

*the  
bee  
and the  
orange  
tree*

M E L I S S A   A S H L E Y

## Prologue

---

# Nicola

*30 March 1699*

The fortune teller Madame Lagasse rented rooms in the attic of a three-storey wattle and daub house: pigeons in the eaves, buckled limewashed walls and exposed beams that threatened injury from every angle.

‘My skin prickles,’ whispered Nicola Tiquet.

‘Be calm,’ advised her companion, Mathe de Senonville. ‘You will enjoy it.’ Mathe’s terrier, Puck, was busy at her feet, sniffing the floorboards. Gathering him up, she deposited the dog into Nicola’s arms. ‘Here, give him a little stroke.’

Warily, she accepted the attention of Mathe’s excitable pet, smiling despite herself as he fussily arranged himself on her lap and leapt up to lick her neck.

The waiting room window offered Nicola a view of the narrow laneway below, where a hodgepodge market of quacks was selling all manner of miracle cures: unguents that dissolved wrinkles, compresses for leprosy and distemper, tinctures to sharpen wits, bewitchments to wither the virility of a former lover. At the shout of a police lieutenant, the begging orphans, oiled confidence men and bartering tarts ran

hither and thither like chickens alert to a fox in their coop, dispersing in a flurry of dropped wares and curses.

When her dear friend had collected her that morning, Nicola had been determined to enjoy the diversion, absorbing the swirling street life of her Saint-Germain neighbourhood. But as the open-topped carriage had approached Île de la Cité, she had clutched Mathe's arm in discomfort. Crossing the Seine's bridges – not once but twice – she tightened her grip. Soon, the broad avenues and carved stone facades were well behind them. Arriving at their destination, she had stepped gingerly behind Mathe down the coach's tiny stairs, reluctantly setting her foot on this crowded, smelly laneway in the Marais.

They were not the only customers. The door of the waiting room opened and a gargantuan fellow, stooping low to avoid a ceiling joist, ducked inside. He held the hand of a young boy dressed in a blue silk jacket and breeches, the same shade of blue worn by a clerk in the civil courts. The shade of blue Claude wore.

Nicola returned Puck to Mathe and closed her eyes, breathing as deeply as her tight stays allowed, determined not to look at the boy. She was too weary for such thoughts. Her bottle of sleeping draught empty, she had spent a long night changing positions beneath the heavy covers of her canopied bed. She dug into her pocketbook and felt for her handkerchief, winding the fabric around her fingers. The tip of her thumb throbbed purple, and she pulled at the lacy edges, making a tear.

'Remember what I told you,' Mathe instructed. She was not to look the soothsayer in the eye; she was not to fidget with her clothing, nor handle the objects on the consulting table. And, most importantly, any questions she was asked must be answered truthfully. 'She will know if you lie.'

'Then she shouldn't need my answers at all,' protested Nicola.

'Come now, my dear,' said Mathe. 'Don't be afraid. Madame shall divine a bright future for you. She's most famous for it.'

Nicola's name was called out. She followed a serving boy into an antechamber, furnished with a round table, two cane chairs and a smoky fire. Taking a seat opposite the aged fortune teller, who was bundled inside layers of dark grey linen and wool, a knitted wrap covering her hair, Nicola recalled her friend's warning. She settled her gaze upon a zodiacal chart hanging on the wall beside the fireplace. A gnarled cross, perhaps composed of driftwood, was mounted above the mantelpiece. She stifled a shudder, wishing for the elegantly framed mirror in her private chamber, which commanded order to the room; a certain comfort.

Madame Lagasse demanded Nicola's hand and she laid it open for inspection. The fortune teller grunted, pulling Nicola's palm toward her purplish nose. She was half-blind. Disconcerted, for the examination seemed to take a long time, Nicola counted the oranges in a bowl by the window. Six.

Under the woman's scrutiny, Nicola's hand felt exceedingly warm. She supposed Madame was making deductions about her home life, judging her by the softness of her skin. Anyone could tell that Nicola barely lifted a finger to do anything aside from study the fashions in *le Mercure galant* and wave a frustrated fist at her husband, or reprimand her son about his German lessons. She felt a blush rise at the thought.

'In two months,' announced Madame Lagasse, 'your great trouble will be over, your enemies vanquished.'

Nicola started, snatching back her hand. The temperature in the chamber seemed to have dropped several degrees. She felt disquieted, noticing, embroidered into the cuffs of the fortune teller's shirtsleeves, crescent moons and a death's scythe. The cross above the struggling fire, upon closer scrutiny, was square, some pagan perversion. She felt a shiver curl down her spine, as if inside the dimpled skins of the oranges were the foetuses of malformed urchins, the shrivelled bodies of bats and toads, the familiars of a wizard or witch.

Nicola touched the bruise at her ribs. It had healed under the physician's compress, and she was able to bend and sit without pain. In her discomfort, she pressed her fingers into the sore spot again and again, making herself wince while she waited for Madame Lagasse to elaborate upon her mysterious prediction.

'I have a husband,' began Nicola, unthinking. 'I don't see how my troubles could possibly be over while he lives.'

'Why do you say that?' asked Madame Lagasse.

Nicola's tongue had been loosened, as if she had taken too much wine. 'He's mean-hearted. Jealous. He keeps me to my rooms.'

It was happening more frequently. Claude visiting her chamber, sullen and sarcastic. Then when he left, the sound of the key turning in the door. So many evenings spent alone and in silence, not even a servant to speak to.

'I see,' said Madame Lagasse, drawing her brows together. 'Your palm records an unusual twist. Let me cast my tarot.'

'Please,' said Nicola.

Madame opened the drawstrings of a red velvet sack. She removed a deck of painted cards and began to shuffle them. Spreading the cards over the table, she instructed Nicola to select four. A hangman, a fool, a maiden, death.

Madame Lagasse's large brown eyes regarded Nicola. The old woman cleared her throat with a brisk cough. 'Not more than two months from this day's date,' she declared, 'your life will be changed. Forever.'

Nicola's pulse began to quicken. 'What do you mean?'

'Remember our Lord,' intoned the fortune teller. Efficiently, her face masked as if she were dealing a second hand to a common gambler, she gathered up the hideous cards. 'He protects his flock beyond the last moment of breath.'

'You mean that I'm cursed,' Nicola said, breathless. She wiped her

hands on her skirt – they were grimy and sweaty – and stood, stepping hurriedly towards the door.

‘If you don’t wish to pay, it’s your affair,’ Madame Lagasse called out behind her. ‘Consider the reading my Christian duty. Forget not your God.’ She pulled the cord on the sack tight.

Nicola realised she had neglected the fee. She dug into her purse and returned to lay several sous on the table. Taken with an ill foreboding, she patted her hot cheeks as she left the tiny chamber.

In the waiting room, she grasped Mathe by the elbow. ‘We’re leaving.’

‘What about my reading?’ asked Mathe. Puck, clutched to her chest, let out an excited, protesting bark.

‘Now,’ insisted Nicola. The fortune teller had shattered her peace of mind into a thousand sharp and tiny shards. How far she had fallen, allowing herself to be subjected to such an undignified torture.

