

Chapter 12

As Violet and Klaus Baudelaire stood, still in their nightgown and pyjamas, backstage at Count Olaf's theatre, they were of two minds, a phrase which here means "they felt two different ways at the same time." On one hand, they were of course filled with dread. From the murmur of voices they heard on the stage, the two Baudelaire orphans could tell that the performance of *The Marvellous Marriage* had begun, and it seemed too late to do anything to foil Count Olaf's plan. On the other hand, however, they were fascinated, as they had never been backstage at a theatrical production and there was so much to see. Members of Count Olaf's theatre troupe hurried this way and that, too busy to even glance at the children. Three very short men were carrying a large flat piece of wood, painted to look like a living room. The two white-faced women were arranging flowers in a vase that from far away appeared to be marble, but close up looked more like cardboard. An important-looking man with warts all over his face was adjusting enormous light fixtures. As the children peeked onstage, they could see Count Olaf, in his fancy suit, declaiming some lines from the play, just as the curtain came down, controlled by a woman with very short hair who was pulling on a long rope, attached to a pulley. Despite their fear, you see, the two older Baudelaires were very interested in what was going on, and only wished that they were not involved in any way.

As the curtain fell, Count Olaf strode offstage and looked at the children. "It's the end of Act Two! Why aren't the orphans in their costumes?" he hissed to the two white-faced women. Then, as the audience broke into applause, his angry expression turned to one of joy, and he walked back onstage. Gesturing to the short-haired woman to raise the curtain he strode to the exact centre of the stage and took elaborate bows as the curtain came up. He waved and blew kisses to the audience as the curtain came down again, and then his face once again filled with anger. "Intermission is only ten minutes," he said, "and then the children must perform. Get them into costumes, quickly!"

Without a word the two white-faced women grabbed Violet and Klaus by the wrists and led them into a dressing room. The room was dusty but shiny, covered in mirrors and tiny lights so the actors could see better to put on their makeup and wigs, and there were people calling out to one another and laughing as they changed their clothes. One white-faced woman yanked Violet's arms up and pulled her nightgown off over her head, and thrust a dirty, lacy white dress at her to put on. Klaus, meanwhile, had his pyjamas removed by the other white-faced woman, and was hurriedly stuffed into a blue sailor suit that itched and made him look like a toddler.

"Isn't this exciting?" said a voice, and the children turned to see Justice Strauss, all dressed up in her judge's robes and powdered wig. She was clutching a small book. "You children look wonderful!"

"So do you," Klaus said. "What's that book?"

"Why, those are my lines," Justice Strauss said. "Count Olaf told me to bring a law book and read the real wedding ceremony, in order to make the play as realistic as possible. All you have to say, Violet, is 'I do,' but I have to make quite a speech. This is going to be such fun."

"You know what would be fun," Violet said carefully, "is if you changed your lines around, just a little." Klaus's face lit up. "Yes, Justice Strauss. Be creative. There's no reason to stick to the legal ceremony. It's not as if it's a real wedding."

Justice Strauss frowned. "I don't know about that, children," she said. "I think it would be best to follow Count Olaf's instructions. After all, he's in charge."

"Justice Strauss!" a voice called. "Justice Strauss! Please report to the makeup artist!"

"Oh my word! I get to wear makeup." Justice Strauss had on a dreamy expression, as if she were about to be crowned queen, instead of just having some powders and creams smeared on her face. "Children, I must go. See you onstage, my dears!"

Justice Strauss ran off, leaving the children to finish changing into their costumes. One of the white-faced women put a flowered headdress on Violet, who realized in horror that the dress she had changed into was a bridal gown. The other woman put a sailor cap on Klaus, who gazed in one of the mirrors, astonished at how ugly he looked. His eyes met those of Violet, who was looking in the mirror as well.

"What can we do?" Klaus said quietly. "Pretend to be sick? Maybe they'd call off the performance."

"Count Olaf would know what we were up to," Violet replied glumly. "Act Three of The Marvellous Marriage by Al Funcoot is about to begin!" a man with a clipboard shouted. "Everyone, please, get in your places for Act Three!"

The actors rushed out of the room, and the white-faced women grabbed the children and hustled them out after them. The backstage area was in complete pandemonium—a word which here means "actors and stagehands running around attending to last-minute details." The bald man with the long nose hurried by the children, then stopped himself, looked at Violet in her wedding dress, and smirked.

"No funny stuff," he said to them, wagging a bony finger. "Remember, when you go out there, just do exactly what you're supposed to do. Count Olaf will be holding his walkie-talkie during the entire act, and if you do even one thing wrong, he'll be giving Sunny a call up there in the tower."

"Yes, yes," Klaus said bitterly. He was tired of being threatened in the same way, over and over.

"You'd better do exactly as planned," the man said again.

"I'm sure they will," said a voice suddenly, and the children turned to see Mr. Poe, dressed very formally and accompanied by his wife. He smiled at the children and came over to shake their hands. "Polly and I just wanted to tell you to break a leg."

"What?" Klaus said, alarmed. "That's a theatre term," Mr. Poe explained, "meaning 'good luck on tonight's performance.' I'm glad that you children have adjusted to life with your new father and are participating in family activities."

"Mr. Poe," Klaus said quickly, "Violet and I have something to tell you. It's very important."

"What is it?" Mr. Poe said.

"Yes," said Count Olaf, "what is it you have to tell Mr. Poe, children?"

Count Olaf had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and his shiny eyes glared at the children meaningfully. In one hand, Violet and Klaus could see, he held a walkie-talkie.

“Just that we appreciate all you’ve done for us, Mr. Poe,” Klaus said weakly. “That’s all we wanted to say.”

“Of course, of course,” Mr. Poe said, patting him on the back. “Well, Polly and I had better take our seats. Break a leg, Baudelaires!”

“I wish we could break a leg,” Klaus whispered to Violet, and Mr. Poe left.

“You will, soon enough,” Count Olaf said, pushing the two children toward the stage. Other actors were milling about, finding their places for Act Three, and Justice Strauss was off in a corner, practicing her lines from her law book. Klaus took a look around the stage, wondering if anyone there could help. The bald man with the long nose took Klaus’s hand and led him to one side.

“You and I will stand here for the duration of the act. That means the whole thing.”

“I know what the word ‘duration’ means,” Klaus said.

“No nonsense,” the bald man said. Klaus watched his sister in her wedding gown take her place next to Count Olaf as the curtain rose. Klaus heard applause from the audience as Act Three of *The Marvellous Marriage* began.

It will be of no interest to you if I describe the action of this insipid—the word “insipid” here means “dull and foolish”—play by Al Funcoot, because it was a dreadful play and of no real importance to our story. Various actors and actresses performed very dull dialogue and moved around the set, as Klaus tried to make eye contact with them and see if they would help. He soon realized that this play must have been chosen merely as an excuse for Olaf’s evil plan, and not for its entertainment value, as he sensed the audience losing interest and moving around in their seats. Klaus turned his attention to the audience to see whether any of them would notice that something was afoot, but the way the wart-faced man had arranged the lights prevented Klaus from seeing the faces in the auditorium, and he could only make out the dim outlines of the people in the audience. Count Olaf had a great number of very long speeches, which he performed with elaborate gestures and facial expressions. No one seemed to notice that he held a walkie-talkie the entire time.

Finally, Justice Strauss began speaking, and Klaus saw that she was reading directly from the legal book. Her eyes were sparkling and her face flushed as she performed onstage for the first time, too stage-struck to realize she was a part of Olaf’s plan. She spoke on and on about Olaf and Violet caring for each other in sickness and in health, in good times and bad, and all of those things that are said to many people who decide, for one reason or another, to get married.

When she finished her speech, Justice Strauss turned to Count Olaf and asked, “Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“I do,” Count Olaf said, smiling. Klaus saw Violet shudder.

“Do you,” Justice Strauss said, turning to Violet, “take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do,” Violet said. Klaus clenched his fists. His sister had said “I do” in the presence of a judge. Once she signed the official document, the wedding was legally valid. And now, Klaus could see that Justice Strauss was taking the document from one of the other actors and holding it out to Violet to sign.

“Don’t move an inch,” the bald man muttered to Klaus, and Klaus thought of poor Sunny, dangling at the top of the tower, and stood still as he watched Violet take a long quill pen from Count Olaf. Violet’s eyes were wide as she looked down at the document, and her face was pale, and her left hand was trembling as she signed her name.