

CHAPTER I

Los Angeles, 1907

Anna Blanc wore a six-inch hairpiece made from the tresses of a yak. She had crowned the abundant puffs and curls with the largest ostrich feather hat in Los Angeles. The look was dramatic, the latest from Vionnet at the House of Doucet, and a terrible choice when running for a train. She sprinted along the moonlit tracks, her big hair bun bouncing, her feathers shaking, her satin gown trailing an undignified sprig of rosemary snagged from the bush where she'd been hiding. Above her, the majestic dome of La Grande Station rose from the expanse of dust and steel, menacing her like some giant guardian of propriety. As she flew past a palm tree, her veil caught on a frond and tore, revealing an eye, a nose, a cheek. "Biscuits!" she swore.

It had occurred to Anna that she should wait to board the train until the last possible moment, so it would be harder for any pursuer to drag her back off. But, just as the last passengers were stepping on board the late-night train, and Louis Taylor was waving frantically from a car window, two men had approached from the tracks carrying a tin bathtub. One was very thin. One was a cop. This gave Anna pause. She had always admired policemen and wanted to be one, but not this one. His face was scarred, like he had been mauled by a dog. More importantly, he might have come to hunt Anna but had gotten hung up by whatever was in the tub, in which case she needed to stay in the bushes.

As they passed closer to Anna, beneath a sputtering gaslight, she rose on tiptoes, peeking through the leaves of a hibiscus bush, and saw a large, lumpy sack oozing in the tub. It looked violent and disgusting

and made her feel ill. It could be a deer, but she thought not. No one called the police when a train hit an animal. It had to be a corpse, likely a woman or a child, because the lumps were too small to be a man . . . unless parts were missing. She resented the sickening lumps for turning her stomach on this most special of all nights.

By the time the policeman had left, the train was rolling. Anna popped from the bush. She charged through the warm December night in glamorous shoes, her taffeta petticoats thrashing down the rails. She felt the rumble of the locomotive in her pounding pulse. It belched black smoke, filling her panting, petal lips with grit, showering her with dirty ash.

Louis hung from the door of the car, bareheaded, reaching for her as she sprinted, his eyes bulging, his tongue tip pasted to the corner of his mouth, his striped, silk necktie flapping in the wind. She grabbed his hand and leapt, losing one François Pinet shoe.

Louis leaned against the oak paneled wall, sweating, heart pounding, and exhaled deeply, as if he'd been holding his breath. He grabbed a perfect Homburg hat from the luggage rack and flipped it on. "So much for a quiet departure. There wasn't a person at the station who didn't see you board."

Anna collapsed against the wall next to him, her mind racing with dangerous possibilities. "He might find out I was on the train, but he won't know where I got off." Even as she said it, she didn't believe it. She half believed that there was nowhere beyond the reach of her father, the man who restricted her freedoms, down to the very books she read. She felt a quivering panic in her chest, and wetness spread under her arms. She looked down at her shoeless foot and made a little sound of distress.

Louis took her arm and cooed, "Don't fret, darling. Your father can't stop us from marrying, you know. It's the twentieth century, and he isn't in France anymore. This is Los Angeles."

She looked up, dread clouding her grey eyes. "You have no idea what he can do."

Louis raised one eyebrow, which, together with his spanking fine

mustache, looked very debonair. "Darling, once the deed is done, it's done."



The car insides were cozy, like a nice hotel, with polished wood, vaulted ceilings, and emerald velvet seats. Anna scanned the faces on her getaway train. To her relief, she recognized no one among the traveling suits and black derbies. She barely recognized Louis, whom she'd spoken to only twice, though they'd attended the same balls and exchanged a dozen mushy letters. They'd kept their affair entirely secret.

Anna's father set a high price on her beauty, and would just as soon keep her as an ornament, like a prized Ming Vase, as relinquish her to another man. He'd driven away every suitor who had shown up on his doorstep with violets and honorable intentions. This being widely known, Louis had taken a different approach. He'd delivered his passionate declarations through Anna's friend Clara, while studiously ignoring Anna in public and never coming to call.

Anna limped on one heeled shoe as Louis urged her down the aisle to an empty row at the back of the car. He walked so closely behind her that when she swayed with the train she fell against him. He had a man smell, humid and spicy, like her father's Bay Rum aftershave.

"Someone was hit by the train," she said. "That's why the train was late."

Louis shook his head. "Yes, I know. Let's not speak of it. I mean, it's not a nice topic for a lady." He raised his eyebrows hopefully. "Unless you want to."

"No. It's just . . . it's hard to get hit by a train unless you try."

He nodded soberly.

Anna would have said a prayer for the deceased, but there was no point. All suicides went to hell. Plus, suicide by train was bad manners, as someone else had to clean it up. A considerate person would take too much laudanum or something, and die in their bed, or drown at sea, so as not to inconvenience other people. She opened her mouth to say so, but Louis clapped his hands over her eyes. "Don't look."

Anna smiled indulgently. "Why not?"

"Because *my* darling is a lady."

This seemed like a bad reason for anything. Anna peeled his fingers off her eyes too late. The train was passing through a gully, and all she could see was darkness and scrub. She looked inquisitively at Louis.

He whispered, "Alameda Street. You know. The women, um, shall we say, wave at the train."

Anna took her seat, scrunching her forehead, knowing there must be more to the story. It was long past midnight. Louis slid in closer than was strictly proper, turned his face to hers, and raised his eyebrows. Their legs touched through nine blessed layers of fabric. Anna blushed. A girl was supposed to object and scoot away, but she didn't. She found she didn't mind at all. His thigh was curiously hard and warm beneath his wool trousers. What she wanted to do was touch it.

"I haven't had a single moment alone with you, and I intend to make up for it." He gazed into her eyes as if checking to see if they were green or gray or blue, and whispered, "Take off your glove."

Anna glanced up the aisle of the near-empty car and saw nothing but the backs of heads. She quickly peeled off her glove. He took her hand, hid it beneath the fold of his coat, and began to draw figure eights on her naked palm with one slow finger, sending shivers from her wrists to her lips, and to other parts.

"When the lights go out, I'm going to kiss you," he said. Anna felt like she was still sprinting for the train.

A heavy *bump, bump* made the lovers start. Anna's eyes cut to an old woman, who hobbled down the aisle, dragging a monogrammed Louis Vuitton case as cracked as her powdered face. Her dress had layers and layers of horrid black pleats and was so long out of fashion she could have worn it to Lincoln's funeral. The old lady parked herself one row in front of Anna and Louis in the otherwise empty back of the train. She turned around and stared at them from under wiry gray eyebrows. Sour old lady breath floated over the seat. Louis glared back at her. She clucked in disapproval and turned to face forward. In a few minutes, her head nodded and she began to snore, snorting in, whistling out.

Anna giggled at this a little maniacally, fueled by the excitement of running away, of holding his hand. She had never touched Louis before—or any man except her father. Not without a glove. She felt dizzy, almost drunk, sitting next to him, fingers entwined and caressing, and she had not foreseen it. As eager as she was to marry Louis, it had never been because of love. She chose him because he was well regarded, dressed well—a real Beau Brummell—and was clever enough to circumvent her possessive father. People said lots of nice things about Louis in spite of his poverty—how presentable he was, how sympathetic and well mannered, and how that rumor about his mother, which had traveled clear across the Atlantic, couldn't possibly be true.

Despite Clara's romanticizing the affair, Anna had accepted his proposal not so she could have a life with him in particular, but so she could have a different life. She'd never confess this to Clara, who loved her own husband to distraction—almost as much as she loved Anna. Good, complicit Clara, who had smuggled Anna's trunks out of the house and had them sent to Louis's apartment in Glendale.

Being with Louis now, it occurred to Anna that she didn't not-love him. And it was rather thrilling to be holding his hand, alone on a rough velvet seat, at night, in the back of a vibrating train.

When the lights finally went out, he kissed her in the dark, one soft brush of lips on lips. With dreamy, heavy eyes, he cooed, "You are the dandiest girl on earth."

Anna sighed and held her face up for another, but he placed two fingers on her puckered lips and smiled. "No more kisses," he whispered. "I'm afraid I'd cause a scandal."

Anna flushed. He'd already caused a scandal by stealing her away, and, if no one were looking, she didn't see why he shouldn't kiss her again and for longer. Instead, he removed her hat, plucking out hatpins one by one, and coaxed her cheek down onto his itchy, tweeded shoulder. Her enormous, yak-hair bun crushed against his face, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Now, go to sleep." His voice was silky and low. "I don't want you tired when I kiss you tomorrow night."

Anna bit her lip. He was even more handsome than she had thought before, like a hero in a book. His hands were so lovely caressing hers. She couldn't possibly sleep with him so near. She might never sleep again. She might actually be in love with him. Anna said a silent, sheepish prayer of thanks to Saint Valentine of Rome, patron saint of lovers, and promised to go to confession for deceiving her father and running off with a Protestant.



The train rattled through fragrant lemon groves, cool air whistling through a slightly opened window. Anna awoke to the pungent perfume, with her face pressed onto Louis's chest, one hand in his lap. His head was thrown back, mouth slightly open, his thin mustache quivering with each exhalation. She reluctantly withdrew her hand, straightened up, and, to her horror, found drool on his shirt where her mouth had been. After dabbing a trail of spit from her cheek, she adjusted her towering, lopsided hair in a hand mirror and shook him awake. He opened his eyes with a yawning, "Good morning, darling," and a crooked smile that said, "We just spent the night together." Anna matched it with one of her own.

The train made a grinding, screeching sound as it pulled into the station at Riverside. Louis gathered up his coat. "This, my queen, is the beginning of a dream come true. We're young. We have money. We finally have control of our lives."

Anna smiled, but reserved her exhilaration for when the deed was done. Louis reached out to touch her cheek. He recalled his hand as the old woman one seat up turned her eyes on him. "In my day," she said in a guttural Russian accent, "people didn't make love on trains."

Louis smirked. "In your day, madam, there were no trains."

Anna's eyes widened. She pressed her lips to prevent them from smiling, an act that she could not condone. The old woman harrumphed and looked at her old leather case. She looked at Louis, then to her bag, and back again. It was a gesture of command. Louis brushed past the old woman as if she were not there.

“In my day, gentlemen helped ladies with their bags!” the old woman called after him.

For the first time, Anna noticed the monogrammed letters on the woman’s case—TLS. She smiled and bobbed. “Good day, Mrs. Smucker.” Anna picked up the bag and carried it to the platform.

It was cool in the desert, though the morning sun made the bare, stony mountains golden. Anna hurried to catch up with Louis. He stood beneath a stand of fruited date palms, smoking a cigarette, waiting as a porter brought their trunks. He exhaled a stream of smoke. “Nasty old thing.”

Anna rubbed her arms beneath her satin wrap. “Shhh, Louis. She’s not some laundress. Her son’s the mayor of Los Angeles.”

“You know her?”

“Not by sight, but I know Mayor Smucker has a home in Riverside. His daughter Tasha, who was in my class, is named after her paternal grandmother. Tasha is a Russian name—like Natasha in *War and Peace*. This woman rolls her *rs* like a Russian. I know the mayor’s mother has a very hard time keeping servants . . .”

Louis gave Anna a sideways smile. “Clara warned me about this.”

Anna’s words tumbled out with increasing speed. “The mayor’s housekeeper calls our housekeeper every few weeks in search of new staff for his mother. It’s sort of a joke among the servants. Even a bad-tempered person can keep staff if she pays them well, so let’s suppose that she does not pay them well. She certainly has the money. So, let’s say she’s a miser. This woman’s bag is worn past respectability, but it’s a Louis Vuitton and cost a bundle. Her dress, too, was expensive, last century. This suggests either a change in fortune, or that its owner does not care to spend the money to replace it. I favor the latter explanation as her bag is monogrammed TS—Tasha Smucker.” Anna took a deep breath. “Which has no ring to it, whatsoever. I could never marry a man named Smucker.”

Louis grinned and hailed a cab. “Then I’m lucky I’m not named Smucker.”

The cab driver motored Anna and Louis through streets lined with

feathered palms to the Mission Inn. The hotel catered to the East Coast rich, who came in droves to winter in sunshine and to see about their lucrative citrus groves. Louis chose it not only because it was fashionable, but because it had a chapel. It reminded Anna of a Spanish castle, with its wrought iron railings and gardens of purple bougainvillea. It dripped with bells. Anna stared up at the dozens of campanías adorning every arch, tower, and alcove beneath the red tile roof and wondered if they would ring for her when she was pronounced Mrs. Louis Taylor.

The couple passed through towering oak doors into the grand lobby. They strolled arm in arm, Anna hobbling on one shoe, ostrich feathers bobbing, her coat sooty, her satin frock looking slept in, her big hair tipping south. A fourteen-foot Christmas tree scented the room, adorned with baubles and tiny candles, waiting to be lit. There were bowls of oranges, red poinsettias, and elegant guests reading newspapers in leather chairs.

Louis sauntered up to a marble counter, wearing Anna like a badge of honor. “Mr. and Mrs. Louis Taylor. We have the honeymoon suite.”

The clerk took in the couple with one broad stroke. He frowned his disapproval. “Welcome, Mr. . . . I’m sorry.”

“Taylor,” Louis said.

The clerk found the name on a list and handed Louis a pen to sign the register. “I see you’ve reserved the chapel, Mr. and *Mrs.* Taylor.”

Somewhere in the lobby behind them, two men began a conversation. Anna heard snippets.

“. . . California has her grip on me . . . I bought citrus farms . . .”

“Riverside’s a world away from Boston . . .”

“. . . my home’s being built in Los Angeles.”

“Following the oil? The oil money? You and everybody else. We’re finding our place in the world. First city with electric lights. The streetcars are the best in the nation. Telephone system, too . . .”

“. . . I’m just here for the weather and the fruit . . .”

Anna didn’t care at all about their conversation or why so many people were coming to Los Angeles, making her city spread out like spilled lemonade. She was giggling at Louis who, reluctant to let go of

her, was trying to sign the register with his left hand, having first nearly overturned the inkpot. He finished with an exaggerated flourish, grinning at his almost-wife. She hadn't realized he was so charming.

The clerk turned his back to Louis and picked up a telephone. Louis cleared his throat, "I'm on my honeymoon, sir, and I'd rather not spend it in the lobby, if you know what I mean."

Without turning, the clerk raised one heavy hand, indicating that Louis should wait.

"If you would just provide us with the key . . ." Louis said.

The clerk frowned and hung up the phone. "I'll be very happy to provide you a key, sir, once you've paid."

Louis looked to Anna. She had told him they could have the bill sent to her father.

"You want us to pay in advance? We never pay in advance," Anna said. It was true. The Blancs always had a tab.

"Forgive me," the clerk said. "I'm not acquainted with the Mr. Louis Taylors of—where did you say you were from?"

"You have nerve!" Louis said, though the clerk's suspicions were entirely founded.

"Are you familiar with the Blancs of Los Angeles? You can send the bill to Christopher Blanc. He's my father," Anna said.

The clerk replied evenly, "Shall I call Mr. Blanc—just to tell him you've arrived safely?"

"No!" Anna's exclamation echoed off the tile and faded into an uncomfortable silence. The clerk pressed his priggish lips.

A man's smooth voice came from behind her. "I can vouch for them. This charming lady *is* Anna Blanc, and I'm sure her father is good for it."

The clerk's demeanor turned like a well-trained horse on a five-cent piece. He handed Louis the key and bowed to the disheveled couple. "I'm sorry, sir."

Anna untwined her arm from Louis's, her face as cool and white as the marble counter. She'd rather sleep in the desert than be helped by an ersatz friend who would give them away, accidentally or other-

wise. She turned to face the threat and sized the man up the way a lady should—that is, without seeming to. He was well bred, barely noticing her shoeless foot and the toes sticking out of her stocking. His accent said East Coast. He must be important, to be shown such deference by the desk clerk. He was not a politician or a businessman. He didn't have the doughy look of a man who worked long hours. He must simply be very rich. His clothes were perfect, his dark curls slicked back. He was toweringly tall and handsome. She searched her memory for his person and came up blank.

"It's Miss . . . Mrs. . . . Taylor. You are . . . You know my father. Of course. He introduced us at . . ." She extended her hand and waited for him to fill in the blanks.

He smiled at her with the sweetness of a boy on the brink of adolescence, though he had to be thirty. "Edgar Wright." He took her hand and then extended his hand to Louis. "Of course I know your father. Everyone does." He smiled some more. "And don't worry that you don't remember me. We've never met. I saw your picture in the paper at your coming out. Was it two years ago? Of course you'd be married by now."

Anna spoke with the barest tinge of bitterness. "You would think so."

Mr. Wright studied her face with too much interest. "You're even more beautiful in person."

Louis stepped closer to Anna. "I appreciate your good word. Now, if you would excuse us, we're on our honeymoon." He slipped his arm through hers in a gesture of possession.

Mr. Wright bowed impeccably. "Congratulations. I won't keep you."

"You won't be seeing my father soon? Or speaking to him?" Anna asked.

"Unfortunately not," Mr. Wright said.

She smiled her relief. "Well then. Goodbye Mr. Wright. And, thank you."

Louis jingled the keys in his pocket. "Goodbye Mr. Wright." He squeezed her arm. "Darling, you should rest. Let me take you to our room."

Anna immediately forgot Mr. Wright and thought of what might happen in that room. Her stomach flipped like she was on a swing.

Louis led her off to a white staircase that wound around and around, up to love.

At the door to their suite, Louis felt for his watch. "Oh boy. I didn't realize the train would be so late. We're due in the chapel in . . ." He checked the time and winced. "Ten minutes. I'll just pop down to postpone."

Anna held his arm. "No, don't!"

Louis looked surprised. "We can do it later, Anna. Don't you want to change?"

"Yes, but . . . Let's do everything right now. Everything."



To Anna, fashion was a sacrament. It was a testimony to her eagerness that she dressed with no attendant and presented herself for her wedding with a crease in her veil, no powder, her *robe nuptiale* half-buttoned in back, and only one shoe. She pinched her cheeks mercilessly to give them color and tucked a sixpence into her slipper for luck. The coin was a token from her English mother, who was presently rolling in her grave.

The priest waited at the gilded altar under a domed ceiling painted like the sky. Two hotel maids in white caps and bib aprons stood as silent witnesses. The room smelled like incense and lemon oil. Louis and Anna processed down the aisle, Clara's borrowed lace train flowing behind. For a brief moment, Anna's feet revolted and she dragged on Louis like an anchor. She felt dizzy and had to lean against a wooden pew. Why was this so difficult? In her head she knew she was doing the right thing. Any future would be better than spinsterhood under her father's roof, and she might have just fallen in love with Louis. She looked to the stained glass saints for guidance, then back at the door. The clock was ticking.

Louis put soft lips to her ear. "Don't be anxious, my queen. I'll be gentle."

"Me, too." She thought of cigarettes, lively dances, mystery books,

brandy, and love—all the things her father denied her. She thought of Louis's hands on the train. She squared her shoulders and willed her feet to move.

The priest began the rite in English. Anna groaned. Here was one more thing she'd have to bring to the confessional. "You promised you'd pretend to be Catholic and get a Catholic priest," she whispered.

"I tried. The Catholic man wouldn't do an elopement."

"You could have said we were orphans."

"We'd be very rich orphans. I don't know what you're so bothered about. People question your loyalties when you're Roman, you know."

Anna sighed. She'd rather be free and in need of absolution than postpone and get caught. "But now we'll have to do it all over again."

Louis shrugged.

During the vows, Anna kept looking over her shoulder. She promised to love with sincerity, crossed her fingers when she vowed to obey, and said "I do" before the priest had finished his sentence. Louis slid a band onto her finger—a ring purchased on her father's credit. His chaste, ceremonial kiss tasted sweet, like freedom, and Anna laughed at nothing in particular. She paid the priest and Louis led her back to their room to the peals of a thousand bells.

In their suite, a bottle of Cuvée Femme waited, chilling in a bucket of ice with a note from Mr. Wright: "All my best wishes for a blessed union."

"How kind." Anna dropped the note on the floor. She was thinking about Louis's hands and wondering what exactly was involved in consummation. She smoothed her wedding gown and perched on a chaise.

Louis poured the champagne and raised his glass. "To you, my queen."

After two glasses, Anna's head was rushing. Louis was studying her, watching her bring the glass to her lips, watching her sip the amber liquid, watching her drain the glass. She felt scrumptiously self-conscious. He ran his fingers through his crispy, brilliantined hair. "Sunset seems a millennium away."

"Why don't you ravish me now?"

His eyebrow arched up. "It's 10 a.m."

Anna shrugged. "Not in China."

"I see." He lunged for her, toppling her onto the chaise. Her glass smashed upon the floor. A thousand bells rang in Anna's head, and she knew for certain that she was *very* much in love with him.

The door burst open with a *bang*. The desk clerk stood on the threshold with his priggish arms folded, flanked by two breathless police officers.

That marked the end of Anna's golden reputation and her marriage to Louis Taylor.