

APPLAUSE rumbles along the Victorian theatre's winding corridors like a departing train. Meandering from the wings, Julie Bateman soaks it in. As the noise fades, she's already missing it, already wanting to bathe in it again, but all that remains is the sound of shuffling feet and clattering chairs as her audience disappears. Julie loves the auditorium's character; the oak panelling and bronze fittings give it the refinement of a distinguished gentleman. She wonders how many fulfilling nights it has witnessed. But backstage the concrete walls are stark and ugly. Sighing, she enters her dressing room. The last night is over. Will she ever hear such an ovation again? But a deeper concern also weighs on her. *How do I tell him?*

Unfastening her costume with a groan of relief, Julie slips from the dress, letting it puddle on the floor. It had felt more restrictive with every performance, increasingly tight around the waist. *Maybe he's right*, she thinks. Julie sits in front of the huge dressing room mirror, makeup and brushes scattered before her.

The door bursts open.

Julie half-turns in her chair. Her unease intensifies.

'Wonderful, darling, simply wonderful. Bravo.' A portly figure sweeps in, his open dressing gown flapping like a cloak over his underwear. 'They all loved it. Lapped it up.'

Hands on hips, chest sticking out in competition with his belly, he almost blocks out the light. 'You've a bright future ahead of you, my girl. A bright future indeed.'

Julie says nothing.

She'd loved the script to "Subjugation", a complex two-hander featuring an ageing colonel, forever reminiscing about conquering foreign lands, and the servant with a secret, wiling her way into controlling his legacy. She'd marvelled at every word on every trembling page, amazed that she'd been chosen to help bring it to life. And with the renowned Sir

Charles Shaw. She'd longed to meet him. Had agonised over seeking him out. She couldn't believe her luck when she was selected to star alongside him.

Julie had disregarded his reputation, which rusted in rumours whispered along quiet corridors and anecdotes liberated over glasses of white wine. There was never anything concrete, nothing proven. So, she'd given him the benefit of the doubt and vowed to get to know him before taking things further. And hadn't she been reasonable and right to do so? He'd been a delight during rehearsals: giving tips and pointers and words of encouragement, his charming bonhomie brightening her days. He'd soon regaled her with hysterical showbiz tales over liquid lunches, becoming the mentor she'd never had. She'd almost blurted out her wishes to him there and then, but held back, determined to wait until the month-long run had ended.

Her first proper role. Over so quickly.

'I've some exciting news, darling. Exciting news indeed.' She hasn't seen Charles so happy since they first met in rehearsals. 'I've landed another major part. A new BBC costume drama. A Jane Austen.' He's breathless. 'Sunday evenings. Primetime. Audience of millions.' His grey vest strains as if struggling to contain him. 'What exposure. Could be another BAFTA. Imagine it, darling. Just imagine it.'

*That's all I can do.*

Julie knows about the production. Is a huge fan of the director.

'So what's next for you, my darling?'

A tight smile. 'Nothing lined up, I'm afraid. Back to waitressing.'

So many days spent serving in cafes and bars between rushing to auditions. So many heart-breaking rejections while struggling to make ends meet. The cramped room feels even smaller.

‘Oh, what a shame.’ Julie struggles to tell if his sympathetic look is genuine. *Should I tell him?*

‘My dear, you seem so tense.’ Concern shades Charles’ face, reminding her of a scene from the play. ‘Please. Allow me.’

He saunters over. Julie feels his paunch push against the back of her chair as oily fingers ease into the nape of her neck, his cold thumbs pressing above her shoulder blades.

‘What perfectly smooth skin,’ he breathes.

Her whole body stiffens.

‘Is that better, darling?’

Julie shrinks into her seat as he strokes her. She remembers how the opening week’s euphoria had tumbled into confusion and uncertainty after Charles’s criticisms began, mixing with the compliments like garlic in a salad. A little barb here, a minor disapproval there. Inappropriate comments peppering the jokes. ‘*Are you putting on weight, my dear?*’ he’d asked before one performance. The remarks nettled, irritating her long after the initial sting. One evening, he’d blown his top, roaring about her inadequacies. The next night, all smiles. Spinning between rejection and praise, she was left stunned. She’d considered confronting him or confiding in the director, but hadn’t wanted to cause trouble.

His fingers caressing her bra strap jolt Julie back into the room.

‘This Austen adaptation. They’re updating it for a modern audience.’ Charles snorts. ‘Making it a bit of a bodice ripper.’

Julie lurches forward, Charles’ hands sliding from her. She reaches for a cotton wool pad and make-up remover. As she pours the clear liquid onto the soft white, Julie feels relief at being free of his grip. She gently wipes her face clean of eyeliner, mascara and foundation until the pad is coated in grime.

‘Such a gorgeous face.’ His eyes meet hers in the mirror. Charles smiles. ‘You remind me of an actress I knew in the nineties. A classic beauty. What was her name again? It’ll come to me.’

Julie’s stomach lurches. Close-up she can see how the make-up artists have decorated his features: lightening the ruddy complexion, hiding the bags and softening the shadows circling them. His badly-fitting wig leans.

She’s seen that greedy look before. Around the third week, he’d gazed at her for too long before casting his eyes down her body. Later, a hand had lingered on the small of her back. And he’d begun barging into her dressing room at awkward moments, his booming laugh drowning out her shrieks of red-cheeked protest. She’d never felt more alone.

‘You know, the director is a very good friend of mine.’ The bulbs around the mirror seem to glow brighter. ‘And I hear there’s an excellent part going for the right girl.’ It’s what she’s ached to hear. Just not in that tone.

Charles’ hands clutch Julie’s shoulders. ‘I could put in a good word for you.’ One slides towards her waist. ‘Could be the making of you.’ The other roams forward.

Julie shakes him off, then stands up to grab her dressing gown from a hook on the door. He sidesteps, his bulk blocking her path. She tries to cover herself with her arms.

‘I could get you an audition very easily.’ Charles’ hand curves around Julie, pulling her towards him. ‘If you’re nice to me.’

He cups Julie’s chin, lifting her face to his. ‘Don’t worry,’ he whispers. ‘Everyone else is in the bar. We’re quite alone.’

His lips descend towards hers, brandy on his hot breath. Nausea courses through her. Wrenching herself free, she pushes him away.

Stumbling backwards she sees his darkening expression, curling lips, anger sparking in his eyes.

‘There’s no need for that.’

For a moment, Julie thinks she’s safe.

Then fingers clamp her wrists and yank her to him. A scream catches in her throat. This isn’t happening to her; it can’t be her body frozen against his chest. Her head swims.

His grip tightens.

The pain ignites her. Julie’s knee jerks into Charles’ groin. He lists.

‘My dear girl,’ he splutters between gasps. ‘Whatever’s got into you?’

‘Get out.’ With shock’s anaesthetic gone, white hot rage surges. ‘Just get out.’

‘You’ll never work with me again,’ Charles hisses.

‘Good,’ she spits back.

He glares. ‘I’ll make damn sure your career’s over.’

Julie feels all her dreams evaporate. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. *He* wasn’t supposed to be like this. Despair dissolves any hesitation.

‘I’m your daughter!’

Time freezes. It’s as if the old theatre is holding its breath. Then Charles’ face reddens.

‘Nonsense,’ he bellows. ‘You’ve made that up to use me.’

Julie looks him in the eye.

He sniffs. ‘Your mother?’

‘Haven’t you remembered her name yet?’ Julie sees it dawning on him. ‘She was Carrie Rose.’ Charles’ jaw drops. ‘I suppose your relationship was only brief.’

‘Oh my God!’ He blanches. ‘But ... Good Lord ... You’re ...’

Suddenly, he has no script. Charles stares at his hands as if they belong to someone else. He shakes his head repeatedly. ‘Why did she never tell me?’

‘I think that’s obvious now.’

Julie thinks of her mum spilling the secret of her real father’s identity while lying pale and gaunt on her deathbed, cancer consuming her. That tsunami of shock, fear and anger washes over her again.

Gradually, colour returns to Charles’ cheeks. ‘How was I to know? Why the hell didn’t you tell me?’

‘I wanted to get to know you first. The real you. Now I wish I hadn’t.’ She edges further away from him. ‘And for you to get to know me. I thought you’d just reject me if I came straight out with it. Maybe, if you saw I had talent, you’d respect me.’

His eyes narrow, as if he's trying to figure her out. 'Look. Why don't we start again, hey?' His voice softens. He holds out a hand, his fingers reaching for hers. 'Let's forget about it. A fresh page.'

She slaps his hand away. 'You can't just pretend nothing's happened.'

Charles' features sag. 'Please. It's all been a misunderstanding. If only...'

'It's too late for that.'

'Just give me a second chance.' His voice cracks. 'Please.'

She grips her chair. 'I've survived perfectly well for twenty-five years without you in my life. I never want to see you again.'

His eyes moisten. 'But ...'

'Just get out.' He's nothing but a stranger. 'Now!'

Charles grunts then trudges from the room.

Julie slumps into the chair. She feels numb. Then the tears arrive. Head in hands, she lets them fall. Tension and emotion pour into every last drop. When she can weep no more, the confusion comes. What kind of father is he? And what kind of man, still behaving like that at his age? Should she report him? Will anyone believe her? The press will have a field day if they discover their connection. What if in some warped spite he actually does turn the industry against her? Does she still want this struggle for recognition, with all these creeps and obstacles? Julie didn't even know if she could bear to step on stage again or risk putting on the TV and seeing his face.

It's all over. Is it relief or anguish convulsing through her?

Then she remembers how much her beloved mum had struggled as a single parent to raise her while working so hard to become a successful actress. She'd followed her dreams no matter how difficult to enjoy a good career. Not that Julie had ever heard her complain. Only on doing her research had she realised how tough it must have been.

Julie steels herself. That lecherous old coward won't do anything. And she doesn't need *him*. However hard the climb, she'll make it on her own. She'd got this break, hadn't she? And the reviews had been great. *Oh God!* She gives a bitter laugh. Several had mentioned the chemistry between them.

Sod him. *You can't lose what you never had.* Julie couldn't just give up. If anything, she was even more determined to succeed.

The theatre is silent. Julie thinks of all the dramas it must have witnessed, the conflict, the horrors. The hope and laughter. And that was just on the stage.

Julie changes into her own comfortable dress, applies fresh make-up, then leaves through the stage door. She glances back. The timeworn theatre seems to smile at her. *I'll be back treading those boards soon enough, daddy dear.*

*1,978 words*