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Rosa-May

Up-Heythram Hall, 22 May 1815

Recently my life has changed so dramatically – a very apt word in the circumstances – and in so short a time that I struggle to make sense of it.

My husband – and how strange it seems to be writing those words! – yesterday dashed off to the Continent to rejoin his regiment, leaving me here, with the promise that he would send for me as soon as possible . . .

This was not at all what I bargained for when, with unaccustomed impetuosity, I abandoned my stage career, at the very pinnacle of my success, for marriage to an army officer. I was in love both with Guy Fairford and the exciting prospect of a new life spent following the drum across the Continent. In fact, this very handsome calf-bound notebook, along with its fellow, were purchased expressly for the purpose of recording my impressions of my new life.

Instead, I find myself immured in this draughty and remote mansion, Up-Heythram Hall, high on the Lancashire moors, as the unwilling guest of my husband's older brother, Rafe, an

autocratic invalid of uncertain temper, and his sour and disapproving wife, Sophia. My suggestion that I return with my maid, Sara, to lodgings in London to await Guy's summons has been summarily dismissed by him, giving me the first intimation of the curtailing of the freedoms I previously enjoyed by the shackles of wedlock.

However quickly Guy sends for me – and I pray it will be soon – at the moment I feel that I have come almost full circle from where I began my life in Papa's draughty and secluded rectory, which is not so many miles away from here as the crow flies – although Papa, in his black cassock, reminded me rather more of some dark bird of prey than a crow.

Ten years ago, I most daringly made my escape in order to seek my fortune on the stage – with what success the theatre-going public well know – and really, I must have been quite inebriated with love to have thrown my bonnet over the windmill with such finality! Now the grim reality of my position has sobered me, though too late . . . and I have threatened to send Sara back to Town if she reiterates one more time that she warned me against my hasty and rash actions. A hollow threat, though, since she knows well she is truly my only friend in this chill mausoleum of a house.

But I can see there is nothing to be done now except wait impatiently for the moment when I can rejoin Guy and begin the new and exciting life he promised me. I will while away the time until that moment in writing a memoir of my life to date, though for my own amusement only . . .



1

Museum Piece

Garland

London, July 2018

Wednesday was my regular half-day off from Beng & Briggs, Theatrical Costumiers, a concession they grudgingly awarded to those of us expected to work on Saturday mornings, and often on into the rest of the weekend, if there was a rush job on.

As had become my habit ever since the Rosa-May Garland exhibition had opened earlier in the year at the V&A Museum, I was spending the afternoon with my nose practically pressed against the glass of one particular full-length display case.

There, arranged over two small, slender and faceless female mannequins, was not only that rarest of early nineteenth-century survivals, the actual costume Rosa-May wore for the reprise of her most acclaimed theatrical role, that of Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also the entrancingly pretty silk evening gown she had had modelled on it.

It was the latter that I was gazing at now, checking once again that the copy I was making at home was as alike as possible in every tiny detail.

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I adored my job at Beng & Briggs, where I specialized in historical costume. It was my passion and I was a bit of a perfectionist where authentic detail was concerned.

The dress was in the high-waisted style of the time, with a skirt consisting of three overlapping tiers of gauzy white silk, the hems coming down in a series of points, each one embellished at the tip with a seed-pearl rosette. They lay like the semi-transparent petals of some fantastic flower over the pale lilac base layer.

Two rows of seed pearls edged the short, puffed sleeves too, and a kind of ruff effect had been cleverly created with a band of pleated lilac gauze, which stood up around the back of the neck and then edged the deep V at the front of the bodice.

The replica I was making employed concealed modern fastenings, so that the ruff could be easily put on and taken off in one piece, and I'd used fake pearls, rather than real ones. But I felt satisfied that, other than this, my copy was identical in every way.

I was even much the same size as Rosa-May had been – small and petite – but then, I *was* some kind of distant descendant, so perhaps I was a throwback. If so, though, it was only in my height and build, for if the hand-coloured prints of her and the rest of the cast in the fairy scenes, which were on display in one of the other cabinets, were anything to go by, she had had bright golden hair and blue eyes, whereas I am a green-eyed redhead.

I certainly didn't have any desire to go on the stage, either. I was definitely a backroom girl and was in line to take over my department when the present, very ancient incumbent, Madame Bertille, retired . . . if she ever did.

Beng & Briggs had been commissioned to re-create *all* the original fairy-costumes illustrated in the coloured prints, including that of Titania – the reproductions sturdy and made

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for effect from a distance, unlike the dress I was copying. They were for a new play that was to be staged in the autumn, and thereby hung a tale . . .

I moved along slightly to examine the Titania costume again, hearing as I did so the sound of footsteps as other visitors entered the so-far-deserted gallery.

Then, reflected in the polished plate glass, I saw the tall, thin figure of a woman loom out of the shadows, her pallid face, the dark pools of her eyes and a scarlet slash of lipstick making me immediately think of vampires . . . as you do, if you have an excess of imagination.

But then the slightly plummy voice of George, my friend in the V&A Theatre and Performance department, said, ‘Garland?’

Swinging round, I saw that George, his small, portly figure attired, as always, in a natty three-piece suit, was steering the elegantly slim woman towards me, with one hand deferentially cupping her elbow. He reminded me inescapably of a small tug escorting a large and racy yacht into harbour.

Of course, I now recognized the woman. That black, sharply bobbed hair and the contrasting pallor of her long, angular face were familiar to me, not because she too was a descendant of the celebrated Rosa-May Garland, but from the jackets of her mega-bestselling novels and all the publicity surrounding them – and her.

Earlier in the year, when she’d loaned the Rosa-May Garland Collection to the museum, I’d realized I must be distantly related to her and, out of curiosity, I had bought the e-book of one of her novels, *Death Became Him*. But the ingenious revenge the jilted heroine took on her ex-fiancé was just too grisly for me. I was still having nightmares about it . . .

‘Garland,’ George repeated, as they came to a halt in front of me. ‘This is Honey Fairford, Honey – Garland Fairford!’

He beamed impartially on us, as if he'd just performed a minor magic trick, while Honey examined me with as much interest in her dark eyes as I'd been devoting to the silk dress a few moments earlier.

'Hi,' I said, slightly nervously. I'd told George all about my connection through my father's family to Rosa-May Garland – hence my unusual first name, of course – but I'd only realized I must also be related to the bestselling novelist when she'd loaned the material in the exhibition.

But while I wouldn't have *dreamed* of contacting her on the strength of that, it appeared George was keen we became acquainted.

'Hello!' Honey said, her voice unexpectedly deep and husky. 'George has told me *all* about you and he thought you might be here this afternoon. Since it appears we're long-lost cousins, it seems more than time we met, doesn't it?'

'I think we must be only *very* distantly related,' I said. 'My parents died when I was ten, so I didn't really know much about the connection until the exhibition, except that I was named Garland after a Regency actress, of course, who later married into the Fairford family.'

'I expect we can figure out where we meet on the family tree,' she said. 'Look, if you're free, why don't we go and have tea at my hotel and then we can fill in some gaps?'

I looked at her uncertainly. She was perhaps in her late forties – it was hard to tell – and exuded a rather scary air of self-confidence, but when she smiled and her mouth twisted up at one corner, it made her seem suddenly more human and approachable.

I found myself smiling back and agreeing. 'That would be lovely.'

'I have someone coming to see me about a donation of

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Elizabethan gloves, so I'll leave you ladies to it, then,' George said, slightly regretfully.

Then he shook hands with Honey and headed off, looking, with his silver hair and neat, pointed beard, like the British Consul to a small foreign nation: Our Man in Havana, perhaps.

*

Honey's hotel turned out to be Claridge's, not a venue familiar to me, since it wasn't one of my fiancé's haunts . . . though I wouldn't have been surprised to spot Marco's uber-posh and snobbish mother there, with her coven: all thin, bony women of a certain age, with taut, wrinkle-free faces and crêpey necks.

But there was no sign of her, even though it seemed that the rest of the world were eager to take their tea there that afternoon. I didn't see how they could squeeze us in, but at the sight of Honey, the staff immediately conjured up a table for two near a window. Such, I assumed, was the power of fame, presence, money and, it has to be said, a certain notoriety.

Still, I was quite sure that however scary my new-found relative appeared, the rumour that she ate her lovers when she'd tired of them was *grossly* exaggerated!

As if she'd read my mind, she looked at me over the top of her menu with that strangely attractive and raffish smile tilting one corner of her scarlet lips.

'This is my home from home. Do order whatever you fancy – this is my treat to celebrate finding a long-lost cousin.'

'I'm not sure I can claim to be a *cousin*,' I said, once I'd made my choice from the menu. 'But we must be connected *somewhere*.'

'My great-uncle Hugo was the one for genealogy,' Honey

said, lavishly requesting two glasses of champagne to accompany our tea, which would probably send me to sleep at that time of day, especially since I'd skipped lunch. 'I've recently inherited his house and there's a huge family tree hanging in the hall. I'm descended from Rosa-May's elder son and the last of that line. He was one of twin boys, but the younger brother vanished from the scene later. Hugo said family rumour had it that there had been a big quarrel and he'd run off to America, taking a piece of family jewellery with him to fund his new life, but Hugo never tried to trace him, so we don't know what happened to him. That could be where *you* come in, though, Garland.'

'If so, the younger son, or his descendants, must have returned to the UK at some point,' I said, interested. 'It would be fun to try and find out, though I wouldn't really know where to start looking, and anyway, I haven't got time.'

'Nor me, but I'll set someone on to it,' Honey said, decidedly.

A magnificent, tiered, porcelain cake stand had been set on the table and Honey now began wolfing down finger sandwiches, one after the other, as if she hadn't eaten for a month, although the plate seemed to refill itself every time I took my eyes off it. Perhaps the waiters were all members of the Magic Circle, temping between engagements. That would account for the way they'd squeezed our table into the crowded room, too.

'Do 'ave a butty, love,' Honey said, assuming a broad Lancashire accent and pushing the cake stand nearer to me. 'It'll make me feel less greedy, though I missed lunch after seeing my agent so I could catch George before his next appointment, and I'm *ravenous*. But I'm glad I did, as he's brought us together. So now, *do* tell me more about yourself,' she invited, before abandoning the sandwiches and biting into a miniature

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meringue, which exploded, enveloping her in a fine cloud of powdered sugar, which she waved away with one thin, elegant hand.

‘What has George already told you?’ I asked cautiously, when I’d finished a tiny smoked salmon sandwich.

I’d first met him at a weekend seminar on the conservation of historic costume and over the years we’d become friends. He was a great gossip – that air of ambassadorial reticence was *totally* misleading.

Honey wiped jammy hands on a napkin so snowy that it seemed like sacrilege to use it, and said, ‘Well, for a start, he said that when he’d once commented on your unusual Christian name, you’d explained that you’d been named after your actress ancestor. So naturally, once I’d offered to loan the collection to the V&A, he knew we must be related and thought I’d be interested. He also told me you work in the historical department of Beng & Briggs, Theatrical Costumiers.’

I nodded, since I’d just put a delicious morsel in my mouth that seemed to be a yummy orange mousse concoction, coated in thick white chocolate, or ‘enrobed’, as menus sometimes put it, although I always feel then that whatever it is describing should have an ermine border and an embroidered fleur-de-lis about it somewhere.

Then I swallowed what was probably my entire normal calorie intake for the day and explained: ‘I qualified in costume making and design, and did a work placement with Beng & Briggs. Then they offered me a permanent job and now I’m in line to take over the running of my department,’ I said proudly. ‘I’ve taken all kinds of courses in my free time, to broaden my skills, especially in historical costume construction, and I’ve also been involved in one or two projects to re-create gowns from old portraits.’ **Copyrighted Material**

‘Yes, George said you’ve already got quite a name for yourself, despite still being in your early thirties, and he often seeks your opinion on the authenticity of a piece.’

‘I’m thirty-four,’ I said, which didn’t seem all that young to me, ‘and it’s very kind of George to say that, but he’s the real expert. I do enjoy making accurate copies of historic clothing, although, of course, at Beng & Briggs we’re only creating costumes that *look* historically authentic and effective on stage or on film.’

‘It all sounds fascinating . . . and actually, that’s given me an idea for a great way to kill someone,’ Honey said thoughtfully. ‘I mean, if you coated the inside of a suit of stage armour with something toxic, by the time they realized and got the actor out of it, it might be too late . . .’

While I stared at her in astonishment, she took out a pen and wrote *Armed with Poison* up the inside of her left forearm, in letters big enough for me to read upside down.

She put the pen away again and her dark eyes refocused on me. ‘Where were we? Oh, yes, before we found you, George took me on a detour through the museum shop so I could see those miniature mannequins you have on sale there, dressed in copies of some of the costumes in the galleries. Lovely. I bought the one in the red-beaded Roaring Twenties flapper dress. George is going to have it sent to me.’

‘I think you’d suit that style of dress yourself,’ I suggested.

‘True, but then, when you’re tall and thin you look OK in pretty much anything,’ she said slightly complacently. ‘You obviously have a real talent for needlework.’

‘Mum was a theatrical dresser before she had me, and she used to make period costumes for my dolls. Dad was a stage lighting technician, but his hobby was woodwork and he carved three little wooden mannequins to display some of

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the dolls' dresses on. That's where I got the inspiration. I don't sell many of them – they're too expensive for the mass market – but fun to do and a good sideline.'

'I can see why they're expensive: all that hand sewing and fine detail on such a small scale,' Honey said. 'Those little black velvet-covered mannequin stands themselves are rather attractive.'

'I have them specially made, though the first ones were hand-carved from wood by a friend, Ivo Gryffyn, like those Dad made for me. They were lovely, but then Ivo . . . stopped,' I finished lamely, wondering, as I always did when I thought of him, where he was now and if he was happy doing whatever it was he had so suddenly abandoned his acting career and his friends for . . . including me, his oldest and, I'd thought, *closest* friend.

'Do you mean Ivo Gryffyn, the actor who played Gus Silvermann in those fantasy films?' Honey asked, looking at me with some surprise. 'He successfully transitioned from child actor to adult roles on the London stage, didn't he, before suddenly giving it all up a few years ago and vanishing?'

I nodded; my throat seemed to have closed up. It still hurt – to have found him again after so many years apart, only to lose him once more.

'You were friends?' she asked gently.

I swallowed hard and managed to find my voice again. 'We more or less grew up like brother and sister until we were nearly eleven. He and his mum and stepfather lived in the flat next to ours in Ealing and he spent a lot of time with us, especially after his mum died and it was just him and his stepfather. Mum worked from home, you see, so she was always there. Ivo and I were both arty and not academic. He loved messing about doing woodwork with my dad best, while I adored working with fabrics.'

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I didn't add that when we'd met up again, years later, he'd still had that love of working with wood and had taken every course he could to learn new skills over the years, just as I had continued with costume courses.

I looked up to find her watching me, dark eyes unfathomable.

'Yes, you said earlier that you were orphaned at ten – was that when you lost touch with Ivo?'

I nodded again. 'I was on a half-term holiday abroad with my parents and there was an explosion in the block of flats where we were staying – a faulty boiler, I think. Mum and Dad were killed outright. I survived, badly injured, and by the time I left hospital, my parents' flat had been packed up and an aunt – my mother's older sister – whisked me away to Scotland, and that was that. I never went back to our flat, or got the chance to say goodbye to Ivo.'

Or Thom, as he had been to me then, though now it seemed to hurt less if I tried to think of him only by the stage name he'd hidden behind.

'That must have been a very traumatic time for you,' Honey said gently.

'I felt detached from life and everything seemed surreal for a long time. The aunt didn't really want me – my mum had been her adopted younger sister and they'd never got on. Once I started college, I moved out. There was some money from a life insurance policy and I managed. My aunt had invested that securely for me – she was always fair, even if she couldn't love me – and she'd also had most of the contents of my parents' flat put in a lock-up storage unit, so I could furnish a place of my own when I got the job at Beng & Briggs.'

'And I suppose, once you were working in theatrical costume, you ran into Ivo again?' she suggested.

'Yes, the theatre world is a very small one and one day we

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just literally bumped into each other, although, of course, he was famous by then. But . . . it was like the years between hadn't happened and we just took up our friendship where we left off . . . ?

Or we had, until I'd started seeing Marco, who I'd met through Ivo's stepbrother Leo. We'd argued about that. Ivo had never liked any of Leo's raffish London friends and couldn't accept that Marco had *totally* changed his way of life.

I came out of my reverie and thought I'd probably revealed more than I'd intended, for Honey looked at me closely and then said, 'I see!' as if she really did.

Then, to my surprise, she added, 'The fact that you knew Ivo Gryffyn makes yet another strange link between us. It's as if our lives have always been loosely woven together without our realizing it – very odd!'

'In what way does my having known Ivo link us?' I asked.

'Because *I* know Gus Silvermann, the author of those fantasy novels the films were based on. It's a small world!'

'But *no one* knows who he really is!' I blurted, shaken out of my thoughts of the past by this revelation. 'I mean, he wrote those books *as* the main character in them and his true identity is a big secret!'

'Not to me, because we were at Cambridge together. He was one of my crowd. However, I've sworn an oath of eternal secrecy!'

She gave another of her twisted but attractive grins and indicated the cake stand. 'Have another cake.'

'I shouldn't,' I said weakly, but I took a thin slice of Battenburg cake, which melted on my tongue like a sweet snowflake, and she put a tiny chocolate-covered choux bun in her mouth whole, chewed and swallowed it.

'George says you're engaged to the playwright Marco Parys?'

She glanced at the antique Art Deco emerald and diamond ring on my left hand, which made quite a contrast with my vintage Bakelite necklace and bracelet. ‘I’ve seen a couple of his plays, but they weren’t quite my cup of tea. I’m more of a *Woman in Black* kind of girl.’

To be honest, Marco’s previous plays weren’t quite *my* cup of tea, either, although they were undoubtedly clever, but I said loyally, ‘He’s a bit avant-garde, but I’m sure you’ll love his new play, *A Midsummer Night’s Madness*. It’s opening in September at the Cockleshell Theatre and he’s directing it, too. And, come to think of it, *that* is another strange coincidence, because the Cockleshell Theatre was where Rosa-May began her career and had her greatest success, wasn’t it?’

‘That’s right. Ran off at seventeen from her post as a companion to an old lady in Bath to go on the stage and then found herself quickly catapulted into stardom as Titania.’

‘Rosa-May must have had a lot of natural talent – *and* luck,’ I suggested.

‘The stars do appear to have aligned in her favour,’ Honey agreed. ‘And now in yours, too, it seems?’

‘Yes, everything does appear to be coming together this year, and Marco and I are hoping to finally set a date for our wedding before Christmas. And you know,’ I added, looking at her with a smile, ‘that’s all really due to you and Rosa-May Garland, because as far as my love life is concerned, the exhibition’s been a real game-changer!’



2

Animal Spirits

‘How intriguing!’ said Honey, as the waiter filled my champagne glass up again. ‘Do tell me more.’

And after we’d toasted each other with a second, or maybe third, glass of champagne – for a bottle in an ice bucket had appeared beside the table – I did just that.

In fact, once everything took on that champagne shimmer, I could hear myself happily babbling away in a very out-of-character fashion for me, especially with a stranger. But then, somehow, by that time Honey didn’t really *feel* like a stranger any more. Perhaps that was because she was the first blood relative I’d ever met, other than my parents.

‘Of course, when George told me about the exhibition, I came to see it as soon as I could, though not on the opening day, because I was at work,’ I explained.

‘You work on a Saturday?’

‘Yes, in the mornings, but I get Wednesday afternoons off in lieu. Sometimes, if there’s a big rush job on, we keep going *all* Saturday, but you don’t mind working long hours when you’re doing something you love, do you?’

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‘No, that’s very true,’ she agreed, with that tilted grin. ‘Stephen King says writing is the most fun you can have on your own, and I agree with him. I never tire of mutilating beautiful young men . . . though only in print, of course.’ She grinned again. ‘But go on: why did the Rosa-May exhibition change everything for you?’

‘Well, for a start, the collection’s unique, isn’t it? I mean, just the survival of the actual early nineteenth-century costume Rosa-May wore as Titania is amazing, since they so often repurposed costumes for other plays – and, of course, frequently still do.’

‘It was made especially for her, when she reprised the Titania role in late 1814, along with new costumes for Oberon and the other fairy characters, though we’ve only got the hand-coloured prints showing those,’ Honey said. ‘I found all the details in that journal that’s in the display – part memoir, part diary.’

‘I’ve seen it, and the blown-up excerpts on the boards around the room.’

‘She began writing it in 1815, after she’d married Captain Guy Fairford and he’d left her with his brother and his wife in a remote house on the Lancashire moors while he rushed back to rejoin his regiment – just in time for the Battle of Waterloo! Rosa-May had expected to go with him to the Continent, so she wasn’t very pleased.’

‘I can imagine! Rural Lancashire must have been very boring after her life in London.’

‘She said she only started the memoir to while away the time. Then it turns into more of a diary when she hears her husband has been injured. The entries stop on the last page, on the day he arrives home, so I don’t know if she wrote any more and that book didn’t survive.’

‘It did say something in the exhibition leaflet about

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Rosa-May mysteriously vanishing from the family records in 1816,' I said.

'That's right. According to Uncle Hugo, where she went is a family mystery,' Honey agreed. 'The costume itself only survived because the owner/manager of the Cockleshell Theatre gave it to Rosa-May as a wedding gift, along with those prints of the other characters, when she left the stage to get married. I found the journal actually tucked inside the dress, in one of the chests I discovered in the attic of Uncle Hugo's house when I was moving in.'

'It is amazing it should survive – and even more so that the dress she had had made to the same design did, too,' I said.

'She wore that evening dress to Vauxhall Gardens on the fateful evening she met Guy Fairford for the first time,' Honey told me. '*That's* in the journal, too. He was a handsome army officer, on leave to recover from an injury, and she fell for him instantly and gave up her career for him.'

The tone of her voice clearly intimated that she didn't think much of *that* choice.

'I'd love to read the whole journal,' I said wistfully.

'We seem to have strayed from your story to Rosa-May's,' Honey said with a smile.

'They are connected, though, because once I'd seen the exhibition, I enthused about it so much to Marco that he wanted to see it too. Then, when we got back to my flat, he said it had totally inspired him and he was going to write a contemporary play, based on the theme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Only *his* would be *A Midsummer Night's Madness*, with a sort of ghost version of the Regency fairy scenes running through it. The actors will be dressed in replicas of the original costumes from the prints – Beng & Briggs are making them. All those scenes will be in black and white,

which Marco says you can create using stage makeup and lighting.’

Marco liked to bounce his ideas off me, so by now I knew this all by heart. In fact, I’d had more than a little influence into getting him to create something slightly more mainstream than his usual work . . .

‘That sounds original,’ Honey said.

‘The fairy characters will be half-seen by the contemporary cast, but then, gradually, the past overlaps with the present . . . or something like that,’ I finished. I wasn’t entirely sure I’d quite grasped the whole concept, despite my involvement in it.

I didn’t think Honey looked as if she’d grasped it all either, for her straight black brows were drawn together in a frown over her dark eyes.

‘Marco’s already started auditions for the cast of the play.’

‘So *that’s* why you keep coming back to the exhibition and were studying those dresses so intently!’

‘Partly, but not entirely,’ I confessed. ‘Because the moment I saw Rosa-May’s Titania-inspired evening dress, I fell in love with it and I’ve been making myself a copy at home. Rosa-May must have been the same height and size as me, except that her waist was a little smaller – stays, I suppose.’

‘Stay me with flagons,’ Honey said vaguely, taking a gulp from her glass. ‘The things women have put themselves through in the past to please men!’

‘Well, I wasn’t going to wear stays, even in the pursuit of historical accuracy,’ I said firmly. ‘So I just made the waist a little bigger. When it was almost finished, I put it on to show Marco and it certainly pleased *him*, even without the wasp waist, because that’s when he suggested we should think about setting a date for our wedding! He’d had no idea I was even making a copy of the dress, because he’d hardly been to the flat

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for ages. First, he was writing his play and then in talks with the Cockleshell Theatre . . . I live miles out in Ealing Broadway, you see, while he has an apartment in the basement of his mother's house in Mayfair.'

'Swanky address,' she commented. 'So, absence had made the heart grow fonder, and seeing you in that beautiful gown knocked him all of a heap?'

'Something like that,' I admitted, though I didn't add that, until that moment, I'd started to be afraid we were drifting apart because we'd seen so little of each other. 'I said something about the dress making a really unusual wedding gown, but it wasn't a hint – just a passing thought – and that was when he said: "Why not?" and that we'd set a date once the play opened.'

Of course, he'd then somewhat marred the romance of the moment by suggesting our wedding might provide a good bit of publicity for the play, what with my connection to Rosa-May Garland, who had inspired it . . .

'So, had you been engaged for a while?' Honey asked.

'Not all that long, although we've been seeing each other for a few years,' I said. 'Our different working hours make things difficult, especially now Marco has gone into directing, as well. Unlike me, he seems able to manage on practically no sleep. He's the brilliantly clever, edgy type, totally focused on his work.'

'He sounds a pain,' she said frankly, and I couldn't deny I'd often thought the same thing . . . especially when his phone calls woke me up in the early hours so he could discuss the work in progress.

But on the other hand, he was also devastatingly attractive and almost impossible to resist when he turned on the charm.

I'd been amazed that he'd proposed to me in the first place. Actually, it turned out he'd never really intended to when he'd

bought me the lovely Art Deco ring I'd fallen in love with when I saw it in the window of an antique shop. He said later he'd been surprised when both I and the shop owner had assumed we were buying it as an engagement ring, but that he'd gone with it because he'd suddenly realized he *did* want to marry me.

Honey's deep, husky voice recalled me back to the present. 'Did you say he still lived with his *mother*?'

'In a way. He's got a flat in the basement of her house and although it's not *entirely* separate, it does have its own front door on to the area and steps up to the pavement.'

I sighed. 'His mother loathed me at first sight. She's very rich, frightfully posh and stuck up, and obviously thinks I'm not good enough for Marco. She knows I stay over at his flat some weekends, but she's hoping the engagement comes to nothing.'

She'd made all that abundantly clear on the rare occasions when our paths crossed . . .

Marco called her 'Mummy', which always seemed odd to me, coming from a grown man. I mean, he's nearly thirty-eight!

Honey said, 'I expect you'll have your own place once you're married, and not have to see much of her.'

'Yes,' I said a little doubtfully, for the thorny question of where we were to live was yet to be resolved. Marco would have been quite happy to stay comfortably where he was, but apart from the fact that Mummy would be permanently hovering over our heads, as it were, there simply wasn't enough room in the flat for all my things and space for me to work.

Picking up my glass, I found it full to the brim again, and drained it. The shimmer around me now took on a rosy tinge and I suddenly felt sure all those little problems could be resolved . . .

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Honey seemed to read my mind, for she said, perhaps slightly sardonically, ‘So, once you’ve overcome a couple of minor hurdles, the future looks rosy all round? You’re in line for promotion in a job you love, your fiancé is about to have a huge hit with his new play and then you’ll get married and live happily ever after?’

‘Yes,’ I said firmly – but I still surreptitiously touched the wooden table under the cloth, for luck.

‘Then I’m glad for you, of course, but from my point of view it’s a bit of a shame, because otherwise I’d have offered you a job on the spot,’ she said, to my great surprise.

‘A *job*?’ I echoed.

‘Yes. I think you’re just the kind of person I’ll need to help me set up and run a project I have in mind, but it would mean relocating to west Lancashire. Pity, because it would have kept it in the family, too, now I’ve discovered I’ve *got* one.’

‘Kept what in the family?’ I asked curiously. And it was then that it suddenly occurred to me that we’d only talked about *me* and I hadn’t asked her a single thing about herself!

‘I’ll tell you all about it anyway – you’ll be interested,’ she said, emptying the last of the champagne into our glasses before the waiter had the chance, and then upending the bottle in the bucket.

‘About eight months ago I inherited my great-uncle Hugo’s house in Great Mumming, which is a small market town in west Lancashire.’

‘I’ve heard of it. Mum came from Ormskirk, which isn’t far away. But do go on,’ I added hastily, before I started monopolizing the conversation again.

‘Hugo was ninety-six and an old rip – an ex-naval man – but we always got on well together and, anyway, I’m the last of the Fairfords in our branch of the family. Pelican House started life

as a Tudor inn called The Pelican, hence the name. The original signboard is even still hanging in the hall. It's been a private home for centuries, though, and much remodelled and extended over the years. The Fairford family relocated there when they sold Up-Heythram Hall, their great, draughty barn of a house up on the moors, to a Victorian mill owner with social aspirations.'

This *was* all very interesting, but I didn't see where it was taking us, or where *I* might have come into the scheme of things – but I was about to find out.

'As I mentioned,' Honey continued, 'when I was moving in, I had some of my things taken straight up to the attics, to sort later – and it looked as if the Fairford family had simply transferred the contents of the manor attics to those at Pelican House. They're crammed with the junk of centuries, although so far I've barely looked beyond the first room. But *that's* where I spotted the two old trunks with the initials R-M.G. on them and immediately thought of our famous ancestor. So I had a look and – *voilà!* – treasure trove!'

'That must have been *so* exciting,' I said. 'I suppose when you realized the importance of what was in them, that's when you offered to loan the collection to the museum.'

'That's right. I thought it would be a nice idea to have it all on public display while I decided what to do with it in the long term. The house needed a lot of renovation and updating, so that's taken quite some time.'

'George was delighted when you offered him the chance to put the exhibition on,' I said. 'I think he hopes you might make the loan permanent.'

'No, I'm afraid I'll want everything back eventually because I've got plans for it, as part of that project I mentioned.'

She grinned at me. 'I don't know if you're aware of it, but as

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well as my novels, I've also written a few non-fiction books?' She reeled off some titles: '*Almost a Bride, Great Wedding Disasters, Wed, then Dead?*'

I nodded. Once I'd realized we must be related, I had, of course, checked her out on Amazon, as well as googling her.

'They're very popular and, over the years, readers have sent me several wedding gowns from their own bridal disasters, and even one or two antique ones that have been passed down in families, along with their stories. And, of course, I have my own dress, too, because I'm also a member of the Jilted Brides Club.'

That I also knew from my internet research, though I hadn't gone into it much.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, but Honey quickly shrugged away my sympathy.

'I haven't known quite what to do with all the donated dresses,' she said, 'so they're packed away—'

She broke off, seeing my expression and said quickly: 'No, don't worry – they're carefully wrapped in acid-free tissue paper and stored in moth- and damp-proof boxes!'

'I *was* about to ask that,' I admitted. 'What *are* you going to do with them all?'

'That's the bit that will interest you, because now I've settled into Pelican House, I've decided to open a little wedding dress museum and put them on permanent display!'

I stared at her; this was the last thing I'd have expected.

'A . . . bridal museum?' I queried finally.

'Yes, although, of course, it won't be the hearts, flowers and happy-ever-after kind, but one dedicated to bridal disappointments and disasters.'

'That sounds . . . a fairly unique concept, Honey.'

'That's what *I* thought! The museum will incorporate the

Rosa-May Garland Collection, too, because although she wasn't jilted, according to that journal it might have been better if she had been. It's clear that by the time her husband left her in Lancashire, she'd started having doubts about her decision to marry him.'

'Really? It's frustrating we don't know what happened to her later, isn't it?' I said. 'Wikipedia says only that she retired from the stage on her marriage, in 1815.'

'I've scanned her journal, so I'll email you a copy when I get home,' Honey promised. 'Her handwriting is really terrible, though. I might get my PA, Derek, to type up the whole thing, at some point.'

'Great! And, you know, I think the museum's a really interesting idea, Honey,' I said, now I'd had time to get over my initial surprise. 'But you'd need to find suitable premises, of course. And then, if it's to open to the public, there are all kinds of rules and regulations to comply with.'

'Ah, but there's something about Pelican House you don't know, that makes it all possible,' she announced triumphantly. 'It has a later wing behind the main house, backing on to a mews, and, up to my uncle's death, it *was* a museum and open to the public on weekday afternoons.'

'Really? What amazing good luck!' I exclaimed. 'What kind of museum was it?'

'They *called* it a natural history museum, but really, it was just a repository for all the dead, moth-eaten, stuffed creatures collected or killed by my ancestors, along with cases of birds' eggs, insects pinned to boards . . . all sorts of grisly long-dead stuff. I wanted to make a bonfire of the whole lot, but it turned out that there's all sorts of red tape about disposing of that kind of collection, especially the remains of any endangered species. I've had to get an expert in, and clearing it is still an

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ongoing thing, though we're getting there. No one,' she added, 'seemed to want a full-sized stuffed water buffalo, with or without its glass case painted with a scene of its natural habitat.'

'No, I don't suppose there's a lot of demand for that kind of thing,' I agreed. 'Still, the fact that the building's been a museum of any kind will make things so much easier for you. It sounds perfect.'

'There's even a cottage, attached to the far end of the museum, where the former curator lived. He was also a taxidermist, so he had a workroom there, too.' She paused, then said musingly, 'I might have to have someone go through the museum and cottage with bell, book and candle, to cleanse the air of any lingering animal spirits.'

I looked at her uncertainly, wondering if she was joking, because that novel of hers I'd read didn't make me think she would be particularly sensitive to that sort of atmosphere, but she seemed to be serious.

'I like animals so much more than most people,' she mused, which went some way to explaining it.

'So, I've already got an expert disposing of the collection and someone else checking what health and safety rules, public liability insurance and anything else we'll need to sort out before opening. I believe in delegating all the tedious stuff to other people.'

'If the building was open to the public, does it need much doing to it?' I asked.

'Quite a bit, because it was just as run-down as the rest of the house, but it does have lovely parquet floors throughout, which I want to preserve. Some of the glass display cases might have been reusable, but I'm going to get rid of them and start afresh. I've found a place in North Wales called Priceless Interiors who will take them, and they're on the track of the kind of

thing I want instead. That's where you would have been so useful, because I'll need expert advice on the storing and display of the wedding dresses and then a permanent curator/conservator to look after them.'

'It would be a dream job for a lot of people,' I said, rather wistfully.

'Once the museum is open and publicized – which will also give my novels a boost – I suspect I'll be sent even more wedding disaster dresses.'

'I'm sure you will,' I agreed, and sighed regretfully. 'If it weren't for Marco and my current promotional prospects, I don't think I could have resisted it.'

'It *is* a shame. You could have lived in the attached cottage with the workroom and been able to carry on with your own work when the museum was shut. I'll probably open it just weekday afternoons, like the old one,' she said. 'But I mustn't tantalize you with what might have been.'

'I'm sure you'll find someone else,' I said, 'but meanwhile, if there's any help or advice I can give you, I'm more than happy to do that. I'm very sure George will, too.'

'Great – and we must keep in touch now anyway,' she said.

We exchanged contact details, before I thanked her for a wonderful tea and staggered out to the taxi she'd summoned from the firm she used, which whisked me off in unaccustomed luxury to my not-very-des res in Ealing Broadway.

Rosa-May

22 May 1815

I was born in 1789, in my father's parsonage in the small rural and remote Lancashire village of Nettlefold, which lay at an inconvenient distance from the nearest town of any size.

The parish covered a wide area, even though the sheep vastly outnumbered the people dwelling there, but Papa had obtained the living through the good offices of the Taggarts, who lived at the big house, the Grange, and were related to my mother. Mama had, against all advice, married a handsome but impecunious cleric and lived to regret it . . .

But more of that later, although I cannot but help reflect that I am now dwelling only a short distance from the place I grew so very eager to leave.

Papa, with his hawk nose and flapping black cassock, may have looked like a bird of prey, but I have no fear that he will swoop down on me now, for my family have long since cast me off and expunged my name from the family Bible.

Not that I had been a welcome addition to the family in the first place, for I was a belated sixth daughter (though two had died

in infancy), and seventh child, who had, so Mama informed me, set the seal on her ill health. Certainly, after my birth she took to the sofa and left the running of the household to my eldest sister, Betsy, even then an embittered old maid.

Of my other sisters, being also so much older than I, one had married the curate, who had later secured a living of his own in another part of the country, and the other, Martha, had secured a teaching post in the school for the children of poor clerics, where she had been educated.

What money we had went to educate and support my only brother, Edwin, though with some assistance with school fees and the like from Squire Taggart at the Grange. The family there provided our only excursions into society, since my parents and Betsy would be summoned to dine, when no other guests of any consequence were to be had.

So, with my sisters already out in the world and my brother embarking on his education, my unexpected and belated arrival was considered by Papa to be some kind of Holy punishment, though he bore this cross with Christian fortitude, christening me Mary Rose (Rose being my mother's maiden name) Swan, though I was always called May.

My mother, in the broken tones of an invalid, reminded me daily that my birth had completely ruined a constitution already frail after years of childbearing. Her manner would have rivalled that of the great Sarah Siddons herself in one of her most famous tragic roles . . . and perhaps I inherited my love of acting from her, along with my small stature, slight frame and fair colouring.

How horrified she would be at the thought!

In any case, it was an inauspicious start for one whose future destiny was to burst forth upon the London stage as that celebrated actress and darling of the theatre-going public, Rosa-May Garland!

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3

Missed Connections

To my surprise, when I let myself into the flat I found Marco there, pacing up and down my living room-cum-workroom in a caged-panther kind of way. His dark curls were dishevelled, as if he'd been running his hands through them as he does when he's overwrought or angry, and the brown eyes he turned intently on me held a strangely accusatory expression.

I reflected, as I often did, that it was a pity someone had once told him he looked like Lord Byron in that famous portrait, because he'd rather cultivated the resemblance ever since – and I can't say Byron would be my idea of a role model, because he sounded a nasty and self-centred piece of work . . .

'Hi,' I said cautiously. 'I thought you were holding more auditions for the new play all day today?'

'I was, but they finished ages ago. Do you know how late it is?' he demanded. 'I've been trying your phone for hours and you've been ignoring me.'

'Oh!' I said guiltily, and fished my phone out of the depths of my bag. 'Sorry. I switched it to silent when I went into the museum and I've had such an interesting afternoon that I forgot all about it.'

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‘Evidently,’ he snapped, throwing himself into one of the old armchairs that I’d covered in a fifties furnishing fabric with a pattern of clipped poodles and Eiffel Towers. ‘Mummy spotted you in Claridge’s having tea with someone, though she couldn’t see who he was, because he had his back to her. Tall and dark-haired, anyway.’

‘You know, I *thought* Claridge’s was one of her haunts, although I didn’t see her,’ I said, dropping my bag on to a small table – or at least I meant to, but entirely missed it. Champagne didn’t seem to have done much for my coordination.

‘She only glimpsed you from the doorway, because they were full. She and her friends had to go to Fortnum and Mason instead.’

‘Tragic!’ I said sarcastically, but he ignored this, as he does most things he doesn’t want to hear, especially about Mummy.

‘Naturally, she rang me to say she’d seen you—’

‘Because she was avid to know who I was having tea with?’ I suggested.

‘You look as if you’ve been drinking more than just tea,’ he said, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

‘I have – champagne! *Oodles* of champagne,’ I said. ‘Isn’t “oodles” a lovely word? I don’t think I’ve ever used it before.’

‘Are you *drunk*?’

‘No, just a bit fuzzy round the edges. And you can tell Mummy it *wasn’t* a man I was having tea with – though it certainly wouldn’t have been any of her business if it was – but Honey Fairford.’

‘*Honey Fairford?*’ he echoed. ‘But . . . when you told me you’d realized you must be related to her and I suggested you contact her, you refused point-blank!’

‘Of course I did! I mean, she’s a very famous novelist and probably gets people claiming to be long-lost relatives all the time.’

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‘So, how come you ended up having tea with her, then?’

‘I went to the V&A after work and George – you know, my friend from the costume department – introduced us. He’d told her all about me. She’s staying at Claridge’s, so she invited me back with her for tea. She’s very tall and her hair is quite short, so I suppose from behind, across a crowded room, your mother *might* have mistaken her for a man.’

Especially since Mummy had the kind of mind that would jump immediately to that conclusion.

Marco visibly untensed and looked interested. ‘Well, even if you didn’t write to her, I’m glad you’ve met at last. I mean, she’s such a mega-bestselling author that she must be *loaded*, and the family connection could potentially be useful with the publicity for my new play.’

I stared at him in astonishment. ‘Marco, we can only be very distantly connected, and it was kind of her to invite me to tea so we could get to know each other better, but I mean, she’s not about to take out adoption papers or anything! And nor,’ I added firmly, ‘do I think she’s likely to want to help you promote your play.’

Ignoring this, he got up and began pacing the room again. Behind him, in the open doorway to the kitchen, the skinny blue-grey wraith of a cat materialized and, eyes malevolently fixed on the hated intruder’s back, pulled a hideous face, just like that Munch painting *The Scream*. Then he vanished again, with only the faint rattle of the cat flap on to the fire escape indicating he’d actually been there and I hadn’t imagined him.

Marco, lost in his own thoughts, had heard nothing. ‘She might agree, if it promoted her novels, too,’ he suggested. ‘I told you the fact that I am engaged to a descendant of the Regency actress who inspired my new play would make a great publicity angle, and the story of your discovery that you’re a

long-lost relative of Honey Fairford would be the icing on the cake.'

'I really don't think she'd like being used as a promotional tool and I certainly wouldn't want my private life used in that way, Marco,' I said crossly. 'I'd prefer my connections with Rosa-May Garland and Honey Fairford kept out of it – and our wedding, too, because I want it to be small, quiet and strictly private.'

'You're *so* unworldly and naïve,' he told me impatiently. 'You want my play to be a huge success, don't you?'

'Of course I do! And I'm sure it will be – entirely on its own merits.'

He stopped pacing for a moment and looked at me searchingly. 'Do you *really* think so?'

These occasional glimpses of his underlying lack of confidence in his work were one of the things that endeared him to me – he *needed* me – and I hastened to reassure him.

'Yes! It's a brilliant play and it'll have so much more popular appeal than your previous ones.'

'Oh – *popular*,' he said, as though it was a dirty word, which it was among some of his more highbrow friends, but I knew he was pleased.

'Perhaps I could just *mention* in the publicity that I was inspired by the exhibition, after being taken to see it by my fiancée, a descendant of the famous actress,' he conceded. 'Although if Honey Fairford did agree to let us use her connection with you, too . . .'

'You can ask her, if you want to – I'm certainly not!' I told him.

'It would give the play a boost, even if it only came out later, when we got married,' he mused.

'If the play is still running by the time we actually set the

date,' I said slightly acidly, but I don't think he'd heard a word I said.

'Perhaps she'd even like to come to the wedding?' he continued.

We appeared to have gone round in a circle and he still seemed unable to understand where I was coming from.

'Who says romance is dead?' I commented sardonically. 'And I don't somehow think Honey is a big fan of weddings.'

'Did you get her contact details?' he asked, single-mindedly.

'Yes, but I'm not sharing them with you. If you want to contact her, you can do it through her agent.'

'I suppose I ought to discuss it all with the Cockleshell Theatre management first, anyway,' he said. 'They're delighted I've got a Big Name to play Titania and we're casting for Oberon tomorrow.'

'Oh, yes – how *did* the auditions go today? Who have you got for Titania?'

'Miranda Malkin!' he announced triumphantly.

'Mirrie Malkin?' I repeated. 'But I thought she was firmly fixed in the States, making films?'

'She was, but the last two didn't do that well at the box office and then she got divorced from that film director she dumped Leo Lampeter for, so she's moved back to London and wants to return to her stage-acting roots.'

'I didn't realize she had any! I know she and Leo went straight from stage school into starring roles in the Silvermann Chronicles films, before they were even teenagers, along with Ivo. In fact, I first met them at Ivo's house in Hampstead – and you, too, Marco, though you didn't remember me when we met again later.'

'I don't think we were every really introduced – you were

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just Ivo's old friend, hanging out with him,' Marco said, before adding resentfully: 'Ivo *never* liked me.'

'He didn't like any of Leo's London friends. He thought they were all afloat on cocaine and alcohol and a bad influence on him,' I said, although it was true that Ivo had always seemed to have a particular animosity towards Marco, even if he would never tell me exactly why.

'That's all in the past. You know I'm a changed man now, darling, sober and industrious,' Marco said with one of his more winning smiles.

'Yes, I do know,' I said, though six years ago it had taken him some time to convince me of that and persuade me to go out with him.

'We all sow our wild oats in our youth, and it wasn't *my* fault that when Leo went to the States, he took to the drink-and-drugs lifestyle there like a duck to water.'

'No, of course not, Marco,' I agreed, and I remembered how distraught he had been about his old friend's death following an overdose. We had comforted each other, for I was both shocked about Leo and devastated that afterwards Ivo had vanished from my life without a word.

I'd started going out with Marco only a few weeks before Leo's death. Ivo had warned me against him, so that we argued. But I was sure that he'd come round eventually, when he realized Marco really had changed and settled down.

With hindsight, that might have been optimistic, given that Ivo thought Marco and his friends had introduced Leo to drugs in the first place. Ivo was always bound to put some of the blame for Leo's death on to Marco. *And* on to Mirrie, for betraying the close ties the three of them had built up on the Silvermann film sets, when she had dumped Leo.

Marco must have been thinking about the past too, for he

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said now: ‘What happened to Leo was all very tragic, especially for Ivo – I mean, his coming home and finding Leo dead – but that was six years ago and people move on with their lives. Mirrie certainly has, and she really wants to make a success of a stage career now. She’s going to be *perfect* in the Titania role, which is the main thing.’

And to him, I suppose it *was*.

‘Oddly enough,’ he continued, ‘I was thinking earlier that it is a pity Ivo left the stage, because he’d have made a great Oberon. It was amazing, the way he could slip under the skin of any character.’

That was true, at least – it was being *himself* he’d had the problem with.

‘Even if he was still acting, I don’t think he’d want to work with you or Mirrie,’ I told him.

‘No, perhaps not. He cut Mirrie dead at Leo’s funeral, just before he vanished,’ he agreed. An unfortunate choice of words in the circumstances . . . ‘Still, I have someone else in mind for Oberon, and we’re lucky to have Mirrie as Titania. She’ll pull in the punters.’

‘I expect she will,’ I said. I’d probably have a chance to see how good she was at the dress rehearsal, if I could get time off work then, but that was some way ahead yet.

Then it suddenly occurred to me that it would be Miranda Malkin I’d be making the copy of Rosa-May’s Titania costume for. She was, I remembered, small and petite – and also golden-haired and blue-eyed, like the Regency actress herself.

I’d been looking forward to copying that costume, but this rather took the gilt off the gingerbread. But still, it was my work, my profession, and I’d make it as perfect as possible.

‘Are you staying for dinner, now you’re here?’ I asked Marco hopefully. ‘I could make something, or we could—’

‘I can’t,’ he interrupted, picking up his jacket and shrugging into it. ‘I’ve got a dinner engagement and I’m going to be running late by the time I get back as it is. Business – networking, you know?’ he said quickly, seeing my disappointed face.

I nodded, but I wondered who he was networking with and had a probably unfair suspicion it might be Mirrie Malkin.

*

Once Marco had gone, the energy seemed to drain out of the room – and out of *me*, too, for the heady bubbles inside me had all popped.

After a couple of strong mugs of coffee, though, I revived enough to make an omelette and salad, before removing the dustsheet from a dressmaker’s dummy in the corner, revealing my beautiful, soon-to-be wedding gown. Of course, Marco had seen it, but since that was before it was completely finished, I hoped that didn’t mean bad luck!

I sat in one of the shabby little armchairs that had come from my parents’ flat and ran a critical, professional eye over the dress. However immodest it might sound, I saw it was perfection and looked identical to Rosa-May’s evening dress in every respect, even though there had been a little adaptation with the fastenings and materials.

I wasn’t going to wear a veil, just a simple band of white silk flowers – and ‘simple’, ‘small’ and ‘private’ were going to be the key words when it came to my wedding, whatever Marco wanted.

I might not be able to stop him mentioning our engagement and my relationship to Rosa-May in his pre-opening publicity, but I was damned if he was going to turn our special day into a publicity stunt.

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I had no family to support me on the day – I didn't really think Honey would go to the wedding – and few real friends, now Ivo had vanished from my life. I somehow seemed to have lost the knack of making close friends after my parents' death.

I did have people I was on friendly terms with, mostly from work, and one or two from my college days, but they were all busy getting on with their own lives.

Still, there was always George, who would lend distinction to my side of the wedding guest list. I might even ask him to give me away!

I expected Marco would want to fill the church up with his friends and any celebrities and journalists he could persuade to attend . . . and then, of course, there would be Mummy and her coven, too. She'd probably wear black!

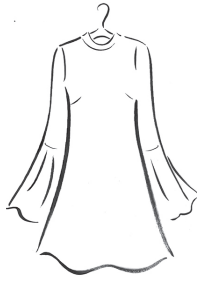
With a familiar wrenching pain of loss, I thought how much it would have meant to me to have Ivo at the wedding. But then, he had so disliked Marco that, even though time had proved him wrong about his changed character, and even if we had made up our quarrel, he might not have wanted to be there.

It was pointless to speculate, for Ivo was gone.

I'd thought our friendship was unbreakable, so precious to both of us that we'd never lose each other again . . .

I had been so wrong.

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4

Three-Act Tragedy

Perhaps it was the lingering, undermining effect of the champagne, but I couldn't stop my mind from wandering back to that wonderful, magical moment when, after more than a decade apart, Thom and I had found each other again . . .

After we'd bumped into each other and started talking, I'd suddenly really looked at him and seen that the reserved, quiet boy I'd known had morphed into the adult man before me.

When he'd told me that some of his happiest memories had been doing woodwork with my dad, and that he still loved working with wood, I'd said on impulse, knowing how much it would mean to him, that I'd give him Dad's wood-working tools. I'd known Dad would have loved Thom to have them, just as Mum would have been so happy to know that I was using her old sewing machine and dressmaking equipment.

Then he'd taken my hand and said he'd show me his workshop.

And as I'd followed him down to the basement, I'd realized that in showing me his private sanctuary, he was acknowledging

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that our old close friendship had resumed, even if the years between had left a few invisible scars and a secret or two.

We were still so young then, in our early twenties . . .

*

The sound of an email pinging into my phone pulled me back from the past and, when I checked, I saw it was from Honey.

Great to meet you, Cousin Garland – and don't even think of calling me Aunt, because it's too ageing!

We must keep in touch now and I'll be picking your brains about the museum project once I get home.

Honey xx

I replied:

Lovely to meet you, too – Cousin Honey! And I'll really enjoy helping you with the project, so ask me anything you like.

Garland xx

I sent that off, then I thought for a moment and pinged off another one.

PS. I told Marco I'd met you – actually, his mother had spotted us in Claridge's – and I'm afraid he might contact you via your agent re involving you in publicity for his new play, the angle being the whole coincidence of him being engaged to a descendant of Rosa-May, who inspired his

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new play, after seeing an exhibition about her, loaned by his fiancée's long-lost cousin, the famous novelist Honey Fairford . . . or something like that! I told him I wasn't keen on having my personal affairs dragged into the PR and that he should certainly contact you before mentioning your name, so I thought I had better warn you.

She replied almost instantly, and I grinned, hearing her deep, husky, sardonic voice in my head as I read.

Forewarned is forearmed! But I'm a total media tart when it comes to publicizing my books, so will see what is in it for me!

If ever I'd met a woman who could take care of herself, it was Honey Fairford!

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Rosa-May

I was lucky enough to have a kind young nursemaid, Sara, a girl of some education, whose family had fallen on hard times. Her older sister, as I later learned, had eloped with a strolling player, who had been performing with his company in the village where they then lived. But this, of course, had to be kept from my parents, and only to me did Sara confide the interesting information about the exciting world beyond the bounds of Nettlefold that she received in her sister's occasional letters.

The squire's family at the Grange included a daughter, Kitty, almost my own age, so it was arranged that I should share her lessons with her governess and be her playmate.

Sara, meanwhile, had become quite indispensable to Mama's wellbeing, bathing her head with lavender water when she had a headache and reading aloud books of tedious sermons and the like. My sister Betsy was at first inclined to be jealous, but was at heart glad to be relieved of some of these duties.

Sara dreamed of escape from her humdrum existence as much as I did when I grew older, for earning a living in some menial capacity was the only alternative to marriage open to either of us, and marriage was unlikely in the extreme given our situations.

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Besides, Sara was very tall and bold-featured, which, together with a very decided air and her superior education, set her apart from the local villagers.

Meanwhile, my lack of interest in scholarship – other than an ability to memorize and recite long pieces of poetry and prose – had caused my parents to think that, once I was old enough, I would be fit for nothing more than the post of companion to some elderly or invalid person.

I got on well enough with Kitty Taggart, who was a little lazy and stupid, but very good-natured. Kitty and I kept mostly to the nursery wing, but when the family were having one of their lively house parties, which often occurred when her two older brothers were at home, and decided to get up a play, we were sometimes bidden to take on minor roles.

I enjoyed this very much and my facility for learning a part quickly meant I was given longer roles than Kitty, from whose head the words, once learned, seem to pass out again with the utmost rapidity.

*

I was not, of course, on an equal footing with the daughter of the house, but at her beck and call as well as that of the rest of the family: useful for small tasks and errands.

Life continued in this not unpleasant, but humdrum fashion, until the year I turned sixteen . . .

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5

The Stage Is Set

Time seemed to flash by me during the next few busy weeks, as a dry, dusty July turned into an unseasonably cool and damp August.

Marco and I spent even less quality time together than before and I began to worry again that we were drifting apart . . .

But then, he was so absorbed in the production of his new play, which was to open at the start of September, while I was working overtime for Beng & Briggs: not only did we have the fairy scene costumes to reproduce for Marco's play, but also those for a TV costume drama.

I did manage one or two overnight stays with him, but they weren't a resounding success since he was now writing a new play and so kept vanishing up to his study, which was in Mummy's part of the house.

Then, when he did reappear, he only wanted to exhaustively discuss his new ideas with me, demanding my support and encouragement as usual, which was a bit draining . . . as was his habit of ringing me in the early hours for the same reason when we were apart.

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Mummy ignored my presence in her basement, though I'm certain she knew whenever I was there and I was sure she was still hoping the engagement would fizzle out eventually.

It was not a very satisfactory situation, but I comforted myself with the thought that once *A Midsummer Night's Madness* actually opened, our workloads would have eased a little for both of us.

My wedding gown was completed, the mannequin carefully covered by a cotton dustsheet, and I'd now begun on a miniature version of an Elizabethan dress for the V&A Museum shop . . . and if you've ever tried to make an authentic-looking lace ruff scaled down to mouse size, you'll know how tricky that was. Still, I like a challenge.

Sometimes my neighbour's cat, Golightly, would appear, silent as a ghost (unless he was hungry, in which case he would scream like a banshee), to keep me company for an hour or two.

I *call* him my neighbour's cat, but actually Miss McNabb found him in possession of her flat when she moved in. The previous occupants must have shared him with whoever lived in my flat before me, for there was a cat flap in my kitchen door that gave on to the fire escape leading up to Miss McNabb's, and Golightly was obviously used to moving between the apartments as he liked.

He was a detached, unaffectionate kind of cat, so I might still have felt a bit lonely if I hadn't been in constant contact with Honey ever since the day we met. She'd quickly become a cross between a best friend and (though she had forbidden me to call her by the title) an acerbic and amusing aunt – a far cry from Aunt Rhona, who had brought me up!

It felt strangely comforting to have someone who was actually related to me, who cared about what was happening in my life. And she did seem as interested in me as I was in her. She

The Wedding Dress Repair Shop

said she always enjoyed exploring new worlds, and mine, the behind-the-scenes work of theatre costume making, was entirely novel to her.

True to her word, she'd had someone trace my family connection to her, working back from my father. I'd given her what information I'd found in the papers that had been stored in the lockup, particularly Dad's birth certificate. They'd tracked the line back to the younger of Rosa-May's twin sons, the one who'd run away to America, so Honey's guess about that had been right.

'Uncle Hugo said the reason for the family row was because he wanted to marry the blacksmith's daughter,' said Honey, on the phone. 'So they eloped and then eventually their son returned to England, though never making contact with the rest of the Fairford family. That was probably because his father had stolen a piece of family jewellery to fund his new life!'

'If his older brother came in for everything else, he probably felt entitled to it,' I suggested.

'I expect he pawned it before they even got a ship to America,' she said. 'Anyway, your father was the last of that line – it's amazing how so many big Victorian families do dwindle away to nothing. Mine did, too: I'm the last descendant of Rosa-May's eldest son.'

Then she added – and I could imagine the wry, tilted grin – 'But don't get the idea you're the long-lost heir to a fortune, because the estate was never entailed, but always willed directly.'

'I'm just grateful you aren't suing me for the lost family bauble,' I told her, and she laughed.

'This means we really are very distant cousins, which is nice.'

'Yes, it's lovely to have real family, however remotely connected,' I agreed.

True to her word, she'd emailed me the scanned-in copy of

Rosa-May's journal, but I hadn't got very far with it yet because the writing was crabbed and hard to read, even blown up on my laptop screen.

I enjoyed all our exchanges by phone, email and text. However strange it might sound, I had felt almost from the moment we met as if we'd always known each other.

Honey seemed to feel the same way too, for one day she said: 'It's odd, but once we started chatting in Claridge's, it felt as if I'd always known you, Garland! I suppose blood is thicker than water – we're family!'

'I know, me too. Believe it or not, I don't usually pour out my life story to someone I've only just met.'

'We're getting to know each other even better every day, if only by way of the phone and emails,' she said.

I thought, rather guiltily, that I'd also learned a little more than she knew about *her* past, because I'd felt curious enough to chase up that reference I'd found about the time when she was jilted.

She appeared to have almost got herself arrested for assaulting the best man, but then the story seemed to fizzle out when it became evident that he'd simply been injured in a drunken argument with the groom, which was why they'd both missed the wedding.

It was quite intriguing, though, and I'd have liked to have asked her about it, if I'd dared!

*

I'd become totally involved with the development of the museum project right from the start, because Honey and I exhaustively and enthusiastically discussed every aspect of it and she also sent me videos and pics of everything that was

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going on, including the last horrible examples of the taxidermist's art, ready to be packed off to a new home.

The photos of the museum showed it to be a long, two-storey stone wing, backing on to the main house, which was black and white Tudor. They were connected by a short passage on the ground floor and there was access to it from the curator's cottage at the other end of the building, too.

Repairs were now well in hand, the walls being painted and new blinds made for all the windows. George had advised Honey about those, because you have to be so careful to block out harmful light when displaying costume.

There was a large reception area and the front door of the museum gave on to the cobbled mews behind the house.

'I'm going to have a shop in the foyer,' Honey told me.

'What are you going to sell?'

'The usual stuff: postcards, a guidebook, souvenirs with our logo on – though I haven't thought one up yet – but also we'll stock *all* my books, both the novels and non-fiction. We could sell some of your little mannequins, dressed in replicas of the gowns on display, if you fancied the idea. But we can discuss that later, when you have time to visit.'

'I can't wait!' I said.

*

George had been roped in by Honey to give his expert advice on the setting-up of the museum, and we had fun discussing it all if he was free for a coffee and catch-up when I called in at the V&A.

Because we were so busy at work, George was the first to visit Honey, which made me quite jealous, even though they did their best to keep me in the loop.

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