

PRAISE FOR

Diva

'I was blown away by *Diva*. Beautiful, visceral, tragic, gutting'
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'With its glamour, celebrity and heartbreak, this is
the unstoppable story of ambition and desire that
enchantress Daisy Goodwin was born to write'
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'I've been completely overwhelmed by *Diva*: by the pleasure of
reading such a marvellous ardent, romantic, yet utterly worldly
book... Quick, where are my Callas records...'
LADY ANTONIA FRASER

'An extraordinary, vivid, and skilful re-imagining
of a modern Greek legend'
VICTORIA HISLOP

'It's got everything: high drama; great love, found and lost;
gossip of the rich and famous and, of course,
the sublime art of Maria Callas'
CRESSIDA CONNOLLY

'Elegant, adult, ultimately very moving, *Diva* presents an
amazingly convincing Maria, while always conveying
the power of the majestic Callas myth'
LAURA THOMPSON

'Daisy Goodwin's richly imagined world makes *Diva* an
irresistible page-turner. Blending high drama with an artist's eye
for detail, Goodwin breathes life into one of the greatest and
most tragic stars of the 20th century. *Diva* is a pure delight'
DR AMANDA FOREMAN

‘The spectacular Daisy Goodwin has written *Diva*,
an epic novel about Maria Callas in love that hits every note
and soars off the page. Told with tenderness and power,
this is bravura storytelling in the hands of a master’

ADRIANA TRIGIANI

‘Daisy Goodwin has brought back to life the legendary diva
and the untold story of her love affair with Onassis sparkles
and captivates like the jewels he lavished on her’

SHANE WATSON

‘I gulped it down... the brilliantly persuasive portrayal of a
woman negotiating the demands of her art with an intense
emotional life is so compelling’

ELIZABETH BUCHAN

‘Daisy Goodwin is a genius storyteller, fashioning the most delicious,
insider gossip into a tale full of heartbreak, love, ambition
and brutal disappointment’

NINA DE GRAMONT

‘Maria Callas was the greatest opera singer of all time...
Based on her true story, this page-turner is a must read for fans
of Daisy Goodwin’s fiction’

LUCASTA MILLER

‘A sumptuous, accomplished novel... *Diva* takes us deep inside
Maria Callas’s emotional journey, and hits the high notes
of both glamour and tragedy’

JANE THYNNE

‘A brilliant novel... Goodwin tells the story with tenderness
and captures the contradictions of Callas; powerful, ferocious,
a woman who created her own glamorous identity but who
was also desperate, used, abused and abandoned’

DOROTHY BYRNE

DIVA

DAISY GOODWIN



An Aria Book

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In memory of Hope Dellon – a great editor and a beloved friend.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a novel about Maria Callas, not a biography, so while I have stuck to the facts as far as possible, I have taken a few liberties when it comes to dates. I am sure there will be many keen Callas fans who will spot these liberties, but I hope they will allow me some dramatic licence. I wanted to tell a story as compelling as its subject.

Overture

PROLOGUE

The Treasure

ATHENS, FEBRUARY 1940

It had snowed the night before and for once, the sixteen-year-old Maria Kalogeropoulou felt grateful for the clumpy men's brogues that were the only shoes in Athens large enough for her size nine feet. She hadn't seen snow since leaving New York, three years ago. The night before, she had been listening to the radio and Milton, her sister's boyfriend, had turned to Maria and said that maybe she should think about going back to America. "Everyone thinks that the Italians are going to invade. You would be safer there."

A year earlier, Maria would have been delighted at the idea of going back to the States and her father. But not now. She couldn't possibly leave her singing teacher, the great Spanish soprano Elvira de Hidalgo.

It usually took Maria twenty minutes to walk from the apartment on Patisson Street to the Conservatoire, but today the snow was slowing her down. As she turned the corner into Syntagma Square, she saw a familiar figure come out of an apartment building.

"Madame," she cried, slipping and sliding on the snow as she tried to catch up with her teacher.

Elvira de Hidalgo turned to smile at the eager face in front of her.

"Madame! I have mastered it. The trill." Standing in the middle of the road, Maria started to sing the trill from the mad scene in the

second act of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, her voice so urgent and full of emotion that it shook the snow-muffled silence of the street.

Elvira put up a hand to silence her.

Maria looked mortified. "Did I make a mistake? I was so sure I got it right this time."

Elvira sighed. "That is not why I stopped you. Maria, you should not be singing at the top of your voice in the street."

Maria looked back at her in surprise. It had clearly not occurred to her that there was anything strange about her behaviour. Of all Elvira's pupils, Maria was always the first to arrive and the last to leave; even if her own lesson had finished she would sit through all of Elvira's classes, hoping to learn something. She wanted to be the best singer that Elvira had ever taught.

Now she looked crestfallen, "Did I embarrass you?"

Elvira shook her head. "My concern is for you, Maria. A voice like yours must be looked after. It is a precious gift. Don't waste it singing in the snow. Right now, you are young, and you think that your voice will always do anything you want. I used to think that too. But it won't be like that forever. The more you protect it now, the longer it will last."

Elvira took the girl's arm as they walked along Patisserie Street.

"You think you are invincible, and that I am making a stupid fuss, but I know what I am talking about. You must have patience, Maria."

Maria nodded obediently, but Elvira could see she was not convinced and she tried to think of a way to convince her. A display in the window of an antiques shop caught her eye.

"Imagine an amphora like the ones in the Acropolis museum filled with those gold coins." She pointed at the tray in the shop window. Maria turned her head to look.

"That is your voice now. Every time you sing you are giving away one of those coins. So spend them wisely, my dear, because once they are gone, there won't be any more."

Maria looked so solemn that Elvira almost laughed.

"One day, I am sure, you will be a great diva, one of the greatest sopranos the world has ever known, and you will think you are immortal. But when you are taking your curtain call at La Scala and the crowd is throwing roses at your feet, remember the coins, Maria. Hold on to your treasure for as long as you can."

They walked along in silence for a minute, and then Elvira said, "You sang the trill quite brilliantly by the way, light and dark at the same time. Just the way it should be done."

The solemn face of her pupil broke into a beaming smile.

The Conservatoire loomed in front of them. Elvira touched her pupil on the arm.

"Right, Maria. Time for class."

Act One

CHAPTER ONE

In Performance

PARIS, OCTOBER 20, 1968

In her apartment on Avenue Georges Mandel, Maria drew the brush across her eyelid into an italic flick. Her hand was surprisingly steady. It was always like this before a performance: there would be nerves before, but once she sat down in front of her dressing room mirror, she would become completely absorbed in her task and the terrors would recede as she painted her face.

The door opened and Bruna, her maid, came in carrying a white fox stole.

"I brought you this, madame, from the *cave* – it is chilly tonight."

Maria nodded her thanks. She didn't ask Bruna why she had gone all the way to the *cave* when there was a cupboard full of furs just across the hall. She knew why her maid had made the extra journey. This fur had been a gift from the director Luchino Visconti after their first *Traviata* at La Scala. The other, more convenient furs, had all been given to her by her lover of the last nine years, Aristotle Onassis.

"Will madame wear the ruby earrings tonight?"

Maria nodded. The bodice of her white satin gown was embroidered with red and gold crystal beads. The rubies would bring a little colour to her face, which was pale despite her makeup. She would wear no other jewellery, no bracelets, no rings. Definitely no rings.

She heard the sound of her poodle, Toy, barking; that must mean that Franco was already here. Franco Zeffirelli, her favourite director and the closest thing she had to a best friend, was always punctual. She picked up a lipstick that matched the red beads on her dress and began to paint a sweep of colour. Up close the shade looked alarming, as if her mouth were full of blood, but Maria knew that from a distance it would give her smile conviction.

Franco was playing with the dog when she made her entrance. When he saw her, his eyes flicked up and down, inspecting, and then he nodded.

"I approve. Dignified but also spectacular. Did I tell you that we are sitting next to the Burtons?" Franco Zeffirelli had just directed Elizabeth Taylor alongside her latest husband, Richard Burton, in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Maria was surprised. "But do they speak French?"

"I doubt it, but they like drama." Franco smiled.

Maria looked at the boulle clock on the mantelpiece. It was seven thirty. The ceremony would just be beginning in the church on Skorprios, the sickle-shaped island in the Ionian Sea that Onassis had bought just after their affair began and where she had spent every summer until this one. Then she remembered that Greece was an hour ahead. The wedding that Maria had first learned about from the newspapers two days before would already be over.

The most famous widow in the world, Jacqueline Kennedy, would now be Mrs Aristotle Onassis.

"Maria?"

Franco was holding out his hand to her. It was cool and dry and he smelled faintly of limes. Maria hesitated and then crossed herself. In answer to Franco's look she said, "Always, before a performance." There was no other word to describe what she was doing tonight. She would not be singing, but she would be performing the role of a woman without a care in the world, just as intensely as if she were standing on the stage of La Scala.

Franco nodded and said, "I guarantee that you will upstage everybody, even Liz Taylor."

For a moment Maria hesitated. "I hope I can do this."

Franco raised an elegant eyebrow. "Most women would find it impossible, but Maria Callas?"

Looking at his watch he took her by the arm. "*Andiamo*. We don't want the photographers to use up all their film on the battling Burtons."



The play, at the Comédie-Française, was a Feydeau farce, and Maria's cheeks were aching with the effort of smiling. She was not wearing her glasses so the action on the stage was just a blur, but Elizabeth Taylor's delighted cackle in the seat next to hers made it easy to know when to laugh.

She had met the Burtons before. They were the sort of shiny people that Ari adored. He had asked them to come on the *Christina* many times, but it had never worked out. The Burtons had their own yacht.

Maria could see a huge diamond glittering on Liz's hand, which at that moment was squeezing her husband's thigh. It was a gesture that spoke of ownership. Maria tried to remember which husband Burton was – the fourth or the fifth? An image of Elizabeth in a lace mantilla flashed into her mind. Was that the wedding with Burton or the one before? But that reminded her of that other wedding on a Greek island far away, and she had to breathe from the pit of her stomach to stop herself from screaming. For a moment she felt a surge of rage corroding her stomach and scalding her throat. If she were onstage now, she would be Medea, singing a vow of vengeance against Jason, her faithless lover who has set her aside to marry another woman.

The sigh of fury was loud enough to make Franco turn his elegant profile toward her and touch her arm. She knew what that touch meant. She was forgetting to give a performance of a woman having the time of her life. She fixed her eyes on the stage.

When the curtain fell, a couple of photographers came rushing down the aisle to capture the audience. Maria was about to turn her head away when Elizabeth Taylor grabbed her arm and leaned over to her, whispering, "Act like I am telling you the funniest thing you have ever heard."

Maria complied, throwing her head back with feigned glee. Elizabeth's astonishing violet eyes sparkled.

"That should make the front page. Maria Callas without a care in the world enjoying a joke with her old pal Liz Taylor."

She patted Maria's hand. "We divas need to stick together. Next time, don't trust a man till there's a ring on your finger."

"I will try to remember that, Mrs Burton."



It had been Franco's idea to go to Maxim's. Maria wanted to go back to her apartment, but she had been persuaded that dinner at the restaurant, the one she had eaten at so many times with Ari, would send an unmistakable message. As the car pulled up outside the restaurant's red-and-gold exterior on the rue Royale, Maria took a deep breath. Holding Franco's hand, she stopped in front of the coven of photographers and gave them her best first-night smile. She pretended not to hear the shouted questions – "Do you have a message for Mr Onassis, Madame Callas?" "Is that your new man, Maria?" – and kept her head up and her eyes bright until she was safely inside the red plush interior.

"What a pleasure to see you tonight, Madame Callas. An honour, in fact." The maître d', Girardoux, gave a little bow that acknowledged both her bravery in coming and his gratitude that once again she had chosen to put his restaurant on the front page.

"Your usual table is ready, unless, of course," Girardoux continued smoothly, "you would prefer to sit somewhere else."

"Now why on earth would I do that, Gaston?"

Adjusting her stole, Maria made her entrance into the main room of the restaurant. She headed for the table in the corner under the art nouveau painting of a bathing nymph. It was Ari's favourite table because he thought it gave him the best view of his fellow diners, and vice versa.

"You'll have to tell me who's here, Franco. You know how blind I am."

Maria had been nearsighted since childhood, and in private she wore glasses. But tonight was a public occasion. She did not want to see the expressions on people's faces as they spotted her. It was bad enough hearing the whispers of recognition – Yes, it's her, Maria Callas, the opera singer. The one who was with Onassis before Jackie Kennedy. I wonder how she is feeling now.

Maria thought of all the times that she had stood on a stage as

Norma, singing of the pain her lover had caused her by his desire to marry another woman. Audiences had wept as she brought out all the magnificent pathos of Bellini's score. No one had ever sung it better. But now she understood how inadequate her performance had been, because now she knew what it felt like to be abandoned by the man you loved.

Franco surveyed the room. "The Windsors are in the far corner with Marie-Hélène de Rothschild. The duchess is waving at you."

Maria lifted a hand to wave back.

Franco continued. "And in the other corner I can see Noël Coward having dinner with Marlene Dietrich and a very pretty boy."

The waiter put two coupes of champagne in front of Maria and Franco, and he lifted his to toast her. "Your health, Maria."

"To the new man in my life." They touched glasses and smiled at each other. To anyone who didn't know Franco's predilection for porters from Les Halles, they looked like an ideal couple. Franco Zeffirelli had directed Maria in some of her greatest roles and was one of her closest friends. They had seen less of each other during the nine years that Maria had spent with Onassis, as Franco had refused to set foot on Onassis's yacht. "I cannot wake up to gold taps, darling, not even for you." He had disapproved when Maria had cut her hair short at Ari's suggestion: "Very suitable for your new career in news reading, Maria."

The hair had grown back, and now it was piled on top of her head, giving her an extra inch over her five foot nine.

She had found the first grey strands earlier that spring. She had shown them to Onassis, laughing. "Look what you have done to me, Ari."

In retrospect it seemed that her body already knew what was to come.

Girardoux was back to take their order.

"I'll have the usual," Maria said.

Girardoux nodded. "Perhaps with some cèpes to start, madame? The chef picked them himself this morning."

Girardoux's tone was coaxing.

"He prepares them with shallots and a whisper of cream, a little tarragon . . . nothing heavy, I assure you."

Maria knew that he would not have made the suggestion if Ari had

been there; with him she always had the same thing – steak tartare with a green salad – but she could feel that Girardoux was trying to bring her some pleasure on this night of all nights.

She nodded. “If you insist.”

She was rewarded by the man’s smile of delight.

“You won’t regret it, madame.”

He moved away and Franco gave her a smile of encouragement. “I am glad you are eating again, Maria. You really can be too rich and too thin, whatever the Duchess of Windsor says.”

The champagne was beginning to do its work, and Maria was able to laugh as Franco kept up an amusing monologue about the other people in the restaurant, who Marie-Hélène’s latest lover was, and how the Duke of Windsor had asked his niece Queen Elizabeth for a state funeral and she had refused. He deftly avoided mentioning anything that might cause Maria pain, without ever appearing to do so.

The cèpes appeared in small copper chafing dishes, the plump fungi glistening under the coating of cream flecked with green. She speared a morsel and put it in her mouth. It was as delicious as Girardoux had promised, the savory richness of the mushroom and the cream spiked by the tartness of the tarragon. Maybe this was the way forward, to lose herself in these other pleasures of the flesh, the ones that she had denied herself so long. She thought of the flaky croissants from the boulangerie around the corner, coffee ice cream in Sirmione, spanakopita just out of the oven in Athens. She could eat as much as she wanted; after all, who would care now if she lost her figure. But even as the thought crossed her mind, she put down her fork and pushed away the dish of mushrooms still two thirds full. She still wanted to look like Maria Callas, la Divina, not Maria Kalogeropoulou, the fat teenager who knew no other way to feed her hunger.

“*Avez-vous terminé*, Madame Callas?” She looked up and saw Girardoux’s disappointment as he took in the unfinished dish of cèpes.

“They were delicious, but at my age you have to be careful.”

Franco was in the middle of an anecdote about the Black and White Ball that Truman Capote had held at the Plaza when he stopped in mid-flow and put his hand on Maria’s wrist.

“Keep smiling,” he whispered.

She heard a familiar voice behind her.

"Well, if it isn't my old friend Madame Callas. I have to say I didn't think I would find you here on this particular evening, but good for you!"

Maria turned to face the small glittering eyes and resolute mouth of Elsa Maxwell, the veteran party giver and society gadfly who eleven years ago had introduced her to Ari. "Elsa! What a surprise! I thought you lived in New York now."

Maria leaned in to kiss the other woman's cheek, carefully avoiding the whiskery mole at her jaw.

"Marie-Hélène insisted that I come and help her with the party, and I couldn't refuse. She has always been such a loyal friend." Maria knew that comment was directed at her. But pretending not to notice, she gestured to her companion.

"Elsa, do you know Franco Zeffirelli?"

"Know him, why I practically invented him!"

Franco was kissing Elsa's hand with its stumpy, beringed fingers.

Elsa Maxwell smiled, showing her unnaturally white teeth. She was dressed in swathes of gold brocade that contained her bulk, but only just.

"I must say, Maria, the years have been very kind to you. You were so wise not to have children – that is why you and the Duchess of Windsor look so remarkably youthful – none of the cares of motherhood to crease that pearly brow."

She raised her cigarette holder to her mouth and inhaled.

Franco, who could see Maria's nostrils flaring, spoke. "Won't you sit down, Elsa?"

"No thank you, dear Franco. I mustn't keep the duke waiting, not to mention the duchess, who I declare is even more royal than he is these days, and as for Marie-Hélène . . ." But Elsa showed no sign of moving on. She let out a sigh and put her pudgy hand to her heart.

"I just wanted to say how . . . responsible I feel, Maria. I mean if I hadn't introduced you to Ari all those years ago, you wouldn't be here, putting such a brave face on it all. Of course now I regret it deeply, but then . . . Well, I thought it was only right that the two most famous Greeks in the world should meet each other."

Elsa pushed out her lips to show just how sorry she felt.

Maria was silent. She felt petrified, an attitude she had taken so

many times onstage, but this was the first time she understood what it was like to be unable to prevent a catastrophe unfolding.

"I mean, if I hadn't gathered you up, so to speak, you would still be with that husband of yours. Signor Meneghini. What did you call him? Tita, wasn't it? Quite a small man, I remember, but then you have never minded being with men who only come up to your shoulder."

Elsa blew out a cloud of smoke.

"But you can't say that I didn't warn you, Maria. I feel like a character in a Greek tragedy, the one that nobody listens to. What's her name?"

She paused to exhale another plume of smoke. "Cassandra, the one who predicts the tragedy to come but is destined always to be ignored, and in my case rejected."

The veneer of apology on Elsa's face had gone.

Maria tried to smile. "Elsa, so lovely to catch up, but here I am having a dinner à deux with my dear friend Franco in my favourite restaurant, and I see nothing tragic about that. But I am worried that you will be guilty of *lèse-majesté* if you stay here any longer. The duke keeps looking over. It would be a real tragedy if you caused offence to such valuable friends on my account."

But Elsa didn't even glance back at the Windsors; she kept her eyes on Maria.

"If only you had listened to me, Maria. You know that all I ever wanted was your happiness."

Maria heard the note of self-pity in Elsa's voice and shuddered inwardly. It was a note that had been played for her since childhood. Her mother weeping in the kitchen in Patisson Street, saying, "I have sacrificed everything for you, Maria"; her husband, Battista Meneghini, in their villa on Lake Garda insisting, "I have devoted my life to you."

She had learned early that no one cared what was best for Maria, just for Callas, the diva. Only one man had seen her as a woman, not simply a vessel for a God-given voice, and now that man was the husband of another woman, a woman whose only talent appeared to be the annexing of rich and powerful men.

She stood up and, leaning down, whispered in Elsa's ear, "If you really want me to be happy, Elsa, you will leave me alone. And, by the way, you don't even have to pretend to feel guilty about introducing

us. Ari and I were always going to meet. It was Fate that brought us together, not Elsa Maxwell."

She turned her back on Elsa and, sitting down, she smiled at Franco. "Now, where were we?"

Franco started to chatter about his latest project, a film about Saint Francis of Assisi, until Maria felt it was safe to ask him, "Has she gone?"

Franco nodded.

"I had forgotten that Elsa has a nasty habit of turning up just when you least expect it like the wicked fairy," said Maria, draining her glass.

Franco laughed. "Well, don't let her spoil your evening. Remember we are having fun!"

He lifted his glass. "No more wicked fairies."

Maria touched his glass with her own. "Elsa has no power over me now" – her face sagged – "because the worst has already happened."