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Star Crossed

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For Chris W-W, a kind friend



Star Crossed

Chapter One

auditions next week

'The next production,' said Candy, looking around to make sure she had everyone's full attention, 'will be *Romeo and Juliet*.'

There was an audible gasp from the assembled group. Fliss turned to her two friends, her eyes shining. '*Romeo and Juliet!* Wow!'

Some of the members of the Circle Youth Theatre Company didn't look so thrilled, however. 'I hate Shakespeare,' moaned Sean, a tall strapping boy with a shock of red hair. 'All that stupid language. Why couldn't he just use proper English?'

'He did,' said Candy, shooting Sean a look. 'It's not his fault you were born four hundred years too late to appreciate it.'

The rest of the group laughed. Sean blushed, his face going the same colour as his hair.

Candy waved some sheets of paper in the air. 'I'll be holding auditions next week. Anyone who wants

a part is welcome to come along but, as usual, my decision is final. And think about what you're taking on. We'll be rehearsing pretty intensively during the summer holidays. If you're cast in the play, there's to be no dropping out halfway through rehearsals.' She glanced at Sean. 'Even if you do think the language is stupid.'

The noise level rose as everyone started to chat and call out questions.

'You should try out for Juliet,' said Mari to Fliss. 'You look just right.'

Felicity 'Fliss' Richards was a petite, elfin-looking brunette, with big eyes bordered by long lashes. By contrast, her friend Mari was solidly built with a round face like the moon and thick blonde hair that never seemed to stay in its ponytail. Fliss blushed at Mari's words. 'It's not just about looks,' she mumbled.

The third friend of their group, Victoria, patted Fliss on the back. 'You know you're easily the best actress in the company.' She sighed. 'Wish I could say the lines like you do. When you act, it sounds like you've just made up the lines yourself. I sound like I'm reading them out of a book.'

Fliss grinned at her friend. Victoria had beautiful dark skin, was tall and slim, with coloured threads

woven into her jet-black hair. 'Don't be silly, Vic. You're fine. It's practice, that's all.'

Mari nodded. 'That's true. Fliss is always reading plays and doing speeches. She must know more Shakespeare than anyone.'

Fliss looked embarrassed. 'Oh, not really. I just like the plays. And *Romeo and Juliet* is my favourite. I can't believe Candy's picked that.'

The Circle Youth Theatre Company only ran in school holidays. Candy had started it up a year ago, and now there were over forty members. Fliss knew that most of them had joined because Candy was such a good director. She taught drama at the local college, and she knew how to get the best out of her actors. She was young, too – only in her twenties – so the cast never felt like they were being talked down to. She was enthusiastic and encouraging but she didn't take any messing around in rehearsals. Fliss thought to herself that anyone in the street could have guessed Candy was into theatre. She had pink stripes through her hair and always wore such brightly coloured boots that people turned to stare. Fliss wished she were brave enough to wear something like that!

'I thought she'd go for another musical after *The Little Match Girl* at Easter,' said Mari. 'Glad she didn't though. I hated singing in that.'

'At least you didn't have to play a boy,' said Victoria. 'It was so embarrassing.'

'Seriously, though,' said Mari to Fliss. 'You should definitely go for Juliet.'

'Especially,' said Victoria, 'if Tom Mayerling is going to be Romeo.'

Three pairs of eyes turned to the far side of the room, where a tall boy with curly brown hair and a cheeky grin was laughing with his mates. The three girls sighed in unison.

'He is so far out of our league,' said Mari sadly.

'Too gorgeous for words,' agreed Victoria. 'And hardly knows we exist.'

'I can't believe he's joined the company,' said Mari. 'I never thought we'd get closer than seeing him on the bus to school.'

'Don't suppose we'll get any closer now,' said Victoria with a sigh. 'He'll never notice us.'

Fliss said nothing. She found it hard to joke about Tom. His smile did funny things to her insides. She knew Mari and Victoria fancied him, but it was only in a not-very-serious way. Whereas Fliss sometimes found it hard to sleep at night because all she could see was his face, hear his laugh. He wasn't even at their school and she'd barely spoken to him, but every time she stepped onto the bus, her heart gave a

leap when she caught sight of him. When she'd seen him walking into the studio with everyone else, she'd felt as though her stomach had turned completely upside down.

'He has to play Romeo, surely,' said Victoria. 'He's the best looking. And he was brilliant in his school play, somebody said.'

'Mercutio is a better part,' said Fliss, trying not to look at Tom. 'It's got more life. Romeo is a bit of a passive character.'

'Does Mercutio get to snog anyone?' asked Mari.

'No, he dies in a fight.'

'What a waste!' exclaimed Mari. 'No, he should play Romeo and you should play Juliet, Fliss. You'd be the perfect couple.'

Fliss was trying to ignore a tiny crackle of excitement inside her. It wasn't just because of Tom, though. Juliet was such an amazing part. Could she really play Juliet? She was sure she could. It was her dream role! She had read the play over and over again. And if Tom were cast as Romeo, as Mari and Victoria said . . .

Mari interrupted her thoughts. 'There's someone who thinks *she* should play Juliet.' She glared at someone over Fliss's shoulder.

Fliss twisted round to see. Samantha Brooks, a tall

blonde girl with silky hair straight out of a shampoo advert, was throwing back her head and laughing.

'That's a fake laugh,' said Mari.

Victoria agreed. 'You can see it in her eyes. She's laughing to impress someone.'

'Guess who?' said Mari. Tom was watching Samantha from several feet away.

'He wouldn't be taken in by someone like that,' said Victoria uncertainly.

Mari snorted. 'What planet are you on, Victoria? Of course he would! She's gorgeous.'

'Her nose is too pointy,' objected Victoria. 'And she won't do anything that might involve breaking a nail.'

'But she's got confidence oozing out of every exfoliated pore,' said Mari. 'Look at her.'

Fliss looked and felt the crackle of excitement fizzle into nothingness. Samantha was the tallest and most glamorous girl in the company. Only three months ago, she had signed with a model agency, and she delighted in telling anyone who would hear that she had had four jobs already and 'people who know' were saying she had a great career ahead of her.

'Can't act though, can she?' said Victoria maliciously, and Fliss felt a smile creep over her face.

'She goes over the top all the time. Our Fliss is way better than her.'

Mari turned to Fliss. 'You *have* to get that part,' she said urgently. 'I can't play Juliet, I'm too dumpy. And Victoria can't act.'

'Hey!'

'Katie Presley left after *Match Girl*,' Mari went on, ignoring Victoria's outrage. 'She could have done it. But no one else is good enough. Face it, half of the girls here couldn't even remember their lines until the dress rehearsal last time.'

'That's true,' said Victoria. 'Including me.'

'So it has to be you,' Mari said practically. 'We'll help you. Test your lines or something. Anything. But you can't let Samantha play Juliet.'

Victoria's jaw dropped open in horror. 'She would be horrifically awful!'

'And we'd all have to resign,' said Mari. 'I'm not as good as you, Fliss, but I love being in shows. And if you let Samantha beat you at the auditions, I will have to give up the one thing I love most in the world.'

'After chocolate,' said Victoria.

'Yes, after that.'

'And your rabbit.'

'OK, him too.'

'And Robert Pattinson.'

'Shutupshutupshutup. All *right*,' said Mari. 'The thing I love *fourth* best in the world.'

'What about us?' said Victoria.

Mari ignored her. 'You will do it, won't you?' she said to Fliss.

Fliss laughed at the fierceness in her friend's face. 'You are completely mad. I guess I don't have any choice, do I?'

'No, you don't,' said Mari, and grinned.

'Oh, one more thing!' Candy called over the noise. 'Quiet! Listen up! Something I forgot to tell you.' She waited for silence, and then went on, 'The theatre is being refurbished, so we can't use it for the production.'

'What!' Fliss was startled, and immediately disappointed. She loved the little theatre with its fourteen stage lights and tiny dressing rooms.

Candy waved her hand for calm. 'So instead I have decided to present you with a little challenge.' She paused. 'The local council has agreed that *Romeo and Juliet* can be performed outside, in the town park.'

'Outside!' The girls stared at each other.

Suddenly Tom spoke up. 'What if it rains?'

Candy grinned. 'Then you'll get wet, won't you? Don't worry, Tom, we'll have an indoor room as a

back-up. So you needn't worry about your hair going flat.'

Tom flushed and ran his hand through his curly hair as his mates chuckled loudly. 'Oh, to be a glove on that hand . . .' murmured Fliss, as she watched him.

Victoria turned, startled. 'What did you say?'

'Huh?' Fliss felt embarrassed. 'Nothing.'

'Yes you did. You said something about being a glove.'

Mari grinned. 'She's quoting the play already, I bet. And too right. You've got to get to work, Fliss! Get that part!'

♥

'I'm home!' Fliss called as she closed the front door.

Her mum, Jeanette, came out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel. 'Hello, love. Did you have a nice time?'

'Yeah.' Fliss hung up her jacket and put her keys on the table. 'It was really good to see everyone.' *Especially Tom*, she thought.

'So?' said Jeanette, raising her eyebrows. 'What's the show?'

Fliss took a breath. '*Romeo and Juliet*.'

Jeanette stared. '*Romeo and Juliet?* Why are they doing that then?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, it's not exactly mainstream, is it?' said Jeanette, draping the tea towel over the sofa and plumping up a cushion. 'Isn't it Shakespeare?'

'Yes.'

'Well, who's going to come and see it? I mean, don't get me wrong, love, but it's a kids' drama club. Don't you think it's a bit – well – ambitious?'

Fliss felt hot. 'I didn't pick it,' she said. 'Candy did.'

Jeanette let out a snort. 'Candy. What kind of a name is that anyway? Is it her stage name?' She said 'stage name' as though it were something to be ashamed of.

'I don't know,' said Fliss, wishing she could just escape upstairs. 'I think it's a nice name.'

Jeanette gave her daughter a pitying look. 'It might be a nice name when you're four years old, but it's not a name for a grown-up, is it? Unless you're an arty sort, I suppose.' She looked at her daughter. 'Oh, don't pull such a long face. I'm sure you'll have lots of fun doing this *Romeo and Juliet* thing. Maybe you'll do a short version. I saw a Shakespeare play once. It went on for hours. I nearly fell asleep. All

those old-fashioned words! If Candy has any sense, she'll do it all in modern English so people can actually understand what's going on.'

Fliss wanted to say, 'The language is what makes the play great, don't you see?' but she couldn't. She hated contradicting people even when she disagreed with them.

Jeanette came over to give Fliss a hug. 'I'm sure it'll be a lovely little play. When is it?'

'End of August. But we can't use the theatre so it'll be outside in the park.'

'Well, now I've heard everything,' said Jeanette. 'Acting outside! And what will you do when it rains?'

'Maybe it won't.'

'This is England,' said Jeanette sarcastically. 'It always rains.'

'Candy says there's an indoor venue just in case.' Fliss felt a tiny flicker of annoyance. Why was her mum always so determined to find fault with things?

'Thank goodness for that.' Jeanette picked up the tea towel again and used it to wipe a smudge of flour off her cheek. 'Come into the kitchen with me. I'm making gluten-free cake. Vivienne's coming round tomorrow, and you know what she's like with gluten.'

Fliss nodded, though the news didn't fill her with

pleasure. Her mother's friend Vivienne was obsessed with diet. One week she would say that dairy made you produce more mucus and so she was giving it up to make sure she didn't get colds. The next week she would declare that tomatoes were scientifically proven to prevent cancer and so she was going to eat tomatoes at every meal, even for breakfast. At the moment, Vivienne had decided that wheat and gluten were the cause of her stomach cramps and so she was cutting them out of her diet.

Fliss secretly felt that her mother looked up to Vivienne. Vivienne was smart and intelligent – at least, she said she was – and she was always exclaiming in a surprised voice, 'Oh, didn't you know that? Didn't you hear? I thought everyone knew that nowadays.' Fliss was a little bit afraid of Vivienne. Vivienne made her feel young and stupid. She wondered sometimes if her mother felt like that too.

Jeanette opened the oven door and peered in. 'Good. They look like they do in the recipe book.'

Fliss squinted in after her. 'Are they chocolate? I thought Vivienne didn't eat chocolate?'

'No, no, chocolate's good for you,' said Jeanette, sounding exactly like Vivienne. 'In small amounts, it's been shown to have a beneficial effect on the heart.'

'Oh.'

'It has to be very good quality chocolate, of course,' said Jeanette. She cast a slightly worried look at the wrapper on the counter top. Fliss knew it was a very expensive brand – a long way from Dairy Milk. 'It'll be worth it,' said Jeanette brightly. 'We'll just get cheaper bread this week.'

Fliss said nothing. Money was always tight in their house. Jeanette worked as a receptionist at the town's surgery but it wasn't a high salary and Fliss often came home to find her mother staring at the gas bill or the council tax bill and obsessively doing sums in her accounts book. Fliss felt cross with Vivienne for making her mother worry about money even more.

'Can I help?'

Jeanette smiled at her daughter for the first time since she had got home. 'You can put the kettle on, love. I could murder a cup of tea.'

Fliss carefully emptied out the water that was already in the kettle ('You should always make tea with freshly once-boiled water,' Vivienne had told them) and filled it up again. Her mind was back on the play. 'There are auditions next week,' she said.

'Mmm?' Jeanette was poring over her recipe book again. 'Just checking I've done it all in the right order, you know. I even had to get special flour.'

'Auditions,' said Fliss again. 'For *Romeo and Juliet*.'

Jeanette looked up. 'Why do you need to audition? You're already in the club, aren't you?'

'Company,' corrected Fliss. 'Yes, but this is to see who gets which part.'

Jeanette reached across and patted her hand. 'Try not to worry, love. I'm sure you'll get something, even if it's only a couple of lines. You were quite good in that play at Easter. The one with songs.'

'*The Little Match Girl*,' said Fliss.

'That's the one. You sang your solos very nicely. And I thought you looked lovely in that sweet costume with the bonnet.'

Fliss bit her lip. Hadn't her mother noticed her acting ability as well as her costume? 'Mari says I might get to play Juliet.'

'Who?'

'Mari. You know – my friend.'

'No, not Mari. I know who Mari is. I meant who did she say you could be?'

'Juliet,' said Fliss, as the kettle clicked off. 'The main part.'

There was a pause. 'Aren't you going to pour that out?' said Jeanette. 'Otherwise we'll have to start all over again with new water.'

Hastily, Fliss poured hot water onto the teabag,

squeezed it and dunked it into the second mug. ('Never waste two teabags where one will do,' Vivienne would have admonished. 'Didn't you know there's a world shortage of tea?')

'Well, I think it's really nice that your friends are so supportive,' said Jeanette. 'And I think whatever size of part you get, you should be pleased. After all, it's not like it really matters, is it? It's the taking part that counts.'

'It's not a team sport,' said Fliss in a quiet voice. She added milk to the mugs and put them on the kitchen table. Inside she felt an ache. It was so difficult to talk to her mother about acting. Jeanette didn't seem to understand the first thing about it. How could she explain that she wanted that part more than anything?

'I know it's not a sport,' said Jeanette with a smile. 'But it's basically the same, isn't it? You're in the drama club because it's fun and you get to have fun with other people your own age. Not because you're going to be a great actress someday.'

Fliss curled her fingers around the scalding hot mug. Her heart gave a thump. 'What if I were?' she said, trying to keep her voice light.

'Were what?'

'Going to be a great actress.' Fliss dared to glance up

through her dark lashes at her mother. 'What would you think?'

Jeanette hesitated for a moment, her head on one side and a puzzled expression on her face. Then suddenly she burst out laughing. 'Oh, Felicity! You do know how to wind me up, don't you? Going to be a great actress!' She chuckled again. 'You nearly got me there. I thought you were serious for a moment!'

Fliss gave something that looked like a smile but it didn't reach her eyes. 'Yeah,' she said. 'Just a joke.'