

# A DANCER'S EDUCATION

GILDED PALACE BALLERINAS BOOK ONE



CELIA JONSON

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## CHAPTER 1



ADELAIDE

Adelaide tightened the buckle on her soft, leather shoes. They were much more comfortable than her ballet shoes, and yet she wished she was banging on the glued wooden box to shape it to her toes rather than flexing her feet in them. They were flexible, more flexible than the patent Mary-Janes they were made to resemble, but Adelaide yearned for the elegance of a gossamer tutu rather than what she was stuck wearing now.

She wasn't in the corps as she usually was for this performance of *The Christmas Toybox*. Instead she was doing character work, and all because of her dratted hair. Adelaide usually wore a wig so her stunningly bright red hair didn't distract from the rest of the corps, but for this new ballet the wardrobe mistress Bronwyn declared her hair a boon. She could play the part of Flopsy Rag-Doll, and a special red wig wouldn't have to be made. She'd bullied the choreography master, Pierre, into giving Adelaide the part, claiming that it would save the company money. It certainly didn't endear the rest of the corps to her. The Flopsy Rag-Doll was a solo piece, and

the corps fought tooth and nail for the recognition a solo piece gave a dancer. Unlike everyone else, Adelaide would much rather stay anonymous at the back of the corps than be the center of attention.

Adelaide winced as she began braiding her hair as tight as she could around a piece of wire. Once done, the braids could be bent out so they looked like stiff, wool braids on a doll. The tightness of the braids made her head hurt, and the wires always seemed to scratch at her skull. Maybe the sweaty heat of a wig would have been preferable. Certainly the glittery tutus the corps wore as the Christmas Tree Ornaments were lovelier than her striped socks and denim pinafore.

A Christmas Snowflake squeezed by, silver sequins on her bodice sparkling even in the flickering lamplight of the dressing-room. The principal dancers and soloists had electric lights, but the corps had to make do with oil lamps set high in the wall to prevent being overturned. As Adelaide hadn't been promoted to permanent soloist, she was still in the crowded corps' dressing-room rather than sharing a more spacious room with one or two other soloists. Adelaide sighed. She wished she could be dancing in the corps as well, even though she was roundly snubbed and hustled to the back of the group so the other girls could dance at the front to try to impress the audience and snare a rich patron from the boxes.

Adelaide never fought them on this. She barely knew how to speak to other male dancers, let alone flirt with a rich man who wanted flattery and witty conversation. Even if she could manage to string a sentence together, Adelaide knew what would be expected of her after a dinner. She couldn't stand thinking of the horror on a man's face when he saw that the wig she wore while dancing was covering a hideous red mop. If she had the money, she'd pay a hairdresser to dye it. She couldn't do it herself either, as she'd seen too many women bleach burns on their skull or turn out with muddy-colored, patchy tresses to dare try. Bronwyn had told her when she was young to leave well enough alone—the Good

Lord had given her red hair for a reason, and she might as well make the best of it. One of the dressmakers had sniggered that 't weren't the Lord who blessed her, but the Devil who cursed her. Bronwyn pursed her lips at the mention of the Dark One, but didn't reprimand her. Adelaide could only conclude that the dressmaker was speaking the truth.

Annabelle clomped into the dressing room, sniffing as though she smelled something bad when she saw Adelaide. While most of the corps just ignored her, Annabelle took great pains to make Adelaide's life as difficult as possible. She delighted in sharpening her tongue on her offstage, and slyly kicking her onstage to off-balance her. At least she was one of the ones usually pushing to the front, so Adelaide could mostly avoid her. When Adelaide was granted the role of Flopsy Rag-Doll, Annabelle was furious, considering herself next in line to be promoted from the corps to soloists. Luckily for Adelaide, the soloist who played Porcelain Doll twisted her ankle, and sure enough Annabelle was temporarily promoted to her place as well. Now she was equal with Adelaide, and got to wear a pretty dress, so her resentment was mostly sated. She wasn't entirely content, however, as she was still in the corps dressing-room. Even though her soloist role was only temporary, she was still conceited enough to think she deserved a spot in a soloist dressing-room.

Despite her airs, Adelaide had to admit that Annabelle was a talented dancer. She had an elegant instep and could execute an impressive number of perfect pirouettes, but she was showy and constantly trying to out-do the rest of the corps. She wanted to eventually be the principal ballerina, and she thought that meant standing out from everyone else. Adelaide didn't bother trying to explain to her that Pierre and the company director, Mr. Rogerton, would never promote someone who didn't know how to dance as part of a team. The corps was about uniformity and symmetry, and if Annabelle was lifting her leg that much higher and executing her turns that much faster just to be noticed, she was ruining the lines

of the whole dance. She was difficult enough to manage now that she was a temporary soloist; she would be absolutely insubordinate if she was a principal. As it was, she was probably the least-liked dancer in the company. If Adelaide was overlooked, Annabelle was roundly despised.

Perhaps part of Annabelle's loathing for Adelaide was because she was jealous that Adelaide was technically the better dancer. Adelaide had been in the theatre world her entire life, and she could acknowledge to herself that she was a talented dancer. If she really wanted to, she could progress far in the company. But Adelaide made sure she made just enough errors in practice to stay in the corps, and she only extended herself as far as the weakest dancer in performance so as not to distract from everyone else. Adelaide was happy in the corps, and if it weren't for the fact that no one argued with Bronwyn, she would have tried to convince Pierre to let her move back there for *The Christmas Toybox*.

"Deedee!" Annabelle trilled. Adelaide felt her shoulders tighten at the hated nickname, but she still smiled quietly to herself. Mr. Rogerton's secretary, Eustace, had told her that Annabelle's real name was Muriel Smythe. With a name like that, of course she'd be jealous of Adelaide's appropriately theatrical and real name—Adelaide Contessa Beausoleil.

"Annabelle?" Adelaide replied wearily.

"Deedee, you really were appallingly off-time last night. You overshadowed my entrance for the final soloist duets. Who do you think little girls really want to see: a ragged old ginger doll or a pretty golden princess?" Annabelle twirled one of her blonde locks in her finger, while a Snowflake behind her rolled her eyes.

Adelaide *could* point out that Annabelle had come onstage two bars early, but she merely shrugged her shoulders. If Pierre—who lurked in the wings watching every move, every night—hadn't reprimanded her yet, it wasn't Adelaide's place to say. "All right, Annabelle. I'll make sure I'm keeping time properly tonight."

"See that you do." Annabelle unnecessarily rose onto her toes,

emphasizing the fact that *she* was wearing pretty, satin, pointe shoes with diamantes and fake pearls embroidered on them, then pushed past the Snowflake and left the room.

“Better you than me,” the Snowflake said to Adelaide, who sighed in resignation. While Annabelle’s dislike was blatant, the rest of the corps left Adelaide mostly alone. While it was mostly because Adelaide tried to make herself as invisible as possible, it might also be because they thought she might go running to Pierre, Bronwyn, or Mr. Rogerton with tales about them. Adelaide had been raised in the Gilded Palace theatre, and had a small room under the stage as a bedroom. Some of the stagehands jokingly called her the ghost of the theatre, although Adelaide could tell them that was ridiculous. The ghost lived in the flies—a woman who had been strangled when her flying wires got tangled up during a performance of *Giselle* thirty years earlier. The same sarcastic dressmaker who had made fun of her hair had told Adelaide this when she was a child, hoping to scare her. But Adelaide was already acquainted with the ghost and knew her to be a shy, retiring type.

Adelaide knew every nook and cranny of the theatre, and while Bronwyn and Mr. Rogerton were practically her parents in terms of how they provided for her basic needs as a child, they certainly didn’t favor her over everyone else. Adelaide was on half-wages, to pay for her board, the years she’d been taken care of before she could earn her keep, and to cover her special wigs. True, she’d learned from the best dancers—sitting in the corner of a rehearsal class, watching performances every night, being taught bits and pieces when people had the time—but when she heard snippets of childhood stories from the other dancers, she would have traded that all for the nights she’d spent since she was four, sleeping in a dark theatre, with only the ghost for comfort.

She was lucky that the theatre ran ballet and opera performances all year round, so she was only alone late at night until the early morning. When she was a child, she relied on Eustace to bring her lunch during the week, and some performer or crew member

to share with her on the weekend. When Mr. Rogerton was in the building at night, he had his dinner and hers ordered from the pub across the road. When he wasn't, there was a standing order for the pub to send over her meal. That had stopped once she joined the corps, and she had to start fending for herself. When she'd discovered how much food cost and how little Eustace earned, she tried to start paying him back, but he refused to take her money. He said it was his pleasure to feed the orphan daughter of the prima ballerina Mirelle Beausoleil, and to see her grow up to be a fine dancer just like her.

Bronwyn made sure Adelaide was always dressed somewhat appropriately, and that she had the rudiments of education. While her reading and writing were quite poor, she could speak fluent French—taught by Pierre, who insisted she knew the language of her mother's homeland—and Russian from touring companies, because all the best dancers were Russian. She could sew beautifully, calculate load weights in her head for flying scenery, and knew how to use various carpentry tools for building sets. She had learned to sing as a child, for she had played the main role in a long-running season of *The Little Urchin*, and the conductor Maestro Giovanni had taught her how to play the piano and the harp. Adelaide always assumed that when she could no longer dance, she would become a backstage hand or help Bronwyn in the sewing room. Certainly she knew the ins and outs of the theatre better than almost anyone.

Adelaide checked her shoes one more time, examined her makeup closely in the mirror, and tugged on her dress to make sure it sat correctly. The Snowflakes had begun to file out of the dressing room, and the strains of the overture were drifting down from the orchestra pit. Adelaide wasn't on for a while. First there was the snow flurry of the Christmas Snowflakes as Constance, her two younger brothers, and her parents arrived at her grandparents' house on Christmas Eve, then the family dinner. While that was happening the corps would be back down here dressing as



Christmas ornaments, for a scene where Constance went to bed and dreamed of the Christmas tree's ornaments dancing. Finally, one by one the toys wrapped underneath the tree would come alive and entertain her. The audience usually laughed as Flopsy Rag-Doll was cast aside in favor of the pretty Porcelain Doll. After all the toys adventures, the audience would cheer when Porcelain Doll was paired with the Captain of the Tin Soldiers, and the Flopsy Rag-Doll's comedic duet with Teddy-Bear was overlooked in favor of that pretty romance. Adelaide didn't mind. Being overlooked was what she aimed for.



JANE

"Uncle, Uncle, may we have roasted chestnuts?" Jane begged, tugging on her uncle Crispin's hand.

"You know I can't stand the sound of rustling paper," Uncle Crispin replied. Jane pouted, but didn't persist. While Uncle Crispin was generous and indulgent, when he said *no* she and her siblings knew he meant *no*. Jane's friend Helen seemed to catch Uncle Crispin's tone, and didn't badger him either. That might also be because she was generally speechless in his presence. He was tall, much taller than other grown-ups, and Helen had whispered to Jane how dashing he was, with his deep blue eyes and silky chocolate-colored hair that flopped just so over his forehead. Jane agreed. He was quite the handsomest man she'd ever seen, and even better his dreamy blue eyes crinkled appealingly when he was in good humor, and his mouth was framed by light smile lines. Jane had never had occasion to see how his eyes darkened to glaciers when he was angered, and given how much Uncle Crispin doted on his nephews and nieces, she probably never would. Still, she and her siblings sensed his intransigent temper, for none of them would dare cross him.

He was the best uncle ever. Not only did he give the finest presents, but he would take Jane and her two brothers, Topher and William, on an outing at least once a fortnight. The twins were too young, yet, and as the boys had no interest in the ballet Jane was allowed to bring a friend with her on the nights they went. Uncle Crispin would take her brothers to horse racing later in the week. It was only the second night of the new ballet in Chicago, and no one else in their class at preparatory school had seen it yet.

They'd been out for dinner at a fancy restaurant beforehand, one that Mama and Papa would *never* think Jane could behave at, and Uncle Crispin had let her and Helen have dessert for each of the courses. Uncle Crispin was also a friend of the manager of the ballet, and had promised them that they would go backstage afterwards and see the costumes up close and, if they were very good, to talk to the ballerina who played Constance. Jane and Helen took ballet classes for posture and grace, but would never, ever be allowed to dance on stage. Jane had heard snatches of whispered conversation between Mama and Papa about ballerinas, and in particular the ballerinas that Uncle Crispin liked. She didn't see why Mama spoke so disapprovingly of the dancers her brother was friends with. Jane was sure if Uncle Crispin liked them, they must be good people.

A bell chimed, and Uncle Crispin said, "Right girls, it's time to take our seats." He guided them through the crowd of people, Helen blushing as he placed a paternal hand on her shoulder. They were sitting in box seats, the best seats in the house, for Uncle Crispin only ever had the best. He was always dressed in the latest styles, and, in fact, had started some of them. All of Jane's circle was in love with him, and Jane took care to note down every detail of his outfits when she saw him so she could share them with her friends at school. She didn't think she could explain quite how handsome he was in his black tailcoat, with his top hat tilted at a rakish angle and his silver and garnet cravat pin. His silver watch chain hung precisely against his flat stomach, and his hands in their neat white

kid gloves swallowed up Jane's small hand. One day, Jane hoped, she would marry a man just as handsome and kind as Uncle Crispin.



## CRISPIN

Crispin Giffard didn't take his niece to the ballet solely to please her. He genuinely enjoyed the art form, and had his own box at the Gilded Palace theatre for ballets and operas. While it wasn't the largest theatre in Chicago, it was the finest, and seats were hard to come by. He attended new productions on opening night, allowing business or social acquaintances use of his box for the rest of the season. For a performance like this, he would gift tickets to employees of his with girls as well. While there was a dress code for the theatre, Crispin had an arrangement with Mr. Rogerton whereby poorer people using his box would be taken up through the back of the theatre, to avoid embarrassment in front of judging society at the front of the house.

He wasn't able to take the girls on opening night, as he'd had a business meeting the previous day that couldn't be put off. While his sister Elizabeth urged him to pass off his role in the railway and shipping business that had made their great-great-grandfather's fortune, and that of their family ever since, Crispin was too involved. He didn't want to sit back and live off their family's fortunes like Elizabeth did. He wanted to grow and expand the business, and while Elizabeth badgered him to take a wife to give her children cousins, Crispin simply wasn't interested. He liked his life alone and uncomplicated, with a dancer for companionship when he felt the urge. In fact, he was on the search for a new companion tonight. Elizabeth would have a fit if she knew he was looking for a new paramour when her daughter was with him, but Crispin would never expose Jane to any kind of licentiousness. He

loved and respected his nieces and nephews; he just didn't want to have any children of his own.

He had had some thoughts of snaring the dancer who played Constance, but his closest friend Mattias had gained her favors the previous night. He fell passionately in love with his dancer lovers, and besides, Crispin was not the sort of man to steal a woman away from someone else.

The overture began, and Helen and Jane began giggling excitedly as the house lights dimmed and the stage lights brightened against the gold proscenium arch and heavy red velvet stage curtain. Crispin had helped finance the transition from dangerous gas lighting to electrical lights. The steady glow made it much easier to admire a dancer's body, besides being safer for everyone in the theatre.

Soon, the curtain was lifting, and the girls were oohing in awe as the corps fluttered across the stage, echoing the movements of snowflakes in a flurry. There were gasps from the audience as a carriage pulled by mechanical horses moved across the stage, with the face of Constance pressed against the window. The Snowflakes whirled around the carriage, and a few of the male corps made daring leaps over the horses. The carriage was pulled off the stage, and the Snowflakes fluttered off as the lights faded to black and the orchestra played over the bumps and clatters as the scene was changed. The lights rose again, on a huge dazzling Christmas tree, and Constance and her family danced onto the scene to greet her grandparents. The dancers playing the grandmother and the mother were too old for Crispin now—nearly his own age of thirty-six—and besides, he'd lost his virginity to the 'grandmother' when he was fifteen. She had been in the corps at the time, and delighted at snaring her first patron. Crispin could hardly revisit territory he'd already been to, and he'd patronized the mother at one point, as well. With his rise in wealth and prestige he had graduated from the corps, and only dallied with soloists and principals now. Occasionally he might take home one or several of a visiting

company's corps, for the exotic diversion, but generally he preferred his *affairs* to have some longevity. Corps dancers tended to either be promoted or leave rather quickly, married off or traveling somewhere else.

So Crispin was waiting for the soloists, who, according to the program, would come on after Constance went to sleep.

The corps entered again in stunning tutus of gold, silver and blue, to dance as Christmas tree baubles and decorations. Rogerton had really gone all out with this ballet. Of course, with the reviews from its first runs in St. Petersburg and London, it was highly anticipated here, and would be a sure sensation. So anticipated, Rogerton didn't wait until the appropriate Christmas season, but was instead putting it on in the middle of summer. From the open-mouthed wonder of Jane and Helen, and the acclamatory critical reviews in today's paper, it would be the demand of every little girl in the city to see this ballet.

The stage went to black for a moment, and when the lights came up the scene had changed again. A set piece of the enlarged base of the Christmas tree had been flown in, with human-sized presents arranged around the base. They were simple frontages, and the ballerina playing Constance mimed surprise as a Teddy Bear danced out from behind one and tumbled across the stage. One by one, toys danced out from behind the presents. Jane and Helen sighed in delight as a Porcelain Doll daintily tip-toed across the stage. Her pink Romance tutu was adorned with enough frills and bows to satisfy a French Queen masquerading as a shepherdess, and her blonde hair was twirled in dozens of ringlets. Her cheeks and lips were rouged, and she stepped lightly across the stage, allowing her skirts to twirl just so around her knees. Crispin briefly entertained the thought of dallying with her, but she was too tall and skinny. He generally liked his dancers to be short and curvy. The Porcelain Doll kicked her leg up into an arabesque, high, holding it just a beat longer than the music required, and Crispin recognized her as the corps dancer who extended herself over the

rest of the corps just to prove she could. He disliked that kind of showmanship. As she pirouetted around Constance and curtsied prettily, Crispin realized she was dancing to the audience rather than in character to Constance. No doubt, she was after a rich patron, and while it was generally accepted that dancers would be lovers of rich men, he disapproved of that kind of single-minded determination. Crispin enjoyed the ballet just as much as he enjoyed ballerinas, and he didn't enjoy watching dancers who seduced while they were supposed to be performing.

The Porcelain Doll twirled off-stage, and Flopsy Rag-Doll came cartwheeling out of her present. She fell into a floppy puddle at Constance's feet, much to the amusement of the audience, then jumped up and began an entertaining character dance. She would end her pirouettes by staggering about as if she was utterly dizzy. She made a show of bouncing from one foot to the other, preparing for a run across the stage, as the orchestra played a boisterous tune. The audience laughed as she made a stumbling dash from one corner, and Crispin held his breath as she somehow managed to leap into the most elegant grand jeté he had ever seen. She landed on one foot and turned it into a comical series of forward rolls across the rest of the stage disappearing out through the wings. The laughter of the audience eclipsed the applause, and if Crispin was more demonstrative with his favors he would have clapped until his hands hurt.

The dancer who danced the Flopsy Rag-Doll was one of the finest dancers he had ever seen. She had managed to combine the floppy-limbed softness of a rag doll with droll dancing, and there were glimpses of how technically fine she was as a classical dancer. He was sure she must be a new recruit, as dancing that emotive would be dancing to remember... if he hadn't noticed her hair first. A stunning natural red, with the electric lights turning up every shade from gold to deep auburn through it. It was short, her braids only shoulder-length, and that was a shame. Hair that color should

be waist-length and left flowing loose, for all to admire. Crispin had never seen ginger hair as luxurious as hers.

Yes, he would have noticed such a beauty as Flopsy Rag-Doll if she had danced for the company before. Now, he was determined to claim her before someone else did... and if someone else *had* courted her after her first night, Crispin might have to break his moral boundaries and steal another man's woman.