Second Act at Appleton Green

Also by Kate Forster

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Kate Forster



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For anyone brave enough to begin again.

After losing her voice before a vital audition, West End hopeful Lily Baxter retreats to her grandmother's cottage at Appleton Green. Lily joins the local amateur dramatics society and falls for attractive nurse Nick, intending to stay only for the summer. Lily must choose between London and the village as she rediscovers her singing passion and family secrets.

Act One

One

'Morning.' Lily woke to hearing Nigel, her housemate, knocking on her bedroom door.

'Go away,' she returned in greeting, rolling over in bed and pulling the duvet up over her head. Their rescue cat, Mr Mistoffelees, was asleep at the foot of the bed, keeping her toes warm.

She heard the door open. 'Seriously, piss off,' she moaned and threw a pillow at the door but it fell short, like most things she did lately, she thought.

'Charming, you're quite the lady, aren't you?' said Nigel in a posh accent as he opened the door.

'I try me best, guvnor,' she said in a cockney accent and she rolled over to look at Nigel.

Nigel was dressed in his active wear and was doing pliés in the doorway. He was always moving, always dancing from one place to another. People like Nigel were like dragonflies, and people were captivated by them both.

'I'm heading off soon. I've got to get the train to the airport. I thought we could farewell each other over breakfast but we don't have any clean mugs. I could still

make tea and we can drink it from those ramekin dishes you bought for that dinner party that time and served the crème brûlée that didn't set.'

'Don't remind me of that and don't remind me it's my turn to do the dishes,' she said as she sat up in bed.

'You haven't done the dishes in about a month, hence the ramekins,' he said with an exaggerated eye-roll. 'I have stopped doing them as an act of protest. I also haven't been here due to rehearsals but those dishes have scurvy; you have scurvy; this flat has scurvy.'

'I must,' she said. 'I just don't feel great. Even getting up is hard at the moment. I think either I'm low in iron or it's scurvy.'

'No, you're low in self-confidence,' said Nigel shaking his head at her. 'Girl, I worry about you. You have to get into it, this whole life concept.'

'I would rather stay at home. I'm thinking of applying for a new job,' she said.

'Oh? That's cool. What is it? Are you leaving the call centre or the restaurant or both?' he asked doing an arabesque.

'Neither. I'm planning on being a biscuit tester. It a work-from-home role and I just sit on the sofa and eat biscuits and give them a rating. Do you know anyone who's hiring?'

'I think that's a perfect job for you,' said Nigel and he walked into the room and picked up the pillow and threw it at her. 'Hobnob reviewer and general dilettante.'

'Thank you, finally someone can see my potential,' she said. 'More than Paul does. You know, I've left messages and he still hasn't returned my calls.'

'Paul is a shit agent. I've told you that. Unless you're a lead he's not interested. You need to try a new one, someone with a bit of hunger.'

'You're with Paul,' she cried.

'I know, but I'm a dancer; it's easier for me. You know what he's like, all about the young and famous ones.'

'Of which I am neither,' she sniffed. When Paul had first taken her on after drama school she was thrilled. He was considered the best in the business, but he had slowly started to take less interest in her as she stopped booking jobs. She knew Nigel was right but the thought of having to start again with a new agent made her tired even thinking about it.

'Now get up and go to your real job,' Nigel said firmly. 'You're not getting any younger or famous rolling around in that squalor.'

'I know.' She sighed and pulled her long dark curls up into a bun. 'I can't wait for a day of calling people to ask them if they want to join the wine club or whatever it is I'll be selling today. Who knew I'd be living this dream at nearly thirty? I mean it's amazing, isn't it? The heights I have reached in my stage career so far.'

'Don't stress, babe, you have your third callback tomorrow for *Les Mis*, on the stage no less. How exciting to sing on that stage. It's going to be amazing. I know you'll get it and then you'll be in a show and never have to sell wine or newspapers or heater servicing again, and Denise can sell the signed programmes on eBay once you're in the show.'

She sighed. Nigel knew her better than anyone and knew she came with a very intense stage mother: Denise. She and

Nigel had lived together through university and graduation and for the past eight years, but now he was going on tour with *The Wizard of Oz* and she would be left in their flat alone working, hustling, auditioning, worrying.

Nigel was an incredible dancer and strong chorus member, but Lily was a soprano and roles were harder to come by, plus with her striking looks of pale skin, blue eyes and long dark curls, she looked like she was born in another time, except she was getting older and the ingénue roles seemed to be going to the younger ones.

She had been in three choruses on the West End since leaving drama school and she was grateful for those opportunities as they'd helped her get the lead role of Marian Paroo in a tour of Europe with *The Music Man*. It was exciting to have any roles at all, as she knew how hard it was to even get an audition on the West End, but it felt like her agent had forgotten about her lately. Sometimes he would ring with a TV commercial audition or even a voiceover or narration for an audiobook but the phone had been ominously quiet in the past few weeks.

Sure, there had been a few walk-on parts on television shows and a few lines in an episode of *Holby City* but this third and final callback for *Les Mis* was everything she had worked for. All those years at college, all the singing with her gran in her cottage in Appleton Green, all the auditions and trying over and over again. She was ready for this.

With a sigh, Lily swung her legs out of bed and landed on the chilly floor. After making her way to the bathroom, she cleaned her teeth and glanced in the mirror. The bags beneath her eyes were not pretty, she thought as she leaned

in closer to see the damage, but that's what happens when you work two crappy jobs with crappy hours and matching pay.

In an attempt to rouse herself, she splashed more water on her face.

'Tea's ready!' Nigel's voice sang from the kitchen. 'In ramekins, as promised!'

As Lily entered their small kitchen, she laughed at the sight of Nigel sitting on the counter, drinking from a white ramekin. With steam emerging from the makeshift mug, he gave her the other one.

'Cheers,' he said and placed her ramekin against his.

Laughing, she took a sip. Nigel always knew how to cheer her up and she made a little toast.

'To your big adventure on the road to Oz. You are going to be amazing and you're understudying the Scarecrow. That's so great – it's about time people saw how brilliant you are,' she said firmly. And she believed it. Nigel was exceptional and it was a matter of time before he was playing bigger roles in bigger shows.

Nigel smiled at her. 'And to your stardom in the future. I have no doubt that you will ace your audition tomorrow. I wish I could be here for it.'

The tour for *The Wizard of Oz* started tomorrow and Nigel would be away for two months. She wished he could be here, mostly because she knew she would miss him and because he calmed her, but she knew she needed to stop relying on him for every emotional moment she had.

She shrugged. It had felt so hard lately. As though all the dreams she had once had didn't seem to matter anymore. She was tired, and the hustle was hard.

'You're so good, Lil, please don't underestimate yourself,' Nigel pleaded with her.

Lily wished she had his level of assurance. Doubts were becoming more frequent of late. 'Nige, I'm not sure. There are a ton of gifted singers out there. What makes me so special? And I'm getting older. People know who I am now and not because I'm a star but because I keep turning up, like a musical theatre masochist or something.'

With a graceful jump, Nigel stepped off the counter and placed his ramekin down. 'What makes you special? Are you kidding me?'

He took hold of her shoulders and met her gaze directly. 'Darling, you have a voice that could make angels cry. You look like Snow White and have a voice like Audra McDonald – that's what's special about you. It's just a matter of time, I promise you. Your life is going to change with one single role.'

Lily rolled her eyes, but as he spoke, a wave of warmth went through her chest. 'You're biased.'

'I am, damn it.' Nigel winked. 'But I'm also right.'

Lily's phone buzzed on the counter as Nigel hurried about the kitchen gathering the rest of his packing. As she took a quick look at it, her stomach dropped.

The Stage Mother came up on her phone screen.

Nigel shot her a pitying glance. 'Want me to answer it and pretend to be you?'

Lily shook her head and inhaled deeply before responding. 'Hi, Mum.'

'Lily, darling!' Her mother seemed super cheerful, always a dead giveaway that she was about to start asking questions.

'Are you prepared for your big audition tomorrow? I just wanted to check in. What state are you in? Have you been working on your technique? How's the voice sounding? Do you need some of that Chinese throat syrup? You can get it at the Asian grocer near you. I rang them to check and they said they had plenty of bottles, but I got them to put one behind the counter for you anyway, under Denise.'

'Mum, I'm okay,' Lily responded, trying to remain calm. No one triggered her like Denise did. As an only child with a talent, the pressure on Lily was more than she would ever admit to people. She made jokes about it to Nigel, calling Denise 'The Stage Mother', but underneath all the questions, Lily couldn't help feeling that she was letting her mother down by not being a lead in a show yet. She couldn't offer anything to her parents that other women her age were delivering: no wedding, no grandchildren, no career.

'I've been practising. It's fine. I don't need the syrup, I promise.'

'That's good,' Denise said. 'I meant to tell you. I saw on Facebook that Sheila from the am dram group in Appleton said that her niece was down to the last three for a role in *Les Mis*. You might know her. She might be there tomorrow.'

The intention of her comment was obvious but Lily wasn't going to bite today.

Lily's throat constricted. 'There's more than one role being auditioned for, so I couldn't say, but whatever it is, that's great for her.' Staying neutral was best with Denise, she had learned over the years.

'You'll be next, darling, I just know it. You are incredibly talented. All you have to do is put in the work. Maybe take the day off and practise.'

Only Denise would encourage Lily to take a day off and practise.

Lily gripped the phone more tightly. 'I can't, Mum, I need to pay rent; that's how this whole adult thing works.' She knew she was having a dig at Denise who had never worked; instead she put everything into Lily to the point it was stifling, but sometimes her lower self won over taking the high road with Denise.

'Well, my main concern is that the jobs might be detracting from your actual objectives. Your career is what you should be putting all of your effort into. Perhaps if you practised for a couple extra hours every day…' Denise had that tone and Lily closed her eyes and mentally counted to ten. She truly loved her mother, but there were moments when the strain became too much for her.

'Lily? Do you hear me?'

After an instinctive 'Yep' Lily replied, 'Look, I have to go and say goodbye to Nigel and then I have to go to work.'

'Oh yes, how exciting for Nigel. Isn't he clever?' Denise said.

As opposed to me, Lily thought, but said nothing.

'All right, sweetheart. Tomorrow, break a leg. I'm sure you'll be fantastic.'

Lily felt her mother's expectations fall hard on her as she hung up the phone. Experiencing unexpected exhaustion, she leaned against the counter.

Nigel walked into the kitchen with plates and some glasses from his bedroom. 'How was Rose Hovick today?' he asked with an arched eyebrow.

'She's worse than Rose. She makes Rose look like she was just encouraging Gypsy. Denise is ready to start auditioning herself, I think.'

Nigel put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulders tightly. 'Avoid letting her affect you. You're doing great, thank you. You're living your dream, putting in a lot of work, and going on auditions. More than most people could say – that.'

Lily gave a little laugh. 'I know, I'm just feeling a bit fragile and she really knows how to get under my skin.' She made a sad face at him. 'What am I going to do without you? You're my live-in cheerleader.'

'Oh, you'll be fine,' Nigel dismissively stated while waving a hand. 'You'll be so busy being a star, you won't even notice I'm gone.'

Lily finished her tea in the ramekin as Nigel got his things ready to leave. Why did she feel so weird about everything lately? She felt happy for him but so terrified for herself.

Stop making this about you, Lily, she told herself as Nigel came into the kitchen.

'I've cleaned my room, so you can rent it out for a few weeks if you like. I've paid my rent up anyway, but you could rent it if you want some more cash.'

'You're a gem,' she said, meaning it.

'I would stay to clean this up, but I don't want to,' he said looking around the kitchen and living room at the mess of dishes and music and papers.

'You're such a good friend,' she said sarcastically.

'Toughen up, sunshine. I'll call you tomorrow to run through the song before the audition, okay?'

They gave each other one more hug as they stood in the doorway with Nigel's suitcases at his feet. Nigel said, 'Knock 'em dead, Baxter,' into her hair. 'And please, be kind

to yourself. Do what makes you happy. Sometimes I worry you've forgotten what makes you happy.'

Lily nodded while stifling her tears. 'I know. I'll work on it. Now go, or you'll miss your train.'

Lily leaned against the door as it closed behind Nigel, taking in the sudden silence of the room. She groaned, taking a quick look at the time. It was time to prepare for yet another day of pointless calls and turned-down sales pitches.

Lily looked in the full-length mirror at herself as she got ready for work. She stopped and gave herself a serious look. Everyone seemed so much more interesting than her when she went to the auditions. Was there still a place for a classical soprano with an antique face in a world of pop princesses and belting divas?

She shook her head, attempting to shake away the negative thoughts.

But Lily couldn't get rid of the feeling that something bad was coming, like she was standing on the edge of something and there wasn't a guard rail. One wrong step and she could fall and never come back again, but she didn't want to tell Nigel that; she didn't want to tell anyone that. No, she would just get on with it. That's all she could do. She locked the door behind her and left the flat. She squared her shoulders, inhaled deeply, and stepped out into the London morning. She had promised herself and Nigel that she would try and find what made her happy, on stage or off. That was her goal for now.