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Chapter One

Olivia Marvell stood by the railings at the top of the Mound and looked down over Edinburgh. Below her was a group of acrobats attempting a human pyramid and wobbling dangerously like a badly set jelly on a hot summer's day. Two teenage girls were doing a comic juggling act. One of them was juggling perfectly with what appeared to be half a dozen fresh eggs, but which Olivia suspected were rubber fakes. The other girl was throwing real eggs into the air and failing to catch them. They kept splatting on her partner's head, whose pretend anger was creating much hilarity among the crowd.

There was also a troupe of mad tap dancers wearing kilts who were doing an intricate routine to bagpipes and being cheered

enthusiastically. Olivia smiled as she watched some small children trying to join in and falling over their own – and the dancers' – feet. She felt a mounting sense of excitement as if someone were hugging her insides very tightly.

It was a bright early August afternoon just a few days before the start of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. A mass of people swirled below, all attracted to the Mound and its merry sights and sounds, and making Olivia think of the Pied Piper. It was as if the entire world was being drawn towards the city by an invisible thread of music and bright colours. She wished her friend, Tom, was here to see it, but he was playing John in a huge sell-out West End production of *Peter Pan* and wouldn't be free until the very end of August.

Olivia wheeled round as somebody touched her shoulder. It was Georgia and Aeysha.

"Hey!" she said, pleased to see her friends. "Did you get rid of all your posters?"

"All but one," said Aeysha, unfurling a midnight-blue A3 sheet dotted with silver stars. It showed a girl on a trapeze surrounded by fairies, and a magician and a sprite walking the high wire. Emblazoned across the top in

small golden Gothic letters were the words: *The Swan Circus Presents*, and then in even bigger letters it read: *Enchantment: A Magical Circus Entertainment*. They had all looked at the poster many times before but it still made Olivia feel shivery with pleasure.

"Eel and I found people to take all of ours," she said. "Lots of shops are going to put them up in their windows. It helps that they're so striking. The woman in one of the cafés said she might even come and see our show after Eel did a crazy tap dance and stood on her head. I can't wait for the Swan Circus to appear in front of an audience!"

Olivia grinned at her friends and they grinned back. Aeysha winked and Georgia did a little skip. Olivia didn't have to say anything; she could tell from Georgia's doll-like face and Aeysha's sparkling eyes with their thick dark lashes that they felt as excited as she did.

Her little sister, Eel – so called because she could never stand still – was busy gyrating wildly to the beat of some distant drums. She had a real talent for dance. The two sisters had seen *Coppelia* performed by the Royal Ballet at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden at the

end of last term and Eel's mesmerising antics reminded Olivia of the life-sized dancing doll.

Eel had just done a spontaneous cartwheel and was starting to draw quite a crowd herself, obstructing the throng attempting to negotiate the steep steps up and down the Mound. Olivia always felt embarrassed when her little sister's dancing displays in public places attracted attention, so she grabbed her by the hand and started down the steps. Aeysha and Georgia followed.

Olivia hadn't gone far when there was a commotion and the sound of shouting behind her. Before she could turn round, she found herself being pushed roughly aside by a girl of about her own age, who was wearing a thin yellow cotton dress with a distinctive trim of blue cornflowers around the hem. She was racing down the stone steps two at a time as if she were being pursued by all the devils in hell. Her long plaits streamed behind her like two shiny black snakes, while Olivia couldn't help noticing that the backs of her legs were extremely grubby.

Olivia stumbled and lost her grip on Eel's hand, and she would have fallen if it wasn't for her own exceptional sense of balance, honed by

many hours on the high-wire and trapeze, and because the quick-witted Aeysha caught her from behind with both hands and steadied her.

"Oi," shouted Olivia crossly. "Watch where you're going!"

Without breaking step, the girl in the yellow dress glanced round and for a fraction of a second her eyes met Olivia's. There was something about those eyes that reminded Olivia of a hunted deer and yet something defiant also glinted there. It felt as if the girl was daring Olivia to protest again.

Then the girl hurtled onwards, followed closely by a black-and-white Border collie. The collie dog whipped past Olivia but then suddenly turned back, sat down abruptly at Olivia's feet, raised a paw and gave a little yelp as if to say "Sorry". He then raced after the girl.

"Did you see that? That dog's amazing. It's almost as if he can talk. I'd swear he was trying to apologise," said Olivia, her eyes wide.

"He's got better manners than his mistress, then," said Georgia, watching as the girl in the yellow dress continued pell-mell down the steps, scattering people like skittles as she went. The collie bolted ahead of her, trying to herd the

people out of the way as if they were sheep.

"I wonder why she's in such a mad rush?" said Aeysha thoughtfully. "It was almost like she was being chased."

"Maybe she's got a show to get to," replied Olivia.

"Well, *we've* got a show to put on," said Eel, "and it's going to be the best in Edinburgh." Unlike her older sister, Eel was always supremely confident. Olivia hoped that in this instance her little sister was right to be quite so optimistic.

The Edinburgh Festival was the biggest arts festival in the world, and Olivia, her friends and other pupils from their school, the Swan Academy of Theatre and Dance, were going to perform at the Fringe. They had been rehearsing hard long before school had broken up for the summer, and all the children taking part had had to sacrifice their family holidays, but they didn't mind. What was two weeks in Tenerife compared with appearing at the Edinburgh Fringe in the debut performance by the Swan Circus? It was too thrilling an opportunity to pass up; over the last sixty years many reputations had been made and lost in Edinburgh during the festival.

Lots of the Swans' families would be

coming up to Edinburgh for the final few days to see their children perform. Aeysha's big extended family were all coming, at least twenty of them, and Georgia's dad, who was separated from her mum, was bringing his new girlfriend, Leonie. Olivia and Eel didn't have any relatives to visit, but Olivia hoped that Tom would make it up to watch the last few performances.

At that very moment, Olivia's dad, Jack Marvell, the famous high-wire walker also known as the Great Marvello, and his friend Pablo, who taught circus skills at the Swan, were putting the finishing touches to the Swan Circus big top that had been erected on Calton Hill on the other side of Princes Street. Last night, they had turned on the lights on the outside of the big top for the first time, and Olivia, Eel, Georgia and Aeysha had gasped to see *Swan Circus* picked out in fairy lights and twinkling high above the great city. The craggy and forbidding castle perched on the other side of Edinburgh had seemed to be winking back at them. It had felt as if the whole city was bewitched.

Even in broad daylight, the scene below them was magical. It reminded Olivia of a medieval fair straight out of the pages of a

history book. She could see and hear a band of Peruvian musicians, and a group of actors dressed in Elizabethan costume were wandering about just like a band of seventeenth-century strolling players. One of the actors was wearing a huge donkey's head and Olivia guessed that the troupe were performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

She suddenly felt anxious. The Swan Circus performance also included a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* with the fairies played by children who had been taking Pablo's circus-skills course. Olivia knew it was good, innovative even, in the way it successfully melded circus, theatre and dance and even roller skating. But would anyone want to come and see their show when there were thousands to choose from? Some long-established theatre companies with serious reputations were at the Fringe this year. The National Theatre of Scotland was performing at the Pleasance, the Globe Theatre were taking their touring production of *Pericles* to the grounds of a local stately home, and Theo Deacon, a former Swan pupil and now a major Hollywood star, was in a controversial new play at the famous Traverse Theatre. The former

soap star, Cassie Usher, who had played Maria in the production of *The Sound of Music* in which Georgia, Tom and Eel had also appeared, was performing her one-woman musical show in an inflatable upside-down purple cow in Bristo Square.

When Olivia had first seen the Fringe programme, she'd felt excited to be part of such a big festival, with so many people performing in so many places all over the city, not just in proper theatres. There was a show taking place in a telephone box on Grassmarket; one that took the form of a city-wide theatrical treasure hunt, and another on and around the swings in a children's playground. But then she had felt intimidated. Would anyone be prepared to make the trek up Calton Hill to see an unknown theatre-circus performance by a bunch of kids when there were so many other brilliant shows on at exactly the same time and in more central locations and at famous venues? If no one came, it would mean financial disaster for the Swan Circus and particularly for her dad, Jack, who had put everything he had into the venture.

Olivia had overheard her grandmother, Alicia, who also ran the Swan Academy, saying

that Jack ought to put his name on the publicity because it would help draw a crowd and get them some media coverage. Jack had been insistent that their trip to the Edinburgh Fringe wasn't about him but about the Swans. Olivia thought that was just like her dad, who was generous to a fault. But it also demonstrated his lack of what her gran called "savvy" and others called common sense. She thought that Alicia was right, and Jack was silly not to use his fame to help sell some tickets. But he had stood firm, so his name wasn't even on the posters.

The Swan Circus was Jack's way of saying thank you to Alicia for taking the girls in and giving them a home and an education at her stage school after an accident had stopped him working. They had lost their travelling circus, and been left almost completely destitute. Olivia, who at first had been resentful of finding herself at a stage school, now loved learning to act and having such good friends as Georgia, Aeysha and Tom.

She wished Tom was here now to calm her nerves. Olivia missed him; it felt as if there was a huge Tom-shaped hole in her life and also in the show itself. She and Tom both had

a natural gift for the high-wire. When Olivia had first arrived at the Swan and unhappiness had made her prickly and difficult, Tom had been the only person to believe in and stand by her. She missed being able to confide in him. Just then, as though he'd known what she was thinking, Olivia's phone bleeped with a message. *Just getting ready to fly in this afternoon's matinee. Hope Edinburgh and high-wire going fine. Tom x*

Olivia immediately texted back. *Edinburgh fab. High-wire with dad such fun. But miss u up there with me. Need u around, ready to catch me if i fall. Liv x*

Olivia's phone bleeped again almost as soon as she had pressed send. Tom had replied. *Liv Marvell never falls!*

Olivia grinned. She wished it was true. All high-wire walkers fell on occasion, even the very best like her dad.

"Come on, let's go and see what's going on down there," she said to the others. "We've still got almost half an hour before we need to meet Alicia and the others at Waverley Station."

Her friends nodded enthusiastically. Olivia grabbed Eel's hand again and they ran down

the rest of the steps past some strange silvery statues. As they were passing one of the statues, it put out an arm and tapped Olivia on the shoulder, making her jump with shock and then double up with laughter. The statues weren't made of stone or metal but were performers standing very, very still. Olivia and the others gathered around the one who'd moved, a young woman dressed as the Snow Queen, and peered at her closely. She didn't even blink.

"I'd die if I had to stand still like that for hours," said Eel.

"You'd die if you had to stand still for a second," said Olivia. "Even in your sleep you're constantly wriggling. My legs are bruised all over."

For the last few nights they'd all been staying in a twin room in a cheap bed and breakfast, with Olivia and Eel sharing one bed and Georgia and Aeysha the other. But with the arrival of the rest of the Swans today they were all due to move into the big rented house that Jack had found for them on the Internet. They couldn't wait to see what it was like. It had been such a lucky find. The first house Jack had arranged to rent had fallen through the week

before they were due to arrive in Edinburgh, so being able to find something else at the last moment had felt like a miracle. Jack's anxiety about it all had turned to triumph. Everything was working out fine. They had three amazing weeks ahead of them, full of performing and adventure.

Olivia was suddenly distracted by Eel, who was pirouetting again, arms outstretched. "This is going to be the best summer ever!" she cried.

Olivia nodded. It was going to be glorious: an enchanted summer they'd never *ever* forget.