

NATALIE MEG EVANS

*the*  
Wardrobe  
Mistress

Quercus

## PART ONE

### *In the Beginning . . .*



*December 1925, London*

*What if she died too?*

What if she, Vanessa Quinnell, were put into a hole as dark as this theatre, as cold as the night outside? She reached for her daddy's hand but his eyes were on the stage.

He was yelling, 'Come on, Billy-Boy, show us an ankle!' His voice cut through the laughter and the music. Daddy had been an actor once and Mum often said that from inside their home he could be heard all the way to the churchyard.

The Bad Fairy had cursed the baby princess, before flying up off the stage with a cackle. The King and Queen were wailing because one day, their little Briar-Rose would prick her finger and die – unless the curse were lifted. Vanessa knew what it meant to die. You were put underground and never came up again.

The princess's nursemaid had been summoned. Broad as a carthorse in a stripy dress and a jelly-bag cap, she was shaking her yellow ringlets and kicking up her dress to display red-spotted drawers. In a disturbingly deep voice, she bellowed, 'Children, we'll save Briar-Rose from doom, if with noise we fill this room!'

The Lilac Fairy could reverse the spell. Did that mean there was hope for her too, Vanessa wondered? Earlier that afternoon, a doctor had shone a light down her throat and tutted, before

telling Daddy that she must have an operation. Vanessa's Uncle Victor had had an operation, and now he was in a hole in the churchyard. But the Lilac Fairy would make everything all right. They must call her name, the fat nursemaid told them, particularly the children.

'Raise your voices as I count *one, two, three* –'

All the children bellowed, except Vanessa.

The nursemaid cupped a hand to her ear and told the children they weren't shouting loud enough. She strutted along the front of the stage, displaying her drawers, and seemed to stare right at Vanessa. 'Is there a little girl in the audience who isn't shouting at all?'

Vanessa let out a choking sob. She'd tried but her throat hurt too much.

Daddy lifted her out of her seat and held her level with his shoulder. His breath smelled funny. They'd both had their medicine before they came in to the theatre. Hers came in a glass bottle and tasted peppery. His came from a silver flask. 'Come on, Toots,' he urged, 'make a wish! Make it happen!'

So she clenched her fists around the playbill he'd bought with their tickets, and projected her will towards the brightly-lit stage. Moments later, child-fairies in shimmering tunics floated down. Their wings sent out diamond explosions around Princess Briar-Rose's cradle. Next, a lady in a puffball of lilac and silver net descended. Her hair was a cloud of moonlight curls and the audience drew in an awed breath. Vanessa's heart slid back to its proper place. The Good Fairy had come. All would be well.

Daddy thought so too. 'See, Toots? When you want something badly enough, it happens. It's not wrong to want something so much it hurts.'

‘Do you want something that hurts?’

‘I do.’

She asked what and he chuckled, ‘Never mind.’ The handsome prince would come on stage after the interval, he said.

‘What’s the interval?’

‘When the curtain drops so the sceneshifters can change the set. Got to make the stage look like a forest has been growing for a hundred years.’

‘Where is the handsome prince?’

‘In his dressing room, struggling into his fleshings.’ Fleshings go on your legs, Daddy explained. ‘They’re murder if you don’t put talcum powder on first. You have to shave your legs three times a week. It’s called “paying your dues” but it’s still the best job in the world.’

‘Shaving your legs?’

Daddy laughed, and told her she was priceless. ‘I don’t know about you, Toots, but I’m thirsty.’

The curtain dropped and Daddy asked a stranger, a lady, if she’d ‘escort his little girl’ to the lavatory. Afterwards, as Vanessa washed her hands, the lady touched the dried tears on her cheeks.

‘How old are you, dear?’

‘Five-and-a-half.’

‘I’m sure you’re much younger than that.’

‘I *am* five.’ As if Vanessa would be wrong on such an important matter! ‘I’m small. I was made from the last bit of pastry, when there wasn’t enough for a whole pie.’ For some reason, the lady thought that was funny.

When Vanessa was back with Daddy, his breath reeked of medicine. He handed her a choc-ice. ‘Don’t tell Mum, eh?’

She did her best with the ice cream but in the end, Daddy

finished it off. A bell rang and they took their seats again. The second part was much nicer. After the now-grown-up princess had been kissed by the prince, everybody joined hands and sang, including the Bad Fairy and the nursemaid. Then the curtain came down for the last time and Daddy whispered, 'We'll skip the National Anthem. Grab your coat, Toots.' People tutted as they left, but Daddy only laughed.

'We're going backstage,' he told her. 'Know what backstage is? If the theatre were a clock, backstage would be its workings. It's where the real fun is.'

He led her through a side door that seemed to be part of the wall. Then they were in a different kind of passage, this one with a hard, grey floor. There were lots of doors and people in a hurry. One man stopped, though, saying, 'Johnny Quinnell, blimey, how's tricks? Gotta dash. We have to reset Scene One for tonight's house. Full till January. You can't go wrong with *Sleeping Beauty* at Christmas!'

'Your name isn't Johnny,' Vanessa said as her dad helped her up a steep flight of stairs.

'Now, here's the thing,' Daddy answered. 'You're called Vanessa but I always call you Toots. Anyone can have extra names.'

'Is Johnny your extra name?'

'That's about the size of it.'

Upstairs, Daddy tapped on a brown door and walked straight in, calling, 'Parcel for you!' At first, all Vanessa saw was the edge of a long table. When Daddy sat her on it, she noticed that the room was full of rails, slung with white sheets like aprons. Velvet curtains, the colour of Victoria plums, covered the window. A woman with the darkest hair Vanessa had ever seen was sewing at the table. She looked up and Vanessa saw her mouth tighten, as if somebody had gathered it up behind.

‘Johnny. My God.’ Getting up, the woman backed away as the princess had done before she and the prince started kissing. She wore a red dress with buttons and pockets. Lots of pockets.

‘Still the undaunted mistress of the wardrobe, Eva?’

‘I’m still working, if that’s what you mean, Johnny.’ Her hair was bound across her head in plaits thick as the poles on a steam-horse carousel. Tucked into them, a pencil and a pair of gold spectacles. She said, ‘You’re going to tell me why you’re back after all this time?’

Vanessa might have listened, not least to find out why everyone here called her Daddy ‘Johnny’ and not ‘Clive’ as they did at home in Stanshurst – when they weren’t calling him ‘Quinnell’ or ‘Mr Quinnell’, that is – but she was fascinated by her end of the table. Shuffling towards a stack of white objects, she discovered wings like the ones the child-fairies had worn. Except these were dull as the paper that the Stanshurst butcher wrapped his bacon in. Checking to see that the grownups weren’t watching, Vanessa put her arms through the loops of one, and flapped her arms.

The grownups talked on in low voices.

‘. . . not a word and now you come? After all we endured? You tore my heart out.’

‘I had to bring the girl to have her tonsils seen by a specialist. She’s had bad throats since she was a baby. I wanted to bring her to see her first play too, and I could hardly take her to *King Lear* at the Criterion. Besides, I need a service.’

‘You *need* me? You inhuman—’

Vanessa broke in, calling, ‘Daddy, I’m trying to fly.’

The lady came towards Vanessa. Her eyes matched her hair, dark as liquorice. ‘What’s your name, precious?’ She turned to Daddy. ‘Mary or Margaret?’

‘I call her Toots.’ Daddy sang, “‘She’s my Tootsie-Wootsie” —’  
‘What’s her name?’ the lady interrupted in a different voice.  
‘Vanessa Elizabeth Quinnell.’

The lady jerked as if somebody had stuck a pin in her. Vanessa jumped off the table and looked down at her hands. She’d kept the playbill Daddy had bought, only now it was crumpled.

‘Don’t be afraid.’ The lady scooped her up, wings and all. Her arms felt soft – unlike Mum’s which were all hard knobbles – and she smelled of roses. Setting Vanessa on her feet, she crouched so their faces were opposite. ‘Did you like *Sleeping Beauty*, Vanessa?’ She spoke the name like powder-puff dabs.

‘After the Good Fairy came. Why are the wings not shiny?’

The lady helped her take the wings off and held them up to the light. ‘They’re covered in sequins which glitter only when the luminaires strike them.’ Vanessa hadn’t a clue what ‘luminaires’ were. ‘The magic of theatre, my love. Did you like the costumes? I mean, the clothes the people wore?’

‘I like the Lilac Fairy best.’

‘Ah, yes. But how muffled you are! Sore throat?’

Vanessa nodded. The lady said, ‘Let me tell you, the theatre is the best place in the world, and the wardrobe room is the best place in the theatre. When you get better, come back and play here. Will you?’

‘I don’t know.’ The lady made her feel warm and interesting but – ‘I would get lost in London.’

‘When you’re older, then. I shall make sure you come back.’ The lady went to a cupboard as big as the one in the room at The Hall where Mum worked. She found a length of ribbon which she held against Vanessa’s hair. ‘Sea green, perfect against brown.’ She wove it into Vanessa’s curls, showing her the result

in a mirror that reflected the room in reverse, including Daddy who watched them, arms folded. The ribbon made a green-blue butterfly on Vanessa's head.

'It's pretty,' she whispered.

'And very old, little one. French silk-satin. Take care of it.'

Daddy came over. All day, he'd been full of fun, cracking jokes, but now he looked as he did on Sundays when they went to church. 'Eva, she's bound to lose it, or her mother will object. Take it off.'

'Never throw back a gift, Johnny. Haven't you learned that?' Bending to Vanessa, the lady asked gently, 'What will you give me of yours?'

Vanessa whispered, 'I haven't got anything.'

The lady – Eva – took scissors from her pocket. She lifted one of Vanessa's nut-brown curls. 'Can you spare one?'

Vanessa nodded.

Snip. The lady closed her palm around the curl. Then, from the neck of her dress, she pulled a strand of ribbon that had a gold key hanging from it. She kissed the key, saying, 'We'll lock your curl away in a special place. That means you will come back.' Leaning across her table, she pulled a round, wooden box towards her. It made Vanessa think of a chocolate cake, the sort the baker made when Lady Stanhurst held a party. The little key flashed, a lid was lifted and the curl was placed inside the box. After locking it, the lady turned to Daddy. 'So, Johnny, what d'you want of me?'

'You need to bear witness while the child signs a document.'

'She can't sign at her age!'

'You watch.' Daddy took something from his pocket. It was the ink pad from his office. He'd let Vanessa play with it

sometimes, stamp bills with the word 'Paid' which made her feel grown-up, though if she came home with inky fingers, Mum would scrub them with kitchen soap.

Before she knew what he was doing, Daddy was pressing her fingertips to the pad. From inside his waistcoat, he fetched a sheet of paper and laid her fingers to it, one after the other. 'There's a good girl, every little piggy, including the thumb. Done. That didn't hurt, did it?' Daddy lifted her up beside the sink, and cleansed away the ink with soap that smelled of flowers.

The lady asked, 'What's my part, Johnny?'

'Get you-know-who's signature against those dabs.' Daddy winked. 'Post the form back, but not to my home – to the Hall. It'll find me.'

He meant Stanshurst Hall, where his office was.

'What are you up to?' the lady wanted to know.

'Planning for the future, Eva.'

'Yours, naturally.'

'Hers. Though now you mention it . . .' Daddy looked around the room, at his reflection in the mirror. 'I miss this place. So much, it hurts. I miss you too, Eva.'

Within minutes, they were walking down a side alley. The night was cold but bright as silver because it had snowed again. The pavements were mushy with footprints. 'It'll be All White in Kent,' Daddy joked. Kent was where they lived, in a village called Stanshurst, like the Hall, near the town of Hayes. It wasn't far from London.

On the homeward journey, she half-slept against Daddy's side while he sipped medicine from his flask. She could feel his throat swallowing. It was the smell of peppermint that told her they were about to draw in at Hayes station. Daddy always kept

mints in his pocket. Lifting her off the train, he said, 'We won't tell your mother about the show, Toots. Or the ink. Our secret?'

She promised. 'Our secret.'

He took the playbill from her reluctant grip, and the ribbon from her hair. 'I'll look after these. One day, I'll take you back to see my lovely Eva.'

Only he didn't. Some months later on her sixth birthday, Clive 'Johnny' Quinnell left home. She didn't see him go; she was in the cottage hospital having her tonsils out. Her mum and Lady Stanshurst had taken her there in the car, Daddy waving them off. Vanessa didn't set eyes on him again for nearly nineteen years and the, only a fleeting glimpse. All through her childhood she was convinced that her troublesome throat, her habit of whispering, had sent him away.