

Beggars and Choosers

CATRIN COLLIER



Chapter 1

A TINSEL AND candle bedecked Christmas tree soared upwards from the ground floor stairwell to the balcony in the foyer of the Empire Hall theatre. Beneath it stood a trestle table covered with a red tablecloth. Sali Watkin Jones, her two brothers, sister and the family's housekeeper, Mari Williams, were busy arranging pyramids of paper cornets containing boiled sweets on it when the door banged open and Mansel James strode in, followed by a train of errand boys carrying large cardboard boxes.

Mansel returned Sali's smile and directed the boys to set the boxes down on to an empty table next to the Hearre's closed box office. He lifted his hat and inclined his head. 'Miss Watkin Jones, Master Geraint, Master Gareth, Miss Llinos, Mrs Williams, compliments of the season to you all.'

'And to you, Mr James.'

Sali's formal greeting contrasted oddly with that of her two younger brothers who ran to Mansel and proceeded to 'pretend' box with him. One of Gareth's punches flew wide and hit Mansel on the chin.

'I yield. I've taught you too well,' Mansel pleaded, adopting a pained expression as he rubbed his jaw. He opened one of the boxes in an attempt to distract the boys. 'I promised I'd check the contents, but only because I knew I could trust you two to do it for me. There should be eight hundred assorted sixpenny toys, for the knockdown price of fifteen pounds, as negotiated by your father with Mr Hopkins.'

'You want us to count them all?' Gareth gasped, horrified by the prospect.

'Only if you're up to it,' Mansel replied gravely.

Geraint, who knew Mansel's ploys well, untied the string on a second box. 'Bet I finish before you, Gareth.'

'Bet you don't.'

Mansel crossed to where Sali was standing. 'I am not the only businessman in town to complain that your father spoils his workers and their children at this time of year to the detriment of every other

employer in Pontypridd. I don't think he realises that our staff expect, no, *demand* the same generous treatment.'

'Father says that Christmas only comes once a year.' Sali set the last cornet from her box on the table. 'I assumed Mr Hopkins would deliver the toys.'

'He was busy so I volunteered.'

'The owner of a toy shop was busier than the owner of a department store two days before Christmas?'

'Would it make you happier if I admitted that I bribed him into allowing me to make the delivery because I wanted to see you?' he flirted outrageously.

Disregarding Mari's knowing smile, Sali inspected the toys her brothers were counting. 'Mr Hopkins really did send us an assortment this year,' she commented, eyeing the array of tin mechanical toys, spinning tops, bags of marbles, card games, jigsaws, doll's tea sets, boats, miniature rag dolls, teddy bears, scrapbooks complete with envelopes of coloured scraps, and, for the older girls who had been press-ganged into helping with the babies, wooden brush and comb sets. A gale of high-pitched laughter echoed from the auditorium.

'It sounds as though your father's colliers' children are having a good time. But then so they should with buns and pop supplied courtesy of the management, free admission to *Babes in the Wood* and lift . . . ?' Mansel sat on the edge of the table and looked quizzically at the paper cones Mari was still arranging.

'Boiled sweets,' Geraint explained, muttering numbers under his breath as he foraged in his toy box.

'I dread to think what this lot is costing your father and that's without the free chickens he handed out to every worker for their Christmas dinner and the party he hosted for his colliers in the Horse and Groom last night. I heard they drank the pub dry.'

'I didn't realise you were an admirer of Scrooge's philosophy before the ghosts of Christmas converted him,' Sali mocked.

'Father said the colliery has had a good year and it's only fair he share his profits with the workers who made it possible.' Geraint repeated his father's standard explanation for his generosity. 'Hear that booing? The evil robbers have been caught by Robin Hood and Maid Marion, the Babes rescued and Baron Ystrad Rhondda has promised to take everyone to Ilfracombe on holiday to celebrate.'

'You've seen the pantomime?' Mansel directed his question at Geraint, but he was still staring at Sali.

'Father booked a box the night Gareth and I came home from school and Llinos came with us.'

'Not you?' Mansel asked Sali.

'I'm too old for pantomimes.'

'No one is too old for pantomimes. I'll book us a box.'

'When?' she enquired. 'My father's Christmas ball is this evening, our family Christmas Eve dinner with all the aunts and uncle tomorrow, and we could hardly go on Christmas Day, even if the theatre was open, which it isn't.'

'Then I'll book it for Boxing Day.'

'You're hosting Aunt Edyth's party, remember?'

'So I am.' He dismissed it carelessly. 'We'll have to make it Wednesday night.'

'I've accepted an invitation to Harriet Hopkins's party.'

'So have I, but we don't have to go.'

'And what would it look like to the rest of Pontypridd if you and I sneak off by ourselves?'

'Like we find Harriet Hopkins boring.' Mansel made a face. 'She's a nagging busybody. The last time I saw her, all she could talk about was her precious Bible Circle and the desperate need for young men to volunteer their services to lead the boys' discussion groups.'

'A very worthwhile cause.' Sali had difficulty keeping a straight face.

'Miss Llinos, you and your brothers would like to see the pantomime again, wouldn't you?' Mansel called out.

'They would not,' Sali answered for them.

'You really intend to go to Harriet Hopkins's tedious party? And it will be tedious. There'll be parlour games of the spin the plate variety,' he lowered his voice to a whisper, 'and no postman's knock. And she'll sing. Something ghastly and Victorian like "*Come into the Garden, Maud*."'

'It would ill-mannered not to turn up after accepting her invitation.' Mansel's prediction was likely to be accurate, given Harriet's previous efforts, but Sali refused to join in his criticisms.

'Then I'll go with you, but only on condition you promise not to leave my side all evening.' Mansel's words were swallowed by a deafening burst of music.

'This bit is funny.' Geraint pushed open the door to the back of the stalls and he, Llinos and Gareth crept inside the darkened auditorium. Mansel felt for Sali's hand under cover of her skirt, and pulled her after them.

Two robbers in clown make-up, black-and-white striped jerseys and red baggy tights were sitting, tied back to back, in front of the closed

curtain. Maid Marion was standing centre stage in a glittering gown of Lincoln green hung with spangles. Sali blushed as a well-endowed female Robin Hood stepped up alongside her, in a pair of knickerbockers that skimmed the top of her thighs, revealing what seemed like yards of leg.

'I sentence you robbers to a fate worse than death.' Maid Marion's clear young voice rang out above the heads of the hushed audience. 'You will sit on Cardiff City Council for life.'

'Grand Finale is next,' Geraint whispered in Sali's ear, as laughter rent the air. 'We'd better go back and help Mari prepare for the attack.'

'For me?' the small girl asked Sali in wonder.

'For you.' Sali handed her a rag doll dressed in a sailor's outfit. 'Don't forget to go along to that lady and gentleman to get your sweets.' She indicated Mari and Geraint.

'Thank you, Miss Watkin Jones.' The child, who was dressed in a dark frock and white, ruffled pinafore, clutched the doll, curtsied and moved to the table Mari was manning.

'I thought that queue was never going to disappear.' Mansel peered into the box. 'How many toys do you have left?'

'About fifty, which Father expected.' Sali closed the box. 'The coachman will take them to the orphanage along with some other things tomorrow.'

'So you're finished here?' Mansel smiled hopefully.

'Miss Sali, the coach has arrived and you only have two hours to dress before the ball.' Mari boxed the remaining sweets.

'You haven't even five minutes to spare?' Mansel helped Sali close the toy box.

'Apparently not.'

'Keep all your dances for me tonight?'

'No,' Sali retorted.

'I only want to make the other boys jealous.'

'At the cost of my reputation.'

'All the waltzes?' he pleaded.

'Maybe,' she murmured softly, as Mari called her a second time.

'This dress is nothing but hooks.' Mari tore a fingernail as she fastened the cotton underbodice of Sali's evening dress. 'Breathe in and stand still.'

'I'm trying.' Sali gripped the cheval mirror to steady herself, as the

housekeeper heaved the boned back over her spine. She held herself, tense and rigidly upright, lest she lose her balance and accidentally step on the ruffled lace skirt of the dress that lay heaped on a sheet around her feet.

'At last.' Mari fastened the last hook and lifted the skirt carefully to Sali's waist before hooking it on to the bodice and handing Sali the silk cord that held the long train. 'This is beautifully worked lace. You are going to be the belle of the ball.' Mari lifted the cream satin and lace bodice from the bed, slipped it over Sali's arms, hooked the back and pulled it down to cover the waistband. She frothed out the layers of lace on the sleeves, low-cut décolletage and the hem, finally smoothing the lines of fine gold baby ribbon threaded through the lace borders. 'Definitely the belle of the ball,' she muttered, as much to herself as to Sali and her younger sister Llinos, who was sitting on the bed playing with Sali's ivory and lace fan.

'You say that before every party, Mari, but there are far prettier girls than me in Pontypridd.' Sali studied her reflection critically in the mirror. She held no illusions about her appearance, but she was not displeased with what she saw. A slender young girl of middle height with an abundance of rich, chestnut hair pinned in an elaborate style a small, neat nose, large grey-green eyes and a determined chin. She smiled and a dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth.

'Gloves,' Llinos reminded, handing Mari a pair of cream satin, elbow-length evening gloves.

Sali held out her arms and Mari rolled them over her fingers, wrists and arms.

'Jewels.' Llinos opened the white satin-lined case and picked out the heirloom sapphire and diamond hairpin, bracelets, necklace and ring that had belonged to their grandmother.

'Miss Harriet's maid told me that Miss Harriet wears six hairpieces to pad out her evening hairstyles. I told her straight, my Miss Sali's hair is that thick and long, she doesn't need to wear a single one.' Mari pinned the diamond hairpin to the side of the elaborate bouffant hairstyle she had taken over an hour to create. 'Look at that, perfect.'

'You don't think it's too elaborate for a family ball?' Sali asked anxiously, turning her head.

'Not for tonight.' Mari fastened the twin bracelets over Sali's gloved wrists, fastened the necklace around her throat and slipped on the ring.

'Scent?' Llinos unscrewed the silver cap of the blue and silver glass bottle that held Sali's favourite essence of violets.

'What would I do without you, muffin?' Sali took the bottle.

'Let me, or you'll stain your gloves, or even worse your dress.' Mari intercepted the bottle, removed the rubber stopper and upended the bottle on her forefinger. Dabbing carefully she applied scent to the back of Sali's neck, behind her ears and sprinkled a few drops on her hair. 'Where's your hanky? We can risk staining that.'

Sali handed over a scrap of silk and lace.

Mari planned a dab, then screwed the cap back on the bottle and replaced it on the dressing table.

'Grandma's fan.' Llinos flicked it together and Sali smiled as she took it.

'Well, you're as ready as I can make you. And if I do say it myself, you won't disgrace your father when you stand next to him in the receiving line,' Mari announced.

'I don't see why I can't stand in the line,' Llinos grumbled. 'Geraint is, and he's only four years older than me.'

'And when you're four years older, Miss Llinos, you'll be able to stand in the line too,' Mari said ruthlessly in an attempt to stamp out Llinos's envy before it became any more apparent.

'And by then I'll be an old withered spinster.' Sali hooked up her train and tried a twirling dance step.

'That, I doubt,' Mari countered.

'Here's your card.' Llinos glanced at it before giving it to Sali. 'Aren't you terrified that no one will ask you to dance? If I have a single line left free at my first ball, I'll die of shame.'

'Then it's just as well that you're not going to the ball, Miss Llinos, because no girl is engaged for every single dance at a ball. Except perhaps your sister tonight,' Mari amended. 'Looking the way she does I wouldn't be surprised to see the men queuing up as soon as they come through the door.'

'That's nonsense, Mari, and you know it.'

'I know no such thing.' Mari combed the hair from Sali's brush, curled it round her finger and placed it in the hair tidy. 'Right, now you're finished, I'll go along and see if I can help Alice with your mother.'

'Do you think you'll be able to persuade her to come downstairs?' Sali asked.

'I'll do my best.' Mari pursed her lips disapprovingly. Gwyneth Watkin Jones's 'delicacy' was famed from one end of Pontypridd to the other and the 'good days' since the birth of her youngest son Gareth ten years before, had been marked by the occasions when she had relinquished the day bed in her boudoir, for the drawing-room

sofa. 'You run along, Miss Sali, you don't want to be too late to greet your father's guests.'

'It's horrible being the youngest. I'll never be old enough to go to balls,' Llinos muttered petulantly.

'You can watch from the landing,' Mari consoled.

'It's not the same.' Llinos crossed her arms and glared at the housekeeper.

'It's no good looking at me like that, Miss Llinos. Everyone would quite rightly look sideways at your father if he allowed you to go gadding around downstairs tonight at your age. But if you go along to the nursery, I think you'll find an early present for you and one for Master Gareth on the table, along with some cakes and Christmas biscuits.'

Llinos frowned. 'What's the present?'

'I'm not saying anything,' Mari answered mysteriously.

'Please, Mari,' Llinos pleaded.

'Now, let me see.' Mari stared at the ceiling. 'Didn't someone say something about wanting a puppet theatre . . .'

Llinos shrieked, jumped off the bed and darted out of the room.

'Your father spoils her and Gareth something awful,' Mari picked up the sheet she had laid on the floor to save the skirt of Sali's dress from dust, folded it and put it away in the bottom of the wardrobe.

'No more than he spoils Geraint and me.' Sali checked her reflection one last time.

'The difference being, you're so sweet-natured you deserve it.'

'I was just as difficult and awkward as Llinos at her age.'

'No, you weren't.' Mari watched as Sali went to the door. 'If you didn't look so perfect I'd risk hugging you.'

'I'll give you a thank you hug for making me look like this later.' Sali walked on to the landing in time to hear the first knock on the door.

'I know we're early, Harry, but I couldn't contain Mansel a moment longer. He's been like a jack-in-the-box that's outgrown the box since he came home from the store.'

Edyth James waited until Harry Watkin Jones's, butler, Tomas, removed her fur evening cape before offering her cheek to her nephew.

'Thank you for coming so early, Aunt Edyth.' Harry watched Sali walk sedately down the staircase. 'You look very beautiful,' he complimented.

'The dress is beautiful,' Sali corrected. 'Thank you for buying it for me.'

'Thank your aunt, she was the one who suggested it as an early Christmas present.'

'In that case, thank you, Aunt Edyth. You have exquisite taste.' Sali kissed Edyth and held out her hand to Mansel.

'Steady,' Harry warned, as Geraint charged down the stairs at speed, fastening his gold cufflinks.

'Am I late?'

'No more than usual, Geraint.' Mansel shook Harry's hand.

'Harry, Mrs James, Mr James, children.' A tall, gaunt, dark-haired, sallow-faced man entered the house, removed his overcoat and handed it to Tomos.

'Morgan,' Harry greeted his wife's brother. 'Thank you for accepting my invitation.'

'I won't stay long, Harry. It isn't done for a minister to be seen on such frivolous occasions, but I called out of respect for Gwyneth.'

'She will be downstairs shortly.'

'Then she is well?'

'I believe so,' Harry replied tersely. He disliked his brother-in-law intensely, not least because he felt that he encouraged his wife in her fanciful notions of ill-health.

'Sherry, sir, madam?' Robert, the footman held out a tray.

'As you well know from my previous visits to this house, I never indulge in strong drink,' Morgan replied curtly.

'Thank you, Robert.' Edyth took a glass.

'Thank you,' Mansel took a second.

'Why don't you three bright young things go and tell the orchestra what to play while Harry and I receive the guests?' Edyth suggested.

Harry hesitated for the briefest of moments. 'Go ahead, Sali.' He knew exactly what Edyth was trying to engineer and hoped that she wasn't reading too much into a relationship he had been monitoring since Sali's eighteenth birthday.

'You can't take them all,' Sali protested, as Mansel James pulled her into a corner of the deserted library and proceeded to write his name against every single dance on her card.

'Who says I can't?' His blue eyes twinkled with mischief and he continued to scrawl his signature.

'There are other boys—'

'Are there?' He stood in front of her, effectively imprisoning her in the corner.

'I was going to add "who are coming to the ball".'

'How can someone who looks so lovely be so hard-hearted?'

'I am not,' she asserted.

'No?' he questioned with mock gravity. 'You refuse me your dances after stealing my heart in the summer. You disappear back to college in September for nearly three months leaving me in purgatory . . .'

'That I don't believe. I heard you took Harriet Hopkins to the Market Company ball.'

'Only because Aunt Edyth insisted I couldn't go without a partner. And I only danced one dance with her. I didn't hold hands. Not once. Or,' he lifted his eyebrows, 'try to kiss her.'

'You promised you wouldn't say that word again. Not after what you did last summer.'

'You said you were going to forget about it.'

Sali's fingers wandered to her lips. She could no more forget the first kiss Mansel had given her — the first she had ever received — than she could forget her own name. But before she had time to recall all the emotions he had evoked, he bent his head to hers and kissed her again. A soft, gentle, warm kiss that made her spine tingle and tinged the room with a soft, pink haze.

'Marry me?'

She stared up at him.

'Tradition demands that you give me an answer, not gaze at me open-mouthed.' He gripped her hands in his. 'Please say yes. There is an alternative, but I'd prefer not to think about it.'

'Mansel . . .'

'You don't love me?'

'You know I do.'

'Then I can speak to your father?'

'Yes. Please.'

'Remember your dance card is full.' He kissed her again, and then he was gone.