



Iron Angel Gaby, is an historical romance set in Paris in the late 18th century. The life of a sensational American soprano and the conflict with her overbearing aristocratic former husband is depicted. A tragic event develops.

Iron Angel: Gaby - Book III

By P. F. Busch

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Gaby / Book Three

IRON ANGEL

The book cover features a close-up of a woman's face, partially obscured by a large white hat. She is wearing a white, high-collared dress with lace detailing and a large bouquet of pink and white chrysanthemums. The background is a soft-focus Parisian scene with cherry blossoms and the Eiffel Tower. The overall color palette is warm, with pinks, whites, and gold accents.

FAME, PASSION AND INTRIGUE
RECUR AS AN UNATTACHED, INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED
SOPRANO, GABRIELLA DE CONTE THORNSEN
RETURNS TO THE CITY OF LIGHT TO THE
CELEBRATED PALAIS GARNIER

P.F. BUSCH

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P.F. Busch

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IRON ANGEL GABY BOOK III

COMING SOON

IRON ANGEL THE TRIAL BOOK IV

GABY

A NOVEL IN THE IRON ANGEL SERIES

BOOK III

By

P. F. BUSCH

1876

A novel depicting the life of a remarkable Louisianan Diva, a woman of profound artistic gifts and untamable passion whose life intermingles with the likes of Sarah Bernard, Berthe Morisot, Gide, Baudelaire, Manet, Flaubert, Bizet, Debussy, Gounod, in a recovering City of Light, Paris, still shattered by a not too distant history of societal divisiveness, despair and hopelessness.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON A TRAIN TO PARIS

Less than two weeks later, Gaby was back on a northbound train to Paris. Letters from her many friends had arrived in Rome while she was away. All celebrated and delighted in the knowledge of her prompt return to the City of Lights.

“Jean-Louis-Pierre has returned from his travels and apparently he is in Paris?” Philippe had shared.

While in Rome these past three weeks, she had denied his presence in the French capital. Recently, her memories of the idyllic times they’d shared rattled her spirit. Why couldn’t she recall the suffering after the rupture? Soon, their confrontation in Paris would become a reality.

Total ignorance of him, wherever he happened to be, would be the line of defense. She refused to be deterred. But... would he ignore her, as well? A shiver shook her. She stiffened her spine, her hands lifting to her heart. A passion, oh so pure, had blown away like a glacial Parisian shower. The very same that often pelted the capital savagely as it quickly diluted in the mighty Seine, flooding the river banks, the valleys, destroying the crops and causing famine to the farmers.

Jean-Louis’s pride had no boundaries. He’d shattered their lives, listening to his grandmother’s salacious rumors rather than assent to her loyalty and her dedication to their union. Their marriage had been a charade! Tragic! It was the past, she reminded herself.

She felt blessed and thankful that her dreams had come to pass. An entrance in Paris’s new opéra house. A score dedicated to her and an

adoring audience awaiting her arrival. The future was happy and bright. She tapped her hands on the bouffant velvet skirt, she loved that fashion, promptly Socrates jumped on her lap.

“You will love Paris, my little darling,” she whispered in his ears, her hair tumbling across his thick, white, curly fur.

The train swept through Tuscany stopping for a few hours in Lucca, a picturesque medieval town surrounded by stone ramparts. They stopped to partake in gastronomic delights of risotto, fresh lettuce hearts swimming in balsamic vinegar from Modena and a local wine that filled her mouth with a savor so delicate that she allowed herself another glass.

They also spent a few hours in Cinque Terre, the five villages built in the mountainside on cliffs that dropped down into the sea. The scenery was spectacular, natural beauty indescribable. Tomorrow to Verdi’s hometown right outside Milan, a night at Lago Maggiore, and then off toward the mountainous Alps where they would switch over to the Glacier express to experience the grandiose Swiss Alps. Then, on to Beaune and Paris.

Munching on little round loaves of German strudel she had purchased earlier in a Swiss *patisserie*, she sat entranced by the magnificence of the scenery, Montellier’s entrance to the salon of the bakery was unnoticed.

“Hello, Gabriella, may I join you?” the historian intoned.

“Naturally,” she responded. She did not particularly like the Academic. His arrogance truly annoyed her.

“We should arrive in Beaune early tomorrow morning. Some of the best meals ever, I do not believe I ever ate a bad meal in Beaune. Have you ever been there?” he asked. Before she could reply, he

continued, “The history of Franche-Comté is rich, it must be very attractive to you. Have you ever visited the Abbaye of Cluny?”

She wanted to respond, “take a breath”, but the stout historian continued his diatribe with very little concern of his audience. “The Romanesque architecture is phenomenal, its role within the church,” he sighed, “the division of Church and l’État, n'est-ce-pas, quite telling, I’ll advance.” He suddenly turned his attention back to the banquette to find Gaby engrossed in one of her music books.

“Are you done, Mr. Montellier?” She glanced upward, sideways and then back to him in great distaste. “Yes, my cousin, Cardinal Thorsen educated me in the special role the abbeye played. I also know that it was William the first, Duke of Aquitaine, who founded it in 910.” She grinned back at him and held his gaze.

The academic’s face turned bright red. “I am sorry, Gabriella.”

Her hand dismissed him as she nodded and let the anger pass.

Had she ever visited Cluny? What an erudite idiot! Academically advanced but socially inept, she wanted to retort. Her enthusiasm for Montellier had never been too great. He’d lost the last bit of approval. She wondered why they had not replaced Bernard, her former historian, with another Frenchman.

“Have you heard about the new opera? I am curious about its historical setting. Have you received any correspondence from Maître Lauriot or Maître Goriot?” she prodded.

“No, they’re keeping it a secret until our arrival. Do not fret. I am well versed in most historical periods.”

She shot a dubious look upward and held his gaze again for a short moment. “Very well, always good for the cast to have an expert on hand. Tidbits of important historical movements eases the production along. We appreciate your quick arrival after the horrific incident Monsieur de Levelant experienced on the slopes. You must have been close by.”

She smiled sweetly but stared fiercely into his eyes. “Where were you born, Mr. Montellier? I understand your studies took you to Boston and then to Venice early in your profession.”

“Virginia,” he replied.

The focus had changed drastically for the impertinent historian, her interrogative statements throwing him a curve.

“Richmond, outside of Richmond actually, Gabriella. I cherish Europe with its rich history and sophisticated society, but I also miss home at times.” His voice had gone down a few octaves in a matter of seconds.

She detected a certain amount of insecurity. Good, she thought. I am more than a pretty face with a fabulous voice. Promptly he regained his insolent demeanor as he expertly skipped over his personal history and that of Monsieur de Levelant’s accident and his personal proximity to the location of the freakish accident.

“Yes, I look forward to our arrival in Beaunne, as well. A lovely town, indeed. Marc shared that you were in Paris during the Siege. Is that right?”

She nodded.

“I was in London for most of the war,” he retorted, “and I traveled to Naples to the San Carlo opéra house soon thereafter. A large community of castrati relentlessly work their voices in the Monastery of Santa Chiara. I remained there during the war and the Siege of 1870.”

“Yes, I heard,” she responded coolly.

Mr. Montellier had been a new addition to her staff just before their arrival in Rome. He was an American, from the South like her, but had moved to Boston to study Art history at Harvard.

“You know,” he continued “the castrati were researched all over Europe. For a couple of centuries, every court in Europe had several

to illuminate their soirées. The Choir in the Sistine Chapel still has quite a few. Have you ever heard one sing, Gabriella?”

“No,” she lied, displeased.

The horror of Philippe’s ordeal flashed through her mind. The 19th century had put a damper in the sub-human practice of gelding young men to keep their voices high and pure. Most never reached the fame of a Facinelli, a famous and adored castrato of the time. Kings, Queens, and aristocrats willingly showered these renown artists with great wealth, gold, precious stones, castles, lands, sculptures in their own likenesses for the sole reason of keeping them in their courts. On the flip side of the coin, many, like her cherished cousin, were sent home, back to their family in a mutilated state. The practice had destroyed so many lives.

Take a breather, Gabriella, she instructed herself. Montellier was solely trying to forge a lien. Suspicion of the world that surrounded her was always at the forefront. Why? Italy, most likely. Jean-Louis had secured her immediate circle of comfort and security but the kidnapping in Venice had left marks—traumatic marks.

Although arrogant, and there were many men in that category in this day and age, the historian just wanted to develop a relationship, she prompted herself. Her former life had titillated the press. All that happened in one’s existence left a remnant of conscious and unconscious memories, not unlike a soft cashmere blanket that envelops one’s being, the fears, the loves, the ambitions until one decided to fling it open for all to see... or not. She stood and returned to the seat near the window.

“Like a writer, Monsieur Montellier, I cherish solitude. Let’s meet later during the day.” She dismissed him curtly.

Later that afternoon he reappeared, his arrogance no longer as obvious. He actually asked questions and her opinions of the many European stages. She’d have to suffer him a while longer. Surprisingly

enough, his questioning returned back to the Prussian siege of Paris in 1870 and early 1871.

“Marc recently shared with me that you suffered the Siege in Paris, Gabriella. You know I have studied this time in history in great detail. The horrific events that occurred during the Commune, after the Siege of Paris and the defeat of the French in January 71’ by the Prussians were ghastly.” Montellier pursued.

She nodded.

Jacques and Juliette, her costume adjustors, had entered the compartment as well. “I was caught at the border and forced back to Paris,” retorted Jacques. “The hunger that I experienced is inexpressible. I recall fighting. Yes, fighting my way amongst lines of men and women to be first in front of the gutters? I waited with my butcher’s knife for the starving rat to inch its way out onto the street. I’d cut his head right then and there, blood spurting from the fallen head across the broken cobblestones. It was a ritual. To my utter surprise, even then, one day a boy reached down in between my legs to grab the bloody head of the rat with its beady eyes and placed it whole in its mouth. Fires were lit and stoked all over Paris, but that child had not waited for the head to be roasted, his intransigent hunger had thrown all rules of civility, humanity into the great basin of survival. That thought lingers to this day in my head. Wars, conflicts come and go, but humans are never the same after living through hell! Let me ask you, Montellier. You were in England, what were the English saying? Why not come to our aid? What about the Americans who maintained the Prussians in their Embassy in Paris and served the Prussian cause? They, too, had forgotten their first friends!”

An awkward tirade coming from an otherwise quiet and gracious man, left Gaby feeling ill at ease.

Montellier swallowed hard as he fell silent.

Juliette lowered her eyes.

The war with the Prussians had lasted from July 1870 to September 1871—just six dreadful weeks. Napoleon III was captured during the Battle of Sedan, abdicated and was taken prisoner by the Germans. The Prussians had released him to England in March of 1871. The Empire had fallen but nevertheless the war against Prussia had continued until January 1871 when the French surrendered and signed the Treaty of Versailles. Jean-Louis had been there. She had stayed behind in Loire. A Gazette's vignette showing the tall aristocrat smiling at a female guest nearby had started a drama that had almost gotten her killed. She'd taken a Montgolfier balloon into the city and had been swept toward the sharp promontories of the Normandy's coast—almost crushed on its jagged coastline. Oh, the past! she considered and sighed. Never rehash its tragedies.

Lost in her thoughts, horrific moments raced in her mind. She repeatedly shook her head, trying in vain to permanently erase the unending judgments firing like fire crackers on the Fourth of July. The aristocracy with their solid financial backing was still a considerable and influential factor of the Parisian establishment—thank God! She looked off into the distance, tucking a stray hair behind her ear, unable to harness the emotion that came firing with intensity at the very thought of the Siege and then the Commune.

The Civil War after the Siege had lasted approximately six weeks—twenty-four thousand Parisians had died. The retributions from Thiers, the leader of the provisional government in Versailles, against The *Fédérés*, an unorganized band of revolutionaries, many young and uniformed young men who did not deserve to die, had been appalling! The askance had been a return to the Constitution drafted in 1793 during the years of the French Revolution. Many of the dead had been members of the National Guards.

Tragically, these young men had been called from the provinces and were not trained as true soldiers in the great military schools.

Instead, they'd been replacements for the valiant soldiers who perished and gifted their nations with the ultimate sacrifice during the Franco-Prussian War. The battles and hostilities with Prussia—gruesome. Hundreds of Parisians had eaten their horses, dogs, cats, and even rats. The large elephants from the Paris's zoological gardens had been butchered along with many other wild animals.

“Rats?” the historian exclaimed.

“Yes, rats. The citizens would wait in long lines with their hammer and knives ready, kneeling down in the gutters, vigilant, waiting for the rats to make their nightly appearances,” she stated sadly, recalling with abhorrence these ignoble days, “some lucky habitants of Paris would call their roast—*sami de rat*, some even mortgage their mattresses for four ounces of milk on the black market! *Le marché noir* was fierce, for a few extra *sous* many would walk outside the wall and buy at outrageous prices food for their families, sellers would wager their lives for goods that their families needed, to be sold like an indentured servant for the very rich who could afford it. In many *quartiers* in Paris, *épiciers* would buy much of the stolen goods and hide their loot in basements. It sold at outrageous prices but the secret would be divulged in the streets very promptly and many of these *canailles* lost their lives. The price of war! The restitutions to the now Germanic kingdom with Prussian leadership had been fierce. In addition, the loss of the Alsace and The Lorraine were sour points in the French soul. So much dignity lost.” She gazed into the distance, yearning to release the great anxieties that trounced her entire being.

“Manet, Degas and Renoir stayed in Paris while many artists fled to England,” Montellier said with awe in his voice—a rare departure from his otherwise pretentious demeanor.

“Manet as well as Degas served in the Parisian National Guards,” she replied.

“Manet? A son of the high bourgeoisie possesses Republican tendencies?” Montellier questioned, clearly incredulous.

“He felt a duty to shield his wife, Suzanne Leenoff, a Dutch born pianist who tutored him as a young man. His mother and Suzanne traveled with him to the Southwestern part of France.”

The stories they told were heart wrenching. Jean-Louis had fought on the warships that tried in vain to obliterate the Prussian army advancing upon Paris. She had been fortunate to have crossed into Paris twice, the first time she had flown back in a balloon from the Place Saint Pierre in Montmartre. The second time, she’d taken a balloon a month later after Gambetta’s first voyage to Tours, where he planned to round up the national forces outside of Paris. He was Minister of the Interior, consequently the right man to ask the provinces to ‘*levée en masse*’ to save the patrimony, namely Paris from the Prussians.

One of the servants who took care of her needs, sat across from her, staring. She must have appeared distant as she recalled some of the sordid stories of the siege. The Provisional government, or Government of the National Defense as they called themselves, liberated Jean-Louis in late December 1870.

The proletariat, which made up a large force of the National Guard, was weary of seeing an aristocrat as part of the National Defense government. She lifted the heavy damask curtain from the side window of the cabin and gazed at the snowflakes falling on the rugged road she traveled. So cold, she thought, as a knock at the door brought her out of her *rêverie*. The maid had departed but Montellier was still there staring at her.

“It must have been some trying times,” he murmured. “I understand that the government was not prepared for such an onslaught.”

“Unfortunately, these men had joined the National Guard without much soldier training. Essentially yes, the guard was large but out of the 300,000 soldiers that made up the force only 100,000 had been soldiers who were accustomed to severe discipline.”

“Trochu, the general in charge of the forces made strategic errors.” She sighed and paused as dark memories filled her spirit. “One blunder after another,” she retorted. “He’d entirely lost his tactician intuition.” Now seated across from her with his usual plum *Eau de Vie* by his side, Montellier looked confused.

“The Duke de Bourbonne had assistance as he mollified the Reds,” she pursued, “the proletarian force had descended on the Hotel de Ville in early October and burned it to the ground. An erratic act, indeed, which essentially erased a great deal of French citizen’s history.” She recalled these darkest of hours. A dark cloud hovered the pretty American soprano. “I will never understand war, and... gossip that destroys human beings and their place in history.”

“The war against Prussia had essentially been fought with the fear of the Reds taking over the government,” Montellier stated in his grand arrogant style. “In my humble opinion, Gabriella, after the extravagances of the Second Empire, many highly placed aristocrats reaped what they sowed.”

Rage bottled up inside her, she stared him down, nodding at the two doors. Shame spiraled through him, she assumed at first, as he hung his head forward in a contrite mien, but he promptly retrieved his aplomb. The historian stood, confident in his beliefs, it appeared, as a smirk hung down his full lips. The butler outside the compartment opened the French doors. Montellier exited.

An overcast gray sky settled over the rolling plains. The rattling carriages lulled her into a melancholic mood. She gazed outside as the sound of a whistle announced to the shepherds on the flatlands that they should gather their grazing animals as the train crisscrossed their pastures at a high speed. Picturesque Alpine valleys dotted with small villages, churches and breathtaking castles at the foot of majestic snow-capped mountains rolled by.

The daily afternoon dessert, usually *petit fours*, was normally served at four in the afternoon. She sighed and spooned the last of the fresh cream covering an apple compote.

Vivid memories of the passionate nights they had shared as the war thundered in the city, destroying all in its path. Nothing much to eat, although she had bought some food on the black market. Where the *boulangers, patissiers, and épiciers* got the food? No one knew—no one cared. She'd formed a close relationship with Elihu Washburn, the American Ambassador who'd refused a transfer back to the United States. All was lost by then—the Krupp had bombed Paris and civilians had died.

Later in February of 1871, in Versailles, a newly elected National Assembly had a royalist majority mostly from the provinces, which had opposed Charles Louis Napoleon's war from the very beginning. Were they to blame? Certainly, not a time to question their allegiance.

All representatives were there to terminate the war against Prussia. Otto von Bismarck, the old King Wilhelm I, and his nephew Wilhelm II made it a point to sign the treaty of the unification of all the German States in the *Gallery des Glaces* in Versailles. Jean-Louis had been in attendance while she was still in Loire. Another huge injury for the proud French. The reparations had been immense for a nation thirsty for freedom from an invading nation.

The last insult the defeated French endured was the painful of viewing the Germans soldiers as they marched one last time down the

Champs-Élysées. The city was draped in black. The reparations cost France five billion francs, which was disbursed in a little less than two years, the final payment in September, 1873. She recollected the festive spirit amongst the troupe that accompanied her. She'd been in Rome with her entourage. The imbibing of French Champagne had not prohibited the extravagant celebration—the final exit of the Prussian army from French land!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gaby descended the steps rolled out by the coachman.

Along the wide paved courtyard, on a black wrought iron bench by the entrance to the Abbey, an elder churchman sat, rosary in hand. Upon the arrival of the couple, he slowly stood, rearranged the crucifix hanging on his cloak, patted it and began to stroll toward the Duke and his former wife, who had just stepped down from the carriage.

Both stopped, basked and marveled at the magnificence facing them. The Benedictine Abbaye de Cluny, founded by the Duke of Aquitaine in 910, had the largest monastic empire whose authority, at the peak of its power during the 11th and 12th centuries, governed over eleven hundred priories and ten thousand monks.

The Abbaye had financed the Reconquest of Spain, countless pilgrimages, the Crusades, while essentially influencing every aspect of politics and history. Many Abbots from the Abbaye had been advisors to kings and Popes. Although its role and architectural design had been greatly curtailed during the French Revolution, the beauty of the land and the sanctity and reverence emanating from its very walls and garden were awe inspiring.

“Monsieur, Madame, great pleasure to see you once more. We were delighted when we heard of your arrival. How long has it been, Monsieur?”

“Six years at the very least, too long, mon Père,” Jean-Louis replied.

“*Et bien oui, Monsieur, le temps passe vite, time soars,*” the old monk smiled good-naturedly.

A second, taller, and leaner brother, who'd just turned up from behind one of the Abbeye's curved stone pillars, strode promptly to them. He faced Gaby with a great big smile on his handsome and youthful face. "*Un grand plaisir, Madame*, I understand that Cardinal Thorsen is in Paris," the younger cleric questioned.

"He will arrive in late January." Gaby hinted, "the Holy Days are upon us. His responsibilities are to his flock foremost." She smiled in greeting.

Father Agueras had a deep but pleasant voice, heavily accented. Spanish perhaps, she thought.

"We were delighted to hear that the Cardinal's life had been spared from the firing squad during the horrifying Civil War, Madame. Your cousin gave his heart fully to our Father Superior, who had been imprisoned in the same cell. Father Orsini just passed, Madame. He would have been proud to meet you."

Gaby nodded. In effect Philippe as well had been taken and defrocked with many clerics by the National Guards in Belleville during the Commune. Often, he had been prepared to die 'the following day... or the next hour,' just to have his life pardoned at the very last moment. All Republicans in the Constitutional government were not atheists; although many had crossed the line to join the Commune, particularly many of the men in the National Guards.

"*Eh bien*, it is getting late and we have a wonderful dinner awaiting you and Monsieur de Pleyssis. You will be delighted."

They all walked inside the large hall. An immense fireplace with a significant cauldron within its hearth took up most of the far wall. Large religious tapestries hung on the wall. Gaby's eyes rested on one of the panels—the Apocalypse from the Book of Revelation, the last battle between good and evil.

"Your glance says it all, Madame. It is on loan, as well as many of the priceless Bayeux tapestries over there, so many of these works of

art were burned or destroyed during the first revolution in 1789, a good many of them to extract the golden or silver threads the crafters used in the design. The Castellans in Angers loaned these panels to us, they foresaw the conflicts that set Paris aflame during the dreadful six weeks of the Commune.”

Gaby nodded. “Horrific times... on a happier note, I have been in Paris these last few weeks and the resilience of the Parisians is formidable.” About to divulge a bit more about her travels throughout Europe, she stopped.

The old monk continued. “I can see that you are appreciative of our great cultural history, Madame. Let me summon the Abbé. He will give you a most informative tour of our latest acquisitions. A fabulous collection of illuminated manuscripts has been brought upstairs for your pleasure. Pure magnificence!” the monk declared with genuine pride and joy in his voice.

“With great pleasure. Merci, Mon Père,” Gaby replied.

“Stay here I will call Abbé Sébastien.” He showed them to a small salon where a low round table was covered by a semi-circular velvet tablecloth. Gaby danced her fingers over the knitted pile. “The weave, how intricate and subtle,” she said to the faithful holy men. “I had not noticed the figures of the Holy Family.”

“You will see much beauty on our walls, Madame, delighted that you appreciate it!” The Abbé, a young, tall slender man with blond hair and vibrant blue eyes, showed up. Gaby and Jean-Louis were taken to ancient rooms where the glory of the Church and of France were exalted.

Two hours later, a monk with a white apron covering his stout abdomen appeared. “Eh bien, after so much information, I hear your stomachs growling. Be prepared for a wonderful feast that I, along with the great gift that our Father bestowed upon me, prepared

especially for you. The short and doughy monk held three small liqueur glasses and escorted them to a rounded sofa facing a fireplace.

“Here let us begin our wonderful adventure, starting with the ancient culinary arts of Cluny. Sit down, please. I have brought you a taster of the liquors. Enjoy our fine dark plum liquor infused on site by our monks.”

He smiled and in one swig swallowed the sweet liquor. He poured another. “For good measure!” he exclaimed, smiling widely as he placed the tip of the glass to his lips and downed the alcohol in one straight gulp. “Ah, pure delight!” He signed himself and laughed, a big hearty burst of laughter. “It is not perfection... ah, but so close!” His eyes lifted to the heavens.

The dampness and darkness of the cavernous refectory initiated a peculiar fretful sensation in Gaby, but she managed to remain quiet and serene. “It will pass,” she murmured to herself.

Leaving the corner of the sofa, she slid nearer to Jean-Louis, reached for his hand and clasped it tightly. Pleasantly surprised at the gesture of affection, he gathered her to him and stroked her hair.

The monk offered another small glass of the plum liquor, which she downed rapidly. A sudden warmth and comfort enveloped her body. Absolutely, she reflected, all was well.

After all the introduction and amiable lectures on the food, its origin in their on-site gardens and their secretive preparations in even more secretive chambers, Jean-Louis was ravenous. As a young man, he had studied in great detail the artistic and political impact the Abbaye had had on the medieval world. He stood, nodded to Gaby and came around to help her away from the large fauteuil where she sat. Taking the initiative, the Abbott also stood.

“Eh bien, it is now time to descend into the caves. A wonderful meal awaits us,” he declared, leading the way across the vast carpeted sitting room.

Jean-Louis clasped Gaby's hand as he followed the cleric and guided her toward an obscure narrow stone stairway that led to the fermentation caves.

As she began to negotiate the first stone staircase that gave way to packed dirt steps, the darkness of the grotto terrified her. Stomach cramps began to contort her abdomen, heat burned her cheeks and chest, her breathing labored with each descending earth filled steps. Her chest heaved, her head shifting from side to side as she reached for the dark wooden railing to retrieve a sense of security.

Jean-Louis had already reached the long corridors filled with the scent of the fermenting wine barrels of the Nuits-Saint-Georges. She felt him reach back and clasp her hand as a monk dressed in the brown monastic tunic of the Benedictine order directed their glances to the dozens of wooden *tonneaux* where approximately nine hundred liters of fine wine matured. A wide wooden cross with a silver Christ sculpted in it hung from a cordon tied around the waist of the brother.

"This very Abbey was founded in 910 by the Pious Duke of Aquitaine, Madame. As you can see the style is Romanesque, but our Cluniac reforms quickly spread to encouraging the arts and caring for the poor," he said, speaking in a kind and tender voice. "Our Abbey here in Cluny at one point covered over 25 acres, before the radical pagans destroyed most of it during the Revolution. A great sadness, indeed."

Gaby straightened and nodded.

At the very center of one of the long, low ceilinged corridors appeared a narrow, winding staircase leading to a rounded cave. From top to bottom, rows of short, tapered tunnels were dug in the packed mud where bottles of wine lay. A small intimate table flamboyantly adorned in thick white damask embroidered with the Monastery's name stood in the cave's center. Large silver plates and silver goblets adorned with enormous forks, knives and spoons were positioned upon

a magnificently woven tapestry that told of past hunting scenes by the Dukes of Bourgogne. Myriad scents spread across the large halls.

Unsteady, Gaby followed Jean-Louis and the Brother. She heaved a great sigh once more. Leading the way, the monk stepped down into the abyss. Heat began to gravitate from her head down to her chest, spine and stomach. She heaved deeply to regain control and lifted her arm to grasp the iron banister along the walls where large wooden drums were stacked side by side, rows after rows.

One of the steps was wider than most. To regain some inner strength, she stopped and looked down. She touched the cold stone above the iron bannister. The swirling staircase had begun to widen, down below the area was illuminated. Nothing to fear, she straightened and steadied her torso as she continued her descent. Her cheeks were burning.

Jean-Louis turned to her and smiled. "Oh, Gaby," he touched the large gray, irregular stones, "if these walls could talk, the stories they could recount."

Weak and dizzy, the elegant, long rectangular table with a vanilla lace tablecloth just off the end of the stairwell came into proper focus for Gaby. Quickly, she followed her former husband. She tried to steady her trembling limbs on the side bannister close to the awaiting monks already seated at the dining table. The long climb down appeared to have no end.

A few more steps, she told herself. She grasped the marble covered by a long red velvet runner; her gloved fingers glided on the cloth that she attempted to grip to foil a disaster. Everything atop the marble was swept to the ground with a thunderous and echoing resonance of broken glasses, plates, wine bottles and silverware.

Gaby fell on the white gravel that covered the floor of the caves along with the candelabras, bottles of wines, plates, glasses and liquors. Jean-Louis sprang to her. The monks sent servants for

smelling salts. The pretty soprano was carried and seated on a large king chair with wide wooden armrests decorated in multi-colors velour patches. The servants returned and swayed the voile sacs filled with salts back and forth like a pendulum in front of her face. She slapped the bag away as she regained consciousness. Haggard, she pushed aside the monk, and jumped down from the dais where the throne rested.

Long corridors bordered on both sides by immense tunnels filled with additional large wooden barrels of fermenting wines gave her room to maneuver. Her arms flailed in all directions, her body shifted too fast for the stunned men to react. She bolted down one of the alleys, contorted, running sideways, hitting the barrels, looking down and behind her. Oblivious of the men following her, she swatted her lower legs as if she wanted to shoo away some imaginary beasts gnawing at her feet.

Jean-Louis followed her, although Gaby's red kid shoes remained on the dais that she'd escaped minutes ago. Her small bare feet struck the cobblestones like lightning—blind to everyone and everything in her current state. Fortunately, a large barrel stopped her flight.

Jean-Louis grabbed her and enveloped her small body tightly. With his former wife lifted in his arms, her head nestled in his chest, he strode back toward the dining area, quickly turned and began to scale two by two the steep stone steps to the sitting room and foyer.

Gaby's cheeks were on fire. She held on to him as if her life depended on it as she hid her face deep inside his chest to obliterate the horrific pictures that danced a macabre waltz in her mind. Minutes later, Jean-Louis emerged outside in the garden. Although brutally cold, the sun still shone bright. Almost immediately, the unnerved vibrations of distress he felt as he held her near began to ease as her body retrieved a tranquility he knew all too well.

"You're fine, Gaby, I'm here," he whispered.

He had forgotten her terror of the dark but this episode had been graver than any other he had witnessed before. Gaby held a dark secret. He wanted to make sure that this episode would not be disclosed. Of all places for her to experience such an incident! He smiled and quickly felt awful about such an outrageous contemplation. His former wife still in his arms, he called out to the two remaining monks who had just re-emerged from the caves—stunned.

“You will keep this dire incident to yourselves. Be certain that all reparations and the cost incurred will be fully recovered. My secretary will contact your Abbot.”

Quickly he nodded to the gatekeeper to have the carriage brought in front of the Monastery. The hunting lodge was less than an hour away. He also had a wonderful friend who owned a castle nearby. They’d ride the short distance to the larger estate.



Iron Angel Gaby, is an historical romance set in Paris in the late 18th century. The life of a sensational American soprano and the conflict with her overbearing aristocratic former husband is depicted. A tragic event develops.

Iron Angel: Gaby - Book III

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