

CHAPTER 9

Polina

Moscow, 1876

Perfecting my technique is theoretically impossible in my papa's coat, and to most I must look like I suffer from Saint Vitus' dance because there is much movement but little grace and my tutu is well hidden. His hefty soldier's boots seriously impair my best turnout. One foot is always colder than the other because of the hole in one sole, but this is all that remains of the only person who found me worthy. Worthy of having a career in ballet. Worthy of his love.

I love to feel my papa close, even though his body lies shattered and cold in a military cemetery, with only a wooden cross to mark his sacrifice. I've whittled "You will always keep me warm, Papa" on the cross, and it distinguishes his place of rest from the thousands of other unmarked crosses.

I can strengthen my core and practice balance and deportment out here in the open with no judging eyes, and all the while, Coupé can do her business and stretch her little legs.

I can also mark the complex steps in my mind so I can do them automatically while trying to *feel* something, which Madame claims is more important than technique. Of all the demanding balletic requirements, *feeling* is surely the hardest?

My Coupé has a sixth sense. She knows our love is forbidden. Were Coupé discovered we'd hear the piercing screams of the entitled. They who'd never met a rat or a mouse of any color in their homes or along the fancy cobbled streets on which they live.

The fortunate part is, I don't count in the eyes of my fellow students. I am not worth observing; thus, my secret friendship is safely cloaked in invisibility by hiding in plain sight.

"Coupé, go, do your business and no mischief. I have but eleven minutes to practice my adage." I lovingly place my white rat down, and while she acclimates herself, I am three bars and eight steps into the music playing in my head. I concentrate on the repetition of the steps so I can clear the path for perfection to make an appearance whilst under Madame's watchful eye.

Or at least, for once, spare me the humiliation of her cane.

Every so often an irregular "clink" disrupts my focus. Metal on muted metal. Annoyed, I follow the sound and see little Coupé on her way to investigate a tin cup set on the pavement.

She ducks, fortunately, before she's pelted with a coin. I try to concentrate: "*Chassé, pas de chat, tendu ...*" but I imagine Coupé being harmed and leave my makeshift barre to search for her.

"You're a tame little fellow," says a timber-rich voice holding a smile. I glance up from the tin cup and around the corner, to where a bearded man sits on the pavement. His body is turned sideways, and he holds Coupé in both hands, an inch from his face.

The little minx has a look of bliss in her pink eyes.

He must feel me watching because he twists to face me, still smiling. I first check out his smiling mouth and see straight teeth between the hairy upper and lower lips. The condition of those teeth alludes to someone who cares what he looks like, although the bushy beard contradicts that notion. And there he sits. One leg gone. Missing. His pant leg neatly folded and pinned so a hand's length of "at trousers hangs from one hip.

I trudge to him through the snow in Papa's boots and put my hands out to retrieve Coupé. "I'm so sorry ..." I begin, but when he stares up at me, his green eyes arrest me with their intensity.

So powerful is his gaze, I feel my body reel away from it and yet ... and yet, I can't break eye contact.

But more importantly, I don't want to.

A force like a horizontal lightning bolt emits from the man's eyes. His life force seeks out my heart, finds it, and earths itself there. Then the glow of familiarity and deep love, planted by that bolt, seeps from my heart into my soul.

I force my mouth open to gulp in some icy air and restore my good sense. He is, after all, a beggar and I, a ballet dancer.

There must be a mistake.

I sense my face, conditioned to express feelings, shows him my dilemma. But when he puts my Coupé down and turns his torso away from me, my sensation is one of barren loss.

I have a desperate urge to pull his head around with both my hands so his green eyes will hold mine again. Then, perhaps, the sense of belonging will return.

Although his back is to me, the invisible cord between us refuses to stop its magic sizzling, nor will it allow me to move away.

Not that I want to.

I have the feeling I've known him for as long as time itself.

I pick up Coupé and hold her to me, then try to finish my apology, though my voice shakes. "Coupé doesn't usually trust strangers. I'm sorry she disturbed you," I say loudly, to his back.

"Disturbed?" He turns back and smiles again, this time avoiding my eyes. "She's delightful," he says, leaning as far as he can from his sitting position to scratch my pet behind her ears again and make her swoon.

We watch her bliss when he says, "You are the first girl I've ever seen with a white rat as a pet."

Avoiding my face, he deliberately looks from my bulky coat to the gigantic boots. "Or perhaps you're a soldier whose voice has not yet broken, back from a skirmish at the front." His lips twitch, teasing me, then spreading into a smile. His perfect teeth demand my attention.

He points with an index finger peeking through his worn glove, right at his heart. "I am Mikhail."

I let Coupé snuggle into my neck and feel myself aligning my feet into a balletic fifth position, placing my left arm in first position and my right hand over my heart, fingers slightly apart and curled, as if I am holding a delicate rose by its petals.

I wonder, #eetingly, why I want so much to impress this beggar with my balletic interpretation of love. “I am Polina.” I feel desperately silly when I remember the beautiful movements I’ve created just for him are lost under Papa’s coat.

But that has not deterred him. He stares up at me from the ground, then closes his eyes like a camera’s aperture capturing a moment.

Ballet photographers are always evident, and their instruments intrigue me, but his emerald eyes fascinate me more, and I teeter as if on a tightrope, waiting for him to open his eyes.

He lifts them slowly, as if he’s dreading something, like someone might no longer be there ... but she is. He smiles the biggest smile I’ve ever seen. His eyes twinkle from green to gray to sage and back to emerald, and my heart lurches, pumping hot blood through my veins at a radical speed.

To cover this odd effect the depth of his eyes and his dazzling, albeit furry, smile have on me, I say possessively, “This is my spot,” then frown at my own rudeness. I blame it on this odd reaction he has ignited in my usually trained, disciplined body.

“Well, may I share it?” he asks simply.

His sincerity makes me smile. “Of course. You’re here and I’m”—I move quickly back to the stone wall—“over here.”

A safe distance away and yet I still feel the cord that connects us, and I have the urge to never stop smiling ... and suddenly I realize. Smiling is something I seldom do.