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Town Belles

Pamela Evans

headline





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Chapter One

One of the stylists at Conly's Coiffures had brought her new portable radio to work to impress her pals who responded with gusto. To add to the excitement, their employer, in a rare fit of generosity, let them have it on in the salon while they were working, provided that they kept the volume down. Hastily dismissing the entertainment offered by the BBC as boring and middle-aged, they had tuned to the American Forces Network where Frankie Laine was belting out his latest hit.

Marcus Conly's good humour was due to his slackest trading day of the week, Monday, being transformed into a real humdinger by tomorrow's Coronation celebrations. Even now, as evening approached and people finished work in shops and offices, clients were still piling in to take advantage of his extended opening hours for their special party hairdo.

The frantic atmosphere warmed his heart like nothing else could. Skilful hairdressers in snazzy yellow overalls and ballet pump flatties worked at high speed, vying with each other behind the scenes for the assistance of juniors as they battled with the problem of being hopelessly

overbooked. Towel-wrapped clients sat damply in front of mirrors waiting for attention; there was standing room only in the reception area, and a queue waiting for the driers which flanked the walls upstairs and down. Marcus Conly was master of all he surveyed. Life held no greater joy for him than to see his investment working at over capacity.

A sweltering, drier-bound client caught the eye of apprentice Faith Hodge, and suggested, rather desperately, that perhaps her hair might be dry by now.

‘Feel her rollers and tell her it’s still a bit damp,’ hissed Jackie, the stylist to whom Faith was assigned.

‘But she’ll be cooked to a cinder by this time . . . she’s been under there for ages . . .’

‘Just do it,’ commanded Jackie who had become an expert in the art of stalling clients, an essential skill for any Conly stylist.

Hawkeye, as Marcus Conly was known privately among his staff because of his uncanny ability to miss nothing that went on in his salon despite the fact that it was on two floors, seemed quite incapable of turning a paying customer away and hovered over the receptionist to make sure this didn’t happen. Book them all in and bugger the consequences, that was his motto, or so it seemed to Faith.

The lengthy wait for service didn’t deter people from coming, though, Faith had to admit that. They came in their droves to Conly’s modern, open-plan salons, this one in Ealing Broadway and the Acton shop which was run by Mrs Conly who, unlike her husband, was a qualified hairdresser. The magnetic ingredient was undoubtedly Conly’s expertise in the new 1950s look which drew the young and



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fashion conscious from all over West London. What a Conly stylist couldn't do with a few rollers and a bit of back combing wasn't worth having done.

For all the hard work and tedium of the job at this very early stage, Faith was not in the least disenchanted. Not for her a job in a shop or office, or one of the old-fashioned salons where they did tightly set waves and pin curls all day. She liked the fast pace and stylishness of Conly's, and hoped that constantly working under pressure would make her into a first-rate hairdresser by the time she qualified in three years' time.

'Just a few minutes more,' she fibbed, installing the overcooked client back under the drier at the lowest setting before returning to Jackie's side to pass pins which were prodded through rollers with great alacrity.

After a varied session during which she was told to shampoo, hand pins and perm papers, and sweep the floor, Faith was sent to make coffee for a client. While waiting for the kettle to boil in the staff room, she became involved in a conversation with two third-year apprentices, Pat and Jean, who had sneaked out here for a cigarette and were sitting down smoking and discussing their social arrangements for the next day.

'I'm gonna have a nice lie-in as I don't have to come in to work,' said Pat. 'Then a crowd of us are goin' up the West End.'

'You won't see much of the procession unless you get there really early,' Jean knowingly informed her. 'My mum reckons there'll be thousands of people camping out on the pavement all night to make sure of a good view.'

‘Who cares about the procession?’ said Pat dismissively.

‘Not you by the sound of it.’

‘Too right. I’m only goin’ up West for the fun later on . . . the fireworks on Victoria Embankment and that. There’ll be plenty goin’ on.’

‘Well, I’ll be watching it on next-door’s television,’ said Jean. ‘Then goin’ out dancin’ in the evening . . . there are special Coronation dos on everywhere.’

‘What about you, Faith?’ asked Pat, tilting her head back slightly as she inhaled on her cigarette, imagining herself to be the last word in sophistication.

‘I’m watching it on a neighbour’s television set with my mum, dad and sister,’ said Faith who was only fifteen and hadn’t yet begun to spread her wings.

‘Sounds deadly dull,’ said Pat. ‘Why not come with us?’ She gave Faith a wicked grin. ‘Johnnie Tripp might be there . . . we all know he’s taken a fancy to you.’

‘I can’t,’ said Faith, her heart leaping at the mention of the really cool bloke who sometimes called at the salon to see Pat – not her boyfriend, apparently, but just one of her crowd. ‘We’re having a street party.’

‘Oh, God. They’re having one o’ those in our street too,’ groaned Pat. ‘I wouldn’t be seen dead anywhere near it.’

‘Why?’ asked Faith, enquiring blue eyes round and vivid against her bright red hair.

‘ ‘Cos it’ll be dead borin’,’ stated Pat categorically. ‘It’ll be all little kids and old codgers.’

‘Our party is for children in the afternoon, naturally,’ explained Faith, compelled to defend her family’s arrangement whilst yearning for the freedom to go with Pat

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and her friends. She ached to get to know Johnnie better. But her parents wouldn't approve. They thought she was too young to go out on the town with friends and they'd be horrified at the idea of her having a boyfriend. 'But there's gonna be entertainment for the adults in the evening . . . a talent contest and dancing.'

Pat gave Faith a pitying look. 'I grew out of that sort of thing long ago,' she announced with an air of worldliness.

'Kids' stuff,' agreed Jean.

'You can't have a good time with parents lookin' over your shoulder.'

'Impossible,' agreed Jean, sighing with the weight of experience.

'I don't see why,' said Faith, whose loyalty was being severely tested by this conversation. 'It should be fun.'

'What . . . with your parents clocking your every move and making sure you behave yourself?' asked Pat cynically.

'They won't do that.'

'They will, you know,' explained Pat. 'It's as natural as breathin' to parents. They just can't help themselves.'

'Mine aren't like that,' defended Faith with sincerity. 'They're great.'

'So are mine but I don't wanna be at a party with 'em.'

The conversation was brought to an abrupt end by the appearance of their employer wearing a thunderous expression, all five foot three of him trembling with rage, his face bright red against his dark, immaculate hair and neatly trimmed beard.

'Well, well, a staff meeting,' he said with withering sarcasm.

'I've got a terrible headache, Mr Conly,' lied Pat, leaping to her feet and speedily extinguishing her cigarette in an ash-tray. 'I came out here to get some Aspirin.'

'And I came with her to make sure she was all right,' added Jean.

'I'm making coffee for a client,' explained Faith, freckled face flushed guiltily.

'Don't take me for a fool,' he exploded, moderating his tone so as not to be heard in the salon.

All three stared at him wordlessly.

'How dare you sit out here gossiping when I've a salon full of people waiting to be seen to?' he barked. 'I don't pay you to socialise.'

'We were just going back . . . ' began Jean.

'How very nice of you to bother,' he interrupted sardonically. 'Now back to work, all of you . . . and if I catch any of you sitting around in my time again, you'll be looking for another job.'

The two older girls scuttled back to the salon while Faith turned to the kettle which was now boiling furiously. They had all been struggling against nervous giggles which wouldn't be suppressed once the boss was out of sight.

It was almost eight o'clock by the time Faith caught the bus to West Ealing. Staring idly out of the window at the shops so liberally adorned with red, white and blue, her thoughts turned to Pat's comments about Johnnie Tripp. She could tell by the way he looked at her that he fancied her and he always made a point of chatting to her if the boss wasn't around. Maybe he'd ask her out some time soon? A

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wonderful thought, even if she wouldn't be able to go.

She was imbued with the feeling of restlessness that had plagued her a lot lately, moods during which she experienced intense irritation with home and parents. She wanted to escape – to do the things the older girls at the salon talked about. Go to places that were off limits for her, like coffee bars where the 'with it' crowd hung out, drinking the new espresso coffee and listening to the latest hits on the juke box. Even more thrilling were dance halls where you jived to pop tunes and everyone wore the latest gear. It was all a world away from the youth club where you played table tennis with boring boys in baggy flannels.

Not realising that these new feelings were natural while she was at such an age, she was tortured by feelings of guilt for wanting to break loose from the parents who loved her and had been so supportive of her ambition to train as a hairdresser. Not a word of complaint from them about having to pay Mr Conly a bonding fee for her apprenticeship, or the fact that the low wage meant she wouldn't be able to pay her way at home for a long time.

Raindrops began to speckle the bus window and a steady drizzle had set in by the time she got off and turned into Jasmine Street where flags and bunting were strung across the road. This festive spectacle, that had so delighted her on her way to work that morning, didn't seem nearly so impressive since hearing Pat's and Jean's opinion of street parties.

Even the resplendent red banner swinging between two lampposts, proclaiming LONG MAY SHE REIGN in embroidered gold letters, seemed claustrophobic somehow. Faith sensed

that there was more to her mood than just the influence of the older girls, though. The street celebrations had become synonymous with the childhood she had outgrown but wasn't yet able to leave.

Hurrying past the terraced rows of redbrick houses, where wild flowers and weeds flourished among occasional cultivated blooms behind low garden walls and unkempt privet hedges, she picked her way through noisy, ubiquitous children resolutely continuing with their play despite the rain. Eventually she came to number twenty-five. Turning her key in the lock, she opened the door and stepped into the polish-scented hall.

'I'm home, everybody,' she called. The familiarity she had found suffocating lately felt suddenly comforting as it washed over her in a welcoming tide, dispelling her uncomfortable feelings.

'That Marcus Conly is a proper slave-driver,' announced Faith's mother, Joan, setting down her daughter's supper on the table and sitting opposite her companionably.

'He's all right . . . really,' said Faith, driven to defend him by the fear that her parents might force her to leave Conly's if they thought she was being overworked.

'I don't know why you're sticking up for him,' said Joan. 'I mean, what sort of a time is this for a young girl to get home from work?'

'It's only because of the Coronation tomorrow,' said Faith, tucking in to liver and onions with cabbage and mashed potato. 'We've been rushed off our feet all day.'

'He has you working late far too often for my liking,'

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said Joan, pouring tea for Faith and the rest of the family who had already eaten and were keeping her company while she had her meal.

‘It can’t be helped in the hairdressing trade,’ she explained. ‘A lot of people can only get their hair done after work. Mr Conly can’t just turn business away.’

‘Other salons manage to work normal hours . . . some don’t even open on a Monday.’

‘They’re not as popular as Conly’s so they don’t need to stay open late,’ Faith informed her with a touch of pride.

‘Not many people get their hair done on a Monday in an ordinary week,’ said Joan, handing a cup of tea to husband, Alan, and younger daughter, Zoe. ‘Conly could stay closed and not notice the difference to his takings.’

‘We do a lot of perms on a Monday,’ Faith pointed out.

‘Even so . . .’

‘Anyway, I get a day off every week to go to the Tech,’ said Faith.

‘Money-grabbing Marcus couldn’t bear to have his cash register standing idle for two days a week,’ pronounced her father, entering the conversation lightheartedly from behind his newspaper. A robust man of forty with masses of dark curly hair, Alan had laughing brown eyes and a huge appetite for life. ‘Sundays must be painful enough for him . . . he’d die if he had to extend it to Mondays an’ all!’

‘One of these days I’ll call in at the salon and give that man a piece of my mind,’ proclaimed Joan, a homely woman of thirty-eight dressed in a blue and white spotted dress under a frilly pinafore. An attractive blue-eyed redhead from whom her daughters inherited their striking

colouring, Joan's tendency to over-indulge in cakes and pastries from the baker's shop where she worked part-time had ruined her figure. But so long as it didn't bother Alan, she was quite content to be plump. Eighteen years married and they were still as devoted as ever. Her husband and daughters were Joan's whole life.

'Don't you dare,' warned Faith anxiously. 'I'd die . . .'

'No, don't do that, Mum,' added sister Zoe who was sitting in a chair by the fireplace, adorned at this time of year by a vase of flowers. A year younger than Faith, Zoe was much less exuberant and impulsive than her sister. In fact, she was rather cool and controlled for someone so young.

Joan laughed heartily. 'Oh, dear, you should have seen your face, Faith. Don't panic . . . I was only kidding.' She paused, then added more seriously, 'But I still don't like the idea of you working so late. It's bad for you to have to wait so long for your food. Still, at least you have a hot meal in Lyon's at dinnertime.'

Faith didn't dare tell her that today she had only had time for a couple of currant buns which had been speedily consumed in the staff room during a short break.

'Anyway, you're home now,' said Joan. 'So finish your food while it's hot.'

They were at the front of the house, overlooking a tiny garden. It was a cosy clutter of a room, spotlessly clean but overcrowded with furniture as it wasn't large yet served as both dining and sitting room. There was a door into the kitchen from here and the stairs in the small front hall led to two bedrooms and a bathroom.

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‘Will you do my hair for me, Faith?’ asked Zoe who had a towel wrapped around her head. ‘I’ve washed it ready.’

‘Yeah, ’course I will, but I don’t see much point when you take all the rollers out as soon as you get into bed.’

‘They hurt my head.’

‘You’ll have to put up with that if you wanna look nice.’

‘I know . . . I’ll really try this time.’

‘I’ll do your hair for you, too, Mum, if you like?’ offered Faith who welcomed any chance to practise.

‘Thanks, love, but I don’t have the time. I’ve some baking to finish for the kiddies’ tea party tomorrow.’

‘Okay.’

‘It’ll be good when you’ve learned how to cut hair,’ remarked Zoe, who was very similar in appearance to Faith with the same round blue eyes and striking hair. ‘I fancy having mine short, in that new Italian style.’

‘I wouldn’t mind having mine like that,’ remarked Faith.

‘Oh, don’t have your hair cut, dear,’ said Joan, glancing at Faith’s long luxuriant mane which was tied back in a pony tail.

‘I won’t just yet,’ she said, ‘but the boss likes his staff to have their hair properly styled . . . says it’s good for business. Anyway, it’s dead borin’ like this. I can’t wait to have something more interestin’ done to it.’

‘Your hair’s lovely as it is, both of you,’ said Joan. ‘Isn’t it, Alan?’

‘Not half,’ he said, which didn’t surprise his daughters because their parents were always in agreement. A quarrel between them was a rare thing indeed.

Faith ate in silence for a while then grinned wickedly

and said, 'I hope you're not gonna show us all up tomorrow, Dad?'

'How would I do that?'

'By carrying out your threat and singing in the talent contest.'

'Bloomin' cheek.'

'Your father's got a very good voice,' said Joan with predictable loyalty.

'For talking with, maybe,' said Faith.

'You don't think I'm another Frank Sinatra then?' said Alan.

'More of a Frankie Howerd, I'd say,' giggled Faith.

'Hear how your sister speaks to me?' he said to Zoe, with feigned offence.

'Faith's right, Dad. You stick to organising the show and being the compere.'

'This is how your daughters treat me, Joan,' he said to his wife with mock regret. 'No respect for their father at all.'

'I notice they're *my* daughters when they're giving you trouble.'

The banter was interrupted by a knock at the front door.

'That'll be Sid from number ten, come to rescue me from all this female domination,' said Alan lightly, rising and putting his teacup on the table. 'We're going down to the church hall in his builder's truck to collect the trestle tables and chairs for tomorrow.'

'Okay,' said Joan.

'Shan't be long, love.'

'Righto.'

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‘We’ll probably go for a quick one on the way back,’ he said, grinning. ‘Carting tables and chairs about is thirsty work.’

‘Don’t get too plastered, then,’ she remarked mildly.

‘Now . . . would I do a thing like that?’ he said roguishly.

‘Not if you want to stay in one piece when you get home.’

‘You’re a hard woman, Joan Hodge, do you know that?’ he said affectionately. ‘Never was a man more henpecked.’

‘You look well on it.’

‘That’s a fact.’ He walked round the table to his wife and kissed her on her cheek. ‘See you later then.’ He glanced at his daughters. ‘Tata, girls, be good.’

‘Tata, Dad.’

It was as though his departure drained the atmosphere of vitality, Faith thought, such was his joie de vivre. A chunkily built man who worked in the machine shop of a factory in North Acton, he was a natural extrovert, loved by his family and liked by everyone on the manor. Always the life and soul of the party, he’d think nothing of standing up and giving a song, especially when he’d had a few beers.

Faith noticed that both her mother and sister were smiling. Such was the effect Alan Hodge had on most people. Faith was overwhelmed by a sudden rush of love for him which came as a blessed relief after the difficult emotions she’d been experiencing recently.

Finishing her meal, she said cheerfully, ‘Well, I’ll just drink my tea, Zoe, then I’ll get crackin’ on your hair.’

‘I must go and finish my baking, too,’ said her mother,

rising. 'Or I'll still be in the kitchen at midnight.'

When she had gone, Zoe, as yet untroubled by the agonies of growing up, said, 'Do you reckon the party tomorrow will be any good, Faith?'

'Yeah, it'll be smashing,' she replied, determined not to allow her own restiveness to spoil the party for her sister.

The weather the next day was disappointing to say the least. But it would take more than unseasonal chilliness and persistent rain to destroy the Jasmine Street spirit, so the party went ahead as planned.

Swathed in cardigans and mackintoshes over their summer dresses, Faith and Zoe entered into the spirit of the thing with as much enthusiasm as they could muster, given that they were at an age to feel comfortable neither with children nor adults. Placing themselves firmly in the latter category so far as the adults would allow, they made themselves useful by helping to serve a crowd of boisterous under-twelves with fish-paste sandwiches, jelly and blancmange, and iced fancies at a long table in the middle of the road.

As evening approached, the party fare designed to appeal to a childish palate gave way to savoury nibbles and alcoholic drinks. Faith and Zoe weren't allowed anything stronger than Tizer but this didn't stop them from drinking in the party atmosphere.

Faith was thoroughly enjoying herself until a group of youths in Teddy Boy outfits appeared and unsettled her again.

'Ello, darlin',' said a black-haired, good-looking young

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man in drain-pipe trousers with pink socks showing above crepe-soled shoes. 'I didn't realise you lived round here.'

'Hi, Johnnie,' said Faith, thrilled to see him. 'I thought you were going up West with Pat and the others?'

'Changed my mind,' he explained, his deep brown eyes resting warmly on her. 'We're havin' a mooch round to see what's goin' on in the area . . . we're going to a dance later.'

'Sounds like fun.'

'Fancy comin' with us?'

'My parents wouldn't approve,' she said, hearing her voice hollow with immaturity.

'Why not?'

'They think I'm too young to go to dance halls.'

'You'll be all right with us,' said Johnnie. 'I'll look after you.'

'You'll have more laughs with us,' said his mate. 'This is really square.'

Johnnie looked at her persuasively. 'I'd like you to come,' he said eagerly.

'She can't,' said Zoe, who was standing beside Faith.

He studied Zoe as though only just realising she was there. 'Are you twins?'

'No, just sisters,' said Faith.

Turning back to Faith, Johnnie said, 'Would your parents let you come with us if your sister came too?'

'No, thanks! I don't wanna come,' snorted Zoe.

'Oh.' Johnnie gave Faith a searching look. 'You could ask your parents.'

'I know what their answer will be.'

‘But you go out to work,’ he said, obviously disappointed. ‘You earn your own livin’, surely that entitles you to some freedom? And you’ll come to no harm, I promise you.’

She was just thinking that her wages as a first-year apprentice hardly amounted to ‘a living’ as such, when her father burst aggressively on to the scene.

‘What’s going on here?’ he demanded in a belligerent tone, looking suspiciously at the strangers.

‘I was just chatting to Faith,’ explained Johnnie amicably.

‘On your way, sharpish,’ commanded Alan.

‘Da-ad,’ said Faith, burning with embarrassment. ‘Johnnie’s a friend of one of the girls at the salon.’

‘I don’t care if he’s a friend of the Prime Minister,’ he bellowed. ‘Teddy Boys aren’t welcome in this street.’

‘We’re not doin’ any harm,’ Johnnie pointed out.

‘Clear off – now,’ ordered Alan.

‘This is a public highway, mate,’ said one of Johnnie’s mates.

‘And this is a private party, paid for by the residents,’ Alan retorted. ‘So get lost.’

‘We don’t wanna join your party,’ said one of the other youths. ‘We’ve better things to do.’

‘Go and do ’em then,’ growled Alan. ‘Before you get my boot up your arse to help you on your way.’

Sick with humiliation, Faith stared at her father in despair.

‘They’ve done nothing wrong,’ she said. ‘There’s no need to turn on them just because of their clothes.’

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Johnnie smiled at Faith, putting his hand on her arm in a gesture of gratitude. 'Thanks, darlin'. But don't get yourself into trouble on our account. We'll go . . .'

'That's it . . . that's enough,' roared Alan, pale with temper. 'Take your hands off my daughter this minute and go.'

'Keep your wig on, old man,' said one of Johnnie's mates. 'He's not hurting her.'

'Go on, sling your hook.'

'We wouldn't stay round here with you squares if you paid us,' said the mate.

'Push off.'

'Okay, lads, let's go,' said Johnnie. He turned to Faith and smiled as though understanding how she was feeling. 'See you around, Faith.'

'Yeah . . . sure.'

They swaggered off, chattering and laughing among themselves.

'Did you have to cause such a scene, Dad?' she asked despairingly, feeling isolated from her own generation.

'I certainly did,' he declared. 'They were making a nuisance of themselves . . . out looking for trouble.'

'No, they're weren't.'

'Rough lot,' he grumbled. 'We don't want the likes of them round here.'

'I thought they were okay.'

'You keep away from Teddy Boys.'

'They're not bad people just because they dress like that,' she said. 'You didn't have to be so rude to them.'

'Here, who do you think you're talking to?' he demanded.

'You. Who else?' she heard herself say, eyes hot with unshed tears.

'Don't you *dare* speak to me like that,' he said grimly.

'Well, honestly, you carried on as though I was a five year old.'

'No, I didn't.'

'You did.'

'If I did then it must have been because you were behaving like one,' he snapped.

'That's not true . . .'

He glared at Faith. 'I won't be told how to behave by a fifteen year old.'

'And I'm fed up with being treated like a child, so stop doing it,' she said, her voice thick with emotion. Desperately upset, she didn't wait for a reply but hurried through the crowds towards number twenty-five.

Faith sat on the edge of her bed trembling, scalding tears pressing painfully against her lids as she wrestled with her painful emotions. The humiliation she'd suffered in front of Johnnie hurt so much she could hardly bear to think about it. But she was also deeply ashamed of having been so rude to her father. She'd never spoken to him like that before. She liked Johnnie, yes, but she loved her father and had been brought up to respect him. Johnnie's mates were a bit rough, she could see, and probably seemed threatening to someone of her father's generation.

Zoe came in and flopped down on her own bed next to Faith's, her red hair damp and clipped to one side, her sister's efforts of the previous evening ruined by the rain.

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'I suppose Dad's sent you to tell me to stop sulking and go back to the party,' mumbled Faith through her tears, fiddling nervously with a lock of hair.

'No, he hasn't said a word to me about it,' she said. 'I came in 'cos it's dead boring out there without you. All the young ones who are old enough to go out at night with their friends have gone off somewhere else.'

'Yeah, there's lots happening everywhere tonight,' said Faith.

'Did you wanna go off with those Teds?'

'It might have been fun.'

'You like that dark one, don't you?'

'Yeah, I think he's gorgeous.'

'I thought they were all dead common.'

'At least they know how to dig the scene,' said Faith. 'Anyway, there was no need for Dad to be so heavy with them.'

'He can be a bit of a pain at times.'

'He means well,' said Faith with a perverse need to defend him in the wake of her own criticism. 'They probably seemed rough to him and I suppose he does have our interests at heart.'

'Yeah . . . probably,' agreed Zoe without much interest.

'I feel really bad now, about the way I spoke to him.'

'He'll get over it.' Zoe got up and combed her hair in front of the wardrobe mirror. 'Are you coming back to the party?'

'I suppose I'd better . . . or I'll make things worse with Dad.'

'Not necessarily,' said Zoe, sounding bored with the

subject. 'He was busy getting everyone ready for the talent show when I last saw him. He'll have forgotten all about the row by now.'

'I doubt that,' said Faith, rising. 'But come on. Let's go and give him our support. He's worked hard to organise the talent contest.'

There was a large crowd around compere Alan Hodge when his daughters arrived back at the party. They had to climb up on to a garden wall to see him. From here they could also see their mother at the front of the audience. Dusk was falling and the lampposts were spreading an amber glow over the damp gathering, wet patches on the pavements gleaming in the light, though the rain had finally petered out.

'I'm sure there's no shortage of talented people in Jasmine Street and we're gonna have a really good show here tonight,' he was saying. 'I, myself, am a very good singer . . .'

He waited for the laughter which came in a loud roar.

'Unfortunately,' he continued when it finally subsided, 'you're going to be denied the pleasure of my dulcet tones this evening because I have been forbidden to enter this talent contest by my daughters.'

This raised a cheer.

'Well, that's nice, I must say,' he said with feigned umbrage. 'Does this mean you've heard my singing through the bathroom window or have you been got at by my lovely daughters?'

The question was rhetorical and the response a riotous one.

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'I tell you, folks, a bloke's life's not his own when he lives with a gang o' women. I'm really outnumbered in our house.'

There were calls of mock sympathy.

'I have to say this though, or I'll get beaten up when I get home,' he grinned. 'I love 'em all to bits.'

Watching this big-hearted man, his curly hair shining in the street-lights, Faith tried to define what it was that made him a natural showman. She could only put it down to his enormous warmth and complete lack of inhibition, assisted on this occasion by several pints of best bitter. She loved him so much and felt dreadful about the way she'd treated him earlier. She longed for him to come 'offstage' so that she could apologise and put things right between them.

'Anyway, I'm sure you all want to get on with the show . . .'

'Yeah, get on with it, you daft bugger,' called someone.

'You just wait your hurry,' he admonished jokingly.

'We'll still be here when the Queen has her Silver Jubilee at this rate,' shouted someone in the crowd.

'Even I won't keep you that long.'

'That's a relief.'

'But before our first contestant comes on, I'd like to tell you about the prizes . . .'

'Oh, no . . .'

'Come on, let's hear it then, and sharpish,' urged someone.

'The first prize is a basket of fruit.'

There were cheers of approval.

'The second prize is . . . is . . . oh . . . oh dear . . .'

voice tailed off and he clutched his chest dramatically.

‘Stop muckin’ about and get on with it,’ said a man at the back.

‘You ought to take more water with it, mate,’ shouted someone else jovially as Alan began to stagger and seemed about to fall.

It was typical of Dad to pretend to be drunk, thought Faith, grinning. He was always joshing, a born comedian. But the smile died on her lips as he began to make alarming choking noises and slumped to the ground. A hush fell as it became obvious that he wasn’t pretending.

By the time Faith and Zoe had fought their way to the front of the crowd, someone had gone to call an ambulance and their mother was leaning over the still and silent figure who was lying in the road staring vacantly up. Someone had put a coat over him.

‘Alan, love,’ Joan was saying, her voice guttural with emotion. ‘It’s Joan . . . say something, love. Oh, please talk to me . . . please.’

Standing behind her, Faith was struck with horror. She knew with a terrible certainty that her father wasn’t going to say anything to her mother, or to anyone. *Not ever again.*

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