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Indigo
Bloome

Match *Pointe*

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers

First published in Australia in 2015
by HarperCollinsPublishers Australia Pty Limited
ABN 36 009 913 517
harpercollins.com.au

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HarperCollinsPublishers

Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India
77–85 Fulham Palace Road, London W6 8JB, United Kingdom
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195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007, USA

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Bloome, Indigo, author.
Match pointe / Indigo Bloome.
978 0 7322 9988 0 (paperback)
978 1 4607 0386 1 (ebook)
Erotic stories. Love stories.
A823.4

Cover design by HarperCollins Design Studio

Cover images by shutterstock.com

Typeset in Sabon by Kirby Jones

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

The papers used by HarperCollins in the manufacture of this book
are a natural, recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable
plantation forests. The fibre source and manufacturing processes meet
recognised international environmental standards, and carry certification.

*For all those who read the Avalon Trilogy,
my most sincere thanks.*

This one's for you!

xo



Prologue

Caesar

Antony ‘Caesar’ King was one of the wealthiest men in the United Kingdom. Casino and hotel management were his business staples, but he was equally notorious for his ruthless dealings in property investments and high-end gambling. The crowning glory of his business empire – on which he spent a disproportionate amount of his limited time – was the firm he had built from scratch: The Edge. It was the world’s leading sports agency, responsible for managing the global careers of the most influential and brand-conscious athletes. Caesar had a natural instinct for identifying emerging talent, and the financial resources to back those he happened to tap on the shoulder.

Athletes knew that if The Edge represented them, they were on the path to greatness. To say ‘No’ to Caesar was akin to kissing your sports career goodbye and fading into oblivion. Not only was the business highly lucrative, but it also ensured Caesar was the pre-eminent ‘mover and shaker’ in the industry. At elite sports venues the world over he was immediately recognisable for his flamboyant dress sense, and he had the personality to match. Whether people loved him or hated him, such was his magnetism that they were drawn to him like moths to a flame. Power and superiority emanated from every gesture he made and the tone of every word he spoke. And rest

assured that he relished the authority he wielded and the attention he attracted. Indeed, he depended on it for his continued success.

* * *

His father, Antonio ‘Tony’ King, was a self-made man. From humble beginnings in Italy, Tony had emigrated to America after the war. He had hocked his few valuables for several hands of blackjack, and won enough to kick-start his life in the new world. He was a conscientious gambler, willing to bet on high-risk ventures. And against all odds, he won significantly more than he ever lost.

Antony junior’s middle name was a direct tribute to an exceptionally lucky night at Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas. During a few raucous rounds of poker, Tony was challenged to risk all of his winnings on the roulette table.

With all the careless arrogance of a man who had nothing to lose, he barely glanced at the spinning wheel, where the numbers and colours swirled towards the potential gain or loss of such a huge sum. Instead, the beauty of a tall young blonde a few feet away captured his eye. With a sly wink he beckoned her close, whispering in her ear that she was his good luck charm. It was only when she returned his smile that he let his eyes focus on the tiny silver ball slowing towards black thirteen as if it were magnetically attracted to the number.

The ball fell into place, and the crowd who had gathered around the table erupted into applause as Tony walked away \$1 million richer. He graciously accepted the envious congratulations of those around him, and the gratis upgrade to the Emperor’s Suite proffered by hotel management. Needless to say, he wasted no time in bedding the stunning babe, who had more than happily accompanied him and his newly acquired funds to the suite.

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At first Tony was shocked by the news of her pregnancy, but given that the conception had occurred on the luckiest night of his life, it seemed fate was sending him a definite sign. The woman had no interest in becoming a mother at the peak of her youth and beauty, so he made her an offer any young student with a substantial college debt would find difficult to refuse. A healthy, strong baby boy was delivered into the world, and once the obligatory paternity tests were completed, the biological mother willingly accepted the bonus money they had agreed on, granting Tony full custody of his only son and disappearing from their lives forever.

Caesar had wanted for nothing during his youth as he was groomed to be the heir of his father's financial throne. He became the only true love of his father's life. Tony was determined that Caesar would have all the refinements he'd lacked in his humble upbringing in Italy. So it was inevitable that Tony would choose the prestigious six-centuries-old Eton College to educate his only son. Fortunately the college had no problem accepting Tony's ostentatious new money.

Caesar excelled academically, more so in mathematics than in any other subject. Although he won several mathematics awards across Europe and was the youngest player ever to represent Britain in bridge, Caesar didn't necessarily understand what all the fuss was about. It all came so easily to him that it was as natural as breathing.

It was only after he discovered the game of tennis in his first year of secondary school that his true passion was ignited. In his mind, tennis was the ultimate sport, dwarfing all others. The idea that a grand slam was all down to two players after a fortnight of competition intrigued him. Only one player could outplay, outsmart, outwit and out-hit the other. There were no teammates to confer with, rely on or blame; two solo players were left to fight it out on court, bound only by the rules of the game.

To win you had to have everything – the physical and mental stamina, skill, consistency, tenacity and most importantly the absolute belief in yourself, that you deserved to win and had the capacity to do so. At the end of the day only one person would take all the glory.

Tennis appealed to Caesar in a way that other sports didn't. It got under his skin. He felt more alive watching Wimbledon than at any other time during his schooling. It was as though he belonged there in some way.

From that point on Caesar channelled much of his energy into the game of tennis, and even managed to crack into the top one hundred on the junior tennis circuit when he was fifteen years old – albeit briefly. Unfortunately, a bad skiing accident left his knee structurally damaged and unable to live up to the relentless demands of the game. Though he was bitterly disappointed, the accident neither deterred nor diluted his interest in the game. He hadn't missed a tournament at Wimbledon since his first year at Eton, and he didn't plan on missing any in the future.

In fact, the accident spurred him on to become involved in the sport in other ways, and sparked his interest in the players moving up through the rank and file. He knew many of the players personally, and he began to learn what motivated them, when they had their off days and on days, and where they derived their desire to win.

Suddenly he was intrigued by the game for completely different reasons, as his mathematical brain took over and he developed a program called 'Junior Jousts' for betting on each of the players. His father fully supported and funded his first foray into sports gambling. It was so successful his father applied a similar mathematical model to identify arbitrage opportunities for professional sports and the money came rolling in. Why? some asked. His father responded simply. 'Because it is Caesar's destiny.'

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He was born under a star where winning is the only way.’ Caesar revered Tony, and the most important thing in his life was to continue to make his father proud.

* * *

Caesar was now in his forties, and still attended every grand slam, never short of a jaunty handkerchief and cravat to complement his impeccable hand-tailored suits and glistening polished shoes. He made a point of establishing a connection with each of the top ten players in the world at any given time, engineering reasons to meet up with them more regularly. That way he came to know them very personally – just as some horse-racing punters build steam rooms in their homes to become better acquainted with jockeys. This close association was the reason why he was able to sign most of the top players up with his elite agency.

Even though The Edge employed dedicated staff to look after his clients’ every whim and sponsorship deals, Caesar liked to provide a more personalised service. It was important to him that the players had direct access to him – not a relationship per se but certainly an identifiable association. So he offered them excellent rates to stay in his luxurious hotels and to be seen in his glamorous entertainment and gambling establishments, usually in his company.

His motive was undeniably twofold. Not only did he derive great personal pleasure from being directly connected with the greats of tennis stardom, but at the end of the day, it also made good business sense and gave him ultimate control over the players he endorsed.

Yet most of all, he was passionate about testing his automated betting models against his personal insights into each player’s capabilities and state of mind. And that was why he so enjoyed

the obscenely sized individual bets he made with his billionaire friends in their secretive ‘Club Zero’ aptly named for the number of zeroes that accompanied each transaction – often on par with the size of the egos placing them! Caesar’s gambling was as highly informed as it could be, since on some occasions the bets placed entire companies at stake. Companies Caesar strategically pursued for his ever-expanding empire.

The only other part of his life that kept him engaged – in a non-business sense – was his philanthropic interest in the Royal Ballet. Some called it his hobby. The beauty and graceful movement of the dancers provided him with a sense of serenity he didn’t experience elsewhere. Perhaps it was a way to make up for the lack of feminine energy in his father’s male-dominated world? No one was sure ... nevertheless, his substantial contributions to the Ballet’s Benevolent Fund had secured his prestigious invitation to become a member of the Board of Trustees. Accepting this role meant he had access to the ears of London’s high society, not to mention association with the aristocracy – lords, baronesses and even HRH the Prince of Wales and Her Majesty the Queen (who disappointingly had no interest in tennis whatsoever, but fortunately was an avid patron of the arts).

To know Caesar, you had to know three things. First, his father was the ultimate role model in his life. Second, tennis was his absolute passion. And third, his love of ballet was his greatest pastime. Other than the finer things in life his bank balance could afford, he treated everything else with absolute disdain.

Eloise

To those in the know, Eloise Lawrance was the latest up-and-coming star on Britain’s ballet scene, and had just been chosen to dance the lead in *Swan Lake*. Her movements were technically

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perfect, her timing precise, and due to her young age perhaps she could be forgiven for lacking a little passion or soul in her otherwise flawless performances.

Eloise was uniquely beautiful, though she only ever saw the imperfections in herself. Men and women alike were attracted to her fragile radiance, but she never noticed their attentions. She wished her fingers were a little longer and her feet were more delicate, but most of all she longed for her hair to be manageable and straight – which was why she seldom wore it out. Her soft translucent skin only caused her frustration, as she could never go out in the sun without it freckling, and she believed her aquamarine eyes were too big for her heart-shaped face, instead of seeing them as her most distinctive feature. At least her body proved to have excellent proportions for a ballerina, though she would have preferred a tad more height.

Yet Eloise had long ago relinquished all rights to her own body. Her diet was strictly controlled so she maintained the delicate balance between her fear of putting on even one additional pound of weight, and ensuring she had the stamina to endure the demanding twelve-hour days. Adept at being weighed, pinched, probed and analysed on a regular basis, she was more than skilled at detaching herself from her physical form. Every measurement had to be recorded in detail; even ‘point to point’ (the distance between her nipples) was noted for each new ballet performance. She liked the way others took control so she could focus solely on her craft, her one creative outlet. In her mind, her body was only a means to an end; merely an instrument to enable her to dance.

She was a quiet, reserved person, not exactly shy but certainly not outgoing. Although she was friendly enough when spoken to, she preferred to keep to herself and didn’t have many friends. Being in the ballet meant that her opportunity to form any real friendships was limited, for in her mind the other ballerinas were

all potential threats who could unravel her dream – something she was fiercely determined to protect. She had been ensconced within the realm of ballet for more than a decade and it had protected her from the harsh realities of the outside world. She had experienced this world in her youth, and had no desire to revisit such a heartless place again.

So she never raised her voice or caused any trouble, instead choosing to focus on listening intently to what was required of her. She appreciated the calm passivity of conforming with her ballet masters' strict requirements – with the aim of always exceeding their demanding standards. And from her perspective, this compliance had finally paid off.

Earlier this year, Eloise had been proudly announced as Principal of the Royal Ballet. Everything she had worked for with utmost focus and physical dedication had finally been acclaimed by her esteemed ballet mistresses and masters, and endorsed by the Board. Striving for such recognition had given her the drive to ensure she was as close to perfect as she could be since arriving as a student at the Royal Ballet School aged twelve. Throughout her teenage years, she had never socialised if it interfered with her studies, rarely succumbing to potential suitors, who would no doubt distract her from achieving her dream.

Now she – and everyone else – knew that her dedication to the art of ballet had been worth it. For she was the best; she was Number One. All of the other girls would aspire to be like her, to act like her, dance like her, *be* her. It provided her with an identity she had never had before. And she loved it!

But even though she had reached the pinnacle of all she'd ever wanted to achieve, before each performance, the fear of losing everything crept insidiously into her thoughts. Fortunately, she had become adept at forcing her mind outwards – to focus on the rapt applause she would hear from all over the darkened theatre

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at the end of each act, and the beautiful flowers she would receive at the end of the performance, rather than on the lonely holes in her emotional life. After all, to show fear was to admit weakness, which she saw as a dreadful imperfection. Imperfect was something a prima ballerina would never be.

Staring into the mirror on the opening night of *Swan Lake*, she saw a vision of what she was about to become onstage. She had discarded the loose grey sweats that usually covered every inch of her feminine body, and her wild auburn mane was now tightly restrained and unrecognisable beneath an elaborate headpiece. She liked the fact that her pert lips were artificially red and her aquamarine eyes were buried beneath a swathe of dramatic black make-up. The headpiece accentuated her neck – long and supple, as a swan’s should be – and her striking costume and feathers miraculously gave her the birdlike qualities that would see her fly onstage. And though she was petite, at five foot four, she knew she would become larger than life in order to do whatever the ballet required of her.

She had come from nothing to being the most revered person in every performance. She lived for this feeling and for this feeling alone. When she danced beneath the heady lights, she was as close to home as she had ever been. It was the only sense of belonging she had ever experienced, and she would cling to it for dear life. For to fail now, when she had reached the peak of her career at twenty-two, would destroy her. To fail was intolerable. She had dedicated her life to perfection and there would be no turning back.

So, drawing her dramatic eyes away from the vision in the mirror as the announcement was made for her to make her way to the stage, she completed the ritual she performed before every performance. She sat down, placed both her hands on top of a small, worn music box and closed her eyes. After a moment of quiet meditation, she opened the box and watched as the tiny ballerina swirled around and around, to the tune of ‘Music Box Dancer’.

Eloise imagined herself as the ballerina, who only ever truly came to life when the box was open and provided her with an opportunity to dance. Absorbed by the music and the tiny dancer's pirouettes, Eloise transformed into the tragic heroine Odette, losing all sense of self in the process.

She turned and made her way to the stage, to give the performance of a lifetime to her many admirers – knowing the music box would only be closed after the final curtain was drawn, and be safely packed away until next time.

Ballet

Caesar's relationship with Ivan Borisov dated back to the days when Ivan was a junior tennis champion. Now Ivan was Number One in the rankings of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), and had been for the past two and a half years. Ivan was a client of The Edge, but his passion for ballet – as insatiable as Caesar's own – ensured their friendship went much deeper than the connection Caesar shared with the other top players.

Ballet was in Ivan's blood, which was why Caesar found their discussions on the topic so engaging. Ivan's mother had been a prima ballerina in her youth, and still taught ballet in St Petersburg. Ivan had grown up around dance and could easily have made it his career, had his tennis not been identified as such a strength; comparatively, ballet was a new discovery for Caesar.

The two men met up at performances of the Royal Ballet as often as their schedules allowed. It was on one such evening, after the final curtain call of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, that Ivan turned to Caesar and commented: 'I've seen this ballet on many occasions around the world, and never have I been so captivated by the ballerina dancing the lead roles of Odette and Odile. Yet she seems so young.'

Caesar nodded. ‘Indeed. *Swan Lake* is her first performance as Principal of the Royal Ballet. Her name is Eloise Lawrance. She’s one of our own, actually; studied at the Royal Ballet School.’

Ivan’s eyes shone with enthusiasm. ‘She is just beautiful; she illuminates the entire stage. The precision of her movements is a joy to watch, simply bewitching.’

‘It appears you are attracted in ballet to what you illustrate on the court, Ivan.’ Caesar’s features creased into a smile, which Ivan returned.

‘You’re being way too kind, Caesar. My mother, perhaps, but I’m afraid I have no such elegance.’

‘Until recently, no one could even get close to winning against you,’ Caesar observed, moving the conversation on to his other favourite subject.

‘I know, Caesar, you’re right.’ Ivan sighed. ‘It all depends on motivation, and I seem to have lost mine recently – which is why I didn’t compete in the Australian Open this year.’

‘You know better than I that it was a huge risk to take with your ranking; luckily your sponsors didn’t ask too many questions. The other top seeded players are all hungry to close in on you like a pack of wolves. Any thoughts on what you’re going to do to stay on top?’

‘In all honesty I’m not sure. All I know is these days, if I have to choose between training and ballet ... well, as you can see, I’m here, aren’t I? Which is not such a good thing for the world Number One, is it?’

He shook his head as if to answer his own words.

‘Please understand,’ he went on, ‘I still enjoy it, but the monotony of training is getting to me. I go through the motions but my mind is in another world – like a swimmer focusing on the relentless black line at the bottom of the pool, no longer able to see the big picture. And all my commitments *off* the court ... You

know I dislike having to appear smiling in front of cameras for sponsors – making sure my watch is positioned just so – I’m just bored with all of it. I feel like I’ve already achieved what I set out to do.’

‘If you like, I can organise to reduce your commitments and free up more of your time – if that’s what it’ll take to get you back on form. Just a couple of calls, no problem.’

‘Believe me, I know if anyone can, you can, Caesar. But it’s not just that ...’ Ivan reflected a moment longer then gestured towards the stage. ‘My heart is in *this* world, in dance and music and beauty, just what I have witnessed tonight. Now that I have seen Eloise – that was her name, yes?’

Caesar nodded.

‘Well, now that I’ve seen her onstage, it makes me want to attend every one of her performances. I know I shouldn’t feel this way – I should be focusing on my training – but there’s something about that exactness, that discipline she has over her mind and body ...’ His thoughts meandered before he added, ‘If I could only capture a performance like that before I play – you know, bottle it up somehow – I have no doubt that my motivation would be sky-high.’ He sighed again, suddenly disheartened by the absurdity of his own suggestion. ‘But instead I must wait until her next performance like everyone else.’

Caesar looked thoughtful. ‘Are you saying you believe watching her dance before you play would improve your motivation?’

‘How could it not? Look at her! I’m sure I’m not the only one who would feel this way. There’s something captivating about the way she moves, like she brings the essence of the music to life ... Well, if I could just bottle up a bit of ballet for my own personal use, that would be perfect.’ Ivan laughed, then added with a wink, ‘I know you are a resourceful man who is capable of many things, Mr King, but I doubt this is a problem you can solve. If you do

come up with the answer, let me know; I'd love to hear about it.' He chuckled at the path their conversation had taken, amiably patting Caesar on the back.

'A fascinating challenge, just fascinating. In the meantime, my friend, come backstage with me, and I'll see if I can introduce you to Eloise and the rest of the *corps de ballet*.'

'Thank you but unfortunately I must be on my way, yet another plane to catch. Thanks for the chat. I shall look forward to seeing you again at another one of her performances.'

As the two men bid each other farewell, Caesar's intrigued mind was clicking into gear, working on a variety of scenarios based on Ivan's sketchy idea.

If Ivan could not manage to consolidate his position as the world's Number One, men's tennis would enter one of its most unpredictable eras. The Edge currently managed the top six male players in the world, which provided Caesar with tremendous insights into what was happening on the circuit – leading to substantial business opportunities.

The more inside information Caesar had, the more money he stood to make. And once an idea had seeded in his mind, it was rarely dislodged – particularly if it was coupled with a fire in his belly. There was no doubt this conversation had ignited the flame of an idea for Caesar and it was usually only ever a matter of time before it came to full fruition.



The Offer

Manon

All the dancers of the Royal Ballet had eagerly gathered in the narrow corridor, anxiously awaiting the announcement of their roles in Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon*, widely acclaimed as one of the company's signature ballets. For most ballerinas, dancing the coveted role of *Manon* was deemed to be one of the highlights of their career. The ballet told the story of a young woman torn between the man she loves and a wealthy older suitor who promises her the luxury she craves. The character must exhibit various states of emotion – ranging from shy to flirtatious, from desperate love to the agonies of an eventual wretched death – all captured within the realms of dance. The demands on the ballet dancer were extreme, requiring almost exhaustive physical and emotional stamina.

Eloise was returning from the ballet's physiotherapist, having been dismissed by Madame Alana from the morning class when she landed badly on her ankle during her *sissonne* jumps, and was immediately drawn to the buzz of activity surrounding the notice board. When she approached the other dancers, the bustle around her immediately faded to silence as the weight of her reaction hung heavily in the air.

As she registered the black names listed on the white paper, she stared uncomprehendingly at the notice board, her eyes

anchored to it as though she were paralysed in the worst nightmare of her life.

Not a sound could be heard other than Eloise's breath slowly inhaling and exhaling through her nostrils ... until a muffled, strangled scream passed through her pursed lips.

The dancers scattered in panic as though a large stone had been thrown amidst a flock of flamingos, their scarves and tutus fluttering and floating to the floor like feathers post-flight. They dispersed as quickly as they had assembled in an attempt to avoid what they all knew would be the eye of the foreboding storm.

In what should have been the triumph of her career, Eloise had been usurped by a Russian impostor.

Principal: Natalia Karsavina

Soloist: Eloise Lawrance

Eloise noticed her hands trembling, before she actually felt them lightly touch the bold print where she had expected to see her name. Her entire body went numb, not allowing her to feel the emotion she knew was brewing beneath her skin. Life swirled on around her, but it didn't seem to touch her. She was present, but in her mind she was not really there. This had to be false – a prank perhaps? But no one could be that cruel; ballet dancers were finely honed creatures, physically strong yet their self-esteem so very fragile.

How could it be? Her life's work – had it honestly come to this? How could she face her peers in light of this demotion? How could she face the world? *She* was the Principal of the Royal Ballet, not Natalia! They might as well have broken her legs, such was the pain in her heart.

The force that had driven her for years to study, to practise, to hone her skills hour after hour, day after day, all ultimately

heading to the role of top ballerina at one of the greatest ballet companies the world had known, all had come to nothing, because the role she had aspired to had been cruelly snatched from beneath her wings. Although she had always loved *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, she had done them all to death, the movements so deeply entrenched in her muscles that she barely needed to engage her brain as they toured around the world doing one performance after another. *Manon* had been her opportunity to challenge, interpret and ultimately shine – to firmly establish herself in the history of the Royal Ballet as Number One for this day and age.

Eloise fell in a crumpled heap onto the cold concrete floor, as the pain of disappointment crashed over her limbs. They had finally broken her spirit, snapped it in half.

Though she was so often complimented on her demure presence, controlled emotions and grace, both on and offstage, suddenly uncontrollable anger ripped through her veins and she got up and tore the menacing announcement from the notice board then charged along the corridor and up the stairs.

The futility of her years of silence, acquiescence and unswerving commitment suddenly seemed to burst the synapses of her brain. How dare some young Russian upstart from the Bolshoi Ballet replace her! Just because the company had recently appointed a new renegade choreographer, Xavier, who preferred the Russian dancer's style and chutzpah! It was *she* who was the lead ballerina of this company, *she* who had been classically trained at this very school for more than a decade, *she* who had only just been promoted to the iconic position of Principal. Unfortunately, it was also *she* who had nothing else to live for now the role of her career had been snatched away ...

Unaccustomed to not being in control of her emotions, Eloise was seething as she threw open the door of the company director's

office unannounced. Her slight frame trembled as she stared daggers at Sir Lloyd Barclay.

He could barely make eye contact as he shifted hastily from behind his desk to close the door discreetly behind her.

‘Ah, Eloise, I’m assuming you have seen the cast sheet.’

As he uttered the words she saw her life shatter into tiny pieces before her eyes.

‘That was *my* role, Lloyd! It was promised to *me!*’

With uncharacteristic vengefulness she pinned the piece of paper to his chest with her finger, though it merely floated to the floor as he stepped back behind his desk, which provided him with a physical barrier of authority and immediately diluted the emotive force between them.

Lloyd still avoided looking at her. ‘That’s nonsense, my dear. You know as well as I that nothing is guaranteed in this business, and that disappointment is part and parcel of being a dancer. Someone with your experience knows that anything can change at a moment’s notice. Naturally, this is hard news for you to take in, but you will still be Natalia’s understudy, of course, and –’

His words permeated her thoughts. *But the Royal Ballet isn’t business; it is art, culture and beauty. It’s my entire life!*

For the first time ever, she wasted not a moment in interrupting him.

‘I will *not* tolerate being the understudy or a soloist. You know I don’t deserve such a demotion. The role of Manon was mine, anything less is insulting!’

She furiously spat the words towards him, astounding herself with her aggressive behaviour. She had never spoken an angry word to anyone in her life, having always kept a tight lid on her emotions until they could be expressed onstage via another character.

Lloyd seemed to change tack. ‘Under normal circumstances I would agree with you, Eloise. But you know as well as I that this

role is demanding – both emotionally and physically. It will put your ankle under too much strain. We can't take the risk, and, well, decisions have to be made and, ah, well, have been, I'm afraid – as you have seen.' His facial expression tensed then softened in an attempt to placate her fury.

'My ankle has nothing to do with this!'

'You need to be patient, my dear – give Xavier some time to understand your true talent and your body time to heal.'

'Then why isn't he giving me the chance to prove that the role should be mine? You know I can dance through pain. It has *never* affected my performance.'

Even though they weren't particularly close, Eloise had always considered Sir Lloyd her ally, her dancing guardian, almost like the grandfather she had never known. Now the person before her seemed nothing more than a condescending old man determined to destroy her career.

Eloise took a deep breath to ensure her voice was measured. She could barely whisper her next words, her anger – or was it fear? – barely contained beneath the surface of her skin.

'I know my ankle isn't the real reason, Lloyd. *You owe me the truth.*'

'Well ... you have to understand that this is Xavier's first ballet with us. He is looking for more depth and emotion, I suppose, for a role like this. He believes Natalia has your technical ability ... but also dances with more passion and verve. It's in her genes. She has more life experience to draw upon for the complex role of Manon.'

He rose from behind his desk and placed his hand on her shoulder, which she deftly shrugged off. He shook his head, not sure what to do next. He, like everyone else, had never encountered this side of Eloise. Up until now she had always addressed him with deference.

The more Lloyd tried to convince her of the wisdom of Xavier's decision, the more blurred his words became to Eloise as his voice faded into the background of her mind.

'Natalia has more grit ... edge ... emotional depth ...

'We know you are technically brilliant but your desire for perfection and control is inhibiting your performance ...

'Ballet has been your entire life for more than a decade ... Perhaps you should take a break if you're not content with being a soloist ... explore something new for a while ... get some perspective ... At twenty-two there's still time to find yourself, discover who you really are, what you truly want in life ... I'd be more than happy to approve a leave of absence given how upset you are ...'

I am a ballerina.

It's who I am.

It's all I ever want to be.

I am a ballerina.

This mantra was on replay in her head like an old-fashioned broken record as his monologue continued chipping away at her depleted ego.

'There are so many bright, talented dancers currently rising through the ranks, and oh, the Russians, their skill, their grace, their exquisite beauty ...'

Eloise imploded emotionally. Her deeply rooted feelings of never having truly belonged were allowed free rein to retranslate his words in her brain.

I am ugly!

I am imperfect!

I lack grace!

Ballet was all Eloise knew. Since before she could remember she had devoted every waking moment to becoming the perfect ballerina. *Prima Ballerina!* she screamed in her mind. *Not Number*

Two, not Number Three. Number One! The Principal Ballerina of the Royal Ballet and she made it, only to have it abruptly snatched away because one man – Xavier Gemmel – preferred Russian dancers over her.

Her peers sometimes thought her myopic mindset was a little naive and unrealistic and they encouraged her to socialise more with them, live a little. She became determined to prove to them that dedication such as hers was what enabled success, and anything less would result in failure – and she had proved exactly that. Until now!

How could she face them now? What would they think? Would they agree with Sir Lloyd's and Xavier's decision to demote her, sniggering behind her back, thankful that they hadn't been as invested as she? Of course they would! Long ago she had removed herself from the pettiness of their discussions to focus on perfecting her craft so she could turn it into majestic art. She was a child when she arrived and now it was as though the only family she had ever known were rejecting her – spitting her out of the only place she had ever belonged.

Her mind closed down, blocking out the last of Sir Lloyd's words, and her body took over.

She was unaware of her own movements as she held her head high, refusing to cast her eyes back on the life she was heartbreakingly leaving behind. She gathered her few belongings as if on autopilot, not noticing any of the commotion around her as she reached the corridor. The voices pleading with her to stay, to calm down and talk to them might as well have been thousands of miles away, they were so muffled in her mind.

She gingerly placed her beloved music box in her bag, not daring to capture a glimpse of herself in the mirror, lest she embed the image of the broken failure she had become.

The doors slammed behind her as the London chill slapped her face, colouring her cheeks. It was cold enough for the tears

her heart had been trying to keep at bay to freeze like crystals on her face.

Even as she maintained her outward composure, she could feel herself shattering further on the inside as each moment passed. She defensively wrapped her faux fur jacket around her body and hailed the first cab she saw, directing the driver to Russell Square to her empty, lonely apartment – desperate to distance herself as quickly as possible from the complete betrayal by those she had once trusted so completely.

The steaming hot shower did nothing to diminish the chill in her bones. What was she to do now? She was used to a life of travel, going to the most beautiful cities the world had to offer, dancing in theatres steeped in history. Admittedly, the busy, nomadic lifestyle sounded more luxurious than it was in reality, but it suited her perfectly. It provided her with her only opportunity to feel truly alive – when she was dancing centre stage.

Her life as a ballet dancer had given her a reason to wake up each morning and ensured she went to bed exhausted each night. It had protected, cherished and disciplined her. Now, she felt the enormity of how alone she truly was in the world. She had no one and belonged nowhere. She was left with nothing but a crushed heart and the vast nothingness of the wasted dreams of her youth.

In the depths of despair, she felt herself slip away from the world in the days that followed. Time was of no consequence, as she lay bereft in her minuscule apartment. There was no food in her fridge, nothing of substance in her barely used kitchen cupboard – not that she cared to eat anything. She could starve to death and not a single person in the world would be any the wiser about her now insignificant existence. She felt more alone than she had in her entire life.

The only thing that eventually managed to distract her from her desolation was the incessant ringing of the phone somewhere in the

Match Pointe

background of her clouded mind. When she finally went to answer it, she noticed a shiny pale gold envelope almost lost amidst the pile of scattered mail near the front door.

Both the envelope and the phone call had the potential to signify the end of her old life, and catapult her into an entirely unfathomable new world.

Tate

‘Caesar King requests the pleasure of your company for lunch at the Tate Modern,’ his personal assistant explained rather pompously to Eloise over the phone. When she opened the gold envelope, it contained a formal invitation along with the personal flurry of his distinctive signature.

Eloise had no idea what to expect when she dressed that morning. Her entire wardrobe consisted of the baggy trousers and sweat shirts she wore over her ballet clothes, some jeans and T-shirts for Sundays – her only day off each week – a denim jacket, her faux fur coat and a few evening dresses for when she changed after performances to meet visiting dignitaries.

Given she had no idea what the dress code would be, she was forced out of the house to quickly purchase a formal knee-length skirt and neat floral blouse from Zara, as well as a small attaché case. She loosely pulled her unruly hair into a braid, grabbed her jacket from the hook by the door, then set out for her mysterious meeting with the renowned billionaire.

After a short Tube ride Eloise arrived at the Tate Modern more than an hour before her scheduled meeting, hoping that wandering around the magnificent works of art would provide the necessary distraction to calm her rising apprehension. She would have given anything to have had something else on today, anything rather than meeting Caesar King at this famous art gallery on the Thames ...

But she didn't have an excuse *not* to go, and what was worse was that he knew she didn't.

Even beyond his connection with the Royal Ballet, she knew of the illustrious Caesar King. And everyone knew that when Caesar called, you answered. The only problem was that neither the phone call nor the gold-embossed invitation she had received had provided any clue as to why he would want to meet with her. Although it did manage to pique her interest enough to temporarily suspend her state of misery.

Deep down she secretly hoped Sir Lloyd had asked him to check up on her, maybe even offer her her position back, but she knew she was hoping against hope and that Natalia would be Principal for the foreseeable future. Unless she was prepared to play second fiddle – which she most certainly was not – her future with the Royal Ballet seemed doomed.

As the time of the meeting approached she was sorely tempted to run in the opposite direction. She hadn't seen or spoken to anyone since her demise and was still in a precarious emotional state. But just as she was considering retreating back home, the great man himself appeared, saying farewell to his guests from his previous meeting. He cheerfully greeted a nervous Eloise, whose palms had suddenly broken into a warm sweat.

As far as she could remember, she had only briefly made Caesar's acquaintance at one of the Royal Ballet's gala performances where the senior dancers were required to socialise with benefactors and the Board of Trustees. His well-known Italian-American heritage contrasted with his upper-crust English accent, and he was better looking, fitter and more polished in real life than the way he was portrayed in the tabloids (which was usually with a drink in his hand). But more than anything it was his charisma that was evident from the moment he walked into the entrance hall. It took her by storm.

‘Thank you so much for meeting me, Eloise. After you.’ He gestured for her to precede him into the lift. ‘We’ll go up to the restaurant on the seventh floor.’

Although she had visited the gallery, Eloise had never dined on the seventh floor. The views of London over the Millennium Bridge were breathtaking as she settled into her plush seat in the private room. She was pleased she had worn a formal skirt and blouse rather than more casual attire, given that Caesar was dressed in a navy suit with his trademark cravat and handkerchief; today’s colour was cerise.

‘I hope you don’t mind, I’ve ordered lunch for us. Would you like a cocktail to start, or perhaps some champagne?’ He raised his eyebrows, awaiting her answer.

If Eloise had been nervous before, she was practically speechless now. Apparently a cup of tea wasn’t on the agenda, she thought anxiously, still unable to believe she was meeting with Caesar *alone* and still hadn’t so much as uttered a word.

‘I, ah, I’m not sure ...’

‘We’ll start with two bellinis, I think, Max, and take it from there.’

‘Certainly, sir.’ The waiter silently disappeared, closing the door behind him.

‘Now, I suppose you’re wondering why I’ve asked you here,’ he began, his smile broadening.

‘The thought *has* crossed my mind, Mr King.’ Eloise was relieved when her first words came out more smoothly in reality than she’d imagined them in her mind.

‘Please, call me Caesar. I’ve no doubt it has. But before I get to that matter, let me just say how sorry I am that you’re not currently dancing with the Royal Ballet. You are such an extraordinary ballerina; it is definitely our loss.’

Eloise had been dreading discussing this, but had known it would be unavoidable given Caesar’s active involvement in the company.

‘Thank you,’ was all she said in reply.

‘So tell me, do you have any plans for your immediate future?’

It took Eloise a moment or two to answer. ‘To be honest, I haven’t given anything much thought since walking out. I realise I’ll need to soon ...’

‘I know this is out of left field, but your future is the very subject I’d like to discuss over the course of this lunch. I have a proposal I want you to consider. But let’s get to know each other a little better first, shall we?’

Eloise agreed, still unsure where any of this was headed.

‘How about I start with a little bit about me?’

‘Sure, sounds good.’ Eloise was grateful he was taking charge, given her level of discomfort with the whole setting.

If there was one thing Caesar was great at – and loved – it was talking about himself until other people relaxed around him, and he didn’t mind how long it took. He was a patient man when it served him to be.

Eloise listened attentively, politely at first and then with fascination at the twists and turns his life had taken. Caesar’s passion for tennis and ballet was obvious, as his eyes lit up and his gestures became more animated whenever he mentioned these topics. Before long, Eloise was completely engaged, laughing at his stories and hanging on his every word. Looking down at her plate, she was surprised to see that she had already finished her lunch. Caesar filled up her glass for the second time with a crisp Pouilly-Fuissé, which she found delicious even though she rarely drank. It didn’t take her long to realise that it was far simpler to go with the flow of all things Caesar, and he was never slow in taking the lead in the conversation – which suited her no end.

‘So, tell me about yourself now that I’ve disclosed most of my life to you.’

‘Mine isn’t nearly as interesting. Up until recently it was pretty much ballet, ballet, ballet ... Now I don’t know what it is.’ She forced herself to swallow the tears these words evoked.

‘Tell me more, I’m all ears.’

As stoically as she could, Eloise described her childhood of foster care and her thrill of being accepted at age twelve to study ballet at White Lodge, home of the Royal Ballet School: something that had changed her life. It was the first time she had verbalised her bitter disappointment about *Manon*, and once she’d started she couldn’t stop.

Caesar observed her as she disclosed the bare bones of her life story, knowing they were nothing more than scraps. He already had a file compiled on her life, so didn’t press for the details she avoided, and which he already knew. He merely took notice of what she left out and her mannerisms as she spoke, which fascinated him.

The poor child had nothing in her life other than ballet. There were times when she was fighting back her tears and he felt like holding her hand to help her through the pain, but he quickly checked himself. He was depending on her feeling completely abandoned and the plan he had developed hinged entirely on that premise.

‘Do you plan to return to the Royal Ballet, Eloise?’

She shook her head solemnly, knowing that words might break her.

‘But you said yourself, you were given the role of Soloist. It’s not as if you were sacked.’

‘I will *not* return as Soloist.’ Eloise spoke quietly but firmly, and felt anger and disappointment cascading over her crushed heart all over again. She made an effort to rein in her tumultuous emotions; the last thing she wanted was for Caesar to see her like this, though she feared it was already too late.

‘So what are you going to do? You must have some idea. You’re too gifted to simply walk away. Perhaps you just need some more time to think things through.’

‘Dancing is all I have, Caesar. My pride won’t let me go back – not after the argument I had with Sir Lloyd. It was made very clear to me that the Russians are the next big thing to hit the ballet world and that being “home grown” is now seen as second-rate.’

‘I’m sorry you feel that way, but I understand what you’re saying. As you know, our new choreographer, the world-renowned Xavier Gemmel, is on a two-year contract and has the full support of the Board. I’m afraid he has scope to bring in more dancers from Russia, which doesn’t help your situation either.’

Caesar watched as Eloise shuffled uncomfortably in her seat, confirming the truth of his words. He often found that succinctly stating the reality of a situation, although difficult for people to hear at the time, had a profound impact on their decisions. It was a strategy he often used to his advantage.

‘Maybe I should apply to another company overseas ... I’m not sure. I’m not skilled in anything else. And I can’t imagine a day without dance in my life.’

‘You could apply overseas, but you would need the Board’s approval to do so.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m assuming you’ve read your contract, Eloise ...’

‘My contract with the Royal Ballet?’

‘It states clearly that you do not have the right to accept a position at another ballet company without the Board’s approval. From what I can ascertain from the other trustees, they’re looking forward to having you back – albeit as Soloist. In the meantime, I believe Lloyd has approved an extended leave of absence, and you should receive a letter shortly.’

‘If Xavier doesn’t believe I am good enough to be Principal, I can’t return under his leadership. I worked hard to be in that position, but to pretend I can return when Natalia has been promoted to my role is impossible. Xavier is well known in the industry for his nepotism and I’m sure it will only get worse during his tenure.’

‘Unfortunately I can’t disagree with you there. This issue was discussed at length before he was appointed. We all knew what we were getting into. So let me ask you this: if you *aren’t* returning to the Royal Ballet under the current conditions and you are unable to dance elsewhere, what exactly are you going to do, pray tell?’

Caesar couldn’t deny that right now he felt like the cat circling the canary whose cage door was open – she was such a delicate little bird – but he’d learnt from experience that it was far more effective to let people work through their feelings. At least then they believed they were making their own decision rather than being masterfully manipulated towards his end game, as was usually the case.

Eloise felt as desolate as she had the day she walked out of the ballet on hearing Caesar’s words. Her current situation was almost too much for her to bear.

‘I just want to dance,’ she replied at last. ‘I do think I need some distance from the Royal Ballet, but I have no idea how to go about it.’

That was the cue Caesar had been waiting for, and if truth be told, he’d had enough theatrics for one day. So he wasted no time in cutting to the chase.

‘Then I’m hoping that’s where *I* may be able to help. I would like to make you an offer and I’m hoping you’ll consider it very seriously. It is something I have put much thought into and I hope it is of equal advantage to both of us. It will guarantee your financial independence – but I won’t lie to you: nothing in this life comes without a price.’

He took a moment to open his Italian leather briefcase, removed a manila envelope with her name on it and slid it across the table towards her.

‘Essentially it means that you would contract yourself to *me* for the next two years.’

If Eloise had been desolate a moment ago, she was in shock now.

‘What?’ She stared at him wide-eyed. ‘Why me?’

‘Because you are financially vulnerable, and you are a magnificent dancer whose skills should be allowed to develop – even if away from structured ballet. You are a beautiful young woman whose life has barely begun – even though you think it is over. I am in a position to provide you with a lifestyle that surpasses what you had with the ballet and surrounds you with athletes who are the top of their field. But I need your personal commitment for two years. After that, Xavier’s term with the Royal Ballet will be complete, you will have just turned twenty-four, with more life experience than you’ve ever imagined and, well, let’s just say who knows what your future may hold?’

He looked directly into her enormous, dewy eyes, giving her time for his words to sink in.

‘I don’t know what to say ...’ Eloise wondered whether she was trapped in a warped dream or perhaps it was a nightmare; she couldn’t decide which.

‘I completely understand this may come as a surprise, so let me explain my proposal, the specific details of which are inside that envelope.’

Eloise’s dessert – once again, pre-ordered by Caesar – arrived just as he was relating his discussion with Ivan Borisov. Eloise had vaguely heard of Ivan on the sports news, but was far more impressed that his mother was the famous ballerina Anna Alexandrava.

‘Ivan is Number One in the tennis world, and for the moment, it’s not in my interests to see him lose that coveted position. He

believes that having you dance for him before every match would bring back his motivation and passion for the game. It may or it may not; only time will tell. I know that you are feeling dejected about losing your own role as Principal, but I'm hoping I can make you an offer too good to refuse. I'm calling it my "Number One Strategy". Although I'd oversee the arrangement, to cover all expenses and ensure that the conditions of the contract were being met, you would become accountable to the top-ranked male tennis player. You would travel with him around the world and essentially he would become your new "Master" – to use a term familiar to you. It would be up to both of you to agree on the terms of your relationship.' He paused. 'Do you have any questions so far?'

'My new Master?' She couldn't remotely fathom why this piqued her interest.

'In my opinion, the most successful tennis players tend to be dominant and controlling – the game demands these characteristics of its champions. Just as you, to the best of my knowledge, are submissive by nature, which drives your perfection in ballet. Professional ballet dancers must adhere to the rules of the dance and depend on certain boundaries. By all reports, you perform at your best under the strict demands of your masters and mistresses.'

There was no doubting Caesar had certainly done his research thoroughly as he paused to watch all the colour drain from Eloise's face, when just moments ago it had been flushed. He smiled as he continued, congratulating himself again on his choice. She was even more perfect for the role than she had appeared on paper, and so very easy to read – an open book in every sense.

'It will be up to both of you to negotiate the parameters of your relationship. This will be an important discussion, as your respective lawyers would then draw up the terms of your agreement, which of course I would require you to uphold.'

‘And by parameters you mean what exactly?’

‘The rules that define and determine your relationship.’

‘So I would negotiate this with Ivan?’

‘You would negotiate this with whoever was Number One, as per the ATP’s – the Association of Tennis Professionals – rankings. Currently this is Ivan, and he is very keen for you to be his private ballerina.’

‘Oh, I see. So the contract would be with you for two years but my agreement would be negotiated separately with each Number One during that timeframe?’

‘Exactly.’ Caesar was pleased she seemed to be catching on.

‘And would my relationship with the Number One ever be more than dancing?’

She had to ask; it needed to be clarified.

‘That would be entirely up to you, but you should be prepared for the possibility. It is certainly not my aim to place you in a situation that isn’t consensual. That is why the agreement between you is such an important step in the process. Of course I can’t speak for each Number One; it would be for them to negotiate the boundaries with you. Only then would the specifics form part of the contract.’

‘And how do you know they would even agree to such a proposal?’

‘I manage the top six male players in the world. I know their lives inside out, more than their nearest and dearest ever will. If Ivan doesn’t maintain that position, one of the other five will be Number One. I have included a brief dossier on each of them for you to review before making your decision. I think you will be pleasantly surprised.’

He smiled, almost like the cat that had already swallowed the canary.

‘But how do you know that they would even want me in their lives?’

‘Believe me, Eloise, I know every one of these men would welcome you into their life in whatever shape the relationship takes. As you know better than anyone, being at the top is lonely and isolating. To have someone who doesn’t judge them and understands the pressure of their lives, the need to perform on cue over and over, would be invaluable. It became abundantly obvious to me after my discussion with Ivan. If these elite athletes don’t have a partner one hundred per cent dedicated to their career, it’s only a matter of time before the stress cracks show and their relationship fails, often affecting every part of their life. I see it time and again. Should you come into their lives, understanding what drives them to be Number One, as you know first-hand, supporting them to achieve, with no strings attached ... do you think they’ll knock all that back? You’d be a dream come true!’

The entire situation was too much for Eloise to take in.

‘I know it’s a lot to absorb, and probably the last thing you were expecting from our meeting today. So I’d really appreciate it if you could read through the information when you go home, consider what I’ve offered and let me know within the next two days if you are remotely interested. I’d be more than comfortable if you feel you need to experience the lifestyle I’m proposing before committing to anything. If you decide to proceed, the contract between us will be legally binding for the next eight grand slams; there are four a year. You’d start with the French Open in May, then Wimbledon, followed by the US Open, and finally the Australian in January.

‘It’s a big decision, which I encourage you to consider seriously. And I need to be clear: should you proceed, your life for the next two years will not be your own.’ His eyes became lethal for a flicker of a second, right before his tone lightened. ‘If you have any more questions whatsoever, just call my direct line.’ He handed her his business card.

Indigo Bloome

‘Unfortunately, my next meeting is across town and I need to get going. As I said earlier, Eloise, I hope you will consider my offer seriously over the next day or two. I’ve really enjoyed our time together today and hope we can continue getting to know each other in the near future.’

He stood up, so Eloise followed his lead, and he shook her hand again. Instead of having warm, sweaty palms, now all blood had drained from her fingers, leaving them stone-cold.

‘Please feel free to stay here longer if you wish to.’ He smiled. ‘I’ll look forward to hearing from you.’

As he reached the door, he stopped and turned back to face her. ‘Don’t look so scared, Eloise; life is meant to be an adventure. I hope I’ve just added to yours.’

‘Thank you, Caesar. For lunch, for the chat, for everything.’ As she said the words she realised her life now had options she hadn’t even imagined a few hours ago. ‘I’ll be in touch.’

‘Good. I’m counting on it!’

On that note, Caesar exited the room, leaving a befuddled Eloise standing in his wake.