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London and Paris, 1791

Curtain rises.

In the theatre, there comes a moment when we bid goodbye to a play. The scripts are put back on the shelf, the scenery dismantled, the actors move on to new roles. Yesterday, my life at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, came to the end of its run.

What can I say to you, Reader? For me, everything is over.

I admit that I'm scared. I don't know what I shall do. I wasn't prepared for such a sudden termination to the life I thought I was going to lead. And so strange to think that the curtain was brought down with such a simple question.

Mr Sheridan caught me in the corridor backstage as I carried the actresses' wigs out of the powder room. 'Cat, come here. Tell me what you think.'

From the stage came the sounds of the orchestra tuning up. My friend Pedro would already be in his place, sitting with the other violinists – and counting the audience we were expecting a full house. Backstage was abuzz with excitement as the moment of performance approached. I really didn't have time to linger but my patron, Mr Sheridan, could not be denied. He hauled me into his office, snatched the tray, and dumped it unceremoniously on the floor.

'Watch it, sir! I'll get skinned if anything happens to those!' I protested as I tried to prevent many guineas' worth of powdered curls tumbling on to the hearth.

'No, no, forget about those,' he said, heedless in his enthusiasm. 'I want you to be one of the first to see the plans,' and he hooked me by the elbow and propelled me to the desk.

'Fifteen minutes!' called the stage manager outside. Three actors rushed by, not yet in costume. They'd obviously lingered too long in the Players' Tavern.

On the scuffed leather surface of the desk lay a

sheaf of crackling white parchment scored with lines and tiny numbers.

'So?' Mr Sheridan asked, rubbing his hands eagerly, looking across at me, his brown eyes sparkling.

He evidently wanted my opinion – a fact that I would have found flattering if I hadn't been in such a rush to deliver the wigs; the actresses would not thank me if I made them late for their first entrance. I had better get this over with. I turned my mind to the papers in front of me. It was clearly a design for a grand building of some sort – a palace perhaps. Maybe Mr Sheridan's extravagant friend the Prince of Wales had yet another construction project in his sights?

'Er . . . what is it?' I asked.

'It's Drury Lane, of course.' My patron's flushed face beamed happily. Was he drunk already?

I took a closer look. I could now see the vast stage and auditorium, but this wasn't my theatre. None of my familiar landmarks were here; he must be joking. 'No, it's not, sir. Where's the Sparrow's Nest? Where's the scenery store?'

'You don't understand, Cat. Not *this* worn-out pile of bricks and cracked plaster,' he waved dismissively at the ceiling. 'These are the plans for the *new* Theatre Royal – one fit for our modern age that will rise from the ashes of the old.'

Mr Sheridan had often talked about sprucing up the theatre when he had the money – he never did, so I had always let these ramblings wash over me.

'Very nice, sir,' I said non-committally, wondering if I could get on my way. In fact, I thought the plans looked terrible – they represented a vast, soulless place where actors would seem like objects viewed the wrong way down a telescope, if I had understood the drawings correctly. It would kill the theatre – and probably quite a few of our leading actors as they tried to make themselves heard in that space. It was a good job that it would never be built.

'Ten minutes!' called the stage manager. 'Light the stage candles.'

'I'm glad you like it, Cat,' said Mr Sheridan, caressing the papers, 'because this evening I'm

going to announce to the cast that the last performance within these walls will be on 4th June. When we close, the demolition crew will move in to knock the old place down.'

'What!' I felt as if he had just tipped a kettle of scalding water on me.

'I know that is very soon, but I didn't want to make a premature announcement. I couldn't get a builder for the job until I'd put the money on the table. Apparently, my reputation for not being prompt about settling my account had preceded me.' He chuckled and smoothed his white silk cravat fixed in place with a diamond-headed pin.

This was serious.

'What, Cat? You don't look pleased.'

'How long will the theatre be closed?'

'Oh, I don't know – a couple of seasons perhaps. We're not talking about a refit here – this is a complete rebuild.'

'A couple of seasons! But that's years!'

He darted a look at me out of the corner of his eye. 'I know it's going to mean a lot of changes for everyone. We'll have to camp out at the King's

Theatre for a while, but I'm sure the company will all pull together when they understand what we stand to gain.'

'I see.' I said no more. My home was about to be destroyed: the Sparrow's Nest, my foothold in the world for as long as I could remember was to be turned into rubble; the playground backstage that I'd shared with Pedro was about to be reduced to dust. Where would we go? At least Pedro had his master, the musical director – as an apprentice, he would be looked after. But I, as an orphan under the protection of the theatre, I'd been allowed a corner no one else wanted. In a new theatre, where no one knew me, would I be so fortunate again?

Mr Sheridan must have been following some of my thoughts from the expressions on my face.

'When this is all over, Cat, I think you'll recognize it was for the best. You can't bed down in the costume store any more like some stray kitten. You're a young lady now. You need to find proper lodgings for yourself – start to make your own way.'

With what? I wondered. I worked in exchange for bed and board. I'd never had any money to call my own.

'I have every confidence that you'll fall on your feet as normal. You're not called Cat for nothing,' he continued cheerfully, ruffling my ginger hair and dislodging my cap.

I knew that for my own good I had to be practical. I couldn't indulge myself and let out the wail of grief that welled up inside me. 'Can I move with the company?' I asked. 'Will you start paying me wages?'

Mr Sheridan began tidying away the plans. 'We'll see. Money's a bit tight at the moment, what with the cost of the new building and the removal. Have a word with Mrs Reid – she might be able to squeeze something out of the wardrobe budget for you. Though I must admit I rather thought that you were going to make your fortune by your pen. I understood that the Duke of Avon was helping you find a publisher.'

He'd hit upon a sore spot.

'His grace has tried, but the booksellers find my

stuff too shocking. They've told me to write about love and female duty – not boxing and battles.'

Mr Sheridan laughed. 'Don't you listen to them, Cat. You have to put up with your fair share of rejection as a writer if you want to succeed. Keep trying – you'll find your audience one day.'

'Yes, when I'm six feet under and women are equals to men – that means never,' I muttered sullenly.

'I wouldn't be so sure of that,' said Mr Sheridan, toying with the watch chain that looped across his broad expanse of waistcoat. 'It may happen sooner than you think. Events in France are transforming things that, when I was your age, were thought to be untouchable. Maybe your sex will be the next to share in the benefits of the wind of change that is sweeping across Europe.'

Mr Sheridan was talking politics now. The theatre was only really a hobby to him: his real career lay in parliament so it didn't take much to jog him on to this track. I'd be getting a full-blown speech about progress and revolution if I didn't watch out.

'We'll see, sir,' I said humbly, bobbing a curtsey. 'May I go now?'

'Yes, yes, off you go, child. And don't worry: we'll make sure you are all right one way or another,' he said, leafing through the plans once more.

I picked up the tray of wigs and retreated from the office, full of doom. I knew my patron better than to trust to his vague promises. Many a shopkeeper had spent hours besieging him for payment only to be fobbed off with hints of money in the future.

'Cat, where's my wig?' screeched Miss Stageldoir as I pushed my way into the bustling dressing room. Half-clothed dancers clustered around the mirrors, elbowing each other out of the way to plaster their faces with make-up, gossiping to each other in quick-fire French.

Well, if I was going to persuade everyone I was an indispensable part of the backstage crew, I could afford to make no enemies by rudeness – even Miss Stageldoir, a middling order actress of indifferent talent.

'Sorry, miss. I was delayed by Mr Sheridan,' I

replied meekly, battling through the ballerinas to reach her.

Miss Stageldoir curled her pretty lips sceptically. She had a patch on her cheek like a squashed fly, hiding a pox mark that spoiled her alabaster skin (this too came out of a bottle – she was really as red-faced as a laundry woman when seen in daylight). 'Put it on me then, girl.'

I lifted the wig from the tray, trying to blow off some of the soot before she noticed, and lowered it on to her head like the Archbishop of Canterbury crowning the king. She stared at her reflection.

'What have you done, you slattern!' She wheeled round and slapped my face hard. 'You've ruined it!'

Mrs Reid bustled forward to break up the commotion. 'What's the matter, Miss Stageldoir?' she said soothingly. I rubbed my cheek, boiling with resentment, but bit my tongue.

'The dirty little beggar's spoiled my wig! How can I go on stage looking like a chimney sweep?'

'I can mend that in a trice with some powder. Just sit tight.' Mrs Reid clucked and fussed over

Miss Stageldoir's head. She enveloped the actress in a cloud of white dust as she repaired the damage. 'Look! As good as new.'

'Hmm.' Miss Stageldoir turned her face this way and that. 'I suppose it'll do, but make sure you punish the girl: it could have ruined my performance.'

As if it needed me to spoil it – she did that well enough herself.

'I will, you can be certain of that.' Mrs Reid glared at me.

This was so unfair!

'But it wasn't me, Mrs Reid. Mr Sheridan dropped the tray when he took me into his office.'

Mrs Reid raised her eyebrows, taking in my crooked cap. 'What was he doing with you in his office on your own?'

Two of the dancers giggled as they brushed past. I blushed and tugged my cap back into place. 'He wanted to show me his plans.'

'Oh yes?'

'Yes, plans for the new theatre,' I continued loudly, savouring the moment when I would fire

my broadside. 'He's closing Drury Lane and knocking it down. On 4th June to be precise. We've all got to move.'

You could have heard a pin drop. In fact, several did tumble from Miss Stageldoir's head as she jerked back in her chair to stare at me in disbelief.

'What did you say?' she hissed.

'It's the end. Drury Lane is doomed. The curtain falls. Can I put it any clearer for you . . . miss?'

She missed my rudeness in her surprise. 'But where are we going? Will we lose our positions?' she exclaimed.

An excited babble broke out in all quarters as the cast began to discuss their fate. Sooty wigs forgotten, the news spread as dancers darted off to whisper it to their boyfriends among the stagehands. Soon there was no corner of the theatre that did not know what was afoot, no doubt as Mr Sheridan had intended when he chose to tell me first.

'Five minutes to curtain up! Beginners, please,' called the stage manager as he tried to hush the hubbub behind the scenes.

Miss Stageldoir swept past me without a word, her velvet train leaving a trail in the powder. With a sigh, I picked up a broom to sweep the floor.

The orchestra began the overture as I made my exit from an empty dressing room. There was no one to see me go as all eyes were now on the stage.

With leaden feet, I climbed the stairs to my lonely corner of the Sparrow's Nest, and huddled on my couch counting the days until I had to fly away.

Only twelve left.