

## CHAPTER 1

On that sunny afternoon, few of the ton attended the King's Theater. Most found the Duchess of Derbyshire's Thymes regatta more interesting than this London matinee debut of a little known ballet, and lesser known prima ballerina. But of the two events, this performance of LA VESTALE, a tragic tale of forbidden love, would be remembered in the years to come.

A gigantic chandelier suspended from the frescoed ceiling illuminated the gay scene. Fringe members of the ton elite flitted between the boxes that lined the sides and upper galleries in elegant semi-circles. The boxes themselves were resplendent in John Nash's elegant new renovation, decorated as they were with gilded checkered woodwork on a pink background. Their crimson curtains and squabs made a brilliant backdrop for the men and women who perambulated between them, exchanging compliments and barbs by turns. Each wore their finest to hide their chagrin at not being invited to the social event of the season.

Plumed in feathers, shrill of voice and as partial to sparklers as magpies, they chattered like a flock of birds. Doubtless, all agreed, the Duchess's regatta would be a soggy, boring affair. It was much more pleasant to attend the theater, they opined, unaware that, after tonight, they would be sought after by even the highest sticklers for their knowledge of the season's most delicious scandal.

In one of the most exclusive boxes, a man stood surrounded by people. He had a confidence in his bearing, a discreet elegance in his person that drew admirers and detractors alike. He wore a yellow rose diamond stickpin and an emerald signet ring with a casual grace that said much of his heritage. When he spoke, he did so quietly, as one accustomed to being listened to.

Still, it was not his obvious nobility, nor even his pleasant face one first noticed. His appeal derived from the spirit that emanated from within--a serene strength and gentle wisdom, an interest in those around him of whatever station. His smile at his visitors conveyed the confidence of one born to rule, and the initiative to do so wisely. Those who knew him well, however, and they were few, caught the melancholy behind the sunny blue eyes that was as much a part of him as his regal bearing.

He was not unusually tall, nor spectacularly handsome. His nose was too small to be imposing, his face too square for perfection. His mouth was strong rather than moody, his eyes too astutely aware of the foibles of humanity--his own included--to fit the sultry, Byron-like handsomeness that was all the rage. His hair was an unremarkable sun-streaked brown, the curly lock always a-tumble over his forehead giving him a boyish look. His physique was slim and lithe, his every movement as graceful as the thoroughbreds he stabled. He was not a man to stand out in a crowd, yet the men and women squeezing into his box to offer their greetings gravitated toward him.

Some were hangers-on, eager to be seen with this most elite member of an elite circle; others were admiring acquaintances hoping to further their friendship; and a bare few were genuine friends who wondered why he had attended the ballet this night.

They knew what it cost him.

The eleventh Earl of Dunhaven, Vincent Anthony Kimball, smiled warmly at interloper and well-wisher alike. "In truth, had I known I'd stir up such interest, I'd have rented a larger box! Have I become so bookish that it's an event for me to enjoy an evening out?"

A voluptuous, flirtatious young widow tapped him on the arm with her fan. "Any outing graced with your presence is an event, your lordship," she said, simpering.

Vince caught the hand she would have placed on his arm, bent lithely and brought it to his lips, thus hiding his grimace. Was he to be plagued until he was gray and goutish with importunate females? he wondered to himself. But his smile held no malice when he released her and straightened. "Then I shall have to socialize more and make it less so, for certainly a dull fellow like myself should not draw attention away from diamonds such as you."

While she was preening under the compliment, he turned to a young beau in a chartreuse waistcoat and orange jacket, with shirt points so high and stiff they stabbed his cheekbones. "Herbert, how good to see you again. Did you take my advice and buy that lively pair of chestnuts at Tattersall's?"

The young man swallowed, his prominent brown eyes both bashful and adoring, and stuttered, "Y-yes sir. Sweet goers they are, t-too, just as you said."

"Excellent! And Jasper, has your new drainage system worked as well as we hoped?"

The rotund little man with the ruddy cheeks of a landholder who enjoyed overseeing his own property replied, "Exactly as you designed, by Jove. Haven't had a spot of trouble since. But deuce take it, man, why won't you let me repay you with that little filly I offered?"

The earl's smile was sweet as he shook his head. "Because you owe me naught. It's satisfaction enough knowing the rarefied atmosphere of the Lords hasn't stunted my brain. I enjoyed designing the system far more than you enjoyed paying for it, I warrant."

Jasper agreed fervently, "You've the right of it there, lad!"

Laughter rippled at this, for Jasper's clutch-fistedness was no secret among the gathering. And so it went, the earl greeting each visitor in turn with unflinching good humor, courtesy and an uncanny ability to address that subject which interested each person most. When they filed out, their faces were aglow with enjoyment. Each were convinced they were prime examples of humanity, a little more determined to prove it-- and each admired more the man who incited such warm feelings.

Only two people remained as the orchestra tuned up. One was a small, majestic-looking matron wearing a diamond tiara that would have sparkled in Westminster at dusk. She watched her son with eyes as blue and direct as his. "Why are you so patient with such social-climbers, Vincent? You should have sent them along forthwith."

Vince sighed at this old, old argument. "It costs me less to be pleasant than it would to snub them. And it's a deal kinder. Part of our family is no more aristocratic, after all, so what right have I to flaunt myself?"

She bristled. "My grandpapa at least had dignity and kindness."

"Exactly so. And I would be less than true to his memory and my name were I otherwise."

The other person in the box laughed softly and kissed the lady's offended cheek. "Dear ma'am, you know he's impossible to argue with when he's like this. You'd not have him different."

The matron relaxed and returned the tall, red-headed man's smile. "You're right, of course, Robbie. I should be happy enough I coaxed him into attending today."

Vince snorted. "Coaxed, is it? More like coerced, madam."

"Talk to him, Robbie. Tell him how foolish he is to hold sacrosanct a boy's memory and condemn me to loneliness because of it." When Vince's mouth tightened, she said more insistently, "It's true. Were it not for that French chit you'd be married with a brood by now...."

Robbie's tightening fingers gave her pause less than the anguished flash of blue eyes before they looked away.

Silence stretched uncomfortably before Robbie said tactfully, "I've yet to meet a woman who would be happy to play second fiddle to John Bull, ma'am. As long as Vince is so devoted to politics, perhaps it's best he not marry."

Vince shot him a grateful look. "So I've tried to tell her. Some people were not meant to wed, and I, I fear, am one of them." As the lights began to dim, he relaxed into his seat, settling the issue.

Adeline, Countess of Dunhaven, gave a disgruntled sigh and turned her attention to the stage, but Robbie still watched his friend. He knew Vince better than anyone, and he worried at the white look about his friend's mouth. Adeline had no idea how much Vince had loved Chantal, so she didn't know how it strained her son to attend a ballet, any ballet, because of the ghostly ballerina that always haunted the earl, especially in such surroundings.

Vince's unfailing charm and tact even when he was not in the best of humors himself never ceased to amaze Robbie. This intrinsic decency made the earl a force to be reckoned with in the House of Lords. Many opponents had dismissed Vince as a soft ninnyhammer, only to find themselves gently but eloquently argued into silence, the bill they supported defeated with Vince's leadership.

Vince had need of some of that drive in his personal life. He'd kept himself sequestered for too long, bright memories his only solace. It had been almost ten years since Chantal's disappearance, but Robbie feared the wounds inflicted by their brief liaison would never heal. At least they wouldn't as long as Vince held himself aloof from the beautiful women of every station who would have beggared themselves to win his interest. For his friend's sake, Robbie hoped Vince would lay Chantal's memory to rest. Thus, Robbie had added his persuasions to Adeline's to attend the ballet tonight-- for a different reason.

He'd heard from a friend who attended this same ballet in Milan that the prima ballerina was of uncommon beauty. She was a wisp of a thing, as delicate and graceful as her namesake, Papillon. If she was as charming as rumored, then maybe here, at last, was a woman who could interest Vince longer than a night or, at most, a week. Robbie knew of no quicker relief for the dismals than a new mistress. As for the reports that Papillon rejected all admirers, Robbie dismissed them as rumors planted by the little danseuse herself to entice more bees to her honeypot. Who ever heard of a virtuous ballerina? he scoffed inwardly, settling back as the curtain opened.

Beside Robbie, Vince gritted his teeth to stem the gorge rising in his throat and told himself he was being ridiculous. Adeline and Robbie were right. It was high time he exorcised the ghost of his past. Chantal was either dead or married by now. If she had cared as much for him as she claimed, she never would have disappeared without a word.

And so he forced himself to watch, trying to deny the tearing anguish in his gut as the first dancers floated on stage. But the memories persisted, made poignant by his emotions: It was wrong for him to be here. It should be Chantal on that stage, dancing for him, only for him as she had so many times before. He was too busy grappling with himself to pay much attention to the stage as the first act began.

A mock Roman circus had been set up, complete with chariots, horses and spectators draped in togas. The games at an end, the Vestal Virgins entered to a slow, measured rhythm from the orchestra, bearing palms and crowns for the victors. Vince noted with vague

appreciation that each Vestal was lovely and sinuous, both innocent and wordly as they began a fluid dance that seemed inspired by the poses he'd seen on Roman mosaics.

They wore the briefest of togas, baring a graceful shoulder each, a golden cord tying white gauze about their waists. The material had been so cleverly draped that, though each dancer was covered to her ankles, details of each supple figure were quite apparent. So in tune were they as they arched, dipped and swayed that at first, none stood out. Like a sonata, they blended into an harmonious whole, no figure crescendoing apart from the others. But then the corps de ballet faded into the background, leaving two people in the forefront.

Vince's wandering attention sharpened. He leaned forward.

Center stage stood Decius, the winning gladiator, clad in leather jerkin and helmet, with Emilia, the smallest Vestal. Unlike the other dancers, who wore their hair up, her long, blue-black tresses were braided with a golden cord, the braid falling over one delicate shoulder. Her waist was tiny, her hips as curvaceous as the legs that could be glimpsed through the thin gauze. She lifted slim arms to place the crown on Decius's head. Their eyes met, drawing the gaze of the audience from the graceful movements of their bodies to that intense look. The gaslight centered on them, highlighting the emotional moment of two people falling in love at first sight. For the first time, the prima ballerina's face was clearly lit.

Blood rushed to Vince's head. He groaned and fell back against his seat, oblivious to Robbie's "My word!" or Adeline's shocked gasp. Vince gripped the arms of his chair so tightly the worn material tore.

Pulling himself upright, he fixated on that small, brightly-lit figure. He mouthed then the very name his companions had hoped today would erase from his lips. "Chantal." And finally, in a hoarse shout, "Chantal!"

Adjacent attendees looked into their box curiously in time to see Robbie put a staying hand on Kimball's shoulder.

Vince threw him off and bolted out the door. He leaped down the stairs three at a time, his pulse keeping time with each frantic step. He ran to the stage door, a prayer mumbling through his lips, "Dear God, let it be, let it be, please...."

The stage manager turned at Vince's noisy entrance into the wings. He frowned, blocking Vince's passage. "Yes, may I help you?" His tone was nominally polite to this obvious member of the nobility.

"Please, I must see that ballerina." Vince cleared his shaking voice and said more calmly, "We are old friends. I'm certain she'd want to see me." He tried to push past the large man so he could see the stage, but a muscular arm barred his way.

"No one is allowed backstage during a performance, me lud. You must leave. You can speak to any dancer you fancy, but later." He tried to escort Vince away.

Vince shook off his hand. "No, I'll not leave. Can I not wait here and speak to her between acts?"

The manager reddened at this flouting of his authority. "You'll be speaking to the watch if you don't leave. Now!"

Vince threw a desperate look at the stage, which he could barely see. He couldn't see her from here. Panic filled him. What if she left before he had a chance to verify her identity? What if he'd imagined her, conjured up the image he most wanted to see in the stress of attending his first ballet since she disappeared? He couldn't wait until the performance was over. He must find out NOW.

He looked at the manager's angry face. He looked back at the stage. For only the second time since reaching maturity, he acted on instinct, emotionally rather than logically. As if defeated, he turned and retreated a few steps. When the manager followed, he darted around the corner of the wing and stuck out his foot.

The man fell headlong. Vince leaped over him and ran out on stage, aware but uncaring that he would become the cynosure of all eyes. Uncaring that he, who assiduously guarded his good name so as to set the example he espoused, would make a spectacle of himself in exactly the way he abhorred in others.

The Vestals were pirouetting when Vince burst onto the stage. He searched frantically for that haunting face. A dancer noticed him and faltered to a halt, drawing the attention of the others. One by one they stopped and stared as this obvious gentleman walked slowly through them, searching, searching.

Vince didn't feel the shocked, fascinated gazes as even the orchestra whined to a stop, the musicians, too, pausing to stare. The audience buzzed as Vince wended his way to the front, his eyes riveted on a gleaming black head. He pushed through the stunned troupe, clasped the girl's arm and turned her to face him. The air left his lungs in a whoosh as the eyes he would never forget looked at him, a miasma of emotions in their lavender-gray depths. They were enormous eyes, vaguely slanted and fringed with thick, black curling lashes. Eyes he'd despaired of ever meeting again.

Utter silence prevailed as every person in the theater, from maid to mistress, from footman to Duke, stared. And, as the earl put up a shaking hand to touch her face, every person present caught the hunger and familiarity in that touch.

The theater owner put a staying hand on the angry manager's arm when he would have dragged Vince off the stage. "After this night, the gentry will flock here," he whispered. Reluctantly, the manager subsided.

Vince knew nothing but the lovely, distressed face before him. With every pore of his body he absorbed the features that still haunted his dreams: high cheekbones, pointed chin, dainty nose, small, cupid's bow mouth and pearly teeth just visible between her panting lips. He would have been content to stare at her for hours, but when Chantal flinched away from the caress at her cheek, he was galvanized into action.

He jerked her to his lean length, groaning at the feel of her against him, substantial rather than the wraith he'd reached for in the interminable dark, lonely nights. He sensed the shocked gasps from the audience, but his only concern at the moment was Chantal.

He forced her averted chin up and looked into the eyes that were now veiled. "Why do you deny me, Chantal?" he whispered tenderly.

She bit her lip, refusing to answer, so he did then what his body had been urging him to do since he touched her. He lowered his sun-streaked head over hers and kissed her, swallowing her gasp. For the barest instant, she melted against him, as if familiar with the touch and taste of the mouth seeking hers so urgently. Then she stiffened and tried to push him away. He lifted his head and looked down at her, his blue eyes moist, but he would not release her.

She closed her eyes, a pained look twisting her porcelain features, but when she looked at him again, her steely gaze matched her tone. "You mistake, m'sieur. My name is not Chantal. I insist you release me."

He did so, reluctantly, but kept within easy arm's reach. "Then why did you respond to my kiss?" His little smile deepened when a blush tinged her cheeks.

She patterned her worldly smile after his own as she looked him up and down. "You are a handsome man, m'sieur."

He frowned, for the Chantal he had known could never have been so bold, but his next question died unspoken as the theater owner, a satisfied look upon his cadaverous features, caught his arm. "Come, my lord. You may speak to Papillon after the performance."

Blinking, Vince finally realized where he was. He snapped his mouth closed and stalked off, delivering a look of blistering promise at Papillon over his shoulder. The ballet resumed, but it was almost the intermission before the prima ballerina recovered her former grace.

As for Vince, he coolly met every curious stare that followed him on the long walk back to his box. He sat grimly impassive through the remainder of the performance, his eyes glued on the small, raven-haired danseuse. After a few tentative questions that went unanswered, Robbie and Adeline didn't speak to him. Vince moved only once during that performance. At the interval, he went to the box door and bolted it, and then returned to his seat. When several knocks sounded, he ignored them. After a time, they stopped.

At this unwonted behavior, Robbie's brown eyes met the countess's urgent blue ones. He nodded slightly and said, "Vince, old chap, what say you to an early evening? I've the deuce of a headache."

"Take the carriage and go if you wish. I'll get a hack home." Vince's brooding stare never left the stage.

"Vince, it's probably not the same chit--" The countess's voice trailed off at the slash of the acute blue eyes so like her own. She rose with regal grace. "Very well, make more of a fool of yourself than you have done. Pay me no heed, as usual. Robbie, your arm."

Sighing, Robbie stood and patted the stiff little hand that landed on his sleeve. "Shall I escort the dear lady home and return, Vince?"

"There's no need, Robbie. In truth, I prefer to be alone."

"As you wish." Wheeling smartly, Robbie and the countess left, marching in lockstep like practiced infantry.

Vince didn't even notice. His every muscle was rigid with self-control. By the time the interminable performance ended, he was so tense he felt he'd snap at a touch. He left his box shortly before the lights dimmed, but even so, he had to evade several people who would have waylaid him.

He was the first gentleman to reach the troupe's dressing rooms. A staring stagehand directed him to Papillon's room. It was set slightly apart from the others, and he saw the door closing as he walked toward it.

Venting a rare curse, he hurried forward and banged on the door. When no one answered, he whammed harder. Heavy footsteps finally approached. The door cracked open. Vince had to look up, way up, before he could meet one storm-cloud gray eye. He glimpsed a thick, unruly thatch of copper hair and a broad chest.

A thick Scottish brogue snapped, "What is it, mon?"

"I want to speak to your mistress." When that hostile eye only narrowed, Vince snapped, "Now!"

"Papillon dinna speak to sassenachs sich as ye. Off wi' ye."

Vince stuck his evening slipper in the doorway, wincing when the man tried to shut the portal anyway, taking his foot in the process.

Vince caught the savage glint of teeth, and when the pressure on his foot eased slightly, he wisely withdrew it. The door snapped shut in his face. Vince clenched his fists and thought about kicking the flimsy wood, but the gentlemen crowding backstage stared at him, one and all.

His muscles aching with tension, he wheeled and stalked off, pulling a stagehand aside. "Tell Papillon that Vincent Kimball looks forward to a quiet conversation." He gave the man a crown and hurried away.

His thunderous frown discouraged even the most avid gossips. By the time the hack delivered him at his townhouse, it was growing dark and he was uncertain whom he was angrier at--Chantal or himself. Never had he flaunted his feelings in such a way. But Chantal had always incited his deepest emotions.

After throwing his cape, hat and gloves at his wooden butler, he snapped over his shoulder, "See I'm not disturbed under any circumstances." He slammed his study door closed behind him, fetched his finest brandy and flung himself in the chair before the empty grate. He poured a hefty draft in his snifter, snapped the decanter down and drank the potent brew in two swallows. He poured himself another, leaned back and closed his eyes.

Breathing deeply didn't help. He tried striding about his study, nursing his brandy and his wounded feelings, but that didn't help either. He paused before the miniature of Chantal he always kept on his desk despite his mother's protests. He picked it up in one hand and drained his brandy with the other.

So sweet, so innocent she looked, that lush hair flowing over her shoulders, that wistful smile that had never failed to move him upon her lips. She'd sat for this portrait at his request that last summer before she disappeared, and for ten years it had been all he'd had of her. If she had her way, it would be all he'd ever have of her.

His hand clenched so hard about the picture that he bent the expensive silver frame. How could she deny even knowing him? HIM, the man who'd held her image sacrosanct for nigh on a decade. His body trembled with the need to grind the miniature under his foot, but he forced himself to set it back down. His anguish grew until he felt he'd explode.

Growling like a wounded bear, he swiped everything off his desk and flung his snifter against the wall. A flying shard caught him on the cheek. He picked the speck of glass away, looked vaguely at the blood on his fingers, groaned and slumped in his desk chair.

His foot knocked against something. He bent down, picked up the picture, stared blearily at it, and then gently put it face down on his desk. He closed his eyes, but the images crowding into his brain were not animated by sight. His heart was relentless, and at last he admitted defeat, buried his head on his arms and let memories take him away....