

Like a Charm by Elle McNicoll

Chapter 1 Extract

The first time I ever saw one of them was the night that I saw my grandfather for the last time.

It was a foggy night in Kensington, London. I was five and allowed to come downstairs to my parent's annual Christmas party, on the condition that I kept quiet and made myself useful by handing out the devilled eggs. I was the only person there my age; the adults towered over me like trees holding cocktail glasses.

I was invisible to them all. They laughed at things that weren't funny, and always laughed too loudly. Some would make cooing noises at me and tell me my dress was pretty. I didn't choose it, I thought it was ugly, but I said nothing.

Our house in London was narrow. High, but slender.

People were crammed inside, and the presence of the guests stole every bit of air in the house. A mess of sound and smell and mystery to me. Seeing my parents and their friends outside of the school playground was like entering a portal into another world. One of secret codes and a different language. One of false expressions. Sly glances and raised eyebrows. People would clink their glasses warmly, but their eyes were cool. Assessing.

Then I saw Grandpa. Like a fleck of gold underneath the dirt.

He was in the kitchen, washing his hands. I put my empty tray down on the table but ran towards him instead of picking up another.

"Ramya!"

At five, I was easy to lift up. I don't remember every word he ever said to me, but I can remember how they reached inside of me and made everything better. I laughed as he swung me around.

"It's late for you to be up," he said, not sounding the least bit disapproving. "Spotted something new under the tree?"

I beamed. I knew he would bring presents.

"Where's Granny?"

"Home with a cold," he replied. "She didn't want to travel."

"Oh, ok."

"She picked out some of your presents, though."

"There's more than one?"

Mum and Dad disapproved of multiple presents, but Grandpa didn't think there was any other way.

I pulled on his dry hand, leaning my whole small body in the direction of the front room. Most people were through there, the largest room in the house. He let me move him down the hall to join the others.

"Oh!" I suddenly remembered. "My tray."

I hurried back into the kitchen, smiling at the hired member of staff as they handed me a new silver plate of food to give out. I concentrated very hard, as I made my way back to the party, balancing the tray with care.

There was a crescendo of voices as I neared the room. I could hear Dad telling one of his work stories, over by the nine foot Christmas tree. Mum was talking to some of her friends about how she didn't like the school I was going to. Grandpa sat by the grand piano, ignored by the rest of the room. One finger on the keys.

I joined him, placing my tray down on the lid of the shiny black instrument.

He smiled at me, our smile. The one that only I got.

"Want to open a present early?"

I almost knocked the tray over in my excitement.

Yes!”

We both glanced over at Mum. Grandpa was her father. Every bit as soft, as she was hard. Every part understanding, when she was quick to anger. Every bit warm, when she was...

A parcel wrapped in gold, with a satin pink ribbon.

“Granny wrapped it,” he explained. “She’s the master.”

I laughed. Granny was dazzling and she liked everything to be beautiful and unique. I couldn’t rip her paper; I opened the present with such care and thought. Knowing that the end result would be worth it.

And it was.

A soft, woollen hat with a little nub in its middle. Baby pink, with little red hearts. The material was so gentle; I noticed it was the same kind that my grandparents’ jumpers were always made of.

“A hat,” I exclaimed, placing it on my head.

“A beret,” he corrected, reaching over to tilt it slightly, so that it sat upon my long dark hair at an angle. “Your Granny knows how smart you are. Now she wants you to be stylish.”

I grinned. They were the only ones who ever told me I was smart. Mum would get frustrated when I knocked things over, always muttering “useless”. Dad would just glance over, grimace, and then go back to his newspaper or his phone.

“I love it,” I told Grandpa.

I turned with delight and vigour to grab my tray, only to stop dead. A tall woman with alabaster skin and a shimmering dress stood behind me. She smiled down, with teeth that were too white.

Every hair on my body stood on end. Every goosebump rose. It was like a thousand sewing needles were pressing against my skin.

“Play me a song?” she asked, her voice like windchimes.

Only, it wasn’t really a question at all. She wasn’t asking.

I continued to stare up at her.

Something flickered in her face. Like a ripple.

“Play me something,” she repeated. A little more weight in her voice.

I still couldn’t move. I was frozen. I simply stared up, feeling the urge to run.

Suddenly, Grandpa moved behind me. He settled himself upon the piano stool and began to play. As the music began, the woman settled a little. Her mouth turned up into a smile.

Then she opened her mouth. And sang.