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The Deserter's Daughter

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Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2017.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2104-7

Typeset in 11/16 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Chapter One

June 1920

‘Carrie Jenkins! What in heaven’s name is that you’re wearing? Oh my goodness!’

Heat flared in Carrie’s cheeks. She folded her plain shop dress in half longways and draped it over the footboard of the mahogany bedstead, trying to make it look as if her heart wasn’t clattering like the holiday express to Southport. She forced a smile.

‘Don’t tek on, Mam. It’s only a corset. It’s the new fashion.’

‘The new fashion for trollops!’

A sharp breath chilled her gullet. ‘Mam! How could you?’

Mam clapped a hand over her mouth, work-worn fingers splaying across lined lips. Carrie tore her gaze away. She was outraged, of course she was, but she felt a thrill of fear too. With the curtains drawn for modesty’s sake, the air in the bedroom the two of them shared was dense with heat, but was it the heat or her conscience making her flesh squeeze her bones?

‘I’m sorry, Carrie. What a thing to say.’

The mattress dipped as Mam sank onto the pale-lemon candlewick bedspread as if her legs had given out with shock. Her face was slack with disappointment and Carrie felt an urge to plump down beside her and wrap an arm round her, but Mam

wouldn't want comfort from someone who looked like a trollop. Besides, standing on the other side of the bedstead, Carrie felt sheltered, half-hidden. To move around the bed to Mam would be like opening herself to public scrutiny.

Mam shook her head. 'I'm sorry, love. I shouldn't have called you that.'

Oh, not an apology. That made it worse. Not that she was a trollop, never that, but she wasn't a nice girl any more and hadn't been for some time. If Mam should guess, if just seeing the new corset Mam should guess, she would chase Carrie down Wilton Lane with the broom. No, she wouldn't. She would lock her in the cellar and not let her out till Saturday.

Saturday.

Her wedding day. And after that it wouldn't matter if she had been a nice girl or not, because she would be Mrs Billy Shipton. A floaty feeling permeated Carrie's limbs. Mrs Billy Shipton. She had known Billy was the boy for her ever since she first clocked him back when she was a lass of twelve, and now they were getting wed the day after tomorrow.

'How could you, Carrie? What was you thinking?'

'It's only a corset.'

'It's more than that. It's your reputation.'

'No one's going to know. No one's going to see.'

'They won't need to. They'll see summat else. A proper corset, a decent corset, one that comes up right under the bust where it's meant to, with all but the very top of your camisole tucked inside it, holds your cami in place and gives you some support. That – that thing you're wearing doesn't hold owt in place. You'll . . . *jiggle*.'

'Oh, Mam, I've worn it all day and I haven't . . . *jiggled*.'

At least she fervently hoped not. She had spent a self-conscious morning feeling hopelessly unfettered as she weighed sugar and

currants and constructed a pyramid of Drummer Dyes boxes, all the while trying not to make unnecessary movements. But come the afternoon, when Trimble's was sweltering hot even with the door propped open, and the air was thick with the smell of wooden floorboards and tea leaves and lamp oil, and the customers were making shifty little movements that indicated they were trying to peel corsets from sweaty torsos, she had known herself to be the most comfortable person in the shop. More than comfortable: vindicated. Her new waist-high corset wasn't pure vanity after all. It was common sense too.

The mattress springs squealed as Mam bounced to her feet, her spine as straight as a poker. Her eyes were bright and she fizzed with energy, just like she used to before Pa died.

'We can't have Evadne seeing you like this, half-naked. She's a lady. You'd do well to tek a leaf out of her book, our Carrie.'

'*Mam*, will you stop it? There's nowt wrong with this corset. It's one of a range and Elizabeth's wouldn't stock a range if there wasn't a demand.'

'Elizabeth's? You bought that thing at the knicker elastic shop?'

'You tell me and Letty off for calling it that. Anyroad, you know they sell undergarments.'

'Not like that, I didn't. Those two old biddies were born the same year as Queen Victoria, and they dress like it an' all.'

'Aye, but you don't know what they're wearing underneath, do you?'

'Carrie Jenkins! Fancy saying say that about your elders.' But Mam laughed and couldn't pretend she hadn't.

'I didn't buy it to be tarty.'

'I know, chick, and I'm sorry about the word I used. That were the shock speaking. But I still don't like it. It's not decent.'

'I got it because . . .' Carrie injected brightness into her tone.

She refused to sound apologetic. 'You know the hours I spent embroidering my wedding camisole, and what a swine that sparkly thread was to work with. Well, I don't want to hide my cami under my old corset. I know no one's going to see it, but I want to feel special. I'm not a beauty like Evadne, but I want to feel special.'

'Oh, Carrie.'

Mam's face fell. Was she remembering all the times she had called Evadne the beauty of the family? That time Evadne stood in their kitchen looking demure in the smart brown tunic with the sashed waist that her posh Baxter grandparents bought for her when she started at the high school, and Pa said, 'Eh, you look reet bonny, lass,' and Mam, looking all swelled up, said, 'Evadne is the beauty of the family.' And the time new people moved in up the road and Mam had introduced them as, 'My lasses, Evadne and Carrie. Evadne is the beauty of the family.' Not, 'Evadne is the big one . . . the older one,' even though, goodness knows, there was a whole eight years between them. Or even 'Evadne is the darker one,' because her hair was a wonderful reddy-brown like a conker, aye, and as glossy as a conker an' all, while Carrie's was fair, and not even proper fair at that. Dirty fair, Letty's mam called it.

'It's because Evadne was born a Baxter,' Mam had explained to the world and his wife, and that was all the explanation that was needed. As a child, Carrie had thought of them as the Beautiful Baxters, even though she had met Grandfather and Grandmother Baxter and they weren't raving beauties. Evadne's dad must have been a right bobby-dazzler.

In fairness to Mam, it wasn't just her. In those days, folks were falling over themselves to admire Evadne, and whenever they did, Mam would do that swelling-up thing and say, 'Evadne is the beauty of the family.' And no one had ever looked at Carrie and said, 'The little 'un is beautiful too.'

Not that she had noticed at the time. Back then, she had been the luckiest little lass in the whole world because all the other girls had only hopscotch and hoops and French skipping, while she had all those *and* she had Evadne to look at.

‘I just don’t want to hide my lovely new cami underneath my old corset – and if you aren’t going to say summat kind, Mam, I’d rather you didn’t say owt.’

Mam fluttered her hands. ‘It’s a nice colour. Pale pink.’

‘Orchid.’

‘You what?’

‘Orchid. It said orchid on the box. The others said pink or cream. I thought orchid sounded a cut above.’ She pulled a face. ‘Turns out orchid means pale pink.’

All at once they were laughing, both of them, closeness restored, and things slid back to normal. Carrie hated being out of sorts with anyone. It wasn’t her way. She wished she could get on better with Evadne, but she was long past being impressed by the Beautiful Baxter. Mind you, Evadne had asked to see her in her wedding dress today and that counted for a lot.

‘Let’s get you dressed,’ said Mam.

Anticipation snaked through Carrie. The drawer glided open beneath her eager fingers and her hand hovered over her brand-new white stockings. The suspenders on her corset were made of pale pink (orchid!) satin ribbon with dainty satin rosettes. She glanced at Mam.

‘Save the stockings for Saturday, chick. It’s the dress Evadne’s coming to see.’

Carrie pattered across the polished wooden floor. Her heart was pattering too. She was about to put on the wedding dress that she, Mam, Letty and Mrs Hardacre had slaved over, two best mates and their mothers working together. She opened the hanging cupboard

and the nasal-cleansing aroma of eucalyptus came streaming out. Bloody hell! Yes, bloody hell, and that was swearing, and that was a sin, but she didn't care.

'Mam, did you have to? The cupboard reeks.'

'It's the only thing that gets a grease stain out of serge. I can't present myself at Mrs Randall's with a grease stain.'

Why not? It was doing Mrs Randall's cleaning that had caused the stain in the first place. Carrie sucked in an anxious breath but stopped midway before the eucalyptus could scrub her lungs. Honest to God, if she was doomed to walk up the aisle whiffing of eucalyptus, she would put Mam twice through the mangle.

Taking her dress out, she snapped the cupboard shut and sniffed like a hungry dog. It took her nose a moment to stop tingling and confirm that her beautiful dress was unsullied. A smile tugged at her lips. One day she would tell her children. 'There I was, all excited, about to try on my wedding dress for Auntie Evadne, and when I opened the cupboard, what did I smell?' and the children would cry 'Eucalyptus!' in gleeful voices, because they would have heard the story a hundred times before. It would be one of their favourites.

And one day – goodness, she had always pictured her children as youngsters, but one day, when her oldest daughter was getting married, they would share the special family joke as they took Letitia's dress out of the cupboard. She and Letty had vowed years ago to name their oldest girls after one another. After today and the eucalyptus, Letitia's dress would smell of roses, because Carrie would make heaps of muslin sachets and fill them with rose petals to fragrance the cupboard.

The fine cotton streamed through her reverent fingers, flowing as elegantly as silk. Heart engorged with emotion, she let Mam help her into the dress, standing still, elbow raised, as Mam bent to fasten the tiny pearly buttons that ran from hip to underarm.

The bedroom was hot as soup, but Carrie felt cool and lovely.

‘There,’ said Mam. ‘Wait while I move the looking-glass.’

Lifting it from the marble-topped washstand, she placed it on the chest of drawers, angling it on its hinges. It was shaped like a shield from the olden days and Carrie had always considered it stylish, but now she would have given anything for a square or oblong with more glass. She stood on her toes, caught tantalising glimpses of rounded neckline and elbow-length sleeves, then dropped back again.

She pressed her lips together, longing to see herself properly. Then she felt a thrill of pride. Billy had shelled out for a photographer, so she would be able to see herself in her dress for ever afterwards. Anyroad, she would see herself head to foot on Saturday morning, because Mr Clancy was giving her away and they had a full-length mirror. Carrie dearly hoped Mr Clancy thought he was having the honour because of living next door and having known her since she was a nipper.

‘Here. Use this.’ Mam picked up the hand mirror.

Carrie turned to her, feeling the movement of the flared skirt around her legs – just a gentle flare, nothing showy. She had always been warned against anything fussy, as if having a sister out of a higher social drawer might have given her unsuitable ideas. But she had never hankered after minute pencil pleats or lacy cuffs. Fuss was for ladies, for beauties. Fuss was for Evadne – though, let’s face it, she could wear a potato sack and still turn heads.

Holding the mirror in front of her at waist level like a bouquet, Carrie beamed at Mam. ‘I’m so glad Evadne asked to see me in my dress.’

Mam’s gaze shifted. ‘She didn’t actually ask, not as such.’ She fiddled with the brush and comb that matched the hand mirror, lining them up as if they weren’t perfectly tidy already. ‘But I know she’ll want to see it.’

Carrie's spirits deflated. She should have known. Mam did this now and again, tried to bring them close. It never worked, even though she was mother to both of them. It was Pa who had held them together. He had worshipped the ground Evadne's smartly shod feet walked on; he had fostered Carrie's childhood adoration.

'I asked her to bring the veil,' said Mam, 'and why shouldn't she see your dress? She's your sister.'

Carrie gave her a kiss. 'It was naughty of you to pretend, but I'm glad you did, because I get to wear my dress.'

'And the veil,' said Mam.

And the veil. Perfect.