

The Scarlet Stockings Trilogy
BOOK ONE: THE ENCHANTED RIDDLE



CHAPTER 1

Hoxton, a district of London, April 1923

The luncheon bell clanged gloomily through the dim corridors of the Orphanage of Saint Jude. From all over the old building the girls, aged from five to sixteen, began to collect outside the dining hall. In their drab gray uniforms they all looked the same, dreary and colorless. Just like St. Jude's itself.

St. Jude's wasn't a harsh place. It was really quite kind. It was just that sadness and boredom hung in the air like a sour smell. The 'babies' were allowed to laugh and play games, but when the 'grown up' age of five was reached life became a serious matter. After that, fun, so desperately longed for, could only be sneaked onto the premises by a brave few.

Below the dining hall, in the dusty basement gym, a slender figure leaped energetically through the air. Daphne's long, shining dark brown hair streamed out behind her as she danced. Her face, with its creamy olive

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skin and enormous dark eyes, wore a look of total, concentrating bliss. Deaf to the bell's summons, she flew in graceful movement down the narrow room. Humming, she was completely absorbed in her imagination. Her diamond-scattered skirt floated around her as she danced. In the gold-encrusted theater, with its deep red velvet seats, the applause grew to a deafening roar.

"Daphne!" A quiet voice spoke from the doorway. Daphne came down to earth with a startled bump. The packed theater and its cheering audience vanished.

"Didn't you hear the bell?" asked Sister Mary Euphoria, St. Jude's popular young music mistress. "Lunch."

"Can I just do one more quick length of the gym? And could you watch me, Sister, and tell me if you think my landings are getting steadier," Daphne pleaded.

"Sorry, Daphne. Now. You know you're supposed to set an example to the junior girls."

Sister Mary Euphoria reached into the pocket of her black habit and pulled out some hairpins. "Put your hair up tidily. We're late." With her hands firmly placed on Daphne's reluctant shoulders, the nun gave her a friendly squeeze and steered her into the corridor.

"Oh, cruel Messenger of Fate. My ballet career means nothing to you," Daphne cried. She staggered backwards, the back of her hand pressed to her forehead.

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Mary Euphoria smiled affectionately. “And which of the thousands of books you’ve taken out of the school library inspired you to utter those deathless phrases?”

Daphne, caught, grinned back and snapped briskly out of her touching swoon. “All right then, I’m coming, but at least tell me whether or not the rumors are true.”

Sister Mary Euphoria never pretended she didn’t know what you were talking about, nor was she stingy with information.

“Yes,” she said cautiously. “They’re true. There *is* a family applying to adopt an older girl. Apparently, the poor mother’s had to give up on having a daughter of her own, and the family all feel it’s too late for them to bring up a baby.”

Daphne’s eyes widened. It was well known at St. Jude’s that everyone wanted babies to adopt. The older you got the less chance there was that anyone would choose *you*. Daphne’s mind seethed with questions. Watching her excited face Mary Euphoria said gently, “That’s all I know, I promise.”

They entered the dining hall, where the subdued voices of more than two hundred girls echoed back at them. Daphne slid in on a bench already filled with her classmates, while Sister Mary Euphoria took up her place at the table’s head. Making a face at the soggy sausages, gray mashed potatoes and pile of wilted cabbage on the plate in front of her, Daphne slowly began to eat.

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Then she saw her arch-enemy, the elderly Sister Pauline Emmanuel, trudging past the table with the day's post. There won't be anything for me Daphne thought, with a shiver of disappointment. There never had been. Not once in the thirteen years since she'd been found outside St. Jude's front door, with only a four word note pinned to her baby shawl, 'My name is Daphne'.

Her mind drifted away to the interesting question of why, exactly, Sister Pauline Emmanuel hated her so much. She was startled by an excited nudge from the girl next to her. "Daphne! Wake up! The Reverend Mother wants you."

Stunned, Daphne walked, a seemingly endless walk, to the front of the long room.

"How nice, Daphne. Something for you today," the Mother Superior said. She held out a brown paper-wrapped parcel tied with the most beautiful silver lace string.

Daphne grasped the flat package, her mind whirling. Someone from the outside world had sent this to her. WHO? Could today be the day she'd dreamed of, the day she'd longed for? The day when at last she'd find out where she really belonged? Without knowing how she got there, she was back at her seat with everyone talking to her at once. "Daphne, who's it from?" "Oh my goodness, those are Italian stamps and the postmark says Rome, *look.*" "You *lucky* thing."

Daphne's hands were trembling so much she couldn't undo the

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knots. “I can’t make my hands work properly,” she said, her voice sounding odd and squeaky. “Would you do it, Sister?”

“I’ll save this pretty silver string,” Sister Mary Euphoria said. At last Daphne held the package again in her own hands. The table fell completely silent as she undid the wrapping.

Daphne gasped. It was a book. The cover showed a young ballerina in a floating white dress, a sparkling diamond tiara in her dark hair. She was in graceful mid-air flight, one leg stretched out perfectly ahead of her, the other equally perfectly behind her. Her arms were held in a graceful arc above her head.

“How To Teach Yourself Ballet” Daphne read aloud in wonder. This was what *she* had just been trying to do in the gym. Did someone know about her lifelong dream of being a ballerina? Know that she’d danced before she could talk, making up her own steps?

The large book was crammed with helpful photographs. “Now I can learn how to dance properly,” she whispered. Eagerly, she pulled the wrappings apart, looking for the letter of explanation that surely must be there.

There *was* more in the parcel, but it wasn’t a letter. It was something small and soft, wrapped in fragile old tissue paper.

“Who on earth has sent me these?” Daphne said, bewildered. In her hands lay a pair of old fashioned scarlet silk stockings.

Suddenly a wave of dizziness rocked her. Was it her imagination or

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could she really feel a gentle heat tingling out from the stockings, warming the palms of her hands?

Startled, she dropped the stockings and carefully searched through the brown paper again. But there was nothing else. Not so much as a single sheet of paper.

“Look inside the book,” Mary Euphoria suggested, her eyes on Daphne’s disappointed face. “There may be a message written in it for you.”

There was. On the book’s first blank page Daphne saw five lines of faint, elegant handwriting in silver ink.

“It looks like a riddle!” she exclaimed. Her voice shook as she read it out loud:

First, you must find me.

Then, you must follow me.

Choosing, you will test me.

At last, you must deserve me.

Daphne looked up, her eyes shining. “What can it possibly *mean*?” she asked.