

The letter arrived by the afternoon post. I found it waiting for me on the front hall table when, having finished a particularly long luncheon shift at the restaurant, I'd dragged myself up to the small fourth-floor flat that I shared, for the moment, with Sally, my flatmate.

She showed me the envelope straight off. 'It's from your agent. Maybe she's got you another audition.'

I shook my head. 'She'd ring me for that, not send a letter.'

'Well, maybe it's a birthday card, then. Happy birthday, by the way – I didn't get a chance to tell you that this morning, you went out too early.'

'Thanks.' Mornings, for Sally, began around ten. She'd been busy today, from the looks of it. Another stack of boxes packed with clothes from her bedroom now blocked my way into the sitting-room. Stepping round, I slumped into the nearest cushioned chair and let my head fall back, caught fully in the power of the wearying mid-afternoon, when every tiny movement seems an effort and the dull light weights your eyelids. I felt like I'd just turned a hundred, instead of twenty-two.

Sally followed me and sat cross-legged on the floor by the bookcases, getting back to the business of sorting the books into

piles of hers, mine, and those that she coveted. She sent me a knowing glance. ‘Long day?’

‘Hellish. They didn’t get round to the hoovering up last night so I had to do it this morning when I got in. Things just sort of went downhill from there.’

‘Oh, poor you. There’s still tea in the pot.’

‘No, thanks.’ The idea of rising to pour another cup of tea, even if it was for myself and not for someone else, seemed far too much like work. I turned my head against the chair back – Sally’s chair, I thought morosely, so presumably it, too, would be leaving the flat at the end of the week.

She glanced over again, homing in on my mood with that particular awareness of hers that had often led me to wonder if the Wiccan altar with its candles in her room might not be more than just an offbeat decoration. She’d have made a good witch, with her wild curling hair and diaphanous clothes that came straight from some Indian version of Oxfam. Everything about her floated, and one always had the impression she’d flare up like a torch if she came too near a lighted match.

We’d met last year, waitressing, but since then her handmade jewellery stall had done good enough business that she’d been able to leave the restaurant, and now she was leaving me, too, to set up house with her boyfriend – a drummer and nice enough bloke, I supposed, once you got past the piercings.

‘Aren’t you going to open it?’ She nodded at the letter I was holding.

I felt a little apprehensive, actually. The envelope, with its printed address, seemed suspiciously official, and the way things had been going all week I was rather afraid this would be more bad news – another agent dumping me because I’d failed to make them any money. Reluctantly, I slipped a finger underneath one corner and started peeling up the flap. ‘I take it no one’s phoned?’ I asked. I took it for granted that my mother wouldn’t have, she

never remembered my birthday, but there was always—

‘Oh, that friend of yours did,’ Sally told me. ‘You know who I mean...that older man, the director...’

‘Rupert?’

‘That’s him. He seemed a bit surprised that you were working today.’

‘Yes, well, someone has to pay the rent.’ I spoke without thinking, then wished I could take the words back when her face sagged with guilt.

‘Look, I can leave you a little extra, if it would help...’

‘I’m fine.’ I wasn’t, really. Fledgling actresses made next to nothing, even when they waitressed on the side. We’d been barely scraping by together as it was, eating lots of rice and things from tins, and wrapping ourselves in quilts instead of turning on the fires, to save on the electric bill. I’d hoped to have found someone to take Sally’s place by the time she moved out, but so far no one had responded to my ad, and without a new flatmate I didn’t know how long I’d be able to cope.

‘Anyway,’ said Sally, ‘you’re to meet what’s-his-name – Rupert – this evening at St. Paul’s.’

My hand stopped in surprise, and I looked up. ‘St. Paul’s? Why does he want me to go all the way over there?’

‘Not the cathedral, silly. The church. It’s a five-minute walk.’

‘Are you sure he meant the church?’

‘I wrote it down. He made me write it down.’ She retrieved the piece of paper as evidence. ‘There you are, you see? St. Paul’s Church, Covent Garden, sixish. Dinner at the club.’ She smiled at the expression on my face. ‘Yes, he said that that might cheer you up. Nice place, is it, Rupert’s club?’

‘Very nice.’ Returning my attention to the envelope, I finally got the flap up and discovered that it wasn’t a letter at all – at least, not from my agent. Inside was a second, smaller envelope, addressed to me and postmarked Italy. Turning it over, I read the

return address in open disbelief. ‘It’s from Il Piacere,’ I told Sally, giving it the true pronunciation so it came out as ‘Il Pia-*chair*-ray.’

‘Who is he?’

‘It’s not a person, it’s a house. A rather famous house. It belonged to Galeazzo D’Ascanio.’ Galeazzo D’Ascanio, self-proclaimed Prince of the Decadent Movement that had blossomed like a black rose in the Europe of the 1890s, languid with drugs and perversity, darkly erotic, committed to nothing but the taking of pleasure. That’s what the name Il Piacere meant – the full name of the house where he’d lived in the twenties and thirties had been Il Piacere del Vecchio... ‘The Pleasure of an Old Man.’

When Sally still looked blank I explained, ‘He was a writer. Poetry, mostly, though he also did novels and plays. See those books on the second shelf up? They’re all his.’

I wasn’t especially fond of his writing. I found it too dark for my tastes, for the most part, but I’d always had an interest in the writer himself, for the simple reason that his last great love – the mistress he had called his ‘muse,’ the joy of his old age – had been, like myself, a young actress from London, with whom I had shared, across time, the same love of the stage, and a name: Celia Sands.

I had no claim to bear her name; we weren’t related. I’d been named at the whim of my mother, an actress herself, not so much in homage to a legend of the British stage, but rather, I suspect, because my mother’s narrow mind so rarely ventured from the theatre that she couldn’t think of any other name to go with Sands, her surname at the time. If we had been Bernhardt’s I should have been Sarah, and suffered as greatly.

My mother never gave much thought to consequences. Certainly she’d never considered what problems I’d face if I followed her onto the stage, having to carry the name of a woman

who had so electrified England and France in the months that had followed the Great War.

I'd sought refuge in a stage name, Celia Sullivan, which still allowed me to use the monogrammed luggage that Rupert had given me for my twelfth birthday but gave me some degree of confidence that I was being given parts because of my abilities, and not because of Mother's fame or some dead woman's name.

My agent knew, on pain of death, not to reveal my real name when she represented me...and yet here was this letter now, forwarded on by my agent from someone at *Il Piacere*, and clearly addressed: Celia Sands.

It was one page, typed neatly and signed with a masculine, no-nonsense hand at the bottom. I read it twice through, to be sure that I'd read it correctly.

Sally asked, 'Well, for heaven's sake, what does it say?'

'I'm being offered a part in a play,' I said, still unable to believe it.

'Just like that, with no audition?'

'Just like that.'

'Is it a good part?'

'It's the lead. And it's a very famous play, the last one that Galeazzo D'Ascanio ever wrote. They're going to stage it in his private theatre, there on the estate.'

'In Italy? How marvellous. Good work by your agent, I'd say.'

'I don't imagine she had much to do with it,' I said, and turned the letter round as evidence. 'Rupert's going to be directing.'

'Ah. Well, nepotism has its advantages. Good work by Rupert, then.' Her smile faded slightly as she studied my expression. 'Don't you want to take the part?'

'It isn't that. It's just...it says here that I'd have to use my real name.'

She reached out a hand for the letter, to read it herself. 'Why would they make a condition like that? What on earth does it matter what name you use?'

I imagined it would matter quite a bit, in this instance. Aloud, I explained, ‘Galeazzo D’Ascanio wrote his last play for his mistress, an actress – he gave her the starring role. Her name was Celia Sands, too. That’s why I use a stage name. She was pretty famous, Galeazzo’s mistress. People still know her name in the theatre, and I don’t want to trade on it.’

‘Even if it means a paying job?’ She was watching my face, and she saw the flash of indecision. ‘Wait, I’ll get the cards.’

Sally’s tarot deck made an appearance at least once a week, whenever she wanted – or thought that *I* wanted – direction on some question or another. I endured it as a harmless entertainment, like reading one’s horoscope in the tabloids, but to Sally it was dead serious.

Returning, she made herself comfortable on the floor in front of me. ‘Here, give those a shuffle and ask the cards if you should go to Italy. Oh, wait a second, I need to keep out your Significator.’ Searching for the Queen of Cups, which supposedly ‘signified’ me, representing as it did a woman with light brown hair and light eyes who had more sensibility than sense, Sally passed the rest of the deck over for me to shuffle, then took it back and split it neatly into three face-down stacks on the carpet, gathering them up again in one hand. My Significator, on its own, sat patiently face-up and waiting.

‘Right then, here you are. This covers you,’ she said, laying a card down directly on the Queen of Cups. The covering card, I knew, was meant to show the atmosphere in which I’d asked my question. In my case, this apparently had something to do with a blindfolded woman holding two crossed swords above her head. ‘The Two of Swords,’ said Sally. ‘That means indecision.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘This crosses you.’ She set a card across the first two. ‘This will oppose you, for evil or good. Oh, the Moon – that’s a Major Arcana card, a powerful force. It’s the card of the psychic, you

know. It can mean vivid dreams, the discovery of your own powers. Or it can mean bad things: people deceiving you, bad luck for someone you know.' She turned the next card over, laid it directly below the three others. 'And this is beneath you.'

The supposed 'foundation' of my question was a Court card – the matching card, actually, to my own Significator.

'The King of Cups,' Sally identified him. 'That's a man with light brown hair, a businessman, responsible, but interested in the arts. He can look quite calm on the outside, this man, but inside he's emotional. Know anybody like that?'

'I wish.'

'Well, he's at the bottom of all of this, anyway. And this,' she said, setting another card down, 'is what's passing away, what's behind you. The Queen of Wands, reversed.' Her upwards glance was dry. 'A blonde, blue-eyed woman who's jealous, unfaithful, and lies a lot. Gosh, who could that be?'

I couldn't help smiling. Sally had only met my mother once, but obviously the encounter had made an impression. There was no mistaking who she thought the Queen of Wands, reversed, might be.

She dealt the next card. 'This is over you.'

A card that was supposed to show me something that might happen in my future. Again there were swords, this time nine of them, suspended rather ominously over the despairing figure of a woman burying her face in her hands.

Sally paused, and her eyes for a moment grew troubled. 'This isn't a good card. It means suffering, tragedy. Loss of a loved one.'

I couldn't say to her, as I wanted to say, that it was only a silly game, and could no more tell my fortune than could a mess of soggy tea-leaves, because Sally would likely have believed in the tea-leaves, too. But I did manage to cheer her a little by reminding her that the card only showed what *might* happen. 'Keep going,' I said. 'Maybe things will get better.'

But they didn't. 'This is before you.' Again she turned over a card from the Major Arcana, the High Priestess card, in reverse. 'This isn't good, either. It means you'll meet up with a selfish, cruel woman. She'll cause you some trouble.' She was frowning now, turning the cards over with obvious reluctance. 'These are your fears...' The Fool, reversed, a ghoulish-looking character who leered at me from his upside-down position. 'You're afraid that you'll make the wrong choice.' And the next card, revealing the influence of family and friends, offered no more encouragement. There were swords again, three of them, piercing a heart, with dark storm clouds behind and hard rain pelting down in the background. 'Oh, Celia. This means quarrels and things going wrong in your family.'

The second-to-last card, my 'hopes,' was all right, which stood to reason, since one didn't often 'hope' for anything unpleasant. Mine came out the Ace of Wands, an optimistic card that meant a new creative venture, and a journey. But that didn't take the frown from Sally's face. She chose the last card for the reading and held it out, suspended, hesitating...then in one quick movement, as a child takes its medicine, she turned it over.

'Hell.'

I didn't need her interpretation to tell me it wasn't an auspicious outcome. The image spoke for itself: a castle turret wrapped in flames, with human figures toppling from it, arms outstretched and screaming, and behind the flames a storm, with jagged lightning.

'That's not good,' I said, 'is it?'

Sally looked up at me, serious. 'Celia, you mustn't take this job. There's something bad there, something evil...'

'Well,' – I put the letter to one side – 'that settles that, then, doesn't it?' But still I couldn't help but look again towards the printed image of *Il Piacere* on the letterhead, and wonder...



## VENICE, 1921

*His anger had not vanished by the afternoon; merely retreated to a place where he could manage it. He pulled another packing-crate across the library floor, uncaring of the scars it left, and went on emptying the shelves of books.*

*His valet watched him. 'Sir, you're certain this is wise?'*

*He should never have hired an English valet, he thought. Anyone else would have understood, would have helped him, not stood there prudishly in judgement. 'Of course it is wise! It is just! To say that I must leave this house,' he said, in indignation, 'after all that I have done here, this is criminal. To simply say, "Get out," like that' – he snapped his fingers – 'to me...to me.' He glared as if that insult in itself were cause enough.*

*'But sir...'*

*'They said I could not keep the house. They did not say a word about the contents.' With a smile he pulled an ancient volume from the shelves, caressed its leather binding. 'I will have my compensation.'* In sudden decision he turned to the valet. *'We will go to the house on*

*Lake Garda. The air there is good for my health.'* To emphasise the point he crossed to pull the window shut against the stale infernal dampness rising from the green canal below.

*And then he heard the voice.*

*A woman's voice – an English voice – melodic, clear and lovely, floating upwards from a point below his balcony. 'I don't suppose he'd be at home to visitors?'*

*A man replied, 'You're mad, you know that?'*

*'Stop and let's find out.'*

*'He'd never see you, Celia.'* A gondola creaked and a single oar splashed, resolute.

*He stood transfixed and watched, his hand forgotten on the window-latch as the black boat slid out of his balcony's shadow and into the light. The man, to him, was but a shape; the gondolier invisible – he only saw the woman, half-reclining in the bow with one hand trailing in the water and a faintly pouting frown upon her face. She was exquisite, pale like porcelain, and the sunlight seemed to gather in her spun-gold hair and ivory dress and radiate around her like the aura of an angel. If she looked up now, he thought, their eyes would meet...but she did not look up. The gondola slipped on and round the corner, out of sight and hearing, but he didn't leave the window. He felt breathless, almost giddy. He felt young.*

*He looked where she had gone and spoke her name to try its taste upon his lips, and having tasted it he knew a sudden hunger for possession: 'Celia.'*