



The Emigré

by JOAN BRADY

Chapter One

PART I

The First Week in September

Reality? What's so good about it? Where's the structure in it? Nobody wants it. Nobody buys it. Myth is better. I love myth. Make-believe and fairy tale too: impossible quests, fantastic riches, the devil raised from hell, dragons and magical creatures. But who would have thought this advertisement in the Times--oh, how discreet it is--could be the start of such a story?

SVIATOSLAV RICHTER

Britten

Nikolas Strakhan (conductor)

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Harry let out a whoop of glee when he saw it and reached for the telephone. The upshot was that on the morning of the concert we took the train from Brighton to London and arrived at Nikolas Strakhan's house in Swiss Cottage just before noon. As Harry raised his hand to the knocker, the door flew open.

A huge man stood there. 'What have you got on your face?' he demanded. No greeting.

Harry touched his beard tentatively. 'You don't like it?'

The house was Georgian, ivy-covered, as huge for a house as the man was for a man; it opened onto the street, and we stood outside, awkward on the footpath. The man cocked his head this way, then that. 'I used to think of you as my handsome nephew.'

'It's really that bad?'

'You must shave it off at once.' He patted Harry's cheek. 'Upstairs. To your left. I'll entertain Eve while you're busy.'

'Now you just wait--' Harry began.

'This isn't Eve?' The massive face scanned me. 'Who is she then? You've switched girlfriends in the last week? Without telling me? I like this one.'

'Of course it's Eve. Why do you say these things? Who else could it be?'

'Well, introduce us.'

'Eve Holland, this is Nikolas Strakhan.'

I took the hand he offered me. 'You're right about the beard, aren't you?' I said, delighted at the thought. 'It makes him look-- I'm not sure. What do you think? What is wrong with it?'

'No, no, Harry,' Nikolas said. 'Not that way. All that sea air is addling your brain. What do you want to live in Brighton for anyway? I've already told you: up the stairs and to your left. Eve, you come with me.'

'Nikolas, I'm not about to--' Harry began again.

'Go on. Go on. You can't wear a thing like that to lunch. Think of the children.'

'Goddamn you, Nikolas,' said Harry, who (like his father) never, never swears. 'You leave me and my beard alone.'

Nikolas shrugged and turned into the marble-tiled entrance hall. 'Mickie went all the way to Harrods this morning to get us something edible,' he said, 'but the English are constitutionally incapable of understanding food. Even at Harrods you can't get a raw truffle to save your skin, and preserved ones have no taste at all. Why would they do something like that? Nobody can beat a good stilton, though, not the French themselves. Don't you agree, Eve? Lunch is in the garden at the back. Follow me.'

He was fat--fifty years old, give or take a year or so. His trousers rounded up over a heart-shaped bottom that wobbled as he walked ahead of us. There was no carpet in the vast living room; the floor was a mosaic of woods, a little cold, but so richly textured that the coldness didn't seem to matter much. Against one wall hung a mobile. Harry told me

later that it was an original Calder; the size of the thing alone oozed money. No carpet. No pictures. Next came a studio: two grand pianos and wall of mirrors. Then a solarium with a bank of French windows that led onto a raw wood porch, where a cedar of Lebanon rose up through the boards and arched over a table partially laid for the lunch to come.

September is such a variable month. The day was sunny, warm, languid, too hot for the time of year, but perfect for a picnic in the shade of a cedar of Lebanon.

‘Sit down,’ Nikolas said, seating himself in a large wooden chair with a plush cushion on it. The other chairs were smaller. They had no cushions. ‘Sit. Sit. Does your enchanting Eve drink wine? I wouldn’t ask if she were French, but since she’s American ...’ He let his sentence trail off, addressing it to Harry but looking at me. His eyes were wide-set; his face lit up here, then there, appraisal, disdain, surprise--what that a shade of contempt? was it a threat?--a quick-change artist who sometimes wears all his costumes at once.

The hand Harry ran over his beard was protective. Yet I knew he’d shave it off as soon as we got back to the safety of Brighton; I couldn’t repress a smile. ‘She doesn’t usually drink at lunch,’ he said, a little sheepish, noting the smile, knowing its meaning. ‘You’ll have to ask her yourself.’

‘What intimacies you allow me, Harry. You’d better be careful. I’ve already taken quite a fancy to this girl. I might press my advantage. Will you drink wine this noon, Eve?’

‘I’d love a glass, if it’s on offer,’ I said.

'I'm offering it.'

I bowed a mock bow. 'Then I'd love it.'

He poured out wine into water glasses, better wine than I was used to--far better--but it was the water glasses that caught my eye. Could they be a flaw in the exquisite taste of the household? Was it possible? I doubted it--and began to feel uneasy about the wine glasses Harry and I had bought only the day before.

And there was a simplicity of line to Mickie, who appeared just about then, that seemed of a piece with the water glasses. Harry had told me a little about her: half-French, half-American, English-educated, about my age--twenty-three--something like a quarter of a century younger than Nikolas. She bustled onto the patio with a platter of sliced tomatoes covered in herbs and a basket of bread. She wasn't good-looking; there was a heaviness about the jaw and her features were too irregular. But she brought to mind the homely strengths of a bygone age, starched aprons and broth on the back burner. Nothing saccharine, though: a smart slap on the backside if you didn't wash behind your ears. She had dark hair, grey-streaked despite her youth.

I turned in my chair and smiled up at her. Harry rose and held out his arms. And Nikolas? Nikolas ignored her. He turned his back on her and said to me in a loud voice, 'I've been wanting to ask you, Eve: do you bleach your hair?'

'Oh, dear, is it so obvious? You don't think it's as bad as Harry's beard, do you? My Aunt Peggy hates it. She says--'

‘Shut up, Nikolas,’ Mickie said, swinging out of Harry’s embrace. ‘I’m damned if I’ll take the grey out of my hair just to satisfy some paedophile whim of yours.’ Her accent was definitely English, but it had other sounds in it too. I wasn’t sure just what. I figured she and Nikolas spoke French when they were alone. ‘Pay no attention to him, Eve. It’s me he’s getting at.’

Nikolas laughed and patted her rear.

I can’t remember what we talked about over the tomatoes, although I do remember that the tomatoes were as good as the wine--and when it comes to food I know what I’m talking about--as good as the ones my uncle and aunt grow in their back yard in California. The new wine glasses would have to go. There is something--I could see it now--well, effete, about wine glasses, something over-complicated, unnecessary.

While Nikolas uncorked a second bottle, Mickie brought in a rack of lamb and a platter of brilliant green broccoli. She carved the meat, pink slices, a fine blackened glaze on the outside. At the end of the table, the salad waited its turn, red-tinged leaves glistening in the sun.

‘What’s on the program tonight, Nikolas?’ Harry said, taking the plate Mickie handed him.

There was a moment’s silence--odd, I thought--then Nikolas shifted his vast body to face away from Harry. ‘Music,’ he said.

'I got that much from the ad in the Times.' Amusement twitched at the corners of Harry's mouth.

'Did you indeed.'

'I like Britten--but not very much. Is it all Britten?'

The vast body turned back. 'No.' Mickie handed him a plate. He waved his hand. 'Nothing for me, Mickie. The meat's too fat.'

'Hey, come on, tell me,' Harry persisted. 'What other music are you conducting?'

'Harry, I spend my days and nights at this. I'd like to be the one to choose whether we talk about it or not. Surely you can indulge me today. Tell me about politics. I don't understand politics.'

Harry took this slap in the face with an adman's roll--he writes advertising copy for a living--and laughed. Besides, he loves political talk. All his Madison Avenue gloss slides magically left when it comes to politics; he believes in the common weal and the rights of the down-trodden. 'What is there to say? Every time that orange-haired movie actor appears on the box I squirm for my country.'

'Movie actor? What movie actor?'

'Don't be absurd,' Harry said sharply.

He told me later that he was never absolutely certain Nikolas was lying when he said things like this. Why pretend not to know what everybody knows? The year was 1984. Ronald Reagan was running for President of the United States for a second term. Of course, explanations of the obvious do make an idiot of the explainer, and Nikolas's face glowed with anticipation.

'Is he nervous?' I whispered to Mickie.

'Nikolas? Nervous? Why?'

'Richter's a very famous pianist, isn't he? Even I've heard of him, and I've never heard of anybody.'

Mickie shrugged. 'You know Nikolas.'

'Do I? Is he so easy to know?'

'It depends on what you want.'

I wasn't sure how to answer this, so I said, 'Do people ever get used to appearing on stage?'

'Nikolas hasn't conducted in public before. What's Harry been telling you?'

'I just assumed--' I began weakly, then went on in a rush. 'He must be nervous. There's hardly any fat on this lamb. It's perfect--so simple. I don't know how you did it, and the broccoli-- He can't mean he doesn't like the look of the meat.'

She glanced at him (not, I thought, a particularly friendly glance). 'Last week he wouldn't have anything else in the house.'

'Why won't he eat it today?'

'Oh, he'll eat all right.' She gave a short laugh. 'Just wait. Won't you have some more bread? More bread, Harry?'

'... corrupt, foolish, vacuous,' Harry was saying. He took another chunk of bread, bit into it blindly and continued to rant while he chewed. 'Reagan's ill-educated, vain, preening. He's a Fascist of--'

'Why do you concern yourself with such a person?' Nikolas interrupted. 'Why not put him out of mind?'

'Not even you can be this irresponsible.'

'If I thought the way you talk, I'd have to act, and I'm not prepared to act. As long as I don't think about it, I can comfortably carry on doing music.'

'Nikolas, the guy's already slashed the arts budgets. So has Thatcher, for that matter. Suppose-- You aren't going to pretend you haven't heard of Thatcher, are you?'

Margaret Thatcher had been Prime Minister for five years, but Nikolas looked blank.
'What's he do?'

'She's a woman, Nikolas.'

'No! Another American? Why are you-- That looks good.' Nicholas peered down at Harry's plate. 'Is it good? Now that I see it up close, it looks almost French. English meat is too fat. Can I change my mind, Mickie?'

Mickie gave me a wry smile, heaped meat and broccoli on a plate and put it down in front of Nikolas, who attacked it as though he hadn't had a decent meal in weeks.

We drank two more bottles of wine at that sunny table and talked about people in Harry's family, which was large and diverse, and about famous musicians I know I should have heard of. Nikolas's two small daughters came out with their nanny, kissed Harry dutifully, shook my hand, disappeared for a trip to the park. Nobody said anything more about the concert to come. Not a word. But I was becoming distinctly uncomfortable; from time to time Nikolas looked at me much as he'd looked at his lamb before he'd swallowed it down in that single gulp. Nobody had ever looked at me quite so hungrily before, and I didn't like it. I leaned my head on Harry's shoulder. I reached out and took his hand. God knows what he thought I had in mind. My contribution to bedroom negotiations was as half-hearted as his own.

By four o'clock the cedar tree no longer shaded the table, and the air was too hot to be comfortable. Nikolas left us to rest. Harry and I staggered up the stairs after Mickie,

who showed us where we were to sleep that night. We flopped on the bed and fell into a drunken torpor.