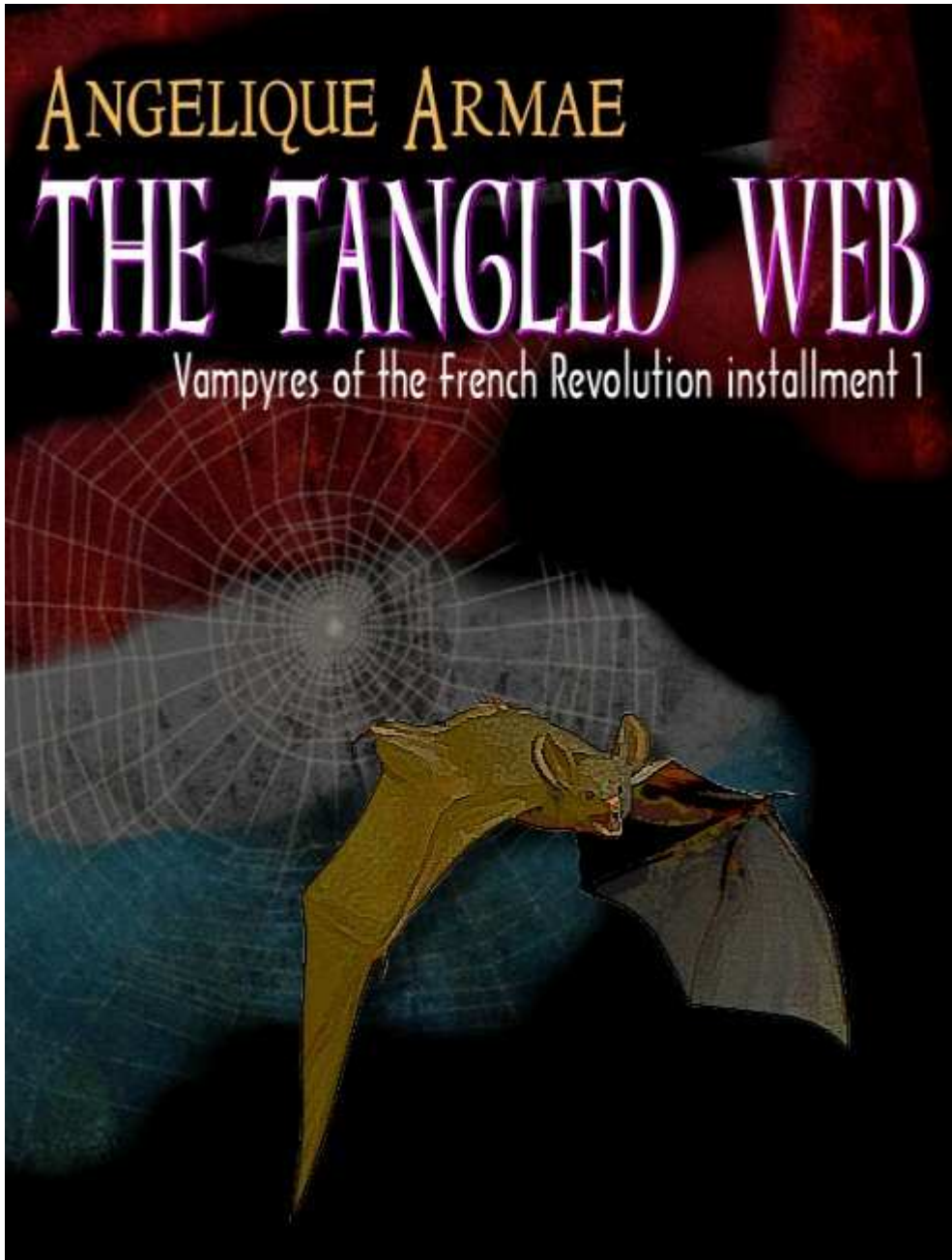


ANGELIQUE ARMAE

THE TANGLED WEB

Vampyres of the French Revolution installment 1



THE TANGLED WEB

By

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France, 1793

He lied. Comte Sergei Laroque was not the man whom he claimed to be.

Lady Chloe Bisette stared at the parchment note folded in her hand. Letters scribbled in indigo ink warned her of a man turned vampyre who fit Laroque's profile. But the Mad Monk Pierre, the author of the letter, still needed proof, and Chloe was the only person who could get close to the mysterious Comte.

There would be no turning back now, no escape.

She rose from her chair and paced the floor. Her silk slippers sank in the cell's damp, muddy surface. Her feet grew cold, and an icy chill stirred her soul. The feeling reminded her of the moment she was first taken into captivity, a moment she wanted to forget just now. She should have escaped both Pierre and Laroque when she had the chance, but like a fool, she didn't. Her infatuation with the vampyre had existed since childhood, since she first laid eyes upon the handsome Sergei Laroque. The thought of crossing over to the world of the vampyre had enticed her.

An icy cold sensation wrapped around her neck. Chloe held her breath, well aware of the power of the unseen entity that now taunted her. For the first time since this nightmare began, she understood. Laroque was more than a creature of the night—he was master of his race. Pierre was right, the Vampyric Dynasty existed, and Sergei sat at its helm.

The sound of approaching footsteps echoed in the hall outside her prison chamber. She turned to the door and waited for her master. It had to be him. No one else would come; no one save for Pierre and Laroque knew she existed. The sound of a key turned in the lock and Sergei entered the cell.

The dimly lit chamber illuminated on the instant. Chloe squinted her eyes. Laroque's hunched-back servant placed a newly filled candelabrum on the table and took away the old, melted tallow stick that had offered only dim light at best. The servant scurried from the room.

Sergei locked the door behind him, then turned to face Chloe. "Mademoiselle Bissette, I've been told you had a visitor."

"How could I have had a visitor? No one knows I am alive," she said. "My family believes me to have lost my head. And since the moment you secretly saved me from the guillotine, I have been locked up in this cell."

Laroque leaned against the wood door and folded his arms in front of his broad chest. Well-toned muscles flexed beneath the thin silk of his shirt. Chloe wished the man wasn't so handsome and so appealing to a woman's hidden desires. In truth, he ruled her like a god ruled his slaves. She had no control over her emotions when it came to Sergei Laroque.

"So, are you telling me my servants lie to their master?" He rubbed his chin. "If so, then they must be punished."

Chloe felt the color drain from her face. Punished? She could only imagine what such a creature would do to a soul who truly displeased him. "I said I had no visitor. I never said your servants lied. Leave them out of this, Monseigneur. Please, I beg of you." She waited for his reaction to her plea, but frustratingly, the devilishly handsome count remained silent.

* * *

She acknowledged him with respect, and obedience, despite her fear of him. Yet, still she lied. He offered a sly smile. The woman enchanted him like no other, and for the first time in more than a century, Laroque battled with his reeling emotions. He seldom allowed himself such pleasure. The act of losing one's heart was far too dangerous for a vampyre. And this, he painfully recalled, he knew from experience. He survived such torment and misery once, but fate, he was certain, would never allow him a second escape. Sergei reached out his hand and motioned for Chloe to come to him.

She refused.

He cursed to himself. Fate had him exactly where he hated to be—helpless and spellbound, at the mercy of a beautiful enchantress. "You have nothing to fear from me. Now come."

She shook her head.

He took a deep breath, keeping his rising frustration in check. "Who was your visitor?"

"I told you, I had no—"

Sergei raised his hand in front of him, silencing Chloe on the instant. "Just tell me what he looked like."

She huffed. "You would deny me a priest? A simple request for penance?" She stomped her foot upon the muddy floor and balled her hands into tight fists at her side. Slowly, in anger, she

approached him. "At a time when France is being slaughtered, while heads roll on a daily basis, all you are concerned with is keeping your own lies a secret." She stood face-to-face with him, her fragrant breath warming his cheeks.

He pulled her hard against him. The scent of her—lavender mixed with sweet honey—made him wild with a frenzy of emotions, lust reigning supreme amid his internal chaos. She moved ever so slightly away from him, freeing her face to breathe. Her swan-like neck, draped in an amber necklace, innocently exposed itself for the taking.

He swallowed hard and released her, pushing her away. "No priest in his right mind would ever come to Castle Laroque."

He moved away from her. Like a wild beast caged for the first time, Sergei prowled and paced the modest cell. "I thought I could keep you safe here, safe from the enemies who hunt me. Obviously, I was wrong."

* * *

Laroque was pleasing to watch, thought Chloe, even in his agitated state. Across the walls of stone, his tall, dark shadow danced in the candlelight. He raised a hand to his neck and fidgeted with the white cravat tied about his flesh. Chloe sensed his apprehension.

"Then who, if not a priest, was my visitor?" she asked.

"I do not know," Sergei said. "I am hunted by many."

She was curious about this creature. Over the years she had heard numerous rumors about Comte Laroque, the most fascinating of them being that he could manipulate the night. The most sinful, being he could pleasure a woman in such ways few dared speak of without fearing for their souls. He was also said to be more powerful than even the king or the present government. And that, Chloe learned, was one fact proven to be true. If it were not for Sergei, she would have lost her head to Madame guillotine more than a year ago. Of course, had it not been for her own desire to explore the rumors, she would not have been sentenced to the guillotine in the first place.

Laroque turned to face her. His dark, fathomless eyes appeared like orbs of black ice, staring at her as if he were looking into her soul.

She swallowed hard. If Sergei only knew the truth, thought Chloe, he would send her back to Paris to die.

* * *

"I know of only one man who would dare disguise himself as a priest," Sergei said. "He is known as mad monk Pierre, the vampyre hunter."

He waited to see what reaction his words would have on his captive. But his prisoner showed no sign of giving in.

Instead, she proved to be a trying little minx who stirred his soul like no other before her. He watched, silently, as Chloe toyed with the heavy fabric of her wool cape, wrapping the garment closer to her body. She was trembling slightly.

Sergei cursed to himself for having kept her here too long. She should be living upstairs, in the castle's sumptuous salons, spending her days in a leisurely manner befitting a lady of her stature. But he couldn't keep her safe if he took her away from his native soil. The dungeon cell was the only part of the castle, save for his own sleeping quarters, where his native soil could protect those under his care. The thought of taking Chloe to his bed was more appealing to his body than he had expected. The realization unsettled him. No, it would be far too dangerous for Chloe if he took her to his bed. Far too dangerous for himself as well.

* * *

Chloe slipped her hand inside the little silk bag concealed under her cape, and carefully crinkled the folded piece of parchment she was hiding. She didn't want Sergei to know she had the note. She didn't want him to know her secret. "What difference does it matter who came to visit me? The man only offered to hear my confession, nothing more."

"It means a lot," Laroque said. "The souls who hunt me are dangerous."

"And these are dangerous times. No one is safe, my lord."

He hesitated. "You don't understand. You see, Chloe, I am not who you think I am."

"I am very much aware of who you are, Monseigneur. You are Comte Laroque. The soul who manipulates the night."

"You have heard the rumors, then."

She nodded.

"And what do you think of them, what do you believe?"

"I believe, now, they are true. But such nonsense matters not to me. You saved me from losing my head, and for that, I am indebted to you, regardless of who you may or may not be." And that was the truth, thought Chloe. She may have come to him under false pretenses, but she would always be indebted to him, and faithful to him even if he was vampyre.

* * *

A sense of shock flooded Sergei's soul. "What do you mean by you believe, now, the rumors are true, Mademoiselle?"

She didn't answer.

Sergei drew his gaze to the motion beneath her cloak. "What do you have in your hand?"

"Nothing."

The sound of a small, yet heavy sack falling to the floor sliced through the chamber's cold air. Chloe bit her bottom lip and winced.

Sergei stared at the floor. A crumpled purse sat at Chloe's feet.

He bent down and firmly snatched the bag with his hand. He pulled at the frayed strings that tied the purse and opened the bag. Several items collided with his fingers. Even without bringing the trinkets into the light, Sergei identified the contents hiding in Chloe's purse—a clove of garlic, a silver cross, a vial of holy water, and a crumpled piece of paper.

"You should have requested a stake, as none of these things will do you any good."

He took out the folded parchment note and placed it on the table. The words were still legible, despite the deep creases marring the page. He read the note and realized the truth of the matter. He would never have believed it had he not read it with his own eyes.

Sergei turned to face Chloe. "You deceived me. You came to me under false pretenses. You knew my identity all along."

She shook her head and backed away from him. "No. No, I did not know about the vampyre. I...I only knew...that I loved you."

He froze.

"Oui. I have loved you since I first heard the tales of your existence. At night, I would go to the edge of my father's estate and watch you. I was in awe of you. But at the time, I did not know what you were. And when my parents were sent to the guillotine, I went into hiding. Pierre, the man who dresses like a priest, had tried to help me. I promised to work with him, to learn more about you. In the midst of my research, I was taken as a prisoner of the state and sentenced to the guillotine. I was to meet the same fate that had befallen my parents. The rest of my family has turned against the king, and they believe me to be dead. I couldn't risk telling you the truth because I feared you would send me back to Paris to face my death."

She loved him. He never remembered anyone ever admitting to loving him. In four hundred years he had loved only once, but that love was never returned. Now, fate had given him a woman he loved who also loved him back.

So, Lady Chloe Bissette was the young woman who spied on him by night and who haunted his dreams by day. He wondered why he hadn't realized the fact before tonight. He also realized he

would have no choice but to bring Chloe across to the vampyre. If he didn't, the mad monk Pierre would come back for her and see to it she be returned to Paris to fulfill her sentence.

"You must be made vampyre," Sergei said. "I see no other way to save you from Madame guillotine. If you remain mortal, Pierre will return for you. As vampyre, he will have no power over you. He has no power over me, that is why he needed your help. The mad monk has been forbidden by the powers that be, to hunt me. He needed a mortal to do his vile work. He is obsessed with hunting the Laroque dynasty."

With wide eyes, Chloe stared at him. "Then he meant for me to kill you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"I would never—"

"I know."

A God-fearing look crossed Chloe's face. "But to be made vampyre, I will be eternally damned."

"To remain mortal, you will be cursed. The mad monk never allows his assistants to ever be free of his leash. The choice is yours, my dear Chloe. You own my heart, therefore I will do whatever it is you so desire."

* * *

Chloe undid the clasp of her necklace. The amber jewels glistened in the candlelight as they silently slipped from her hands and fell to the floor. Sergei offered her neck a gentle caress with his hand. He softly brushed her hair over her shoulder. Chloe wondered how in the world she ever managed to get into such a situation, even if she was in love with Laroque and more than willing to spend eternity by his side.

A soft whisper caressed her ears and the Vampyre's kiss seared her neck. Life, as Chloe knew it, would never be the same again.