



BELINDA ALEXANDRA

• *The* INVITATION •



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ONE

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When I arrived at the café on Rue du Faubourg-Montmartre, my colourful friends were already there, engaged in a lively conversation. Claude was the first to see me and waved. The others turned to look at who had caught his attention. It was clear from their pleased expressions that he had shared my good news.

‘Ah, here is our great literary success!’ said Nicolas. He hadn’t changed out of his overalls before coming to the café and his clothes and face were smeared in yellow and black paint. ‘I present to you Mademoiselle Emma Lacasse, authoress of mysterious tales!’

Claude stood up and kissed me. He looked handsome in his corduroy suit with his clean-shaven face and mop of wavy brown hair. Although he was French he exuded a Mediterranean sensuality that added to his allure. Even after five years of being together I was still mesmerised by his smoky grey eyes.

‘I trust you don’t mind that I told them about your novella before you had a chance,’ he said, squeezing my hand. ‘The news is too exciting not to share it right away.’

‘It gives us hope of our own ships coming in some day,’ said Sophie, moving over so Claude and I could sit together. ‘That’s pretty by the way,’ she added, casting her doll-like eyes over my navy blue dress. ‘Is it new?’

I shook my head. ‘No, but I added some lace to the collar and cuffs.’

‘Our drinks are on you today!’ said Robert, pushing back his reddish-brown hair. He was a poet but his real talent was persuading other people to pay for him.

‘All right,’ I said, signalling to Jean-François, the café owner, to bring us a couple of carafes of wine and some glasses. Although the advance I had received for the novella was hardly going to keep the wolves from the door, I was in a mood to celebrate. After years of submissions to literary journals, dozens of short stories and a few one-act stage plays, I’d finally written something substantial.

Belda, whose white-grey hair, high cheekbones and porcelain skin evoked a fairytale queen, leaned towards me. ‘I like the premise,’ she said. ‘Every woman whose lover has betrayed her would like to exact her revenge the way your heroine does — although her repayment is quite unintentional. What are you writing now?’

‘I’m finishing another novella called *The Mysterious Cat* as well as some more short stories,’ I told her. ‘After that I’ll attempt my first novel.’

‘Have you got an idea for the novel yet?’ she asked. ‘You should have a harpist as a character. It always helps to write what you know.’

While I told her about my ideas, she picked up her sketchpad and drew furiously. Belda was one of my favourite Montmartre eccentrics. She had been a promising young artist but had been exploited by her dealer. When she tried to leave him, he had crushed her right hand in an etching press. He hadn’t realised that Belda was left-handed and the ensuing court case made

her famous and greatly inflated the price of her work. With the proceeds she had bought a house with a garden on Rue Girardon that was large enough to rent out several rooms, and lived a good life there with her menagerie of rescued cats, dogs, geese and goats. She also ran salons for artists and from time to time wrote as a literary critic. It was Belda who had introduced me to my publisher.

When she was finished, she handed her picture to me. She had captured my snowy blondeness, my slender neck and shoulders and thin arms faithfully. Disconcertingly, she had also caught the bereft look in my eyes.

Jean-François arrived with our wine and glasses. He placed a copy of my collection of short stories, *Histoires de fantômes*, on the table for me to sign. It always gave me a thrill to see the yellow cloth cover with my name embossed in gold above the title.

‘I shall place it proudly on the counter and let people know that Mademoiselle Lacasse is one of my regular customers,’ he said.

‘Look at them,’ whispered Sophie, indicating a couple who were standing across the street and staring in our direction.

The woman’s dress was bouclé silk with gigot sleeves and a collar and yoke of layered silk satin. Her companion was equally well-dressed in a striped suit with arrow-point lapels and a Homburg-style hat. They couldn’t have been more out of place on the manure-strewn street but they regarded us and the café like two children gazing into the window of a sweet shop.

‘Come in! Come in!’ Jean-François called to them. ‘Come and drink in a genuine Bohemian café where the most interesting artists, dancers and writers spend their time dreaming up wonderful ideas!’

His invitation was like dangling a carrot in front of a donkey. The couple looked at each other, then rushed across the street and eagerly sat down at the table Jean-François offered them. Claude and I exchanged a smile.

‘Those gloves!’ said Sophie, captivated by the rich lady’s attire. ‘Pale yellow — imagine that! She probably only wears them once then throws them away.’ She sighed with envy. ‘I bet she’s never cold either. She probably doesn’t get out of bed until the servants have lit the fires. I’m dreading this coming winter. Vauclain’s studio is always freezing, and although he has money he puts up a fuss if I ask him to put more coals in the stove.’

‘I went to dinner at Vauclain’s home once,’ said Belda. ‘He kept his best bottle of wine for himself and served a cheaper variety to his guests.’

We all roared with laughter.

‘That will be Robert one day,’ said Claude. ‘If he ever does invite us to dinner.’

Robert joined in the mirth. Our little group of artists ribbed each other mercilessly but we always supported each other. Despite Robert’s avarice, we enjoyed his bravado and listening to his stories, especially from his time working in a circus.

While the others continued talking, I noticed Sophie’s thin arm when she picked up her glass of wine. She was skin and bone, and couldn’t afford to lose any more weight if she wanted to keep working as an artist’s model. I ordered some mushroom soup and bread, then pretended it was too much for me and passed the rest to her.

‘Thank you,’ she said, taking a spoonful. ‘My sister from Pont-Aven is staying with me again. I love her but she drives me crazy. She insists on cooking for me but she either over-salts the food or burns it! I don’t have the money to keep going to the market.’

‘Why is she staying with you?’ I asked.

‘She and her husband had another fight. He’s a brute who becomes violent when he drinks. I told her not to marry him.’

‘At least you can turn to each other in times of need,’ I said. ‘That’s worth being driven crazy for.’

As I spoke, I sensed Claude listening. He tugged his earlobe but said nothing.

Robert began a story about Siamese twin sisters he'd known in the circus. 'One was a contralto and one was a soprano and they were beautiful to listen to ...'

Claude touched my hand and nodded to the clock on the café wall. 'We'd better get going if you want to see your publisher before he leaves for the day,' he reminded me.

We wished the others goodbye and went inside the café so I could pay Jean-François. Afterwards, he reached under the counter and handed Claude an envelope with money in it.

'I've sold nearly all your postcards this week,' he said. 'Make sure you bring me some more soon.'

Claude pushed the envelope into his pocket without a glance and gave a silent nod to Jean-François. The postcard sketches were signed 'Jolicoeur', which was Claude's equivalent of a nom de plume. He drew Paris scenes and sold them through various cafés and tourist shops to support his more serious art.

'And for you, mademoiselle,' said Jean-François, 'I have an even bigger package.' He handed me a bunch of envelopes tied together with a piece of string. 'Your admirers are increasing by the day. These all came at once.'

If only the letters were all from my admirers! I quickly tucked the package under my arm before Claude spotted the yellow envelopes from Roche & Associates, the debt collectors.

'Your publisher gave you good advice when he told you to provide an address other than your personal one for readers to write to,' Claude said as we walked out to the street. 'You'll have to hire a secretary soon.'

My smile was more of a grimace. I didn't like keeping secrets from Claude, but he was not a rich man. The last thing I wanted was for him to make some heroic effort to save me. My debts were my problem and I had to address them on my own.



My publisher, Monsieur Plamondon, had offices on Rue Auber in the ninth arrondissement. When his clerk announced me, he welcomed me with a broad grin that showed the gap between his front teeth. I was fortunate that Belda had introduced me to Monsieur Plamondon. He took on few new writers and was exacting in his standards when it came to fiction. ‘There are too many second-rate writers in your genre, Mademoiselle Lacasse,’ he’d told me when I first met him. ‘I’m going to push you to improve with each new piece.’

‘Mademoiselle Lacasse,’ he said now, ‘what a pleasure to see you!’ He nodded towards the letters under my arm. ‘I see the correspondence we forwarded to the café reached you? The letters are increasing by the day. What a lot of happy readers you have created!’

‘It appears so,’ I said, taking the seat that he offered me.

Mahogany bookshelves covered every wall of his office and were crammed with novels. The air carried an intriguing combination of odours: musty old books and fresh ink from the piles of papers stacked on his desk.

‘So tell me what you are working on at the moment,’ he said.

I described the outline of my novella about a woman who returns to life as a cat and visits her friends and relatives to discover what they really thought of her when she was alive. ‘I’m also working on ideas for a novel. For some reason the image of two sisters keeps floating up in my mind: two sisters with a secret.’

Monsieur Plamondon had a way of scrunching up his face when I was speaking and relaxing it again when I paused. It was as if he was a sponge trying to soak up every word I was saying.

‘What intrigues me about you, Mademoiselle Lacasse, is that when you come to see me you look as fresh and innocent as a dandelion in a field. I am quite sure you could never harm another human being, or even hold ill will towards one. Yet

your stories reveal the dark side of human nature. I find that fascinating.'

'Perhaps we are attracted to the opposite of what we are,' I told him. 'My themes of love lasting beyond the grave, gruesome deaths and bottomless grief often surprise me. I never think of myself as macabre but my writing often turns out that way.'

'Indeed we are fascinated by our opposites. It was certainly true of my late wife and me. She lived at only one volume — loud. While I have always valued tranquillity.' Monsieur Plamondon sat back and closed his eyes for a moment, as if revelling in the hushed quiet of his office. Then he smiled at me. 'I heard you played the harp for a production at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. I didn't know you were an accomplished harpist.'

'My grandmother taught me from an early age until her arthritis prevented her continuing,' I explained. 'Then she engaged a teacher. My grandfather was a doctor but also a gifted pianist. Apparently they fell in love playing duets.'

Monsieur Plamondon clapped his hands. 'What a perfect way to fall in love. It's a pity you don't write romantic fiction — that would make a good story.'

When it was time for me to leave, Monsieur Plamondon searched among the papers on his desk, then handed me a book written in English: *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin.

'An American colleague sent me this. It is excellent. I wondered if you would read it too and give me your opinion, as a woman? I sent him *A Tale of a Lonely House* in return, in case he feels there is an American readership for your work.'

'I hope there is,' I told him, delighted. 'To be published in English would be marvellous.'

The United States had a population of over seventy million people, double that of France. An American readership might be what I needed to save me from my financial troubles.

'It's about a woman who leaves her husband and children to find her personal freedom,' Monsieur Plamondon said, gesturing

towards the Chopin novel. ‘The story is set in Louisiana — you were born there, weren’t you?’

‘I left the United States when I was less than two years old,’ I explained. ‘The plantation where I was born was ruined in the Civil War, and my parents died of yellow fever. I came to live with my maternal grandmother and ... here in Paris.’

I had almost slipped and mentioned Caroline. I was careful who I told about my sister because it was too painful to explain our estrangement. Sophie’s sister drove her crazy but at least they had each other. In my case, Caroline might as well have not existed.

Monsieur Plamondon rubbed his chin. ‘Louisiana has an eerie atmosphere, full of ghosts and voodoo. Perhaps you will write about it one day? Although you were very young when you left, it is astounding what can lie hidden in our unconscious mind.’



When I returned to my apartment on Rue Jacob in the afternoon I was surprised to find my boarders, Mrs Cutter and her daughter, Elizabeth, sitting in the parlour drinking tea. I’d expected they would still be out taking in the museums and art galleries.

‘Oh, Mademoiselle Lacasse, Paris is a dream! A dream!’ said Mrs Cutter, clutching her hands in her lap. ‘We decided not to go to the Louvre today because every street around here is a painting. We walked to Rue de Rivoli and everywhere we turned there was something beautiful to see. Even the way the laces are arranged in the haberdashery store is a delight to the eye.’

‘See here, Mademoiselle Lacasse,’ Elizabeth indicated a vase of silvery pink roses on the side table, ‘aren’t they divine? The florist said they were Joséphine Bonaparte’s favourite cultivars.’

I smiled and leaned over to inhale the sweet tea fragrance of the roses. I was sure the flowers in Boston, where Mrs Cutter and her daughter came from, were just as pretty, but like many

of the American women who stayed with me they viewed French civilisation as older, richer and more elegant than their own. That was why, when their husbands started to succeed in business, they came to see me with their adult daughters, hoping I could impart the taste, intellectual wit and sophisticated charm that Parisian women were famous for. I gave them board, along with lessons in the French language and etiquette.

‘And look at Mademoiselle Lacasse’s pretty dress, Lizzie,’ said Mrs Cutter, glancing at me with admiration. ‘She certainly has that French *je ne sais quoi*. Mademoiselle Lacasse, you must introduce us to your dressmaker while we are here.’

In truth, I bought all my clothes on sale at Le Bon Marché. I was always careful to choose the simplest, best-tailored dress I could afford and then added little embellishments here and there — some embroidery, a touch of lace, an elegant brooch. But of course I couldn’t tell Mrs Cutter that; or that I was born in America, like herself. As Voltaire stated: *Illusion is the first of all pleasures*. What I gave my guests was better than reality. I gave them Paris without the officialdom, chauvinism, poverty and the tainted horsemeat disguised with a rich sauce.

‘I must attend to my correspondence,’ I said to the women, picking up from the sideboard the post that had come directly to the apartment and adding it to the stack I already held. ‘But let’s get together before dinner and practise French for social occasions. Meanwhile, why don’t you go over the names of the French dishes I gave you yesterday?’

Mrs Cutter and Elizabeth enthusiastically agreed to the plan. I left them to roll their tongues around *consommé de volaille à la Sévigné* and *pommes de terre à l’anglaise* and went to my room. I closed the door behind me and placed the bundle of letters on my writing desk, next to the photograph of Grand-maman.

‘*Salut*, Grand-maman,’ I said, gently tracing the outline of her kind face. It comforted me to see her every day but it pinched my heart too.

Underneath the frame was a folded piece of paper from the journal in which I had written down her last lucid words to me: *I am not afraid to die. I am only sorry that I am leaving you alone, Emma, because I know what a sensitive heart you have and that you will grieve deeply. Don't, my child, because I will always be with you, watching over you. My love will remain with you forever.*

I sat down at the desk and pressed my hands together. 'I will love you forever too, Grand-maman. Please help me.'

I spread the letters and postcards over my desk. The yellow envelopes paralysed me with helplessness. There were more of them than last time, and now they were being stamped *Urgent*.

I'd always known somewhere in my mind that I would lose Grand-maman one day, but I imagined she would simply fall asleep in her chair by the fire and slip from this world to the next. She was too good a person, too kind, too sweet, to suffer. At first I assumed the tenderness in her abdomen, the sudden weakness and loss of appetite were signs she was growing older. My blood turned to ice when the doctor told me it was cancer. I mortgaged the apartment to pay for the expensive X-rays, and to take Grand-maman to Germany where a doctor used localised hyperthermia to produce tumour regression in patients. Nothing helped. Grand-maman endured her pain and met her death with dignity, while I fought and fought. After that moment when her soul left her body and her chest sank and her features fell flat, I had a new companion that walked with me every day: grief.

And now the debt collectors were coming after me.

I opened the envelope from Roche & Associates with the most recent date but couldn't bring myself to unfold the letter. Instead I lifted one corner and peeked at it as if I were staring down a dangerous viper. Like the previous notices it was typewritten, which somehow imbued it with a greater sense of threat than if it had been written by hand.

I glimpsed the words: *The outstanding amount remains unpaid despite our previous reminders. We urge you to contact us immediately. If we do not hear from you within fourteen days of the receipt of this letter we will be forced to refer this matter to the courts, where your continued lack of compliance could lead to imprisonment ...*

Chills ran down my back. How was it possible that I had accrued such a formidable debt? Before Grand-maman became ill I'd been able to support us comfortably with my harp lessons and recitals and my published pieces. With careful saving, I'd even been able to take her to the spa in Vichy once a year to relieve her arthritis. But those days of happy abundance were a distant memory. When Grand-maman was in pain, I was in pain too. It was unendurable. I couldn't play the harp. I couldn't write. It would take a miracle for me to repay so much money now!

I placed the yellow envelopes in the desk drawer along with the others from Roche & Associates, and with trembling hands turned to the letters from my readers as a distraction. People who enjoyed my stories were my salvation. Maybe one day I would be a very successful writer and this dark time would be behind me. But that time wasn't coming soon enough.