

Opening extract from

Den of Thieves

Written by

Julia Golding

Published by

Egmont

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First published 2007

This edition published 2008 by Egmont UK Ltd
239 Kensington High Street, London W8 6SA

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ISBN 978 1 4052 4184 7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the
British Library

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group

www.egmont.co.uk
www.juliagolding.co.uk

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🐾 THE CRITICS 🐾

‘Not tonight, Josephine: I’m too busy reading
Cat Royal’ – NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

‘Publish her and be damned – it’s revolutionary
hogwash!’ – THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON

‘It is the Right of every man to read her books’
– TOM PAINE

‘Cat Royal? She provides the oxygen of wit for
the brain’ – ANTOINE LAURENT LAVOISIER,
SCIENTIST

‘I was very disappointed: there’s not a moment of
Germanic obscurity or sublimity in it. I
understood every word’ – IMMANUEL KANT,
PHILOSOPHER

‘Cat Royal’s life is like a fairytale, full of light and
darkness’ – THE BROTHERS GRIMM

‘Who? I have no time for such frivolities while
there is a wagon of aristocrats to behead’ –
MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE

‘Her wit has a cutting edge’ – DR GUILLOTINE

**'Like me, she sounds mad, bad and dangerous to
know – just my type' – LORD BYRON**

**'She takes the dead corpse of history and
breathes new life into it' – MARY SHELLEY**

**'Not a moment of drowsy numbness when
reading her – she's all dance and Provençal song,
and sunburnt mirth!' – JOHN KEATS**

**'What! She's not still writing, is she? I thought I
asked someone to arrest her!' – RT HON WILLIAM
PITT, THE PRIME MINISTER**

❧ A NOTE TO THE READER ❧

Considering the high tide of feelings running against our French neighbours at present, I should warn my reader that you will find no such prejudices in these pages. I, Cat Royal, late of Drury Lane Theatre, am a declared friend of the revolution (most of the time). If you only like to dine with absolute monarchs on good old English roast beef, suet pudding and beer, perhaps you should look elsewhere for satisfaction. In these pages you'll eat with the people on a meal of highly-spiced French adventure, washed down with a sparkling draught of dance.

Will you take a seat at my table, *mes amis*?

Cat Royal



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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

LONDON

MISS CATHERINE 'CAT' ROYAL – ward of the
Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, your guide

MR PEDRO AMAKYE (FORMERLY MR PEDRO
HAWKINS) – ex-slave, talented violinist

LORD FRANCIS (FRANK) – sartorially challenged
heir to a dukedom

LADY ELIZABETH (LIZZIE) – his sister, in love with
a rebel lord

THE DUKE OF AVON – peer of the realm

THE DUCHESS OF AVON – formerly the singer
known as The Bristol Nightingale

MR JOSEPH – loyal footman to Lord Francis

MR RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN – man of
many talents, theatre owner

MRS REID – wardrobe mistress

MADAME BEAUFORT – mistress of the ballet
troupe bound for her native land

MR TWEADLE – devious bookseller

MR NOKES – his assistant with personal hygiene
issues

MR SYD FLETCHER – Covent Garden gang leader

MR BILLY SHEPHERD – lowlife thug who
unfortunately is on the up and up

PARIS

MR JONATHAN (JOHNNY) FITZROY (AKA CAPTAIN
SPARKLER) – British peer turned American
citizen, cartoonist

M. JEAN-FRANÇOIS (J-F) THILAND – King of
Thieves of the Palais Royal and a fine dancer
to boot

MARIE and ANNETTE – ladies of the King of
Thieves' Court

M. IBRAHIM – the charming but perilous Bishop
of the Notre Dame Thieves

M. SCARFACE LUC – right-hand man to the
Bishop, who has a powerful squeeze

M. MARIA-AUGUSTE VESTRIS – principal dancer
at the Opera, popular idol of the people

M. RENARD THILAND – retired thief lord,
concierge and grandfather to J-F

M. JEAN-SYLVAIN BAILLY – Mayor of Paris,
astronomer

Ballerinas, *sans-culottes*, national guardsmen,
French royal family, etc., etc.

Julia Golding

Julia Golding read English at Cambridge then joined the Foreign Office and served in Poland. Her work as a diplomat took her from the high point of town twinning in the Tatra Mountains to the low of inspecting the bottom of a Silesian coal mine.

On leaving Poland, she exchanged diplomacy for academia and took a doctorate in the literature of the English Romantic period at Oxford. She then joined Oxfam as a lobbyist on conflict issues, campaigning at the UN and with governments to lessen the impact of conflict on civilians living in war zones.

Married with three children, Julia now lives in Oxford. *DEN OF THIEVES* is the third book in the brilliant *Cat Royal* series. The first *Cat Royal* book, *THE DIAMOND OF DRURY LANE*, was the winner of the Waterstones' Children's Book Prize 2006 and the Nestlé Children's Book Prize.



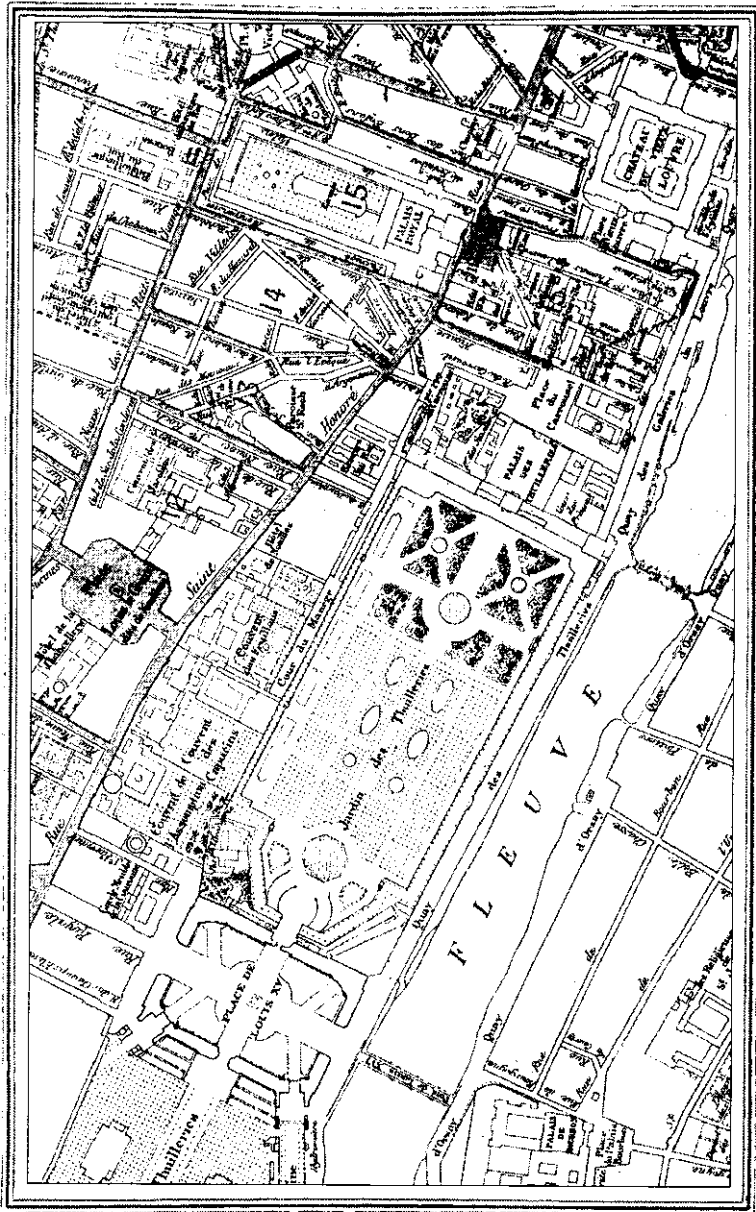
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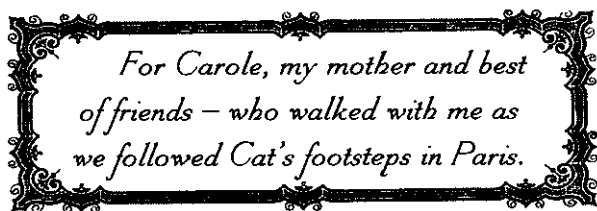
The Diamond of Drury Lane

Cat among the Pigeons

Cat O'Nine Tails

Black Heart of Jamaica





*For Carole, my mother and best
of friends – who walked with me as
we followed Cat's footsteps in Paris.*

London and Paris, 1791

Curtain rises.



PROLOGUE

MOVING ON

In the theatre, there comes a moment when we bid goodbye to a play. The scripts are put back on the shelf, the scenery dismantled, the actors move on to new roles. Yesterday, my life at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, came to the end of its run.

What can I say to you, Reader? For me, everything is over.

I admit that I'm scared. I don't know what I shall do. I wasn't prepared for such a sudden termination to the life I thought I was going to lead. And so strange to think that the curtain was brought down with such a simple question.

Mr Sheridan caught me in the corridor backstage as I carried the actresses' wigs out of the powder room. 'Cat, come here. Tell me what you think.'

From the stage came the sounds of the orchestra tuning up. My friend Pedro would already be in his place, sitting with the other violinists. Counting the audience we were expecting a full house. Backstage was abuzz with excitement as the moment of performance approached. I really didn't have time to linger but my patron, Mr Sheridan, could not be denied. He hauled me into his office, snatched the tray, and dumped it unceremoniously on the floor.

'Watch it, sir! I'll get skinned if anything happens to those!' I protested as I tried to prevent many guineas' worth of powdered curls tumbling on to the hearth.

'No, no, forget about those,' he said, heedless in his enthusiasm. 'I want you to be one of the first to see the plans,' and he hooked me by the elbow and propelled me to the desk.

'Fifteen minutes!' called the stage manager outside. Three actors rushed by, not yet in costume. They'd obviously lingered too long in the Players' Tavern.

On the scuffed leather surface of the desk lay a

sheaf of crackling white parchment scored with lines and tiny numbers.

‘So?’ Mr Sheridan asked, rubbing his hands eagerly, looking across at me, his brown eyes sparkling.

He evidently wanted my opinion – a fact that I would have found flattering if I hadn’t been in such a rush to deliver the wigs; the actresses would not thank me if I made them late for their first entrance. I had better get this over with. I turned my mind to the papers in front of me. It was clearly a design for a grand building of some sort – a palace perhaps. Maybe Mr Sheridan’s extravagant friend the Prince of Wales had yet another construction project in his sights?

‘Er . . . what is it?’ I asked.

‘It’s Drury Lane, of course.’ My patron’s flushed face beamed happily. Was he drunk already?

I took a closer look. I could now see the vast stage and auditorium, but this wasn’t my theatre. None of my familiar landmarks were here; he must be joking. ‘No, it’s not, sir. Where’s the Sparrow’s Nest? Where’s the scenery store?’

'You don't understand, Cat. Not *this* worn-out pile of bricks and cracked plaster,' he waved dismissively at the ceiling. 'These are the plans for the *new* Theatre Royal – one fit for our modern age that will rise from the ashes of the old.'

Mr Sheridan had often talked about sprucing up the theatre when he had the money – he never did, so I had always let these ramblings wash over me.

'Very nice, sir,' I said non-committally, wondering if I could get on my way. In fact, I thought the plans looked terrible – they represented a vast, soulless place where actors would seem like objects viewed the wrong way down a telescope, if I had understood the drawings correctly. It would kill the theatre – and probably quite a few of our leading actors as they tried to make themselves heard in that space. It was a good job that it would never be built.

'Ten minutes!' called the stage manager. 'Light the stage candles.'

'I'm glad you like it, Cat,' said Mr Sheridan, caressing the papers, 'because this evening I'm

going to announce to the cast that the last performance within these walls will be on 4th June. When we close, the demolition crew will move in to knock the old place down.'

'What!' I felt as if he had just tipped a kettle of scalding water on me.

'I know that is very soon, but I didn't want to make a premature announcement. I couldn't get a builder for the job until I'd put the money on the table. Apparently, my reputation for not being prompt about settling my account had preceded me.' He chuckled and smoothed his white silk cravat fixed in place with a diamond-headed pin.

This was serious.

'What, Cat? You don't look pleased.'

'How long will the theatre be closed?'

'Oh, I don't know – a couple of seasons perhaps. We're not talking about a refit here – this is a complete rebuild.'

'A couple of seasons! But that's years!'

He darted a look at me out of the corner of his eye. 'I know it's going to mean a lot of changes for everyone. We'll have to camp out at the King's

Theatre for a while, but I'm sure the company will all pull together when they understand what we stand to gain.'

'I see.' I said no more. My home was about to be destroyed: the Sparrow's Nest, my foothold in the world for as long as I could remember was to be turned into rubble; the playground backstage that I'd shared with Pedro was about to be reduced to dust. Where would we go? At least Pedro had his master, the musical director – as an apprentice, he would be looked after. But I, as an orphan under the protection of the theatre, I'd been allowed a corner no one else wanted. In a new theatre, where no one knew me, would I be so fortunate again?

Mr Sheridan must have been following some of my thoughts from the expressions on my face.

'When this is all over, Cat, I think you'll recognize it was for the best. You can't bed down in the costume store any more like some stray kitten. You're a young lady now. You need to find proper lodgings for yourself – start to make your own way.'

With what? I wondered. I worked in exchange for bed and board. I'd never had any money to call my own.

'I have every confidence that you'll fall on your feet as normal. You're not called Cat for nothing,' he continued cheerfully, ruffling my ginger hair and dislodging my cap.

I knew that for my own good I had to be practical. I couldn't indulge myself and let out the wail of grief that welled up inside me. 'Can I move with the company?' I asked. 'Will you start paying me wages?'

Mr Sheridan began tidying away the plans. 'We'll see. Money's a bit tight at the moment, what with the cost of the new building and the removal. Have a word with Mrs Reid – she might be able to squeeze something out of the wardrobe budget for you. Though I must admit I rather thought that you were going to make your fortune by your pen. I understood that the Duke of Avon was helping you find a publisher.'

He'd hit upon a sore spot.

'His grace has tried, but the booksellers find my

stuff too shocking. They've told me to write about love and female duty – not boxing and battles.'

Mr Sheridan laughed. 'Don't you listen to them, Cat. You have to put up with your fair share of rejection as a writer if you want to succeed. Keep trying – you'll find your audience one day.'

'Yes, when I'm six feet under and women are equals to men – that means never,' I muttered sullenly.

'I wouldn't be so sure of that,' said Mr Sheridan, toying with the watch chain that looped across his broad expanse of waistcoat. 'It may happen sooner than you think. Events in France are transforming things that, when I was your age, were thought to be untouchable. Maybe your sex will be the next to share in the benefits of the wind of change that is sweeping across Europe.'

Mr Sheridan was talking politics now. The theatre was only really a hobby to him: his real career lay in parliament so it didn't take much to jog him on to this track. I'd be getting a full-blown speech about progress and revolution if I didn't watch out.

'We'll see, sir,' I said humbly, bobbing a curtsy.
'May I go now?'

'Yes, yes, off you go, child. And don't worry: we'll make sure you are all right one way or another,' he said, leafing through the plans once more.

I picked up the tray of wigs and retreated from the office, full of doom. I knew my patron better than to trust to his vague promises. Many a shopkeeper had spent hours besieging him for payment only to be fobbed off with hints of money in the future.

'Cat, where's my wig?' screeched Miss Stageldoir as I pushed my way into the bustling dressing room. Half-clothed dancers clustered around the mirrors, elbowing each other out of the way to plaster their faces with make-up, gossiping to each other in quick-fire French.

Well, if I was going to persuade everyone I was an indispensable part of the backstage crew, I could afford to make no enemies by rudeness – even Miss Stageldoir, a middling order actress of indifferent talent.

'Sorry, miss. I was delayed by Mr Sheridan,' I

replied meekly, battling through the ballerinas to reach her.

Miss Stageldoir curled her pretty lips sceptically. She had a patch on her cheek like a squashed fly, hiding a pox mark that spoiled her alabaster skin (this too came out of a bottle – she was really as red-faced as a laundry woman when seen in daylight). ‘Put it on me then, girl.’

I lifted the wig from the tray, trying to blow off some of the soot before she noticed, and lowered it on to her head like the Archbishop of Canterbury crowning the king. She stared at her reflection.

‘What have you done, you slattern!’ She wheeled round and slapped my face hard. ‘You’ve ruined it!’

Mrs Reid bustled forward to break up the commotion. ‘What’s the matter, Miss Stageldoir?’ she said soothingly. I rubbed my cheek, boiling with resentment, but bit my tongue.

‘The dirty little beggar’s spoiled my wig! How can I go on stage looking like a chimney sweep?’

‘I can mend that in a trice with some powder. Just sit tight.’ Mrs Reid clucked and fussed over

Miss Stageldoir's head. She enveloped the actress in a cloud of white dust as she repaired the damage. 'Look! As good as new.'

'Hmm.' Miss Stageldoir turned her face this way and that. 'I suppose it'll do, but make sure you punish the girl: it could have ruined my performance.'

As if it needed me to spoil it – she did that well enough herself.

'I will, you can be certain of that.' Mrs Reid glared at me.

This was so unfair!

'But it wasn't me, Mrs Reid. Mr Sheridan dropped the tray when he took me into his office.'

Mrs Reid raised her eyebrows, taking in my crooked cap. 'What was he doing with you in his office on your own?'

Two of the dancers giggled as they brushed past. I blushed and tugged my cap back into place. 'He wanted to show me his plans.'

'Oh yes?'

'Yes, plans for the new theatre,' I continued loudly, savouring the moment when I would fire

my broadside. 'He's closing Drury Lane and knocking it down. On 4th June to be precise. We've all got to move.'

You could have heard a pin drop. In fact, several did tumble from Miss Stageldoir's head as she jerked back in her chair to stare at me in disbelief.

'What did you say?' she hissed.

'It's the end. Drury Lane is doomed. The curtain falls. Can I put it any clearer for you . . . miss?'

She missed my rudeness in her surprise. 'But where are we going? Will we lose our positions?' she exclaimed.

An excited babble broke out in all quarters as the cast began to discuss their fate. Sooty wigs forgotten, the news spread as dancers darted off to whisper it to their boyfriends among the stagehands. Soon there was no corner of the theatre that did not know what was afoot, no doubt as Mr Sheridan had intended when he chose to tell me first.

'Five minutes to curtain up! Beginners, please,' called the stage manager as he tried to hush the hubbub behind the scenes.

Miss Stageldoir swept past me without a word, her velvet train leaving a trail in the powder. With a sigh, I picked up a broom to sweep the floor.

The orchestra began the overture as I made my exit from an empty dressing room. There was no one to see me go as all eyes were now on the stage.

With leaden feet, I climbed the stairs to my lonely corner of the Sparrow's Nest, and huddled on my couch counting the days until I had to fly away.

Only twelve left.



*Act I - In which our principal
characters take flight with varying degrees
of success . . .*

ACT I

SCENE 1 – THE PROMISE

The following morning, Syd Fletcher, leader of Covent Garden's Butcher's Boys gang, spotted me passing the door of his father's shop.

'Oi, Cat!' he called, striding out on to the sun-drenched pavement and wiping his bloodied hands on his apron like Hercules returning from the slaughter of the lion. His hair shone gold in the dazzling light.

'Oh, hello, Syd,' I said, pausing to rub my brow with a handkerchief. I was wearing my best clothes and already sweltering in the heat. 'I can't stop: I've been invited to Frank and Lizzie's this morning. They're expecting me. Why don't you come too?'

'What, like this?' laughed Syd, spreading his arms wide to display his stained working clothes. 'Nah, Kitten. You look swell, all togged up in that

white dress of yours; I'd lower the tone if I came with you.'

'But Frank and Lizzie would love to see you.'

He grinned and rubbed his yellow-bristled chin. 'Perhaps, but not like this. I'll see Frank happily enough down 'ere any day, but 'e won't want me sippin' tea and eatin' off china plates any more than I'd like to be there. Nah, dook's children 'ave their world and I 'ave mine: that's 'ow it is and 'ow it's meant to be.'

'So what about me? Are you saying I shouldn't be mixing with the likes of them?' I suddenly felt very inadequate in my cheap muslin dress, knowing that Lizzie would doubtless be beautifully decked out and there might even be other visitors quick to notice my humble origins.

Syd beckoned me to take a seat in the shade, first wiping the top of a barrel with his apron. The whole street had a tired, languid feel, like an old dog stretched out panting in the sun. Carriers' carts rumbled wearily by, raising clouds of choking dust. The gutters smelt foul. 'Course not, Cat. You're an exception to the rule, you are.'

That made me feel a bit better. I was, after all, going to visit my friends, not take part in a fashion parade. Lizzie and Frank wouldn't care what I turned up in. Their mother had been an opera singer before her marriage to the Duke of Avon so her children had not inherited the usual prejudices of people of their rank. They did not regard me as beneath their notice.

'So, what did you want me for, Syd? Was it about the theatre?' I wondered how far the rumour about its closure had spread since last night.

'What about the theatre?'

Not very far yet then.

'Mr Sheridan's knocking it down to build a bigger one.'

'What 'e want to go and do that for?' asked Syd in amazement.

'The march of progress, Syd, the winds of change,' I said ironically.

'The march of what? What you goin' on about?'

'Put it another way, some fool's lent him the money and my patron wants to make his mark on London - leave something for him to be

remembered by.' I was feeling ungenerous to Mr Sheridan today. 'Oh yes, and I s'pose there might be the little matter of making a bigger profit by selling more tickets.'

Syd whistled and shook his head. 'That's a rum do – spending a fortune to make one.'

'I couldn't have put it better myself.'

'But what about you, Cat? Where are you goin' to live now, eh, when they knock your theatre down?'

I shrugged, not wanting him to think I couldn't look after myself. Pedro had asked me the very same question when I'd broken the news to him the night before. But I couldn't bear to confess my worries to two of my best friends. Pedro was in no position to help me and as for Syd, he'd never let me in his gang if I appeared incapable of sorting out even this simple matter. I have my pride.

'I don't know yet, but I'll find somewhere,' I said more cheerfully than I felt.

Syd nodded. 'Mr Sheridan won't let you down, not after all you've done for 'im in the past.'

I didn't want to tell him that this was exactly

the kind of matter over which my patron was entirely unreliable. I just gave Syd a non-committal smile and got up to go.

'Ere, Cat, wait 'alf a tick. I 'aven't told you my news yet.'

'What's that?'

A country girl walked past with a tray of strawberries and gave Syd the eye. He winked back then blushed when he remembered who he was with.

'I . . . er . . . I'm leavin' London for a bit.'

'No!' I was astounded. Neither Syd nor I ever left town. Our bones were made from the dust of its streets and our blood from the water of the Thames. I couldn't have been more surprised if he'd announced he was going to the moon.

Syd was pleased to see that I was shocked by his announcement. 'Just for a bit like, Kitten. Just for the summer. I'm goin' on tour with me manager. We're goin' to take on all-comers at the fairs up and down the country. 'E says there's a mint of money to be made in boxin'. 'E promises it'll set me up for me own place in the autumn if all goes

well. I'll be able to think about settlin' down.'

I made a sceptical snort. Syd's face fell. 'What? You don't like the idea of settlin' down? Me startin' a boxin' academy?'

'No, Syd, not that. It's just that I don't like your manager. I don't trust him as far as I could throw him – which, as it's my muscles we're talking about, isn't very far at all.'

Syd turned away and ran his hands through his hair in exasperation. 'Don't start that again, Cat. What you got against Mick Bailey but his bad taste in jackets, eh? I know 'e looks a sharp one, but 'as 'e ever let me down, I ask you?'

'He hasn't had the chance. You've been on a winning streak.'

'It's more than a streak, Cat,' said Syd, bobbing on his toes and making a jab at his shadow. 'I'm good, bleedin' marvellous, 'e tells me.'

'For once, I agree with him. Just be careful.'

'Course I will, you daft Kitten,' he said, making a playful punch in the direction of my ribs. 'I'm a big lad. I can look after meself, you know.'

'I know.'

We'd been friends for so many years, but I couldn't see the grown-up Syd without remembering the boy who'd taken me under his wing when I was an infant. My earliest memories consisted of me trailing after him, pulling the little wooden horse he'd made me, or sitting unnoticed at his side when he played marbles with the boys. Later, I climbed the apple trees with him when we went scrumping in the Reverend James's orchard and fled on his heels when we were spotted. Even then, he'd taken the punishment for me, saying it was his fault for leading me astray. I knew that he'd always been able to take care of himself and the others under his protection. It was only recently that I had come to appreciate that he was also sharper than he looked: a gentle, slow manner disguised an astute grasp of street politics. I was going to miss him.

'So, when are you leaving?'

'Monday. I'm puttin' Nick in charge of the boys. I won't let Billy Shepherd get on to my patch while I'm out of the way, don't you worry.' He stopped bouncing about and gave me a stern look.

'You not 'eard from 'im again, 'ave you, Cat?'

I shook my head, shivering as if the day had suddenly turned cold. Billy 'Boil' Shepherd, gang leader of the Rookeries mob, had both tried to kill me and saved my life in the last eighteen months. I wasn't eager to find out what else he had in store for me on our next encounter. But still hanging over me was the little matter of my promise to Billy, made when trying to stop Pedro being kidnapped by his old slave master. I hadn't heard anything more about this since that cold winter night on the Thames when I had given my word that I'd repay the debt I owed Billy. I had started to hope that he'd forgotten.

'No, I think he must've lost interest in me.'

'Good.' Syd gave me a hand up from my seat. 'Glad to 'ear it, Cat. 'E's not stopped 'is nasty 'abit of dumpin' his enemies in the river with rocks tied to their ankles. Very best thing a girl like you can do with a lad like that is keep well out of 'is way.' The clock of a nearby church struck the hour. 'You'd better be off. I've made you late, 'aven't I?'

'Don't worry about that. I'm pleased you let me

know your plans yourself.' I waved farewell as I walked briskly off towards the market.

I hardly noticed the streets separating Covent Garden from St James as I pondered the news. Syd leaving home? That didn't feel right – how would he manage away from his friends? And – a selfish thought slid into my mind – why did he have to go now? Just when I needed him more than ever.

A cool breeze found its way across Hyde Park to Grosvenor Square, fluttering the gold tassels of the canopy stretched over our heads. Lady Elizabeth and I were reclining in chairs, raspberry sherbets in hand, enjoying the shade of the oriental booth erected in the garden in the middle of the square. Her chestnut hair was plaited in a fashionable Grecian style, caught high off her neck, and she was dressed in a beautiful lightweight pale blue gown. Tiny navy slippers decorated with seed pearls peeped out from under the hem. If I'd met Hercules outside the Butcher's shop earlier, it wasn't hard to imagine that I was now lying beside Helen of Troy. Out in the noonday sunshine, Lord

Francis and Pedro were playing a very competitive game of Pall Mall. Lulled by the regular 'clock-clock' of mallet striking balls, I had begun to doze off when a row erupted.

'That ball went through!' protested Lord Francis.

'Didn't,' challenged Pedro. My African friend tilted his head defiantly up at his lordship. Frank had sprouted several inches during the spring and, unless you knew him well, struck an imposing figure with his shock of curly dark hair.

'Did!'

'Did not . . . my lord,' said Pedro archly, bowing low.

'Did, you . . . you musical dandy!'

Pedro grinned, brushing off his impeccable yellow and blue livery. 'Did not, you sartorial disgrace to the name of Avon.' Frank's shirt was hanging out and his cravat untied. He never liked conforming to the high standards expected of the heir to a dukedom.

'Lizzie, Cat, tell Pedro that it went through!' Frank appealed to us.

'I'm not getting involved,' said Lizzie wisely,

waving her fan at her brother. 'Both of you need your heads examining, if you ask me, for standing out there in that heat for so long.'

'Cat! You tell him.'

I laughed. 'You are an outrageous cheat, Frank. It missed by inches. Just because you were blocking the hoop from Pedro's view, doesn't mean we don't know what you were up to.'

Frank threw his mallet on to the ground in a huff. 'I tell you, it went through as sweet as a nut. If you were a boy again, Cat, I'd beat you for calling me a cheat.'

'Frank!' exclaimed Lizzie. 'When are you going to start treating Cat properly?' Frank shrugged and helped himself to a glass of sherbet. 'I'm serious,' Lizzie continued. 'You've set the tone with the servants, you know – they all treat her like an honorary boy in the house, taking all sorts of liberties with her.'

Frank gave me a quick look then turned away to watch Pedro who was collecting up the balls with his mallet. 'What sort of liberties?' he asked stiffly.

'Lizzie, it's nothing —,' I tried to interrupt. I knew what she was going to say and blushed to be reminded of my latest indiscretion. There was something about being in the splendid surroundings of the Duke of Avon's residence that made me incapable of behaving as I knew I should.

'No, he should hear what he's done,' said Lizzie firmly. 'Only last week, Joseph jumped out on her in the library and pushed her along on one of the ladders so she fell off and broke Father's bust of Voltaire.'

Frank laughed. 'Oh, that's all right then. I thought you meant something far more scandalous.'

'Well, to some people that would be, Frank. And do you know what Joseph told me when I challenged him about it?'

Frank shrugged.

'He said, in his best Joseph manner, that he "couldn't resist it, my lady" and that he "knew Miss Catherine liked it". In his defence, I should say he offered to pay for the breakage out of his wages. I refused, of course — the bust was an ugly thing that none of us really liked. Now don't tell

me that you haven't encouraged your footman to behave like that?'

'Lizzie, I —' I began.

'No, Cat, this is between me and Frank. It's not that I want to spoil your fun but you're both growing up fast. My brother needs to treat you with respect or, well, you might find it very difficult in the future.'

I didn't want to listen to her. So many things were changing; I couldn't keep pace. Behaviour that I had got away with just six months ago was now thought immodest for a young lady of my age. Everyone seemed to expect me to grow up, make my own way.

'I'm sorry, Lizzie, I'll try to behave better when I'm at your house,' I said, unsuccessfully trying to hide my frustration.

'Oh Cat, I'm not scolding you,' said Lizzie with a smile. 'We all like you as you are. I'm just trying to drum some manners into my incorrigible brother.'

'I stand corrigeed,' said Frank with a bow. 'Miss Royal, if you would be so kind as to move your delicate toes from the end of the seat so that my

sitting apparatus can place itself in the shade, I would be most obliged.'

Even I had to laugh at that. Lizzie poured two more glasses of sherbet and the four of us sat at our ease, sipping them appreciatively.

'So, you're both leaving Drury Lane and Syd's off on tour, is he?' asked Frank. 'I wish I could go with him.'

'We all seem to be on the move,' said Lizzie.

'Oh? Are you going to the country soon?' I enquired. The Avons usually spent the summer on their estate near Bath.

'No, it's better than that,' Lizzie replied, her blue eyes shining with a light I hadn't seen since a certain gentleman of her acquaintance had left England. 'Our cousin, the Comtesse de Plessis, has invited us to Paris. She thought that Father, as a friend of the revolution, might enjoy the 14th July celebrations.'

'What do they get up to?'

'Since the people of Paris stormed the Bastille prison on that day two years ago, they have begun to hold an annual holiday. They have music and

processions – it all sounds wonderful.’

‘Lizzie wouldn’t think it was so wonderful if a certain foreign dignitary wasn’t going to be there,’ added Frank in an undertone. ‘I fear Cousin Rebecca is playing cupid.’

‘Oh?’ asked Pedro.

‘Don’t tell me, Johnny’s going to be in Paris!’ I exclaimed.

Lizzie nodded shyly, her face wreathed in smiles. ‘He’s been sent by an American newspaper to record the proceedings.’

‘Lizzie and Lord Johnny have been plotting this between them for some time,’ Frank continued.

‘Not exactly plotting, Frank,’ corrected Lizzie. ‘Just taking advantage of a happy coincidence.’

As pleased as I was to hear that the two young lovers were to be reunited, I couldn’t help but feel disappointed that my friend Johnny was going to be so near and yet I wouldn’t have a chance to see him. Johnny still had the little matter of an arrest warrant hanging over his head for treasonous cartoons – he would be unable to return to England for many years.

‘Are you going too, Frank?’ I asked enviously.

‘Lord no, Cat. I’d be quite the wallflower. Mama and Lizzie will be shopping all day, Father talking to the political chaps. In the evening, Lizzie will be billing and cooing with Johnny and my honoured parents going to dinner parties – I’d be in everyone’s way. No, I’ve been exiled to the family pile.’ He gave me a sour smile.

‘What nonsense, Frank! You know that’s not why you’ve got to go to Boxton. You need to prepare for your college examination,’ said Lizzie, prodding her brother with her fan. ‘Father doesn’t want you to get by on your rank but on your merit.’

‘And unfortunately, according to my tutors at Westminster School, my merit is not sufficient,’ Frank added sorrowfully. ‘I wish I had your feel for Latin, Cat: it would make my life much easier and the summer much shorter.’

‘And I wish we could swap places,’ I replied, thinking that I wouldn’t mind spending the summer on a country estate improving my language skills – it would certainly be better than the uncertain future I was facing in London.

‘Unfortunately, I think my tutor might notice this time.’ Frank nodded at my hair which now reached my shoulders after being cut short six months ago so I could masquerade as a Westminster schoolboy. ‘What about you, Pedro? What are you going to do when the theatre closes?’

Pedro stretched out on his back on the grass, hands behind his head. ‘I’ll be with the maestro. He did say something about going to Paris and then on to Italy.’ He’d evidently been saving up that little gem of information, just waiting for us to ask for it. That’s Pedro’s way: to appear quite collected about the most exciting things. I guessed he was really enthusiastic underneath his cool demeanour.

‘What! You lucky thing!’ Frank exploded. ‘So I’m the only one stuck in old England, am I?’

‘Apart from me,’ I said quietly.

‘Of course, you. That’s a given. You leaving Covent Garden is as about as unthinkable as the ravens leaving the Tower of London.’ Frank turned back to Pedro. ‘Will you see the Colosseum? Venice?’

I refilled my glass, not entirely pleased with this speech. Why did Frank think it inconceivable that I would leave London? Why did my privileged friends think I couldn't move beyond the world I knew? Did they consider me so limited that I wouldn't be able to cope? Another voice whispered, perhaps they were right? Perhaps I couldn't survive outside the Sparrow's Nest? My hand shook and I splashed raspberry sherbet on my white gown.

'Oh, b*****!' I swore.

'Cat!' exclaimed Lizzie as Frank and Pedro howled with laughter at my obscenity.

'What was that about behaving at our house?' crowed Frank. 'Treating her like a lady?'

I got up. 'Sorry, Lizzie. I'd better go.'

'No, no, I'll summon someone to bring a cloth to wipe off your skirt. Raspberry leaves terrible stains.' She reached for a bell.

'No, I clean my own clothes, thanks.' Pride dented, I took off across the grass before they could stop me. Larking about in the library was one thing, but swearing in front of Lizzie another. I'd let

myself down. I knew that my anxious state of mind about the future was some excuse for the bad language. What did Lizzie and Frank know about worrying where your next meal was coming from or where you could shelter for the night? Their reaction to my bad language only served to emphasize the gulf that I had always known stretched between us. What had Syd said? Duke's children had one world, he another. The problem was I didn't seem to have any world at all any more.

I heard soft footsteps running up behind me and Pedro appeared at my elbow.

'Frank and Lizzie sent me to accompany you home,' he explained. 'Frank's sorry if he offended you and Lizzie said not to worry about your lapse in . . . er . . . taste.'

I turned. The duke's children were standing watching us from the shade of the pavilion, Frank at his sister's shoulder. He gave me a salute when he saw I was looking in their direction. I waved back, having a strange sensation that they were on board a ship sailing away from me, separating us for ever.

'What's the matter?' asked Pedro, noticing my uncharacteristic silence.

'I don't think I'll be coming back to Grosvenor Square,' I said, giving voice to my intuition.

'Don't be silly, Cat,' he laughed. 'You didn't swear that badly. You didn't say . . .' He proceeded to reel off a list of the saltiest words in my vocabulary that he had picked up in my company.

It was my turn to laugh. 'True. No, I just meant that I feel as though these separations are bringing something to an end. All of you are going in different directions. It's never going to be the same again.'

Pedro kept silent for a moment but I could feel his eyes were on me. 'Will you be all right, Cat? Lizzie and Frank were wondering if they —'

'I'll be fine,' I said, cutting him off. I wasn't going to spoil my friendship with the Avons by becoming a hanger-on, living off their charity. 'The theatre will look after me, I expect.' At least, I hoped so. From the angry voices I heard last night, I wasn't the only one to have worked out that with a full staff at the King's Theatre already, not all of