

F r a n A n n a f o r d

A L L I S E E I S Y O U

**The S t a r n b e r g S e r i e s
B o o k 5**

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Grey. They both had grey eyes. There the similarity ended. One was brunette, the other ash blonde.

"I imagine the tea is disgusting."

Lennie shrugged and turned her back on the leading lady standing next to the props table on which rested an outsize teapot. Clive, the actor lounging near the table, drew in a breath, as if waiting for the explosion. He had been slurping his drink noisily, smacking his lips as though it was nectar he hadn't tasted for months. He was obviously nervous, because Lennie had seen him sitting next to the steamed-up window of a greasy spoon café in a street running parallel to the rehearsal room as she rode past it. She suspected he had already drunk three cups there, having arrived over an hour early for the first day. It was typical actor behaviour.

"I'll have a cup please. Needs must."

Lennie selected a mug from the collection in front of her, hesitating over one with a large chip on the rim, before selecting a newer one with a picture of a drag artist and Drama Queen scrawled across it. Clive drew in another breath, put his empty mug down carefully and retreated, speedily joining some other members of the cast standing next to the director's table.

"Milk and sugar?"

"Just milk."

Lennie dipped a teaspoon into the mug and stirred before handing it to the woman, watching her impassively. Their fingers touched and a spark made them both jerk backwards. The tea slopped dangerously but didn't spill.

"Sorry. Winter is coming." Lennie's good manners kicked in at last. Not to mention self-preservation. Turning her back on the show's star was one thing. She had to, in order to disguise the anger that flared up in her at the tea remark. But it was quite something else to pour the hot beverage over the fiendishly expensive ankle-length black leather coat.

Melanie Blaine turned and walked over to Robert, the director, without a backward glance.

Clive sidled back for yet another mug.

"Are you tired of life, Lennie?" They knew each other from a previous production. It had enjoyed a few weeks touring in the provinces before it didn't come into the West End. A merciful death in Swanage.

"Just fuck her."

"Wouldn't you like to?" He sniggered.

"Isn't she married? To a man?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"On reflection, no thanks. She's a bitch. Fancy having to live with her. I don't."

"I wasn't suggesting you walk off with her into the sunset. There are however... very faint rumours... about her swinging both ways."

"You are such a gossipy queen."

"Look at her drinking out of that mug. I expected her to throw it back at you, contents and all."

"Yeah, she gets a credit for that. I deserved it."

They watched as the actress finished drinking her tea and looked for a place to put the mug down. Clive nudged Lennie and reluctantly she walked over and held out her hand.

"The tea was good. Thank you."

Lennie took the mug, being careful to not make physical contact.

Robert clapped his hands. "Good morning, everyone, and welcome to rehearsals for our new production of *Private Lives*. If I could ask you all to sit at the table, I will introduce everyone, and we can start to read the play."

Was she imagining it or was there already a tired atmosphere in the room?

As tired as the old Noel Coward classic they were going to put on for its millionth revival. It came up at least once every ten years in the West End. Every time a middle-aged actor or actress with clout needed a starring role for themselves and wanted to avoid paying author royalties.

This time, it was Gareth Hughes, forty-something star of an action film franchise trying to prove he was a legitimate actor. Lennie looked at him as she took her place at the second table. The films were famous for having so little dialogue that twenty minutes would go by without a word being spoken as cars crashed into each other, subway trains derailed, and planes plummeted to the ground.

They were about to embark on a 1930s comedy with no discernible action, five characters and dialogue. Nothing but dialogue. Which had to be perfectly timed to garner laughs. Four weeks on tour and six weeks in the West End were planned. Lennie seriously doubted it would even make it into London, and if it did, they would all be out of work after the first two weeks. She anticipated appalling critics. Presumably, Gareth was financing the production himself. She couldn't believe anyone else would be putting up money.

And what was Melanie Blaine doing? As far as Lennie knew, she was a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company. She had made a huge splash when she played Juliet years ago at the Young Vic. Lennie saw it on a school trip when she was thirteen. She was now twenty-six, so it was thirteen years ago. She calculated. I think she was nineteen or twenty at the time. Which makes her thirty-three or four.

Lennie stole a look at her profile. She was classically beautiful. Her neck was long and graceful, her features perfect. The sensuous full lips glistening with lip-gloss left a perfect mark on the mug. Lennie had touched it with her thumb. In profile, she could see her eyelashes were long and curling unless they were applied. Bet they are. Nobody can be that beautiful. She still wore her coat, so her figure was hard to discern.

Now that she was sitting, Lennie shivered. It was cold in this dismal rehearsal room in an insalubrious part of Shepherd's Bush. Although that said nothing about the finances of the venture. All West End productions rehearsed in grotty areas of London. Costs were kept to a minimum. Any return on investment came from the ticket revenue. The upfront financing of a London show included all the costs and wages for the three-and-a-half-week rehearsal period, as well as the sets and costumes and infrastructure in the theatre of its destination. The touring theatres had to be rented in advance and the transport organised. And all without any guarantee of returns.

Gareth Hughes was probably a high earner. Lennie calculated he was putting up anything between five hundred thousand and a million pounds for this self-indulgent treat. She wondered what Melanie Blaine was earning. It must be a lot. She was risking her reputation on this. More than I am. Lennie suppressed a snort. She was on the Equity minimum. The lowest rate allowed by the actors' union of that name.

"I'm going to introduce everyone. Excuse me if I don't go ladies first on this. Gareth Hughes is here with us from Hollywood. He will play the role of Elyot Chase, written by and for Noel Coward. It's no secret to say that without you,

Gareth, we wouldn't all be sitting here." Everyone banged their knuckles on the table.

"In the role of Amanda, we are thrilled to welcome Melanie Blaine, best known for her classical roles with the RSC."

Melanie bent her head to acknowledge the welcome. Gareth looked at her hungrily.

"That's the way the wind is blowing and why she has been cast." Robert looked over in Lennie's direction. She blushed. She hadn't meant to say it out loud. Even if she only muttered it.

"Samantha Sams is our Sybil." Everyone tittered. It sounded ridiculous.

"It's a name people don't forget." The young actress looked straight at Melanie, who held her gaze. This time, Lennie zipped her lips together, as she felt a wave of irritation flood her stomach. She shook her head. Is the tour going to be a bedroom farce? As company manager, she would have to keep whatever was happening in the bedrooms out of the press and, more to the point, under control so that the actors had the energy to play eight performances a week.

"Delphine Alland is Louise. Who better to play a French maid?" Laughter again, as the older actress smiled, although it didn't reach her eyes. Lennie sympathised. How often had the poor woman heard that tired old joke?

"And last but not least, Clive Timpson who will give us his Victor." Robert must be nervous. This is awful.

"I'm Robert Digby, the director. Our company manager is Eleonore Adams. Our two assistant stage managers are Elijah Stanforth and Sophia Klee, and now I'm going to ask our designer, Benjamin Owen, to talk you through the sets and costumes, the latter being all you are really interested in, I'm quite sure."

This even older joke earned him a nervous laugh from Clive. Melanie turned her head in Lennie's direction. She was stony faced. She looked back at Benjamin, as he stood and talked them through the model of the set, which Lennie had placed on a small table to his right. Then he held up his costume designs. They were modern. Lennie was sure it was going to be pure nostalgia, but apparently it wasn't. For the first time, she felt a flicker of genuine interest in the project.

During the preceding week, as she prepared herself by reading the play through several times, she discarded the fluff and concentrated on the darkness of the story, in particular the second act and the ending of the third act. She directed the scenes in her mind's eye, making notes in a script she prepared. Her official prompt copy was interleaved. She would note all the moves made by the actors, and if she was doing her job properly, the emotions they portrayed. Later she would add the lighting and sound cues. Her second annotated script was on her tablet and was for her eyes only.

Lennie was thirteen when she won the school Shakespeare prize for directing the opening scene of Richard the Third. It was a small sensation, because the annual prize inevitably went to a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old senior. Her English teacher, on whom she had a crush, was thrilled for her.

The subsequent evening the three finalists' scenes were presented to a public of proud relatives. The occasion was notable for something else she remembered, but not until many years later. She was standing in a dark corner of the school assembly hall stage near her classmate who was playing Richard of Gloucester,

waiting for the stage manager to give them the go. Janine had hold of her hand. It was damp and cold with nerves. They looked at each other and moved closer together. The near kiss was interrupted by the lights going back on. Janine walked to the middle of the stage. *Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York.* The interpretation owed a great deal to the Laurence Olivier film. Janine copied the strange, clipped tones Olivier adopted for his outrageously camp over the top performance. Lennie paced the side of the stage, finding it difficult to concentrate. She had a very strange feeling in her gut, not to mention a buzzing in her vagina.

Six months previously, she decided she was in love with a young actor in Dr Who. She wrote him fan letters and waited impatiently for every Saturday evening episode.

The young Lennie didn't know what to do with this new feeling. She forced herself to sit on a high stool at the side of the stage. Then she felt silly. Janine avoided her eyes at the curtain call, and the little party in the hall afterwards kept them apart.

She forgot about it.

"Lennie, how about another cup of tea before we begin reading?" Robert Digby interrupted her reverie, just as the lines of Gloucester's soliloquy came into her head.

Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?/ Was ever woman in this humour won?/ I'll have her; but I will not keep her long. She looked over at Melanie Blaine. How had her husband wooed her?

"Elijah, come and help me please." This was the last time she would make the tea. She had made the first pot because her two very young assistants seemed overawed and she didn't trust them not to somehow make the disgusting brew Madame Blaine was expecting.

She took out the tea bags she had brought with her. They were Darjeeling First Flush. It was her treat for the beginning of rehearsals. When the packet was empty, the assistants would buy the cheapest blend from the nearest supermarket.

"Sophia, please wash the mugs quickly."

They waited for the large kettle to boil. Clive produced a packet of biscuits. Melanie went outside, followed swiftly by Gareth. Presumably to smoke. Lennie wrinkled her nose. A woman who smoked was a no-no. Rancid kisses. Ugh. Melanie came back in, looking angry. She marched over to the props table and grabbed the freshly washed Drama Queen mug, which she held out to be filled.

"I was going to give you a different mug. Sorry about earlier," Lennie muttered softly. She breathed in. Melanie smelt of citrus fruit and musk. Not of smoke.

"I like this one." There was a hint of a smile as she said it.

Lennie's hand shook slightly as she splashed milk into the mug. Melanie reached across her for a teaspoon. Her arm brushed across Lennie's chest and grazed a nipple. She drew in a breath as it hardened.

"Sorry." Melanie almost smiled. Her enlarged pupils conveyed that she wasn't in the least apologetic. She moved back to the table and slowly took off

her coat, pushing her dark hair onto her head for a moment to cool her neck. She was wearing designer jeans and sweatshirt, which did not conceal the fact that her breasts were generous. Knee-length boots completed the outfit. Her legs were long and lean. Lennie struggled to look away. She is hot.

“Changed your mind?” Clive whispered in her ear. Lennie blushed.

“She is so out of my league. Are you kidding?”

“Sweetie, you are the hottest stage manager in the West End. Known to one and all as the blonde bombshell.”

“How unoriginal.”

“I agree. Blonde bombshells are always bottle blonde. Your ash blonde is much more elegant. It is natural, isn’t it?”

Lennie rolled her eyes. “Yeah.”

“Don’t look, but the man who is paying your no doubt paltry salary is mentally undressing you.”

“I think our diva gave him the brush-off outside. She did not look happy when she came back in, and he obviously interrupted her smoke.”

“She’s not a smoker.”

“How do you know?”

“I read an interview. Her father died of lung cancer. She hates it.”

“If everyone has their tea, let’s begin.” Robert took his seat.

Lennie returned to her chair and positioned it so that she could see at least a quarter of Melanie’s face. She opened her book, intending to follow the reading, but decided she would listen and watch to start with. The tension around the table was palpable. They would be exposing themselves to colleagues they didn’t know. It was a nerve-wracking experience for every actor, regardless of how applause hungry they were. From previous readings, Lennie knew some actors read in a monotone, others gave a full-scale performance. In this case, they all began quietly. Lennie sensed that Melanie was holding back not to embarrass Gareth. They were obviously all convinced he couldn’t cut it. Lennie gave Melanie credit for not launching into full-on Amanda, her character in the play, which she was more than capable of doing. But Gareth surprised them all. He stumbled occasionally over words, but he had excellent comic timing. By the time they were halfway through the first act, they were playing off each other. There were lots of laughs and everyone burst into spontaneous applause as the act ended. Robert looked like a man who had won the lottery.

“Let’s break for lunch and then come back for acts two and three.”

Melanie shrugged herself into her coat and looked over at the stage management who were once again collecting mugs and clearing the table of biscuit crumbs. She opened her mouth to say something as Robert called over to her.

“Come and have lunch with us. There’s a kind of French bistro ten minutes away, which isn’t too awful. I can drive us. The lunchbreak is an hour and a half everyone.”

Clive grumbled as they left the room, “Typical. We really don’t need an hour and a half for a sandwich in the pub. Come on, guys. We plebs must stick together.”

Delphine shook her head and took a baguette out of her bag. She settled herself in an old sagging armchair in the corner and put in earphones.

“I’m going to work out. There’s a decent-looking studio down the road.”

Samantha heaved her bag over a shoulder and left the room.

Lennie hurried after her. “What a good idea. Can I join you?”

“Why, of course, pretty lady. It will make the hour go a lot quicker.” Lennie suppressed an eyeroll. Samantha was so not her type. They walked quickly to the studio and took out membership for three weeks. It was surprisingly cheap.

“Wow, what’s the catch? I didn’t think I could afford it.” There was very little equipment, and it was old, but the room was almost empty. They both began on the treadmill and finished on the bikes. “Now for the best part. I wonder if the shower is communal.” Fortunately, it wasn’t, and Lennie entered a stall and let the lukewarm water wash over her. She had taken a threadbare towel as she registered. Tomorrow she would bring her own, along with some more suitable clothes. Her jeans and sports bra today were a compromise. She managed to dress before Samantha came back into the locker room.

“I’ll wait for you outside. Are you going to eat something?”

“I’ll drink a coffee.”

They walked back to the pub, both still with damp hair, as neither had a hair dryer with them. Lennie attacked a sandwich. Samantha stuck to black coffee. She was muscular but every rib was visible. Lennie had taken in her figure during their work out. Definitely not my type. She liked a woman to be a woman and to look like one. Which meant breasts. Like Melanie Blaine’s. She felt the familiar twitch in her centre and crossed her legs. No chance.

“Come on, team,” she waved to Elijah and Sophia. “We have fifteen minutes before the rehearsal begins. That is cutting it fine. I want you all in every morning at least half an hour before we begin unless you are out buying props.”

They hurried back across to the rehearsal room, but it was still empty except for Delphine who was dozing in her chair. Elijah boiled the kettle again. Lennie went to the cloakroom to comb out her thick hair, which was still slightly damp. She was joined by Samantha. They got back into the room as the two stars and Robert walked in. Melanie stopped mid-sentence and looked them both up and down. Her lip curled.

The cast read through the rest of the play. The lunch break had taken some of the morning’s energy away, and Melanie had a sour look on her face. There was definitely a question mark hanging over the happy ending the way she spat out her last page of dialogue.

“Ladies and gentlemen, that was brilliant for a first reading. Of course, we will have to be much more upbeat at the end.”

Lennie suppressed a groan. In her own production, she would emphasise the darkness at the end of the play, even more than Melanie had just done. But she wasn’t a director, and probably never would be.

Melanie walked into the cloakroom as the stage management cleared the table of debris. There was not much to do this afternoon. As soon as they began blocking and the space filled with props, they would be much busier. Lennie had to lock up, so she waited for Melanie. Robert and Gareth were deep in conversation just outside the door. She heard them move off.

“You’ve found a friend, I see.”

“What... no... I mean... you mean Samantha? We went to work out together.”

“Oh really? I might join you tomorrow, that’s if three isn’t a crowd.”

“Of course not,” she snapped back. Why does this woman have the ability to push my buttons?

“Be careful, Eleonore.”

She walked away. Lennie followed her and locked the door as she watched Melanie climb into a sporty Mercedes. But she didn't drive off immediately. She reached for her smart phone. Lennie unlocked the chain on her bike and moved off into the traffic, going southwards. She lived on the borders of Hammersmith and Fulham, so the Shepherds Bush rehearsal location was a luxury for her. The Mercedes drew level as she stopped at some traffic lights and accelerated away when the light turned green. She caught a glimpse of dark grey eyes watching her in the rear mirror.
