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Opening extract from

Catherine Certitude

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Illustrated by

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Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

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Catherine Certitude

Patrick Modiano



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Andersen Press • London

First UK edition published in 2015 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in 1988 in France
by Éditions Gallimard
First English translation published in 2001 in the United States of America
by David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 302 4

Printed and bound in Italy by Grafiche AZ, Verona, Italy



It's snowing here in New York, and I'm looking out of the window of my 59th Street apartment at the building across the way where I run a dance school. Behind the large glass panes, the students in leotards have stopped their pointe work and entrechats practice. As a change of pace, my daughter, who works as my assistant, is showing them a jazz step.

I'll join them in a few minutes.

Among the students is a little girl who wears glasses. She set them down on a chair before the lesson started, the way I used to when I was her age and taking lessons with Madame Dismailova. You don't wear glasses when you dance. I remember that when I was with Madame Dismailova, I would practise not wearing my glasses during the day. The shapes of people and things lost their sharpness and everything was blurry. Even sounds became muffled. Without my glasses, the world lost its roughness and became as soft and downy as the big pillow I used to lean my cheek against before going to sleep.

"What are you daydreaming about, Catherine?" my father would ask me. "You should put your glasses on."

I did as he said, and everything changed back to its everyday sharpness and precision. When I wore my glasses I saw the world as it was. I couldn't dream any more.

Here in New York, I belonged to a ballet company for a



few years, then taught dance lessons with my mother. When she retired, I continued without her. And now I work with my daughter. My father should retire, too, but can't bring himself to. Actually, what would he be retiring from? I never knew exactly what kind of work Papa did. He and Mama live in a small Greenwich Village apartment. We're nobody special; just New Yorkers, like so many others. Only one thing in my life is out of the ordinary: before we came to America, I spent my childhood in Paris, in a neighbourhood off the 10th *arrondissement*. That was almost thirty years ago.

We lived above a kind of shop on Hauteville Street, with a steel shutter that Papa rolled down every evening at seven.

The place looked like the luggage room of a country railway station. There were always crates and packages piled on top of one another. There was a scale, too, with an enormous platform at floor level that must have been designed for heavy loads, because the dial went up to six hundred pounds.

I never saw anything on the scale's platform. Except for Papa. At those rare moments when his partner, Mister



Casterade, was out, Papa would stand silent and still in the centre of the platform, with his hands in his pockets and his head bowed. He would thoughtfully gaze at the dial; I remember it read one hundred and seventy pounds.

Sometimes Papa would say, "Come here, Catherine," and I would join him on the scale. We would stand there, the two of us, Papa's hand on my shoulders, without moving. We looked as if we were posing for a photograph. I took off my glasses, and Papa took off his. Everything around us became soft and fuzzy. Time stopped. We felt fine.

One day Mister Casterade caught us standing on the scale.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

The spell was broken. Papa and I put our glasses back on.

"We're weighing ourselves, can't you see?" Papa said.

Without bothering to reply, Casterade trotted briskly to the office at the back of the shop. Behind a glass partition, two big walnut desks with swivel chairs faced each other: Papa's and Mister Casterade's.

Mister Casterade started working with Papa after Mama left. She's American. When she was twenty, Mama belonged to a dance troupe that came to Paris on tour. She met my father, they got married, and Mama stayed on in Paris, dancing in music halls: the Empire, the Tabarin, the Alhambra . . . I saved all the programmes. But she was homesick. After a few years, she decided to go back to America. Papa promised her we would join her there, as soon as he wrapped up his "business affairs." Or at least that was the explanation he gave me. Later on, I understood that there were other reasons for Mama's departure.

Every week, Papa and I would each get a letter from America, in envelopes bordered with little red and blue stripes.

Mama's letter always ended with: *"Catherine, all my hugs and kisses. I'm always thinking of you. Mama."*

Sometimes Mama made spelling mistakes.

When Papa talked to me about his partner Raymond Casterade, he always called him "The Pill."

"Catherine, honey, I can't pick you up at school this afternoon. I have to work all evening with 'The Pill.' "

Mister Casterade had brown hair, dark eyes, and a very long chest. In fact, his chest was so long and stiff, you couldn't see his legs moving, so he seemed to be gliding along on roller skates, or even ice skates.

Later, I learned that Papa had originally hired Mister Casterade as his secretary. He wanted someone who was good at spelling, and when he was young, Mister Casterade had got a degree in literature. Later, "The Pill" became his partner.

Mister Casterade would lecture people at the drop of a hat.

He also liked to announce catastrophes. In the morning, he would sit down at his desk and slowly open the newspaper. Papa would be sitting across from at him his desk, with his glasses off. Mister Casterade would report on the day's crimes and disasters.

"Georges, you aren't listening," Mister Casterade would scold. "You're woolgathering. You're afraid to see the world as it is. You should put your glasses on."

"Must I?" asked Papa.

"The Pill" had another odd habit, that of dictating letters. He would do this in a loud voice with his chest puffed out. How many times did I see Papa typing business letters while Mister Casterade dictated, without daring to tell him — out of politeness — that the letters served no purpose? Mister Casterade would spell some words out and even supply punctuation marks.

As soon as his partner turned his back, Papa would rip up the letters.