

Prologue

They call me Lovely.

The reflection that studies me tells me otherwise. In the cold, pale lemon light of a December morning, I appear haggard, drawn. Sooty circles lie beneath my eyes, and my skin looks bloodless and dull.

I am twenty-one years old, yet I feel forty.

It does not matter to them, however. My body is young and supple. And by the time I am finished with rouge and kohl, I, too, can pass for any one of the virginal ingénues flouncing about the city.

“Lovely, Mademoiselle,” they whisper in my ear.

But I know I am not.

Chapter One

Paris, 1900

“Mam’selle Angelique?”

The one who stands nervously at the door to my chamber is, I am certain, close to my age—perhaps only slightly older. His long fingers clutch and curl awkwardly at the brim of his hat, and I cannot help but be amused. It is impossible for him to be a virgin, not in a city where men are wont to plunge their cocks into nearly anything that will move, so this is either his first dalliance outside of marriage, or his first time with someone like me. Perhaps both.

I smile and pat the empty part of the settee next to me, forever the coquette.

“*Oui*, Monsieur. Please, won’t you join me?”

A sharp, wordless nod and this dark-haired boy-man closes the door behind him, crosses to me and carefully folds his tall length to sit upon the burgundy velvet. He lays his hat carefully on the seat beside him, and clasps his palms together. His hands seem strong and capable, and his fingers are long.

There is a long moment, difficult for him, I suppose, where I patiently watch and wait. It is necessary for me to gain whatever knowledge I can, to be able to judge precisely what I am to do. It is an art, this learning moment, and I long ago discovered it was in my best interest to listen to my instincts. They usually do not fail me.

He is handsome, this man-child. Clean-shaven, with a strong jaw and full mouth. Dark, unruly curls play atop his head and down his neck, and his expressive, guileless eyes

are the same hue. The scent of wealth is on him, from his fine wool suit and clean shirtfront to his shiny black shoes. Whatever else I may say about him, he is well-bred. He does not immediately paw at me like some beast in heat, though perhaps that means nothing—others whom I thought to be men of dignity and honor would have barely heard the click of the door before their trousers were around their ankles and I was on my knees.

It seems I shall need to take charge this evening, but I do not mind. He is not the first to require it, and he shall certainly not be the last. Besides, his air of innocence intrigues me.

“Monsieur?” I ask. “What is your name? What may I call you?”

A flicker of a glance in my direction, and the flash of a shy, beautiful smile. “Alexandre.”

His voice is rich and pleasant; it sends an unexpected shiver down my spine. I smile at him. “Well, Alexandre. What shall we do tonight? I am at your service in whichever way you prefer.”

He does not immediately answer. But I can see by the clenching of his jaw and the rapid drumming of his fingertips atop his thigh that his skittishness has reappeared, and I must alter my strategy.

“We can do nothing more than talk, if that is what you wish.”

He turns slightly to look at me once again, and his eyes express relief. “*Merci*, Mam’selle,” he says, quietly. Again, he will not hold my gaze, but with a short, deep breath, begins to speak.

“You must forgive me, Mam’selle. I have never sought company in this form, and I find myself somewhat unnerved.” A brief look of panic crosses his face and his voice becomes apologetic. “I do not mean to imply—”

I cannot help but give a quiet laugh. His naïveté is refreshing. “*Cher* Alexandre, do not be embarrassed. I cannot be offended. We both know my purpose here. I provide companionship and comfort to those who cannot find it elsewhere. What form that comfort takes varies from gentleman to gentleman.”

Alexandre exhales audibly. “Your reputation does not do you justice, Mam’selle. My inquiries led me to you, and I find you do not disappoint.” He takes my hand in both of his, and presses a lingering kiss to the back of my hand. My skin tingles where his lips have touched me, and the sensation is a surprise. For a moment, I am rendered speechless.

“You flatter me, Alexandre.” The words escape me on a mere breath, and I must clear my throat. It will not do to appear so affected by a mere chaste kiss. Madame Jeanette would be horrified.

The topic of business is my savior, and I genuflect at its feet, unwilling and unable to think more about my reaction to this man.

“What is it you desire, Alexandre? If I may be so bold, there is a reason you are here, and it might be wise to begin there, *non?*”

“Yes, yes. Of course. I—” His voice falters, and at that moment I am certain he belongs in the *dalliance outside of marriage* category. The faintest twinge of regret echoes through me—that this man already belongs to someone—and I am mystified by it. It is none of my business where and to whom that may be. “My wife—” my soul dims the faintest shade to hear the words escape his lips, “—is gone, Mam’selle. Has been so for several months now. She died in childbirth—” The words seem to catch in his throat, and he is silent for a moment. “My son was lost with her.”

I exhale softly, wishing this new knowledge instantly forgotten, in that same moment ashamed by the brief pulse

of fierce pleasure on learning of his marital status. It is not my place to think these things. It is such a sad story for one so young—a not uncommon one, however—and my heart aches on his behalf. Where others have used their losses as a mere excuse, Alexandre's pain is real. When he glances at me, I see the dark shadows in his eyes. With the others I have never been entirely certain of their honesty, though some liars were easier to spot than others. Would he have come to me anyway, had his wife lived? I am surprised to think that he would not.

But now I have my measure of him, and I know I cannot push. For such a big, strong man he is most fragile. He is not yet aware of the fact, but I know, too, the deeper reason he has need of me—I must heal him, mend his wounds. Once again make him whole enough to rejoin the land of the living, rather than dwell with the ghosts of the past.

I open my mouth, about to speak, when he interrupts me, his expression apologetic.

“Forgive me, Mam’selle, but I must take my leave. I had intended only to meet you, to see with my own eyes if you were precisely what the others had described.”

Somehow, I do not want him to go. But it is not my choice. However, I do not want his last memory of me to include the spectre of his lost wife. I smile at him, encouraging, teasing, flirting. “And do I meet your measure, Alexandre?”

He stands stiffly, and I spy a promising bulge growing in the front of his trousers. An inexplicable sense of triumph fills me, and I would like to crow with laughter. Instead I merely raise my gaze to meet his. Not only conscious of his own state of arousal, but also of my selfsame awareness, Alexandre fumbles for his hat from the settee, holding the felt chapeau precisely over his midquarters.

Cheeks tinged with pink, Alexandre clears his throat. “You are beyond measure, Mam’selle. May I request the pleasure of your company again tomorrow evening?”

The disappointment over his departure is swept away by the knowledge that he will return. Again, I am discomfited by this discovery, but I cannot dwell on it at present. “You certainly may, Alexandre. Simply speak with Madame Jeanette to make arrangements before you depart. However, there is one condition.”

A flicker of what might be panic appears in his eyes. “And what might that be, Mam’selle?”

I sigh inside. I must be more cautious with this one. It will take some time and effort to relax him, but I will do my best. Indeed, I am excited by the prospect. Rising from the settee, I step closer to him and then cup his cheek in my hand. His skin is rough with the hint of new whiskers. His throat works nervously. “My one condition is that you must call me by my name. You need not call me Mam’selle any longer.”

His eyes are wide, and the words escape in a whisper thin as smoke. “Yes...Angelique.”

I smile at him, hoping to impart care, concern and sweetness in the gesture. Alexandre smiles hesitantly back at me, then quietly leaves the room.

Crossing to my dressing table, I contemplate my reflection in the glass for a moment. I shall not admit that in the space of mere moments, this man has disconcerted me like no other.

I will not.

Monsieur Carriere’s breath reeks of onions and garlic, and I must turn my head away in order not to gag. His thrusts are rough and awkward, and I cannot help but grimace, thankful that with my cheek pressed against the bedlinens, my expression is hidden from view. Reaching beneath me, he

fumbles clumsily with my breasts, yanking on my nipples as though they were the teats of a cow.

I barely refrain from sighing out of boredom, and instead force a squeal of pleasure. Monsieur Carriere is not my favorite caller, by any means. He is fat and jowly, boisterous and demanding. However, he is also wealthy beyond measure, and so to make up for his shortcomings—where his cock figures not-so-prominently—he pays a secretly inflated fee for my services. What he does not know shall not hurt him. Today of all days, I want him gone. The sooner he has satisfied himself, the sooner I shall see Alexandre again. The man has stayed foremost in my thoughts since waking.

He would not paw at me like this. The thought arises, unbidden and unwanted.

Releasing my tit from his torturous grasp, Monsieur Carriere digs pudgy fingers into my hips, pumping faster, his balls slapping damply against my skin. I know he is reaching his crisis by the grunting sounds emanating from deep in his throat, and I groan loudly. He believes he excites me more than any other, and this makes him mad with lust.

“Ah, *Ange*,” le monsieur bleats loudly, his voice shrill with pleasure. “Your sweet cunny adores my cock, does it not? I sense it!”

“Oh, Monsieur,” I groan, feigning breathlessness. “Your cock is immense, such pleasure you give me! Oh, I cannot stand it! You must come now, Monsieur. Please! Do not make me beg it of you.”

It seems my words never fail to excite *cher* monsieur to his ecstasy, for with one last giant thrust of his tiny rod, he howls his release to the heavens, and I feel the heat of his seed deep within. I sigh quietly with relief. His visit is nearly complete, and I shall soon be rid of the man for another week.

With a wet slither, he withdraws from my quim and proceeds to slide his softening cock in the crack of my bottom, smearing his spend. It is a peculiar trait of his that I endure. Finally he dips a finger in me, coating it with our mixed juices, and sucks it clean. With a rough laugh, and a sharp slap of his palm against my rump, he straightens, buttons his trousers and dons his topcoat.

Now I am finally able to relax my pose and recline on the bed, forcing an expression of contentment on my face.

His gaze greedily devours me, and I can feel his attention on my nipples as they pucker in the cool air. Reaching into his pocket, he carelessly tosses a small handful of notes on my dressing table.

“An extra gift for *mon ange*,” he says, with a wink.

“Oh, Monsieur, you are entirely too kind.” I smile at him, fluttering my lashes. Deception is no longer necessary at the sight of that money. This week, those francs will buy a fresh set of watercolors and a new brush, and perhaps even a new gown or a pair of shoes. His freehanded spending makes enduring his visits worthwhile.

He opens the door to my chamber and pauses, turning to look at me again. “Nothing is too good for my Angelique. I look forward to seeing you again, Lovely.”

The door closes, and I collapse wearily against the mattress. There is a sour taste in my mouth, and I lift the water glass from the bedside table to take a sip. But water will not wash away the taint and I put the glass down without drinking. Instead I rise, cross to the small cabinet in the corner, and gather both goblet and wine bottle. The acrid, smoky flavor of the grape cleanses, the burgundy liquid burning my throat with each mouthful.

Do not dwell upon it, Marie-Claire. Do you hear me? You must not.

I rinse the empty goblet in the small washbasin and carefully return it and the bottle to their place in the cabinet,

feeling somewhat wistful. However, it would not do to indulge too freely. Madame Jeanette frowns upon such behavior, and neither do I wish to have my wits befuddled for Alexandre's return.

Glancing at the small clock at bedside, I feel a flash of alarm. He is due shortly, and I am not prepared. I have not bathed, and the bedlinens must be freshened. Like a whirlwind I yank the coverings from the bed and toss them into the washing sack, then pull out fresh, rosewater-scented ones from the drawer. In a thrice I have straightened the bed, and now must tend to myself.

A quick knock grants me a bucket of warm water. My chemise joins the others needing laundering, and after a douche, I am hunched over my small tub, lathered with bubbles. It is not long before I am clean, dry, powdered and redressed—this time in a new chemise and light evening gown. Knowing Alexandre as I do thus far, the sight of me in mere undergarments would send him scurrying away in shock.

I have barely completed tying ribbons in my hair when the knock comes. My traitorous heart jumps briefly in my chest, and I must slow my breaths.

"Enter," I call softly.

Alexandre enters, and it is as though the air in the room vanishes. It is hard to gather breath, and I am vexed by this girlish foolishness.

He wears a shy smile, and today his hair is more disheveled, as though he has raked his fingers through the dark curls. His suit is again well-cut and fine-looking, and I cannot explain the relief that rolls in my belly. It is as though my mind is satisfied that it had not exaggerated his looks; that, indeed, he is as handsome, dark and broad as he was just yesterday.

I am nervous, and I regret now putting the bottle of wine away so soon.

“Angelique. It is a pleasure to see you again.” The expression on his face is earnest and forthright.

“I am pleased to see you again, as well, Alexandre. How do you fare?”

“I am well. And you?”

I incline my head. “I find nothing to cause complaint. Please—” I gesture to the settee, “—won’t you be seated?”

With similar careful movements as before, Alexandre folds himself down onto the bench. He fusses with his chapeau again, and it occurs to me that perhaps wine might relax him enough to make him comfortable.

Crossing the room, I reach into my cabinet and withdraw an unopened bottle. “May I pour you a goblet, Alexandre?” I ask, indicating the drink.

He shakes his head. “Thank you—no. It has been some time since I have indulged, and I would rather not have my wits befuddled.”

It would be impolite of me to imbibe alone, so I return the bottle to its place.

“Was it an illness that gave you cause to not drink?”

He hesitates, and I wonder if I have tread overmuch into provinces wherein I do not yet belong.

“It—it was Cosette’s request. She was not fond of wine, and for her sake I did not consume it.”

“Ah.” I wonder if this subject should be pursued, but it seems there is no time like the present moment to reveal these wounds to the light and to the air, lest they continue to fester.

Composing my thoughts, I return to the settee and seat myself next to Alexandre.

“Do you wish to speak of her with me, Alexandre? What was she like?”

His expression is a surprising mixture of relief, gratefulness and wonderment, but in the end, he nods.

Reaching into his breast pocket, he withdraws a worn photograph and presents it to me.

The young woman is pretty, in a pale, ethereal, fragile sort of way, and she holds an aura of virtuousness about her that I am certain appealed greatly to Alexandre. However, she also appears as though a strong bluster of wind would topple her. But such thoughts are uncharitable, especially regarding a deceased woman, and I shan't grant them voice or revisit them.

"She was beautiful." I return the photograph to Alexandre and watch him as he studies it himself, adoration upon his face. Jealousy flashes through me, and I am surprised. I am not subject to these influences surrounding my callers' wives.

I wonder—what sort of lover was she? I cannot fathom roughness with her, or even true passion. Perhaps she considered opening her legs as nothing more than a dutiful obligation to her husband.

I hold back a sigh. Uncharitable, again. But I study Alexandre, and he is young, handsome. What of his own desires? Perhaps his lustful appetites have been dismissed and lost to time as has his taste for wine.

Or perhaps deep within he continues to hunger.

Only time will tell. And I will do what I can to discover those secrets.