



Master of Illusion
Book I



by Anne Rouen

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Master of Illusion

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For Beth

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Epilogue

Prologue

1 December 1929

'Who is making that *infernal* racket? And at such an ungodly hour, too.' The publisher pulled the pillow over his head, but the hideous cacophony on the doorknocker finally galvanised him into action. 'If it's an author with a manuscript, I'll ram it down his throat,' he swore, bounding down the stairs in his dressing-gown to stare at the brown envelope slowly working its way under the door—in sudden, jarring silence. He snatched at the bolts, dragging it open, running out to glance up and down the street—empty, the street lamps glowing eerily in the mist. He shivered, turning back to pick up the anonymous delivery. Some people had just no thought for others ...

Angrily re-bolting, he grabbed a paper knife from his desk, retreating to the warmth of his bedchamber. Before the fire, he slit open the envelope, gasping in astonishment as he drew out a yellowed newspaper clipping.

A little frisson chilled his spine. He recognised the title of an article his late father had written on the tenth anniversary of a certain tragedy for his '*Historical Recollections*' series. With an exclamation, he picked up the piece written almost thirty years ago, about an old mystery that still kept readers fascinated. Intrigued himself, he began to read:

Historical Recollection: The Unsolved Mystery of the Opéra Français

On the twenty-fourth of August 1891, the news of the previous night's great catastrophe was trumpeted all over Paris. 'Return of the Phantom?' blared the headlines. 'Dark Angel: A Copycat Crime?', 'Opéra Français Destroyed in Blaze: Crime or Accident?', 'Angel: Murderer or Hero?'

These headlines were the talk of Paris that fateful day, and everyone had an opinion, particularly on the question posed in the above last. It was a nine-days

wonder—and so scandalous some of the claims and stories that many were inclined to shrug their shoulders and disbelieve it completely. Especially since two of the main subjects of this salacious gossip were seen to be enjoying the sponsorship in society of the comtesse de la Roche-Carillac: one affianced to her nephew, the other as chaperone.

But what really happened at the Opéra Français that fateful night? And afterwards, too? Was there, as some suggested, a dark spectre, driven by a mad lust for power to destroy his world, the theatre, in one final, terrible act of vengeance?

Or again, some whispered a story of an eccentric genius who, supposedly modelling his life on the frightening despot of the Opéra Paris of some twenty-one years earlier, had, like his hero, held a great opera house to ransom.

There were certain similarities; it is true. But, it must be stated, there were also important differences: the chief of which being the essence of his character. For buried deeply beneath the dark exterior, the dreadful scarring of mind and body, there was a power and gentleness waiting to emerge, to add a piquant dimension to the personality of this extraordinary man.

Like his hero, driven by dark demons and uncontrollable passions, he fell in love with a beautiful music student: hardly surprising for a young man growing up in an opera house, would not one think?

Like his hero, a facial disfigurement led him to hide himself in darkness, away from the cruel ridicule of his fellows.

But, unlike his hero, through the agency of one who truly loved him, he was given a second chance at life.

What would he do with that life? Was there any formula he would follow now? And, more importantly, where was he?

Speculation was rife at first, careering wildly between the ridiculous and the fantastic. But then, over time, much was forgotten. However, all agreed on one thing:

that his voice, having once been heard, could never be forgotten. Its compelling power and exciting timbre relived over and over with ecstasy—especially his final performance.

And here was another point of conjecture: had he really murdered the tenor, as was popularly supposed, in order to sing in his place? 'Rubbish', declared the sceptics. Dolenti, grossly overweight, had succumbed to a heart attack at the most inconvenient of moments. This man, Angel, had stepped in at the last second in order to save the day, there being no understudy. Could he be blamed if, through the appalling negligence of a corrupt management, the theatre was so badly maintained that a shocking accident had occurred?

Later, there were some libellous claims (doubtless by the same management) that he had arranged it all in order to kidnap the beautiful diva. 'No, no, not so!', shouted his supporters. 'No, he saved her. He used his great genius and strength to save her from certain, horrifying death. If he had kidnapped her, how can she be here now, stunning society with her beauty and demure charm?'

Now, ten years on, unearthed from obscurity in a dusty archive, this question, along with the others, remains unanswered: a mystery, living on in legend. And as with any such mystery, time dims its intensity but not its appeal. We have to wonder: will it ever be resolved?

Copycat crime? The publisher tugged at his lip. *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*—Gaston Leroux had sworn it to be a true story, citing this piece by his father as corroborating evidence. He'd been the rankest copy boy when this monumental scandal had erupted. Although, heir to the distinguished publishing house of Delaine, he had been made to start at the bottom, working for a newspaper, to gain the vital experience that stood him in good stead now. He'd been about eleven at the time, but he still remembered those headlines quoted in his father's article and the excitement and speculation on the streets that day. He also remembered that the man, Angel, whilst having some serious detractors in the persons of the young comte de Villefontaine and the Police Chief, Captain Moreau, had a formidable ally in that

outspoken old tartar, the marquise du Melande and another in the retired prima ballerina, Madame Aranova.

He looked again at the last question posed by his father. Not so long ago, he would have said, 'Not a chance'. But now it looked as though there may be a breakthrough, after all. Just the other day, he'd heard the tantalising rumour that the diaries of Madame Dupont, the Artistic Director of the Opéra Français at the time in question, had been discovered in an abandoned wing of the Hospital du Bois—a hospice for wounded soldiers from the Great War. There was also another rumour currently doing the rounds—that a previously uncrackable safe had been opened, at last, and found to contain certain revealing documents, including the secret files of the Master himself—or so he had been told ... But, above all, there loomed the question: 'Who had sent him this clipping? And, more importantly, why?'

At opening time, still with the question, 'Why?' in the back of his mind, he was hailed by a courier.

'Special delivery, Monsieur. Urgent, so they said. They said to be sure to tell you that.'

'They?'

'It was a group of performers from the Opéra Magique acting on behalf of the author, they said.'

'You did not ask the name of this author?'

'I did, Monsieur, and do you know, I think they were making game of me. They each said it was the other ...'

'Indeed?' The publisher did not smile. 'There is no accounting for some people ...'

'Will you sign for it?' asked the courier, holding out a package.

'But certainly, Monsieur. *Un moment, s'il vous plaît*, while I snib this door ...'

there. Put it on the shelf while I get my pen.'

'Oh, and there's one more. I'm sorry, I almost forgot.' Thrusting the package on the shelf, he went to rummage in the basket on his bicycle, returning with a second, which he placed with its fellow. 'They said this one's not urgent, Monsieur. They said you will know when it's time to open it.'

'Really?' The publisher gave him a narrow look.

'*Vraiment*, Monsieur. But you know what authors are.'

'I should, by now.'

'Indeed. Some of them are a little *outré, non*?' The courier chuckled. 'Sign here, Monsieur.'

'Many a true word ...' murmured the publisher, flourishing his pen.

At the end of a long and arduous day, the publisher closed the doors to the public, stoked up the fire and unwrapped the package. He took up the covering letter. 'The accompanying manuscript,' he read, 'is a faithful rendition of the diaries of Madame Dupont (with reference, where necessary, to other relevant sources), containing original excerpts (where appropriate) and set out in the form of a novel for the sake of continuity. Oh, yes? We will see ...'

But, as he acknowledged, there was yet another mystery—the letter had not been signed; the unknown author making an astonishing claim ...

'*Mais*, what is this?' He pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. 'Obsessive love and jealousy at the bottom of a forty-year-old mystery? Scandalous secrets exposed? A respected member of the *haut monde* a Master of Illusion?'

The publisher began to appreciate the writer's need for anonymity. Brows raised, he put his hand to the manuscript, flipped it open and settled down to read.

Part I. Elise and Angel

Chapter 1

Quatorze Juillet 1864

On Special Days we dance in the square.

The carriage driven by the squat Russian slackened speed on reaching the village, entering at a smart trot. Fingers of bright afternoon sunshine played over the rippling muscles of the Akhal-teké horses, touching to gold their pewter coats; the lively tempo of their hoof-beats mingling delightfully with sounds of carnival music, children's voices and the evocative scents of curing hay.

One of the leaders propped at a solitary hen pecking amongst the cobblestones, and the coachman, with an admonitory growl, slowed his team to a sedate walk. The voices and music, growing louder as they neared the village square, prompted the opening of a window, and Madame Aranova leaned out—the better to watch the happy throng of dancing children.

'Yuri,' she gasped, clutching her companion's hand. 'Look at that child! Did you ever ...?'

'No, my dear, indeed not.' Yuri Aranov pulled the check cord. 'Let us out here, Pyotor, then go on to the inn and stable the horses. We shall stay in this village tonight.'

He helped his wife to descend and strolled arm in arm with her to the square.

'How many times have we come through this village and not seen more than a hen? I did not know there were so many people living here.'

Madame Aranova seemed distracted. 'No? Well—it is Bastille Day.'

'Ah, Bastille Day—of course. I had forgotten about this typically French institution. And what a day to celebrate! The French, they are so bloodthirsty, are they not?' He laughed good-humouredly. But then, receiving no response, turned his attention to the scene that so engrossed his wife.

The village children danced happily. One, a tiny child, more delicate than the others, appeared to defy gravity as she leapt and twirled, plaits flying, skirt billowing out from her slender legs like a tutu, her Madonna-like little face reflecting her joy in her dance.

'Belle, belle—she is beautiful,' declared Madame Aranova. 'I must—must take her with me, Yuri.'

'Yes, my Love, I think you must. I have never seen such grace and lightness in an untrained dancer, let alone a little child. In fact, I do not remember seeing such exquisite dancing in many a trained ballerina—except for you, of course. Indeed,' he added, his eyes on the child, 'a very special little girl.'

'Yes, you understand, my dear, bless you. Do you mind going away now? This is something I had better do alone.' Her sweetness of expression robbed her words of offence.

He looked at her quizzically. 'You are afraid I will frighten her, the little one?'

'Oh, Yuri ...'

Lovingly, he kissed the hand she placed upon his. 'I am sorry, my darling. Of course, it shall be as you wish. I will take a stroll through the village and await you at the inn.'

Yuri Aranov, enjoying his walk beside the tranquil stream that meandered through the village, felt himself to be a lucky man. Many years older than his wife and physically very ugly, he had been afraid to approach any eligible young lady, especially since he admitted to himself there was not one who made his heart beat hard

enough to overcome his fear of rejection.

Forgetting marriage, he had set about making his fortune, quietly, thoroughly, methodically; keeping mistresses as did many others of his time, regularly visiting the theatre and other entertainment venues, for his appetite for all of life's pleasures was hearty, and he was a genuine admirer of the arts.

He had fallen in love with Natasha Oleva when he had first seen her on the stage in St Petersburg; her fragile beauty attracting him as fatally as any moth to a flame. In the same way that he had become a successful businessman, he set about wooing the prima ballerina so that she looked to him for everything. He had then suggested two things to the lovely creature he worshipped: one, that she marry him; and two, that they move to his estate just a few hours out of Paris so that she could dance in that glittering city in the Opéra Français—a theatre he part-owned.

He knew society disapproved of their union, calling them 'Beauty and the Beast', but he cared nothing, aware that it was prompted by jealousy and comforted that his wife saw through his ugliness to the generous soul beneath.

Ironically, he still kept his mistresses, able to enjoy their bodies and his own pleasures in ways that he would never dream of with his wife. Whenever she allowed him physical intimacy, he revered it, treating her like fine porcelain, afraid to abandon himself to the moment in case he hurt her, overwhelmed with humility that such a beautiful woman wanted to be a part of him. Yet, despite this restraint and its inevitable consequences, not one of his 'convenients' had ever touched that sacred place in his heart where he kept his love for her.

A great success, she made him proud in every way, dancing for years until strained ligaments in her knee and ankle forced her to retire. But she did not give up, training to world renown the students of the corps de ballet. His only sadness—there were no children. Curious how the little girl in the square had torn at his heartstrings.

Hands in pockets, he made his way back to the inn. He did not know whether or not his wife would be successful in her quest, but he hoped with all his heart she

would be. *If I had a daughter*, he thought, *I would want her to be like that.*

§

The little girl's eyes grew rounder and rounder. A ray of sunshine spread across her face with her wide, beaming smile. 'Madame Aranova!' she cried ecstatically, curtsying deeply.

'You know who I am, Child? But, how amazing!'

'Yes, Madame. You danced here once.'

'Did I? I don't remember. How old were you, Child?'

'I was nearly four, Madame.'

'And how old are you now?'

'Six.'

'Oh, it must have been when I did the regional promotion for the Ballet. Did you like it, Child?'

'Oh, Madame.' The little girl clasped her hands. 'Yes, above all things, and I have been practising ever since, because ...' she took a deep breath, 'I want to be a ballerina just like you.'

'But, how fortunate,' murmured Madame Aranova, taking her hand. 'And what is your name, Child?'

§

'Oh, Yuri,' she said later at the inn, pressing her temples. 'Her family is not at

all willing to let her go with me. I will try again tomorrow.'

'I can understand that her parents would not wish to part with her,' he replied, massaging her neck and shoulders.

'But that's it—she has no parents. She is being reared by her elder sister with her own children. In a hovel, Yuri. Oh, it does not bear thinking about. They are so poor—yet so proud.'

'Come, my dear, relax. You are becoming overwrought. Such tension in this beautiful neck.'

She turned her head to look at him. 'I am not leaving without her.'

15 July 1864

Madame Aranova did not like my Home one little bit.

Madame Aranova sat in the dreary kitchen, ill lit by one small window. She looked about her at clean wooden benches, the scrubbed stone floor, dingy walls and babies' apparel drying over chair backs before the fire. Wretchedly poor but scrupulously clean, it spoke to her of hard work and poverty. Her eyes went to the flustered young woman, pregnant, holding one infant, and twins—scarcely older, crawling about the floor.

She gestured comprehensively. 'You want this kind of life for Elise?'

The young woman thrust out her jaw. 'She knows no other, Madame.'

'But she could, Mariette,' said Madame Aranova. 'And so could you.' She came over to her, placing one graceful hand on the baby and the other on the girl's arm. 'Perhaps you do not know how very special your sister is? What a crime it would be not to allow her this opportunity?'

The young woman said nothing, eyeing the diamonds flashing on the delicate fingers. What a contrast to her own chapped, work-roughened hands. *Just one of those*

rings would change my life completely, she thought resentfully. But I will not break up this family.

'My dear,' said Madame Aranova, 'I have been through many squares in many villages, and I have seen many children dance. But Elise is the only one I have ever stopped for. What will make you change your mind?'

She shrugged. 'We are peasants, Madame. Farm workers—not dancers.'

'You speak for yourself, of course. But you may take it from me—Elise is a dancer—a born dancer. Where is your husband?'

'Away, trying to get work,' she replied, swallowing a sob.

'You are here on your own with all these infants—and Elise?' Madame Aranova threw up her hands in horror.

'Yes, Madame.'

'Then, that is it! Yes, I tell you, it is final. You cannot any longer remain here in poverty. It makes no sense. I will take Elise with me now and hire a good village girl to help you. You will send word to your husband that he has a job on my estate, and I will despatch a carrier to remove you.'

Mariette shook her head as she opened her purse. 'No, Madame. I will not take charity. We may be poor but we stand on our own two feet.'

Until you fall down for lack of food, you silly girl. But Madame Aranova paid homage to her pride. 'A loan,' she said gently, putting some coins on the bench. 'Your husband can pay it back out of his salary. Now, where is Elise?'

17 July 1864

Today I came to Paris to become a Ballerina.

Elise sat in the carriage, a solemn little girl, clutching a shabby notebook. 'Madame,

will you write in my diary what has happened today?' she asked. 'So that I can remember to tell Mariette.'

'Yes, dear child,' she promised, 'I will write a full account, for today is a very important day in your life. It is a new beginning—the beginning of la belle Elise, Ballerina.' Madame Aranova smiled at her, hiding the tears that had so unaccountably risen at the memory of the child's parting with her sister:

'Elise, you must tell me,' had said Mariette, kneeling down and holding both her hands, 'do you really want to go?'

'Oh, I do, I really do. Please, please, Mariette, I want to go with all my heart. Oh, but I will miss you.'

'And I, you.' They clung together, until Mariette put her gently away to reach up on a high shelf. 'Wait. I have something for you. It was Maman's, but she never wrote in it. It is your diary. Every night, you will write what you did that day so that when you come home you can tell me all about your life. How about that?'

'Oh, yes.' She held the little leather-bound book with its attached pencil to her chest. 'I will write in it every night.' Then her face fell. 'Oh, but I cannot yet write.'

'Someone will help you until you can,' promised Madame Aranova. 'And Mariette will not be so far away that you will not see her often. Come, Petite, we must not keep the horses standing. They become impatient, like children.' She smiled at Mariette. 'You have made the right decision, my dear. You will see.'

19 July 1864

It is all so Big and Strange. I was afraid until I met Monsieur Dupont.

Elise entered the Opéra Français holding tightly to Madame Aranova's hand. She felt overawed and dwarfed by her opulent surroundings: the royal blue curtains with their silver fringing and silk rope ties; the baroque furnishings. Then her attention was taken by a gentleman with wavy white hair and the kindest eyes she had ever seen. Hers

were drawn to his shoes. Never had she seen such shoes, she could see her reflection in the polished surfaces, a far cry from the farm workboots she was used to. Fascinated, she continued to stare at them until the gentleman spoke in courteous tones.

'Madame, you have returned. And how was your trip?'

'Excellent, Monsieur. Most enjoyable.'

'Good, good. Yuri is not with you?'

'No, he had some urgent business to attend to. He sends his compliments.'

'Of course, my dear. How very kind of him.' He was sensitive to the fact that Yuri Aranov felt at a disadvantage when confronted with his polished address. 'And who is this you have brought to us, Madame?'

'This is Elise Gordonnier, Monsieur. She wants to be a ballerina.'

'A praiseworthy ambition, dear child.' Monsieur Dupont smiled at her. 'But, Madame, is she not a little young to leave her family?'

'A little, Monsieur.' She turned to Elise. 'My dear, this is important. Will you show Monsieur Dupont how you can dance? He is the one who will say whether or not you may stay.'

Elise looked at her. For a fraction of a second, her big eyes showed uncertainty. Would she not be allowed to become a ballerina, after all? But then her brow cleared. She had only to dance her best to make everyone happy. Ever since she had been able to walk, she had found dancing to be the panacea for every ill—brightening even the longest face of those around her.

Monsieur Dupont crouched down to her level. 'I will play a happy little tune for you on the piano, and you will listen to the music and imagine that you are a happy child dancing. Can you do that?'

She nodded vigorously. 'But, yes.' She had no need to imagine being a happy

child dancing. Whenever she danced she *was* happy.

'Good. Come over here into the *salle de danse*.' He began to play a carnival tune and Elise, completely absorbed, began her dance, leaping, twirling, defying gravity, unconsciously following the directions of the music as it, too, leapt and twirled.

Monsieur Dupont stopped playing. He looked at Madame Aranova. 'My God,' he said. 'Where did you find her?'

'I thought you would be pleased with her.'

'Where?'

'In a village. I forget the name. Near Amiens.'

'Come here, Petite.' He cupped his hands around the sweet little face. 'You are a very special little girl, do you know that? And if you work hard, you will grow up to be a great ballerina. This is what you want?'

'Yes, Monsieur.' She looked him in the eye. 'I promise I will work hard.'

'Then, you may stay, my dear.' To Madame Aranova he mouthed just one word: 'Exquisite.'

Chapter 2

20 July 1864

Today my best Friend is to take me to watch some Beautiful Dancing, and then I shall be given my first Lesson.

Elise, lonely and miserable, cried herself to sleep on her first night; but the next morning one of the older girls took the smallest ballet student under her wing.

'I am Micheline,' she said. 'Madame Aranova has asked me to look out for you and write in your diary until you are old enough to do it for yourself. What shall we say? ... I know.' She wrote a few words quickly and closed the little book. 'Come now, we mustn't be late. It is time for ballet practice. I know we shall be the best of friends. We will stick together, *hein?*'

In the *salle de danse*, Elise was struck by the beauty of the dancers, one in particular. She tugged on Micheline's hand. 'Oh ...Who is that?'

'That's Gabby, Gabrielle, really. Lovely, isn't she? Some think her better than Noëlle, our prima donna.'

'Oh-h-h.' Elise's eyes shone with excitement. She turned impulsively to Micheline. 'She's so beautiful! I want to dance just like her.'

Her friend smiled. 'You could not have chosen a better heroine. Because, if you can, there will be none to surpass you. Come, I will introduce you to her. She is as lovely on the inside as she looks on the outside.'

Gabrielle looked kindly on the little girl, smiling modestly when Micheline told her what she'd said. 'That's very nice of you, Elise. Come, shall we dance?' She held out a graceful hand, glancing at Madame Aranova for permission. It was granted with an amiable gesture. And so, Elise began the first of many lessons with one whom

she adulated and soon came to love for the sweetness of her temperament.

Micheline also, she loved, and went happily with her everywhere: to breakfast, ballet lessons, schooling lessons, outings and to the dorm—everywhere. Micheline, she was fond of saying, was her bestest, bestest friend.

Whenever there was a holiday, Madame Aranova took her in the carriage to visit Mariette, now living in a delightful, roomy farmhouse. Mariette's husband Jean-Luc was a very proud and conscientious farm manager; the children lusty and strong, born farm workers.

It wasn't long before Elise had mastered all the rudimentary dance steps so as to keep up with Micheline, three years her senior; and soon she was able to take over her own diary.

Madame Aranova was a charismatic teacher; Monsieur Dupont gentle and fatherly: de facto parents for the little girl; the other ballerinas, particularly Micheline, her sisters. Gabby, she regarded in the light of a goddess, a Being far above lesser mortals. She worshipped with a practical fervour, imitating each elegant gesture, every exquisite turn of the head, until Madame Aranova was moved to declare that it was fortunate Elise was so much smaller, or they could never be told apart.

As time went on, Elise discovered that Monsieur Dupont was married to a gentle, sickly lady whom he looked after with tireless devotion. Previous to her illness, she had been house mother to the boys' dorm. There were only a few boys, some training to be male ballet stars and others learning instruments for the orchestra; but since her illness, Monsieur Dupont had hired a kindly older woman to take her place.

Madame Dupont, he explained, could not tolerate loud noises or boisterous behaviour. Her heart was weak and her nerves not strong. Any time Madame felt up to attending a rehearsal, he knew his little ballerinas would be on their best behaviour for her.

'Yes, Monsieur Dupont,' they chorused. Poor Madame Dupont to have to suffer

so much. Lucky Madame Dupont to have someone who loved her so selflessly.

8 September 1866

Where is Monsieur Dupont? Why does he not come back?

Elise entered the classroom to find Madame Aranova at the lectern instead of Monsieur Dupont who always gave the music lessons. Her eyes were reddened and she did not smile.

'Today we will not have a music lesson and you must all be especially quiet. Father Dupré will lead you in a prayer session. I am so, so sorry to have to tell you that Madame Dupont passed away during the night. Monsieur Dupont is very sad, and you must not tease or disturb him.' She looked towards the door. 'Father Dupré, come in. The girls wish to pray and sing hymns for the repose of the soul of poor, dear Madame Dupont.'

In the days that followed, while waiting anxiously for Monsieur Dupont to emerge from his study, Elise's compassionate little heart was troubled for him.

Finally, she begged a bunch of flowers from the florist decorating the foyer and went to tap on his study door. As soon as she had done so, she wanted to run away. Madame Aranova had told them he must not be disturbed. What was she doing disobeying her? By the time the door opened, she was rigid with fright.

'Here,' she quavered, thrusting the flowers blindly towards the large figure in the doorway. 'These are for you. Sorry, sorry to —'

'Elise, my dear child. But, how kind of you! Come in, come in, my dear.' One hand took the flowers, the other rested on her shoulder, drawing her into the room.

She raised clear eyes to the beloved face. Monsieur Dupont was just the same. How could she have felt afraid? 'I was worried about you, Monsieur. We are sorry about Madame Dupont. I am sorry you are lonely and sad.'

Monsieur Dupont was very touched. 'You are a very sweet and kind-hearted little girl. Thank you.' He smiled at her. 'Sit down there, Petite. It is right that I mourn my dear wife and, yes, I am sad. But I will not be lonely, for I view all my little ballerinas as my children.

'You see, Madame Dupont has been very ill for a very long time. It was an unhappy thing for both of us that we had no children. A little girl like you, for instance—so kind and sweet. And although I will be sad without her, I can also be thankful that her suffering has ended.

'Yes, my child, she suffered great pain but she never complained—never. And so, in that light, her passing can be regarded as a merciful release. She is at home in Heaven with the angels, looking down on us. If we think of her like that, we cannot remain sad, can we? *Au contraire*, we must be thankful.'

'Yes, Monsieur,' she replied with conviction, 'Madame Dupont will certainly be happy with the angels. When will you come back to us, Monsieur? We miss you.'

'Ah, you sweet child.' He hugged her to him, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. 'You have made me realise that I have been missing my children, too.' His voice became decisive. 'Today I must see to some duties I have been avoiding, and when I have done them, I will be back. Tomorrow at the latest, I should think. Thank you, little one. You go along now. I will see you tomorrow.'

He watched her go with a tender smile. Suddenly, it was easier for him to call two servant girls, and instruct them to pack up all the personal effects of the late Madame Dupont and deliver them to the nuns for distribution to the poor. Suddenly, there was a bright aureole to light up the bleakness of the future.

Such a sweet child, Elise. How many other eight-year-olds would have had the intuition, or even the inclination, to divine a need and act on it as she had done?

21 December 1866

Noëlle is leaving to get married, and Gabby has been made Prima Ballerina. It is So exciting! We are having the biggest Party!

There was a special ballet featuring Noëlle for the last time as prima donna, followed by a lavish feast to celebrate her betrothal. Her fiancé, Charles Le Brun, was a good man, and everyone was happy for her. It was natural for Gabby to step into her shoes, and so their lives at the Opéra Français continued with little difference, except that Gabby could now show the real quality of her talent. Elise idolised her even more.

8 October 1868

Today I danced in front of an Audience. I loved it. Gabby says that next week she wants to try a new idea. I am so Excited! It means I will get to dance with her Onstage. I hope I do not disappoint her.

The childish letters were neat and copperplate, a little larger than in later life. A sentence was added in another hand: *The audience loved you, and you will not disappoint anyone.* Micheline, still her best friend, often added a postscript to her diary entry, even though it was years since Elise had begun to keep it herself.

This, the beginning of Elise's career as a ballerina, brought her to the notice of the critics, all of which was flattering.

She was given small solo parts for children in several productions, continuing to work hard to be like her idol. Onstage, a delightful, fairytale figure, light as thistle down; in real life, she continued to be matter-of-fact and caring, always noticing if one of the others was unhappy and trying, in her own way, to make things better for them.

No longer the youngest ballet student—for the Opéra Français enrolled at eight years old—and Elise had just passed her tenth birthday. She was inclined to try and mother the younger children, causing Monsieur Dupont and Madame Aranova to

exchange indulgent glances.

She spent her holidays with her sister on Madame Aranova's estate and had long ago adopted the Opéra Français as her home. She was very happy with her life. As far as she was concerned, it was perfect, for to dance was all she'd ever wanted. She continued to work hard as she had promised Monsieur Dupont, her dedication fulfilling all that had been prophesied for her.

Her parts onstage grew more complex as Madame Aranova, treading a fine line between immature bone structure and the avid acclaim of audiences and critics, allowed her more time in the limelight. And then came the magical day when Madame Aranova, presenting her with a pair of blocked, solid-toed slippers, declared that she was ready to learn to dance *en pointe*.

Gabrielle, continuing to take a great interest in her, suggested a *pas de trois* of a kind, with her own steps echoed by the tiny Elise, the male ballet lead performing the same support for both of them. It was a *succès fou*, Elise a miniature foil for Gabby. The dance represented a princess who, although grown to adulthood, could not let go of the child within, her lover waiting in vain for her to grow up.

Already touched by the sweetness of success at ten years old, what more could Elise ask from life?

5 April 1869

Today I Danced en pointe.

Aged eleven, even more success. And at twelve ...

1 March 1870

Today I was made a Coryphée and the Newspapers have been very Kind.

Tomorrow it will be Mardi Gras.

Dancing *en pointe* with all the skill and aplomb of a prima donna—and all the acclaim. 'A rising star', they said. 'What will she be like in her ascendancy?' It was now that she first began to be called La Belle.

There was nothing in her world but love, kindness, beautiful people and the exciting promise that tomorrow they were to be allowed to go as a group, with Gabby in charge, to the street festival before the deprivations of Lent. Even though there were restrictions, avoiding certain streets, back before dark etc., Elise's eyes sparkled. She looked forward to another perfect day in a perfect world.

Chapter 3

Mardi Gras, 1870

Today I found Angel.

The sights and sounds of the street fair were tantalising but not nearly as absorbing as the entrancing tricks of a sweet-looking monkey in a red jacket and fez. His big, dark eyes and beguiling chatter kept Elise's attention long after the others had moved on.

Coming to herself, she looked around to find she was alone in a crowd of strangers. She flicked a plait over her shoulder. The others would come back for her when they realised. Gabby would scold, but she wouldn't mean it. Besides, the gendarmes were just up the street interrogating some gypsies about something or other.

Then she heard banging, rattling, shouting, 'Satan's spawn! Devil's child! Accursed rat!'

Running to the street corner, she peered around the edge of a building at a boy crouching in the gutter. Dressed in ragged and filthy gypsy clothing, he was curled up, trying to protect himself from the missiles pelted by a jeering crowd.

'Oh-h-h, what are you doing, you great bullies?' An immense anger flamed in her heart, overpowering her fear. Without knowing how she got there, she stood beside him; his unkempt aggressors lowering their arms but creeping closer in an evil-smelling tide.

She stood her ground, a child herself, a small virago, her voice ringing out, convicting them. 'How dare you torment this boy! Go away, all of you, before I call the gendarmes. They are coming anyway, just around the corner,' she added, accurately reading the expression of a mean-looking man bearing down upon her.

It was enough. He stopped and turned away. One after another, the rest dropped

their eyes before her clear gaze and shuffled after him.

Then, reaching down to take his hand, her heart stopped as the boy raised startlingly blue eyes to hers. The grime could not disguise the fearful scarring.

Oh, your face! Your poor, poor face! 'Quickly, Child. The gendarmes are arresting your gypsy friends. Follow me.'

And he did.

'They are no friends of mine, Mademoiselle. They have abandoned me.'

'How long were you with them, my dear?'

'I do not know, Mademoiselle. Some months, perhaps. Not such a long time, I think.'

She barely noticed the uncertainty in his voice as, fleet-footed, they traversed streets and alleys, keeping well away from the crowd.

Diving into the alley beside the opera house, she brought him through the stormwater outlet and up through the grating into the basement. Safe, at last.

Stumbling over to the inner wall, she cupped her hands under the mouth of a bronze fish, out of which water trickled into a small stone basin and away down a pipe to the drain.

'Come, have a drink.' She stood aside, sipping the cool water from her hands while he thrust his face into the basin, splashing water over his head.

For a few minutes, they refreshed themselves, the only sound the trickle of water. Then, shaking the excess droplets off his hair like a dog, he pushed back his black locks and looked around.

'Where have you brought me, Mademoiselle?'

'This is the basement of the Opéra Français. We are a little different to other opera houses. We specialise in opera ballet.'

'That is your chapel, over there?' He pointed to a large arched doorway about halfway along the corridor. 'What if someone comes?'

She shook her head. 'No, no-one will be about today. You will be quite safe here. It is Mardi Gras. The opera house is on holiday.'

'Mardi Gras? Oh.' He laughed.

'What is funny about it?'

'Nothing, Mademoiselle. It is just that I have not eaten yet, today.'

'Oh, poor boy—not Fat Tuesday for you, *alors*. But we can soon fix that. Here.' She took a croissant from a little drawstring sack in her pocket. 'Luckily, I did not eat my lunch. I had pancakes instead.'

'*Merci*, Mademoiselle.'

She noticed that though he must be ravenously hungry, he ate with manners and restraint, not speaking until he finished.

'That,' he said, 'is the best croissant I have ever eaten.'

'Is it enough?' she asked anxiously. 'I don't think I can get you anything more until suppertime.'

'It is enough. I will drink some more water.' He cupped his hands under the fish. Emerging, he asked, 'But where do you live, Mademoiselle? Here?'

'Yes, here in the opera house. In the dormitory with the other girls.'

'Oh. You do not stay at home with your parents?'

'I have no parents.'

'Nor me—at least, I do not think so ...'

'I think you must be right, *mon cher*. No parents would abandon you like that if they were alive.'

'What happened to you when yours died?'

'My grown-up sister took me to live with her when I was little. I don't remember them.'

'Like me.' He nodded. 'May I stay here, Mademoiselle?' He looked around apprehensively at the damp walls. 'Somewhere?'

She was touched by his vulnerability. 'Of course, Child. I will look after you.'

'Thank you, Mademoiselle. But why do you call me child? You are not very old, yourself.'

'I am twelve. You are younger than that.'

'You are smaller,' he pointed out, standing up to his full height.

'Perhaps. I am small for my age,' she admitted. 'How old are you?'

He shrugged. 'They say perhaps nine or ten, most likely nine. I am big for my age.'

'They say?'

'Yes. You see, Mademoiselle ...?'

'Elise. My name is Elise. What is yours?'

He rubbed his scarred forehead. 'That is what I am trying to tell you, Mademoiselle Elise. I do ... not know. I ... cannot remember.'

'You cannot remember your name?' She was stunned. *He doesn't look like an idiot.* 'Why? Why cannot you remember?'

He smiled a little ruefully. She saw that it touched only one corner of his mouth, the other paralysed by the dreadful scarring.

'I cannot remember that, either,' he told her.

Then she saw the deep scar on his hairline, overlaying the older, broader,

curiously patterned puckering of the skin that disfigured his brow and more than half of one side of his face and neck, veering outwards around his eyebrow, back across his eyelid, continuing to zigzag down his cheek and jaw into his collar.

'I understand, my dear. At some time, you have received a serious blow to the head.'

'Yes, they told me that, the gypsies—that they found me like that. In a forest somewhere, starving and frozen. I don't remember it.'

'When?'

He shrugged.

'Do you know where? Because if you knew where it was, perhaps we could send somebody to find out your name.'

'The gypsies did not say which forest it was, Mademoiselle. I am sorry.'

'Oh well, that is of no moment. But you cannot go without a name. We shall have to call you something.'

He hunched a shoulder. 'Nobody has cared until now. They just say, "You, devil-spawn".'

No! Unspeakable! Her heart was too full to answer.

Glancing at her keenly, he said, 'Perhaps I can be like le Spectre.'

'Le Spectre? Who is le Spectre?'

'Have you not heard of him, Mademoiselle? Since I have been in Paris, many people have told me his story. It is because of my face, you see. They say I am like him.' He brooded darkly for a moment, then his expression lightening, he added, 'Though many say he is much, much uglier than I am. At least I have a nose, which they say, he does not.'

'Yes, and a very nice one it is, too, my dear,' she interrupted, admiring the high-

bridged, carven lines.

'Thank you, Mademoiselle.' He bowed. 'I don't know when it was, not long ago, I think, he lived at the Opéra Paris—the Paris Grand Opera House. He made them all think he was a ghost. He even made them pay him a monthly salary. I admire him—he does not let anyone stand in his way. He kills with the rope—like so.' He made deft moves in the air with an imaginary noose.

Seeing her expression, he grinned shyly. 'Do not worry, Mademoiselle, I shall not do it to you. I am not like le Spectre. I shall only kill those who deserve it.' He added grimly, 'I have killed, Mademoiselle. I am, what would you say—contaminated.'

She was horrified. 'But, you are a child.' Then, after a disbelieving silence, 'Who?'

'It was a gypsy. He was wicked and mad—*fou*. Everyone hated him, wished him dead. He was beating the children, stealing their toys, burning them with little sticks from the fire, laughing when they screamed. When I saw that, I just—like I showed you. I could not stand it any longer. I could not let him go on hurting the children, Mademoiselle.' His eyes pleaded for understanding.

'Of course, you could not, *mon cher*.' When he put it like that, somehow it seemed acceptable. Even: justice. It would also explain why the gypsies had abandoned him.

'And another thing ...' Having made his confession, he changed the subject with lightning speed. 'I shall be of use to this opera house, Mademoiselle, for I can sing.' He backed up his claim by launching into *Va Pensiero* from *Nabucco* in the pure sweet tones of the boy soprano. Not even in the cathedral on the holiest of days had she ever heard such a beautiful soloist.

She gasped, '*Mon Dieu*, but you sing like an angel.'

He bent a serious gaze upon her. 'You think so?'

'Like an angel, *mon cher*,' she confirmed. 'I have never heard anything as good.'

'Of a truth?' His upper lip just quirked. 'Then, there is a name for me. You can call me Angel. I shall be the angel of the Opéra Français.'

'Very well, Monsieur Angel. We had better find a good hiding place for you. Unfortunately, it cannot be on high, as your name suggests.'

He interrupted, 'The people who talked about le Spectre told me he lived beneath the opera house—in a palace,' he added reverently.

She thought a minute. *Yes, that might do.* 'There is an old palanquin in the bottom cellar. It is not a palace, far from it, but you will be safe and dry. Nobody goes there now; they only use the top cellars. I will get you some blankets, and you can sleep in there. The palanquin is quite large enough for a bed. You should be comfortable, and if you draw the curtains, no-one will know you are there. Wait here while I get some candles from the chapel.'

When she returned, he was smiling. 'While you have been away, I have had an idea. You know how I have been telling you of le Spectre?'

Le Spectre, again. She nodded, resolving to find out a little more about this strange character.

'He had a lady, Madame Somebody—the assistant who looked after him. That was my idea, Mademoiselle. You can be my Madame, er ... assistant.'

'But what are you saying, *mon cher*? Surely, you do not wish me to call you le Spectre? And I am not an *assistant*, but a ballerina.'

'No, Mademoiselle, of course I do not wish to be known by such a name. And I am not a ghost but an angel—you remember?'

'Of course.' A dimple appeared in either cheek. 'And I shall be happy to look after such a talented angel—as long as you sing to me.'

He bowed. 'It will be my greatest pleasure, Mademoiselle. I shall sing to you often. In truth ...' He hesitated, turning his head so that she saw only the unblemished

side of his face: sensitive, vulnerable, even beautiful, with its child's bloom. 'I have to sing, Mademoiselle. I cannot explain. It is here.' He thumped his fist against his chest. 'I feel it here. If I do not sing—I do not live.'

'I understand, my dear,' she replied. But she didn't—not then. 'You have come to the right place if that is the way you feel. But tell me more about this le Spectre: he is still at the Opéra Paris?'

'*Non*, Mademoiselle. Well—perhaps. But not as far as I know.'

'Oh? Why is this? Explain yourself, *s'il vous plaît*, my dear Angel.'

'It is hard to know. There is much unrest on the streets. There is even talk of war. It may be that that is the reason.' He put a hand on her arm. 'You must not go out on the streets again, unless I am with you.'

She turned to him, laughing. 'But what is this? It is not above an hour since I find you, and now, you think to become my guardian angel?'

The sensitive profile set in serious lines. 'Perhaps, Mademoiselle. Who can say? It is dangerous out there. I am already very strong and I will grow stronger.' After a second or two, he added, 'But to return to your question, are you sure you have not heard of him?'

'Le Spectre? No. Oh—wait a moment—you mean the *Phantom of the Opera*? Of course, I have heard of him. But it is a legend, *mon cher*, a hoary old legend. Every opera house in the world has its ghost.'

'No, no, Mademoiselle, it has only just happened—I swear it! It was—how do you call it—a trihedron.'

'A tri? Oh, a triangle?'

'Yes, a triangle, that is it: a love triangle. The ghost fell in love with a young soprano. A young nobleman was also enamoured of her. Le Spectre kidnapped her. He was very daring, Mademoiselle.' The blue orbs glowed with luminous intensity. 'He

caused an accident with the chandelier and took her—*pouf!*—from the stage, in front of the entire audience, under the noses of a hundred gendarmes.' Ignoring her shocked exclamation, he continued, 'He took her to his underground palace. The young man went after her. Then his brother went after them and was murdered.'

'Oh, horrid.' She shivered. 'So wh-what happened?'

'Nobody knows. They were never seen again.'

'*Oh, là, là!*' she cried. 'You have such a monster as your hero? Do you mean he killed them?'

'Some say so, Mademoiselle. But me, I do not think so—no. Not if he loved her.'

She shook her head. 'This is a very dark story you are telling me, *mon ami*. It sounds like a terrible affliction for an opera house.'

'Have no fear, Mademoiselle; I shall not follow le Spectre to such extents as that. And I shall not demand salaries and payments. I shall pay my own way,' he declared. 'I have been learning magic from the gypsies, and I draw and design. And I have been composing music, oh—*depuis longtemps*. So you see, Mademoiselle, I shall be an asset, not a liability—unlike le Spectre.'

Oh, the sweet boy. He was so earnest.

'Here we are,' she said, arriving at the bottom cellar. 'Here is your palace, my dear Angel.'

He looked around in the soft candlelight, nodding approval. The cellar was a repository for all kinds of bits and pieces, old or broken furniture, musical instruments, discarded scenery, stage props and backdrops. There was plenty of scope for his talents, here. Setting down his candle on a small table, he somersaulted onto the palanquin, causing it to groan and shudder alarmingly.

'Careful, *mon cher*. It is very old.'

'It will be strong enough, I think,' he said, bouncing experimentally. 'This will be good, very comfortable.' He jumped up. 'What is behind that door in the wall over there?'

'It is a secret passage,' she whispered. 'Nobody knows about it but me.'

'And me, now. But you cannot be the only one. How did you find it?'

'Who told me about it, you mean?'

'Yes. Someone else must know.'

'They do,' she admitted. 'But they don't know where it goes.'

'Quoi?'

'You see, everyone knows that the door opens onto a secret passage, but nobody is brave enough to go into it and see where it goes because everybody believes it is haunted.'

'And you? You do not believe it is haunted?'

'I don't think so.'

'And you know where it goes?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Then, show me.'

'Very well. We will need some more of these candles.'

'And another holder,' he said, picking up a branched candlestick from the bureau. 'This should do. You take mine. But wait, how did you find it out?'

'Where it goes, you mean? Oh, well, it was on my eleventh birthday, and Edith and some of the other girls played a joke on me. They said I was so up in the air that they were going to bring me down to earth, so they locked me in here, telling me I could stay here and miss my supper or try my luck in the haunted passage with the ghost. Luckily, I found some candles in that old bureau over there, for they shut me in

with only a stub.'

'So what did you do?'

'I prayed to *le bon Dieu* for his angels to keep me safe, took two candles as a precaution, and went out into the passage.'

'And this worked?'

'I saw no ghost—and nothing happened to me.'

'Come, then,' he said, lighting the candles from the one on the table before handing it to her. 'Show me where it goes.'

They started along the rough-hewn passage.

'Take care,' she warned. 'There are rocks all over the floor, and we must be careful not to trip over and let the candles go out.'

After what seemed an age of walking up a steep slope, avoiding the worst of the rubble, and climbing a seemingly endless number of crude steps, they halted, puffing, in front of a dark wall.

'There does not seem to be any ghost, Mademoiselle. Perhaps it is because you still have an angel with you?'

'Very funny. Hush, do you hear that?'

'A horse?'

'Yes. Through there is the coach-house and the stables. The door is over here in the corner. See this latch? But I dare not open it; the coachman must be back from the festival. That is something you must be very careful of, *mon cher*—only open the door when it is dark. And blow your candle out first. Oh, and if you come in from the other side, the latch is part of the harness hook, the one closest to the corner. Come on, we must go back.'

'But you came out here? When they locked you in?'

'Yes, no-one saw me. The coachman was at dinner. They all almost died of fright when I came in and sat down with them at the supper table.' She chuckled. 'They were very nice to me for simply ages—afraid that I would tell Monsieur Dupont.'

'And did you?'

She glanced at him mischievously. 'What do you think?'

'I think only you and I know about the secret passage, Mademoiselle.'

'Oh, call me Elise,' she begged.

'Very well.' He halted about midway, after the long run of steps. 'You know, Elise, here would be a good place to build a wall across the passage with a hidden door. Then it truly would be our secret passage, would it not?' he said, patting the wall and moving along so that she had to run to keep up.

'Oh, indeed. What a clever idea. But could you do it? A little boy like you?'

He grasped her arm cruelly. 'I am *not* a little boy.'

'Ouch, you are hurting me.' She pulled away. 'Boys are so rough.'

'I did not mean to hurt you,' he muttered, head down.

'Very well, then: let us start again. Can you build a wall with a secret door?'

'I think so, Mademoiselle—Elise. I know how to cut rock. I just need the tools, that's all. There are plenty of loose rocks here to build it out of, perhaps without cutting, if I select carefully. I am not so little, you know.'

'I am sorry. I didn't mean it unkindly. Just—I don't know how you could do it.'

'You will see, Mademoiselle. I will make you unsay those words.'

'But where could you have learnt it?'

'I don't know.'

'And that's another thing. You don't speak like a gypsy—or a nine-year-old.'

You speak like someone older, educated. I wonder why?'

'I find it very fatiguing when you ask me questions I cannot answer,' he replied, with a flash of temper. 'You should be careful that I do not strangle you—like le Spectre.'

'You would not.'

'I might—if you make me angry enough.'

'Did le Spectre strangle Madame Whatsername?'

'No.'

'Well, then—there's your answer. I am safe.'

'You'd better hope so,' he muttered.

'You are tired, *mon cher*,' she replied sympathetically, excusing his ill humour.

By this time, they had reached the cellar. 'Will you be all right here, while I find you some food and blankets?' she asked.

'Mmm. Do you have an instrument in the chapel?'

'Yes, a pipe organ—very big and beautiful.'

'*Bien*. If you can hear it when you return, do not be afraid that it is a ghost.'

Chapter 4

Evening, Mardi Gras, 1870

Gabby Scolded, as I knew she would, but then she hugged me and told me to take no Notice of the others, and go off to bed because I looked tired. I want to tell her about Angel, but I dare not. Even Micheline, I dare not tell.

Escaping, with difficulty, the chorus of questions and censure she received in the dining room, Elise went to the pantry to get her own supper, since Cook was still out. Hurriedly assembling bread and cheese and a jug of milk on a tray, she took two blankets from the linen press in the hall and, on an impulse, went down to Wardrobe. There was a pageboy suit she had worn in performance recently. It was a trifle too large for her. That, a shirt and a nightgown. Ah, yes, that would do. Satisfied, she hurried back, fearsomely burdened, stopping as she heard wonderful sounds coming from the organ in the chapel—sounds she never knew it could make. She closed her lips firmly on the question that loomed in her mind.

What an amazing child. Strange, talented, temperamental, both older and younger than his years. She shook her head. She had found out so much about him in one short afternoon, yet these very things just added to the mystery of him.

She put down her burden and came to tap him on the shoulder. 'That is beautiful, *mon cher*. Truly beautiful. But we must hurry to the cellar now.'

He turned from the keyboard, climbing down. 'This is an excellent instrument. I shall play it often.'

Tiens, he sounds just like Monsieur Dupont. 'What if someone finds you?'

'I will play at night—when you are all in bed.'

'Will you? But won't you be too tired?'

'No. Le Spectre stayed up at night, roaming the theatre. But this is a much smaller house than the Opéra Paris, is it not?'

'Indeed, we are very small in comparison, *mon cher*, very small but very select. We pride ourselves on the quality of our performances. We are the only house that has waiting lists on our ticket sales. Entrepreneurs from all over Europe come here to try and entice our dancers and singers. We have only the best here—the best music, the best singers, the best dancers,' she finished, her face alight.

'Then, it is, as you have said, the right choice for me.'

'Indeed, I think so, my dear, for I have never heard a better voice, not even here. But come, we must hurry.'

Handing him the blankets and clothing, she picked up the tray, and set off for the stairs. 'I have brought you a nightgown and clean clothes for you to wear tomorrow. We shall have to burn those you are wearing, I think.'

He surveyed them critically. 'I fear you are right, even washing will not help them. They still look dirty, even though I had a wash back there.'

'In the basin? But that water is so cold.' She shuddered at the thought.

He was amused. '*Eh bien*, Mademoiselle,' he told her, 'I am not a little girl to shrink from the cold.'

Arriving at the third cellar, he threw the clothes over an armchair, remarking that he would need to find some hooks or hangers. 'I dare say I may,' he added. 'There appears to be everything down here, if only one may find it in the mess.'

'I will help you tidy it up—make it more homelike,' she said, setting the tray on the table while he dusted off two stools and brought them over.

'You will sit with me?' he asked. 'Share my supper?'

'If there is enough?'

'Of course, plenty.' He divided the bread and the cheese. 'I know you have not

had time to eat yourself, have you?'

'No, and I must hurry back to the dorm before they notice. I have already had to endure a thousand questions as to where I have been today.'

'What did you tell them?'

'Just that I became separated from the others and thought it prudent to come back because of a riot.'

'All true. I commend you, Mademoiselle.' He half-rose from the table, bowing in his quaintly old-fashioned way.

Just like Monsieur Dupont.

They ate in silence. She waited until he finished his supper, then picked up the tray to leave.

'Elise,' he said, calling her back. 'You did say there was not a ghost here, did you not?'

Was he going to be afraid here, all alone in the dark? 'There is the rumour, but I do not want to frighten you, my dear. It is very dark down here, it is true, but I don't think it is haunted.'

His answer surprised her. 'I will not be frightened, Mademoiselle. Of a truth, a ghost holds no fear for me. Phantoms cannot inflict wounds like real flesh and blood people. I like the dark—to hide where no-one sees.'

'Well, as I told you, even alone in the haunted passage, I did not see a ghost and when I asked Monsieur Dupont about the rumour, he said a ghost could only reside here with his blessing, and he most certainly would not give it. He said he would not allow a ghost in his opera house, frightening his little ballerinas. So no, I don't think there is a ghost here.'

'So Monsieur Dupont does not allow them, eh? *Formidable!* Who is this Monsieur Dupont?'

'He is a very famous conductor, *mon cher*, and our artistic director. All of us here love him because he is a very kind man.'

'Will he be kind to me, do you think?'

She responded automatically to the pathos in his voice. 'He could not help it, my dear. He will be kind to you. He is kind to everybody, and though he will not countenance a ghost, he will surely give his blessing to an angel—especially when he hears you sing.'

'I hope so. And thank you, Mademoiselle, for your many kindnesses.'

'May God bless you, dear Angel. *Bonne nuit*.'

'Goodnight, Elise.'

She sped away, fending off the questions of the others by saying she was very tired and would go to bed, feigning sleep as, one by one, they went to their bunks. But, of course, she could not sleep. And, despite her assurances to Angel, she was afraid of what would happen when his presence was discovered. And what of him: was he really as phlegmatic about the cellar as he had declared?

What if he was lonely? What if he was afraid? When she was sure all the girls were asleep, she took her candle and crept down the cold, stone stairs to the cellar. As she approached the palanquin, she heard a sob, hastily suppressed.

'Oh, do not cry, Petit. Here, let me light your candles.'

From his face buried in the pillow, back came a muffled reply, 'I am not crying, Mademoiselle.'

'I thought I heard you ...?'

'It was a hiccough.'

'Oh, that's all right, then ... You can keep a candle alight if you don't like the dark. I gave you enough to last the night.'

'It is not the dark. I told you—I am not scared of the dark. It was a hiccough.'

And then it came to her. With the fine instinct that was characteristic of her, softening her managing disposition and making her what she was, she realised that he was lonely. Darkness may be his friend, but surely, he missed the warm bodies of the gypsy children, all huddled together for warmth under a horse blanket. Of course, he did. Just as she had missed her family when she had first come, regardless of the number of girls in her dormitory. And despite his bravado, he was just a little boy, after all—only nine (or ten).

'Move over and give me some of your blanket,' she ordered. 'I am cold.'

He sat up, moving aside, flipping back the rug to let her in. Folding her dressing-gown tightly around herself, she slid in beside him, sitting up against the pillows. As he put the blanket over her, a black shadow leapt upon their legs. They both gasped at wicked green slitted eyes glittering in the candlelight.

He lunged towards her, hiding his face in her shoulder. She put a protective arm around him as the shadow began to knead the blanket, issuing a low rumble.

'Oh, it is only Ziggy,' she cried in relief. 'She must have followed me. How you frightened us, you naughty cat!'

'She didn't frighten me.'

'Well, she did me.'

'Never mind,' he said, drawing her closer. 'I will take care of you.'

'Thank you, my dear. Are you comfortable?'

'Yes,' he replied sleepily, snuggling against her.

The opera house cat, after rubbing energetically on both of them, uttering little cries and purring loudly, settled down against his back.

'Hush,' she said, an idea forming. 'We must not move until Ziggy is asleep. Then I will quietly creep away without waking her. Try to stay awake. You must look

after her so that she doesn't go back to the dormitory and frighten anybody, for they will want to know where I have been, and I don't want to tell them about you just yet.'

A faint sigh was his only response, and she realised he was asleep. Carefully sliding out from under his arm, she climbed out of the palanquin and tucked the blanket around him. For a moment, she stood looking at the closed eyes, the young face. From this side, he looked a normal little boy, sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. On an impulse, she dropped a kiss on his brow and tiptoed away.

The cat briefly opened one eye but did not move.

Cats know, she thought. *Cats know who needs comforting*. Ziggy was his cat now. She knew that, too. And he would never be lonely at night while he had her. Satisfied, she went back to her own bed, cold and shivering from her long walk.

But it was not this that kept her awake. She knew she must tell Monsieur Dupont about Angel, and she didn't know how to do it.

Chapter 5

First week of Lent, 1870

I feel so Guilty, hiding Angel from Monsieur Dupont. But what else can I do? I cannot bear for him to be sent away.

Elise, unused to being secretive, was torn between her loyalty to Monsieur Dupont, who trusted her, and the dependency upon her of Angel, who had no-one else to care for him, and nowhere else to go. Anxious for his wellbeing, she obtained more clothing from Wardrobe by the simple expedient of asking the wardrobe mistress if she had any spare clothes for 'dress-ups'.

The wardrobe mistress, well-versed in the ways of children, pointed to a pile on the other side of an *armoire* and told her to take what she wanted before they were sent off to the nuns for charity. 'And don't leave them lying around the floor when you're finished with them.'

'I won't,' she promised, rummaging through the discards, lucky enough to find some suitable boys' clothing. Altering them herself by candlelight in the cellar, she was able to ensure that he had a reasonable, if rather theatrical, wardrobe.

She brought food, candles, pencils, paper and books, for already his prodigious learning was apparent. Struggling to care for him adequately on her own, she stole candles from the chapel, God forgive her, begging extra food at mealtimes.

'You must have hollow legs, my dear. You never seem to put on weight.'

Yet still, she could not bring herself to announce his presence and her part in it to Monsieur Dupont.

Day 8 of Lent, 1870

I must, must tell Monsieur Dupont. But I am Afraid.

Elise hurried along the basement corridor with Angel's supper. She was late, but so many things had gotten in the way. Edith had suddenly and unaccountably wanted to talk to her, keeping her back at supper until the housekeeper, leaning menacingly over the table, had told them to leave the dining room so the maids could finish clearing up.

'There's some of us who might like to get to bed at a decent hour. There's some who still have work to do. And there's some who have no respect for others.'

Elise had finally escaped, flitting in and out of the larder just quickly enough to avoid detection. Now, nearing the chapel, she heard the opening of a door behind her and stepped quickly into an embrasure, holding her breath as footsteps came closer. She knew that firm tread ...

Monsieur Dupont passed her, looking neither right nor left. He stopped abruptly outside the chapel door as music from within suddenly swelled, ebbed and swelled again.

No, oh, no, no, no!

She set down the tray and ran to him as he put a hand on the knob.

'Monsieur Dupont,' she whispered in panic. 'No, please ...'

'Hush.' He put a finger to his lips, turning the handle slowly and easing the door open, to look across at the boy at the organ. The tune was not one he recognised, but which Elise knew to be Angel's own composition.

Completely engrossed, Angel heard nothing but his music, and even though he had his back to them, they could see that he stroked the keys with loving precision, adjusting the stops with the hand of a master, peddling to work the bellows, and all the while singing with the sweet, piercing beauty of the boy soprano.

For long moments, Monsieur Dupont stood transfixed; his hand on the door knob. Then, his other arm around Elise, he backed out, closing the door. '*Nom de Dieu,*' he breathed. 'I do not believe it. What a voice!' He turned her to face him. 'Tell me about this boy. Did you bring him here, Elise? I want the truth now.'

'Yes, Monsieur.' She raised guilt-ridden eyes to his. 'I am sorry. I was afraid to tell you. He ... he has nowhere to go, no-one who cares about him. I was afraid to tell you—in case you will not let him stay. Please, please, don't turn him out, Monsieur. I told him you would not.'

He looked into the big earnest eyes, the worried little face, and put a kindly hand on her shoulder. '*Eh bien,* dear child, if you were so sure, why have you been afraid to tell me?'

'The street people, they were hurting him because of his appearance; and he is not like other children ... Oh, Monsieur Dupont ...' She burst into tears.

'Come, *ma fille,* you are overwrought. Dry your tears now. That is better ...'

The music soared, fell and rose again hypnotically. Monsieur Dupont half-closed his eyes in ecstasy, swaying to the tune. 'Listen to that,' he murmured.

Opening his eyes, he said, 'You did very right to bring him here child—very right. But the burden of responsibility for this boy is weighing too heavily upon your shoulders. Why not share it with me? You have my word that he shall not be turned out or abandoned. A home shall be found for him here.'

'Do not forget that a problem shared is a problem halved. Now, are you going to tell me?' His kindly expression and gentle insistence soothed her, and she began to relate the story of how she had found the poor little gypsy boy being stoned by the mob.

Haltingly, she told him how she had been so angry at the sight that she had run up and told them to go away, her voice reflecting her indignation.

Monsieur Dupont sighed. 'Ah, Mignonne, so brave! A mother tiger fighting for

her cub. But you should not have done it, Petite. The mob can be dangerous, you know. Go on ...'

But it seemed that when she got him to the safety of the opera house, he was not a gypsy, after all, but had been found by them wandering in some forest with a dreadful head wound. A peasant child, perhaps? 'He is very badly scarred, Monsieur.'

'Ah, poor boy.'

Casting a quick, nervous glance at him, she told him how she had decided on the cellar as a hiding place because of his obsession with the *Phantom of the Opera*. 'Do you know of this man, Monsieur, this le Spectre?'

Monsieur Dupont stiffened. 'I do, *ma fille*, and he is a very frightening man. Indeed, the Opéra Paris has suffered greatly because of him.'

'This boy, he says he will not follow him too closely because he believes in justice and that one should earn one's keep.' She lowered her voice: 'But—he says he has killed—in the same way, Monsieur.'

'Oh, I shouldn't take too much notice of that, my dear. It is probably make-believe. Young boys often act out the exploits of their heroes.'

'But he said ——' She stopped. Monsieur Dupont was clearly not listening, his attention caught by the melody: beautiful, haunting.

'*Incroyable*. Where could he have learnt to play like that? I do not know the melody, either.'

'It is his own composition, Monsieur.'

'Never say so, Mignonne! It cannot be. I do not believe it.'

'Yes, it is,' she asserted. 'It is called *Safe Harbour*. He wrote it since he came here, in honour of his rescue.'

'My God! A gypsy boy, you say? Or a peasant? No, no, no, he is not either of these things. He is something else, I don't know what.'

'But, Monsieur Dupont,' said Elise timidly, 'I am a peasant child ...'

'A changeling,' he said, stroking her cheek, 'a fairy child—your feet hardly touch the ground, Mignonne. But I am not saying a peasant child would not have the talent—no, indeed. *Au contraire*. But where would he find the money to be so thoroughly educated? You see? But no, there is some mystery attached to —— what did you say his name was?'

'He cannot remember his name, so we have decided to call him Angel.'

'Ah, a piquant appellation—so apt, and yet so inapposite. Come, the music has stopped. Let us go in, and you shall introduce me.'

'Monsieur Dupont,' she warned. 'His face ...'

'I am not easily shocked, my dear,' he said, opening the door. But he was—to the tips of his shining leather shoes.

For Angel, hearing the door open and waiting for his supper, turned and jumped down from the organ, exposing the full horror of his injury. He stopped and shrank back against the instrument, instinctively turning his head away.

'It is all right, *mon cher*,' said Elise, seeing his consternation. 'Monsieur Dupont is here to help us.'

'I am enchanted to meet you, Angel,' he said, extending a welcoming hand. 'How would you like to work with me in the Opéra Français, *hein*? You have much talent.'

The boy nodded, taking the proffered hand, but saying nothing.

'So dear boy,' pursued Monsieur Dupont, 'Elise tells me you have made the *Phantom of the Opera* your hero and aspire to be like him. For that you will need a mask. Tomorrow I will show you how to make one. Once you have made the first one, I dare say you will astonish us with their variety. But don't follow your hero too closely, I beg of you. He did not make life very comfortable for his fellow occupants

of the Opéra Paris.'

'No, Monsieur. When do I start?'

'Tomorrow, I said. In the evening.'

'No, Monsieur, not that. My job.'

'Ah, well, you will need some training first. Why do you not enter as a pupil? And then when you are fully trained you shall be our resident singer. What do you think, eh?'

The boy nodded. 'Thank you, Monsieur.'

For a moment, they surveyed each other: the gentlemanly, distinguished conductor; and the strong, well-built young boy whose undeniable physical beauty was marred by a terrible injury.

'Elise, you had better give the boy his supper. Yes—I saw you with the tray, coming out of the larder. But where has he been sleeping?'

'In the third cellar; in an old palanquin,' she called, nipping back to the embrasure to retrieve the tray.

'In the third cellar? Oh, that is no good. He'll die of loneliness, down there. I shall give him a room near the other boys.'

'But, Monsieur,' she whispered urgently. 'He does not like to be —— other boys will taunt him. You know, like the —— his underground palace.'

'Oh, I see,' said Monsieur Dupont, successfully reading between the lines. 'Very well, tomorrow we shall see if we cannot furbish it up a trifle, and make it a little more homelike and *comme il faut* for you, *hein?*'

That was the thing about Monsieur Dupont: he understood about heroes and elves and fairies, even though he had no tolerance for ghosts. He turned to Elise, waiting with the supper tray. 'Take him and make him comfortable, Elise, and don't be too long. It is Edith you have to thank for the intelligence that led me here tonight.'

'Intelligence, Monsieur Dupont?'

'The information that you have been spending long periods away from your dormitory, at night.'

'Oh.' *Prying rapporteuse!* 'I was worried about Angel being lonely, but it won't happen again, Monsieur Dupont, I promise. Angel has Ziggy now.'

'Really? That is most—advantageous ... Whose idea was it?'

'Well ... Ziggy's.'

'Indeed? Cats are most perspicacious, are they not? You have done well, my dear. Off you go now.'

'But, Monsieur Dupont—Edith?' Elise, poised on one foot to leave, stood watching him anxiously.

'I shall speak to her,' he promised, waiting while they ran down the corridor to the cellar steps.

Turning away, he began to hum the haunting melody revolving in his head. It was not until he reached his apartment that he realised it was that played by the strange, disfigured little boy he had surprised at the chapel organ.

Chapter 6

6 August 1870

I cannot believe what I have just heard. Gabby and Monsieur Dupont! Shouting at each other! Gabby will shout, but not often, and she doesn't mean it, but never have I heard Monsieur Dupont raise his voice, Never! But Gabby must not leave. She must not!

Many things happened over the next few months. First, Gabby left to get married, not without opposition and a certain amount of ill will from her mentors. Elise's disappointment was intense, and she missed her idol, crying many tears. There was just one small consolation: she was given her own room, privacy to weep.

Madame Aranova appointed Micheline prima ballerina in Gabby's stead, saying to Elise, 'I am sorry, my dear. You are just a trifle too young'.

She worked hard at her dancing, had grown away from Micheline (or rather, Micheline, somewhat over-faced by her new position, had little time for her friends), spending what amounted to all her spare time with Angel. This, after arithmetic, ethics, writing and music lessons sandwiched between ballet classes—did not amount to much.

However, with Monsieur Dupont's blessing, she continued to bring him his lunch and supper. He had to find his own breakfast because Elise was at ballet practice from six until eight in the morning, when they all sat down to eat.

Monsieur Dupont put it thus: 'In the morning, dear boy, whenever you awaken, you have my permission to take whatever is necessary for your sustenance from the larder or the breakfast table. Of course, if you can overcome your aversion to making a public appearance, you are welcome to join us at the table. Failing that, it may be as

well to make friends with Cook, for your meals will be so much more varied. I leave it up to you.'

At about the same time, he told Elise to go and talk to Cook about the food she had been taking to Angel. 'She knows, but she will appreciate your explanation, my dear. You know Cook.'

Monsieur Dupont gave Angel his music and singing lessons in the chapel at odd times of the day and night, but first he descended to the cellar to show him how to make a lifelike mask from a few simple materials.

Quickly mastering his surprise and awe at the boy's capacity for learning, and the already amazing extent of his knowledge, he decided to allow what, by now, he recognised as his genius, full rein. To this end, he had the bottom cellar completely cleared of rubbish and odds and ends, replacing them with quality furnishings and a comprehensive reference library, only sparing the palanquin on Angel's protest.

'But only until I have something similar built for you with new materials,' he told him next morning, after failing to persuade him. 'In a larger size,' he added. 'For you are growing prodigiously. These old fabrics will not be good for your health. There may be bad humours, dank air and so forth. We shall have to have an airshaft somewhere.'

'There is one in the haunted passage,' said Angel. 'I may be able to put some ventilators onto it. That should give me plenty of air. Some comes in anyway. The candles flicker sometimes.'

'Yes, there should have been adequate ventilation in this cellar when it was built. They were aware, even then, of the dangers of bad air. But adequate ventilation for people coming and going for storage purposes is not the same as for one using it as a dwelling place. Candles, lamps and braziers all use up the air and, of course, some of the ventilators will have been blocked by debris. But, what is this you say about a haunted passage? There are no ghosts in my opera house, dear boy, I do not allow it. So, where is this passage?'

'That door there.'

'Oh, yes, the old escape route to the coach-house; a relic of more turbulent times. I had forgotten all about it.'

'I wanted to do some stonework in there. I can, you know. I just need the tools.'

'Ah.' Monsieur Dupont smiled. 'You wish to build an underground palace?'

The boy flushed. 'Well, yes—if you do not mind.'

'Not at all. As long as you draw up plans, which I may have approved by an architect—so that we can see you know what you are doing. I trust you have no objection to that?' Monsieur Dupont always encouraged. However wild the scheme, he never vetoed, refusing to clip the wings of enthusiasm or put boring boundaries on inventive minds. Because, as he later told Madame Aranova, 'Out of the imagination of innocents comes creativity, and out of creativity comes great genius. Furthermore, my dear, out of the imagination of innocents come all the beautiful creations in the world. I live in awe of the imagination of children.'

Angel met his eyes. 'Do not worry, the Opéra Français will not fall down around it, I promise you. But, of course, I shall draw up a plan—if I can have a draftsman's table and instruments?'

'Very well, you shall have it tomorrow,' said Monsieur Dupont, rising. 'Let me show you where you may find some useful materials and a set of stonemason's tools.'

'There are plenty of rocks in the passage.'

'Are there, indeed? Then, you are mostly self-sufficient, are you not?' He sat down again. 'You will find the tools to the right of the stairs in the second cellar, and some bricks and lumber if you need them. Now, I need you to make a list of anything you want for your studies. I think I have thought of most things, but if I have not, you have only to ask.'

'*Bien*, Monsieur, thank you.'

Monsieur Dupont peered into the corner. 'What are you doing with that old clavichord? I thought I threw it out.'

'Please, Monsieur, I wish to restore it. They have a lovely sound, you know—gentle, other-worldly. I love it.'

'I know, my boy, but I think you are being a little optimistic. It is a long time since that one made any such sound.' He studied the small, dilapidated instrument, its remaining three legs supplemented by a stool, shaking his head doubtfully.

'It will again, Monsieur. Please? It is a beautiful little thing.'

Monsieur Dupont cast another quizzical glance at it. 'If you say so, *mon fils*. Very well, write down what you need to restore it.' He yawned suddenly. 'But get to work straight away on those ventilators; there is not enough air in here. Open that door now,' he said, pointing to the one leading to the passage, 'and leave it open until you have arranged alternative ventilation.'

He watched Angel walk across the room to obey him. 'That is a very interesting outfit you are wearing, dear boy. Most colourful.'

'It is, is it not?' He grinned. 'Elise got it for me from Wardrobe.'

'Ah, well, that is another thing to put on your list, unless you have a fancy to look like an eighteenth century nobleman?'

'I don't mind,' he said, exhibiting a scarlet and gold monstrosity. 'I like this cloak.'

'Oh, indeed, very dramatic. I shall leave you now. Oh, by the way,' he added, turning back, 'I have just remembered—that passage. The concierge told the children it was haunted so they would not be tempted to explore it and become lost and frightened in the darkness, not to mention the dangers of getting out on the street. But, of course, you must already know the way out. You will use this knowledge circumspectly, will you not?'

'Yes, Monsieur, you need not worry. I will make it so that no-one will be able to get in or out without specific knowledge.'

'Very good.' Monsieur Dupont inclined his head. 'I look forward to viewing your plans. *À bientôt.*'

Angel turned in bright anticipation to his reference library, not as yet catalogued or arranged in alphabetical order. Now, where was architecture, stonemasonry and engineering, something to start on? He intended to secretly visit building sites, watching the masons and carpenters at work. But now, some more practical knowledge was necessary before he began his project.

But stay, what is this? He read the title aloud, 'A Treatise on Magic or the Magician's Handbook. *Formidable!*'

Immediately, he was enchanted, forgetting all ideas of learning enough to draw up plans for his abode. He sat for hours, passionately, greedily, devouring the pages, oblivious to all else; Ziggy curled up on his desk beside the book.

Elise found them like that when she brought his lunch.

'Angel, my dear. Angel? Angel!'

'What? Oh, Elise.' He ran a hand through his hair. 'Oh, you've brought my lunch, thank you. Just put it there. I am not hungry.'

'But you must eat, *mon cher,*' she admonished, setting it down on the table.

'Go away. Can you not see I am busy?'

'What are you doing?'

'What does it look like? Girls ask such stupid questions.'

'There is no need to be rude about it. I only wanted to know what you are reading.'

He sent her a look of such mingled threat and exasperation that she retreated.

'Very well, if you won't tell me, I'll leave you to read.' Her eyes wandering around the room, she exclaimed, 'Oh, your palace is looking very nice, is it not, with all your new furnishings?'

'Yes. Now, go away.'

She shrugged her shoulders. His concentration for his book was so intense, and since he had made it plain that he did not wish for interruption, she saw nothing for it but to obey him. It was ridiculous to feel hurt by his attitude, wasn't it? Even if it was the first time since they had met that he had no time for her. She read nothing into it, no warning for the future, nothing. All she wanted was for him to be happy and comfortable, and if leaving him alone would make him so, then—*bien*—she would do it.

For several days he hardly ate, hardly spoke, so urgent was his mastery of the content of the great tome, the title of which she had so far not been permitted to see. As long as she moved about quietly, did not disturb or question him, he was grateful for her services, emerging just long enough to utter a preoccupied, 'Thank you, my dear', if he happened to notice her set down his meal before she quietly slipped away.

Chapter 7

3 May 1871

Now I know what Angel was studying so Intensely ...

In retrospect, she should have known something was up when, bringing his supper, she saw that the cellar was in darkness. Even though he said otherwise, Angel liked the light—as much as he could get. In fact, he used as many candles as Monsieur Dupont thought seemly to allow him.

As she stepped over the threshold, something flew at her out of the gloom: a glowing creature with luminous eyes and a horrible, whirring scream, flapping in her face, clawing at her hair. Her hands went up automatically to fend off the attack as she heard a terrified wailing sound she knew was coming from herself. Dimly, she felt the equally terrified cat brush past her legs.

'Don't panic, Elise. It is only some bits and pieces I got from Properties.' Angel laughed delightedly. 'Good, is it not? You screamed like a girl.'

'I am a girl,' she pointed out, straightening a plait. 'And now I've dropped your tray.'

'Well, it is not a calamity. I got the jug of milk earlier, and the floor is clean. I took precautions, you see, in case it scared you as much as I hoped.'

'You scared Ziggy, too.'

'She will come back soon. She is getting used to it now. You see, here she is, back already. You'll make a great magician's cat, won't you, Zig?' The cat rubbed on both of them and sat down to knead the rug contentedly.

He relit the candles; salvaged the scattered contents of the tray. 'You see,' he

said, unwrapping the tea towel. 'The bread and cheese are perfectly unharmed. Sit down and have some with me.'

She sat, accepting a morsel. Suddenly, with a rush of guilt, she said, 'I should bring you something else sometimes, but Monsieur Dupont ——'

'It is all right. At least I am not starving.'

'Monsieur Dupont told me to talk to Cook, but I have not yet done so. Cook can be ——'

'I know. I have seen her. I don't blame you.' He broke off a piece of cheese and fed it to Ziggy. 'We shall live, won't we, Zig?' He looked up at her. 'Now, how are your nerves?'

'Better. Angel, you ... you planned all this?'

'Yes, it was in the book.'

'The book you have been studying? That book? But what kind of book ...? Oh.'

He nodded. 'I had to try it on someone first, to see if it would work, someone who was not easily scared. I knew you would be hard to frighten, but it did frighten you, did it not?'

'Oh, yes.' She shuddered. 'Indeed.'

'Then, *voilà!* I am now a magician,' he announced triumphantly. 'That book, my dear, was *The Magician's Handbook*.'

'But how did you ——? It seemed alive. Its eyes and the horrid noise it made. And the way it glowed ...' The memory sent another shudder through her. 'How did you do that, *mon cher?*'

'Phosphorescence—a natural phenomenon. You see it in the oceans at night.'

'You read about this phosphorescence, where it comes from—in your book?'

'No, I already know where it comes from.'

'Then, how do you know?'

He seemed puzzled. 'I don't know. I must have read it somewhere, I suppose. I don't remember. Why? Is it important?'

'I don't know,' she replied. 'Perhaps it is.' She stood up and walked around. 'Why is that door open?'

'Monsieur Dupont says I need air.'

'Oh.' She went over to his dressing table, to pick up a mask and try it on in front of the mirror. It was too large for her, and she took it off, admiring the smooth sheen, the lifelike colouring.

'But this is so good. Beautiful, lifelike. Try it on.' She went to put it on him, and he submitted. 'It looks lovely, *mon cher*. In a dull light, one would never know. You will be able to go out amongst people without comment.'

'Oh, leave it.' He pulled it off and threw it down with the others. 'It is curst, uncomfortable, itching and prickling. I only wear it when I have to ...' He picked up another dainty mask, made to disguise only the eyes, fashioned from spangled lace and ribbon; very pretty. 'Here, this one is for you—for when you dance *Columbine*.'

'Oh, but it is beautiful, thank you. But, we don't have a ballet about *Columbine*.'

'Do we not? What a pity.' He rummaged in a drawer, taking out several pages of stiff paper. 'Give this to Monsieur Dupont and see if he will have it performed.'

§

She found Monsieur Dupont in the orchestra pit.

'What is that you have there, Mignonne?'

'It is a ballet Angel has composed for me. He said to give it to you. He calls it

Columbine.'

Monsieur Dupont took the pages of music, scanning them in silence. 'But this—this is amazing.' He walked over to the piano and began to sketch out a tune. 'The boy is a genius. He may be eccentric, but he is absolutely, and without doubt, a genius.'

§

Finally, Elise screwed up the courage to make her timid approach to Cook. 'Madame, may I speak with you? If it is convenient?'

'What is it, dear?' Cook turned from the dough she was pummeling and wiped her floury hands on her apron.

'Monsieur Dupont said for me to come and talk to you ...'

'Ah ...' The big woman eyed her perceptively. 'You wish to explain to me why it is that you have been raiding my larder every day?'

'It is with Monsieur Dupont's permission, Madame.'

'Well, I know that, my dear. If it wasn't, you would have felt my rolling pin around your shoulders long ago.'

Elise shifted her feet nervously. Cook was very tolerant of hungry children, but she had rules that must not be broken, and one of them was, if you want something, you ask. Stealing was met with serious punishment.

'I am sorry,' she said.

'Now, my dear—I know it is for that poor little gypsy boy you found. Nobody has to tell me, you would not have taken it for yourself. But why doesn't he come to the dining table with all the other children? He can't live on bread and cheese forever.'

'That is what I have to explain to you, Madame. Monsieur Dupont wishes him to do so, but he is so dreadfully disfigured that he is afraid of being seen and poked fun at. But Monsieur Dupont is holding to it that if he wants variety in his meals, he must come to the dining table.'

'Just let me catch anybody poking fun at him.' Cook picked up her rolling pin suggestively. '*Le pauvre*. You can tell him he can come to my kitchen to eat, if that is his worry. Now, if that's all, I'm busy. I need to get these croissants into my oven if they're to be ready for *le déjeuner*. Take a couple of those tarts cooling on the windowsill to him. And Elise, come to me for his lunches, he can have something better than bread and cheese for them.'

'But, Madame—Monsieur Dupont ...?'

'If Monsieur Dupont asks—which he will not,' said Cook, with a smile, 'you will tell him that I said a growing boy needs his vegetables at least once a day. Off you go.'

'*Merci*, Madame.' Elise, hands full of plum tarts, scurried away to look for Angel.

With no sign of him in the well-lit cellar, she peeped into the adjoining passage. Following the distant glow to the foot of the stone steps, she found him, surrounded by candles, chipping at a rock with hammer and chisel. 'Are you hungry, *mon cher*? Cook sent you a gift.'

He straightened, rubbed his hands down his breeches and took a pastry. While he ate, she told him of Cook's invitation.

'I am a little tired of bread and cheese all the time,' he admitted. 'But she is—whoo!' He gestured widely. '*Formidable*. She has muscles on her arms like a bricklayer.'

'That is from making bread, my dear. One cannot make bread every day and be built like a sylph, you know. All the kneading—that requires strength. But you need

not be afraid. Cook is very kind—if you do not upset her. And you have to admit, she is a wonderful cook.'

'Mmm,' he said, finishing the tart and eyeing the other.

'It is for you,' she assured him, holding it out.

'Don't you want it?'

'No.'

'You pick like a bird. No wonder you are so tiny.' He broke it in half. 'Share it with me.'

'I don't want ——'

He shoved it at her. 'Take it.'

They ate in their usual silence, then she said, 'You are building the wall across the passage that you talked about?'

'Yes, it will give me practice for when I build my palace.'

'Your palace? But I thought the cellar was your palace.'

'It is just a cellar and anyone can get into it. I want something secret, something that will be mine, and only I will know exactly where it is and how to get into it.' He smiled at her affectionately. 'And you, of course.'

'Thank you, *mon cher*. And when do you intend to build it?'

'Oh, after I build this wall. I shall have to do some more study, draw up some plans ...'

'You can draw up these plans?'

'Not yet, but when I have studied a little and decided what I want, I will do it.'

'Oh.' She did not lend much credence to this, but the wall he was building looked, to her inexperienced eye, to be very natural, and she said so.

'That is the idea, Mademoiselle. If any should chance to discover it, from whichever side, they will think it the end of the passage and turn back.'

'How will you make the door?'

'I am still thinking about that: either wood covered by plaster of Paris, sculpted and painted to look like rocks, or real rocks set on a pivot, whichever I can manage best alone. When it is done I shall show you the mechanism to open it, and we two will be the only ones who know of it.' He took up his tools to resume his work.

Elise took the hint. 'Very well. I will come back with your *déjeuner*.'

While he worked, Angel was very tempted to make himself known to Cook, however large and formidable she was, but Elise's arrival with a totally scrumptious meal of roast duckling and vegetables changed his mind. As long as he had one delicious meal a day, he was prepared to suffer the Spartan suppers. And Cook, intuitively divining the approximate time of his morning appearances, took to leaving tasty breakfasts for him in the larder.

Angel now bent his mind to the study of architecture, engineering and stonemasonry. He worked hard on his plans; Ziggy always curled up somewhere close to him. Seeing him so preoccupied, Elise left him alone, except to bring his meals. In the interests of peace, she sealed her lips on her curiosity, tiptoeing away so as not to disturb him.

Easily obtaining the architect's seal of approval for his plans, he started work, thoroughly discomposing Elise, who knew nothing of his pact with Monsieur Dupont.

The cellar was in darkness. Elise, remembering what happened last time she had entered a darkened cellar, stepped back cautiously.

'Angel,' she called. 'I've brought your lunch. Angel? Where are you?'

'Over here.' A light appeared below a grubby face as he climbed through a ragged hole in the wall.

'But what are you doing? Demolishing the cellar?'

'Sort of,' he said. 'Come and see. I am making a moated palace like le Spectre's.'

Setting down the tray, she followed him through the hole, gazing around at what seemed to be a tiny island surrounded on three sides by narrow canals, and on the fourth by a dark tunnel.

She gasped in horror, 'But what is this? I don't understand. You have breached the foundations of the opera house?'

'No, no, these are only stormwater drains taking the water away from the foundations of the building. One small doorway will do no harm. Look, it is the end of the passage from the coach-house. I will brick up the other door into the cellar and divert it to here —— so. When I have finished, none but you or I will ever find the entrance.' He added humbly, 'It will not really be a palace, not the way le Spectre's is; and the moat will only have water in it when it rains, but that is of small moment. It is just that I have a design I want to try. Come, I will show you.'

He ducked back through the hole into the cellar, dragging her over to his draftsman's table, lighting more candles with the one he held, excitedly explaining the plans on the parchment before her. As far as she could see, it would be a chamber off the cellar with hidden doors to both the cellar and the secret passage, the end of which would be widened into a good living space.

'Very ingenious, my friend. That should keep you occupied for quite some time. But what has Monsieur Dupont to say about this?'

He grinned lopsidedly. 'I have not yet shown him, but he has already told me where I may find materials for it, and he said I may start as soon as I have an architect's seal of approval for my plans—and look—I have.'

Chapter 8

28 March 1872

We are in Uproar. Angel has refused Monsieur Dupont's Contract.

At the organ in the chapel, Monsieur Dupont wound up his lesson with Angel. 'Excellent, dear boy, excellent. Now, I think Elise has made some supper for us on the fire next door. Let us go and eat. I have something to say to you.'

Angel made no demur, for there was a wonderfully appetising aroma of freshly made toast and hot chocolate coming from the little room off the chapel, and it was a chilly night.

Elise, cheeks rosy from the heat of the fire, stopped buttering toast to pour chocolate from the pot on the hob, smiling a welcome as they entered. Monsieur Dupont took the cups from her and put them on the coffee table. She finished buttering the toast, cut it into fingers and brought it over.

'Thank you, my dear. Sit down and have your chocolate. Toast, Angel? Mmm, this is delicious. Is there anything nicer than hot toast made over the coals? A very good way to celebrate, is it not?'

'But, Monsieur Dupont, what are we celebrating?' A thought struck her. 'Is it your birthday?'

'No, Mignonne—and hardly cause to celebrate if it is. No, it is to do with Angel's musical studies.'

He turned to the boy sipping his chocolate and chewing methodically, mouth closed. *Natural manners*, he thought. *I wonder who he really is?* 'You have studied hard, dear boy, and you are ready now to sing, as we agreed. Provided you keep on with your lessons, you are, as of now, our resident boy soprano. Get out your most

attractive mask. You may have your first rehearsal onstage tomorrow.'

'But, Monsieur Dupont—I cannot—in front of people ...' He went white, except for the scarring, which stood out purple.

'But you will be masked, dear boy, and at that distance, no-one will know.'

'I cannot sing in a mask. I have tried, but I cannot. I cannot breathe —— move my face muscles. I am sorry.' His wretchedness was palpable. 'I want to do it, but I cannot. I am sorry, Monsieur, I have let you down; and I know that a man of honour does not ...' His head drooped.

Elise moved to put her arm around him. 'Never mind, dear. Monsieur Dupont will find a solution.'

'Will he, indeed?' murmured Monsieur Dupont. 'I hope so. Your faith in me is touching, my child. Hold hard, *mon fils*, we will do nothing to distress you. We will put off your debut for a little, while we think about it. But we must not leave it too long.'

'Why not?' asked Elise, over Angel's head.

From his face hidden in her shoulder came the muffled reply, 'Because I will not stay a soprano. Because when my voice ... breaks ... who knows what it will be?'

'Precisely, *mon cher*. Now, let me see if I have this right: if, by some means, I can arrange for you to sing unseen, you will honour your contract?'

Angel raised his head. 'Yes, Monsieur, but I do not see ... In the wings or behind the stage, my voice will not project.'

Elise, not a singer, cried, 'But, Monsieur, if he stood always with his good side facing the audience, he could do it.'

Monsieur Dupont shook his head. 'No good, Petite. His voice would disappear into the wings. He would need to be at least three-quarter facing the audience ...' His voice tailed off into thought, an intent look on his face. There was a point up high

where sound would be concentrated; it was part of the acoustics of the theatre. If he could find the exact spot and hide it from the audience by the angle of the curtain and one or two carefully placed mirrors ...

He turned to Angel. 'Do I have your word—remember, a man of honour does not go back on his word—that if I can arrange for you to sing unseen, then you will definitely sing?'

He nodded. 'Yes, Monsieur, you have my word. As long as I cannot be seen, I will sing.'

'Good. And how is your head for heights?'

'Fine.'

'Very well. Be ready to sing tomorrow.'

29 March 1872

Monsieur Dupont is busy finding a Place for Angel to sing.

Angel and Elise sat on their favourite ornamental wall in the garden, faces turned to the shaft of early spring sunshine peeking through the cloud. It did not matter that it was a trifle cold, for this little corner was sheltered from the chilly breeze, and it was private. They'd formed the habit of meeting here after Monsieur Dupont's warning to Angel about the need for fresh air, slipping away in spare moments to discuss their emerging philosophies on the world. It had been Elise's idea to combine a relaxing chat with a sojourn in the healthy outdoors, but lately their conversations had taken on a more serious flavour—ethics, joining their growing passion for justice, as a favoured topic. Sometimes their discussion became quite technical and heated, occasionally causing Angel to stamp away in frustration; but in the main, Elise—sensitive to his moods—was able to soothe him back to good humour before this point.

Today they were in the midst of a lively exchange on whether violence was a necessary evil for the dispensing of justice, when the carpenter's lad came up behind

them.

'Hey, Devil,' he called. 'Your platform is ready. Old Dupont wants you up on the stage now, to try it out.'

Without a word, Angel jumped down, punched him in the face and ran off towards the opera house.

'Oh.' The boy reeled against the wall, his hand to his bleeding nose. 'He's a brute. I'm going to tell Monsieur Dupont.'

'He should not do such things, of course. But you deserved it. If you tell Monsieur Dupont, I shall have to tell him why he did it. You must not call him names. He has had enough of such things.'

'But he *is* a devil. He puts nasty devices in my tool bag that jump out at me when I open it. He rigs up little explosives on the walls that go off when you hammer in the nails. Oh, I am sick of his practical jokes, I can tell you, and so is Master Hillier.'

'Very well. I shall try to talk to him when he has cooled off a little. But I don't understand why he has been doing these things to the carpenters and no-one else?'

The boy hung his head. 'He did ask Master Hillier if he could watch us work and help us, so that he could learn from us, but Master Hillier said that it would put him off his dinner if he had to look at his ugly face all day and told him to go away.'

'Oh!' Elise's cheeks reddened. 'That is disgusting, absolutely disgusting! Monsieur Dupont *shall* hear of this. And you can think yourself lucky that you've already got a blood nose or you'd have another one!' Seething, she marched off to find Angel.

Greeted by the sweet purity of his voice as she entered the auditorium, she sat down to listen, calming immediately.

'What do you think, my dear?' Monsieur Dupont's benevolent face appeared over the edge of the orchestra pit. 'How is the sound?'

'Perfect,' she said, and meant it.

Bien. You go off to lunch now, while Angel and I finish our rehearsal. You can take his *déjeuner* to him after that.'

She went away to think out how she could possibly explain to Angel that he must not react the way he had, even if it was, to some extent, justified.

§

He was already defensive when she entered the cellar, meeting her eyes from behind his draftsman's table. 'Don't look at me like that.'

'Like what, *mon cher*?' She set the tray down close to his hand.

He averted his eyes. 'You make me feel guilty.'

Tiens,' she said politely. 'And are you?'

'Elise, go away! Go and disconcert someone else.'

She tossed her head. 'You are rude—very rude!'

'And you are tiresome!' he flashed back, hurling the tray at her. 'Go away!'

Fortunately, it missed her, fetching up against a chest of drawers; the plate and glass smashing on the floor. Unwisely, she stood her ground, surveying the debris, unlike Ziggy, who had discreetly vanished at the first sound of his raised voice.

'Now, look what you've done, Angel. Cook will be furious. I shall have to clear it up.'

'Go away! Go away! Go away!' he shouted in mounting fury, beginning to launch at her whatever missile came to hand.

She tried to stand against the barrage, but after being struck by a glass

inkstand, a silver candlestick and two heavy books in quick succession, she gave it best.

Sobbing with distress, she ran from the room, clapping a hand to the back of her arm as she felt a sudden, sharp sting. The point of a compass, still attached to its pencil, was embedded deep in the flesh. Not even pausing in her flight, she pulled it out, dropping it in the doorway.

Blinded by tears, she ran into the arms of Monsieur Dupont on the second cellar stairs.

'Elise, my dear. Whatever is the matter? This is not like you.'

'It is Angel,' she sobbed. 'I don't understand him. I tried to—no, I did not even say a word before he started and then he ... he ...' She held out her arm.

'Oh, dear, dear. Give me your handkerchief, and I will bind it up for you. There.' He took her up to the chapel. 'Sit down, my dear. I think you had better tell me all about it.'

Afterwards, he did not speak for a little while, then he said, 'Do not blame yourself, Mignonne. Angel is not like other children. You had best leave this to me. Now, you go up and rest in your room for half an hour, and then go to practice. And Elise,' he added, 'I want you to stay away from Angel until he communicates with you in an acceptable manner. I know it will be hard, but you must do it for both your own sake and his. He must not be permitted to think of you as his possession. Perhaps you do not understand what I am saying here, but it is very important, Mignonne, and I want your promise that you will obey me in this.'

She stared at him, eyes wide and troubled. 'But—who will bring his food and care for him?'

'That is exactly my point, my dear. But do not fret, I shall not allow him to starve. Go on now.'

He waited until she had turned the corner and closed the door behind her

before turning away himself to resume his descent of the stairs.

'I see you were not hungry, my son.' Monsieur Dupont stooped to retrieve the compass, picking his way through the debris on the floor.

Angel started to rise to his feet from behind his desk.

'No, no, dear boy, do not get up on my account,' he said, removing the pencil and putting down the compass in front of him. 'One should take very good care of one's instruments,' he murmured, 'for the sake of accuracy. A very tiny deviation will put a building out by as much as one or two metres. And that would be disastrous, would it not? ... I shall sit in this armchair while we have a little chat.' He picked up Ziggy and sat her on his knee. 'Ah, very comfortable. Elise chose it for you, you know.'

Angel bowed his head, saying nothing, rubbing a hand over his scarred forehead.

'We men,' said Monsieur Dupont, tenting his fingers and rolling the pencil between them. 'We are strong, *n'est-ce pas*? Much stronger than *les femmes*, are we not? We can very easily hurt them, snap them like this pencil.' He held it up and did so, tossing the pieces to Angel. 'But because we are so much stronger, and it is easy for us to hurt them, we have a responsibility to protect them and to treat them kindly. *Les femmes*,' he mused, 'their very softness and sweetness is a comfort to us. Elise, for example, so gentle and good, so small and soft. Exquisite.' He kissed his fingers. 'Is it justice that she be hurt for her kindness, think you?'

'Arrrgh!' Angel grabbed up the compass and stabbed it violently into his arm, driving it to the bone, causing the cat to shriek and fly out of the room. 'There,' he said, 'I have paid for what I did to Elise. She has had justice.'

'No, my son.' Monsieur Dupont rose to his feet, dismayed. 'No. Do you think Elise would be happy to see you suffer? No and no, she would be hurt doubly. But you are on the right track in that you are sorry for what you did to her. You are, are you

not?' he said, pulling out the point and binding up Angel's arm with his own handkerchief.

'Yes,' he muttered. 'I did not mean it. I was angry.'

'Why were you angry with her, *mon fils*?'

'Because she was right. She always is—right.'

'Oh-ho,' laughed Monsieur Dupont. 'You will have to get used to that. Number one lesson in being a man: *les femmes*, they are always right. But seriously, you wish for justice for Elise? To make reparation?'

'Yes, Monsieur. I did not mean to hurt Elise. I would take it back if I could.'

'Another lesson, *mon cher*. There are many of us who feel that way and mourn forever. But I do not think your case is a lost cause.' He sat back and regarded the boy. 'So, tell me—what can you do to make Elise happy again?'

'I do not ... know.' He looked at him candidly. 'What would you do if you were me?'

I would not bite the hand that fed me, for a start. 'Oh, *les femmes*, they like an apology—that would be a good beginning. Perhaps you could tell Elise you did not mean it. Or a gift? Something you have made yourself—that will show you care.'

'*Quoi?*'

'Well, one of your fine drawings, perhaps? Or a carving, or sculpture? Or you might paint a fan for her? You will think of something she will like.'

'Yes, but ... what if ... she does not forgive me?'

'That is a risk, *bien sûr*. But I think she will forgive you, my son. She is very loving and compassionate.'

'Yes.' He put his head in his hands. 'But, *can* she forgive me?'

'That is just one of the many questions for which a man needs courage, *mon*

films. But there is a way to sound the waters. You can tell her how you feel without words. Get out the book *Manners and Conduct for a Contemporary Gentleman*—it is in your library here, somewhere. In it you will find the *Language of Flowers*. Then you can tell her how sorry you are by sending the right flowers. You see? It is a useful thing for a man to know. You never can tell when you may need it. Eh, *mon brave*.' He clapped him on the shoulder. 'I will leave you now.'

He turned back at the door. 'There is a temporary change in your meal arrangements. Cook will leave your tray on the table outside the basement door for you to collect at your leisure. *À bientôt*.'

Angel reddened. 'Yes, Monsieur.'

Monsieur Dupont's lessons soon hit home to Angel. His boring suppers that he was beginning to rail against were replicated in all the other meals left for him outside the basement door. But Monsieur Dupont had made it clear—if he wanted variety, he must make a friend of Cook or overcome his aversion to appearing in public and take his meals at the dining table.

He missed Elise, her warm, motherly presence, the way she supported him, entering into all his plans and providing a sounding board for his ideas. Not that she was anybody's puppet—oh, no, she had plenty of ideas of her own. And not afraid to voice them, either. *Nom d'un chien*, but he missed her.

At first, he raged, destroying paintings and manuscripts, venting his spleen by hurling small objects at the walls, before falling exhausted onto his palanquin. There he stayed for quite some time. He awoke thoughtful, and rose to tidy the mess; no mean feat. Satisfied, he reached for the book recommended by Monsieur Dupont, and two other botanical texts, studying them so hard that he forgot two of his meals before he surfaced, ravenous. Consequently, the tray having been taken away, he had to raid the pantry.

4 April 1872

I miss Angel, but Monsieur Dupont has made me Promise, and I cannot break it, on pain of Death. Poor Angel, I hope he has enough to eat, but he is so Stubborn

...

After foraging in various gardens, Angel went to Cook, bringing with him a bouquet of succulent herbs. 'Good morning, Madame. I am Angel. I have come to thank you for your so wonderful cuisine.'

'Ah, Petit—so you are the little mouse that takes the food from the larder, *hein?*'

'Yes, and it was very nice until Monsieur Dupont put a stop to it. I am fed up with bread and cheese.'

'Well, naturally. I wonder that you took it for so long. I have been in daily expectation of meeting you in my kitchen.'

'It was the lunches you sent me, Madame. I shall never forget the first one—the roast duckling—*magnifique.*' He kissed his fingers in the manner of Monsieur Dupont.

'*Mais, merci, mon chou.* And what is that you have there?'

He proffered the bouquet with a little bow. 'Fresh from the garden, Madame,' he said. 'You will be able to make a delightful sauce with these, *hein?*'

Not proof against the cajolery in the blue eyes, or the ordeal of a growing boy's hunger, Cook was pleased to accept them, and after a few minutes conversation, his obvious knowledge of their various culinary uses put her on her mettle.

'You shall try them in your *déjeuner,*' she promised. 'And you may call me Berthe. Oh, here, take a croissant, fresh out of the oven. Have two. Boys are always hungry.' She shooed him away, his immediate needs assuaged.

Pleased with the success of this venture, he went away to put the second into

operation.

§

Elise sat on the wall. She was lonely, but Monsieur Dupont's instructions had been clear. She was not to go near Angel until he had made at least one sincere gesture of remorse. She turned as she heard his voice.

'Elise? These are for you.' He was thrusting a bouquet at her.

'Oh, Angel.' She slipped off the wall and came over to take the flowers, her wide smile vanishing as she studied them. She looked up, her lips trembling, eyes full of reproach. 'This is a very sick joke. I did not think that even you would play a joke like that.'

'What do you mean? Cannot you read the flowers? I am saying I am sorry.'

'Is that what you think?'

'Yes.'

'Then, you should study the language more carefully.'

He glowered. 'Why?'

'These flowers are saying you are sorry I am dead. That is not very nice.'

'But, no,' he said. 'Look: *Je regrette infiniment*—see? The asphodel.'

'Yes: I am infinitely sorry that you are dead. The asphodel is right, but you see these marigolds? And the cypress? When you put them together that is what they mean—sorrow and death.'

'*Quoi?*' He stared at her in horror. 'Oh, Elise, I did not mean —— I like the asphodel, they are elegant, like you. But since they are all white, I added some colour and texture. I thought you would like the bright gold of the marigolds and the feathery

green with the little cones. Oh, that has just made everything worse! I am sorry for what I did. Even if you were dead—I am still sorry. What can I do?'

His dismay was so comical that she began to laugh. 'Nothing, you idiot. Come here.' She held out her arms. 'Of course, I forgive you, *mon cher*—of course.' Suddenly, it was exquisitely funny that Angel—who could solve the most incomprehensible mathematical problem, draw such complicated architectural plans, compose such convoluted music—could make so dire a mistake in his social address, all because his artist's eye had demanded he add texture and colour to a bouquet, without noticing the consequent change to his message.

He clasped her to him fondly, laughing with relief. 'Oh, thank you, dear. I will never try to hurt you again.'

She sighed. He was sorry he had hurt her. That was all she needed to resume her friendship with him. But why was she reminded of a child hugging his *poupée de chiffon*? She thought about what Monsieur Dupont had said about him regarding her as his possession. *Am I his rag doll?* Disengaging herself, she said, 'Shall I teach you the language of flowers?'

'No,' he said. 'I am not giving you flowers any more. I can think of much better gifts for you. And one more thing,' he added. 'If I do ever give flowers again, it shall be just one, and it shall be a red rose. Nobody can mistake the meaning of that.'

'No, *mon cher*. But—you must be very sure.'

'I will be. Shall you bring my supper tonight?'

23 April 1872

Angel and I, we performed together tonight. Gabby, our beautiful Gabby, came to watch us, but she left before we came offstage. She was heavily veiled, but I would know her anywhere. I was Heartbroken that she did not stay to talk with us.

The pure beauty of the voice stunned the patrons, surrounding them so that they could

not tell the direction of the singer. Monsieur Dupont, glancing over his shoulder, smiled at their obvious puzzlement. After several false starts and enough shifting of the platform to drive the carpenters demented, he had hit on the acoustically perfect spot—it was proven, here and now.

The audience and critics acclaimed it as one of the consummate performances of the season. The great bowls of flowers from the south released their nostalgic scent. The ballerinas on the stage defied gravity as they performed their graceful patterns; the music flattering and supporting them. The angelic voice completed the picture—exquisitely, aesthetically glorious—a banquet for all the senses.

Nobody knew that the beautiful little ballerina, La Belle, cried herself to sleep that night; her joy in her performance evaporating, because her friend and idol had not cared to come backstage to congratulate her or share even a hug.

Chapter 9

12 June 1872

Angel is very upset. Ziggy has gone missing.

'Berthe, Berthe. Have you seen Ziggy?' Angel erupted into the kitchen.

'Yes, Petit. She has been coming for her milk.'

'Oh, good. I was afraid she was dead. She hasn't been to visit me in my palace for ages.'

'Listen to it—palace, indeed.' Cook turned her eyes skyward. 'She is lucky she's not dead, my dear. She's gone and had her kittens in the linen press on a pile of the best clean sheets. Three times has the housekeeper had them removed to the loft over the coach-house, and three times has she brought them back. And what, with the laundry maid likely to have a breakdown—well, she has told Gaston he must drown them, and he has gone just this minute to do it.' She eyed his thunderous expression. 'You might just catch him ...' She turned back to the big black range as he sprinted down the hall. 'Ah, *le pauvre*,' she sighed, pensively stirring a pot of bouillon. 'So precipitous. Gaston will be lucky if he is not the one who is drowned ...'

She was right. Angel—running madly—fuelled by Ziggy's mournful wails as he passed the coach-house, saw Gaston lean out to drop the weighted sack in the duck pond. Before he could straighten up, he was sent flying into the water, the whole weight of Angel on his back. He gulped water, thrashing about, unable to rise, beginning to panic, and then unaccountably, he was free.

Angel plucked the bag out of the water, running back to the coach-house. Stooping to grab Ziggy with the other hand, he paused before the door of the secret passage to check that nobody was about, before reaching for the latch. Behind the

door, he lit one of the candles he kept there and began to untie the neck of the sack. Six squalling, shivering bundles were brought out and placed before their mother.

'All alive, Ziggy. Quickly, let us get them home and dry.' He scooped them up, tucking them down the front of his shirt

§

Elise found him in his palace, sitting on a rug in front of a brazier, carefully drying the kittens with a cloth and handing them over to Ziggy, stretched out, purring, beside him.

'We are lucky you caught them in time, *mon cher*. But what did you do to Gaston? He is saying you tried to drown him.'

His brows snapped together. 'Had I been trying to drown that—dog—he would be dead and saying nothing. I was angry enough, but these would have died, too. So, he was lucky.' He finished drying a little grey kitten and picked up a ginger one.

Elise watched him tenderly. 'It is a sad thing, *mon cher*, but kittens must be drowned—otherwise we would be overrun with cats. But you must not blame Gaston. He was only following orders.'

He stroked the ginger fur with one finger. 'He had better keep out of my way, then. He should not have done it. He should have checked with Monsieur Dupont. He would have told him to bring them to me. Ziggy's kittens will *not* be drowned!'

'But what will we do with them?'

'Find homes for them, of course—what do you think? That can be your job.'

'Oh, *merci*, Monsieur. And how shall I go about it?'

'You will think of something. Meanwhile, they can stay here with me—away

from that stupid Gaston and others like him. Imbecile! I wish I *had* drowned him.'

§

'Gaston, what has happened? You look as if you have fallen into the duck pond.' Monsieur Dupont stood back, observing him critically.

'I didn't exactly fall, Monsieur. I was pushed.'

'You distress me, Gaston. Are you going to tell me by whom? You have not been upsetting the maids, have you?'

'Of course not, Monsieur.' Gaston grew red to the ears. 'It was Angel. Madame Boucher told me to drown some kittens, and just as I put the sack in the water, he jumped on me, pushing me in. He took the kittens and disappeared into the coach-house and never came out. The mother cat is missing, too.'

'*Eh bien,*' said Monsieur Dupont. 'It is a great relief to me to know that the boy has some proper human feeling.'

'But he hasn't, Monsieur. I thought he was going to drown me.'

'You may rest assured that he has. In fact, you owe your life to it, if I am not mistaken. Next time the housekeeper orders you to drown kittens, do it while he is not about—or better still—do not do it. Take them to Madame Aranova's estate to keep the rats out of her barn. And, Gaston?'

'Yes, Monsieur?'

'Go and find some dry clothing and wash your hair. You have pond weed in it.'

13 June 1872

Madame Aranova gave us a Solution for the kittens and sent Angel an Invitation.

This is a great Honour, but I am afraid he does not see it that way.

'Elise, *ici!*' Madame Aranova called her over after practice. 'Can this be true what I have been hearing? That Angel has actually attempted to *drown* Gaston? *Du vrai*, there must be a little more to the story than that!'

'Oh yes, Madame, there is, indeed. It is because of Ziggy's kittens.' Elise recounted to her all she knew, wiping away a tear as she told her mentor how she'd found Angel drying the bedraggled little creatures and handing them over to their mother. 'He absolutely refuses to let them be drowned, Madame.'

Madame Aranova clasped her hands. 'Ah, the little Angel! Is he not *épris*? But, how sweet! To fight for the lives of the poor little kittens. Such chivalry! ... You may tell him that I will need them on my estate to deal with the mice.' She threw wide her arms. 'So many mice, you would not believe! ... But poor Gaston,' she said, her eyes crinkling. 'It was not his fault, but he will have to keep away from Angel. That boy must have great strength to have overpowered one so much older than himself.' She fell silent, turning her rings the way she did when deep in thought. Then she tapped Elise's arm. 'Angel needs an avenue for his energy. Elise, you must tell him I have invited him to join my ballet classes. If nothing else, it will be good for his deportment.'

When Elise relayed Madame Aranova's invitation, Angel stared at her, open-mouthed. 'Elise, she must be joking!'

'*Non*, she's not. She is perfectly serious.'

'Me? Prance around like those other idiots? She cannot be.'

'She is, *mon cher*. She said it will be good for your deportment.'

'Good for my deportment? Does she think I am a little ballerina?' He shook his head. 'Madame Aranova is a *grande dame*, but I cannot see myself ... I don't wish to disappoint her, but ... You can tell her. You can explain to her better than me that I do not want—that I cannot ——' He turned abruptly and began to stride away.

'Wait! Don't you want to hear about the kittens?'

'I will keep them.'

'You cannot, *mon cher*. There are too many.'

He shrugged. 'I like them.'

'Madame Aranova says we can take them to her barn. She says she has a mouse plague.'

'Very well, if Madame Aranova needs them, she can have them; but not just yet. They are too young. We will take them when we go there in the holidays. That is not so far off,' he said, hurrying away and leaving her sitting there.

She was thoughtful. Did Angel really ridicule the thought of ballet for men? Or was it just that he was afraid to show himself?

Chapter 10

21 September 1873

Today a Prince watched me dance. I did not like his eyes.

In the *salle de danse*, Elise had an uncomfortable feeling of being watched. She turned to see a man staring at her. He was handsome in an arrogant, thin-lipped way. His fair hair waved neatly back from his brow, and he was dressed in high fashion. He stood motionless as she faced him before she averted her eyes from the intensity of his gaze, passing him in silence on her way to the barre.

'Stay away from him,' said Micheline, noting his interest. 'He bites. No, I mean—literally.'

'But who is he?' Elise shivered. 'He stares like a madman.'

'That is because he is one. If you have not already been warned about him, you will be—as we all have. It is just that he has not been here for quite a while. Don't look at him,' she advised. 'Act as if he isn't there. I'll tell you all about the Black Prince later.'

As they practised, the prince continued to stare unnervingly, and almost exclusively, at Elise. Micheline, keeping an anxious eye on her, said later, 'It looks as if you have attracted his attention. That is a great pity. He is a very dangerous man, *ma chère*. You must stay well away from him. Promise me?'

'Of course.' She shivered. 'He is creepy. I will keep away.'

10 January 1874

A coup! Madame Aranova has finally managed to interest Angel in Dance, even

though he remains steadfast in his refusal to join our classes.

Madame Aranova stood in the *salle de danse* talking to Monsieur Dupont.

'*Bonjour*, Madame, Monsieur.' Angel, running past and leaping lightly down the stairs, interrupted their conversation.

'He is growing into a beautiful young man, such elegant muscling, lithe, tall, well-knit; such eyes ...'

Monsieur Dupont looked at her closely. 'Yes, his case is a sad one. He cannot see past his disfigurement.'

'No? Such a shame, when he has that dark beauty, an air of mystery, such presence,' she murmured. 'I would have him in an instant, if he ...'

In her eyes was a look of such speculation and longing that Monsieur Dupont exploded: 'Madame! Do I understand you correctly? You will not tell me that you nourish sentiments for this young boy that are most improper and, indeed, abhorrent!'

Her colour rose, eyes flashing magnificently. 'Anton! I do not know how you can say such a thing to me. If you cannot see that in every line of him he has written male ballet star of the most stunning and spectacular quality, then I am as much mistaken in you as you seem to be in me.'

'I apologise for my degree of obtuseness, my dear Natasha. I see now, you only covet him as a dancer. But you do admit you do covet him?'

'Frankly, yes Anton, I do. But I understand why you were so quick to jump to conclusions. Gentlemen of all ages—it is too much, is it not? The way they are slavering over the girls at practice. And that prince—I am terrified of him, Monsieur—an evil being if ever I saw one.'

'I know. I, too, am worried. But there is little that can be done about him since he is royalty—of a kind—other than to warn the girls not to allow him to get them alone. There is no doubt that his designs are evil, but he has not gone so far that he will

flout society. Fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know which—he is a coward. It will not do to openly offend him, but somehow, we must ensure that the girls are protected.'

'I have already thought of that, Monsieur, and have sent for my Cossack dancers. You will insert them into the programme somewhere, and nobody will be any the wiser that they are not only dancers but trained warriors. They will maintain a twenty-four hour guard over our girls.'

'Well done, Madame. Very well thought out,' he approved. 'In that case ...' His eyes twinkled. 'In that case, with them at my back, I shall take leave to tell all those gentlemen a few home truths about the *salle de danse*. *Merci*, Madame.'

'You must take care, Monsieur. This prince, he may not be as amenable to society as you think. Yuri has found out that he has already committed murder—several times. I think he is a worse villain than you know.'

'All the more reason to warn him away, then.'

'Perhaps you are right. But, Monsieur ...'

'Yes?'

'The boy: Angel. Do you not think ...?'

He smiled. 'I will ask him, Madame, but I do not like your chances. You realise how much his disfigurement colours his life, do you not? He will only sing if he is hidden from sight.'

'But he could wear a mask. Everything is beautiful, except one tiny part. A mask would give him an air of mystery and enigma. Oh, he would be—*épatant!*'

'I am afraid he will not see it like that, my dear Natasha.'

'Ah, but it will be so romantic, Anton. A lone male dancer: a masked lion amidst the delicate ballerinas.' She heaved a sigh.

Monsieur Dupont, in his kind way, said nothing.

But when Monsieur Dupont tactfully broached the matter, Angel was unequivocal. 'Non, Monsieur, I will not don tights and slippers and prance around the stage like those other idiots. A mask? Hah! Hot and sweaty, blinding me. And what happens if it comes loose while I am gyrating around or trying to catch that baby elephant, Edith? It will frighten the audience and put them off—if they are not already put off by her.'

'My son, that is unkind.'

'But true,' he muttered.

'For myself, I do not mind if you wish to stand hidden on your platform and sing every night—*eh bien*, it is enough for me and your audiences, *bien sûr*—but not for you. You must learn muscle coordination. You must develop your constitution, my boy, for your health. Your chosen abode and all your study will compromise your lungs if you do not exercise.'

'But, Monsieur Dupont, I climb all around the stage, up and down ropes to the rafters, helping with the scenery ... What is that?' He ran to the edge of the orchestra pit, looking over to see a band of fit men in jaunty uniforms—fur hats and shining top boots—march into the entrance foyer and turn towards the *salle de danse*.

Monsieur Dupont joined him. 'Madame Aranova's Cossack dancers,' he replied, looking sideways at the boy. 'Now, there's a thought ...'

'Very well,' said Angel, standing straight as a die, suppressed excitement gleaming in his eyes. 'I am prepared to learn all that a Cossack can teach me. But please, not in public. Not in the *salle de danse*.' His eyes beseeched him.

'Where, then?'

He looked about him. 'Here,' he said, 'on the stage, behind closed curtains, early in the morning.'

29 March 1874

How shall I dance tomorrow? Edith is a Cow and a Bully. Ever since Gabby left, and Micheline took her place, she has just got meaner and meaner. Dear, kind Gabby, how I miss her! I keep a look out for her when we perform, but I have not seen her since the day Angel first sang for us. It still hurts that she did not stay to speak to me, but perhaps she had a reason. And if she comes tomorrow, it will be too bad; for I shall not be able to show her my best.

END OF FREE SAMPLE

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About the Author



Anne Rouen

Anne Rouen is an Australian historical fiction author whose writing is inspired by the opulent operatic era of 19th century France. This passion was ignited from delving into her own French heritage, and a lifelong love of historical fiction writing of a similar ilk to Georgette Heyer.

And so, inspiration for *Master of Illusion* and its upcoming 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.

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Throughout her career, Lynn has escaped the everyday demands of work through the hand of Anne Rouen. Although *Master of Illusion* is her first published novel, she has seen success with her short story writing and recently achieved 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 at:

www.AnneRouen.com/blogspot/, where she chats about her firsthand experience beating breast cancer and other current issues that are close to her heart.