

Ballet Noir

Caroline Miller

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CHAPTER I

I heard the cries again, just as I had on the three previous nights of our ballet tour. The year was 2009, and these cries were similar to those I'd experienced as a child whenever someone I loved had died. The first time was a week after my grandmother departed. For months afterwards, I'd refused to sleep without a light burning in my room. Then I'd heard them again when I was nine. That time they came after my best friend died of leukemia, the day after I'd visited her in the hospital. My final haunting came when I was twelve. The year was 2000, the turn of the century and was made memorable because it marked the loss of my beloved dance teacher, Madame Yelena Natilova. She'd been run down by a car at the age of sixty-four.

These recent hearings came while I was performing before an audience at the Prague National Theatre. I was dancing the role of Odette and I heard them during the final scene in *Swan Lake*. No one on stage or in the hall seemed troubled by them. The dancers swirling around me kept pace with the music and the audience, anticipating my theatrical death, sat in rapt attention. What I heard came from beyond the footlights and seemed to be exclusively for me.

When the curtain rang down on our final performance in Prague, the audience broke into joyful applause. David Harden, as Prince Siegfried, and I advanced toward the edge of the stage with the full corps de ballet behind us.

"Not bad, Tara Bentley," my partner whispered in my ear. "Not bad at all."

He stepped to one side to allow for my solo bow, and I did the same for him seconds later. Next, we entwined fingers and with our free hands, we tossed kisses to the audience. The patrons went wild and I should have been ecstatic, but my eyes kept scanning the upper balconies for some rational explanation of what I'd heard. Finding none, I felt alone, like a caged animal cut off from the rest of my species.

If I'd hoped to gather my thoughts, alone in my dressing room, I was mistaken. As it was closing night in Prague, members of the corps kept running in to congratulate me, ecstatic that our performance in the first city of our tour had gone

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so well. I was kept so busy hugging them and sharing compliments that by the time my best friend, Susan Kepler, showed up I'd barely begun to remove my makeup.

Susan was my age, twenty-one, but shorter and with a rounded figure which forced her to be conscious of her weight, particularly as our Artistic Director, Alec Borden of the Seattle Ballet Company, liked his dancers so thin, they barely cast shadows. Her nervous energy saved her. Her speech and gestures were rapid as was her capacity to share gossip. Among members of the company she was known as the Town Crier.

"Aren't you dressed yet? Alec has a taxi waiting for us. He doesn't want anyone late for the cast party at the Grand Hotel Bohemia. Especially, not you. He sent me to hurry you up."

Standing behind me, she peered at her reflection in the mirror.

"Do you think this dress makes me look fat?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I laughed. "Of course you don't. Why do you always need reassurance?"

"And why are you always late?" She reached from behind me to put the lid on my cold cream jar. "Come on. You don't want to hold everyone up."

Her cheerful disposition helped me to feel normal and not like someone losing her mind. For a moment, I considered telling her what I'd been experiencing. Maybe she'd have some explanation or at the very least, she might order me to bed with a bowl of chicken soup. But I hesitated. She wasn't good at keeping secrets. Besides, she looked so happy. She had a right to feel that way. We all did. Our little company, after much struggling, was being noticed at last. I guessed there was another reason for her glowing countenance, as well. She hadn't said anything, but I suspected she was in love.

"I think I'll skip the party," I shrugged. "I'm tired and we have to catch the train for Budapest at 8 in the morning. Then it's rehearsals and three performances at the State Opera House. Then there's Vienna, Milan and Venice."

"Stop that. You're making me exhausted just listening to you. You're the prima ballerina. You have to show up." She bent down to speak in a conspiratorial whisper. "Besides, someone will be there Alec wants you to meet."

I spun around. "Who? Why didn't Alec tell me?"

"I don't know," Susan shrugged. "You'll have to ask him."

As I stood up, she handed me my black dress and helped me with the zipper.

"You do look a little tired," she admitted as she stood back to look at me. Reaching for my powder puff, she dabbed a bit more color on my cheeks.

When she was done, I brushed away the excess and, grabbing my coat and

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purse, allowed her to pull me out the door.

David Harden, waiting in one of the taxis, waved us inside. Susan headed toward him, with me in tow, and climbed in beside him, already chattering about her hopes for the rest of our tour. As she was capable of an extended monologue, I allowed myself to drift off and was sound asleep when the cab came to a halt in front of the hotel. I remember how cold the night air felt as we stumbled toward the entrance.

Susan was the first to spot the drinks-table and steered us toward the flutes of champagne. Handing David and I a glass, she then proceeded to elbow the other guests out of her way so that she could deliver us, like a pair of express packages, to our Artistic Director.

When we found him, he was talking to a woman taller than he was by several inches. Adding to her sense of height was the floor-length gown and matching red turban that she wore. A few strands of lustrous black curls had broken free beneath the headgear. I judged her to be in her late fifties, but she was lithe and had the posture of a dancer. Certainly, her violet eyes glittered with a critical air as she surveyed the three new arrivals, suggesting she knew her ballet and held firm opinions.

“Ah, well done, Susan.” Alec smiled as he waved us closer to him with the tip of his fingers so he could make introductions. “Madame Lazaremko, this is Tara Bentley of whom we were just talking.”

Alec narrowed his eyes as he looked at me -- a warning that I was to be on my best behavior. Whoever this woman was and whatever her background, by his glance, he wished me to know that she was in a position to benefit the company.

Madame Lazaremko held out her hand.

“How do you do, Miss Bentley? Your performance tonight was impressive. You danced *Odette* with perfect innocence. I must congratulate you.”

I took the hand that was offered and thanked her for her compliment, though uncertain of her sincerity. The hand I took was cold, which didn't surprise me, as it mirrored her demeanor. I decided to keep the conversation simple and asked if she was fond of ballet. When her cheeks reddened, I knew I'd made a faux pas.

“Come now, Tara.” Alec broke in to smooth over my mistake. “Everyone knows Madame was the prima ballerina with the Bolshoi for many years. How long has it been since you retired?” He turned to look into the woman's violet eyes. “Can it be fifteen years, already? What a loss for the theater. I recall the news of your triumphant exit as if it were yesterday.”

His flattery dramatically reduced the tension in the air. Madame's shoulders

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relaxed and when she spoke, her voice, rich with its deep, Russian accent, sounded more wistful than annoyed.

"I'm afraid it has been a while. Miss Bentley can hardly be expected to remember. But she might recognize my stage name: Ludmila?"

Now it was my turn to blush. Of course I'd heard the name. Ludmila was considered one of the great Russian interpreters of the Swan roles, as was my teacher who had died.

"F-forgive me," I stammered. "I know your reputation well. Madame Yelena Natilova gave me my early training and spoke of you many times."

The woman sniffed when she heard the name.

"I doubt she knew much of my work. I was a mere girl with the Bolshoi when she defected."

Alec stepped in for a second time sensing a renewed chill.

"Ludmila is here on behalf of the tour's sponsor, Tara. She brings news that his support might be permanent if we do well in Europe. Of course, we're all anxious to meet our benefactor so that we can express our gratitude."

When Madame Lazaremko said nothing to his implied question, Alec hurried on with the introductions.

Susan was quick to step forward, flushed with excitement and, being aware of who Ludmila was, gave a slight curtsy which the woman acknowledged with the nod of her head. David, not one easily impressed, shook Madame's hand, but damaged any good impression he might have made with his handsome face by allowing his eyes to drift longingly toward the buffet table. When he followed up on Alec's question about the identity of the man behind our tour, naturally, the reply he received was curt.

"He wishes to remain anonymous for the moment. Understand, nothing is promised until the tour is a success. Let us see how the reviews treat you."

Alec's lips twitched with nervousness when he heard her but he maintained his cheerful air.

"Yes, yes. We've plenty of time to discuss the future. Why don't we sit down and get to know each other better?"

He assembled a few stray chairs around an empty table, but finding only three, he suggested Susan and David make themselves useful by bringing us food from the buffet.

Susan looked disappointed, as though she were eager to make the acquaintance of this prickly woman. Gladly would I have changed places with her. Madame Lazaremko made me uncomfortable. Beneath her arrogant posturing, an

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air of sadness clung about her. I didn't understand it, didn't know how to deal with it, and felt annoyed that Alec had given me the task of entertaining her.

After the pair had gone, the three of us sat down and Alec again took up the conversation.

"You mentioned you'd be joining us again in Milan. Is there the slightest chance our benefactor will be there? I mean, if all goes well."

Madame waved his question away with a slight impatience.

"His appearance would be of no importance. I assure you, he will rely upon my recommendation, entirely. He has too many other interests to occupy him."

"I see. What might those interests be, if I may ask?" Alec was doing his best to learn what he could about our sponsor, but he was thwarted at every turn.

Madame scanned the room, appraising the other occupants, a clear sign she intended to say nothing more about the matter. Alec tossed me a desperate glance.

"Do you live in Prague, Madame?" I offered weakly. "It's my first time abroad and I think this is a beautiful city. All the buildings look like wedding cakes."

My remark was no doubt foolish, but at least it gave no offense.

"You may call me Natalya or Ludmila, if you prefer," Madame said, turning her gaze in my direction. "And I will call you, Tara. That's how Americans address one another isn't it? By their first names?"

Glad that I still had a head attached to my body, I ventured another remark; this one a compliment about her dress. The effect was like water on a desert flower. She blossomed and told me her gowns were made by a designer in Milan. She spoke highly of her work and, knowing that our company would be performing there, she offered to write down the designer's name and address.

Relieved that the conversation was taking a turn for the better, Alec made an excuse to leave us for a while, no doubt hoping we two women would bond over fashion. Madame barely noticed his departure, but I felt abandoned and in a state of fury, I watched him go.

What more was I to say to this woman, I wondered. Madame and I were dancers, but beyond that, we had little in common. The only other commonality between us was my teacher Yelena Natilova, so I asked her what she knew of my teacher as a girl. The woman opposite me at first looked surprised and then frowned.

"I was a girl, a member of the corps when your teacher was in her prime. She took no notice of me. Perhaps she didn't care for young people. Or perhaps, she saw me as a future competitor. Who knows?"

"That surprises me," I countered. "Madame seemed to adore children. She

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could be strict, but I was six when I started taking lessons with her and, with her swept up silver curls and silver arm bangles, I thought she was magical, like a fairy godmother.”

Madame Lazaremko drew her lips into a thin line, then shrugged.

“People can change, I suppose. I describe her as a prima ballerina, a person we junior dancers never addressed unless she spoke first. Like a British queen, yes?”

For a moment both of us gazed about the room, neither of us able to carry the conversation forward. I was angry with her for what she'd said about my teacher, but as I studied her profile, I had to admire her frail beauty and the grace with which she carried herself, the prime recompense for having lived the life of a dancer. Though I was young with many performances ahead of me, I saw in the gloom of that overthrown prima ballerina a hint of my future. In mid-years, would my life be over? Would I spend it longing for my past?

“The public adored her.”

Jolted from my ruminations, I tossed Madame a quizzical expression, this last remark seeming so different from the first. When she expressed herself more fully, I understood that her contempt was unchanged.

“We Russians referred to her as our ‘Little Angel,’ but when she defected, when she turned her back on us, we did the same to her. All except one.”

Naturally, I asked whom she meant and she needed no coaxing to tell me the tragic story of a young male dancer who had fallen so deeply in love with Yelena Natilova that when she defected, he'd tried to kill himself by plunging his car over a cliff. He recovered from his injuries, but he never danced again.

I couldn't contain my horror.

“I don't understand why he'd want to kill himself. If he loved her, why couldn't he be happy that she'd found freedom?”

Madame's glare was glacial.

“Perhaps you are too young to understand these things.”

“But this dancer was young. What did he understand that I don't?”

“His soul was too great for his body. Don't compare him with others. There is no one like him. And Yelena Natilova threw him away as if he were nothing. She left without a word of goodbye. He thought she loved him, but she loved only her career.”

The bitterness in the woman's voice was unmistakable, which made me wonder if Madame Lazaremko didn't have some feelings for the young man herself.

“What was his name? I'd like to know. Perhaps she mentioned him to me.”

“His name was Vladimir Reznikov. He could have been greater than Nijinsky.

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And so handsome. Every girl in the corps de ballet was in love with him.”

“So what happened to him? If he could no longer dance, what became of him?”

“He went to live with his mother and her family in Tuscany. His father was Russian, so she left Vladimir behind to study with the Bolshoi. Unfortunately, his father died of tuberculosis not long after she left, so the son was left on his own. Perhaps if she’d stayed in Russia, his life might have been different. Who knows?”

“Is he still alive in Tuscany? Do you ever hear from him?”

Madame waved a braceleted arm in the air to show her impatience.

“Are you so interested in this story for a reason? Have you a lover, possibly?”

Her question took me by surprise, as if she’d reached across the table to slap my face. My personal life was no concern of hers and I might have told her so if I didn’t know Alec would be furious if I offended her. Or maybe I was embarrassed that at twenty-one, I didn’t have a lover. There’d been a dalliance at seventeen with a boy my age, but it was brief as both of us were experimenting and not really infatuated with one another. Eventually, we went our separate ways.

When I sat staring into my lap, Madame answered for me.

“I know how it is. You love only the dance. Why not? It’s an honest, if not tyrannical lover. One could choose worse.”

A faint smile crossed her lips and for a brief moment, I felt a rapport between us. We both knew the pain and sacrifice dance demanded. It *was* a tyrannical lover and age never slaked our passion for it.

“Yes, I do love to dance,” I answered softly. When she heard me, she nodded.

“I know. I can see it in your work. You remind me of myself when I was young.” She leaned toward me to speak in confidence. “Alec knows his business, Tara, but never forget you possess the talent. Many will attempt to humble you. Don’t listen to them. You and I are a rare breed. We push ourselves to the edge of the precipice, abusing our bodies to achieve movements beyond the body’s design. We suffer, yet we also succeed. Not many will surrender to that degree – certainly not your partner, that Prince Siegfried. He’s a good dancer and that is enough for him. He will never be great. You could never burn with passion for him, I think. Am I wrong?”

My cheeks must have glowed like candied apples. I thought she had done David an injustice but I couldn’t help being flattered. Still, she was right about one thing. I had no interest in him and told her I thought he was attracted to Susan.

Madame leaned back in her chair, gazing at me the way a cat might stare into a fishbowl.

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“Ah yes, little Susan. She’s charming. But so small. She’s another not destined for greatness.”

Again, I took umbrage with what she said.

“In my opinion, she’s a beautiful dancer. I wish I had her grace.”

“If that were so, then she’d be dancing the role of Odette and you’d be among the corps.” Madame allowed her eyes to scan the guests again looking bored. That was the moment Alec chose to return.

He came toward us, rubbing his hands together as if he hoped for good news.

“Well, well, you two seem to be getting on well. What have I missed? Anything interesting?”

Madame rose as he was about to sit down and so he righted himself again, his eyes searching mine for some explanation.

“Is there anything I can get you, Ludmila? Another glass of champagne?”

“I’ve an early flight in the morning,” she replied with a diffidence that implied she didn’t care if we believed her or not. “I’ll say good night.” She held out her hand for Alec to take. “We’ll meet in Milan. By then, let us hope there will have been several good reviews.”

Whether she really hoped for our success or not, I couldn’t tell from her tone of voice, but she made a speedy exit, turning her back on us at once and disappearing among the guests. Alec tossed a few words after her about a new ballet he was choreographing, but if she heard him, she gave no inkling.

When he turned toward me, his eyes were the size of pinpricks.

“What happened just now? I was watching the pair of you from across the room. You seemed to be getting on okay. Why did she take off like that?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “She was talking about undying love for a while, then she said some stuff about Susan that I didn’t agree with. If there was something specific you wanted me to talk about, you should have given me a clue.”

When he heard me, Alec rubbed a hand through his hair and sat down.

“Yeah, I know. I suppose I should have, but I wanted you to act natural, not get upset about meeting a dancing legend. It probably wasn’t anything you said. You know the Russians. They’re a moody lot. Ever read their books?”

“I like their novels, but she’s another piece of work altogether.”

“You don’t have to like her,” Alec said, pointing a finger at me. “Just make nice. A lot is riding on her good opinion. You’re lucky she takes an interest in you.”

“Yes, that’s part of the puzzle. Why should she? I’m a kid from Seattle. How could she have heard of me or about the company? Aren’t you the least bit curious about that?”

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Alec looked blank, as if my questions hadn't occurred to him. Either way, he didn't seem bothered. Spotting a journalist across the room, he stood up as if intending to introduce himself. But before he left, he wagged a finger at me.

"Never look a gift horse in the mouth, Tara. That's my advice."

Susan joined me at the table after he had gone. She was balancing two plates piled high with canapés.

"This stuff is good," she said, setting one dish in front of me. "And so is the bread."

She bit into a French roll and I watched as the crumbs tumbled down the front of her dress. While she brushed them away, I sampled the items she'd brought as I realized I was hungry.

"These deviled eggs are wonderful. You should have brought more," I said, as I bit into a golden cushion.

"Don't worry," Susan pointed to the buffet table. "There's more."

Susan sat watching as I wolfed down my food, her eyes full of questions.

"Well?" she demanded when she could no longer contain her curiosity. "Did she like us? Are we going to get more money? She didn't say anything about me, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact she did mention you." I put down my fork and looked at her, intending to choose my words carefully to leave a good impression, but Susan squealed before I could get a word out.

"What? Oh God, don't tell me she said anything bad. I don't want to know if she hated me. She didn't, did she?"

I wiped my chin with my napkin, knowing what I intended to say.

"As a matter of fact, she said your dancing was charming."

"You're kidding?" Susan fell into a spasm, clutching her arms across her bosom as if she'd burst if she didn't hold on to herself. "She said that? She really said that?"

"She really did."

"Oh, I wish I could have heard her. But if I'd have been here, she might not have said anything, or I'd have said something stupid." Susan paused to look me in the eye. "To be honest, she's a little bit intimidating, don't you think?"

"I do and I wish you'd have warned me about what I was getting into."

"How could I, Tara?" Susan squirmed. "Alec swore me to secrecy. Did you find out anything about our sponsor? He's rich, obviously."

"I think she intends to take her secret to the grave," I smiled.

"Still, you talked about something. Your lips were moving. I could see that from across the room."

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“Well, she did ask me one personal thing...”

“Come on, Tara. You can tell me. I won't say anything.”

That was a lie, even if she meant it to be true. I knew she'd tell David and he might tell Alec, but I didn't care. I wanted Susan's reaction.

“She asked if I had a lover.”

“What?” Susan pursed her lips and made a sound like a horse whinny.

“Don't assume you know everything,” I replied as I struck a Mata Hari pose. That won me another snicker.

“Maybe she's got a son she wants to fix you up with,” Susan went on.

“Ugh! How'd you like to have her as an in-law? No, I tell you, the conversation was weird. She even mentioned some guy she cared about a hundred years ago.”

“That's interesting. Who was he? Did she say?”

I told her Vladimir Reznikov's story and of his connection with my teacher while Susan sat with her elbows on the table, her chin propped in her hands.

“Do you suppose Madame Lazarevko still loves him? Could he be our mystery guy?”

I shook my head to indicate I didn't know. The thought had escaped me, but suddenly, it made sense.

“Whoever he is, he owns a villa in Tuscany. That doesn't make him sound poor, does it?”

“No, it doesn't.” Susan nodded. “I wonder if there's a way to find out more about him.”

“What him?” Prince Siegfried, alias David Harden, had managed to creep up on us unaware. Susan repeated our conversation, and I didn't object when she added embellishments. She told a good story.

David wasn't curious about the past lover. What he wanted to know was if it meant the promise of more money.

Susan snorted.

“If you think Alec would give the money to us if it did, you can forget it. He wants to produce a new ballet.”

“A ballet?” David's eyes narrowed. “Where did you hear that? Honestly, sometimes I think you live with your ear to a keyhole.”

Susan jabbed at his ribs with her elbow and he pretended to crumble.

“Hey! I didn't say being a snoop was bad.”