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Olivia's Curtain Call

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Chapter One

Olivia Marvell looked around the room, her eyes bright with excitement. She and her friends had been among the first to arrive at the after-premiere party of Theo Deacon's new movie, *The Way Through the Woods*. They'd had high expectations of both movie and party, and neither had disappointed so far.

Olivia knew that she was standing in the function room of a swish central London hotel, but it felt as if she were in the middle of a fabulous dream. The room had been transformed into a woodland glade, with rolling green hillocks dotted with clumps of primroses, toadstools, fallen logs and rustic tables and chairs. Every now and again an owl could be heard hooting. Georgia and Katie swore they'd seen two live

rabbits hopping around, and Tom had pointed out tiny silvery fish darting under the water lilies in a little rock pool.

In another room they had marvelled at a waterfall and a stream with stepping stones, and in a third they were amazed by a dense forest of real fir trees complete with a magical clearing that was to be the disco later. Little silver icicles were attached to the branches so that they shimmered and tinkled when anyone brushed by. When Eel and Emmy had stepped on to the dance floor fake snow had fallen on their heads, making them squeal with delight.

In yet another space there was a huge buffet laid out on white tablecloths. Eel put her nose close to a massive chocolate cake and inhaled. "Chocolate! Mmm. Isn't that the most delicious smell in the whole world," she said dramatically.

Olivia and Tom laughed, and Olivia said that she preferred the scent of lily of the valley and Tom said that he thought that freshly mown grass and smoky bacon crisps were hard to beat.

"Champagne for the young ladies and gentleman?" asked a waiter with a smile and a little bow, as he held out his tray towards Olivia and her friends.

Olivia grinned and shook her head. “Gran would go ballistic if she saw us all knocking back champagne,” she said.

“I certainly would,” said Alicia, appearing quietly behind the group and looking stunning in an eau-de-Nil evening frock with an emerald-green velvet jacket. “Do you think you could get them all some orange juice, Sam?”

“I can do better than that, Miss Swan. I’ll rustle up some non-alcoholic cocktails.” He hurried away.

“How do you know the waiter, Gran?” asked Eel.

“Sam was at the Swan. He was in the same year as Theo Deacon. Very talented. They both went on to RADA a couple of years later.”

“Oh,” said Aeysha, looking a little uncomfortable. “And now one of them is having a party to celebrate his latest movie while the other one is serving the drinks.”

Alicia nodded wryly. “I’m afraid there’s nothing fair about this business. But don’t feel too bad for Sam. He’s not a star like Theo, or even a name, but he does get work. He’s just going through a thin patch at the moment, hence the job this evening.” Alicia waved her arm

around the room. "I'm prepared to bet that half the people serving tonight are resting actors and they're looking at the stars of *The Way Through the Woods* and saying to themselves, 'One day it'll be me.' And Sam's got some auditions coming up: he's up for a new TV series and has a call-back for Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* in the West End."

"The one directed by Jon James? Isn't Kasha Kasparian supposed to be playing Romeo?" asked Katie excitedly.

Alicia nodded, her eyes dancing as if she knew more than she was saying.

"I wonder who's going to play Juliet," said Olivia, and a dreamy look flickered across her face. Alicia glanced at her with interest, but at that moment Abbie Cardew, the Swan's former head girl, walked into the room and everyone began to clap wildly. Abbie had co-starred with Theo in the movie and she was immediately surrounded by photographers and well-wishers. She was wearing a coral sheath dress embellished with tiny pearls, and Olivia thought she looked like a beautiful mermaid.

Alicia walked over to Abbie, who broke off from posing for the photographers to give

her a massive hug. Olivia and the others moved towards the group, and Abbie planted a big kiss on Eel and Emmy's heads, squeezed Olivia's hand, and began to tell them all about her next movie, *Joan of Arc*, which was due to begin shooting in Spain in six weeks' time.

Georgia and Aeysha hung back to watch the scene.

"To think that eighteen months ago Abbie was telling us to tuck in our school shirts and not run in the corridors, and now she's a glamorous movie star," said Georgia. Then she added, "It makes you think, doesn't it? If it can happen for Abbie and for Kasha, maybe it can happen for us too."

"I hope it does for you, Georgia, for all of you. But there are more Sams in this business than there are Theos, Abbies and Kashas." Aeysha looked thoughtful. "It's all so much a matter of luck and being in the right place at the right time. Who knows, maybe Sam's star will rise as Theo's, Abbie's and Kasha's fall. Things like taking the wrong role or suddenly getting sick at a crucial moment all play their part in success and failure every bit as much as talent."

"Abbie was fantastic in the movie; she's

going to be around for years," said Georgia confidently.

"I certainly hope so," said Aeysha, "but if she hadn't been cast in *The Sound of Music*, she wouldn't have got the *The Way Through the Woods*, which was why she got *Joan of Arc*. One thing led to another."

"Maybe it was written in the stars," said Georgia. Her eyes were shining. "Oh, when you see Abbie coming into the room like that, and everybody cheering her, don't you so want it to be you?"

Aeysha shook her head. "No, I don't want to be the centre of attention like that. I love writing songs but I don't want to have to go out and perform them in front of thousands of people like Kasha does. Singing 'Bruised' with him at that big gig was quite enough for me. I've decided I'm strictly a back-room girl. But don't worry, Georgie, I'll be watching you on the red carpet and cheering you on louder than anyone, and I'll tell everyone I know that I was once at school with the famous Georgia Jones."

"We will still be friends after you leave the Swan at the end of term, won't we, Aeysh?" asked Georgia anxiously.

Aeysha knew that the decision she had made to leave the Swan had caused great upset among her friends, and had been a source of real heartache to Georgia in particular.

"Of course!" she said brightly. "It will be all the nicer, Georgia, because we won't be competing against each other for the same roles. And you'll still have Livy, Tom and Katie at the Swan, and you couldn't ask for better or more loyal friends." She linked arms with Georgia and they strolled over to the others.

By now, Abbie had moved further into the room and was talking to Warner Huffington the Fourth. Huff, as he was known, was the famous Hollywood casting agent who had spotted Abbie when she was in *The Sound of Music*. Theo had also joined the pair, giving Abbie a bear hug and looking extremely dashing in a sharply cut dinner jacket.

"He'd make a great James Bond in that suit," observed Olivia, as Kasha Kasparian joined the group of Swans and kissed all the girls enthusiastically. He clapped Tom on the back before draping his arm affectionately around Olivia's shoulders. Tom knew that Kasha was very fond of Olivia, who had helped him out of

a tight spot a couple of months earlier, but he wished he wasn't quite so proprietorial with her.

Katie and Georgia tried to quiz Kasha on the Romeo rumours, but Kasha just put a finger to his lips and introduced them to his older brother, Hamo, who was very serious-looking and seemed rather uncomfortable with his dinner jacket and his surroundings.

Tom asked Hamo if he was a performer like Kasha, and Hamo looked quite shocked, before replying that he wouldn't do anything so frivolous. He had trained as an accountant and now ran the Kasparian family business. From the tone of his voice he made it quite clear that he thought Kasha ought to be doing the same. Kasha made a face at Tom and moved Hamo off quickly.

Huff turned, caught sight of Alicia, Olivia and Eel and broke into a wide smile as he came over to talk to them. The Swans were beginning to feel like the most popular people in the room. He swung Eel up in the air to give her a kiss on each cheek and grinned at Olivia.

"Is your dad here?" he asked. "I'd love to see the Great Marvello again. You know I'm his biggest fan."

Olivia shook her head. "Jack's in Moscow, directing a show. But he'll be back in a couple of weeks if you're still going to be around."

"You never know, I might be. I'm scouting for new British talent for a top-secret movie project," said Huff, and he turned to talk showbiz gossip to Alicia.

Olivia was suddenly aware that Katie was lurking behind Tom as if trying to make herself invisible. She looked acutely uncomfortable and seemed to be hoping that the floor would swallow her up. Guessing the reason why, Olivia took her hand and gave it an understanding squeeze. The last time Katie had seen Huff was when she'd been playing Louisa in *The Sound of Music*, and she'd behaved appallingly.

"I don't want him to spot me," muttered Katie. "It would be too humiliating. I behaved like a really obnoxious stage-school brat. He must think I'm a complete monster, and he'd be right. I was."

"But you've changed, Katie," said Olivia.

"Yes, but he doesn't know that," hissed Katie.

"He will, if he knows that you're our friend," said Tom firmly.

"That's right," said Georgia, and she linked arms with Katie so that she couldn't run away. At that moment Huff looked over at them.

"Tom! Georgie! Great to see you!" He stared at Katie for a second as if he was trying to place her. Katie turned puce and an expression of horror passed across Huff's face as he suddenly remembered who she was.

Alicia realised what was happening and stepped quickly into the breach. "Huff, this is Katie. I believe that you two have met before, but Katie is not the girl she was in those days. Think of all that as happening in another life entirely. She is a most cherished Swan pupil, and a great friend of Olivia, Eel, Tom, Georgia and Aeysha. We all feel very lucky to know her."

"Well," said Huff kindly, "then I feel very lucky to know you too, Katie," and he gave her a little bow. Katie laughed with such genuine pleasure and gave such a shy little bow in return that the producer was completely charmed.

"I'm sorry I was such a horror," she said quietly.

"Entirely wiped from my mind," whispered Huff. "It never happened."

"I can hear music," said Eel excitedly. "I

think the dancing is beginning. Let's go and see."

"Off you go, all of you, and have fun. But don't hog the dance floor," said Alicia.

They all raced off after Eel. Georgia had linked her arm back into Katie's, and as the two of them walked away, their blonde heads bobbing side by side, Katie turned back and gave Huff and Alicia a bashful little wave. "Thank you," she mouthed at them both.

"I can't believe that's the same girl I met before," said Huff wonderingly, watching them go.

"She's not," said Alicia simply. "She's been through a really tough time, but she's come through it, chastened and transformed and a million times nicer. Her acting is becoming very fine too. She's a genuine talent and a lovely girl."

"Katie and Georgia could easily be mistaken for sisters," said Huff thoughtfully, almost to himself.

"They could. Easily," said Alicia neutrally.

"Interesting," mused Huff. "That's very interesting indeed."