

# Sinners and Shadows

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Extract

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## CHAPTER ONE

Rhian Jones stacked the last piece of breakfast china from the table on to her tray, left the dining room and sedately crossed the oak-panelled hall of Llan House. The moment the door to the narrow servants' staircase closed behind her, she charged as fast as she could down the stone staircase and into the basement kitchen.

'Gwilym James opened their doors at half past seven this morning, it's almost half past eight and it will take you twenty minutes to walk to Dunraven Street.' The housekeeper, Mrs Williams, glanced up from the tradesmen's account books that she had spread out on the table.

'It's not my fault I'm behind this morning, Mrs Williams.' Rhian dumped the tray next to the Belfast sink where the ten-year-old kitchen maid, Mair, was washing dishes.

'I know,' Mrs Williams murmured sympathetically.

'Some people will have camped out all night to get the best bargains. There'll be nothing left worth having by the time you get there,' Meriel the cook predicted gloomily from the stove where she was making stock from a chicken carcass.

'Miss Julia reminded the mistress three times over breakfast that she had run out of perfume and wanted me to pick up a bottle of Zenobia Violets from Thomas the chemist's this morning. But the mistress still insisted on having a third cup of tea and a fourth slice of toast.' Rhian pulled the hairpins that secured her maid's cap from her blonde curls.

'The way madam eats, I think her family must have

starved her before she married the master. Have you noticed how much weight she's put on these last six months?' Meriel, who wasn't exactly a lightweight herself, dropped a bundle of bay leaves into the stock, moved the pan on to a smaller hob and set the lid on it.

'We have,' Mrs Williams endorsed dryly. 'Here's the grocery order for Rodney's, Rhian, and mind you tell Mrs Rodney that we don't want any of her substitutes this week. When I say I want Lifebuoy soap, I mean Lifebuoy not Sunlight, and the same goes for biscuits. If she hasn't any Huntley and Palmer's Bath Oliver's, we'll go to a shop that has. Understand?' She handed Rhian the list.

'Yes, Mrs Williams.' Rhian untied her apron and lifted it over her head, before taking her cloak down from the pegs on the back of the door.

'This really is only fit for the rag bag, Rhian.' Meriel inspected the hem of the serge cloak Rhian had bought when she had started work in Llan House four years before. She had bleached out the dye along with mud stains and it was more rusty than black in places.

'Which is why Rhian is on her way to the sale.' Mrs Williams looked out of the window. 'I wouldn't wear your hat, Rhian. It will get ruined. It's hailing and sleeting out there. Take my umbrella.'

'Thanks, Mrs Williams.' Rhian threw her cloak around her shoulders.

'The family will all be out until tea-time and I'll give Bronwen a hand with the bedrooms when I've finished totalling these figures, so you can take as long as you like but mind you buy quality. It's easy to get carried away by low prices, but remember, even in the sales, you only get what you pay for. And don't forget to pick up Miss Julia's things in the chemist's,' Mrs Williams warned.

'You have the list safe?' Meriel checked when Rhian went to the back door.

'Yes.' Rhian lifted it from her uniform pocket to show her before buttoning it back in.

'And your money?' Mrs Williams asked.

‘In my purse in my mitten.’

‘Then off with you, girl.’

Rhian dived out of the door. A gust of wind caught it, slamming it behind her. Frozen raindrops stung her face and snarled her blonde curls, which were prone to tangling at the best of times. Realizing that Mrs Williams’s umbrella would blow inside out the second she tried to put it up, she gripped it and the front of her hood with one hand, held the edges of her cloak together with the other, put her head down and ran as fast as she could, while trying not to imagine hordes of shoppers bearing down on the sale rack of winter coats in Gwilym James.

The department store was the largest and most expensive in Tonypandy and it sold only high-quality goods. A ladies’ slim-cut, black cashmere coat had been the centre highlight of the window display of winter fashions since last September. Coveted by every fashion-conscious woman and girl in the town, at seven guineas it was priced out of the reach of all but the wealthiest people.

Rhian earned her keep, plus washing, uniform and twelve pounds a year in Llan House. But when it came to buying clothes, her wages didn’t go far. The week before Christmas the price tickets on the goods in the window display had been slashed to encourage interest ahead of the traditional first of January sale. The coat had been reduced from seven to two guineas and it had seemed almost within her grasp – until she had run late that morning.

Miss Julia and Mrs Williams had done what they could to help her get away early because they both knew that if she asked permission from the new mistress, who had married Mr Larch only two months before, it would be withheld. But even they couldn’t arrange for her to get out of serving the family breakfast.

She crossed her fingers, and – not exactly prayed because she felt that it would be sinful to pray for something material – wished that just one black cashmere coat would be left in her size.

Her heart sank when she reached the main street. The pavement outside Gwilym James was so crammed with shoppers it was impossible to work out who was trying to get in and who was trying to get out of the store. Bracing herself, she joined the scrum, parrying inadvertent blows from elbows and knees as she fought her way inside. Buffeted first one way, then another by the crowd, she paused to take her bearings. The lingerie counter was surrounded by a five-deep circle of women pawing through the discounted underwear, the ones in the outer ring grabbing at anything and everything that they could reach.

She spotted the discounted racks of coats but a horde of women at the knitwear counter blocked her path and the store manager, Joey Evans, was attempting to calm a situation that was threatening to turn ugly.

‘Please, ladies, there are plenty of bargains for everyone.’ He pitched his voice above the hubbub while smiling at two elderly women who had locked their fingers into the same grey cardigan. ‘Mrs Jones, looking beautiful as ever on this cold and miserable morning.’ He clasped the fist she had raised to her rival, Mrs Hopkins, and kissed the back of her hand.

‘Save the charm for girls young and stupid enough to believe it, Joey Evans. I saw this first.’ Mrs Jones snatched the cardigan from Mrs Hopkins but Joey intervened and held it fast.

‘Wouldn’t you prefer it in your favourite navy, Mrs Jones?’ He signalled over her head to the supervisor. ‘Miss Robertson, send one of the boys to the stockroom to get this cardigan in navy in a –’ he ran a practised eye over Mrs Jones’s ample figure – ‘forty-four-inch chest.’

‘We weren’t going to put the navy out until tomorrow, Mr Evans,’ she replied frostily.

‘We can make an exception for a special customer like Mrs Jones, Miss Robertson.’ His smile broadened but it failed to reach his eyes.

‘Mr Evans . . . Mr Evans . . .’

Rhian ducked behind a display of mannequins in the hope of escaping Joey's attention. She knew him and his family well, because her closest friend, Sali, was married to his eldest brother, Lloyd. But then every girl in Tonypandy knew Joey Evans, and not just because he was the manager of Gwilym James.

Twenty-two years old, six-foot tall, with black curly hair and dark eyes that he had inherited from his Spanish mother, he looked more gypsy than Welsh. But he wasn't just handsome. He oozed charm, and it was his charisma, coupled with his ability to make friends in every strata of Rhondda society, that had won him promotion to the position of store manager at such a young age. However, his penchant for flirting with women – young, old, single or married – made her uneasy. She'd never known quite how to respond to compliments too lavish to be sincere.

Turning her back on Joey and his adoring audience of assistants and shoppers, she continued to fight her way towards the coat racks. There were plenty of grey, brown, blue and red woollen coats, but she had set her heart on the black cashmere. She could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw it on the rail. She lifted it close and ran her fingers over the cloth.

Just as she'd hoped from the sheen, it was the same quality as the mistress's and Miss Julia's Sunday coats. She retreated to a comparatively empty space close to the back wall of the store.

'It's no use to you.'

She looked up. Joey Evans was behind her. 'Why not?' Assuming he was teasing her, she tried not to allow her irritation to show.

'It's a forty-four inch bust, it will drown you.'

'I can take it in.' She pulled off her cloak, bundled it over her arm and slipped on the coat.

'There's no way you can take this in.' He gripped the empty shoulders. 'You could put a gorilla in there with you and still have room to spare.'

She glanced down at her feet. At five feet six inches she

wasn't short, but the coat was dragging on the floor. 'Do you have it in any other sizes?'

'We did, but they were the first to go. Twenty people started queuing before we closed yesterday, and given the weather they had to put up with overnight, you can hardly blame them for grabbing the best bargains this morning.' He looked her up and down then took a plain black woollen coat from the rack. 'This looks more your size. Thirty-four-inch chest, fifty-five-inch length?'

She shook her head. 'No thank you.'

'No thank you, I don't like the coat? Or no thank you, it's not my size? Or no thank you, I've set my heart on the cashmere?'

'I know I shouldn't have set my heart on the cashmere, but I have.' Reluctant to let it go, she continued to hold on to it.

'Tonia!' Joey shouted to an assistant who was carrying an armful of scarves out of the stockroom.

'Coming, *Mr Evans, sir.*' Tonia smiled at Rhian. 'Come down from Llan House to pick up a bargain?'

'I had hoped to find one.' Rhian returned Tonia's smile. She was the same age as her, and they knew one another well. Tonia's mother, Connie, owned Rodney's, the grocers that supplied Llan House.

'Tonia, do me a favour. After you've dumped those scarves, go into the office and ask Sam to telephone the Pontypridd and Cardiff stores and check if they've any of the ladies' cashmere coats in a thirty-four chest left on sale. If they have, tell them to set one aside for me.'

'I will, *Mr Evans, sir.*'

'And less of your cheek, Miss George,' Joey reprimanded, not entirely humorously. Tonia was his cousin. Unhappy working for her mother in Rodney's, she had begged him to give her a job in the store. When he had finally capitulated, he had assumed – wrongly as it turned out – that she'd assume a professional distance and not presume on family connections.

'Yes, *Mr Evans.*' Subdued, Tonia dumped the scarves

on the knitwear counter and headed for the manager's office.

'I always take a break about now, and given what I've had to put up with this morning,' Joey looked at the crowds and raised his eyebrows, 'I think I've earned my tea and cakes ten times over. How about we go next door?'

'I have to put an order into Rodney's and pick up some things from Thomas the chemist's.'

'You can spare ten minutes.' He closed his hand around her elbow and steered her towards the door. Hemmed in by customers frantically searching for bargains, she had little choice but to comply.

The peace of the teashop was blissful after the noisy, teeming chaos of the store. Too late for tradesmen's breakfasts and too early for shoppers' 'elevenses', they had the place to themselves apart from the waitress and a retired school teacher, who was reading the *Glamorgan Gazette* over a pot of tea.

'Table for two, please, Ruby, there's a love.' Joey winked at the waitress and she blushed to the roots of her grey hair.

'How about your favourite, Mr Evans?' She showed them to a corner table that couldn't be seen from the window. It was cleanly laid with a fresh linen cloth and napkins.

'A pot of tea and a plate of cream cakes for two. That is all right, isn't it?' Joey flashed Rhian a smile.

'Tea would be fine, thank you. But I'm not hungry.'

'You don't have to be to enjoy the cakes here. They're little slices of heaven, baked by Ruby's sister, who has the touch of an angel.' He kissed the tips of his fingers and waved them in the air.

'You have the gift of the gab, Mr Evans, and no mistake.' Ruby scribbled down their order and left for the counter.

Joey shook out Rhian's napkin and laid it with a flourish over her lap. 'I've been meaning to talk to you

for some time.' He sat opposite her and placed his hand close to hers on the table.

Rhian withdrew her hands on to her lap. 'What about?'

'I think it's time we got to know one another better.'

'Why?' she enquired warily.

'My brother is married to your best friend. That makes us practically family. And it's occurred to me that I know absolutely nothing about you.'

'There isn't much to know,' she countered. 'And my being Sali's friend and you being Lloyd's brother doesn't make us related.'

'You're their children's aunt and I'm their uncle.'

'You're a real one, I'm honorary.'

He changed the subject abruptly. 'When's your next day off?'

'Why do you want to know?' She wasn't sure why she was asking, when she'd already guessed the answer.

'Because I'm going to take you out. I know you haven't much chance of getting Sunday off and that's my only free day but—'

'I have no chance. It's the family's favourite day for entertaining and between their lunch and tea parties, and church for them and chapel for us servants, it's the busiest day of the week.' She was glad of an excuse to turn down his invitation, but she couldn't understand why her heart was thundering loud enough for the waitress and their fellow customer to hear.

'There's always the evenings. The shop only opens late on a Thursday, Friday and Saturday.'

'Thursday is my day off.' She glanced at him, only to look away when she saw him staring intently at her.

'Can't you change it?'

'No.'

'I'm entitled to one and a half days off a week, not that I always take the half day,' he continued. 'But I can arrange for the assistant manager to cover for me next Thursday afternoon. The store doesn't get busy until eight o'clock in

the evening. We can go down to Pontypridd late morning, have lunch in the City Restaurant and catch a film in the Park Hall. They open every afternoon at three. I'll take you back to Llan House by half past six and still be in time to oversee the rush. And then, unfortunately, it's bedlam until we close at ten. And to think that I used to love Pandy Parade when I worked underground. It's a different story now.'

Thursday was the traditional pay night for the miners when, flush with the men's wages, families embarked on their weekly shop. And, as practically the entire population of Tonypany turned out, it had become known as 'Pandy Parade'.

'I've made arrangements for next Thursday.'

'You're going to see Sali.'

'How do you know?' she asked suspiciously.

'Because I pay the children toffees to spy for me and they've told me that you always visit them on Thursday afternoons.'

'I do other things as well.' She suddenly realized that outside of Llan House, Sali's family, chapel and her rare shopping trips, she had no life.

'I'm sure that you haven't made a single appointment next Thursday afternoon that can't be rearranged or cancelled,' he dismissed. 'I'll pick you up at Llan House after I've opened the store. Ten o'clock suit you?'

'No, I meant it when I said I've made arrangements. I really do need to get a winter coat—'

'Which, now that I know your size, I promise to organize for you,' he interrupted.

'I need to do some other shopping.'

'Then we'll meet at the railway station and get the half past ten train.'

'You don't understand the meaning of "no" do you?' she demanded irritably.

'Not when you say it, because I know you don't really mean it. Admit it – you can't wait to go out with me.' He beamed at her.

‘That is nonsense.’

‘Is it?’

‘Why don’t you ask one of your other girls to go out with you?’ She wanted him to know that she was aware of his reputation.

‘Because I’m asking you,’ he persisted.

‘I’m not looking for a young man.’

‘I’m happy to hear it. Because you’ve just found one.’

She was glad when the waitress interrupted them with the tea and cakes.

‘I’ve put two of all your favourites on the plate, Mr Evans. I know how you love our cream puffs and custard slices.’

‘You also know the way to a man’s heart, Ruby. These look delicious. Cream puff?’ He picked up one with his fork and spoon and held it over the plate Ruby had set in front of Rhian.

‘I really haven’t time.’ She rose to her feet.

‘It’s raining cats, dogs and elephants out there. You can’t go anywhere until it eases, so you may as well sit down, drink your tea and eat your cake.’

‘You always this bossy?’

He continued to gaze unabashed into her eyes. ‘Only with difficult women.’

She sat down and looked at the cake on her plate. ‘This is enormous.’ She picked up her knife and fork and poked at it.

‘You always visit Sali on your day off, don’t you?’

‘I thought the children were your spies?’

He ignored the gibe. ‘As she’s the ladies’ fashion buyer for all three Gwylm James stores, I’m surprised you didn’t ask her to set aside a coat for you.’

‘Every time I ask Sali to get me something from Gwylm James, she insists on giving it to me as a present.’

‘And you’re an independent lady who doesn’t like to receive presents?’

‘I love getting presents on Christmas and birthdays,’ she qualified.

He quartered his cream puff. 'So, what did Sali buy you for Christmas this year?'

'A beautiful cream silk and lace evening dress.'

'With a lace over-tunic and lace trimming at the neck and hem?'

'Yes.' She found it distinctly odd to be discussing clothes with a man.

'I know the one, it's stunning. I'll have to take you somewhere where you can show it off.'

'I won't go out with you.'

'How much do you want to bet you'll change your mind?'

She poured extra milk into her tea to cool it, finished her cake, delved into her mitten for her purse and extracted three pennies. 'That's one for the tea and two for the cake. Now, I really must go.'

'The tea and cake are on me.'

'I don't accept refreshments from men.'

'That sounds like one of the maxims Mrs Williams gives to the female staff in Llan House.'

'I've heard her talking about you.'

'And knowing her, saying nothing good.' He left his chair and pushed the pennies back towards her. 'You can pay next time.'

'There won't be a next time.'

'There will be,' he countered confidently. 'I'll wait for you outside the station from a quarter past ten on Thursday. I'll let you know if I've tracked down a coat then.'

'I won't be there.'

'Yes, you will, if only to find out about the coat.' He stared at her shabby cloak. 'I wish you'd let me know just how much you were in need of a new one before the sale started.'

The following week had never dragged so much for Rhian. The more she tried to put all thoughts of Joey Evans from her mind, the more she found herself dwelling on his invitation to spend part of her day off with him.

His image – handsome, smiling – rose unbidden at the oddest moments, especially when she was carrying out dreary tasks, like dusting, polishing or cleaning the silver.

She didn't dare tell Mrs Williams that he had asked her out. The housekeeper disapproved of the maids having boyfriends and it had taken a couple of years to work out that her attitude wasn't down to an aversion to men, but annoyance at having to look for replacement staff whenever a servant left to marry.

Mrs Williams gave Bronwen's sweetheart of two years, shy, hardworking collier, Ianto Miles, a hard time whenever he walked Bronwen back to Llan House after her day off. But she felt that the housekeeper's condemnation of poor Ianto would be nothing compared to the contempt that she would show Joey Evans, should he venture to the back door of Llan House.

She normally looked forward to Thursday mornings, because she could lie in beyond her usual rising time of five o'clock. But for once she was awake before Mrs Williams tapped at the door of the attic room she shared with Bronwen. She lay back on her pillow and watched Bronwen strike a match, light a candle and leave their bed.

'Water's frozen again.' Bronwen held the japanned metal jug upside down over the enamel basin.

'Do me a favour?' Rhian's breath misted in the ice-cold air.

'Bring up a jug of warm water for you when I come back after laying and lighting the fires?' Bronwen guessed.

'You're an angel.' Rhian's nose stiffened from cold and she buried it back beneath the blankets. She carried out a swift mental check of her winter wardrobe, which didn't take long. A dark blue knitted suit, a plain black woollen dress she kept for church, a grey skirt and sweater. It would have to be the blue suit with the grey sweater.

Ignoring Bronwen's return and the sound of her washing and dressing in the khaki overalls they wore to do the

rough work first thing in the morning, she drifted back to sleep. When she next opened her eyes, Bronwen was changing into her grey housemaid's dress, starched white cap and apron.

'It's seven o'clock. I've brought warm water up for you.'

'Thank you.' Rhian sat up in the bed and shivered.

'So, I'm dying to know: are you going to meet Joey Evans at the station this morning, or not?' Bronwen brushed out her hair and twisted it into a knot she secured with hairpins.

'Probably,' Rhian conceded, 'but only to see if he's found me a coat.'

'I don't blame you. He is *very* good-looking.' Bronwen pushed in the last hairpin and reached for her maid's cap.

'You're so besotted with Ianto, I'm surprised you noticed.'

'Being besotted with Ianto doesn't stop me from looking around at what else is on offer.'

'Joey Evans is on offer to any girl who'll go out with him,' Rhian pronounced, hoping Bronwen knew more gossip about him than she'd told her.

'Did I ever mention that he went out with my sister Ruby?'

'No. Which one is Ruby?' Bronwen had five sisters and Rhian hadn't met them often enough to sort one from the other.

'She's two years older than me. You must have seen her in chapel. She's the only one of us who doesn't have brown hair and brown eyes. My father still jokes she's the milkman's daughter.'

'Is she the pretty one with dark hair and blue eyes?'

'Depends on what you call pretty. She has my gran's Irish looks,' Bronwen said dismissively. 'Anyway, she only went out with Joey a few times but that didn't stop her from mooning over him for months afterwards. She even went to the library and took out a book of Lord Byron's poetry because it had a colour plate of a portrait

of him in the front. She tore it out. Luckily for her the librarian didn't notice.'

'Why Lord Byron?' Rhian asked, mystified.

'Because Joey Evans is the spitting image of him. If you don't believe me, look at the collected works of Lord Byron the next time you dust the library. It has the same picture inside as the one Ruby stole.'

'What happened between him and your sister?' Rhian tried to sound casual.

'He brought her home one Saturday night after taking her to the Empire Theatre, thanked her for a nice evening, kissed her goodnight, and the next day she saw him walking out with Anwen Stephens. She got no sympathy from any of us. As my mother said at the time, "More fool her for going out with a Don Juan in the first place."' Bronwen squinted into the tiny scrap of brown-spotted mirror that was all the new mistress would allow in the attic on the grounds that the old cracked cheval mirror encouraged vanity. 'Well, that's me done and ready to lay the breakfast table. The washstand is all yours.'

'Thanks.' Trembling in anticipation of the cold, Rhian gingerly stepped out of bed on to the wooden floorboards.

'You going down to do Miss Julia's hair before breakfast?'

'Don't I always?' Rhian rinsed out the tin basin with cold water and tipped it into the slop bucket, before filling it with the jug of warm that Bronwen had brought up.

'Yes, but I still think it's a bit much of her to expect you to dress her hair on your day off.'

'I don't mind, Miss Julia's good to me.' Rhian unbuttoned her nightdress, pulled it down to her waist and soaped her flannel.

'That's the mistress shouting, I hope it's at the master and not for me.' Bronwen slipped on her apron and tied the strings as she ran down the stairs.

Rhian washed and dried herself before sprinkling lavender-scented talcum powder and cologne over her skin. She opened the chest at the foot of the bed where

she kept her underclothes and stared down at the neat pile of winter-weight woollen vests, bust-shapers and drawers. Her summer-weight, embroidered and lace-trimmed Nairnsook underclothes were so much prettier. But then who would see them, or know she was wearing them?

Deciding that she would, she went for the pretty set and began to dress.

Rhian set her candle on the window ledge of the first-floor landing on the back staircase and knocked on the door that connected the servants' quarters with the family's at the front of the house. When there was no reply she opened the door and blinked against the glare of the electric lights Mr Larch had recently installed in the 'upstairs' rooms. The passage was deserted, but Mrs Larch's rebuff, cold and clear, echoed from behind her dressing-room door.

'I'm dressing, Edward. I'll see you at breakfast.'

Rhian waited until she heard the master's bedroom door close before blowing out the candle, and walking along the corridor to the opposite end of the landing. She tapped softly and it was flung wide. Julia Larch, her master's 27-year-old daughter, grabbed her hand and pulled her inside her room.

'You look pretty. I love that suit on you and your hair is perfect.'

'Thank you, Miss Julia.' Rhian slipped off her cloak.

All the staff liked Miss Julia. She was kind, considerate and had a quiet, diffident manner that prompted even Meriel, who was more easily riled than most cooks (and there wasn't one who had the reputation of being easy-going in the Rhondda), to work harder whenever she asked her do anything. But none of the servants was closer to her, or adored her more than Rhian.

Rhian had come to Llan House shortly after her fifteenth birthday. When Julia had discovered that she was bright, intelligent and had received virtually no

schooling she offered to lend her books. Julia's passion for history, art, archaeology, geography and romance had become Rhian's, and although they both observed the social mores of mistress and maid in public, they had grown close enough to adopt a familiarity in private that was rare between a servant and a member of her employer's family.

'You going anywhere special today, Miss Julia?' Rhian picked up a silver-backed hairbrush from the dressing table.

Julia made a face. 'Shopping in Pontypridd with my stepmother. She thinks there's a better class of people there than in Tonypandy.' She sat on her stool and deliberately turned away from the mirror.

Julia had no illusions about her appearance. At five feet ten inches she towered above every girl she knew, and most men. Thin, angular, with straight red hair, hazel eyes, large hands and feet, and a face so long that the girls at her school had nicknamed her Dobbin, she'd never considered herself even passably attractive. But the little self-esteem her mother had nurtured throughout her childhood had been completely eroded by her stepmother, Mabel, who never missed an opportunity to make a disparaging remark about her plain looks and lack of grace and personality. The remarks hurt more than Julia would have admitted to anyone, even her adored father, whom she had never entirely forgiven for marrying a shrewish, avaricious and snobbish woman less than three months after her beloved mother's death.

'I wish I had hair as thick and straight as yours. It never tangles or frizzes, just stays put when you pin it.' Rhian brushed it out, caught the end and twisted it into a neat knot on the crown of Julia's head.

'You wouldn't like the colour.' Julia picked up her hairpin box.

'I think it's lovely.'

'I don't. I'd give anything to have blonde curls and big blue eyes like you.'

‘And be a maid?’ When Julia didn’t answer, she added, ‘Mrs Williams says we always want what we can’t have. Pass me a pin, please.’

‘Have you decided whether or not to meet Mr Evans today?’ Rhian and Julia had no secrets from one another and Rhian had told her about Joey’s offer to get her a coat and his invitation to spend the afternoon with him.

‘I still haven’t made up my mind.’

‘You only have a couple of hours left.’

‘I know.’

‘I’m dreading tonight. Mrs Larch has invited thirty people for a New Year supper.’ Ignoring the fact that Julia was two years younger than her, Mabel Larch had demanded that both her stepchildren address her as ‘mother’ with the result that Julia and her brother Gerald avoided calling her anything to her face and ‘Mrs Larch’ when they had to resort to naming her.

‘With thirty people coming, there’s bound to be someone nice you can talk to,’ Rhian reassured.

‘Is there?’ Julia enquired sceptically. ‘I scanned the guest list. I scarcely know any of them. And,’ she wrinkled her nose, ‘I doubt my father and brother do either.’

‘You never know, one of them might be an explorer or archaeologist who can’t wait to tell you about his latest find.’ The authors who had fired Rhian’s imagination the most were Rider Haggard and Kipling.

‘Can you see Mrs Larch inviting an explorer into her drawing room? She’d be terrified that he’d bring a pet lion cub or wear muddy boots.’

‘Real explorers would do both.’ Rhian looked at Julia and they burst into giggles.

‘It would be wonderful if an Alan Quartermain did walk into our drawing room tonight, but even if by some miracle he did, he wouldn’t want to talk to me.’ Julia fingered the gold locket around her neck that held a photograph of her mother.

‘Why wouldn’t he?’ Rhian slipped the last pin into the knot. She leaned forward, studied Julia’s reflection

in the mirror and teased a light fringe out on to her forehead.

‘Because I’m dull and boring.’

Rhian suspected that Julia was repeating something Mrs Larch had said. But she wasn’t in a position to criticize her mistress. ‘You read so many books and you know so much about art and music, you could never be boring, Miss Julia. There, your hair is all done.’

‘Could it be you don’t find me boring because you’re a good listener, Rhian?’ Julia left the stool.

‘No, because I’ve learned a lot from you, and, while I think of it, thank you for lending me *Kim*.’

‘Have you finished it?’

‘Not yet, because Bronwen won’t let me use up a week’s attic candle ration in a night. Do you want it back?’

‘Not until you finish it. And if you’re short of candles, sneak some from the storeroom.’

‘The mistress inspects the attic.’

‘If you’ve a spare half hour, come in here, switch on the electric light, empty the top drawer of my dressing table on to the bed and if she finds you, tell her I ordered to you to tidy my room.’ Julia gave Rhian a rare smile that lit up her face and added sparkle to her eyes. ‘Since Mother died, you’re the only person I can talk to about books. Father likes reading, but between work and his other commitments he never has time. And all Gerald wants to do is ride his bike and sneak whisky from the cabinet in my father’s study.’ Julia plucked nervously at her gown. It was black, like all her clothes. Despite her father’s remarriage she had refused to stop wearing mourning for her mother.

‘I have to go down and eat breakfast before Bronwen starts serving it upstairs.’ Rhian gathered her cloak and bag from the chair.

‘And I have to go down and check that Mrs Williams has everything in hand. The slightest thing out of place seems to upset Mrs Larch.’

Neither of them doubted that the housekeeper would have everything under control, but whether Mrs Williams's arrangements would be to Mrs Larch's satisfaction was another thing. Julia opened the door and they stepped out on to the landing. Edward Larch was leaving his bedroom. He stopped and looked at both of them.

Embarrassed to be seen in the family quarters out of uniform, Rhian bobbed a curtsy. 'Sorry, sir.'

'It's Rhian's day off, Father,' Julia reminded him.

Edward loved Julia dearly but every time he saw her he couldn't help wondering how he, and petite, delicate Amelia, with her fair hair and gentle blue eyes, had produced such a daughter. He and his son, Gerald, were tall, slim, fair-haired and blue-eyed, like his Scottish father. But if they owed their looks to some raping, pillaging Norseman, Julia had reached even further back, to a time when flame-haired, raw-boned, uncouth Scottish clansmen had ruled the Glens. She would have made a striking peasant. A carthorse of a woman, sought as a wife for her strength and capability for hard work. Certainly, she would have looked more at home in a primitive croft than a drawing room. Whereas Rhian . . .

'Father?'

Edward realized then that he was staring at the maid. 'Sorry, I was miles away,' he lied. It was the first time in months he had seen the girl out of uniform and he was amazed that he'd never noticed her resemblance to his late wife before. Freed from her uniform cap, her blonde curls were the exact same shade as the lock of hair secreted in the back of his wallet. Her eyes were just as blue – and worryingly disturbing. 'Enjoy your day off, Rhian,' he snapped, more abrupt than he'd intended.

'I will, sir.' Glad to be gone, Rhian put her head down and walked to the end of the passage. Just as she closed the door to the servants' staircase she heard Mrs Larch shout.

'Edward, what is that girl doing in the family quarters, out of uniform?'