

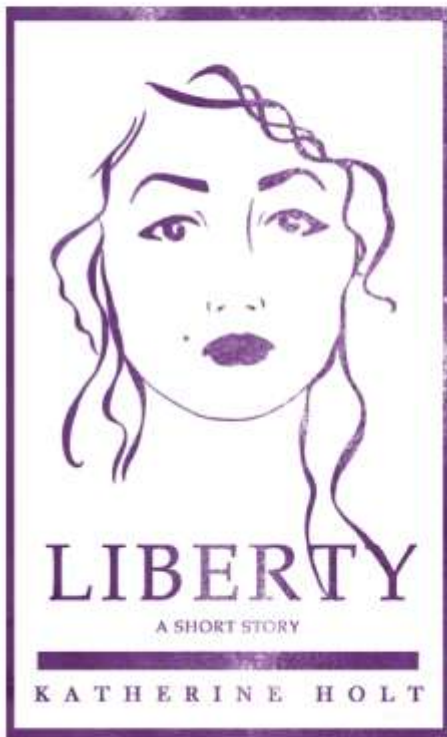
THE REVIEW

By
Katherine Holt

Book One in the Liberty Troupe Trilogy

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The Governess
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The Review
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Published: 10th April 2015

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With grateful thanks to Adam and Allison

CHAPTER 1

‘I’m not sure we’ve been introduced.’

‘You’d know if we had,’ I replied with a smile.

His head was up to look at me – not like people had to crane their necks to look at my statuesque friend Annie all the time, but because I was several feet above him on the staircase.

He quirked a brow back at me, and I studied him leisurely. Not too tall, probably, although it was hard to gauge from this height. He had a nice figure, and he looked neat and healthy. That was it. If anybody asked me what he was like, I’d reply “healthy”, without hesitation. I extended my hand to him. Terribly formal.

‘I’m Evelyn Thompson. You’re here to see my father.’

He bowed over my hand, but didn’t kiss it. Disappointing.

‘Michael Bailey. Although I’m sure you knew that.’

I inclined my head graciously and gave his hand a gentle tug.

‘Do come up, Mr Bailey.’

He climbed the steps to stand beside me, and he was quite the right height. I tilted my head to look up at him this time, and smiled again.

‘I trust you shan’t mind if I sit in with you? My father has requested it. He doesn’t...’
How to phrase it delicately? ‘He doesn’t see people all that often.’

‘The cloistered artist in the tower?’

‘Precisely, Mr Bailey. I’m so pleased we understand one another.’ I put my hand on his arm and gave it a little squeeze. Firm muscle. Very nice. ‘Shall we?’

I shook the folds from my dress – deliberately Grecian and artistic, being as it was one of Mother’s old costumes – and allowed him to support me up the stairs. If truth be told I was glad of it. Mother’s dresses were several inches too long and I had donned heels for the occasion. I could walk over rugs without issue, but stairs were something of a trial still.

He smelled nice too – clean. Perhaps he was a country boy. If so then maybe flirting had been the wrong tack to take. He probably preferred his ladies capable and docile. Well, time would tell.

His hip brushed mine as we sashayed (and it was a sashay) towards Father's studio. Aside from my study, it was my favourite room in the building. Like an old bric-a-brack shop, layers of rugs were covered with large props and pieces of scenery, and the walls were a mish-mash of drapery and shelving dotted with knickknacks. Even the thin film of dust which seemed to coat everything failed to dampen the jewelled vibrancy of the colours.

'This is Mr Bailey,' I called as we entered.

'Good afternoon,' a voice came back, from somewhere. Mr Bailey twisted his neck trying to find Father. After a moment he appeared, like a small, creased magician from smoke, rising from behind an easel covered with swags of dusty velvet. He's always reminded me of a badger, Father has. It's his tiny eyes, and the broad tracks of grey through his hair. The sort of docile old badger one might tame and befriend in a fairy story, rather than one of those who would make its living fighting dogs.

'Julius Thompson,' he said, wiping his hands on a paint-stained cloth before extending one to Mr Bailey. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'And I, you. I have already had the pleasure of meeting your daughter on the stairs.'

'Do please sit down, Mr Bailey,' I said, gesturing to the slightly threadbare ruby chaise longue. 'Would you care for a pot of tea before we begin?'

The pot was ready, on the wobbly side table. I had set the leaves to steep when I had heard his knock. He needn't know we didn't have any staff to do that for us.

Father nested himself into the deep leather wing-backed chair, which I had covered with a chenille throw to hide the large tear across the backrest. It almost ate him, poor dear. He was barely as large as me.

'Would you mind awfully if I drew while we talked, Mr Bailey?' he asked, his long fingers stretching already to the pencil and paper which were never far away.

'Not at all,' Mr Bailey replied, drawing a slim, paper-backed notebook and pencil from a pocket inside his jacket.

'I do so dislike to be idle,' Father continued. 'And of course, I am unaccustomed to being studied, as it were. I am usually the one doing the studying. All this has come as such a surprise, you know. And when they mentioned the articles in the newspaper, why, I didn't quite know what to make of it all. Still don't,' he added, his pencil making delicate sweeps across the paper.

'And how do you like your tea?' I asked as I dragged the table across to the chaise longue and seated myself both as close to Mr Bailey as I could and as delicately as I was able, which was passably well, in spite of my unaccustomed height. Our knees touched.

He glanced at Father before he turned to me to reply, shifting away from me as he did so. He avoided my eye and found himself looking down my bodice instead. It was difficult to hide my smile as I leaned forward slightly.

‘Erm, milky. No sugar.’

I brushed his leg with my hand as I leant to pour the tea. He shifted further away and the chaise longue creaked a little. Perhaps I was pushing it a bit too far.

‘And have you worked at *The Advocate* long, Mr Bailey?’ I asked. ‘Do you enjoy it?’

‘I must say,’ Father piped up, ‘You don’t look like a journalist. Aren’t they usually terribly pale? From being inside writing all day?’

‘I prefer to do my writing on the hoof, as it were. But we aren’t here to talk about me. Would you mind if we began, Mr Thompson?’

I rose and took Father his tea, ensuring that I bent over to place it beside him. I couldn’t see any effect it had on Mr Bailey, but the chaise longue creaked again and I felt hopeful.

He cleared his throat and tapped his pencil against a blank sheet in his notebook three times, and shifted away from me again as I returned to my seat beside him.

‘Firstly, could you tell me a little about the work you’re doing for the exhibition?’

Father’s pencil didn’t pause in its course over his paper as he considered his reply.

‘They’ve not decided on the name yet – of the exhibition – but they’re going down the Neo-classical route. I don’t know how familiar you are-’

‘My readers will of course be provided with a potted guide to the movement.’

‘Very good. But we are going with the Greek theme throughout. The troupe,’ - here Father gestured towards me- ‘will be performing some Grecian comedy or tragedy at the opening, and I am working along that theme.’

‘Very good,’ Mr Bailey said as he scribbled. ‘I will be asking the troupe about the play later, if that is agreeable, Miss Thompson?’

I nodded graciously and replied in a low and, I hoped, husky voice. ‘I can barely wait.’

Mr Bailey swallowed.

‘But your piece, Mr Thompson. Can you give me any clues about the inspiration or subject matter?’

There was a few moments’ pause again as Father considered his answer.

‘My muse is, as always, my wife, Liberty. She shall also be leading the troupe in their performance on the night.’

‘The Liberty Troupe?’ Mr Bailey asked with a sly smile.

I almost poked him in the ribs. One more comment like that and I would.

‘Of course,’ Father sounded surprised he even needed to ask.

‘How did you feel when you received the commission? A great accolade for both yourself and the troupe, I’d say.’

‘We were very surprised. I have been a devout follower of Augustine’s work for many years. His style has, I am not ashamed to say, greatly influenced my own over the years. His new piece shall be the centre of the exhibition and I am greatly honoured to be considered worthy to hang beside him. I would not have put myself in that bracket,’ Father said seriously, his brows deeply furrowed as he frowned over his drawing. ‘I fear I copy, more than I create. But when the Fitzroy family asked me to be a part of it, how could I refuse?’

‘Julia Fitzroy has been your patron for many years, I believe?’

‘She has indeed,’ I interjected. Father was forever complaining about her, and I didn’t want to risk any of that making the papers. Not that I blamed him – she barely bought anything. I tried not to look at the pile of unsold canvases in the corner. ‘And Father is very grateful for her support.’

‘Hmm.’ Mr Bailey scribbled into his notepad and I leaned slightly closer to try and read his writing. He shifted away from me again. ‘And how do you feel, perhaps most importantly, about the work being exhibited for the benefit of the Duke of Wellington?’

I drew breath to answer but Mr Bailey placed an unexpected hand on my arm. I was so taken aback that I didn’t speak.

‘Mr Thompson, if you please, your thoughts on this matter.’

Silence again as Father scribbled and I held my breath.

‘Oh, a great honour. It’s as I’m always saying, isn’t it Evey? Nobody knows art like the great military leaders of our time.’

I nodded enthusiastically.

‘He is always saying that, Mr Bailey.’ Although I forbore to point out how sarcastic he usually was when he said it.

‘To be included in this exhibition, alongside Augustine and the other greats of Neoclassical art, for the perusal of the great and good is a singular honour, and quite possibly the peak of my career.’

Even I wasn’t sure if that was said bitterly or not. Perhaps I hadn’t been needed on this interview after all.

‘Thank you, Mr Thompson. That will be all for now, although if you wouldn’t mind, I may need to talk to you again nearer the day – would that be agreeable?’

Father waved his hand airily.

‘Whenever you choose, dear boy. All I ask is that you give me a little notice. If I’m painting – you understand.’

‘Of course. If I may – what were you working on when I came in? Was it your piece for the exhibition?’

‘Ah,’ Father smiled gently. ‘Alas, I was not. The mood and muse took me elsewhere this afternoon, and I am neglecting my work for Wellington.’

‘And where was it the muse took you today?’

Father smiled again, his eyes sparkling through the creases of his heavily bagged eyes.

‘My dear boy, if it ever sees the light of a gallery, you will find out then. Until that comes to pass – and I heartily doubt it ever will – then I fear it must remain a secret between myself and the muse.’

‘Hmm.’ Mr Bailey frowned and scribbled something in his notebook. I peered over his shoulder. “Pretentious?” was scribbled in barely legible writing and with two scored underlines. I poked him hard in the ribs and he dropped his pencil.

‘Thank you for your time, Mr Thompson.’ Mr Bailey rose and made his way over to Father with an outstretched hand.

‘One moment,’ Father scribbled a little more and Mr Bailey took the opportunity to turn and scowl at me. I widened my eyes at him, hoping to look as innocently sultry as my mother could, on her best days.

‘Here you are, for your trouble.’ Father presented Mr Bailey with his drawing and hopped from the chair. ‘And now, my dear boy, I bid you adieu. The muse is calling me. I cannot resist her any longer.’

I rolled my eyes. No wonder Mr Bailey thought him pretentious. Or us. Well, there was nothing I could do about that.

‘Do follow me, Mr Bailey. Is now a convenient time for you to meet my mother?’

He didn’t know the meaning of the word pretentious until he had met Liberty Thompson.

‘Ha, he’s quite good, isn’t he?’

Mr Bailey paused in the hall, poring over the paper Father had given him.

‘Not just “Affordable Augustine”?’ I replied archly as I crossed to look at the picture. It was Mr Bailey, hunched over his notebook, scribbling away.

‘Ah! I knew you were reading over my shoulder. I ought to write something horrible about you now. And don’t give me that kitten-eyed look.’

I smiled wickedly and bit my lip, resting one arm on his shoulder.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mr Bailey. That is a very good likeness though.’

‘Do I really hunch like that?’ He straightened unconsciously, and I felt his muscles move under his coat. His weren’t as large as Jackson’s but, really, I had long been of the opinion that Jackson’s were a little *too* large.

‘I was sitting far too close to you to notice.’

‘And you’re standing far too close to me now. What’s your game, I wonder?’

I gave his shoulder a light squeeze before I drew back slightly.

‘A game, I? Never. I am quite hurt that you could even suggest such a thing, Mr Bailey. Any more rudeness and I declare I shall fall into a swoon.’

He laughed at me, and I gave a theatrical wink.

‘Come Mr Bailey, let us climb to the next floor. I’m wearing some terribly harlotish shoes and I would very much appreciate your arm.’

‘Hmm.’

But he gave me his arm regardless.

‘Mother will still be dressing, I believe, so we might as well indulge in conversation for a few moments, Mr Bailey.’

‘If you’re going to refer to me by name quite so frequently, you might as well call me Michael.’

I squeezed his arm again.

‘Oh, marvellous. Call me Evey, everyone else does. Apart from Parker when he’s cross, and Mother. Speaking of which, she often calls me Hope. Pray ignore it.’

‘She does? Whatever for?’

‘Stage name. Not that I ever grace the stage, thank heavens. I’m a terrible actress, as you could probably tell from my not-quite-swooning earlier. Tell me, Michael,’ and I squeezed his arm once more to highlight the intimacy. ‘Have you ever seen Mother in anything?’

‘I have not had the pleasure.’

‘Nor The Liberty Troupe?’

He shook his head and I could smell apple on his hair. It was very nice.

‘Then you are in for such a treat when you meet her. Of course, she’s a tearing beauty, just like she was when she was younger. I daresay you’ll fall in love with her. Most people

do. Never quite so much as Father, but I suppose that's different because she loves him back. I imagine that helps.'

'You talk an awful lot, don't you?' He smiled when he said it, but I could see that he meant it.

'Yes, I suppose I do. Not in the normal run of things, but truth be told, I'm a little nervous.'

'You are?'

'But of course. I'm trying to seduce you, and I'm not at all sure how it's going.'

While Michael blinked at me and cleared his throat, I took the opportunity to totter forwards and tap on Mother's door.

'Liberty?' I called, then added to Michael - 'she doesn't let me call her Mother in front of strangers. Says it ages her. Makes sense, really.'

Michael coughed.

'Liberty, darling? That journalist is here, from *The Yorkshire Advocate*. Can we come in?'

There were muffled bumps and bangs, and I could swear she was moving furniture. Then the door opened and there she was, seemingly on the best of form. Her thick dark hair was piled high on her head, with just a few tousled locks artfully draped over her shoulder, highlighting the paleness of her bosom. She was wearing one of her favourite silk dressing gowns – the type with feathers and a train that trailed to the floor. She'd even had the presence of mind to apply a tiny, heart-shaped moleskin patch to the corner of her mouth. She had a sheaf of newspapers under one arm, and a glass of what appeared to be champagne held aloft in her other hand.

'Hope, my dearest girl, and the journalist? Do come in.' Mother draped herself against the door frame and we squeezed past her into the room. 'You find me in a state of hideous disarray. I have been reading reviews from last night, and darling, have you *heard* what that awful man at *The Mercury* wrote about me?'

I was suddenly very glad of Michael's presence. I had seen the reviews. They weren't good. She would be forced to accept them with grace and hopefully we would avoid any scenes and sulking. I shepherded Michael into the room and prayed her good humour would hold.

If my father's studio had been a chaos of props, Mother's was one of costume. Like a violent eruption in a haberdashery, the walls were hung with rails of garments of every conceivable hue and fabric. A row of bewigged heads graced the highest of shelves, and one

wall was entirely mirrored. Parker Davis, the owner of the building (and manager of The Liberty Troupe - in name only) had at one time fallen into the camp of those besotted with Mother, and had fitted the room out to her exact specifications. Alas, fifteen years of working together had dampened his love, and now he merely adored her a little.

‘They don’t understand you, darling,’ I cooed. Michael looked nervous and Mother rounded on him.

‘Did you read it? I haven’t got to your paper yet. I’m sure they were nice though. They are usually pleasant. But *The Mercury*? I expected better from that snivelling little weasel of a man.’

I was pleased to see that Michael had not yet got out his notebook. Hopefully he would be too overwhelmed and emotionally scarred by the whole ordeal to remember any of it. Or so in love with Mother that he agreed entirely. There wasn’t generally a third option.

Placing her glass on the mantelpiece, Mother went through the newspapers, dropping each into the fire until she found the offending *Mercury*.

“‘Liberty Thompson, wearing the first flushes of youth rather thin, failed to enthral as the prince of Denmark. Frailty, thy name is woman!’”

Michael coughed.

‘You played Hamlet?’

‘My dear young man,’ Mother drew herself up to her full height and tossed back some of her champagne. ‘I *owned* Hamlet on the stage last night.’

‘She certainly did,’ I seconded. ‘*Tres avant garde, ma Cherie*. We knew it was unlikely that those boors at *The Mercury* would understand it.’

‘*The Intelligencer* was even worse, did you see it?’ She coiffed some more champagne and threw the last of her newspapers into the fire. They landed with a damp thud and the flames almost went out.

I frowned, trying to remember.

‘It was a quote, wasn’t it?’

‘To be, or not to be?’ Michael chipped in helpfully. I gave him a little pat on the back.

“‘That is the question’,’ Mother continued grandly. ‘And to quote *The Intelligencer*, “And where it concerns The Liberty Troupe’s reworking of Hamlet with a female lead, the answer is that it ought not to be.”’

Michael coughed, and I patted him on the back a lot harder.

‘Philistines, every one of them, darling. And besides, Michael’s here to write about how wonderful we are, and how the Duke of Wellington will adore us. Isn’t that right?’

‘Sweet man,’ Mother cooed. She eyed me briefly at my use of Michael’s given name, and I knew she’d be questioning me later. ‘How terribly rude of me to keep you looming in the corner. Do have a seat, won’t you? Have you been offered tea?’

Michael stepped forward, shuffling tentatively towards one of the flimsy looking sofas.

‘I had some when I was interviewing your husband,’ he said, lowering his posterior with the utmost caution.

‘Champagne then?’

Michael eyed the bottle, currently glistening gently in an ice bucket on a side table, with a barely concealed longing.

‘Really, I ought not,’ he said slowly.

‘She has that effect on everybody,’ I whispered. ‘I admire your restraint, truly I do.’

‘You, sweetheart?’ Mother offered.

It was barely noon. Best not, else I really would end up face down on the floor in those damned heels. And not in a good way.

‘Best not, dearest. Shall we get to it, Michael?’

He cleared his throat and flicked through his notebook to a clear page.

‘If that is agreeable with you, Mrs Thompson.’

‘Liberty, darling. Always Liberty.’

‘And you are not at liberty to call her ought else.’

Mother rolled her eyes at me, but otherwise chose not to rise to my bait. Helping herself to more champagne, she swung her trailing dressing gown and, with a flourish, settled herself in the marvellous, gold brocade armchair she favoured. It was like a throne, with gold painted cabriole legs and a back almost as tall as she was.

‘Have at me, Michael.’

He closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. Poor boy. I think he understood the meaning of pretention now.

‘Firstly, can you describe to me how you heard of this commission – how you felt and so on?’

‘Oh, I can indeed.’ Mother leaned forward, her eyes glazed slightly and her voice was low and husky as she began her tale.

‘It was late in the day, and the shadows fell long across the stage. We were rehearsing Hamlet. Your readers will, I am sure, be interested to hear of this highly adventurous performance which really reaches to the core of the young prince’s psyche. Currently on limited run, although that would be extended due to popular demand.’

Michael's pencil paused and so did Mother, her eyes clearing for a moment.

'Are you getting all this?'

'Oh, yes.' He tapped his pencil against his notebook and furrowed his brows. 'I'll ensure my readers get the emphasis – the *thrust*, of Hamlet – and his psyche.'

I managed not to laugh, but couldn't resist gently prodding him, obscured from Mother's gaze by an opportunely positioned cushion. He jumped slightly, then leaned in towards me.

'But you were saying, Liberty. The shadows were long?'

'Hmm.' She leaned back a little, and sipped her champagne. 'Long were the shadows indeed, when we rehearsed that day. I was, of course, in role and character as the young prince, conflicted - dare I say maddened - when a halt was called to the production upon the arrival of Parker Davis.'

"Cease, fair Liberty!" he called, as he strode through the seats towards the stage. "For I bring the most wondrous news!" It took me some time to shed the mantle of Hamlet, as it will whenever I am truly immersed in a character, and I pressed him for further information first as the prince, and only after several minutes as myself.'

'Such devotion to her art,' I interjected, gently prodding Michael again, on the soft bit just above his hip. With enough luck I might be able to distract him from realising just how ostentatious she was.

'Eventually order was called, and Parker broke the news. "Liberty," he said, "The Duke of Wellington wishes to see you perform – at his behest the troupe is to perform one of the great Greek tragedies for him, not two months hence!"' Mother raised her glass high, and the contents slopped against the side, dripping a little onto the fabulous golden throne.

'Good heavens,' Michael said, shuffling a little on the sofa. It creaked loudly. 'At what point did Mr Davis mention the coinciding exhibition, which the play is to be performed alongside?'

He was mocking her. I was sure of it. It *was* quite funny, but only so long as none of it made it into any of his columns.

Mother waved her hand airily.

'I choose not to concern myself with all the... logistical details. I am here for the performance, the character, the *art*, in this case, theatrical art. I do of course appreciate my husband's work greatly, but at that point, as Parker Davis's shadow fell long across the stage, I was merely concerned with my role – and of course the great honour done to us by the

Duke. Although,' she added sadly, 'it is such a shame that our run of Hamlet must be cut short to accommodate it. But every man, and woman, must do their duty.'

'Well, quite.' Michael rubbed the end of his pencil on his temple and frowned at his notebook. 'Would you mind terribly if we called it a day for now?'

'So soon?' Mother half rose from her seat, and I too was surprised. He'd barely sat down five minutes earlier. Most people made it longer than that.

'As you may know, Liberty, I'll be working on a series of pieces – interviewing all of the players, and your husband, building up anticipation for the big event and so on. To help with sales for the following nights, you understand. Well, I have quite enough for now – just a bit of background, laying the foundation for the excitement to come. And frankly,' Michael rose as he slipped his pencil into the spine of his notebook. 'I would really like to start writing sooner rather than later, so as not to lose the... ambiance of the piece. Any longer and I fear I may not be able to adequately transcribe the passion of your words.'

Mother settled herself comfortably once more, and sipped her drink with the grace of a queen.

'I understand,' she said. 'I'm sure we shall speak again frequently. Do see Michael out, won't you darling? Then I'll need you to run some lines with me.'

I bobbed a slight curtsy, and took Michael's arm. As soon as the door was closed behind us, he sagged against me slightly.

'Good heavens,' he said quietly. 'Is she always so...'

'Intense?' I suggested. 'Theatrical? Pretentious?'

'Yes, all of them.'

'Yes,' I said quietly. 'She can be quite overwhelming. But – you did make your excuses rather suddenly and...'

I trailed off, as begging comes to me much less easily than seduction, only I felt that might not work at this juncture. I would rekindle the seduction later.

'Yes?' Michael turned to me, and put his hand over mine, where it lay on his arm. 'What's wrong?'

I sighed, trying to buy time as I searched for the right words.

'Please – I know she's a bit much, and she's the quintessential darling of the theatre, but...'

'But,' Michael prompted, bending his head slightly to look into my eyes.

'This is the biggest opportunity we've ever had. And I know she seems a bit much, but she's like that because she really believes in it. She becomes the character, for better or

worse, when she plays them. And she desperately wanted Hamlet to succeed because she loves the part and she doesn't think it has its equal for a woman to play.'

'She's probably right,' Michael conceded.

'And I'm trusting you with this, which is probably foolish because people say you shouldn't tell journalists things like that – no offence meant, of course.'

Michael smiled slightly and nodded.

'None taken, I assure you.'

'Thank you. But what I wanted to say, is please can you not make her – make us – look ridiculous?'

Michael stared at me for a few moments.

'Is that why you're sitting in on the interviews? And... the other thing?'

I nodded. It was one of the reasons, anyway. So I wasn't *really* lying.

'You have my word on it. The paper wants to spike interest, not scare people off. I swear it, I shall be respectful to your family. To the whole troupe.'

I squeezed his arm hard.

'Oh, thank you. I can't tell you how worried I've been. I'm under no illusions as to how they come across, but they're good people.'

'I'm sure they are. Does this mean you won't be trying to seduce me any more though?'

He said it with a smile, but his eyes were wary. Hopeful? No, surely a country boy wouldn't think like that? Or would he?

'Oh, Michael,' I purred, squeezing the muscle in his arm once more. 'Just try and stop me.'

CHAPTER 2

Five weeks remaining.

I had pasted the cuttings into the back of my big notebook, on a long strip of paper that folded in a concertina and tucked beneath the cover. I had studied them for days, and knew most of the words by heart, but now I had met him, they seemed to read differently.

There was the story about the robbery that ended in murder, the ship that went down off the Devonshire coast with all hands, that touching piece about that girl who died giving birth, having been turned out by her family. Accidental explosions, bar brawls, collapses in coal mines and theatres going up in flames. I shivered. Michael had written all of these pieces. There was nothing about the theatre among them. No piece of frivolity, anyway, and the only mention of the arts was a piece from a few months earlier when a Colin Christopher painting had been destroyed at the Houses of Parliament. Michael's piece had focused on the poor soldier who had been dismissed for failing in his duty to protect it.

I didn't like it. It made me feel as though we were a tragedy waiting to happen and that Michael was merely waiting to witness it. He might be the bringer of destruction, and bad things preceded all of his actions. Fanciful? Yes, but we theatre folk are a suspicious lot.

I peered more closely over the piece about the girl. It was down as being written by an M Bailey. That wasn't a person, not really. M Bailey was an idea, a matter of ether that I could seduce and distract. Michael Bailey, on the other hand, was a well-built, broad young man, with a fine head of wavy hair that curled gently over his brow, muscular arms and a smile as bright as sunlight. He had researched each of those tragedies and spoken to those bereaved relatives.

I shook my head. Meeting him had in no way shaken my resolve to seduce him. Strengthened it, if anything. Who could bring destruction when cradled in the warm bosom of seduction? And us getting good coverage wouldn't hurt either. Seducing him would be a pleasant diversion, and I was confident that I could distract him enough to let his guard down. M Bailey wouldn't remain an enigma much longer – of that I was sure.

'How was our man from the media?'

Andrew strode in, closely followed by Annie. I quickly flipped my book so it was open on some notes I had been writing the previous day.

‘Oh, you know,’ I said lightly. ‘He is but a man.’

‘How tall is he?’ Annie piped up, throwing herself sideways onto an armchair and swinging her long legs over one of the arms.

‘You’ve laddered your stocking,’ I said with a mock frown. ‘And he’s not that tall. Certainly not tall enough for you.’

Annie pouted.

‘There’s no money in journalism anyway,’ Andrew added, leaning against the door frame and frowning. ‘And they’re all parasites.’

I wondered if Michael would mention that Andrew was black when he wrote his articles. Most of the papers did when they wrote reviews, although he’d been with us for five years, so you’d have thought they’d have been used to it by that time. I didn’t mind when it was relevant to the play – it gave us a boost when we were performing *Othello*, for example – but it just seemed unnecessary the rest of the time, and took up valuable space in the column which could have been devoted to the actual play.

‘He’s not too bad,’ I said, eventually. ‘I don’t think he’ll ruin us, put it that way.’

‘If you don’t ruin him first.’ Annie chirped. ‘I’ve decided you can have him, Evey. He sounds too much like a louse for my liking.’

‘Too kind,’ I murmured, hoping she wouldn’t change her mind when she saw him. Still, height was height, and neither Annie nor her standards were likely to get any lower.

‘Speaking of our engagement,’ she continued, ‘have you picked a play yet?’

I groaned into my notebook.

‘There are choices. I have a shortlist. But every time I think I’ve found one, I decide the Duke will hate it.’

‘*Othello*,’ Andrew said with a grin. ‘I’ve not done him for ages. The Iron Duke would love it.’

‘I know, and it’s on the list for the one *after* this one. But it’s not really very neoclassical, is it?’

Andrew shrugged. ‘Damned themes. But I’ll hold you to having it next.’

‘I think I’m in the mood for a comedy,’ Annie said as she twisted copper strands of hair around her finger, peering closely at the ends. ‘Hamlet has sucked all the joy out of me. If I have to go mad one more time, I tell you, I’ll not be acting. Ophelia is such an enormous bore.’

‘What about *Le Misanthrope*?’ I asked.

‘Isn’t that French?’ Annie asked. ‘The Duke hates the French. Obviously.’

‘It was banned in France. It’s anti-French. But I’m not sure I want to risk it. I don’t think it’s quite anti-French *enough*.’

‘You may have a point. Cross that one off.’

It wasn’t a decision but it was progress. I scored through it violently.

‘Weren’t we considering scenes from Homer – war and things?’

Annie’s knowledge of Homer was scant, at best. Mine wasn’t much better.

‘It’s a possibility.’ I chewed at the end of my pencil. ‘But I don’t really have time to read through *The Iliad* and sift through it for appropriate scenes. Same with looking for a decent translation of something actually Greek. The problem is that everything’s been done – this has to be something special – something different, so it’s memorable.’

‘Your mother as Hamlet is different and memorable,’ Andrew said dryly. ‘But I somehow doubt we’ll be pursuing that much further.’

‘Well, quite,’ I said, pursing my lips. ‘Although I didn’t enjoy your Yorick.’

‘Alas!’

‘*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* would work,’ Annie said, between biting off her split ends. ‘It’s set in ancient Athens, isn’t it?’

‘Not again,’ Andrew groaned, sagging back against the doorframe. ‘We do *Midsummer* all the time. Everybody does. It’s not even funny anymore. I’m not sure it ever was.’

‘So you see my problem,’ I said, ‘but since you’ve got rid of everything else on my list, it looks like it’ll have to be *The Rape of the Lock*.’

‘Pope?’ Andrew straightened slightly. ‘And a poem. That’s a bit more unusual. We could work with that.’

‘Precisely, and he’s dead, so I’m sure he won’t mind us bastardising his work. Presuming, of course, that the Duke’s men approve of it.’ I picked up the slim volume from the table. ‘I’ve given myself until Monday morning to figure out how we’re going to treat this, so you might want to start reading before then. Although it’ll have to look Greek, so I imagine we’ll have to repurpose a lot of the *Midsummer* sets.’

Andrew brightened.

‘And if we repurpose them enough, we’ll not be able to use them ever again.’

‘Every cloud, isn’t it?’ I piled my books together and stood. ‘You can have the paper now, Andrew, which is I assume what you came in for. Now nobody talk to me for the next three days, else it’ll have to be *Midsummer*.’

CHAPTER 3

Excitement ripples through the world of art this week, with the announcement that Augustine will be unveiling his latest work at a spectacular gala in Leeds at the end of June. The Duke of Wellington, a self-professed supporter of Augustine's work, will be guest of honour at the event, which will include a supporting exhibition by other greats in the world of neoclassical painting, and a performance by The Liberty Troupe. In the run up to the unveiling of what is sure to be a masterpiece, this reporter is fortunate to be spending time with both the players and the celebrated local artist, Julius Thompson.

'He seems a nice boy,' Mother tossed *The Advocate* down on the table and picked up the monogrammed hand mirror a besotted Prince Regent had given her, back in the days when he wasn't quite so fat but she was just as vain.

'Hmm?'

She didn't need much encouragement to elaborate.

'That reporter. Handsome boy, too. You didn't waste much time, I might add. Not that I blame you. I considered doing it myself – for the good of the company, you know. But nonetheless, I couldn't go through with it. Not since – well. The less said about that the better. And I do so love your father. But I'm probably not this boy's type. Too painted, too... experienced. You, on the other hand, might be just the thing.'

'Hmm.'

'Oh, don't be like that, Evey darling. I know you've set your cap at him. Is that phrase still appropriate if you don't intend to marry him? But I digress.'

I lowered my book – Pope, if you were wondering – and rolled my eyes at her.

'Most mothers don't encourage their daughters to seduce strange men,' I said. 'I understand it's generally frowned upon.'

'I try to avoid frowning – the lines, dearest. You ought to do so as well. I'm happy to be mistaken for *your* sister, but you really oughtn't be mistaken for *mine*.'

'Hmm.'

'And how can I be cross with you when your seduction is clearly working? I draw the line on asking where in the process you are, but really, Michael's been splendidly lovely

about us. He was even nice about Hamlet, and I really wasn't convinced he would be. And your father – the way he paints him! He raves about him as though he's almost better than Augustine.'

'Father did draw a very good picture of him. Perhaps that swayed him.'

Mother arched a brow at me over her hand mirror.

'Not as much as you swayed in those shoes you borrowed. I thought you might be aiming to swoon into his arms. They looked strong – I'm sure he'd catch you nicely if you did it next time.'

'I'd really prefer it if you frowned on me. Figuratively,' I hastened to add. 'Or at the very least pretended you didn't know what was going on. Not that I am confirming or denying that anything is going on. Or that to have something go on would be my intention in any way.'

Mother rolled her eyes at me that time, and it looked even more exaggerated as she was stretching out the faint crow's feet at the corners.

'You may be my daughter, and I adore you, but you are no actress.'

'I didn't think you were old enough to have a daughter.'

The door swung open and bounced off the wall, shaking a little more dust out of the deep hole in the plaster, worn there by years of being knocked by the handle.

'Isn't it wonderful?'

Parker Davis, a ball of good humour, adoration and self-delusion, bounced into the room, ricocheting against a wall, two chairs and a side table as he did so.

'You've read *The Advocate*, Parker?' Mother purred, curling a stray strand of dark hair around her fingertips.

'You divine creature, I knew you'd charm your way into his graces. Strange man to send to drum this up – no experience on reporting the arts at all. Was he a terrible bore?'

'Evelyn has been looking after him,' Mother said with a theatrical wink in my direction. 'But I daresay he isn't as uncultured as you feared.'

Parker dropped himself into the cerise loveseat and something within it rattled.

'After the reviews came out for Hamlet, I did have my concerns. They don't understand us, these newspaper men. They don't see the point of it all, the true artistry. The *vision* involved in having a lady Hamlet.'

'Fools, yes. Did you see *The Mercury*?' Mother shook her head and came close to contorting her features into one of those dreaded frowns.

‘And *The Intelligencer!*’ Parker pulled a large silk handkerchief out of his pocket and blotted his face with it. ‘Cretins, all. But you needn’t worry about wasting your talent on such fools much longer. Not once the Duke’s seen your- er, seen you as – I say, what, er, what is it exactly we’re putting on for them? *Midsummer?* That’s always a good one.’

‘Andrew won’t allow it,’ I said with a sigh. ‘And besides, that’s been done to death. Any thoughts, Parker, or is this one in my hands?’

Parker furrowed his brow and sucked his bottom lip.

‘Well it is a very important opportunity. I would really rather have some input...’

‘As you wish it.’ I stood slowly and clasped my book to my chest. ‘Although I had thought you’d be busy with supervising all the improvements to the theatre – the re-plastering in the hall. The cleaning of the curtains, the lights...’

Parker sweated gently as he considered my words.

‘And as you say,’ I continued ‘It is a very important opportunity. After the financial black hole of Hamlet, we do need something good. And Hamlet was good, but I did say that while an important and avant garde piece of work, it may not prove popular to the masses, didn’t I?’

He gave a heavy sigh and blotted his face with his handkerchief again.

‘You may be right. Fine, it’s on your head now, Evelyn.’

‘Uneasy lies the crown,’ Mother trilled. ‘But you’ll make sure I have a good part, won’t you?’

I left them to their self-congratulation and made my way to my room. I really needed to get a handle on Pope. I still had no idea how to treat it, in spite of getting my own way with the direction. But that was for the best. I’d rather have full responsibility than have Parker sticking his chubby fingers in and messing up my direction.

As I climbed the stairs to go by Father’s studio, I heard voices. They were slightly raised, although they didn’t sound angry. It sounded like a youngish man was in there with him. Against all advice, I frowned. Surely Michael hadn’t returned for another interview already – and without me.

The door began to open and I ran up the stairs, ducking behind a bookshelf on the landing above the studio. It would be beyond embarrassing to be caught as though I was eavesdropping. And if it was Michael, I could always lean over the banister to talk to him. He’d probably enjoy that.

‘A pleasure doing business with you, Mr Thompson.’

Not Michael, but a slightly older man, with a deeper voice. I leaned round the edge of the bookcase and peeped at him. He faced into the room, towards Father, so I could only see his back, but he was tallish, with dark hair slicked back with what looked like Macassar oil. In a word, he was elegant, from the perfectly snug shoulders of his jacket, to the gleam on his hessians.

The man turned and Father followed him from the room, scratching his head and looking rather like he'd just woken up.

'Someone will be in touch with you to arrange delivery,' the man said. 'And of course to finalise the payment. I'm sure you'll agree the price named is more than fair.'

Father spluttered a little bit and nodded. His eyes seemed even smaller than usual, and for a man who always looked as though he was lost in a crowded room, he seemed positively abandoned.

The man bowed his head slightly and turned to make his way down the stairs. I caught sight of a moustache and one of those small pointed beards – like a cavalier or a Spaniard – before I ducked back out of sight behind the bookshelf.

Father stood in the doorway, motionless, watching the man descend the stairs. It wasn't until we heard the front door close that he moved, sagging suddenly against the door frame. I leapt from my hiding place, and ran to support him, taking the stairs two at a time.

'What is it, darling? Who was that?'

Father blinked very slowly and deliberately and licked his lips twice, frowning throughout.

'I don't quite... oh Evey, I wish you'd heard – I don't quite – I should have called for you, but he was quite insistent.'

'What is it?' I held him firmly by the arm and led him back into the studio so he could sit down.

'It's Julia Fitzroy. She's bought all my paintings.'

'What?' We both wobbled a little then, and sank down on to the chaise longue together. 'All of them? Even the *Croesus*?'

Father nodded. 'And that terrible nativity I did when I was just starting out.'

I grimaced.

'Did she say why? Or did that man?'

Father shook his head.

'I didn't ask. I didn't say a lot, Evey. I couldn't. You know how I get when I'm surprised. I just couldn't say anything. I didn't have any words.'

I put my arm around him and pulled him closer.

‘She’s always liked what you do, she’s just not bought that much before. Perhaps she wasn’t as rich as we thought? Maybe she’s just come into an inheritance? Mind you, I don’t think any of them have died – we’d have seen it in the papers.’

Father shrugged. ‘I wish you’d been here. Or at least Parker.’

‘I don’t think Parker would have helped, darling.’ I kissed his brow. ‘But you did well. She bought all your paintings – not much could go wrong from that.’

‘I could perhaps have haggled on the price?’ Father shrugged. ‘Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do? Parker might be cross I didn’t get more. I probably could have – he was quite insistent that Mrs Fitzroy have them all.’

‘How much did they offer you?’ I frowned again, as Father was notorious for undervaluing his work, and he and Parker had exchanged cross words on more than one occasion.

He said it so quietly I had to ask him to repeat it.

I hugged him very tightly.

‘Don’t worry darling, Parker shan’t be cross.’

The pictures hadn’t even been worth half of what they had been sold for.

CHAPTER 4

‘Is now a good time?’

I hadn’t heard him come in, and jumped violently. I turned, and there he was, a scant foot behind me.

‘Oh my,’ I fanned myself with my book and placed a hand on his arm to steady myself. ‘I didn’t see you there, Michael.’

He smiled and clasped his hand over mine, before bowing and muttering his apologies.

‘I do hope you are quite well.’

I smiled winsomely, tossing my hair slightly as I did so. I have always been fond of my hair, which is very long and thick like Mother’s, and he had caught me with it down.

‘I shall do my best not to swoon,’ I said, ‘but I can promise nothing. You have done me quite a mischief.’

Michael looked at me for a second and I couldn’t fathom what he was thinking.

‘Do you mind if I talk to you now? Or are you too busy?’

‘No, no, sit down, please.’

I dragged one of the chairs against the wall so he could sit opposite me at my desk.

‘I see you found my lair,’ said the spider to the fly.

‘Your mother directed me.’ Michael loosened his collar slightly. ‘She insisted I visit you here. Just so you know, I wasn’t trying to be improper.’

‘What a shame,’ I said, tossing my hair again. ‘But we digress. What can I do for you?’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his notebook and pencil.

‘I was hoping to talk to you about the production you’ll be putting on. I asked Parker Davis, but he said I’d be best asking you? He said he was too busy with renovation so had decided to let you handle the play itself. That’s a brave decision to make when so much is at stake.’

I straightened my back, and pulled the most supercilious look I could muster.

‘It may have been something of a gamble on Parker’s part if I hadn’t been responsible for every successful production we have had in the last eight years.’

Michael looked surprised. Good. I was full of surprises.

‘Eight years? But you can’t be that much over twenty.’

I raised a brow and tilted my head back, so I could look down my nose at him.

‘Quite. I started when I was sixteen.’

He coughed and shifted in his seat.

‘And Lady Hamlet?’

‘One of Parker’s, I assure you. Not, of course, that Mother wasn’t up to the part. But it isn’t very commercial.’

‘No?’

‘No. Of course she can play Hamlet – she’s one of the greatest actors of her generation – if not the greatest. But she doesn’t get chance to use her full range because there are so few great parts for women. But the world isn’t ready – men aren’t ready to see a woman play that part. I wonder if they ever will be.’

Michael cleared his throat and looked down at his notebook for a moment, but didn’t write anything.

‘I’ve never seen your Mother act. Not on stage.’

‘And you’ve never seen me direct. Oh, I know, Parker saved face and you believed him. And I daresay you oughtn’t put any of this in your article, however much I wish you could. And I daresay you wouldn’t – it’d hardly paint a popular view of the production if the Duke found out it was a woman’s work.’

‘I’m afraid you might be right.’

I supposed I might as well be placated. It was an argument I’d had to face many times before.

‘I meant to talk to you about this on Thursday, actually. If you had seen any of our plays, you wouldn’t have heard of me anyway. Nobody has. I act, sometimes – trees mostly, or the occasional line if I absolutely can’t help it. Then I’m credited as Hope Thompson. For production, direction, everything either goes to Parker, or more recently, occasionally, to E Thompson.’

Michael leaned back in his chair and surveyed me through half closed eyes.

‘So you don’t want to be credited in this production, is that what you mean?’

‘Quite the contrary,’ I said. ‘I want to be credited as Evelyn Thompson. I merely don’t want you to specify my gender.’

‘So the world assumes you’re a man?’

‘I wasn’t aware the readership of *The Advocate* extended quite that far.’

Michael raised a brow at that.

‘Sorry. I don’t mean to be a bear. I just can’t seem to reconcile getting no credit for what I do.’

‘How lucky that Evelyn is androgonous,’ Michael said with a smile. ‘Oh, not that you are, I mean. Just the name. You aren’t. You’re definitely a lady.’

I smiled.

‘So pleased you noticed.’

He avoided my eyes.

‘Well, I – your hair looks very nice today. It’s very long, isn’t it?’

I laughed.

‘Thank you. I’m a little too long in the tooth to wear it down now, but I miss it when I don’t.’

And it was my greatest asset, being as it was down past my backside and wildly curly.

‘Must be very warm. In summer. I’d imagine.’ Michael looked uncomfortable, then suddenly smiled. ‘Am I flirting with you?’

Amused, I confirmed that yes, he was.

‘Oh, good. I’m not very good at it. Never know when it’s happening. Lucky you told me you were trying to seduce me yesterday, else I’d never have realised.’

‘I’m not sure I believe you.’

‘Oh, it’s true.’ He leaned forward in his chair earnestly. ‘It’s like German to me – I just don’t speak the language.’

‘But you’re so handsome,’ I said – because he was. ‘Surely you’ve had plenty of women throwing themselves at you?’

He shrugged.

‘I’m not saying I haven’t. Merely that the gentle art of flirting has passed me by.’

I stared at him for a few seconds before laughing.

‘I do believe we are going to get on famously, Michael. I adore it when people say what they mean, and I have a feeling you are precisely that sort of person.’

He smiled at me, his lips parting to reveal bright, white teeth. I had seen him smiling once or twice before, but not facing me directly and never with genuine good humour. The sunlight teeth were brighter than ever, and a little part inside of me felt as though it had melted.

‘Shall we return to the matter in hand?’ I asked, trying to regain control of the situation. I gestured to my desk, the surface scattered with papers.

‘As you wish,’ Michael bowed his head in deference to me. ‘Have you decided on your play?’

‘It’s not been easy,’ I said, twisting my lips a little. ‘It’s a lot of pressure on one decision. And I don’t know the Duke, so I have little to no idea what his tastes are. With the theme, as well, that puts restrictions on the plays we can use.’

‘How do you resolve a quandary like that?’

‘I want to play to our strengths. I think quality shines through regardless of taste. I mean, if I see a picture which is beautifully painted, I may not appreciate the subject matter, but I can still admire the brushwork.’

Michael lifted his notebook and elbows on to my desk and resumed scribbling, propping his head up on one hand.

‘I say, make yourself quite comfortable.’

‘I wish you would,’ he said. ‘Sit back, put your feet up on the desk if you wish it.’

‘Is that what Evelyn the gentleman would do? Ought I turn my chair backwards and sit astride it, like Andrew and Jackson often do?’

Michael looked at me through his lashes.

‘I certainly shan’t stop you.’

‘You are definitely flirting,’ I said with a smile. ‘I no longer believe that you don’t know German, either.’

‘Am I? I was merely being truthful. You may sit as you wish in your own study. This is *your* study, is it not?’

He waved his pencil at the walls, and I glanced proudly at the shelves all along two of them which overflowed with plays, and at my neat little desk, for all that it was pock-marked and stained by years of use by others less careful than I. My room may have been small, but it was mine.

‘It is.’

‘It’s a lot neater than the other rooms,’ Michael said conversationally.

‘It has to be. No room for mess. It used to be a props cupboard, but I cleared it out when it became apparent I needed somewhere to work.’

‘It’s very nice,’ he said, but I worried he was humouring me. ‘Now, I take it you have come to a decision on the play?’

‘Yes,’ I said firmly. ‘It’s Pope. *The Rape of the Lock*.’ It had to be – there simply wasn’t time for me to work on anything else. I still hadn’t figured all of the details out, but I

hoped they would come together once we started rehearsing. The Duke's men would approve it. I was sure. Mostly.

'That's a brave choice,' Michael said.

'No it isn't. Is it?'

'He's had a bit of a dip in popularity, hasn't he? Since he died. Now he can't write those angry letters anymore.'

'Oh. I don't think I knew that. I just know I quite like his poems.'

'Quality will out,' Michael said, punching the air with his fist.

'Hmm. Still. No accounting for taste, is there? Perhaps the Duke's a Pope enthusiast. At least it's not French.'

'He'd definitely prefer Pope to something French.'

'That's some consolation,' I said, with a half-hearted smile. 'But either way, it's far too late to change it. We've sets and scenery to build, and I've barely finished the casting. We haven't even had a read through yet.'

Michael started scribbling in his notebook again.

'Oh God,' I said quickly, 'Please don't put all that in. Don't let them know how unprepared I am.'

'Stop worrying,' Michael said. 'I'll make you all sound wonderful. I'll make you sound like a man and will harp on about what a brave and avant-garde choice Pope is. How it amplifies the theme and enhances Augustine's work, all that.'

'Such is the power of the press,' I said. 'The pen is mightier than the sword and all that.'

'Well, precisely.' Michael leaned on his hand again and smiled at me, his blue eyes seeming to twinkle slightly. 'And if I say anything bad, you'll stop trying to seduce me. And I don't want that, do I?'

'Neither of us do,' I said. 'I do so hate being thwarted.'

'In work as well as life? Or does Parker Davis leave you alone to get on with his good work?'

I shrugged.

'Occasionally he will have to be reminded of my past successes, to ensure that we continue to have success in the future. He doesn't like it – he sees it as letting me play with plays. But he doesn't mean it badly. Luckily he still adores Mother, so I let her talk him into it most of the time.'

'Except for Hamlet?'

‘I didn’t want to stop her. I just advised Parker that it wouldn’t pay. I wished it would, though.’

Michael put his pencil down and leaned back in his chair.

‘Do you know, I think I’m beginning to figure you out,’ he said.

My eyebrow shot up at that.

‘I’m not sure I like that. There’s something far more romantic about being an enigma, don’t you think?’

‘You have your moments, don’t worry. But just so you know, you’re lucky you got me here with you, reporting all this. You could have had Colbert.’

I thought back, recognising the name.

‘Oh yes, *The Advocate*’s critic. I don’t see why not – he’s always been lovely about our productions.’

Michael leaned forward with an air of confidentiality.

‘Now, don’t tell your mother I said this, but word is he hated her Hamlet. Wrote such vitriol that they couldn’t print it.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Oh, I couldn’t possibly repeat it. It’s not fit for a lady’s ears.’

‘How simply hideous. Mind you, he always did strike me as being somewhat old-fashioned.’

‘Practically prehistoric.’

‘Lucky indeed that we got you then,’ I leaned forward too, and our faces were scant inches apart. I breathed in, and the breath tasted like warm bread. ‘Is that why we have you, then? Because we sent Mr Colbert into an apoplectic fit?’

Michael leaned back and shrugged, entirely ruining the tension and seductive possibilities of the moment.

‘You couldn’t have seduced your way out of his rage.’

I leaned back too and rolled my eyes.

‘Oh, for that I’d have sent in Mother. She’d have won him over before she’d finished her first glass of champagne.’

He smiled, and crossed a few things out in his notebook. I didn’t believe he had me figured out for a moment. Not before I’d dissected every last inch of him.

CHAPTER 5

Father wasn't painting. I couldn't remember a time of more than three minutes together where he had been both awake and not had a pencil or brush in his hand. This was the time history was made however, as while he had two brushes behind his ear and a third tucked into the waistband of his trousers, he was not at his easel.

'Oh, darling, thank heavens you're here. Evelyn will know, won't you, darling? Where did your father leave his sketchbook?'

Mother reclined on the chaise longue, sipping something alcoholic from her coupe glass.

'Do we ever wash that?' I leaned over and gave her a kiss on her lightly powdered cheek. 'Or do you just refill it?'

'Andrew does it while I sleep, darling.' She turned her cheek to accept my embrace and gave me a gentle pat on the arm. 'But there's no need, alcohol kills germs. That's medical fact. I shan't stop him, though.'

'Have you seen it?' Father interrupted. 'It's got all my roughs for this damned Augustine thing in.'

'You chose a subject, then?'

'A far sight quicker than you, I may say.' Mother sniffed loudly. 'Who am I to be playing?'

'Belinda,' I said, not a little smugly. '*The Rape of the Lock*.'

'A comedy!' Mother clapped her hands together and slopped a little of her alcohol onto the chaise longue. 'Just the thing. An epic satire, no less.'

'I'm glad you're pleased. I'm just worried it's too much of a satire of our society and the Duke will hate it. It is what he's fought all those wars to protect and encourage, after all.'

'You're over-thinking it.' Father's head popped up from behind his chair, where he was rooting through piles of papers and old sketchbooks. 'A bit of farce is probably just the ticket. And your mother's wonderful in that sort of thing.'

'We all are.' I went over and knelt on the chair, peering over the back to help him look without actually helping in any way. 'Even if he hates it, everyone loves a farce.' I turned on

my knee and slumped down in the chair. ‘Or do they? This’ll be a high society crowd. *The Lock* would probably play a lot better to our usual audiences. The ton might think we’re mocking them. Oh god, this is all a terrible mistake.’

‘It will play very well to our usual audiences, when the play runs after the Duke’s long gone,’ Father muttered. ‘This isn’t the be all and end all, darling. And besides, who won’t want the players who performed for Wellington? I’m sure the cits will want us – and that’s where the future lies, you mark my words.’

Mother snorted.

‘A fortune teller, my husband. But he’s probably right. He is terribly wise, aren’t you dear?’

‘Hmm? Oh, it’s no use. I’ll look again in the morning when the sun’s in the window. I can’t see a thing in all this shadow. Can’t we ask Parker for more candles now we’re playing for the rich and titled?’

‘Not to mention how successful you suddenly are,’ Mother said. ‘Did he tell you, Evey? About Julia Fitzroy?’

‘He did,’ I nodded. ‘But even if Parker gives you a thousand candles, it’ll still be dark under furniture.’

Father crawled from behind the chair and lay in a dejected heap on the floor.

‘I’d gamble Augustine doesn’t have to put up with this. He’s probably got a beautifully categorised library of sketchbooks, or a man who follows him around with one.’

‘And bends over to give him something to rest on,’ Mother added with a cackle. ‘It’ll turn up, darling. And besides, you said you were going to paint me. Well I’m here, aren’t I? Paint me.’

Father brightened.

‘You’re right. It’s a few days since I worked on your picture – not since that Bailey fellow was here.’

‘What are you painting with Mother?’

‘He won’t even tell me,’ Mother cut in before Father could even draw breath. ‘It’s a great secret. I think it’s a present for me.’

‘It’ll have to be now,’ I said with a smile. ‘And for the exhibition?’

‘Oh, Narcissus.’ Father pulled one of the brushes from behind his ear and began to ply the bristles between his thumb and forefinger. ‘Jackson’s going to be my model.’

I couldn’t hold back a crack of laughter.

‘Perfect casting. But where is he? Do you know, I haven’t seen him for days? Not since he went out with those two blondes after Hamlet closed.’

‘I think he came in this morning. Or it could have been last night. I can’t remember. But either way, I sent him off to bed. I said he’d need to be looking a bit less haggard if anyone was going to buy him as being in love with himself.’

‘And yet, he will have been.’

CHAPTER 6

The Liberty Troupe is housed in the large and imposing Liberty Theatre on Woodhouse Lane, situated close to the top of Briggate, in Leeds, and very close to the Corn Exchange. Currently serving as both a studio and workshop for Julius Thompson, it is also the venue where the troupe rehearses and performs.

In what will likely be the Duke's first visit to this gem of Yorkshire, the theatre will serve further as the host of Augustine's exhibition and the associated soiree. A charming neoclassical building, decorated with an eye-catching ancient Greek "key" design, the Duke could surely not wish for a more apt setting in which to witness the unveiling of Augustine's newest masterpiece.

Jackson surfaced later that afternoon. My little study had proved too stuffy for work, and I set up camp instead in the upstairs sitting room, the large windows of which were high enough above street level to cut out most of the smells and noises of the people and horses below. There was nowhere to escape the noises and the smells of the people within the theatre, however, and I had barely ten minutes of solitude in which to work before Jackson dragged himself in.

The door swung open and glanced off the wall behind it, removing another layer of dust from the hole that was already there. Jackson, or perhaps a man who once resembled Jackson, but had since traversed the pits of hell in order to rescue a loved one, slowly entered the room with a low moan. Once out from the shadow of the door frame, he paused, squinting and screwing his eyes up against the feeble light.

'I thought you were dead,' I said conversationally. 'It appears I was right.'

A low groan was all the response I got.

'You've been gone five days,' I continued. 'So I presume this is your first day sober?'

Jackson groaned again and lowered himself gently – like an elderly person into a bath – into one of the big armchairs. Luckily, in his haze of pain, he had chosen one of the few rickety chairs that would support his enormous bulk. Six foot two inches tall and mostly

composed of muscle – although at this point a large percentage was alcohol – Jackson was a test for most of our furniture and he usually chose with more care. It was disappointing, but he had got lucky this time.

‘And in those five days, I note that you didn’t see fit to take any sort of bath.’

Jackson groaned again, and although I rolled my eyes, I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. He was like a big youth, for all that he was into his early thirties. He never learned, and I daresay he never would.

‘A bath would make you feel better. And me, too. Oh, Jackie. Have some water.’ I poured him a glass from the jug I had brought in for myself and took it over. He didn’t look up as I approached, but extended a giant, limp hand for it. I smoothed his hair gently. ‘You’ll feel better once you’ve had dinner.’

‘God, don’t.’ Jackson slowly curled himself inwards at the very thought of food. ‘Why did I do this?’

‘*Hamlet*,’ I said. ‘Your ghost wasn’t that well received. There were boos.’

Jackson groaned again.

‘Hell, I remember. But that was just some boys from the army. I punched three after.’ He flexed the fingers on his right hand and inspected his knuckles with delicate interest. ‘You should have seen the state of them, Evey.’

Unfortunately for Jackson, Andrew chose that moment to enter the room.

‘Doubt they look much worse than you do. And that was four days ago. Their bruises will have healed by now.’

He cuffed Jackson playfully on the back of the head as he walked by, and Jackson yelped before curling up into an even tighter ball.

‘Oh, don’t,’ I chastised. ‘Jackie’s suffering.’

Andrew rolled his eyes and picked up the newspaper.

‘When does the next article come out about us?’

‘Next Friday I think. We’re weekly for the next five weeks. Why?’

Andrew shrugged. ‘Just wanted to see what your *paramour* has been writing about us.’

‘Whoziss?’ Jackson rumbled, emerging slightly from his tightly coiled ball.

‘Journalist,’ Andrew said, his wicked smile gleaming in the dusk. ‘That one who’s writing up about the preparations for the Duke. Evey’s got a thing for him.’

‘I’m merely ensuring we have a good write-up,’ I countered lightly. ‘And don’t worry Jackie, he’s too short for Annie.’

Jackson grunted his approval and returned into his cocoon of self.

‘Here, have you seen this?’ Andrew dropped his mocking tone and was suddenly serious. ‘That fellow from Lincoln – Tristan Lovett – he’s had his studio broken into. Wasn’t he on the list for this one?’

I frowned.

‘I haven’t read it yet. What does it say?’

Andrew disappeared behind the paper.

‘He says he’s lost a small canvas, but that seems to be about it. Not even a particularly good one if I remember rightly. He says it was a Madonna and child.’

‘I don’t think I ever saw that one,’ I said, trying to remember. You see so many Madonna and child pictures these days. They seem to be every other painting. ‘I’ve not heard much of him for the past few months. Word is he’s working on something huge. Surprised he’d even bother with our exhibition, he’s already got patrons in high places.’

‘Perhaps that’s what happens when you become successful,’ Andrew said, with a wink in my direction. ‘People steal your bad work so you don’t even have to try and sell it.’

‘A blessed existence indeed.’

‘Do you need to talk so loudly?’ Jackson’s voice was muffled by his own expanse of back. ‘My brain, it’s far too big for my head. When did my brain become so large?’

Andrew’s laugh couldn’t have made him feel any better.

‘I need you to sober up, sweetheart,’ I said conversationally. ‘So you and Andrew can have a read through for me. Unless you want to split out parts now? I need an Ariel-‘

‘*The Tempest*?’ Jackson asked, raising his head slightly to look at me with horror. ‘I don’t want to do any more Shakespeare. You can’t make me. I’ll leave.’

‘And join the circus?’ I rolled my eyes at him. ‘It’s Ariel or the Baron. *Rape of the Lock*, Jackson, which you’d know if you hadn’t been heaven knows where for the last four days.’

Much though I had a soft spot for him, the giant lug that he was, I was a little annoyed. The nicest of men when sober, he simply could not be counted on for anything. Apart from womanizing. That I could count on him for.

He mumbled something which could have been an apology. Andrew sighed behind his paper and carried on reading. I stared at Canto number two and tried to visualise it on stage. Apparently I needed at least 50 sylphs. So how to give the impression of 50 with two, possibly three actors? I felt cold on my forehead and the back of my neck, and my eyes were hard and hot.

‘It’s become clear that all of this has been a terrible mistake. I’m going to write to the Duke and tell him he can’t come. The whole thing is off.’

‘Jackie can be Baron,’ Andrew lowered his paper and smiled at me. ‘Less lines, I’d imagine? I’ll be Ariel and fuss around Liberty. That agreeable for you, Jackie?’

Jackson gave a surprisingly shrill whistle, as though he was deflating.

‘You know, you don’t have to do this on your own, Evey,’ Andrew said quietly. ‘I can help you.’

And it was true, he was one of the only people I’d trust to. And he would, too, but not until I’d worked this poem into something vaguely resembling a play. I rose, gathered my books together and left, dropping a kiss onto Andrew’s forehead as I passed him.

‘I’m going to my room. Please don’t let anybody disturb me for the next three hours. And please be nice to Jackie.’

Andrew gave a mock salute and I felt confident that I would remain undisturbed. I was going to finish this damned poem if it killed me. It felt like it might.

CHAPTER 7

'Hmm.' Pause. 'Hmm.'

Further pause.

'Hmm.'

I edged up beside Parker, who was frowning in the corner of the hall.

'What's that man doing?' I whispered.

We both watched a man in overalls look very closely at a flaking bit of plaster on one of the walls. He gave it a brisk tap, and a cloud of dust fell into his beard. He had a very fine, very large beard, but luckily it was white. He didn't seem to notice, at any rate.

'Hmm,' the man said.

'Hmm,' Parker echoed. 'He's looking over the building. To find out what needs doing. Before we get the builders in.'

'Oh, I see. Has he said what needs doing yet?'

Parker looked worried.

'All he does is hum. I think humming will be expensive.'

'Poor Parker. It's lucky you're so rich, isn't it?'

'Hmm.'

'By the bye, have you heard anything about Pope?'

'Hmm?'

'The play. Have they said if the Duke is happy with the play yet?'

There was a long pause as Parker searched his memory, and then was distracted by the bearded man, and forgot then remembered my question.

'Oh. Yes, I think so. Yes, I'm sure they have.'

'Thank heavens for that.' I gave him a peck on the cheek, but he didn't seem to notice.

I made my way up the stairs and almost bumped into Father, who was standing outside his studio, arms folded, glaring down the stairs towards nothing in particular.

'Still can't find your sketchbook?' I asked, giving him a kiss on the brow.

‘Nor Jackson, *nor* your mother.’ He ground his teeth and looked about ready to stamp his foot. ‘God knows how they expect me to get any work done. And God only knows how I’m going to get these damned paintings ready for the exhibiton.’

‘One painting, sweetheart.’ I reassured him. ‘You only need one.’

He rubbed a hand over his forehead.

‘Stress. Stress is the antithesis of art, Evey. I can’t work under these conditions.’

We heard another tap from the hallway below, a shower of dust, and a succession of three very loud sneezes. Then another loud and very deliberate “*Hmm.*”

Father turned to me with eyes narrowed to slits.

‘Augustine doesn’t have to work in these conditions. People *want* to model for him. *He* gets treated with a bit of respect.’

He turned on his heel then and stormed into his studio, leaving me staring after him like he was a stranger. Father had never lost his temper. Not even when Mother had done things that were particularly bad, he wasn’t ever angry. Just hurt, like one of those sad-looking wrinkly dogs you sometimes see with very rich old ladies.

I felt a little hurt, but I supposed it wasn’t aimed at me, and he must be under a great deal of pressure. And Mother and Jackson could be *infuriating*.

I made my way to my study, where Andrew and Annie were waiting for me.

The Lock was almost converted to something resembling a play, but I was at that point in the creative process where all words looked the same and I had no idea whether anything I had written even made sense, never mind being anything approaching good.

I had scheduled in a reading for the following day, and had enlisted Annie and Andrew’s help in writing out copies of all the lines. We were using Shakespeare’s method of only writing the lines each player needed, but rather than using this as a way to combat plagiarism, this was merely an issue of time.

Nonetheless, we were hindered by a lack of desk space, and the fact that I, a person of average height, was forced to share very close quarters with two people of exceptional tallness. Their elbows and knees were everywhere that my limbs needed to be, and I ruined three sheets of paper and two nibs before ten minutes were out. Such a temper was I in, that when Michael appeared at my door, I was not in the mood to grant him an audience.

‘Is now a convenient time?’ he asked, pleasantly. He smiled, and bowed to Annie and Andrew. ‘I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Michael Bailey – of *The Yorkshire Advocate*.’

Annie fluttered her lashes at him, and unfolded her legs, standing to greet him. There was a good few inches difference on her side. He bowed over her hand, and she fluttered appropriately, but mouthed 'all yours,' as she turned back towards me to resume her seat.

Andrew also rose, and shook Michael's hand.

'I'd reckon you're rather handy with a pen and ink, aren't you?'

Michael blinked a few times, before nodding.

'Occupational hazard. Have to be a fast writer.'

'Excellent!' Andrew clapped him on the back. 'You can take my spot and we'll be done in half the time. I'm Andrew, by the way, but I'm sure we'll talk more once rehearsals are underway. Come on Annie, let's leave these two to it, shall we?'

'Your dedication to the play and, indeed, the future of this entire company is touching,' I shouted after them, bristling with sarcasm.

'I really am a very fast writer, you know,' Michael said with one of his smiles.

'Fast and legible?' I asked, doubtfully.

'Beautifully.'

I gestured to him to take the seat which had lately been Andrew's, across the desk from me. Instead, he chose Annie's. His knee brushed mine as he sat.

'Why are you in the smallest room in the building?' he asked conversationally, drawing a blank page before him.

'We were going to move, but Parker's showing a bearded gentleman how much everything is falling apart, so we decided to stay out of the way. That said, I hadn't realised quite how many limbs those two possessed.'

'You did look like three peas in a pod. You were the small one.' He smiled, and I was caught in the light for a moment. 'What do you need me to do?'

I explained the concept and pulled my master copy so it lay between the two of us. He was to start with Umbriel and Ariel's lines, while I worked on the Narrator's. He leaned towards the centre to read the words, and I could smell his hair. It was definitely like apples. Nobody's hair smelled of apples. I breathed in deeply, feigning a sigh to try and smell it again without him thinking me a fool. Definitely apples.

'You smell like violets,' Michael said conversationally, leaning over to pick up the next sheet.

I coughed.

'It's true. I do.'

I looked at his hands, too. We'd sat side by side before, but never like this. Never leaning in towards one another. The fingers weren't long, but they looked strong. I imagined them touching me. That was the point, wasn't it? This seduction. That was what it was leading to. Touching one another. How strange that it had never seemed so real before. That I had never realised that it would actually involve those hands. I had been touched before, and none of what may be coming would be new to me – but with him? Now I realised what it would involve, I suddenly felt less confident in my powers.

'Thank you for your help with this,' I said, because he turned to me, and I realised I hadn't written anything for a while. 'It wasn't what you came for, was it? Who were you here to see today?'

'Nobody in particular. But I thought you could point me in the right direction. There are still a few people I have yet to meet, although now I've seen Annie and Andrew, I imagine they'll be next. And I have a feeling you'll probably be involved in any interviewing I do. You have been so far.'

I shot a quick glance at him to see if he was being rude, but his face was a placid mask. I started writing again, scribbling quickly to catch up. He was already a sheet ahead of me.

'I like to be involved. And at the moment, I'm the only one who knows what's going on.'

'What is going on?'

'Not much. Would you like to come to the read through tomorrow? Unless you think it'd spoil the story for you?'

I wanted to see him again, I decided. I wanted to see him in a room with all of my closest friends, and to see if he was so good then. If he was so calm, and interesting. And I wanted him to see me at work, and in control. That would be wonderful.

CHAPTER 8

There was paper everywhere. Nobody seemed to be sitting still, and Jackson had already messed his pages out of order. He was terrible with numbers, and I knew I'd have to sort them back into sequence for him.

I had pulled chairs into a circle in the middle of the auditorium, which the troupe were supposed to be sitting on. Father, there for both moral support and in the hope of finding inspiration for his painting, lay in the middle of the floor with his arm over his eyes.

Michael was sitting off to one side, scribbling into his notebook, with that irritatingly placid expression on his face. Annie was biting off her split ends again as she read, but at least she was actually reading. Andrew was too – I could always count on him. Mother refused to read ahead – apparently the first read through set the mark for spontaneous delivery.

‘And a good line reads well the first time it’s read, darling.’

I buried my hand in my hair. I had it down again, which was probably a mistake. It could have been my imagination, but I always felt people treated me with more respect if I wore it up, piled high on my head. One must get ones advantages where one can, when one is surrounded by tall people. Unless one is trying to seduce attractive young journalists.

‘Has anyone seen Parker?’ I asked, twisting my neck to look around the theatre, into the shadowy boxes and the gloom of the unlit stage.

Jackson shrugged and shuffled his papers out of order a little more.

‘Not seen him for ages.’

Helpful, as always. I could feel my irritation begin to rise, but that was no use. Snapping and being annoyed would get me nowhere here. It never had and never would. My actors were like animals. They had to be coerced. Herded. Tricked into thinking they were doing what they wanted to do; that my ideas were really theirs, and that they were terribly clever for thinking of them.

I'm not one to get angry very often. There's just no point. Not when you live with one of the age's finest drama queens. But I've always hoped that the day I finally do lose my

temper and fly into a magnificent rage, not only will I appear as some Amazon-like warrior queen, but that people will actually listen. I'm saving that special rage, and I would squander it if I wasted it on this read through.

I took a deep breath, as Michael – quite sweetly, I thought – raised his hand slightly and interjected-

'I saw him outside about fifteen minutes ago. He was with a man on a ladder.'

'Did the man have a magnificent beard?' I asked.

'Undoubtedly.'

I sighed.

'Then we shan't be seeing Parker today, I fear.' I leaned back in my chair and stared at my papers with a resigned air. 'I shall take Sir Plume in his absence.'

Which was a shame, because Parker was going to make a splendid Sir Plume.

'Annie, can you begin?'

She began reading, her voice honey-sweet and lilting. Perfect for an epic farce. Lulling them in before the satire begins. I started making notes on my master copy – little marks for emphasis.

Mother remained quiet for about a minute and a half.

'Darling, I've had a quick glance through these lines, and I can't help but notice that Belinda doesn't have many.'

'And?' I asked, infusing my voice with as much of Annie's honey-sweetness as I could.

'And I can't help but notice that Annie – the narrator, rather, has a lot more lines than I do.'

'Narrators often tend to. This poem is quite heavy on narration.'

'Yes, I had noticed, darling.' She leafed through her sheets, shaking her head and getting them out of order. 'And I must say that this isn't quite what I had in mind when I accepted the role of Belinda.'

'I see.' I would retain my calm. I must retain my calm. It was like this every read through, but usually there wasn't so much riding on a successful outcome. 'Although of course, Belinda, particularly during the lengthy descriptions of her beauty, is onstage acting throughout.'

Mother snorted.

'It isn't that much of a stretch for me to act as though I'm beautiful, darling.'

I took out my notebook.

‘As always, the read through not only allows us to take a measure of how the lines work spoken, but also acts as an opportunity for me to take feedback on the play as it stands, in order that I may mould it towards a greater team fit.’

‘You mean Belinda will get more lines?’

I rubbed my forehead and tried not to look at Michael. I was sure he would be laughing at me.

‘I mean that I am open to your constructive criticism and, if it appears beneficial and relevant to the play as a whole, I will add in more lines for Belinda.’

‘Wonderful.’

‘If,’ I stressed. ‘If Annie, if you would?’

And Annie continued. The narration was, in many ways, an extended monologue. Mother kept shifting in her seat and fidgeting. In truth, I hadn’t realised quite how long it was. But that wasn’t the point. Mother opened her mouth to speak. I cut her off.

‘You’ll be acting now. You will be onstage this entire time. Acting.’

She sighed, but kept quiet. Then Annie stepped into the role of Umbriel; a brief role which I had though intertwined well with that of narrator.

‘Now, darling, I’ve been thinking.’

We paused and looked towards Mother.

‘Do you have some constructive feedback you would like to share with the group?’ I asked sweetly.

‘Not feedback as such, you know, but more a suggestion. I would suggest that, as the lead of this group – the namesake, if you will – I, indeed, the public and patrons – the ton, even, would be best served were I to have the most lines. Were I to be narrator, and Umbriel, and any other little parts you may have given the narrator.’

‘I see.’ I pinched the bridge of my nose hard. ‘I have misjudged your public, Mother. I thought that when they came to see The Liberty Troupe, they would want to see Liberty in the starring role, on stage for about nine tenths of the performance. That they would want her to play the model of beauty, wit and elegance. I see I was wrong.’

‘Nine tenths, you say?’

‘Unless you feel your presence would be better felt by being offstage for nine tenths of the performance. Our narrator will speak from the edge of the pit.’

‘So onstage still,’ Mother said firmly.

‘Slightly. Wearing all black. Possibly a mask,’ I added perversely. ‘I haven’t decided yet.’

‘I do really think I’m right, darling.’

‘Mother knows best,’ Father said quietly, but wholeheartedly, from the floor.

I glanced at Annie, and she gave me a weak smile.

‘Well, how about this? We finish the read through – with the parts currently assigned. And nobody says anything which isn’t written in front of them. Then, once all lines have been spoken, *as written*, I will open the floor to suggestions.’

I paused and looked at Mother, addressing her directly.

‘Suggestions which have not already been made. Following that, I will go back to the play and amend as necessary, before re-distributing the lines for a final, and un-amendable read through.’

‘I really think, given my motto for reading lines blind on the first read through-’

‘If you could, Annie?’

We began again, and Mother remained silent although, damn it, I could practically hear her thinking about how much better she would be as narrator, all the way through it. I would address it in more detail later, of course, and it really wouldn’t make that difference to the end result if Mother narrated. I could probably rely on her not to overact and steal the scene. And Annie was beautiful, and would make a dashing Belinda. But that wasn’t the point, not really. I couldn’t look at Michael. Not directly.

I glanced his way a few times, out of the corner of my eye. He was listening carefully, his eyes half closed and his head tilted slightly to one side. He wasn’t looking at me at all. He wasn’t jotting notes, sarcastic or otherwise. The knowledge dampened my anger, but I still retained my annoyance.

With only three more interruptions, and a few lengthy pauses while Jackson found his lines, the read through came in at approximately an hour. Once we had the timing down, I estimated it would be about forty minutes long. Perfect for a brief vignette in an evening composed of several attractions. For the first time that day I felt pleased with something relating to that damned play.

I cast another surreptitious glance in Michael’s direction to see how he had found it. He smiled as I caught his eye, and made no move to leave. That must be a good sign. Although really all we had done was read a slightly amended version of the original poem, I was so concerned about the whole enterprise that I didn’t think I could bear any criticism from him.

‘So,’ I folded my script back to the beginning with a sense of impending doom. ‘I would like to open the floor to any feedback or suggestions.’

Mother was sitting with her back ramrod straight, pursing her lips and refusing to look at me. Clearly I had offended her. I found that I could live with that. She'd forgive me soon enough when I made her narrator.

'Anybody?'

Andrew suggested a slight rewording in the third canto, and Jackson intimated that he would prefer his lines to be slightly less flowery in their language.

'In that case,' I said quickly, as Mother was rolling her pursed lips together in a way which usually signified an outburst, 'I will be needing your scripts back. All of your suggestions have been noted, and I will let you know any changes by the end of the day. Annie, Mother, we need to talk about costumes. I'll come find you both later this afternoon if that's agreeable?'

Annie nodded enthusiastically, and Mother blinked very deliberately. One meant yes.

'We'll meet again at the same time tomorrow for another read through. Thank you for your time.'

And like children from a classroom, I dismissed them. Mother rose, a queen departing her throne, and glided from the auditorium as though on wheels. Michael remained in his chair, looking amused as the others clattered their chairs back into place slowly and noisily, and I carefully gathered my papers together.

Annie wandered over with a faux casual attitude and whispered to me. My reply caused her to punch the air, and she skipped from the room as Michael looked on, bemused. He waited quietly as Father scrambled to his feet – I'd swear he'd fallen asleep – and then we were alone.

'What did you say to make Annie so happy?' he asked, patting the seat beside him.

I smiled.

'She asked to swap parts with Mother. I said yes.'

Michael's left eyebrow disappeared beneath the sweep of hair over his brow.

'I didn't think you'd go for that. You didn't seem that keen on the idea when Liberty suggested it.'

I shrugged, leaning back so I was a little closer to him.

'It won't make that much difference. They can both carry off either role. And Mother's probably right, it would be better this way.'

'Why didn't you just tell her? Why let her stew?'

I chuckled. 'If I just give this to her now, she'll keep asking for things – and they will likely not be so sensible as this. If I give her the idea it's been a battle she's had to work hard

to win, she'll be so high on that she'll let me get on with the rest of it.' I paused and looked at Michael mournfully. 'Well that's the idea, anyway.'

'How manipulative of you.'

'I do try. So,' I twisted in my seat to look at him more directly. 'Tell me. What did you think?'

'I enjoyed it. I like Pope.'

'You're my ideal audience, then.'

Michael nodded.

'Although that isn't to say that it wasn't good in its own right. I mean, I know it was a first read through, and a bit rough around the edges, but I did get a feel for how it would go. I never really go to the theatre, it was a nice change.'

I made as though to stretch slightly, pushing my shoulders back and rolling my head to one side. His eyes lingered on my bosom, and I used the distraction to press my advantage.

'I did wonder about that. Why were you chosen to write this piece? If you aren't experienced in the theatre.'

He kept his eyes on my chest, blinked, and smiled. Still without looking me in the eye, he replied.

'Oh, you know. Like I say, the other fellow was too enraged by Lady Hamlet. I was between assignments, and decided to take it on. Not choice, really. More timing.'

'Hmm.' I reached over and put my hand on his knee. 'And how are you finding your first foray into the arts?'

He transferred his gaze from my bosom to his knee, before looking me straight in the eye.

'Oh, I'm finding it very enjoyable indeed.'

CHAPTER 9
Four weeks remaining.

‘I don’t see why you still need me to pose. You’ve been painting me for years. I’d have thought you’d know what you were doing by now.’

Father furrowed his brows and looked very sad.

‘That isn’t the point of it, my love. Your presence-‘

‘Yes yes, fills you with inspiration and joy.’

Mother, dressed in a black silk dressing gown trimmed with feathers, twirled the stem of her glass between her fingers and tutted.

‘The lines – one can never truly master the human body. But, if you would rather not today...’ Father reached out to her timidly, but withdrew his hand before he touched her. We’d all seen her in moods like this before. With her pale white skin and dark hair and clothes, she reminded me of a cornered, baited badger. A pair of badgers, her and father were. Perhaps that was why they were together, in spite of their enormous differences. The only two badgers in human form. It was almost sweet.

‘If you insist on it, then I must, I suppose.’ Mother tossed her head back and swung the hem of her robe with great drama and aplomb. ‘Who am I to refuse the great Julius Thompson? I, a tuppenny actress, a mere clothes horse.’

Father said nothing, merely backed into his studio and left the door ajar, should she wish to follow. Mother eyed me, Annie and Andrew, as we loitered in the hall, both watching the drama unfold and fastening our boots as we prepared to make the very short trip into the town. We avoided her steely gaze and, with a “humph”, she swung around and strode into Father’s studio, slamming the door behind her with such force that the picture frames on the wall around it rattled.

Having seen this before and knowing the sort of noises which generally followed, Annie, Andrew and I hurried from the theatre, for all that Andrew’s coat was half on and my left bootlace was untied. From the broken peace of home, we ventured into the protective bustle of the town.

I have never been to London, but I feel justified and confident in saying that it cannot be much more of a thriving hub than the centre of Leeds. We have, on the long, broad road from the Leeds Bridge to the Headrow, ten inns. I think that alone speaks volumes for both the amount of visitors we have and the quality of the local ale.

Of course, Annie and I never had much money to spend, beyond what Parker gave us for groceries and things we needed for productions, but we always managed to save a few pennies here and there for ribbons and what Andrew mockingly referred to as “baubles”.

Either way, we always looked forward to a trip into town, even though we lived in the very middle of it.

‘How long do you think that’ll take to burn out?’ Annie asked of Mother’s anger, as the door swung closed behind us.

‘All day, won’t it?’ Andrew said, stepping back to let a large maid with a big basket and who was clearly in a great hurry, pass by.

I shrugged. ‘With any luck we’ll miss the part where she explodes, and go back to have her merely simmering quietly with rage.’

Annie took my arm as we crossed the Headrow, giving it a squeeze as we wound between the mounds of manure which littered the road.

‘I hate it, you know.’

‘I know.’ I squeezed her arm back. We all hated it. There was something unsettling about watching my mother bully my father, continually playing the victim as she did so. I always avoided it if I could. I’d tried to defend him before, when I was younger. It wasn’t worth it. He was as convinced as she was that Mother was always right, so there was really no point.

‘Where are we going?’ Andrew asked, slipping between us and capturing an arm either side of him. ‘If I am to squire you about town, I’ll need some direction.’

‘Feynman’s?’ Annie piped up. She swished her skirt as she skipped around the wheel-crushed carcass of one of the town’s proliferation of pigeons. ‘I get a discount there now.’

‘She’s rutting the manager,’ Andrew stage-whispered. Annie elbowed him hard in the ribs as an old woman turned to glare at us. ‘What? You *are*, aren’t you?’

‘All for the greater good. We can get more fabric this way. Or more candied almonds. I have an absolute hankering for candied almonds.’

‘You’re all heart,’ I slipped my arm from Andrew’s so as to squeeze between a group of travellers with a large pile of luggage and a harassed looking young man. ‘Perhaps you should flirt with the clerk there too – then you might double our savings?’

‘Perhaps *you* could,’ Annie shot back, ‘unless you’re a one-man woman now? Perhaps we should go to Lewis’s? I feel as though I’ll need a new hat.’

‘I think I can still get you a discount there,’ I said with a grin. The clerk there had the prettiest eyes I had ever seen on a man, and I had spent many an enjoyable hour fluttering my lashes in that direction. ‘But let’s go to Feynman’s first. What is it we’re getting again? Oh, we probably ought to have made a list of what we need, oughtn’t we?’

My heart sank as I thought over how we could have made better use of the shopping trip – not least to save more money for sweetmeats. Amazing how swiftly I could drop into sadness and, frankly, fear, these days.

‘We should have planned it,’ I continued. ‘A proper company would have written down a list of what they needed and budgeted it accordingly.’

I felt a little sweaty. I couldn’t remember any of the characters we needed to buy fabric for or any props we were short of. I wasn’t even sure if we needed any props.

I looked back over my shoulder towards where I knew Woodhouse Lane was, now obscured by buildings and horses. I wasn’t prepared to go back and make a list, either. The milling crowds which I usually thought of as wonderfully bustling suddenly seemed dangerous and menacing. I wondered, in the depths of my brain although in a voice seemingly removed from my consciousness, if I would have a fit of the vapours or turn hysterical. That hadn’t happened for a very long time. I’d almost forgotten what it was like.

‘Perhaps we ought to just go to The Adelphi,’ I said desperately. ‘Fritter our money away on ale and loose women. Never return to the stage and become professional elbow-crookers.’

Andrew placed his hand on the small of my back and steered me towards the haberdashery.

‘Stop panicking,’ he said quietly. ‘Remember you aren’t alone.’

Feynman’s was a cool oasis within the hubbub of the town. Mr Feynman (the son in Feynman & Sons Haberdashery Emporium) greeted Andrew and me with a smile, which quickly turned into a blush when he saw Annie behind us. From then on he made no attempt to speak to either of us besides Annie, and conducted all business with her in soft whispers and longing looks. I’d likely have minded, if he didn’t give us so much money off.

At first I stayed by Annie’s shoulder, frowning at cottons and wracking my brains to remember the smallest details from the play and umming and ahing over colours and worrying over how they would appear on stage. When it became apparent that Annie was in

complete control and I was merely a muttering hindrance, Andrew stopped pretending to be interested in some dyed feathers and shepherded me away.

‘You aren’t usually this worried,’ he said.

‘I know.’ I didn’t like it.

‘I’m worried about you,’ Andrew continued. ‘I’m worried about the Troupe too. What are you worried about exactly?’

I wasn’t sure I liked his accusatory tone, and avoided his eye, instead looking at the rolls of ribbon which were strung across the ceiling.

‘I have grown concerned that...’ I paused, trying to word it in a way that didn’t make me sound like a hideous snob who hated The Liberty Troupe and was ashamed of her family. ‘God damn it, Andrew, I’m scared they’ll laugh at us. We’re just a provincial theatre company with no idea how to perform to Dukes.’

‘Wellington has only been a Duke a few months. I’d be surprised if his tastes have changed all that much.’

‘Not from being a Lord, no. But that isn’t the point and you know it.’ I reached up and batted away a thick length of silk ribbon embroidered with poppies, then immediately regretted it. Feynman’s had previously been known to implement a *you-touch-it-you-pay-for-it* policy. Happily in this instance, the younger Feynman was the only member of staff on duty, and his attention was firmly fixed elsewhere.

Andrew took my hand and squeezed it, hidden behind the tables stacked high with bolts of fabric so nobody could see.

‘I can see why you’d be worried.’

I turned to him then, eyes wide and with a lump of nausea in my throat.

‘You mean I’m right to be scared? I knew it. Leeds has been humouring us for years. We’d never have lasted if Parker hadn’t been supporting us.’

‘I mean,’ Andrew cut me off by squeezing my hand again, this time uncomfortably tight. He frowned down at me in the way fathers were supposed to. ‘Your mother is doubtless as scared as you are. This is her one big chance to get back in the public eye. And if anything is going to ruin us then it’ll be Liberty overacting or collapsing on the stage drunk.’

‘She wouldn’t.’ I was horrified. Here was a concern I had not even considered. I had assumed that any failure of mine would be the cause of failure for the group. Now I saw that humiliation threatened from every quarter. ‘She’s a consummate professional.’

‘She’s an alcoholic,’ Andrew replied quietly.

I knew he was right about that.

I thought for a moment, watching the ends of the reels of ribbon gently sway. Andrew let my hand go, trailing his fingers over the delicate skin of my palm. I liked it when he did that. It made me shiver.

‘She’ll be fine,’ I said firmly. ‘She is an alcoholic, yes, but when she’s on stage – I’ve seen her play countless roles drunk. She’s always done them perfectly. Remember when she was Titania? She’d not been sober for days and *The Advocate* said it was one of her finest performances.’

‘That is true,’ Andrew conceded. ‘She’s generally fine so long as she doesn’t have to dance.’

‘Precisely. But now I am also worried about that. Thank you, Andrew.’

He sighed, and rubbed his thick, cropped hair roughly.

‘Don’t be a bear. You know I don’t mean it in that way. What I’m trying to say is that you should stop worrying about things you have no control over – like the Duke’s opinion, or high society’s.’

‘I should worry about Mother’s desperation and lack of self-control instead?’

‘Yes. And no. Because that’s something that I can help with. I can help with the scenery, I can help with the rehearsals. Annie can help with the costumes and we can all help with... controlling Liberty.’

I still felt riled, but I knew he was right. It’s a hideous thing when you can’t trust your own mother to be discreet.

‘And there’s Jackie,’ I said. ‘You know what he’s like. He’ll likely trip in the middle of the stage and pull the curtains down.’

‘Possibly.’ Andrew shrugged. ‘But that could always happen and you never worried about it before.’

‘Not actively, but the fear was always there. Besides, our regulars would love it if something like that happened.’

‘Perhaps the Duke would. Everyone laughs at other people falling over, don’t they?’

I smiled.

‘I suppose they probably do.’

‘That’s better. Are you going to stop fretting so much now? I’ve been ham-fisted about it, but what I mean is that the things that could go wrong are the same as they always have been. Your mother perhaps more than usual, but it’s nothing we’ve not handled before. What the Duke and his exalted guests think is beyond our control, but doesn’t bear fretting over. People are people, whether the world tells us they’re better or not.’

‘Hmm.’

He was probably right. I felt somewhat reassured that he would be there for me to help with the usual problems, but resolved to keep my fears of public ridicule to myself from then on.

We potted around the shop for a few minutes more, hands scrupulously in pockets to avoid the temptation of stroking the rolls of gauze and fingering the fine lace. Not a moment too soon did Annie, for whom *you-touch-it-you-buy-it* did not apply, having secured quite the bargain, stop pressing the hand of Mr Feynman (son), and gather Andrew and I from the depths of the haberdashery. Her purchases were securely bundled in a large square of brown paper and tied with string. As she struggled over to us, Andrew held out his arms to take the package from her, but even he struggled a little under the weight.

‘You’ll never believe how much I got,’ she whispered. ‘And all with plenty of money for treats left over.’

She fluttered her lashes at poor Mr Feynman, and glided from the shop like a skater across ice. We hurried after, before the aura of her presence could fade and young Mr Feynman come to his senses.

The grocers’ shop was a delight. When we made our way back up to the theatre, our arms were filled with paper-wrapped packages, which included not only the groceries we required for the next few days, but several little bags of secret treats which would never grace the shelf in the pantry. We were in such high spirits at the success of our mission that I, at least, had forgotten the ungodly mess we had left brewing.

The theatre was quiet when we arrived back, and the silence was broken by our chatter and laughter as Andrew mimicked Mr Feynman’s doe-eyed devotion. There came a crash from upstairs somewhere, like the sound of furniture falling over. We heard Mother’s voice, a ragged scream.

‘I don’t care. How could you do that to me?’

There was another crash, the sound of shattering glass. I stared up to the landing above, and saw the door of Father’s studio wrenched open, and Mother storm out, spitting violent disdain.

‘I hate this bloody house, and I hate you bloody people. I wish I’d never met you, Julius.’

She stopped at the banister and looked down at us. She was deathly pale, and her cheeks were streaked with deep red in her anger. Her lips were dark, and I supposed she must have painted them.

‘What the hell are you looking at?’

She looked around for something to hurl at us, but luckily nothing presented itself and after a brief pause, she stalked off to her dressing room. We could hear her growling as she climbed the stairs, muttering on and on about how much she hated us all and this bloody theatre and how we’d all ruined her life. I felt Andrew take my hand and Annie put her arms around my neck.

‘That was worse than usual,’ I said quietly. ‘It hasn’t been that bad for a long time.’

I felt sick. I always hated it when they – well, when she – argued. Mother’s anger was riled at least a little on a fairly regular schedule, at least once a fortnight, and for the most part I could ignore it. The episodes always followed the same pattern. Mother would be angry over some imagined slight. Perhaps one of us hadn’t been complimentary enough after she’d had a bad review. Perhaps Annie and I had been talking, and the conversation had reached a natural lull when Mother had entered the room. She often became convinced we were talking about her, and took our silence for guilt when she arrived. I had grown into the habit of extending conversations if I heard her coming, which helped a little but for the most part she found something else to be angry about instead.

It was a skill I had developed to ignore or suppress anything which might stoke the fire of her ire. The things I could turn a blind eye to in the name of peace sometimes surprised even me.

Then, every couple of months she would fall out with Father. That was worse, because then there was nobody that she could complain to about how much she hated him, or us, or the theatre. Admittedly, he was infuriatingly useless at times, when he seemed incapable of doing anything beyond painting and loving her, but I always thought that the devotion which had spanned almost three decades should be worth something.

But this time was different. There had been a streak of desperation in her screaming. She hadn’t been acting, even a little. It hadn’t been for drama or effect, I was sure.

‘We have to fix this,’ I said.

‘Leave her.’

Andrew was probably right, it usually worked. She burned herself out after a few days and needed someone to talk to, so slipped back into the normal routine as though nothing had happened. But I didn’t want to wait. I wanted things to be right *now*, so we could get on and the play would be a success and, frankly, so she didn’t feel like she was desperate or alone and had to act like this. I also wanted, a little, to go up there and slap her.

Shaking Andrew and Annie off my person, I climbed the stairs and tapped on Father's door. When there was no answer, I opened it and peered in. He was standing by the window in the gloom. Not painting, not even looking out, really. Just standing by the window with his hands by his sides, and his head bowed.

'What happened?'

He shrugged, not really acknowledging my presence. He didn't want to say anything as she would likely hear – she seemed to hear everything that was said after an argument – and then hate him more, and start shouting again. Safer to say nothing, let it pass. Andrew was right. Still, though, I left him and climbed up the next set of stairs, stopping outside Mother's dressing room. Her door was ajar.

She was still muttering to herself about how much she hated us all, but some of it was obscured by dull thuds and slamming cupboard doors. I pushed the door and it swung open, revealing that she had been very busy in the scant few minutes since she had arrived there.

Three large cases had been dragged to the centre of the room. Their contents, previously old costumes and fabric off-cuts, were now strewn over the sofa and floor, and had been replaced with coats and hats and books of newspaper clippings. Mother was standing in front of her wardrobe, ripping dresses from hangers and throwing them in the vague direction of the cases. She was facing away from me, but I could tell she still bristled and radiated with anger.

'Go away.'

It was a snarl more than anything else.

'What happened?'

'I hate him. I don't want to talk about it. All these years and he's been bloody mocking me.'

'No, he can't have been. He adores you more than anything.'

She swung round then to face me, and hurled an arm full of creased-up dresses into one of the trunks. The lid fell shut with a deep bang. She stared at me for a few seconds, waiting for me to make the next move. I wanted to leave. Andrew had been right. I should have left her alone. She probably wasn't leaving, not really.

'Are you leaving?' I asked, quietly and very politely.

'No, I'm merely rearranging for my summer wardrobe. Stupid bloody child. Of course I'm leaving. I'll be glad to be rid of the lot of you. Stupid bloody fools.'

‘Oh.’ I didn’t know what to say. I suppose she wanted me to tell her I didn’t want her to leave. I didn’t want her to, but for some reason I didn’t think to say it just then. ‘Where are you going?’

She waved her hand, a mechanical action supposed to be airy.

‘Wherever I bloody like. You aren’t the only people in my life, you know that? What do you care anyway? You’ll be glad to see me go. Then you can give all my parts to that simpering milkmaid.’

‘Annie?’ I was surprised. ‘But you’re the narrator now. If anything,’ I continued blithely, like a damned fool, ‘you stole her part.’

Mother glared at me, her face a picture of incredulous disgust.

‘How can you be so stupid? How can a child of mine be so stupid?’

Then she began to sob, and I stood there, torn, until she began to sag forward, dissolving into a heap of shuddering tears.

I waited a moment before I went to her, just to be sure these were sad tears rather than angry ones which may result in my being batted away in a fury.

‘What happened? Why do you want to leave?’

Mother let me put my arms around her although she did not put hers around me. She smelled strongly of cheap wine, and I realised that her lips were not painted dark, they were stained by red wine.

‘I thought he loved me, after all this time the only thing I was ever sure of was that he loved me. But how he sees me, Evey, he sees me so cruelly.’

Even with her eyes red and the blackening from her lashes streaked down her face, she still looked beautiful.

‘What on earth has he done to make you think that?’

‘He just... I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘You know he adores you. You can’t fail to see that, can you?’

‘It’s his new painting. I look hideous. *Masculine.*’

‘I highly doubt that.’

‘It’s true. I’ve lost it all, Evey. All I have now are my looks and they’re fading fast, and I’m turning into a shallow husk. I’m turning into my own mother – no – my father, if that painting is anything to go by.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ I said, dropping a kiss on her brow. ‘You’re just overwrought, that’s all. You never did get a proper rest after Lady Hamlet closed, did you?’

‘No, that’s true.’ Somewhat mollified, she sniffed delicately and rubbed a hand over her wine-stained lips. ‘Perhaps you’re right.’

‘And whatever Father’s picture is like, I’m sure it’s not so bad. It’ll be nowhere near finished, will it?’

She sniffed loudly and shook her head.

‘There, then,’ I said. ‘I’m sure it’ll be completely different next time you see it.’

‘Perhaps you’re right.’

Mother pushed me away and shakily began to rise to her feet.

‘Where’s my wine? Where did I leave it?’

I suspected she had hurled the glass at Father, but it seemed unwise to suggest that. Happily for me, Andrew tapped lightly on the door at that moment.

‘Come on Liberty, let me take you to dinner.’

She brightened immediately, and patted her hair, smoothing down the stray ends which had worked loose.

‘But I’m not dressed for it – I look a fright, I’m sure.’

Andrew smiled, and he’s such a handsome man that she couldn’t help but primp a little more.

‘Not at all, but since my means won’t stretch beyond the kitchen, you needn’t worry yourself on any account.’

She went to him, still a little unsteady on her feet, and our eyes met over her bowed head. He wouldn’t let her drink any more. He’d probably give her water and put her to bed. Wonderful, capable Andrew. If only he didn’t make me feel so useless.

Annie was nowhere to be seen so I guessed she’d taken herself off – quite sensibly – to avoid stoking Mother’s wrath. I occasionally felt a little hurt that it was always Annie she felt threatened by and jealous of and never me, but that was foolish. Annie was her equal in beauty and acting skill. I was just her daughter. I had my father in me, therefore could never be quite good enough.

I spent a little time setting Mother’s room to rights. It was such a mess anyway that her haphazard packing had made little difference. I hung up her gowns and bundled everything else back into the cases – original contents and more besides. I managed to heave them back against the wall where they had been before, and my hope was that when Mother woke with little more than a bad headache later, she would forget she had ever planned to leave.

As I made my way down the hallway I could hear Mother chattering to Andrew, her voice half peeling bells and half choking back the sobs which still lingered. I could still hear

her as I approached Father's door again, and saw that he had turned, and was looking at his easel with great sadness.

'She said it was because of your painting.'

'Yes. I know.'

He didn't look up, and I took another step into the room.

'I – *we* have cheered her up now though.'

'Yes.'

'She said it was different. She said you made her manly. I told her that was ridiculous and that it would be different when it was finished.'

'Hmm.'

I took another step forward.

'Can I see it?'

Father slowly raised his head and looked at me with sleepy eyes.

'See what?'

'Your picture of Mother.'

'Oh. No. I'd rather not.'

'Oh.' I didn't quite know what to say to that. I could hardly insist upon it. 'I won't shout at you, if that's what you mean.'

'No.'

He was still quiet but there was no mistaking the firmness in his voice.

'Ah.' I didn't know what else to say. 'Perhaps it would be a good idea if you didn't ask her to model for you again for a little while.'

He blinked twice.

'That won't be possible,' he said slowly, as though speaking to a particularly stupid child. 'I need to work on it and she needs to model for me.'

'If you're sure that's a good idea.'

'Oh, yes. It's the only option. Excuse me, Evelyn. I have work to do.'

The look in his eyes made me want to go to him and run away, both at the same time. I wanted to beg him to let me in and to show me what he was doing, and what was so important that it was worth Mother being upset. It was dark in there, and it seemed to get darker as we looked at one another, not saying a word.

It was a skill I had developed, the ability to ignore things which might cause a disturbance. I creaked into life, and left him without a word. I wasn't prepared to shoulder this as well. I didn't know if I physically could.

CHAPTER 10

Three weeks remaining.

Plaster dust falls like snow over the stage of the Liberty Theatre, situated just a ten minute stroll from the Assembly Rooms in the centre of Leeds. In readiness for the Duke's visit, the theatre is undergoing extensive restoration in order to ensure that it is in perfect condition to welcome its exalted guests, and frame Augustine's new masterpiece within the grandeur that it deserves.

Work on the commission by Julius Thompson, the Liberty Troupe's resident artist, also continues apace. Although great secrecy surrounds the exact nature of the piece and how it will fit in the exhibition, this reporter can reveal that the likely theme is that of Narcissus. In what manner Thompson will choose to portray this theme is as secret as the subject of Augustine's work. Thompson is known to favour oils and has previously exhibited in several London galleries. Those with an interest in art can see smaller pieces in various galleries around the Yorkshire region, although all pieces produced within the past ten years have been purchased and are in the private collection of the Fitzroy family. Applications to view any of this collection must be made by writing to the editors of this newspaper and will be considered by the family in due course.

With Thompson's pieces demanding increasingly higher prices and the scarcity of all but his earliest work in public viewing spaces, his is sure to be one of the key attractions in the exhibition. Other artists of note include Tristan Lovett, of Lincolnshire, famous for his countryside scenes, Colin Christopher, whose still lives grace the walls of the Houses of Parliament, and Lindsey Elliot, whose most notable works are his series of scenes from Shakespeare. Anticipation grows as art lovers across the country grow eager to view such a proliferation of masterpieces under one roof.

I think that, secretly, Parker likes it when all is chaos and disruption. He likes to stand in corners, deep lines covering his brow and his lip sunk deep between his teeth. He enjoys the pacing, the worry, the nervousness. He likes to exclaim about the cost, the lack of sleep

he's getting, the many ways he bested whatever tradesman he thought wanted to con him out of his hard inherited wealth.

Every year he begins some new project to repair or enhance various parts of the building. He refers to it as "scrubbing up", and generally his efforts are focussed on the endless improvements Mother demands to her dressing room, bedroom, sitting room, and very occasionally, the stage or auditorium. And now, Parker was in fine fettle as he oversaw the beginnings of what looked set to be a massive overhaul of any and all public spaces.

I was pleased, overall. I have been hinting and suggesting and downright asking for the auditorium seats to be re-covered, the walls to be repainted, and for any other maintenance work that wasn't purely cosmetic, for months to no avail. We had got new curtains a few weeks earlier, however, as Mother refused to be "framed by those damning rags". But now we were inviting in the highest (almost) in the land, Parker was convinced they would see beyond our painted façade to the crumbling foundations beneath. I hoped the same wasn't true of what would happen when they saw the troupe perform.

I was pleased, yes, but only for the most part. I was feeling decidedly the opposite as I skipped over tools and around ladders, dodging paint pots and burly men. There were men everywhere. Annie had been in heaven, surrounded by strapping workmen, quite a few of whom were tall enough to meet her requirements. Yet after engaging in a large amount of gentle flirting, she resigned herself once more to a loveless future. Although some were highly skilled craftsmen, they still didn't make nearly enough money. Not even the prettiest was handsome or tall enough to overcome that hurdle. Yet she carried on flirting, because, as she put it, "it isn't as though I'm going to run out of 'flirt', is it?"

Which was true, and all well and good, and frankly, rather funny, but this influx of men was playing havoc with my preparations. Annie was flirting rather than working on the costumes with Mother. Mother in her turn was spending all of her time reclining on various upholstered objects with a damp cloth on her forehead. Parker enjoyed this, too, as he liked to fuss over her and fan the flames of her feelings of ill use with such unhelpful comments as "that was *far* too loud, wasn't it my dear?" or 'I swear I felt the windows rattle then – it's a wonder the ceilings haven't caved in on us yet.' In her element amid all his fussing, Mother was failing to learn her lines. Narrator she may be, but I was damned if she was going to have her script on stage with her.

'It can't do us any good, can it, breathing in all this dust. Don't you think, Liberty darling?'

I leaned against the door frame, having first checked that it was both still attached to the wall and not covered in wet paint. One could never be too careful these days. Mother was reclining in her throne with exquisite grace. She leaned to one side, like a grieving, widowed queen, with one hand over her eyes, shielding her from the glare of death. The other was cradled with great adoration by Parker. One would think he was holding the Magna Carta, such was his reverence.

‘Oh, I do hope you’ll be well enough for the first rehearsal tomorrow,’ I said, my faux-concern shattering the tableau.

‘We all hope so.’ Parker looked at the little hand encased in his own with great sorrow. ‘And to think – my renovations have caused this malady. Forgive me, dearest Liberty. I only wanted a theatre fit to showcase your gift to the great and good.’

‘With life come trials, Parker dear. The road to recognition is never an easy one but remember this – all shall pass, in time.’

She sounded so mournful that any passer-by might have thought she was referring to her own mortality. Not I. I had heard this far too many times before.

‘We can only hope for the best, Mother. I do hope you will be feeling more yourself tomorrow. Michael said he would attend the first rehearsal, and it should be his largest column yet. I should hate it if he had to devote precious inches to fears about your health.’

‘Do you know, that might not be such a bad idea.’ Mother, suddenly invigorated with an idea, swung upright and leaped from her chair. ‘Imagine – he could build it up as the weeks go by, will Liberty make it to opening night? Will Liberty’s frail health keep her from performing?’ She began to pace, clearly taken with the idea. ‘And then, on the opening night, when even the Duke himself fears he may see an understudy, I rise, like a phoenix from the ashes, to give the performance of a lifetime.’

‘You don’t have an understudy,’ I said, wanting to inject at least a little realism into the conversation.

‘Not the point. Oh, do say you’ll suggest it to him darling. Only, not openly, you know. Make him think it’s his idea. Unless you think he’d like to be in on it? Can we trust him?’

‘Perhaps. Oh, and since you now seem quite recovered, I’ll leave you to learning your lines.’

I turned tail and set off in search of less flamboyant company. Still, I heard as I walked away-

‘But think of how dramatic it would look were I to swoon and drop my papers. They’d scatter, like leaves on the wind!’

Luckily I was too far away for her to hear me cursing. I dodged beneath a ladder carried by two boys, and almost fell into an open cupboard, most of which was covered with a sheet. Then I heard a voice I seemed to recognise, and peered out carefully. Below, Father and another man climbed the staircase to his studio. It was the man from before, the strange one, now in a sea of strangers, who I had seen leaving the studio a week earlier.

‘How are you getting on?’ he asked, so quietly that I could barely hear him above the clatter of workmen around us.

‘They’re both coming on well,’ Father said quickly, nodding. ‘They should be ready in time.’

They stepped into the studio and Father closed the door behind them. I waited only a few seconds before bounding down the stairs. I hovered by the door but couldn’t hear anything. If only I could press my ear to the door or peep through the keyhole. If only I wasn’t surrounded by people, who would look at me suspiciously and draw attention to my attempts at subterfuge. If only I wasn’t surrounded by people, making so much noise that I couldn’t eavesdrop.

I couldn’t understand why he’d said “both”. If Father had received another commission, he would have told me. Not least because it would take him away from his important work on the piece for the exhibition. As it was he was already working on another piece against my better judgement – the one of Mother. Three pieces was the most he had ever worked on at one time before, and all of them had taken him over a year to finish. I couldn’t see him having the Narcissus ready in time for the exhibition – it would have been a stretch if it was all he was working on.

I was almost ready to march down to his studio and find out what was going on. Almost. We hadn’t really spoken after he had banished me from his studio several days earlier. Perhaps I would later, when the strange man had gone. Perhaps I would do all sorts of things in the future, when future Evelyn felt capable of it. Perhaps I would let him go hang. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

Instead I made my way on to the props room, where I had arranged to meet with Michael. Even though almost every room in the theatre was scattered with props, there was one central hub from which the prop creeper grew. The closer one got to the room, the higher the density of props became. Others may call it a junk room – everything did seem to get stored in there once it had passed its best, rather than be thrown away. We hardly ever threw anything away. I could hear some noise coming from the room already, and wondered what he was up to. I poked my head round the door.

‘Is this a real skeleton?’

Michael reached for its hand and waved it at me. No matter how many times we had done that ourselves – and it was many – it never failed to make me laugh. Chuckling, I swatted the hand away.

‘Treat Benny with more respect, if you please. I’ll have you know he’s one of our leading men, and no stranger to treading the boards. Although his last performance didn’t get such good reviews.’

‘He was Yorick?’

‘Alas poor Benny, we knew him well.’

Michael examined him closely, setting the bones rattling from where he was hanging on his stand.

‘Where on earth did you get him?’

‘Oh, Mother and I like to go grave robbing in our free time.’

Michael gave me a look, and made Benny shake his finger at me.

‘Well,’ I said, spreading my hands with a shrug. ‘What else are we to conduct our illegal medical experiments on?’

‘You’re lucky I don’t put that in my article just to spite you.’

‘It’d never make it past the editor. Would it?’

Michael tapped his nose with Benny’s finger.

‘You’ll just have to wait and see. Now, where is he from? Is he a critic your mother took exception to?’

‘I’m shocked you could even consider such a thing. Now, stop playing about, we’ve got things to find.’

I gestured over the piles of props which surrounded us.

‘I’m quite certain we have a snuff box in here. And a cane.’ I put my hands on my hips and surveyed the mountains of mess. ‘I’m going to have to tie my hair back.’

Michael leaned on a whatnot and drew swirls in the dust which graced its surface, all the while watching me as I twisted my hair into a long rope, and wound it into a bun on the top of my head, securing it with a ribbon and the pins I always carried in my pocket.

‘Very impressive. And all without a mirror.’

I curtsied playfully.

‘What I lack in acting ability, I more than make up for in blind hairdressing skills. Do I look a fright?’

Michael smiled.

‘I think you know that you don’t. I’m not sure you could.’

I smiled back.

‘Are you flirting with me?’

‘I’m merely being honest.’

‘Oh.’ I didn’t quite know what to say to that, and felt a little uncomfortable. Which was irritating. I was supposed to be carrying this seduction. ‘Thank you. Although I fear you may wish to take that sentiment back by the time we’ve sorted through this mess.’

Michael continued lazily tracing shapes on the top shelf of the whatnot.

‘I’m not sure where you get this “we’ve” idea from. I’m merely here in a viewing capacity. I spectate.’

‘I’m not even sure that’s a real word.’

He helped me anyway, as I knew he would, and after a few minutes we were both knee deep in hats, artificial flowers and old, cracked tableware.

‘We really should throw most of this away,’ I said, as I frowned at half a serving dish. ‘But you know, as soon as we do, we’ll need it for something.’

‘What could you possibly need this for?’ Michael held up a broken puppet, a little wooden boy who hung only by one string. It looked heart-breakingly forlorn, and not a little bit disturbing.

‘Perfect! Andrew was asking about these and I’d completely forgotten. It’s for some of the more difficult imagery in the final canto,’ I said as Michael looked at me as though I was mad. ‘The battles of epic proportions, that sort of thing.’

‘Ah.’ He carefully laid the puppet to one side. ‘I was wondering how you’d manage those. There aren’t that many of you to go to war.’

‘It’s Andrew.’ I picked up and discarded a splintered picture frame. ‘He’s absolutely marvellous at this sort of thing. We decided to do it as shadow puppets, and he’s building a frame and a very clever rig which will make it look like there’s a backdrop of hoards while the main action goes on at the front. Sometimes I think it’s a shame that he doesn’t get more credit for what he does, because it’s such artistry.’

‘That sounds marvellous.’ Michael looked at the mangled puppet with more respect. ‘I’d be interested to see some more about that – how it works and all that. I think it’d be a good topic for one of the articles.’

‘Shouldn’t be a problem,’ I said, pulling out the snuff box with a shout of triumph. ‘Andrew and Father will be setting the screen up later to try a few things out. You’re welcome to watch.’

‘Thank you. I will.’

‘Only – please don’t put too much detail in,’ I turned to him, very serious. ‘There’s a troupe in Sheffield who have been trying to poach Andrew from us for months. We don’t want them getting our secrets.’

‘On my honour,’ Michael said, raising his hand in solemn oath. ‘Are you sure he won’t leave you though? Surely everyone can be bought with the right inducement.’

‘Oh no, not Andrew. He’s my friend.’

I turned back to my pile and began rummaging again. After a few moments I cast a sly look in Michael’s direction and was pleased to note that he looked very thoughtful.

We worked on for a while in a silence which was broken only by my exclaiming over some rediscovered treasure or Michael asking if he had found what we were looking for. He invariably hadn’t. It must have been about half an hour later when we heard voices outside. It was Father and his visitor. I raised my head to try and listen. Michael noticed, and followed me as I rose quickly and made my way over to the door.

I opened it just a little, and peered out, towards the staircase. The cupboard I had fallen in to earlier blocked the view, and I crept out to hide behind it.

‘What are we doing?’

Michael had followed me. I shushed him with a touch on his hand, and pulled him behind the open door with me. The workmen were still making noise, but if I really strained my ears, I could just about make out their words. Michael leaned over my shoulder towards the stairs.

‘Who are we looking at?’ he breathed in my ear.

‘I don’t know.’

After a moment, they came into view. Their voices were still a murmur, but I could see that Father looked worried. The deep lines on his brow were deeper than ever, and his wrinkly eyes looked like jet beads. The man turned to leave, without shaking Father’s hand. He left him saying something brief and sharp sounding, and a decisive nod of the head and a stern look. Father remained in the hallway for a few long seconds, looking worried. He only moved when he had to step back out of the way of one of the workmen, and then he retreated back into his studio and shut the door.

I turned to Michael, not quite knowing how to explain, and realised that I was still holding his hand. When I tried to let go, he held on and gently pulled me back into the props room, where he released me only once he had shut the door.

‘Do you know what he was doing here?’ he asked. His tone was light, but he seemed serious, beneath it all.

‘That man? No. I mean, I think he’s something to do with Julia Fitzroy. She bought all of Father’s back catalogue a week or so ago, and that man arranged it.’

‘Did he now?’ Michael leaned against the door frame and pressed his forefinger against his nose. ‘I wouldn’t have expected that.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘You don’t?’

‘No.’

‘Didn’t you ask your father?’

I wrinkled my brow, trying to remember his exact words.

‘He didn’t say. Just that Mrs Fitzroy had bought everything. He was in shock. We both were.’

‘I see. His name is Brendan Fitzroy. He’s Julia Fitzroy’s husband.’

I remembered the young man with the cavalier beard.

‘I thought she was older. I saw her once, when I was little and she first started taking an interest in Father’s work. She was at least thirty then.’

‘He’s something of a younger man.’

‘Oh. Good for Mrs Fitzroy.’

Michael looked amused.

‘I might have guessed you’d focus on that.’

‘So he does her business for her? I suppose that makes sense. If she is – what, nearly fifty?’ I thought about it for a moment. ‘Actually, that’s not that old, is it? Is she ill?’

‘Not that I’ve heard. And he’s never actually done her business for her, as far as I’m aware. He doesn’t get involved with that sort of thing. Far too busy with his parliamentary aspirations.’

‘Oh.’ I didn’t understand. ‘How do you know all this?’

‘I work for the newspaper owned by the Fitzroy twins. It’s always good to know what’s going on with your employer. Why were you spying on them?’

‘Hmm?’ I widened my eyes and looked as adorably simple as I possibly could. I wasn’t ready to undermine my father in front of this man I barely knew. And a newspaper man, no less. He blinked twice, and I parted my lips slightly, moistening them with the tip of my tongue. His blue eyes were locked with my brown ones, and I tilted my head slightly, trying

to draw him in. We were both still then, as long seconds ticked by, each locked in one another's gaze. I should have moved. I should have pressed the issue.

He'd have come to me, I'm sure of it. Given a little longer he'd have kissed me, and I'd have left it at that, for then. Probably. But time was not on our side, as we were shaken from our deep inspection of one another's pupils by a loud bang.

Jackson had fallen into the cupboard.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was a lot funnier when he did it than when I almost had. I might have been gravely injured. In this instance, it was the safety of the cupboard which was in question.

'I don't believe you two have been formally introduced,' I said, trying not to laugh. 'Michael, this is Jackson. He's absolutely splendid at entrances.'

Jackson scowled at me as Michael helped him up.

'I saw you at the rehearsal,' he said. 'Michael Bailey. I'm doing the articles for *The Yorkshire Advocate*.'

Jackson brightened, and straightened his shoulders.

'Did you like my Baron? In the rehearsal?'

'Oh yes.' Michael nodded, and the springy waves of hair over his brow bounced. Even though Jackson was a good head taller than him and built like a load-bearing wall, Michael seemed to hold his own. He certainly didn't look weak, like a lot of men did (my father and Parker very much included) when compared to The Liberty Troupe's resident Atlas.

'I've asked her to rewrite a bit of it,' he confided to Michael, bowing his head a little to speak while casting me mutinous looks. 'I want him to be a bit more brutish. Like a war hero. Like Mars. That's neoclassical, isn't it? God of war?'

'Isn't he Roman? We're doing Greek, Jackie.'

'Ares is your man then.' Michael clapped Jackie on the back before turning to me. 'Is this one of the suggestions you decided to take on board?'

'As a matter of fact, I did. Which Jackson would know, if he had read the revised script I gave him two days ago.'

Jackie had the good grace to look sheepish, and mumbled some excuse under his breath. I forgave him instantly, as I always did when he looked adorable. He was like a big, stupid horse. You couldn't be angry with a big, stupid horse.

'You know, I almost forgot. Andrew sent me to find you and your father. He's been rigging some things up for the shadow effects. Wants your opinion and your father's help.'

'What perfect timing,' I said. 'Would you still like to watch, Michael?'

‘It would be an honour.’

‘He’ll be on the stage then, I take it?’

Jackson nodded.

‘Very well. Jackie, please will you show Mr Bailey the way, and I’ll go collect Father.’

Michael looked as though he was about to protest, but was propelled forward by Jackson with an arm so strong it could not be resisted.

Once Jackie and Michael had cleared the stairs, I tapped tentatively on Father’s door. There was no answer, but I could hear frantic noises from inside. I knocked again, more loudly this time, and pushed the door open.

‘Father?’

At first the room looked empty, but I could still hear rustling noises, so I knew he had to be in there; him or a giant rodent – which was sadly not an impossibility. He was always leaving half eaten plates of food around, and every few weeks I’d come across a new sort of fur growing on some crockery I vaguely recognised. Those plates, once washed thoroughly with boiling water, inevitably made their way to the props room. We had a lot of plates in there.

‘Who’s there?’ His head popped up from behind a large pile of books, which stood beside a half-empty bookcase that he seemed to have pulled slightly away from the wall. ‘Oh, Evey. It’s you.’

‘Is everything quite all right?’ I moved forward tentatively, stepping carefully around the scattered papers and rags which littered the floor.

Father looked at me for a moment. He looked crosser than I’ve ever seen him, and his hair stood up wildly around his head.

‘It’s my damned sketchbook. I can’t work without it, Evey, I just can’t.’ He ran a hand through his hair again, restyling it into a slightly different sort of wild. ‘I’ve looked everywhere, too. It’s been missing for days.’ He stopped and stood, kicking over the pile of books in front of him. ‘I could have made so much progress now, but instead I’m falling further and further behind.’

I didn’t know what to suggest. I wanted to go to him, but given the state he was in, I wasn’t sure how he’d respond to an embrace. He didn’t seem much like my father at that moment. My father had never treated his books like that.

Then he sank back to the floor, looking so utterly miserable that, within only a few strides, I was over by his side, and holding him.

‘What’s wrong, Papa?’

He held me too, then, but didn't reply immediately.

'I think it's the pressure. The stress. The deadlines.'

'What did that man want?'

Father scowled and his face was like a ball of screwed up paper.

'Irritating man, always asking me questions and distracting me. Doesn't he know I've an exhibition to prepare for?'

'Do you want to show me where you are with it?' I asked. 'You know I'm good at spotting any mistakes.'

There was a pause again before Father replied.

'Narcissus? Yes. Yes, I can show you Narcissus.'

He scrambled to his feet and loped across the room to his easel. I followed him, and noticed another two canvases covered with cloth and stacked against the wall.

'What are those?'

It seemed as good a time as any to ask. He'd hardly made any effort to hide them.

'Spares,' Father said, stepping in front of them and waving towards his easel. 'This could all go wrong at any time, couldn't it?'

The painting was on a large wooden panel, about four feet high and three wide. The board had been painted with white gesso and showed the rough figure of Jackson, kneeling with his back to the viewer. He was hunched over the water, and the scene was shown looking down on him from above. Over his shoulder, I could see the reflection, pencilled into where the water would be.

'I like your composition,' I said, and it really was striking.

Father brightened a little.

'They all do him from straight on, don't they? From opposite, hunching over the water. And do you know why that is, Evey? It's because it's the easy way to draw it. They concentrate on having two faces, and they never look identical, but nobody – not even the critics ever point that out. This, with the difficult perspective, is the way it'll work best. Look how close he is to the water – he's just about to fall in, but you can still see almost his whole face.'

'I love it. When are you going to start with the paint?'

'Soon. Tomorrow. I'm thinking about colour. I need weeds and things in the water. But my studies, Evey.' He turned to me, at once frantic again. 'I have a book full of studies of ponds – from when I was painting the sirens a few years ago.'

‘And they all looked like Mother.’ I said with a smile. ‘The water was lovely on those – even that gentleman from Germany said so, and they said he was very important.’

Father brightened again, as he always did under praise.

‘Still, though. There are only three weeks left, and there’s still so much to do.’ He ran his hand through his hair again. ‘And Jackson won’t keep still. I’d start on the figure but he’s always disappearing.’

I put my arm through his and propelled him towards the door.

‘I know where he is. Now, how about you come with me. Andrew’s been setting up the shadow screen. He’s asked you to help.’

Father started to protest but I cut him off firmly.

‘You take your mind off it for an hour or two, then you can have Jackson at the end of it. And I’ll think about what we can do about your sketchbook, what do you think?’

He finally agreed, and seemed much relieved that I had taken on some of his responsibility. I was convinced we wouldn’t find the book. Father lost things all the time and they never seemed to appear until after the need for them had passed. Such was the way of things, but it meant that it was probably best to provide Father with something else to work from in the short time allowed.

We found the three boys in high spirits on the stage. A large white sheet had been strung taut on a wooden frame, four metres high and six metres wide. Behind the frame were three or four more identical frames, equipped for suspending puppets, or sets, or anything necessary for the shadow effect. Clearly Andrew had been busy, and while the screen itself was pristine, the stage around it was strewn with piles of wood and cardboard shapes.

Michael turned when he heard us approach, and jumped down from the stage, bounding towards us between the seats like a big Labrador.

‘It’s marvellous, Evey, so clever. Oh, and good afternoon, Mr Thompson.’

If Father thought anything of him using my given name, he didn’t mention it. He was probably still too worried about the painting to notice. I was careful to never let Father know about my rendezvous – he was concerned I’d go the same way as Mother.

‘They haven’t shown me it with the lights on yet, but I’m sure it’s going to be impressive.’ Michael took my arm and led Father and I to the stage. ‘There are hills and trees which frame the front and sides, and cover up all the levers and pulleys behind it.’

‘He’s recycled the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* backdrop for that, I think. Is there a Greek looking building on one of those hills? Like a little temple?’

‘Yes, although Andrew wanted to get rid of it. Said it was too much of a good thing, but I think it looks *very* impressive.’

He was so pleased with the shadow set that it was infectious, and I was excited to see it again myself, even though we had used it several times before.

‘Look, he’s made all of these cardboard figures, and when you shake them the limbs move like they’re running. It’s so clever.’ He leaned closer towards me and continued in hushed tones. ‘No wonder you don’t want to lose him to Sheffield.’

For a moment I was caught in his eyes again, so much more powerful when they were full of excitement and pleasure. Then I blinked, and because *I* was the one who was in charge of this seduction, said-

‘And he’s my friend. I wouldn’t want to lose him for that reason either.’

‘Of course.’ Michael dropped my arm, and I climbed the stairs to the stage ahead of him, swinging my hips widely as I did so.

‘You’ve made good progress, I hear,’ I said as Andrew popped his head up from where he was tinkering with one of the mechanisms that provided a rolling motion to whatever was attached to it. It was usually used for boats and seas, but I was sure a battalion’s worth of horse riders would do just as well. ‘And you’ve impressed our reporter friend.’

Andrew grinned, and mopped at his forehead with his sleeve.

‘Finally, an appreciative audience.’

‘Are you almost finished with the basics now?’ I asked. ‘You seem to have made a lot of progress today.’

‘Thanks to Jackie.’ Andrew smiled and held out his hand for me to help heave him to his feet. ‘And now we have our set and I know what size space I have to work with, I can make a start on the puppets.’

‘And not a moment too soon,’ I said with a frown. ‘Sorry I’ve set you such a difficult one, Andrew.’

He shrugged. ‘I like a challenge. Anyway, that’s why I asked you down here, Julius.’ He turned to my father with an apologetic smile. ‘If you’ve time, of course. I’d like your advice on what to do about a few of the more complex scenes.’

‘Heavenly battles?’ Father smiled. ‘No problem, I can spare an hour or two.’

‘Can you?’ Jackie popped his head up from the piece of wood he was sanding. ‘What about Narcissus? And the great sketchbook hunt? You’ve been hounding me for days to pose.’

‘Ah, well, Evey is taking care of the sketchbook situation, so I feel confident it will soon be resolved.’ He put his arm around me and gave me a kiss on the temple. ‘And after we have done this, she promises you will pose for me for a while. Whenever you’re ready, Andrew.’

‘Now?’ Andrew asked, ignoring Jackie’s splutters of indignation, as did the rest of us. ‘Although first, I’ll show you what we’re working with so far – and check for your approval, Evey?’

‘Fine with me.’

‘You mean we get to see it working?’ Michael almost jumped up and down in his glee. ‘With the light and everything? Where’s the best place to sit?’

Father, Michael and I took seats in the stalls, a few rows from the stage. Jackson ran around the auditorium and pulled the curtains closed over the windows, so we might better see the effect of the light.

It was beautiful. The hills and trees of the backdrop stood out in sharp shadow against the sheet. Beyond, its shadow slightly lessened by distance from the sheet and closeness to the giant light behind it, the waves were a blur on the imaginary horizon.

Andrew ducked behind the sheet and began to turn the big wooden handle which controlled the rolling mechanism, and the waves began to churn. I turned to Michael. He was entranced.

‘It’s wonderful,’ he said. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘It’ll look even better with the puppets,’ I said.

‘That tree needs moving,’ Father said. ‘I’m glad they asked me to come.’

He rose and stalked towards the stage, leaving Michael staring after him in shock.

‘He’s an artist,’ I explained with a wave of the hand. ‘He can make it perfect. And he will.’

‘Now you’ve given him the time.’ Michael twisted in his seat to look at me. ‘What’s the sketchbook hunt?’

‘He’s just lost one of his old sketchbooks. It’s full of studies he needs to work on the painting for the exhibition.’

‘Narcissus, did Jackson say?’

‘The very same, and modelled by Jackson himself.’ I smiled. ‘A multi-talented bunch, are we not, Mr Bailey?’

‘And you tie them all together. How are you going to find his sketchbook?’

‘Hmm.’ I twisted my lips. ‘I don’t think I am. He’s already looked everywhere it might be. I’m just going to have to give him something else to study from.’ I turned to face him, resting my hand on his in an oh-so-friendly manner. ‘Are you familiar with the sirens?’

‘The mermaids who lure sailors to their death?’

I nodded.

‘Why, I begin to understand the peril of those poor sailors more than ever. But I presume your father hasn’t a sketchbook full of those.’

‘No, the voyage was deemed far too dangerous and the ship couldn’t get insured. However, he spent absolute months studying water and how plants look through it when you’re looking at them from the surface.’

Michael blinked.

‘How fascinating?’

‘It is, really. But mostly to him. And it was worth it, the finished painting he did was marvellous – his biggest success to date.’

‘Ah, so this is for when Narcissus is gazing at his reflection in the water?’

‘Precisely. And this missing sketchbook is holding up progress somewhat, so I need a plan. At first I thought we might be able to borrow *The Sirens* from Julia Fitzroy, but I don’t think it’ll do the trick.’

‘No?’

‘No. That’s sea water, crashing waves, and so on. This one is a calm lake. No use. The problem is that there isn’t a ready supply of placid lakes around the Leeds area. Not clear ones, at any rate.’

I nibbled on the tip of my thumb as I thought.

‘Stop doing that.’

I frowned. Then I had it.

‘Parker! Parker will help. Parker always helps.’ I grinned. ‘He has fish!’

‘I don’t quite follow you.’

‘Fish. In tanks. Big tanks, with lots of plants in. I’ll ask him to bring them in.’

‘Will he?’

‘He’ll have to.’ I rose to my feet and spun away from him, stopping only to drop into my best deep curtsy. ‘The Duke of Wellington demands it.’

‘When you put it like that, how can he refuse?’ Michael clapped, and I rose from my curtsy. ‘Bravo. Your father was right. You will make everything right again.’

‘Thank you. At least he’s stopped tearing his hair out and messing up his studio.’

‘Did you find out what Brendan Fitzroy was doing with him today?’

‘He didn’t really say.’ I frowned at the memory. It wasn’t like Father to be so evasive. ‘He was just so distraught about the sketchbook. It was all I could do to comfort him, and he was certainly in no state to be questioned.’

Michael rose and stepped towards me. Close, so I had to tilt my head back to look at him. His body was almost touching mine.

‘I don’t believe it, you know. This act you have about being coy. I know what you’re doing and I know you’re trying to seduce me.’

‘I did tell you I was,’ I pointed out. It came out sounding a bit breathless.

‘And I don’t know why you’re doing it, but it’s working.’ He bent his head closer to mine.

‘Oh?’ He was so close I could see the pores on his nose, the spaces between his eyelashes, the tiny flickers of dark blue on his irises. He smelled of soap, and I felt my arms sway towards him. He bent his head slightly closer to mine. We breathed the same air.

‘But I’m not sure I trust you.’

He almost spoke the words into my own mouth. If I moved, I could kiss him. If I licked my lips, I’d probably lick his too. I considered it, but my brain was in too much of a haze to consider anything thoroughly. The thought passed on, flitting away into the auditorium that I had forgotten existed, around and beyond several of my friends and relatives. Michael entirely filled my vision, and I prickled to be closer.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ I whispered.

But once again, our lips were destined not to meet. I heard how it had happened after, but all we knew at the time was that a great roar went up, and part of the stage was on fire. The flames had caught one of the piles of card and wood, and with the air filled with sawdust, it burned merrily. Andrew, the only person on that stage with even a modicum of common sense, had the presence of mind to run for the sand bucket to smother the flames before they spread too far.

Michael and I had run forward as soon as we became aware of what was happening, but were too late to help in any way.

‘What the hell happened?’ I shouted.

Jackson shuffled his feet and looked embarrassed.

‘I knocked the lamp. Sorry.’

I slumped down onto the nearest seat and rubbed my hands over my eyes a few times.

‘Well,’ I said, having taken a very deep breath and counted to ten. ‘Luckily we caught it quickly, and-’ I peered at the pile of sand and crispy, smoking wood. ‘There probably wasn’t too much damage done. Thank you for reacting so quickly, Andrew.’

Andrew briefly paused in glaring at Jackson to acknowledge my thanks with a nod.

‘What was in that pile – does anybody know?’

‘Mostly offcuts,’ Andrew said, and Jackson looked relieved – as well he ought.

‘That’s not so bad then. Jackie, please will you clean all this away, and I’m sure one of Parker’s handymen can help repair any damage done to the stage floor. Then you can have him, Father.’

Jackson opened his mouth to complain, but seemed to think better of it when he saw the looks on mine and Andrew’s faces.

I left them then, and the walk from the stage to the door at the back of the auditorium had never seemed so long. With every step, I repeated to myself *don’t break down, don’t break down, don’t break down*, and with every step, it seemed harder to not. Once through the doors, I sagged against the wall, straightening almost immediately when I realised that Michael had followed me.

‘Well,’ I said in an attempt at lightness. ‘To be interrupted by a loud noise when on the verge of kissing once in a day can be assigned to misfortune. Twice almost makes a person suspect foul play.’

‘I’d do it now, but I’m not sure the mood is quite right.’

‘No, you’re right.’

But I wanted him to. Or at least to hold me, but instead he remained at a distance, as though we were separated by an invisible wall. I had hoped that he would want to hold me, and would be looking for an excuse to touch me. But no, it seemed that I was not as in control of the seduction as I had previously thought.

‘For what it’s worth, you did very well,’ he said after a lengthy pause during which I refused to meet his eye.

‘Things just keep going wrong.’

‘And you’ve handled everything. You haven’t made a fuss, you haven’t shouted or hurt anyone’s feelings. You fixed things for your father, and you’ve made things right with the fire.’

I supposed he was right, for all that he was just trying to make me feel better. Not that everything was right with the fire. I had no idea what the damage would be to the stage floor,

nor how much Andrew had lost. And in spite of my attempts at Solomon-like justice, I was fairly certain Andrew would be punching Jackson later.

‘Accidents happen. Fires in theatres are common. We were lucky this was so minor. And that nobody was hurt.’

I rubbed my face roughly with my hands again. The thing of it was, that I didn’t want to tell Michael, was that with every little thing that went wrong, it felt like the play was falling out of my control. Every set back like this was a sign that I was failing to hold everything together. As things unravelled, it felt as though I did too. The feeling was a little like when you are on a hill, and there are loose rocks beneath your feet. You slip, and no matter how you try or where you step, you are sliding inexorably down.

‘That’s right, look for the positive,’ Michael said. ‘I’m sure you’ll feel better soon.’

He seemed artificially far away. As though some sort of magnetic field was repelling him from me. There was no way we could reach through it and touch one another, no matter how much we – I wanted to.

‘Right.’

I pushed myself from the wall with great resolve, and marched onwards.

‘Right? What are we doing now?’

‘I am going to see Annie and Mother, and we are going to talk about costumes.’ I paused and looked back at him. ‘You are welcome to join if you wish.’

I strode away, my skirts swinging in a manner which I imagined looked quite magnificent.

‘The show must go on, eh?’

Michael caught up with me within about three strides.

‘Always. I am a consummate professional, after all. Accidents happen, we just move on. People are idiots, we just ignore it and try to minimise the damage they can physically do. I suppose it would be frowned on if I were to keep Jackson in a cage? He is a large ape, after all.’

I stopped again then, quite abruptly.

‘That was cruel of me. He’s just a little clumsy, that’s all. He’s a lovely man. Not to women, sometimes, but generally. Well, he’s nice to me, anyway. And I don’t think he *means* to be cruel to those women. He doesn’t realise they fall in love with him.’

‘I take it he’s something of a lothario?’

I sighed.

‘It has been known. It is known. Every opening night, every closing night, every play we do. There are regulars, some drop out when they get married, some find him because they’ve been married too long.’

Michael shrugged.

‘I suppose he’s a good looking man. If you’re a woman. And he’s massive.’ He raised his elbows and hunched his shoulders. ‘In the arms, and so on. Like an ox. I might have to ask him how he does it.’

‘He’d love that.’

Michael absently flexed one of his arms, making the muscle bulge pleasantly. It wasn’t even half as large as Jackson’s arm, but that certainly wasn’t to say it wasn’t large. It was twice the size of mine, for what it was worth.

‘How did he get into the weight training? Is he ex-circus?’

I giggled at the thought of Jackie in a strong-man loin cloth.

‘He’s ex-army. He and Andrew served together. Before that, he doesn’t say much about. I know he’s had his fair share of jobs, though. Harvesting, building, that sort of thing. I’d say he’d make a fine blacksmith but I wouldn’t want him that close to fire.’

‘See, you’re joking about it already. It really wasn’t so bad.’ Michael stepped a little closer to me. ‘It could have been a lot worse, but you have at least one sensible member of your team.’

‘That’s true. I do feel a lot better about it, now the moment’s passed.’

I pouted slightly and stared up at Michael. He gave a small smile. He knew exactly what I was doing.

‘I say, I’ve been meaning to ask you,’ he said, inching towards me slightly. ‘Did you hear about Tristan Lovett?’

‘Excuse me?’ That was decidedly not what I had been expecting. I eased off my pout.

‘Lovett. His studio was broken into.’

‘I did hear.’ I frowned at him, trying to figure out what he was playing at, so didn’t sound quite so sincere as I ought have when I continued, ‘poor man.’

He looked at me queerly, and I worried he thought me callous.

‘It would be so terrible if something like that happened here,’ I continued quickly. ‘You know – well, I’ve told you – how Father’s been over his missing sketchbook. I suppose that’s one of the good things about Julia Fitzroy buying up all his old work. If we did get burgled, there’d be none of the valuable things here to steal.’

‘Hmm.’ Michael drew away slightly. ‘Although your Father would be upset, surely, by the loss of any more sketchbooks.’

‘Of course.’ I stepped away from him, too. ‘But I suppose it would be difficult to find them in the mess he has been making looking for the other one.’

‘I do wonder where it’s gone.’ Michael stepped forward again, suddenly. A large pace that brought him back into uncomfortably close proximity.

‘The sketchbook?’

‘Yes. I wonder where it could have gone. And why? Have you considered that it might have been stolen?’

The thought had crossed my mind briefly, only to be rejected almost immediately. I wasn’t prepared to acknowledge yet another potential problem with the exhibition. If it had been stolen it could only have been by one of us, and I couldn’t believe one of my friends could do something like that. I refused to believe it.

‘It seems unlikely. You’ve seen how messy his studio is. And how absent minded he is.’ I raised my chin and looked him squarely in the eye. ‘He’ll have left it somewhere. It could be here, or could be in a field somewhere. Chances are it’ll turn up in a few years when we next have a spring clean.’

‘You don’t seem so bothered about it being missing.’

‘I do not have time to worry about everything my father loses. If I did, I would never get anything done. I can’t worry every time Mother takes another drink and I can’t watch Jackson every second of the day to check he isn’t doing something foolish. Instead, I try and make things better. Like with the fish.’

‘Very neat.’ He was laughing at me. I didn’t understand why, or how it had suddenly become like this.

‘What do you mean?’

He shrugged, and looked so smug that I wanted to hit him.

‘I’m merely saying. I’m just surprised that, given the theft of Tristan Lovett’s painting, you aren’t worried. I would have thought you’d be more concerned when things started going missing in your own theatre. You can read into that what you wish. I know I shall.’

I burned.

‘You’re suggesting that I had something to do with it? With both? How dare you?’

Michael shrugged again.

‘I never said that, but it’s interesting that you did, don’t you think?’

‘I don’t know if this is how you interrogate the other people you interview – those who have lost their homes or loved ones – but I will not be spoken to like this in my own theatre.’

Michael’s expression was unreadable.

‘In Parker Davis’s theatre.’

‘In name only,’ I replied coldly. ‘But now I think you should leave.’

‘You may be right.’ He stepped backwards, and I suddenly felt cold. ‘My apologies if you are upset, Miss Thompson.’

I tossed my head and glared at him.

‘You can come back when you are prepared to apologise for what you did, rather than how I reacted to it. Good day, Mr Bailey.’

I strode away with dignity, my back straight and my head held high, leaving him standing in the hallway alone and, I daresay, looking foolish.

I made it to my study, but had barely shut the door before I began to cry.

I didn’t go and see Mother and Annie about costumes that day. It put me behind schedule, but I couldn’t face any more drama. Instead, I pleaded a headache and spent the evening alternating between boiling with rage, pacing around my bedroom, and staring blankly at walls while sitting in the corner, hugging my knees to my chest. I looked back at the articles pasted into my notebook a few times too, trying to figure out precisely what Michael was about. That he dared accuse me of having something to do with the disappearance of Father’s sketchbook was more than rude, but then to suggest I may be involved in the theft at Tristan Lovett’s studio – that was downright unforgivable.

I had tried so hard to keep everything working as normal, but it turned out that simply ignoring things didn’t always make them disappear. My head felt too small to contain the mass of mess, which spilled through every part of my life and this damned exhibition.

I was awake late into the night trying to fathom out how everything fit together with the unexpected presence of Brendan Fitzroy, but nothing came of it. My brain wouldn’t cooperate in that. Instead, it chose to dwell on how hurt I was that Michael would speak to me like that. I was hurt, and it was the feeling I could understand, so my mind stuck with it, in the comfort of pain. Sleep did not come easily, and I awoke twice as cross as I had been the previous day. Less hurt, though, for I steeled myself against being hurt. I would, I vowed, continue my seduction of Michael in spite of his rudeness. I still needed him on my side for the publicity. But once he had been seduced, I swore I would break his heart.

CHAPTER 11

In addition to her being tall, extremely beautiful and a gifted flirt, Annie is also a fair seamstress. Paired with Mother's eye for fashion, and the large amount of fabric Parker shipped in for us every six months, we did not do too badly for costumes. I had always wished we could afford a small team of staff to help, but my hope was that once we had performed for the ton, we would be able to expand.

As it was, our costumes tended to look very well on the stage, beneath the bright lights and from a distance, but did tend to be slightly botched together, with seams being where they shouldn't. Annie was very gifted in making things work under very short notice, but it had occasionally been the case that a person on stage had to make an unscripted exit to be pinned back in to their garments.

The best of our costumes came from dresses we had altered, either our own personal castoffs, or remnants of Mother's career before she found Father and Parker. Although she minded the slight drop in personal circumstances, she only mentioned it once or twice a year, or when reviews were particularly bad, or when she didn't get her own way when it came to direction.

I always enjoyed watching Annie and Mother cobble the costumes together, and I was sorry that my tears of the afternoon before had kept me from it for longer than I ought to have been. That felt like letting Bailey win, and I was damned if he was winning. Even though I didn't really know what it was that we were playing.

I found them in Mother's room, where the majority of the costumes were kept. Fabric of every imaginable colour lay over every conceivable surface. Annie was nested in the middle of it all with scissors and a beaten look, while Mother viewed the mess from her throne, her glass in her hand. An empty bottle stood beside her, and I was sure I could see the neck of another, toppled over, peeking from behind her chair.

Now the parts had been sorted it was Annie's costume, as Belinda, which had to be the most lavish in appearance, but Mother's narrator costume that must be the most cunning. And as I had predicted-

‘I will *not* be wearing a cape.’ Mother looked disgusted at the very idea. She swirled the contents of her champagne glass with menace. ‘My audience do not come to see Liberty Thompson wearing a *cape*. What on earth were you thinking, Evey?’

I sighed and sank back into the sofa. It was lumpy, as I was sitting on crumpled dresses which had been balled and discarded.

‘That the narrator is not traditionally supposed to detract from the action on stage. As you may recall I mentioned at the original read through. I did say that, you know.’

Mother arched a brow, enough to make even the meanest critic tremble. But not I. I was now made of solid rock, and would not be quailed by a mere brow.

‘Although,’ I continued, wearily. ‘I *had* feared that having you as the narrator would, by sheer force of your voice, distract from the central action you will be narrating. And.’ I added, deliberately nonchalant. ‘That was when we were considering having you offstage. Perhaps I was wrong to shelve that idea so soon.’

Mother shook her head.

‘No no no, that just won’t do.’ She leaned forward and looked at me as though I were simple. She sounded a little like she was chuckling at my foolishness when she continued, ‘I know you try hard darling, but you must remember that I do have so many more years of experience than you in the theatre.’

I was rattled.

‘I thought we weren’t allowed to mention those many years?’

Behind me, Annie giggled. Mother chose to ignore me, and tipped the remainder of her glass back.

‘Be that as it may,’ she said as she swayed slightly, and I knew we were in for trouble. Swaying while seated was never a good sign. ‘I know more about this than you, and that cannot be denied.’

Something inside me snapped.

‘You know more about getting yourself as much time centre stage as possible, Mother. I cannot argue with you there.’

I gathered my papers together in my lap and made ready to leave. There was no talking to her when she was drunk, and I had already gone further than I ought to.

‘It appals me how my child despises me so.’

‘Oh, Christ.’ I sank back into my seat. Now this had to be fixed.

Annie quickly gathered together the things she needed for Belinda's costume, and made a swift exit. She left the door open, too, which was kind of her. An "exit, pursued by a bear" seemed likely.

'After all I have done, still she defies me.' Mother wandered over to the mantelpiece, where her bottle stood, half empty. Mother's bottles were never half full. She sloshed it into the glass and it spilled over the side. She sucked her fingers before continuing. 'I give her the gift of the theatre, but she turns her back on acting, on my *dynasty*. She ignores my advice, my wisdom, and shuns my care.'

I stood to leave. I'm not sure whether I would have, but I had little hope of talking her out of this mood. Not once she had started on how much of a disappointment I was.

'No, don't go.' She reached out to me, but didn't move from the fireplace. 'I just – please don't leave me alone.'

'As you wish,' I said with a heavy sigh.

'That's what happens, isn't it? That I'll end up alone. We're all alone, when we die.'

I sank back into my seat. This wasn't likely to be over quickly.

'As I grow older, Evelyn, I become more and more and more aware of my own mortality. The lines on my face. The grey in my hair. The sagging, where once there was no sagging. Of course, childbirth did a lot of that to me.'

I closed my eyes and sat back.

'I never wanted children, you know. But they said I should – it was expected. You get married, you have children, and it's what women do, although as you know I have never aspired to be like *other* women. But now, look, my body ruined.'

She swung slightly and balanced her mouth on the rim of her glass, as though for stability.

'I'm so sorry I ruined your figure.' I said with as little expression as I was able.

'Oh, good, you're still here. For now, at least, but in the end, I am going to be alone, aren't I? They'll realise, one day, and soon probably. They'll see the cracks in my powder. The stage light won't hide it forever. There are less visitors to the dressing room every performance, did you know? I thought I could save it with Hamlet, that I could become a respected actor. But they all laughed at me.' Her face dropped, a picture of despair. 'Did you hear what they said? They were laughing when I walked on the stage. At first, when I saw it was a full house, I was pleased and I thought no, finally, it was going to go well. But they laughed. They came and they bought tickets and they queued up and waited to laugh at me.'

She wobbled and sank down to her knees, and I ran forward to catch her. We knelt together among the swathes of fabric. Her glass rolled away, dripping into the rug.

‘Oh, Evelyn, don’t you see? The acting was all I had. That’s why I can’t be Belinda. I can’t pretend to be young and beautiful anymore and I can’t have any of the good parts because they laugh at me.’

I held her close, and she sobbed into my shoulder.

‘You were wonderful as Hamlet,’ I said, completely sincere. ‘But they weren’t ready for you. Perhaps in another century, men will be able to see it for what it was, but not yet. I’m so sorry, Mother.’

She looked at me then, her big eyes glassy with tears. She was still so beautiful. So much more beautiful than I ever would be.

‘You’re aging so well,’ I said. ‘Your face has so much more character now and you are a better actress than ever.’

Mother grunted and sniffed loudly.

‘Who wants character? The world doesn’t want character. The Prince Regent has character, and his hideous wife, whatever her name is. Character is the word people use for the elderly and the ugly. Youth is what the world wants, but it runs out so fast.’ She reached up and cupped my cheek. ‘Enjoy your youth while you can, darling. Have as many men as you can and take any opportunities that come your way. Because it’ll all go, darling. And the men will dry up and you’ll be alone. Cracked and faded and alone.’

‘You aren’t alone,’ I said firmly, shaking her hand from my face. ‘I’ve seen the paintings from before I was born. You’re more beautiful than ever. Father paints you more than he ever has, doesn’t he?’

‘The lines on my face make me more interesting,’ she mumbled, but I knew it was only half-hearted. She knew he adored her, and would until he died.

‘And if one of the greatest painters in the land finds you so irresistibly lovely that he has to paint you, even while he has one of the most important commissions of his career to be getting on with, then you can’t be all that old and alone, can you?’

Mother sniffed again.

‘I suppose not.’

I squeezed her tightly, and she nestled her head against my shoulder.

‘Parker adores you, Jackson’s half in love with you and half afraid you’re so much more beautiful than he is. And while I’m alive, you won’t be alone. Nor the rest of The Liberty Troupe, either. We stay together. It’s what we’ve always done.’

And I hoped so much that it was true. But fractures were beginning to show, and tempers were fraying more than they had before. The bonds of the group had never been stretched so far, never put under so much pressure as they were with this, our biggest chance. Mother sighed gently, and I realised she was asleep. She probably wouldn't remember much, if any of this when she woke in the evening, but hopefully she would remember enough to not be angry with me about her costume. She would be wearing a cape, and that was that.

The damage done by the fire had, thankfully, been minimal. One puppet had been caught by the blaze, and while Andrew was still annoyed by this, he set to work immediately. I was on my way to see what progress he had made, when I heard noises coming from the props room. Inside I found Jackie, nursing a spectacular black eye.

'Ouch,' I said, giving him a pat on the shoulder. 'That looks impressive.'

Jackie grunted.

'I didn't hit him back. I wanted to.'

'I'm so proud of you, sweeting.' I knelt beside him, by a large pile of odds and ends he appeared to be sorting through. 'What are you doing?'

'Assisting Andrew,' Jackie said with a hiss. 'I'm looking for another puppet for that damned set.'

I knew very well we didn't have any more puppets, but wasn't about to tell Jackie that. Far more punching would ensue than I was comfortable with. Neither the Baron nor Ariel could appear on stage with black eyes or injuries.

'Ah. Well, keeps you busy I suppose.'

Jackie grunted again.

'What have you done with Benny?'

'Nothing, why?'

He shrugged.

'Just that he's not here. I was hoping he would be. He always cheers me up.'

I looked around, and sure enough, Benny was nowhere to be seen. I rose and peered behind a few of the taller piles and looked inside and behind the large wardrobe we had in there (one of Mother's which had lost a leg).

'I have absolutely no clue.' Defeated, I returned to Jackie and absently patted him on the head. 'Perhaps Andrew took him. Although God only knows why. I can't think how he'd be useful in this one.'

‘Probably did it to spite me.’ Jackie pouted, but it didn’t look quite so adorable as usual, what with the bruised face.

‘Chin up darling.’ With one last pat I made my way to the door. ‘Good luck in the search. But if you can’t find it, don’t spend too long looking. Give it half an hour, perhaps? Father will be wanting you again soon, I’m sure.’

‘Ha,’ Jackie called after me. ‘He’d better not, he turned me away earlier.’

I made my way down the corridor with a frown. Parker’s fish tanks were due the next day, but without them to work from, Father should have been concentrating on the figure of Narcissus. He couldn’t do that without Jackie posing for him, which led me to believe that he must be working on something else. I didn’t really believe those other canvases were simply spares, for all that I was trying to convince myself. I ought to have tried and take a look at them, but there hadn’t been a time of more than five minutes together where Father had been out of his studio over the past few days, and I was beginning to think I should just ask him again.

I tapped on the studio door.

‘Go away,’ was the muffled reply.

I tapped again.

‘It’s Evey, Father.’

‘I do not wish to be disturbed,’ was his panicked response.

I reached for the door handle, and rattled it. He had locked himself in. I was rattled myself. He had never done that before, not that I could remember.

‘Father?’ I rattled the handle again.

‘Evelyn, *please*.’

I couldn’t force him to open it, and I found that I couldn’t force myself to be involved in Father’s drama. Not then - our first dress rehearsal was scheduled for the next day. In spite of my hopes to the contrary, Mother was still proving mutinous about the cape. My throat felt tight and I gripped the door handle tighter as I felt myself begin to slide off balance. There was just so much at stake. My brain felt hot and my skin cold and tight. No more, no more.

After a long moment of forced calm, I managed to ease my stiff fingers from the handle and made my shaky way downstairs, to the auditorium where Andrew was still working.

I found him up a ladder, leaning perilously over the middle of the frame and reaching for one of the hooks he had screwed in there. I walked down the rows of chairs noisily before I spoke, not wanting to surprise him and cause him to lose his balance. Forget black eyes, we could never disguise a broken leg with makeup.

‘How goes it?’

Andrew climbed down the ladder and wiped his brow with one of the rags from a pile on the floor.

‘Good. If we don’t have any more fires, and Jackie doesn’t take an axe to it, I should be finished in time.’

‘Hmm.’ I leaned behind the sheet to inspect the puppets and props. ‘It looks good. Unlike Jackie.’

Andrew didn’t even look sheepish.

‘He’ll be healed in time for opening night.’

‘I daresay. But in future, if you do feel the need to beat one another, can you keep it away from the face?’

Andrew snorted with laughter.

‘But beat one another, we may?’ He leaned against the frame and gave a conspiratorial wink. ‘You think he deserved it too.’

‘I refuse to dignify that with a response,’ I said, trying to keep the smile from twitching into the corners of my lips. ‘Merely, I would not dare intercede or try and prevent you two from punching one another.’

‘That’s very magnanimous of you.’

‘Well, who am I to keep you two from your hobbies?’

Andrew smiled, and his gaze flickered from my face to over my shoulder.

‘And who am I to keep you from yours?’

‘Hmm?’ I turned, and in the doorway at the back of the auditorium stood the unmistakable figure of Michael.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, turning to leave Andrew and his irritating grin. What I had to say to Michael was best not said before an audience, anyway.

I strode between the chairs, my head high and my heart hard. He watched me every step of the way, giving a weak, hopeful-looking smile as I approached.

‘My study, I think?’

I didn’t even pause as I passed him, but I knew he would follow me. I kept my head up and my back straight as a board as we made our way briskly up the stairs.

Once in my study, I seated myself behind the desk as regally as possible. Michael dallied by the door. I raised my brow at him.

‘I have a lot to do, you know.’

He cleared his throat, and then closed the door before sitting opposite me. He shuffled the chair a few times, then, just as I was beginning to lose my patience, finally spoke.

‘I ought not have spoken to you as I did last week.’

My brow remained high.

‘No, you ought not.’

He shuffled again.

‘It was wrong of me to imply that you were in some way... involved with or... pleased by the loss of your father’s sketchbook.’

‘Yes, it was.’

He sucked his lips between his teeth briefly before he continued.

‘I see now that you are... most likely not involved in either of those things.’

‘Quite rightly.’

I thought for a moment, carefully composing my reply. We really *did* need him onsite for the duration of the exhibition’s run.

I leaned forward, never breaking eye contact.

‘Can you tell me what it was that brought about this change?’

Michael cleared his throat again, and his eyes flickered from mine, towards my bosom. He flushed red, and focussed instead on the end of my nose.

‘Further facts have come to light that – erm – that imply – that exonerate, that, erm-’

I frowned and nibbled on the end of my finger. There were no pencils to hand for me to gnaw the end off.

‘You sound like a lawyer. It’s just a sketchbook, after all. Isn’t it?’

Michael ran a hand through his hair and looked worried.

‘Do you know Lindsey Elliot?’

I chewed my finger a little harder in thought.

‘He’s in the exhibition, isn’t he?’

‘Yes. And he’s been robbed.’

I leaned back in my chair again, troubled.

‘That wasn’t in the papers this morning.’

‘No,’ Michael said, his arms folded and his brow low. ‘It’ll be in tomorrow. I heard when I was in the office.’

‘What did they take?’

‘I don’t know yet. They’ve sent someone down to interview him, if they can. Word is he’s not one to talk to the press. Your real cloistered artist.’

‘I see.’

There were, what, ten, maybe twelve artists in the exhibition. The exhibition which was taking place in my theatre. I felt powerless and overwhelmed by this new press of worry. So I did what I always do when I don’t want to think, and when I want to feel in control. I leaned forward again, standing this time and leaning right across the desk, so I was scant inches from his face.

‘And what makes you so sure this is nothing to do with me?’

Michael flushed.

‘Nothing.’

I leaned a little closer.

‘Then what are you doing here?’

Michael leaned as far back as he could, but he was hampered by the back of the chair. I was just pleased my desk was a narrow one. I wouldn’t have looked half so polished if I’d had to mount it.

I reached out and put a finger beneath his chin, gently ensuring that he remained facing me.

‘Well?’ I asked.

He looked at my lips for a few moments.

‘I don’t want you to be.’

‘Oh?’

He looked me in the eyes then.

‘And since you probably aren’t, in spite of being one of the most manipulative, clever people I’ve ever met, that means you might be in danger.’

I gently pulled his face closer to mine, so our mouths were almost touching, and tilted my head to the side. I could feel his breath, shallow though it was, on my lips.

‘You’re here to rescue me?’ I asked, in a whisper.

He nodded, his eyes half closed.

‘Hmm.’

I pushed him away and sat back down. He blinked a few times and it was all I could do not to laugh in his face.

‘I’m not sure I deserved *that*,’ he said, still pink.

‘I don’t recall hearing an actual apology,’ I said. ‘And the fact remains that you still believe me capable of great wrongs, and are here only from some misguided sense of chivalry.’

‘When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound like an apology.’

‘Well?’

He opened his mouth and then closed it again.

‘I’m not going to lie to you,’ he said, finally. ‘I don’t know what’s going on and I don’t know if you’re involved.’

He paused, awaiting a reaction from me. I said nothing, only nodded that he continue.

‘And I’m not going to tell you what I think might be happening, and I’m still going to be suspicious of you. But I need to be here to write my articles, and this is probably the best place to keep an eye on you. Either to catch you out, or to help you if anything bad happens.’

‘I see,’ I said. ‘Is that everything?’

Michael blinked several times before replying.

‘I like you flirting with me. Might as well kill three birds with one stone while I’m here.’

I smiled.

‘Then I believe we can continue much as we did before.’

‘That was a lot easier than I expected.’

I raised my hand to stay him.

‘However, I do have several stipulations. Firstly, that your coverage of our troupe and my father’s painting continues to be uniformly positive.’

Michael nodded.

‘But of course. It would be any way.’

‘Secondly, that you do not communicate any of your suspicions or any sense of threat or danger to any member of this troupe.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘And thirdly, and most importantly,’ I leaned forward again to emphasise just how important this was. ‘Regardless of any suspicions you may have, or what you believe to be going on, you will *in no way* interfere in the running of this theatre, or the production of the play in it. Because believe you me, if anything goes wrong with our performance or Father’s work, and I think you have anything whatsoever to do with it, then you will be out on your ear with as much of a beating as Jackson can give you.’

Michael looked uncomfortable.

‘I imagine that would be quite a large beating, then.’

‘It certainly would.’

‘And I imagine that your seduction of me would also cease at that moment.’

‘I’m glad I’ve made myself clear.’ I leaned back again, this time with a smile. ‘So, now we have all that sorted, we can get on. You must be a few days behind with your latest article. Is there anything that would be useful for you to focus on?’

‘I’d like to focus on you,’ he said with as coy a smile as a gentleman can give. ‘But if you are busy then don’t worry, I’m sure I can make something up.’

‘I would hope you would make most of it up, since I am supposed to be a man.’

CHAPTER 12

Two weeks remaining.

Tragedy was happily averted this week in The Liberty Theatre, when fire ravaged one corner of the stage. The flames were doused by the quick-thinking Andrew Millet, the theatre's technician and one of its key players. Readers may recall Millet from his arresting performance as Tamino, in The Liberty Troupe's sell out adaptation of The Magic Flute, which went down a daring, non-operatic route.

Minimal damage was done to sets and props, although the cause of the blaze remains unknown. Director and producer Evelyn Thompson, nephew of esteemed artist Julius Thompson, assured this reporter that rehearsals continue unabated, and that all is still on schedule for the opening performance in only two weeks' time.

In spite of my bravado with Michael, I was worried. I was always worried two weeks before a new production opened, and indeed, I was always worried, a little bit, about something or other. Yet this time, I could not put it from my mind, or laugh it off as nerves. The report about Lindsey Elliot's burglary appeared in *The Advocate* the day after Michael's visit, and covered half of the third page. A smaller piece ran inside *The Mercury*, and *The Intelligencer* only deemed it worthy of a meagre paragraph near the back. But regardless of how important the newspapers deemed the robbery, I could not shake the pulse of fear that came to my throat each time I saw another strange workman a little too close to my father's studio.

Elliot had lost three paintings, a source had told reporters. Nothing else seemed to have been taken, and the subject of the paintings remained a mystery. *The Advocate* even made the link between that and Tristan Lovett's burglary, reminding the reader that both artists had pieces commissioned for the upcoming exhibition. I could only imagine how Augustine must have been feeling. I made a mental note to speak to Parker about security around the theatre.

It was with great apprehension that I waited in the theatre for the rest of the Troupe to arrive. I had banned Michael from attending, preferring instead that he see the performance

on opening night with every other audience member. I didn't need him sniffing around at such a crucial point of production. Andrew's shadow set having been pushed back to cover the charred wood left by the fire, the front of the stage was bare of all but two large columns, painted on cloth, hung one on either side. These were our *Midsummer Night's Dream* columns, and Andrew had campaigned that they needed to be altered for their new, prestigious use. Time permitting, I had allowed that they could be painted with an ivy vine, but for the moment they hung as bare stone.

'Do you know, this might not be all that bad.'

Mother entered stage left, twirling and flapping her cape like a giant crow. She had refused to be fitted for it, and given that the only place it might not fit was her neck, I let her win that battle.

'You like the cape?' I asked, suspicious.

'I wouldn't go that far, darling. But have you noticed how pale and regal I look in it? I should like to wear all black more often, you know, but one can't do that without being asked if one is in mourning.'

'I'm sure that will be a great consolation to you, the next time somebody dies,' I said. 'So you will wear it on stage?'

Mother spun one more time and the cape flared around her ankles, revealing the cyan skirts she wore beneath.

'I still think I could have come up with a better solution,' she said in her most patronising tones. 'But given the time constraints and so on, I can see why you thought it better to take the easier option.'

'How kind of you to humour me. Is everybody else back there?'

Mother ushered the rest of the troupe, including a reluctant Jackie, who was done up in jewel-coloured satin and clearly felt that it was a little too feminine for his liking, on to the stage. I felt a flutter in my stomach, and I wasn't sure if it was pride that it seemed to all be coming together, or nerves. We had failed to have a successful rehearsal yet, so it was probably the latter.

I stood, and climbed the stairs to the stage.

'I needn't tell you how little time we have left before the exhibition,' I began, and Mother rolled her eyes. 'I'm sure I've told you enough already. But given the shortness of the time, we will be having a dress rehearsal every day until the day before we open. These will be at 3pm every day, and they will not be optional. I assume you understand me?'

Andrew scratched his head and Annie examined her nails. I sighed.

‘No scripts, please.’

Jackie looked shifty, and I noticed a piece of paper peeping out from his sleeve. The fool only had three lines in the whole production.

‘Hold on.’ I counted players and tried to match them up with parts. ‘Where’s Parker?’

Annie raised her hand as the others stifled yawns.

‘He sends his apologies. Workmen.’ She shrugged and rolled her eyes.

I briefly imagined him being hit around the head with a plank of wood.

‘Priorities, priorities,’ Mother muttered. I was still annoyed with her about the cape, and so decided not to be riled by Parker’s disappearing act. Annie narrowed her eyes and scowled at her. She was very protective of Parker.

‘At least the theatre will be standing as we perform. Unless you don’t think that’s a priority?’

Mother looked ready to snap back, but I wasn’t about to let this dissolve into a sniping match. These two were professionals – it could last all afternoon.

‘And he has one line and minimal direction,’ I said quickly. ‘I’m sure we shall suffice. Right then, places, please.’

The players disappeared off stage, Andrew dimmed the lights, and we began.

It wasn’t awful, I realised. That’s not to say that it wasn’t bad overall, and particularly awful in the places where Jackie’s script fell out of his sleeve and when Mother started flinging her arms out and swinging her hips to make her cape look like a ringing bell. But for a first dress rehearsal, it was no worse, and no better than any other we had ever had.

I felt better, a lot better, and as the rehearsal wore on I began to allow myself a little respite from constant worrying. This would suffice. We had things to work on, little tweaks and big ones which would be corrected and adjusted by the opening night. The important thing was that we had a play, and no matter what happened, the curtain would rise before the Duke of Wellington.

This rehearsal was also the first complete run through of Andrew’s shadow set. Once the light behind the screen was lit, Jackie edged back as far as he could, almost disappearing off the stage.

It was beautiful. I could see Father’s input on the shapes, but the movement was all Andrew’s. Of course, there were things which would need improving, there were slight hitches here and there where the mechanism didn’t move quite as smoothly as it ought, and gaps where more scenery would come later. But beautiful nonetheless. It was like watching a dream I wished I could have. If only my nights consisted of heavenly battles played out with

light and shade, rather than different scenarios in which the play was ruined and I was unable to do anything about it.

CHAPTER 13

I left them with orders that they were all to assemble at three o'clock sharp the next day, by which time I would have gone through my sheaf of notes and have feedback and changes. Mother and Jackie already looked mutinous, and I wasn't looking forward to the battles which would be waged over the next fortnight. But I would win the war, I was sure. Wellington would be proud of me.

With a lighter heart than I'd had for days, I skipped down the hall, around dust sheets and ladders and paint pots. Then I stopped. It was deserted. I frowned at the mess. Not even Parker was there, tutting. All was silence. It was wonderful.

I set off at a skip once more, pirouetting around obstacles now I realised I would not be seen. I hurdled a stack of planks on to the bottom step, and took the rest of the stairs two at a time. As I rounded the corner to pass Father's studio, I stopped abruptly. I wasn't alone anymore. Michael was there, crouching by the door, his eye to the key hole. He stared up at me, and without even considering it, I kicked him. He glowered, and I half expected him to hiss at me. I grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him to his feet, propelling him towards my study with a strength I didn't know I possessed. He was so surprised that he just followed me, not even resisting.

I pushed him into the room and slammed the door. There was a loud crack and I heard dust falling outside.

'What the hell do you think you were doing?'

I was so angry that I couldn't even shout. It was quiet and calm. Menacing. Perhaps this was the great rage I had been saving for all these years.

Michael had the good sense to appear sheepish, but unfortunately for me, it made him look utterly adorable. The wave of hair fell over his eyes when he bowed his head, and when he pressed his lips together in an approximation of anguish, a dimple formed in his right cheek. He mumbled something, but I couldn't hear. I wasn't watching his lips, because I was distracted by just how long his eyelashes were. And that, of all the things, made me more angry than ever.

‘Don’t you *dare* be adorable while I’m angry with you,’ I snapped. ‘Sit down and stop looking like an ill-treated puppy.’

He gave a shout of laughter, and settled himself comfortably on the edge of my desk.

‘Are you, in all seriousness, trying to seduce me while you’re angry with me?’

‘No.’ I sounded like a petulant child. Damn him.

‘You’re not angry at all then, and this is just you trying to seduce me?’ He folded his arms and looked unbearably smug. ‘Even I know that anger doesn’t tend to go hand in hand with flirting. You must be an expert to pull that one off.’

‘I’m not trying to seduce you,’ I ground out through gritted teeth. ‘I’m merely stating the obvious.’

‘You are?’ He looked genuinely surprised. ‘You think I look adorable?’

‘Looked adorable,’ I amended hastily. ‘Looked. You were dimpling.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Your cheek – look, I’m not here to talk about you being adorable.’

‘That’s a shame.’ Michael smiled and had the audacity to dimple again. I glared at him and he hastily schooled his features. ‘But it cannot be denied or undone. You think I look adorable.’

I crossed the little room in two strides and stood in front of him. I leaned forward, planting one hand on either side of him on the desk. He had to lean back to give me room.

‘Am I making you uncomfortable?’ I asked quietly. ‘Am I infringing on your space?’

He didn’t say anything, just swallowed. Lifting one of my hands, I ran it over his shoulder, tracing the front of his lapel. I slipped my hand beneath his jacket, enjoying the warmth I could feel radiating from beneath his shirt. I couldn’t get distracted though, not even when I could feel the shallow rise and fall of his chest. It was a heady sensation. He could have stopped me any time he wished, but he didn’t.

I traced patterns over his shirt with light fingertips, before leaning in more closely.

‘Am I...’ I whipped the notebook out from his inside pocket. ‘Am I invading your privacy?’

I stepped back then as he made a swipe for the notebook, but I held it out of reach.

‘What were you doing outside my father’s studio?’

‘Give me that back.’

‘What were you doing?’

‘You know I could take that from you if I wanted to.’

I rolled my eyes.

‘Of course you could, but you won’t do that. Because in spite of being a *treacherous*, *spying*, and quite possibly *thieving* blaggard, you aren’t...’

‘Actually that bad?’ Michael finished for me.

I sighed, and threw the notebook back to him. He held it for a moment, rubbing his thumb over the cover before pocketing it.

‘If I don’t tell you, are you going to have Jackson beat it out of me?’

I shrugged.

‘Tempting though that thought is, I’d just settle for barring you from the theatre. Then it’s your choice if Jackie beats you or not.’

‘Firm but fair.’ Michael rubbed a rough hand through his hair. ‘I think it’s quite obvious what I was doing, but I can see that you wish me to say it, so I shall oblige you. I was attempting to spy on your father by looking through the keyhole on his studio door. And I was doing a particularly poor job of it, frankly.’

‘Hmm. What were you spying on him for?’

‘I wanted to know what he was up to,’ he said simply. I suddenly recalled with uncomfortable clarity that I had wished the halls were empty of workmen so that I could do precisely the same thing. But if one could spy on anybody without guilt, then it was surely a member of one’s own family. And *my* interest stemmed purely from a place of love.

‘Where were all the workmen? Why was the hall empty? What did you do?’

Michael seemed to relax then, leaning back on the desk with a dimpling smile.

‘Suspicion, thy name is Evelyn. As it happens, I didn’t do anything. Your father cleared the halls for me.’

I sat on the desk beside him, plonking myself down with little grace and a hefty sigh.

‘What?’ I asked wearily.

‘I was looking for Parker, as it happens, and was not intending to do anything so nefarious or, frankly, unnecessary as squinting through a key hole. There were men everywhere, and one of them was hammering something, and it went on for several minutes. I’m surprised you couldn’t hear it, actually, it was very loud and went on for a very long time.’

‘Get to the point.’

‘The point is that your father stormed out of his room, screamed blue murder at the workmen for disturbing him, and they scarpered.’

‘No.’ I twisted round to face him. ‘He never did that.’

‘He did.’

Michael was an expert at looking smug.

‘So you decided to risk angering him further by spying on him?’

‘Precisely. He never struck me as the sort of man who would be riled to anger so quickly. Is he?’

‘No,’ I felt bound to admit. I couldn’t quite bring myself to tell him that I’d have resorted to spying at that point as well. After all my high spirits at the rehearsal going adequately well, I felt drained. ‘I have been a little worried about him, actually. The stress seems to be getting to him. He only got the fish this morning and I don’t think he was very pleased with my solution.’

‘The carpet outside his door was quite wet.’ Michael gestured towards his knees, and the dark, damp patches that adorned them.

‘Well that serves you right.’ I rubbed my forehead with my hand, screwing my eyes up as tightly as I could to try and make everything outside my own brain disappear.

I felt Michael’s hand on my arm, and with very little pressure on his part, I leaned my head against his shoulder.

‘I’m worried about him,’ I said quietly, wringing my frustrations into my skirt, which was twisted and creased beneath my hands.

Michael smoothed my hair down and rested his cheek against the top of my head.

‘I’m worried about it all,’ I said. ‘But especially him.’

‘I’m sure he’s just worried too. But in just over a fortnight, this will all be over, remember.’

‘I suppose.’ But two weeks seemed an insurmountable amount of time.

Michael stirred against my hair, and I couldn’t tell if he’d kissed me or not. We were closer than we’d ever been, really, with the sides of our bodies pressed against one another. His fingers drew circles and swirls on my arm. Our mouths were so far apart, though. It would be a lot of effort to lift my head. And then, of course, once we faced one another, he would know of my intentions and could decide whether or not to accept or reject me. I wasn’t sure I could bear it if he rejected me.

Then I realised that I was not being myself. I had never worried about my kisses being rejected before. If they were, they were, and while I was pleased to say that had happened only very rarely, it was a matter of pride to me that I was always in control of situations like that. I didn’t care, and that was what had always defined any intimate encounters I’d had in the past.

Even with that boy from Sheffield, almost ten years ago now, who had told me he was the second cousin of a Duke. He'd spoken more properly than anyone I'd met before - at that time - and I hadn't let him cow me with his supposed superiority. Instead I'd let him kiss me and skipped away with his watch chain, pressed upon me as a token of his affection. I think I still have it somewhere.

I didn't like how I was feeling with Michael. It was a symptom of the stress, it had to be. I was going to break his heart.

I lifted my head suddenly then, and dropped my crumpled skirt, instead using my free hands to cup Michael's face and draw him to me.

I kissed him gently, but confidently, and while at first his lips were hard and unyielding, within moments he had relaxed and was kissing me back, winding one of his hands into my hair and holding me closer with the other. I felt myself begin to soften and melt into his embrace. I couldn't do that. I had to be in control. I drew back slightly and caught his bottom lip between my teeth, gently dragging them over the soft skin. He moaned quietly, and I couldn't resist placing one last kiss on the corner of his mouth.

'That's not it, is it?' He leaned in once more, pulling me closer.

I stroked his cheek with a lingering hand. Half seduced, he looked more adorable than ever.

'I'll see you later,' I promised.

'I can't go anywhere for a while.'

He looked so concerned I couldn't help but fall a little deeper.

'I'll see you later,' I said again, and left him sitting on my desk while I went to speak to my father.

I waited outside the door. Perhaps it would help if I pretended it was Mother I was going to see. I was an expert at dealing with Mother when she was in a temper. I had years of experience in that. But Father - now, there was something entirely different. I screwed my face up as I tried to remember the last time he had been remotely perturbed. Or that I hadn't known what to say to him. There was that incident the other day when Mother had stormed out of his room and he had refused to show me the painting of her, which had been so out of character. And Mother's affair, of course, but it has always annoyed me how calmly he had taken that news. It annoyed Mother as well. Perhaps that was why she'd had the affair in the first place - to try and inspire him with a passion beyond quiet, unceasing devotion.

I tapped the door, and then grasped the handle. Locked. Somehow, in this entirely surprising situation, I wasn't surprised. I hammered then, loudly.

'Father?' I used my best, most authoritative stage voice. 'Father, I need to speak to you.'

Silence.

'Father.' Short of stamping my foot, I don't think I could have sounded more demanding. I heard a shuffling noise, then the key turned in the lock and he peered out. His hair stood on end, wildly, and he looked close to tears. So sad, I almost embraced him, but I don't think that would have suited my purpose.

'Er, Evelyn.'

'Yes.' I put my foot in the doorway so he couldn't shut me out. Like a frightened rabbit, he trembled slightly and appeared ready to bolt at any moment. 'May I come in?'

I didn't wait for an answer, and stepped straight through the doorway, pushing past him into the studio. It was even messier than I had last seen it. Piles of books still stood across the floor, with most of the stacks knocked down and kicked and spread in arcs now. Before the windows stood two enormous fish tanks, the murky water casting a pall across the whole room, keeping the dim light in constant motion as it washed over the mess.

'What are you doing?'

I turned to look at Father, as he stood in the doorway. He wilted against the frame, refusing to meet my eye. He cast a desperate look over his shoulder into the hallway, as though considering flight. Surely not.

'Father?'

He shrugged.

'Painting. Doing work. Got to get Narcissus finished.'

'I'm worried about you.' I said this in a very matter of fact way. I wasn't willing to inject any more emotion into the room. Father's eyes were watering suspiciously.

'Oh.'

'I want you to tell me what's going on.'

'Nothing.' He swayed slightly, and with a sigh of great resignation, closed the door slowly.

'Father.'

'There's just... paintings.'

'How many?'

'Two.' He shifted from foot to foot, and wouldn't meet my eye.

‘Father.’

‘Three. There are three.’

Now it was out in the open, he looked relieved.

‘But you can’t tell anybody,’ he said quickly.

‘Why?’ Father always told me about his paintings. I was practically his manager.

‘It’s a secret commission. I can’t tell anybody. If I do,’ he shrugged, then his attention was caught by a teal smudge of oil over his wrist.

‘Then?’

‘Oh. Then I don’t get paid. My name is blackened and I will never sell another painting again.’

Of course. The world of painting was surely second only to the theatre in its high drama.

‘What can you tell me?’

‘I don’t have to tell you anything, do I?’

A genuine question.

‘No. But you want to. And if you’re going to tell anybody, you know it’s best if you talk to me.’

‘That’s true.’ He gave a small smile, and I realised that I pitied him – that I have always pitied him, and I felt awful. It’s a terrible thing to not be able to look up to one’s parents.

I made my way over to the chaise longue and patted it in as reassuring a manner as I could.

‘Sit here, then nobody will hear us.’

As Father passed me, I chanced a glare at the door. I didn’t trust Michael not to try his spying game again. Hopefully the lingering effects of our kiss meant he still wasn’t fit to be seen in public.

We sat in silence for a few moments, Father clearly hoping I had forgotten why we were there.

‘Well?’ I prompted. ‘What are the three paintings?’

‘Narcissus.’

‘Yes.’

‘And there’s one of your mother.’

‘Of course. The one she hated.’ There was always a painting of my mother.

‘Well, yes. And... another,’ he finished.

‘And what is the other?’

Father took a deep breath and chewed on his lip.

‘A commission. From Julia Fitzroy.’

‘And that’s the one you can’t talk about?’

‘No. I mean, yes, I’m not allowed.’

‘On pain of blackened reputation, and doubtless snapped paintbrushes, to boot.’ I raised a brow, and Father turned to me then, panic in his swimming eyes.

‘It isn’t funny, Evelyn. These people are powerful, aren’t they? They own everything, the Fitzroys do. So if they say we can’t – I can’t tell anybody, then nobody can know. It isn’t an option. And that’s even before they see the painting – if it’s not good enough then that’s the same thing, isn’t it.’

I took his hand then, to try and calm us both down. I felt a bit sick to see my father being treated in this fashion.

‘Could you not have turned it down? We don’t really need the money – there’ll be other patrons, I’m sure. Especially once Narcissus is shown.’

Father shook his head sadly.

‘Not got the option, same thing. Never work again. So you see,’ he gave a heavy sigh. ‘I’ve got no choice. And the worst thing, Evey, is that they want it by the exhibition as well.’

‘Why ever for?’

Father shrugged again, and sunk into his loose collar like a roosting chicken into its feathers.

‘But even so, you only need to work on the two – the commission and Narcissus. The painting of Mother can wait.’

He looked faintly appalled by the idea, and for the first time in as long as I remember, he seemed to grow into his spine once more, and his shoulders perceptibly straightened.

‘It’s all or nothing, Evelyn. If I don’t finish those paintings in the next two weeks then I won’t have a career, and that’s all there is to it.’

I was so startled by his show of mild vehemence that I decided not to argue.

‘Can you finish them?’ I asked.

Father shrank again.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps, if I never sleep again.’

‘Show me?’

‘Not the commission.’

‘As you wish. But the others. Perhaps I can help, somehow.’

Not with painting – my brushwork was clumsy at best – but with reassurance, I could certainly be of assistance.

Father nodded, and scurried over to the corner of his studio. I followed, surprised and pleased that he was allowing me access to his work again. While he shuffled the canvases propped against the wall, I surveyed Narcissus. He still lacked definition in the muscles in his back and shoulder – my favourite part of a man, as it happens. But there were the beginnings of depth in the water, shadows of reeds, the glimmer of fish.

‘You’ve worked this in fast.’ I gestured to the corner of the painting, where light seemed to ripple and reflect. Father grunted and straightened, a canvas in hand.

‘It’s not ideal,’ he said. ‘That water isn’t right. There’s just no movement to it, and those fish? Not showy enough.’

‘But so useful given the time scales,’ I finished firmly. ‘And there’ll be no speaking like that in front of Parker. You know how proud he is of his fish. It was very kind of him to lend you them.’

Father mumbled something about Parker wanting to keep the theatre going and golden geese, which I chose to ignore.

‘How long until you finish?’

Father screwed his eyes up into even smaller slits and squinted at the picture.

‘A week?’

‘That’s not so bad.’

‘Maybe more.’

‘And that one?’ I reached for the canvas he held, and he instinctively drew back from me.

‘Ah.’ With great reluctance, he propped it gently onto the edge of his easel.

‘Oh.’

It wasn’t what I was expecting, although I don’t know what that was. Father’s paintings of Mother tend to be highly decorative and floral. They involve cherubs, winged creatures, vines of flowers and roses. Mother is usually draped in swags of fabric, reclining against sofas or trees, or flying through the air or floating in water. It was no wonder she had hated this one.

Here, she was dressed in a gentleman’s garb. She wasn’t even looking out of the painting, nor up to some heavenly host, instead only her profile was visible to the viewer. Her head was bent, and she peered intently at the skull in her hands. It was mostly line at the moment, with the stark dark blue of the background being most of what Father had painted so

far. The clothes had most of their black in them, but the detail of the face, skull and hands was still to be completed.

‘Goodness me,’ I said quietly. ‘She’s Hamlet.’

And she was, and it was perfect. Or it would be. I think I understood why he refused to stop working on it. Even in line only, she was questioning her own mortality. It was unsettling to me – I could only imagine how unsettling she would have found it.

‘How long do you need?’ I asked.

Father sighed behind me.

‘Not so long as I’d like. Every line here, every brush stroke, it speaks to me. It’s going down perfectly. For the first time in my life, the paint is obeying my every thought, and this is how I pictured it. I can never paint how I picture it. Not like this. There’s always something missing. But this time –’

‘This time, it’s Mother.’

Without all of the drama, and the beauty – although she was starkly beautiful still – this was Mother in her most basic form. She was an actor, and she lived what she acted. This wasn’t the homage Father usually painted. This was love unblinded by adoration.

‘She’s coming round to it,’ he said, shifting from one foot to the other. ‘Although she won’t look at it, I think she understands it better now.’

‘And the third?’

Father opened his mouth to refuse questions, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm.

‘I know you can’t give me details. But how much time do you need?’

With one last, reverent, lingering glance at Hamlet, Father packed it away behind the other canvas, which was still covered with a sheet. It slipped slightly, revealing one bright yellow corner.

‘Two weeks. More. I just – I don’t want to paint it. I don’t feel it, it doesn’t feel right to me. Every stroke I take with my brush, it mocks me, it calls to me that I should be working on Hamlet. Or even Narcissus.’ Father rubbed his face roughly and slumped back against the wall. ‘It drains me, this one. I feel tired when I work on it.’

‘I see.’

I took Father’s arm and led him back to the chaise longue.

‘What have you been working on this morning?’

‘Bits. Not much. I just... I couldn’t.’

It was as I expected. Overwhelmed by pressure, Father had ground to a halt. Following a few moments of thought, I borrowed Father’s notebook and drafted a schedule for the next

fortnight. Every day was much the same – mornings were dedicated to the secret commission – to get it out of the way for the day. Afternoons, when light was best, were mostly for Narcissus, which would be finished soonest anyway, then the early evenings were for Hamlet, to make use of the last of the light.

Father pouted, but agreed. It was time for Narcissus – only for an hour, but every minute counted at this stage.

‘But I can’t bear staring into those tanks anymore.’

I promised to find Jackson forthwith and send him to model. It was a much happier father that I left in that murky studio than had unwillingly met me only ten minutes before. Well, perhaps not quite happy. But a lot less fractious.

Michael was sitting on one of the steps, waiting for me. I waited until the door had closed and I was a few steps away from him to speak.

‘That’s a respectful distance,’ I said, lightly. ‘And your knees have dried.’

‘I wasn’t listening.’ Michael frowned. ‘You’re going to tell me what he said.’

I laughed at that.

‘I don’t know where you got that idea,’ I said with a smile as I pulled him to his feet.

‘Well, I might tell you some. But I need to think about it first. About what I feel you need to know.’

‘That’s hardly fair.’

‘What’s there to be fair about? You won’t tell me your secrets, and you think I might be up to something nefarious. The only reason I’m allowing you to remain here is because I want good publicity.’

‘And the rest.’ Michael patted his lips gently. ‘Which I am entirely supportive of, by the way. More of that, I can handle more of that.’

I leaned forward and kissed him softly on the cheek. I felt his stubble against my lips. He reached to pull me closer but I stepped out of his reach.

‘We all can, but unfortunately now is not that time.’

‘Tease.’ But he smiled, and dimpled, and I wondered which one of us he was referring to.

‘Now go away. You can come back tomorrow if you like, but I have a lot of work to do. I can’t do it with you distracting me.’

‘By being adorable? No, I suppose not. It’s a wonder I manage to get any work done myself.’

He caught my hand and bowed over it, brushing his lips against my palm.

‘Until tomorrow.’

He left me with another smile, and I watched him as he descended the stairs, and disappeared around the corner.

It took me a few moments to remember where I was supposed to be going and what I was supposed to be doing. I shook my head at myself, to clear away the heavy dregs of lust which still hung about my mind. Foolishness. He was just a man, after all. They were all built the same, so he wasn’t anything special.

I checked my watch, and reasoned that as it was almost five o’clock, Jackie would most likely be the kitchen.

I made my way down the back stairs, and almost tripped over Annie.

‘Oh my, did I kick you?’

She was curled on one of the steps, her long limbs folded into a neat parcel which nestled against the wall. She nodded.

‘I’m so sorry, darling.’

She nodded again, and I decided that both Jackie and Father would have to wait. I seated myself down on the step and put my arm around her.

‘Would you like to talk about it?’

‘No,’ came the sulky reply.

‘Sure?’

She nodded, but not a moment later burst out with-

‘Stupid Jackson.’

I frowned. ‘What’s he done now?’

‘Stupid Jackson,’ she mumbled again.

‘He is very stupid,’ I agreed. ‘But any particular reason why this time?’

‘Nothing. It’s nothing.’ She sniffed loudly.

‘Where is he? Father needs him for modelling.’

Annie rose swiftly and mumbled something that sounded like “kitchen”. I let her go. I knew what it would be. It was always the same.

I found Jackie, as predicted, at the kitchen table. He was leaning back in his chair, his boots on the table. The remains of a feast lay before him, from bread crumbs to chicken bones, and the large flagon that stood in the midst of it all. They were not the only things on the table though, as perched, one either side of Jackie’s boots, were two blondes.

I had never seen them before, so I could only assume they were new. Both were terribly pretty, and couldn’t have reached twenty yet. The old dog.

‘Good evening, Jackie,’ I chirped as I entered. He jumped slightly, and after a moment’s pause, took his boots from the table. I smiled. ‘And ladies.’

I strolled over and laid a nonchalant kiss on Jackie’s head. The blondes exchanged looks, and I hid my smile by busying myself by the sink. Come to think of it, I could barely remember eating earlier. My stomach gurgled and I made my way to the pantry, seeking out any bread Jackie might have left, and the ham I had bought a few days before.

I returned to find the kitchen empty of blondes but for Jackie, whose own golden head was raised to reveal a petulant pout.

‘What did you do that for?’

I shrugged. ‘You can do better. Or go after them if you’re that bothered.’

Jackie leaned further back in his chair, and returned his boots to the edge of the table.

‘I’m not so bothered. They chirp to each other all the time. It’s really quite boring, come to think of it.’

‘A perfect tableau ruined by sound. Poor Jackie. Perhaps it’s for the best.’

‘You could be right.’

‘Oh.’ Annie appeared in the doorway. ‘So they’ve gone, have they?’

Jackie sat up a little straighter at the sound of her voice, but didn’t turn his head. I took a good look at her. Tall as she was, she was slender as a reed, and quivered slightly as though in a breeze, as she stood in the doorway. No, scratch that, she was like a violin string – long, taut and tight, vibrating with anger as though a bow were being pulled across her.

‘Evey scared ‘em off,’ Jackie said, seemingly unaware of the passion in the doorway.

I nodded and took a large bite of my sandwich. Probably better to stay quiet for this one.

‘I wish,’ Annie said, ‘That I could visit the kitchen in *my own home*, without being forced to endure the company of... of ladybirds such as those.’

Clearly Jackie had come to the same conclusion as me. He remained quiet, but looked a little frightened.

‘That I cannot even eat – and I need to eat, Jackson – without being forced to sit through the inconsequential chatter of your, of your *whores*, is frankly, untenable.’

I don’t think Jackie knew what that meant.

‘And they were sitting on the table. On the *table*, Evey. And heaven only knows where they’d been.’

Annie trembled even more.

‘Well? Aren’t you going to say something, Jackson?’

Slowly, and with great reluctance, Jackie twisted in his chair to face her.

‘If you didn’t like it, why didn’t you say?’ he asked.

‘I never like it.’ Annie’s lips shook and she was so pale she seemed to glow a little in the darkness of the doorway.

Jackie frowned, opened his mouth, and then closed it again. Annie continued.

‘And I think it’s appalling that you’re wasting time with such *impures*, when you should be learning your lines. You’re going to ruin it for us, and I shan’t have it.’

‘I don’t think I understand.’

Annie gave an angry squawk.

‘You’re so stupid, Jackson. Why are you always so stupid?’

And with that damning proclamation, she turned on her heel and marched up the stairs.

Jackie stared at me.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘And chances are you never will, darling. She’s angry because she doesn’t like seeing you with all those girls.’

Jackie frowned.

‘They do get in the way a bit. But it isn’t distracting me – I’ve learned my lines now. Well, more. Mostly. I know most of them.’

‘In the right order?’ I teased.

‘But surely you should be more worried about her.’ Jackie leaned forward and regarded me with the air of a concerned father. ‘She’s been hanging about those builders a lot, you know. Flirting. I don’t like it.’

‘I’m sure you don’t, but she’s learned all her lines so you’d better not shout at her about it.’ I popped the last piece of bread into my mouth and chewed slowly. ‘But perhaps it’d be best if you kept your liaisons to a minimum until after opening night, what do you think?’

‘I suppose. But she should do the same.’ He thumped the table with his fist. ‘And there’s another thing. I don’t see what right she’s got to call them those names, do you? We’re in the theatre, for Christ’s sake. This is what we do. It’s what she does.’

I choked.

‘God, don’t tell her that, will you? Annie is... choosy. You aren’t.’

‘I don’t have to choose,’ Jackie said smugly. ‘They choose me.’

‘And none of them will if we’re blackballed by the Duke of Wellington because my Baron and my Belinda are at one another’s throats. Even though they should be. Forget that. Just learn your lines.’

Jackie rose wearily.

‘Fine. I’ll do it now.’

‘After you’ve seen Father, actually.’

‘What? But I-‘

‘Ponder what has just happened as you stare at your own reflection.’ I patted him on the back and led him out of the kitchen. ‘See if you can use the time to come to a full understanding of Annie’s mind.’

He left me to go to Father, to make the most of the last scheduled hour. It was strange, but I didn’t feel quite so worried now that I knew Father was being blackmailed into producing secret paintings to unrealistic deadlines. It made things only a little clearer, but the most important thing was that he wasn’t lying to me anymore. Father being worried about his work was something I was used to. When he brought me a problem I could generally provide him with a solution. It was being powerless to help that hurt me.

So perhaps it was selfish, and more likely foolish, but I felt a little lighter for the rest of that day, and allowed myself the luxury of pretending that everything was well, if only for those few hours.

CHAPTER 14

Rehearsals continue apace as the countdown of days until the Duke's exhibition nears single figures. With less than two weeks to go until the great unveiling of Augustine's work, the Liberty Theatre appears to be undergoing a phoenix-like transformation. It rises, in glorious splendour from dust sheets and crumbling plaster. Julius Thompson and his piece for the exhibition remain shrouded in mystery, and this reporter has been unable to breach the locked studio door to glimpse what will surely be a masterpiece.

Parker Davis, manager of the troupe and owner of the theatre, spoke to me and confirmed that everything was going as well as he could hope in both restorations and rehearsals. Mr Davis will have more reason than might be supposed to be proud on the night of the performance; his daughter Annie Davis will be taking a starring role of Belinda.

It wasn't going well. Mother hurled the newspaper from the stage, and the tempestuous swirls and flutters of her cape only added to her menace. I had to admit, she had really mastered that cape, and her use of it was adding an unexpected flourish to the narrator's role. It seemed to enhance the action on the stage, rather than distract from it. I hadn't told her that yet though.

'You need to speak to him, Evelyn.'

'Happily.' I kicked one of the chairs so I could rest my feet on its seat more comfortably. 'Why?'

Mother shook her head in disbelief before gliding and ruffling down the stage steps and towards me, like a thwarted, dark angel.

'He's said *she's* got the starring role. *Her.*' She hissed like a viper and pointed at Annie, where she stood on the stage, pointedly ignoring Jackie.

'He's just got confused,' I said, airily. 'As she appears to be the main character.'

'He was at the read through.' With a swoop of her cape, like a bird's wing, Mother sat beside me. 'He heard the lines. He heard the parts.'

'He'll have remembered it wrong.'

‘It isn’t the starring role, is it?’

‘The role I initially offered you, do you mean? The one of the main character? No.’

I shouldn’t have been baiting her, but the truth of it was that I was in a foul mood.

‘No, you’re right, I made the distinction where you didn’t. I made the right choice. No doubt about that.’ She nodded her head firmly, before leaning in to whisper to me. ‘And I didn’t like that he put that bit in about her being Parker’s daughter. It makes it sound as though this place reeks of nepotism.’

I rolled my eyes at that.

‘In the troupe brought fame by association with your husband’s artwork, and in the production directed by your daughter. Oh yes, he should have mentioned that instead.’

‘I can see there’s no talking to you this afternoon. You aren’t making any sense.’ She rose like a flapping crow and swooped back to the stage. ‘I brought the troupe to fame,’ I heard her add quietly.

‘Can we get started?’ I called, clapping my hands. ‘Where the hell is Parker?’

No answer, but all but Annie sighed.

‘Oh, he’s never coming. Can’t we cast someone else instead? Or cut out Sir Plume?’

Mother folded her arms as she perched atop her narrator’s box.

‘Sir Plume is an integral part of the plot,’ Annie bit back. ‘And you know he’ll be marvellous.’

‘He hasn’t been to a single rehearsal,’ Jackie added. Annie glared daggers at him and he backed away, knocking into the shadow puppet set and causing it to rock alarmingly.

‘Hey,’ Andrew called, marching across to steady the frame. ‘Watch where you’re going, you clumsy oaf.’

Jackie looked mutinous and balled his large hand into a fist.

‘Evey, I am tired of everyone treating me like a fool.’

‘You shouldn’t be such an idiot then,’ Andrew cut in.

Mother snorted with laughter.

‘Am I late?’ Parker shouted from the door, hurrying in as he struggled into his magenta jacket. ‘I can’t find my wig.’

‘No,’ Annie said, but it was drowned by a loud chorus of “yes” from everyone else.

‘My apologies,’ Parker said, trying to force his arm into the sleeve, which was half turned inside out.

There was a loud ripping noise, and the whole back seam of Parker’s jacket had split.

‘Ha!’ Mother crowed. Annie jumped down from the stage to try and help him.

'I'm terribly sorry,' he said, but I couldn't look at him, not when my head was in my hands.

'I wish you'd come to even one fitting, Parker,' I ground out from between gritted teeth.

'I'll fix it,' Annie said. 'It just needs another panel in the back. It can be a different coloured stripe – that'll look even better.'

I waved them both in the direction of the stage.

'If we could, please?'

The stage slowly cleared, with a small tussle between Andrew and Jackson the only violence. Mother, from her box, began her opening monologue.

*'What dire Offence from am'rous Causes springs,
What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things.'*

There came a loud cry from off stage left, and the sound of a slap echoed across the auditorium. Annie made her entrance on cue, but rather than pausing in the middle, she strode across the stage, and jumped down.

'I will not work with him,' she shouted as she hurried in my direction. 'I refuse to work with him.'

'With who?' I asked calmly, my already stretched patience almost ready to tear.

'Jackson,' she turned and pointed to the stage, where Jackie's hulking mass peered into view. 'The man's an animal. I think we should get rid of him. We don't need him, there are plenty of thugs with muscles who can take his place at the drop of a hat.'

'I'm not a thug,' Jackie said. He rubbed his cheek. 'I'm not.'

'What happened?' I asked.

Annie folded her arms and turned away from me.

'I don't want to talk about it.'

I sighed.

'I'm not going to have him removed from the premises and all our lives if you won't tell me.'

Jackson yelped in protest.

'And I'm not going to have him removed any way,' I continued. 'There's nobody who could do it, for a start.'

'I thought you'd be on my side,' Annie said with a sniff. 'You're supposed to be on my side.'

‘I don’t know what’s happened, so I’m not on any side.’ I rubbed my hand roughly across my face. I could kill them all, and at that moment I almost didn’t think I’d care. ‘Was it about his girls?’

‘He said...’ Annie flopped down beside me and stared down at her lap. ‘He said I was just as bad,’ she finished in a whisper.

‘I have no comment to make on that,’ I said. ‘You do both enjoy a good liaison.’

‘He said I was as bad as them, as those ... as those *trollops*,’ she hissed.

‘Ah.’

Clearly Jackie’s time for reflection with my father hadn’t brought him to any deeper understanding of Annie.

‘Can we get on?’ Mother called, her strong, clear voice cutting through the turmoil. ‘I’m growing bored.’

Annie rose, the picture of anger. She was how I imagined I’d be, when I finally unleashed the raging amazon within. But not so tall. She strode to the stage and let free a tirade of abuse and expletives at my Mother, who returned it all in kind, leaping from her box as she did so.

I gathered my things and left them to it.

Michael was in my office, perched on the edge of my desk.

‘Good,’ I said, dropping my notes in a heap on the floor. Within a second I was in front of him, pressing my lips to his. I almost knocked him back onto the desk, but he regained his balance and returned my kiss, if not with equal violence, then with equal enthusiasm.

I raked my hands through his hair, pulling his face to mine as hard as I could. I felt his hands over my back, in my hair, on my neck, and I leaned into him, grinding my chest against his, bending my back as far as I could in order to touch him as much as possible. From his lips, I moved my attentions to his jawline, so strong and still dusted with stubble like the day before. I welcomed the roughness against my lips. There to his neck, and as I bit his earlobe he moaned my name, pulling me closer to him still. I paused only to gulp in more air, and reached for his cravat to rip it from his throat.

‘Evey, I-‘

I pushed him back against the desk and climbed over him.

‘Woah, I-‘ he grabbed my wrists as I reached for his shirt.

‘What? Don’t you want to?’ I couldn’t believe it. He was rejecting me. How could he be? I shifted my hips against his. He was so eager.

‘God, I do. Believe me. But-‘

‘But?’ I shifted my hips again and he gave a low moan.

‘But not on your desk. Well, maybe on your desk. And will you please get off me?’

No, he was rejecting me. I felt a little sick, and like such a fool. I rolled to the side, catching him with my knee as I did so. He grunted, and I was glad.

‘You should go,’ I said as I sat up. He reached into his trousers and adjusted himself with a creaky sigh.

‘Jesus.’

He sat up next to me and reached for my hand. I turned my head from him, but didn’t move my hand away.

‘Please know that this is one of the most difficult things I’ve ever had to do.’

‘Oh?’ I glanced at him from beneath my eyelashes.

‘Oh yes.’ He gave my hand a squeeze. ‘But you were- you are so angry. You are, aren’t you?’

I nodded.

‘And I think, if we do that as the first time, then that will be the only time, do you see what I mean? I don’t want it to be our only time.’ He gave my hand another squeeze. ‘It may sound terribly presumptuous, particularly as it hasn’t actually happened yet, but I feel that when – if it does – then I won’t want it to be the last time.’

‘I see.’

I didn’t, really. All I knew was that I seemed not to be in control any longer. He sat with me and held my hand for a long while.

I wanted him to leave. I wanted to be alone so I could throw something and shout, then curl up in the shell of my own shame and curse the day Augustine ever picked up a paintbrush. But most of all I wanted somebody to take all of the mess and the anger and the hate that whirled around The Liberty Troupe, gathering force and momentum and turning into an unstoppable wave, and move it out of my reach. For somebody to step in and say, “you don’t have to deal with all of this,” or even better, “you don’t have to deal with all of this on your own”.

The weight of responsibility hung over my head, and I felt crushed and suffocated. I didn’t want to cry with an audience. That would be an even greater shame. Yet Michael stayed, quietly, holding my hand without moving, as minutes stretched and merged, and I had no idea what time it was. My hand longed to stretch, and my skirts weren’t thick enough to cushion me from the hard wood of the desk we sat on. But I remained motionless, listening to the sounds of both of our breathing and trying not to think, for a while.

Then without a word, he shuffled closer to me and put his arms around me, and I sank into his embrace, and sobbed. He stroked my hair and kissed my forehead, holding me closer as my sobs increased.

‘I’m so sorry you feel like this,’ he said. ‘I wish there was something I could do to help.’

‘No,’ I said between sobbing and heaving for air. ‘No, you can’t.’

‘There’s nothing I can do?’

‘I don’t want you to. I have to fix it, don’t you see? Otherwise I’ve failed. I can’t fail, I just can’t.’

My words were muffled by the lapel of his jacket, the scratchy wool of which I was using as a handkerchief. He’d never have me now, I thought, and hated myself for being so weak as to care.

He squeezed me tighter and I wondered if he could squeeze me so tightly that I’d cease to exist. That the pressure would be too much, and I would fall out of existence. I just wanted everything to stop.

‘I don’t know what’s happened,’ Michael said quietly, ‘But I know that if anyone can fix it, you can.’

I drew back from him then, still keeping my head bowed so he wouldn’t see the mess of my face. My kingdom for a handkerchief. I sniffed loudly, and resisted the temptation to touch my nose.

A handkerchief appeared beneath my eyes and I hesitated only briefly before grasping it eagerly.

‘Everything is falling apart here,’ I said. ‘Father’s been keeping secrets from me, the whole building is covered in dust and sheets, and today, rehearsal was...’ I paused, searching for the words to accurately describe the carnage. ‘It didn’t go well,’ I finished quietly.

‘Oh. I can imagine that would be upsetting.’

‘It feels as though everyone is deliberately trying to make things difficult for me. As though they don’t want this to go well. They’re just arguing all the time, and picking at things.’

‘Perhaps they’re feeling the pressure too.’

I nodded.

‘You’re probably right. But I’m the only one who isn’t allowed to fall apart. And then when – well,’ I flapped my hand in the vague direction of Michael. ‘That was the last straw.’

He pulled me close again and held me tightly. It was better that time, and I didn't feel quite so bad about his not wishing to make love to me on my desk. In spite of myself, I began to persuade myself to see the positive side of things.

I decided to give them almost two whole days before I called another rehearsal. During that time, I allowed myself precisely an hour after Michael had gone to feel sorry for myself. But by the time he had gently kissed me goodbye and I had made my way to my bedroom via the back stairs, so as to avoid meeting anybody, I didn't feel quite so suffocated any more. My tears seemed to have dried unshed, and I could only be grateful for that, although I couldn't help but feel as though I had been denied the luxury of self-pity. When you feel as though the whole world is against you, self-pity is one of the greatest comforts.

I made a list of all that was wrong; with the production, the cast, the building, the family. Then beside it I wrote a list of the things that could be done to fix them. And I felt better. The list was long, but not as long as it had seemed in the chaos inside my head. It was true that we went through this sort of turmoil with every production we staged – I had conveniently forgotten the drama we had been through with Hamlet, and the arguments that had plagued every rehearsal. There had been less resting on that, we were less fractured. Although perhaps I place too little value on Mother's integrity as an actor.

Now, under Michael's gaze, I saw our flaws as though I were a stranger, magnified by the magnitude of the occasion. It was the most publicity we had ever had, by far. Although I prided myself on our productions, I saw now that we were barely professionals. More like a band of children putting on plays for parents and friends. The world was filled with what I imagined were proper people, and now they would see us for what we really were.

That was the lowest. That was the rock bottom foundation on which I was able to construct some hope. We tended to receive almost exclusively favourable reviews. We were fronted by one of the greatest actors of her generation. We had Andrew, the most skilled builder of shadow boxes in the country. We were a lot better than that troupe in Sheffield. Their Macbeth was once described by *The Mirror* as "more a flock of bleating sheep than the three witches".

As for the personal differences – there was little I could do. My cast separated, prickled and avoided one another, but there was no more fighting. Their differences would melt away with a good review, and be replaced by some other drama further down the line. It was what we did. We were in the theatre, darling, there was always drama. For now, though, the theatre was a den of calm. There was no noise, beyond the builders, but they kept their personal

chatter to a minimum. Although filled with people, my home rattled like an empty machine, filled with spare parts.

Michael, too, kept himself to himself during those days. I tried not to think about why. It seemed, however much I tried to twist or distort it, as though he was actually coming to care for me. Not as some cheap harlot to bed and then leave, but as a friend, and dare I say, equal. It was, I suppose, what I had aimed for when he was still the faceless M. Bailey, who I would seduce to distract.

I had known all along that he was up to something – that a man who wrote such heart-rending pieces about tragedies and human suffering could never truly be interested in something so flippant as our little play. And I had been proven right, but rather than distract him, he had distracted me. And I was, in my way, perhaps coming to care for him a little too. I didn't want that. I wasn't my mother, but I am my mother's daughter. As she has proven, happy marriage and the theatre do not go together hand in hand. It was my intention never to marry, and it remained so, but once Michael and I had slept together, it would doubtless be more difficult than I had anticipated to push him away.

At half past two, nine days before the curtain opened on *The Rape of the Lock*, I left my study, and for the first time in forty eight hours, sought company. I would gather the cast together, and we would rehearse, as we ought to. I had my notebook beneath my arm, my list of issues pasted in behind my other notes, and I felt in control. I have always liked to feel in control. As I made my way down to the stairs, I heard hushed voices whispering in the hall below. As silently as I was able, I crept towards the banister. I ignored the sneering voice in my head mocking my hypocrisy. When they are my people, I am allowed to know what is going on.

That man was there again. With his Van Dyke beard. I couldn't see it, though, as all I could see was the back of his heavily maccasser-oiled head. I scowled. He was leaning forward into the doorway to the sitting room, his arm against the door, blocking my view of who he was talking to. I knew, though. She can't really whisper. Not when she's spent most of her life on stage.

And that was when I realised who Mother's affair had been with. It coincided, as it happened, with when Julia Fitzroy had stopped automatically buying every new piece of my father's work, sight unseen.

'We can't,' she whispered, so even the back stalls could hear her. 'My husband-'

I couldn't hear his reply, being as how he wasn't trained for the stage, but I saw him reach into the room, and it looked as though he was stroking her face. Then he kissed her, and there was no doubt that was what happened, as when he pulled my mother towards him and he held her tightly, she swung into my view and I could see her kiss him back. It was several long seconds before she pulled away, stepping out of view once more. She didn't look like the penitent wife. She looked more powerful than I had seen her for weeks. Brendan Fitzroy leaned in to the doorway, paused, whispered again, and then left.

I decided I'd leave it another day before I called the rehearsal, and went back to my study.

CHAPTER 15

I had run out of things to do. Parker had seen to the playbills being printed over a fortnight ago, and the renovations were nearly complete. Annie was making good headway with the costumes, I imagined, and Andrew was probably doing well with the shadow theatre. He likely relished the uninterrupted free time he could spend perfecting every last string.

For myself, until I could get back to the stage and put my changes into place, I was at something of a loose end. There probably were things I could be doing, but I was too lethargic to bring myself to think of them.

I passed the hours before I intended to gather the troupe instead by looking through leaflets of our past successes, and trying not to think about Mother's duplicity. I tried not to wonder if Father had gained his patron because his wife had been whoring herself to the benefactor's husband. I tried not to wonder if that was why, when it all came out, he hadn't been angry.

I found that I could no longer envisage spending my life in this building, surrounded by these people – not the people, no, rather under the roof of my parents, for all their uselessness and lies. I felt betrayed, as though the hard work I had put in to my productions, in to making sure Father met the deadlines put on his paintings, had been futile. The theatre would survive; my mother was fucking the patron. Until he let her go, as he might, once her prophecy of sagging and cracking had been fulfilled. The affair had probably been going on under my nose, even since she claimed it had been stopped. What a fool I had been to trust her with anything. She was like a child, I thought spitefully. All lies and selfishness. I supposed I could go now, but the loyalty I felt towards Annie, Andrew and Jackie stopped me. Then, I may even go to Sheffield. Andrew might come with me, but even that didn't soften the blow.

I was pleased, then, when Michael came into my office, without knocking. I wanted a diversion from my thoughts, and as he paused in the doorway and looked at me, I smiled, and put the flyers for *Midsummer* and *Die Zaube Flaute* to one side gladly.

'Are you busy?' he asked. His voice sounded strange, as though it was trapped in his throat.

‘Not at all, come in.’

He stepped forward, and slowly turned and closed the door. Then he paused for a second, still holding the handle.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked.

‘I want you,’ he said, still facing the door.

I blinked.

‘Sorry?’

‘I want you.’ He turned then, and faced me, deadly serious. ‘You wanted to seduce me. I want you, now. Here. On this desk.’

‘Oh.’

‘Can I have you?’

I nodded, but still he waited by the door. I rose, and went to him, taking his hand and leading him to my desk. I gently pushed him so he sat, and he just looked at me, obediently, waiting for me to have my way with him. I smiled.

‘I thought you didn’t want it like this.’

‘You aren’t angry anymore, are you?’

I shook my head.

‘Well, then.’ Michael didn’t smile, he just looked at me. ‘Then we can do this. You needn’t worry, nobody saw me coming in. I made sure of it.’

That hadn’t been my concern, but I saw then how he was there for one thing and one thing only.

He couldn’t care for me then. Not really.

So I decided that I would. It would probably be the last time, anyway. I wouldn’t be staying here after the performance.

I reached up and stroked his cheek. His stubble felt nice against my fingertips. I looked into his eyes, hoping I could memorise every detail of the pale blue flecks in his irises. Then on to the pores on his nose, the curve of his lips, covering his beautifully straight teeth. He wasn’t smiling now, merely staring back at me, and his hands rested unmoving on my hips.

I leaned forward and kissed him, firmly. He kissed me back but it felt forced and his lips were hard, the movements mechanical. It was like kissing an automaton. Then his hands moved, and his lips softened as he pulled me closer and pressed me to him. Something sparked inside me and I kissed back without restraint, dragging my fingers through his hair and grinding myself against him as best I could through layers of petticoats.

As I scattered kisses along his jaw, he reached up to pull the pins out from my hair, dropping them on the floor behind me. Finally, he pulled the end of the ribbon and my coil of hair dropped and unwound, and he plunged his fingers into it, pulling my head back. I moaned as he kissed my neck and my collar bone, pushing my hair out of his way and stroking his fingers beneath the neckline of my gown. He pulled it down as far as it would go, and buried his face in my bosom. His stubble scratched at my delicate skin, and I pressed his face closer as he fumbled with the buttons on the back of my dress.

Impatient, I pushed him away and reached around to undo them myself, watching with clouded eyes as he watched me slip the heavy fabric from my shoulders, then my hips, revealing my thin cotton stays beneath. Breathing heavily, I stepped towards him, undoing the cravat loosely tied at his neck. As I did so, he reached for my behind, caressing me through my cotton underskirt. He moved down my leg to my knee, then put his hand beneath my skirt, touching me softly, in gliding circular motions, over my knee and to the top of my stocking, where it was tied with a ribbon. Not taking his eyes from mine, he ran his finger inside the top, and I shivered. I couldn't move as his hand then ran up the back of my thigh, those circular motions becoming tighter and more gentle as he approached my very core.

I clung to his shoulders, my eyes closed and my breath shallow, able to do no more than wait as his fingers came closer and closer, aching slowly. Just before he touched me, he stopped. My eyes flew open and I watched as he withdrew his hand and kissed me lightly on my collar bone. I almost cried out as he pushed me away, but he rose too, and shrugged off his jacket, never once taking his eyes from mine. He untangled the mess I had made of his cravat, and my eyes dropped to the V of skin it revealed through his open collar. His skin was lightly tanned – healthy, as I have always seen him, although today the skin on his face seemed paler than usual, and I noticed he looked tired and, in spite of what was happening, sad.

Any thoughts not related to the matter in hand were soon banished though, as he reached into his waistband and untucked his shirt, pulling it off over his head. I stepped forward, and into his arms, and we kissed again and it was as though the world receded. All was hot breath and warm skin, the feeling of hair beneath my fingertips and the rough pads of skin on his hands grazing my shoulders, my back, my thighs. As he fumbled with his trousers I pushed him back onto the desk and lifted my undershirts, climbing on top of him. Desperate with need, I rubbed myself against him, and he groaned in return, reaching up and pulling the straps of my chemise down over my shoulders and dragging the neckline down over my breasts. It was all I could to stay my cries as he massaged and pulled and pinched. And there

was little tenderness there and I was glad. I took one last look at him, his eyes half shut but still looking at me, his mouth slightly open as he panted, his bottom lip locked between his teeth. I closed my eyes and, reaching down, pressed him inside me.

It lasted minutes. The teasing and flirting and the anger I had felt, on and off, for weeks, all built up into a crescendo of rutting and fucking that peaked for him just after it did for me. I only remained astride him for a few moments after that. He lay back on my desk with his eyes closed, breathing heavily, and it would have been very easy to sink down onto that firm chest, slightly damp with perspiration. It would have been easy to kiss the dip between his nipples and run my fingers down over his stomach.

When he opened his eyes, I smiled at him saucily and dismounted. I turned away as I straightened my chemise, and stepped back into my dress.

‘Would you mind buttoning me up?’

I turned to him then, holding my hair up and looking at him over my shoulder. Michael sat up slowly, and blinked a few times.

‘Yes.’

He didn’t touch me as he did it, even though he struggled a little with the small buttons in his large fingers.

‘That desk is quite hard.’

‘I can imagine,’ I said. ‘But I trust it wasn’t too bad an experience for you.’

This said with a smile, too. I knew he had enjoyed it. I felt that he had, dripping down my legs.

He nodded, and looked around for his shirt. He was clearly dazed. I felt it too. It had been good – very good – but it hadn’t felt right. The ending was too abrupt, and now it seemed that neither of us knew what to say to one another. Our flirtation and my seduction had been playful, but this had been nothing of the sort. Sex driven by a need unrelated to anything else.

‘I should go. You must have a lot to do.’

He was still sitting on my desk, his shirt now back on but still untucked. The back of his hair was sticking up and half of his collar was folded the wrong way. He looked charmingly dishevelled, and I turned away again, walking around him to the other side of my desk, to sit on my chair.

‘We haven’t rehearsed since that debacle the other day.’ I kept my voice light and avoided looking at his back.

‘Oh. That must be a little worrying for you.’ He didn’t turn to speak to me. It was as though he couldn’t bear to look at me.

‘It certainly is. But usual, I suppose, for this stage in the process. I’m sure it will all be well.’

Michael hopped off the desk suddenly, and straightened his shirt.

‘Your cravat is on the floor by the side table,’ I said, picking my notebooks up from the floor beside me – I hadn’t remembered hearing them fall – and spreading them across the desk.

‘Thank you.’ He was scrupulously formal as he tied it, passably well, considering that he had no mirror. I supposed I could have offered to help, but I didn’t want to be that close to him, then.

Retrieving his jacket from where it lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, Michael made his way to the door and then paused and turned, looking at the desk in front of me.

‘There’s a week left, isn’t there?’

‘Eight days,’ I replied.

‘It’s close.’

‘Closer than it’s ever been,’ I said, still aiming for lightness but I wished to God that he’d go. I needed to clean myself. I could feel the moisture slipping between my legs and into my skirts. And I needed to make sure that it didn’t come to anything, and that was something that I was certainly not willing to do with an audience. I was sure it would be well, but as a rule I preferred to tend to it sooner rather than later. Combined with *coitus interruptus*, it was my preferred method of being safe, but there hadn’t been time for that. I frowned. I hadn’t really given it much thought in the heat of the moment.

‘You should be careful,’ Michael said quickly, interrupting my silent self-chastisement.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Just – in the run up. As it gets closer. Just be careful. Won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said, taken aback slightly. ‘Yes, I will. And when,’ – against my better judgement, I asked, ‘when will you be back?’

Michael looked at me for a moment.

‘I’m not sure. It’ll be in the next day or two. Perhaps longer. I have some business I need to attend to. It takes me to Manchester. So I’ll be away for a night or two.’

‘Another story?’ I aimed for lightness again, but it seemed to come out sounding accusatory, as though I was angry with him for thinking anything else could be more important than our ridiculous play.

‘No,’ Michael looked away again. ‘Personal. But whatever happens, I’ll be here for opening night. Just, be careful, that’s all. Won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said again. Then, impulsively, ‘You, as well.’

‘Yes.’ Michael nodded. ‘Goodbye, then.’

‘Goodbye.’

Andrew came to find me an hour or two later. My little room was almost in darkness, but I hadn’t lit any candles. I was just looking, unseeing, at my bookcases, letting the titles of the plays I loved soothe my mind as I tried to tie together the strands of chaos that surrounded me, when there came a tap on my door.

If Andrew thought it was strange to find me sitting in the darkness, he said nothing about it. Instead, he came and sat opposite me and laid a newspaper on the desk, twisting it round so the headline faced me.

‘Have you seen this?’ he asked, with a voice so devoid of emotion that I could barely recognise it.

It took a few moments for my brain to understand what I was reading.

‘Augustine is dead,’ Andrew said, but I still couldn’t quite believe it.

‘What does it say? I can’t seem to read it.’

Andrew reached across the newspaper and took my hand. His skin was so dark compared to mine. It always had been, but it seemed more so than ever before in the grey light of dusk. It was easier to think about that than try and understand. I squeezed his hand tightly. At that moment he was my favourite person in the world. We could run away to Sheffield together and all would be well.

‘It looks like another burglary, but he was in his studio at the time.’

‘Oh. How awful.’

Andrew nodded.

‘Is it off, then?’

‘The exhibition?’ He shrugged and squeezed my hand. ‘I don’t know. I hope so.’

I nodded, and looked down at my desk again. I wanted very much to tell him that I wanted to leave, that we could run away and either do plays again or not do plays, but then I wasn’t sure that I wanted to go with him, as it happened.

‘We were the only ones who haven’t been targeted,’ I said.

‘There were a few others – minor contributors, I suppose, but yes, you’re right.’

‘It looks awfully suspicious, on us, doesn’t it?’

I withdrew my hand from his, and he frowned.

‘Surely you don’t think any one of us would have been involved.’

I stared at the open pages in my notebook. *Father’s sketchbook*, I had scrawled in the top corner, underlined twice and with three question marks.

‘I just don’t know anything anymore,’ I said. ‘I hope it’s cancelled now. It must be, surely. Out of respect.’

‘Perhaps.’ Andrew rose then and reached to pick up the newspaper.

‘No – leave it. Please.’

He nodded and took a long look at me before leaving. He shut the door behind him, and the room was shrouded entirely in grey. I couldn’t read the article, but I didn’t really want to then. I just wanted it to be there when I was ready.

Parker called us all together the next day, and we gathered slowly, arriving in the sitting room in dribs and drabs. Mother and Annie sat together, and I suppose that if the circumstances had been different, I would have been pleased to see them talking again. Now I wondered if they were strangers conspiring against me.

Father was sitting in the corner by the window, staring at the floor. He was desolate. Andrew and Jackie had sat one either side of him, and were exchanging concerned looks over his head.

Parker cleared his throat, and we all looked at him. I was just waiting for the confirmation that the exhibition and play were cancelled. I had packed together a few of my things and what little money I had, and from there I was going to get on the next coach which would take me, I didn’t care where.

‘You’ve all heard the sad news about Augustine.’

Nobody made a sound, so after a brief, respectful pause, Parker continued.

‘We don’t know all the details of what happened, but the rumour is that he was strangled.’ Father made a small yelping noise, and Andrew reached over and patted him on the shoulder.

‘Oh, how awful,’ Mother said. She was decked out entirely in black silks and bombazine, like a scraggly crow, waiting and preying on the weak and the mournful. She held a handkerchief edged with black ribbon to her lips. How fortunate for her that she looked so well in black. How she must be enjoying this.

‘Well, yes. Like the papers said, if you’ve been following it, it looks like a burglary gone wrong. He was strangled with one of his own scarves – that he was wearing at the time,

they think. It is a very sad time, indeed.’ Parker paused for effect. ‘Very sad. But out of the darkness must come some light, and while of course we mourn the loss of one of this century’s finest painters, we may take consolation in the fact that his newest work was not – indeed, no paintings were – in the studio at the time of the attempted robbery.’

I sat up, then. I think we all did.

‘What do you mean?’ Andrew asked. ‘Was nothing taken?’

‘It does not appear that way. Although, you know, sketchbooks and so on. It was very messy, I am told. The Duke’s envoy tells me. They give so much more detail than the newspapers do, you know. Most interesting. Apparently, he had turned quite purple in the face, but one doesn’t know if that can be true or not. Look of absolute terror on his face too, apparently. One can only imagine. Ah.’ Parker suddenly seemed to catch himself being a gossip. ‘Well, that’s beside the point. The new painting had been moved from the studio, having been finished only the day before. It was all packed up and ready to be transported here, and was – well, it was in the stable, apparently. Covered with an old horse blanket in one of the stalls. Took them two days to find it.’

‘How odd,’ Annie murmured. I couldn’t have agreed more. To hear Parker tell it, it was almost as though the painting had been hidden.

‘Where is it now?’ Andrew asked.

Parker shrugged.

‘The Duke has men guarding it. I asked them if they wanted it to be stored here, ahead of the exhibition, but they said not.’

‘You mean the exhibition is going ahead?’ I could barely credit it.

‘Oh yes, don’t worry about that, Evey. All our hard work shan’t be for naught! It’s going to be a tribute, now.’

‘Even the play? They still want us to perform the play?’

Parker swayed onto the balls of his feet and clasped his hands with pleasure.

‘Well, as luck would have it, Pope was a particular favourite of Augustine’s. I know, I couldn’t believe it myself when I heard. His studio was full of his books, and they said they spoke to his son and he confirmed it. So it’s to be a tribute. Isn’t that lucky?’

‘Isn’t it,’ I murmured, as Parker congratulated us all on our good fortune. There would be no hopping on a coach today. It appeared I must see the thing through to the end.

I gave it until the next day – six days before the exhibition – to hold the next rehearsal. It wasn’t awful. It was melancholy, and I wondered how the black arm bands Parker had

decided we had to wear would come across to the audience. Our farce, for all its heavenly battles and beautiful shadows, could only appear crass with our bright silk costumes. Nothing would come of this, I was sure. We could only ever after be associated with our inappropriate mourning. Perhaps they all realised that it was all for naught. I considered changing it to something more appropriate. Something more sombre. A reading from Pope's translation of Homer's Odyssey, perhaps. But no. To change it now would require more effort on my part, rather than just going along with what we had already. I would have to talk to them, to explain my reasoning, and tell them that we were never going to be good enough to carry this off well enough for it to be seen as a fitting tribute. I didn't have the energy.

So we rehearsed, and we all just wanted it to be over, and I said as little as I possibly could, and disappeared to my study as soon as it was finished. And when I got there, instead of being alone I was greeted by Michael, who was sitting in the chair opposite mine, waiting for me. I wasn't sure if that was better or worse than being alone. I closed the door without a word, and took my seat. I looked at him for several moments, noting his unshaven face, his creased collar and cuffs, and the black jacket and waistcoat he wore. He had worn the same colours when I had seen him last. Finally, when it was clear that he wasn't going to begin the conversation, I spoke.

'Did you know?'

He didn't reply, only looked away from me briefly.

'Did you know that Augustine had been killed before you came to see me the other day?'

Michael nodded.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I asked.

There was a long pause while he stared at the grain in the wood on my desk. The desk where we had been two days earlier.

'I didn't know what to say.'

'You thought I had something to do with it.'

'I don't know what to think any more.'

I leaned back into my chair.

'That makes two of us.'

He looked at me, then, finally.

'I've been thinking about it for the past few days, and I just can't put it all together. I don't know how you're involved.'

'I'm not involved,' I snapped.

‘You might not know it, but you are. And I don’t know if you’re telling the truth but-’

‘But you wanted to fuck me anyway. So what are you doing here?’

‘It wasn’t like that,’ Michael said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

‘It was exactly like that, and you know it. You were angry, and you had me. I wasn’t allowed to do that with you, but you were with me. Not that I mind particularly. We both got what we wanted, didn’t we? And it’s like you said,’ I continued as Michael steadfastly refused to meet my eye. ‘It’ll never happen again now.’

‘No,’ he said, finally. ‘It won’t.’

‘So I ask again, what are you doing here?’

‘They killed Augustine.’

‘Who?’

Michael shook his head.

‘Then get out,’ I said. ‘Tell me what you know or I won’t tell you a damned thing, and I won’t help you with whatever it is that you’ve come here for.’

‘Fine. Fine. It’s something to do with the Fitzroys. I’m sure of it. But I don’t know what. It was something to do with that painting Augustine was working on, but I don’t know what it was. And nobody will until the unveiling, unless you can get a look at it for me.’

‘Me? Why on earth should I do that for you?’

Michael shrugged.

‘I thought it was important to you that this endeavour was well-received by the newspaper.’

I stared at him, unable to believe what he was suggesting.

‘You’re threatening me with bad press? How low, how *loathsome*.’

‘Take it as incentive. I know the subject of the picture, you get a good review, and *The Advocate*’s readers don’t realise that they were tricked into watching the rambling visions of a little girl. We roll like pigs in the mud of our mutual happiness.’

My fingers curled into claws against the edge of my desk. I wanted to claw him and rip his carefully, smugly expressionless face off. My strength seemed to ebb and flow, seeping from my arms and washing through to my brain. For all that I wanted to leave, I needed a good review. It was all I could salvage from this debacle. Michael had it in his power to ruin me, to ruin the troupe. I might wish them to hell but Andrew and Annie at least were my friends. I couldn’t doom their careers in the theatre too.

‘You don’t even trust me,’ I said weakly. ‘I might lie.’

‘I’ll know. And you’re the first, and likely only chance I have. It’s going to be delivered here just before the exhibition opens. The Duke’s convinced there’s going to be a robbery attempt but I think it’s more than that. It has to be. Julia Fitzroy could afford this painting if she really wanted to. There’s something more going on here.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know,’ Michael said. ‘But the more I think about it, the more I think we need to know the subject of the painting.’

I rubbed my hand across my forehead.

‘Someone must know what it was. He must have had sketchbooks or studies or something, planning it.’

‘All stolen.’

‘They never said that. Parker said nothing had been taken.’

‘That’s what the authorities were told.’

‘But why?’

Michael shrugged again. I cracked my knuckles the way Mother always hates.

‘Wait a moment – Augustine has a son.’

Michael sank lower in his seat.

‘What about him?’ he asked.

‘Won’t he know what the painting was?’

‘Apparently not,’ Michael said. ‘They hadn’t seen one another for months. Estranged.’

‘How odd,’ I said, slumping back in my seat, exhausted. ‘How common such estrangements seem to become.’

‘Quite. So will you do it? Will you try and get a look at the painting?’

‘I don’t have a choice, do I? Although I don’t see why we can’t wait until the exhibition. If I could get a look at it – and that’s *if*, because I will have a lot of other things to be doing at that time, you know, then we’d only know about an hour before the exhibition starts. And only two or three hours before it’s unveiled to the public.’

‘I need to know before then. Find out, tell me what it is, and then chances are you never have to see me again.’

‘That does sound tempting,’ I said, trying to remember the man who had held me as I cried, and trying to discern just how he was related to this stranger who stared at me dispassionately. ‘You’d really publish my identity? You’d really slander the troupe? Annie and Andrew haven’t done anything to deserve this.’

Michael shrugged, expressionless.

‘Seducing you might work instead, but I find that I haven’t the energy.’

I began to feel dizzy as my brain swam with questions and hurt.

‘Fine then,’ I said, wanting him to leave as soon as possible. ‘As you wish it.’

‘Good. The painting will arrive here at six o’clock.’

‘Doors open at eight, and it’s curtain up at nine.’

‘The painting is unveiled after that? Shall we say ten?’

‘Four hours,’ I said slowly.

‘Plenty of time,’ Michael said with a smile, so different from those sunlight ones I had seen earlier. ‘I’ll be here, then. Come here once you’ve seen it, and tell me what it is.’

‘And if I can’t?’

Michael rose and stood over me.

‘You will,’ he said. ‘Failure to do so is not an option. Just think of the reviews, darling.’

‘But it will most likely be guarded, given the security the Duke has put around it at the moment.’ I was aware I sounded desperate, and hated myself for it.

Michael smiled again.

‘Oh, I shouldn’t think that would be a problem for you. You can just seduce them.’

The door had closed behind him before my ink pot hit the place where his head had been. The glass smashed and black ink sprayed over the bookshelf and dribbled and pooled onto the floor. I found that I couldn’t move.

CHAPTER 16

One day remaining.

The people of Leeds have long flocked to see Liberty Thompson (previously Porter) perform. For ten years she has graced the stages of the Liberty Theatre and delighted audiences with her beauty, wit and dazzling acting skills. She has enjoyed particular success as Lady Macbeth, the like of which has not been seen since the great Mrs Siddons, and her performance as Titania in A Midsummer Night's Dream two years ago sparked a wave of reported sightings of fairies and magic, which swept through most of the Yorkshire area.

Liberty found the stage at the tender age of twelve, and has been delighting theatre-goers since then. Starting as a dancer, she worked her way to the front of the stage in playhouses from Liverpool to London, and was soon performing as Portia in front of the great and good of high society at Drury Lane. The Duke of Clarence is reported to have seen her performances there and likened her talents to those of Dorothea Jordan, his companion and the mother to ten of his illegitimate children.

By then, Liberty had met Julius Thompson, and after they had started a family together and his star rose in the world of painting, Liberty chose to leave London and set up her own theatre, where she could exercise greater creative control over her roles.

Father had spent the last five days in his studio. He refused to leave for either sleep or food, and Annie took to bringing him food on a tray every few hours. He wouldn't let her, or indeed anybody else into his studio, and had I had the mind to visit him, I didn't think he would have allowed me in either. Even me. How things had changed.

For the rest of us, all we did was wait in that grey theatre, sitting in semi darkness as the heavy clouds which had seemed to darken the sky for the past week refused to clear. It rained on and off, but the oppressive gloom never seemed to lighten. Rather, it got hotter and hotter, as the last rays of summer were trapped beneath the clouds. We avoided one another, and waited. Our only contact was at our desultory rehearsals, which we went through mechanically and as swiftly as we could. The play ran smoothly, actually, but there was no

passion or feeling there. It was technically competent, but we were going through the motions. There was no love. We scattered immediately after the final scene, without comment, question or congratulation. And I was pleased with that. But then, when there was only one day to go before the painting's arrival, Father spoke to me.

I was brought from my study by the sound of raised voices. Had I recognised them as a member of the Liberty Troupe, I would have remained in my room and waited for it to be over, but it was not one of us. It was Brendan Fitzroy.

I crept along the wall and peered over the bannister. Fitzroy was in the hall, shouting up at my father, who was cowering behind his studio door, looking out with an expression of both fear and anger – one entirely foreign to his face.

'It must be ready in time,' Fitzroy yelled, his voice quivering with rage. 'Or you mark my words, you'll never work in this country again.'

He was perfectly turned out, as always, but a few strands of his dark hair had worked themselves loose of their Macassar oil constraints and flicked over his brow. His cheeks had deep flushes of red over them and the skin on his nose shone.

'It will be ready,' Father half shouted, shaking a little as he did so, and I couldn't tell if it was with rage or fear that caused it. 'But I will finish it to a lot higher standard if you leave me be. I will not have visitors in my studio, and certainly not without any prior warning.'

Fitzroy seemed then to turn icily cold, as he bowed stiffly and said in a low voice filled with menace,

'Have it as you wish, Thompson. Play the temperamental artist if it suits you. But our deal stands, or you'll pay for it.'

'All will be ready,' Father said again. 'You have my word.'

Fitzroy snorted.

'For what it's worth.'

He turned on his heel then, and I stepped back out of view. Father's eyes darted upwards, and he saw me. He stared silently, wide-eyed and shaking slightly until we heard the door slam. Then he moved, waving me down to his studio with quick, jerky movements.

'I don't think he saw you – did he?' Father asked as he pulled me into the room, closing the door swiftly behind me.

I said not, as Father led me to the chaise longue and pushed me to sit. I watched as he paced up and down in front of me.

'What's happened?' I asked after a pause.

Father flung his hands into the air and shook his head, never ceasing in his pacing.

‘I can’t work like this, under these conditions,’ he muttered. ‘Augustine, he would never have had to work under these conditions. God rest his soul. It’s all becoming too much. Why won’t they just leave me alone, Evey? Why can I not just work without interruption? Why can I not just be allowed to create? The things I could do, if I were just given the time. Why does it always have to be about the money?’

‘Are you nearly finished?’ I asked, because in spite of myself, I found that I did care, just a little, if my father was about to be ruined.

Father threw his hands into the air again.

‘No. Perhaps. I could be, you know, but I’m not sure. You never do, when you’re on the last few days. But he wants it tonight, and I said, no, that wasn’t part of the deal, he said in time for the exhibition, but now he wants to see it, to see if he thinks it’s ready to take away now. And I said no, because I may be a charlatan, but God damn it Evelyn, I am a professional and I will not put out unfinished work.’

‘He wants it now? But the exhibition isn’t until tomorrow, and you’d have thought he could wait until then.’

‘Oh no,’ Father shook his head and sank down onto the seat beside me. He settled into the creases in his shirt and seemed to sink into the chaise longue like a hot air balloon deflating. ‘The sooner the better, although I thought we had agreed tomorrow morning. Oh Evey, I begin to not care if I’m ruined or not.’

He looked dejected and sunk further back, as though his spine had disappeared completely.

‘Can you still not tell me anything about it?’

Father rubbed his face hard with balled fists.

‘I want to. I do, I really do. And I’ve been thinking about it so much, and I want to, but something bad will happen if you know, Evey.’

‘Have they threatened you? More than your career being over?’

Father looked at me through tiny eyes which sat dull in his paper-creased face. He rolled his lips between his teeth.

‘That isn’t enough?’

‘There you are.’ The door swung open and glanced off the wall behind it. In wobbled Mother, her glass held high and half its contents dribbled down her front. ‘Hiding from me again, are we?’

That's what she said, but it sounded more like "haidyngframmeeeeegenahweeeeeeeee". And Father leapt from his seat and scuttled over to steady her.

'Sit down, darling.'

He lowered her down onto the chaise longue next to me, and she stank of miscellaneous alcohol and sweat. I didn't know if it was hers or someone else's. Her hair was falling loose from its pins and her usually immaculately painted face was smudged and smeared with damp lip stain and eyelash tint. I left immediately, and didn't turn back. Not even when I heard her start to sob. One more day. Just one more day.

CHAPTER 17

‘Have you got a moment?’

I was in bed. There was no sun, only limp greyness. The sort of light which doesn’t come from any direction but hangs damply in the air, casting no shadows. The sort of light where you almost feel you could open your window and step out onto it, it is so dense and heavy. It must have been morning – the sound of traders calling from the street below insisted upon it. But that light could just as easily belong to afternoon, or dusk.

I had been awake for hours, ever since the darkness had first lifted to charcoal, then to graphite, drawn with a heavy hand. It had brightened to the colour of a dirty puddle, and had remained that way for oh – heaven only knew how long. But so long as the light was timeless, it could be reasonably supposed that time was standing still and I would never have to get out of bed. I would never have to see anybody or talk to anybody or meet the Duke of Wellington – not that I would, most likely – and most importantly of all, I would neither have to flirt my way past security, nor see the debacle of our play being performed. Nothing would ever happen. I would remain, propped up against the headboard in my nightgown, motionless and without thought, until I crumbled to dust. And that would be marvellous. And perhaps it would have been so, if not for Annie.

She stuck her head around the door and I was surprised to see that she too was still in her nightgown. Her red hair hung in a light braid over one shoulder, tied with a scrap of ribbon which was almost falling out. It wasn’t remotely cold, but at my nod, she padded swiftly across the bare boards of the floor and climbed beneath the blankets beside me.

‘I can’t remember the last time we did this,’ she said as she snuggled in next to me, burning me with her cold feet. I lay my head on her shoulder and she put her arm around me.

‘I miss it,’ I said. ‘Sometimes I miss us sharing a bed. It was nice having somebody there all the time.’

‘I miss you. I haven’t seen you for days – weeks, probably. We haven’t even spoken properly since we went fabric shopping.’

‘How long ago that seems.’

‘A lifetime. As though we were different people. And we were, weren’t we?’

I put my arm across her stomach and held her, just like we used to do in winter when we were children. She always looked after me, not because she was older, but because she was so much taller. Then she blossomed, and I started to look after her, until she began running after boys, and I let her run away. But as we held one another in silence, the years seemed to slip away. But it wasn’t the same. It would never be the same.

‘I don’t like it here anymore, Evey,’ Annie whispered.

I squeezed her more tightly. ‘Me neither.’

‘I thought I’d be here forever – with Parker, you know. And I love him, I really do, but I just-’ she broke off suddenly and I waited, in silence, for her to continue.

‘It’s Jackson,’ she said eventually. ‘Mostly.’

‘What’s he done now?’

‘Oh, nothing new.’ Annie sounded wistful. ‘I knew he was stupid, I always have known, but he has such a good nature, I never thought I’d grow to dislike him so much.’

‘But why now?’ I asked. ‘Why not when we were doing Hamlet, or when he was a terrible Prospero. In fact, I don’t recall you shunning him as much as I’d have liked when he almost burned my stage down.’

I felt Annie sigh against me.

‘I can’t be angry with him when he’s just being foolish. He always means well. It’s just, now – recently. There are so many girls, and I didn’t care so much before because I had men, and I was waiting for somebody rich. Do you remember, Evey? I was going to marry a rich man and you were going to marry a playwright, and mine would be patron for yours and we’d be beautifully happy?’

‘And my playwright and I would live in a cottage in your grounds and we would visit one another every day to take tea from your beautiful porcelain, painted with daisies?’

Annie giggled, then sighed again.

‘It won’t happen. Not on my part anyway. I’ve started to care too much for Jackie.’

‘Do you love him?’

‘No. I don’t think so. Not quite. So it’s the right time. I want to leave after the performance tonight.’

‘You’re sure?’ I tried not to make any sudden movements or say anything that would reveal my own plans.

‘He’s changed. He seems crueller now, to those girls. He just doesn’t care. And he disappears for days at a time, with his drinking. And have you noticed, when he’s sitting and

he isn't saying anything, he used to look so pleasant. As though there was not a single bad thought in his mind. Now he just always looks cross.'

I couldn't say I had paid much attention to Jackie in repose.

'But that isn't all,' Annie went on. 'If he left, and I wanted him to for a while, then here hasn't become somewhere I'd want to stay any way.'

'No?' I prompted gently.

'I hate to say it but – your mother – and the tantrums and the alcohol, and Andrew picking on things when he needn't, and me, turning into Liberty as I get older and start to lose my looks.'

'You've a while yet, surely darling? You're-' I was going to say that I had always seen her as Liberty's natural successor, both in looks and talent, but it didn't matter anymore what I thought. I wasn't going to cast anybody in anything.

'I'm tired of the same things happening again and again. We find a play, we argue over the casting, we rehearse, we argue over costumes and lines, we perform, we get drunk, we sleep with the visitors to the dressing room, we cry over reviews. I peel off layers of paint and the show runs and then we start again. And we get older, but nothing else changes. I won't lead while your mother is here, and I'm not sure I want to. I want children. I want a family. I want a husband and three children and five dogs.'

I felt a tear drop from her chin onto my cheek and I held her closely.

'What will you do?'

I wanted to say we should leave together, but the words seemed stuck in the back of my throat.

'I've been saving the money Parker gives me every month. And there are my trinkets and jewellery that I can sell. But I don't know, really. There was an advert for a governess at the Fitzroy house, but I don't think I could bear it. And my handwriting is terrible.'

I couldn't argue with that. Annie's scrawl was only legible if she reduced her writing speed to one word per minute – and sometimes not even then.

It would be an option for me though, although I didn't like the idea of being so subservient. I was used to telling people what to do – but outside of the security of the troupe, my options were very limited.

'What options are there, then? For an attractive young woman who can act, and can't be a governess?'

I felt Annie shake her head.

‘I could join another troupe, but I want to get away from all that backstabbing and rivalry.’ She sighed. ‘Truth be told I’ve had it easy here. Relatively speaking. Of course, it helps that Parker’s related.’

‘So what then? Not-‘

‘Oh no, I won’t leave without a plan. Although being a professional mistress is an option. I’d be good at it, I suppose. It’s merely a matter of being introduced to the right people. And who knows who will be there tonight who might take a shine to me.’

‘You can’t base your future happiness on the hope that someone you haven’t yet met will take a shine to you.’

‘Why not? Hundreds of debutantes do it every year. They’re selling themselves too, but if you aren’t being exhibited at Almacks then it’s suddenly inappropriate and disrespectful. I’d be a businesswoman.’

‘Not all men are gentlemen. Not even – and perhaps particularly not – rich ones. Still, as you say, it’s not much different to what you’ve been doing these past few years.’

I thought back to Mother’s affair with Brendan. She couldn’t love him. There was no reason she could have done it other than to further her own career. Or perhaps Father’s.

‘It seems more honest, actually,’ I continued, ‘to have it as a business. Then everybody knows where they stand. No lies or trickery – I like the idea of that.’

‘We’ll see, then. After tonight. The world could change tonight. And if I don’t leave tomorrow – well, then I’ll be looking for the first good chance I get.’

And it would be the same with me, I silently vowed as Annie made her apologies for deserting me. Although I wasn’t sure what my future career would be.

There were men everywhere. All bustling like paint-splattered ants, overseen by one, impressively bearded ant, who was shadowed nervously by a red, squashy one.

Parker was in a state. Not a state where he enjoyed the confusion, but a state where he appeared to be bordering on some form of mental breakdown. Poor Parker. There wasn’t much to do in the grand scheme of things, but with men and dust sheets everywhere and a thousand and one miniscule jobs to do before perfection could be achieved, “ready” seemed a long way away, up a steep hill and on the other side of a fast-flowing river.

My stage was ready. Andrew had spent the week I had been shunning all company in the admirable pursuit of perfection. The boards which had been damaged by fire had been sanded and repainted, or replaced, as needed. The backdrops hung with nary a wobble and he had even dragged Jackie in to help him clean the floor in the stalls. With the fine new seats

which Parker had sent away to be reupholstered with a dark green velvet, it looked fit for the Prince, never mind the Duke.

Thus freed from some areas of worry, I felt content to spend an hour or so in the morning shadowing Parker, under the guise of helping him. I think I managed to calm him down a little, but that was merely a by-product of my main aim, which was to learn the plans for getting the painting into the building. This was something Parker was particularly pleased with, being as how the secrecy and importance in such a matter raised his own esteem considerably, and he rattled on at length and in great detail, much to my delight and the disinterest of the workmen in whose way we were.

It was to arrive at six, just as Michael had said.

Two of the Duke's staff carried it in, although it wasn't so large. Smaller than my arm span, anyway. They were flanked by four men from the army – I couldn't recognise the rank if I tried, I've always been hopeless at that sort of thing. Neither Jackie nor Andrew were in the vicinity, so I couldn't ask. I assumed they were officers, although I daresay it isn't important. They were wearing swords, but I supposed that most people in the army did so. They took the painting into the hall where we usually sold drinks and food to patrons, which had sometimes served as a gallery for Father's work too. I followed the group in as Parker went ahead to direct them and oversee the precise placement. He had a very good eye for seeing if something was straight.

The hall looked almost entirely different from usual. There were no more stains on the floor, from the dregs of drinks which had slopped from our enthusiastic patrons' glasses. Nor was there the smell of pies clinging to every surface. The floor had been varnished anew, and the walls painted in two shades of green; lighter for the main part and with moulding the same deep, vine green as the newly covered stalls.

The men marched forward, and the sheet which covered the canvas rippled slightly but not enough so as I could see anything beneath it. Parker directed them to a clear space in the wall – most of the paintings had already been hung, and there were only two spaces remaining now. My father's, and this one.

'Thank you,' one of the officers said firmly as Parker gestured to the wall. 'We'll let you know when we need you.'

'I'm sorry?' Parker blustered.

'I'm going to have to ask you to leave,' the officer said.

'I'm not sure I understand,' Parker said. 'This is my gallery. In my theatre.'

He wobbled slightly and the end of his nose gleamed.

The officer bowed his head a little, all the while maintaining his perfectly straight bearing.

‘Be that as it may, the Duke wishes that the pleasure of the unveiling is lost to none. He would see it as a gift to you in thanks for your hospitality.’

‘Which means,’ Parker muttered bitterly as the gallery door was closed firmly behind us, ‘That he doesn’t trust that I won’t damage it or stop it from being stolen. I’m shocked, Evelyn. Shocked and saddened that the Duke would judge us so harshly and find us wanting! To think that after all the effort, not to mention the money I’ve put in, I can’t even see to the hanging. What do officers know about hanging?’

‘I couldn’t possibly comment, Parker.’

‘Well a dashed sight less than me, I’ll wager. It’ll be crooked, I can just see it now. And that’s what the papers will pick up on, you know, and they’ll blame me for that. I get blamed for everything – just look at how it was with Hamlet...’

And he went on as he made his way down the corridor, not noticing or not minding that I wasn’t following him. There was another I should be thinking of. Parker had put his life into this troupe, not to mention his money. He needed a good review as much as Annie and Andrew did.

Left alone in the hallway, I quickly looked around and, with nobody to observe me, bent to peer through the keyhole. Then the door opened, and I stared directly at the unmentionables of one of the officers. He cleared his throat, and I slowly straightened. I fixed my eyes on his shiny buttons and gave an awkward curtsy before scuttling off down the corridor towards the safety of my study.

I gave them an hour, during which I saw the funny side of the incident, and decided to turn it to my advantage. Then, I tried again, pinching my cheeks as I left the room, and pulling my bodice down a little. One must use all the arsenal at one’s disposal.

Two officers stood guard, one at either side of the door frame.

‘Good afternoon,’ I said brightly as I approached them, lifting my skirt slightly as I walked to reveal my ankles. I am blessed with slender ankles.

They didn’t say a word. I paused in front of them, and smiled my best and most coquettish smile, all teeth and dimples. Not even a blink.

‘I do hope you are both comfortable,’ I said, wrapping one of my curls around my finger. ‘I can fetch you a drink if you would like. A cup of tea, perhaps?’

Nothing. I pouted.

‘I could try and get you something a little stronger – Parker keeps a stash of spirits and I know where he hides them.’ I coupled this with a giggle and conspiratorial wink. One of them swallowed and blinked.

‘None of it imported illegally, I assure you,’ I added swiftly.

I decided to focus on the one who blinked, and swung to the side of him, leaning in what I imagined to be a delicious fashion against the wall.

‘Where did your friends go? I’m sure there were more of you.’ I leaned forward so that, if he happened to look in my direction, he could have an eyeful of cleavage. ‘Have they left the best behind? I do hope so.’ I ran light fingertips down the side of his arm, the heavy wool coarse beneath my touch. He wasn’t bad looking as it happened, not that it mattered. I wasn’t convinced this seduction would work. There simply wasn’t the time I needed to break one with as tough a shell as this. Clearly the Duke only surrounded himself with the men most equipped against interrogation and torture.

‘Evey, I- *Oh.*’

My angel approached, the answer to my prayers.

‘Annie,’ I waved her over. ‘Do come and meet these charming gentlemen. They’re guarding Augustine’s painting and, I must say, are doing a very impressive job of it.’

‘Oh,’ Annie leaned against the wall and ran a hand over the upper arm of the entirely unresponsive officer. She squeezed gently and gasped. ‘I can tell they are *very impressive*. And so fine in their uniform.’

‘Aren’t they? I declare, I don’t remember seeing anyone so handsome in this theatre before.’

‘Indeed not, Evey. And we’d remember, would we not?’

‘Without a doubt.’ I stroked the arm of my officer again, squeezing him gently through his sleeve as I did so, moving my hand up and down, up and down.

He swallowed and looked a little uncomfortable. I took a quick look at Annie’s officer. The same. If anything, I pitied them and felt a little bad for putting them in that position. It was fair to say that not everybody was seducible, and perhaps we merely weren’t in the style these officers preferred. It was galling to fail so entirely. I caught Annie’s eye and raised a brow. She gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. I nodded in reply, and without a further word, we stepped away from them, linked arms, and made our way down the corridor without so much as a glance back at them.

‘I begin to fear that my scheme for escape is a little less plausible than I thought.’

We had returned to my office and Annie flopped herself down at the desk, looking as disconsolate as I felt.

‘You’ve never tried on an officer on duty, though, have you?’

Annie shook her head.

‘But I assumed I could have, if I wanted to. Wouldn’t you have thought so?’

‘Undoubtedly. But the Duke’s men – they have a steel and verve lacking in most men.’

I sat myself down opposite her and reached across the desk to give her hand a squeeze.

‘They grow quite attractive in my mind, Evey, the more I think on it. They were both very handsome.’

‘And probably wealthy, too. Generous lovers, no doubt, and either one or both would have married you and fathered you red-headed boys, and looked after you and adored you into your old age.’

Annie smiled ruefully.

‘It’s always those ones who show no interest.’

‘And they’re the only ones who do. What a strange coincidence. Oh, did you want me for something? You were looking for me.’

‘Before I chanced upon the Adonis who ought to sire my children? Oh yes, I was. Liberty is looking for you.’ She twisted her lips. ‘Something about her costume.’

‘Then I shall avoid her for as long as possible.’

‘That seems wise. Is there anything else you need doing? All the props are set up by the stage – I’ve just finished that – and Andrew’s set up the lights and all the costumes are clean and pressed.’

‘It sounds like everything, then,’ I said. ‘I’m going to get ready. Can you believe I’m so calm just before people are arriving? I’d never have thought it.’

Particularly given Michael’s threat of a bad review. But it seemed so out of character for him, I still hoped he could be persuaded away from his blackmail. It looked like the most likely way of getting out of this since seeing the painting was so unlikely.

‘At least the time is passing quickly. Now it won’t be long until it’s all over.’

Annie looked so wistful that it almost hurt to see her.

‘I didn’t know you were so unhappy, darling. I wish you’d told me sooner.’

She shrugged.

‘You had enough to worry about. But you know now. I’ll miss you, when I go. Although it may not be for a very long time. Perhaps I’ll never leave. Perhaps all I’m good for is being a mediocre actress.’

I held her hand again.

‘I want to leave too. I didn’t tell you this morning – I wasn’t sure how – but I do.’

Annie brightened.

‘Oh, well then we won’t be in it alone, will we? Shall we try and go together?’

‘I would like that a great deal, I think.’

CHAPTER 18

I was in my room, standing before the mirror, debating how to wear my hair. Down was too informal, but having it up in a style I was capable of mastering on my own was far too commonplace for the company of a Duke. I bundled a few handfuls up into something resembling a bun and draped the rest over my right shoulder. It didn't look too bad, but I wasn't sure how I'd secure it with pins rather than fingers. I hummed over it, twisting my neck this way and that to try and see how it looked at the back. I was interrupted, rudely, by a cough.

I jumped and pulled my dressing robe more tightly around myself. I was conscious that in spite of our previous intimacy, Michael had never seen me so little dressed. The robe covered only my stays, which were a very thin cotton and did little to hide the contours of my figure.

'What on earth are you doing in my bedroom?'

Michael smiled.

'Your mother was in your study. I managed to avoid her, though.'

My heart sank.

'She's waiting for me?'

'Yes.'

'How long ago was that? And what time is it now?'

'Just now. I haven't been watching you for very long, you know. Moments. Seconds. I like it half up, like you had it then.'

'Oh.'

I was aware of how vulnerable I was. I hated him for his threats, but part of me still struggled to reconcile the smiling country boy with this grim, threatening stranger. I might have lost my heart to the smiling country boy.

'I prefer it down, though.'

I turned back to my reflection and watched in disbelief as he made himself comfortable on my bed.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’

He smiled.

‘You’re surprisingly coy, aren’t you? And I’m only sitting down. You have such improper thoughts for a young lady.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘There now, you can’t convince me you’re a shy virgin.’

‘I wouldn’t wish to.’ Perhaps flirting wasn’t the best idea, but it seemed like all the defence I had. ‘Is this about the painting?’

Michael lay back down on the sheets, his arms tucked behind his head and his boots, mercifully, hanging over the edge of the bed. He was pretending his lack of care, though. He was rigid and tense, and his movements were stiff and unnatural.

‘Of course. You haven’t told me if you’ve seen it yet. Have you?’

I shrugged, and began attempting to style my hair. Lifting my arms pulled the fabric of my chemise taut beneath my bosom, lifting it. I caught Michael’s eye in the mirror, and he didn’t look away.

‘Annie found me, then it was time to get ready. Besides, you’re early. We said before ten. I’ve still got – goodness, it’s half past seven. I’ve only half an hour to get ready.’

‘Go like that,’ Michael said with a tight smile. ‘The Duke will forgive any problems with the play then.’

‘I find that I don’t really care anymore.’

‘No? That’s not the impression I got the other day. You haven’t seen it, then?’

‘No, and I don’t think I’ll be able to.’

He sat up, swiftly, all pretence at being relaxed forgotten.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just that the room is guarded and those officers are not susceptible to my wiles – or Annie’s.’

‘Does she know?’ Alert, snapping, like a dog. I took a step back.

‘No. But she likes flirting and she was there so I saw no harm in her trying. They were immovable. And if they can’t be moved by Annie, they can’t be moved at all.’

‘You should try like that.’

‘I’m not walking the halls in such a state of... *dishabille*. Have you got a hundred pounds? Perhaps you could bribe them to let you in if you’re so bothered about it.’

‘I can’t believe you failed. I must be so easily seduced.’

‘I shall choose to ignore that.’

Michael rose and sidled up behind me as I struggled with pins, running his hands down my sides. I stiffened.

‘Will you try again?’

‘Like this? No.’

He kissed my neck where it was uncovered by the hair, still stroking my waist through my chemise.

‘Then in your evening dress? Will you try,’ - he kissed me again, then bit my earlobe gently so I gasped. ‘Will you try at all?’

‘Someone will find you here,’ I said in a shaking voice. ‘You won’t seduce me into doing this.’

He kissed my neck again.

‘I said I’d take a look if I could, and I will.’ My voice shook.

‘I can seduce you, though. And God knows, I want to.’

My eyes met his in the mirror, and I saw that he was quite delirious. That realisation made me stronger. A little of the power was back with me.

My doorknob rattled, and we froze.

He had locked it. Thank heaven he’d locked it.

‘Evelyn!’ Mother shouted, still rattling the doorknob, as though it would have suddenly become unlocked. ‘What are you doing in there? I thought I heard voices. Why have you locked the door?’

She paused, then rattled it again.

‘I don’t like having locked doors in this house, you know that. What are you doing? Is somebody in there with you?’

Michael didn’t move.

‘I’m just getting ready,’ I called back, irritated. I was twenty-four. I was entitled to privacy.

‘Why have you locked the door?’

‘Perhaps to stop people walking in while I’m dressing?’

Michael smiled at that, and I glared at him in the mirror.

‘I want to talk to you.’

‘I’m busy. I need to get ready and so should you be.’

‘I am ready,’ she shouted back, her voice thick and nasal. She gave a loud sniff. ‘You used to be so helpful to your mother, but now look. You’re just rude.’

‘And you are a saint to put up with me,’ I said, making no attempt to hide my sarcasm.

‘Let me in.’ She rattled the knob again as she said it, but it was such a high-pitched wail that I had no trouble hearing her. She’d clearly worked herself up into a state. I’d have to see her. I glared at Michael again.

‘Fine, I’m nearly ready. Meet me in the study in ten minutes, won’t you?’

‘But I need to speak to you now.’

‘Ten minutes,’ I shouted back firmly. There was silence for a long moment, then I heard her footsteps retreating down the corridor.

‘That was uncomfortable,’ Michael said. ‘And am I right to assume that your ten minute window does not include me?’

‘Quite right,’ I said with a nod. ‘Now I need you to help me into my dress, then get out of my bedroom before she comes back.’

He helped me into my dress, his fingers blundering over the tiny buttons a few times, and then adjusted his breeches.

‘Fine I shall leave - with great unwillingness and enormous discomfort, I assure you. And you’ll try and look at the painting again, if you can?’

‘Yes, I said I would. Now go.’

‘I will see you again later. And take that off you.’

He kissed my neck again, and then left.

I did not feel half as calm as I had only minutes earlier. My hair was barely dressed, and I stuck a few pins in here and there as best I could. It looked passable, I supposed, although of course I couldn’t see the back. I ought to have hired somebody to help me today, and I daresay I would have if I were doing it properly – if I’d have still cared. It was almost eight o’clock. Almost time for the guests to begin arriving. I hurried along to the study, but Mother wasn’t there.

The doors to the gallery were opened now, and although I could hear the clock in the hall chiming eight as I passed through them, there were still ten or fifteen people milling around. I fixed a smile on my face and stepped in, nodding this way and that as I passed people. None of them were regulars and I had no idea who they were. Old, mainly, with fine silk gowns and well-fitting dinner jackets, and expressions of slight distaste. It seemed likely that it wasn’t that they were disapproving of the surroundings, most likely they always looked like that. I felt a pin slip from my hair and fall down the back of my dress. Even more likely was that I looked a fright.

Augustine's painting was flanked by officers, and a different pair to those Annie and I had flirted with so unsuccessfully. I wondered if they had been there all along. I wandered by as nonchalantly as I was able, taking as long a look as I dared at the sheet which still covered the frame. It looked straight – Parker would be relieved. But still, not a speck of paint was visible. The officers on either side looked just as implacable as the other two. Still, Michael could wait until ten o'clock, surely. Once he'd seen it, he surely wouldn't follow through with the bad review.

I made my way to the corner where Father's painting now hung. It was finished, then. A little rough in places, perhaps – there were a few reflections in the water which weren't as refined as his usual work, but I daresay it would pass muster in society. Saved by its striking composition, the eye was more drawn to the delicate pattern of muscle in Jackson's neck and shoulders. All in all – and I consider myself a more than fair judge of Father's work – it would do. But it could have been masterful, had he had more time.

It was also slightly askew – clearly Parker hadn't been allowed any further dealings with any paintings once he and I had been evicted from the gallery earlier. I reached up and straightened it slightly, looking guiltily over my shoulder as I heard one of the officers cough in my ear. They were capable of movement, then. With any luck there would be an incident of civil unrest, or someone would faint or attempt a robbery of their own, which would distract them long enough for me to take a peek at the painting. Oh yes, I would cross my fingers for a robbery now, I thought with a wry smile. But it didn't really matter. I wasn't going to risk being embarrassed or brought into disrepute by being caught with my hand on Augustine's last masterpiece. Not when Michael could simply wait for two hours. Probably.

I dallied in the corners of the room, exchanging nods with Parker every so often. Nobody was talking to either of us, and we didn't have a clue what to say.

There were a few members of Leeds' society here and there, but once they had nodded in acknowledgement in Parker's direction – and completely ignored me – they let us both alone. Annie would be so disappointed – there was hardly a young man among them. What few there were glanced my way once or twice, even smiled a little, but none approached. All seemed to be there with their wives or mothers.

Most of them didn't seem very interested in the paintings, and instead concentrated on chatting and gossiping about this and that. Only one or two had broken away and were weaving around groups and peering forward – under the watchful eyes of the officers of course – to take a closer look at the brushwork on the paintings. I supposed they must be the critics from the newspapers. One paused before Father's and spent what seemed like a very

long time frowning and stroking his chin. The frame still wasn't perfectly straight. I wondered if Parker had noticed yet.

I was surprised that Michael hadn't come in, not least because he would need to write about the event for the next edition of *The Advocate*. I found myself scanning the crowds for him, or watching the door to see if he would arrive. At the very least he could try to take a look at the painting himself.

After I had made three circuits of the room, alternating between looking closely at the paintings and looking for Michael, I decided to make my way to the study, to tell him that it was hopeless, and plead my case. It was half past eight, and the light outside the windows was beginning to dim. More implacable-looking officers brought in candlesticks – large silver-coloured ones, at least five feet high and with branches holding about twenty candles. They stood these at intervals between each painting, unlit as yet. Then two even larger candlesticks were brought in and stood one either side of Augustine's covered painting. They made the quite small painting look even smaller. I could only hope it was good, after all of this fanfare.

I began to make my way towards the doors, weaving through the clusters of people and squeezing past groups. It was turning into quite the crush. Then Brendan Fitzroy appeared at the door, with an older lady on his arm, who I recognised as Julia, his wife.

She had changed little since I had seen her last, even though that was over ten years previous, and I had only been a child. Her round face had gained few wrinkles, although her jaw sagged more heavily. The corners of her mouth were pulled down by the weight in her cheeks, giving her a constant expression of glumness, and she looked like little more than an old, sulky child. Her hair was crimped and ironed into improbable curls which were tinted an even more improbable reddish brown colour. There was a blotch on her forehead, which looked as though a drop of the colour had stained her skin before being rubbed vigorously. Her broad expanse of bosom heaved with jewellery, which draped over her dress, a pale, rose pink more suited to a debutante than a lady in her late forties. The tiny puffed sleeves which were trimmed with wisps of lace looked far too delicate and unsubstantial atop her broad, red arms.

It's fair to say that I took a dislike to her. If she hadn't been so unattractive then her husband would have been less likely to sleep with my Mother. I ducked into the corner as Mr and Mrs Fitzroy made their way into the room, followed by a small lady with dark skin and a regal bearing, who wore all black. I could barely see her above the crowd of people, and she soon disappeared into their midst. Then there was a surge backwards, as two pairs of officers

strode forward, forcing a gap in the crowd. I was quite squashed in my corner, and almost knocked a very small picture from the wall with my hair. Yet even through the crush I could still make out the tall figure who entered, and paused as the crowd began to applaud.

The Duke's face, for that was all I could see of him, was precisely what one would imagine of a hero in the war, the defeater of Napoleon. High cheekbones were accentuated by sharply angled sideburns. His broad chin was clean of facial hair and his lips were full and wide, but it was his nose which really arrested one's eyes. Wide and roman, it gave him a profile worthy of a coin, and although his eyes could have objectively been described as being a little soulless, I was quite in awe of him. He limped slightly, but still held his back straight and head high.

The applause lasted well over a minute, as the Duke nodded in acknowledgement. Once he began to make his way around the room to greet acquaintances, I slipped through the door. It was almost nine.

My active roles in the play were few. All that was required of me was to light the candles on the stage and, once all the audience were seated, open the curtains. We had used little scenery, and aside from Andrew's shadow box which remained unlit at the back of the stage until needed, there were only the hanging columns and they were on throughout as well.

All was quiet in the theatre. My footsteps echoed as I hurried down to the stage. The curtains were already closed and the footlights were lit, although we had four large branches of candles, one on either side of the stage and two closer to the back which had not been lit yet. These would be extinguished before the shadow box was lit. The whole affair would be a dark one, and I slipped between the curtains into the semi darkness.

'There you are,' Annie said as she came forward out of the shadows. 'How is it going upstairs?'

'I don't see why she gets to mingle with the great and good while we have to wait down here,' Mother sniffed huffily.

'Did you see the Duke?' Andrew asked, but I could barely hear him as Jackie was bellowing about having once seen the Duke a few years earlier, over a hill in Portugal.

I was saved from the barrage of questions and any more bitter outbursts by the arrival of Parker, who slipped through the curtains in a sweat.

'They're coming down, they're coming down. Everybody get to your places. I haven't even changed yet.' He flapped across the stage, pushing the actors back into the wings.

I stayed on stage to light the candles, before peeping through the gap in the curtains as the seats began to fill. Our usual clientele did not wear so many jewels to the theatre, and

every bosom seemed to gleam, even in the dim light. There was less shouting, and a good deal less coarse language uttered. Oh, we had played to the local dignitaries before, and that was all very well, but it was nothing to our matinee shows. Slowly the gaps filled and then, lastly, the Duke entered, once again to a long and sustained applause.

Once he was seated, I called Mother to her place. She wouldn't look at me, but I didn't have time to worry about that. I was a little surprised she had brought her petty attitude to the stage – it wasn't like her to do so. Usually she would have been in character by now. Yet here we were, and we would have to make the best of it. I gave her a nod, before exiting stage right to where the pulley was, and then I opened the curtains.

It wasn't perfect, but our exalted guests didn't really seem to notice. If I had still cared, really, then I should have been annoyed that they talked through most of it. It was tradition, I supposed, and happened at a lot of our performances, but most of those weren't special performances for Dukes, and they usually quietened down once the action really got going. I would have been hurt that I had put in so much time and effort, and that our work was ignored for the most part. I was a little annoyed, as it was. How lucky that I didn't really care. I watched Mother from the wings, to see if she had noticed. Happily, she had drifted into character and was entirely involved with the story telling. I peeped out at the Duke once or twice, too, but he merely looked bored. Now it was happening, I can see that I should have expected it. What were we, but a sideshow to Augustine's work? Less important still now he was dead. Nothing increases an artist's popularity as much as being dead – Father had mentioned that often enough.

They quietened down though, when the shadow box was lit. That was what did it. If fame was what we were after, then the shadow box would secure it. I heard gasps and mutterings as the puppets moved behind the screen and Jackie rattled cans and beat drums to simulate the sounds of a heavenly battle. And it was beautiful. Even from the side of the stage, where I could see Andrew working, crouched down behind the back of the box, the movement on the screen was mesmerising.

When it was over, all of the audience applauded, even the Duke. They rose and clapped, but I knew they weren't clapping our troupe, and they weren't really clapping Andrew, for all that it was his handiwork. They were clapping the shadow box, and their own suspension of disbelief.

The players took their bows, but just once so as not to lose the crowd's interest. Better to leave on a high, and Annie and I exchanged looks as she made her curtsy, knowing that we both hoped this would be our last time. As the applause began to die, I ran to the side and

closed the curtains. The rest of the players stepped out with Parker, to stand in front of them as he made a brief toast to the Duke before the painting was revealed. I wasn't going to join them, but as it was my hand was grasped tightly and I was pulled from the side of the stage, deep into the darkness of the wings and the firm softness of Michael's arms.

He kissed me, and I was so buoyed by the thrill of it being over, of not having to worry any more, that I kissed him back with all of the excess energy I had bubbling over me. I didn't care about the painting and if he was kissing me like that, perhaps he didn't either. I didn't care about my family or The Liberty Troupe. I desired nothing more than to lose myself in desire, and Michael was perfectly adept at that.

In the back of my mind I thought that this might help soften the blow of his being unable to see the painting, but sadly, that wasn't my motivation. I wanted to be desired, I wanted to recapture the power of my sex.

Another round of applause signalled the end of Parker's toast and I pulled Michael through the door from the stage, and hand in hand we hurried through the halls. I was going to take him to my bedroom, but he stopped at my study.

I was about to protest at being taken on a desk again, but he covered my mouth with kisses to the point that I was almost unable to speak.

'Did you see it?' he asked as we paused for breath.

'The painting? No.'

'Did you try?'

He held me away from him then, and looked me in the eye. I could hardly focus, my head was swimming with feeling.

'I couldn't get to it. And then I had to do the play. I tried as much as I could,' I said, although I suppose I could easily have snuck away during the play. In the euphoria of it all being over, I didn't see why I had to, though. Annie and Andrew would do well regardless of their association with our troupe. They always landed on their feet. It was the same with Parker. I didn't have to try and save everybody.

'We should go now, then,' Michael said, taking his arms from my shoulders, dropping me. 'Otherwise we'll miss the unveiling.'

'Then?'

He smiled.

'Then I am going to your room.'

‘I might join you,’ I said coyly. He smiled, and I decided to humour him, even though it took every shred of self-restraint not to just leap on him then. It was the sunlight smile that did it.

I straightened my hair and he adjusted himself slightly before we left the room, hurrying back down the hall. We joined the throng of guests as they streamed towards the gallery. Then there came a scream, and like a many headed beast the crowd turned as one and began to run back towards the doors. Michael dropped my hand and hurried through the crowd to the stairs, where I could see smoke billowing through the doors to the gallery. He pushed through the fleeing, screaming masses and ran to the doors, shouting at me to stay back, to leave. I turned this way and that, unsure of what to do. And then I thought about Father’s work, and about how I had not seen him all day.

I ran down the hall and sprinted up the stairs to the studio. The door was open and I ran straight in. It was empty.

My throat restricted, my stomach dropped and with a hollow feeling of dread, I believed with all my heart that he was in the gallery. I ran back down the hallway as I screamed out for him, and took the stairs up to the gallery two at a time, holding my hair over my mouth as the smoke became thicker. The two officers who had stood guard, who I had ineffectually flirted with only a few hours previously, lay face down at the door, their heads dusty and bloody messes. I retched, and stepped over their bodies, following Michael into the room.

Arms grabbed for me, officers I think, trying to dampen the fire and rescue the paintings, but I shook them off, dropping to my knees and crawling across the floor where the smoke was slightly less dense.

I heard someone shout my name, but I went on, because Father was in there, he had to be, and I needed to get him out because he had been so afraid, and I hadn’t been nice to him for days. The heat was oppressive and my skirts slowed me down, slipping on the freshly polished wood as I struggled to get further into the room. Smoke clawed at my throat. My eyes, streaming uncontrollably, felt as though they were rolling in sand. I scabbled on across the floor, but I couldn’t gain any traction against the boards. Coughing as though my throat wanted to be free of my body, I stumbled to my feet again, but was grabbed again, by strong arms around my waist, and pulled from the room as I cried out for my Father.

Michael carried me down the stairs, for all that I weakly struggled, and out onto the street, where I was vaguely aware of a chorus of squawks at my appearance. I was wrapped in a blanket, and the rough wool scraped my skin. My throat burned and I coughed and

sobbed and coughed some more, as they tried to force water down my throat. My nose and eyes streamed and I could barely see or breathe but I kept trying to ask, had anybody seen my father?

I was vaguely conscious of a scream and Annie appeared before me, still in costume, her makeup half removed and her hair falling from its pins. I just looked at her hair, on the spot where it fell over her shoulder in that one, fat curl that remained from when Jackie had cut the other off in the play. I stared at it, at the wisps that strayed free, and thought how Father would love to paint that and he could paint it, when he was here, but where was he? She held me tightly and kissed my face, and Jackie was there too, lifting me and taking me away to somewhere quieter, away from the smoke which still billowed from the upstairs window. Andrew held my hand and wiped my face with his handkerchief, and I cried and cried and called out for Father, but nobody answered.

CHAPTER 19

Fire devastated The Liberty Theatre on Templar Street, Leeds, on Thursday evening. The blaze, while contained mostly to the main gallery, burned for two hours and resulted in five known casualties. The Duke of Wellington was escorted safely from the building, and escaped uninjured.

Parker's house wasn't as large as I had expected. I had imagined it all bright colours and space and light, so as to accommodate his exuberance and bulk. However, while still a relatively large dwelling on Albion Street, the rooms were cluttered into dimness, with stacks of paper, old pieces of furniture, and piles and piles of scripts absorbing the light. I liked it that way, although I would have preferred to be somewhere which didn't remind me of home so much. There had always been a profusion of clutter.

Annie sat with me. She had never lived with Parker – that would have been to officially acknowledge her as his child, something he never did before she was of age. She had instead been brought up with me, at the theatre. Still, she seemed quite at home among the piles of things, and seemed to know where everything was.

They had wrapped me in a cocoon of blankets, which all prickled against me with needle-fine points whenever I moved. I had been bathed, my hair had been washed and my clothes had been changed, all by Annie. I don't really remember it.

I wished we had swapped. If Parker had been my father, then my Father wouldn't be missing. My father would be bumbling around humming with concern and sweating his apprehension. We could have swapped. It would have been so easy.

Annie told me, her soft, sweet voice soothing my nerves, that nobody had seen Father since that morning, when he had locked himself in his studio, demanding that he be left alone, undisturbed, to finish his work.

Then she paused, and didn't look at me for a moment. I knew, then. For certain. The world stopped.

‘They found another body in the gallery,’ she said, taking my hand and looking at that instead.

‘Father?’ I asked.

‘It was badly burned, just parts of the skeleton were left, but it looks like it was your father.’

‘You mean there’s a chance it might not be?’ For a brief moment, a glimmer of light.

Annie squeezed my hand.

‘His watch was by the body.’

‘Oh.’

She took a deep breath, and I wondered if she was going to cry.

‘There’s something else.’

I didn’t say anything, just waited. Michael, I thought, it must have been Michael. He was dead, or he had started the fire, something like that.

‘It’s Liberty. Nobody has seen her since the play.’

‘Oh.’

‘They haven’t found her body, and since she was last seen at the other side of the building, they’re saying she’s missing.’

‘Oh.’

Annie held my hand for a while, I don’t know how long. I couldn’t think of anything. There was nothing in me that knew how to deal with the loss of my father. Nothing that made it bearable and nothing that I could relate it to. With no idea what to do, my brain just stopped. Some time later, Annie climbed over me and held me in her arms. It was only then that I started to cry.

They took turns sitting with me, all day. Annie held me like we had when we shared a bed when we were little and it was cold. It was nice. It was comforting. Andrew held my hand and talked to me. He told me jokes and read to me. They were all silly stories, fables about animals who could speak, that sort of thing, and I wasn’t really listening but it was nice to have his voice there.

Jackie was the best. He was so large that when his turn came he scooped me up into his lap and held me there, surrounded by his arms. It was nice in there. I felt small and sheltered, like I was a kitten he was holding gently. Nothing could hurt me when I was safe in Jackie’s arms, because I wasn’t an adult who had to do anything. I was a kitten, and that was the best thing of all.

At night I started to think again. They'd left me with laudanum, but I didn't want it. My throat was still dry and scratchy and that was quite nice, because it hurt and even though it made me cry when I coughed, it was good to feel something again. I longed for my brain to start working so I could begin to sort out in my mind exactly what it was that had happened. The numbness of grief was holding me back, and beneath it all I knew that once I could function properly again, I would want revenge.

After two days, Parker was allowed back into the theatre. I insisted on coming with him.

From the street, you could almost pretend that nothing had happened. There was a little smoke damage streaked down the front, but that could hardly be seen in the dim light of evening. If you didn't look at the blackened hole left in the second floor, it barely looked any different. Disregarding, of course, the large notice pinned to the front door forbidding entry.

Inside, the hallway was covered with a light layer of ash, which coloured all the new paint and the formerly pristine floor with a light grey tinge and made it look as though it had been untouched for a hundred years.

I didn't want to see that gallery, for all that Parker had assured me that the bodies had been removed. I wanted a few things from my office – my notebooks, my pen, a select few of my favourite plays. Then there were the mementos I wanted from my room; the bracelet my Father had given me when I turned eighteen, my bottle of rose water and a bag of clothes. And the handkerchief Michael had lent me. But before that, I had to do the hardest thing, but the thing which needed to be done most of all. I wanted, no, I *needed* to go to Father's studio.

I paused by the door, my hand over the handle. Now I was there, it seemed less like something I should do. I could walk away, pack my bags and leave, and become a new person. The Evelyn of the future would leave all her cares behind here and be happy somewhere else, pretending that she had left as I had planned to, running away after the play. I would probably never have seen my family again then, so this would be no different.

The door was locked, but Parker had given me his spare key. The room was just as it had always been. Parker's fish tanks were still by the window, still casting murky shadows over the room. The fish had survived untouched by the fire, for the most part. I could only see one dark coloured body floating on the surface of the water.

That pile of books was still spread across the floor, and Father's big chair was exactly as it had always been, although the blanket which covered the ripped backrest had slipped

slightly. I crossed the room and stood before that chair, not sure if I wanted to sit in it or not. I decided not.

The easel was empty. It hadn't been empty for as long as I could remember. There was always something new to be painted, and Father had never been without a spare canvas. There was nothing now, and the wall where the other two canvases had been stacked was now bare, with only the crumpled sheet which had covered the secret commission remaining.

Brendan Fitzroy must have been to collect his commission, although I couldn't think when that would have been. Nobody had mentioned Father having had any visitors that day, only that he had locked himself away in the morning. He must have visited, I thought, perhaps when Annie and I were talking. It need only have been a quick visit, after all, that wasn't so strange. But there was something, something that nagged at my mind, and didn't feel right. Then I remembered: Lady Hamlet was missing.

I searched the studio, behind chairs and bookcases, for anywhere Father might have put it, but I found nothing. Nothing except that sketchbook, which had become bundled up in one of the piles of fabric, swathes which Mother had draped herself in when being painted in the Grecian style. It had been there all along. I looked back to the tanks, and the lifeless, eyeless body which floated there.

I sent Michael a note. Written on Parker's notepaper and in my finest handwriting. I had been forced, by having no idea where he lived, to send it care of *The Advocate*, whose office address was handily printed in every copy of the newspaper.

*In tasks so bold, can little men engage, And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage.
Sol thro' black curtains shoots no timorous ray, nine strikes find me at the scene of our
play.*

I folded the note twice, so none of the black ink could be seen, even when held to the light, and sealed it with a plain wafer. I addressed the note for the attention of M Bailey, and sent it with Parker's man. There would be no reply, I advised, and if asked who the note was from he would remain silent. In return I paid him a silver sixpence, and had him promise that he'd not breathe a word regarding the errand to anybody.

I hoped Michael would understand my bastardisation of Pope, and the instructions it contained. I wasn't even sure that he would be at the offices that day, or if he would wish to meet me. Other than waiting, all that remained for me to do was convince Parker that as he

only lived at the bottom of the street, I didn't mind being left alone in the shell of my former home as the shadows lengthened. That I would rather be alone among my memories, and that I would make my own way when I had finished packing. He offered to send Annie, or Andrew and Jackie down to stay with me, but with tears in my eyes, I finally convinced him that all I wanted was to be alone with my past. After squeezing my hand for a long moment and looking at me with great fatherly affection, Parker finally left the theatre. The clock struck once. It was quarter to nine.

I made my way to the auditorium in the semi-darkness. The ash-covered surfaces seemed to glow a little in the shadows, and there was no sound other than my footsteps, muffled to low thuds by the dust. The chairs in the auditorium were slightly scattered from their straight rows, pushed away in the panic which had ensued only nights earlier. Otherwise, the room was untouched, and as I climbed the steps to the stage, I saw that all the props and scenery were still as I had last seen them.

I lit two candles, and waited.

At five past nine, the door at the back of the auditorium opened, and in stepped Michael. He paused in the doorway for a moment, barely visible in the gloom. I waited, saying nothing, not even moving, as he walked forward and stopped, a few metres before the stage.

'Are you angry with me?' he asked.

'I don't know,' I said. 'Should I be?'

'Your note sounded angry.'

'It was. But not necessarily with you.'

'Oh.' He blinked twice. 'Then why do you want me here?'

'First of all, I want you to tell me that you had nothing to do with the fire.'

He stepped forward towards me, but held himself back.

'No, I didn't. I was afraid you might think - but no, I was in the auditorium, watching. I had to be, for the review. Not that I wrote it, in the end.'

'Do you promise me?'

'Yes. Parker saw me, I'm sure of it. I caught his eye while he was onstage. You should ask him.'

'Perhaps I shall. It was nice of you to come, even though you thought I might be angry with you.'

I picked up the candles and made my way down the steps to where he stood, still waiting uncertainly.

He shrugged, and took one of the candles from me.

‘It was the least I could do. I wish - if I could have done something, if I hadn’t stayed to watch the play then perhaps-’

‘I think, though, that you probably also wanted to come back to the theatre,’ I said. ‘But we can talk about that later. For now, though, I need you to make love to me.’

He looked at me very carefully, then.

‘You’re sure?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, meeting his eyes boldly. ‘It would hardly be the first time we’ve done it. And besides, you promised me that you’d finish what you started two days ago.’

‘As you wish it, then. Where?’ He crooked his arm and I rested my hand on his forearm.

‘My bedroom, I think. I got rid of Parker, but I don’t trust him to leave me alone.’

‘As you wish it, then.’

We made our way through the doors off the side of the stage and out into the hall, retracing the steps we had made that evening two nights previously. We passed by my study and continued on to my room. Once there I dropped his hand and placed both our candles on the bedside table while he locked the door.

‘You’re sure?’ he asked again.

There was distance between us – two feet, perhaps. It seemed like a lot. I stepped forward, reaching for his hand and lifting it from the door handle.

‘Yes,’ I said, lifting his hand to my lips and kissing it. ‘I want you to make love to me.’
I want to feel something.

He touched me then, reaching up and cupping the back of my head, pulling me closer for a kiss so delicate that I could scarcely feel it. I deepened the kiss, leaning forward and pressing my hands into his back so he couldn’t move away. After a few moments he gave a deep, guttural sigh, and I knew I had him, even when he drew back shortly after.

Moving behind me, he laid a feather-light kiss on the nape of my neck, and began the painfully slow process of undoing the lacing at the back of my dress. A shabby affair, it was the only lightweight black dress we had been able to find for such short-notice mourning. Michael didn’t seem to notice, though, and he didn’t say anything, only slipped the dress from my shoulders, kissing my neck as he did so. He stroked my exposed skin with gentle fingers, making me shiver.

‘I saw you come into the gallery,’ he whispered gruffly, caressing me all the while. ‘I heard you screaming, and I pulled you out.’

My breath was shallow as the stroking continued, softly, beneath the shoulder straps of my chemise, down towards my chest. I reached up and put my fingers in his soft hair, arching my neck as I pulled him closer.

‘There was a while where I couldn’t find you,’ he whispered again, ‘even though I could hear you crying I couldn’t see you. And it was hell.’

He turned me and held my shoulders, forcing me to look at him. His eyes gleamed as though he might cry, and I felt a lump grow in my throat.

‘Don’t – don’t, please.’ I whispered, my voice catching in my still sore throat. He would not make me cry to make himself feel better. He felt guilty for his part in it all, I was sure. For not saving my father.

‘I want you to know that it was hell,’ he said. ‘That’s all. And nothing. I just want you to know.’

He could go to hell before I comforted him.

I nodded, and he pulled me roughly into the circle of his arms and kissed me deeply, holding me so tightly I could barely move. He lifted me then, and carried me over to the bed, placing me gently back against the pillows. It wasn’t like when Jackie lifted me. I didn’t feel like a kitten or a child.

‘Take your hair down,’ Michael said quietly. ‘Please.’

He watched as I reached up and began to pull the pins out, setting them down on the bedside table one by one. His eyes never left mine as he shrugged out of his jacket, and pulled off his boots. Once all my pins were removed and the heavy coil of hair unwound itself down my back, I sat still and watched as he continued to undress. I had never seen him naked. Never seen his entire body, beyond his manhood and the hair-speckled bareness on his chest. How strange that we could have done something so intimate with so little intimacy. I felt a prickle of unease, that I shouldn’t be doing this, and that I couldn’t deal with this in the way I would wish to. But his shoulders were broad and the candlelight highlighted the dips in the shape of his muscle, and all I could do was stare, while he pulled off his trousers and stood before me.

‘Now you,’ he said, waiting.

‘You don’t look like a journalist,’ I said, trying to clear the atmosphere, which felt so heavy and oppressive. He didn’t reply, just waited.

Raising myself to my knees, I pulled my chemise over my head, and so was left clad in only my stockings. Not pale silk, how I wished they would be, but good, sensible, black cotton, secured at the top, just above my knee, with a black ribbon. Michael moved and knelt

before me and held my foot in one hand while he ran the other up the length of my leg, stopping at the top of the stocking. His eyes met mine as he slowly pulled one of the ends of the ribbon, before rolling my stocking down my leg.

‘It’s a shame, really,’ he said as he reached for the other ribbon, his fingers trailing across my thighs. ‘I’d like to make love to you while you wear them. I’ve always had a weakness for black stockings.’

My breath caught in my throat, and I couldn’t take my eyes from his fingers as he rolled my other stocking down, then stroked back up my legs, towards my thighs, precisely where I longed for him to be. Pausing at the top of my legs, Michael stood and leaned over to kiss me, nudging my legs further apart with his knee as he climbed on the bed. No other part of his body was touching me, only his knee and his mouth, although I had reached for him and was trying to pull him closer.

He laughed, a little, and then lightly rubbed his fingers over my nipples, only touching the tip. My hips rolled and I tried to press myself against his leg, his knee, anything for more contact, but he was too far away. More firmly, then, he rolled them between his fingers, still refusing all contact with any other part of his body. I arched my back and pulled on his arms but he was too strong. He gently tortured me for what seemed like an age, while I spread my legs wider and tried to pull him down onto me.

‘Please,’ I whispered, hardly able to bear anymore. ‘Please, Michael. Please.’

He stopped, then, and I hoped for sweet relief as he drew away, but it was to kiss my breasts as he ran his fingers down my body, closer to the very core of me. His fingers skirted the hair at the top of my legs, and I spread them as wide as I could, trying desperately to force some contact. I couldn’t touch myself. It had to be him.

‘Please,’ I begged once more. ‘Please.’

I watched through half-closed eyes as he drew back completely, and looked at me. Then he was on me, kissing me hard and supporting himself with one hand while with the other, he found my entrance. As soon as he touched me I began to unravel, and once he had entered me I was unable to control my breathing any longer. I clawed at his back, scratching and squeezing his buttocks as I pulled him deep into my core. It wasn’t long before his moans matched my own, and my mind spiralled and leapt into the sky, into a blackness where nothing existed beyond that feeling and blessed relief.

I had to come to my senses first. His weight on me became uncomfortable, but I allowed him to remain there for a little longer while I debated precisely what I needed to say.

In his current state of satiation, I imagined he would be more suggestible, his mind too clouded for convincing dishonesty.

‘I need you to tell me everything,’ I said.

He groaned, and I heaved him off me, so he rolled onto his back. I reached into the drawer in my bedside table for a handkerchief and raised myself up onto my knees, so I could talk to him from a position of height and without making a mess on the bed.

‘Michael,’ I snapped. ‘Why did you cover the exhibition for the paper?’

He blinked at me.

‘Oh, Christ. I might have known you’d have an ulterior motive.’

I scowled at him.

‘Don’t avoid the question.’

He raised himself up onto his elbows and looked at me through half-closed eyes.

‘Fine, I will tell you all, but I just want to know one thing.’

‘What?’

‘This thing that just happened. Did you do this because you wanted to seduce me into telling you the truth?’

I wanted to say yes, to shout it, but I couldn’t.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, eventually. It was probably for the best.

He continued to look at me in silence for a long few seconds.

‘That’s better than nothing,’ he said. ‘I’ll take that.’

‘Yes, well, anyway. Tell me.’

Michael sat up and leaned over to the floor where he had thrown his shirt.

‘I think I’d rather we did this with clothes on, for what it’s worth.’

We dressed in silence, and as he bent over to put his trousers on, I had to stop myself from looking at him. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it one bit. But there were much more important things to concentrate on now, and any foolish feelings of lust would certainly fade once the real business was dealt with. It was because I was grieving, of course.

‘My name is Michael Bailey, that much is true,’ Michael said once we had dressed and, at his insistence, moved to the gallery. I had suggested my study, but he had refused. I stood awkwardly by the door while he wandered around the blackened shell of the room, and continued. ‘And I am a journalist. I have worked for *The Yorkshire Advocate* for three years, and I have always covered stories of a more... tragic nature.’

‘I saw that. When they said they were sending you, I looked at your work. I couldn’t understand why you’d choose to report on the exhibition.’

‘And you didn’t buy my “right place, right time” excuse?’

‘Not for a moment.’

‘I knew you’d be trouble,’ he said with a wry smile. ‘Nonetheless, I did put myself forward for this story, not because I was tired of my role as it was, but because I knew that it was likely that something would be happening at the exhibition. I knew that somebody would try and steal or destroy Augustine’s work, because he warned me that it would happen. I must say, I didn’t believe him at first, but I took the job at his insistence.’

‘Why you? Why not hire somebody to look after the painting or something?’

Michael paused at the spot directly in front of where Augustine’s work had hung. He stared at the blackened hole on the wall, at the small sections of the frame which remained, and the ashes beneath that had once been the canvas. In spite of the damage, you could still see a flash of bright yellow in the top corner, where the paint had melted and stuck the canvas to the frame.

‘I’m his son,’ Michael said. ‘Augustine is – was – my father.’

‘Oh.’ I thought about that for a moment. ‘So when we, in the study, you were-’

‘Yes,’ he said quietly. ‘I was grieving.’

‘Oh. I understand.’

He nodded.

‘He knew, as we do, I think, that Brendan Fitzroy is behind this, but the thing of it is that I haven’t a clue why, or how your father was involved.’

‘And my mother,’ I said quietly. I crossed the floor and stood beside him, resting my head on his shoulder. I needed some support then. ‘Haven’t you heard? She disappeared. And I think – I’m not sure, but she’s taken one of Father’s paintings with her.’

‘You think she had something to do with the fire?’

Michael didn’t sound convinced, and I knew he was remembering the drink-addled flirt he had met all those weeks earlier.

‘She was having an affair with Fitzroy,’ I said shortly. ‘They had one year ago, but it had started up again.’

Michael swore.

‘I’m so sorry, Evey.’ He put his arm around me and held me closer.

I didn’t want to dwell on my mother’s deception, so swiftly changed the subject.

‘Did Augustine not tell you what he was painting? Or why Fitzroy might be after it?’

‘No,’ Michael’s response was curt. ‘We were not close. I took this assignment to humour him, so I didn’t really ask him much about it. He didn’t want to say what was in the

painting, and I didn't press it. I just wanted to leave, and get on with it so I could get back to some proper work.'

'I see.' We stared at where the painting had been, in silence.

'It's such a shame we couldn't get a look at it,' he said.

'I did try, but I suppose I could have tried harder. I didn't realise it was so important.'

Michael squeezed my arm.

'I should have told you, instead of suspecting you as I did.'

'Instead of blackmailing me.'

'I'm not proud of that.' Michael shifted on his feet awkwardly. Good, I wanted him to feel guilty.

'Hmm. At least we know it was a bit yellow,' I said.

Michael leaned forward, peering at the smudge on the frame.

'Oh my god, Evelyn.'

He pulled me closer to the wall, until we were both stood in the pile of ash.

'It's still out there, somewhere.'

'What do you mean?' All I could see was the yellow smudge but I didn't know how that told us anything.

'See this corner, where it's not quite been burned? Can you see those threads there?'

And I could see, a row of little stubby threads, all neatly sliced, with another, yellow piece of canvas beneath them.

'It's been cut out of the frame.'

Michael reached up and carefully lifted the fragile remains of the frame down from the wall. Turning them over, we were able to see a strip of canvas glued to the inside of the frame.

'It's been stolen, then replaced before it was burned.'

'Father's commission – it was yellow, and it was about the same size as this one was. Both canvases were, actually. He doesn't usually do that, he says it's better to fit the canvas to the picture than the picture to the canvas.'

'Fitzroy hired your father to create a forgery, then stole the original?'

He kissed me hard on the lips.

'Then it's out there somewhere, probably in his damned house. We can find out what it was and why my father was killed.'

'And mine,' I added. I wasn't willing to forget that, although I felt a little more kind to Michael now I knew his motivations. Only a little.

'I don't want to be here anymore,' I said. 'I'm going to go back to Parker's.'

CHAPTER 20

It came on quite without warning. One moment my mind was scrupulously clear, and I was thinking about the dust floating in the air between my eyes and the ceiling. The next, the walls were closing in around me and there seemed to be no air.

The thought came into my head as though dropped by an invisible hand above; my mother was a murderer and I would never see my father again.

I was overwhelmed by the feeling of being alone and nothing ever being right again. I couldn't cope with them and my body began to shut down. My lungs seemed to shrink, my heart raced and I heaved in great sobbing breaths.

It lasted longer than I care to think about, too. Minutes. And almost as soon as the walls receded and the air thickened, it began again. I heaved, sobbed, and curled into a shaking ball on my bed, and tried not to close my eyes. The walls were closer in the dark.

Then I heaved again, and the chamber pot was in reach, but it was on my face and in my hair and my eyes stung and streamed.

I lay quietly after that. The thin trickles of a grey dawn light barely stained the walls, and grew little stronger in what must have been, oh, an hour? Two? Three?

The next time I saw her would likely be in a courtroom, if I saw her at all. My mother. As devoid of all feeling as a mother could be while still retaining the title. Bile and venom coursed from my stomach to my throat and I choked a little on my hatred. Vile, cruel, hideous shell of a human she was, and her blood, her poison ran in my veins. But not undiluted by Father's, everything that was great and good and kind and patient, any talents or skills, any good qualities I dare boast I possessed were from him, they must be from him. Oh yes, the next time I saw her again would be in a courtroom, if I were feeling kind. And I would see her again.

Annie tapped on my door later that morning. I was still in my night clothes, half beneath the sheets, staring at air again, and the tiny dots and lines on the surface of my eyes. I was vaguely aware that I wasn't clean, but I didn't particularly care. This wasn't a civilised society, not really.

‘Oh,’ she said, stopping in the doorway.

I rolled my head to the side to look at her, but there was nothing to say.

‘Come, Evey. I’ll draw you a bath.’

She did, and she cleaned my body and soaped my hair while I cried into the bubbles, but all was well, really, because you couldn’t tell where the tears began and the bathwater ended. And I loved her, in the small, unsure, barely formed way I could feel anything at that time, aside from anger.

By the time I had been dressed in one of Parker’s old dressing-robos and my hair had been towel dried and was hanging down my back in its long, heavy plait, I felt more normal again. More human. Annie and I sat side by side on one of the sofas in Parker’s living room, in front of a small fire. I sat with my legs over hers, and we had our arms around one another as we watched the reddish streaks of afternoon light pattern the dark wallpaper.

‘Parker wants to talk to you. Not necessarily now - or soon, even, but when you’re feeling better.’

I nodded.

Annie hesitated, before beginning again.

‘He - well, for you - he’s been given Julius’s remains.’

‘Oh. Thank you. Thank him for me.’

‘I will.’

She gave me a kiss on the forehead, and I felt empty.

There was nothing inside. My mind was scrupulously empty. My body was a cavernous furnace, waiting to be stoked up in fires of fury. I think I was waiting for something to happen, but nobody would do anything. Andrew and Annie gave me space or embraces as they saw fit, and Jackie avoided me if at all possible, not able to properly meet my gaze when we did meet. Parker left me to come to terms with my grief in my own time. But regardless of the motive, I was spending a lot of time alone.

My courses arrived, which was nice. I hadn’t even thought of the possibility of a child following my last meeting with Michael, although of course it had been possible. But there was nothing inside me, nothing for a potential child to claw onto, to catch on to life. I wasn’t sure if I was glad or not, which was a sign I think of just how far I had gone from my former self. I didn’t want to be alone any more, I thought. Rather than suffer to spawn, I chose instead to go and pay that long overdue visit to Parker.

It was two weeks after the fire, almost to the hour, when I knocked on Parker's office door. He bade me enter in a muffled and distracted voice, and I was surprised to see that a man was with him.

He had brown skin, although not so dark as Andrew's, and he was older too. His head was bound in a neat turban of black cloth and he had a very tidy beard. The rest of his dress was entirely English in appearance; very dark and very smart, with well starched, if modest, shirt points and cuffs. When I opened the door he had been standing behind Parker, leaning on the mantel, scribbling onto paper. Upon my entrance, he gathered his things together without a word and left, only nodding as he passed me by.

'He's marvellous, Parker,' I said, regretting the conversation that was to come and happy to deviate for as long as possible. 'So tall. Who on earth is he?'

'Evelyn.' Parker rose, all the smaller and rounder for being in the presence of someone tall, even though the man had been a little stocky. 'That was - no matter, what can I do for you?'

I waited a moment, then slid into the chair opposite his desk.

'Thank you for taking me in. Taking us in, I mean.'

Parker rocked back in his chair, his hands clasped together with a vuncular pride.

'It's nothing, don't even give it a thought, I beg you. What are we, if not a family?'

'Well, yes, I suppose. Annie said you wanted to talk to me. She said you had... my father.'

Parker nodded solemnly.

'I have. And he is, well, yours, I suppose, to do as you wish with.'

'Would we not bury him?'

Parker hummed a little into his clasped hands.

'Wouldn't we, Parker?'

He didn't meet my eyes.

'I mean, yes, of course, but there is the issue of where, and I hate to say it, Evelyn - you know more than anybody how fond I was of your father - but we don't really have any money. Not for a proper plot in town, not like he deserves. So I was wondering if you would rather wait, until all of the business side of things has sorted itself out. Until my insurance is paid, and we can do the thing properly.'

'I see.'

'Well, yes, and the thing of it is, Evey, that since there are rumours going round that this fire was deliberate, the blaggards might not pay out at all.' Parker unclasped his hands

and roughly rubbed his face. 'But even supposing they do, they'll take a devil of a time sorting it.'

'I see,' I said. 'But Father - will he...' I didn't know how to say it. It was vulgar and crass and seemed disrespectful. 'Won't he go off?'

Parker rubbed his face again and then peeped at me through his fingers. He gave a heaving sigh and leaned forward, propping his elbows on the desk between us.

'That's the other thing, Evey. After the fire, there was very little left. Very little indeed. It was burning so long, all that's left are his,' - Parker paused here to cough and dab at his forehead with his handkerchief. 'Well, his shin bones.'

'Oh. I suppose that makes sense.'

'I have them for you. I thought we could get a nice box - when we can afford it, something really grand with painted scenes on or inlaid into the wood or something. He'd like that, wouldn't he? Something classical, something a bit Greek? What do you think?'

I swallowed. He would like it, I was sure. The only thing he'd probably rather would have been to be ground down and put into paint.

'Where is he now?'

Parker looked deeply uncomfortable. He cleared his throat twice, dabbed his forehead and cleared his throat again.

'In my desk drawer,' he said quietly.

I tried not to look but, even though I knew I wouldn't be able to see from where I sat, I could not help but lean forward a little.

I nodded.

'For now then, if you have no objection, could we keep them there? In your care, I mean. Where you see fit. While I decide what to do.'

'Yes, yes. Of course. As long as you need. There isn't a Thompson alive or dead who isn't welcome in this house,' he blustered.

I fixed him with a look that I hoped was expressionless, and he started coughing again. Foolish Parker. Perhaps he hadn't realised.

I made to rise, but he held out his hand to stop me. The hand which wasn't grasping his damp handkerchief.

'There is just one more thing though, Evelyn. And we needn't talk about it if you'd rather not, of course, but really, ideally, I would like to talk about it sooner rather than later. If you don't mind.'

I sat back in my seat again.

‘Of course, Parker. What would you like to talk about?’

He huffed and shuffled a little before he spoke. I was growing irritated by his discomfort, and began slowly and methodically cracking each of my knuckles in turn.

‘It’s about the troupe. What to do now. Now... now that Liberty has gone.’

I rolled my lips between my teeth and considered for a moment.

‘I honestly don’t know.’

Parker shifted in his chair again.

‘See, the thing of it is, like with the insurance, I’ve got no money coming in - not really. And I can - and will - happily take you and Annie in and keep you for as long as you want or need. But Andrew and Jackson? They’re idling away now, waiting for what happens next, and I can’t keep giving you all pin money like I did before all this, do you see?’

Poor Parker, so worried, so concerned and glowing with sweat at having to keep us all like that.

‘Have you asked them about it?’

‘Yes, yes I have.’

‘And what did they say?’ I prompted gently.

‘Oh, that it all depended on if the troupe would reform in the end. You know, if they had a job to come back to here once the insurance had been sorted out. The question, Evelyn, is if you would be interested in that happening. We’d need a new name, of course, but if you were interested in directing? We could take on more people, new people, really grow it like a phoenix, I suppose, rising from the ashes, don’t you think?’

Parker was getting quite excited. His cheeks glowed red and he started making dramatic gestures with his hands, painting smoke and triumph broadly in the air between us.

‘I suppose. I don’t know, Parker. You should do it regardless, though.’ I watched his hand sink down on to the desk. ‘Do change the name, though, won’t you?’

‘Of course, of course, no doubt about it.’

‘And I’ll let you know. Nearer the time, if I want to be part of it.’ I rose then, not willing to linger. ‘But until that time, I think it may be wise to seek gainful employment.’

CHAPTER 21

When I returned to my room following my meeting with Parker, to think about what needed to be done next, I found Annie sitting on the bed, waiting for me.

‘How was it?’

I shrugged.

‘Parker has my father’s shins.’

‘Oh.’

‘They’re in his desk drawer.’

She nodded slowly.

‘That seems like a sensible place for them.’

And we laughed, then, which was ridiculous, because it was ridiculous, and it broke my heart that all that man with such immense talent had been reduced to was two shin bones in a desk drawer, and a pile of paintings that nobody would ever see outside of Julia Fitzroy’s house. I had his notebooks, of course, piled up in two wooden boxes in the corner of my room. I hadn’t looked at them yet. They were filled with pictures of her. *Her*. I wasn’t sure what to call her. But in my mind, *her* or *she* would suffice for now.

Annie held out her arms to me and I sat with her on the bed, and we held one another in the way we had when we were children and had only recently become accustomed to doing again.

‘Did he ask you about the troupe, about getting back together again?’

I nodded.

‘I don’t know if I can. I don’t know what I want to do. We can’t even bury Father yet. Not that I’m sure he’d want that. What else ought I to do with shins? And the troupe,’ I continued, looking at her with a frown. ‘I don’t know if I can go on, after what *she* did. I don’t want anything to do with her. I just want...’

I looked at Annie then, properly, assessing her as I might assess someone I had never seen before. She smiled at me and she looked so kind and wonderful that I was afraid that if I told her she would try and stop me.

I took a deep breath, and withdrew my hand from hers.

‘I want to find her. My mother. And I want her to pay for what she did.’

‘You think she killed him then?’

I shrugged.

‘It’s been two weeks and we’ve heard nothing. She just left. She was seeing Brendan Fitzroy.’

‘Oh. I see.’ She reached out and held my hand again. ‘Promise me you won’t do anything rash - if you do find her.’

I took a long, hard look at Annie again before I replied.

‘I promise. But either way I have to find her. If only to find out why she left. But I know - I feel, really, that it was her. It seems like the only clear thing in this situation.’

I told her everything, including what Michael had told me about his secretly illustrious parentage and his suspicions and finally, hugely, that Augustine’s painting had been stolen.

‘I need to think about this,’ she said, as she gave my hand a long squeeze. ‘I need to get everything organised in my head. It’s a lot to take in.’

I agreed. Every bit of information was knocking around the inside of my head - like lost words caught by the breeze, it seemed that the key to understanding it was just out of my reach. Annie would likely find it worse - I had thrown odd facts at her in no particular order, only as they occurred to me. I’d likely remember more I ought to share, after she had gone.

‘Does Andrew know?’

I shook my head.

‘Can I tell him?’ she asked. ‘Once I’ve got it all straight. I think he’d be a big help - you know how logical he is.’

That much was certainly true.

‘Nobody else though. Not yet.’

Annie nodded and kissed me on the cheek.

‘Just us three, then.’

It would be four though. We needed four. I needed to visit the fourth again.

CHAPTER 22

Michael, I learned, lived in a modest apartment on Albion Street. It was only a ten minute walk from the theatre, or rather a five minute trot. The same street as I lived on, really, although I hadn't known it. Parker had known all along. He'd simply asked him when they first met.

Parker had barely given me a glance when I asked him for Michael's address, much less been disapproving or asked why. He had, after our meeting, received a visit from one of the men from the insurer's office, and had been drowning in paperwork ever since. Poor Parker.

I sent Michael a note requesting a meeting and asking if I would be received. He replied an hour or so later with five words. "If you think it wise."

I went any way, and enjoyed the brief walk for all that I wished it would be longer. It seemed like a very long while since I had left the confines of the house for pleasure alone. Albion Street, being as it is slightly away from the main thoroughfare is, while scattered almost as liberally with mounds of steaming manure, much quieter than Briggate. A person can, for the most part walk unhindered by others, and the only issue I have faced there is people walking far too slowly.

It's a strange thing to realise that someone you know lives, and has for some time lived on the same street as you. As I made my way briskly towards Michael's house, I could not help but wonder if our paths had ever crossed before without our knowing, and if he had ever seen me passing by beneath his window before. Foolishness, really.

He greeted me in his shirtsleeves, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and great smudges of ink on the sides of his hands and the edges of his fingers. Seeing him in a new situation – out of the theatre, and in his natural habitat I was reminded of the first time I had seen him. Healthy, I had thought. He still looked it, in spite of all that had happened. Where I looked drawn and pale, and my hair hung limply, his skin was flushed with good health and the gentle curls of his hair were just as full of life as I had ever seen them. While it is always a pleasure to see an attractive gentleman, perhaps particularly one with whom I have recently

had the pleasure of a satisfying intimate encounter, frankly I found his seeming invulnerability to being worn down by woe and the world to be more than a little irritating.

His apartments were quite large, and handsomely furnished. Although most pieces were simple designs built from walnut-coloured wood, and the walls were painted a mid-green colour, everything appeared to be of very good quality. Michael offered me tea, and I accepted gladly, taking his absence while he prepared it as an opportunity to shamelessly gape at his belongings.

There was one particularly nice painting hanging on the wall above the fireplace in the sitting room. Small and square, it showed a hand, just a hand, reaching across the picture for something unseen. The skin was dark - not so dark as Andrew's, but a tone between ours. I went closer to examine the brush work. It was good - very good, and it came as no surprise to me to find Augustine's signature in the bottom corner. It was dated 1814. This very year.

The tea service, when Michael brought it to me, was of a much finer porcelain than the old, chipped set I had served him from two months earlier. Much finer, I thought, than a journalist could have afforded. Particularly one who chose to focus on stories of personal tragedy rather than sensationalism. I tried not to glare as I sipped my tea - which of course, I imagined he had a large stock of. But it was unfair of me to judge him so harshly for living, as he must have been, propped by the generosity of his father. Not when Parker had cushioned our finances so generously.

'What can I do for you?' he asked, at length.

I returned my teacup to its perfectly matched saucer and placed it on the table beside me. I wished I had remembered to wear gloves. I felt out of place here, in what I have since learned to be low-level grandeur. I folded my hands neatly on my lap and straightened my back before I began.

'It seems quite clear to me that my mother killed my father, and fled. It also seems very likely that she has taken at least one of his paintings with her. As this is also most likely linked to the murder of your father and the theft of his last work, I see no reason why you should not be included in our plans.'

'Our plans?' Michael asked, as he eyed me over his teacup.

'Annie, Andrew and myself have decided that we will be looking into this, as it has become apparent that nobody in authority has any interest in the death of my father beyond the effect, if any, that it will have upon Parker's insurance claim.'

My voice had become raised during that little speech, and I paused, taking a deep breath before I continued more calmly.

‘As such it has fallen to the three of us to see that things are set right. Given your knowledge of Augustine, and as he asked you to look into the Fitzroys yourself, it seems sensible that we work on this together.’

Michael placed his teacup on the table before leaning back in his chair.

‘I had presumed that was what we would do anyway. I’m not sure why you see the need to be so formal about it.’ He smiled. ‘We were formal for barely a minute after we met.’

I reached for my tea so I had a reason not to look him in the eye.

‘Regardless, I’m glad things have been properly agreed to.’

‘Is Jackie not involved in this?’ Michael asked. ‘I thought you all came as a set?’

‘Annie isn’t entirely comfortable with him at the moment,’ I said, happy to seize upon a topic that wasn’t related to sex with Michael. The truth was that I feared that in my current state I would latch onto Michael, and think it love. I didn’t want that. Not now, probably not ever. I felt a pang in my chest. Lord, I was so alone, and I always would be. That was for the best.

‘I see. I always thought there might have been something going on there.’

I shrugged.

‘It’s complicated. They make it so. But who am I to judge? We digress. Annie, Andrew and I have been discussing what best to do next.’

‘And what have you decided?’

‘That we must look into the Fitzroy family more closely.’

Michael nodded.

‘They are certainly linked to, if not wholly responsible for Augustine’s death, and as you say, your father’s must be related to it. I had been thinking much the same thing, but the issue is how. I am, after all, an employer of the family - you know the Fitzroy twins own *The Advocate*?’

‘Yes. It certainly would be difficult for you to get close to them.’

At once, he was alert.

‘For me, you say? And not you? What do you propose? You aren’t going to try and seduce one of them are you? I know that’s been your method of solving problems historically.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t refer to you as a problem, Michael. Merely an annoyance.’

He sat back with a wry smile.

‘As you wish it. So go on then, surprise me. What will your method be?’

I reached beneath the lapel of my jacket, and his eyes widened slightly. I couldn't resist toying with him still, even though it wouldn't do either of us any good. I rested my hand over my bosom for a moment, before retrieving the small, folded piece of newspaper from my inside pocket.

'They're going to hire me.'

I passed him the paper and he unfolded it quickly, ripping it slightly on one of the creases.

'Governess?'

I nodded.

'You won't get it,' he said, shortly. 'And a good thing too. It's far too dangerous.'

I rose with more hurry than grace.

'You will allow us to work together so long as I do nothing, is that what you mean?'

Michael stood too, evening the odds.

'Yes. No, I mean, going there, being their governess - living there and being entirely under their power? That's ridiculous. That's too much.'

'The missing painting is most likely in there, Michael. Would you have us just leave it there?'

'No, but why does it have to be you?' He reached out to me then, skirting round the table to hold me by the elbows. He looked into my eyes and I could not tell if he was deliberately looking adorable, with a slight, sad smile and downcast eyes. 'Can't Annie go?'

'No, she cannot. The Fitzroys - or at least most of them - they've seen her already. On stage, if you recall?'

'There'll be another way. We'll get in there somewhere else.'

'We won't. And even if we could, do you think we would be there so quickly? Have such complete access?'

'I'm not saying it isn't a good idea, merely that I don't want you doing it.'

I reached out and grasped him firmly by the chin, lifting his face so he was looking me squarely in the eye.

'What you want for me at this juncture is irrelevant. I am applying for that position and I'm going to get it.'

'With what qualifications?'

'I'll lie.'

'You don't know these people - you don't know what they're capable of.'

I drew myself up to my full height and shook his arms from mine.

‘And you don’t know what I’m capable of. They killed my father. Directly or indirectly. And they killed yours. Brendan Fitzroy ruined my parents’ marriage. As far as I’m concerned, he’s as guilty of Father’s death as *she* is. And I’m damned if I’m going to let him get away with it.’

Michael crumpled down onto his chair and screwed his eyes shut tightly as he rubbed his hand across his forehead.

‘Fine. I’m not happy with it, but if that’s what you want, I suppose I have no choice but to let you.’

‘You’ll *allow me*?’ I bobbed a sarcastic curtsy, not ready to give up on the quarrel just yet. ‘How terribly kind of you. But it may have escaped your notice that you aren’t my father. I don’t have to answer to you, or any other man.’

‘No, I know I’m not your father. Perhaps you’ve forgotten what happened in your bedroom, and in your office, but I bloody well haven’t.’ He stood and grabbed me by the hands. ‘Has it entirely escaped your notice that I have come to care for you? Does it not occur to you that I hate the thought of you being in that house, with those people, because I can’t bear the thought of losing you? Has that occurred to you at all?’

‘Let go of my hands, Michael. You feel guilty, that’s all. We both know it.’

He stared at me for a moment, and then dropped my hands.

‘Please, Evey. Please.’

‘I don’t want to talk about this.’

‘I didn’t like my father, but he was my only family. Now there’s nobody, except for you.’

I took a step back from him. My lips quivered and twitched as I had to force myself to ask my next question.

‘Are you saying you’re in love with me?’

He blinked several times and opened his mouth, but no sound came out. It took opening and closing it a few times for the words to work.

‘I - I’m not saying that - I don’t know, but-‘

‘But I shouldn’t go to work for the Fitzroys, and try to find out why our fathers were murdered? I should be your unpaid mistress instead? Or no, perhaps you would pay me from your undoubtedly large inheritance. Well thank you for the offer, but I respectfully decline.’

I snatched the newspaper clipping from the table, and hurriedly folded it, ripping it a little more in the process.

'I was hoping you'd tell me what you know already, and what you know about the Fitzroys. I thought it would be *safer* if I had some idea of what to expect. Clearly you would rather I went in blind. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a role to prepare for.'

He let me go. I wasn't sure if I was glad or not.

Thank you for reading. If you loved the book and have the time, I'd really appreciate a review.

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To find out what happens next...

The Governess

[US](#) / [UK](#)

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The Review is Book One in The Liberty Troupe Trilogy

The Review

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An Unnatural Daughter

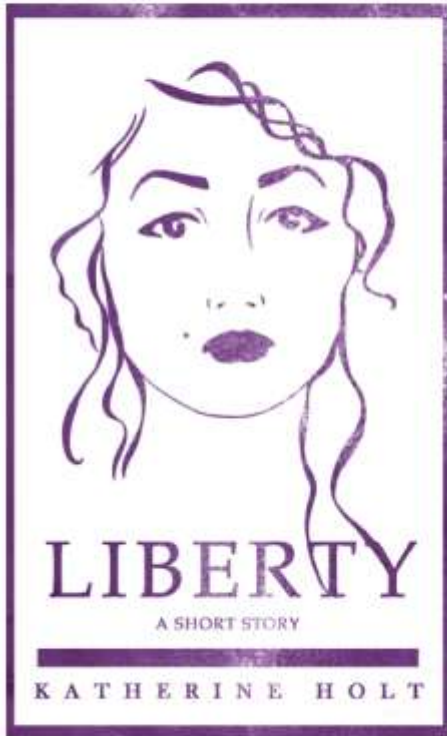
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