

Thursday, 25th October

Rose Grayson rushed into her house, slamming the door on the gale and driving rain. Panic had set in, her heart was pounding and she was sick with fright. To make matters worse, now that she was late, there was no time to back out, the cat had to be fed, and she had to change her clothes.

‘I can’t do this! What am I, some sort of masochist?’ she yelled at the bedroom mirror.

Hurriedly, she unbuttoned the blue uniform dress with one hand while riffling through the clothes in her wardrobe with the other, trying to decide what to wear. Finally, she dragged her jeans off the hanger, wriggled into them and pulled on a thick sweater. Unable to stand the persistent yowling of Min her cat, she pounded down the stairs to feed her, before returning to the bedroom mirror with a frustrated squeal. Her mane of curly, Titian hair had corkscrewed right out of control in the damp weather. Cursing, she dragged a brush through it, applied lipstick and nearly jumped out of her skin at the loud hammering on her front door.

Clearly Lauren had arrived.

‘Rosie - come on - I’m drowning out here!’ her friend called through the letterbox.

‘Coming!’ Rose clattered downstairs and opened the door.

Lauren lived four houses down the street. She was an extrovert, colourful character who, whilst not exactly pretty, had a face so full of warmth and character she drew everyone to her like a magnet. She was twenty-eight, three years older than Rose, and a graphic artist. Tonight she wore a long, bright orange latter-day hippy skirt under an aged Afghan coat she had jumped on with glee at the local Oxfam Shop. ‘It’s pure sixties – I love it!’ she had enthused, showing it off to Rose the week before.

‘Does it bite? Or more to the point is there anything living in it which might?’ Rose had asked warily.

‘Don’t be silly – it’s been dry cleaned. I hope.’

Now thoroughly wet, the coat resembled a pathetic abandoned dog in an advert for the RSPCA and smelled appalling.

‘Sorry about the pong,’ Lauren grinned.

‘I’m sorry too. I’ve changed my mind. I’m not coming to the audition.’

‘Rosie...’ Lauren paused, came dripping into the hallway and took her friend by the shoulders. ‘Do try. I know it’s in the bloody church – but it’s not your church. And we’re doing a pantomime, not King Lear.’

‘It still spooks me. Look, my hands are shaking, and I feel ill.’

‘If I were your patient, what would you advise me to do?’ demanded Lauren. ‘Face up to my fears or bury my head in the mud?’

‘Sand,’ muttered Rose. ‘And I’m a children’s nurse, not a shrink.’

‘Well, if you don’t come, I can’t go either. My car won’t start...which means I shan’t get the part I want ...’ She lowered her head to hide a smile.

Rose gave her a shove. ‘Blackmail! Your car never starts. Oh God...well, all right. But not the coat. Call the vet for it tomorrow - leave it in the bathroom till we get back – you can borrow my Barbour.’

‘Okay. It is a bit lively.’ Removing the coat she revealed a lime green sweater topping the orange skirt.

‘You look like traffic lights,’ grinned Rose. ‘How can you be an artist when you live in colours like that?’

‘It gets me noticed. Come on, we’re going to be late!’

Rose headed her little red Skoda for the local Methodist Church Hall, where the audition was to be held. ‘You have no idea how nervous I am – especially about going into the church,’ she muttered ‘I don’t know how you persuaded me into this.’

‘It will be good for you, Rose. Honestly, its fun. And when you’ve been through a rough time – and Lord knows you have – something outside of your normal life gives you a lift. They’re an interesting crowd. In fact, some are very interesting. If you were a psychiatric nurse instead of a Sister on the kids’ ward, you’d have a field day.’

‘Sounds scary...I think I’ve changed my mind. I’ll just drop you off outside...’

‘Don’t be daft. Try to calm down and don’t think about going into a church. After all it’s only a building.’

‘You’re right. Sorry. So, tell me about some of these mad people I’m about to meet.’

‘Better if you find out for yourself. I don’t want to prejudice your first impression. But one person I hope you will like is Clive.’

‘Clive? You haven’t mentioned him before. Have you been holding out on me?’

‘No...well, not really, he’s just...well, kind of a friend.’

‘Kind of a friend? What *kind* of a friend?’ she asked intrigued.

‘Well, we’ve been on a few dates – he’s really nice but it’s nothing serious. I don’t do serious, you know that. I’ll introduce the others as they pitch up.’

They pulled into the car park at the very large Methodist Church in the centre of the High Street where the Sipton Amateur Dramatic Society, unfortunately known as SADS, rehearsed their shows.

Rose and Lauren pushed open the heavy oak door and went into the stone-pillared foyer. To the left was a passage to the church hall and to the right the Minister’s office; straight ahead lay the church. The glass doors separating it from the foyer had been left open, but it was quiet and darkened. The smell of old hymn books and the lingering perfume of flowers left after Saturday’s wedding wafted out, and Rose stood for a moment, almost overcome with fear, and ready to run. Her breath caught in her throat, she felt sick and began to tremble violently.

‘I can’t...’ she finally whispered.

‘Yes, you can. We’re through here – not in the church. Just don’t look if it upsets you.’

Lauren took her arm and led her away into the large church hall with its polished parquet floor and pictures painted by the Sunday School children pinned round the walls. At one end was a small stage hung with dusty red velvet curtains; at the other end was a little kitchen, with a hatch through which the smell of coffee drifted. In the kitchen a diminutive woman in her sixties was pouring hot water into the green Beryl Ware cups without which no church canteen would be complete.

‘Hello, Patsy,’ Lauren greeted her. ‘Need a hand?’

‘No, thanks, but a longer pair of legs would be useful.’

Drawing nearer, Rose realised Patsy was a little person and standing on a specially constructed platform so she could reach the counter.

‘This is my friend Rose - she’s new,’ Lauren told her. ‘Rose, this is Patsy, who is our mother figure. She’s an artist, sculptor and formidable seamstress.’

‘And I play small parts on stage – very small parts,’ she chuckled. ‘Coffee?’

‘I would love one – thanks,’ smiled Rose gratefully. Her breathing had returned to normal, and now she looked around with interest.

Lauren pointed to couple in their mid-forties who were obviously in the middle of a confrontation. ‘That’s Mason and Candy Fairfax; Mason’s directing the pantomime.’ Almost nose to nose, but speaking quietly, their body language indicated that some vitriolic exchanges were taking place. Mason was about six-foot four and towered over Candy who was slim, blonde and spitting feathers. ‘They fight – often.’ Lauren shrugged. ‘But they probably have a great time making up.’

But do they?

To find out you’ll have to buy *Stage Struck*, available from most good bookshops and on-line.