

DANCE OF LIFE

Barbara Blythe

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Dedication

To Mom— thank you for giving me a love of dance; to
Dad— thank you for giving me a love of history. And
to my Lord and Savior who gave me parents who have
always been there for me.

Praise

Fire Dragon's Angel

"A charming tale of adventure and love in colonial times...well worth the read. I highly recommend this book. ~ Pegg Thomas

Ransom for Many

"The book will keep you on the end of your seat (pirates, passion, et al). The story was intriguing and...had charm." ~ Review by "Elizabeth" at Book Collector

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Paris

October, 1845

Le Théâtre de la Mondé

Rosin, sweat, and gas permeated the charged air, thick with discord and the Russian rants of Nicolai Rubenevski.

Feet aching and head pounding, Charice Marin wondered how much longer she could put up with this.

Poor Mira stood before Rubenevski, head hanging as she bore the brunt of the man's tirade.

Didn't the man realize he was wasting his breath chastising Mira in Russian when she spoke only French? He'd been shouting nonstop for thirty minutes because Mira's slipper ribbons had loosened during the rehearsal of the opening act.

Charice feared the girl now wished she'd remained in her village and married the neighboring shepherd her parents had favored instead of running away to Paris to become a ballerina.

Releasing a sigh while summoning her nerve, she prepared to present herself on stage and end Rubenevski's tirade. There'd be no practice if she didn't. The man had been known to shout and yell for hours. Lifting her chin and stretching her neck to regal lengths, as her mother did when portraying a woman

who would not be denied, Charice darted out of the shadows. And slammed into the broad back of a man.

Inconsiderate oaf. Couldn't he see me? He stepped right in front of me.

Pivoting, the man's emerald green gaze slammed into Charie's and flared. A shock of nearly black hair fell over his brow. Lips twitched, and a scar leaped at her. "*Pardon moi.*"

A sense of familiarity settled as the deep timbre of his voice vibrated within her.

Broad shoulders were defined by the taut linen of his pristine white shirt. Trousers hugged corded thighs while his scuffed boots outlined muscular calves. He had the look of a *danseur*. With his towering height, he was almost intimidating.

But Charie would not be intimidated—not by this man who seemed far too certain of himself. "*Aucun préjudice causé.*" *No harm done.* Averting her gaze, she hurried past. Was that a soft chuckle that floated behind her?

"You are a thoughtless, witless girl," Rubenevski barked, his volume shaking the rafters.

Charie cringed, thankful that Mira couldn't understand his words. She wished she couldn't.

Behind Rubenevski stood Antoine, shifting from one foot to the other while exuding indifference. The egotistical *danseur* had no care that a member of the company suffered humiliation. Charie noticed his shoulders lacked the breadth of the man's who'd bumped her. Banishing the unwarranted comparison, she cleared her throat.

"*Gospodin* Rubenevski, if I could have a word." Charie's flawless Russian caught the man's attention, and he fell silent. Swallowing hard, she met his

enraged glare and stopped before him.

"What do you want?"

"I want to practice, and I can't if you continue bellowing. You are wasting time and the count's money. What will you say when he arrives and finds you badgering a dancer?"

Intakes of breath occurred simultaneously, and the ensuing silence deafened as all awaited Rubenevski's response.

Charie wasn't sure she was breathing.

"I am the choreographer, *baryshnya*, and you would do well to remember that. Your *prima danseuse* status does not allow you to dictate. And though I planned to tell you after rehearsal—as you've chosen to interrupt—I think it only fair to let you know I am in agreement with *gospodin* Phillipe. Roberto Capretti will partner you in *Long Ago in Bethlehem*."

"What? You can't be serious. Surely you remember his behavior last year in *Marionette*? When he managed to present himself sober, he was disagreeable—when drunk, he was disgusting. *Monsieur* Phillipe might admire his skill, but he's a disruption to any troupe. I have ethics and principles. God would not want me to dance with him."

"I don't believe Phillipe has consulted God. He wants to draw an audience. Women enjoy Capretti's dancing. Women bring their husbands and paramours who spend lavishly to keep those women happy. Do you understand?"

Charie felt faint from a suffocating heat. An overwhelming need to escape took hold while tears burned behind her eyes. Her breathing dissolved to short, angry gasps.

A movement near the curtain ropes caught her

eye. It was the annoyingly handsome man who seemed to enjoy the unfolding drama. At her expense. Elevating her chin, she met Rubenevski's livid gaze.

"This will not be."

"Do you plan to run to the count and complain?"

Charie had never resorted to tactics of that nature. *Monsieur* Rubenevski knew she wasn't one to take advantage of her fatherly relationship with Count Stanislov. She wouldn't do so now. "No. But I will not partner with a man who is vile and immoral."

"See how far your 'ethics' and 'principles' take you in this business, *gospoja* Marin."

Something deep within her exploded, and aware she was about to either burst into tears or slap *Monsieur* Rubenevski, she whirled around and retreated. As she passed the annoying stranger, he reached out as though to stop her, sympathy spread across his rugged features.

Shaking her head, she surged forward, pausing only long enough to retrieve her cloak from her dressing room. Throwing it about her shoulders, she fled the backstage area, flew down the stairs, and exited through a rear door. A blast of cold October air enveloped her. Lowering her head, she pushed into the wind, her steps automatically taking her towards the *Théâtre Impérial*.

Charie had just divested her wet cloak, and commenced pacing when commotion in the hallway signaled the advent of her mother.

Which meant the final curtain had fallen on the

Thursday matinee of *The Misadventures of Sally*.

Charie hurriedly smoothed the tendrils of her curling, auburn hair that had loosened during practice and her recent dash though the wind and rain.

Her mother always looked elegant, perfectly attired, and every hair in place. No torn stockings and worn tutu for Matilda Marin.

The door of the dressing room burst open, and her mother swept within, her arms laden with roses and lilies, while her dresser, the ever patient and mothering Swede, Lizbet Borgensen, shooed the lauding throng away. Order was immediately restored as Lizzie slammed the door in the face of a balding, rotund, mustachioed man.

The flowers perfumed the air, so much so that her mother cracked a window. As soon as she turned towards Charie, concern clouded her crystal blue eyes.

"This can't be good. I've never known you to visit me in the middle of the day." Her mother spoke English, her slight drawl marking her as a Virginia native.

"Oh, *Maman*, everything is all wrong." Releasing a sob, Charie moved towards her mother, warmth enfolding as Matilda wrapped her in her arms.

"You're not ill, are you?"

"No." Charie pushed away. Folding her hands, she paced. "I need your advice. *Monsieur* Rubenevski spent all morning and part of the afternoon shouting in Russian, and then informed me *Monsieur* Phillipe has decided I will dance with Roberto Capretti in the company's performance of *Long Ago in Bethlehem*. You know how I feel about the man. I've a good mind to quit the ballet, *Maman*."

"*Monsieur* Rubenevski said I shouldn't worry so

much about ethics or principles. It's bad enough that people accuse us of immorality because we are performers. If I dance with Capretti, there are those who will think, 'birds of a feather—'" Charie shuddered.

Matilda grasped her hand and led her to the divan. They sat down and her mother gathered her close as she had when Charie was a child.

And as though she was, Charie laid her head on her mother's shoulder.

"I told you long ago we don't fit society's idea of a lady. But in God's eyes, we're just as much a lady as—and maybe more so than—some tongue wagging, tongue lashing, hoity-toity socially acceptable female. When I decided to become an actress, most of my kin nearly died, including Ma and Pa." Matilda now sounded like the simple southern girl she'd been at the age of seventeen when her love of performing had drawn her to New York City.

Gone was the cultured, refined voice of the stage actress. "But I'm not one bit sorry. And you're not to be, either. As long as you love the ballet, dance. When it becomes burdensome, quit. But while you're dancing, don't compromise. I agree with your opinion of Roberto Capretti, so tell *Monsieur* Phillipe. If he won't listen, I'll speak to Olar."

"I wouldn't want you to do that."

Her mother shared a strained relationship with the Russian noble who was the patron of the Ballet Éléphanté.

The two never saw eye to eye on anything, and sometimes Charie felt like a rope tugged back and forth between them.

Their on-going battle had waged for nearly four

years, ever since Count Olar Stanislov had taken the *corp de ballet*, bordering on bankruptcy and on the verge of disbanding, under his wing, physically and financially.

"I will, if it would help."

Charie would rather be dragged through a re-staging of the battle of Waterloo than have her mother "speak" with the count. "No, I'll tell *Monsieur* Phillipe how I feel. Immediately, because you need to change, and I should return to the rehearsal."

Lizzie, who'd remained silent during their discussion, shuffled the gowns in her mother's armoire, an indication that she was ready to help Matilda out of the costume she wore in her portrayal of Sally Sharp, a feather-brained beauty with romantic troubles that somehow resolved themselves humorously.

If only Charie could resolve hers in the same manner.

"Stay as long as you like." Her mother gave her one of those "everything's going to be fine" smiles.

"I can't. I threw a tantrum for the first time in my life and then stormed off the stage. I didn't know what else to do when *Monsieur* Rubenevski said I was to dance with Capretti. And Rubenevski had already angered me by treating Mira abominably."

"When you return, tell Phillipe exactly how you feel." Matilda kissed her cheek. "Now, you're to be punctual for dinner."

"I will," Charie promised sheepishly. She was notorious for remaining at the theatre long after the others had left, practicing alone and so absorbed, she'd forget about eating and everything else. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I'm your mother, the most

important role I've ever played or will ever play. I hope you never decide you don't need me." Matilda looked at her closely. "Are you certain you're not taking ill?"

Charie shook her head. "I'm certain. Sometimes I wonder if my father is sorry he left you."

A troubled light clouded her mother's eyes.

Charie stood, reaching out to clasp her mother's hand. "You've worked so hard over the years to make a good life for me. And you had not one bit of help from him."

"I didn't want or expect his help. You know that."

"He should have done his duty by you. And me," she added with a whisper.

"Dear, don't — "

"Yes, I know. Don't speak or think badly of him. He was a man, and I quote, 'zealously committed to honor.'" Charie had hoped to lighten the mood, but her mother's expression told her she'd failed miserably. "I promise to be home for dinner. I couldn't endure a scolding from *Madame* Jeaneau after listening to *Monsieur* Rubenevski. *Au revoir*," she called over her shoulder as she headed to the door.

Opening it, she stifled a cry when she realized the obese man she'd glimpsed earlier still lurked outside her mother's dressing room.

Not wanting her mother disturbed, she closed the door quickly. Ignoring him, she set off down the hall, her ballet slippers making but a wisp of sound. As she approached the stairwell, the man's heavy tread followed. He was a persistent someone. Irritated, she twirled around.

"*Madame* Marin's next performance will be tomorrow night," Charie explained impatiently in

French.

"I'm not here to see *Madame Marin*." The man replied in English, his accent bearing traces of the New Yorker.

She would know—she'd lived there with her mother for the better part of twelve years.

"I'm here to see you."

"I don't understand." She replied in English.

"Aren't you Charice Marin, *prima danseuse* of the *Ballet Eleganté*?" The man drew forth a handkerchief to wipe his damp brow. The hallway was anything but warm.

She was chilled, and the man before her added fear to her chill. Charie reined in her imagination, and though the ardent admirers and theatre crew had departed, her mother and Lizzie were not far away and could easily hear if she called out. Even so, she pulled her cape closer.

"I am. What do you want?" She made no attempt to hide her annoyance.

"Is there somewhere we could speak privately?"

Charie hesitated, distrustful and aware of the lengths some obsessive devotees could go. Crossing her arms, she rubbed her hands over her woolen cloak, hoping to restore warmth. The cloak covered her practice tutu and ragged leggings; clothing that provided little protection on a raw October afternoon. This was what she deserved for running out of rehearsal. "You can speak to me and my mother."

"This matter doesn't concern your mother. It concerns you and your father."

"My father?" Charie regarded the man incredulously, odd that she'd just mentioned her father, something she rarely did.

Now this complete stranger referred to him.

Suspicion mounted as she narrowed her eyes. "There's no reason to speak with you or anyone else about my father. I've never met the man."

"I represent an individual in New York who wishes very much to become your patron. He's asked me to present his offer, which, should you accept, would prove lucrative."

"My father isn't involved in my career or my life. You should speak to my mother."

"You are wrong." His voice raised a notch with insistence. "Your current patron, Count—"

"There you are, *Mademoiselle* Marin. I've looked all over for you. Rubenevski is beside himself with worry." Strong fingers gripped Charie's upper arm as the deep, richly accented voice penetrated her apprehension. Pulling her gaze from the irritating bald man, she raised her head.

Stormy green eyes met hers with such intensity her knees nearly buckled—the man from the theatre?

Before she could gather her wits, she was ushered down the stairs, the pudgy man sputtering and cursing as he was left behind, unable to keep up with their rapid descent. Upon reaching the lower level, she snatched her arm free—no small feat and undeniably painful, and then turned upon this new, unwelcome presence.

"Just who—" Charie's voice died in her throat as she took a good look at the man.

Nearly a foot taller than she, he exuded a physical strength that both frightened and attracted. His topcoat hung open, and the cut of his serviceable jacket conveyed the fact he was no slave to fashion. The neck cloth was haphazardly tied, and the buttons on his vest

matched up one hole lower than they should have. Untamed hair hung unconventionally long; that lock still falling boyishly over his brow. But it was his face that sent her reeling. The scar she'd glimpsed earlier ran a jagged path from his left temple to his jaw, marring his sculpted features.

Gasping, she pressed her hand to her chest, "are you?"

"An angel of mercy when compared to the man with whom you were previously conversing." His English was flawless, but flavored with a hint of the Slav. There was no trace of a smile; no jesting gleam in his eyes. They remained a frigid green, and his scarred jaw twitched with vexation.

Hackles rising, Charie forgot that seconds earlier she'd been terrified.

"It's time you returned to rehearsal." He reached out as though to take hold of her already bruised arm.

She stepped back. "I was planning to do so. Without your help. I don't know who you are or why you're here, but you're not welcome." With that pronouncement, she strode past him, wondering how *Monsieur* Rubenevski's fit of temper had precipitated such strange events for her.

She was more than ready to return to the rehearsal if it would make the odious New Yorker and the iron-jawed eastern European go away. Wrapping her cloak closer, she braced for the wind and mist.

"You don't understand." The man fell into step beside her. "I'm escorting you to the theatre. Unless you want that man to rejoin you?"

Something in his tone made her pause and look behind her.

Sure enough the short, fat man was in pursuit.

Without thinking through her actions, Charie grabbed the man's hand and broke into a run.

They finally slowed when her companion diverted them down a narrow alley, not far from the theatre.

Winded, with a catch in her side, Charie gratefully leaned against the cold, stone wall of a deteriorating, windowless shop and drew a shaky breath. She glanced at the man who watched her with an unnerving intensity.

He appeared unaffected by their frantic race, his breathing steady. "You kept up with me. Rubenevski has trained you well."

"I beg your pardon?" Charie focused her rage and anger at this irritating, outrageous man. She would've been better off talking with the other stranger.

He'd not been nearly so intimidating. And he'd been close to disclosing something about her father.

"You possess surprising stamina."

"My stamina is not a topic of discussion. And given the fact my pursuer is no longer a threat, I can find my way back. Alone."

"I think not. My instructions were to locate and return the 'temperamental' ballerina post haste. That's what I'm doing."

"Who 'instructed' you?" Charie snapped.

"The count."

"Count Stanislov would never refer to me as temperamental."

"He did today." The jaw was twitching again.

"How do you know him? You will explain or I shan't move a muscle."

Rather than reply, he swept her up in his arms as though she weighed no more than a sack of potatoes and proceeded towards the entrance of the alley.

Furious, Charie kicked her legs and pummeled his solid muscled chest ineffectually. "Release me—I demand that you release me. Now." Unexpectedly she found herself sitting in a puddle looking up at her tormentor, who had the audacity to laugh. The nerve of him.

Leaping to her feet, she rushed him. Deftly stepping aside, he allowed her to sprawl face first into another puddle. Pushing herself up, she prepared to launch another attack, but the man was gone.

How could he just leave her? Was he such a coward that he would desert her now?

Charie was of a mind to search for him, but she knew she had to return, with muddy face and cloak. What had she done to deserve this irritation?

"I lost my temper." Charie made the admission aloud while shaking her head. She should never have let *Monsieur* Rubenevski upset her. Logic and reason would have served her much better than dashing angrily from the theatre. She wouldn't do that again. "So, Lord, I have learned something. Never again will I abandon a rehearsal."

Brushing what grime she could from her person, she trudged towards the theatre, properly humbled and subdued. Entering through the side entrance, she hoped to avoid notice. Her efforts failed as the members of the *corp de ballet* swarmed her.

Mirenda LaTalle—Mira—threw her arms about her. "I was so worried, *mon ami*." Her friend spoke rapidly in French. "You were so brave to defend me. The count has been beside himself since discovering

you ran out. You've never done anything like that before. There's a mysterious man with Count Stanislov. A scar runs down the side of his face, but even so, he's the handsomest man I've ever laid eyes upon. Count Stanislov sent him after you." Mira paused and drew a deep breath. "Are you all right, Charie?"

Rather than answer, Charie broke from her best friend and wended her way through the chattering dancers, searching for the ballet company's Russian patron.

He found her first. "Charice, I thank our God above that you are unharmed. There is someone I'd like you to meet. Allow me to introduce a good friend and fellow lover of the ballet."

As the tall, scarred man hovered into view, his lips tilted mockingly, her fury mounted.

All the Bible lessons taught her by her mother evaporated.

The annoying thought she'd seen him before hovered on the fringes of her anger and sharpened her tone. "You—you!" The words wouldn't come. Her frustration and embarrassment demanded demonstration.

She slapped him.

2

"I'm sorry, so very sorry." The *prima danseuse's* voice conveyed contrition, and quite out of character with what Domitri Auberchon had previously observed.

Rubbing his stinging jaw, he glared, not trusting himself to speak.

"I don't know why I did that. Please forgive me. But you left me face down in the mud." Irregular grayish smudges marred her creamy cheeks and the tip of her nose.

He was momentarily consumed by the oddest sensation to produce his handkerchief and wipe away the dirt. "No less than what you asked for. I believe you told me to release you."

"I did, but I had no idea you would do so in so ungentlemanly a manner. I am truly sorry I slapped you, but you have some apologizing to do, as well."

It took everything within Domitri not to laugh at Olar's pretty powder puff.

And what else could she be considered, for certainly there was very little of substance contained inside that lovely head covered in glorious chestnut curls.

"If anything, you should thank me for rescuing you from that obnoxious man."

"I was handling him well enough on my own."

"Is that why you grabbed my hand and ran when