

## BEAUTICIAN

“So, what is it going to be today? Eyebrow tint? Facial?” I dug through the contents of my case, past rolls of cotton wool, bottles of oils and lotion and pulled out a selection of foundations of varying tints. “You’re looking a bit pale. Are you feeling okay, Mrs Brent?” The woman on the table smiled up at me.

“You’re funny,” she rolled her eyes and then sighed. “I always thought my wedding day was going to be the day I was most fussed about. You know, everyone’s looking at you and you want to look perfect, but somehow this afternoon seems even more important.”

“I understand,” I said as I brushed her hair back and gently pressed my fingertips against her cheeks, testing the pliancy of her skin. She felt cold but I was used to that. “Don’t worry, you’re going to knock ‘em dead.”

“I bet you see some right old sights sometimes, don’t you?” she asked as I began to mix foundation on the back of my hand, trying to match it to her skin tone. In my line of business, foundation should never look like a mask and I’ll be damned if one of my clients leaves me looking like they’ve been rolled in saffron.

“Oh, everybody’s different,” I told her. “Some people need more attention than others. Sometimes it can be a huge reconstruction job but everybody I work on leaves my hands looking a million dollars.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Mrs Brent said. “Listen, can you do something with my eyebrows while you’re there?” she asked. “I’m embarrassed to say I’ve rather let myself go over the past few months and my eyebrows have been the last thing on my mind.” I leaned in to take a closer look and smoothed her eyebrows with the tip of my finger.

“Sure,” I said. “They’re not as bad as you think; just a few stray hairs. I’ll get them in a minute.”

“I hate having my eyebrows done – my eyes always water.”

“Ah, but that was before you met me, Mrs Brent. I have perfected the art of eyebrow plucking so you won’t feel a thing.”

“Call me Martha,” my client told me. “Mrs Brent makes me feel so old. Whenever I used to go to the doctor and they called my name I’d find myself sitting there looking around for this Mrs Brent until I realised they meant me. And that was after twenty years of marriage!” I smiled half-heartedly. I’d never been married. I’d yet to achieve even a long term relationship. Men often gave me a wide berth when I told them what I did for a living, but they never complained when they were my clients. Strange that.

I rubbed foundation over Martha’s face and silently congratulated myself on giving her such a healthy glow. I applied a touch of blush to her high cheekbones and tweezed a few wandering hairs from places they weren’t meant to be.

“Don’t worry too much about eye makeup,” Martha said. “I was never one for that sort of thing. Too much makeup and no one will recognise me!”

“Of course they’ll recognise you,” I said. “You’re the one they’re all coming to see. Lipstick?”

“Have you got something in coral or nude?”

“How about this one?”

“Perfect.”

“Louise, who are you talking to?” The interruption made me jump and I looked up to see Mr Benton standing in the doorway.

“Uh...” I glanced at Martha who was resting quietly, waiting for me to finish. Her eyes were closed and she looked as if she were merely sleeping.

“I’ve told you before, they’re not going to answer back,” he said with a bemused expression.

“Sure, I know that.” We regarded each other for a moment and then Mr Benton smiled at me.

“You know, the girl who helped out here before you liked to talk to them, too.”

“I guess it helps to be a little crazy,” I replied with a shrug.

“Well, when you’re done being crazy, we’ll have a cup of tea.” He took a step forward and squinted at Martha’s face.

“You’ve done a nice job there. Very natural. Her husband will be pleased.”

“Hopefully Martha will like it too,” I said, fiddling with the lipstick I was about to apply to Martha’s pale lips. Mr Benton paused.

“I don’t think I ever told you her first name,” he said slowly.

“I saw it on her paperwork before I came in here.”

“Right,” he said eventually. “Well, kettle’s on so don’t be long. Martin and Jason will move Mrs Brent into her coffin when you’re done.” I nodded and smiled, watching the undertaker’s back until he had left the room.

“That was close,” Martha whispered.

“I’m sure he lurks in dark corners waiting for opportunities to spring out on me,” I whispered back. “He’s worse than the bloody Grim Reaper. Now, we’d better get you finished. You don’t want to be late for your own funeral.”