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Gillian Cross

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Chapter One

The heavy red curtain swirled outwards and settled into long folds. From behind it shuffled a stooped figure, alert and menacing, his fingers gripping something long and straight which glittered as he stropped it restlessly against his other hand.

'They all come'—the voice was low and gloating—'rich and poor, old and young, they all need the barber.' His feet inched forwards over the boards. 'I sit them in my chair and I lather 'em up to the nose, watching their silly faces in the mirror, dreaming of fine dinners and fancy women. No eyes for the barber as comes creeping, creeping . . .

'Then, all of a sudden—' the figure jerked upright and in his right hand something bright flashed once, slicing murderously down. '—I *cuts* 'em! From ear to ear! And the blood drips down their shirts and puddles on the floor.'

The left hand traced the slump of a head, the slow sliding of a body. 'And then'—briskly—'into the cellar with 'em and off to be chopped up and rolled in pie crust.'

His laugh shivered through the silence.

Jackus, leaning against the door at the back of the Hall, shuddered involuntarily. Somehow, he had not expected anything so good. As the laugh died away, there was a hush. For a full minute, nobody spoke.

Then fat Ann Ridley broke the tension with a nervous giggle:

'That was *beastly*, Marshall!'

'That was *tremendous*, Marshall!' said another voice.

Miss Lampeter jumped to her feet, her fair hair swinging, and clapped her hands. 'That's just what I wanted.'

The figure on the stage smiled and thrust the metal ruler into a blazer pocket. 'Had you all shaking with terror, did I?' Marshall said jauntily. His eyes glanced over the rows of faces, flickering with amusement. Then he saw Jackus at the back of the Hall and his smile broadened. 'Even you, Jackanapes?'

'Take more than you to terrify me,' Jackus retorted calmly. But he did not feel calm. They had all turned to stare at him and someone started to whisper. He had planned to slip up to Miss Lampeter at the end and talk to her without being overheard. Now he was forced to walk up the Hall like some kind of public procession.

'I say, you fellows,' murmured Stephen in his Billy Bunter voice, 'look what's crawled out from under a stone.'

Ignoring him, Jackus paused by Miss Lampeter. 'Mr Garner sent me. He said you wanted me. For the play.'

Miss Lampeter smiled, consciously gentle. 'Yes. I'm pleased you've come, Colin. Now Alan Benning's let us down we need a new Jarvis Williams. We were in rather a pickle.'

She laid a hand on his arm, and Jackus had to make an effort not to shake it off. Before he could think of something flippant to say, Ann giggled again:

'We never thought you'd really come. Not to be in a *play*.'

Jackus sniffed. 'Just fancied seeing you all make idiots of yourselves.'

He felt them bristle. Little Benny Harris clenched his fists and went pink. 'We knew you'd be rotten. Marshall said—'

'I said,' Marshall sat down on the edge of the stage

and swung his legs, 'that you would come. Just to annoy everyone.'

'Thanks a lot.' Jackus scowled at him.

'*I* think it's very good of Colin,' Miss Lampeter said hastily, a trifle too enthusiastic. 'I don't know what we'd have done without him. I want you all to make him feel welcome and help him catch up what he's missed.'

Ann picked that up at once, of course. Ever bossily helpful. 'You can have my script, Jackus. I've learnt all my words already. Here.'

She held out a bundle of papers and, without looking at her, Jackus closed his fingers reluctantly round it. After all, he had no choice.

'Try and read it through before Thursday,' Miss Lampeter said. 'That's when we're meeting again. It's not a rehearsal. More a sort of workshop. But it'll help if you know the play.'

Jackus grunted and let his arm swing, making no attempt to look at the script. For a moment Miss Lampeter paused, slightly puzzled, as if she expected him to say something. Then she clapped her hands briskly:

'Right, everyone. That'll do for today. We've done a lot of good work. See you on Thursday, in the History room.'

Gathering her papers up in an untidy bundle, hugged to her chest, she smiled round at them all and swung off towards the door, her spiky heels clipping sharply on the floorboards.

'Quite the little producer, isn't she?' Jackus muttered sarcastically.

Benny Harris was still annoyed. He whirled round and thrust his face at Jackus:

'You shut up! *We* know you've only come to make

trouble, even if she doesn't. And we're enjoying doing this play. You dare try and mess it up.'

'Dear, dear.' Jackus grinned irritatingly. 'What's got you so hot under the collar? Soft on her, are you?'

They were all glaring at him now. It gave him a sort of sour pleasure to bait Benny, as a way of getting his own back. But he did not intend to fight. When he saw Benny's fists double up, he side-stepped, ready to pass the whole thing off with a joke. But, as he glanced up, he suddenly saw Marshall smile scornfully and look away, refusing to meet his eyes. In a spasm of rage, he lashed out at Benny's silly, fair face.

The next moment the two of them were rolling on the floor, battering at each other, while Ann said feebly, 'Oh, do *stop* it. Don't be stupid.'

Pulling a rude face at her, Jackus rolled Benny on to his back, scrambling to sit astride his chest.

'Feeble as well as a creep, aren't you, Harris?' he muttered triumphantly and drew back his fist. But at that instant, he was aware of an odd silence. Marshall's legs stopped swinging, abruptly.

'Oh, crikey! Oh lor!' murmured Stephen.

'Colin Jackus!' rapped a voice from the back of the Hall. 'What are you doing?'

Jackus groaned and looked over his shoulder. Old Garner was striding up from the door, his bald head shiny and his face sharp with anger.

'Well?' he said, standing over them.

Feeling foolish, Jackus jumped up and Benny got sulkily to his feet.

'He started it, sir.'

'Well, Jackus?'

Jackus looked at the ground. 'I did hit him first.' No point in trying to explain.

Mr Garner nodded sarcastically. 'It must have been a

great challenge to you. A boy of Benny's size. Wait here, Jackus. I'll speak to you when the others have gone.'

Jackus stood awkwardly while the rest of the cast edged by Mr Garner, turning their eyes away in embarrassment. Only Marshall gave him a long stare as he passed.

'Not a very good beginning,' Mr Garner said, when the Hall was clear. 'I thought you had more sense.'

Jackus shrugged. 'Don't want me in the play, do they?' he said sullenly. 'I knew it would be like that.'

'So you made sure of it by fighting Benny?' Old Garner sighed and sat down. 'I would remind you that we made a bargain. A bargain it is in your interests to keep.'

'I did keep it,' Jackus said quickly. He waved his script under the headmaster's nose. 'See? I told Miss Lampeter I'd be in her rotten—in her play.'

Mr Garner looked at him sharply. 'Don't pretend to be more stupid than you are. You know that I didn't mean you to do it grudgingly. What I want from you, Jackus, is co-operation.'

Jackus said nothing. Old Garner watched him for a second and then leaned back in his chair.

'I don't want you to think I've gone soft in my old age. I didn't send you down here as a way of letting you off, you know. I was quite aware that it would be difficult. But I was prepared to take a chance on you.' His face wrinkled fastidiously. 'I have a particular dislike of involving the police in school affairs. Even where theft is concerned. But if you break our bargain—'

'I know,' Jackus said wearily. 'You'll call in the law. You told me.'

'I'm glad we understand each other so well,' Old Garner murmured wryly. 'And I don't expect to hear that you have been causing any more trouble.' He

contemplated Jackus's rebellious face and chuckled. 'You never know. If you practise being pleasant, you may find that it makes people more friendly towards you.'

'Yes, sir. Can I go now, sir?'

The headmaster nodded and Jackus slouched off down the Hall, in an evil temper. As the door closed behind him, he aimed a kick at the wall, knocking yet another flake of paint from its battered surface. 'Bloody play!' he snarled. 'Bloody Miss Lampeter! And bloody—Old—Garner!'

But it did not make him feel any better. Still furious, he snatched his jacket from its peg in the empty cloakroom and stamped off down the school drive.

When he turned off the road, down the footpath which led to the canal, he saw a tall shape at the far end. It was leaning against the corner of a building, its hands in its pockets and its lean shape reflected vaguely in the scummy surface of the water. Not altogether surprised, Jackus took his time walking down the path. As he drew level, he nodded.

'Hi, Colin,' said Marshall lightly.

'Hi, Colin,' Jackus said. 'Waiting for someone?'

Marshall inclined his head. 'Just thought I'd find out how things went. Did Old Garner give you a bad time?'

'Not really. Just told me what a wicked boy I was to thump poor defenceless little Benny Creep-Face.'

'Not *that*.' Marshall flicked his fingers impatiently. 'Before. When you went up to his office.' He was watching Jackus surreptitiously, through his eyelashes. 'I thought you'd be in handcuffs next time I saw you.'

'Planning a dramatic rescue, were you? Hijacking the Black Maria and driving me to safety?'

'Of course.' Marshall grinned. 'Now come on. Give. What did he say to you?'

'You could have been there yourself, couldn't you?' Jackus said gruffly. 'If you're so keen to know.'

'Ah!' Striking a dramatic pose, Marshall clapped a hand to his forehead. 'A flash of temper! Can it be that the worm has turned?'

Suddenly, Jackus realized what it was all about. He punched Marshall amiably. 'Thought I'd got myself off by Telling All, did you? I bet that had you worried.'

'Worried? Me?' Marshall raised his eyebrows. 'Why should I be worried?'

They began to walk along the towpath, swinging their bags. On either side, tall warehouses stretched up, shutting out the feeble evening light. As he went, Jackus kicked sideways at little stones and they fell into the water with thick, oozy splashes.

'No handcuffs,' he said at last. 'Just a lecture on my idiocy and the way I never act as if I were part of the school. Usual Old Garner rubbish.' He laughed lightly. Somehow, he did not want to tell Marshall how unpleasant it had been. 'And now I'm in the play. Part of the cast of *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.' He swept a bow, grandly theatrical. 'The start of a new and sensational career.'

Marshall gave him a sly, sidelong glance. 'You won't like it, you know,' he said abruptly. 'It's not your sort of thing at all.'

'You're telling me.' Jackus kicked bitterly at the towpath, knocking a hole in the ground. 'I'm not like you. Don't go out of my way to make an exhibition of myself.'

'I'm worth an exhibition,' Marshall said grandly. He flung his bag into the air, catching it neatly just as it looked ready to fall into the water. 'I'm going to give a stunning performance. I'll have the audience sweating with nightmares after they've seen me.'

'You do that to people anyway,' said Jackus. 'Without trying.' He sniffed. 'Seems a pretty stupid sort of play to me, anyway. All about some old geezer knocking people off and putting them in pies? What rubbish.'

'Now, now.' Marshall wagged a finger at him. 'You'd better not let the Lamppost hear you talking like that. She's all set to make this the best Lower School play ever. Prove she can do better than Old Garner with his everlasting Shakespeares. She won't like it if you knock it.'

'Have to lump it then, won't she?' Jackus growled. 'If she's so keen to have me in it.'

'Oh, I expect she thinks she's going to save you,' Marshall said flippantly. 'Turn you into a respectable member of the community. Like me.'

'Ha ha. Very funny.' Suddenly Jackus felt the urge to tease Marshall. 'I could shake that virtuous image of yours if I wanted to, couldn't I?'

Marshall did not bridle as anyone else would have done. Instead, he smiled. A tight little smile. 'I think you ought to keep out of my hair,' he said dangerously. 'Tell them you don't want to be in the play after all. Because you don't really, do you?'

Leaning forward with a swift, darting movement, he snatched the rolled up script from under Jackus's arm and held it out over the water of the canal, letting the pages flap slowly in the wind.

'Go on, Jacko. Why don't you tell her what she can do with her precious script?'

As the breeze ruffled the surface of the water, the reflection of the paper rippled and fragmented.

'Go on,' Marshall said again, softly. 'Shall I drop it in?'

In his mind's eye, Jackus saw the white pages spill out onto the scum, spreading wide, sucking up the dirty

water. They would grow soggy in the end and sink down into the mud and slime at the bottom, mercifully lost.

'Funny joke,' he said heavily. 'Give it back, Marshall.'

'Oh, go *on*. Just one little splash and it'd all be over. You wouldn't have to get up on the stage and make a fool of yourself.' His voice was humorous, but Jackus, watching him, saw the calculating look in his narrowed eyes.

'You're serious, aren't you?' he said slowly. 'You really don't want me in the play with you.'

Marshall's face, pale in the twilight, twisted into an unconvincing grin. 'Of course I want to have you in it. You're my best mate, aren't you? Auntie Mary's little boy. Friend of my childhood.' He laughed quietly. 'But you would like me to chuck this in the canal. Splash!' He pretended to drop it and it almost fell from his fingers. As he tightened his grip round it, he grinned.

Jackus suddenly tired of the game. Because there was nothing he would have liked better than to see the script fall into the water. 'Pack it in, Marshall,' he grunted. 'It's not funny. I've *got* to be in the rotten play. Old Garner said. Otherwise he'll call in the police.'

'Oh, I *see*.' Marshall's face cleared suddenly, understanding. 'So that's the bargain. That's how you got yourself off. By promising to be a good, helpful little angel.'

With a crow of laughter, he waved the script frantically over the water and Jackus, afraid that he might actually drop it by mistake, reached out to snatch it. He slipped, and his foot slid neatly into the canal. He saved himself from following it only by falling to one knee and clutching at the concrete edging. From the black, oily depths which he had disturbed came a stench of decaying rubbish.

'Now look what you've done!'

Marshall held his nose and dropped the script delicately on the ground. 'Let's hope that's all you're going to stir up.'

Cursing, Jackus dragged his leg out of the water and pulled off his shoe to empty it. 'You're an idiot. Of course I won't tell anyone. Anything.'

'What a pal,' Marshall said politely, turning away. 'See you at rehearsals then.'

He walked off down the towpath. 'I still think it's a barmy play,' Jackus shouted after him. But Marshall had already rounded the corner of a warehouse and disappeared. Jackus was left alone in the half light between the high walls with a soggy trouser-leg and the stink of decay filling his nostrils.

'Hallo, Col,' Mrs Jackus said as he came in. 'Have a good day?'

No. I was threatened with the police, I had a fight with Benny Harris, and your blue-eyed boy pushed me in the canal. He could just imagine how her face would crumple with disappointment if he said that. Instead, he shrugged.

'They've put me in the Lower School Play.'

'Oh, Col!' She beamed at him. 'That's lovely. Who else is in it? Big Colin?'

'I wish you wouldn't call him that,' Jackus said irritably. 'Marshall. His name's Marshall.'

'He'll always be Big Colin to me.' Mrs Jackus smiled sentimentally. 'Ever since that first day when Rose brought him round, just after you were both born. I'll never forget her face when we realized each of us had chosen the same name.'

'I know,' Jackus said wearily. 'And you vowed the two of us would be best friends, like you two. You've told me a million times before.'

His mother looked hurt. 'Well, we were right, weren't we? You *are* friends?'

Silly question, thought Jackus. It was like asking if you liked your feet. Marshall was Marshall. Who'd always been there. Aloud, he said, 'I dunno. He's OK. Bit of a Clever Dick.'

'It wouldn't hurt you to be a bit more of a Clever Dick,' Mrs Jackus said, rather sharply. 'Sometimes I think—'

'I know, I know,' Jackus interrupted rudely. 'You'd like me to be just like him. You've been waiting for it ever since we were babies. Well, you can just go on waiting!'

Crossly, he stamped into the living-room and sat down. So that she couldn't talk to him any more, he began to read the nearest thing, which was the script of *Sweeney Todd* that he held in his hand.

Extract from the Diary of Ann Ridley
Tuesday, 10th November

‘ . . . It started off as a horrible rehearsal. Whatever we did, the Lamppost got in a temper. She stalked up and down, saying ‘‘You haven’t got the right idea, any of you. You still think it’s a funny play. I want you to see it’s *frightening*. That’s why I rewrote the script.’’

The more we tried, the worse she got. I’d learnt all my words, on purpose, but she didn’t even seem to notice. Every time I spoke, I could see her scribbling things in that little notebook of hers. It made me feel really awkward. Like a sack of potatoes.

It was Marshall who saved the day. Right at the end, she told him to do his opening speech—and he was *marvellous*. He shuffled about like a creepy old man and talked in such a beastly voice that I went all goose-pimply. It was a real bit of acting. I don’t know how anyone so super (!!!) could be so like a dirty old man. The Lamppost was so excited that she could hardly sit still.

Everything would have been lovely except that, after that, Colin Jackus turned up. It seems he’s going to play Jarvis Williams. That means I’ve got to act with him. (Yuck!) He looked at us all as if he wanted to kill us, and kept making stupid jokes. I hope he doesn’t spoil it all.

Then he started fighting Benny Harris. Poor little Benny. I don’t see how anyone could hit a little boy like him. And Mr Garner came in, so there was a really horrid row. It quite upset me.

So it would have been a completely foul day if it hadn’t been for Marshall.’