

A detailed illustration of a woman in a historical-style dress. The dress is primarily purple with pink and white lace accents. She is holding a sword with a highly ornate, golden hilt. The background is a light green wall with a diamond-patterned tile design.

A  
SWORD  
GIRL  
NOVEL

LA  
MAUPIN

JORDAN STRATFORD



**LA  
MAUPIN**

**Jordan Stratford**

LA MAUPIN: SWORD GIRL BOOK 2

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# I

*From a letter found in the Bibliothèque Nationale  
attributed to Mme. Julie La Maupin.  
1688—la Bastille*

**T**here is fever, which weaves thought and fear together into a tangle of words. It comes from the chill of the walls. Perhaps there are too many prayers for death in such a place, so fever lurks, awaiting invitation. It is not much, just an uncomfortable heat on my forehead, and a thirst, though the water here is at least fit enough. I am hungry. But there is paper, and ink, while I wait for bread. Should my jailers remember, or care.

Like the hours at Avignon, in the convent of the Visitandines, the candle makes the hours go, and prayer blurs the walls of my prison. There are faces in the shadows, as memory paints them: Sérannes, and the shape of his mouth, and when in recollection I taste his skin there is the salt of the sea, and Marseilles. Lisette, and the line from her throat to

her collarbone that caused an ache in me, and the flame becomes the glow of the convent fire roaring so loud it shook the earth beneath our horses, heat behind us and before us only the night sky and the thin road, a pilgrims road, and then in Paris in the Café Procope and the steam of coffee sweetened with pink sugar and poor Lully is dead, masterful Lully is dead and I am seventeen and we all the actors of the city have come to mourn him, over coffee. And d'Albert, sweet d'Albert who called me Emilie when he kissed me. Somewhere now in a cell like this one, for the same crime, and in this at least we are together. And elsewhere, my husband. My poor husband and his boundless kindness. Shamed to think of him now at last.

It is the fever or the sleeplessness that jumbles my words so. A marvel that my fingers can keep up.

There is more paper here, so I need not write crosswise over the page, and I will continue until sleep takes me or the guards rattle me to fear and to whatever fate awaits me now.

The price for what I have done is death. Not my first crime, nor my first death sentence, should it come to it.

I am a murderess. Ten men, they say, although it was only six by my hand and barely that, more from their wounds and ill care. Drunkards all and dead only for their lack of souse to call anyone with the common sense of a midwife or a stablehand—any seamstress could have saved them, but wine thins the blood. And therein is the whole story writ out.

I am a seductress, and in the circles into which I was born this too is punishable by death, by pox

or birthing-bed or exile. I am the breaker of sacred vows, both to my husband and to God, although it was God who cut my hair and this I have yet to forgive. I am a thief, when I have had to have been—as an actress, one rarely gets to choose the role in which one is cast.

They think prison will break me, but they forget I have been a nun. Cold walls and thin gruel and hours of solitude; these are things I have sought out, games I have played and pieces I have moved in the pursuit of love. Every step a performance, every face a mask, every lover a character. In this last scene I wore my best dress, danced to perfection, kissed a girl, insulted a fool, dueled with pretty boys and taught a lesson in blood and muscle and steel. And so, the scene changes, and there is the luffing of the candle, the scratch of paper, and the chill from stone walls.

I do not know how this play will end.

God, for a sword in my hand at this moment.

For a sword in my hand.

*1686—Two years earlier*

My fingers are sticky with blood.

It is a simple mistake, *his* simple mistake in taking the measure, but his sword pushes a cut into my chest, below the collar bone, above the heart. There is no pain, not yet—and the look on his face, the poor boy! He freezes, and I smile.

I know precisely how to punish him.

I lay my point across the top of his thigh and turn my wrist, drawing the point in an arc across his flesh the full width of my palm. Just a scratch, really, or more than that, but ever slightly, and it is what I want. His touch an accident, mine deliberate. Knowing this makes me feel bigger than I ever have before.

And there is not too much blood, just enough.

I know now that I can have anything I bleed for. Anything I show up for. And a little blood will wash away with salt, when I'm ready. I'll gift the blouse to the maid's daughter, when she mends it.

I hope it leaves a scar. A little pink line to remind me to keep my guard up. I pray that it is the right sort of pink. Rather exactly.

I think about colours a great deal. It seems everywhere they are pushed into other colours they do not wish to be. Harder. I lament that every dress has to look like a jewel—dark and deep and like a stone. I'm sure there are proper words for colours, but I do not know them. Pale colours are for the poor, the girls here say, and you can tell. The families that can afford the dyers so they too can look like jewels, but the girls from the lieutenants' families, the colours are ever so softer. Watered-down. I prefer them, though I know I'm not to.

They all—we all, I suppose—are meant to look like the shiniest apples on the cart. While my friends and their sisters and even their maid's sisters all seem to struggle with it, it is the simplest thing in the world for me, so much so that I find it dull. A raise of a shoulder, a look and a look away. Then there are little gifts and little compliments and a nod

to my father, but when I roll my eyes or even laugh, he is cross with me. I'm to take this seriously, me in a dress too orange or too blue for my liking.

Not that I am any kind of flower myself. I can groom a horse as well as any of my father's men, and ride well, and throw a rock as far as any boy—although there is one farm boy who can make a tree crack at fifty paces, and I wish I could do that.

But *this* boy, this bleeding boy before me catching his breath and mortified by the fact that we are both bleeding—what did he expect from this? This line of sawdust, with the forest behind us, and a barn to shield us from gossiping eyes, swords levelled at one another. God knows where his came from, and what filth its point has been dragged through. I shall wash the wound thoroughly when I return home, this lasting gift from the clumsy boy.

He showed me his thing behind the stables once, years ago, and I laughed so hard he threatened to pee on me. He is an idiot. I told Elise and she said the same thing happened to her, so the next day I let him kiss me. But he was shy, like a cousin. I'm not even sure I know his name.

But we have written little names in each other's flesh, and that is something.



My horse is called Lilas.

Father trains me with the grooms. Not every day, but sometimes. I can clean a saddle and pick a hoof, and I must groom Lilas myself every time before I go riding.



After grooming we ride. I am not allowed to ride bareback anymore, as I did when I was very little, but now must ride sidesaddle. Mine has a horn over which I can hook my knee, so it is not so bad, but much more difficult than riding astride as the grooms do. I am a good rider, tall and straight, and neither afraid of the whip nor cruel with it.

Mostly it is a chance for me to be alone, Lilas and I. Alone enough, though always in company and never too far out of sight. We always ride south, into the sun, into the warmth, and to the stand of pines, which mark the end of royal grounds. Past the carts of stone, the parade of tradesmen and cloth merchants, the ice-carts of butchers and fishmongers, so many men and horses constantly flowing into the palace, and only Lilas and me flowing away from it, away from the shining, golden stink of it. Toward the pines.



I have read these books of letters, which are popular at Court, and realize I have begun my story not at all properly. I have yet to come up with something truly scandalous, but with all the bum-grabbing around here and not much to do but gossip, I am certain to think of something.

My name is Julie Emilie d'Aubigny. My father is Gaston d'Aubigny, Secretary to Louis de Lorraine-Guise, Count of Armagnac and Master of Horse to the King, Louis XIV. It is the forty-third year of his reign. I am sixteen years of age.

My mother clucks to her maid, my father to his mistress, my brothers grown, or dead, and I am left much to my own amusement after Mass each morning. In the afternoons I am tutored with the pages here, and study writing and grammar with the other palace daughters, and drawing. In music I love to sing—in Italian although it displeases my tutor. It is fashionable to sing only the new operas in French, but I find the Italian lighter, and prettier, so I collect these songs in my head and sing them only when alone. In dance I am tutored privately, and sometimes I dance with the other court girls. But all of this after Mass.

Mass is a kind of price paid by all those born to money, and in the orbit of Court. Attendance ensures how one's value is perceived—I have said “the shiniest apple on the cart” and yes, we girls all in a row, veiled and silent, heads bowed, the price of the apples remains high. I have seen how it grates the other girls, some of whom are my friends, clever and pretty. They are dragged to it and flee from it. But I adore it, the theatre of it, the beauty of the music and deliberation of each movement. Everything including the washing of the performer's hands is done with care, with presence. It is probably blasphemy to think so. So, for me it is all a play, and a beautiful one, and when it is my part, I too, have steps and lines to recite.

The chairs are uncomfortable, but so are shoes, and the trick is to remain as upright as a tulip. Even sitting is dancing. Tall spine, shoulders down, chin high when unbowed, head back, hands either

clasped and motionless, or, to evoke perfect piety, palms open softly on the lap.

The worst is all the brown. The oppressive brown of the wood, in the panels, on the floor, of the furniture. Brown, brown, brown. Even gold in a girls' chapel seems to be some drab metal, dragging brown into an attention with which it is not comfortable.

The boys at the altar tend to be friends' younger brothers, the second brother for most families, bound for the cloth. I see how they giggle and fidget and fart or fumble as they hand the priest something. But some move with grace and I think there, there is a dancer. And the singing is always beautiful—but the King has declared it thus; everything here is to be beautiful.

I say this knowing full well the life of horses, and their sweat and their rutting and their shit. But this is shoveled away hourly, just as I've seen filth in the halls of the Palace, and the hasty attendance of servants to remove dropped food or puddles of piss from otherwise immaculate marble. That which is not beautiful is removed or replaced. The ugly vanishes. Such is Versailles.

The price of Mass paid daily my mornings are my own. And people are kind to me. My father teases me that it is because our family name is so close to that of the King's wife, the Marquise de Maintenon; she is a d'Aubigné and for those not intimate to such things, or those who cannot read, it is assumed we may be blood. Cousin to the wife of the King! A jest of which I do not relieve them, and so I find myself rarely chastised.

But of the day my father tells me I took my first steps with a sword in my hand, but honestly it was a main gauche, a parrying dagger. While his title is Secretary, his task is to oversee the instruction of the use of arms for those who attend to the King's stable; the lieutenants and the grooms of the Black Guard and the Grey Guard—the Musketeers of the Royal Household—and of course the Swiss Guard, who keep the palace itself. It is Father who sees to the employment of the fencing masters from Spain and Italy, and the Low Countries where the men are French and Spanish and something else altogether, all at once. Even de Liancourt has taught at the salle here.

But at my father's side, and to his amusement, I learned all the steps of Thibault's circle; of how to take the measure of my opponent, to find the sentiment of his blade. To feint and rebuff, to press and refuse, to parry and to retort. Further, we learned in the "old way," with heavier rapiers and the grip of the forefinger along the blade, rather than like a pistol, wrapped 'round the guard. Because the weapon is heavier, it is slower, and the movements more deliberate. This way a smallsword, like those worn at court, seems a slighter thing, a quicker thing.

The bravos who come and learn at my father's piste are strong; the sons of strong families, and rich. They shove their youth and their muscle into the weapon and end up flailing about. My father will face them with a baton, or a crop, and disarm them with little effort. Broad shoulders are of no use with the smallsword, and serve only to make you

a wider target, and I have learned to take my time. Wrists, not shoulders. Steps, not leaps. And always the eyes on the eyes, with a softened gaze so as to take in the posture, the position, the point, and the measure.

For the new boys I am something of a curiosity in my father's salle. I train in breeches or skirts as it suits me, and while my father forbids that I take challenges, we drill and pass and riposte all in a line, and those who look at me when they should be watching their opponent or their master, pay a quick enough price, delivered by baton or epee.

I have several swords. One a gift from my father, which is a delicate gilt little thing I dare not scratch against another blade; and on such days when it amuses the King that the girls dress in boy's breeches (and there are such days) I have worn it at my side, but never drawn it.

I have two swords that I keep beneath my bed. Both of these are claimed. Or stolen. I suppose one could see it that way. There are swords enough at my father's piste, so I leave mine in my room. My maids are sworn to silence, and do not mention them when they are down there with warmer or chamber pot.

Come to think of it, these grand books of letters do not seem to mention the things under a young lady's bed. This is no doubt deliberate, as everyone I know keeps all manner of things under there. Forbidden books. Small treasures from suitors, or attempted suitors. Childhood things that would be tossed away, like worn-through night dresses softer than new linens. There is likely a book to be written of

the secret things under the beds of the young girls of Paris.

I was born in the old Palace, and we moved here when I was two, while the new stables were under construction and my father here to supervise. Behind us there was all marsh, and then forest with a ridge of pines, and then farmland. It is an endless garden now, but I would play with the children from the farms when the borders of the Royal grounds were less distinct.

But still, it is a short ride south to the countryside, where the air is less close, and more honest. The air here is heavy with incense or perfume. I am told the King bathes in perfume twice a day, as the Marquise does not like the stink of his sweat—all those heavy brocades and silks, and candles everywhere, even during the day. So, he sweats, and he reeks, and he douses in perfume. There! A bit of Court gossip at last.



More gossip, then.

Although not of the King, but of me myself. As I am sixteen, I am expected to be someone's fiancée, and likely someone's lover besides. To be a proper mistress strikes me as a somewhat better situation than a wife. And of the young lieutenants—supple and flawless and stupid—well they are for taking to one's heart or one's bed, but not the altar. Thus far, where my friends have dalliances and proposals, I have merely the disapproving looks of my father, which serves to keep the young men of any

intention at a distance. It is likely because they know how easily, as fencing master, he could kill them.

Duelling of course is illegal. The King has decreed it thus. But training too is decreed—a lifetime of rehearsal for that which there is to be no performance—and an accident in my father’s *salle* is a simple thing to orchestrate.

But the one man of whom my father dare not disapprove is his Master, Louis. Not the King, the Count. And the Count has noticed me, in a way of no difference to me and no end of displeasure to my father.

Some weeks ago, they were speaking, the Count and my father, while descending the white stairs to the stables. I was sitting at the bottom, and I cannot recall doing much of anything, honestly. But I rose, as I was expected to rise, and the Count kissed my hand as he has since ceased to kiss my cheek when I was a child, but as he withdrew, his gaze lingered for a heartbeat and a dark cloud came over my father. I smiled and bobbed in the way I have practiced and performed countless times, and perhaps too, I added a little throwaway, like the slightest pinch of the fingers or a slower drift to the eyes. Nothing, really. Just games. But this seemed to have hooked something.

And now he seeks me out. Again, I am doing nothing of anything. Not reading, between Mass and a meal, so simply meandering, and the Count is there around a corner in the garden that it is natural to expect me to turn. He draws me close, saying something that was nothing, and I smell his breath. Like an old man, but not so old, and

not so unpleasant. He makes to kiss me, and so I rebuke him, of course, and give him my cheek as I had when I was barely walking and he some vague uncle.

And then his arm comes around and he tries to squeeze my bum.

Not that he can find it really, in this dress. The emerald silk with the blue and yellow stripes, like a Borgia from an old painting, and the fabric is so stiff I could hide a goat under there and he'd be none the wiser. But still, he certainly intends to grab my bum, because he thinks he can.

I consider biting him.

I think, I could pretend to kiss him and just bite his bottom lip and tear it off with my teeth. Or I could fold my fan and drive the hinge right under the pulse of his jaw, open him like a purse full of blood, and leave him gagging for breath in the garden, clutching at the gravel as I watched.

I could do that. It has never occurred to me how terribly simple a man is to open, even before, even after my first blood and the first time I'd cut a boy.

And here is the Count of Armagnac, of the Royal Household, Squire to the King. And I could snuff him like a candle, if I wanted. And I have every right to want to.

But I do not.

I think, I am to be lover to my father's Master. To the Count, although I'm sure there's a Countess somewhere, I've never thought to ask and I'm sure I've never seen her. Squirreled away in some Chateau in the country, squeezing out babies while addressing the pleas of tenants. Managing cooks