

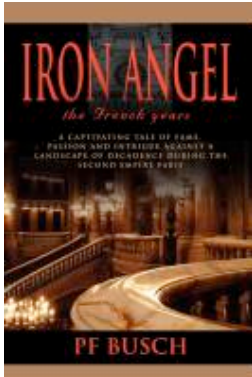
IRON ANGEL



the French years

A CAPTIVATING TALE OF FAME,
PASSION AND INTRIGUE AGAINST A
LANDSCAPE OF DECADENCE DURING THE
SECOND EMPIRE PARIS

PF BUSCH



In a captivating tale of fame, passion and intrigue, against a landscape of decadence during the Second Empire, Gabriella De Conte Thorsen, a plantation owner from Louisiana, travels to Paris to attend the Académie de Musique, and takes Paris by storm. Conflicted by her relationship with the powerful Duke de Bourbonne and her love for the Parisian artistic scene, Gabriella must choose between her domineering suitor and operatic fame on the world stage.

IRON ANGEL

The French Years

Book 1

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IRON ANGEL
THE FRENCH YEARS

Book I

A Novel

By

P.F. BUSCH

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To Carl, my love and my pillar of strength.

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Warm thanks and great appreciation to my family for your unconditional love.

And to my friends, your encouragement and support touch my heart.

France 1830-1869

1830 July Revolution *Les Trois Glorieuses* Charles X from the House of Bourbon goes in exile in England. Louis Philippe from the House of Orleans is crowned.

1836 Charles Louis Napoléon, the future Napoléon III, tries unsuccessfully to initiate a Bonapartist Coup by taking over the French troops in Strasbourg. He is arrested and is sent into exile in Switzerland.

1840 Charles Louis Napoléon attempts another unsuccessful coup. He is sentenced to life imprisonment in Ham. He escapes to England.

1848 February Louis-Philippe is deposed. A Republic is established.

1848 Charles Louis Napoléon is elected President of the Second Republic.

1852 After a Coup d'État in 1851 Charles Louis Napoléon declares himself Emperor.

1853 Georges Haussmann is charged with the reconstruction of Paris.

1854 France and England declare war on Russia and defeat her in Sebastopol in 1855.

1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris. Courbet defies the Salon and sets up his Pavilion de Réalisme across from the Académie des Beaux Arts.

1859 King Wilhelm of Prussia accedes to the throne. Otto von Bismarck is appointed Minister/Imperial Chancellor.

1859 France defeats Austria. Nice and the Duchy of Savoy is ceded to France.

1859 February Capture of Saigon by Admiral Charles Rigault de Gernouilly.

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1859 Darwin publishes his Original Species.

1861 Construction of the Palais Garnier begins—the new opéra house.

1861 April American Civil War begins.

1862 France invades Mexico

1862 Indochina is ceded to France

1862 Manet *The Lunch on the Grass*

1863 Salon des Refusés. Another venue from the French Académie de Peinture and Sculpture, the Salon of the Rejected artists was instituted by Napoléon III to satisfy the bourgeois taste and essentially to gain their political support.

1864 Prince Ferdinand Maximilian of Austria is crowned as Maximilian I of Mexico with French support.

1865 Napoléon III meets with Otto von Bismarck.

1865 Monet *The Bodmer Oak*

1865 April Robert E. Lee surrenders to Ulysses Grant at Appomattox.

1865 April 14 Lincoln's assassination

1867 Maximilian I is executed by the Republican forces led by Benito Juarez. Return of the French troops from Mexico

1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris

1867 October 22 Garibaldi marches on Rome to oust the Pope from his lands—the Papal States.

1867 October 28 French troops arrive in Civitavecchia to protect the Pope against Garibaldi. Garibaldi is captured.

1867 The poet Baudelaire, the Great Flâneur dies in December 1867.

1869 Suez Canal is opened. De Lesseps is a hero.

1869 Summer of 1869 Renoir and Monet paint together near Bougival *La Grenouillère*

Chapter One

“Opéra is a strange mix of poetry and music where the author and the composer, both embarrassed to be in each other presence, have massive amount of conflicts and dilemmas to create a horrific spectacle.”

Charles De Saint-Évremond (1614-1703)

Paris France September 1867 L’Opéra De Paris

Mesmerized and enthralled by the supreme beauty of the opéra De Paris, Gabriella De Conte Thorsen sat regally in her loge next to Maître Lauriot, the famed music maestro. Her eyes lifted to the heavens. She prayed fervently that Jean-Louis-Pierre De Pleysis, Duke de Bourbonne would be in attendance tonight yearning for her presence.

Libiamo, the famous aria sung in Verdi’s *La Traviatta*, had been the catalyst to their passion. The orchestra played the lively music that normally convinced opéra aficionados to sing, dance, drink and be merry. Instead, Gabriella was devastated. The music brought back reminiscences of the formidable moments spent with the Captain on *La Tempête*, his private vessel, and of the passionate nights in the south of France. She called to memory the Grand Gala in Monte Carlo in the company of the Prince of Monaco, Jean-Louis’ great friend. The Russian Ballet’s awe-inspiring rendition of *Swan Lake* had enchanted her. That very same night their lovemaking had ignited Jean-Louis-Pierre powerful body as he’d gathered her to him. “I want to erase all connection that you might have had, Gaby. I want you to live for me and me alone,” he’d whispered in a moment of rare passion. “I adore you, too, Jean-Louis,” she’d gasped. At the time she’d presumed that the passion they sensed for each other would

become the love story of the century. She was confident then that he adored her as well. The following morning he'd presented her with a stunning emerald necklace and had clasped it around her neck. "They match your eyes, Gaby," he'd murmured as he'd kissed her eyelids shut. "I feel complete when I'm with you, chérie," he'd shared.

Out of her *rêverie*, dreaming, she lifted her hand to her throat and felt the stones. Five months had passed—did he still feel passion for her? She doubted it. He had not given her a sign of life. Young girls' fairytale stories . . . her heart lamented for days gone by.

She sat, regal, in a white and gold satin bergère looking down at the *Grand Monde*, high society, as they filed down the aisle to their assigned seats. Her mind raced, frightening thoughts fired and immobilized the young soprano and plantation owner from New Orleans who had been admitted at the Académie de Musique in Paris. If by any great chance an encounter with Jean-Louis should arise, would he engage her in conversation or feign not to recognize her? The sisters at the convent in Grenoble had prepared her for the disappointment. They knew all too well the culture and treatment of tainted women.

Her beloved cousin as well, Cardinal Philippe Thorsen had failed to convince her to return with him to Rome to ignite her musical career. "Milan, Rome, Venice—you'll delight in the artistic scene, my dearest Gabriella. Italian cities have commanding National Académies de Musique—the very best, you know that, dear cousin," the cleric had assured his cherished first cousin with all the love he possessed for her.

Lost in her unfulfilled dreams, Gabriella nodded.

"I presume that it would be enlightening as well, Philippe," the astonishingly beautiful, raven-haired young girl replied without much enthusiasm.

"You'll flourish under illustrious maestros, Gabriella. Jean-Louis, as you so familiarly call him was a mistake. You're too perfect. Don't compromise your future my dear Gabriella. You'll be cast out like a commoner. For God's sake . . . let me clarify," he sighed and cleared his throat; his magnificent face softened as he invoked the Lord's name in vain. "Bear in mind your dreams, your laughter, your dislike

for society women of your time. Remember your independence, it used to be the only thing you lived for. What happened to all that Gabriella?”

She nodded and smiled sweetly to her beloved gentle cousin.

In a last attempt to convince his stubborn cousin to accompany him, Cardinal Thorsen appealed to her sense of logic.

“Your plantation and privileged background and standing in New Orleans will not appeal to his aristocratic roots. You’re aware of that, Gabriella,” the ecclesiastic exclaimed bluntly. “Entertainers make good courtesans, but my dearest, you want more and you deserve more, a lot more. In my eyes you deserve the world, my dear cousin.”

He’d kissed her lovingly on her forehead and he’d gathered her tenderly to his chest to absorb the pain and bring a sense of reality to her conflicted mind.

“Dear Philippe, I love you immensely, as well,” she’d responded, knowing all too well that she could do no wrong in his eyes. However, she had chosen another path.

While traveling to Avignon with Philippe, she’d visualized a joyous life that had taken hold of her optimistic spirit once more. The original plan to return to Paris and lead the life she delineated for herself in New Orleans was back on track.

Through Jean-Louis in the south of France, she had encountered influential men in both Nice and St. Tropez. The Prince of Monaco had been impressed when Jean-Louis had told him that she had been accepted at the Académie Nationale De Musique. Life would shine upon her. After all, she was no stranger to set back. Her whole life had been one difficult decision after another. She had learned to turn defeat into victories. She knew how to make herself happy. Filled with confidence, she had told Philippe of her plans to return to Paris.

Three weeks later, however, in the City of Light, her *joie de vivre* vanished. She felt vulnerable, weak at the thought of an encounter with Jean-Louis. She had seen him two days earlier in front of his mansion on the Quay De Bourbon, but her pride forbade her to confront him. Now, she pondered in her loge where the euphoric sensations of a few weeks past had gone.

What would be Jean-Louis' reaction to her ordeal? That is, if he even deigned to speak to her. Why had she taken so long to share with him the tragedy in Grenoble? Would she take the leap and confront him? He had a terrifying sense of pride. Would he empathize? No. Jean-Louis never empathized with anyone. Had he forgotten her? The thought alone filled her with despair.

At this most opportune moment, when her heart sank and her mind told her to flee, the orchestra began the prelude. The acoustics were phenomenal. Momentarily, the magnificence of the music absorbed her entire being. She was lifted into another world, a world that she adored, and one where she always found refuge. Thank heavens, music always assuaged her distraught mind.

Gabriella lost track of time. She had entered her own private world filled with euphonious sounds she knew so well. One day soon she would be the lead soprano singing on that very stage.

* * *

In the intervening moments, just as conflicted but for other reasons, Jean-Louis-Pierre De Plezsis, Duke De Bourbonne, or Jean-Louis, as Gabriella commonly called him, stepped down from his carriage and walked up the steps leading to the foyer of the opéra de Paris. His Grandmother waited in the reception area with her long time *ami*, friend, the Count D'Ardienne. Hats were removed as he passed along the crowded halls. Smiles and cleavage flashed from lovely ladies clad in satin and voile evening gowns, who might have known the Duke in more private venues. His enigmatic smirk responded to all greetings. He knew quite well what society murmured under their breath this evening, the great De Plezsis, the worst of rakes, brought an American Southern Belle to France and now the sweet young thing had disappeared—nowhere to be found. A colonial had tossed the Grand Monsieur aside like an old rag. The story would feed the gossip mills for the rest of the opéra season.

Nevertheless, le *Grand Monde*, the aristocracy, noticed the celebrated Captain and rushed to his side. To see and to be seen with a man of his stature and influence in both the political circles and the

world of high finance was the favorite pastime of many. His life and victories, fighting along Admiral Charles Rigault de Grenouilly in the colonies and his exploits during the American Civil War had become a legend. All around the French nation, and particularly rampant in Paris, gossip alleged that Louis Napoléon himself had recalled the Duke to the *patrimoine*, native land, to negotiate the final treaties dealing with the complete reunification of the Papal States to the Kingdom of Italy.

Of all nights, Jean-Louis-Pierre De Pleyssis was reluctant about wasting his time on entertainment. However, his Grandmother had extracted a promise from him. It was her eighty-seventh birthday and the Duke recognized that nothing would please her more than to attend the opéra at the arm of her grandson. He had assured *l'aïeulle*, grandmother, that he would accompany her to the gala. A little distraction would serve him well. He just wished it had not been at the opéra.

Playing over and over in his mind were visions of the stunning American girl who had stolen his heart on that fateful journey home from America. He recalled her expressive face, as she looked up at him, stunned, when he'd entered his cabin on the *Tempête*, at midday. Gaby had unwrapped the bindings from her breasts, and she'd let her wet, mahogany mane stream down her décolleté. She had been pretending to sing her heart out as she rehearsed silently the necessary acting skills of a diva. Wrapped in 'his' burgundy coverlet, her opulent breasts teased his gaze. The expressive emerald green eyes shot sensual sideways glances at him. Blinded by her imagination, she'd extended her hand elegantly while she danced around his desk on light feet, gracefully holding on to a bottle of Cognac—the imaginary partner. How charming the pose had been. He recalled how she feebly smiled at first, and then shock and discomfiture had overtaken her formidable flawless complexion, first turning her cheeks many different shades of pink, and then crimson. He should have taken her in his arms then and continued with the fantasy waltz as her real partner.

She had fallen off the face of the earth and all the efforts in finding her whereabouts had been fruitless. What had happened to the

little mischief? There lay the mystery. There were more questions than answers.

His Grandmother brought back reality to his distant thoughts. She guided him toward a group of intimate friends on the first balcony. Obediently he followed her and flashed his inscrutable smile. The social ballet had begun.

* * *

Four months ago, his ship, as planned, had anchored in Brest. He'd sent word to his secretary that he would be in Paris within days. The message was to be relayed to Gaby immediately. He had spent over a month of passion-filled days with the beautiful young American. She stirred up emotions, he didn't know he was capable of feeling. The sense of loss he felt when they had to part ways at the height of passion in Grenoble had shaken his stoicism. Yet he had been consoled by the idea that they would reunite weeks later in Paris. Never would he have imagined that she would go missing. The reply had returned promptly stating that no one knew the whereabouts of Mademoiselle De-Conte Thornsen and that she had neither registered, nor attended her courses at the Académie.

The search for Gaby had started immediately. Now just before leaving his home for the opéra, a missive had reached him. There were clues about the whereabouts of the beautiful soprano.

After so many disappointments, he was doubtful that she was in Paris. He was almost certain that she had returned with her cousin to Rome. Next week he would travel to Rome once more. He was going to get to the bottom of this sordid affair. The suspense had to end.

Chapter Two

Enthused by the splendor of the highly decorated opéra house along with its superb acoustics, Gabriella missed the entrance of the Duke De Bourbonne. His Grandmother at his arm, he slowly walked to his grand loge overlooking the stage. She recalled how he'd teased her during the crossing.

"Gaby, I will do you the honor. You'll attend your first Gala night at the Opéra De Paris with me, ma chère." It now seemed but just a faint image.

During the intermission, she remained in her seat and glanced at the audience as she searched for his tall frame and dark brown hair. Everyone appeared to be of short stature in Paris. Jean-Louis surely would stand out in any crowd.

Predictably, in one of the loge one level below hers she caught a glimpse of his distinctive profile. He sat next to an older woman who glared at everyone through her *lorgnette*, opéra glasses. The dowager's gaze froze on Gaby, who at this very moment could not for the life of her peel her eyes away from the Duke.

An exchange of words between the regal dowager elegantly dressed in a blue satin dress with large white roses sewn on the shoulders and around her décolleté, and Jean-Louis seemed to be taking place. Lazily, with his sensual smile, he turned as he glanced upward.

His indolent glimpse suddenly turned into a look of incredulous disbelief. Instinctively she recoiled. For lacks of knowing how to better respond, she returned the gaze, waved and fluttered her long-gloved fingertips.

Abruptly, without interrupting his defiant glare he stood up and cast a skeptical stare once more—no it was not a mirage! Briskly, he stomped out of the loge.

The same urge enveloped her. Without a word to the old maestro, who gawked at the scene that unfurled before his eyes, she elegantly peeled away from her *fauteuil*, armchair, dashed up the three steps

leading out of the loge and ran out the door into the highly decorated hallway. In the excitement of the moment, she lost all sense of direction. Where would he be coming from? She froze for an instant at the top of the staircase. It was a dream. By enchantment in this fairy tale castle, a breathtaking familiar voice called out her name—powerless she glanced down.

Jean-Louis stood, dashing, bigger than life, clad in a black formal waistcoat with a snowy white shirt that enhanced his olive skin and magnificent blue eyes.

Gabriella paused, terrified. Jean-Louis was striking in both look and demeanor. Suspended in time, she prayed with every last fiber in her body and soul that their storybook adventure would be eternal. *God, don't fail me now*, she fervently asked the Master up above.

Gracefully, she glided down the stairs onto the platform where he stood. The reflection of a thousand Jean-Louis and Gabriellas manifested in the gigantic mirrors that framed the staircase. She flew in his arms.

Oblivious to the crowd, who had left their salons to watch delightfully the play develop before their very eyes, Jean-Louis-Pierre De Pleysis took her fully in his arms, lifted her off the floor only to hold her as close as it was humanly possible. His passionate kisses landed ardently on her lips and on every inch of her uncovered bosom. Unmindful of where he was, who was looking and what the gossips were going to trade the following days, he collected her close to him for interminable minutes, not willing to let her go for fear of losing her forever. The world closed in on both of them, Gabriella lay immobile in his arms, afraid that she might wake up from a formidable dream.

After a long embrace, unaware of the large crowd now standing on the balconies and the staircase, gawking at this most unusual encounter, Jean-Louis-Pierre gently set her back on the stairs and gazed in her eyes.

“Where have you been, Gaby?” he whispered in a voice meant only for her. I searched for you incessantly.” His body ached with an overwhelming desire.

“In Paris . . .” she began to explain as she felt his body go rigid.

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“In Paris?” he interrupted loudly. “The entire time?”

Her mind raced as she tried to find the right words to calm him.

Simultaneously men and women strained their necks; some gasped. Gabriella looked upward.

“I can explain,” she murmured. “I can Jean-Louis . . . please let me,” she reiterated.

Instantly the reality of the situation hit him. She had not been hurt. She had not been missing. In fact she was intentionally hiding from him. Gabriella’s desperate attempts to explain became distant background noise and an untenable fury grew inside him.

He looked around, the gawkers were all ears, drafters’ pencils scrolled on their pads.

She sensed the change in his demeanor. As quickly as he had gathered her up to his body, he took a deliberate step back. She watched his gaze change from one of unabashed passion to an icy glare. His square jaw clenched with flawless determination.

She searched his face for answers. Did he still love her? Would he ever forgive her? No. She sensed a tangible seething fury set in. Her heart broke. He would never want to see her again. As he started to turn away Gabriella caught a glimpse of pain.

Chapter Three

NEW YORK February, 1867 New York Harbor Quay 80.

It was the first time she missed Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Gabriella De Conte Thorsen conceded somewhat gleefully that her singing would be missed at the prestigious Krews balls. However, memory was short in these fashionable circles. As soon as the season ended, she would be history. The grand of the city had forgotten her beloved cousin, Philippe, now Cardinal Thorsen, when he'd travelled to the Vatican.

Gabriella never took anything for granted. The young plantation owner had lived well and independently for the past twenty years because of that very philosophy. She reveled in the knowledge that her voice was special, an incredible God-given gift that she cherished. She was forceful, diligent, and very much aware that in the world she lived in, she only had herself to trust and God to rely upon. Her singing talent had been honed to near perfection; now she needed additional professional support and she was on her way to get it. She had been accepted to the Nationale Académie De Musique in Paris.

The Frigate that would take her to France waited, anchored at the port. The crew stood in attention, awaiting orders from the Master.

While she stood alone on the cay, her cognac-colored valises held shut by large white leather straps next to her, she silently watched the heavy-set and very muscular longshoremen. In oversized beige cargo pants and dirty white sweaters with rolled up sleeves, they lifted and carried away the remaining trunks inside the cavernous suites of the ship. Clad in a black and white, ankle-length suit, she gazed at the ship and the mast towering over her as she waited to be taken across the ocean to a faraway land.

An overwhelming sense of nostalgia took hold of her as she recalled her childhood, her friends, and the sisters at the convent. She sighed. The tinge of sadness toward the past would never supersede the great satisfaction she'd derived from not meeting the coward, her

father, during the opéra season. All the false pretenses of affection and fondness he professed toward his daughter in front of the grand society, his friends, were a farce. That was one horrific act she would not miss in Paris.

On the cay, ready to climb on that fateful ship that would change her life forever, she lifted her gaze to the heavens and prayed.

The ship across from her waited in New York harbor—for her. She had traveled five days to get here, with stops in Washington and Philadelphia. The crossing to France would be an extraordinary experience and by God she was ready for the challenge.

Less than an hour later, a mariner came to escort her up the wooden plank where the Captain, an Italian seaman, Master Capello, stood waiting to greet the passengers arriving on deck.

Gabriella noticed that she was the only female on board. Just as well, she thought. She had brought a large amount of reading material. Tranquility, she valued. Had she ever experienced a time in her life when a responsibility to something or someone had not been a pressing issue? No, she could not recall the instance.

The Captain of the ship went out of his way to personally welcome her on his vessel. Short and stout, Master Capello's uniform fit tightly around his rotund abdomen so that the fabric around the buttons was stretched to its maximum and coming undone. *Un bon vivant*, she promptly thought. The Captain possessed a charming voice and a great sense of old world niceties.

"I am thrilled, Signorina, to personally welcome you on my vessel." He was seemingly enthralled when she shared that she spoke fluent Italian.

She greeted the Captain and the other travelers that would join her in the crossing. After a polite salutation to all, she filed into the designated room.

The crossing would take approximately twenty-eight days. She looked out upon New York Harbor from the porthole above her bed and was frightened by the dark billowing cloud that covered the pane. Momentarily, a long, thundering noise shook the furniture in her room. It blasted from the ship's chimney. The great road onward had begun. She'd followed her dream by taking a giant leap forward.

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* * *

The first few days of the passage were quiet. She sat reading in her cabin, thankful for moments of pure silence. Almost two years had passed since the end of the Civil War and the Reconstruction was not going well. The War of Secession had left its indelible prints on Southern society. The federal government had ordered federal troops to stay in the slave states for another fifteen years to protect the former slaves, Freedmen. Sherman's rampage on her Southern lands had been horrific and the deaths inflicted on the population while he marched on to Savannah were unbearable. The very thought that the federal government could protect a polarized population appeared bleak.

White women did not fare much better, Gabriella thought. In her eyes, now that the men had returned home from the war, the independence that many of her friends had acquired during these troubled times vanished. Rare was the master who returned from war, who asked his wife, sister, or mother how his land should be managed.

It was a debacle and she presumed that it would take many years, perhaps decades to soften the pain inflicted. She was pleased to have taken the decision she had envisioned years ago. Self-determination was the means to attain her goals; she possessed financial independence and self-reliance. Consequently, her happiness did not depend on being taken care of by a man. Marriage was not on the table for her. She had the means and determination to make herself happy. Most of the women she knew had very little control over the lives they led.

A bottle of red wine, a pewter pitcher of water and a book were placed on a mahogany desk. She walked over and picked up the book given to her by Edgar De Gas when he visited New Orleans. She fell on the tweed eiderdown of the large wooden frame bed and expertly propped up the pillows behind her while she reclined lazily with book in hand.

The book was enveloped in a soft yellow parchment like cover. It brought to mind the encounter with the great painter of everyday

lives. Degas had changed the spelling of his last name, not willing to share with the world his doubtful aristocratic background—his father’s lineage was not as pristine as the old man would have liked it to be. The family had money since they were involved in the European banking system, and Edgar had a most privileged childhood. His love of depicting simple people in their working lives captivated her. Of all places, they had met at the Cotton Exchange in New Orleans; he had been painting the scene. His mother, Hortense, had been a close friend of her mother. She was a Southern socialite who loved balls and festivities. Unfortunately, after marrying the Old Man, as Edgar’s father was known, in effect, he was thirty years older than his young impetuous wife, they had moved to Paris with the family. Deprived of her friends, status and social life, Hortense slowly died of boredom and despair. Edgar was only sixteen when his mother passed and perhaps because of this traumatic event in his life, he had developed a cynical view of life. His icy remarks often enraged many would-be friends. Essentially, the man lived for his art and frankly he was not the worst off for it, Gabriella thought. That familial proximity and their similar background—Gabriella’s mother had been married in a loveless marriage in Italy at an early age and had been forced to America by her husband who sought to expand his fortune in the New World—Edgar had shared his world with Gabriella and asserted that she would absolutely love Paris. A fortnight hence she’d written to him announcing her arrival. The answer had been prompt: “Why have you waited so long?” Yes, she thought, why had she waited so long?

Later that day the Captain came to meet with the young girl who’d showed up on deck to glance at the sunset.

“Miss De Conte, I would be honored by your presence, if you chose to join us for dinner this evening,” he demanded gallantly. “You are the only woman on board, so please feel free to talk to my commanding officer and request whatever is needed. We do not have the pleasure of female companionship often enough. Dinner is usually served at seven. I would be honored to have you as my guest anytime you so desire.”

“With great pleasure,” she responded. A bit of social activities might make the long voyage less tedious, she thought. She gladly accepted the Captain’s standing invitation.

She strolled back on the main deck, and got closer to the railing. Porpoises frolicked on the large gray mass of water that slowly formed and broke in white crests on the steel arches of the bow.

“Hello, Miss Thorsen,” one of four men she had met earlier on the ship approached her. “We’re having a mid-afternoon nibble and we were wondering if you’d consider joining us. At this time of year, the sunset falls mighty quickly; we have a perfect perspective from our seats in the enclosed dining area.”

“That would be great fun, thank you,” she replied as she followed the tall and lanky man who seemed delighted by her quick acceptance. They entered a small but lovely dayroom. The walls were covered with a dark paneling, but the view from the windows was spectacular. She stopped at the entrance mesmerized and soon came to recognize the four other fellows she had met on deck earlier that day. In that very manly setting with five gentlemen sitting and drinking around a heavy wooden round table, she thought of excusing herself and returning back to the cabin, but the need for company and conversation got the best of her and she decided to sit and watch the sunset on the horizon. A spirited conversation ensued on the merit of traveling at sea on an Italian passenger boat. The food was scrumptious, they all agreed.

It would be a very nice passage, she concluded after returning to her cabin.

The following night she accepted the Captain’s standing invitation. Four of the men she had met the day before were in attendance. She was the only Southerner onboard; naturally the conversation seeped in areas that were still tender to both camps. Far from shying away from politically incorrect verbiage, Gabriella exposed her view as a Southern social observer assertively.

Sitting at the right of the Captain, she had been listening to two men who discussed how to do business with Italian merchants on the Old Continent. And just as quickly, one of the men turned to her as if

he had wanted to make a statement about her Southern roots all evening.

“Miss De Conte-Thorsen, how do you reconcile the perverse attitude toward humanity that the South has conducted for the past two hundred years, before we placed a stop to it?” The tall and slender man called Melville Brown asked haughtily. He was a Bostonian minister, involved in some sort of business venture in Europe, and he had been drinking heavily.

“I don’t reconcile anything, Mr. Brown. I never practice this infamy on my plantation. We had servants—paid servants, that is.” Gabriella emphasized just as testily. “As a matter of fact, two of these servants were instrumental in my upbringing. They not solely attended to my physical needs as a young child, but they instilled in me from an early age integrity and myriad of valued moral lessons, sir. Yes, the South was wrong about slavery. It certainly went against every fiber of society.” She concluded on a more conciliatory note.

“Interesting,” mused his companion, squirming, visibly uncomfortable with the gist of the enduring conversation. He smiled at Gabriella.

“I am pleased that you feel that the North was correct in pursuing this largely humanistic war. I wonder how many of your compatriots,” he stopped for a moment and most likely realize that there was no longer a national division between the states, “would argue otherwise,” he concluded.

“I’m unable to speak for all Southerners, sir; however, not everyone looked at the practice as benevolent. My mother was a fervent abolitionist. She hung for it, Mr. Brown.”

Both the Captain and the hefty man called John Henry La Tourte pushed away from the table at the same time. The conversation was inappropriate and the amiable Miss De Conte-Thorsen surely would take offense. Furthermore, she most surely would deprive the other passengers of her lovely presence by spending the rest of the journey in her cabin. The Captain was about to interrupt when the articulate minister/ businessman intent on proving his point preempted him.

“Therefore, this conversation is moot, Miss De Conte-Thorsen. You have just demonstrated that most Southerners were hostile to free

their slaves. The North served a highly mighty purpose in this war—the fight for human rights for all people.” The gentlemen from Boston continued.

“Hostile or not, sir, the South was built on the free services of our Freedman, women and their children included. I will give you that, sir. It’s been a way of life; even some free slaves purchased and owned slaves once they got their freedom papers. I’ll grant you that the practice itself was horrific, but the Freedmen who have fled to the Northern cities have not gained much in terms of prosperity and acceptance.”

“Let’s agree to disagree,” the Captain stated in a conciliatory tone.

“What gives you this idea?” The man continued agitated, oblivious of the discomfort his controversial speech produced among the Captain’s guests. “Being free is an innate right. That alone is primordial, I’d rather be starving in a Northern city than owned and fed on a Southern plantation.”

Knowing that the conversation was inappropriate, especially the second day of the crossing, the Captain chose this point to put an end to the supper.

“Miss De Conte-Thorsen, gentlemen, I thank you for your graciousness. Unfortunately, my men need rest and so do I. I hope to see you tomorrow. I can only hope that the weather will be as pleasant and fair as it has been these past two days. Good night.” He stood up and waited for his guests to do the same and take their leave.

Brown was visibly disturbed that he had not been able to pin down the pretty plantation owner. Involved in politics, he liked making a point that could not be refuted. Gabriella realized the situation and as he tried to continue the same line of conversation in the sitting room, she bid good night to all and strode to her cabin.

Stay away from these disturbing conversations, she concluded, nothing good can ever come out of it, especially with men as narrow-minded as Mr. Brown. No matter how lopsided a story was, both sides required to be explored and understood so as to not repeat the errors of the past. Mr. Brown was not the man to speak to. She promised herself she’d stay close-mouthed on questions of race, politics and religion the next time she met him.

The following two days were nauseating. The seas were rough and Gabriella stayed in her cabin. Just the idea of eating was appalling. Finally, on the third day of the crossing, the ocean calmed down and she walked on deck to feel the cool breeze on her face. February was not a good month to travel across the Atlantic.

Once more Mr. Brown and Mr. Balludeca—a half-Spanish, half-Italian businessman—were sitting on two of the four lounge chairs the crew had set up for the travelers.

“Good morning, Miss De Conte-Thorsen, you look mighty perky after the storm. I presume it did not affect you, personally I don’t recall such high seas and yet I sail these routes fairly often. Please sit with us the fresh air is invigorating.”

Reluctant, Gabriella acquiesced to the man’s request, hoping he would not start up on the subject of slavery once more. Less than ten minutes later the topic was brought up—yet again.

“I felt cheated the other evening, the Captain did not let you respond to our lively chat. You mentioned something about the well being of the Freedmen in our Northern cities?” he asked.

“Well ...” She was going to tell him to forget the issue. It was the past. The war had changed many traditions but then she changed her mind and went straight to the point. “My feelings, Mr. Brown, are quite opposite to yours. I feel that the white Anglos responded in two ways, neither correct nor appropriate. Out of pity or guilt, some would bend backwards to assimilate the Freedmen into the white man’s society in our Southern cities, they fell to recognize that ‘freedom’ was not a quick fix for things like illiteracy, poverty, and business savvy. They overlooked the frustrations the newly freed slaves were facing. The paper-thin golden cover I call it Mr. Brown. I don’t quite know how you see it, but in my eyes it is far from being an egalitarian gesture toward a newly free individual.”

“That is a serious charge Miss De Conte-Thorsen,” the dismayed Mr. Balludeca stated, visibly shocked at such an impertinent remark especially coming from a young woman who would do well to think about her wardrobe and marriage to an honorable man. The businessman cast a glance of displeasure at Gabriella. His companion, however, wanted closure on the subject, and woman or not, this

young Southerner was the only one he could vent his frustrations upon.

“Are you speaking about your culture, the people that you know, Miss De Conte-Thorsen, or do you have the audacity to accuse us for the problems that the South brought upon all of us as a nation?” He questioned trying to assuage his comment with a sarcastic laugh.

“Since you are being so candid, Mr. Brown, please allow me to do the same. Trust that I found the practice appalling, however, your elevating the Northern cities as the epitome of fairness and good wages is largely exaggerated. This ambiguous philosophy is professed by freedom-loving members of the society who often appeared to have fallen in love with the sound of the word freedom!” she concluded extremely annoyed.

“Inconceivable. So you shame the North for its admirable effort while trying to lessen the wrongdoings committed by people in your part of the nation?” he said incredulously.

“I simply want to state that it is not in my view what is needed. We have appalling issues as well in the South. Many former slaves owners either despise the free blacks or worse—yes, worse—they just do not care. Care at this time would be a good thing, indeed. The newly freed slaves need care and compassion, not rhetoric. For many, it is their place of birth. Why should they flee to the North? They have worked hard to make the South their home, now they require financial and educational support to learn how to rebuild their lives, how to retrieve their family members, how to rebuild their cultural heritage. As slaves, they knew where food and shelter came from to feed their loved ones. The practice of oral history went a long way on the fields and houses they toiled in to retrieve lost family members. However, as Freedmen they have to fend for themselves in a world mostly hostile to their plight, or at the very best indifferent to their situation in life.

Flabbergasted at such outrageous comments, the Bostonian did not try to hide his displeasure. “Miss De Conte Thorsen you are dead wrong and history will prove my point. I am just too sad that I will not be around to appreciate its value. Good day.” He stood up, red-faced, while Mr. Balludeca follow suit. They both left the deck. The

Captain had watched from afar the altercation. The poor man did not appear too enthused to settle a dispute especially one as sensitive as the conflict between North and South. The sweet little Gabriella was not so sweet after all, he concluded.

Meanwhile, Gabriella had been amused at the reaction of the Northerner. Internally she was divided on the issue. Listening to some of her mother's friends, the ones involved in the abolitionists' movement, one would think that the issue was already settled. They could foresee an integrated South in less than a generation. She remembered thinking at the time that these people most certainly believed in Santa Claus.

As the men walked out, she watched them climbing up the stairs to the main deck, she also noticed the Captain, a stern look on his face. He must have been privy to her remarks. Perhaps she should have walked away from the tense conversation. These types of altercations never served the purpose intended; instead, they aggravated and polarized the parties involved. She would have to control her responses from now on. Meanwhile, unwilling to return to her cabin, she walked closer to the bow.

Gabriella stayed up on deck reading for a long while. Often she would lift her head and stare at the horizon as moments of sadness in leaving behind her beloved New Orleans, her plantation, her servants, and her Country, flashed in her mind. The conversation with Mr. Brown had re-ignited her melancholy. She was proud of the great new power the United States was quickly becoming, but she looked forward to fulfilling her dreams somewhere else. It sounded so right. Why was she feeling so conflicted and egoistical?

She had worked very hard after all to keep the plantation profitable during the Civil War. She was a teenager then and she had achieved a miracle. After the war, her plantation, which had been left intact because of her father's Irish ancestry, had become one of the few lands still financially viable. She had been the sole financial administrator. In essence, her business savvy and practical negotiation style had served her well.

Many of the old influential sugar brokers had lost immense fortunes in the war. To them, Gabriella had suddenly become an

alluring partner. Single-handedly, Miss De Conte-Thorsen—the Voice, as she was commonly called in the New Orleans musical circles—had re-established her plantation as a financially sound and working land.

God had blessed her again and she looked forward to a wonderful life, one that she, as a young woman had chosen. She had been accepted at the Nationale Académie De Musique. That was the reason she was sailing to France. Very few women had this sort of opportunity.

Her earlier heartaches, that of not being loved or nurtured by her parents, had worked in her favor after all. Her unanswered prayers had been the real blessing. And there she was, standing at just five feet and one inch tall— she never forgot those last two-and-a-half centimeters ready to take on Europe with her supreme singing.

“Good afternoon, Miss De Conte,” she heard from behind. “Terribly sorry that I was not able to put an end to your conversation with Mr. Brown earlier,” the Captain said in a heavily accented English.

“I have heard it all before, Captain; do not worry. I am thrilled to sail to Europe. I look forward to the European life, my singing career, traveling through Europe, hopefully performing as the lead soprano of major opéras with my sublime gift.” She smiled charmingly. She wanted to sing and share her gift with hundreds, maybe thousands of people with different cultures, set of beliefs and mores.

“I was not aware that you were a singer, I had been told that you were a business woman. I thought you’d travel to France for pleasure.” He smiled, just as charmingly. Austrians and Italians understood music and its many layers of texture that truly changed the spirit of those who let themselves fully surrender to it.

“I have been accepted at the National Académie De Musique, Captain. That is the reason I’m sailing to France. As an artist I feel that music is a force that touches everyone at every level of society, bringing real pleasure, and to many it gives a sense of tossing every negative force out of the window,” she responded.

She would learn it all. Yes, she would crown her career at the Scala in Milan. That was one of her long-time goals. Singing was her

passion, always had been, the one talent she relied upon to bring her happiness and a sense of hope. The gift was always there to take her mind off the hardships she had experienced and faced. Singing would transport her to a different world, a world of dreams where she could feel secure and truly happy. Through the study of music she had met fascinating individuals who also shared this freakish passion of nature felt solely by a few chosen ones.

Her own parents had financially supported her music lessons—her singing having been a source of pride for them. Mind you, not of pride in their daughter's accomplishments, oh no. That was unthinkable on both of their sickly, soiled minds. Rather, in their perverse, egotistical thinking, they actually attributed her skills as their own accomplishments, a trait passed on genetically to their child. She had to forget and forgive those two horrific souls. In any case, it was her past; her bright future lay ahead aboard the Italian frigate.

The Captain of the ship was both surprised and perplexed with the young passenger. She looked awfully young, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two years old. At odds with her youthful appearance, her language skills and demeanor appeared much older than her youthful smile. It betrayed her. He took upon himself to invite her often to his table. She was not the prissy type, deathly sick with every rolling of the sea. He had inkling that the forces of nature would not deter her steely demeanor. It was quite attractive.

Later that day he made a point to meet her formally. Gabriella De Conte Thorsen kept to herself, studying her music books. The first time in her young life when she had no other chore to oversee or accomplish, she savored the moment. She had no other thing to think about but her one passion—her music. She lived that moment and loved living it, as she constantly reminded herself never to lose sight of the happiness she so richly deserved.

The Captain would find her often, late in the afternoon sitting in one of the great big chairs on the deck, which almost engulfed her tiny body. She was almost invisible when she placed her feet Indian style under her large bouffant skirts. What could she be telling her secret diary? Was she writing her daily events or perhaps keeping a

journal? Lots of young women of this era kept great journals, he had read quite a few from Southern ladies who had described in their writing, real, gut-wrenching, factual events that occurred during the divisive Civil War. They passionately described the sadness experienced by the widows that had been left behind—the forgotten ones.

Besides lean and straggly Mr. Brown and fat Mr. Jerkins, a few of the other gentlemen sailing on the ship had tried to engage her in conversation, but to no avail. She was polite but cool. She had learned her lesson, the old Captain grinned.

Four days had gone by, the sea was calm and beautiful, unusual for February. “You must be my guardian angel,” the Captain had told her yesterday, as they passed a French ship that had communicated with them earlier. The Captain of the French ship, the Duke De Bourbonne was returning home after almost five years spent in the United States. He had fought on the Union side, although France had had an inkling of supporting the Confederacy in 1862.

“He was seduced by the new free world,” the Captain explained, “and he remained in Boston and purchased a home in the aristocratic Louisburg Square, in historic Beacon Hill. The area is the Bostonian’s answer to the English blue blood society. One never falls far from his roots.”

“That’s interesting,” Gabriella, replied, curious. “Why is he returning to France?”

“Perhaps the women in Boston are too prudish for his affinities, Jean-Louis-Pierre De Pleymis, Duke De Bourbonne is a dashing young French aristocrat with a reputation for leading the fast life. He loves danger, challenges, fighting, and women. He accumulates as many of the above mentioned experiences as is humanly possible.” The Captain laughed happily.

“He sounds like a nice fellow,” Gabriella retorted sarcastically.

“The fact is that if one should travel across the Atlantic Ocean, it is a fabulous omen to have his ship sailing nearby. It means that protection is at hand. His personal ship, *the Tempête*, is magnificent and equipped with cutting edge technology, most powerful armaments, and the toughest and boldest soldiers who share their

Captain's love for dangerous world situations and unconventional challenges. An invincible force," the Italian seaman declared.

"I was under the impression that the crossing was relatively safe," Gabriella stated, concerned.

"Very safe, Miss De Conte Thorsen, not to worry," the Captain replied calmly.

In reality, Captain De Pleyssis had communicated to him earlier that a pirate ship had slipped in the sailing routes and that it had already pillaged two passenger boats. Be aware, the old mariner had been told.

For two days, the Italian Captain had taken precautions, placing his crew on high alert, and then he had relented. It was quite difficult for the passengers to stay indoors. It was not good for business.

At exactly 12:03, the seventh day of the transatlantic passing, l'Escalina was attacked and rampaged.

Shock struck Gabriella sleeping all alone in her cabin. Screams, clanking of swords, and gunshots blasted above. Fearless and without one iota of self doubt, she fled her cabin, grabbed the outfit of a dead sailor laying outside one of the Captain's door, and slipped into his uniform. She quickly noticed two large trunks that had already been looted. She stepped in the larger and deeper trunk and hid under a heap of men's clothing and burgundy like silk curtains. She listened intently and was almost sure that she'd heard someone shouting orders in French. She sank deeper into the trunk and waited for either death by drowning, death at the end of a sword, or maybe with a bit of luck, the French Captain who appeared to have entered in the battle would find her alive.

For what seemed to be forever, shrill shrieks from prisoners begging for mercy to not be killed or tortured, seeped through the planks. Some begged to sail for the new Captain, change banner, so as not to be thrown overboard. She lay quietly and motionless as screams and gunfire and the clatter of barrels rolling and crashing down the stairs terrified her. A human must have rolled close to the trunk where she hid, for squeals of terror and moans of extreme pain echoed in her trunk. The moans turned to a piercing screech and seconds later silence reigned. Fighting, swearing, the bumping and

rolling of bodies, hollow splashes from humans falling or being thrown overboard continued above on deck. What seemed to be hours of complete terror and torture persisted and quite suddenly the shouts tapered and quietness returned to the vessel? She was alive. What was next?

Her clever tactics worked so far. After several loud cannon shots and the cries of battling sailors just above her, the war above seemed to die down. She had read somewhere that the large trunks belonged to the master of the vessel. Therefore, with a bit of luck, she would be delivered to Master Capello or the French Captain if his forces vanquished whomever had tried to board the vessel.

In hindsight, she was still flabbergasted at her reaction. She had often thought that heroes acted out of fear and responded with integrity to the demands of human survival. Her personal skills at self-survival had been sufficient to make her act like a hero in her own eyes. Let compliments fall where they are deserved.

All of a sudden she heard footsteps and someone lifted the trunk where she hid. She prayed that she would not be tossed out to sea. Maybe that had not been such a great idea after all.

She was rolled around for what seemed an eternity; the trunks were going to the Captain's room she heard someone say in French. She bit her lips not to scream in pain when the trunk was lowered and then roughly dropped on the hard wooden planks.

A while later, a door closed and silence returned. She waited a few minutes. As quietly as a mouse she peeked in between the slates, not unlike a gator that surfaced silently from the murky waters to take hold of its surroundings.

She had been lifted to another ship, one that displayed an elegantly decorated cabin with much comfort. An empire desk in the middle of the room was scattered with documents and maps and a half-eaten meal rested on the ink blotter. The bed was massive, the man lying in there must be gigantic she told herself. She slowly lowered the lid to its closed position and curled in a fetal position once more. Tasting horror—total despair beset her. She sunk in deeper in the trunk as dread inculcated itself in the deepest layers of her mind.

Someone tapped his boot against her trunk. A fearsome cavernous voice, loud, harsh, devoid of emotions shouted to another to search the trunks and to toss everything overboard if no precious metals, papers or money was found.

“Tell the sailors unwilling to conform, that they will be killed and thrown overboard. They’ll come around quickly.” The brute opined.

Her hope of finding someone who would understand her plight evaporated. If he gave her a chance, however, she would tell him that she was being sent to France because she wanted to join the Ursuline Order in either Grenoble or Paris. Her cousin, a Cardinal would take care of her as they disembarked. He would gladly pay for whatever expense she might incur since her own fortune had been taken from her.

Damn, what type of scenario she imagined. God, she was at his mercy. Extreme fear engulfed her whole being now. She would have preferred to die or be sunk with the ship. What were they going to do with her? Rape her, torture her, kill her? She heard the clanking of the boots once more on the wet planks and the screams and shouts of the mariners who were supplicating their captors to save their lives. A detonation of gunshots discharged. Minutes later the begging ceased. *Oh, dear Lord*, she thought, she should surrender all hope and prepare to die.

She heard another voice. This one decidedly had an Irish accent.

“Captain, what should we do with their Captain? He is still alive”

“Throw him in the brig. If he refuses to cooperate—starve him. In my view handing him over to the authorities is absurd. These scoundrels do not deserve prison; they should be shot on sight. We found four sailors who had been impressed by these brutes on four different docks in different lands. One I happen to know vaguely, a connaissance of my friend, Luke. For years, his family searched high and low for the chap. I understand that he would have gambled all of his family’s fortune given half a chance, not much of a find, I’ll give you that, but nevertheless the pirates should be eradicated, not paid off like so many monarchies and empires are presently doing.”

Both men entered the cabin and the Captain spoke once more.

“What are these trunks doing in here?” he shouted.

“They were found next to the travelers’ cabins, Jean-Louis-Pierre. Gold and silver was spotted in one of them. Before our mates decided to tear them open, I decided to have them brought in here first.”

“Look through all of them, Cunnan, and give what is unnecessary to the crew. Jewelry, coins belong to the Empire. You can leave the trunks piled up against the wall for now.”

The man called Cunnan started to rummage through the trunks. Gabriella froze. Nothing was processing through her nervous system. The first and second trunk had been disposed of and pushed aside. The third, her own, the larger of the three was being opened. Brutally, the mariner grabbed all the silk drapes, and then he discarded the mound of men’s clothing and stopped as he stared at the nightgown she’d discarded before donning the mariner’s uniform.

Cunnan, the commanding officer, hesitated and wavered, he must have been processing the feminine attire since she had been the sole woman on the Italian frigate.

“I wish we could have gotten there on time,” he muttered, “but the old seaman flippantly chose to preserve his business ventures instead of taking precautions against pirates’ attacks. Damn, we warned about the real possibility less than seventy-two hours ago, for God’s sake. He had to learn the hard way,” she heard him whisper to himself.

The female attire still surprised him, as he continued his monologue pondering at the possibility that maybe these were gifts for girlfriends or wives. He dug deeper. When his hands squeezed her breasts, she let out a sharp screech. The large man looked down, astounded to find two green eyes staring back at him in horror. He let out a curse as she heard loud footsteps walking over toward her hiding place. The first mate was astute enough to realize that this was neither the time nor the place to let the master know that a young lad disguised as a ‘matelot’ was hidden in the trunk. She shot a supplicating look in his direction. For an instant, she thought that he would pull her out and let the wrath fall where it may, but with a smirk and a tilt of his head, he related to the Captain that besides a gigantic candelabrum and a few other silver items, no coins were found. Uninterested, the Captain retorted that he would remain in his

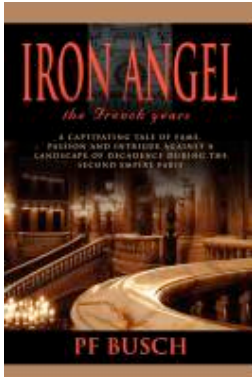
study. He had had a full day and wanted some sleep. Tomorrow was going to be disagreeable and he needed some rest.

Cunnan waited for the Captain to reach his study and calmly returned his attention to his new guest. "You need to stay in there, lad. The Captain is in no mood to deal with you now," the old sailor placed his finger over his mouth to demand silence.

"I was going to France to enter the order of the Ursuline in Paris, my cousin is a Cardinal waiting for me in Nice," she whispered.

"A girl! Good God, please don't say another word," he whispered. "Later I'll bring some food when the Captain leaves his cabin. I'll leave the trunk partly open and hidden behind the others. Please don't disturb him. Stay in and keep quiet." He looked backwards towards the Captain's cabin and he returned his intent stare upon her. With a deep sigh, he closed the trunk and pushed her trunk further back toward the wall.

It was getting more and more challenging by the minute. Gabriella relaxed a bit, at least the mariner seemed to have taken pity on her plight. But her life depended on the monster asleep in the gigantic bed in the next room. Better be quiet and endure another night. She needed rest, as well. Who knew what future lay ahead for her? She curled up once more. Thank God for her ballerina training, flexibility and pliability had come in handy these past frightening hours.



In a captivating tale of fame, passion and intrigue, against a landscape of decadence during the Second Empire, Gabriella De Conte Thorsen, a plantation owner from Louisiana, travels to Paris to attend the Académie de Musique, and takes Paris by storm. Conflicted by her relationship with the powerful Duke de Bourbonne and her love for the Parisian artistic scene, Gabriella must choose between her domineering suitor and operatic fame on the world stage.

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