

LAURA PURCELL

**THE
WHISPERING
MUSE**

OBSESSION.
SUPERSTITION.
TRAGEDY.

RAVEN BOOKS

LAURA PURCELL is a former bookseller living in Colchester, Essex with her husband and pet guinea pigs. She is the author of six previous novels, among them Gothic novel *The Silent Companions*, which was a Radio 2 and Zoe Ball ITV Book Club pick and *The Shape of Darkness*, winner of the inaugural Fingerprint Award for Historical Crime Book of the Year. Her short story 'The Chillingham Chair' was included in *The Haunting Season* anthology, which was an instant *Sunday Times* bestseller.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Silent Companions

The Corset

Bone China

The Shape of Darkness

THE
WHISPERING
MUSE

LAURA PURCELL

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For Katie

ACT I

Macbeth

‘A false face must hide what the false heart doth know.’

CHAPTER 1

The offer was too good to be true. I knew that from the start. Opportunities don't fall into your lap from the sky; they must be fought for, tooth and nail. I *knew*. But I wanted her to prove me wrong.

It rained stubbornly that morning, on and on like an infant that won't hush. I didn't have an umbrella. The omnibus could only carry me part of the way, and so by the time I turned into the square of tall, white townhouses, I was soaked through to my petticoats.

My left boot squelched from where I'd stepped in a puddle earlier. Pausing, I checked the direction again, but it was difficult to see house numbers through the drizzle. For a while I floundered there, listening to the water tinkling from the eaves, and toyed with the idea of going home again. But my family couldn't afford to offend these people any more than we already had. Better to see the lady and possibly receive some refreshments than return to the cramped room with its mountain of chores.

When at last I found Number 13, it looked exactly like its neighbouring houses: three storeys of white brick with a slate roof and dormer windows. A cherubic girl of about six years peered down at me from her nursery in the attic. At that distance, the raindrops sliding across the window might have been tears, running down her plump cheeks. I waved. Before she could return my greeting, a hand appeared over her shoulder and drew the curtain firmly shut.

I wasn't surprised. The gentry taught their little ones reserve from a young age, and perhaps they were right to do so.

The front door shone as black as a freshly polished boot. It wasn't intended for the likes of me. Instead, I gripped the slick iron rail and took the area stairs to the basement. I can't say I was nervous, exactly; nerves imply hope of a happy outcome. I trod wearily, a broken-winded horse on its way to the knacker's yard. Mrs Dyer might have dressed her summons up as an invitation to tea, but that was the veneer of good breeding. She could have nothing pleasant to say. The only reason for her to seek me out would be to deliver more bad news.

I knocked on the trade door. After a long wait, a pimple-faced youth answered. 'What d'you want?'

'I'm here to see Mrs Dyer.'

His eyes raked me up and down, from my limp capote hat to my mud-splashed skirts. 'Not likely.'

My cheeks flushed, more from anger than embarrassment. I had twice this boy's training in service – and I knew how to answer a door with good manners. 'Well go and ask her, then. Tell her Jenny Wilcox is here.'

He looked me over again. 'I suppose you can come in from the rain. But I'll be watching you.'

He let me into a smoky kitchen with soot-stained walls and sat back down at a long deal table. A pot bubbled over an open range. I'd expected to see a bevy of servants, like at Mrs Fielding's house, but there was only the youth there, sharpening knives and polishing silverware.

I stood in front of the fire to dry myself off. My clothes started to steam and I could feel my hair frizzing at my ears, as it always did in the damp. I would look a mess. Still, perhaps that was good. Mrs Dyer might pity a bedraggled waif.

A bell chimed the hour from somewhere inside the house. Ten o'clock, the exact time of my appointment. As if by magic a footman appeared, dressed in an old-fashioned livery and powdered wig.

'This way, please.'

Rain murmured on in the background as he led me out of the servants' quarters and into a long corridor. Everything seemed smart and well kept. Pier tables displayed vases of fresh flowers

and a mirror gleamed from the wall. Months of absence had served to make me feel out of place in a gentrified environment. Had I ever really enjoyed so much space?

The footman glided to a door at the very end of the hallway, beside a grandfather clock. He knocked once and counted to five under his breath before pushing the door open.

The parlour inside was decorated in pale green chintz. Ferns and a cage of lovebirds hung over the window. No fire burned in the grate – it was August, after all – and the space was occupied by a pair of matching china dogs instead.

A lady sat on the sofa, staring at them. Caramel hair was piled on top of her head and held in place with combs. She wore a high-necked teal gown with fashionable pagoda sleeves. So this was Mrs Dyer, my correspondent. Wife to the owner of the Mercury theatre.

The footman cleared his throat. ‘Miss Wilcox for you, madam.’

Her head turned slowly in my direction. She was handsome, a little past the age of forty. ‘Ah,’ she said, smiling with cochineal-stained lips. ‘Do come in. Sit down.’

She slid forward and began to busy herself with the silver tea-tray on the table in front of her. Her hands trembled as she worked. The cup rattled against its saucer, the porcelain chattering together like teeth in the cold.

But why? Mrs Dyer was at home. She’d asked me here. Surely there was no cause for *her* to be nervous?

Warily, I perched on the edge of my seat, trying not to leave a water mark. I didn’t know what to say, so I kept my mouth shut.

‘That will be all, James,’ she told the footman.

He made a low bow and retreated backwards, as though leaving the presence of a queen.

Mrs Dyer stirred milk into the tea. ‘I am so glad you received my letter, Jennifer – may I call you Jennifer?’

I took the cup from her perfectly manicured hands. ‘If you like.’ It was the only reasonable answer, but I’d rather she didn’t. Using my Christian name implied a level of familiarity. I didn’t know her from Adam. For the first time, she met my eyes. Hers were green like absinthe. ‘I can detect the family resemblance. You favour your brother.’

My fingers curled around the handle. ‘Forgive me, madam, but ... I’m not sure exactly why you’ve asked me here. If Greg left the theatre owing you money, I can’t ... I don’t have ...’

Mrs Dyer assessed me over the rim of her cup and took a careful sip. She must have seen the truth of my words. He’d left us with barely tuppence to rub together. ‘As a matter of fact, Mr Wilcox *did* take more than he was owed. His wages were paid up until the next quarter day. But please do not imagine I invited you here to collect a debt. I wish to speak to you on a more ... delicate subject.’

My pulse quickened. Every time I thought I’d cleaned up my brother’s mess, fresh sewage bobbed to the surface. Had he stolen something from his former employer, too? Maybe Mrs Dyer’s hands were trembling for the same reason as my own; maybe it was the effort of holding back all that wounded rage.

I drank to buy myself some time.

‘Do you enjoy the theatre, Jennifer?’

Her question took me by surprise. ‘I do, very much, when I have a chance to go. It’s been a while since I saw anything ... Greg took me to the gallery once or twice, when he first started working for you. We saw *East Lynne* and *The Corsican Brothers*.’ Those happy memories were galling now.

‘Ah, yes. Such touching pieces.’ Her expression softened. ‘I do not recollect seeing you at the time. I should not have been aware of your existence, yet I am afraid gossip has spread rather rapidly through the theatre since your brother absconded. As a philanthropist, I was naturally concerned to hear that Mr Wilcox had left behind a family in need. We have lost a painter and a soubrette at the Mercury, but I fear you have lost even more from these sad events.’

She didn’t know the half of it. ‘What’s a sou—sub—’

‘A soubrette? That is what we call young actresses that play supporting roles. Actresses like Georgiana Mildmay.’

I could think of one or two other names for her.

The rain pattered on. One of the lovebirds chirped. Mrs Dyer took another sip.

What could she want with me? She seemed a kinder sort of lady than my mistress had been. There was no reason to think

she'd help me, but it was worth asking whilst I was here. We were running too low on money for subtlety. 'I'm not overly familiar with the theatre terms,' I admitted. 'My work's all been in service. In houses like this. I don't suppose ... Forgive me for asking, but we've been left rather short. None of your acquaintance need a char, do they, madam?'

Mrs Dyer nursed her cup in her palms. She seemed to be weighing it, weighing me. 'I *had* heard it said that you were seeking a new position, following your brother's departure. Tell me, what was your previous role?'

I liked how she said *role*, as if I'd taken a part in a play. I'd certainly worked hard enough for it. Years of auditions in the scullery, clawing my way up the servants' hierarchy, and all of it blown away in a moment. 'I was lady's maid to Mrs Fielding and her two daughters.'

She frowned. 'Excuse me for speaking candidly. But would it not be a shame for an accomplished young woman like yourself to spend her time cleaning houses? As a lady's maid, you must have possessed other talents. I am sure you can care for garments, style hair and sew perfectly. Life as a charwoman may prove somewhat ... demeaning to you.'

I swallowed a ball of pride. Mrs Fielding hadn't given me a reference. Without one, I'd be lucky to secure work sweeping carpets. 'I'll do what I must.'

'What if,' Mrs Dyer said slowly, her green eyes flicking back to the china dogs, 'there were another option? A position more suited to your talents? Should you be willing to take that up instead?'

Hope sparked, painful in my chest. 'Do you mean ... something at your theatre? Is there an opening?'

'Precisely.' She flashed a smile. 'My husband has taken a select group of actors on tour to Southend-on-Sea for the summer, but when he returns we shall be busy – very busy indeed. I must prepare by taking on more staff. I invited you here hoping that you would agree to be one of the number.'

I placed my cup down on the table before I could drop it. Relief made me weak. After so much misery over the last few months, I hardly dared trust what I was hearing. 'Mrs Dyer ... I don't know

what to say. It's so kind of you to think of me! I'm sure you have other women eager for the place.'

'I do. But the position calls for a very particular worker. One in whom I will place a great deal of trust.'

Anything. I'd do practically anything to help winch my family back to the place it'd fallen from. 'Yes, madam. Of course, I'll do my utmost to deserve your kindness. I'll pay back what my brother owes you and be the best – the best in the position that I can be.' I stumbled, realising I was babbling. 'I'm sorry – what exactly *is* the position?'

She looked indulgently on my fluster. 'We call it a "dresser". A person who arranges costumes, hair, and applies stage paint to the actresses.'

I hadn't dared expect work at all, let alone an interesting prospect like this. It would be something, to dress a character. I'd grown bored of tweaking my mistress and her daughters for the same old society balls, arranging fashionable hairstyles that didn't suit them, fastening pastel-coloured gowns.

'I could do that, Mrs Dyer. I'd be happy to do that.'

'I am glad to hear it.' Her throat worked beneath the high collar of her gown. 'Yet do not let your gratitude run away with you. I will not engage you under false pretences. You must understand, the actress you shall be dressing ... She is not a good woman, Jennifer. She needs to be watched.'

Surely she could be describing any actress. None of them were trustworthy. Look what Georgiana Mildmay had done! Mrs Dyer's warning didn't put me off. I hadn't exactly liked my former mistress, either.

'How do you mean, watched?' I queried.

Mrs Dyer set her cup down beside mine on the table. A pink crescent marked the rim of hers. 'Allow me to explain the situation. Our leading lady of many years retired in the spring and Mr Dyer promoted an actress of our company in her place. She calls herself Lilith Erikson. A stage name.' Thunder purred outside. The light was growing dimmer by the second. 'There is something not right about her, Jennifer. You will sense it the moment you meet her. My husband is convinced she has "untapped talent"

and perhaps that is true. But I do not like the cut of her jib. You see, we are investing a great deal of capital in bringing her forward, the reputation of our theatre is at stake. Georgiana has already deserted us, and I should feel much happier knowing there was someone keeping an eye upon Lilith.'

'I'd be glad to oblige. But surely you don't need to worry so much? Your husband must trust Lilith, to give her this big chance?'

She looked me dead in the face. 'Mr Dyer,' she said levelly, 'is bewitched. I mean that quite literally. My husband is a good man, but not a strong one. He is not proof against Lilith Erikson's tricks.'

I lowered my gaze. Was there more to this than Mrs Dyer was letting on? Actresses had a reputation for loose morals. Maybe it wasn't just her husband's money she wanted to keep safe. His fidelity might be in question.

Well, I wasn't above watching him for her. If she needed a sneak and a tattletale, I'd do that too. There wasn't much choice.

'Of course, I should be willing to pay for your discretion,' Mrs Dyer continued, her hands quaking softly in her lap. 'You would have forty-five pounds a year in this role.'

I blinked at her, certain I'd misheard. Forty-five pounds! That was more than even the manservants earned at my last place. It wasn't the kind of wage I ever dreamed I'd see.

And what I could do with that fortune ... I could save for Bertie's operation again. Move us to better lodgings. With this job I'd have enough to keep us all safe.

'You're certain it's that much? There hasn't been some kind of mistake?'

Mrs Dyer gave a rueful smile. 'You will learn, Jennifer, that I am good to those who are good to me. It is only a shame your brother did not count himself amongst that number.'

I took a fortifying sip of tea. Greg had never earned anywhere near that money. Mrs Dyer cared deeply to stump up so much cash. 'Could you teach me, madam? About working in a theatre? I know a bit from my brother, but I'd need some help.'

'Of course!' she said warmly. 'Never fear, I will verse you in all our ways.' Mrs Dyer rose to her feet and unlocked a drawer in one of the cabinets. She returned with a purse and a leatherbound

book. ‘*The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Consider it a gift. Read it all, but pay close attention to *Macbeth*. That is the play we will open with, come September. You will be dressing Lilith as Lady Macbeth.’

It was a thick slab of a book. I flicked through the pages, surprised to see they were as thin as onion skin and packed with small, close print. It would take me ages to plough through it. I’d never read a book this big.

‘Thank you, madam. I’ve heard of Macbeth. Isn’t he a great villain?’

‘Indeed he is. Ghastly. Yet I consider his wife to be even worse.’ She stroked her chin, thoughtful. ‘What else may assist you? I am sure it would be helpful to see one or two productions at other theatres before you start – they will not be *Macbeth*, of course, but we are not above borrowing elements of costume from other companies. My wardrobe mistress, Mrs Nettles, is always scouting for inspiration.’

I didn’t have the money to spare for theatre tickets. It felt like pushing my luck to ask for an advance. ‘But ... it’s summer,’ I said as an excuse. ‘Aren’t the London theatres shut right now?’

‘All but one.’ She paused. A strange, wistful smile took possession of her lips. ‘One very special playhouse remains open all year round, devoted to its art. The Helicon.’ Her voice hushed, as if she were imparting a sacred secret. ‘It belongs to the most splendid actor I have ever known. His name is Eugene Grieves. Have you heard of him?’

‘The name sounds familiar, but ...’

‘I must confess to being something of a devotee.’ She unclasped her purse and released a spill of coins. Not worn and dull like the coins I traded with, but shiny, a dragon’s hoard. ‘Mr Dyer says that Lilith Erikson has talent, but you may judge between us when you have seen *my* conception of a brilliant actor. Here.’ Taking my hand, she opened it and let pennies shower in.

I cleared my throat. ‘Mrs Dyer, that’s more than enough for a single ticket!’

‘Take it all,’ she urged. ‘I believe you have younger brothers and sisters at home? Perhaps the children should like to go too?’

There it was: the crack in my defence. Kindness to me was one thing, but showing consideration for my siblings warmed my heart. I tried to hush my misgivings. This was the luck I'd prayed for. Maybe some rich ladies simply liked to help people of my class? To show themselves as virtuous and charitable Christians?

'Thank you, madam,' I said earnestly, closing my fingers over the treasure. It felt heavy, reliable. 'I appreciate that. I'm sure they'll be delighted to come. What's the play?'

'A great classic. You will see Eugene Grieves portray Doctor Faustus!'

It meant nothing to me. My ignorance made me ashamed, but she'd promised to be my teacher. 'And what's that about?'

Her lips parted in surprise. 'Why, it is a famous legend! Faust. The foolish man who made a deal with the Devil.'

CHAPTER 2

I'd never seen Philip so excited. He stood on tiptoes before the mirror, combing his hair back with water.

Dorcas winked at me. 'He wants to look nice for the ladies.'

Philip blushed a deep red. He was only thirteen. 'Leave me alone! I've never been to the theatre before. Greg always said I had to stay at home and be the man of the house.'

I flinched to hear him speak Greg's name. 'You'll love the theatre, Phil,' I replied high and bright, as if I could bury the mention of our brother with the tone of my voice. 'You're right there inside the story. When there's thunder, you feel it in your ribcage.'

Bertie set up a whine and pushed his uneaten supper across the table. 'I want to go too!'

I cursed myself. I should have foreseen this. I wrapped my arms around his thin shoulders. 'I know you do, love. But there are too many steps up to the gallery for your poorly foot. You wouldn't make it.' Bertie's lower lip poked out, trembling. 'I'll take you when you're older,' I tried. 'And remember, Mrs Khan from downstairs is coming to sit with you. She'll tell you lots of stories, probably better stories than the one we're seeing.'

Bertie was nine now, but his tears still caused the same surge of panic in me as his infant cries had done. I didn't suppose that would ever go away.

Just then the watchman called the hour from the street. Dorcas grabbed Philip's collar and pulled him away from the mirror. 'Time to go. You ain't getting any prettier.'

I sighed. It cut me to leave Bertie, but the three of us deserved one night off, at least. I kissed his hot, tear-stained cheek. 'See you in a few hours.'

It was impossible to feel guilty for long. The evening was perfect, warm with a gentle breeze, and the sun had only just started to dip. People spilled into the streets, eager for amusement after a hard day's toil. Ragged boys tumbled and turned cartwheels for pennies. A man set up his hurdy-gurdy and began to play for a troupe of dancing dogs.

Philip grinned. My spirits lifted to see joy on his freckled face. It had been sadly lacking since Gregory took off.

'Who wrote this play?' Philip asked me suddenly.

'I don't know. I never saw this one before.'

'Is it Shakespeare?'

'No. Someone else. Another dead writer.'

Dorcas laughed. 'Don't quiz her, Phil. She's only paid to care about the clothes.'

I *was* interested in the plays too; I just struggled to make sense of them. My schooling hadn't been heavy on literature or history. I kept having to read the pages of *Macbeth* over again, to make sure I understood what had happened. Thankfully Mrs Dyer was patient and explained everything. The more I visited her for instruction, the more I warmed to her. She was articulate and generous, fond of her little girl, whose name I learnt was Rachel.

As we neared Covent Garden, the streets filled with traffic. Stalls steamed on the corners, offering saloop, chestnuts and brandy balls. I bought a bottle of ginger beer before joining the queue: we passed it between us, glad of refreshment in the heat. Ladies glided into the Helicon through the subscribers' door without having to wait.

'Get an eyeful of them,' Dorcas marvelled. 'How do they manage to look so fresh and keep their skirts clean in all this dust?'

'Money,' I said.

At last it was our turn to push ninepence through the hole in the wall and receive our metal tokens. The crowd moved forward in a rush, treading on my skirts as they propelled me inside. I'd

been right when I told Bertie about the steps. He never would have made it up to the gallery. Hundreds of stairs led higher and higher, with no landings to stop and rest in between. By the time we reached the top, the muscles in my legs were screaming.

But it was worth the climb to hear Philip's intake of breath as the auditorium unfolded before him.

Up in the gods we could see each drop of the crystal chandelier. Lines of benches raked steeply from the back down to the front, where a protective rail stopped people from toppling over into the dress circle below. Dorcas grabbed our hands and made a dash for the lowest bench. We gained it just before a group of costermonger lads. Poking out her tongue at them, Dorcas removed her bonnet and tied it to the rail by its strings.

Philip grinned. 'The best seats in the whole gallery!'

Already the air was thick with orange peel and sweat. Voices buzzed, feet stamped. Someone behind us cracked nuts.

Was it really possible that I was swapping my drab maid's existence to work in an exciting place like this? I hardly dared trust my good fortune. Happiness was a beast to be kept on a short rein – in case it bolted and threw me into a ditch. Better to keep wary and guarded in a world where anyone could betray you – even your da, even your eldest brother.

But I couldn't resist peering under the railing for a glimpse of the stage. It looked tiny. The swells sitting in the orchestra stalls were like ants: some of their heads shone with bear's grease; others had their hair piled up in ribbons and feathers. Their finery sat at odds with the rather worn auditorium. The Helicon had definitely seen better days. When I let go of the rail, it left rust on my gloves. The safety curtain looked moth-eaten, its velvet sheen dulled by dust.

Glancing up, I noticed one side of the chandelier was tarnished. A cobweb stretched between the discoloured crystals, waving gently. Once, the ceiling had been painted with a fresco of nine women in ancient garb, but they were faded now. One figure had weathered better than the others: she held a club and some kind of mask in her hand.

'I can't believe you're going to work here,' Philip gasped.

Excitement stirred in spite of me. ‘Well, not here. Another theatre. I haven’t been inside the Mercury for years, it might not be as fancy.’

‘It might be better!’

The theatre had always been Greg’s domain. He’d been the one who got to experiment with colours and flights of imagination – the prerogative of the eldest, perhaps. My duty had been to leave the others behind as soon as Bertie was weaned and earn a decent wage, sending money back to the home I rarely saw. There was a kind of savage joy in thinking I might finally seize this fantasy world for myself. Greg owed me something, in return for all he’d taken.

Finally, a bell rang. The chatter subsided and a shushing ran through the audience. The conductor raised his baton.

Philip gripped my hand as a bold, strident overture boomed through the auditorium. I felt it right in my bones; music so powerful it could sweep you away, make you leave all you knew behind.

The curtain raised to reveal a ghostly chorus wearing white masks and black robes. As one, they began to chant in old-fashioned language. The scenery wasn’t impressive; perhaps that was the point, for all eyes were instantly drawn to the actor Mrs Dyer had enthused about, Eugene Grieves, as he stalked on stage dressed in a scholar’s robe and cap. That simple costume made him stand out, showcased his high, sharp cheekbones and the pallor of his face. A watch swung from a chain at his hip, glinting in the limelight. I don’t know what it was about him, but he had a presence, something shimmering in the air around him like mist.

The winnowing machine turned, releasing a throaty howl as Doctor Faustus vowed to call up powers from Hell. He began to spout some other language, gruff and demonic.

‘What’s he saying?’ Philip’s voice was small and scared.

Mrs Dyer had warned me that Doctor Faustus made a deal with the Devil, but I hadn’t expected it to be so visceral.

‘Don’t look, Phil. This bit will be over soon.’

A stinger chord and a clash of cymbals. Resin flashed and a shadow loomed over the backdrop. Slowly, the shape dwindled into

a puff of smoke and a man emerged, dressed in red. Mephistopheles, the demon.

Balls rumbled down the thunder run and the music gave a dizzying plunge.

'Go bear these tidings to great Lucifer: say Faustus surrenders up to him his soul, so he will spare him four and twenty years, letting him live in all voluptuousness, having thee ever to attend on me.'

Dorcas sat deadly still. 'That's a bad idea,' she whispered.

Eugene Grieves rolled up his sleeve, took a dagger and tore it across his flesh. Something splattered over the boards. In other plays, I'd seen a red handkerchief produced to signify blood. This was some new effect.

'Did he really do that?' Philip hissed. 'Did he just cut himself?'

'Of course not,' Dorcas snapped back.

But I wasn't sure. Nausea pushed at the back of my throat.

'And Faustus hath bequeath'd his soul to Lucifer – But what is this inscription on mine arm? Homo, fuge! Whither should I fly? My senses are deceiv'd; I see it plain; here in this place is writ Homo, fuge!'

Maybe it was my imagination. I suppose I was too far away to see. Yet I could have sworn the blood began to congeal and make letters on his arm, just as the character was saying.

There was something wrong here, it didn't feel safe. I'd promised Philip the story would come alive, and it had. It was a hellfire and brimstone sermon made flesh. How could Mrs Dyer encourage me to take children to this? She'd been right about one thing though: Eugene Grieves was an astonishing actor; for he made me believe, without a shadow of a doubt, that he'd just made a pact with the Devil.

I sat on the edge of the bench, gripping Philip's hand, focusing on the flaking rail rather than the action on stage. I kept anticipating the end. What would happen when the twenty-four years passed and Faustus had to pay the price?

There was no twist of the plot to save him. He sensed his time grow short. There were speeches of remorse that seemed to rip inside my chest.

'For vain pleasure of twenty-four years hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity. I writ them a bill with mine own blood; the date is expired; the time will come, and he will fetch me.'

He clutched at the watch that hung from his waist. The lights turned blood red. Flames capered, smoke belched and a scent like sulphur filled the house.

I could feel his fear, choking me. I didn't know a play could frighten me like this. I tried to hold myself steady and be brave for the others.

A bell tolled. Midnight had arrived and with it the bill was due. Eugene Grieves scurried about the stage in terror. He would have left through the wings, jumped into the orchestra pit, but each time a devil barred his way with a pitchfork.

At last he crumpled to his knees, gasping. *'Adders and serpents, let me breathe awhile!'*

And then it happened.

I knew at once that it was no theatrical trick. As he spluttered for air, blood gushed from his lips.

A lady in the stalls screamed.

We were up high, a good distance from the stage, but it looked like his tears had also turned to gore. The violins screeched to a halt.

Eugene Grieves dropped and began to twitch. It was some sort of fit, hideous to behold, like a puppet jerked on its strings. The sound he made – the liquid, tortured moans. I covered Philip's eyes, but it was too late.

The man playing Mephistopheles called out, 'Merciful God!' Other actors ran on stage and tried to revive him. Then the green curtain fell abruptly.

There was no national anthem. Whispers shivered through the gallery. A man wearing a forage cap crossed himself and rushed to leave, followed by an elderly woman. I was too stunned to move.

'Did that really happen, Jenny?' Philip gabbled. 'Did the Devil come and carry that man off to Hell?'

I didn't know how to answer him. What unholy thing had just taken place? I'd never rid myself of that awful sight.

‘I think it was an accident,’ Dorcas said uncertainly. ‘I think the actor just ... died.’

But what a hideous way to go. Eugene Grieves had looked so afraid ...

Eventually, a flustered-looking gent was thrust out on stage; he must have been the manager. He stumbled an apology that Mr Grieves was ‘indisposed’. Who did he think he was fooling?

‘I would ask you to kindly vacate the theatre as soon as possible, to allow us to deal with this ... unfortunate event.’

Someone at the back of the house demanded a refund. The manager didn’t respond, only whisked himself behind the curtain.

Chaos must be reigning backstage. Did Eugene Grieves have a man who dressed him, as I would dress Lilith? Had someone carefully arranged the actor’s hair and put those clothes on him before they were drenched in blood? Imagining it made me want to weep.

I thought I’d feel better in the night air, but I didn’t. Covent Garden was as lively as ever and every object recalled that hellish scene: the fug of cigars, sparks flying from a barrow’s wheels as it rolled over the cobbles.

Philip was ashen. ‘I don’t want you working at a theatre any more, Jenny. I thought it would be a magical place, but it isn’t. It’s ... wicked.’

If I was honest, I felt the same. The prospect of my new job had soured like a pail of milk in the sun. Yet still, it was work. Work we desperately needed. I tried to shake Philip’s words off and be rational. ‘Only that play. They’re not all horrible like that.’

Then I remembered there was plenty of blood in *Macbeth*, as well.

Crimson light spilled from the baked chestnut stall, turning its patrons into demons.

‘Not a word of this to Bertie,’ Dorcas ordered. ‘He’d have nightmares for weeks.’

I thought that I would, too.

CHAPTER 3

I didn't want to tell Mrs Dyer what I'd seen, not when she was so fond of the actor who'd died. Although *died* seemed a paltry word for an ending like that. The way he shrieked, the tracks of scarlet oozing down his cheeks ... I wished I could forget it.

But when I turned up at Mrs Dyer's house for my next lesson, I worried that something even worse had befallen her. All the shutters were closed. Straw coated the cobbles outside and there was a black ribbon muffling the door-knocker. Her husband was due to travel back from Southend imminently. Surely he hadn't died? What would that mean for me, for the theatre?

Buzzing with anxiety, I tapped on the trade door, but it opened swiftly. 'Is Mrs Dyer receiving—' I began. Before I could finish, James the footman beckoned me in. He didn't speak as he escorted me on the familiar route towards the parlour. Mrs Dyer sat on her sofa, clothed from head to toe in black.

My heart dropped. 'Oh, madam! I'm sorry ... I didn't realise. Have you lost a relative?'

She offered me a wan smile. 'It certainly feels like I have.'

'I'll come another day—'

'No, stay.' Waving a hand, she dismissed James and encouraged me to sit beside her on the sofa. 'Please tell me you saw him. Say you glimpsed the brightest star in the firmament before it burned out.'

I faltered. She was a lady of the theatre – she tended to be dramatic, but I couldn't think what on earth she meant by this. 'Saw ...?'

‘Saw Eugene Grieves, of course. Who else would I mourn?’

Her gown was made of the finest bombazine. A jet brooch rode at her collarbone. Attached to the brim of her hat was a netted veil, to be pulled down to hide her tears. Was all of this really for an actor?

‘I ... yes, I saw him, Mrs Dyer. I hadn’t understood that he was a friend of yours.’

She shook her head. The veil fluttered. ‘I only spoke to Eugene Grieves a handful of times, yet for me he represented ...’ She started again. ‘You are young, Jennifer. Barely more than twenty, I think.’

‘I was two-and-twenty this summer, madam.’

It looked as if the number caused her pain. ‘Then you may find it hard to understand my grief. I am mourning a period in time, as much as a person. His death really is the end of an era.’

I fought to keep my expression neutral. Clearly, it mattered to her, and I should be sympathetic, but I kept remembering the days after Ma died. I hadn’t had the time to sit around in a costume of grief like this; we were trying to keep baby Bertie alive, trying to scrape together the money for a burial.

Mrs Dyer didn’t notice my discomfort. ‘The first time I saw Eugene Grieves perform ... well.’ Her eyes kindled with the memory. ‘I was younger than you are now. Not such a good and dutiful daughter though, I am afraid. My parents ... to be frank with you, my parents bored me to death. Their world was so respectable and ordered. Ennui plagued my days. But when I saw Eugene Grieves perform ... I thought it a miracle. I seemed to wake from a long and terrible sleep. I could not sate myself. Going to the theatre was the only activity that made me feel alive.’

I couldn’t imagine that kind of childhood: being rich enough to grow tired of your own security. But I supposed if you were born to it, you simply didn’t notice your good luck.

‘I spent a fortune on theatre tickets. I fear I made myself something of a nuisance. But you have sat in that presence now. You understand what a magnet he was, especially when he was a young man and even more spirited.’

It was necessary to say something now. 'He was handsome, too,' I offered.

She dabbed a handkerchief to her eyes, smiling fondly. 'Heavens, yes. Not a word of that to Mr Dyer, of course. You can comprehend how deeply that actor affected me, as a young girl.'

It still didn't explain the overt mourning. I wondered what her husband would say, if he was at home. 'But ... everything's going on as usual, despite this tragedy? The Mercury's opening up and Mr Dyer's coming back soon?'

'Yes, very soon. Bringing the dreaded Lady Macbeth with him.' She reached out and touched the small, pewter cross I wore about my neck, nodding gravely. 'I am glad you have that. You will need protection against Lilith's wiles.'

As though Lilith Erikson were a vampire to be repelled! Did I dare laugh? Was I supposed to? She was so strange this morning.

At a loss for a response, I inspected her jewellery in turn. The brooch beneath her throat showed a female figure picked out in white against the black background.

Seeing me looking, she unpinned it. 'Ah, here is another theatrical lesson for you, Jennifer. Who do you think that is?'

I thought she must be a goddess of some sort; she wore a toga, sandals on her feet and laurel in her hair. In one hand she held a club, in the other, a gaping mask.

'I know this,' I realised. 'I saw a painting of this lady on the ceiling, at Eugene Grieves's playhouse.'

'Oh yes, you would have done. Perhaps you also recognise that mask she holds? You might have glimpsed it above the stage, beside a smiling one. This is Melpomene, the tragic Muse. I always said she must have paid a visit to Eugene Grieves and inspired him. He has been *the* tragic actor for ... well, over two decades now. I cannot think who shall ever replace him.'

I ran my thumb over the brooch. Melpomene looked stern, timeless in her sorrow.

'Mr Grieves owned a watch,' she went on, 'with Melpomene engraved on the front. I had this brooch made in imitation of it.'

Memory flashed. I saw him clutching that watch, his eyes wide in terror. 'It's so sad, madam. But maybe some good will come of

this? Things might work out well for your theatre. The Mercury specialises in tragedy plays, doesn't it?'

'Well, yes.'

'And aren't we trying to launch Lilith Erikson as a tragic actress?'

Her mouth puckered. 'Yes, I suppose we are. It would go against the grain for me to see such a woman take Eugene Grieves's crown ... But as you say, it would be good for the Mercury. A real opportunity. It is more important than ever that you pay close attention to what Lilith is doing and send me a report of anything suspicious each week.'

I gave the brooch back. A weekly report? What exactly did she expect this actress to get up to?

There was a tap at the door and little Rachel, escaped from the governess, poked her head around. 'May I see the birdies, Mama?'

The lovebirds chirruped at her voice. Mrs Dyer's face smoothed from its sadness for an instant. 'Of course, darling.'

Rachel gave a delighted squeal and trotted in, her short skirts frothing. She was a sweet, tow-headed thing. Mrs Dyer had never mentioned brothers or sisters. I would have expected a woman of her years to have more children, but maybe there was a medical cause. It struck me now that I had never seen any calling cards on the mantelpiece in the townhouse, never caught a friend just leaving. Compared to my family, this one felt small and isolated.

Mrs Dyer stood and lifted her daughter up so she could see the cage. The birds twittered and cocked their heads. 'I do not believe there is much left for me to say, Jennifer. You have proven an apt pupil. I consider you quite ready to start next week. I shall send the carriage to collect you.'

'There's no need for that, madam,' I began.

She smiled. 'Only on your first day. Go straight up to the wardrobe room and ask for Mrs Nettles. She will be expecting you.'

It felt very final all of a sudden. From now on, the play and Lilith Erikson herself would be real, not vague concepts in my mind. 'Thank you.'

'Keep your observations and wait to receive my note. I shall allow you some time to learn your new position. We will reconvene ... say, near the end of the week?'