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McKenzie Watterson

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DUCHESS IN RED

MCKENZIE WATTERSON

The sight of the theater door, a gray rectangle in a sea of graffiti and black-painted brick, stopped Marianne only for a moment. Ever so slightly, her shoulders leveled and her breath slowed with forced calm. She turned her face to the sun for one last warm moment before she pulled open the stage door. The maze of hallways and dressing rooms was dimly lit. Posters, most with her silhouette on them, covered the walls: “*The Duchess in Red* starring Marianne Duncan. Dangerous and decadent. A must see!” Signs with fat red arrows proclaimed “Stage This Way,” as if anyone could forget where the spotlight was.

She did not remove her scarf or sunglasses as she walked through the halls. They would recognize her. The first open door was a large dressing room for female dancers in the chorus. As she walked by, lights surrounding the shared mirrors glanced off the buttons on her overcoat and highlighted the graceful line of her cheekbone. She passed the room and heard whispers of her name. She didn’t have to look back to know at least one dancer had peered out the door, watching her progress down the hall. She grinned as she slowed to a more purposeful walk, the rhythmic click of her stilettos echoing in the narrow hallway. She passed by the open doors of various supporting actors and actresses not important enough to have their own rooms. One pair even had the guts to slam their door as she passed by. Her inching smile transformed into a wide grin at the loud crash.

The nameplate outside her dressing room had been covered with a slash of masking tape with the name “Greta Anderson” scrawled in marker. She peeled it off with one swift motion, revealing the glistening gold lettering beneath: Marianne Duncan.

“Greta, my dear, I’m afraid you’re back in the chorus this evening,” Marianne crooned as she entered her dressing room. Greta whipped around, bobby pins falling out of her thin blond hair. Marianne greeted Greta’s wide-eyed indignation with ease, pressing the masking tape label onto Greta’s robe.

“There,” Marianne gushed. “Now you have your own label to claim one of the mirrors in the group room.”

“Daniel didn’t tell me you—”

“Oh, you’re on a first name basis with big Mr. Director?” Marianne placed her bag on the boudoir. “You must be really moving up in the world! Unfortunately, Daniel doesn’t tell you everything, sweetie. Get out of my dressing room.”

With a glare, Greta gathered her makeup and the dilapidated stuffed elephant she used as a good luck charm.

“I’m going to see what Daniel has to say about this.” She stormed out of the room.

Marianne removed her scarf and sunglasses, hanging them with her coat on the back of the door. She surveyed her room, searching for any of Greta’s lasting intrusions. Letters from Marianne’s fans still lined the mirror. The coffee table, usually hidden beneath adoring roses, was bare. Marianne took the few remaining flowers and tossed them in the garbage. She had no need for Greta’s sloppy seconds.

Her hands began to tremble. Anxiety gripped her chest as she closed the door and pressed her back into it. She had made it this far. Everything was going to be okay. Marianne forced three slow, deep breaths. It was then that she noticed the smell. Sickly sweet vanilla wafted into her nose. She quickly located Greta’s offending candles and threw them out with the flowers.

“Greta, I have your costume ready to go.” Emily, the dresser, entered with the signature gown.

“You’re going to have to go get mine,” Marianne said. “Greta’s dress is far too scrawny for me.”

“Oh Mari, you’re here!” Emily exclaimed, the smile lines around her eyes creased deeper than usual. “I didn’t think you were supposed to get back so soon.”

“I decided to return a little early. You didn’t think I would miss press night, did you?” Marianne handed her the press invite that a fan had forwarded.

“Of course not. Thank goodness.” Emily scurried out of the room to find Marianne’s gown. Marianne lifted her dress over her head and put on her silk dressing robe. She sighed as the familiar burgundy folds enveloped her. Ignoring the periodic stares from different cast members as they invented excuses to pass by her open door, she sat down at her boudoir and began a familiar routine, preparing herself for the stage.

She pulled out an array of makeup and hair products from her

bag, carefully arranging them in the order she would need them. Then she pulled out a small tin of pastilles, placing one on her tongue before putting the box in the corner of her dresser. Immediately, her throat and vocal chords relaxed. Marianne pulled out a single rose from its wrapping, delicately dried with a ribbon-tied note still dangling from its stem. "Break a leg, kiddo!" the note read. She laid the flower at the base of the mirror. Humming soft scales, she began to warm up as she brushed foundation across her features. She took a sip from her water bottle, trying to ignore the missing part of her routine. She raised the water to her lips and drank half the bottle.

"Emily? Do you have any red lipstick?" Marianne called out to no response. Maybe there was some old makeup in her boudoir. As she opened the drawer, three little glass bottles rolled out. Absolut. They hadn't cleaned out her dressing room. Marianne grabbed the bottles. She glanced around to see if anyone was watching and thrust them into the pockets of her robe. They felt as though they would pull her down from her chair. Quelling her shaking hands, she sang vocal warm-ups until she fell into a familiar rhythm. She returned to the mirror and her routine.

"Marianne. What are you doing here?" Daniel stood in the doorway.

"This is my dressing room," she replied. Without turning to face him, she continued to glide mascara across her eyelashes.

Daniel crossed his arms. "Four weeks, they said. And you know as well as I do that it's only been three."

"They let me out early." She twisted the tube of mascara closed.

"Bullshit."

"Believe whatever you will. I'm here and I'm going to perform."

"You know I can't let you do that." Daniel shooed a dancer away and shut the door behind him. "What's going on, Mari?"

Marianne put down her mascara, and, standing to her full height, pounded her words into Daniel, calm and deadly.

"What's going on is that I am here to perform. Right now there is a critic from every major newspaper in New York picking up a ticket at our box office. Do you really want my understudy out there? Greta still can't hit that C at the end of act one, can she?"

Daniel's silence answered her question.

"Exactly. You need me. And that is why you are going to let me perform. Now please open the door so Emily can come in and prepare me for the show."

Marianne turned around, knowing she had won. Daniel huffed in frustration and flung the door open. He paused to talk to Emily in the

hallway. "Oh good, you already got her dress. Did everyone just decide she was performing without consulting me? You know what, never mind. Just make sure she's clean, okay?"

The little bottles in Marianne's pockets grew heavier and her heart beat a little faster as her fingers brushed the cool glass. What harm could one sip do? Marianne's hand leapt out of her pocket when Emily entered the room.

"Here's your dress! We might need to make a few repairs once you have it on, but it's pretty much still in stellar condition!" Emily helped her out of her robe and tossed it on the couch out of Marianne's reach.

Emily held out the dress for Marianne to step into. Welcoming waves of cool red silk washed over her skin. Emily's quick fingers fastened each tiny button running from the bottom of her spine to the valley between her shoulder blades. The dress embraced each curve of Marianne's body. She brushed her fingers across the careful ruching at her waist. The sleeves clung tightly to the entire length of her arms. A plunging neckline framed the cool strand of pearls that Emily fastened around her neck. Marianne turned to face the mirror. She *was* the Duchess in Red.

"Places in ten minutes." The stage manager's voice burst from the intercom near the door of the room.

"Thank you, ten," Emily replied, then turned to examine Marianne's costume. "Oh! You need some lipstick!" She pulled some out of the drawer where the bottles had been. "There, now you're perfect. Ready?"

"I was born ready." Marianne smirked, but the silk caressing her skin began to feel tighter. Was *The New York Times* out there? Undoubtedly. What about *The Daily News*? She eyed the bulges in the discarded robe. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, but felt no relief.

"You better check in with James," Emily reminded her. "Does he even know you're back?"

"He should by now." Marianne smiled and glided out the door to the dressing room across from hers. As usual, his door was closed, but notes of warm baritone drifted from under it.

She knocked. "It's me." The singing stopped.

"What the hell? Marianne?" James opened the door. She slowly let her eyes slide over his features.

"Did you miss me?"

"Come on in." He smiled and opened the door wider. She brushed by him as she entered the room. His dressing room was dim, lit only by Christmas lights crisscrossing the ceiling. He must have finished hair and makeup early. Marianne's eyes caught on the open bottle of wine

on his dresser.

“Oh, shit!” he said, corking the bottle and stashing it in a drawer. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Marianne replied. His lips had deep purple stains in their creases. She wondered if they would taste like wine.

He began pacing. “So, was anyone planning on telling me you’re back, or were they going to wait until we’re on stage together and see if I notice it’s not Greta out there with me?”

“See, that is the disadvantage of being a hermit.” Marianne caught him mid-pace and put an arm around him, resting her head on his shoulder. “You miss important news.”

“There’s never a dull moment with you, is there?” She felt his shoulders finally relax. She kissed him on the cheek and let her hand drop. “See you on the stage.” Before she could leave his room, the intercom came to life.

“James, Daniel wants to see you. Stage left, now.”

“Excuse me.” James pushed by her and was gone.

Marianne froze. She stared at the second drawer down on James’s dresser. Dim lighting cast shadows across it. She crossed the room and caressed the smooth wooden handle of the drawer. She could walk away. She *should* walk away.

The drawer slid open when she pulled, and the wine bottle rolled forward. The dark nectar swayed inside the green glass. She slammed the drawer shut. She did not need it; she was Marianne Duncan.

“Places in five.”

Nerves buzzed in every inch of her body and breath escaped her. She could not go out onto the stage like this. Marianne returned to the drawer and removed the wine cork with an expert twist. Intoxication wafted from the bottle, and she inhaled the heavy scent. She tilted the slender neck of the bottle, anticipating heady release. Her stained lips would match James’s when they met on stage, wrapped in the soft haze. The faces of the critics and the audience would all blur together, her performance a familiar whirlwind of color and song. The first drop of wine bit her tongue.

“No.” She dropped the bottle. With shattered glass, its spell was broken.

Marianne stumbled out of the room. Her dressing room was bright in comparison. She gulped water and placed another pastille on her tongue. After replenishing her red lipstick, she began singing scales again. Her heartbeat mellowed. Any moment now.

“Places,” the stage manager’s voice pealed through the intercom.

Marianne lifted her head, striding through one last door to the wings of backstage. The indistinct murmur of the crowd rolled in, slightly muffled by the thick curtain. The orchestra stirred to life. Stray voices of violins, flutes, and horns mingled with the opening notes of the overture. The audience hushed, and behind the curtain, the lighting cue for the first scene raised. Marianne took a deep breath.

Dust swirled off the curtains and played in the light. Soft shuffling feet announced the presence of the dancers, ready to make their entrance. The overture swelled.

Only seconds now before the curtains opened and the dancers entered. The dress felt tighter than before, too tight. Heat from the lights caused sweat to bead on Marianne's forehead. The curtains swept open, dancers rushed to fill the stage and embody the music. Her cue was coming up. She tried to breathe, but the dress was too tight.

Just as she turned, rushing away from a performance sure to end in disaster, Emily caught her.

"There's someone here from Healing Steps. She's looking for you, but Daniel's stalling. If you don't go on stage right now, she's going to take you back."

Emily spun her around and pushed her toward the stage. This was it; she had no choice. This performance would stop all the whispers. To hell with those who said she was washed up, her legacy drowned. Marianne was there to perform, and the siren's call was fading. She didn't need it. Right on cue, she strode to center stage. Whispers rippled through the audience as they realized who was standing in front of them—a surprise return from Marianne Duncan. First one clap, then a few, then the whole audience burst out in cheers. Marianne finally let out the breath she had been holding.

The orchestra held their chord until the adoration died down, but she did not begin singing. The world around her was crystalline. She felt exhilaration, lost long ago at the bottom of a bottle, stir anew deep inside her. The whole audience hung on her lips, waiting for her sweet melody. A fiendish flicker rose in her chest. She heard the creaks of people leaning forward in their seats, completely at her mercy. She let the anticipation build. Three. Two. One. Notes soared out from deep inside her, filling the theater. She was home.

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When the curtains closed for intermission, Daniel was waiting for her in the wings, smiling and shaking his head.

"I told you I was going to perform." Marianne tried not to grin.

"I never should have doubted you," he said, but his smile faded. "The woman from Healing Steps is in your dressing room."

Marianne straightened her back, raised her chin, and strode into her room.

"I'm sorry, no visits from fans until after the performance." Marianne began to touch up her makeup.

"You know that's not why I'm here." The woman was wearing a pale green polo, embroidered with a dove carrying the words, "Healing Steps." There was a coffee stain on her khakis.

"Get out of my dressing room."

"Marianne, why did you leave treatment?"

Marianne's heart pounded. She whipped around.

"In case you had not noticed, my name is on every poster you passed on your way in here. That show you see out there—it's a sniveling wreck without me. I am Marianne Duncan. I *am* the Duchess in Red. I am here to perform. Now leave."

"Cut the crap. Do you understand the concept of court-ordered rehab? You did not have permission to leave our facility. Give me one good reason not to haul you back right now. I bet you're not even clean." The woman began searching the room, checking in drawers, shifting around makeup. Marianne's heart stopped when the woman reached her robe. How could she have been so stupid? She should have thrown the bottles away, drained them in the sink, anything but leave them in her room. The woman lifted the incriminating fabric from the floor. Marianne wondered how the audience would react when Greta went on as the Duchess in the second act. But when the woman patted the pockets, she found nothing. Where were the bottles?

"I told you." Marianne's words cut through the silence. "I'm here to perform. I'm clean."

"I still have to take you back." The woman crossed her arms.

"I know." Marianne closed the door behind her. She would not let the chorus girls see her beg. Her voice softened. "Just, please, not yet. Please let me finish this performance. Every newspaper in town is out there. I need this. I need to know that I can do this without—" Marianne played with the stitching in her sleeve. "Just one performance, please?"

"Places for Act Two," the intercom interrupted.

"The moment this show is over, you're mine. I'll be out back with a taxi." The woman flung open the door and stalked away.

Emily came in to check on the costume. "I saw you in James's room." Emily fixed a stitch at her waist. "With the wine."

"Emily, you have to know I didn't—"

“I know. I almost went and got Greta’s dress again, but you stopped.” She straightened. There were familiar bottle-shaped lumps in the pockets of her jeans. “After that, I wasn’t about to let Mrs. Healing Steps steal your second chance.”

“Thank you.”

“Now don’t waste it.” Emily reached out and brushed a curl out of Marianne’s face. The intercom erupted with sound.

“I said places for Act Two! Where is Marianne?”

“Coming!”

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The adoring roar of the crowd followed her off the stage. When she entered her dressing room, a symphony of colorful flowers greeted her. She let her hair cascade to her shoulders and wiped the stage makeup from her features. The once-cool silk folds of her dress were warm as she let them slide off her body. She redressed in her street clothes, securing the belt of her coat around her slender waist, wrapping her hair in the scarf, and perching her sunglasses on her nose. The only item she returned to her bag was the rose: “Break a leg, kiddo!”

Before leaving the dressing room, she gathered a large armful of flowers. Daniel, Emily, and James were all waiting outside her door, gushing. She gently pushed past them and began her walk down the corridor. Greta was near the entrance to the dancer’s dressing room, still half in costume. She thrust the armful of flowers into Greta’s confused arms, damaging petals. Without a word, Marianne Duncan strode past fans screaming at the stage door and slid into the waiting yellow taxi. •