

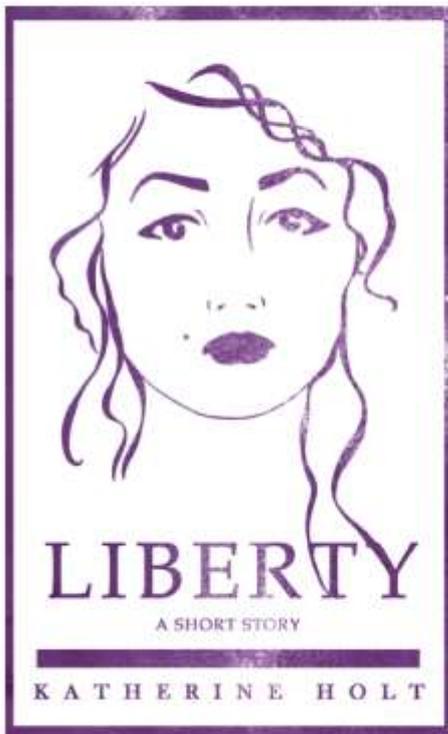
THE REVIEW

By
Katherine Holt

Book One in the Liberty Troupe Trilogy

The Review
The Governess
The Advocate

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The Review
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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*.’

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