

Chapter 2 ~ *Impromptu*

First Visions

George drew deeply on her cigar and swept into the drawing room haloed in smoke. She had come attired in her trademark masculine vestments, flaunting trousers of rough grey cloth, matching waistcoat and black boots. Her dark flashing eyes dared anyone to challenge her contempt of convention. She took in the faces, her gaze alighting first on a young woman who sat fanning herself. 'There sits that silly young Mademoiselle Filet', she thought, 'wishing to be seen among the cultivated throng. She will take great pleasure tomorrow entertaining her friends at my expense.'

George's eyes fell on a number of older ladies sitting together tittering, and she made no attempt to conceal her scorn. 'Foolish young women, I can forgive to a degree. There is even some hope left for them, that with maturity their outlook on life will improve. But a witless older woman - for that type there is no hope of change. Such as she remains ignorant all her life, and, worse, to conceal her ignorance and boredom with life she idly engages in character assassination.'

But while George's keen eyes picked such individuals from the crowd, their attention this evening was focused not on her but on another. Tonight all had come to hear Chopin play, George herself for the first time, drawn by her love of fine music and the public adulation of this

man who so intrigued her. She had to see, hear, for herself.

Frederic Chopin sat very straight at the piano, a long, thin figure, elegantly dressed. Sitting in profile to George, she noticed his aquiline nose and full lips and the place where his fair curls brushed the collar of his coat. While Madame Bouchard, their hostess, welcomed the select gathering, he sat still and quiet at the piano, head bent, eyes closed as if engaged in deep meditation, blotting out the gathering. But his long tapered fingers gave his inner thoughts away and caught her attention. While the rest of his body obediently, politely, waited for their hostess to finish her introductions, his rebellious fingers moved restlessly on the keys, impatient to begin.

He was not handsome, but the sight and sense of him made her catch her breath. There was about him an indefinable air of melancholy, a sense of past tragedy, future suffering. It moved her to tears. The feeling was beyond anything she had ever felt for any man, beyond sexual attraction. She was so shocked at the violent emotion he provoked in her that she felt the need for unaccustomed self-reprimand, severely reminding herself of her duties as a mother and to her live-in paramour, Jean-Paul.

Quite oblivious to the gracious introduction of their hostess, she was startled when Chopin began to play. His music was soft, caressing, though there was nothing light or superficial about it. She had been standing, but now

sought a seat, away from the candlelight, away from the eyes of others, on the opposite side of the room. She could see his face clearly now, observe the subtle changes in emotion that his playing caused in him, realized with wonder that although the music had been introduced as an existing piece, he was reliving the composing of it. It was, for him, at that moment, a fresh piece, flowing from his fingers for the first time, a miracle in sound. The cadence of his music was so pure it seemed to her to surround the player in luminosity.

When he finished playing, he raised his head, slowly emerging from the trance, and, as she was in the path of his vision, looked directly at her. She realized she was weeping, but made no attempt to wipe away the tears. Overcome as she was with emotion, in a trance as he had been, she felt no need for pretence or feigned modesty. No void separated them; for a fleeting, pure moment they were in perfect communion as fellow artists. Before this occasion they had never met, but she became gradually aware that he recognized her from the descriptions of others. At first she noticed mild surprise, then, horrified, saw his expression change, the slight deprecating upturn of his lip, the recognition of the public woman, that outrageous woman who dresses like a man, smokes cigars, flouts convention, that divorced woman who has known several lovers. Abruptly, her mood turned to overwhelming, unreasonable anger against him. How dare he judge her! He did not even know her! How dare he make her bare her soul before him, then mock her. Her

eyes flashed defiance. She rose, slowly, haughtily, and, holding his eyes all the while, left the room.

As she walked away from the gathering, away from him, he noticed a small, silver dagger at the back of her hair, holding together the rebellious, raven-dark shining coils.