

HARRIET CASTOR

firebird



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For Helen

Firebird

Harriet Castor

Chapter One London, 1989

It was a filthy plastic bag, shredded in places as if a porcupine had tried to wear it. Now it was trying to wear Laura's ankle.

'Blast!' She kicked her foot out to the side and the wind, after a thoughtful tug, picked up the bag again and tossed it down the pavement. It was May, for goodness' sake. What had happened to warmth and sunshine and a bit of cheering blue sky? Laura grimaced, picked a stray strand of hair out of her mouth, and plunged into the Institute.

Four floors up, where the ceilings got lower and the windows smaller, she found her secretary hovering outside her office.

'Yes, Maria?'

'It's Mr McIntyre.' Maria nodded towards the door and lowered her voice. 'I'm, sorry, Madame. I tried to persuade him to wait outside—'

'All right.'

Laura's heart sank. This was the member of her staff she least wanted to see, but also, as the most famous, the one with whom she must exercise the most care. And this morning, the nasty little man had undoubtedly come to crow. Laura set her face in a tight-lipped smile and opened the door.

'Alexander!'

'My dear *Madame*. Good morning.'

A pair of pale eyes, enlarged by spectacle lenses, faced her from across the room. Alexander McIntyre was standing just beyond the window; as she came in he stepped forward into the light, straight and trim as a military man, his white hair and clipped white beard immaculate.

Laura pushed the door shut behind her and drew in a breath. Her smile was holding. 'Well,' she said, setting down her briefcase and turning to hang up her coat, 'my congratulations on last night's documentary, Alexander. Were you pleased?' She tugged at the sleeves and turned again. 'Hm? What did you think of it?'

The old man tilted his head the merest fraction and smiled a delicate smile. 'Let me see.' He considered. 'The tributes . . . were of no consequence, of course. I shan't pretend I don't deserve them – if there's one thing I can't stand it's false modesty – but I can safely say that those five minutes of stinking slander were worth the whole of the rest and more.' As he met Laura's gaze, his eyebrows arched in amusement. 'You expected me to be angry, hm?'

Oh, no – no, no, no. It was the *coup de grâce* . . . You did *watch* the programme, I take it?’

‘Fifty minutes of prime time honouring “the most gifted choreographer of his generation” – who just happens also to be one of my staff? Oh, Alexander . . .’ Laura surveyed him calmly. She could hardly admit to having spent much of the previous evening barely able to see the television set, let alone make out anything on it, prostrate with a cataclysmic headache. But – stinking slander? Though she was well practised enough not to show it, Laura hadn’t a clue what he meant.

‘It quite tickled me,’ Alexander was saying now, ‘the way they blacked out the slanderer’s face as if she were some terrorist or child molester. “A current student of Mr McIntyre’s who wishes to remain anonymous” – anonymous, dear, dear! Did the girl imagine I had no brightness button on my handset? One touch – pzz!’ He jabbed an imaginary remote control in Laura’s direction, then described an arc above his head, his hands opening like a flower. ‘There she is – revealed! Did you not think to do that, Madame?’ He chuckled and wagged a finger at Laura. ‘Well, I can solve the mystery for you. The culprit was indeed a student here. Can you guess? It was our little crock of – shall I say? – *questionable* talent, who just loves-*loves-likes* to make trouble . . .’

Laura, finding herself in front of her own desk, reached for the small hard chair she reserved for unwanted callers and gripped its back. She was thinking fast. The television

crew had interviewed one of the Institute's students (*how? she had forbidden it*). And they had just happened to choose the one whose views were not only guaranteed to be slanderous, but who would relish broadcasting them to the nation. It was not hard to work out. 'Natasha Taylor,' she said.

'Who else? So.' Alexander folded his hands before him with an expectant air.

'So?'

'Naturally I rushed here, as the injured party, to hear the miscreant's fate. You must know, Madame, how long I have dreamt of seeing that little runt righteously struck down.'

'I know how unhappy you are,' said Laura evenly, 'with the parts she has been given in the graduation gala—'

Alex flapped a hand. 'Simply the latest in a long line of travesties of justice. I have marvelled at how there has seemed to be nothing – nothing! – that the Institute in its flabby wisdom cannot accommodate. How often has her arrogance, her insulting behaviour brought her to the edge of the abyss? Hm? And each time her talent is truffled up as the paltry excuse. Of course, the fault lies with your predecessor, Madame. You have, after all, been *notre maîtresse* only – what? Eight months? One cannot expect you to have come to grips with every area of your role.'

Bristling at the insult, Laura held his gaze. She said

icily, 'Yours is not the common view, Alexander. The rest of the staff—'

'Ach! That bunch of clowns—' He stopped, and touched his fingers to his lips. 'They wanted Miss Taylor to star in the gala. What could I do? Long live democracy . . . That is why, you will understand, it is so sweet to me now. She has been given a little rope and — chhk — has done the job my greedy fingers have been itching to perform for so long.'

'And what exactly,' asked Laura, 'are you hoping for?'

Alexander affected a look of innocent surprise and then, with a flourish, deep thought. Behind the posturing, Laura knew, he was watching her narrowly. He said, 'Well, now. I really do not think she can remain a student here, do you?'

Famous and influential he might be; Director of the Institute he was not. He had presumed too far. Laura said, 'Natasha Taylor is two months away from graduating. Do you seriously consider your reputation to be in danger? From one dissenting voice among so many?'

There was a pause. Alexander stepped forward and ~~leant~~ ^{rested} a hand on the desk's edge. 'This is a point of principle. I am not a vain man. But my work cannot be impugned. I will not have it.'

'I see.'

'Oh, I hope so, Madame.' He straightened, and inspected his fingernails. 'It would be unfortunate to

discover such an important difference of opinion between us. Just as . . . for *example* . . . it would be a shame to hear, at this eleventh hour, that my friend – your benefactor – had withdrawn his funding for our first graduation gala, would it not?’

Behind the glinting spectacles, the gaze had lifted again. And brought with it a threat. For a moment Laura faced him in silence, as still as Lot’s wife. Then she walked around the desk and let herself smoothly into the high-backed chair behind it. Silently, she was calculating the implications.

‘You want this new gala to stamp your mark upon the Institute?’ Alexander went on. ‘I do not condemn it, Madame. But I understand it, however much you might like to tell yourself it is for the glory of the school. Remember, I knew you before – in your other life. I know the strength of your ambitions. You tasted great success once, and you want to again. So you and your Institute shall rise together, hm? Well, indeed. So it should be. But do not forget it is my friend you depend on for money. And without money, your little publicity machine will grind to a halt.’

Laura’s voice in reply was perfectly steady. She said, ‘My gratitude will hardly allow me to forget, Alexander. Your friend’s generosity has saved the gala.’

His smile broadened. ‘I am only trying to help you, Madame. After all, you will have to give reasons to the rest of the staff for Natasha Taylor’s departure – and, bless

them, they are but simple-minded folk. So here is the neat choice you present: they may have their gala or they may have their sluttish little star. But — *quel dommage!* — with no gala the star cannot be the star of anything, can she?’

At this he gave a snort of mirth and advanced, jaunty as a man half his age, around the desk towards her.

‘We have built a tower of bricks and somehow I seem . . . to have my hand on the bottom one. Madame—’ Quick as a tongue, that same hand darted out to grasp Laura’s. She felt a brush of lips and clipped beard, then he released her fingers and smiled. ‘I know you will do the right thing.’

LAURA SAT STARING fixedly at the closed door. On the other side of the wood, carried on his rasping little pumps, Alexander was skimming away from her down the corridor to the stairs. But the unease cast up by his presence hung about the office still, like dust from a powder puff. Laura drew a deep breath and dug her fingers, hard, into her eyes. The skin felt papery; it felt old.

‘Maria—’ she said, emerging from her office a moment later. ‘You saw it, did you? Last night—’

Maria was sucking a lollipop. ‘The documentary?’ she said, removing it. ‘You bet!’

‘Then tell me,’ said Laura, ‘what *precisely* is Mr McIntyre so bothered about?’

Beneath the lurid red fringe Maria’s eyes widened. ‘You mean you don’t . . . You didn’t—’

‘Not all of it, no. Something came up.’

‘Well.’ Maria pulled open a drawer. ‘Why not see for yourself?’ In her hand, held out, was a video-tape. Laura took it and shot her a quizzical look. ‘I set the study room machine on the timer. For the archive.’

‘Full marks, Maria. Study room free now?’

Maria spun on her chair to look at the wall-chart behind her. ‘Uh – yep. Till eleven. But don’t forget you’ve got the second-year girls in studio two at half past. And – ’ The phone rang. As she picked it up, she slapped her hand on a pile of papers. ‘ – there’s a mountain of post you should definitely see. London Ballet Institute, good morning?’

Laura headed for the door.

‘Madame?’ Maria had jabbed her lolly on the mute button.

‘Take a message.’

‘But it’s the *Daily T*. About that documentary.’

Silently cursing, Laura started back for her office. As she passed the desk she thrust out her hand for the pile of post. And turned back in the doorway. ‘Ring Dr Debenham and make a date for dinner tonight. Or, better still, lunch. Don’t let on it’s urgent. Say I’ve been meaning to call for a while – ’

‘ – but you’ve been *so* busy and now you’ve just had a cancellation.’ Maria grinned stickily. ‘Raphael’s at one?’

‘Perfect. But whatever you do don’t let her put it off.

And, Maria, find Natasha Taylor. I want her up here by the time I'm off the phone.'

'THE PROGRAMME INCLUDED some pretty serious allegations, Miss Douglas,' the reporter was saying. 'And the name Natasha Taylor has been mentioned to me. Can you confirm?'

'It was an anonymous student.'

'Ah. I see. You'll be protecting her, then?'

Risking a cricked neck and shoulder by clamping the phone between them, Laura dropped the pile of papers onto the desk and let the tape slither from under her arm. 'I'll be protecting no one,' she said. 'An internal inquiry is in hand.'

'So you're going to punish this mystery student simply for speaking her mind?'

Laura mustered a patronizing sigh. 'Mr Shaw. If criticism is levelled at a member of staff by a student in so public a manner—'

'You mean ...' He was clearly searching through some notes. 'You mean like, "The man hasn't choreographed since 'seventy-eight. If he ever had any talent in him, he ran out of juice long ago"?''

So *that* was the direction of assault. Laura raised her eyebrows at the cyclamen on the window-ledge. It ignored her.

'Is there any truth in the allegations?'

‘None whatsoever.’

There was a pause. ‘This Natasha Taylor, then. Is it true she’s your best student?’

‘Every student of ours is unusually gifted, otherwise they would not have a place at the school. We do not deal in superlatives.’ It was almost a chant; policy line. Laura picked up a letter from Maria’s pile and began to read.

But this journalist was persistent. ‘Still, she’s important to the, er, graduation gala you’re staging?’ he said. ‘You must feel a lot hangs on it for you. New, higher profile Institute – you’ve a fat pay cheque to justify, after all. And they poached you from the Haycroft specifically to shake things up. Don’t *you* lose out through this gaffe?’

At this point, Laura’s patience left her. When Maria knocked on the door a few moments later, the call was over – one journalist chewed up, spat out and cut off – and Laura was deep in reading her mail.

‘Madame? Drawn a blank on Natasha. Not signed in and even that Renée Aitchison swears blind she doesn’t know where she is. Said she was going to see her father for the weekend or something. He lives in Oxfordshire, apparently.’

Laura nodded briskly, without looking up. ‘As soon as she’s in, let me know.’

When she heard the door click behind Maria she stopped reading and sat back. For some time she stayed like that, staring at nothing, lost in thought. She picked up

the video-tape, put it down again. Then she slapped her way through the rest of the letters. Invitations to this and that, complaints from parents of failed candidates for next year's intake, inquiries from hopefuls for the year after. Laura read, struggling to concentrate, and one by one put the letters aside.

Thinking she had come to the last, she was about to reach for the tape when she spotted a final piece of paper she had overlooked. It was a letter, headed with a Parisian address. Laura scanned down the two brief paragraphs – and froze.

For how many minutes she sat there, she was hardly aware. Her face, slack-jawed in shock, wore an expression that neither Maria nor Alexander nor any other person at the Institute had ever seen.

A little later the sun came out at last, thin and cold and bitter, staining the building's grey stone walls and leaking through the pocked uneven window-panes. Unnoticing, Laura rose, placed the paper, apart, in a drawer and shut it softly. Then she reached for the video-tape and made for the door.

SHE WOULDN'T TOUCH IT. There was no one there to disgust or impress and so no point, either, in pretending to childish bravery. Squatting on her heels, breathing through her mouth against the smell, she stared at it. It would once have been beautiful: alive, the dark pattern