Part One

London

November, 1931



CHAPTER ONE

It is possible that the pantaloons were a mistake.

I realize this now, as I take in the interested glances from some of my fellow rail passengers and head down the swaying corridor towards the compartment marked on my ticket. When I got dressed earlier this evening (by candlelight, so as not to wake Midge and Pa, and – I will admit – for the sense of *atmosphere*), the costume had seemed like such an appropriate choice for a young girl, running away from home to seek glory and fame in the bustling metropolis.

It consists of a scruffy waistcoat over an oversized shirt that once belonged to Pa, a flat cap pulled low over my eyes with all of my hair tucked up underneath it, a pair of long, badly darned socks, and, of course, the pantaloons. (Strictly speaking, they're a pair of ladies' Victorian athletic bloomers that I picked up at the village jumble, but with some very minor alterations they do an admirable job at passing for ragamuffin apparel.) I was particularly satisfied with the dirty fingernails and the artful smudge on my right cheek – it's the little touches that make all the difference.

Looking in the mirror at home in the dingy candlelight I had been pleased with my efforts, and yet now I feel less confident. My intention had been to lurk in the shadows, blending effortlessly into my surroundings, but instead I seem out of place on the night train, soon to be making its way from Penzance to London. The other passengers are wearing very ordinary travelling clothes, their faces pale moons in the lamplight – not a smudged cheek to be seen.

I finally reach my compartment, and slide open the door. With a sigh of relief, I find that I have it to myself.

I make myself comfortable, slumping down into one of the seats and pulling the cap a little lower over my forehead, shadowing my eyes and giving me a feeling of being very discreet – an important feeling for any fugitive.

The train begins to move faster now, the percussive sounds of the wheels against the rails building rhythmically as it gathers speed, and I glance out of the window as Penzance melts away. The world rushes alongside me, draped in an inky darkness that turns the familiar face of the Cornish landscape into a stranger. I shiver, delighted. Here I am, on an intrepid adventure into the unknown. It seems almost impossible to believe, but the gentle swaying of the train is real, the faded green seats are real, the miles slipping quietly away like a silk ribbon running through my fingers are really, deliciously real. Oh, at last, this is living!

I reach for the worn old duffle bag (another of Pa's possessions that I have made off with; it's a good thing he's such an even-tempered sort of man, with all this felonious activity taking place) and open it, extracting a slightly squashed jam sandwich, wrapped in waxy

brown paper. I made it before I left home, creeping into the pantry to raid Midge's stores.

Midge is my mother. Her name is Mary, but everyone calls her Midge. I think she got the name because she's very tiny – "a dot", Pa calls her sometimes when he sweeps her up into a big bear hug. Anyway, Midge is an absolutely incredible cook, and her ginger jam sandwiched between two thick slices of home-made bread and butter is a feast that any worldly traveller might be proud of.

After polishing off the sandwich in several hungry bites, and some more staring into the impenetrable abyss beyond the windowpane, it's not long until my eyes begin to feel heavy. I suppose there's only so much staring into the impenetrable abyss that one person can handle. The adrenaline created by my dramatic flight into the night is rapidly leaving my system, and, despite my best efforts to stay awake, my head begins to nod.

It must be after midnight by now, and the train is not due to arrive in to London until seven o'clock in the morning. I settle back into my third class seat, resting my head against the lumpy cushion. I didn't have the

money for a sleeping compartment, and anyway, it feels a lot more authentic to travel this way, as if I am a true vagabond. If I wasn't so law-abiding I'd have tried to stow away, but this is the next best thing. I wrap my arms around my bag, clutching it to my chest, and give in to the gentle rocking of the train and my own exhaustion. I let my eyes fall closed, just for a moment.

When I open them again, I realize that some time has passed. It is still dark outside, the lights in the carriages have been dimmed, and we must have stopped at another station – I know this because there is now a boy sitting across from me.

At first, he doesn't notice that I've woken up, because his nose is buried in a book. The light in here isn't very good so he's holding the pages close to his face, like I do sometimes. (Any avid reader who's had to share a room with a younger sibling probably does the same.) What I can make out is a mop of curly red-gold hair above the book, and a pair of long legs stretched out in front of him in dark tweedy trousers.

He shifts slightly, and I see his face. It's a nice face, not exactly handsome but friendly-looking. His nose is

crooked, as if it's been broken before and healed a little off-centre, and against his skin, pale in the lamplight, freckles are scattered in light, golden constellations. I think he must be around twenty, twenty-one maybe, not that much older than me.

He looks up then, catches my eye, and flashes a wide smile that shows off two deep dimples, one in each cheek. It's a very good smile.

"Hello!" he says. "You're awake!"

I nod and realize my cap has fallen off. I grab it and tuck my long hair back inside. "Are we nearly in London?" I ask. My voice is croaky.

The boy shakes his head. "About four more hours," he says. "Hope I didn't give you a shock. I did say hello, but you were out to the world when I came in."

"No," I reply quickly, to cover the fact that my half-awake brain is still trying to catch up with where we are and how long I've been asleep. I look at him with interest. "Where did you get on?"

"At Taunton."

"We've been through Taunton already?" I rub my eyes. "I'm missing the whole thing!"

"Not much to miss at the moment." He gestures to the window. Outside I can only see the odd blur – dense, black shapes against a dark sky that skitter away from us before I can make any sense of them.

"I suppose," I agree reluctantly. "Although I can't help but feel it's a bit of a letdown to sleep through one's first proper adventure. It seems to demonstrate a lack of character somehow."

The boy laughs. The laugh is good, like his smile, and it makes me want to hear it again.

I find myself grinning back at him. "I'm Freya Trevelyan," I say.

"Christopher McKay. But please, call me Kit." The boy leans forward and holds out his hand. We shake, solemnly.

"Tell me about your adventure so far, then," Kit says, leaning back again, and arranging his long limbs more comfortably. He looks too tall to be folded into these slightly cramped quarters, and I can tell he's trying not to crowd me.

"Well," I pause for a second, allowing the silence to stretch and some tension to build, "I'm a runaway, of

course." The words fall starkly in the space between us with, I think, just the right amount of drama.

"Of course," Kit agrees, as though it's only natural, and I can't help but feel a little deflated at that. I mean, for heaven's sake, this is some high-stakes intrigue. I've just revealed that *I am on the run*. Who knows what dark forces are at play? At the very least he could have gasped.

I try again. "I am fleeing my home. Striking out … alone."

Kit's eyes gleam in appreciation. "I thought as much. Had an idea that was the case as soon as I saw you. The cap, the Victorian urchin costume – that gave me my first inkling."

"Oh, thank you!" I exclaim. "I made it when I played Oliver Twist in a local production." I hesitate for a second, deciding I might as well tell the truth. "Though, even calling it a 'local production' is a bit grand. It was just something I put on with some volunteers from the village, and they certainly didn't take it seriously enough. I had begun to worry," I continue, glancing down at my outfit, "that the pantaloons were a step too far."

He shakes his head firmly. "Definitely not. You have

to commit to these things, otherwise what's the point in doing them at all?"

"My thoughts exactly!" We share a conspirator's look, and just like that, it feels as though we've known each other for ever. It's a nice feeling, as if I am sitting with a friend or a member of the family, someone familiar and worn in like a particularly cosy jumper.

"So, you're running away to London?" Kit asks. "Hopefully not to actually live as Oliver Twist?"

"No," I reply, a little regretfully – joining a gang of pickpockets really *would* be an adventure. "I'm going to stay with my sister, Lou. One of my sisters, I should say. I have three of them, and four brothers."

Kit doesn't say any of the mundane things that people like to say about us being a big family. To be fair, eight children *could* be considered rather over egging the pudding. Pa sometimes says that there might have been more of us if it hadn't been for the war keeping him and Midge apart for a time, and that we should be thankful for small mercies. It's a sad sort of joke, but quite a good one given the state of chaos that exists in our little farmhouse.

My oldest sister, Alice, is married now, with a little girl of her own, and the next oldest, Lou, is living in London; but that still leaves six of us at home. At just turned eighteen, I have been promoted to head of the siblings. After me comes Tom, who is thirteen, then the triplets, Joe, Max and Davy, who are five, and Anthea-the-baby who is two now but may well be Anthea-the-baby for her whole life.

"That's all right, then," Kit says. "At least you'll have someone to show you around."

"It will only be for a very little while," I add quickly, lest he thinks my adventure diminished. "Until I get my first part. I'm going to be an actress, you see."

Again, Kit nods in easy acceptance. "On the stage?"

"Yes," I say, leaning forward, feeling the pulse of excitement that comes with those words. *On the stage.*

"I really do understand. How funny that we'd end up travelling together. I want to be a playwright, myself."

"*Do you?*" I ask, eyeing him with interest.

"Yes. Always have done. I did my own running away to London a couple of years ago."

"And?" I ask, breathless. "What is it like?"

He shrugs one shoulder and gives a wry half-smile. "Hard, heartbreaking … wonderful. I haven't had any of my plays staged or anything like that. I've been working stagehand jobs, trying to learn what I can, and working on my own script in my spare time. It's…" He breaks off, as though trying to put it into words is too difficult. "Well, there's nothing like it really."

I sigh. Hard, heartbreaking, wonderful. And all out there just waiting for me. "What were you doing in Taunton?"

"My aunt lives there, I was visiting. I'm just about to go on tour with the company I've been working for, so it's the last chance for a while." He flushes slightly. "It's my first opportunity at stage managing, actually. The man who was going to be doing the job got shingles and had to pull out on quite short notice, so … they promoted me."

"On tour," I breathe. "How thrilling."

Kit picks up the book on the seat beside him, and with a flick of his wrist, sends it cartwheeling through the air. I catch it between my palms and turn it gingerly so that I can read the title.

"The Importance of Being Earnest!" I exclaim. The play is a favourite of mine. I open the dog-eared paperback and notice that there are a lot of pencil marks and scrawls in the margins and whole parts underlined. "Is this the production that you're going on tour with?"

"That's right." Kit sits back. "With the Queen Anne Theatre's touring company. The theatre is a lovely old place, tucked round the corner by the National Gallery."

I wriggle in my seat. "I can't wait to see it. I can't wait to see *all* of them – the theatres, I mean. I've only been to London once in my life to visit Lou. We went to Drury Lane and saw *The New Moon* with Evelyn Laye, and they set a pirate ship on fire, right there on the stage." The thrill of it comes back to me as I remember the scene. "But that's all I've seen of the theatre. Can you believe it?" I spread my hands, in a gesture that I hope conveys the depth and breadth of my ignorance, and the tragedy of it all. "To have so little to do with the one thing in the world that you know you're destined for? It's been torture."

"Sounds it," says Kit simply. "It's terrible when you

have ambition, but not the opportunity to do what it is that you want the most."

Ambition. Opportunity. Want.

The words thrum deep through me, reverberating like a tuning fork, a pitch that only I can hear.

"If you're around before we leave next week then you should come down to the Queen Anne one afternoon," Kit continues. "I'll give you the guided tour."

"Oh!" I grip the seat either side of me with such force that my knuckles turn white. "Do you mean it? Really?"

Kit's eyes crinkle. They are an interesting pale blue, Kit's eyes. Almost grey, like the sea on a cold day, and fringed with thick sandy lashes. "It would be a pleasure."