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Chapter One

1906

Marietta Stelle's mother always said that nothing good came of a rainy day. However, it was a rainy day when the magic came, and once magic has entered your life, you stay in its glittering clutches forever.

A mysterious new neighbour – who Marietta would later come to learn went by the name of Dr Drosselmeier – heralded the arrival of magic and wonder in her life. Though he appeared to be but an ordinary man, enchantment clung to him. It dripped from his voice, seeped out from under his skin and whispered around his eyes.

Marietta was dipping in and out of pliés at her ballet barre when she happened to glance out her window and witness his entrance. A black town hat bobbed along the cobbled street below. The cloaked figure carried a single case, pausing to look up at the sprawling townhouse Marietta called home. He seemed to look straight through her, so Marietta took a step back from the window to study him from a more covert position: his face was clean-shaven, fair and younger than one would expect, considering the sweep of silver hair peeking out from beneath his hat. Creases burrowed into the skin at the corners of his eyes, marking him as a gentleman in his late thirties perhaps, and his irises were an intense frosted blue, lending him a bewitching stare.

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The curtains of rain sheeting down Marietta's window failed to touch him and, after a momentary hesitation, he continued on his way. Rising up onto demi-pointe, her attention snared, Marietta watched him stride into the equally grand, vacated townhouse opposite the Stelles'.

'We seem to have acquired a new neighbour,' Frederick announced later at dinner.

'Is that so?' their mother asked. She smoothed a hand over her honey-tinted coiffure, as if he were to make an appearance that instant. Ida Stelle's dark-blue eyes were a mirror of Marietta's, only hers were accompanied by a delicate nose and pinched chin beneath her lighter hair rather than the firm jaw, aquiline nose and raven hair both Frederick and Marietta had inherited from their father.

'A former doctor,' Frederick continued, 'turned inventor, so I hear. No family to speak of. He must possess a sizeable inheritance to have purchased the entire townhouse for him alone though I failed to recognise his name. It was rather an unusual one; Drosselmeier.'

'No doubt he's of German heritage,' their father said, shaking a starched napkin out and draping it across his knees. 'How curious, it has been quite some time since we've had a new acquaintance on this street. We shall have him dine with us one evening to take his measure ourselves. An inventor, you say? In which direction do his talents lay? Telephones? Electricity? Is the next Marconi in our midst?'

Frederick gave a polite cough. 'In children's playthings, I believe. Toys and such.'

Theodore set his sherry glass down harder than was warranted. A few drops bloodied the ivory tablecloth. He harrumphed, the tips of his ears pinkening.

Marietta met Frederick's eyes. Theodore Stelle was not

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a man persuaded of the merit or delights in creative pursuits. Marietta clenched her soup spoon, the familiar argument wearing deeper grooves into her patience each time it reared up.

'I shall extend an invitation,' Ida said, scanning the dining room, eager at any excuse to entertain a guest in their fine house. Her gaze took in the emerald and cream striped wallpaper, the large mahogany table and chairs, polished floorboards and large arrangements of hothouse roses spilling over crystal vases, perfuming the room with the faint odour of decay. 'I have yet to hear mention of him among my acquaintances; I shall ensure ours will be the first dinner he attends.' She frowned at a petal that showed signs of spoiling.

Theodore gave a disproving sniff. 'Are you certain that's wise? Perhaps he has yet to be mentioned for good reason.'

'Yes, I too am dubious on his trade selection. However, we mustn't let that discourage us,' Ida said. 'He's invested in a superlative address, which suggests he comes from good stock—' her eyes flicked to Marietta and back to her husband '—or a sizeable inheritance. This bears further investigation.'

Marietta glanced down at the table setting, growing hot beneath her Paquin dress in palest periwinkle. The voluptuous sleeves – edged in whisper-thin black lace that had so drawn her to the couturier's creation on her last visit to Rue de la Paix – now itched unbearably under her mother's matchmaking insinuations. Ida had been eviscerating a fortune on gowns at the House of Worth whilst Marietta had stolen away next door. She'd admired the delicately embroidered roses tumbling down the silky dress before purchasing it and absconding on a walk as her mother continued shopping. The afternoon free from her mother had been as happy as the blossoms that had floated through the streets of Paris that spring and she had a sudden, sharp longing for that halcyon day.

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A flick of colour pulled her from the macaron-sweet memory, incongruous amongst the porcelain plates and silverware. A smear of gouache licked up Frederick's wrist, a flare of burnt sienna. She flashed him a look and he tugged his charcoal jacket sleeve down to hide the offending stain.

'Tell me, Frederick, what have you been occupying yourself with of late?' Theodore beckoned for his brandy glass to be refilled. A footman obliged him and he studied Frederick over the Armagnac.

'Much of the usual, I'm afraid, Father. My studies leave me very little time to devote to anything else.'

Frederick's lies were as smooth as the brandy Marietta sipped. She regarded the smile Frederick had pasted on as he deftly handled their father's enquiries. Only Marietta knew of the canvasses stacked in Geoffrey's room—Frederick's closest friend and, as Marietta had learnt after being taken into her brother's confidence, his secret beau.

Frederick's experimentation with the new Fauvism movement translated to wilder brushwork and stronger pigmentation than she'd seen him paint with before. 'The likes of Matisse and Derain are sending the Parisian art world into an uproar,' Frederick had explained to Marietta some weeks earlier. 'When Louis Vauxcelles saw their paintings in the Salon d'Automne last year, he declared them "les fauves", wild beasts of colour and brilliance and life. Mark my words, art cannot die; art is the future and it is as tightly intertwined with my own lifeblood as ballet is with yours.'

To their parents' knowledge, Theodore had stamped out Frederick's passion for painting before his voice had broken, diverting his path onto law school. Frederick was now a post-graduate student, following in their father's footsteps and eventually bound to join Theodore in presiding over the courts of Nottingham. It was Theodore's position as a high court judge that had led to his being

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bestowed the courtesy title of Baron, a too-appealing prospect for the young Ida, who was a woman of means but craved the delicious satisfaction of her sisters addressing her as The Right Honourable. The match had suited the equally socially ambitious Theodore and the pair had been manoeuvring themselves upwards ever since. Having children proved to be another asset which they could use to aid them in this endeavour.

Marietta pointed her toes beneath the table, considering whether she ought to have the dressmaker adjust her dress so she might dance in it. The blush roses were the exact shade of her pointe shoes.

Theodore turned to Marietta. 'And how have you been spending your days?'

Her daydream melted away, leaving her with the dregs of reality. 'I—' Her thoughts were slow, sticky as caramel.

'The usual agenda of shopping and luncheons.' Frederick came to her aid, raising his eyes to the heavens.

Marietta smiled at him and he inclined his head. The extra ballet practices that had been consuming her time remained an unspoken truth.

'That reminds me, your mother has informed me that you failed remarkably in sustaining Lord Compton's attention over afternoon tea last week, despite her efforts in contriving a meeting between you.'

Marietta's royal cheddar soup – already cold having been served room temperature so as not to necessitate the unseemly blowing upon it to cool it – turned thick and cloying in her throat. She sipped her brandy in an effort to settle her mood. When she spoke, it was in a more assured tone. 'Charles Compton is an utter bore and thoroughly ill-natured.' In fact, he had spent the entirety of their afternoon in the brand-new Ritz espousing on the chestnut thoroughbred he was having shipped from Argentina. Marietta had

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learnt far more than she had ever desired on the subject of polo ponies and had scarcely uttered more than a word. Though she had observed that his unfortunate macrodontia lent him a certain resemblance to his beloved thoroughbred. Grounds for marriage, it was not. By contrast, Ida had spent a pleasurable few hours drinking in the duchess's scrutiny of their dining companions and the Palm Court décor, redolent in soft apricot, panelled mirrors reflecting the sparkling chandeliers a thousand-fold.

Theodore's nostrils flared. 'Might I remind you that Lord Compton is the Marquess of Northampton. The next time you choose to insult a peer of the realm, you ought to recall that I have been more than generous in allowing you to host your upcoming performance in our ballroom. It is high time you demonstrated a little gratitude. I have invited Lord Compton and several other suitors to our Christmas Ball in the hopes that they shall find your dancing an attractive quality in a prospective wife. Perhaps this will even hasten a betrothal.'

Marietta regarded her father coolly over her crystal glass.

'Darling, it is most unbecoming to be unmarried at your age,' Ida added. 'When I was twenty, I had been married for three years.' She paused. 'Perhaps Lord Compton shall give you a second chance.'

Frederick cleared his throat before she could respond. 'Father, what are your thoughts on this new battleship? They say the HMS Dreadnought will revolutionise our navy.'

The soup course was cleared away and the next course brought in, the footmen fading into the background, ever-present shadows. Marietta tuned out the politicking between her father and brother, grateful for Frederick's interception of the conversation before she had spoken out of turn. Conversing with her father was a tactical art not unlike a game of chess; it necessitated clear strategy and focus.

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She laid her silver fork down, the aroma of thick pastry and gravy clotting her stomach. Gazing out the window, she imagined the candle perched against the dark glass as a star to be wished upon. When she danced, she was a conjurer, writing spells with the whirls and arcs of her body. Her dancing was hers and hers alone, not for the enticement of any man, nor for her father to wield as a weapon against her. When she danced, she flew on gossamer wings that lifted her away from the dragging weight of her family's expectations. Enticed her with a glimpse of an alternate path to the one she was obligated to tread. When she danced, she had a voice. And nothing was more fearsome than a silent future.

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