



Master of Illusion

BOOK II

Anne Rouen

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Master of Illusion Book II by Anne Rouen

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Table of Contents

Master of Illusion—Book Two

[Prologue](#)

Part One: [The Opéra Magique](#)

Chapter One: [À Succés](#)

Chapter Two: [The Tuscan Warbler](#)

Chapter Three: [Le Marché](#)

Chapter Four: [Le Mécène](#)

Chapter Five: [Betrayal](#)

Chapter Six: [Les Décisions de L'amour](#)

Chapter Seven: [Broken Dreams](#)

Chapter Eight: [Vanity and Revenge](#)

Chapter Nine: [Dark Humour](#)

Chapter Ten: [Philippe](#)

Chapter Eleven: [The Oracle](#)

Chapter Twelve: [The Halcyon Years](#)

Chapter Thirteen: [Cèline](#)

Chapter Fourteen: [Better Not to Intervene ...](#)

Chapter Fifteen: [Imprévu](#)

Chapter Sixteen: [Dust and Ashes](#)

Chapter Seventeen: [Requiem](#)

Part Two: [Lost](#)

Chapter One: [A Gypsy Curse](#)

Chapter Two: [Amitié ou Amour?](#)

Chapter Three: [The Heir](#)

Chapter Four: [The Château du Bois](#)

Chapter Five: [A Name, at Last!](#)

Chapter Six: [Justice](#)

Chapter Seven: [An Unsuitable Lover](#)

Chapter Eight: [Roller-Coaster](#)

Chapter Nine: [The Soirees](#)

Chapter Ten: [A Studied Slight](#)

Chapter Eleven: [A Proposition](#)

Chapter Twelve: [Let Paris Talk](#)

Chapter Thirteen: [Summer in Provence](#)

Chapter Fourteen: [A Secret Love](#)

Chapter Fifteen: [One Shock after Another](#)

Chapter Sixteen: [At Death's Door](#)

Chapter Seventeen: [One Frightful Day](#)

Part Three: [Angelique](#)

Chapter One: [A Diva, for Certain](#)

Chapter Two: [Persona Non Grata](#)

Chapter Three: [La Belle Époque](#)

Chapter Four: [A Midsummer Miracle](#)

Chapter Five: [Old Ghosts](#)

Chapter Six: [Angel of Light; Darkest of Devils](#)

Chapter Seven: [Return to the Opéra Magique](#)

Chapter Eight: [A New Star](#)

Chapter Nine: [The Immortality of Love](#)

Chapter Ten: [Le Perdu](#)

Chapter Eleven: [The Debutante](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[More Books by Anne Rouen](#)

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Prologue

3 December 1929

‘Book two,’ read the publisher, taking down the manuscript. He kicked the fire into some semblance of life, recharged his coffee cup from the pot on the hob and retired to his favourite armchair. ‘Continuing the tale of the Master of Illusion from the diaries of Madame Dupont and other illuminating sources, including the secret files of the Master himself. And now, the promised revelations ...’

Part One

The Opéra Magique

Chapter One

À Succès

Almost midnight, 21 April 1892

*Our greatest Triumph! The culmination of all that we have worked for: a Zenith beyond our dreams.
Yet, it is my Nadir.*

He was laughing at her, she knew, something he had always done. Once it had been with affection, but now the malice was overt, tangible. From the day they had met as children they had been close. He, the younger, had always depended on her, listened to her counsel and, in male fashion, protected her; their lives irrevocably intertwined. Until Katarina's wedding day. From then on, Elise's life had, literally, been in the balance, as he struggled with his fury towards her. And now, it was hard, all too hard. Katarina would be back soon. And what then?

She began to feel ill. Would he never forgive her? Was she to be punished forever? Without another word, she got up and left their little party, stumbling over to the door, fumbling the handle, pausing for a moment in the outer dressing-room to take herself in hand.

‘Madame?’ called Sprite. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Leave her,’ said the Master. ‘Madame is exhausted by her evening and must needs retire. Perhaps the champagne has gone to her head?’

She gave a little sob. *Oh, the — How dare he? I have taken the veriest sip!*

‘Speaking of which,’ he added, ‘you are being very clutch-fisted with it, Maestro. Recharge, *s'il vous plaît.*’

‘I am sorry, Monsieur.’ Monsieur Merignac hastened to repair his omission. ‘I was thinking

...’

‘Well, see that you do not do it. It does not suit you.’ The glasses clinked. ‘*Salut.*’

Heedless of the tears, Madame Dupont ran down the backstairs littered with drunken bodies, averting her eyes from abandoned embraces, unable to maintain sufficient sangfroid to return to the more civilised party in the foyer.

Crossing the square to her house, she thought about the story of the angel and the apostle John, about the little book that tasted like honey in the mouth but made the belly bitter. She knew just how he must have felt. Their Opéra Magique—its Grand Opening, the sweetness of their triumph, the magnificent after party—all turned to bitterness at his treatment of her. Yet, she had not been subjected to rudeness or violence, only a subtle undercurrent of anger. Debilitating, corrosive, relentless ...

Five am, 22 April 1892

The Reviews. Dare I open them? Will they be filled with Praise or Ridicule? Or worse—Danger and Death?

‘Good morning, Madame. I have brought to you the newspapers and the mail, the minute they arrived, as you requested.’

‘Oh, thank you, Marie.’ She did not look up from her stretching exercise at the barre. ‘Put them down there and tell Berthe to send a tray of coffee to the Master's dressing-room. *Merci.*’

Deliberately, she made herself finish her morning routine before she went to the side table to pick up a paper. Turning to the entertainment section, she gasped, closing it quickly.

Forgetting her distress at their previous encounter, she gathered up the bundle and ran to Angel's apartment, throwing them onto the tray with the coffee and, mindful of the hour, tapped lightly on his door.

‘Monsieur? Monsieur?’ She spoke quietly, so as not to disturb him if he had not yet risen from his bed. ‘Are you awake?’

The door swung open of itself, as before, but this time she entered, looking about for him.

‘What is it, Madame? You are up very early for someone who was celebrating to all hours.’

‘And you, Monsieur. I thought I may have woken you.’

‘No, no, I was working. Early morning is the best time for composing, before the world violates my doorstep.’ He rose from behind a small instrument to take the tray from her. ‘I see you come bearing gifts.’

‘*Oui*. But you have bought another clavichord.’ She seemed uncertain. ‘I did not get you one, because I was not sure ... that is, I did not want to ... to remind you if ——’

‘Very thoughtful of you, Madame. It is the first glimmer of sensitivity I have seen in you for quite some time.’

‘Please ...’

‘Ah, I see. You have brought to me the newspapers. Come, sit down. Let us see what the critics have had to say about our debut. But I expect you know, already. Tell me, is it good news or bad? It has to have been one or the other to have brought you here at this hour.’

‘I have had the veriest peek at a headline, but I would not read it without you, my dear. However, I think we do have something to celebrate.’

‘*Du vrai? Eh bien*, pour the coffee, Madame, while I read out to you the salient points.’

He opened the first paper, beginning to laugh. ‘Oh, listen to this one: “The Promethean Fountain, showering fire that does not burn, just one of the wonders we witnessed at the Grand Opening of the Opéra Magique with that peerless magician”—peerless magician, indeed. I wonder who writes this rubbish?—“the Master of Illusion”. And so it goes on. Oh, here is another piece: “Madame Dupont is *femme formidable*”—oho, they got that right!—“in her assessment of the mood of the public. Her mix of entertainment was exactly right, *épatant*”. Whose assessment of the public? Madame Dupont, indeed.’ He took a sip of coffee, shuffling through another newspaper. ‘I shall get a big head if I keep reading these reviews, Madame. What do you think of this one? “A voice that is Perfection”—with a capital, mark you—“itself. Unknown sorcerer puts spell over opening night of Opéra Magique. Brave Madame Dupont did not miss her tip when she selected an Unknown”—also with a capital—“as the star of her opera house”. Brave Madame Dupont?’

‘I think I am, Monsieur. Very brave.’

‘Foolhardy, you mean.’ The menace was back in his eyes as he lowered them to the article.

For a short time, there was only the rustling of paper while they searched through the remainder of the reviews.

At last, Madame Dupont looked up, refilling their coffee cups. ‘Have you noticed something, Monsieur?’

‘What? Apart from each of us having to buy a new hat at least two sizes larger? Or do you mean, not one negative comment? Or that my ideas for our mix of entertainment have been attributed to you?’

She smiled. ‘None of those, Monsieur. No, it is something I have been very much dreading. In fact, it kept me awake for the better part of the night. But there has not been one mention of the similarity of your voice to a tenor from the past, despite some rather significant comments from at least two of the critics. I think we are safe, my dear.’

‘*Eh bien*, so it would seem.’

‘It must be because your voice has developed and matured. It was something the marquise du Melande said to me after your aria. I was so afraid that she would recognise you. Because, you know, if anyone could, it would be her.’

‘And did she?’

‘No, well ... She said straight out that your voice reminded her of Angel, but it could not be, because yours has so much more depth and colour than his.’

‘Hmm. Monsieur Merignac said something similar about my music.’

‘*Eh bien*, you see? Did I not tell you?’

‘Indeed, you did, but I shan't let you crow.’ His eye fell to the tray. ‘Is that the post?’ he said, rifling through it to snatch up a pink envelope, its heavy scent wafting upwards.

She wrinkled her nose. ‘Faugh! How can you stand that perfume? Stench, rather!’

‘I like it. Do not you?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

She shrugged, wondering if he had, after all, found himself a *chère amie*. Someone from the demimonde, judging by the cloying strength of the scent. Perhaps that was why he was so secretive about these communications that arrived with clockwork regularity every week, because he knew she would not approve. ‘It is heavy ... smells too much of musk.’

He sat back, a gleam in his eye. ‘It reminds me of *les femmes* in the full bloom of

womanhood.’

This was too much. ‘Yes, and I know which ones! Such *femmes* use it in the false belief that it will cover the malodour of their unwashed persons.’

‘Is that so? The stench of unwashed humanity is particularly pungent. Not at all like this. I can see that you, Madame, have never lived on the street.’

‘And now, you are going to say that I should be thankful for it.’

‘No, but knowing the kind of person you are, I am sure that you do regularly render up such thanks.’

‘One should count one's blessings, Monsieur.’

‘Undoubtedly.’ His fingers closed briefly on her wrist, to the point of agony. ‘One does not then have to face the reality of one's disappointments.’

‘Oh, my dear ...’ *Such bitterness!* She did not know how to answer this, rallying to change the subject: ‘So ... are you going to let us meet her?’

‘Her?’

‘Your perfume-loving correspondent.’

‘Why should I?’

‘Well ... she writes so regularly.’

‘She? How do you know it is a woman?’

Pink envelope? Overpowering scent? ‘I, er ... I assumed.’

‘And did you also assume that the return address is, perhaps, a bordello?’

‘Of course not! I ——’

‘It can be dangerous, sometimes, to make assumptions, Madame. You will do well to remember it. And now, if you do not mind, I must get back to my work.’

‘But wait, Monsieur. *Un moment*, if you please?’

‘What is it?’

‘You have not forgotten that we have been invited to the soiree of the comtesse de la Roche-Carillac?’

‘Oh.’ He waved a hand. ‘I cannot go. I have some music to compose. It has been teasing my brain for weeks, and now our Grand Opening is out of the way, I must get it down.’

‘But it is not until Tuesday, and the marquise du Melande is her special guest. Last night, she asked me specifically for your attendance, because she is determined to make your acquaintance. You will have finished your composition by then, will you not?’

‘*Mais non!* It is complex. You go. Say all that is proper to the comtesse and present my most profound apologies to the marquise.’

‘One day the marquise is going to see right through you, *mon cher*, without doubt. This is the second time that I have had to present your apologies.’

‘Do you think she will not, already? There is only one thing she cares about. As long as I continue to deliver my music to the expected standard, she will forgive me.’

‘Such conceit! You are spoilt and deserve nothing of the kind.’ But she knew he was right. And perhaps he was wise. Madame la marquise had been Angel's greatest supporter. Just because she thought the Master so much better than Angel did not preclude her from ever working out who he was.

26 April 1892

Is it not Angel all over to do this? I am always having to Make Shift for him.

‘Madame Dupont!’

She smiled, waiting for the duchesse de Belvoir who was gliding towards her: svelte and elegant. ‘How do you do, Madame?’

‘Delightfully, Madame, now that I meet with you, at last. My felicitations on the stunning success of your Grand Opening. I looked for you at your afterparty but could not find you. Such a press!’ Her light eyes were warm and friendly, full of laughter. ‘We, the duc and I, enjoyed your show very much.’

‘I am honoured and enchanted to hear it, Madame. Your approval means very much to me. Thank you.’

‘Your talent does not wane, *bien sûr!* Now, tell me ...’ The duchesse, tucking Madame

Dupont's hand in her arm, moved away with her to a quiet corner.

‘Well!’ said the comtesse de la Roche-Carillac, bearing down upon them with the marquise du Melande. ‘That will be the end of any questions anyone else wants to ask Madame Dupont, until the duchesse sees fit to release her. She has taken a great fancy to her. Literally pounces on her, my dear. I believe they met at her wedding. Madame Dupont organised it for her. Well, for the duc, really, and ever since then, from what I have heard and seen for myself, the duchesse goes out of her way to speak with her.’

‘Indeed?’ said the marquise, fanning herself. ‘Taken a fancy to her, has she? It must run in the family, then.’

‘What? You do not mean the duc? Oh, I do not think so, Madame. He hardly gives her the time of day.’ She looked at the other's inscrutable face and smiled. ‘Oh, your little jokes ... so delightful, Madame.’

‘*Merci*. But what makes you think I was joking?’

The comtesse gave her tinkle of laughter. ‘I know you, Madame. You and your wicked, wicked sense of humour. Ah, here we are now. If I distract the duchesse, you will be able to have your word with Madame Dupont.’

‘No.’ The marquise shut her fan with a snap. ‘It amuses me much more to watch the machinations of the duchesse.’ She shook her head. ‘The lengths to which she will go in order to please that husband of hers. Myself, I would rather slap him in the face with a wet mackerel.’ Her eyes twinkled at the shocked mien of the comtesse. ‘To bring his head out of the clouds, so that he sees what's under his nose,’ she explained, then shrugged. ‘As you say, my deplorable sense of humour. Come.’ She took the arm of her hostess. ‘You may lead me to your supper table. I have suddenly discovered an appetite.’

The comtesse, staring at her aghast, was obedient to the tug on her arm. She murmured an appropriate answer, wondering, all the while, whether others of the *le beau monde* were aware that the marquise du Melande was showing the first signs of senility.

Chapter Two

The Tuscan Warbler

27 April 1892

Does our House have need of a Soprano? Certainement. But after Sophranie, I have steered clear of such Troublesome creatures.

Taking the post from Marie, Madame Dupont placed it on the hall table and, recognising the writing of the comte de Villefontaine, took up the top envelope. A little shiver of disquiet ran through her. Why had Xavier written and not, as always, Katarina? With trembling fingers, she broke open the seal to unfold a sheet of expensive, crested notepaper:

Dear Madame,

Since I have so basely stolen your Resident Soprano, I have taken the Liberty of sending you Another in her stead. Her name is Signora Rosetti, and she is very famous here in Vienna; a court Favourite, known as the Tuscan Warbler—and it is no misnomer—believe me. I have found her curiously fluted notes most Captivating, and even Katarina admits that her voice is unusual. In my humble opinion, she is, indeed, a Songbird; and I trust that you will be delighted with her. In my capacity as your Patron, I have engaged her for the Season at no cost to you.

‘Xavier,’ she breathed, ‘how dare you ...?’ And then she saw the arrival date of the diva. Today. Now! This letter must have been delayed in transit.

Gathering up her skirts to run, she shouted, ‘Marie, *ici!* At once!’

‘Yes, Madame?’ The parlourmaid caught up with her on the stairs.

‘Remove all my belongings from my suite and have it prepared for immediate occupation. You may take my things to Sophranie's old room for now. Get as many girls as you need to help you, and do it as soon as possible. We have a famous soprano arriving at any minute and no suitable accommodation ready for her.’

‘Yes, Madame. But what about you?’

‘Sophranie's bedchamber will do me very well until we have another suite of rooms redecorated. *Bien!* I must go.’

She sped across the square and into the opera house, calling for Gaston, as a light travelling chaise and a large *fourgon* came into view. Standing back to wait until the woman alighted with the assistance of her maid and manservant, she came forward, holding out a hand. ‘Signora Rosetti? Pray forgive me. I have just this instant received the delightful intelligence that you have come to us, the comte's letter having been quite tiresomely delayed. Please forgive the random nature of your reception, and allow me to welcome you, most sincerely, to the Opéra Magique.’

‘How do you do, Madame?’ The diva, a slim brunette, having touched her hand, began to walk up the steps into the foyer. ‘Yes, this is a very nice house—as the young comte took pains to assure me. Such a sweet young man with his dear little wife. A very lucky young woman, do you not think? He has such a charming way with him.’

‘Indeed, Signora.’

‘*Oh mio Dio!* Grand in the extreme, is it not?’ she exclaimed, looking about. ‘Yes, I shall sing very well here. Your beautiful stage will do me the justice my singing deserves. The little comte was right—ah, he was so kind!—in saying this house was a fitting bower for me. Do you know, he said to me that however magical I found it that it would not be more magical than my voice? Is that not charming, Madame? And now, I say in my turn that the Opéra Magique is indeed a magical place. Quite, too enchanting.’

‘Thank you, Signora, I am delighted that it receives your approval. Excuse me for one second, if you please. Gaston, take the Signora's baggage to the resident soprano's suite on the third floor of the Académie.’

‘But ...? Don't you mean the second floor suite, Madame?’

‘No, I mean the third.’ Her manner was distinctly cool. ‘Did I not say so? Have you forgotten that Madame Le Brun has the second floor suite?’

‘You will need to accommodate my maid and my dresser close by,’ said Signora Rosetti, drawing herself up. ‘Also, my horses, my carriage, my groom and my coachman.’

‘But certainly, Signora. Gaston will see to it. Come, let me take you on a tour of the opera house, where you shall view your dressing-room and meet our conductor.’

Gaston, staring after her in disbelief, roused himself to direct the luggage coach to the other side of the square. Before opening night, he'd tried to warn her of the danger she faced from Angel; and all he'd gotten for his pains was a fury he had never seen from her and, ever since, a chilling indifference that broke his heart. And now—he hardly believed he'd heard aright—she was moving out of her apartment for this strange and demanding foreigner.

Signora Rosetti appeared to go into raptures over her surroundings. ‘This stage, he is lovely—ah, like no other!—and Monsieur Merignac and his orchestra? *Wunderbar!* As they say in Vienna. They shall play for me, *hein?* You will indulge me, Madame? Ah, good. I shall exhibit to you my so glorious voice, given to me by God, who has, as my cherished papa was fond of saying, caressed my vocal cords with a golden finger. I shall sing the same, very technically difficult, song that so enchanted the little comte. Thus, I shall reveal to you that my sobriquet “The Tuscan Warbler” is certainly well merited.’

‘Signora, we shall be enchanted. But will you not first take some refreshment after your journey? And then, when I have assembled an audience from the rest of my artists, we shall have our great treat.’

‘Very well. I shall take a little wine and a meringue. I do not eat at this hour. And when you are assembled in your boxes and, perhaps, your gallery, I shall sing to you *The Laughing Song* by Johann Strauss the Younger from *Die Fledermaus* as my introduction to your house. It will also help me decide whether your acoustics are good enough for me to show off my voice, for if not, I very much regret that I must decline the so flattering offer of your patron, the comte.’

‘Oh, indeed, I think you will find the acoustics all they should be, Signora. Now, if you would oblige me by resting in your dressing-room, I shall send to you the promised refreshments and your maid.’

‘*Grazie*. And do not forget my dresser. I shall be ready to sing in half an hour, and I do not like to be kept waiting.’

‘Oh, indeed not, Signora. We shall all be waiting in the greatest anticipation, *je vous assure*.’

‘Who is this woman?’ asked the Master, when she had got him to the box.

‘Signora Rosetti: the Italian diva.’

‘I can see she is Italian, but what is she doing here?’

‘Xavier has not only recommended her, but has paid her salary for the season.’

‘You will not allow it!’

She shrugged. ‘I only found out about it this morning. What can I do?’

‘That depends upon whether she can sing.’

And if she can't, she thought, Xavier, if the Master doesn't murder you, I will ...

Signora Rosetti had a light, sweet, rather quavery voice, but as the song progressed it became apparent that the aria she had chosen was a little too difficult for her: several of her notes not quite making it. Whether this was because the diva had not taken the time to warm up her voice after travelling for so many days or due to a natural deficiency, she could not tell, but glancing sideways at the Master, Madame Dupont knew they were in for trouble. He was silent: lips folded uncompromisingly. *Xavier, we are both going to kill you ...*

‘Too much vibrato,’ he said, under the cover of their applause at the end of the aria. ‘But you know that.’

She nodded. ‘Yes, it is a little wobbly, but it is not bad, I think.’

‘A little? *Bien sûr*, Madame, what do you mean: “a little”? If her voice were a bicycle, she would fall off it!’

‘Oh, Monsieur.’ She smothered a laugh. ‘You must not exaggerate ...’

‘And her high notes are off-key. It is particularly annoying and does not belong in an opera house.’

‘Would you go that far, my dear? It is only rarely and very slightly in her ornamentation. That aria, it is very difficult.’

‘I know, but she cannot maintain her voice quality at such times—a very serious fault.’

‘Yes, I must admit that she does become a little flat on occasion.’

‘You are too kind, Madame. But while you are “admitting” ... here and now, you may admit to me that she sounds exactly like a hen about to present her master with his breakfast egg!’

‘Oh, *mon cher!*’ This time, she could not help laughing. ‘What a scandalous thing to say! But

she could be improved, do you not think?’

‘No.’ He nodded towards the diva regally accepting the applause. ‘She believes she is perfect: look at her. She would not accept a criticism, however constructive. I would not waste my breath.’

‘That is very true. I have read that about her somewhere ...’

‘But you do not expect me to sing with her?’ Reading her expression, he said, ‘Oh no, Madame, no. You must get rid of her.’

‘How can I? I cannot turn off a famous diva without a reason other than you will not sing with her.’

‘Why not? It is the best reason.’

‘But ...’

He sighed. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘I was thinking that if she sang less demanding arias ... If you wanted, you could compose some to suit her voice, disguise her shortcomings and emphasise her good points. She is a gift from the comte, *mon cher*.’

‘There is only one thing that I want from the comte.’

Thinking it safer to ignore this, she said, ‘Most of our audiences would be very happy with her voice. It has a certain haunting quality that is very alluring. It would be only the marquise du Melande ——’

‘Would it?’

‘And the other thing is: are we ready for a battle of epic proportions? For she will not go quietly, that I promise you. She will say she only answers to the comte.’

‘Very well, if you will not do it, then ——’

‘No, no, you must keep well away from her, for I have remembered what it is I read about her. Any criticism of her voice will spring the biggest tantrum. Oh, no, you must not go anywhere near her! Please, Monsieur, can we not compromise on this? She is not *that* bad.’

‘To *you*, perhaps not. But I cannot stand her.’ He bent a stern eye to her. ‘Pay attention to me, Madame. I—will—not—sing—with—her. And I will not have her ruining my compositions by her so-called singing. Get rid of her. Because if you do not, I will. Have I made myself clear?’

‘Oh, infinitely, Monsieur. But what are we going to do? We need a soprano.’

‘Not one like her! Forget your ideas of a soprano. You seem to be going from bad to worse. What is wrong with putting on a ballet—say, perhaps, *Cleopatra*?’

‘*Cleopatra*? Why not *Le Château Enchanté*?’

‘Because, my dear, while it will do the patrons no harm to remind them of La Belle, it could be deleterious to both of us to remind them of Angel. I thought you would be able to see that. Not to mention the fact that the latter requires the disputed soprano. You are not thinking, Madame. *Le Château Enchanté* is an opera ballet, not a ballet. Why do you not suggest *Giselle*?’

‘Perhaps it is because I do not have your *savoir faire*, lacking that certain *je ne sais quoi* that places you in your position of superior knowledge and intellect ...’

‘Oh, claws! Did you get out of the wrong side of the bed this morning?’

Bed? As of this morning, I don't even have one ... ‘And if I had? Would you care?’

‘A good question. Tell me first: are we putting on *Cleopatra* or *Giselle*?’

‘Oh ... do what you like! You will, anyway. I have more important things to attend to.’

‘Like explaining to Signora Rosetti why we do not want her?’

‘You ... are impossible!’ she told him, leaving the box. Outside the door, she stopped to take several deep breaths.

§

She found the diva reclining complacently on the chaise longue in her dressing-room.

‘Ah, Madame Dupont, I have been waiting for you. I saw you in close consultation with a gentleman in your box. He is very handsome, is he not? He is your star?’

‘Yes, Signora.’

‘Ah, *bellissimo*, he looks so romantic. Such dramatic good looks! He will sing with me, will he not? He *is* a tenor?’

‘Yes, Signora.’

‘Ah, excellent. I prefer the tenor voice; it is a perfect foil for my own. And what is he to you?’

‘Pardon, Signora? I am not quite certain of your meaning?’

‘He is your man? Your lover?’

‘No, no, a friend and colleague, merely.’

‘Oh good, I should not like to tread on your toes, you understand, for I always like to fall a tiny bit in love with my leading man; and perhaps he would not be averse to a little light flirtation? What do you think? A little *affaire de cœur*, conducted with delicacy: it adds a zest to life, which is reflected in the voice, don't you agree?’

Fortunately for Madame Dupont's peace of mind, it seemed she need not answer her questions.

Clasping her hands and running on, ‘Ah, to look soulfully into the eyes of a lover when one sings on the stage ... it adds credibility, a great emotion to the performance! Yes, I have had many lovers. It keeps one young, does it not? When will you introduce me to my so romantic co-star? I cannot wait to sing with him!’

‘I am afraid it will not be possible today, Signora. He has many commitments; unavoidable prior engagements that he cannot break. And because he is unwilling to show you the disrespect of a hurried interview ...’

‘Oh, *épris!* Such a gentleman! But tell me: What did he think of my voice? You were excited by my rendition of the aria?’

‘Indeed, Signora, you might say that it was most exciting—for both of us. But in the light of the undisputed quality of your performance, he and I have agreed that it would not be fair to you if I allowed you to make your final decision before you hear what I have to say.’ She took a deep breath, holding the diva's eye. ‘You see, Signora, Monsieur le comte, whose intentions are, I am sure, admirable, and who is most enthusiastic about this house, bless him, is not fully conversant with the type of theatre we present here. He left on his bride trip before we opened, you understand, and I did not fully explain to him what it is we had in mind. You may not wish to demean yourself by singing in this house ...’

Signora Rosetti rose from her couch in alarm. ‘What do you mean: “demean myself”? This is a perfectly respectable house, quite ... beautiful, if I may say, and well suited to my talents, I should think. You need not be so humble, Madame.’

‘Signora, you are an opera singer who has sung in the great houses of the world.’

‘Of course!’ She swept her skirts regally. ‘I am no stranger to world acclaim.’

‘Then, perhaps, you will not wish to sing in this opera house when I tell you that the principal performer is a previously unknown magician—with a street spectacle as his pièce de résistance.’

‘A magician? A common street magician?’

‘I am sorry, Signora.’

‘Madame, you shock me greatly! I would not have thought it. No, I would not have thought it ... But, on reflection, perhaps his looks are too cheap and flashy to be real. The combination of that black hair and sapphire-blue eyes is a little too dramatic, even for me. And in an opera house of such quality? You poor, poor woman, to be used by one so patently a mountebank. Oh, no, no, no, it must not be.’

‘*Oui*, Signora, I am afraid so. We are trying a new form of entertainment, and I blush to inform you that you have, all unwittingly, been dreadfully misled. We are not serious classicists here, and you will not be singing the great arias to which you have been accustomed. No, you will be singing only our magician's compositions, and he, well ...’ She looked down, fiddling with her chatelaine. ‘He has not been recognised ...’

‘Do you mean that I shall be required to sing inferior works by an unknown composer?’

‘Regrettably, yes, Signora,’ she said, perjuring herself without hesitation.

‘You do not say so? But the comte did not —— What outrage! Does the comte think to make of me a laughing stock? To disrupt me in the manner so profound? For a charlatan? Oh, no, no, no. The great diva Rosetti does not stoop to sing the unknown compositions of a street magician, and so I shall tell the comte. Good day, Madame. Our contract is cancelled as of this minute! I shall remove to the Opéra Paris. They have an apartment they keep—just for me.’ She tossed her head, eyes snapping. ‘You may despatch my trunks, on the instant, if you please.’

Xavier ... Thought Madame Dupont in some relief, watching her stalk away, neither Angel nor I shall have to kill you. The Signora will do it for us ... ‘Of course, Signora,’ she said, catching her up at the door. ‘You must not worry yourself further. Your entourage shall be sent to the Opéra Paris without delay. Indeed, it is a scandal that you have already been so inconvenienced. Please wait while I send for your carriage, so that you may immediately repair to it, *à l’instant*, Signora. I am desolated that our theatre is not of sufficient standard for your so unusual talents.’

‘Madame, never say so. It is not your theatre that is at fault, no.’ The black eyes glistened.
‘You must send this canaille on his way—get some new artists. I can help you there.’

‘Thank you, but I am afraid I cannot do that, Signora.’

‘Why not? You are secretly in love with him? ... No? ... He has some other hold on you?’

Madame Dupont shrugged delicately. ‘It is too late for me, Signora. But you ——’

‘Blackmail? Oh, the villain! Thank you, Madame, for your timely warning, and at no little risk to yourself, I’ll warrant. If ever you do find a way to be rid of him, I will show my gratitude by coming to sing in your house.’

‘You do me great honour, Signora, and I felt it to be the least I could do, *n’est-ce pas?* But I have been forgetting the comte. He will be so disappointed when he returns to find you are not here with us.’

‘Ah, yes, the little comte: he has something to answer to me for. Did I not see already that he was sly, inept—ingratiating in his manner? Oh, but certainly, he shall feel the lash of my tongue ...’ The diva, thus reminded of the comte’s iniquity, broke off what she was saying and waited in disdainful silence for her carriage, mounting and driving away in high dudgeon.

Madame Dupont retired thankfully to her house.

The Master met her in the hallway. ‘I see, Madame, that in your ingenuity, you were able to persuade the talented Signora that she is not suited to this establishment.’

‘Yes, and I hope you are satisfied.’

‘If she has gone, then I am satisfied. I do not know how you could stand that cackling she calls singing. Did you have any difficulty in persuading her?’

‘I found it ... embarrassing. Mortifying. Not that you would care! And, anyway, I think you were being a little precious about her. She was not as bad as you would seem to think.’

‘So! You are an expert on voice now, are you?’

‘I have not lived most of my life in an opera house without learning something about it.’

‘True. But her voice did not suit me.’

‘You certainly made *that* obvious.’

‘To her?’ There was a faintly hopeful quality in his tone, and she frowned.

‘No, to me.’

‘Oh.’ He looked disappointed. ‘How, then, did you get rid of her? She seemed to be armed invincibly in her own conceit.’

‘I shall not tell you that. You may just be glad that I have. She has removed to the Opéra Paris.’

He laughed. ‘Oh, good. She will adorn their house admirably. *Die Fledermaus*, hmm? Bat is certainly the right description for her.’

‘I thought you said she was like a hen.’

‘If you wish to pick me up on it, then you should get your facts right. “Sounded like a hen” was what I said. And I still say it.’

‘She is a famous diva. You must not say such things of her. Besides, I thought her very handsome.’

‘*Eh bien*, she is not to my taste.’ He made a *moue*. ‘Bat, hen, what does it matter, if she looks like the one and sounds like the other? She still cannot sing.’ His eye fell to the tray with the post. ‘Another letter?’ He snatched it up. ‘But why did you not bring them to me, as always?’

‘I was on the point of it when ...’

For the first time, he seemed prepared to open the pink, scented envelope in her presence. ‘Pardon me, Madame,’ he murmured, turning it over to break the seal. ‘This may be important ... But what is this?’ His eyes met hers in accusation. ‘It has already been opened. You opened this?’

‘No, my dear, of course not. It looks as if it has been wet, out in the weather. See how the seal is not broken, but lifted away from the paper?’

‘Or steamed open. Tell me the truth. Have you read this?’

‘No. Perhaps you are unaware that it is not *comme il faut* to read the private mail of others?’

‘That would stop you, would it?’

‘Of course.’

‘You need not sound so self-righteous.’ He took out a crisp, white sheet and, glancing at it, let it fall onto the tray. ‘Very well, you have my permission to read it. Go on.’

She picked it up. On it was written Paris, a date and time, and nothing else. Part of her

registered that it was next Tuesday.

‘Makes sense to you, does it?’

‘No.’

He reached into his fob pocket. ‘Perhaps this will help. You may consign them both to the fire at your leisure, of course. You need not look for any more pink envelopes. This is the last one.’ Throwing a card on the table, he turned away, leaving the house as it slid off the tray onto the floor.

Retrieving it, she read the legend, raising troubled eyes to the door as it slammed shut behind him. ‘H. G. Merlin, Investigator.’ *What was he up to now?*

Chapter Three

Le Marché

3 May 1892

I am obsessed by Curiosity. This is the date on the most recent of the letters, which Angel has been so secretive about. I would like to stay to find out their Significance, but I cannot. It is Market day, and there are too many things that I need.

Sometimes—and I have said it before—I wish that I could be in two Places at once.

Happily bargaining in the market place with vendors of fine lace, braid, sequins and other decorations, Madame Dupont was interrupted by a richly dressed manservant who spoke to her briefly. Nodding, she completed her purchases and made her way to the Café de Flore.

A vision in white rose from a table to fling herself into her arms and greet her with a familiar cry, ‘Ma mère, ma mère! I am so happy to see you again.’

‘Katarina, dear child—what a wonderful surprise! Let me look at you ... But you are blooming, my dear, positively blooming!’

The comte drew himself up proudly and, bowing over her hand, invited her to join them. ‘Have this chair, Madame. Such a pleasure to renew our acquaintance ... You will sit with us awhile? You will take coffee with us? *Bien.*’ He snapped his fingers with authority. ‘*Garçon!*’

After they had discussed the high points of their tour, the comte suddenly bethought himself of something, interrupting Katarina's description of her visit to the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. ‘But tell me, Madame ... I do apologise, my love, for breaking in on your conversation, but this is important. Did Signora Rosetti arrive?’

‘*Oui*, she did.’

‘And what did you think of her? That beautiful fluting in her voice! So unusual, *n'est-ce pas?*’

‘He means vibrato,’ said Katarina, in an aside. ‘But her voice is unusual, is it not?’

‘Yes, my dear. I am afraid it is.’

Xavier lowered his eyes humbly. ‘I am not knowledgeable about these things like Katarina. I only know that I liked it.’

‘Of course, dear boy. If you like something, you like it. *Eh bien*, it does not have to be explained.’

‘Some things, even, cannot be explained,’ murmured Katarina, playing with her teaspoon.

The comte put his hand over hers. ‘Very true, my love. Very true.’

A boy came up, bowing. ‘Excuse this intrusion, Monsieur, *s'il vous plaît*, but the lady in the carriage over there has asked me to deliver this note to you.’

‘Thank you,’ said Xavier, handing him some coins. ‘I crave your pardon, Madame, but this communication would appear to be urgent. You do not mind? It is from Signora Rosetti.’ Giving a muffled exclamation, he looked up; his light-blue eyes were icy. ‘So! You did not like my diva, Madame?’

‘You must forgive me, dear boy. It was your diva who did not like us. You did not tell her she was to share her billing with a magician.’

‘A magician?’ He was incredulous. ‘*Non, bien sûr*. A magician in an opera house? Oh, that's a good one! Madame, you are joking?’

‘No.’

For a moment, he sat still, staring at her. ‘We shall speak about this,’ he said, rising to his feet. ‘But for now, I must go to Signora Rosetti. She is demanding my presence in her carriage, with an explanation. May I prevail upon you to keep Katarina company until I return?’

‘Of course, *cela va sans dire*. And anyway, we have a lot to catch up on.’

Katarina watched him walk across the square, bow to the Signora and mount into the carriage, where the diva rapped him across the knuckles with her fan. Seeing his attention fully occupied, she grasped Madame Dupont's hands. ‘Ma mère? You have heard from Angel?’

‘You must try to put Angel out of your mind, dear child. You are the comtesse de Villefontaine now, with a position in society to consider and, soon, a family to take care of.’

‘But, ma mère, I only want to know if he is well. I can bear it if I know ...’

‘He is well, my dear, and pursuing a career he has always dreamt of, and that is all I can tell you about his life. You must strive not to think of him.’

‘Oh, how can I not?’

Madame Dupont studied the white, strained face; the eyes huge with distress. ‘Oh, Child ... By having someone else to occupy your mind, of course! A new little being. You have, have you not? That is, you will have, in a few months?’

Katarina looked amazed. ‘But ... how did you know?’

‘It is the usual consequence of a bride trip, my dear, especially one as protracted as yours has been. Six whole months. Besides, you have a particular bloom ——’

‘Please, do not tell Xavier.’

‘But you must tell Xavier, Child. You must.’

‘I know. But not yet. Please.’

Observing her agitation, Madame Dupont said, ‘Of course, I shall leave it to you to tell him—anything else would be quite wrong—but may I enquire as to the reasons for your reticence?’

‘Oh, ma mère, he loves me so much ...’

‘But, that is not a fault, surely?’

‘No, but he ... oh, I cannot explain ... He smothers me with his love, wraps me in a cocoon; I cannot so much as move without him, and he is so anxious! I think he loves me *too* much, and if he knows I am *enceinte*, he will be even worse.’ Her hands clung to her godmother's. ‘Please, ma mère ... I will tell him before it becomes obvious.’

‘Very well, my dear. Do not distress yourself. It is your own affair, after all.’

‘Thank you. Oh, here he is, coming now.’

Madame Dupont turned to see the comte beckon to a boy and send him off with a note scrawled on the back of his card, before striding back to them.

‘Katarina and I have had a very pleasant chat, Monsieur, but I'll warrant that it was not as, er ... *interesting* as yours.’

‘To be sure, Madame. You are very right.’ The honest gaze begged forgiveness. ‘Oh, I must

apologise to you. I do, most abjectly.’

‘That is very nice of you, my son. But why?’

‘Signora Rosetti—did she ring a peal over my head! Such words, Madame, as you would not believe! I did not know she had so comprehensive a grasp of the French language. You would have taken her for a fishwife, rather than a world-famous diva. And the things she said about your beautiful house ...’

‘I do not think it was the building she objected to ...’

‘Perhaps not, but she was so angry that she became difficult to understand. But I am most concerned about one thing she saw fit to tell me: most concerned! Indeed, I could hardly credit it.’ He held her eyes. ‘Who is this mountebank you have engaged? And why is he blackmailing you? Shall I send him about his business?’ He put up one hand as she started to speak. ‘No. I would not even consider re-employing the Signora—not after the things she has said to me. *Parbleu!*’ He shook his head. ‘What an experience!’

‘Signora Rosetti is very excitable, *mon fils*. Are you sure she said such a thing?’

‘Oh, yes, Madame. I made her repeat it until I was. She definitely said “mountebank” and “blackmail”.’

‘But of course, it is no such thing, Monsieur. The Master of Illusion is a most talented and highly accredited magician.’

‘Ah, yes ... Your magician. I must take issue with you over that. It is not *comme il faut* to have a magician performing in an opera house. On that point, I do have to agree with the Signora.’

‘It is *my* opera house, Monsieur ...’

‘Ah, here he is, at last. Well met, Monsieur le capitaine.’ Xavier, obviously not listening, jumped up to shake Captain Moreau by the hand. The same Captain Moreau who had been in charge of operations to capture Angel, after he was blamed for the accident in the Opéra Français.

Madame Dupont drew in her breath. What now? Surely, the handsome Master could not be connected to the disfigured Angel? They had staked their lives on it.

‘But certainly, I shall go and investigate the credentials of this man!’ exclaimed the Police Chief, after listening to the comte's low-voiced explanation. ‘It will be a pleasure, Monsieur.’

Madame Dupont tried to take a firm hand. ‘But really, there is no need, Xavier. Not to mince

words: you are putting in your oar where there is no water.’

The captain was infuriatingly patronising. ‘Tut-tut, you must not be ungrateful, Madame. A little woman—on her own. The comte is only concerned for your safety.’

‘But, Monsieur, the Master is a friend of Madame Aranova.’

‘He has a name, this Master of Illusion?’

She was silent.

‘Well, Madame?’ The captain was regarding her intently.

‘I ... do not know it, Monsieur.’

‘And he had with him a letter of introduction?’

‘Erm ... no, Monsieur.’

‘Why not? Why did you not demand to see a letter of introduction?’

‘Well, because ... because he was vouched for by Madame Aranova.’

‘Very suspicious, Madame, *very* suspicious. He could have fooled her, too. I would say that this character wants looking into.’

‘But, Monsieur le capitaine ...’ Madame Dupont had the same suffocating feeling she'd had the last time she faced this man.

‘*Les femmes, hein?*’ He smoothed his moustache. ‘They can be taken in by the handsome looks, the flashing eyes ... oh, at any time! You will wait here with the comte and his lady, Madame, while I ascertain the bona fides of your magician.’

Something about the way he said this alerted her, subverting her annoyance at his masculine superiority. ‘You have seen him, Monsieur? My magician?’

‘*Mais oui*, Madame.’

‘And what did you think?’

‘Wonderful! A tremendously enjoyable performance. He was most charismatic, *n'est-ce pas?* I do not hesitate to tell you that I shall, in future, keep Madame Moreau well out of his way. He is more than capable, in my estimation, of pulling the wool over the eyes of even such an astute lady as yourself, Madame.’

She sprang up. ‘I will come with you.’

‘You will stay with the comte and his lady, Madame,’ he commanded, frowning. ‘Good day.’

The comte regarded her narrowly. ‘What is going on, Madame? You are jumping like a cat on hot bricks.’

‘Nothing.’ She returned his gaze, stare for stare. ‘That is exactly what is going on ... nothing! But you have made of it a great big something, with your—stupid interference, your refusal to listen, your ——’

‘Madame, how dare you?’

She replied quietly but with as much vibrato as the Signora. ‘And how *dare* you ride roughshod over me, like that? Sending me a mad diva I do not want, and then, to crown it all, listening to her idiocies, calling the gendarmes ...’

‘Stop it, please! Both of you! Ma mère?’

Madame Dupont bit off her words, instantly returning to calm. ‘Katarina is right, my son. Please take her home now. I shall speak to you later, when I am not so angry. No doubt it will turn out to be a *bagatelle*, which we will laugh about one day, but I am afraid, not today. Goodbye now.’

She kissed Katarina, patted the comte on the shoulder and vanished into the crowd—finally hailing down a cab, sitting bolt upright, hands clenched, wondering why she had had to pick one that must needs travel at a snail's pace.

When she reached her destination, Captain Moreau was coming down the steps of the opera house.

‘Ah, Madame,’ he said, bowing as he helped her alight. ‘You are so discreet, are you not? I have heard that about you, but *tout de même*, you should have known that you could confide in the Chief of Police. I shall tell the comte that your magician has satisfied me as to his antecedents, and that he need worry no further for your safety. *Au revoir*, Madame. I only wish the half of my force could keep a secret as well as you do. I would have sworn you knew nothing at all about it.’

Dumbfounded, she watched him walk away before ascending to the Master's apartment.

‘*Dieu merci*, you are safe,’ she told him, ‘but how did you satisfy the captain?’

‘Forethought and planning, Madame, but I hasten to add, not by me.’

‘Madame Aranova?’

‘You are right. Was it just a lucky guess on her part, or ...?’

She shook her head. ‘Madame Aranova has the uncanny ability to divine the future; I am certain of it. What did she do?’

‘You remember that I called in to see her on my way back here after my restorative surgery: the time I got Cheval?’

‘Yes,’ she said, stroking the big black and white cat. ‘He is growing even more handsome, is he not? And?’

‘And she said to me, “What are you going to do if any try to force you to reveal your identity? You must not be proven to be Angel. I am thinking of that arrogant young sprig, Xavier, here.” And so, the long and short of it was that she had a document made up ... But, here, look for yourself,’ he added, handing her a scrolled vellum.

Unrolling it, she saw that it was an affidavit swearing the signatory to secrecy, before unrolling the smaller scrolled document within. Noting that the captain had signed this, she opened the second scroll. ‘Clever Madame Aranova,’ she said, smiling, ‘to have conveyed so much, while saying so little. Tell me, does the captain believe that I know you to be a Georgian noble escaping persecution after a political coup in your principality, and that your life is in the gravest danger should your identity ever be revealed?’

His eyes gleamed. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think Madame Aranova has saved us from discovery—and the Bastille, *mon cher*.’

‘Without doubt, indeed. But how did the Police Chief become involved?’

‘Oh, you know, erm ... a trifling matter: something that began as a small misunderstanding and, not corrected in time, escalated out of all proportion.’

‘Oh, I see. Right up your street, *alors*, is it not?’

She blinked. Where was the smiling, friendly man she had just been talking to? His resentment was a festering sore, flaring into an abscess without warning, impossible to cleanse or heal no matter what she did.

Oh, why did I not understand? Why do I not understand?

She'd had enough today. ‘Oh, please! Can you not stop this—this pernicious attitude? How long must I be punished? It is hard to go on in this fashion. Can you not forgive me, *mon cher*?’

‘Yes, it is hard. Very hard. Katarina is back in Paris with her husband, reminding me that, but

for your interference, I would have been that man. I am trying to forgive you, and some days are better than others. That is all that I can say.’ He waved dismissal, turning back to his design table.

Crossing to her house, she realised, in amongst all her misery, that he knew Katarina's whereabouts—had known all along exactly where she was and when. Those scented letters from an investigator, informing him of her progress. And the last one, Paris—today.

‘Where are we going?’ she whispered. ‘Ah, *Dieu me sauve!* What will happen next?’

Chapter Four

Le Mécène

12 May 1892

Tonight Angel will look for Katarina in the Audience. And when he does, what will I face?

‘Another full house, Monsieur. Magic appears to be *le dernier cri*.’ He was looking grim, as usual, but she thought that she would get in first.

He bowed. ‘As you say, but there is one box that has remained conspicuously empty, despite the return to Paris of its occupants.’

‘Oh, erm ... yes.’

‘Why?’

‘That slight misunderstanding I told you about? It was with the comte.’

‘You had words with the comte? Oh, the diva ... of course! So, he was the one who set the police onto me? At her instigation, no doubt.’ He suddenly appeared very much amused. ‘Don’t tell me ... he absolutely adores her voice?’

‘Unfortunately, yes.’

‘Hmm. Perhaps I should have —— But, no, I could not support her.’

‘There is one more thing you have not thought of. He has been quite offended by the idea of a magician in an opera house.’

‘Indeed? I do not think such snobbery will outlive the knowledge that the duc de Belvoir is quite flatteringly impressed by it. The comte will bow to fashion, without doubt. And even if he withdraws his patronage, we do not need him. But it is more than that. I know you, Madame! It is

your straight talking that has offended him. You had best make your peace with him.'

'I intend to, *mon cher*, but not just yet.'

'Why "not just yet"?''

'I shall let him stew a little. Perhaps he will not then be so quick to try to manage my life.'

'I would not be surprised if you had offended him deliberately, so that they would stay away from here.'

'That is a good idea. I am sorry I did not think of it for myself. May I ask why you are so interested in their attendance?'

'No, you may not.'

'I think I have that right.'

'Undoubtedly.'

'And?'

'And ... what?'

She did not speak.

'Oh, no you don't! Take that look off your face.' He made a sweeping gesture. 'You are not going to browbeat me with that reproachful stare—the way you did the comte—I'll be bound. Yes, you have every right to the question. And I have every right to keep my counsel. Now, go and make your peace with the comte!'

'I am afraid ...'

""Brave Madame Dupont""? Afraid? Surely not?'

'Please, do not mock me.'

'Why not? Is it better that I lose my temper?'

'No.'

'Then: do as I say.'

She stared at the wall; her face set.

'You are strangely silent, Madame,' he remarked, studying his hands. 'One might even say ... recklessly so.'

Her eyes encountered his. ‘Very well, Monsieur. I shall write to him today.’

19 May 1892

Even though I tried to resist Angel, I felt Compelled to obey the Master. I tremble at the Thought of what may come of it.

The comte de Villefontaine, dressed to perfection as usual, bowed unsmilingly over the hand of Madame Dupont. Katarina hugged her warmly.

‘You are well, Child? *Bien*. I am very glad to see you both.’ Her eyes asked a question of Katarina, to be met by a slight negative. So she still had not told the comte of her *petit paquet*.

‘Thank you for inviting us, Madame,’ he said. ‘As you can see, we are here. I am sorry about the other ... matter.’

‘*De rien, mon fils, de rien*. I know you meant it for the best. And it would have been a coup—would it not?—to have secured such a famous diva for us. I apologise, too, for the way in which I spoke to you.’

A slight smile softened the rigidity of his mien. ‘I do not blame you, Madame, after what I had to endure from the Signora. Indeed, I am becoming quite accustomed to your plain speaking. Katarina has made me see that being your patron does not give me the right to meddle with the running of your house. And as for your magician, whom Captain Moreau assures me is of impeccable character, with no more to be said about it ... well, he would seem to be a high favourite with both the duc de Belvoir and the marquise du Melande.’

‘And so you have come to judge for yourself, *hein?* That is the best way. Come, I shall show you to your box.’

Following her with Katarina on his arm, the comte added, ‘It is a feather in your cap, Madame, to have impressed both of these most exacting critics. Your magician is obviously not just in the common style.’

‘Most certainly not, my dear, anything but—*je vous assure*. I have no doubt that you and Katarina will also be impressed,’ she replied, stopping before a gilded door.

‘This is ours, *hein?* Very baroque, Madame.’

‘Indeed.’ She flung it open and stepped back, motioning them to enter.

‘But, how beautiful! Thank you, ma mère. This box is divine. Such exquisite decor,’ exclaimed Katarina, glancing all about her. ‘Look, Xavier ... our chairs.’

‘Excellent, yes, excellent. You have been most generous to us, Madame. This box, also, is not just in the common style.’

‘It has been decorated especially for Katarina's taste.’

‘Yes, they are my colours. You see how well they match my gown?’

‘Yes, indeed.’ The decor of cream and dusty-rose pink with touches of olive and gold did enhance her gown of palest blush pink with cream lace trim. ‘That is a beautiful gown, my dear. It becomes you, delightfully.’

‘I chose it in Italy,’ said the comte, a possessive arm about her. ‘Pure silk.’

‘You have done well, Monsieur. Katarina is in great beauty tonight. And now, I must leave you as I see the ballet is about to begin. You are comfortable, yes?’

‘Indeed.’

‘*Merci*, ma mère.’

Leaving them sitting in their richly upholstered chairs, she entered her box, pleased that they seemed so settled together, yet unable to still a slight apprehension about the effect on Katarina of the Master's voice in his two arias programmed to follow the ballet. *Slight?* Her hands clenched her chair arms. She had to admit that her apprehension was *way* more than slight, so much so that the ballet had ended before she had even properly thought about it: an unheard of event. From her box, she could just see the de Villefontaines in theirs.

The Master came on stage to vast applause, raised his eyes to Madame Dupont, bowed unmistakably to the comtesse de Villefontaine and began to sing.

At the sound of his voice, Katarina sat bolt upright, gripping her fan in her lap, silent until the end of the aria. ‘*Ange*,’ she whispered.

Xavier bent towards her. ‘What was that, my love? I did not quite catch it over the applause.’

‘Nothing ...’

‘I thought I ... Did I hear you say “Angel”?’

‘I said “*aux anges*”, because of the beauty of the aria. This music makes one *aux anges*, do you not think?’

He looked uneasily into the softly glowing eyes. ‘Oh, indeed, *ma chère*, indeed. It is a most excellent performance.’

‘Shh, he is about to sing his encore.’

The comte glanced even more uneasily at the mesmerised countenance, the sweetly smiling lips, before resuming his scrutiny of the tenor.

Observing these effects from her box, Madame Dupont was completely unsurprised when, a few days later, she received a visit from him.

23 May 1892

It is Entirely as I thought! And of course, I had to Prevaricate. It may be wrong to do so, but it is better than what will happen if the Truth comes out.

Inviting Xavier into her salon, she listened sympathetically until he told her that since their evening at the Opéra Magique, Katarina had begun to walk in her sleep again.

‘Katarina is sleepwalking, you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘She only does that when she is agitated in the extreme. What have you been doing to her?’

‘What have *I* been doing?’ He went over to lay his forehead against the wall, tears squeezing out from under his lashes. ‘Nothing, believe me. I only wish to cherish her. But, at night, she ... she calls out in her sleep. She calls to Angel—always. Why is it to him? Why not to me? But it is to him—always to him, even after ——’

‘Ah, *mon pauvre*. Come, sit down. But what did you expect, *mon fils*? You knew that she was in love with Angel, yet you forced a sweet, biddable girl to honour a promise she made to you as a child ——’

‘I did not force her, Madame,’ he spluttered, ‘I would not behave like that.’

‘No? You knew that she loved you as a friend and did not want to hurt you, and you used it to

the hilt. *Eh bien*, the result of your manipulation is that you are the one who has her to wife, and you should be satisfied with that.'

'I do not know what you mean ...'

'I am speaking plainly, *mon fils*, so take note of it. As her husband, you may command her conscious thoughts; but no man may command the unconscious. No, no, her private soul: that you may not touch! And this is the result. So, my advice to you is: be satisfied with what you have.'

'But ... You allowed it ... Yours was the say.'

'Yes, I did.' *To my eternal regret*. 'But had I fully understood the circumstances, you may be sure that I would have attended more carefully to the not-very-lucidly-expressed wishes of Katarina.'

He jumped up, striding about in agitation. 'I will not allow you to say that Katarina did not wish to marry me. Of course, she wished it.'

'Of course, my son, make yourself easy. I have no desire to argue with you.'

Making an effort to be calm, he said, 'I have come to ask you about your magician. Madame, who is he?'

'He is a friend of Madame Aranova. Madame has a great regard for him.' That, at least, was true. 'As you know, I have engaged him to provide a magic show as a part of each night's entertainment. And of course, he has a magnificent tenor voice. He is all the rage—I assure you—very popular. In fact, he is *le dernier cri*.'

'Oh, indeed, I am aware. He is vastly entertaining, performing incredible feats. I have noticed it myself. But you have not answered my original question. Who is he?'

'But I thought ... Was not Captain Moreau satisfied with his credentials?'

'Yes, but he was very mysterious, refusing, also, to tell me who he is. But I need to know, Madame, so I have come to ask it of you.'

She took a deep breath. 'He is performing incognito, Xavier. I know him only as the Master of Illusion.'

'Incognito? Why? He could be anybody!' As he stared at her, aghast, she watched his eyes harden and suspicion begin to form in his features.

'Perhaps he is someone who would not normally engage in theatre,' she suggested. 'Some of the nobility use an alias when they do something out of their social strata, you know. Think about

Rockman.’

‘Who? Oh, Rockman ... The great Shakespearean actor? You mean the comte de Chantilly? Yes, I see. Some of his relatives would not like to think of a member of their noble house treading the boards. It could be so.’ He stroked his chin thoughtfully, then, just as she relaxed, turned on her, shouting, ‘Why then, does Katarina believe him to be this accursed Angel?’

‘Does she? She has said nothing to me. And you do not need to shout.’

‘No, I beg your pardon. She ... she did not want to tell me, either; but I got it out of her.’

‘I see. You browbeat her, after all?’

‘No, no, of course not! Have I not already told you? You know that is not my way.’

She raised her eyebrows, merely, and he frowned.

‘Well, Madame? What do you have to say about it?’

Without flinching, she played her last card. ‘I do not know, Monsieur. This man, Angel: You have seen his face? You remember what he looks like?’

‘Yes, Madame.’ He stood stiffly.

She waited a little, studying him. ‘And the Master? You have seen his face?’

Xavier was silent.

‘Well?’ The silence seemed to go on forever. Resounding. Terrifying.

‘Madame, you are right.’ The belligerent stance evaporated. ‘That face could not be disguised so well in the light of centrestage, and I have seen him close.’ His expression both relieved and rueful, he added, ‘You are right: it cannot be. Katarina is prey to odd humours ... imagining him everywhere ...’ His voice trailed away.

Hiding her relief, Madame Dupont was content to allow Katarina to take the blame in this instance; although, deep down, she felt a pang of guilt. Suppressing it, she reminded herself: *Our very lives depend on him believing this.*

Even to herself, she would not call it a lie; but she remained deep in thought long after he left.

24 May 1892

I think I have averted Suspicion for the present. Poor Katarina, it is a scandal.

But at the same time, I fear very much for the future; for I realise the Master has just as much Power over her as before, and he is not less dangerous now that he has been healed of his Affliction. Indeed, I begin to see that he is becoming more dangerous than ever with the emerging strength of his Occult Powers.

But even Madame Dupont did not know the extent of her prophecy, and when she found out just how far he was prepared to go, she was *tout à fait bouleversé*—to say the least.

Chapter Five

Betrayal

26 May 1892

I cannot believe what has happened this day. Never, in my wildest dreams, could I have imagined the Events that have taken place. It would not be an Exaggeration to say that I am completely Shattered, for I fear that the Master, in his Profligacy, will bring us down; and our World, which we have so carefully built, will crash around us in ruins.

Oh, I am distrait—obfuscated—with nowhere to turn. Du vrai, I feel as if he has betrayed me. Not just me: both of us. For when people hear of this extraordinary Occurrence, will they not begin to ask who he is, and why he is so interested in the Comtesse de Villefontaine?

Madame Dupont was in the wings taking care of Cheval, for tonight was to be his first appearance, and the Master did not want him getting stage fright before his debut. Or so he said. And that was when she was struck speechless to see her goddaughter being led onto the stage by the Master's assistant. In the same state, she watched Katarina take his outstretched hand and begin to sing with him, conscious of the complete silence of the audience. But why did they not cheer and applaud? Katarina had been a great favourite. She saw that Monsieur Merignac had recognised the melody. Eyebrows almost at one with his hairline, he immediately took it up with his orchestra, continuing unfazed to the end.

No, it seemed the only person to be shocked was herself, looking on horrified as Sprite joined her, leaning over to stroke the cat. Seeing her face, she whispered, 'Do not worry, Madame. None of the audience will remember this. They have all been hypnotised.'

'What?'

‘Shh. Not so loud, Madame, I beg of you.’

She lowered her voice, ‘What do you mean? How can they all have been hypnotised?’

‘I cannot tell you, Madame. It is a method known only to the Master and the Great Maximilian, who taught it to him. It is an amazing mystery, is it not? Besides being an incredible feat ...’

‘Indeed. But what if ——?’

‘Be calm, please. The Master: he is able to make them forget this and remember only that they have greatly enjoyed themselves and wish to come back again. Such is his power, Madame,’ she added, her expression serene, admiring.

Madame Dupont eyed her incredulously. ‘Sprite,’ she whispered, ‘do you not care that the comtesse is being coerced like this? That the entire audience is in his thrall?’ She shook her head, unable to take in the enormity of it.

The girl negated this emphatically. ‘No, she is *not* being coerced. She is drawn to him. A person under hypnosis cannot be made to do that which is aversive to them. Truly, Madame, she wishes to be here—singing with him. Indeed, she came with me willingly when I fetched her at the Master's order.’ Seeing the doubt on her mentor's face, she drew closer. ‘But I will tell you a secret. She has not been hypnotised: the only one! It is the Master's ethic that she be in full command of her senses when she is with him, so that she may choose for herself. So you see, she has come willingly.’

Madame Dupont's heart sank even more. If possible, this was even worse than she had imagined. ‘And Xavier—the comte? What about him?’

Sprite showed pearly teeth. ‘But of course: he was the first. Otherwise, he would never have let her leave the box. Even *I* could see that he is crushingly possessive of her. *Du vrai*, I think she is pleased to get away from him, even if it is only for ten minutes.’

Madame Dupont, beginning to speak, was interrupted, a beguiling hand on her arm. ‘Hush, Madame. Is it not the most beautiful duet you have ever heard? How could the audience *not* be enthralled by it?’

The exquisite voices penetrated Madame Dupont's distraught senses with an extraordinarily soothing effect. Even in the state she was in, she was aware that both had developed beyond their previous capacities, effortlessly matching each other. In silent homage, she and Sprite listened to the two spectacular voices pouring out in glorious harmony: the one powerful, resonant, magnificently

compelling, then suddenly soft and alluring; the other high and sweet, filled with delicate promises.

At the end, the Master smiled at Katarina, bowed over her hand, kissing it reverently. After speaking softly to her, he made a sign for Sprite to escort her back to her box.

‘Madame,’ Sprite stayed a second, looking earnestly into her face. ‘He has to have this—to be complete. All will be well. I promise you.’

A short time later, when Katarina was seated beside her comatose husband, and his assistant had vanished from sight, he released the members of the audience from their trance; and the magic show continued.

Sprite returned to the wings. ‘Come, Madame, it is not so bad. The comtesse is very happy, *aux anges*, I would say. Here, let me take Cheval. He will be going on soon. Why do you not go home? You look a little tired. Come, Chevy, your turn next. *Merci*, Madame.’ A beaming smile, and the assistant was gone from sight.

A little longer, she stood there, staring at the swaying curtain, and then tottered home. *I cannot face him*, she thought numbly. *I cannot face any of them*. Thus, Madame Dupont, *femme formidable*, was finally reduced to a mass of shattered nerves.

§

Later, retrieving her sangfroid, she tried to remonstrate with the Master over his outrageous behaviour; but he took a high hand with her.

‘Leave me to my magic, Madame. I believe I know what I am doing.’

She drew in a breath. ‘I do not doubt it. Oh, I do not doubt it! But that does not make it right.’

He waved a careless hand. ‘You worry too much—over a trifling matter.’

‘A trifling matter?’ she gasped.

‘You are right to call me to task. It is most certainly not a trifling matter, but it is your fault that we have been brought to this.’

‘Oh, *mon cher* ...’

‘Your fault! And if this is the only way Katarina and I can take a little happiness, then be

assured that you should not be the one to cavil at it.’

‘But ...’

‘What is the matter? You are not satisfied with a full house and at least one standing ovation every night?’ He shook his head. ‘You are a hard woman to please.’

‘Of course, I am satisfied, *mon cher*; I am delighted, *cela va sans dire*. But what if there is someone in the audience that you cannot hypnotise? What then?’ She met his arrested gaze. ‘Yes? You have not thought of that?’

He stared at her, then shifted his focus. ‘I do not believe that day will come, but if it does, I will deal with it then.’

‘You do not seem to care that you will bring us undone with this.’

‘Of course I will not.’ He made an impatient gesture.

‘It is only a matter of time, *mon cher*. I can see that, if you cannot. And what about the comte de Villefontaine?’

He grasped her forearm. ‘Without hypnosis, the comte is as good as dead; for I will not relinquish the little that I have.’

She froze—eyes wide and shocked.

‘Aye, Madame. That is the extent and consequence of the misery you have put us through.’

‘No! You *must not* do harm to Xavier. Where is your sense of justice?’

‘*My sense of justice?*’ For just a second, he looked murderous.

Feeling suffocated, she whispered, ‘Please, for both our sake, you must not do any such thing.’

‘Then, make your choice. Leave me to my magic, as I said, or ... prepare for a funeral.’

‘Two funerals,’ she said, walking away before he could have the last word; but this, she seriously misjudged.

He spoke quietly, but she heard him just the same. ‘Whatever the number, be it on your head.’

But it seemed that the Master had heeded her after all: although she sat in the audience at every performance until their summer break, she saw no more duets; the comtesse remaining, as was de rigueur, in her box with her husband.

Chapter Six

Les Décisions de L'amour

Les vacances, Summer 1892

It will be such a relief to close the Theatre and have some Peace and Quiet. In my mind, I can hear the sougning of the Sea, feel the warm pebbles under my toes. Du vrai, I have not realised just how much I am in need of a Holiday.

Leaning over to deposit the Master's correspondence on the table in his dressing-room, Madame Dupont caught a flash of white out of the corner of her eye.

‘Katarina? Dear child ... But what are you doing here? It is not *comme il faut* for you to come here alone like this.’

The comtesse rose from the winged chair; a mulish expression about her lovely mouth. ‘I have come to see Angel, and I will not let anybody stop me.’

‘Hush, Child, you must not say that name here. You will put his life in danger. The Master is away ... for two weeks, along with the rest of our artists.’

‘Oh, ma mère ...’ Her goddaughter wilted. ‘But where has he gone?’

‘Madame Le Brun has taken the ballerinas to the seaside—our usual place. But the Master has gone to look at bridge footings in a number of towns and cities. So *that* I cannot tell you, my dear. But perhaps you can speak to me about whatever it is, *hein?* Let me guess ... You have finally told your husband of your pregnancy?’

‘Yes, I had to, because it has become obvious; but I cannot stand it. He is driving me insane, hedging me about, refusing to leave me for a second. Even worse than I thought he would be, until I — Oh, I could scream!’ Her usually gentle face was reddened and puckered with imminent tears.

‘He ... he had a caller, an important man, closeted with him in his study; and I took the chance to escape, while I may. Oh, ma mère, I do not wish to go back. May I stay here with you and A—— the Master?’

‘*Ma pauvre ...*’ Madame Dupont took her in her arms. ‘I cannot turn back the hands of time and undo what has already been done, but at least, I can make what you have a little better for you. Come, Child, we will go to my house and talk it over.’

Madame Dupont guided her in to her salon. ‘Sit down, dear child, while I make you a tisane. It is quite safe and will not harm your baby. Marie! Will you bring me the silver kettle on the spirit burner and the calming mixture? *Merci.*’ She took Katarina's hand. ‘You were lucky to find me here, *ma fille.* Marie and I were going to follow the others to the seaside tomorrow.’

‘I am sorry, ma mère, but it is too much. Entirely too much! Xavier, he ... he has said we will not go to the Opéra Magique any more, because I have walked in my sleep and called to Angel ... and ... Oh, he is impossible!’

‘He knows that you have sung with the Master?’

‘No. Oh, no. Ange—— the Master said it was our secret; that nobody could know except for us, and that whenever I came, we could have this special time together, because he could put it out of people's minds. No, I am sure Xavier has no inkling of that. Indeed, I could not wake him when I returned to our box. If only I would not dream of A—— him, it would be all right. But I cannot help it. I do not do it on purpose.’

‘Hush, my darling, we shall sort it out, I promise. And now, you must tell me, within yourself, with *l'enfant*, how are you feeling?’

‘Oh, so well, ma mère. I have such energy—*incroyable!*—but Xavier will not let me ——’

The little kettle began to sing, and Madame Dupont transferred the contents to a warmed teapot with its mound of herbs. A soothing aroma drifted upwards, and Katarina visibly started to relax as Madame Dupont talked of the baby's layettes and *trousseaux*, the best aspect for the nursery and so on.

And then, just as she had her goddaughter calmly sipping the tisane, a commotion arose outside. Katarina leapt up—the cup slipping from her fingers to smash on the floor. ‘It is Xavier! Oh, please, ma mère, do not let him in.’

Marie appeared in the doorway, following them up the stairs. ‘The comte de Villefontaine is at

the door, Madame. I have told him you were otherwise engaged, but he will not take no for an answer. I very much fear that if I do not let him in, he will break it down—such a state as he's in.'

'Never mind, Marie. Give me time to get Madame la comtesse up to my bedchamber, then show him in to the morning room and tell him I will be with him directly. Then make up another tisane and bring it up to her. Come, my dear, you will rest on my bed, and when and if you see him, it will be on your terms: I promise you. Come now, put your feet up.' Covering Katarina with a crocheted rug, she went slowly down to face her goddaughter's husband.

The comte, striding about the room, did not stay for the niceties. 'Katarina? She is here with you? She has left me, Madame!'

'Nonsense. She probably just went out for some air.'

'Do you think so? I made sure she would have come here.'

'So, you have driven her away. Pretty work. But do not distress yourself. As you have so rightly guessed, she is here with me.'

'Oh, thank heaven! Where is she?'

'She is upstairs, resting.'

'*Bon*. I will go to her.' He made for the door, halted by words spoken in quietly freezing accents.

'You may do as you please in your own establishment, Monsieur, *cela va sans dire*. But in my house, you will not visit a lady's bedchamber without my permission.'

The comte reddened. 'No, er ... no, of course not, Madame, er ... hmph.' He tugged at his collar with a forefinger.

'Sit down, my son. I have many things to say to you, not least the story of a bird.'

'*Un oiseau?*'

'Yes, a little bird.'

'*Parbleu!* This is too much! Katarina has left me, and you wish to tell me stories about little birds? Allow me to say, Madame, that at a time like this, I find such trivia offensive!'

'*Doucement*, Monsieur, there is reason in all things. Have you not heard the old saying: "If you wish to keep a bird, you must unlock the cage and set it free"? Naturally, it will fly away, but if you have made it happy, it will want to return to the comfort of your house—and then it is truly

yours. *Bien sûr*, you have no need to lock the cage; you may leave it open. Your bird will never fly away again. But if you keep the cage locked, and one day, perhaps, you are distracted and forget to close it, *alors*, that little bird will fly away; and you will never see her again.’

‘Very instructive, Madame. Now, with your permission, I will go and rouse Katarina; and we will be on our way.’

‘No, you will not. *Les femmes enceintes*, they need their rest, and Katarina has been distraught, which is a thing I find most disturbing. But you have not listened, *mon fils*. I am going, now, to ask you some delicate questions, and for Katarina's sake, I wish you to answer me honestly. I will apologise in advance for any offence, but you will do well to answer truthfully.’

‘I will endeavour to do so, Madame. It is not my custom to lie.’

Only to yourself. ‘No, indeed, you are exceptionally honest. That is why, I believe, if you will only listen to me, you will see what is upsetting Katarina and change it.’

He sat down and folded his arms. ‘Very well. I am listening.’

‘In your hotel, Katarina has her own apartment? And at your country château, the custom is the same?’

‘No, Madame—even though I do not know why you are asking this—I will answer. She shares my apartment.’

‘Katarina shares your apartment? But why? Surely, you are not going to tell me that there is no accommodation for the comtesse at either of your houses?’

‘Indeed not, Madame. Of course, there is a suite at each of my establishments expressly for the comtesse. I just cannot bear to be apart from her ... that is all.’

‘Every minute, you mean?’

He hung his head. ‘I am afraid so, Madame. I ... I have this anxiety, you see, and if I do not have her close, it grows and grows, and just ——’

‘But, *mon fils!* *Les femmes enceintes*, particularly in the later months of the pregnancy, they need to rest by themselves. But your parents? They, too, had this arrangement?’

‘No. Maman had her own suite of rooms.’ He smiled. ‘They were lovely ... fresh and feminine. I loved to spend time there with her.’

‘To be sure, you did, my son.’ Madame Dupont patted his hand. ‘And when your papa wanted

to see your maman, what did he do?’

‘Papa used to take me to see Maman before I went up to the nursery to bed every night, and I think, now, that they had a sort of secret code. You see, he always knocked on her door and asked if she wished for a tall, handsome visitor ...’ He seemed to lapse into a kind of daydream.

‘And?’

He roused himself. ‘Pardon, Madame, I was just remembering. And she would tell him to come in so that she could look him over. And he would open the door and say, “Oh, by the way, I found your son outside”. And she would laugh delightedly and hold out her arms to me, crying, “But how marvellous! What a wonderful surprise!”’, and she'd hug me ... and tell me a story ... Then, later, when I was almost asleep, my nurse would come and take me off to bed; and Papa would stay with her.’

‘Ah, I perceive that your parents had a very good relationship.’

‘Yes, I believe they did. They were very ... loving.’ He swallowed. ‘And then she died—and left me.’

‘Ah, *mon pauvre* ...’

‘That is why I worry so much about Katarina. Especially now that she is carrying my child.’

‘But it is not a disease, my dear! Pregnancy and childbirth are perfectly natural functions, even though each new baby is a tiny miracle.’

‘But, Madame, you do not understand. Maman died during her pregnancy. She had just told me that in a few weeks she was going to present me with a baby sister or brother, when she died.’

‘Oh, my dear ... But there is no reason to think that such a thing will happen to Katarina. She is in perfect health, blooming, even.’

‘But so was Maman. She was perfectly well that evening, and the next morning, she ... she wasn't there!’

‘I am very sad that you lost your mother in such a way, and at such a young age, but that does not mean you need fear for Katarina. Such things are the will of God, my son. Your papa could not have prevented this tragedy by hanging on to her at every minute.’

‘My papa shut himself away and would not see anyone. He stayed that way until his death. I had only Katarina, for her parents took pity on my lonely state and invited me over often to play with

her. At first, I thought of her as my little sister, like the one that could not be born; and then, as we grew older, I began to love her ... in a different way. She is my only ——’ His voice choked with emotion.

‘My dear, I do understand. But you are suffocating her gentle spirit, driving her away. You must give her some space. The more you wish to cling to her, the more you must resist. Think of your papa: what a far-sighted and percipient gentleman he was. You see, he knew that he, being the head of his household, could force your mother to obey his wishes; but he gave her the respect and dignity of refusing if she wished, and she, conscious of the honour with which he treated her, responded accordingly. Now tell me, and this is important, Monsieur, what did she say to your papa if he brought you there when she was unwell or exhausted? How did she reply then?’

‘She would say that she would find a handsome gentleman, unfortunately, *de trop*; but if a ministering angel were in the house, he was welcome to hold her hand and bathe her heated brow.’

‘Ah, what a lovely couple! Truly, your way is clear. You can do no better than to follow your wise papa's example. You will give Katarina your maman's apartment, and when you want to see her, you will knock and ask her permission to enter.’

‘You are telling me what to do in my own house? With my own wife?’

Her fugitive dimple surfaced. ‘I believe I am, my dear. Shocking, is it not? But it is for your own good.’

‘Even so, Madame, you have no business to do so.’ The comte, his *amour-propre* seriously wounded, remained unamused.

‘I think I have the right to set you straight on the way to treat Katarina when you have so patently made her unhappy. Especially when she has come to me for help.’

He grasped her arm. ‘Did she go to you or to look for Angel? ... Yes, I thought so.’ He drew himself up; his face bleak and miserable. ‘This may be your house, Madame—that I do not dispute—but Katarina is my wife ... Mine to do my bidding. And if I wish her to come with me now, make no mistake: she will come.’

‘Very well. If that is the way you feel, after all that we have spoken of, then take her. But if you do, I give you fair warning that if she comes to me again—the little bird escaping from the cage, *hein?*—then you will not get her back unless she chooses to go. And if you think I cannot do it, think again. I can hide her where you will never find her. You and your ... gendarmes.’

‘Angel ...’ he breathed.

‘Angel is not concerned in this. It is you who is driving her away, and if you are willing to listen, I can show you how to change that. I suggest that, if you wish to keep her, you go now to your estate, which, no doubt, you have been neglecting—Yes, I see that I am right, am I not?—giving orders for the comtesse's apartments and the nurseries to be redecorated according to the desires of Madame la comtesse. I shall bring Katarina tomorrow, or at whatever date she wishes, and remain with her until these changes have been effected—and then it is up to you. But if you do not choose to do that, *eh bien*, she is here, sleeping in my bedchamber ... You have had your warning. Katarina will not be forced against her will.’

‘Madame, I will do as you say. I am not—altogether—a Bluebeard, you know,’ he protested; his ego quite deflated.

‘Of course not. You are a very fine and upright young man, just a little skewed in your perceptions. You must not allow your fears to become so obsessive that they take over your life and blind you to what is right. Go along now. I shall bring Katarina as soon as she is ready.’

‘But ...’

‘The bird, Monsieur? By the way, the Opéra Magique is closed for a fortnight. The only male protection I have is Gaston. But he should suffice, do you not think?’

The brow of the comte cleared miraculously. ‘Oh, yes, Madame, indeed. I shall leave you now, and on the way I shall tell Captain Moreau to assign an extra patrol to this street: then, you can be easy. May I ...?’ He gestured upwards.

‘No, Monsieur. You must remember the little bird, *n'est-ce pas? À bientôt!*’

Madame Dupont sat in silence. Danger—no longer a vague threat—real and tangible, bared its teeth in her face. Katarina: the weak link and the Master's Achilles heel, had she not always known it? Somehow, she must be persuaded to go home with the comte and not come back until after the birth of her baby. For then, she would have something to lose if she, again, thought to leave him. And all this must be achieved before the Master returned from his vacation. And somehow (an even bigger somehow), Katarina must be stopped from calling to Angel at night, for Madame Aranova's document would not stand up to scrutiny if she were browbeaten into admitting that she knew the Master to be Angel.

Sighing, she rose and called to Marie, ‘Set out a cold collation, if you please, Marie, for *déjeuner* and prepare a bedchamber for the comtesse for one night only. She may borrow anything

she needs from me. I shall accompany her tomorrow and stay with her a little while. You may come with me, or join the others at the seaside—whatever you wish.’

‘I shall come with you, Madame, if you do not mind. And *dîner*? What do you wish me to do about that?’

‘Send out for it; that will be easiest. And tomorrow, we shall breakfast on the way.’

She found Katarina sitting up against her pillows, regarding her anxiously.

‘Ma mère? Xavier? He has gone?’

‘Yes, Child.’

She played with a medallion on the corner of the rug: her eyes on the intricate pattern. ‘I will not go back, ma mère. I have made up my mind.’

Oh, if only you could have done that months ago, we would not be here, like this, now.

Madame Dupont turned up her eyes, dismayed at the uncharacteristic resolution. ‘Are you sure, dear child? You may stay with me, of course, but is that what you really want?’

‘I do not want to inconvenience you, ma mère. I have my own money. Perhaps I will buy a house.’

‘You have your own fortune, of course. But you know that it is held in trust for you by Xavier?’

‘I thought you were my trustee?’

‘I was, but upon your marriage, the trusteeship was transferred to your husband, as is customary.’

‘Oh.’ She shrugged. ‘No matter. Angel will take care of me.’

‘Do you think he will wish for another man's child, my dear?’

‘I ... do not know.’

‘And Xavier? This child is his heir. Do you seriously intend to keep them apart? To bring him up with another man as his father? Or her? Or, indeed, that the comte would allow it?’

‘I ...’ Tears flowed down her face, dropping onto the rug.

‘There, there, my dear. Have you eaten yet, today? ... I thought not. You must eat for your baby, you know. Come, Marie has prepared us a luncheon. We shall have that and then take a stroll in

the garden amongst the flowers. You will like that, *hein?* And while we are there, away from prying eyes and ears, I must relate to you *une histoire*; and you shall tell me what it is that you have decided.’

‘I have decided.’

Again, Madame Dupont opened her eyes at the uncharacteristic resolve. She took her hands. ‘*Ma chère*, you do not know all the facts. A decision cannot be final until all aspects can be considered, for you see, you are making a life that hangs in the balance even more tenuous. This is not the time for blind obstinacy: believe me.’

‘But——’

‘Come, my dear, *déjeuner* first, and then we shall walk and talk. The garden is a little overblown at this season, but still remarkably beautiful. I know you will love it.’

Casting her a puzzled glance from under her lashes, Katarina accompanied her to the dining room. While they ate, Madame Dupont made comforting small talk, still not referring to her goddaughter's bolt-from-the-blue statement.

Then, on one of the walks, which made the extensive garden of the Académie Mirage so delightful, she began, ‘Once, long ago, a young ballerina attended a street festival for Mardi Gras, and having been separated from her group, she came upon a disfigured child being stoned by a mob. Rescuing him, she took him home to her opera house, where the director was so impressed by his voice and his—unbelievable genius—that he brought him up as his own. This child, though always conscious of his scarring, became an invisible voice for the ballet. At first, an angelic soprano; and later, a magnificent tenor, composer, architect and designer. Always a little eccentric and wayward; both older and younger than his years ...’

‘But you are talking of Angel? You ... and Angel?’

‘*Oui.*’

‘Yes, for that is how he got his name, isn't it? Because nobody knew who he was, and you said he sang like an angel.’

‘Yes, my dear, he did indeed, but he had one quirk that Monsieur Dupont, our director ——’

‘And your late husband?’

‘Yes, that Monsieur Dupont, later to be my husband—and your godfather, Child—he allowed him to indulge his hero-worship of a man calling himself *le Spectre*, who, at that time, was holding

the Opéra Paris under siege. You see, this man, le Spectre, was disfigured, too; and people would tell Angel about him. So he made him his hero, emulating him in terrifying ways, at times ...’ Madame Dupont became pensive, walking in silence until Katarina spoke.

‘Yes, I have heard of him, the *Phantom of the Opera*. It is why Angel built his palace, is it not?’

‘Indeed, my dear. But we will pass over that, despite it being an amazing achievement for one so young. It is only important to this story because of what occurred later. To continue: Over the years, Angel sang in the Opéra Français, remaining heart-whole until nearing his thirtieth year, when a beautiful young girl crossed his path. A girl who not only was *not* horrified by his disfigurement, but actually loved it.’

‘But of course I did, ma mère. It was part of him, and I loved everything about him.’

‘I know you did, my darling, but hush; for now we come to the important part: the part where your presence is as pivotal as the irony of his adulation of the le Spectre; the time when the Opéra Français was subject to a series of dreadful accidents in which two lives were lost, and in the last, our opera house burned down.’

‘I know, I know, none better. If Angel had not saved me, I would have been one of them.’

‘Of a certainty, my dear. Both you and I know that. But therein lies the dreadful irony. You see, these tragic deaths were the result of accidents that were very similar to those caused purposefully by the notorious le Spectre—so that he could abduct the beautiful diva singing on stage.’ She held her arm. ‘You see?’

‘I do, at last, ma mère. I see that Xavier, in his jealousy, believed that Angel caused the accident in order to abduct me. So many things become clear ...’ She was silent a moment; her face working. ‘Oh, if only it were true!’ she cried.

‘Katarina! Dear child, please ...’

‘I only agreed to marry Xavier because I thought Angel did not want me.’

‘And now you know that he does.’

‘Yes. I thought I could live with Xavier, but ... he is making my life a misery with his jealousy and ——’

‘The jealousy of the comte, indeed, has far reaching consequences. Listen to me, Child: Angel has been unjustly branded a murderer, because he made no secret of his admiration for the *Phantom*

of the Opera, and I, his accomplice, because I saved him. What do you think will happen to the Master if, by your actions, you prove him to be Angel?’

‘He will be put on trial? For murder?’

‘And if he is found guilty, he will face the death penalty.’ She made no mention of the punishment she herself would receive.

‘But I would never betray him, *ma mère*. Never!’

‘It may not be a question of that. If you are called upon to testify under oath before *le bon Dieu*, how can you lie?’

‘One cannot lie before God, but I will not be called. I will say that I know nothing about him. He does not even look like Angel.’

‘Child, you call to him in your sleep. You cannot know when you might betray him. And it is this that has made Xavier so possessive of you—that he is only waiting for the chance. And if you leave your husband and go to him? How much is his life worth, *hein?*’

‘But ... Madame Aranova has provided him with an identity. I was there when Captain Moreau told Xavier he was above reproach.’

‘Madame Aranova's document will not stand up under intense scrutiny, and you will be forced to reveal his identity. I know you mean what you say, Child, but you are not strong. What odds would you give me that Xavier and his pet captain will not harangue it out of you within the day?’

She gave a sob. ‘Oh, *ma mère*, you are right. I am weak and stupid. I have always been taught to obey those in authority, and I do so hate it when people shout at me and ... and bore into me: they make me nervous, and I cannot think ... and then I get all tangled up!’ Taking a deep breath, she said, ‘Angel's life must not be put in jeopardy because of me. What must I do?’

‘First of all, you must *never* call yourself weak and stupid, for these things you are not. You are sweet and gentle, wanting to please, character traits that some would use unscrupulously to gain their own ends. But without question, you are the one who holds Angel's life in your hands.’

‘I am not quite a fool, *ma mère*.’

Surprised at the brittleness of her voice, Madame Dupont gave her a quick, searching glance, but made no comment, waiting for her to finish her statement.

‘Angel will only be safe whilst I continue to live with Xavier, for only then will he not

prosecute the search for the Master's identity. This is what you have been trying to say to me, is it not?’

‘Quite, my dear. And if you feel that you are able to return to the comte, I have negotiated terms for you, which I believe will make this decision more acceptable to you.’

‘You have already? Oh no! I thought that you said it was to be my decision?’

Madame Dupont held her hands. ‘Katarina, too late, I found that you love Angel. Here in this garden, by ourselves, we will call him Angel, but once we leave here that name must never cross our lips again. And I am so—so sorry—that I did not —— But, *eh bien*, knowing that you love him, I also knew that once you were made aware of the terrible dangers he faces every day, of the fact that yours is the hand that holds his life in the balance ... then, dear child, I knew the decision you would make. It is the decision of true love, is it not?’

‘Yes, it is my only course, I know that, but ... Oh, ma mère! How shall I go back now, to Xavier?’

Madame Dupont spoke of her conversation with the comte. ‘And so, we will go tomorrow, or at whatever time you wish, to choose the decorations for your apartments and nurseries, to your own taste. I will give you the recipe for the tisane that will calm your sleep, so that you no longer call to Angel. That will not be so inflammatory to Xavier. You will have to let him in, sometimes, my dear, otherwise ——’

‘I know. He will suspect that I still have a *tendre* for Angel.’

‘And it will be best, if you can bear it, to remain at Villefontaine until your baby is born. Then, of course, it will be wonderful to welcome you back to the Opéra Magique.’

For a moment, Madame Dupont thought she had gone too far; for Katarina looked as if she would cry. ‘Very well, ma mère,’ she whispered. Then, grasping her arm, she cried, ‘You will come with me, please?’

‘But certainly, I will come, and I intend to stay with you until you are settled.’ She smiled and patted her hand. ‘You will be happy when your baby comes, and—despite his inadequacies—Xavier is still your dearest friend. It is his anxiety that overrules his reason.’

‘His jealousy, you mean,’ said Katarina.

‘*Eh bien*, that, too. But if we remove the necessity for it, you will have the added bonus of a charming companion, will you not? Come, we must get you inside and put your feet up. Exercise is

very important, but so is rest. Do you know, I believe it will be a boy.’

‘A boy?’

‘*Oui.*’

‘But why? How do you know?’

‘Oh, your bloom ... and the way you are carrying. Just little things ... Tomorrow will suit you, my dear? *Bien.*’

§

At the hôtel de Villefontaine, the butler met them with a bow. ‘I have had coffee and croissants, just this instant, sent to the breakfast room, Madame, and Monsieur le docteur will wait upon you directly.’

Katarina sent Madame Dupont a helpless glance. *You see?* Said her eyes. ‘Thank you, Marcel. Madame Dupont is remaining with me, as is her maid. You will see to all the necessities?’

‘Of course, Madame. You need not trouble your head over it. Monsieur le comte has given his orders. You are just to tell me when it is that you wish to set out for Villefontaine, and all will be made ready, *à l’instant.*’

When he had gone, Katarina said, ‘Oh, did you hear that, ma mère? Xavier has already organised everything according to his own wishes.’

‘No, not to his wishes—to what he believes are your wishes—a very different thing. Come, let us sit down and break our fast. *À vrai dire*, I am famished, are not you?’

When they were replete and sipping their coffee, Madame Dupont said, ‘You will not be able to prevent Xavier from organising your life, you know. He has been born to command—it is his heritage. You can only make clear your wishes, so that he organises things the way you want them. Perhaps you can enlist the aid of the physician. We will see ...’

The physician was a bluff gentleman, whose bracing manner made Madame Dupont widen her eyes. She did not think Xavier would have employed a doctor who prescribed brisk promenades in the garden and climbing every day from the front steps to the attic as the proper treatment for *les femmes enceintes*. But very soon, all was revealed.

‘You are in excellent health, Madame, and all is well with the infant. It shall be my great privilege to bring the child of the comte into the world, just as I brought him ... oh, it must be more than twenty years ago, now.’

Madame Dupont spoke: ‘Then you will be able to reassure him, Monsieur. I do not scruple to tell you that his anxiety has totally overwhelmed his reason, where Madame la comtesse is concerned.’

‘I shall certainly do my best, Madame. I have already endeavoured to explain to him that I had warned his dear, late mother that another child could kill her but, *hélas*, she did not listen.’

‘There was some underlying condition, Monsieur?’

‘Oh, indeed. The late comtesse had the misfortune to contract rheumatic fever as a child, leaving her with a weakened heart. She knew the risk, but she did not want the comte to grow up as an only child; and so he had to grow up, in all reality, as an orphan: for his father never spoke to him again.’ He took Katarina's hand. ‘Have patience with him, my dear. Losing his mother at such a young age was a dreadful trauma. Dreadful. But he will not lose his lady, for her heart is excellent—as I shall make sure to tell him.’

‘I like him,’ said Madame Dupont, when he had gone. ‘He is a man of good sense. You will be able to confide in him, Child, if Xavier, again, becomes too confining.’

30 July 1892

All is well. I believe I have averted this particular Disaster.

Driving away with her maid, on her way back to Paris to reopen the Opéra Magique, Madame Dupont smiled as she remembered Xavier's reception of them upon their arrival at Villefontaine. He had rushed out to swing up Katarina in a joyous hug, when he had seemed to call to mind Madame Dupont's instructions, holding himself back to bow very correctly over her hand and welcome her to her country home. Katarina, remorseful for the hurt she had inflicted on her childhood friend, ignored his hand and went into his arms in tears.

His words to her when Katarina had lain down to rest were suspended by emotion. ‘*Merci*, Madame. I do not know what you said to her, but ——’

‘It is not what I say to her, *mon fils*. It is for you to treat her with the respect she deserves. Do

this and, *eh bien*, you will have a good and faithful wife and mother to your children. It will be wise for her health to keep her away from Paris until after the birth of your child. And, of course, you will keep me apprised of her progress, yes? *Bien*. But I will expect to see you both in your box as soon as is *convenable* afterwards, you understand. Go with God, *mon fils*.’

What she was going to say to the Master when he discovered their absence from the first performance of the new season, she could not bring herself to contemplate.

Chapter Seven

Broken Dreams

4 August 1892

The Confrontation, I fear, has come upon me so quickly! What shall be the End of it, I wonder? Will I still be in the Land of the Living when the Show finishes tonight?

In trepidation, Madame Dupont waited for the magic show to end; for the look the Master had sent her after seeing the de Villefontaine box empty froze her to the marrow.

He caught up with her in the box office. ‘What have you done?’

She did not pretend to misunderstand. ‘The right thing, I hope. And, quite possibly, the *only* thing.’

‘I have been told that, during *les vacances*, you brought Katarina here and then went away with her. Is it true?’

‘Something like that, yes. In all but the essential details.’

‘Why?’

‘There was a reason, *mon cher*.’

He leaned back against the wall with folded arms. ‘*Eh bien*, then if that is so, I am waiting to hear it.’

‘Katarina came here looking for you ...’ she said, knowing that nothing less than the truth would suffice. ‘Distraught.’

‘Ah, *la pauvre*. That pompous *chien*, he has been ill-treating her?’

‘Not that one could say, Monsieur. No, it was quite the opposite, really. He has been very cherishing. It would seem, crushingly so ... Because of you and your activities, he is afraid of losing her.’

‘Aye, he may well ... Go on, *et alors?*’

‘And then, I told her you were away and that it is not *comme il faut* for her to come here alone in this way.’

‘Things have gone way past that, Madame. You do not know ...’

My God, what was coming next? Giving no sign of how much his words had shocked her, she replied, ‘And there are things that you do not know, Monsieur.’ She took a breath. ‘I brought her to my house where she told me that she had had enough of Xavier and wished to leave him.’

‘Ah ...’

‘But then he arrived, upsetting her again.’

He started up. ‘He forced her to go back to him? You allowed it, Madame? *Mon Dieu!*’

‘*Doucement*, my dear. Of course, I did not. I sent him away with some home truths. If my goddaughter comes to me in such a state, then you may be sure that I keep her with me until I get to the bottom of it. Which I did, eventually.’

He relaxed. ‘And?’

‘And I told her a story—a story of how her recognition of you will only result in your execution for a murder you did not commit—and she reversed her decision and went back to him.’ She waited for the thunderclap, but he merely smiled.

‘You are out there, Madame: it does not have to be. Katarina and I can be together at last, for the Great Maximilian has shown me how.’

‘You are making me very nervous, *mon cher.*’

‘There is no need for you to be nervous, Madame, for none of this will kick back onto you. Indeed, you will seem to be as wronged as the comte. And I shall have Katarina ...’

Men, she thought. *Are they not all the same?* Had she not seen Xavier with just that expression of possessive triumph over Katarina? ‘I do not think to become your victim,’ she informed him, ‘but, Angel ... Monsieur ... surely, you are not telling me that you are going to elope with another man's wife? Please, tell me that is not your intention. Please ...’ Unbeknown to herself, she was

wringing her hands.

He glared at her. Behind the rebellious gaze, the need for secrecy warred with the wish to hurt. Malice won. 'I am taking her to Canada to start a new life. We shall have new identities. We shall be the baron and baroness ...' He shook himself. 'But I do not tell you that. You with your plotting and planning ...'

'Mon cher ...'

'No, Madame! I have learnt better than to trust you where Katarina is concerned, but *du vrai*, I will not permit you to spoil it for us now. Next time she comes here, I intend to take her. I will take my show with me, and we will sing together. We can leave all this behind.'

She was suddenly bent double over folded arms, for out of nowhere, like a kick from a mule, she was hit by the knowledge that she was included in his dismissing gesture; and with it came such hurt that, at first, she could not think. Distraught, she stared at him. She couldn't seem to hear what he was saying. Almost fainting, she clutched at the desk. 'But when have you had time to decide all of this?' she gasped, straightening up. 'You have been meeting with Katarina clandestinely? I would not have thought it of you ... of either of you!'

'Would you not?'

She ignored the sarcasm. 'But when have you seen her?'

'Why should I tell you? You who have ruined our lives in the first place!'

'But you cannot mean —— You cannot!'

He turned on her. 'Why should I not?'

Gathering all her resources to face him, she shrugged. 'But all this is immaterial, *mon cher*. You cannot take her. She is with child. In a matter of weeks, she will present the comte with his heir.'

He went grey-white.

She focused on the diamond sparkling in his tiepin, averting her eyes from the anguish in his; for she saw that she had dealt him a mortal blow.

'With child,' he whispered, jerking his head back against the wall. For a moment he stood, staring at nothing. Then, kicking a little flower-laden ormolu table out of his path, he stumbled away through the scattered roses, slivers of smashed vase crunching under his heels.

The ticking of the clock was loud in the silence. Madame Dupont jumped at the sound of a

splintered leg as it dropped from the overturned table and rolled across to her feet. Perfectly still, she stared at it, and her eyes filled with tears; the scent of crushed rose petals unbearably sweet, exacerbating her pain.

'Que ... sera,' she said, her voice breaking.

Chapter Eight

Vanity and Revenge

5 August 1892

I have waited for Hell to be loosed, but there is only Silence ... Will he return? Or is the Opéra Magique finished?

A cold and distantly formal letter, together with a notice splashed across the billboard, informed her that the Master was indisposed and would not be performing his magic show until further notice. 'Put on a ballet or close the theatre' was his terse advice. Madame Dupont looked up, distraught. Had he, after all, gone off to take Katarina, despite her precautions and Katarina's advanced pregnancy?

Fairly certain that he was not in his apartment, she went to see if Sprite could shed any light on the matter, only to discover that she, too, was missing.

After about two weeks, they returned, neither giving an explanation, to instil a new dimension of fear into Madame Dupont over the ethical direction of the magic show. The Master seemed to have a new level of closeness with Sprite, treating Madame Dupont with a bitter mockery that drove a wedge through her heart. So much so, that she avoided them as much as possible.

From time to time, she was driven to protest at some of the more humiliating pranks played upon the unsuspecting audience, as they indulged their dark sense of humour without restraint. One, in particular, was really getting to her tonight. An offering by Sprite: it was the suggestion that people had all come to the theatre in their dressing-gowns and nightwear. She could not see the funny side of the expressions of fear and horror on their faces as they realised their worst nightmare. In fact, she writhed with them. *After all*, she thought, *we've all dreamed of going somewhere formal and looked down to see ourselves in our nightgowns*. It was one of humanity's most fundamental phobias. She began to appreciate the biting subtlety of the apprentice's sense of humour and was surprised at how

much it hurt her.

And now, watching their callous amusement over the behaviour of the audience, observing with dismay the mirrored expressions of gleeful malice, she realised, not for the first time, that they were together on a wavelength she could not understand, and that she was fighting a losing battle.

Oh no! They are as bad as each other. What can be done? She felt the same despair as on the last occasion. Shrugging her shoulders, she turned away to hide her consternation and began to walk off the stage.

‘Do not worry, my dear.’ The rich voice halted her in her tracks. ‘We will not lose our audience.’

Turning, she looked sadly upon his handsome, smiling visage and the impish face of innocence beside him. ‘I know,’ she replied, ‘you told me; they will not remember anything about it.’

‘No, Madame,’ he corrected her. ‘They will remember only what I wish them to remember.’

Chills shivered down her spine. For just a second, she hesitated, then almost ran off the stage and out of the theatre before despair engulfed her.

After the show, Sprite found her in her salon, where she had been sitting for a long time in the semi-darkness with just the coals in the fireplace for comfort. ‘Madame, I have made us a pot of chocolate.’ Setting down the tray, she began to pour the rich brown liquid. ‘Madame is not angry with us?’ she asked, handing her a cup.

Madame Dupont sighed wearily and, thanking her, took a sip. ‘No ... no, *ma fille*, I am not angry. Disappointed, perhaps ... I hardly know.’

‘Madame ...’ Sprite hesitated. ‘The Master: he knows what he is doing. There is no need ———
,

Madame Dupont made a gesture, interrupting her. ‘The main reason I am disappointed, Sprite, is not because of the Master. I am not surprised that he wishes to play cruel pranks on our audiences. No. Not at all.’ Her lips twisted wryly. ‘I just did not expect *you* to share, so wholeheartedly, in his malicious pleasure at the humiliation of others.’

The little face quivered. ‘For myself, no, Madame. But for him, yes.’

Madame Dupont put down her cup and stared at her.

‘Please, Madame, let me try to explain.’

‘Yes, *ma fille*, I think you had better do that.’

Sprite held her cup in both hands, looking earnestly at her over the rim. ‘Do you remember, Madame, how I told you that I know what the Master is going to say to me before he says it?’

‘Yes, Child, I remember.’

‘Well ... it is not as simple as that. You see, I can feel what he feels, too.’ Her expression became agonised. ‘It is terrible, Madame, the great burden of pain he carries. Terrible,’ she whispered, large tears, which she dashed away with the back of one hand, rolling down her face.

‘Yes, I can believe that.’ Madame Dupont nodded, aghast at the thought of what this child must be suffering.

‘You have known him a long time, Madame. You know what he has been through, but I ... I feel it here.’ She lay her hand across her heart.

Madame Dupont sat up straight. For only an instant, fear and amazement showed in her eyes. ‘The Master: he has told you these things?’

‘No, Madame.’

‘But, Sprite, how can you know this? Of course, you know about Katarina, but ——’

‘It is not just the comtesse, Madame.’

‘I know that, but how do you?’

‘I just do. I know who he is, Madame,’ she said with certainty; a strange, ancient wisdom in her eyes.

‘Then, if that is the case, *ma fille*, you know much more than I do.’

‘Yes, Madame.’ It was a plain statement of fact. ‘And I know that when he plays these pranks on the audience and humiliates them—in ways that they do not remember—it eases his burden for just a little while. He just takes a little revenge for all the humiliations these people have put on him in the past, and it helps him to deal with recent hurts. There is no harm in it, Madame.’ Her eyes glowed with sincerity.

Madame Dupont let this pass without comment. There was no doubt the child believed it wholeheartedly. ‘But, Sprite, this trick you played tonight—did I not understand it to be your idea?’

‘Yes, Madame, it was about vanity,’ she explained. ‘I thought it could not hurt them to be punished a little for it.’

‘Indeed? So that was your plan, was it?’

‘Yes, Madame. Our fine patrons: they primp and they preen, and they cry if they get the hole in the silk stocking or the mark on the glove. There are people out there who could have food for a year on the price of one of their gowns. I did not think it would hurt to show them up for what they are—vain and shallow.’

Somewhat overwhelmed by these revelations, Madame Dupont sat back. ‘My child,’ she said, at last, ‘where is all this coming from?’

Sprite smiled sweetly, shrugging her shoulders. ‘I do not know. It is just there.’

There was silence. The little ballerina, having waited for her to speak, leaned over and pressed her hand.

‘Madame,’ she spoke gravely, unlike her usual bubbly self, ‘we will not harm your theatre by our pranks. And the Master—it helps to ease his burden, as I said. Please, do not judge us too harshly, and do not let it distress you. We are not hurting anyone by it, and the Master—he needs a harmless way to release his pain and tensions ... Madame?’

Madame Dupont did not know how to answer her. ‘Thank you, Sprite, for telling me this,’ she said, at last. ‘I do try to understand about the Master, and your spiritual connection with him. But do not forget, my dear, that it is these same vain people, crying out for entertainment, who provide all of us with our living.’

‘Indeed, Madame, we do not forget it.’

Knowing that she must try to say something—some word of warning to her—Madame Dupont began, ‘And what about you, *ma fille*? The Master is a very complex and dangerous man — —’

‘He will not hurt me: never fear.’ The glowing eyes held hers.

‘You went away with him. Where did you go?’

She dropped her eyes. ‘I, um ... I am not at liberty to tell you that, Madame. I am sorry.’

For a moment, Madame Dupont studied the downcast eyes; the regretful, secretive expression. With a certainty she could not explain, she said, ‘The street, and the Opéra Français! Is that where the Master took you? Back to the street to show you his origins? At least,’ she amended, ‘the only ones he remembers?’

Sprite snapped to attention. ‘But, Madame, how did you know?’

‘*Eh bien*, Child, I did not think you went away on a *fugue amoureuse*.’

The girl flushed; her fair skin glowing rosily.

‘Sprite?’

‘Of course not, Madame. The Master is the soul of honour. Besides, there is only one for him. As you have guessed, he took me back as far as he remembered and, oh, Madame, he showed me the street corner where you saved him from the mob. He said you were “oh, so brave”. Then he took me to see the ruins of the Opéra Français. And do you know, Madame, his palace still exists? In exactly the same condition as he left it. Truly! Is that not *incroyable*?’

‘If it was in exactly the condition that he left it, it would have been a mess.’

‘Oh, indeed, Madame—*bien sûr*. But once we tidied it up, and threw out all the broken furniture and ornaments, it looked quite nice—luxurious, really—after we'd replaced them. Except that we had to go out to eat. He said he didn't run to a kitchen, it had been upstairs. And only fancy, Madame, he told me that Madame Berthe had been your cook!’

Madame Dupont nodded, enjoying the excitement of the young girl. ‘So, you stayed there with him?’

‘In another room, Madame.’

‘It was probably the safest place for you in that quarter.’

‘Yes, it is like a fortress, *bien sûr*. He told me how you rescued him a second time when the opera house burned down, and you took him away for the restorative surgery; how you hid him from the gendarmes. It was, oh, very exciting, Madame. You were most resourceful, *n'est-ce pas*?’

Madame Dupont made a deprecating gesture as Sprite chattered on.

‘Of course, the coach-house is burnt and roofless now, but the back wall still stands, with the door to your secret passage intact. What fun you must have had, Madame, when you were children.’

‘Yes, yes, we did,’ said Madame Dupont, determined never to tell anyone of the dark time in their lives when, as adolescents, they had decided to administer justice in an unjust world. Angel had already despatched three desperate murderers let off by the courts by the time Monsieur Dupont had found out what they were up to and convinced her of their error. How had they got it so wrong? It had seemed perfectly logical at the time, but now, whenever she thought of it, she was swamped by a

hot tide of guilt; for it was her fault that Angel had killed. Just one more iniquitous bond to hold her to him, despite the yawning chasm between them.

‘Oh, and, Madame? The most wonderful thing! We went to the chapel where he composed *Cleopatra*; our ballet we have been doing. He said he composed it for you.’

She put up a hand, saying quickly, ‘The organ? It is still there?’

‘No, Madame. Sadly, it has been desecrated. Birds are nesting in its broken pipes and rats in the bellows. It is a great shame. All has been vandalised, except the Master's palace; and that is because nobody can find it with its concealed door in the third cellar, and of course, the wall across the passage means that anyone finding the entrance in the coach-house will be stopped halfway along it, believing it to be a dead end. You cannot see that there is a door, can you?’

‘No, my dear, he certainly did it well. Indeed, both of us owe our lives to the impossibility of uninformed persons finding a door in that wall.’

‘Yes, it is a very safe haven. I must tell you, also, that he showed me his library, given to him by Monsieur Dupont.’ She clasped her hands. ‘Oh, how I wish I had known him, Madame. What a lovely man he must have been.’

‘Yes, indeed, he was: a lovely, lovely man.’ She did not add, nothing is the same without him.

‘I am sorry if you were worried about us, Madame, but I am glad I went; for we have made his palace the inviting place it used to be. It will provide a refuge for him when the pressures of his life become too great.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Madame Dupont, silently thanking her Maker that Katarina was inclined to claustrophobia.

Sprite's enchanting chuckle dragged her back to the present. ‘And I saw the duck pond where he nearly drowned Monsieur Gaston. No wonder he is rrrr! Rrrr!’ She pulled a comical face, making clawing motions with her hands. ‘But there are no ducks there now, Madame.’

‘No. Gaston took the ducks, the hens and the cats to Madame Aranova's estate.’

‘Ah, so the canaille did not get them?’

‘No.’

‘*Bien*. I shall tell the Master.’

‘He knows about the cats.’

‘Yes. It was only the ducks and the hens. And, oh, Madame!’ The little face was bright with animation. ‘The Master made me dress as a boy to go out on the street. Only think, I fitted into the outfit he wore when he was just nine ...’

‘Yes, he was very big for a nine-year-old, and you are small—smaller than I was.’

‘It was a flamboyant costume. He said you altered it to fit him. And with it, I wore a scarlet cloak with a gold dragon on the back.’

‘I remember ... It was a sad day when he grew out of it. I had to pack it away in a little cedar-wood chest for him, with lavender and rosemary.’

‘It is in perfect condition, Madame. And, oh, we went to the *Place du Tertre* and visited the artists, and ate olives and goat's cheese, and went to a music hall—an old mill, too—the *Moulin Rouge*.’

‘*Eh bien*, it was just as well he dressed you as a boy.’

‘We had no trouble, Madame. If anybody showed us aggression, the Master merely gestured, and he was rendered as quiet as a mouse. Hypnosis, it is a wonderful thing, is it not? And, oh, the greatest thing of all! We had a prodigious adventure. Do you know, we even went to the Opéra Paris to search for the palace of the *Phantom of the Opera*? *Mais*, what a building! *Formidable!*’

‘Indeed. And did you find what you were looking for?’

‘*Non*, Madame, *je regrette*. We went, oh, so deep below the cellars, and there were kilometres of passages and caverns. We found the underground lake, but we could not find his palace.’

‘Could you not? But how fortunate.’

‘Fortunate? But, Madame, why? We so wanted to find it.’

‘Well, if you had, you would have been away still, would you not?’

She giggled. ‘You are right, Madame. It would have been a great thing to have discovered it. The Master—he expects it is accessed through a hidden facility on the island in the middle of the lake, but we did not take the trouble to go back and get a boat to go out there. He says, one day when we have more time ... But I see that all my chatter has tired you. I will leave you now.’ She turned to go and stopped, looking back. ‘And Madame? One more thing: It will be wisest not to interfere if he wishes to sing with the comtesse when she returns. It will prevent something worse happening. Goodnight, dear Madame. Try not to worry too much ...’

A brilliant smile. And she was gone.

###

END OF FREE SAMPLE

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About the Author



Anne Rouen

Anne Rouen is an Australian born 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 ongoing series was born.

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

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

Throughout her career, Lynn has escaped the everyday demands of work through the hand of Anne Rouen. *Master of Illusion—Book One* was her first published novel, and it has been nominated in several award programs, most notably, the Global Ebook Awards.

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

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

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