murmured. ‘One does not have to ask whether or not the marquis de Beaulieu enjoyed his night ...’

His lips lifted a little at one corner as she coloured, feverishly changing the subject.

‘Godmama is a wonderfully graceful dancer, is she not? I had no idea—I have never seen her dance before—well, only the steps to demonstrate to her ballet students, of course; but I have never seen her waltz.’

‘No, she does not usually dance, but *du vrai*, she has not lost the lightness and gaiety she had as a ballerina.’

‘Tell me about her when she was a ballerina. You knew her then, Angelpapa?’

‘Yes, indeed. I watched all her performances.’

‘But when did you meet her?’

‘So many questions, Petite! Why now?’

She shrugged. ‘I did not think to ask you before, and whenever I asked Godmama, she turned it off. But I do want to know. Please?’

‘Oh, very well. When we were children, she rescued me, homeless and nameless, from a street in Paris and took me home to her opera house. I suppose I was about nine—she a little older. Will that do?’

‘But you are the marquis du Bois! How could you have been homeless and nameless on a Paris street? Oh ...’ She pouted. ‘You are making up a tale for me!’

‘No, no, I would not do that, but it is a long story, Petite. I will tell you another day. Your godmama rescued me, and before he died, Monsieur Dupont made me promise to take care of her. One way or another, she has been with me ever since; although, I think of late, it is more that she takes care of me. Back then, because I had no name, I became known as Angel ——’

‘Because of the way you sing!’

He smiled. ‘Perhaps it was my saintly disposition? However it was, we both thought it amazing when, out of your own spirit as a little girl, you began to call me Angelpapa—even though you had never heard that name. But I thought you wanted to know about Madame Dupont, my dear?’

‘I do! Oh, I do! She will never talk about her young life, but I have heard her students whispering amongst themselves. She was a famous ballerina, was she not? A prima donna, even?’

‘Indeed, she was. She had many admirers. They called her “La Belle”. She was very, very special, indeed. But then,’ his knuckles whitened on the chair arms, ‘her career was cut tragically short.’

‘May I know what happened, Angelpapa?’

He looked beyond her at a scene that she knew was working powerfully on his emotions. She could not know that he was weighing up the horror of the tale side-by-side with the fact that Angelique should know that, out there in the world she was about to enter, there were those who would wish to harm her.

‘I will tell you. You are old enough to know, now. However, it is privileged information, and you must never mention it to Madame Dupont or anyone else, Petite. She cannot speak of it. It is too painful for her. I will only tell you on that condition.’

‘Of course, I would not do that! But I have always wondered ...’

‘Very well. Elise Gordonnier was seventeen ——’

‘My age,’ she breathed.

‘When she was attacked outside the Opéra Français by a homicidal maniac who lay in wait for her.’

‘Oh, no! Oh poor, poor Godmama! How terrible!’ She felt physically ill.

‘Steady, Child. I should have known this would be too much for you to bear.’

‘No, please tell me! I will be all right.’

‘Are you sure you can cope with it?’

She nodded.

After looking at her closely, he continued, ‘The police knew about him, but he was a royal prince and, therefore, thought to be above the law.’

‘Do you mean that someone could have stopped him and did not?’

‘There are different rules for those with power and those without,’ he confirmed. ‘Many were afraid of him, for he had always murdered his victims.’

‘Are you saying that if someone is powerful enough, they can get away with anything?’ She was horrified.

‘That is why you must be careful, Petite; why I have decided to tell you this harrowing tale. Your career will put you in the path of many different types of people. Amongst them are those we must avoid for, sadly, the law will not always support us.’

‘But, if he murdered ... How, then, did Godmama survive?’

‘Ah, that is where her fortune changed: her life was saved at the last second by the great conductor, Monsieur Dupont, returning with his orchestra from a soiree. However, she was so badly injured that she could never dance at that level again. It was after this that she married Monsieur Dupont.’ He looked down at his hands. ‘The prince was later found dead beside the Seine.’

A little chill feathered up the back of her neck. Somehow, she knew that this man, whom she loved more than anyone, had meted out his own justice: in his own way, in his own time. She said quickly, to dispel the sickening visions he had conjured up, ‘But she is all right now, isn't she? Godmama, I mean? She said she enjoyed her evening!’

He nodded. ‘Yes, dancing with the duc. The gossips would have had a merry old time had not the comte stepped in when he did.’

‘To dance with the duchesse, you mean?’ she asked, thoughtful for a moment. ‘I saw Godmama last night waltzing with the duc de Belvoir: he held her as if she were ... Oh, a precious, precious *objet d'art*; she looked so happy. I have never seen her look like that. They danced as if they were in love. Oh ...’ She put a hand to her mouth. ‘I am sorry, Angelpapa! My tongue runs away with me!’

He spoke under his breath. She could hardly hear him. ‘So! My astute angel has seen what others may well have noticed; though, I did my best to defuse it.’

‘Pardon?’

‘You were quite right, Petite,’ he answered. ‘The duc has been in love with her for many years, since long before he met the duchesse.’ He smiled. ‘It was hardly a secret that he was, perhaps, her most devoted follower. Madame Dupont is probably

the only one who did not know it. It was a wonder that she did not make the connection: but no, it was a complete surprise to her since he worshipped from afar, as the saying is. Of course, once her career was over, she isolated herself from all that. He has been remarkably constant for so little encouragement. But you see, once the spark of true love has been ignited, it cannot be quenched. It is there forever.'

'So, he was in love with her before she married Monsieur Dupont?'

'Oh, yes, before that, too.'

'But why, then, did they not marry?'

'A duc has obligations, my child. He is not free to marry whom he wishes. In many ways, he has power; but in others, he is a slave. *Noblesse oblige*,' he murmured. 'Some take it seriously.'

'But what about the duchesse?'

'There can be no doubt that the duchesse knows all about it, my dear. She would have known when she married him that he was in love, and with whom,' said the marquis. His lip quirking at one corner, he added in dry tones, 'It was blindingly obvious to those of us with even the smallest powers of observation, *je vous assure*. And knowing him, he would have told her, if only to prevent her finding out some other way. It was her choice to marry, and in my estimation, she has accepted it. Nothing has come of it, after all. Madame Dupont and the duc are both honourable people. The duchesse, like all women of her class, has been brought up not to expect marriage to be a love match. No, in such circles it is more likely to be regarded as an "asset match".'

Shocked by his cynicism, she exclaimed, 'But, Angelpapa, may not a duc marry one whom he loves?'

'Oh, certainly, my dear, but only if he falls in love with a lady of his own class.'

'Is that why you have never married?'

'I am not a duc, Petite,' his voice deepened.

He was not looking at her, but in a blinding flash, she realised something she had known subconsciously all her life.

'It is because ... You love my mama, do you not? I know that you do!' *How could I say such a thing?* She wondered, almost fainting with fear. Clinging to the

edge of the table, she sank into the nearest chair. Her lips framed words she could not speak; an apology she could not utter, for this she had to know.

He frowned over her bent head, alive to her distress. Impetuous and wilful she may be, but Angelique was not usually insensitive in this fashion. Once, too, he would have torn to shreds the author of such a question, but he was not the same man; and this was his own little angel. And yet ... He did not want to bare his heart to her, or anyone. 'Enough of these indelicate questions,' he replied, forcing himself to return a light answer. 'Too much prying is not good for the young. There are some things in life that are beyond mere words.' But he could see that she needed the truth.

Taking her hand and holding it, he said simply, 'I love you both, my dear.'

'Angelpapa ...' She hesitated. 'I cannot remember a time in my life when you were not with me. Since I was a little girl, I have always felt surrounded by your love. I have always loved you more than anyone. My papa, even.'

'We are being very serious, this morning, Petite. It must be the result of our late night. Too much euphoria brings about the opposite state of melancholia to approximately the same degree, I find.' Sensing that she was not to be fobbed off, that something deep inside her was driving her, he added, 'Many years ago, when you were a very small child, I made my pledge to your mother that you would be to me as my daughter; that I would cherish you and nurture you, developing your great singing talent as if you were my own. Even though, to my eternal regret, you are not my own flesh and blood, you are, without question, the daughter of my spirit. Does that answer you, my angel?'

'Yes, thank you,' she whispered. Then, emotion-charged words tumbled out, 'I could not live without you, Angelpapa!'

'Do not talk in that fashion, Angelique.' He spoke almost roughly. 'Look at me—at how much I have failed in health in the last few months!' His mouth twisted. 'Soon, my dear, regrettable though I find it, you will have to learn to live without me.'

'No! No! Do not say that! I cannot! I cannot!' Real distress darkened her eyes. Hysteria was not far from the surface.

He saw, and comforted her, caressing her cheek. 'Come, my child! Let us not talk about it now. We must not spoil the memory of your ball. Do not forget that we have both your first season and your first tour to think about.' He made an immediate, irrevocable decision: 'And I am determined to go with you on that!'

Instantly, her misery turned to joy. ‘Did I hear you say that you are coming with me on my tour?’

‘Indeed!’

‘Truly? Oh, Angelpapa, that is wonderful! Oh, I cannot, cannot believe it!’ Then, seeking reassurance, she added, ‘*Vraiment?*’

‘Yes, really.’ He spoke calming words. ‘Of course, my child, most certainly, I will be with you. You have my word. So, now, there is no more need to worry, *hein?* That is my good angel.’ Lifting her chin with a finger, he added, ‘The morning is too good for my beautiful debutante to be indoors in this melancholy mood. You must go along for your ride. Etienne and his sister will think you are not coming. I will see you in the music room upon your return; we must work on the songs for your tour. Wrap up your throat well!’ he commanded, as an afterthought.

‘Of course, Angelpapa!’ She showed him her neatly tied stock.

‘Off you go, then, my child. I will come with you tomorrow.’

She embraced her guardian once more before she left; her beautiful amethyst eyes swimming in tears. He watched her disappear behind the doorpost and sat, staring at nothing, a muscle working in his jaw. She was his golden child, and his heart went out to her. So brilliant, so talented and, yet, so fragile: all her life she had had to be protected and nurtured beyond any normal consideration, perhaps because of the circumstances surrounding her birth. Who, other than himself and Madame Dupont, could realise that? Who, when he was gone, would be able to look after her? Etienne loved her, he knew, but would he have the understanding and inner strength and stability to support her in the way her delicate spirit required?

Frowning, he returned to his paper. He was still frowning over it when, a little later, Madame Dupont entered the room. Once again, he lay it aside.

‘Ah, Madame, good morning.’

‘Good morning, Monsieur. You are unwell this morning?’ she asked a trifle anxiously, since he had forgone his usual morning ride. For, even though his illness forced him to use a wheeled chair much of the time, he was still a competent rider, able to sit tall and athletic on his horse; a form of exercise he embraced daily. ‘Tired after your night out?’

‘Something like that, Madame. I wish you to send for Monsieur Merignac, if

you please.’

‘Now, Monsieur? But ... he will be rehearsing his orchestra.’

‘I know, but this is too important to wait.’

Something had visibly upset him.

‘Something in the paper, my dear?’ She eyed the broadsheet apprehensively.

‘Here, take it with you. See for yourself. But send for the conductor, at once!’

‘Yes, Monsieur, it shall be done right away,’ she murmured, enquiring, as usual, ‘More coffee?’

He shook his head. ‘Later, perhaps, but only if Monsieur Merignac feels himself to be in need of refreshment.’

As soon as she had carried out his request—no—order, she searched the paper for whatever it was that had set him off.

She was left baffled. King Constantine sneaking into Paris in the late afternoon. And not a bit of wonder: The Greek King's unfortunate comments on the recent Balkan Wars had not endeared him to Paris. But she already knew Angel's estimation of him: a spent force, unloved by his people. Besides, the Balkan Wars were over.

Pilot Adolphe Pégoud performed a *boucle à boucle* in a Blériot XI. Nothing there: Angel would have been pleased by that, having had his own input into some of these aeroplanes, following their progress with intense interest; for of late, aircraft design had become quite a passion with him. But, flying in loops? The thought made her queasy.

Seventeen people killed in a bridge collapse at Villeneuve-Loubet. *Oh, poor things!* It was probably due to the dreadful spate of wet weather they were having, and regrettably, there would probably be more such incidences if it did not abate. She stopped a minute. Was that the trouble: that it was one of his bridges? No, it simply would not happen! She thought carefully. No—definitely no bridge of his design had been constructed at Villeneuve—any of the Villeneuves! No, it was not that.

The usual ructions in the French parliament. Nothing new, there. It happened with monotonous regularity. What, then? Not this, surely? A small paragraph tucked away at the bottom of the page announced that the German parliament, later in the year, was expected to send a military mission consisting of a few specialist officers to Sirkeci Station. *Where on earth is that?* She went to the globe and began to turn it on

its axis. *Oh, here we are: on the straits between the Aegean and the Black Sea—oh, yes, Turkey.* What was there to upset one about that? It was half a world away, and the Kaiser had probably built it for them, anyway. Besides, if the Germans wanted to spend money in Turkey, how could it possibly affect France? Especially since, as everyone knew, the Ottoman Empire was on its last gasp. *Crows after carrion,* she thought disdainfully, folding the paper.

She was troubled. Perhaps the illness of the marquis was beginning to cause him to develop anxiety, as well as progressively limiting his movement?

The butler moved into her line of vision.

‘Yes, Henri?’

‘Monsieur Merignac has arrived, Madame. He is waiting in the morning room.’

‘Take him through to the salon, Henri. Monsieur le marquis wishes to see him.’

‘Very good, Madame.’

She noticed, with compassion, that the butler was limping. He, too, was growing old, and his work was getting too much for him. She shook her head. One would have to be brave to mention the matter to him. Best to let him be the judge of when he was ready for retirement!

Of course, since the marquis had moved into her wing of the mansion, Henri's workload had become lighter. Her salon had become, to all intents and purposes, the studio, office and recreational area of the marquis. It was a bright, welcoming room and kept him under her eye.

The marquis had had a lift installed to the first floor, where he had his design studio proper, his bedchamber and that of his man, the new music room and several guest chambers. She and Angelique had moved to the second floor into the renovated student dormitory: now a set of feminine and very pretty boudoirs and sitting rooms. On the top floor were the old music room and her studio, vast and empty, where she still went every morning to practice at the barre before starting her day.

§

‘Ah, Maestro, well met!’ The marquis shook the conductor's hand. ‘Sit down,

Monsieur, *s'il vous plaît*. It would please me if you could call to mind the Handel Oratorio *Messiah*, in which Angelique made her solo debut at the Opéra Magique.'

'But of course, Monsieur.' The conductor bowed. 'How could I forget? *Mon Dieu!* The reviewers went wild that night, about you both!' he recalled with enthusiasm.

'You are too kind, Monsieur,' murmured the marquis. 'On that night, there was a party including the Archduke and Duchess of Austria-Hungary and a group of young royals purporting to be an envoy from Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. And afterwards there was the rumour of a secret meeting between representatives of our two countries; I believe you said. Was there an outcome to this misguided event? If, indeed, it occurred.'

'Oh, yes, it occurred, Monsieur.'

'And the outcome, hmm?' He frowned intently.

'Why, if I remember rightly, it was just as you predicted, Monsieur. Our generals walked out. About halfway through, as you said they would. The matter was, as I understand it, left unresolved.'

'Given the combination of Germanic diplomacy and Gallic sensibility, it was a foregone conclusion, *mon brave*,' he murmured. 'And you do not know any details of the subject of this aborted discussion?'

'Monsieur, we were sworn to secrecy!' The conductor's bird-like gaze met his. 'But of course, as owners of the theatre, you and Madame Dupont are privy to any information given to me,' he amended hastily. 'Or any other of your staff, for that matter.' He eyed his employer a little apprehensively, for even in his wheeled chair, but a shell of the man he once was, he still radiated an indefinable air of menace.

The steely gaze of the marquis softened a little, and the conductor went on, 'Unfortunately, I cannot help you in this regard, Monsieur, since I was with my orchestra.' He hesitated. 'You feel the subject of this meeting may be important? To France?'

The marquis replied fretfully, as if talking to himself, 'The Kaiser—so arrogant and aggressive—the countries of Europe in an arms race: all strutting and posturing. Tension, everywhere ...'

'It is true what you say, Monsieur. But is it not merely the rattling of sabres?'

He shrugged. 'It has been going on for years.'

'As you say, Maestro. But it will only require one of these pompous mountebanks to feel that his *amour-propre* has been offended ...'

The conductor took in the enormity of his words.

'Oh, God forbid, Monsieur! God forbid!'

'I tell you, Maestro, they are only waiting for a trigger they can pull without censure!'

'But what are you saying, Monsieur? Who will pull what trigger?' Madame Dupont had come in unnoticed.

'As usual, Madame, you have put your finger on it,' replied the marquis. '*Du vrai*, you could stick a pin in a map of Europe, blindfolded, and not be far from the answer! Take these, for example.' He held up the sheaf of letters, showering them back onto the table. 'All these requests: Can I help improve the design of battleships? They all want their dreadnought—or preferably, something bigger and better. Huh!' he added bitterly.

'Can I bend my mind to aircraft to make them faster, more deadly, fly higher? Am I not already doing enough in that direction?' he demanded, waving a complicated aerodynamic design.

'Is there a way to make bigger guns, faster gun carriages, more explosive ammunition?'

'Can the internal-combustion engine—infernal, rickety contraption that it is—be made stronger, more efficient, more reliable? Strangely enough, they do not ask for it to be made quieter! There is no end to the madness, Madame!' He calmed his voice, but his eyes flashed. 'Nor, it would seem, European man's desire to wreak the maximum in death and destruction on his fellows. And when I tell you that it is not just France asking for these things, but potential enemies as well as allies ... And now, today, I read that German Military personnel are about to be placed at southern Russia's only gateway to the world,' he said finally, 'I tell you, I do not like it. No, I do not! And Russia will not like it, either!'

His words fell into an electric silence, eventually broken by the conductor.

'There is much in what you say, Monsieur. I have not thought ... I have not looked at it like that, before.' He cleared his throat. 'It has occurred to me that our

theatre manager, Gaston, may know what went on at the meeting of which you speak. He organised the catering. I apprehend he served the refreshments himself. To preserve discretion, you understand.'

'I see. Thank you, Maestro.'

The conductor, politely refusing Madame Dupont's offer of coffee, bowed himself out with a creased brow.

A brooding silence descended over the room, unbroken until the marquis snapped out, 'Send for your dog, Madame. I must have speech with him.'

'But, Monsieur ...' she began.

'Oh, enough, Madame! I am not in the mood to argue. We are both old men now, hopefully with more wisdom than in the past. I can hardly be a danger to him, like this!'

'No, Monsieur.'

'Besides, you will speak to him first and explain to him that he must tell me all he knows.'

She was stung into protest. 'And that will be enough for Gaston to break his secret oath?'

'Of course it will, Madame. I do not call him your dog for nothing. We both know the lengths to which he has gone for you in the past, will go for you now and, no doubt, in the future – until he dies, probably. He may have married Mathilde—for convenience, *sans doute*—but I know where his heart lies.'

'Companionship. It was for companionship. He asked for my approval, and I gave it.'

'Hmph, *cela va sans dire*. Otherwise, he would not have done it. When you bring him in, stay in the room with us to encourage him, in the event that he is not inclined to co-operate.'

'Yes, Monsieur,' she replied, leaving the room. It would take all her considerable diplomacy to reconcile Gaston to the demands that were about to be made on him.

The marquis sighed, flicking his correspondence with a disparaging finger. Once, he, too, had been bent on destruction. But he had learnt. Why could not these

fools see what they were about to unleash on the world? God's world—he could now acknowledge.

§

‘Thank you for coming, Monsieur,’ the marquis du Bois said formally, surveying his theatre manager in a manner that the latter found extremely offensive.

Gaston bowed stiffly. ‘It is my pleasure, Monsieur. How may I serve you?’

‘If Madame Dupont has carried out my request, you know very well how you may serve me,’ he responded in steely tones.

Gaston remained silent.

There was a hint of the implacable about Gaston. He had always been like that—stolid, immovable. Madame Dupont was reminded of the eternal philosophical question about the irresistible force meeting the immovable object, and since she did not want to find out the answer here in her salon, she said, ‘Gaston, please, you promised me ...’

‘Yes, Madame.’ Gaston spoke woodenly. He had meant to do as Madame had asked of him, but as soon as he got in front of this arrogant swine (of an aristo), his hackles went up, as always.

‘Well, Monsieur?’ There was a faint threat in the hated voice. His eyes went miserably from one to the other, and since Madame Dupont was beginning to look distressed, he capitulated.

‘You will not like it, Monsieur,’ he warned.

‘You may leave me to be the judge of that, if you please. Go on, man!’

‘It defies belief, Monsieur, but ——’ He caught the other's eye. ‘When the Kaiser's delegation and ours had finished their pleasantries and general discussion, they shut me out of the room, Monsieur, but—you know your cupboard—the secret one?’

‘Yes, yes, of course I know it! Will you get on with it!’

‘Yes, Monsieur. By that time I felt that something was going on that was not right, so I went back through the passage in the wall and hid there, in that cupboard, so

that I could listen.’ His face had gone a dull red. Incredibly, the man felt shame in admitting to this behaviour.

‘There is nothing to be ashamed of, Gaston. You obviously had a very good reason for doing what you did.’ Madame Dupont spoke gently. ‘You have done this for France. You would do more than that for your country, would you not?’

‘Indeed, Madame.’ The words were simply spoken, but both of those watching knew that, if necessary, he would die for her—stolidly, silently—just as he had always protected Madame Dupont.

‘And you heard ... what?’ she prompted, knowing he would find it easier to tell all this to her, rather than the marquis.

‘I heard a terrible thing, Madame. A terrible thing! It is no wonder our generals walked out.’ Sweat had broken out on the manager’s brow.

‘May God give me strength!’ breathed the marquis, turning his eyes to heaven. ‘And save me from fools like this!’ he shouted, bringing his fist down on the table with a whack.

Madame Dupont jumped and glanced imploringly at the theatre manager.

Keeping his eyes on her, he went on in a whisper, ‘The Kaiser’s men, they told our generals to break our alliance with Mother Russia. They said if Russia objected, Germany would defend us. They said if we would not join an alliance with Germany, we must declare neutrality. They said ...’ He was almost sobbing. ‘That they would give us one year to decide. That is when the generals walked out, Madame.’

‘*Mon Dieu!*’ The marquis was white.

‘But that is not the worst, Madame! I heard them talking amongst themselves afterwards, about what they would like to do to our generals, and what they will do to them and to France when—when, Madame, not if!—they conquer us. They said they are ready, that they have the troops, the guns, the war machines waiting for the call. They talked of secret weapons. They said they cannot be beaten.’

The eyes of the marquis were twin sapphire points. ‘And what did you do then? After you had heard this ... slanderous scuttlebutt?’

‘Do? What do you mean, Monsieur? What could I do?’

‘You said they mentioned secret weapons. What secret weapons?’

‘They did not say what they were, Monsieur.’

‘You told the generals what you had heard?’

‘No, Monsieur.’

‘And why did you not?’

‘But, Monsieur, how could I? The generals had already gone, and I was sworn to secrecy. Who could I have told?’

‘My God, Madame!’ roared the marquis. ‘Get this idiot out of my sight before I do something I regret!’

‘Come, Gaston, you have done well. Monsieur le marquis does not mean ... We are very grateful to you, my friend!’ She shepherded him out, ignoring the hissing sigh behind her.

When she came back, the marquis was writing furiously, cursing now and again at the spluttering of his pen.

‘You are distressed by such news, and no wonder. I do not know what to think, myself.’ She watched his nib jam and break. ‘May I do that for you, my dear?’

‘No, Madame ... Oh, here, then. I am sending a communication to General Joffre. Before nightfall, I am determined to have an answer to all this!’

Taking a new pen and a fresh sheet of paper, she copied the missive as he dictated and sent it off. Within the hour, the general's aide arrived, remaining closeted with him for some time. As soon as he had gone, Madame Dupont went back into the room.

He answered her question before she asked it. ‘It would seem, Madame, that there is not much urgency, after all. Apparently, when the generals sent to the Kaiser to find the meaning of this outrage, he back-pedalled considerably. As well he might! He swore that he knew nothing of this scandalous ultimatum; that the delegation was unauthorised by him; and that it was a group of unruly minor royals endeavouring, amongst other things, to overthrow him, as well as to provoke vulnerable states into a declaration of war. It sounds unlikely, but it appears that the Kaiser's ambassador apologised for them, or more likely, threatened reprisals on them.’ He dropped his eyes, playing idly with the fringe of the tablecloth. ‘Do you know, Madame, I do not think either of these things is the real truth. I believe it lies somewhere between. I think the Kaiser did send an envoy, but with instructions to sound out France's

position, diplomatically. These crass fools have revealed his hand before he was ready to show it. It would appear that, according to our own Military Intelligence, the threats were merely posturing, and there is no immediate danger of war.'

His lip lifted wryly. 'Most of its would-be instigators wish first to bring in their harvests unmolested, and no-one wants to consider such activities in the depths of winter. Most understandable, I am sure. So ...' He shrugged. 'Perhaps we can shelve it, for now. Perhaps I overreacted, after all.'

Madame Dupont nodded. It was what she had thought herself.

'Oh, and by the way ...'

'Yes, Monsieur?'

'This morning, in a fit of madness ... It is all I can put it down to,' he smiled ruefully, 'I told Angelique that I would accompany her on her first tour.'

'But, my dear Angel ——' In moments of stress, though it was strictly forbidden, Madame Dupont was prone to revert to his childhood name.

'I know, I know ... It will have to be restricted to a tour of Europe, and not the world tour she has been offered. Monsieur Merignac and the Orchestra Magique will still travel with us, of course, but the world tour can come later—when she is more experienced and no longer needs me. In truth, I do not see myself travelling by ship.'

'No, indeed!' She found it hard to envision him travelling anywhere, by any means.

'I shall sing with her, of course.'

'But, Monsieur, you have not thought!' She was aghast. 'Can you do it?'

'A good question, my dear, a good question. I will try for two duets at each performance: one at the beginning; one at the end.' He looked her over. 'That is not a very encouraging expression, Madame.'

'No, Monsieur.'

'I have promised Angelique ...'

How she dreaded those four words, usually the prelude to great suffering on his part. 'I see. There is nothing more to be said then, is there?'

'I knew you would see it that way, Madame. The poor little one: she needs me.'

After this first tour, I am convinced she will be able to do without me. But for now, no. It is clear that she must have my support. Now, I must go and organise our music, before she returns from her ride. I can leave our itinerary to you?’

‘Of course, my dear.’

She wheeled him to the lift, discussing various preliminary aspects of the proposed abbreviated tour without, she hoped, revealing too many of her misgivings about the whole thing.

Chapter Two

Morning Ride

Ten thirty am, 21 September 1913

It is so nice to look out the window and see Angelique riding off with her friends. My secret wish is that the young gentleman riding beside her will be in her life forever. He is quite a favourite with me, a proper man for a jeune fille of whom I am so proud. And his younger sister, Elise, such a sweet young girl.

The elegant young lady and gentleman, waiting with the groom and the horses, looked up from their conversation.

‘At last!’ cried the young lady, joyfully. ‘I thought you were never coming!’

The young gentleman regarded appreciatively the beautiful creature flying down the steps with hoydenish abandon.

‘Good morning, Mademoiselle,’ he said, the formal greeting belying the warm glow in his golden-hazel eyes. ‘Your steed awaits you.’

‘Etienne, Elise ...’ She was breathless, tears forgotten. ‘I am sorry to have kept you waiting.’

‘Not at all. We have only just arrived, have we not, Elise?’

‘Oh ... oh, yes, of course! But a few minutes, my dear.’

‘Liars.’ She laughed, her cheeks delightfully flushed. ‘But I do love you for your tact and kindness.’ She kissed Elise and gave Etienne her hands, shyly avoiding his glance.

The groom, disapprovingly observing the colour in her cheeks and her fluttering manner, placed the reins over her horse's neck, holding them for her as the young marquis threw her lightly into the saddle and turned to help his sister. It looked

like the marquis du Bois wasn't riding this morning. That meant that he would have to go in his stead.

Fast, that's what they were, the young people of today. It wouldn't have been countenanced in his day, young people riding out without proper supervision. The marquis should have been with them to keep an eye on Mademoiselle Angelique. A proper handful she was and always had been, ever since a child. He smiled, remembering her battles with her pony. It was hard to say which of them had been more determined: he to stay in the stable yard or she to go out; although, they had usually managed a compromise, with a little help from himself or the marquis.

To be sure, she was an excitable filly, very hot at hand and liable to go off into hysterics at the drop of a hat. He patted his pocket to make sure he had the little bottle of smelling salts, which the marquis had decreed one of them must carry whenever they rode out with her. Highly strung, that's what she was, and easily out of control unless the marquis du Bois was there to keep her calm. And yet, she looked like an angel, sang like one, too; and in his opinion, rode like a goddess—though perhaps he was biased. Yet, critically watching her sensitive handling of her reins as she took them from him, he did not think so. A little frown creased his forehead. He hoped there would be no contretemps on this outing. Temperament, that was her downside; and he did not feel confident to deal with it. He felt strongly that the marquis should be here. Strange it was, the way he could quell her with a glance under his brows and a quiet endearment: and the only one who could, by what he had heard around the household and seen for himself. Even Madame Dupont, who could, without saying a word, make the worst bully slink away, had had trouble with her until the marquis had taken a hand.

He shook his head. This young marquis had got himself a job of work; that was certain. Deftly shortening the stirrups, he mounted his employer's horse, following at a discreet distance.

The young marquis de Beaulieu, listening with indulgent amusement to the inconsequential chatter of his companions, was content to ride beside the glorious creature who had taken his heart with one glance from those incredible amethyst eyes. Of course, the conversation was all about the ball last night at which, for the first time, he had partnered Angelique. Dreamily, he remembered the feel of her in his arms. She was passionate, vibrant, adorable. He wanted that passion for himself, even though he knew he must share her, metaphysically speaking, with thousands of her followers.

Quiet, patient, his nature was to protect; and Angelique, willowy and fragile, aroused all of those instincts in his calm breast. The son and heir of a man who governed wisely from a long line of philanthropic ducs; he was imbued with the urge to take care of those less able to take care of themselves.

‘Oh, look! Who in the world is this coming?’

He heard the little throb in his sister's voice and looked hard at the approaching horseman. One of the de Villefontaine boys; that was certain. They were like peas in a pod. He knew Elise was hoping it would be Philippe.

He addressed Angelique: ‘It is your brother, Luc.’

‘Oh.’ Of her three brothers, Luc was the one she least understood, the one who openly showed aggression to her. Philippe, she loved, for he was kind and gentle like her papa; and Christian was like a big soft cushion, without deep convictions, but warm and generous, withal. But of Luc, she was afraid; for he seemed to harbour a deep-seated animosity that was never far from the surface, and she never knew when some seemingly innocent remark would set it off.

Elise, admirably concealing her disappointment, invited him to join their party; and since the road was wide, they rode four abreast. She engaged him in jocular conversation, which, nothing loth, he returned.

‘I should go back soon,’ Angelique spoke in a nervous aside to Etienne. ‘Angelpapa will be expecting me for my lesson. I do not like to keep him waiting.’

‘Oh no, surely, not yet!’ cried Elise. ‘We have hardly started our ride! Anyway, I have always been curious. Why do you call him Angelpapa? The marquis du Bois, I mean?’

‘I don't know. I have never known him by any other name. Godmama said I named him that when I was very small: too young to remember, I'm afraid.’

‘Godmama?’ trilled Elise. ‘I have often wanted to ask you ... and I can because we are all but family, are we not? Why, when you have a perfectly good mother and father of your own, were you reared by Madame Dupont and the marquis du Bois?’ The indiscreet question momentarily dislocated the symphony of the horses' hooves.

Both Angelique and Luc flushed vividly.

‘Elise!’ warned the young marquis. ‘You have gone beyond the line with your ill-bred curiosity.’

‘No,’ said Luc. ‘No, she hasn’t. Why should she not know? After all, as she says, we are almost family ... Tell them, dearest sister,’ he added, with heavy sarcasm. ‘Etienne needs to know what he has let himself in for. Tell them why you live with Madame Dupont and the marquis instead of the comte and comtesse de Villefontaine, and your three big brothers!’

‘I do not know what you mean, Luc! You know that I was too young for Papa to send me away to school, as he did you boys when Mama became ill, so he left me with Angelpapa for my singing lessons, and Godmama for my ballet and other schooling.’ Angelique spoke breathlessly; her colour fluctuating in a way that would have warned the groom had he been closer.

‘Hah! A manifestly whitewashed version, if ever I heard it!’ jeered her brother. ‘I will tell you why!’

‘Please, Luc ——’

‘Angelique has always been precious, going off into hysterics if she cannot have her way, crying night and day for her “Angelpapa” when our father brought our mother home to us. We were sent away to school, but that was not good enough for my little sister, was it, eh? Of course, when it became clear that Godmama and the marquis were spoiling her rotten, Papa tried to send her away to school; but she ran away.’

‘Please, Luc, I could not stand it without ——’

“‘My Angelpapa’,” he mimicked. ‘Don’t we know it! When she was sent back, she set up such a screech that they put her in isolation—where she spent her time drawing opprobrious caricatures of her teachers on the walls—including a most reprehensible likeness of the headmistress in a compromising situation with the dancing master!’

At this, a little glimmer of amusement dispelled the frown in the eyes of the young marquis. ‘What? Kissing the dancing master, was she? Well, good for Angelique!’

‘Well, she was! I saw them!’ cried Angelique, close to tears.

‘Yes, and recorded it for all to see! Well done, Sister!’ Luc bowed exaggeratedly over the pommel.

‘It wasn’t my fault! They had forgotten I was in the detention room, and I had to hide when they came in. Afterwards, I was there for such a long time alone that I

became bored and drew them on the wall. There was no slate or paper,' she explained.

'Evidently,' continued Luc, as if she had not spoken, 'it must have struck a chord, for she was expelled. Even Godmama despaired of her. Didn't she, dearest Ange?' He smiled evilly. 'And there you have it, Monsieur. If you still wish to offer for my sister ...?'

'No-o-oh!' moaned Angelique in mortification, one gloved hand to her mouth.

'Then, I have to warn you that the only one who can control her is her precious Angelpapa!' He rounded on her ferociously. 'And that is Mama's mare you are riding! Is there no end to you?'

'Stop it, Luc! Stop it! Please, do not! You know Mama gave her to me when I grew too tall for my pony!'

'Enough! That is enough!' snapped the young marquis, but Luc had gone too far to stop now.

'We were all happy until you came along,' he cried viciously. 'It is your fault our mother is like she is! Your fault! I wish you had never been born!'

'No!' Angelique, sobs choking in her throat, spun her mare on her haunches and galloped back the way they had come.

Etienne, turning his head to shout instructions to the groom and finding himself addressing his rapidly diminishing back, said evenly to Luc, 'How dare you treat your sister in that fashion! What do you think the marquis du Bois will have to say when he hears about it?'

'Oh, the marquis!' He gestured disparagingly, giving an ugly laugh. 'I am not worried by him! The marquis du Bois has shot his bolt!'

'I would not be too sure about that if I were you.'

'Why? What can he do in his wheeled chair? Run over me?'

'He can do several things,' replied the other, quietly. 'One of which is to authorise me to do it for him. And now, while I rescue *your* sister, you will escort *my* sister home, taking the greatest care of her. For, if she does not arrive safely, I will forget that I am a gentleman and give you the thrashing you deserve. Be thankful that I do not have the time to do it now.' And he, too, turned and galloped back the way they had come.

Looking her companion over with shocked eyes, Elise rode on without comment, leaving Luc to follow, equally a prey to shame—a slow-burning jealousy and an uneasy conviction that this time it was he who had gone beyond the line.

Elise, herself, battling to hold back tears of mortification and distress, was horrified at the storm precipitated by her ill-considered question—asked out of a kind of lighthearted naivety. She had been deeply shocked by the hatred and aggression displayed by Luc and knew she deserved the homily that would presently be delivered by her brother. Ignorance, she knew, was no excuse. But there had been nothing in her own relationship with her brother that could have prepared her for Luc's attitude to his own beautiful sister.

Oh, poor dear Angelique. If only Etienne finds her safe, she prayed silently, I will never be so doltish again. That stupid, stupid question—if only she could have snatched it back! Oh, if only it had been Philippe and not Luc who had come riding down the road. Philippe, in whom she cherished an innocent maiden's dream. An unbiddable tear rolled down her cheek. As soon as was possible, she would abjectly apologise to her dearest friend; and never, ever, ever, again would she ask stupid questions.

Chapter Three

Suitors

Midnight, 21 September 1913

In the twenty-four hours since Angelique's debut, we have been inundated by suitors. And Angel has treated them to such a display of temperament that already he has a reputation as a tyrant! Perhaps in the long run, it will be a good thing. Poor Angel, I know that he wants the same one I want. Justin and I have tried to protect both him and Angelique from the unsuitable ones, but now and again, one slips through. I'm not sure whom I feel sorriest for: Angel or the Suitors!

The groom, leading Angelique's horse beside his own in a quiet walk, was deeply troubled. God knows what would have happened if he had not been able to catch her. Thank God the marquis kept fast horses and he was riding his own big gelding. She would have galloped blindly in any direction until ... who knew? At best, maybe her mare would have taken her home. At worst? ... Well, it did not do to dwell on it.

‘Be easy, Mademoiselle,’ he had soothed when he had ranged alongside her wildly galloping horse and taken hold of her rein. ‘Slow down, Petite. There, there.’

At this point, it was not clear to Angelique whether he was addressing her or her mare; but he had taught her to ride as a little girl, and she was used to obeying his instructions. Without thinking, she slowed to a walk, allowing him to control both horses.

‘*Eh bien*, Mademoiselle,’ he murmured, ‘you are safe now.’ He took the bottle of smelling salts from his pocket, endeavouring to hold it under her nose. ‘Breathe, Mademoiselle, breathe! Come, now. That is right. Calm, calm, Mademoiselle.’ He spoke soothingly, as he would to a frightened horse. Yet, he knew he was not really getting through to her.

He supposed he would have to take her home, but shuddered at the thought of

the reaction of the marquis when he saw her like this. The young marquis had shouted something at him when he had gone after her, but he had not heard it. Ah, here he was, coming now. Let him explain this contretemps to that old fire-eater: the marquis du Bois!

‘Breathe, Mademoiselle,’ he instructed. ‘Again, Mademoiselle. That is right. Here is your young gentleman, coming now.’

The marquis de Beaulieu, having slowed his horse to an easy canter when he had come in sight of them, pulled up, surveying the distressed damsel on her sweating mount. ‘Oh, my dear one, you must not let yourself be upset by such a *bêtise*. It is but a tempest in a teacup. Not worth all this angst. Of a certainty, your brutish brother deserves a flogging!’ He turned to the groom. ‘My thanks to you, Jean, you did well to catch her. But we cannot continue like this. The marquis du Bois will have us horsewhipped if we bring Mademoiselle home in the vapours!’

‘Indeed, Monsieur!’ said the groom, handing him the smelling salts. ‘Just what I was thinking myself.’

‘Walk the horses for us, if you please, while I take Mademoiselle for a quiet stroll in the garden here. When she has composed herself, you may escort us home. It will not hurt her mare to be walked quietly, either,’ he added, noting the heaving flanks and foaming neck. ‘A bran mash later, I should think.’

The groom nodded, taking his reins as he dismounted and stood by Angelique's stirrup. Common sense: that was what was required here; and this young marquis seemed to possess it in abundance.

‘Come, my sweet,’ he said gently. ‘Let me help you down. We will go for a walk in this delightful garden, and you shall tell me all about it.’

Angelique, still breathing irregularly, calmed at once, sliding down into his arms. Supporting her tenderly, he held the smelling salts under her nose, while she clung to him as if to a lifeline.

As they walked away, the groom, seeing her respond to this gentle treatment, stared after them, a dawning respect in his eyes. Mayhap the marquis du Bois was not the only one who could handle her, after all.

Continuing to speak soothingly until Angelique's breathing calmed, Etienne took the little bottle from her hand and put it in his pocket. He had a fair idea now why the groom had it ready and resolved to always carry a bottle himself. ‘Tell me about it,

my love,' he said, holding her hand between both of his. 'Tell me why there is this clash of spirits with your brother. I apprehend he is closest to you in age?'

'Yes,' she nodded. And there, walking amongst the trees and shrubs, the whole halting story came out. Here and there, he asked a question when something she said puzzled him; but in the main, he just listened. As a first-time auditor, he was aware of two things: the first, just how sad a story it really was; and the second, her utter dependence on and unconditional love for the marquis du Bois.

At the end of the story, she had calmed so much that he judged he could take her home, so he turned about, retracing their steps. 'This, what you are telling me here, really boils down to sibling rivalry,' he told her. 'Your brother resents you because the attention he had been used to was suddenly removed with the illness of your mother at your birth. He is punishing you for it by treating you in this fashion. But do not worry, my sweet, I will not allow it to occur again: that you may be sure of!' He smiled down at her.

'They say I must not get so upset by such things—that I have excessive sensibility. They say it so ... accusingly.'

'Of course you become upset. You are sensitive; your nerves are easily put on end. You would not have such wonderful rapport with your audiences if you did not have this extra sensibility, my sweet.'

She leaned against him, taking strength from him. Incredibly, knowing all her faults, he still wanted to be with her. She raised her eyes to his. 'You understand,' she said. 'You understand.' *Like Angelpapa*. 'And you do not ... mind?'

'Of course I understand, my love. I mind only that others have been permitted to upset you. It is my desire to protect you from the arrows and unpleasantries of life, so that you may get on with charming all our hearts out with your glorious voice. That is your destiny.'

'Oh, Etienne ...' Her lips quivered into a tremulous smile. 'You are so good to me.'

'Nonsense, my angel. I am happy to see you smile. Mayhap that is my destiny: to make the beautiful Angel of Song smile.' He put his hand over his heart in a comically exaggerated gesture.

'Oh, Monsieur!' she chided. 'Do you think to make a joke of such a serious matter?'

‘No, my dear one. I swear on my life that I have never been more serious.’ The intensity of his gaze made her heart give a queer bump, but he said merely, ‘And now we must get you home before the marquis du Bois decides to put me in his sights, for by now you will surely be late for your music lesson, my dear one!’

§

The marquis, out of his wheeled chair, was standing by the piano, sorting music. Arrested by the sound of running footsteps, he looked up, eyes narrowing as Angelique rushed into the room, and he saw her blotched complexion.

‘Angelique?’

‘Oh, Angelpapa!’ She flung herself into his arms, beginning to sob again; her face pressed against his coat.

Over her head, his outraged eyes met those of the younger man just entering the room. ‘Monsieur?’ The question thrummed with menace.

The marquis de Beaulieu stood his ground, meeting his gaze with a rueful smile. He appeared to have no difficulty in sustaining the fiery glare and spoke with his usual gentle calm: ‘I do apologise for returning Mademoiselle Angelique to you in this state, Monsieur. I assure you, it will not happen again. I was not aware of certain, er ... family difficulties. Next time I will know what steps to take to prevent it.’

‘Oh ... Luc!’ The marquis relaxed, turning his attention to his drooping pupil. ‘Have I not told you, Petite, to ignore that boorish brother of yours?’

‘Yes, Angelpapa.’

‘He is jealous of you, merely.’

‘Yes, Etienne said that.’

‘He is trying to get under your skin: hurt you with his nasty remarks.’

‘Yes, Etienne said that, also.’

‘Indeed?’ He shot a dry glance at her companion. ‘*Alors*, I am relieved to find that Etienne appears to be a young man of such eminently good sense!’ He turned to the marquis de Beaulieu, holding out his hand. ‘I am indebted to you, Monsieur. No doubt you will wish to assure yourself of the safe return of your sister. Angelique must

have her singing lesson now, but if you like to return in one hour, you may join us for luncheon.'

'Thank you, Monsieur. I will avail myself of your kind invitation,' he replied, adding with a twinkle, 'although, I have no doubt of the wellbeing of my sister.'

The marquis, looking after him, thoughtfully stroked his chin. Perhaps he would do, after all.

'*Eh bien*, my angel,' he said, striking a note on the keyboard. 'Let us begin with our scales.'

§

It was as they were finishing their lesson that the comte de Villefontaine walked in, unannounced.

'Papa! I am so happy to see you!'

'Indeed, my dear. And how is my beautiful daughter today?'

'Well, indeed, Papa. Etienne is coming to lunch.'

The comte's eyes questioned the marquis, who nodded slightly. 'Ah, a fine young man,' said the comte with satisfaction, kissing his daughter and shaking the other man's hand.

Angelique, excusing herself, went off to change out of her riding habit.

As she left the room, the marquis enquired: 'Katarina is well this morning?'

'My wife is as well as can be expected, Monsieur.' There was a faint emphasis on the comte's first word.

'You do not think the evening was too much for her?' asked the marquis, somewhat anxiously, disregarding the inflection.

'Oh, no, no, Monsieur, nothing like that.' The comte relented. 'Oh, no, no. Indeed, she gave me to understand that she enjoyed the outing tremendously.'

'Indeed?' murmured the marquis. 'I am very happy to hear it.' Adding reflectively, 'But not so happy, Monsieur, to have heard something else.'

‘Indeed not! It is what I have come to see you about: this nasty temper of Luc's. I do not know where he gets it from.’

‘Certainly not his mother.’

‘No, Monsieur. As you say,’ replied the comte without expression. ‘He is sorry he hurt his sister, Monsieur, but it appears that he blames her for his mother's illness.’

The marquis snorted. ‘Ridiculous! It is ridiculous to blame an innocent child for the sins of others!’

There was a short silence. The comte swallowed and looked out the window while the other continued, ‘Luc should not have been sent away to school so young. You should have got a good woman to look after him—let him see his mother, at least. You neglected your children, Monsieur. Madame Dupont tried to tell you!’

The comte made a gesture of misery. ‘Monsieur, you are right. Often have I regretted ... But at the time, I thought it best to keep them away from her.’ He wrung his hands. ‘You *know* what she was like!’

‘Indeed, I do! And the redeeming thing about you is that you did not, in any way, neglect her.’ He fell silent, regarding him sympathetically. ‘But rehashing the past will not solve the dilemma that has reached an impasse today.’ Receiving no answer, he added, ‘This situation cannot go on, you know. Angelique is fragile; she cannot take this sort of attack and then go out and perform onstage. You know how easily she goes to pieces—how little it takes to send her nerves and emotions spiralling out of control. If the marquis de Beaulieu had not brought her back to me ——’ He restrained himself with an effort.

‘I know, Monsieur, I know. But what can I do? They are bound to meet occasionally.’ Xavier had always had difficulty with the discipline of his children, ranging from laxity with his boys to ineptitude with his daughter.

The marquis studied his worried, honest face. The man was speaking the truth. ‘*Eh bien*, Monsieur, since you do not know, I will tell you what you will do.’ The quiet tones of the marquis brooked no opposition. ‘You will buy him a commission and send him to Morocco.’

‘An officer in the Foreign Legion? Oh, I do not know!’ Xavier was wavering, as usual.

‘Do you not? But I do! You will find it is what he has always wanted but has

been afraid that you will not allow him to go.'

'It is true that he has asked permission to join the cavalry and also to travel abroad. But he is young. I was not sure he was ready.'

'Indeed, Monsieur, there can be no doubt,' replied the marquis, smoothly. 'You will make him this offer, and we shall all be happy.'

The indecisive nature of the comte did not allow him to be certain of the underlying threat he thought he heard in the other's voice. Before he could make up his mind, the marquis added abruptly, 'You had better stay to luncheon with us, if you've nothing better to do. You may further your acquaintance with Angelique's beau. I expect Madame Dupont will wish to see you.'

The comte accepted this graceless invitation, and they made their way to the dining room.

'Xavier, my dear ... Welcome!' Madame Dupont hurried to greet him.

'I hope I have not inconvenienced you, Madame.'

'Of course not! There is always room at my dining table for you, Monsieur.'

'Thank you, Madame. You are very good.'

'Katarina did not feel up to coming with you today?'

'She is with her modiste, choosing some hats.' He grimaced slightly. 'I thought I should leave her with it.'

'Very wise,' commented the marquis, waving a careless hand. 'I leave all that sort of thing to Madame Dupont.'

'Katarina has a great fashion sense, Monsieur.' She turned to the comte. 'What Monsieur le marquis does not realise is that I always give her the final say in any apparel I choose for Angelique or myself.'

The comte looked gratified. 'You could not do better.'

'No, indeed! A little more of this excellent chicken casserole, Monsieur?'

'Etienne would like some, Godmama.' Angelique, having recovered her complexion, eyes brimful of laughter, silently dared him to deny it.

'Thank you, Madame.' He sent Angelique a look of agonised reproach, which was intercepted by Madame Dupont.

‘Here you are, Monsieur. And I will pass you this delicious herb omelette for Angelique. She must have some more of that. Our chef has made it especially for her.’ She smiled at them both.

‘Touché, my sweet,’ murmured the marquis de Beaulieu to his love as they struggled with their extra portions. ‘Madame Dupont is *femme formidable*, is she not? Finely, has she called your bluff!’ He raised his eyes respectfully as the comte addressed him, replying attentively.

Madame Dupont was very pleased to see such good manners in a young gentleman. Even in love as he was, he did not forget to pay attention to his other table companions. Indeed, she admitted to herself, he was a favourite of hers; for he had very much the warmth and dignity of his father, the duc de Belvoir.

After *déjeuner*, the young marquis accompanied the comte to his club; Madame Dupont took Angelique to view the results of her mother's appointment with the modiste; and the marquis retired to his design table in a bright corner of Madame Dupont's salon where, some little while later, he was apologetically disturbed by his butler.

‘Yes? What is it, Henri?’ The marquis looked up from his work.

‘A young man has called, Monsieur, to see you. I apprehend it concerns Mademoiselle Angelique.’

‘Not another one!’ The marquis cast up his eyes. ‘But of course, why else do we have visitors? How many, now, is it that have come asking to pay their addresses: twenty ... thirty?’

‘Oh, at the very least, Monsieur!’ He did not tell him of the numerous hopefuls he had skilfully dissuaded. Only the most persistent of them ever got as far as the marquis. ‘The card tray in the hall is overflowing! And the bouquets!’ He shrugged up his shoulders. ‘After Madame Dupont has filled the house with them, she can send the rest over to the Académie Mirage to the students.’

The marquis nodded. Madame Dupont may have given up her ballet teaching, but she still kept a good eye on her School of Ballet, now under the aegis of her best student, Jeanne, a retired prima donna, and the new wife of Monsieur Merignac. He stopped, remembering how the maestro had broken his news to him:

‘I am about to embrace the married state myself, Monsieur.’

‘Eh?’

‘You are surprised, Monsieur? So am I.’ The conductor's lean cheeks were red. ‘You see, I have never found anyone I could love more than my music. So, I never married. But then I met Jeanne. Of course, she was far too young. I mean, what would she want with a *vieillard* like me? But incredibly, she did. You see me a happy man, Monsieur.’

‘If you mean to tell me that you found someone you love more than your music, then all I can say is ——’

‘Not more, Monsieur. I cannot, *cannot*, say that. It is an impossibility for me, you understand. But I do not love my music more than her, you see?’

‘It is a very fine point, but I think so. Jeanne is the first woman you have loved as much as your music?’

‘Exactly so! I am a man who has everything, *hein?*’

The marquis frowned, recalling the joy radiating from his person, and his own dry response, ‘A fortunate circumstance, Maestro. Be sure to cherish it ...’

A muscle jerked in his cheek. He put down his slide rule with a snap. ‘I suppose I had better see this young man. But we shall have to put a stop to this constant stream of suitors. It is beyond the pale!’

‘Yes, Monsieur.’ The butler showed in the hapless youth and retired.

The marquis rounded on him savagely: ‘Yes? What do you want?’

‘Er ... er,’ stammered the poor young man, his eyes following the progress of a large black and white cat that unfurled itself from the depths of an armchair and strategically left the room. He had to suppress a sudden, irrational desire to follow the creature.

‘Come on, out with it! I am a busy man. I have no time for these piddling interruptions!’

Monsieur de Nouailles haltingly made known his desires.

The marquis tapped his pencil on the desk. ‘Have you the means to support my ward, Monsieur?’

‘Yes, Monsieur. I think so,’ confidently replied the suitor. ‘I am tolerably well-heeled. I can send my man of business if ——’

Ruthlessly interrupting him, the marquis questioned further, ‘Have you any idea how expensive it is to keep her in gowns for her singing engagements? Or how much it costs to maintain an entourage on tour?’

‘But she wouldn't ——’ began the dismayed young man.

‘Wouldn't what?’ His eyes were hard as diamonds.

‘She wouldn't have to tour as Madame de Nouailles, Monsieur. She would have charge of her own establishment: a substantial mansion. I would not allow my wife to sing on a stage,’ he added, ‘like a common entertainer.’

‘Enough! I have heard enough! Common entertainer? How dare you! You have not the faintest idea! No, you may not! It is an affront, Monsieur!’ The enraged blue gaze held him paralysed while it pierced him through. ‘I have had enough of the lot of you! Mademoiselle de Villefontaine is otherwise engaged and will remain so! Have I made myself clear? She will not see any of you!’

‘No, Monsieur. I mean, yes, Monsieur, er ...’ He flinched at the brutal tones.

The marquis rang the bell. ‘This interview is over. Do not call again. Ah, Henri, *à la bonne heure!* Show this gentleman out, if you please.’

Shepherding Monsieur de Nouailles out into the hall, Henri sympathetically helped him into his coat, handing him his hat and cane. ‘I wish you a good day, Monsieur.’

‘A good day? After what I have just been through? Oh, you must be joking, Monsieur! I suppose there is nothing left for me to do except blow my brains out, or throw myself into the Seine ...’

Obviously a young gentleman lacking in imagination, thought Henri. Since Mademoiselle's debut, he had heard many inventive ideas of self-disposal from disappointed suitors, including jumping off the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Ponte Vecchio (one Italian hopeful) and the cliffs of Normandy.

‘Oh, no, Monsieur! Truly, many have come on the same quest as you. I will tell you,’ the butler leaned closer, ‘*you* are one of the lucky ones!’

‘You mean ...?’

‘You are able to walk out of here, are you not?’

The would-be suitor started emerging from his misery for a moment. Had he

not heard somewhere that the marquis du Bois had a murderous temper? Just what was this butler trying to impart to him?

The butler, holding his eyes significantly, certainly seemed to be trying to convey some sort of message. 'I cannot tell you what I have seen, Monsieur,' intoned Henri, portentously.

'Truly?' faltered the suitor, feeling his hair stand on end in growing horror as the butler's impassive face relaxed for a second, and he briefly closed one eye.

'*Mon Dieu!*' Monsieur de Nouailles at last got the implication. Clutching his hat and cane, he stammered his thanks as the butler saw him off the doorstep. With every step he took, the demeanour of the marquis grew more evil: his speech imbued with such menace that, by the time he shared the memory of its horror with his friends, it had assumed terrifying proportions.

With a white countenance, he whispered a garbled account of his conversation with the butler, passed on by his friends to their acquaintances. Thus the rumours started—embellished according to the imagination of each *raconteur*—until the marquis (conveniently forgetting his past) would not have recognised himself in the Machiavellian character described by Angelique's disappointed suitors; although, he would have obtained a peculiar satisfaction in the depiction, hugely enjoying his reputation.

Returning to the salon, Henri picked up a book from the floor, placing it within reach of his employer.

'Thank you. You have seen off our young musketeer?' He added with satisfaction, 'I think I have discouraged that one!'

'Oh, indeed, Monsieur,' replied the butler. 'I do not think he will darken our door again.' Turning away, he permitted himself a glimmer of a smile.

If the legend grew amongst Angelique's disappointed suitors that the marquis was an evil ogre who kept his beautiful, golden-haired angel locked away from the world—constrained, as it were, between the music room and the concert hall—then it was equally apparent that while they fantasised about her rescue, in reality, none dared to cross the threshold of the hôtel du Bois, leaving its occupants in relative peace.

But there were those who moved in the privileged circles of the duc and duchesse de Belvoir who could have told of one who the marquis du Bois was pleased to approve. The trouble was that he had not yet made a declaration that the marquis

could use to forbid any further aspirants to Angelique's hand.

About the Author

Anne Rouen



Anne Rouen is an award-winning historical fiction author from Australia, who is inspired by the opulent operatic age of 19th century France, the classic Belle Époque era and the dark times of the Great War. This passion was ignited from her own heritage, combined with a lifelong love of historical fiction writing, particularly those of a similar ilk to Georgette Heyer.

This is where inspiration for the *Master of Illusion* series was born.

Anne Rouen is the alter ego of Lynn Newberry: a country woman from the New South Wales New England region, who breeds Brangus cattle by day and is a dedicated, passionate horsewoman.

The lady behind Anne Rouen has completed a specialist teaching degree in the Rural Sciences department of the University of New England, and has spent most of her life involved in the agricultural industry—twenty of them as an educator.

Throughout her career, Lynn has escaped the everyday demands of work through the hand of Anne Rouen. *Master of Illusion—Book One* was her first published novel, and it, along with its sequel, *Master of Illusion—Book Two*, has been nominated in several award programs, most notably, the *Global Ebook Awards* where it won the Silver Medal for *Modern Historical Literature Fiction* in 2014.

Lynn has also seen success with her short story writing, achieving a Highly Commended in the *Rolf Boldrewood Literary Awards* (2011) for *The Scent of a Criminal*.

With a broad range of interests, Anne Rouen writes a regular [blog](#), where she chats about her firsthand experience beating breast cancer, her love of horses and other current issues that are close to her heart.

More Books by Anne Rouen

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