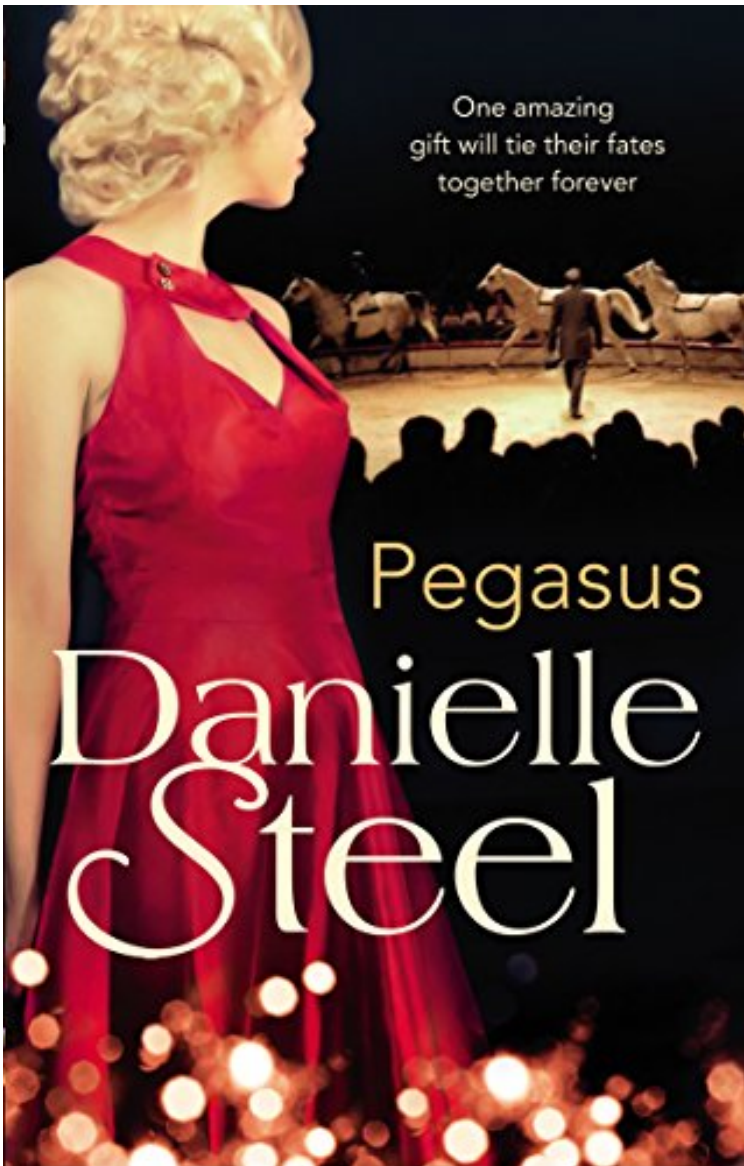


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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOne life-changing war. A love story that would echo across the decadesOn the cusp of the Second World War in Europe, Nicolas and Alex are two widowed men raising their children alone. They lead contented, peaceful lives, until a long-buried secret about Nicolass ancestry threatens his familys safetyTo survive, they must flee to America. The only treasures Nicolas and his sons can take are eight purebred horses, two of them dazzling Lipizzaners gifts from Alex. These magnificent creatures are their ticket to a new life, securing Nicolas a job with the famous Ringling Brothers Circus. There, he and the white stallion, Pegasus, become the centrepiece of the show, and a graceful young high-wire walker soon steals his heart.But as the years of war take their toll, Nicolas struggles to adapt to their new life while Alex

and his daughter face escalating danger in Europe. When tragedy strikes on both sides of the ocean, what will become of each family when their happiness rests in the hands of fate? A beautiful story of fate, love and loss, tied together by two families who were never meant to stay apart and the powerful bond that will link them forever, from the incomparable storyteller Danielle Steel

Chapter 1 It was already nightfall when the stable boys heard the horses approaching. Their hooves sounded thunderous like a distant drumbeat, long before the uninitiated would have known what it was. The riders were returning from the hunt, and minutes later the boys could hear the voices calling out, the laughter, the horses snorting as they brought in their riders. When they entered the courtyard of Schloss Altenberg and approached the stables, it was obvious they were in high spirits and it had been a good hunt. One of the earliest arrivals said the hounds had gotten the fox, which they expected, as the horses pranced around, still excited from the exhilarating day. Riders and mounts alike had enjoyed the cold October weather, and the men in pinks, their scarlet riding jackets, with white jodhpurs and tall black boots, looked like a portrait as they dismounted and handed the reins of their horses to the stable boys, who helped several women dismount too. A number of them were riding sidesaddle, which looked very elegant, but was no mean feat on a hunt. The group that had gone out that day had been riding together for all the years they had known one another and were old enough to hunt. For all of them, horses were their passion, and riding their favorite sport. Alex von Hemmerle was known to be one of the finest riders in the county, and had been breeding extraordinary horses since he was barely more than a boy. Everything in his life was born of tradition, which was true for all of them. There were no newcomers or surprises here. The same families had inhabited the area for centuries, visiting each other, following long-established rituals and traditions, intermarrying, running their estates, and cherishing their land. Alex had grown up in Schloss Altenberg, as generations of his ancestors had, since the fourteenth century. He held a ball there at Christmas, as all his forebears had done. It was the most glamorous event in the county, and everyone looked forward to it every year. His daughter Marianne had been his hostess for the first time the year before, when she turned sixteen. Now seventeen, Marianne had the same striking ethereal beauty her mother had had, with finely chiseled features. She was tall like Alex, with almost translucent porcelain skin, her mother's nearly white blond hair, and her father's electric blue eyes. She was one of the most beautiful young women in the region and as famous a rider as he was. He had put her on horseback before she could walk, and she went on every hunt, so she had been furious not to go with him that day, but she had a bad cold and a fever, and he had insisted she stay home. She was sturdier than she looked, despite her delicate beauty, unlike her mother, who had been far more fragile, and had died from blood loss and a severe infection the day after Marianne was born. It was not unusual for women to die in childbirth, but losing her had marked Alex severely. There had never been an important woman for him since. And although he had discreet dalliances in the county occasionally, his daughter was the only woman he truly loved now, and he had had no desire to remarry since his wife Annaliese's death, and knew he never would. They had been distant cousins and childhood sweethearts, although he was several years older. He had never expected to find himself widowed at thirty, but in the seventeen years since he'd lost her, his life with his daughter and his friends was all he wanted, and he always warned the women he saw quietly not to expect anything permanent from him. Running his vast estate kept him busy, and breeding the Lipizzaner horses he was so proud of filled his life nearly as much as his daughter, and she shared his passion for them. She loved admiring the new foals and watching her father train them. His snow-white Lipizzaners were said to be the finest, and the easiest to train, and his bloodlines the purest. He was rigorous about which stallions he used for breeding, and which mares he chose to reproduce, and he had taught Marianne all about them since she was a little girl. She had been to the Spanish Riding School in Vienna with her father often, and thought their rigorous precision exercises looked like ballet, as she watched the splendid white horses dance and go through their incredibly intricate paces. She held her breath as she watched them prance on their hind legs in the capriole or courbette or leap into the air in the croupade, with all four legs tucked under their bodies. It thrilled her every time she saw it, just as it did Alex. And he had trained some of his horses in these exercises as well. Marianne wished that she could become a rider at the school, and she was capable enough to do it, but the Spanish Riding School did not accept women, and her father said they never would. So she was content to see her father's horses perform at home or in Vienna and help him train them before they left. Once in a great while, he allowed her to ride them, but very seldom. But he did allow her to ride any of the Arabian horses he kept in his stables and bred as well. Her riding skill was instinctive, and she had grown up with some of the finest horses in Germany, and learned everything her father taught her. Horses were in her blood just as they were in his. Good hunt today, Alex commented, looking happy and relaxed as he and his

good friend Nicolas von Bingen threaded their way through the other riders, who were chatting animatedly in the courtyard. They were in no hurry, even after the long ride. It had grown bitter cold as night fell, and the ground had been hard, but nothing stopped them, since all of them had good mounts, though perhaps not quite as fine as their hosts. Nicolas had been riding a new Arabian stallion that Alex had lent him and had found him an excellent ride. I might like to buy him from you, Nicolas said, and Alex laughed. Hes not for sale. Besides, I promised him to Marianne, after I train him for a while. Hes still a bit rough. He suits me that way, Nicolas said, smiling at his boyhood friend. Besides, hes too much horse for her. He liked his horses lively and a challenge to control. Dont tell her that! Alex said, smiling. Marianne would never have tolerated an insult like that, and her father wasnt sure that was true. She was a better rider than Nick, although Alex would never have dared say that to him. Nick was a little overly zealous with his horses at times, and Marianne had gentler, better hands. He had taught her himself, with exceedingly good results. Where was she today, by the way? I dont think Ive ever seen her miss a hunt, Nick commented, surprised that she hadnt come along. She was a familiar sight at their hunts, and always welcome with her fathers friends. Shes sick. I nearly had to tie her to her bed to keep her home. Youre quite right, she never misses a hunt, Alex said with a worried look. Nothing serious, I hope. Nicks eyes were instantly concerned. She has a bad cold and a fever. The doctor came around last night. I was afraid it was going to her lungs. He ordered her to stay at home. I knew my word wouldnt suffice, and I didnt think his would impress her either, but I think she was feeling worse than she wanted to admit. She was asleep when I left this morning, which is very unlike her. Should you have the doctor back tonight? Nick had had his own bad experiences with influenza, and had lost his wife and four-year-old daughter to it five years before, after an epidemic in the county and a particularly hard winter. He had been devastated to lose them both, and like Alex, he was widowed now, in his case with two sons, Tobias and Lucas. Tobias had been ten when his mother and sister died and still remembered them both, and Lucas was only six now, and had been barely more than a baby when they died. Tobias was a quiet, gentle boy, who worshipped Marianne, who was two years older. And Lucas was a lively, mischievous child, full of fun, and happy wherever he was, particularly if it was on a horse. Tobias was far more like his much gentler mother, and Lucas had all the energy and fire of his father. Nick had gotten up to all kinds of misadventures when he was younger, and was still the talk of the county at times, when he started an affair with some woman, occasionally even married ones, or took a bet racing a horse at breakneck speeds. He was an extremely competent rider, though not of Alexs superlative skill. He had never had the patience to train a horse the way Alex did, although he was fascinated with Alexs Lipizzaners, and what he was able to do with them. Even before they left for the Spanish Riding School, Alex had already begun to train them in the intricate figures for which the beautiful white horses were famous. Do you have a minute? Alex asked him as they walked past the stables. The others slowly began to disperse and called out their goodnights when they got into their cars. Im in no rush to get home, Nicolas said, smiling casually, as the two men strolled toward the barn. They had been friends since their childhood, although Alex was four years older, and they had gone to boarding school in England together when they were young. Alex had been the better student, and Nick had had far more fun, which was still the case. Nicolas von Bingen enjoyed everything about his life. He was a good friend and a good father, and a kind person, although Alex knew he was a little too fun-loving and irresponsible at times. Widowhood had only dampened him a little, and for now he was not yet burdened with running his estate. His father was still alive and very much in control, which left Nick a considerable amount of time to play, unlike Alex, who had run his own estate and fortune since his early twenties, when his father died. In many ways, Nick still acted like a boy, while Alex had been very much a man for more than two decades. But they complemented each other and were more like brothers than friends. Nick followed Alex into the barn, and Alex led him to an immaculately kept stall where one of his finest Lipizzaner mares was nursing a foal she had given birth to only days before. The coal-black foal was standing unsteadily on its legs as the mare looked at them both with her big dark eyes. Nick knew that Lipizzaner foals were born dark brown or black, so he wasnt surprised by its color, as it stood in sharp contrast to its snow-white mother. He knew it would take five or six years for its coat to turn white, just as he knew it would be ten years old before it was fully trained. The foal would spend four years with Alex, and six at the school in Vienna. The training of the remarkable Lipizzaners happened over long, careful, diligent, and meticulous years. Hes a beauty, isnt he? Alex said proudly. One of the best Ive seen. He was sired by Pluto Petrawho Nick knew was Alexs finest stallion, whom he used only to breed and this little mare did very well. Im going to have fun training him. He looked as proud of the newborn horse as any father, and Nick smiled at him. Youre a wonder, Nick said affectionately, as the two men walked out of the barn together.

Alex would have asked Nick to join him for dinner, but he wanted to have dinner with Marianne in her room. Do you want to ride with me tomorrow to the north border? Alex asked him. I'm thinking of clearing some of my forests. I thought I'd take a look. I want to get an early start, and be back at noon. We can have lunch after our ride. I'd love to, Nick said regretfully, as he stopped at the Duesenberg he had left parked under a tree. He much preferred his Bugatti, but had decided to be more respectable when he came to join Alex for the hunt. I can't, though. I have to meet my father. There's something he wants to talk to me about. I can't for the life of me think what it is. I haven't done anything to annoy him in weeks. They both laughed at what he said. Nick enjoyed a close relationship with his father, although his father frequently scolded him over rumors he had heard, of Nick's womanizing, or his galloping around, or driving at insane speeds. Above all, Paul von Bingen was always trying to get Nick involved in the running of the estate. He assumed that that was what his father wanted to discuss with him the next day. It was a recurring theme. I think he wants me to take over managing the farms, which sounds like dreadful work to me. You'll have to do it one day.

You might as well start now, Alex said sensibly. They still had farmers on their land who had been indentured servants, and now rented their farms from him for pennies. But they were a necessary part of the system, and the traditions that had ruled them all for years. They weren't really part of the modern world, but living here in the countryside allowed them a tranquil life away from the cities. Germany had been troubled for years, since the chaos and poor economy after the Great War, and the Depression. The economy had improved under Hitler, but the country's problems weren't over yet. Hitler had tried to give Germans a sense of pride again, but his fervent speeches and rallies at fever pitch didn't appeal to Alex or Nick. Alex thought he was a troublemaker, and had a strong dislike for most of his ideas, and his annexing Austria in March was a disturbing sign of his ambitions. But whatever Hitler was doing seemed very remote to them here in their peaceful Bavarian countryside. Nothing could touch them here, and nothing ever changed. Their families had been in the area for centuries, and would be, doing the same things, in another two hundred years. They were insulated from the world. And both men were comfortable knowing that their children and great-grandchildren would still be here one day. Alex and Nick had been brought up to be noblemen, and very little else. They had been blessed with enormous fortunes, which they never discussed and rarely if ever thought about. They had tenant farmers and servants, and vast estates, which in turn would pass on to their children, in a totally protected life and world. Presentation de l'diteur One life-changing war. A love story that would echo across the decades On the cusp of the Second World War in Europe, Nicolas and Alex are two widowed men raising their children alone. They lead contented, peaceful lives, until a long-buried secret about Nicolass ancestry threatens his family's safety To survive, they must flee to America. The only treasures Nicolas and his sons can take are eight purebred horses, two of them dazzling Lipizzaners gifts from Alex. These magnificent creatures are their ticket to a new life, securing Nicolas a job with the famous Ringling Brothers Circus. There, he and the white stallion, Pegasus, become the centrepiece of the show, and a graceful young high-wire walker soon steals his heart. But as the years of war take their toll, Nicolas struggles to adapt to their new life while Alex and his daughter face escalating danger in Europe. When tragedy strikes on both sides of the ocean, what will become of each family when their happiness rests in the hands of fate? A beautiful story of fate, love and loss, tied together by two families who were never meant to stay apart and the powerful bond that will link them forever, from the incomparable storyteller Danielle Steel