

Guardian Angel



Anne Rouen

Book Four in the
Award-Winning
Master of Illusion Series

GUARDIAN ANGEL

Master of Illusion Book 4

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Dedication

Guardian Angel is dedicated to my beautiful friend Diane, who, having read a fledgling manuscript and believed in its possibilities, encouraged me to pursue my dream. This book represents the culmination of that dream, and I thank her with all my heart.

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Prologue

2 June 1930

Armand Delaine sat in the baroque magnificence of the Opéra Magique on the eve of his departure for New York, absorbed in the harmony of the two most glorious voices he had ever heard: those of the divine Angel of Song and her son, *le beau* Nicolas—*le dernier cri* in Paris, and in Armand's judgement, the world.

His father had followed a story written over a lifetime and, scenting an even bigger one, was loath to let it go. ‘The late Madame Dupont,’ he told him, ‘made some intriguing statements regarding the child, Nicolas de Beaulieu. It is your task to prove or disprove them. I want you to follow him wherever he goes and write his biography, which, in due course, the house of Delaine shall publish. Times are lean, but I believe I shall contrive to clothe and sustain you as befits a respectable man of letters.’

The words ‘respectable man of letters’ gave Armand an idea. He wanted to show his father that his son had innovatory skills as well as literary ones. And that he could adequately clothe and feed himself. In line with this bid for independence, he jumped at his parent's wry suggestion that he adopt his mother's maiden name, Lemaitre. Being young and bookish, Armand asked no questions—then.

He made representation to the marquis de Beaulieu to such good purpose that he was now touring with them as secretary to the marquise, the sensational diva, Angelique and tutor to their equally gifted son, Nicolas.

He then made a secret vow: ‘I, Armand Delaine alias Lemaitre, am determined to seek out and unravel the mystery that my father, the publisher, so yearns to reveal.’ He obtained a peculiar satisfaction in the knowledge that whatever the story, he himself was to be a part of it: an essential character in an unknown plot. A shaft of excitement tingled his spine at the prospect of a lifetime of adventure with these talented people, for although he knew already *how* he would write it, he didn't know just *what* he would write.

Chapter 1

Il Divo

18 August 1930

Our last evening in New York. My diva is stunning as always. And my pupil is excited. He occupies centrestage alone tonight. Strangely enough, I don't think he has any nerves. I could write so much about the beautiful Angelique, but this is meant to be the story of Beau Nicolas and not the hopeless yearnings of Armand Lemaitre for the Angel of Song.

Nicolas de Beaulieu stood at the front of the stage, bowing to his fans: the elite and privileged of New York.

It was his first solo, and he straightened in triumph before a standing ovation. He'd taken encore after encore, and he could not bear to leave them: These people who adored him so openly. He felt their love wash over him like warm breakers on a tropical shore. He was overwhelmed by it; his heart almost bursting with the love he felt in return.

His mother joined him, taking his hand as she smiled and bowed to their public. 'We will sing *Éternité d'amour* and then we will go,' she said. 'It is fitting that you sing it with me. Angelpapa wrote it for Godmama's opera ballet *Le Perdu*. It was our favourite duet.'

'I know.'

'How do you know?'

'Perhaps you have told me before ... More than once.'

'If we weren't in front of an audience, I would box your ears!'

His lip lifted and his eyes flashed sapphire-blue—a strangely adult amusement lurking at the back of them. 'If we weren't in front of an audience, my dear Mama, I would not dare.'

'Cheek!' she said, smiling at the audience.

'But after we have sung and you still wish it, you may do so with my good will.'

She almost laughed, but *au fond*, she was shocked, too. *Do other ten year olds speak like this?* ‘As if I would! Come, now! On the count ...’

He was scanning the audience as if looking for someone. His mother squeezed his hand, nudging him into another bow, after which he resumed his scrutiny.

Angelique blew a kiss to the audience and left the stage, but Nicolas lingered behind. ‘Come!’ she whispered, beckoning from the wings.

Nicolas bowed, took a last look around the standing, wildly cheering audience and went to where his mother, father and Armand were waiting for him. Armand was going to take him to supper at the Waldorf while Mama and Papa went to a reception at the French Embassy on this, their last night in New York.

‘Godmama and Monsieur Dupont weren't there tonight,’ he said. ‘I looked most carefully.’

‘So that is why you were ogling the audience!’ exclaimed Angelique. ‘Oh, Nicolas!’ She laughed, but Armand stood, stricken.

‘Godmama? ... Monsieur Dupont?’ he repeated.

‘Madame Dupont was my godmama: my mother's godmother. She reared me when ... Never mind. On our last tour, Nicolas thought he saw her sitting in the audience with her husband Monsieur Dupont.’ Tears sprang into the beautiful eyes. ‘On the day she died, as it turned out.’

‘I didn't “thought” I saw her,’ corrected Nicolas. ‘I *did* see her ... them.’ He surveyed Armand. ‘What do you think of that?’

Armand stared. *Her godmother? Madame Dupont had reared this beautiful creature? My God! And her diaries are about to be published!* He swallowed. ‘Most ... unusual.’ Averting his eyes from the sight of his idol's husband cradling her to him and offering her a handkerchief, he said to Nicolas, ‘Come along, now. You can tell me all about it over supper.’

‘*Oui, bien, bien!*’ Nicolas ran to kiss his parents. ‘Goodnight, Mama and Papa.’

‘Goodnight, my darling.’ Angelique smiled through her tears. ‘*Merci, Armand.*’

Armand did not hear the marquis echo her sentiments. The words ‘goodnight, my darling’ reverberated in his head. He pretended that they were for him.

He was preoccupied during supper, lingering over a shrimp cocktail while his charge tucked into delicate sandwiches, cakes and lemonade. He tried to make the effort to question Nicolas about his sightings. But it was no use: the diaries loomed large in his thoughts. He began to wish that he'd paid more attention to what his father had said about the publishing date. Armand understood it to be after he'd found out what he could about Nicolas. So, perhaps there would be time, yet.

‘Armand? Armand!’ Nicolas turned a menu card into a paper aeroplane and launched it at his mentor.

He started, brushing it off his collar. ‘I beg your pardon?’ He took one glance at his pupil's fun-filled eyes. ‘Now, look here, young man!’

‘No! You look here.’ Nicolas stabbed a finger either side of his own nose. ‘Armand, dear old chap. Can we have some ice-cream? Please?’

‘What? After that exhibition? I doubt it!’

‘Please? You were away with the fairies. I only wanted to wake you up. Please?’

‘Oh, very well! I expect you'll have nightmares, though. Or be sick.’

‘*Merci*. I won't.’ Nicolas stood up, waving his napkin like a semaphore at the maître d'hôtel. ‘*Eh bien, Monsieur! Ici, s'il vous plaît!*’

Armand laughed. ‘That's the head waiter you're treating like that. Serve you right if he ignores you!’

But the maître d'hôtel not only did not ignore him, he beckoned to a minion with a trolley of desserts, another with a tray of coffee and wended his stately way through the tables. He bowed to Nicolas. ‘Ice-cream, Monsieur? Or strawberries, perhaps? Which would you like?’

Nicolas fixed him with his great blue eyes. ‘Could I possibly have ice-cream *and* strawberries, please, Monsieur? If it is not too greedy?’

‘You are a growing boy. Of course you may have both.’ He lowered his voice. ‘An *extra* helping of ice-cream?’

‘*Bien sûr*, Monsieur! You are a trump!’

Suppressing an exclamation, Armand grew red with embarrassment.

The maître d'hôtel turned. 'Coffee, Monsieur?' he murmured, beckoning the second waiter. 'You are to be congratulated on such a spirited young charge.' He turned back to Nicolas. 'You are happy with our service, Monsieur?'

'But, yes! It is perfection. Thank you.'

'It was an absolute pleasure.' The head waiter bowed and left them.

Armand surveyed the ecstatic expression as his pupil spooned in huge dollops of strawberries and ice-cream. 'Incorrigible!' he said, dropping three lumps of sugar in his coffee and forgetting to stir it.

Everyday life was something Armand had contrived to escape. Until now. His head in his books; he'd never given a thought to how real flesh-and-blood people might feel. *Selfish! I've been selfish*, he thought, suffering agonies of remorse.

In true journalistic style, he'd been prepared to sacrifice all for a story, seeing himself as an investigator and chronicler of an ongoing mystery. He'd no idea that he would not simply be an observer—that he would be forced into the maelstrom of the lives of the de Beaulieus—that he would fall hopelessly, deliriously, in love. He'd also had no idea that this family was so close to Madame Dupont. How could he? His father had been so secretive about the diaries.

He'd known Angelique was the daughter of the reclusive comte de Villefontaine and that she'd married the heir of the powerful duc de Belvoir, but he knew nothing of her relationship to Madame Dupont, since his father had not allowed him to read the manuscript. All he'd really known was that Madame Dupont had noticed something unusual about the child, Nicolas, that his father wanted to follow up. *If only I'd thought!* he told himself, writhing inside. *I would have seen ...*

'Are you unwell, Armand?'

Armand looked up to see his charge eyeing him anxiously.

'No.' He stirred. 'Just ... thinking.'

'*Eh bien*,' said Nicolas. 'They must be troubling thoughts. You look ill, Armand. Come back to our rooms, and I will read you a bedtime story to take them away.'

'Thank you.' Armand was touched by the boy's insight and compassion. He couldn't very well tell Nicolas that Angelique's disclosure had shocked him; or that what had shocked

him even more was that he, Armand, cared.

§

They came home to France on the *Olympic*, as always. Nicolas was quite used to sea travel by now, having toured the world, singing with his mother from the time he was three. He turned to his tutor as they sailed out of New York harbour. 'I love the *Olympic*. Do not you, Armand?'

'Yes, she's a grand old lady. Showing her age a little now, of course.'

'Armand? Is ... is that why you seemed troubled last night.' The boy hesitated, took a deep breath and rushed on: 'Are you worried that, perhaps, we cannot pay you?'

'No, no, of course not!' A tiny smile lightened the tutor's rather grim expression. 'What questions you do ask, Nicolas. Why would I be worried about something like that?'

'This morning, I heard a lady ask Mama why she still sailed on the *Olympic* when the *Île de France* was now all the fashion for those who could afford it. And do you know what she said, Armand?'

'No, what did she say?'

'She said, "But, Madame, that is *exactly* why!"' Anxious eyes studied the tutor's wan face. 'What did she mean, Armand? Can we not afford it, do you think?'

'Oh, I wouldn't think that would be the case, at all,' said Armand, thinking of packed houses and the dock full of waving fans. 'No, no, remember what your papa told you? Your mama needs to rest after her performances. Surely, you saw how tired she was this morning?'

'Yes.' Nicolas mulled this over. Relief sprang into the sombre blue eyes. 'Oh, I *see*. You mean, she would have to be social when she wants to sleep?'

'That is exactly what I mean, so there is no need to worry. And now,' Armand looked at his watch, 'I am going to get a book, sit in a deckchair and read in the sun.'

'*Bon.*' Nicolas, his fears relieved, stood at the rail on the promenade deck, contemplating the ocean. Water, as far as he could see ... It could become boring, he supposed, such an expanse, except that it was always heaving and moving like a living

creature. Who knew what lurked beneath the surface? It had always attracted him and continued to do so. But there was one thing that endlessly fascinated him that he'd pondered often from his earliest voyage: what made the wake that boiled out from under the ship, spreading out behind it like a highway?

Nicolas had asked his father.

'It's the turbines,' he said.

'What is a turbine?' countered Nicolas. 'And, please, don't say an engine. I know it is not an engine.'

'I think you know more than I do, *mon fils*. Perhaps I mean propellers? Yes, the propellers beat the water and move the ship along.'

'But how, Papa? How do they do that?'

'Oh, my son,' laughed Etienne. 'I am not an engineer. Perhaps you should ask Armand.' With a shrug of the shoulders, he walked away.

How does beating the water into foam propel the ship? Nicolas thought that if he could just see them, these propellers, perhaps he would understand what they did.

He took a quick glance around the deck. His mother was lying on a chaise longue in the sun with her eyes closed. She had on becoming white lounging pyjamas with a halter top. He watched her for a moment. It was true that Mama was always so exhausted at the end of a tour. As Armand had reminded him, Papa said she used this time on the ship to recuperate and must not be disturbed.

Nicolas didn't know why his father fussed so over Mama. When they sang together, she was good fun, lit with an inner glow after each recital. She appeared to have boundless energy until the tour was over. Then she just seemed to collapse.

'Mama lives on her nerves,' explained his father. 'That is why we must take the greatest care of her.'

Nicolas looked at his mother carefully. Yes, she was asleep. His eyes sought his tutor. *Good*. Armand had his head in a book, as usual, when he was at leisure. His gaze swivelled the other way. Papa was leaning on a bollard, paring a broken fingernail. Nicolas made a split-second decision. Now was as good a time as any to see what he wanted to see.

Leaping for the rail, Nicolas heaved himself on to it and leant over, grinning at his mother's frantic scream.

‘Etienne, Etienne, look! He will fall! No, no! God save my baby!’

Baby? I am not a baby! He wriggled farther, craning to see ... *No, just a little farther* ... Then both hands slipped. He was falling, grasping wildly at nothing. Suddenly, he felt a broad chest against his shoulder, taking his weight, easing him back. Invisible hands grasped his—guided them to the rail—held them there until he got his bearings. Angel had come to his rescue, as always. His fright evaporated. He was fine. *Now, to see ...*

Two arms went round him from behind. ‘Careful, my son,’ murmured his father, depositing him on the deck. ‘We don't want to lose you ...’

‘Oh, Papa! Why did you do that? I was quite safe ——’

‘*Tiens!* You were safe? I would hate to see you in danger, then!’

‘I only wanted to see the ocean. How it ——’

‘You can see it with both feet on the deck, can you not? It is all around.’

‘No, I meant coming out from *under* the ship. The propellers.’

‘You must not upset your mother, my son. *Les femmes*, they worry when they see their children dangling over the ship's rail. Why it should be ...?’

Nicolas chuckled.

‘You can laugh.’ His father put a loving hand on his shoulder. ‘Do not forget your mother's nerves.’

Instantly, Nicolas was remorseful. ‘I am sorry, Papa.’ He ran to hug his mother. ‘Dearest Mama, I did not mean to distress you.’

‘I know.’ She wrapped her arms around him. ‘*Mon petit ange* is a little thoughtless. Also, a little devil, I fear.’ Since she alleviated this accusation with a kiss on his brow, Nicolas was unworried. ‘You will go with Armand while I have my sleep in the sun. I cannot rest if I am thinking about you falling into the ocean.’ With another hug, she put him away. ‘Armand, *ici!*’

‘You called, Madame?’ Armand snapped shut his book and rose; his pale cheeks

tinged with pink.

‘Yes. You must take your pupil in hand. He is endangering his life because, *if you please*, he wants to know what happens to the water beneath the ship!’

‘Aha! The young genius!’ Armand beamed. ‘Always wanting to find out things.’ He was genuinely enthused by the intellectual prowess of his pupil. ‘But he does not need to endanger his life to do so.’ He bowed to Angelique. ‘Pray excuse us, Madame. Come with me, young man. We will do a scientific study of how ships move in the ocean. Also, we may well inform ourselves of the finer definitions of a propeller and a turbine.’ He put an arm around Nicolas's shoulders and began to walk him away. ‘What would you say if I told you that in my cabin is a big picture book, some balsawood and a fretsaw? We will make our very own *Olympic* and float it in the pool. Then you will see ...’

‘Oh, yes!’ cried Nicolas, skipping ahead. ‘Yes, yes, yes!’

Thank God for Armand, thought Angelique, smiling at these antics, *always getting into the spirit of things. Nicolas will be safe with him.* ‘Armand, you are an angel! Positively!’ she called after him. Watching her son's eccentric progress through the palm court, she did not see Armand redden at the gushing compliment. Angelique sighed and rolled over, calling Etienne to rub sweet-smelling coconut oil into her back and shoulders.

§

Armand glanced around his spacious cabin. He could not fault his employers for generosity, even though they were inclined to leave Nicolas with him unless they were either on stage or about to go on. It seemed that they found their son exhausting. He looked at the young boy. Even from here he could feel his energy and vitality. He pointed. ‘Over there: the smaller trunk.’

Going to stand beside his pupil, he indicated the necessary items. Only once did he mention the cause of this diversion. ‘You are not usually heedless of your safety, *mon brave*, and you are far from stupid. Why did you do it?’

‘Do what?’

‘Come, now! You know.’

Nicolas grinned. 'I wanted to know how propellers work. Can you keep a secret, Armand?'

The tutor suppressed a groan, avoiding the bright, questioning gaze. 'That doesn't explain your reckless behaviour. I suppose you wanted your mother's attention?'

Nicolas considered him, briefly. His mother's attention was just what he hadn't wanted. He shook his head. 'Guess again.'

'Pass me that book ... No, not that one, the other ... Right. It is in here, somewhere ...'

'Don't you want to know, Armand?'

'If you wish to tell me: yes, I do. But not if you want to play silly games.'

'You're in a mood, aren't you?'

The tutor raised his head. Grey eyes clashed with blue.

'Very well.' Nicolas capitulated. 'Have you ever had a secret friend, Armand?'

Armand blushed.

'Why, what did I say?'

'Nothing. Go on ...'

'*Have* you?'

'An imaginary friend as a small child, do you mean? I expect I did.'

'Don't you remember?'

'No.'

'I have a secret friend. I've had him *depuis longtemps*—as long as I can remember. But he is not imaginary. He is real!'

'Ah ...'

'His name is Angel. He tells me things and ...' Nicolas paused for effect. 'He rescues me whenever I am in danger!'

The tutor blanched. 'You are *not* serious!'

‘*Oui*, I am. He saved me when my hands slipped off the rail today.’

‘I saw no-one but your father. He was the one who rushed to your aid.’

‘Silly! Angel is invisible.’

‘Oh ... And you think he will rescue you whenever you put yourself in mortal danger?’

‘*Oui*, he will. He has promised.’ The statement was quiet, assured.

‘It is a dangerous theory, *mon brave*. I would not put it to the test too often if I were you.’

Nicolas flicked him a glance, then began to read, ‘*RMS Olympic*. Scale model dimensions ...’

Chapter 2

Scandal

Four thirty am, 25 August 1930

Today the ship docks, and we return to Paris. I must, must convince Father to cancel the publication of Madame Dupont's diaries. If I cannot, my heart trembles at my fate. I think of glorious amethyst eyes: how it would slay me if they looked upon me with reproach or reproof.

The ship docked at Cherbourg in the early hours. Nicolas, half-asleep, was shepherded by Armand down the gangway and across the pier, avoiding the sudden crowd: families reuniting; porters with great trolleys of luggage. Very soon, they found themselves in their private carriage on the *New York Express* to Paris.

Armand took Nicolas to their compartment and settled him in the top bunk where he went straight to sleep. The tutor flung himself down on the lower one, returning to the problem that had scarified his emotions since their last evening in New York. *I cannot bear to hurt her!* ‘Angelique ...’ he whispered the name with hopeless longing, closing his eyes on the vision: her long, golden hair; her alluring scent; her willowy beauty; her glorious smile; her voice: to die for.

There was no getting away from it: he'd always known his father meant to publish the diaries of Madame Dupont. How could he have acquiesced in such infamy? He felt guilty, smirched: as if he were the worst traitor. The duc, so gentle and dignified; the marquis, a quiet wall of strength; his heroine, fragile and nervy; Nicolas, bright and confident: Armand knew that they would be shattered by this. Nothing would ever be the same for them. *Do we have the right?* he asked himself.

For the first time, he thought of the reasons behind his father's suggestion of a name change. Armand was certain to be dismissed if his real name were known. He clenched his fists. If only he could get to Paris in time to stop publication, convince his father that it would

hurt too many people to be justified. No-one could know the ferment that raged behind the scholarly brow; the pale, austere expression.

Suddenly, he knew it was not just Angelique he loved, but all of them.

The automobile ride from the Gare Saint-Lazare seemed to be unconscionably slow. When they reached their apartments in the hôtel du Bois, Armand begged leave to make an urgent visit to his father.

‘Of course,’ said Etienne. ‘You have been away a long time. You must take a week to yourself.’

‘*Merci*, Monsieur, but a day or two will suffice.’

‘Nonsense! You have devoted all your time to Nicolas. If you are not exhausted, then you should be. There will be no argument: you must take a week.’

Armand's conscience flayed him at his employer's generosity.

§

The duc greeted his family lovingly. He was thin and looked distraught, as Angelique noticed. ‘But, Papa-duc: what have you been doing to yourself? You look all-in!’

‘Do I, my child? Well, that is no wonder. You see, I have received a great shock. You and Etienne must prepare for one, also.’

Etienne moved to hold Angelique firmly in his arms. ‘What is it, Papa?’

‘These.’ The duc picked up a set of three red leather-bound volumes. ‘We're all in them: you, me, the marquis du Bois, La Belle ...’ His voice softened for an instant, then sharpened again. ‘Even Nicolas! The scandal will encompass us all!’

‘Scandal?’ asked Angelique, bewildered. ‘What scandal?’

‘One that should have been forgotten, but for the unscrupulous theft of Madame Dupont's diaries!’

‘Godmama's diaries? Why? Whatever can be in them?’

‘Don't ...’ said Etienne, looking at his father's face.

Angelique moved to free herself from his suddenly tightened embrace. ‘Monsieur Bernaud's son, François, came to see me the day I returned from our tour ... after Godmama died. He was asking about her diaries. It seems her instructions were that they be taken from her drawer and placed with her in the Dupont vault.’ She wrung her hands; her face reflecting the duc's grief. ‘I took him to her room—it was so lonely there ...’ The beautiful eyes filled with sudden tears. She took a moment to go on. ‘And ... showed him the drawer where she kept them. But it was empty. We searched the whole house and did not find them. And so, we could not ...’

The duc ran his fingers over the tooled leather. ‘This was the last thing Ma Belle ... Madame Dupont would have wanted: to hurt us. She ——’

‘When did you get them, Papa?’ Etienne interrupted the melancholy speech.

‘Yesterday,’ said the duc. ‘Your sister, Elise, sent them to me from our Embassy in London. She said that some kind acquaintance had given them to her, saying that our family should know what is being bandied about in all the salons about us! I read it last night. Which is why I look so tired, probably.’

‘I see,’ said Etienne. ‘No hope of stopping it, then?’

‘No. I have tried. It is too late.’

Angelique picked up a volume. ‘*The Diaries of Madame Dupont*. Author unknown,’ she read. ‘Anonymous? But who could it be? Someone who knew Godmama? Well enough to know where she kept her diaries? A servant, perhaps?’

‘No,’ said Etienne. ‘All the servants were loyal. They would never have ——’

‘*Vive La Reine!*’ muttered Nicolas, hunching over a semiquaver he was forming on a music scoresheet.

The duc spun around. ‘*What* did you say?’

‘*Vive ... La Reine ...*’ he faltered, looking from one shocked face to another.

‘Why?’ asked his father in a soft voice.

Nicolas shrugged. ‘I don't know. When Mama asked who could have written the book, it just popped into my head; so, I said it. Have I done something wrong?’

‘No, no, my angel!’ Angelique smoothed his hair. ‘We forgot you were here, so quiet

as you were. Go along to the piano, now, for your practice.'

'C line: the Countess Kireyevsky, of course!' said the duc, clapping a hand to his brow. 'There is no-one else who would do it! In her heyday as a ballerina, she was called "The Queen of Dance", La Reine, for short. Though, how the child knew ...?'

Nicolas lingered just beyond the doorway, sneaking back in when he saw he'd been forgotten by his mother. She was staring at his grand-p re. 'When Fran ois Bernaud asked the countess if she had them, she said she knew nothing about them. She also said that they were hers by right, since she was Godmama's only child; and if they were found, she wanted them. Fran ois said, "No: If they were found, they were to be placed in Godmama's casket, as per the instructions in her will."'

'And what did C line say to that?'

'She just smiled nastily and said that it was just as well that they were missing, then.' Angelique's eyes clouded with puzzlement. 'I couldn't make her out, at all ... Oh, and she said to ask the nurses. But when Fran ois finally tracked one of them down, Nurse Jacques said the other, Nurse LeFevre, had given Madame's diaries to her daughter. When he took it up with the countess, *she* said the nurses were lying and it was obvious that they had stolen them.'

'I cannot see the nurses doing it,' said Etienne, rubbing his chin.

'*Non, bien s ur*,' agreed the duc. 'They were good women.' He thought it over. 'No, on balance, if one had to decide who the liar was, it would have to be C line.'

'But would she not honour her mother's wishes?' asked Angelique.

'She never did, that I knew of.'

'Why would she do such a thing?'

The duc lifted a shoulder. 'For money or spite. Or both. Her life was governed by greed and malice. It was apparent, even from her childhood. She hated your guardian, my child.'

'But ... Why?'

'Jealousy, perhaps? A form of insanity? She took after her father, in that respect.'

'Her father?' queried Etienne. 'You're not saying Monsieur Dupont ...?'

‘No. She was not Monsieur Dupont's child.’ The duc tapped a volume. ‘It is all in here. She even admits to attempted murder. The child of a murderer. La Belle was ... *raped*,’ he whispered the word.

‘I know. Angelpapa told me,’ said Angelique. ‘Poor Godmama.’

‘In that case,’ said Etienne. ‘Won't it be as bad for C  line as it is for us?’

‘Yes, Papa-duc: why would she allow that to come out?’

‘I don't know. But, I believe, to court notoriety; the way a mass murderer tries to admit to more killings than he actually does. She may also wish it to be known that she is the daughter of a prince. *And*,’ he added dryly, ‘it will bring publicity to the Op  ra Magique. The more people come to sightsee and indulge their curiosity, the more money it will make.’

‘And, perhaps,’ said Etienne, ‘there is a psychological factor: no-one will point the finger at her as the author, reasoning that she would be the last person to want the diaries published.’

‘I should never have agreed to her taking over the management of the theatre when Godmama's staff retired!’

‘You had little choice in the matter, my love, since we were still in America. It was a crisis, and the countess stepped in. We were grateful enough at the time. And the Op  ra Magique is doing well under her management.’

‘Yes, her reforms have brought full houses,’ said the duc, with a frown. ‘There is no doubt of that. But lately, I have heard it whispered that she went after the old management with a hatchet, so to speak, making it so difficult for them that they had to resign.’

‘Do you mean that they did not retire voluntarily, due to age and ill-health, as we thought?’ gasped Angelique. ‘You are saying that they were forced into it by the countess?’

‘*Oui*. My information is that her demands were intolerable. They did try to withstand her but eventually gave in. Some ulterior motive there must be, but I don't quite see it yet.’

‘Control,’ said Etienne. ‘The woman must be a megalomaniac!’

‘Oh, poor dear Mathilde, Monsieur Merignac and Jeanne! Something must be done for them, at once! If only I'd known!’ Angelique's eyes flashed. ‘I have a good mind never to sing there again! She is a harpy and a thief! A criminal!’

‘I understand your loyalty to Madame Dupont's old retainers, my dear love. And we will do something for them, never fear. I will set it in motion before the day is out; I promise you. But you are making the wrong decision.’

‘Why? You don't, *surely*, think we should allow her to get away with this, do you?’ demanded Angelique.

‘I think the scandal will be forgotten a lot faster if we all put a brave face on it and go on as usual.’

‘You're right,’ agreed the duc. He addressed his daughter-in-law: ‘The Opéra Magique is half-yours, my dear. You can have as much say as C  line.’

‘Yes,’ affirmed Etienne. ‘And perhaps we should look into the question of its management more closely when we have time; although, she does seem to be quite efficient. But we have bookings for recitals to honour. It is your fans we should be thinking of, not the Countess Kireyevsky! Besides, we cannot prove she did this.’

‘We just know,’ murmured Nicolas, inscribing a neat fanfare on his scoresheet.

‘Oh!’ Angelique swooped. ‘Give me that! I sent you to practise at the piano.’

‘Mama?’ The big blue eyes were sad, entreating. ‘I miss Armand ... When will he come back?’

But, for once, his mother stood firm. ‘In a week. Go, now!’

§

Armand greeted his father with an expression of doom.

‘Why the long face? Has the world ended?’

‘Not yet, but I think it is about to. For me, at any rate.’ He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. ‘Father, I have come to beg you not to publish those manuscripts based on the diaries of Madame Dupont.’

‘What?’

‘Please, Father! Madame Dupont was the godmother of my employer's wife: she even

reared her! Angelique, the marquise de Beaulieu—she will be distraught—her nerves are not strong. You do not know ...’

‘What *are* you rambling on about?’

‘The great diva: Angelique! The Angel of Song! Of course, you know who I am talking about! She is magnificent! She ——’ He stopped for breath.

‘Ah, now I understand!’ Monsieur Delaine regarded this unusual animation in his son with a rueful eye. ‘You have fallen in love, *mon fils*?’

Armand's colour rose. ‘And what if I have?’

‘I am sorry for you.’

‘You need not be! To serve her is all I ask.’

‘Ah, my son ... I have read of such devotion.’ The publisher scratched his top lip with a forefinger. ‘And quite recently, too.’

Armand grasped his father's hands. ‘*Mon père*, you must listen to me! These manuscripts: they must not be published. They must *not*!’

‘My son, you are too late. It has already been done. Everyone who is anyone in Paris has bought them.’

‘No! Why did you not wait for my contribution? Why did you break your schedule?’

The publisher's lips tightened. ‘Because, unlike you, I don't live with my head in the clouds! Times are hard. I couldn't afford not to.’ He viewed his son's distraught appearance with compassion. ‘I am sorry. It was a difficult decision, but one that had to be made. You see, if the house of Delaine is to survive, something had to be done, and quickly. That is why I couldn't wait.’ He jingled the coins in his pocket. ‘The diaries were a windfall in that respect.’

Armand tore his hair. ‘Survive? *Survive*? If it is a matter of survival ...?’ He controlled himself with an effort, whispering, ‘So, for the house of Delaine to survive, it is fitting that we destroy the house of de Beaulieu?’ He flung himself blindly around the room. ‘Let it not be!’ he shouted. In that moment, he was so consumed with revulsion that he decided to keep the name Lemaitre.

‘*Mon fils*, control yourself! I did what I had to do. It is done and cannot be undone.’

Armand sank into an armchair in misery. 'I would rather die myself than distress that beautiful angel.'

'Melodramatic nonsense!' snapped his father. 'Here! Read them for yourself and then tell me they should not have been published. *If you dare!*' He threw the volumes at him and strode out, as angry at the pricking of his own conscience as at the theatrics of his son.

Chapter 3

Dismissal

Evening, 25 August 1930

Time is running out. How shall I face these people I love? As a traitor? God forbid! Yet, I do not see myself as a hero—even an anonymous one.

‘So, Madame: you are satisfied with Lanvin's vision for you, as faithfully transcribed by me?’ Madame Minette, one of a team of sketchers employed by the great designer Lanvin, touched the elegant creation on the sketchblock reverently.

‘Oh, yes! It is perfection, Madame. I cannot wait to see it made up!’ Angelique looked up, startled, as Nicolas bounced into the room.

‘Mama!’ He stopped, executing a bow that delighted her visitor. ‘Oh, I do beg your pardon, Madame Minette! I am sorry, Mama, I did not know you were busy!’

‘It is perfectly all right, my dear one. We are almost finished. What is it?’

‘I have had my piano lesson, and Monsieur Merignac wants to take me to the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra. May we have the car, Mama, *s'il vous plaît*?’

‘Of course, Petit. Mary is over in the hospice with her husband. Tell her I said you may go.’

‘*Bien! Merci, Mama.*’ He turned a friendly gaze on the sketcher from Lanvin. ‘Our chauffeur is a lady. Have you ever heard of that, Madame?’

‘*Never, Monsieur!* You are *très avant-garde, n'est-ce pas?*’ said the woman; her eyes twinkling. ‘Do you like this gown your mama has chosen to wear when she sings with you? She will look beautiful, *hein?*’

Nicolas came forward to cast a critical eye over the flowing creation with Lanvin's signature embroidery: in this instance, stylised roses cascading from the shoulder and

repeated from the waistline down one side and across the front of the dress. 'The material?' he asked.

'White silk,' replied Madame Minette, hugely entertained. 'You approve?'

'Mmm! And the embroidery?'

'Seed pearls, crystals and silver thread. What do you think?'

'*Épatante!* But Mama always looks beautiful.'

His mother laughed. 'Little flatterer! Go along now. And mind you don't tire Monsieur Merignac. Not too much standing, *hein?*'

'No, Mama. Monsieur Merignac is ...' Nicolas threw wide his arms. 'Oh, *ancien!*' At the couturière's chuckle, he sent his mother a speculative glance. 'I *do* miss Armand!'

Angelique made a shooing gesture and he ran out.

'What a beautiful child! So full of spirit and *espièglerie!* You are to be congratulated, Madame. No wonder he is so popular with audiences.'

'He is wonderful! But such a *handful* without Armand.'

'You've let him go then?'

'What? Who?'

'Armand Delaine: You've dismissed him? I thought you would. It was only to be expected.'

'I'm sorry? I don't know anyone called Armand Delaine.'

'Your child's tutor. Your secretary.'

'Oh, Armand!' Angelique laughed. 'Armand Lemaitre, you mean? No, no, he is on holiday. We will be glad to have him back. Nicolas asks after him every day.'

Madame Minette pursed her lips; she seemed to consider before she spoke. 'Madame, normally I would not say this, but you are too long-standing and valued a client for me to pass over it. I am sorry to have to tell you this, but that young man has been deceiving you ... One sees why, of course.'

'Armand has been deceiving us? But why?'

‘He is the son of ... *the* publisher. You know ...’ Madame Minette paused delicately.

‘No!’ Angelique turned quite pale; her hand going to her exquisitely draped neckline. So, not only had her couturière read the book, but Armand was a traitor, insinuating himself into their lives to spy on them. It was too much. She began to fight for breath.

‘Madame, I am sorry. What can I do?’

‘Smelling ... salts,’ gasped Angelique. ‘In ... that drawer ... over there.’

‘Here,’ said Madame Minette, regretting that she had spoken. If Lanvin ever heard of this indiscretion, it would be the end of her career. ‘Try to take deep breaths, Madame. In a moment, I will ring for your maid.’

‘No.’ Angelique inhaled deeply and waved a hand. ‘I am feeling better now.’ She visibly pulled herself together, smiling at her visitor. ‘Thank you for your help, Madame. I am sorry ——’

‘No, no. I am the one who is sorry, believe me. But I thought you should know ...’

‘Yes, indeed, Madame, and I am grateful. You may tell Lanvin that I am thrilled with her design. I look forward to the fitting.’

Madame Minette took the hint and left, wearing a very troubled expression.

Angelique waited only until the front door closed behind the woman before voicing her distress: ‘Etienne! *Etienne!* Oh, someone *find* him for me!’

‘*Doucement*, Madame.’ Justin, the butler, appeared silently. ‘I have sent the groom with a message for Monsieur le marquis. He will not be long delayed. A small dose of your nerve tonic, Madame? I have it here. I have sent for your maid, also.’

‘Thank you.’ Angelique sank into an armchair and drank the cordial; her chest heaving. The knowledge that Armand—on whom she relied so heavily to care for Nicolas and smooth over the difficulties that accompanied fame—had lied and betrayed them was enough to starve her of air whenever she thought about it. Her fingers convulsed on the bottle of smelling salts.

Her maid hurried in. ‘I am so sorry, Madame. I went to get your new *parfum*, *Joy* by Monsieur Patou, while you were with Madame Minette; and I had to wait and wait. Shall I take you up to your boudoir? Do you wish to try it?’

‘No.’ Angelique waved dismissal. ‘I will wait ... here.’ She turned as the door opened. ‘Etienne?’

The marquis strode swiftly to her side. ‘What is it, my love?’

‘Oh, Etienne, I cannot, *cannot* believe it!’

‘Cannot believe what, *Chérie*?’

‘I cannot believe that Armand is a traitor!’

‘Armand a traitor? What nonsense is this? Come now, you are working yourself up for nothing, my darling.’

‘No.’ She clung to his hands and told him what Madame Minette had said to her.

He was silent, gripping her fingers, staring out the window, a rigid set to his lips. He looked at her. ‘You know what this means, don’t you?’

‘But Nicolas is so attached to him!’

‘All the more reason to let him go.’

‘But *poor* Nicolas!’

‘We will just have to make sure we spend more time with him.’

She didn’t quite meet his eyes. Her love for Nicolas was as strong as ever. It was just that he was *so* tiring.

§

Upon Armand’s return, the butler met him, expressionless. ‘Monsieur le marquis wishes to see you in his study, Monsieur. Immediately.’

‘Yes, thank you, Justin.’ Armand wondered if it were possible to feel any more wretched than he did already. Sooner than he wanted, he faced the study door. He knocked and was bidden to enter.

‘Ah, Armand ...’ The quiet tones of the marquis de Beaulieu were oddly intimidating. ‘Just the person to answer a question that has been bothering me. Before we go any further, I

will ask it of you: is your name Lemaitre or is it Delaine?’

Armand's breath caught in his throat. He flushed to the roots of his hair. ‘It was Delaine, Monsieur, but it is now Lemaitre. *Je regrette ...*’

‘So do I.’

‘Believe me, Monsieur, I tried to stop it. I would not, for the *world* ... It was why I asked for leave. But I was too late, the book had already been published. I beg your forgiveness and that of Madame la marquise ...’

‘It is possibly too late for that, also,’ murmured Etienne.

Armand ducked his head. ‘Yes.’ His throat worked. ‘I must tender my resignation, Monsieur.’

‘You have a month's wages owing.’

‘No! I cannot take your money! Pardon, Monsieur.’ He swallowed. ‘I am desolated to have hurt your family. Those I love ——’ He stopped abruptly, gasped, ‘*Adieu*,’ and bounded for the door.

The marquis sighed and went out after him.

Chapter 4

Left Behind

1 September 1930

My father should be pleased: our coffers are overflowing. I feel we are vultures, feeding off misery. How can I live without her, my Diva? And Nicolas? How shall I survive without these beautiful people? I saw in the newspapers that they are going on tour, to England, this time. How I wish I could turn back the clock and be with them!

The duc retreated to his château in Provence to escape the interrupted conversations in the salons; the sudden silences whenever he came within earshot. He spent much of his time behind the locked door of his study.

Etienne, Angelique and Nicolas honoured the first of their obligations to perform at the Opéra Magique, but when Nicolas came down with a sore throat they cancelled the other two and followed the duc to Belvoir. Anxiety over their son made them put off their decision to question the countess about her role in the resignation of the theatre staff. Had they been party to the furious tirade the cancellations brought down over the head of the unfortunate count and anyone unlucky or unwise enough to step into the path of the countess, they may have rethought their priority.

‘We will take a short break before our tour of England,’ said Etienne. ‘It will be good for Nicolas to play with the village children.’

‘I should go with you to England,’ said the duc. ‘It is a long time since I saw my cousin and friend, King George. He is not well, I believe.’

‘Yes, do come, Papa-duc. There will be plenty of room for you.’

‘Thank you, my dear. We will see.’

Nicolas grew well and spent his time outdoors with the children of Belvoir village until the day an outbreak of measles was reported. After this he was confined to the château,

watched anxiously by his mother.

‘I miss Armand,’ he said. ‘When will he come back?’

‘Something has come up,’ said his mother. ‘He is too busy to return to us.’ She shrugged. ‘I am afraid we must do without him.’

All was going to plan until a few days before they were due to depart. Nicolas developed a dry cough but was otherwise well. On the morning of departure, he woke up with a headache and a temperature. He refused to get up when his mother came to call him. ‘Mama, I feel too sick to travel,’ he complained.

‘Look at you!’ she cried. ‘Covered in spots! Oh, Nicolas, you have the *measles*!’

‘He’ll have to be quarantined,’ said his father. ‘We will have to leave you behind, my son.’

‘Can you not wait for me to get better?’

‘Sadly, no. We have engagements in a few days.’

‘Perhaps I can come, then, and stay in the hotel with Grand-père until the spots go?’

‘Oh, my darling,’ said Angelique. ‘You cannot come with us.’ With a sudden inspiration, she took off her locket, slipping the chain over his head. ‘There,’ she said. ‘You will wear my Angelpapa’s locket until I come back. It contains one of your grandmamma’s curls. Yes: Katarina, but you must not call her that! I wear it in memory of the love my Angelpapa had for me; just the same love that I have for you. You will wear it until I come back, and each time you touch it, you will remember that I love you ... Oh, so much.’ She put a cool hand on his forehead and smoothed his black locks. ‘Do not despair. The time will pass quickly.’

‘I will miss you and Papa.’

‘I know. We will miss you, too.’

‘It would help if I could have Armand.’

His parents looked at each other helplessly.

‘Be brave, *mon fils*,’ said Etienne. ‘You don’t want Armand to catch the measles. We won’t be away long.’

When the duc heard what had happened, he said, 'Never mind, Nicolas. I will stay here with you. It is up to you and I to hold the fort, eh?'

After a week of misery, Nicolas began to feel better. He went to stand before his favourite portrait in the picture gallery, his hand clasping the locket: the little forget-me-nots with their sapphire centres and diamond leaves pressing into his fingers. 'Grandmamma: Katarina,' he murmured. Suddenly, he remembered his secret friend. 'Angel,' he said, concentrating hard, but there was no invisible presence beside him when he said the name. It seemed that everybody had left him.

A tread on the stairs roused Nicolas's curiosity, and he ran to look over the gallery railing. It was his grandfather, on his daily journey to his private sanctum. Nicolas followed. He'd often done so but had never made it past the locked study door. This time it hadn't latched properly, and Nicolas eased it open and slipped in.

The boy ducked down behind the ornate desk to watch the duc press the centre of a carved lotus flower on the bookcase. He almost gave himself away with a gasp of astonishment as the wall of books slid away to reveal another room. When the duc went inside, the bookcase slid back. Nicolas moved to lie down behind the sofa and wait.

After what seemed forever, the aperture opened silently, the duc crossed the room and went out. Nicolas heard the key turn in the lock. Now, what? Faced with the prospect of being incarcerated until the duc returned, perhaps in a day or two, he was taken aback. But the lure of the secret room and the prospect of adventure suppressed his fear.

His heart thumped, and the blood sang in his ears as he reached for the flower centre his grandfather had pressed. He sprang over the threshold, and the bookcase slid back behind him. But he didn't notice, fascinated by the full-length portrait of a ballerina. *Belle, she is belle*, he thought, examining the delicate features, the perfection of her attitude. Yet, deep within himself, he was certain that this exquisite creature was the sweet lady known to him as Godmama. And, young as he was, he knew that the glorious ballerina depicted in the portrait was his grandfather's secret love.

Nicolas didn't question these things but made his way around the tower room, taking in everything with his bright, inquisitive gaze. 'La Belle,' he read in a newspaper clipping preserved under glass. So Godmama had been famous like him and Mama: *épatante*! Strange that she had never given him any inkling of it. He climbed the spiral staircase a little way,

viewing walls full of sketches. He approved them, knowing without question that they had been done by his grandfather.

Suddenly, loneliness surged over him; he felt frightened, overwhelmed. *Angel, Angel, where are you?* he cried in his mind. *Angel, you promised!* But no comforting, invisible presence came to him.

‘I want Mama,’ he whimpered, clasping the locket so that it hurt his hand. He went to stand before the portrait to try to dispel the coldness, the loneliness, but it was no use. *How beautiful was Godmama*, he thought and began to cry.

‘So, there you are,’ said a voice behind him. ‘I have been looking for you.’

‘Oh, Grand-père. I am sorry ...’ Nicolas sobbed.

‘There, there ...’ The duc put an arm around him. ‘You are lucky that I left my spectacles behind; otherwise, I may not have thought to come here. There they are, over on that display table.’

Nicolas disengaged himself to fetch them, thankful that his grandfather did not seem angry or reproachful.

‘Thank you, *mon fils*.’ The duc pocketed them and steered him towards the opening. ‘Come, let us go to luncheon. Then, perhaps, we will take a ride around the estate, *hein?*’

Nicolas looked at his grandfather with love and gratitude. He knew without being told that he had discovered something that the duc would prefer to keep a secret, yet he asked nothing. With an innate integrity and sensitivity beyond his years, the boy determined, then and there, that he would never reveal the duc's secret; never go back into the tower room unless he was invited.

§

Etienne and Angelique, though missing Nicolas, decided to look on this tour as a second honeymoon. They had not been away alone together for over seven years.

After Angelique's recital at the Royal Albert Hall, the King held a reception for them. ‘Meet Sir Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation, and Lord Thomson, my Air Minister,

both great fans of yours, Madame.'

Angelique bowed and thanked them. Etienne shook hands.

'These gentlemen are about to make aviation history,' continued the King, 'we are soon to launch a luxury passenger liner of the skies. I think your guardian would have approved, Madame.'

'The marquis du Bois designed an airship, I think,' remarked Etienne.

'Oh, all manner of mechanical inventions,' replied Angelique. 'He probably did.'

The King smiled. 'I wonder what he would think of our R101?' He glanced at Lord Thomson; a quizzical gleam in his eye. 'Could we?'

'Oh, most certainly! We shall be honoured. There is plenty of room, you know.'

King George turned to Angelique. 'How would you feel about a trip to Karachi on our airship's maiden voyage? Perhaps we could arrange for you to sing to the viceroy?'

'Your Majesty is inspired!' exclaimed Sir Sefton. 'Irwin will be charmed, utterly charmed. It will give him something else to think about besides Gandhi!'

Everyone laughed, except Thomson. Anglo-Indian relations were giving him a headache at the moment. Etienne and Angelique looked at each other. Their hosts waited in expectant silence.

'How stupendous,' said Angelique, with her glorious smile, 'to be a part of history! I should adore it.'

'Then that is settled,' said Etienne. 'Thank you very much, gentlemen.'

§

'It is such a shame Nicolas could not come with us,' said Angelique, viewing grey skies and the panorama below from the promenade deck of the airship. 'He would love this!'

'Yes, a pity, indeed. Never mind, there will be other times.' Etienne ushered her to a striped canvas deckchair and stretched out in the one beside her. 'How tiny the people look from up here! How small is the world! This is a most impressive way to travel. I could

become used to it—very quickly.’

‘Yes. So beautiful and so quiet! Almost angelic! Here in the clouds, away from the bustle of the world. Perhaps it would become boring for Nicolas?’

‘I don't think so,’ Etienne smiled. ‘Without doubt, he would be down with the engineers, finding out how it moves through the air!’

‘Too true!’ Her laughter pealed out.

‘Even your laughter is musical, Madame,’ said Lord Thomson, coming up silently. ‘May I invite you both to dine with us?’ He presented his arm. In the white and gold dining room, he appeared to take great pleasure in pointing out the use of aluminium cutlery and wicker furniture to reduce the weight for lift. ‘Lift,’ he added, with a rueful smile. ‘The word has given us nightmares! But not any more, I am happy to say!’ He looked around with pride.

They retired to the airy lounge for coffee and conversation. Angelique sang them her latest song and a couple of old favourites before Lord Thomson called a halt. ‘You are too good, Madame,’ he told her. ‘We must not impose on your generosity any longer. Let us have a nightcap.’ He signalled to a waiter with a tray of drinks. When they had been served, he said, ‘There is some bad weather at the moment, but I do not want you to worry. There may be some rolling ...’ he shrugged.

‘Like a ship in heavy seas?’ suggested Angelique.

‘Something like that, Madame, though not nearly as bad. She may dive a little or rise due to air currents. She is built for it: very strong and sturdy. My engineers have it all under control.’ He finished his drink and rose. ‘I am so little worried by it that I am going to bed. Tomorrow—today, I should say—ought to be fine and fair. I beg you will excuse me.’

‘We are the last up,’ said Etienne, when the air minister had gone. ‘Everyone has retired for the night.’

‘Let's take a stroll on the promenade deck and watch the storm.’

‘Very well,’ said Etienne, falling into step and tucking his arm around her. ‘How awe-inspiring!’ he gasped at a brilliant lightning display.

‘Yes,’ she whispered, nestling into his body. ‘Simply amazing!’

After a while, he said, ‘I think we should retire now.’

‘I don't feel sleepy.’

‘No? We are so used to late nights, I suppose.’ He bent to kiss her earlobe. ‘There are other reasons for going to bed ...’

‘So there are! I had almost forgotten!’ Mischief edged her smile. ‘We need a bottle of champagne to set the mood ... and grapes and canapés. But of course, we are beginning with this romantic stroll in the heavens.’

‘Siren!’ He pulled her to him. They kissed deeply. ‘I don't need anything to set *my* mood—only you!’

Her lips curved tenderly, but she protested, ‘No, no! The proper sequence! We must have our wine and grapes.’

‘Oh? An orgy? I see!’

‘Silly!’ Her eyes gleamed with secret promises.

‘When I have all these things organised for your pleasure, my dearest love, I shall return to claim you ...’ He added, in a melodramatic whisper, ‘In the best operatic tradition!’

‘*En avant, mon chevalier*. My heart pines ...’ She erupted into delicious laughter, then became serious. ‘It is true, what I just said. Oh, Etienne ...’ Her lips sought his. They were silent, locked together in their own delightful world.

‘I love you more than life itself.’ He tightened his hold, suddenly overcome. ‘To be with you for all eternity. That is all I wish for.’

‘All?’ Tender laughter infused the question. She held his face between her hands. ‘*All?*’

‘It is a lot to ask, *bien sûr!* But you are right, my wicked one. Tonight, I wish for something else! Back soon!’ He kissed her again and strode away.

Her eyes followed his tall, slender figure, then turned back to the storm. *Love with Etienne*, she thought, *calm and protective like this airship; erupting into splendour like the storm; moments of exquisite pleasure ...* Her lips softened in anticipation. *Hurry back, my dear, dear love.*

Rain lashed the windows; the airship dived and rose again. The electrical display was spectacularly terrifying, but Angelique felt no fear, only awe at the power of nature. A bolt of

lightning plunged through the heart of a cloud, illuminating the deck with an eerie blue glow. 'Such majesty!' she whispered. 'Such awesome majesty!'

There was movement beside her. 'Etienne? You're back already?' She turned her head, her eyes widening. 'Angelpapa! *You're* here!' Crying and laughing all at once, she threw herself into the arms of the man who had supported her for most of her life. 'But why are you here? I have not seen you for years!'

'We have come for you, my angel.'

'We? Oh, Godmama!' She moved from his arms to embrace the dainty lady who stood at his back. 'I did not know you were there. How wonderful it is to see you both! Angelpapa, you look so *well*! And Godmama looks so young and pretty.'

The tall, handsome man smiled and held out his hand. 'Come with me, my darling. It is time for us to go.'

'But: Etienne?'

'He is coming, too.' He spoke to his companion. 'Elise?'

Madame Dupont turned gracefully. 'But certainly: I will go to fetch him.'

Strong, comforting fingers closed over Angelique's. 'Come along, Petite: Etienne will be with us soon.'

Chapter 5

The Power of Music

6 October 1930

I have decided that my life is over. No more life: no more love. It died with my adored one in a fiery inferno. My body may exist in time, but I no longer live.

The duc stood before the great studded front doors of the château; his head bowed over a telegram. Harsh, dry sobs shook his spare frame. White and stricken, he raised his face to the heavens, crumpling the telegram in his fist. ‘My God ...’ he whispered in agony. ‘Could you not have taken *me* and left my son and *ma belle-fille* to raise their child? Why did you do this? Why?’

‘Grand-père!’ Nicolas ran to embrace him. ‘What is it?’

The duc held the boy close. ‘Oh, my dear child, you must be brave. Your mama and papa have gone on a long journey. One from which they will not be able to return. You see, God requires your mama to sing with his angels; and your papa has gone to take care of her. Ah, *mon Dieu, mon Dieu!*’ he lamented softly. ‘Come, Child, we must tell your grandmother. Although, perhaps mercifully, she will not understand.’

Nicolas barely understood himself, but the old man's grief overwhelmed and frightened him. Holding his grandfather's hand, Nicolas cried the first of many lonely tears. At first, he felt disbelief, but gradually it was borne in on him that his beloved parents were never coming back.

News of the crash of the British airship just south of Beauvais spread across the country. The nation mourned the death of their beloved soprano, Angelique, and her charming husband, the marquis de Beaulieu. Cards and letters of condolence poured in from all over the world. The duc dealt with them by throwing them into a room and shutting the door.

Later, Nicolas's Aunt Elise and Uncle Philippe arrived from the French Embassy in London; their eyes red-rimmed and sad. They were driven down by his Uncle Christian, a

gentle giant, inarticulate in his grief. Yet, he had an aura of kindness that drew his nephew to him. Nicolas knew his father's sister and mother's oldest brother better than his Uncle Christian because he had occasionally met them after performances, but his Uncle Christian never went into society, living as closely as possible to the land he farmed on the de Villefontaine estate. There was another brother, Luc, but this was the first Nicolas had heard of him. There was speculation as to whether he would arrive to complete the family gathering, but he didn't.

Aunt Elise wanted to take Nicolas back to London with her, but the duc wouldn't allow it. 'Belvoir is his home,' he said, 'the one constant in his young life. It must not be taken from him as well. And, of course, he is my heir.'

Aunt Elise began to sob when he said that, and Nicolas held his breath. He liked his aunt, but he didn't want to leave his grandfather. It was with relief that he heard the duc say, 'Yes, it is a hard thing to come to terms with, my dear. But you have your own family. You are married to the head of the de Villefontaines, and you must take care of them. It is your sacred duty.'

'But of course, I will have time for Nicolas and you and Mama!'

'Of course, my dear, *cela va sans dire*. And I thank you for your kindness. But, you see, I, and Belvoir, have only Nicolas. He will remain with me.' The duc made soothing noises and held her until she stopped crying. His most immediate fear allayed, her nephew managed to slip away before anyone noticed him.

Nicolas was dressed in a formal suit and taken, in a big black limousine, to attend a memorial service. He stood with his family to accept an endless number of solemn greetings. People called him the marquis de Beaulieu and spoke of him as the duc's heir. He wanted to say, 'No! You are mistaken! That is my papa!' He thought that when he was older, he would refuse to allow anyone to call him Monsieur le marquis. *I am Nicolas*, he thought, trying to blink away tears. *Mama and Papa call me Nicolas*.

He was asked if he would sing a hymn for his mama and papa. Almost, he couldn't do it, but suddenly, Angel was there beside him. His secret friend had come back when he most needed him. For just long enough, joy overcame grief. Nicolas sang *Panis Angelicus*. His voice—pure, sweet, angelic—had the congregation in tears. Finally, for his mother, he sang their favourite song *Éternité d'amour*. And then he broke down.

§

During the day, Nicolas was kept busy with music lessons, singing lessons, schooling and riding lessons; but at bedtime, he remembered. Every night he held onto the locket and sobbed his heart out. Even with Angel there, he cried.

‘I understand,’ said his secret friend. ‘It is good to cry. One must cry for those one has lost. But remember: it is not forever.’

‘It feels like forever,’ said Nicolas.

‘Yes, it does now,’ agreed Angel. ‘Tomorrow you will ask your grand-père to let Armand come back to you. He is grieving, too.’

‘Armand is grieving?’

‘Yes, he understands how you feel. In a short time, he will come back. Then, for just a little while, you will no longer need me.’

‘I will always need you!’

‘Soon, you will grow up. You will forget to talk to your secret friend.’

‘No, never! I will never forget you!’

‘You will. But it doesn't matter. I will always come when you need me, and a time is coming that you *will* need me. Remember to listen to your inner voice. That is how I will help you. Promise?’

‘I promise.’

‘Good. Now, I must leave you for a little while.’

‘No! Don't leave me! Please!’

‘Many things require my attention. Occasionally, I will have to come and go. Don't worry: my promise to you is that I will always be with you when you need me.’

Nicolas felt a warm, loving hand sweep over his hair, invisible arms go round him in a comforting hug. Then he knew that he was alone. He clasped his locket and cried himself to sleep.

In the morning, he asked his grandfather if Armand could come back.

The duc regarded him sadly, 'I will think about it if you will be good enough to sit with your grandmother for a while.'

'Yes, Grand-père. I will play the piano for her. Why does she never speak to me?' Nicolas vaguely remembered a kind, gentle lady who hugged him and gave him sweets when he was little; but his grandmother hadn't recognised him for a long time now.

The duc's eyes filled with pain. He shrugged. 'An illness of old age, my child. There is nothing we can do except to see that she has every need and comfort provided. Even though she does not seem to notice, I am sure that she will appreciate you playing for her. She was no mean proponent herself, once.'

It was no chore to Nicolas to carry out his grandfather's request. He particularly liked the baby grand piano in his grandmamma's sitting room and often played several tunes when he visited, chatting to her in between, knowing better than to expect an answer.

He walked up to the still, silent figure wrapped in shawls in the armchair by the fire and touched her hand. 'Hello, Grandmamma, I am here to play some music for you.'

As expected, he received no sign of recognition and seated himself at the piano.

He played a Strauss waltz, followed by a Chopin *étude*. 'Did you like those, Grandmamma,' he asked, almost falling off the stool when she said, 'Etienne'.

'No, Grandmamma, I am Nicolas.'

'Etienne, have you had your music lesson today?'

'Nicolas. Yes, Grandmamma.'

'Play something for me.'

He began a Mozart piece from *Così fan tutte*.

'No, not that! Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*: first movement. Can you do that?'

'I am just learning it, but I will try.' He went well for a while, then stumbled.

'No, no! Not like that.' The old lady threw aside her shawls. 'Help me!'

Nicolas helped her to the piano stool.

'Up here, beside me,' she said, patting the seat. 'See: like this. Now you try ... *Bien, bien!*' Her light eyes glowed with pleasure and kindness. For the first time in years, Nicolas

saw what a beautiful person his grandmamma had been.

When the duc returned from his cogitations, they were playing *Chopsticks* together and laughing like old friends. Astonishment held him silent.

‘Hello, my dear,’ said the duchesse. ‘Etienne is improving, is he not?’

‘Indeed, he is, my love,’ he said, helping her back to her chair and replacing the shawls. ‘You were playing delightfully. Just like old times.’

But the duchesse did not answer. She had gone back to the lonely place she’d inhabited for so long.

‘This is important,’ said the duc when he had Nicolas alone. ‘What did you do?’

The boy shrugged. ‘Just ... started playing the piano. Grandmamma began talking to me. She thinks I am Papa.’

‘It doesn't matter,’ said the duc quickly. ‘And then what?’

‘I made a mistake and Grandmamma got up to show me how it went. I, um ... I had to help her out of her chair and over to the piano.’

‘A miracle! It is the first time she has moved or spoken for well over a year.’ The duc grasped Nicolas's shoulders. ‘You will do this for her every day?’

‘But, yes, Grand-père. If it helps!’

‘I don't know how. But I suspect it does.’ He knelt to look into his grandson's eyes. ‘I am going to Paris to see your grandmamma's physician and tell him of this remarkable development. You will be a good boy and look after your grandmamma while I am gone. *Bien!*’ He rose and smiled. ‘I have also made an appointment to meet with Armand ...’

For a second, the old Nicolas emerged from the solemn little boy. ‘*Eh bien*, Grand-père: you are a *trump!*’ He whirled around the room. ‘That will be just the cat's pyjamas!’

The duc laughed. ‘I don't know what that means, but I take it you are pleased?’

‘*Aux anges*, Grand-père! *Merci! Merci!*’

‘*Très bon*. I will see you in a few days.’

‘With Armand?’

‘Perhaps,’ amended his grandfather, ‘with Armand.’

§

Armand met the duc in a private corner of the Café de Flore. A red tide surged into the cheeks of the sensitive young man, across his high forehead and up to his hairline. He lowered his eyes. ‘Monsieur le duc,’ he muttered, briefly taking the proffered hand, ‘you wished to speak with me?’

‘*Oui*.’ The duc surveyed him kindly. ‘Thank you for coming. This meeting must, of necessity, be awkward for us both. But, perhaps, we can find some common ground?’

‘Monsieur, if you could but forgive ——?’

The duc held up his hand. ‘Not yet. Coffee?’ He called a waiter and gave the order, then looked over the younger man. ‘We must discuss our common ground. Is there one, do you think?’

Armand hesitated, his colour receding as suddenly as it had come, leaving him sickly white. ‘Monsieur, dare I presume ...?’

The duc nodded. ‘Go ahead. I am listening. For Nicolas's sake.’

Coffee was brought to the table. Armand did not speak until the *garçon* left. ‘Is ... could Nicolas be our common ground?’

‘Perhaps. I am waiting for you to convince me of that.’

‘Yes, Monsieur.’ Armand gulped. ‘When I saw how ... Monsieur, I tried to stop a ... certain publication. I had not then read it.’

‘And you have now?’

‘*Oui*, Monsieur.’

‘I ... see.’ The duc studied an engraving absent-mindedly, then met the other's eyes with piercing candour. ‘You have changed your mind since you read it? You, too, are a jackal after scandal?’

‘No, no, Monsieur! *Never!* You must not think that! It is not a scandal but an epic!’

The young man's grey eyes glowed with fervour. 'A powerful and inspirational story of love!' He gestured. 'Comparable with Romeo and Juliet; Tristan and Isolde; Siegfried and Brünnhilde. You have done nothing to be ashamed of. You conducted yourself honourably. Monsieur ——'

The duc grasped his wrist, holding his eyes with painful intensity. 'What do you know of love? You have, yourself, experienced love?'

Armand nodded.

The grip intensified. 'Who do you love?'

The young man dropped his gaze. 'She ... she is dead, Monsieur.'

'Ah ...' The duc released him. 'I see ... Yes, I see. But, just the same, there is great scandal attached to this publication.'

'Monsieur.' Armand leant across the table. 'If there was scandal, it was not yours. It belonged to a man of whom the world was well rid.'

'Perhaps ... Yes, that is true. The world *was* well rid of him.' The duc studied his long, white fingers. 'Other hands than mine were responsible for that.' He began to sound frustrated. 'These hands that have never held the pen to write a word in defence of my love; never worked to dispel the injustice visited on the innocent ...'

'They have held pencil and brush to create images that showed your adoration. They have held the reins that melded together a great estate and kept your loved ones safe all these years.' Armand leant forward to touch the duc's sleeve. 'Let it go, Monsieur. As I said before: It is a powerful love story: An epic. It deserves to be told. I did not understand until I ...' He was about to say, 'fell in love,' but substituted with 'read it'.

The duc's eyes filled with pain. 'I suppose it is a record of those whom I have loved ... and lost.'

Burdened with his own grief, Armand remained silent.

The duc straightened. 'I sent for you because Nicolas is lonely. It is not right for him to have a grieving old man and a woman out of her senses as his only companions. Will you come back to us?'

'But certainly, Monsieur. I thank you for asking. I, too, have been lonely.'

‘And grieving, I think? No, do not answer. I know what it is like to be one of the thousands that adore a beautiful performer.’ The duc sighed and stood up. He held out his hand to Armand. ‘You will come as soon as is possible? *Bien.*’

Armand watched him walk away, then followed. Neither of them had touched their coffee.

Chapter 6

Reinstated

6 November 1930

So, I will have Nicolas once more. How different is this world to the former? All the bright things, all the good things, all the beautiful things have gone. We that are left must now support each other in our grief.

Nicolas was pathetically overjoyed when his grandfather returned with Armand. He showed his tutor the mountain of sympathy cards and letters of condolence from all over the world.

‘*Eh bien*, here is work!’ exclaimed Armand. ‘Have you answered any?’

Nicolas shook his head. ‘Grand-père threw them all in here, out of his sight.’

‘I understand, but now we must face it. We will do them together.’

‘But there are too many!’

‘So,’ said Armand. ‘You see how everybody loved your mama and papa? They love you like that, too. Now, let us get started. We have to answer them all, you know. Your fans will expect it.’ He was relieved: here was a way to keep Nicolas busy for months to come.

Nicolas cavilled at first, but when he read the messages of sympathy and support from his fans, he was comforted, and since he had Armand, didn’t feel quite so alone. He stopped thinking about his secret friend and, as Angel had predicted, more or less forgot his existence. At least, for the time it took to answer the mountain of letters and cards.

At ten, Nicolas had a good grasp of the language; but it creased his brow to find the number of answers expected of him and even more to understand the meaning of some of his fan mail. One he took to his grandfather to decipher. ‘Grand-père, what does this mean?’ Nicolas pointed out a phrase in his letter.

The duc spluttered over his after-lunch coffee. ‘*Mon Dieu!* Where did you get this?’

‘One of my fans sent it. A lady.’

‘Hmm. Send Armand to me. Where are you going now?’

‘To answer this letter.’ Nicolas picked it up. ‘When I find out what it means.’

‘No, you are not!’ said the duc, plucking the scented sheet out of his hand. ‘I will answer it. Have you played for Grandmamma yet?’

‘*Non*. I will go now.’

‘*Bon*. Send Armand to me first.’

‘*Oui*.’ Nicolas sped off on his errand.

While he was playing the piano for his grandmother, the duc lay down certain rules before Armand. ‘The child must be protected. I am not going to explain this filth to him and neither are you. His mail must be censored in future, by you, before he sees it.’

Armand's face was red. ‘Yes, Monsieur. But, as I told Nicolas, I don't know what it means, either.’

‘Good answer,’ replied the duc, balling up the letter and throwing it into the fire. ‘Anything else you don't understand can go the way of this one. But either you or I must read his mail first. One wonders about some of the minds in this world!’ He left Armand and went to see how Nicolas was getting on with the duchesse.

‘Nothing, Grand-père,’ said Nicolas, with a disappointed shrug.

‘Never mind.’ The duc took his wife's hand. ‘We'll try again, tomorrow, *hein*? Where are you going?’

‘To explore the east tower, if I may?’ Nicolas's favourite place was this tower. It commanded stunning views of the surrounding terrain and fired his imagination.

‘Go on, then. But be careful.’ The duc remained, holding the hand of the duchesse. ‘My poor Catherine,’ he mourned. ‘Poor, imprisoned soul.’

§

Angel came back into Nicolas's life in a totally unexpected manner.

After a history lesson about this very château, Nicolas had been as eager as ever to spend time in the east tower. He stood on the crenellated roof, surveying the vast expanse of fields, hills and valleys; the little hamlets with their church spires; the winding roads; the high, snow-topped mountains in the background.

In his imagination, he was Dominique, duc de Belvoir during the French Revolution, commanding his people in defence of the château. He thought about how his people had been loyal to him—resisting attempts on the part of the revolutionaries to arrest him—how he'd hidden another duc who'd escaped from the Bastille and helped smuggle him out of the country.

He imagined a great horde charging the portcullis, shaking the bars, screaming threats—the majority foiled by the rising drawbridge—the duc's own people gathering in the courtyard: the clamour, the shouting, the people of Belvoir taking up arms, the challenge and subsequent withdrawal.

Go down to the picture gallery.

Nicolas jumped. ‘What?’ Then he thought, *Inner voice!* ‘Angel? Is that you?’

Yes. Go to the picture gallery.

‘Why?’

I'll tell you when you get there.

The boy obeyed, negotiating the spiral stone staircase at death-defying speed; traversing numerous corridors and stairs until he arrived in the long, narrow, well-lit space that occupied the whole length of one wing of the château. He waited, breathing hard.

The portrait between Katarina and Angelique.

‘But, that is ——’

One thing to remember, mon brave: speak to me in thoughts. Otherwise, idiots will say that you are fou and lock you up.

Yes. Nicolas concentrated. Angel? You are the marquis du Bois? Mama called you Angelpapa.

She did, indeed. I am all of those, including the Master of Illusion.

But ... I have always known you as Angel. What shall I call you?

Angel will suffice. That is my role where you are concerned.

What do you mean?

I was your mother's guardian, and now I am yours.

You saved me on the ship. Why did you not save Mama and Papa on the airship?

There are some things that cannot be changed. You must understand that: they are already written. Destiny. It took me a long time to accept that. But something is about to happen that can be changed. Don't worry. Trust what I tell you. Concentrate on the portrait. Look into my eyes.

Nicolas looked into the commanding, sapphire-blue eyes—so like his own—little though he knew it. He fancied that they were alive: all-encompassing, all-knowing. He felt as if he were drowning in them: disappearing, submerging. He reefed his gaze away to study the strong, yet fine, aristocratic features: the shining black hair, the little touch of humour about the mouth. He saw a leader and was satisfied. *What must I do?*

Listen to me.

Eh bien, I am listening ...

Look well at the portrait. Memorise my features. When you need me, concentrate, visualise me standing beside you. Feel my strength, add it to yours. Open your mind to me. Together, we will be formidable! Do you understand, now, how I can help you?

The boy hesitantly touched the painted surface. *I ... think so.*

No matter, you will.

Nicolas glanced at the images of his mother and father. ‘Mama, I ... Papa, I miss you so ...’ Tears scalded. His hand grasped the locket until it hurt. He bowed his head and sobbed.

A wave of love swept over him, soothing his grief. *Be calm, my son. Be patient. They are not far away. When you have done what you have to do, you will see them again.*

He mopped his tears with a sleeve. Suddenly, he could look at the portraits and feel love and comfort as he always had with that of his grandmother, Katarina. He gazed into his mother's beautiful amethyst eyes and his father's warm golden-hazel ones and felt them near.

He let go of the locket to grip invisible hands—one he knew was his mother's and one his father's—and was immeasurably comforted.

With Angel's help, he had accepted the loss of his parents and was at peace. And, paradoxically, in that moment of peace, they had returned to him. Nicolas understood none of these things, except that it no longer hurt him to think of them. On the contrary: he felt surrounded by their love.

Chapter 7

The Price of Loyalty

21 September 1931

Nicolas seems to have accepted his loss and become his usual ebullient self. I would that the duc and I could do the same.

Nicolas sat at the piano playing for his grandmother. So far, she had made no sign of recognition. He was very proud that he'd learnt the whole first movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* just for her. 'You would like to hear it, Grandmamma? *Bien*.' He began the majestic chords. 'You liked that, Grandmamma?' he asked, when he'd finished. But his grandmother sat expressionless, unmoving. Nicolas drooped; his pleasure gone. 'I will play it again,' he said, turning back to the keyboard and addressing it with more gusto.

Make a mistake. Fumble a note or two.

Nicolas's fingers crashed on the keyboard.

The duchesse winced. 'No, no, Etienne, not like that. Let me help you.' As before, Nicolas assisted her to the piano and they played duets, the duchesse warm and complimentary about his progress. At the end, she kissed his forehead and called him her clever little Etienne. He adored the feel of her lips, her warm sweetness, the way she held him in her arms.

Nicolas could hardly wait to tell the good news to his grandfather, tearing down the corridor to his study, halting in astonishment at the spare figure standing in the shadows by the door.

'Shh.' Armand held a warning finger to his lips.

'*Quoi?*' whispered Nicolas.

'Listen.' Armand jerked his head at the raised voice behind the closed door.

‘I do not, do not, believe it!’ said the duc. ‘What have you been about to let a thing like this happen?’

‘I am sorry, Monsieur. It is the wording of the document. Had I been the one to draw it up ...’

‘François Bernaud,’ breathed Nicolas in Armand's ear. ‘Mama's lawyer. What is it about?’

‘You, I think. Shh.’

‘Very well. I understand,’ said the duc. ‘And there is nothing you can do?’

‘No, Monsieur, je regrette ... After a twelve-month period of mourning, which is now almost expired, Nicolas must perform once per week during the season in the Opéra Magique for a period of ten years. The Countess Kireyevsky is enforcing it.’

‘Ten years! I know Nicolas has inherited his mother's half-share in the opera house, and, with it, her responsibilities to the place. But I am his guardian until he turns twenty-one. Do I not have a say?’

‘Regrettably not, Monsieur. Not unless you wish Nicolas to forfeit his part-ownership of the Opéra Magique. It all hinges on the omission of a clause that under no circumstances would I have allowed. However, I was out of the country at the time. And because the Countess Kireyevsky has taken over the management of the Opéra Magique, she has the casting vote on any decision made by the owners. In other words: her word is law, she can make any demand she chooses and there is nothing you or I can do about it.’

‘*Mon Dieu!* That woman is a she-wolf! But there are only two owners. How can she have a greater vote?’

‘When Madame Dupont left her share of the Opéra Magique to her daughter, she had a document drawn up, giving equal say to three people: the two owners and the theatre manager. Knowing her daughter, she felt that this would prevent difficulties in case of unresolvable differences between the two owners. I would have made sure to add that the theatre manager must not be one of the owners. But, as I said ...’

‘Yes, I understand. And you are sure that there is nothing you can do? You have explored all avenues?’

‘*Oui*, Monsieur. I am so sorry.’

The door opened suddenly. Nicolas and Armand stepped back, red-faced.

‘*Tiens!*’ remarked the duc. ‘How did you two know that I wanted you? Monsieur Bernaud shall explain your duties for the foreseeable future.’ He turned his head so that they would not see that the lightness of his tone was belied by the pain in his eyes and the grim set to his mouth.

§

‘Nicolas, your grandfather wants you, *tout de suite*, in your grandmamma's sitting room. The physicians have come,’ said Armand. ‘Hurry!’

Nicolas knocked and entered. A number of solemn gentlemen stood around the walls. His grandfather was frowning. ‘Nicolas, will you show these gentlemen what you do to, er, “wake up” your grandmother? The gentlemen want you to act as if they are not there.’

‘But certainly, Grand-père.’ Nicolas bowed to the gentlemen and went to touch his grandmother's unresponsive hand. ‘Hello, Grandmamma. I am here to play you some music. You will like that, *hein?*’ He seated himself at the piano, played a waltz and a polka, then launched into the *Beethoven Fifth*, making a mistake at the usual place. He waited for his grandmother to react, but she sat unheeding. He played it again and again, crashing chords, playing wrong notes; but the duchesse noticed nothing.

Dismayed, Nicolas met the duc's eyes and rose from the piano. What had gone wrong? This method had never failed. He and his grandfather had been confident that they had the answer. He looked at the gentlemen. They were beginning to make impatient mutterings to the effect of wasted time. They took a whispered leave of the duc, with much shoulder patting, eloquent with sympathy for his obviously wishful thinking, as well as irritation for being sent on a wild-goose chase. One touched Nicolas on the head and smiled at him as he passed.

When the noise of their vehicles had receded into the distance, the duchesse came to life. ‘I would not, for the world, point out your errors in front of those prosy looking gentlemen, Etienne,’ she said. ‘But now we must correct your mistakes.’ She smiled kindly. ‘It must have been nerves. I have never heard you play so many wrong notes. Come along,

back to the piano.'

'*Mon Dieu!*' Not trusting himself to say more, the duc threw his hands in the air and left the room. Nicolas and the duchesse spent a very agreeable half-hour together.

It was their last. A day later, the duchesse succumbed to pneumonia and slipped away during the night, very quickly and silently.

'A happy release,' said the duc, wiping his eyes.

If it is so happy, wondered Nicolas, rubbing away tears of his own, *why is he crying?*

It is not a tragedy. She is free, at last.

Nicolas did not understand, but he was not about to question the judgement of Angel. It might be happy, he supposed, except that he missed his grandmother already. He loved the way she smiled, the warmth in her eyes when the music brought her to life, her wonderful loyalty that would not allow her to admit a mistake in one she loved. Because she was a loving person: Nicolas knew that. When the music freed her, she could be herself. His soul craved a loving, feminine touch. The tears came in earnest.

Nicolas played Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* at his grandmother's funeral service in the chapel. At the end, he felt a sudden rush of euphoria. A vision came to him of light, animated eyes; a delightful smile; a warm, loving presence; a sense of joy.

You see?

Suddenly, Nicolas could see what Angel meant. His grandmother was able to be herself all the time, instead of just now and again.

Chapter 8

La Reine

12 October 1931

Nicolas and I are off to visit the queen. The duc is indisposed and cannot come with us. Since Her Majesty would not countenance a postponement of the meeting, I have his strict instructions to protect the boy. Only, who is going to protect me from being mauled by the ‘she-wolf’? That is what I want to know!

Nicolas faced the Countess Kireyevsky with a strange fear in his heart. Her thin lips smiled, showing gold teeth, but no smile was echoed in her eyes: cold, ice-blue. Expensively dressed, skilfully made-up, she smelled of Chanel No.5 and cigarette smoke.

What was it about her that repelled him? He studied her fearfully: her hair, swept up in a chignon, was a classically elegant silver blonde; her slim figure, swathed in softly falling silk and satin, was always chic, perhaps even regal, in the creations of her favourite designer, Chanel. Her features, despite her age and the fine lines around her mouth, were still attractive. Nicolas was aware of a kind of baleful energy emanating from her, suffocating when one stood close. It was all that he could do, not to step back.

Glad of his tutor's presence at his side, Nicolas blanched when the countess flicked a malicious glance at Armand and said, ‘I believe we do not need you, Monsieur. My nephew and I ——’

‘With respect, Madame. I must take issue with your statement. Nicolas is not related to you.’ Armand became breathless, losing the thread. ‘He, er, is not your nephew. I-I mean ... you cannot be his aunt.’

‘Such an awkward young man,’ murmured the countess, her lips curving at his rush of colour. ‘Splitting hairs, too.’ She brushed him off with a careless wave and addressed Nicolas. ‘My mother reared me first, and then your mother. That makes us sisters. Of course I am your aunt! If not by blood, then by the closeness of our two families.’ She stood back, playing with

the string of amber beads she wore. Her voice became caressing. ‘And I know that you miss your mother and have no lady in your life to care for you in that way.’

Angel intervened. *Cunning! Agree with her.*

‘Yes, Aunt.’

Armand began again, ‘With respect, Madame ——’

‘Enough! You may wait in the foyer!’

I beg your pardon, Madame. But I must ——’ Armand's larynx bobbed painfully. He was afraid to argue with this domineering woman, but the duc had given him precise instructions.

‘*You* are a servant! Do you dare to bandy words with the Countess Kireyevsky?’

‘I am the servant of the duc de Belvoir, Madame. He has told me that, under no circumstances, must I leave Nicolas alone with ... you.’ Armand could hardly get out the last word. A painful silence ensued.

The countess stood tall; her eyes narrowing to slits.

Nicolas could see no resemblance whatsoever to the lady he'd called Godmama, even though this terrifying woman was supposed to be her daughter.

Angel? What shall I do?

Tell Armand to go. She will only do him harm.

What about me?

You, she dares not harm ... Yet.

Nicolas placed a hand on his tutor's arm. ‘Please, Armand. If my “aunt” wants to speak to me, I will listen to her. Please, do as she says.’

Armand glanced from the triumphant, cat-with-the-cream smile of the countess to his pupil's worried expression. How strangely grown-up and touchingly wise this young boy seemed. *Sometimes, Nicolas has such dignity for one so young*, he thought. *Just now and then, I realise the heritage he is born to.* He raised his brows. ‘I cannot disobey your grandfather's orders, Nicolas. But I will sit over here out of earshot. If the countess permits ...?’

A bored wave of the hand signified assent.

Armand looked hard at Nicolas. ‘You are sure?’

Yes.

‘Yes, Armand.’

Armand sat unobtrusively behind a handsome lacquered screen, painted with birds of paradise and butterflies—but his ears were good. He heard everything. Even things that he wished he couldn't hear.

The countess's voice was honeyed, ‘I have invited you here because I know you are a lonely little boy.’

I am not little! was Nicolas's first indignant thought.

Shh!

‘Now: I have found a way for you, so that you will no longer be lonely. You will like that?’

‘Oh ... Oh yes, Aunt.’

‘Ah, good. I have had the most marvellous idea. Nicolai and I, we have no children, and you—poor little boy—have no parents. So, we, the count and I, have decided to adopt you as our very own. Is that not wonderful?’

‘B-but ...’ stammered Nicolas.

‘You like this idea of mine, *hein?*’

Say yes.

Quoi?

Say it!

‘Yes, Aunt. *Merci.*’

‘Ah, *très bon.* I have the perfect apartment for you. It has a secret entrance. Perfect privacy for a rising star. You may keep your tutor—Armand, is it not? There is room for him in your apartment. It once belonged to a tenor just like you.’

It belonged to me.

‘I am a soprano, Madame.’

C line's metallic laughter rang out. ‘Oh, dear little boy!’ She tried to gather Nicolas into her arms.

He winced, evading her touch.

She straightened, eyes hardening. ‘You will not always be a soprano, Child. Have you not heard what happens to little boys' voices when they begin to grow up? That is why we must make the most of what you have! Why you must come here to live with me and sing every night.’

Nicolas felt clammy and rather sick. ‘Madame, *je regrette* ... that I cannot. My grand-p re is old. While he lives, he needs me. He has no-one else.’

As if she would care! Don't worry; the duc will not allow it.

‘Well, well, you are a good little boy. Your grandfather will see reason. I will write to him now while you go along to the stage to practise. Nicolai is waiting for you. Make the most of the time you have with him because you will be performing together next week.’ The countess stepped back and clapped her hands. ‘Armand, *ici*! Take your charge to Count Kireyevsky on the stage and come back here so that I may dictate a letter to the duc saying that Nicolas wishes to live with me.’

Salope!

‘*Quoi?*’ Startled, Nicolas spoke aloud.

The countess cuffed him about the ears. ‘Stupid boy! Have you not listened to a word I said? Go to the stage, at once!’

Nicolas stared, unable to take in her chameleon-like change. Armand touched his sleeve. They turned, as one, to the door.

Chapter 9

Two Guardian Angels

19 October 1931

I am now certain that I am going mad! How to even write it? But, this evening, I could swear that I am so attuned to Nicolas that I can hear his thoughts; and it is as if there are two people I am listening to, not one. To hear conversations in one's head? We all know what that means!

And tonight—I blanch to think of it!—I swear I caught a glimpse of a man standing beside him on the stage. What was worse was that I recognised him from a portrait in the gallery at Belvoir—the marquis du Bois! And he died more than a decade ago!

I will be in the insane asylum if I keep going like this. Surely, it is midsummer madness with me!

And the countess? What a dragon! I feel in my heart that she means trouble for Nicolas. She makes me shudder when she comes near, and she's always getting me to write letters for her, leaning over my shoulder, breathing into my ear—Urrgh!

I don't want to know what Nicolas thinks, or who else is in his head with him! I have enough trouble with what is in my own head!

The painted lips of the countess dropped phrases of affability: ‘You have come to stay, this time, dear boy?’

Nicolas schooled his expression to bland apology. ‘I am sorry, Madame ... Aunt. Grand-père says I must live with him until I am twenty-one. After which time, I may take up your most kind offer. I have come to sing tonight.’

‘Ah, indeed, indeed. Your apartment will be waiting for you, *mon fils*. You have warmed up your voice? Come along then; I will take you to wait in the wings with your

tutor.' She sent Armand a look that made him feel ill. 'This dance is about to finish, and then you may go on. He can wait for you here.'

The introductory ballet ended. The dancers filed past Nicolas. One attracted his notice, at once. She had chestnut hair, plaited into a becoming coronet, bright blue eyes, a pert nose and a cheeky, conspiratorial smile.

'Oh, there's Lisette! Excuse me, Madame. Sette! Settie!' He ran to her. '*Belle dame!*'

The pretty ballerina smiled and held out her arms. 'Beau Nicolas, *mon chou!* How wonderful to see you! You're still as cute as ever, *hein?*' The ballerina gave him a motherly kiss on the brow and a warm hug, which he returned with fervour.

'Am I big enough yet, Settie?'

'Hmm. Let me see ...' The ballerina held him at arm's length, looking him over with warm, twinkling eyes. 'Almost. Not quite. Soon, *mon ami.*' She kissed him again. Then, folding him closer, she whispered, 'I am sorry about your mama and papa, *Chéri.* But we are troupers, *hein?* We do not let our troubles be seen. The show must go on, *n'est-ce pas?*' She stepped back. 'Break a leg, as we say.'

He nodded, taking in her plain costume. 'Why weren't you dancing prima?'

'Because I did break a leg: an ankle, rather, and some toes. I'll tell you about it later.' She looked up to meet a reptilian gaze. Icy fingers groped her spine. 'You'd better go,' she whispered. 'The countess is looking at us. I think she wants you. I'm going to watch you sing, if I can. *À bientôt, Chéri.*' Lisette hugged him again and turned away.

Nicolas watched her go out of sight, then turned to face the older woman's speculative glance. 'You want me now, Madame?'

'*Prochainement.* You like Lisette?' she asked, smiling at him in a disquieting fashion. 'She has *espièglerie, n'est-ce pas?*'

'*Oui,* Madame. She is lots of fun to be with.'

'*Eh bien,* we must see that you spend time with her.'

'Yes, Madame. I love Lisette. She is *belle.* I am going to marry her, one day. As soon as I grow up.'

'Ah, then we must help you to grow up quickly.' The countess spoke dryly.

Nicolas didn't understand her tone and began to look around for the count.

'It is no use looking for Nicolai! Did I not tell you?' She laughed and waved her fan. 'How remiss of me! Poor Nicolai: he is indisposed. You will have to go on without him. When you hear the cue, you must go to centrestage and sing solo. But you can do that.' She turned and spoke over her shoulder. 'Forgive me, I must leave you now. A full house awaits you, so do not let me down!'

'No, Mad—— Aunt.' Nicolas watched her hurry away, consternation in his breast. 'Armand,' he whispered. 'Did you hear that? How can I face them alone? Without Mama?' Nicolas began to shake. He was afraid that he would break down as he had in the church. *What is wrong with me?* Never, in his life, had he been a victim of stage fright, but never had he been on stage in front of an audience without his mother close by, even though he had sung alone. She'd always been there to encourage him.

Armand held him by the shoulders. 'Steady, *mon gar*. Listen to me: Your public love you. Remember all the letters they sent you? This is how you can repay their kindness, return their love. And besides, you must fulfil your part of the contract. You don't want the countess to win, do you? Take your inheritance?'

'No. But I don't know how I can do it.'

A rustle of silk, a clicking of beads and the countess reappeared. 'Why are you not on stage?' she hissed. 'Herr Schmidt-Hesse is waiting for you.'

'And that's another thing ...' Nicolas whispered to Armand, 'I don't like that new German conductor! He is not at all *sympathique*.' He showed the countess a face of misery. 'I am sorry, Madame, I ... I cannot go out there and sing alone!'

'Of course you can! If not, I will sue you for everything you are worth!'

'Please, Madame ——'

She turned her fury on Armand. '*Chut!*' Tall, terrifying, she grasped Nicolas by the lapels of his formal suit. 'If you do not, you will be finished! *Finished!* Think about *that!*' She pushed him back so violently that he cannoned into his tutor.

You are not alone. I am with you. Come, we will sing it together.

Nicolas took a deep breath and smoothed his lapels. 'Very well, Madame.' He turned, squared his shoulders, tried to visualise Angel and stepped out on the stage. The orchestra

began his introduction; the red and gold velvet curtain rolled back. Nicolas smiled and bowed to his audience. In return, he received a standing ovation.

Eh bien, you see? You do not need me.

I do. Please?

Very well. On the count ...

Suddenly, all Nicolas's confidence returned. He felt warm and loved, as if his mother stood on one side and his secret friend, the other. Angel's strength infused him. He opened his mouth and glorious notes streamed out. Sooner than he thought, it was over.

The crowd surged off their seats. 'Beau Nicolas!' they chanted. 'Beau Nicolas!'

You did well, Nicolas. Superbe!

'Thank you!' he said aloud to Angel. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" But it didn't matter because the audience thought he was speaking to them and cheered even harder. As long ago, Nicolas felt their love wash over him. He went back for several encores, finally singing *Éternité d'amour*.

That is enough. Do not go back.

Armand was waiting in the wings to convey the same sentiments. 'Come, you have fulfilled your obligations. You have conducted yourself bravely. We will go home now.'

The countess intercepted them on the way to a side entrance. 'You did well, Nicolas. Your fans have been looking for you. Next time you come, you will stay behind to meet some of them backstage and sign their autograph books, *hein? Bien*. Goodnight.'

§

'Some of the other girls are leaving,' said one of a group of ballerinas draped about the top few steps of the third-floor staircase, smoking and conversing in tense low voices.

'Yes, but ... I have heard that it is much the same wherever you go. There are expectations ...'

'Expectations? Expectations are not the same as the demands that are being made on

us! One can say no to expectations, but apparently not to La Reine. Do as she says or get out! Well, *I* am getting out!’ said a third, in a furious undervoice.

‘Hush! Here comes the old dragon now! Whatever can she want at this hour?’

‘I hope it is not another “client” for one of us. I cannot bear ——’

The countess came to the landing and peered upwards. ‘Lisette? Is Lisette there? Send her down to me.’

A tall, dark ballerina elbowed Lisette. ‘You heard! Go on.’

‘Lucky you!’ said the one who was leaving.

‘Shut up!’ whispered Lisette, with a warning grimace. She raised her voice, ‘Coming, Madame. I’ll just get a wrap.’

‘Very well. I shall be in my salon. Do not keep me waiting.’

‘No, Your Majesty,’ mouthed Lisette, to the concealed amusement of her friends.

‘Be careful!’ said the tall ballerina. ‘She’ll probably chop off your head if you say the wrong thing.’

‘Shh. She’ll chop off *all* our heads if she hears you.’ Lisette ran up the stairs and, in a few seconds, down again, wrapping her sylph-like figure in a crocheted shawl.

‘You wanted me, Madame?’

‘Ah, Lisette. Yes, come in. I have a little “after-hours” job for you. Very pleasant. But first: what were you girls discussing on the stairs? You all looked so serious.’

Lisette studied the jewelled bows on the toes of the countess’s expensive shoes and knit her brows. She knew someone had to speak up for the ballerinas. Lisette did not want to be the one, but the countess seemed to be in a good mood and here was her chance.

‘Madame, we were discussing the new requirements of our positions. With respect, Madame, our previous ballet mistress, Madame Merignac, never suggested ... In fact, such liaisons were frowned upon, unless ... of the heart.’ She coloured at the countess’s amused glance.

‘Some of us feel that we cannot ... That it is demeaning to us as dancers to be expected ——’

‘Nonsense! Why should you think that?’

‘But, Madame, you were a ballerina. You must know what it is like to be importuned

after a performance; how unpleasant it is to be pawed about by some drunken ... roué!’

‘*Chut!*’ The countess got up and prowled around, snapping her fan open and shut. ‘I had sense enough to marry young, didn’t I? No-one asks a married woman what she does in her boudoir.’

The ballerina stared. ‘Madame! But ...?’

The countess interpreted Lisette’s shocked silence. ‘Why not? If the price is high enough? It must be exclusive, of course. *Very* exclusive. And discreet. But we are not talking about me. We are discussing a service that is in great demand. *Eh bien*, if a commodity is in demand and we are providing it, that is good business. Extra little luxuries for you; extra for me.’

‘But there are houses that provide this service!’

‘Aha, but they do not have dancers, do they? It is the grace and beauty of the female form—the extreme athleticism of the dancers—that fascinates and arouses the gentlemen.’ The countess’s eyes gleamed as she extolled these virtues, but lost their animation as she continued, ‘Then they go on to these houses you mentioned and make do with those lesser trollops. Where is the sense in that? This way we keep them. Double the profit. For a very high figure—and I *do* mean a very high figure—a discerning gentleman may have that which his eyes have desired.’

‘Madame, we have trained since we were children to provide this beauty that you speak of. But it is a fine art: to look at and admire, not to touch. This idea of yours: it is ruining our lives! Believe me, these extra luxuries you promise do not compensate us for —’

‘Enough!’ The countess snapped shut her fan. ‘If you cannot, any longer, fulfil the requirements of your position, then ...’ She pointed the carved ivory sticks. ‘There is the door!’

Lisette bit her lip. She knew she should walk away. But to what? Starvation on the street? Who was going to employ a dancer who could no longer dance *en pointe*? ‘I am sorry, Madame.’ She took a deep breath. ‘What is it that you require of me?’

‘That is better!’ The countess’s humour was magically restored. ‘It is simple and easy. There is a young gentleman—no drunken roué, I might add—who has taken a fancy to you.

Quite a fancy. In fact, he is ripe ...’ Her cold blue eyes rested on the ballerina. Lisette felt, as usual, touched by evil. ‘If you do as I say here, you will not be required to be available to other clients.’

‘Very well, Madame.’

Her obvious relief made the countess smile unpleasantly. ‘You will instruct this young man in every worldly pleasure: to be a connoisseur of wine, to hold his liquor, to smoke elegantly, to be awakened to the joys of aphrodisiacs like cocaine.’

‘But ... cocaine? Cocaine is not ——’

‘It provides euphoria, heightened energy, does it not?’ The countess dropped her fan to reach for a cigarette in an elegant holder. Lighting it, she added, ‘You will, of course, instruct him in the arts of the boudoir: the delights of love.’

‘May I know who it is, first, Madame?’

‘*Mais certainement!* It is our young superstar, Nicolas de Beaulieu.’

‘But he is no more than a child!’ gasped the ballerina. ‘A child, Madame! Unawakened.’

‘Then, it is for you to open his eyes.’ She drew on her cigarette, expelling the smoke in Lisette’s face. ‘You will make him dependent on you ... Then you will insist that he comes here to live—with you!’

‘Madame, *please!*’ Lisette stretched out an imploring hand.

‘Enough of this stupidity! This maudlin sentiment! He has said that he wants to marry you. He told it to me himself!’

‘But ... but ——’ Lisette was stunned.

‘And when you are with him, you shall wear only white. I will provide your raiment.’

‘But, Madame.’ The ballerina finally found her voice. ‘I think you are operating under an error. Nicolas has been saying that he wants to marry me since he was a little boy. It seems I look like some portrait or other that he is enamoured of.’

The countess studied her. ‘Hmm. Yes, there is a resemblance, now you come to mention it: the hair colour, the eyes, the face shape. Although, she was a namby-pamby, milk-

and-water miss if ever there was one! At least you have a bit of spirit. Or I thought you did. Katarina ...’ She clenched her hand in sudden spite. ‘I don’t know why all the men were in love with her. The comte: as namby-pamby as she was! And *Angel* ...’ Her face distorted into a mask of hatred.

She’s mad! The woman is mad! Who is this Angel she speaks of? And with such venom! Frightened, Lisette whispered, ‘Madame, it is just a joke I have with Nicolas; a standing joke between us.’

The countess sighed, seeming to come back from somewhere. ‘Nevertheless, you will appear to take him seriously. You will instruct him in the art of love.’

‘Madame, please! You don’t know what you are saying! He is only a baby!’

‘Then it will take as long as it takes. He will grow older; there is nothing more certain. There are ways to encourage him. He will soon get the idea. If you are the first, you will have a hold over him.’

Lisette gasped, but the countess, apparently unaware of having said anything atrocious, smiled and drew on her cigarette.

‘But, that’s ... depravity!’

‘Nonsense! A man of the world needs to know these things.’

‘No, Madame, I beg of you ... Let him grow up, fall in love and discover them naturally. As for the other evils of society ...’ The ballerina shrugged. ‘There is plenty of time before he need make up his mind about them.’

The countess went on as if Lisette hadn’t spoken, ‘A little extra knowledge in the boudoir never goes astray.’

Lisette felt ill with horror. The woman was crazy—*fou*. There was no doubt about it. She was obviously bent on ruining the life of a young boy. *But why?*

‘Madame, forgive me, but I do not understand why you would wish to do such a thing to Nicolas? Why do you wish him to live here with me? And why would you want an innocent child to be exposed to vice at such a tender age?’

‘That is not your business! You will do as I say! Or you will be out in the street!’ In a sudden, vicious move, the countess pitched the cigarette out of its holder and ground it under

her heel. ‘*And* I will see that you do not obtain employment in any other opera house.’ She tossed the ebony holder into an ashtray and looked up. ‘*Tu comprends?*’

Again, Lisette felt the touch of evil. She shivered, drawing her shawl about her.

The countess picked up her fan. ‘Next time he comes to sing, you will be waiting in his dressing-room with feminine comforts. I leave it entirely up to you. If you are there, dressed for the part, *bon*. If not ...’ She drew the fan across her throat, lifted her shoulders and swayed out of the room. Without looking back, she said, ‘Pick up that cigarette butt before you go.’

Lisette stooped, picked what was left of the cigarette out of the carpet and flung it across the salon. Avoiding the other ballerinas, she went up a back staircase to her room, where she lay thinking and smoking for a long time. They weren't supposed to smoke in their rooms, but, tonight, she didn't care. Her face crumpled at the thought of that beautiful, clear-eyed boy: innocent, full of fun, adored by friends and fans, now so vulnerable in his loss. If she told the countess what to do with her depraved suggestion, that evil hag would find another, not so caring, to carry out her dirty work for her. Lisette was sure of that.

A sleepless night decided her. Who knew how far the countess might go with her grotesque fantasy? The old witch could say what she liked, but what Nicolas needed was mothering. She stubbed out her last cigarette and turned her face into the pillow. If that dragon wanted the poor child to have feminine comforts, then she, Lisette, would provide them—in the sacred role of mother.

It was the only way she could think of to protect him from evil.

Chapter 10

A Pretty Ballerina

26 October 1931

Nicolas sings at the Opéra Magique again tonight. He seems to have found a friend: a pretty ballerina. Her presence and joie de vivre appears to have worked wonders for him. Will he be onstage alone? Or will a ghost be with him? But my biggest fear is: will the countess try to get me alone again like she did last time?

Nicolas's next appearance saw him step out onto the stage with confidence. When the curtain began to open, he wavered for one tiny second. *Angel?*

I am here.

Visualising the man in the portrait standing beside him, Nicolas sang solo and then with the baritone Count Kireyevsky. His final encore was a solo that again met with a standing ovation.

When Nicolas came backstage to meet Armand, the countess was waiting for him. 'I want Armand. You go up to your dressing-room and wait for him. Lisette will look after you until he comes.'

'*Très bon*, Madame!' In his joy, Nicolas did not notice how Armand shrank and paled.

The countess watched his face light up and nodded. 'Go along now.'

'Are ... Will the fans be there, Madame?'

'Not tonight. Next time.'

'*Bon*.' Nicolas tore up the stairs to the dressing-room that used to be his mother's; and before that, the Master's. *Angel's*, thought Nicolas, bursting into the room. 'Sette! Settie! You are here! Oh, you do look pretty in that!' He went straight into her arms. 'How soft you feel!'

'Do I, *mon brave*?' Lisette kissed his hair. 'Come, let me take your coat and undo your

tie ... there!' She held up a dressing gown for him to shrug into. 'You are hungry after your performance? Supper first?' She indicated a table loaded with sandwiches, pastries, cakes and various drinks and cordials attractive to children. 'Or make-up removal?'

'Supper first, *s'il vous plaît*.' His eyes glistened at the feast. 'That looks scrumptious! How did you know that I was starving?'

'I wonder!' She looked amused. 'Where do you want to start?'

'The quiche, please.' He waited while she cut him a slice. 'What about you, Settie? Will you have some.'

'No, thank you for asking. I've had mine. I have not just come back from a performance. Eat up.' She moved around the table, pouring him blackcurrant juice, finally serving him with a large piece of chocolate cake topped with strawberries and crème fraîche. 'Your favourite, I think?'

'Mmm, thank you.' Halfway through, he said, 'Settie, you won't be offended? I cannot eat it all.'

'*Mais non!* You've done well. A valiant effort, *mon cher*.' Lisette pulled out a chair from the dressing table in front of the mirror. 'Sit here, my soldier, while I remove your stage make-up, *hein?*'

He submitted. 'You're good at this.'

'Plenty of practise, *mon ami*.'

He sat, watching her in the mirror while she scooped up lumps of cold cream and spread it on sections of his face, removing it with cottonwool. 'Do you remember when we signed each other's autograph books, Sette?'

'Of course, I do, *Chéri!*' Lisette had been unashamedly admiring of Nicolas and he'd basked in her compliments: 'You have a voice, Maestro. *Bien sûr*, you have a voice!' Amidst much chaffing and laughter, they'd signed each other's autograph books. 'I keep yours in a special place,' she said. 'Turn your head a little. This way. *Bien*.'

'Grand-père said he's seen you dance. He says you are very good.'

'Not any more, Petit.'

'You must not call me Petit, Settie. I have grown a lot. I am big now; bigger even than

you.'

'So you are, *Chéri*: big and handsome! Sit still while I get this pancake off your top lip. Do this.' She pulled a face. He laughed and complied, eyeing his reflection.

As soon as she finished, he asked, 'How did you break your ankle, Sette? You said you would tell me.'

'I broke my ankle and my toes in a skiing fall, and I cannot dance *en pointe* any more. So ...' Her face twisted. 'No more prima spot for poor Lisette.'

'That's a shame! You are *belle, très belle*!'

'Thank you, my sweet. That is very charming of you.'

'I told my grand-père.'

'Did you?'

'*Oui*. I told him I love you, too.'

Her hand stilled momentarily. 'And what did he say?'

'He said that one could not help falling in love with a beautiful ballerina and that I had good taste.'

'That is so kind! He must be a lovely grand-père.'

'He is.'

Lisette giggled.

'What are you laughing at?'

'There is a big lump of *maquillage* in your right ear! Who put this make-up on?'

'*Moi*.'

'Oh, Nicolas! You went on stage like that? No matter: it would not have been noticed. Next time, I shall do it for you. Sit still, now. There! Nice and clean.' Lisette tossed the soiled cotton into a bin. 'All finished.' She smiled. 'And what have you been doing with yourself lately, *mon brave*?'

'Oh, lots of things, Settie, mostly learning. Did you know that I like to design things?'

'*Tiens*! What things?'

‘Oh, houses, buildings, machines, things like that; and I like to play and compose music.’

‘Ooh, *brave!* You're very accomplished, *n'est-ce pas?*’

‘You think so? I love music the most. Do you love music, Sette?’

‘Of course! I am a dancer ...’ Her smile faded. ‘Of a sort.’

Nicolas did not miss the change in expression, concern leapt into his eyes. ‘Settie? I think that now you cannot dance prima, you might need me to take care of you. You might need to marry me soon. What do you think?’

‘Oh, Nicolas!’ She kissed his brow, smoothing his hair the way his mother used to. There was a break in her voice. She, too, found Nicolas's surprising insight touching. ‘I think you will find a beautiful young girl, one day. Then you will throw me, like a rag doll, on the scrap heap.’

‘Never!’ he said. ‘Never!’

‘Never?’ She smiled. ‘What would you do if I married Armand?’

He looked at her speculatively, a little dismayed. ‘Would you?’

‘I might ... When you throw me over.’

Nicolas chuckled. ‘You're funny, Sette!’

‘No! Am I?’

‘Hmm-mm. Settie? May I have a hug?’

‘Of course, you can, *Chéri!*’ Lisette sat on the couch, patting the cushion. ‘Come, sit here beside me.’

Nicolas lay in her arms, nestling his cheek against the white satin *peignoir* that had been provided by the countess. ‘Mama had one of these,’ he said, touching the embroidered lapel. ‘She always held me like this and kissed me on the forehead.’ Tears sprang into the great blue eyes. ‘I know I'm a trooper, but I miss her, Settie.’ He turned his head into her shoulder. ‘I do miss her so ...’

‘Oh, you poor little boy!’ gasped Lisette. ‘You poor, poor little boy. Come here.’ She kissed his brow over and over, holding him tightly, sobbing with him, until—exhausted from

his tears—Nicolas closed his eyes.

Armand, finally released by the countess, came in. He seemed surprised to see the ballerina on the chaise longue with her arms around the sleeping Nicolas.

Lisette smiled. 'He is all in, Monsieur. He has just fallen asleep. Poor baby: he misses his mother.'

'Er, yes.' Armand reddened. *So do I. Especially after what I have just been through!* He shuddered at the memory.

Lisette, rising carefully, her eyes on Nicolas, did not notice. 'I don't want to wake him. You will look after him now, hein? Tell him I will see him next time.'

'Er, yes. Lisette, isn't it?'

'*Oui. Au revoir*, Monsieur.' Lisette let herself out of the room with a last look at Nicolas. Head down, brushing away tears, she did not see the countess until she almost ran into her. Lisette stepped back. 'I am sorry, Madame. I didn't see you there.'

'How did you go?'

Lisette's tone was guarded, subdued: 'He went to sleep in my arms, Madame.'

'Good, good,' leered the countess. 'Don't they all?'

'He's just a poor little child that misses his mother!' flashed Lisette, before she could stop herself.

The countess laughed. 'Well, of course, he does! What else are we going to use to hold onto him until he is a little older?'

'Oh ... You evil toad!' whispered Lisette, hardly able to speak for the fury that boiled in her breast. 'How can you be so ... disgusting? What you want me to do is a crime. Shame! Shame on you! Oh ...' She flinched as the countess slashed her across the face with her closed fan.

'I warned you! You stupid slut! Out! Get out! Now!'

Lisette straightened, head high, disregarding the trickling blood and pain that almost made her faint. 'With the greatest of pleasure, Madame!' Pride took her down the stairs, across the foyer and through the great front door without falter. It was only once she was out

of the sight of the countess that she sank to the marble steps and cried, pressing the back of one finger to her bloodied cheek. The tears seeped into the wound, making it sting unbearably. She wished she'd had the wit not to lose her temper with La Reine, because who would help Nicolas now? She made a little, helpless gesture of despair, turning at the sound of hurried footsteps to see the tutor loom above her.

‘Lisette!’ He stopped, mid-career. ‘But, good Lord! Whatever is the matter? Oh, you’ve hurt your face! It’s bleeding! Here ...’ Armand pressed a clean handkerchief into her hand. ‘Use that.’

‘*Merci.*’ The ballerina held it to her cheek. ‘The countess hit me with her fan. She has thrown me out ... on the street.’

‘What a terrible woman!’ He shuddered. ‘Why on earth ...?’

‘Because I refuse to commit a sin against a child!’

‘*Comment?*’

‘Please ...’ She tossed him a silver cigarette case and lighter. ‘I need a cigarette. Have one yourself.’

‘Well, I don’t really ...’ Armand sat down awkwardly on the step, lit two cigarettes and handed one to Lisette. She drew on it with a long sigh. He looked as if he didn’t know what to do with his, or what to say, either. Carefully, he stubbed out the bright tip. ‘Is this, uh ... Is this about ... Nicolas?’

‘*Oui.*’ She expelled the smoke and grasped his hand, her eyes urgent. ‘Nicolas is in danger here! Please ... You must do something before it is too late!’

Armand, embarrassed by her touch, was even more alarmed by her words. ‘Wh-what do you mean? Are you trying to tell me ——?’

‘Listen!’ She told him what the countess had demanded of her and what the woman had threatened if Lisette refused. ‘And now I am out on the street and that poor, sweet child will be at the mercy of that gorgon and perhaps another who does not have a conscience. You are the only one who can help him.’

Armand was silent. He couldn’t leave Lisette out here alone, and there was obviously something very wrong with the management of the Opéra Magique. Despite having had a lucky escape himself, he had no way to determine the degree of danger to Nicolas. But it

wasn't up to him. He cleared his throat. 'There is only one man who can do something about this. I must take you to the duc de Belvoir.' He stood up—suddenly decisive—his shyness overcome. 'I will fetch the car and come back for Nicolas. Get your things and meet me here when you are ready.'

'She won't let me get my things.'

Armand grimaced. 'I dare not face her, either. Wait here, then. I won't be a moment.' He strode into the square, signalled to the driver of a big black Daimler and ran back into the opera house, returning a short time later with a yawning companion. 'Come along, Nicolas: Where are your manners? We have a lady with us. Your friend, Lisette, is coming to talk to your grand-père.'

Nicolas gave her his arm and a sleepy smile. 'Oh good, Settie! He will like that. You can sit in the back with me. Armand can ride in the front with Mary.' He noticed the handkerchief she held to her face. Anxiety entered his voice. 'Did you hurt yourself? You're bleeding!'

'It is nothing. I bumped my cheek on the door. Armand lent me his handkerchief so it wouldn't drip onto my dressing-gown. Look it has stopped now.' She showed him the cut.

'No, it hasn't.' He frowned at the blood welling from her cheek.

Lisette smiled at the worry in his eyes. 'Then it will soon. We artists are tough. Remember?'

'I remember.' Nicolas pressed her arm.

They were just getting into the vehicle when a limousine drew up at the steps and a woman in furs alighted.

Lisette put a hand on Armand's sleeve. 'Can you wait a little minute, Monsieur? That is Anna, our present prima donna. She might consent to pack some things for me and bring them down ... Anna!' Lisette began to run.

The blonde woman turned and waited. The others watched Lisette's agitated explanation; the calming gestures of the prima ballerina before she vanished into the Opéra Magique. The limousine drove away and Mary pulled over to the steps. The seconds ticked by. Then Anna was back with a large carpetbag and a dressing case. Armand got out and took them from her, averting his eyes as the ballerinas took emotional leave of each other.

As they approached the hôtel du Bois, Lisette indicated her dressing-gown. 'May I have a moment to change out of this, Monsieur, before I must meet the duc?'

'It's pretty, Sette,' Nicolas assured her. 'Grand-père will like it.'

'It is not *comme il faut* for the salon, *Chéri*. Only the dressing-room.'

Mary spoke rarely, but when she did, everyone listened. They loved the way she spoke French with her soft Welsh accent. 'Master Nic should be in his bed, Armand. Why don't I drop you two at the front entrance? Then take Mademoiselle with me to the hospice to change and have her injury seen to. I'll bring her back through the house to the salon as soon as she is ready.'

'Yes, that will be best, I think,' agreed Armand.

'That's good, Mary,' murmured Nicolas, 'if you will take care of Sette for me. I am so tired ...'

'Of course, you are, *Chéri*.' Lisette kissed his brow. 'You've had a big night. See you soon, *hein*?'

Armand steered his charge through the front entrance, and Mary drove smoothly around to the door of the hospice.

'The late marquis du Bois and Madame Dupont turned most of this house into a hospital during the Great War. This wing remains a hospice, and I have an apartment upstairs. My husband is in here. He never recovered from his war wounds,' explained Mary, taking Lisette to a nurse to have her wound attended.

'I'm sorry,' murmured Lisette, her brow furrowed. 'One question, Madame: You said "the late marquis du Bois". This is not the home of the duc de Belvoir?'

'No, but he is here. The house was left to Nicolas's mother and now belongs to him, but the duc has made it his headquarters in Paris. He feels that Nicolas, having lost his parents, must be allowed to keep his home.'

'Ah, *le pauvre*, yes. Then the duc is here?'

'Oh, yes, he is here.' Mary waited for the nurse to finish her ministrations before showing Lisette into a cloakroom. 'Leave your bags here. A porter will take them over later.'

When Lisette appeared, exquisitely dressed, Mary led her through what seemed like

miles of corridors to knock on a door and converse with a large, sombrely dressed butler. 'I will leave you now,' she said to Lisette. 'Justin will look after you.'

'But certainly. Come along to the salon, Mademoiselle.'

Lisette followed the substantial figure, wondering how the duc would react to her story. If he did not believe her, or if he refused to accept her because of what she'd become, what would happen to Nicolas?

Chapter 11

The Duc Takes Charge

27 October 1931

I have never heard such a dreadful thing. La Reine is definitely mad! I cannot even write what she tried to do to me! The count does not care, either. I never saw anyone so apathetic. He told me that while she has her attention on me, she is leaving him alone; and that is all he cares about. He says that all he wants is peace and doesn't care how he gets it. No wonder: she is a hag! It is whispered around the back of the stage that she has another madness called nymphomania, and I believe it! And the evil she wishes to visit on Nicolas? Eh bien, there is only one man in the world who can pull her up!

Lisette was relieved to see Armand seated in an armchair. He jumped up when he saw her, came to the door and escorted her in to the room. 'If you please, Monsieur, this is the lady I was telling you about: Mademoiselle Lisette ...?' He looked a question.

'Lavoisier.' Lisette came forward, holding out a hand. 'I am happy to make your acquaintance, Monsieur.' She almost curtsied, so evident was the nobility of the man she faced, but stopped herself. *This is France. We are all equal here.*

The duc greeted her with a gentle courtesy that immediately set her at ease. 'I understand that I have to thank you for taking care of my grandson. We will get to that presently. But first, I think you have something that you wish to tell me?'

'*Oui*, Monsieur. Armand has told me that you are the proper person to relate this to. But I beg your forgiveness, Monsieur. It is sordid in the extreme.'

The duc waved a hand. '*De rien*, Mademoiselle, there is nothing to forgive! You would like some refreshment first? A little wine, perhaps?'

'No, thank you, Monsieur.'

'Then, I am listening, Mademoiselle.'

Lisette took a deep breath. ‘When the Countess Kireyevsky took over the theatre management, at first, she did not make too many changes, only good ones; so that we grew to depend on her judgement. She has always been autocratic—will take advice from no-one—but lately, she has changed. She has moved all of us to rooms in the opera house and has closed the *Académie Mirage* to cut costs, she says. She seems driven ... I don't know ...’ The ballerina's worried eyes sought to explain what her words could not.

‘In what way has her behaviour changed, Mademoiselle?’

‘That is it. It is inexplicable, really.’ She shrugged. ‘Madame suddenly decided that the Opéra Magique must offer more services than the entertainments an opera house usually provides.’

‘No!’ said the duc. ‘You do not mean ...?’

‘The countess has made it quite plain that unless we are prepared to give gentlemen the ...’ Lisette hesitated, flushed and lowered her eyes, ‘pleasures that they desire in our rooms after the performance, there will no longer be a position for us at the Opéra Magique.’

The duc straightened in shock. ‘Cèline has become an *entremetteuse*? And has turned the Opéra Magique into *un bordel*? *Une maison close*? *Mon Dieu!*’ He got up to pace back and forth.

‘I think she has gone mad, Monsieur.’

‘*Vraiment?*’ He swung around to face her. ‘That is your considered opinion, *n'est-ce pas?*’

‘*Oui, Monsieur. Je regrette ...*’

‘It is more than possible, Mademoiselle.’ The duc was looking grim. ‘Please continue.’

‘I tried to leave, Monsieur, but I injured my toes and ankle and could not dance for several months. The countess pretended to be sympathetic: gave me time off with full remuneration. She said I could think of it as a holiday. But then, she began to demand recompense or she would throw me out in the street as I was, saying that the kind of dancing I was to do wouldn't stress my ankle.’ Lisette paused, the suggestive chuckle of the countess ringing unpleasantly in her ears. ‘I did as she said, but believe me, I am not proud of it, Monsieur.’

‘Poor, poor child! It is a scandal. Worse even than ...’ He indicated her swollen, dressed cheek. ‘She has done this to you?’

‘*Oui*, Monsieur. I may be so much dirt, but there is a sin that I will not commit. So ...’ She shrugged. ‘I am out on the street, and Armand has brought me to tell you my story.’

‘Armand was right to bring you to me,’ he assured her. ‘But there is one thing you will *not* do. As a dancer, you have an exquisite gift: an ethereal beauty of body and soul. You will never again refer to yourself as dirt. You understand? *Bien*.’ The duc looked at her closely. ‘But I know you! Were you not principal dancer at the Opéra Magique ...? Now, let me see ... the year before last? Nicolas has talked about you: *Lisette*, of course! Are you not the one he's been wanting to marry since he was four or five?’

‘Yes, Monsieur.’ Lisette's tense expression changed to one of tender amusement. ‘He is a faithful suitor, that one.’

‘Indeed!’ said the duc with a charming smile. ‘I do apologise for not having recognised you sooner, Mademoiselle. That year began ——’ The duc stopped himself from saying, ‘A nightmare of grief and confusion that still goes on today’, squared his shoulders and changed the drift. ‘You were a very lovely dancer.’ He smiled again. ‘I must applaud my grandson's good taste.’

‘*Merci*, Monsieur. It is a joke I have had with Nicolas since our first meeting. It seems I remind him of someone he loves.’

‘Ah, yes: the portrait of the late comtesse de Villefontaine. He was enamoured of it long before he was old enough to understand she was his grandmother. Permit me to tell you that there is a distinct likeness. Now, if it will not distress you too much, will you recount to me this sin that the countess has told you to commit?’

‘Monsieur, it has to do with this very thing we are talking about. I tried to explain it to her, but ...’ Lisette told him exactly what the Countess Kireyevsky had demanded of her.

‘*Incroyable!* Such depravity!’ The duc went white, swayed and grasped the back of a chair.

‘Monsieur, you look ill!’ Armand hurried to take his arm.

‘That is not surprising. I am sick to the very core of my being! Never have I heard ...’

‘May we assist you to the chair?’ asked Lisette, at his other side.

‘*Non, merci.*’ The duc held a handkerchief to his lips. ‘I shall recover presently.’ He took a few deep breaths and, when his colour returned, spoke to the ballerina. ‘You may rest assured that the countess will *not* get away with this. But you, Mademoiselle ... what will you do now?’

Lisette dropped her eyes. ‘I do not know, Monsieur. My ankle, you see, is not strong enough to do more than dance in the main corps—in the background. And my toes ... There is only one other avenue open to me. I do not wish to take it, but ... one must eat.’

‘Will you go back to the Opéra Magique as a dancer? If I make it possible for you?’

‘Monsieur, my career is very close to the end. I feel it here in my heart. Despite months of practise, I have not been able to attain my previous high level of dance. And the countess! I do not think I can ...’

‘I understand. Do you read and write?’

‘Oh, yes, Monsieur.’

‘And you sew?’

‘I make all my own clothes, including my hats.’

The duc eyed her fashionable, tastefully designed suit and chic little hat with approval. ‘Forgive me, Mademoiselle, for this question: if you had a respectable job, would you consider any other, let us say, *less* respectable offer?’

‘*Never*, Monsieur! I will be only too glad to escape a way of life that has become a living hell.’

‘Poor young lady!’ The duc's eyes were full of sympathy. But then his expression lightened. ‘I have an idea: do you feel that you could teach?’ He waved a hand. ‘Dance? Deportment?’

‘*Mais oui*, I suppose so ...’ Lisette thought for a moment, then looked up, joy in her face. ‘Oh, yes! Yes, I could.’

‘*Bien, bien.* Then, here is your job: You will help Armand answer the fan mail—a sort of under-secretary, if you will. You will keep Nicolas's stage costumes furbished up and make sure he is neat and tidy and made-up for his performances. Then, when we go to Belvoir for the summer, you will teach the village children, and Nicolas, dance and deportment.’ The duc

came closer. 'What do you say?'

'Oh yes, Monsieur. *Merci*.'

'*Bien*.' The duc bowed. 'May I say how thankful I am to you for saving my grandson?' He took her hand and kissed it. 'You will not have to demean yourself in *my* house, Mademoiselle.'

'Thank you, Monsieur.' She hesitated. 'Nicolas isn't ... he only wants the love of a mother. And despite that evil ... it is the only kind of love I have shown him.'

'I know that without you telling me. Nicolas needs a mother figure. It has made him vulnerable. I have no objection if you wish to continue in that role.'

'*Merci*, Monsieur. I will be very happy to do so.'

§

The duc met the countess in her newly decorated salon on the ground floor of the Opéra Magique. He briefly closed his eyes at the harsh modernity that accorded ill with its baroque surroundings and made his way to the countess, who stood motionless beside a small table on which reposed a silver ashtray with a gazelle *couchant*, a matching cigarette box and a long decorative holder. Clasp ing a carved ivory fan in a black-gloved hand, she made no move towards him; her thin lips curling at his approach.

'Ah, Monsieur le duc! You make your appearance at last, *hein*?' The countess looked him over with unconcealed mockery. 'To what do I owe this *great* pleasure?'

'Madame.' The duc fancied he saw knowledge and spite in the narrowed blue eyes and bowed with chilling hauteur. 'I have come because I have heard some *extraordinary* tales about this house, and I wish to know the facts behind them.'

'So, Monsieur: what have you heard? All good, I trust? We are doing very well in these hard times. Very well, indeed!' The countess flourished her fan, deliberately aping the style of her mother—watching his reaction with amusement—enjoying his revulsion in her own perverse way.

'That is not how it was put to me, Madame,' replied the duc. 'In fact, it was something

quite different. May I?' he said gently, removing the fan from her suddenly flaccid grip and placing it on the table. 'I am afraid I cannot bear to watch you do that.'

'My mother ——'

'You dare to speak your mother's name to me after what *you* have done?' The duc's voice vibrated with anger, though he did not raise it.

The countess tossed her head. 'Why not? I have done nothing wrong.'

'Nothing wrong? *Nothing wrong?* You published your mother's diaries. In direct contravention of her wishes!'

The countess laughed, reached for her ornate holder, and concentrated on inserting and lighting a cigarette. 'You will have to prove that, Monsieur.'

He sidestepped the smoke she expelled and waited for her attention. 'No matter. I know that it was you. But not content with disrespecting your mother's wishes, I hear that you have further tarnished her memory by turning her beautiful Opéra Magique into a house of ill repute. Is this true, Madame?'

'*Mais non*, Monsieur!' She narrowed her eyes. 'Where *on earth* did you hear that?'

'It does not matter. So there is no truth in it, then?'

'No, Monsieur. None at all.'

The duc drew from his pocket a wad of notes, closely watching the woman's reaction. 'And if I happen to have seen a dancer that I ... desire?'

'This is an opera house, Monsieur.' She shrugged. 'Nothing more. You must go to another type of house if that is your requirement. Your informant has obviously been mistaken.'

'I wonder,' he murmured, moving to the table and setting down roll after roll of notes. 'I have heard that this house is most exclusive. How exclusive?' The pile continued to grow.

Tension heightened. The hand of the countess trembled as she raised her cigarette holder to her lips. 'I have already told you, Monsieur: there is no such service here.'

The duc watched her impassively as he placed yet another wad. 'Everything has its price, Madame. Tell me when I have reached this one.' He set down another and another.

‘Now, perhaps?’

She gritted her teeth. ‘Monsieur, I have told you: this is an opera house, nothing more.’

‘Ah, yes. I heard you.’ He took a little chamois drawstring bag from his inner coat pocket and poured its contents onto the table, smiling inwardly as he heard a sharp intake of breath.

‘*Mon Dieu!*’ gasped the countess, greed flaming in her eyes.

The duc waited, idly stirring the diamonds with a forefinger, so that they flashed with a myriad rainbow lights.

The countess moistened her lips and sucked hard on her cigarette holder.

The duc waited patiently while she coughed, waved away the smoke and took another draw.

Finally, as if forced, she spoke. ‘Times are hard, Monsieur. Perhaps ... *something* ... could be arranged for a man who desires a ballerina as much as that.’

The duc sighed and straightened. ‘So ... *it is* true? And you *are* lying.’

‘No, Monsieur.’ The countess ashed her cigarette. She glanced slyly from him to the bounty on the table. ‘For those who ... *sufficiently* ... appreciate beauty, it is just an extra service, that is all.’

‘Into which you *coerce* your dancers ...’

‘No, Monsieur! Certainly not!’

‘You lie. I know that you do.’ The very quietness of the duc made him all the more formidable. His implacable calm, icy dignity; the condemnation in his eyes silenced the countess. ‘There was only ever one ballerina I desired,’ he said, picking up the notes and returning them to his pocket. ‘I thought you would know that.’ He glanced from her thwarted expression to the seductive glitter of the diamonds on the table. ‘It seems that I read the diaries more carefully than you.’ Scooping the bright stones back into the bag, he pulled tight the string. The silence lengthened while he waited. When the countess did not speak, he went on, ‘Monsieur Dupont never permitted such usage of his ballerinas. To him they were exquisite, precious creatures to be protected and adored.’

‘Papa ...’ she whispered. A dim recollection from her childhood almost brought tears: Monsieur Dupont she had truly loved and never forgotten, despite losing him before she was three years old.

‘Not your papa—as we both know—as everyone now knows, thanks to you.’ The duc was brutal in his quiet way. ‘There is poetic justice here: By your actions you have tarnished his memory, too, ruined it for yourself. Because until you read the diaries, you did not know that the one person in the world you loved was not your father, did you?’

The countess flinched and made a strangled cry. ‘Do not ...’ She bowed her head, blindly stubbing out her cigarette, dropping the ebony holder with a clatter on to the ashtray.

‘No,’ said the duc. ‘Because ... If he had been, your hereditary instincts would not have allowed you to behave in this despicable fashion. You have acted on your own whim—always; listening to no-one; causing misery and evil to all that you touch, including these beautiful creatures at your mercy—and I tell you now that you have gone your length.’ The golden-hazel eyes, usually so warm, were hard as tiger’s eye. ‘What do you have to say in defence of yourself?’

The countess did not lift her head. She made a gesture that could be construed as helplessness, remorse, excuse or even grief at the mention of Monsieur Dupont.

‘Nothing? *Vraiment?*’ The duc was not fooled. The gentle, sensitive artist was gone. In his place stood the ruler of a great estate: one who expected to be obeyed. ‘In that case, you will attend to me,’ his voice rose a little. ‘You are listening? *Bien,*’ he said at her nod, lowering it again. ‘If a ballerina consents to a liaison with a patron by her own free choice then, *eh bien*, it is her own decision.’ He shrugged. ‘It may be a bad decision, but it is hers to make. It must not be a requirement of the position.’ He paused, and his glance held bitterness. ‘You have Nicolas over a barrel, and I allowed him to sing because I would not risk his inheritance; but now things have changed. I have been informed of your scurrilous and infamous plot against my grandson, and I tell you, here and now, that your machinations will come to nothing. Lift your head and look at me when I speak!’

At last the countess raised her head and looked down her nose with an arrogance that reminded the duc of his late cousin, the Black Prince. He ignored the frisson that went down his spine, resuming his quiet tone, ‘I will *not* have my grandson’s inheritance turned into a bordello. You will observe the so-called niceties—the mores of society, however double-

faced they may be—or I will have you closed down.’

Spite flashed in her eyes; triumph that lasted less than a second. The countess began to speak but the duc forestalled her.

‘*And* I will do it in a way that will give you no redress. There is no money in playing to an empty house, Madame.’ He waited for that to sink in, surveying her with a contempt and revulsion that made her flush and bite her lip: a reaction that she had not expected from herself, and it enraged her.

Noting the fury in her narrowed eyes, the duc was satisfied that his thrust had gone home. He was the undisputed leader of fashion and a connoisseur of note when it came to *les beaux-arts*. If he declared a house below standard or *démodé*, then *le beau monde* would ostracise it. His next words, measured and softly biting, flicked the countess on the raw: ‘You may live off your mother’s toil and beauty, but I will *not* have it mired in this fashion.’

She gasped but said nothing.

The duc gave an order, ‘Call your ballerinas.’

‘*Mais ...*’

‘Call them.’

Baffled by his air of chilling authority, the countess inclined her head and went out.

The ballerinas filed in, looking nervous. The duc’s eyes softened and warmed as he looked upon these delicate creatures so dear to his heart. The countess did not return.

‘Mesdemoiselles,’ began the duc, smiling at each of them, ‘I have been a patron of this house for many years and have a profound admiration for the grace and elegance of the ballet. I now stand proxy to one of its owners, and in that guise, I wish to assure each and every one of you that your contract here is as a dancer. Nothing more, nothing less. Despite what you have previously been told, your beauty is for the stage alone and must not be compromised by fear or coercion. For art to shine in its true glory, the artist must be free to express it with joy, unconstrained.’ His warm, golden-hazel eyes held all the respect and admiration the ballerinas could have wished; and his next words did nothing to dispel the illusion: ‘Your personal conduct must be at your own discretion. Should anything else be required of you, I will wish to hear about it.’ His smile encompassed them. ‘That is all.’

The duc bowed and turned away. But as he left them, his expression set in grave lines.

He was not enjoying his thoughts. Memories, good and bad, crowded in on him, overlain by the feeling the countess had given him when she had raised her head and looked at him with a venom that reminded him of a man who was pure evil.

It was then he realised that his visit to the Opéra Magique had not allayed any of his anxieties about Nicolas. *Au contraire*, it had only increased them.

About the Author

Anne Rouen



Anne Rouen is an award-winning historical fiction author from Australia, who is inspired by the opulent operatic age of 19th century France, the classic Belle Époque era and the dark times of the world wars. This passion was ignited from her own heritage, combined with a lifelong love of historical fiction writing, particularly those of a similar ilk to Georgette Heyer.

This is where inspiration for the *Master of Illusion* series was born.

Anne Rouen is the alter ego of Lynn Newberry: a country woman from the New South Wales New England region, who breeds Brangus cattle by day and is a dedicated, passionate horsewoman.

The lady behind Anne Rouen has completed a specialist teaching degree in the Rural Sciences department of the University of New England, and has spent most of her life involved in the agricultural industry—twenty of them as an educator.

Throughout her career, Lynn has escaped the everyday demands of work through the hand of Anne Rouen. *Master of Illusion—Book One* was her first published novel, and it,

along with its sequels, *Master of Illusion—Book Two* and *Angel of Song* have been nominated in several award programs, most notably, the *Global Ebook Awards* where Anne won the Silver Medal for *Modern Historical Literature Fiction* in 2014 and the Bronze Medal for *Modern Historical Literature Fiction* in 2016.

Lynn has also seen success with her short story writing, achieving a Highly Commended in the *Rolf Boldrewood Literary Awards* (2011) for *The Scent of a Criminal*.

With a broad range of interests, Anne Rouen writes a regular [blog](#), where she chats about her firsthand experience beating breast cancer, her love of horses and other current issues that are close to her heart.

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