NOT ANOTHER COZY MYSTERY ROMANCE

MUSIC, MAYHEM AND MATRIMONY





Six hopefuls.
One heart's desire.
One dead host.

JULIE ANNE GRASSO

MUSIC, MAYHEM AND MATRIMONY



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A guide for international readers: This author is Australian and therefore uses British English spelling and punctuation. Some spellings and punctuation may differ from those used in American English.

To learn more about Julie's books, including picture books and middle grade, as well as the next book in the ***Not Another Cozy Mystery Romance*** series, head to www.julieannegrassobooks.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Julie Anne Grasso is a children's librarian in public libraries in Melbourne, Australia, delivering story time to hundreds of families each week. Her picture books are published by Scholastic Australia, and her Frankie Dupont mysteries and now cozy mystery romance series are independently created.

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Stay Tuned For Book 2!
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1



Marigold Manor, somewhere in England, mid-1930s ish…

Dearest Letty,

I can barely contain my excitement. Perhaps I should telephone, but this news is so spectacular, I fear I'd scarcely be able to draw breath. This coming July 25th, I'm hosting a rather elaborate summer soiree at the Marigold, and this time you simply cannot refuse my invitation.

Mark your calendar and start polishing up those stories you write so charmingly for the little library children, as all your publishing dreams are about to come true…

Affectionately yours,
Aunt Hattie.

Lettice Marie Marigold was only ten years old when she went to live with batty Aunt Hattie in the country. Losing her parents to the war was Lettice's

tragic story. Aunt Hattie was determined it wouldn't be her defining moment. With a mix of nurses, governesses, and tutors—even boarding school abroad in France—Aunt Hattie had given Lettice every opportunity, and she'd turned out rather magnificently.

At thirty years of age, Lettice rented a room at Mrs McCaffrey's, a respectable boarding house for unmarried women. She also ran the children's section of the Moseley Public Library. Aunt Hattie was proud as punch about this. The only thing Hattie longed for in life, apart from a generous serving of melted chocolate added to her morning coffee, was to see her only niece settled in matrimony. That is why her latest scheme would be considered her battiest of all.

Lettice placed Aunt Hattie's letter on her bedside table and sighed. Her eccentric aunt had conjured a plethora of odd schemes over the years. They usually involved some wealthy socialite's son, whose conversation was as scintillating as cultivating moss and as torturous as gastritis. No letter had quite so captured Lettice's attention before.

As long as she could remember, she'd entertained herself with tall tales and adventures in far off lands. When she accepted the role in the Moseley Public Library children's department, her creative energies took flight, fuelled by the anticipation on her little charges' faces. Lettice longed to share her adventures with more than her weekly patrons, so Aunt Hattie's letter intrigued her.

When she attempted to telephone her aunt for more information, she was time and again given the run around. Nothing was to be done but to pack her portmanteau and satchel full of manuscripts and secure a ticket on the early morning train.

Marigold Manor was a two-hour journey from London, during which Lettice, of course, took every opportunity to continue to reshape and rewrite her latest adventure. She had no idea, however, if her aunt was serious about a potential publishing opportunity. It could be one of her outrageous matchmaking schemes.

In case the reason for the visit was as suggested, Lettice was nothing if not prepared. She had two completed novels for adults and four children's books she'd ardently illustrated with pencil and watercolour.

After hailing a cab from the station, Lettice arrived to discover a line of people snaking around the gravel path of the Marigold's magnificent front doors. The line consisted of men and women in working-class clothing, and

she noted many of them held some kind of pamphlet, while a few clutched cream envelopes. Spying one envelope clearly penned in her aunt's distinctive handwriting, Lettice wondered what was going on.

She paid the cab driver, opened the door, and set her portmanteau on the gravel. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders, stepped out of the cab, grasped her portmanteau and satchel with more enthusiasm than she usually mustered, and ventured towards the chattering people.

The manor's double doors flew open, and a cascade of cheers rang out from the crowd. At only five feet two inches tall, Lettice was unable to see what all the commotion was about and found herself being ushered through the front doors. With growing annoyance, she clutched her case and satchel to her chest and nudged her way to the left of the stream of people.

Breaking herself free, she spied Shackleton, her aunt's butler. He towered over most of the crowd, his eyes scanning left to right in earnest. Dressed in a black suit with coattails, a crisp white shirt with a black vest, and matching bow tie, he was easy to spot through the less formally attired group.

Shackleton spotted her too, and a relieved sigh escaped his lips.

'This way, Miss Marigold. Your aunt awaits you in the drawing room.' He bowed, taking charge of her portmanteau and reaching for her satchel.

'I'll take this one myself,' Lettice replied, clutching the trove of manuscripts to her chest. Her books were her babies, and she wasn't ready to give them up—except to the careful hands of Miss Louisa Pemberton, London's most exciting new publisher.

'Very good, miss.' Shackleton turned on his heel, ushering her through a side door to the main entranceway. On the other side she was met by a woman wearing a short-sleeved black dress with a white collar and puffs at the shoulder sleeves. A white apron with two large pockets was secured over the dress and Lettice wondered why the woman was wearing an old-fashioned maid's outfit. Her aunt hadn't had much more than a skeleton staff of a butler, a cook, and the odd footman, for as long as she could remember. Despite the *Marigold* being a stately home known for its opulence, Aunt Hattie chose to employ staff only when she held a ball or soiree. Lettice knew her aunt paid the staff so ridiculously well, the maids and footmen were always eager to return for her next occasion.

The woman bobbed a curtsey then said, 'If you please, miss, I'm Rilla Vaughan, Lady Marigold's lady's maid.'

Lady’s maid, thought Lettice. Not just a maid … a lady’s maid. A personal assistant of sorts. Lettice wondered why after years of virtual hermitage, her aunt would require the services of a lady’s maid.

‘Your aunt wished to see you the moment you arrived. That will be all, Shackleton.’ Rilla nodded hastily. ‘You had best get back to managing that unruly crowd. This way, miss.’

She led Lettice up the stairs and down a corridor lit with electric lights. Lettice had not been at the Marigold for over a year and was astounded by the expense of electric lighting in the corridor. Her aunt was planning something fishy; she could tell.

Rilla opened a door at the end of the passageway and the sunlight streaming through from the drawing room blinded Lettice momentarily.

Blinking, she heard the familiar shrill of her aunt’s voice.

‘There you are my darling Lettice.’

Aunt Hattie was lounging on one of the many yellow velvet chaises filling the room. Lettice liked her aunt’s drawing room, with its sunny aspect and yellow walls to accentuate its welcoming glow.

With a flick of her wrist, Aunt Hattie beckoned Lettice inside.

Lettice observed that her aunt was dressed in a powder-blue billowing gown with delicate French lace at the bodice and an elaborate turban with blue feathers poking out from behind her right ear.

Aunt Hattie placed her fountain pen on the neat little mahogany writing table beside the chaise. She hitched up her gown and rose, sashaying over to embrace her niece.

‘I’ll fetch some more tea, ma’am?’ Rilla suggested, bending to pick up a used tray on the coffee table in front of the chaise. The evidence of some sort of chocolate delicacy was left in crumbs on the plate.

Lettice noticed something else on the tray setting. Apart from the usual silver tea pot, china cups and saucers, there was a small silver sign with *Lady Marigold* beautifully engraved into the metal.

‘Tea for my treasure,’ Aunt Hattie said, enveloping Lettice in a swathe of bustling fabric and feathers.

Always batty Aunt Hattie, Lettice thought, surveying her aunt’s dramatic gown. Her own plaid short-sleeved travelling suit paled in comparison, but Lettice never cared much for fashionable attire.

‘Come, let me look at you.’

Lettice put down her satchel and Hattie clasped her hands, squeezing as she breathed in deeply. ‘You look ravishing, my dearest. Now … come and sit and tell me all about London life.’

Lettice obliged her aunt, allowing herself to be led to a chaise, but she was not perturbed.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ she scolded. ‘You are not going to distract me from all that out there so easily.’ She motioned towards the door she had entered. ‘What on earth is going on?’

Aunt Hattie smiled, her eyes sparkling. Well, isn’t it obvious?’ She rolled her hands like a magician presenting a trick. ‘I’m going to make your dreams come true…’

‘Quite a bold statement,’ Lettice warned, ‘even for you.’

‘Ahh, Rilla,’ said Aunt Hattie. ‘Just in time.’

Rilla had returned with the tea tray. Another *Lady Marigold* sign was positioned at the top of the tray and adjacent to it was a handwritten note. Lettice wondered why her aunt needed a silver sign denoting these particular tea trays. Surely within her aunt’s own house it seemed excessive. She was about to enquire as to the meaning of the odd sign, when Aunt Hattie snatched up the note.

Rilla set the tray on the coffee table, while Aunt Hattie’s eyes danced as she hastily read the missive.

‘Oh dear,’ she gasped, then clutched her chest. ‘Oh no, no, no, this definitely can’t be.’

‘What is it?’ Lettice enquired, reaching for her aunt’s shaking hand.

‘Everything was planned down to the letter,’ Aunt Hattie grumbled, thrusting Lettice’s comforting hand aside. ‘Oh, why did I trust that miserable scoundrel! Marquis of Mayweather, my eye. Marquis of Mayhem more likely. I knew he would double cross me!’

‘Anything else, ma’am?’ Rilla enquired.

‘Yes, Rilla, make haste.’ Aunt Hattie clapped. ‘This is of the utmost importance. Find my steward and the vicar and tell them both we must go to plan B before we begin!’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Rilla reached for Lettice’s satchel, then bobbed a curtsey and departed.

‘What about my manuscripts?’ Lettice asked.

‘Oh, yes. All will be revealed.’ Aunt Hattie tapped her nose. ‘Rilla will see they get to the right room.’

‘Which room?’ Lettice replied, an uneasy feeling rising in her chest.

Aunt Hattie looked to the door as if to check Rilla had truly gone.

‘Shall I be mother?’ she asked, ignoring Lettice’s question as she reached for the teapot.

‘Yes, of course,’ Lettice said, tempering her reply. Her aunt had a knack of drawing even the most mundane situations out for full dramatic effect. Lettice observed she was in fine form that morning. She wouldn’t fall prey to her trap, though. Desperately needing to know what was going on, she knew the more impatient she became, the less information her cunning aunt would share.

After adding milk to the cup, her aunt poured the steaming tea over the top, then set it upon the saucer.

‘One lump or two?’ she enquired, and Lettice’s jaw tightened. She’d never once in her life seen someone pour milk into the cup first. What the deuce had got into her aunt?

‘Two. Thank you,’ Lettice choked out, wishing for something stronger. Sugar would have to do.

Aunt Hattie took the silver tongs and added two lumps from the sugar pot. She dropped them in the teacup, added a spoon to the saucer, then handed it over to her niece with a grin like a Cheshire cat.

Lettice took a sip, mostly to stop herself from screaming at her aunt in frustration!

Aunt Hattie poured herself a cup, took a long sip, then set it down.

‘What is the scheme?’ Lettice burst out, unable to contain her curiosity any longer.

‘Scheme?’ her aunt trilled, feigning offence. ‘I’d hardly call inviting one of London’s top publishing house editors, Miss Louisa Pemberton, to Marigold Manor, solely so my dearest niece can have the opportunity of pitching her magnificent stories, a *scheme*. Stories we both know would otherwise go unnoticed, languishing in a bottom drawer for all eternity, no doubt!’

Lettice coughed, attempting to quell her resentment. She wanted desperately to believe her aunt had extended this incredible invitation on her behalf, without wanting anything in return. Lettice knew better. Aunt Hattie always had an ulterior motive. Always.

‘And how many first-born children were promised to be named after the illustrious Miss Louisa Pemberton?’ Lettice said sarcastically.

‘None,’ Aunt Hattie huffed. ‘Just because I once made you sit next to that terrible scoundrel Victor Pleasant, who drank far too much at dinner and cast up his accounts right into your pink muslin dress we’d had fashioned from Paris! I'll never live it down, it seems.’

‘And the time you embroidered Reverend Holiday’s face into a cushion, then sent it to him with a love note signed by me, which his dear wife opened and read?’

‘How was I to know the man was already married?’

‘And the time you paid a—’

‘Yes, yes,’ Aunt Hattie interrupted, ‘guilty as charged. It doesn't mean I don't have the best intentions for my only living relative. Is it a crime to want to see my niece’s words in print before I shuffle off this mortal coil?’

Lettice’s breath caught in her throat. ‘Aunt Hattie, you aren’t dying, are you?’

‘Of course not.’ Aunt Hattie chuckled. ‘Fit as a fiddle. Doctor Oddling gave me a clean bill of health last week. He'll be here today, too. He never misses a wager.’

‘A wager for what?’ Lettice wondered if she even wanted to know the answer.

‘Why, the contest of course,’ Aunt Hattie replied as a huge gong sounded. ‘Bless my soul, it’s time. Come, dearest, we have to get you into your costume, and you need to choose an instrument!’

‘Costume? What costume? And why will I need an instrument?’

Panic washed over Lettice, while Aunt Hattie bundled up her skirts, grabbed her by the hand and raced them out of the room.

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They bustled down the brightly lit corridor, and Lettice was already detesting the vividness of the electric lighting. Aunt Hattie opened another door not guarded by a footman and dragged her inside. They were met by Madame Pomfrit—Lettice recognised her from her high-end couture shop in London. The modiste was dressed in a figure-hugging gown, with gold and blue shimmer scales falling down her back into a flipper-shaped train. Lettice guessed she was meant to represent a mermaid. Everyone knew Madame Pomfrit was a leading London fashion designer. Lettice had never darkened the door of the actual store since moving to London. She certainly passed it by on her morning walk to the Mosely library, though.

Lettice hardly had a moment to breathe before the slender woman, assisted by an attendant dressed in a velvet green suit, forced her into a silver satin gown with glittering butterfly wings attached to the back of the bodice.

‘*Au revoir*,’ Aunt Hattie called. ‘I’ll see you in the ballroom.’ Then she shut the door behind her.

‘Perfection,’ Madame Pomfrit announced, then pointed to Lettice’s bobbed dark hair. The haughty woman’s nose creased. The attendant read her unspoken words and went at it, plastering it with Brylcreem, finishing off by placing a mask on her face. Lettice could only assume it was also butterfly in theme.

In the commotion, she realised more people occupied the room. Two other women stood with their backs half turned; both being fussed over by

attendants wearing identical velvet suits. Lettice realised the velvet-suited ladies must be Madame Pomfrit's famed lightning-fast seamstresses.

One of the guests was tall and thin with dark skin. She wore a midnight-blue gown with a matching blue wig piled on the top of her head like a beehive. She sported a black mask—as though she were about to attend a masquerade ball. Lettice had rarely seen anyone as beautiful as this dark-skinned diva before.

The other guest was a bit younger, Lettice guessed, maybe in her mid-twenties. Her golden hair flowed down her back in waves, and her dress was pink like spun sugar. Her mask resembled a net, her delicate features apparent beneath. Lettice wasn't acquainted with either woman.

Before she knew it, they were all being ushered back into the hallway, down the stairs and into the ballroom. A footman stood guard at the magnificent doors. Lettice didn't know him, which wasn't unusual. She'd refused every invitation from Aunt Hattie since their falling out last summer. The footman wrenched the door open, and as they entered, the three women were met by rousing applause from a room full of people.

Peering ahead, Lettice discovered the ballroom had undergone significant renovations. A newly built stage at the front was flanked with row upon row of chairs either side of a central aisle. It had truly transformed into a theatre of sorts.

Taking the hands of the two women either side of her, Lettice marched them down the aisle, determination in her step. Her aunt had gone beyond the pale this time, but Lettice still had enough curiosity and desperation for a publishing opportunity to play along.

To the left of the stage sat an orchestra, the enormous dinner gong from her grandfather's time adding to the percussion section. The conductor waved his baton vigorously, stirring up a lively piece as the women approached the stage. To the right of the orchestra was a long table and chairs, with people occupying four of the ten seats. The first chair was vacant and beside it sat Mr Laurent, Aunt Hattie's long-time lawyer, then Reverend Telford, the local vicar, followed by Aunt Hattie's elderly physician, Doctor Oddling, as well as a uniformed policewoman, with whom Lettice was not acquainted.

Aunt Hattie stood centre stage, clutching a microphone and stand. To her left were three masked men, all dressed in black suits, crisp white evening shirts, white bow ties, and shiny black shoes. One had hair the

colour of straw, his loose curls reaching his shoulders. The man beside him was tan-skinned, with heavy set shoulders and tightly cropped black hair, while the other was fair-skinned with loose auburn curls dangling in front of his eyes.

Lettice spied Shackleton, who motioned for her and her two charges to join the men above. Aunt Hattie tapped the microphone, making sharp sounds that hurt Lettice's ears. The conductor, recognising his cue, drew the orchestra to a close. The crowd quieted.

'Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to *Music, Mayhem and Matrimony*!'

The crowd clapped politely, and Aunt Hattie waited for them to settle again.

'It is my great honour to welcome you all to my humble abode!'

'Humble as pie!' someone piped up from the crowd and Aunt Hattie's cheeks turned pink.

'First things first,' she trilled. 'Thank you to everyone who responded to my invitation. My steward and I have spent months sifting through your candidate letters, and I am delighted to introduce the six successful hopefuls, willing to join me in *Music, Mayhem and Matrimony*.'

Lettice had to muster every ounce of restraint not to shout, 'I never agreed to music, mayhem and most definitely not matrimony!' She thought better of embarrassing her aunt. Her only living relative was cunning … Lettice was too. She would play along with this game, if it meant she could shoot her shot with a hot London publisher. Surely the matrimony was just for show. No one would turn up to a wealthy manor house and marry someone on the spot, at first sight.

'Now, let me introduce you to our players.' Aunt Hattie motioned towards the ladies. 'First, we have the lovely Miss Lettice Marie, dressed as the butterfly. Take a bow, Miss Marie.' Aunt Hattie waved.

Lettice's jaw tightened as she made a quick bow. It wasn't lost on her how her meddlesome aunt used only her first and middle name. It made sense, though. This entire crowd was full of anonymous hopefuls, while she was anything but anonymous. The use of her surname—Marigold—would have been a dead giveaway.

'Next, we have the formidable Miss Dahlia Delvine.'

The dark-skinned woman in the midnight blue dress and the beehive wig waved confidently. The crowd went wild and Aunt Hattie hushed them.

‘Last but not least,’ she continued, ‘we have the magnificent Miss Candy Appleby.’

The blonde girl bobbed a curtsey then clapped several times excitedly.

Waiting for the crowd to settle again, Aunt Hattie drew in a breath and faked a dramatic swoon.

‘And for our masked menfolk,’ she trilled. ‘Welcome, Mr Chester Bembridge.’

The blond-haired man took a bow then stood back up to attention.

‘Mr William Davis.’

The tan-skinned man did a quick tap dance then bowed, while the crowd cheered.

Aunt Hattie didn’t even wait for them to settle. ‘And Mr Jacob Patrick!’

The man with the curly hair took a deep breath in then bowed, as though he was still convincing himself to play along.

Several ladies in the audience cooed and whistled.

Mr Patrick took his time, breaking into a smile as he straightened back up.

The crowd became louder than ever, and Aunt Hattie tapped the microphone again, bringing them to order.

‘Now for the nitty gritty of the contest, my dear friends. Each one of these hopefuls has a secret hope or talent. None of us knows exactly what that is, and neither will the judges. Every single one of them must do their best to convince us they are an expert in every field, or they will exit the game.’

‘Impossible,’ shouted a man in the crowd.

Aunt Hattie was not perturbed.

‘Oh, really? Well, let’s wait and see,’ she said haughtily. ‘Now for the stakes, because—let’s face it—why would anyone agree to be married in jest in front of an entire audience without the promise of the prizes?’

Lettice felt ice in her veins. Did her batty aunt say, ‘marry in jest’? This was beyond her usual ridiculous scheme. This was outright madness.

‘Prove it,’ another man shouted, and Aunt Hattie merely took a bow of her own.

‘I intend to,’ she countered. ‘By the end of this day, one will become a noteworthy baker, one a rising fashion designer, another will join the philharmonic orchestra, and a fourth will sign a lucrative publishing deal.

One will sing like an angel and be granted their musical wings, while another will be most advantageously married!'

'Pick me, you handsome rogues,' an excited lady cried, and the crowd laughed in response.

Aunt Hattie held out her arms, quieting the crowd as though she were trying to tame a lion.

'This game is not for the faint of heart,' she continued. 'Our hopefuls have thirty minutes in each room—enough time to rehearse an instrument, perform an original song, design a gown, bake a biscuit, pitch a publisher, or get to know the person they very well might end up married to.'

'This would definitely go down better with a cuppa tea and a biscuit,' a man shouted.

'Get on with it,' a woman countered.

'Let us press on,' Aunt Hattie suggested. 'Now for our judges, who will each take a bow.' She pointed to the people seated at the long table. Eight of the ten seats were now occupied and some of them had rearranged their seating. A woman with short curly blonde hair, dressed in a billowing white gown, sat at the farthest end.

Is that a wedding gown? Lettice wondered.

Aunt Hattie continued. 'From left to right: my lawyer, Mr Lawrence Laurent; the good Doctor Oddling; our very own first female Chief Inspector, Miss Zephyr Swift; Madame Pomfrit, a fashion design powerhouse; Mrs McLaughlin, our *chef de cuisine extraordinaire*; Reverend George Telford, our vicar, and the wonderful Miss Louisa Pemberton, from one of the foremost publishing houses in the country. Finally, our *faux* bride, Miss Bettina Gainsbury!'

The lady on the end bobbed a clumsy curtsey and the crowd clapped and cheered.

'For the astute amongst us, you may have noticed we are in dire need of a faux groom. Never fear, I have it on good authority our marquis will arrive very soon!'

'Not a moment too soon,' another woman suggested and the crowd made known their approval with more whistles and applause.

Aunt Hattie waited till they settled again. 'And of course,' she said, motioning towards the orchestra. 'The wonderful musicians and our conductor, Monsieur Thomas Durand.'

The crowd applauded and Aunt Hattie raised her arms outstretched like wings, declaring, ‘Let the games begin!’

Lettice took a deep breath and steeled herself. A group of maids dressed like Rilla, rushed onto the stage. They led each of the six hopefuls away to their first challenge. Lettice couldn’t help following, but her inner voice was screaming, ‘*Run!’*

She didn’t run. She composed herself by singing a childhood song in her head.

Ring a ring a rosy, a pocket full of posies, a tissue, a tissue, we all fall down.

The song’s macabre tone would play out in real life soon enough.

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3



‘This way, miss,’ Lettice’s maid said as they headed for the ballroom’s main doors.

Six rooms surrounded the ballroom—three on either side. The orchestra struck up a gypsy-like tune, and the crowd clapped in time as Lettice and the other hopefuls exited the doors then went in different directions.

‘Hurry, miss, you haven’t much time, and there is much to do.’

The maid stepped up their pace. Lettice stayed her arm, stopping her.

‘What is your name?’ Lettice frowned.

‘Meredith,’ the maid replied. ‘Meredith West. Most people call me Meri.’

‘Where are we going, Meri?’ Lettice asked with frustration.

‘The blue room.’

Lettice knew the Marigold well, having lived most of her life there. The bedrooms all had stately names from times gone by, but as to the rooms surrounding the ballroom, she didn’t remember them being colour-coded.

‘And what’s in the blue room?’

‘If you please, miss, you’ll find out soon enough. We must hurry. Lady Marigold has given us strict instructions not to tell you which room you will attend next at any time during the contest.’

‘Very well,’ Lettice huffed. ‘Lead on.’

Meri bobbed a curtsey and hurried down the corridor, with Lettice stomping behind her. Passing two doors, footmen standing guard at each, they stopped at the third. The footman opened the door to a room well-lit

with electric lights. They glimmered every so often, casting their hazy glow on the blue walls. Two blue chaises longues filled the room, with a black dressing screen to the left of the entrance.

Lettice figured her aunt had not only refurbished the ballroom but had included the rooms surrounding it.

Miss Bettina Gainsbury, the fake bride, occupied one of the chaises, while on the other sat a masked man with short dark curly hair. He was dressed in a black tuxedo with a crisp white shirt, white waistcoat and black bow tie. On Lettice's entrance, he stood and bowed.

Lettice drew a startled breath. She managed to proffer the man a curtsey in reply, which was ludicrous. She hadn't seen maids curtseying in years, except when Aunt Hattie put on one of her pretentious social events. And now she was doing it too.

Miss Gainsbury promptly picked up her skirts and stood.

'I beg your pardon, miss,' Bettina said, rushing out of the room.

'Miss Lettice Marie, may I present, Mr Gilbert Lewis,' said Meri, curtseying awkwardly again. It was as though she wasn't sure when it was appropriate to curtsey, and if Lettice had her way, it would be never. 'Mr Lewis will be filling in for the marquis until he arrives.'

Mr Gilbert Lewis removed his mask and held out a hand.

Immediately struck by the man's gentle demeanour and vivid blue eyes, Lettice took his hand. In her thirty years, she had never met a man as pleasing to the eye as Mr Gilbert Lewis.

With an easy smile, he led her to the chaise. She took a seat, awkwardly fixing her butterfly wings as she did so. Mr Lewis sat beside her, while Meri plonked on the other chaise with a squeak.

Lettice stifled a laugh as Mr Lewis enquired, 'How are you finding the contest so far, Miss Marie?'

'Lettice. Please call me Lettice.'

'Lettice it is. And call me Gilbert.'

Before another word was exchanged, a maid burst through the door carrying a silky white gown.

'Sorry, miss,' she began, 'I got all mixed up and went to the cloakroom.'

'Don't vex yourself, Flick,' Meri replied, hurrying to meet her at the door. Meri turned to Lettice and Gilbert. 'This is Felicity Warren. We call her Flick. She's come with your gown, miss.'

Lettice’s eyes widened. She realised which room she was in. Mr Lewis stood, reached for Lettice’s hand, gave it a kiss, then bowed.

‘I will see you at the ceremony.’ He paced out of the room without another word.

Lettice stared at Meri and Flick in confusion. Both their heads were turned to the side, admiring Mr Lewis’s departing form.

‘My word, he’s a handsome one, ain’t he?’ Flick said, and Meri giggled in agreement.

‘What ceremony?’ Lettice frowned. ‘Please tell me this is all in jest and not some elaborate scheme to get me married to a man I have newly met?’

Meri pursed her lips, stifling a chuckle.

‘It’s all for show, miss. I promise you. Every one of the hopefuls must play the game and get married. Bettina will be marrying all the hopeful men today as well.’

‘You wouldn’t catch me turning down the likes o’ him,’ Flick proffered. ‘He’s a right dish and a proper gent ’n all.’

Lettice blew out a slow breath.

‘My aunt is actually going to insist on everyone getting pretend married, in order for them to advance to the next room?’

‘We don’t make the rules, miss,’ Flick replied. ‘We have to keep you moving from room to room.’

‘Alright,’ Lettice said, resigned. ‘We’d better get this dress on, then.’

‘Yes, we have to hurry,’ Meri replied. ‘We’ve only got a minute before you’re due down the aisle.’

‘What?’ Lettice panted. ‘You mean the ballroom aisle?’

‘Right you are, miss,’ Meri said, turning Lettice around and unbuttoning her wings.

‘Let’s get you out of your costume and into your wedding dress.’ Flick motioned, holding the wedding gown ready.

Meri undid the silver gown and Lettice stepped out of it, hugging her arms across her chest to cover her brassiere as much as she could. She wondered why they weren’t moving behind the black dressing screen but didn’t have the energy to challenge the determined maids. It wasn’t her habit to undress in front of strangers, and she’d done it twice in one day. Lettice reached up to remove her butterfly mask.

Meri shook her head.

‘No, miss. I’m instructed you are to wear the mask at every costume change.’

‘Oh,’ said Lettice, resigned to the process.

‘Over your head it goes,’ said Flick, ‘then arms up.’

Constructed from delicate satin, the dress slid over Lettice’s form, and when Meri buttoned her up at the back, the oddest sensation washed over her. It was positively the most beautiful thing she had ever worn and it fitted her like a glove. She’d never owned such well-fitting clothing since moving out from Marigold Manor in her twenties and pursuing her own way in the world. There wasn’t a lot of call for glamourous gowns as a children’s librarian. Her short-sleeved plaid travelling suit was a firm favourite for everyday wear.

She had attended a plethora of balls and parties and soirees of Aunt Hattie’s over the years and had always been dressed in gowns of her aunt’s provision. Aunt Hattie had outdone herself this time, especially being a fake wedding and not even a real affair.

‘Not much we can do with her hair,’ Flick complained.

Meri tut-tutted her.

‘Miss looks quite fashionable with her short hair and nothing a tiara and veil can’t improve.’

Several veils hung on the clothing rack, a couple with a tiara attached. Meri chose one of the tiaras with a veil and placed it on Lettice’s head.

Flick shuffled around, taking hold of the netting and fixing it in place over Lettice’s masked face.

‘It seems a bit unnecessary to wear the veil,’ Lettice said.

‘We don’t make the rules, miss,’ Flick replied as music sounded from the ballroom.

‘It’s time, miss,’ Meri said, taking Lettice by the hand and hurrying her out the door.

Lettice realised the music the orchestra was playing was the wedding march.

They ventured back into the hallway, winding around to the ballroom entrance. A footman opened the door, and on the other side stood Shackleton.

‘I’m to give you away, milady,’ Shackleton said, offering an arm.

Lettice glanced down the aisle to see Mr Lewis—Gilbert—standing on the stage, awaiting her. The crowd roared in appreciation and Meri and

Flick bobbed a curtsey towards Lettice as Shackleton led her down the aisle.

‘Please tell me this isn’t real?’ Lettice whispered.

‘Play along, milady,’ he whispered back. ‘Remember what you are here for.’

Lettice squeezed Shackleton’s arm in appreciation. It may have been a fake wedding ceremony, but Lettice felt herself getting caught up in the momentum.

Aunt Hattie stood on the stage beside Mr Gilbert Lewis, and as they approached, she reached into a tiny purse and threw a handful of rice at Lettice.

Her aunt seemed to be crying proper tears when Shackleton released her arm.

Gilbert took Lettice’s hands in his, and with a kind smile, he turned them towards the microphone, where Reverend Telford had moved into position. The panel of judges remained at their table looking on, each of them clapping, except for Chief Inspector Zephyr Swift. She had a look of concern upon her face.

The crowd clapped and cheered, and Reverend Telford waited for them to quiet.

‘Dearly beloved…’ he began.

Lettice felt as though her mind left her body, floating up above her, watching this bizarre scene. With a sharp intake of breath, she returned to the present, trying to concentrate on the reverend’s words. It seemed he was speaking an entirely different language or perhaps even from a different room. Nervous giggles bubbled up from within her and when the reverend asked them who would like to say their vows first, something Lettice had never heard of before, she relaxed a little. Realising this really was a fake ceremony, perhaps they could do anything they chose.

Gilbert glanced at Lettice for his cue.

‘I will,’ Lettice said, stifling her giggles.

‘Very good,’ said Reverend Telford, and Aunt Hattie clapped a hand over her mouth, attempting to contain her soft sobs. Lettice thought her aunt could very well be commissioned the role of a doting mother of the bride in a stage performance.

‘Repeat after me,’ the reverend continued.

Lettice quashed another giggle, but she was unable to contain herself. Her laughter spilled forth and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop.

Gilbert caught the infection, the low timbre of his chuckles resonating. He coughed, trying to cover them, while the audience erupted in fits.

The reverend had to call them all to order.

'Repeat after me,' he reminded her.

Lettice couldn't possibly play this seriously. Swallowing her laughter, she looked to Gilbert, who gave her a wink. Somehow, she knew he would be willing to play along, so Lettice would play.

'I, Lettice Marie, take thee, Gilbert Lewis, a complete and total handsome stranger—apart from one casual sentence uttered on a chaise longue in the blue room not more than five minutes ago—to be my wedded husband.'

The reverend raised an eyebrow, as though he was considering whether to scold Lettice for her impudence. Shrugging it off, he seemed to move on. After delivering his next line, he shrank back from Lettice, almost as though he was expecting a slap. Lettice pursed her lips, letting a couple of stray giggles escape the side of her mouth.

'To have,' she said, then paused and shot Gilbert a cheeky grin, 'a very nice cup of tea with and maybe even a jam and cream scone, and to hold from this day forward.'

Gilbert nodded his approval.

The reverend continued onto the next stanza and his voice seemed to be getting higher.

Lettice's shoulders shuddered as she tried to contain her amusement.

'For better,' she said, 'or for what could be any worse than marrying a complete stranger…?'

The reverend's eyes widened, anticipating her reply after he delivered the vow about sickness and health.

'In sickness,' Lettice repeated, 'except for the plague—you can keep that one to yourself—and in health.'

Gilbert coughed again to contain his chuckles.

The reverend droned on.

'To love…' Lettice said, and pondered a moment. 'Maybe one day after a very many dinners, cherish every pork pie we share, and obey the call of my stomach—not my heart—on every occasion.'

The reverend closed his eyes, serenely delivering his next line as though preparing to meet his maker.

‘Till death,’ said Lettice, ‘is a very long time, don’t you think? Maybe until next summer, do us part.’

Delivering his last line, the reverend blew out a breath in defeat, then looked to Lettice with resignation.

‘According to whatever the good reverend said as I can’t remember, I give thee my troth.’ Lettice pursed her lips, sending Gilbert a silent challenge that said *beat that*, while the reverend wiped his brow.

Aunt Hattie erupted in applause, and the crowd followed her lead.

Reverend Telford cast her a glance with one eyebrow cocked, and Aunt Hattie quickly stifled her celebrations.

‘Now for the groom,’ the reverend pressed on, and Gilbert repeated his vows matching Lettice’s poetic license.

‘I, Gilbert Lewis, take thee, Lettice Marie, a rather pretty, cheeky, witty and incorrigible complete and total stranger, to be my wedded wife. To have as many dinners as possible, picnics, afternoon walks in the garden, perhaps even friendly games of Whist, to hold from this day forward.’

Lettice giggled and clapped in glee.

‘For better or for what is worse than marrying a complete stranger, is not taking the time to actually get to know said complete stranger, which I very much would like to do, for richer or for poorer.’

Lettice bit her lower lip, unsure of how to respond.

‘In sickness—apart from the plague; I definitely won’t share that one with you, or even the pox as I’ve heard it gives quite an itch—and in health.’

Lettice felt a sudden urge to scratch her neck.

‘To love, maybe one day after very many dinners, cherish every pork pie we share, and obey the call of my stomach—not my heart—on every occasion as well.’

Lettice felt suddenly hungry and could not get the idea of a pork pie out of her head.

‘Till death is a very long time, but the thought of a nice long, hot summer by your side is quite appealing, do us part.’

Lettice was also thoroughly tempted by the thought of taking a nice long stroll to get to know this man better.

‘According to all those things I can no longer remember because I looked into your eyes and got a little lost, I plight thee my troth.’

Gilbert squeezed her hands and Lettice drew a sharp breath. The reverend droned on with a few more sentences she could not possibly pay attention to. Meanwhile, this fascinatingly fun man she had newly met stood before her, holding her hands in his. She couldn’t take her eyes off him.

‘I now pronounce you, man and wife.’ The reverend threw his hands in the air. ‘You may kiss the bride.’

Lettice’s throat clenched. She’d had a couple of kisses in her time: one stolen; another danced upon her lips with hopes and promises, only to cool like a fresh winter’s morning. *This* kiss would be witnessed by hundreds of strangers. Somehow it calmed her. No one cared. This was all for show. A wedding was a celebration, regardless of the terms. She secretly wondered if Aunt Hattie was somewhat of a genius, giving hope to a generation who had suffered at the hands of war and depression.

Mr Gilbert Lewis lifted her veil and gently threw it over her shoulders. As he drew her to him, the world seemed to slow. Lettice could not stop looking at his lips, wondering what it would be like if they touched hers. His face swam before her. Closing the distance, she shut her eyes, her heart pounding as he … touched a light kiss upon her nose. Dropping her hands, he shot her a wry grin, then stood back and bowed.

The crowd booed and Gilbert turned towards the audience with a frown, waggling a finger. Lettice’s years of tutoring kicked in, and she curtseyed, unconsciously reaching one hand to touch her lips, feeling the absence of his.

‘Oh, my dearest, you’re married,’ Aunt Hattie cried, hurrying to embrace her niece.

‘Not quite.’ The reverend shook his head. ‘Now to sign the registry.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Aunt Hattie shuffled back to the table, returning with a document and fountain pen. Lettice frowned, looking to Gilbert, who shrugged. Taking her hand, he whispered, ‘Play along. I promise it will be worth your while.’

Lettice had no idea what he meant, or if there was any truth at all in this performance. Somehow it felt good to see this thing through. Maybe she would never truly have the pleasure of taking a certain someone to be hers, for richer or for poorer, and she’d come this far. An ink squiggle on a piece

of paper was meaningless without the actual intention of marriage. She'd play along.

Gilbert accepted the fountain pen from Hattie. The reverend placed the paper on the table and pointed to where Gilbert needed to sign. With a flourish, he signed and passed the pen to Lettice. *Here goes nothing*, she thought, and added her neat signature, making a tiny flourish of the D in Marigold. The orchestra struck up a stirring tune, and the crowd clapped.

'Now for the finale,' Gilbert's voice boomed over the crowd. 'Let's give this a proper send off, shall we?'

Lettice nodded and he led her across the stage. They hurried hand in hand down the stage steps, along the aisle and out the ballroom doors, while the audience cheered.

The footman shut the doors behind them with a bang, and Lettice and Gilbert burst into laughter, his arms finding her waist, pulling her into a hug. Lettice breathed in his sandalwood scent, and for one magical moment, Lettice Marie Marigold truly felt as though she had married the sweetest man on the planet.

'*Ahem*.'

Lettice turned. Meri and Flick stood awaiting her return. The orchestra struck up again.

'Farewell, fair maiden.' Gilbert drew her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. 'Don't forget. I said it would be worth your while.' With that he turned on his heel and rapped on the ballroom door. The footman opened the door again and Gilbert paced back down the aisle to cheers and whistles.

Lettice drew circles on her own palm, reliving the presence of his warm lips upon her skin, while the footman shut the doors with another bang.

Meri tugged on her elbow, startling Lettice again.

'Come, miss. You've got a bit of time before you're due in the next room. We won't go back to the blue room. We'll go to the cloakroom instead. We've got to get you out of that dress. You can't bake biscuits in a wedding gown!'

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On entering a small cloakroom beside the ballroom doors, Lettice vaguely noticed chairs placed around the edge, with a brown trunk stowed under one of them. There were some standing hangers in the far corner of the room, but there didn't seem to be any cloaks. Her nerves were beginning to fray. She was tired of being forced into this gown or that gown, her choices taken away from her. It was something Aunt Hattie had a habit of doing when she felt she knew best for her niece. Part of the reason Lettice eventually moved out was because she wanted to be independent. She wanted to feel the joy of working hard for something, not getting it only because her aunt had the means to give her whatever her heart desired. Lettice had never once thought she was missing anything, being thirty and a spinster. She liked her life in the library. She had friends and her writing and books and…

'Your gown, miss,' said Meri, bringing Lettice out of her thoughts. 'You won't be needing it where you're going next.'

'Yes, of course.' Lettice turned, and Flick unbuttoned her out of the exquisite piece.

'No one'd look as good as you did in it,' said Flick. 'Looked like a right princess you did, even with that hair.'

Lettice burst out laughing and the tension flowed out of her as she stepped out of the dress.

'Stop talking about her hair, Flick,' Meri scolded, as she moved to take the tiara and veil from Lettice's head. 'Just because you couldn't pull off a

fashionable bob like all the proper ladies are doing, doesn't mean anyone else can't try. I think your hair is magnificent, miss.'

'Thanks Meri,' Lettice warbled, 'I like it very much.'

Unexpectedly, she took off her mask and burst into tears.

'Oh, miss, I'm so sorry.' Flick wrung her hands. 'I didn't mean to offend you. It's me first time as maid, you see, and me mam told me not to run me mouth off. But 'ere I go again getting you all in a fix.'

Lettice shook her head. 'No, Flick, it's all right.'

Meri offered her a handkerchief. 'It's just … it's just … it was the most beautiful moment and it wasn't even real.' Lettice's sobs increased.

'Now, now, miss,' said Meri, taking Lettice in her arms. 'Don't you worry about a thing. You're still youngish. You'll have your moment for real, I'm sure. Such a pretty face won't go to waste. I promise you.'

'And you've got the contest too,' Flick encouraged. 'Maybe something will come of it.'

'The contest,' Lettice remembered.

'When the gong sounds, we've got to get you to your next room,' Meri said.

Flick went over to the trunk and pulled out a black dress with a white collar, and a mob cap, not unlike the dresses she and Meri wore. 'Here's your outfit for your next stop.'

'And what is my next stop?' Lettice said the words before she remembered she probably shouldn't ask.

Meri pursed her lips, as though she was deciding something. 'All I can say is your next stop is the green room.'

'The green room it is,' said Lettice, stepping into the black dress.

Flick popped the mob cap over her cropped hair.

'Well, it's the one time a bobbed haircut is of some use.' Flick chuckled. 'Easy to fit in a mob cap.'

'Flick,' Meri shrieked, but Lettice couldn't help cracking a smile.

'I best be off now, miss. Good luck with the rest o' the contest,' Flick said.

'Thank you,' Lettice replied, as Flick left the room. Composing herself, she refitted her mask.

The gong sounded.

'Let's go,' Meri said. 'Your next stop is nearby.'

They ventured into the hallway, and Lettice heard the orchestra begin a piece she recognised. She made a mental note that when her turn came on stage, it would be the piece she would choose.

Meri pointed. ‘You’re right next door.’

Lettice smelt something delicious emanating from the room they approached.

‘It’s Meri,’ said the maid, rapping on the door.

The footman pulled the door slightly ajar. He grinned widely at Meri, then ushered them inside.

Lettice walked into a small kitchen with two working benches in front of an oven range. Several rows of shelving were hung on the walls like an open pantry, and Lettice noticed the abundance of ingredients nestled on the shelves. Pots and pans hung on the walls beside the range, and in the opposite corner was a large white cupboard built into the wall. Beside the cupboard was a double wash basin with taps running into each one. Lettice marvelled at how much her aunt had put into the preparations of this room. The main Marigold kitchen was situated at the rear of the original building. Many lords who had come before her father and grandfather had added to the house, building the Marigold both upward and outward. It was quite a walk from the main kitchen to the ballroom, so it made sense that her aunt had installed a boutique version of a kitchen for the contest.

The smell of baking made Lettice’s mouth water. On one of the countertops, she spied a tray of biscuits, perhaps just out of the oven. She noticed a handwritten note with the number one on the top of the tray.

‘Get these biscuits onto a cooling rack,’ ordered the portly woman with rosy cheeks. Lettice vaguely remembered Aunt Hattie calling her Mrs McLaughlin.

Another maid wearing a black dress with a white collar bustled about. She used a spatula to lift the biscuits onto a wire rack. As she continued with them one by one, Rilla rushed into the kitchen. Holding the silver tray with Lady Marigold’s sign resting on top, she loaded eight biscuits onto the tray. Lettice remembered the sign from morning tea, and she realised why her aunt needed her own sign in her own house. It was for the contest.

Rilla avoided making eye contact, seemingly intent on her duties. After positioning the biscuits in a neat row with the number sign perched in front of them, she exited the kitchen.

‘Rightio, miss,’ the portly lady began, addressing Lettice. ‘I’m Mrs McLaughlin, former *chef de cuisine* at the *Turquoise.’* She pronounced it in the French way. *Tyr-kwaz*. The chef didn’t bother curtseying, for which Lettice was relieved. She had the feeling this woman had spent many hours battling it out earning her rightful place in the world.

The war had afforded many women positions they would never have achieved otherwise, and Mrs McLaughlin wasn’t about to simper to anyone it seemed.

‘This is your chance to impress me with your skills, and if you play your cards right, you’ll have an apprenticeship with me right here at the Marigold. Now, your ingredients are over there in the pantry, and we’ve got a larder with fresh eggs and butter and milk.’ She pointed to the white cupboard on the wall.

Lettice liked this lady. She didn’t mince about and got straight to the point. Lettice decided she would too. Time was ticking, after all—she only had about twenty-five minutes to bake a biscuit to impress not only Mrs McLaughlin, but also the other judges.

‘Thank you, Mrs McLaughlin.’

Meri shot her an encouraging smile and went to stand beside the footman manning the kitchen door. He was quite young and handsome, and Lettice suspected he was Meri’s beau.

Lettice approached the ingredients pantry. She scanned the contents and selected potatoes, sugar, flour, molasses, ginger, cinnamon, and baking soda. In the larder she found an abundance of butter, eggs, and milk—no scrimping and saving on ingredients. Aunt Hattie had again spared no expense. With fresh eggs available, as well as butter, Lettice knew she could elevate her regular ginger puff biscuit to something that would not only wow Mrs McLaughlin but also impress the judges. She had to do whatever it took to get to that publishing room, and time was ticking.

Aunt Hattie’s favourite biscuit was sure to garner some favour as well: a ginger puff made with mashed potatoes and French buttercream. A delicacy Lettice had learned at French boarding school. If it didn't get the attention of Mrs McLaughlin, nothing would. Lettice reminded herself she had to do enough to keep advancing to the next room. Although, it occurred to her, so far none of the judges had appeared in the kitchen. She suspected Aunt Hattie was yet again controlling the narrative. Maybe no one would be

ejected from the contest if they didn't perform at each challenge. Lettice wasn't willing to take the chance.

She peeled the potatoes, placed them into a pot of water, and put them on the range top to boil. Next, she measured her dry ingredients and added them to a mixing bowl. After scraping a knob of ginger into another bowl, she poured molasses over the top. Knowing her potatoes would take some time to boil, she separated the eggs. There were many steps to making French buttercream, including boiling up a sugar syrup, and Lettice was starting to regret her choice. However, she was determined.

She mashed the potatoes and combined them with her dry ingredients, adding her ginger and molasses mix last. Finally, she kneaded the mixture until everything was combined into a dough. The maid set down a greased tray for her.

It wasn't until then that Lettice realised Mrs McLaughlin was scrutinising her every move. Working fast, she scooped handfuls of dough, rolling them into even balls and pressing them onto the tray. She kept them small, knowing they would cook fast.

‘Ready for the oven, miss?’ the maid enquired.

Lettice nodded, her mind fixated on her next step. Whipping the egg yolks vigorously using a whisk, she knew she had to get a sugar syrup on the hob as soon as possible, or it would not be ready in time. Mrs McLaughlin motioned for the maid to step in and whip the yolks for her. Lettice wasn't sure it was allowed, but if Mrs McLaughlin was offering assistance, she wasn't going to say no—getting her sugar syrup on the hob was the crucial stage. She heated sugar and water until she was satisfied it was ready, and with the help of the maid, slowly whisked the syrup into the yolks. With only a few moments left before the dreaded gong would sound, Lettice took some butter, now softened in the heat of the kitchen, and whisked it into the egg yolks and sugar syrup until it became smooth and creamy. She dipped her finger in for a taste. The buttercream was delicious.

The gong rang out and Lettice’s heart sank. She raced to the oven and pulled the door open. Her biscuits were golden, but they were much too hot to add the buttercream.

‘We’ll take it from here, miss,’ the maid reassured her.

‘Will you add the butter cream?’ Lettice enquired.

‘No, miss,’ the maid replied, shaking her head.

Mrs McLaughlin tut-tutted. ‘It would be a shame to waste all that buttercream. I’ll have a word to Lady Marigold and see if you can add it before the judging.’

The gong sounded again and Meri was once again at Lettice’s side.

‘Thank you, Mrs McLaughlin,’ said Lettice.

‘A right royal effort, it was, attempting a French buttercream in such a short space of time. I’ll make sure you have your moment to shine.’ Mrs McLaughlin winked.

‘Here we go again,’ said Meri. ‘You’ll get changed in your next room, and don’t fret about the state of your habit.’

Lettice’s dress was covered in flour and syrup. She *was* in quite a state, and wondered why she wasn’t offered a white apron like Rilla wore when she entered the kitchen.

The footman opened the door, and they exited into the corridor. Following the path anticlockwise, Meri stopped at the next room.

‘*Au revoir*, Miss Delvine,’ came Madame Pomfrit’s distinctive voice. A footman opened the door, and Miss Delvine exited the room with another maid by her side. Dahlia held her mask in her hand, with obvious tear stains glistening her cheeks. Lettice realised she’d been crying. She no longer wore the stunning blue gown Lettice remembered from their first meeting. The only thing still intact was the blue beehive wig. Her new gown was similar in colour and also appeared to be fashioned from very fine fabric. It didn’t fit well at all in contrast to her previous attire. Dahlia gave Lettice a small wave, then put her mask on, before her maid whisked her off down the corridor.

‘One moment.’ Madame Pomfrit poked her head around the door, then disappeared, the footman closing the door behind her. Lettice and Meri remained in the hallway, and Lettice was unsure what to expect. She had barely known Miss Delvine for more than a minute, but the woman had a way about her. If Madame Pomfrit had reduced her to tears, what could Lettice expect? Her only consolation was at least she knew her next challenge was the fashion room. If it was the publishing room, Lettice may have lost her nerve. She desperately wanted to get there, but her mind wasn’t quite ready for it.

‘Goodness me,’ whispered Meri. ‘I thought Mrs McLaughlin was goin’ to forbid you to use the buttercream.’

‘Me too,’ Lettice rasped. ‘I thought I'd gone to all the trouble to no avail.’

‘We aren’t meant to help you at all in any of the rooms,’ said Meri conspiratorially.

Lettice had no idea why Mrs McLaughlin had allowed a maid to help her mix her buttercream. She suspected after the ravages of war—followed by the Great Depression—wasting ingredients like eggs and butter was an extravagance the chef would never have allowed in her kitchen. Sometimes Aunt Hattie, being a wealthy heiress, was truly oblivious to the outside world.

Lettice put the thought out of her mind and focused on her next room. She had no interest in fashion. She had spent time in a French boarding school studying the works of the masters. Charcoal was her favourite medium, and Lettice knew enough about gowns from years of her aunt dragging her to the *modiste* for her coming out. Lettice had tolerated two whole seasons on the marriage mart before informing her aunt she would be making her own plans for her future—*without* the influence of her aunt’s fortune or her misguided desire to see her married. The conversation was met with much weeping and wailing. Lettice was stubborn. She knew from a very young age what she wanted to do in life, and it didn’t involve making morning calls or embroidering cushions.

At twenty-one, and finally of age, Lettice had had plans—big plans in the publishing world. Now, at thirty, she would be happy with an opportunity to pitch to a publisher. She knew Aunt Hattie’s contest had no guarantees, but it gave her the first glimmer of hope she'd had in a long time. She loved her job at the library, giving her every opportunity to test out her new manuscripts, and not only on the children. Lettice wrote for every age; the number of manuscripts piled up in her tiny apartment was significant.

The footman opened the door, and Madame Pomfrit poked her nose out again, beckoning them inside.

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The room was painted purple, with several purple brocade chaise longues scattered around the edge of the room. In the centre were four tables, two of which held reams of fabric laid out in neat rows. The third table was awash with silk cords and ropes and embellishments, as well as an assortment of masquerade masks in glittering colours. It didn't take an expert to tell that some of the fabrics were of the finest silk, not to mention exquisite French lace. Once again, it was a testament to Aunt Hattie's decadence.

On the fourth table were charcoals and a closed sketch book. To the left of the sketch table was a longer table and chairs, at which sat the three green-velvet-suited ladies Lettice had encountered in the dressing room. They were perched behind sewing machines, all sitting upright and stiff, hands lying at the ready on their machines as though they were awaiting instruction.

Lettice had never seen anything like it. Perhaps it was the only way Madame Pomfrit managed to produce so many gowns in her lucrative business. She was known for her speed after the initial design brief, fitting dresses as little as a day later.

‘You have thirty minutes to produce a gown,’ Madame Pomfrit said. ‘Thirty minutes to convince me of your skill in taking a gown from concept to creation.’

Lettice swallowed hard. She knew she could bluff her way through making biscuits and even produce a sketch worthy of making it into a

modiste's catalogue one day. Her sewing ability, however, was wretched.

Madame Pomfrit's next sentence allayed her fears. 'You will have use of my finest seamstresses. The catch is, whatever you produce here today you will have to wear for the remainder of the contest. Mark my words, a plaid travelling suit will not be in your repertoire. It must be a gown fit for couture.'

Lettice bit her lip, and Meri squeezed her elbow.

'Come, miss, let's get you out of that outfit.'

She pointed to the black dressing screen. Lettice hurried behind the screen to find an assortment of simple shifts and less formal shirts and trousers on the rack. Removing her mob cap and maid's outfit, she chose a simple cream shift, figuring she wouldn't be wearing it for long if she had to try on a dress of her own design within the next thirty minutes. The seamstresses whispered away to each other and Meri moved to stand behind them, joining in their conversation. It seemed Meri knew everyone.

Madame Pomfrit took a seat on the chaise.

Lettice squared her shoulders. She must design something simple, but elegant. She had never enjoyed gowns which hugged her figure. This seemed the only solution. Anything else she conjured would take a great deal of time to draw, as well as make. What did she care for couture anyway?

An idea came to mind. Instead of drawing something elaborate, which would not fit her in the way Miss Delvine's dress seemed to, she paced along the fabric table. Securing an exquisite green silk, she draped it over her body, ruching the fabric at her bust, then wrapping it around her side and securing it in place under her left arm.

'Do we have any safety pins?' Lettice said, and one of the seamstresses came forth with a tin.

Madame Pomfrit laid down her sketches with a frown, her lips puckered in disapproval.

Lettice didn't care. She wasn't going to wear something ill-fitting which would make her feel uncomfortable under the watchful eyes of the hundreds of people in the ballroom. She would drape the fabric in exactly the way she wanted, hoping against hope the safety pins held up.

'One seamstress may assist you,' Madame Pomfrit declared, and Meri pursed her lips in amusement. Madame Pomfrit had been given the same instructions everyone else had, not to assist the competitors. What Lady

Marigold didn't see, Lady Marigold didn’t know, and it seemed to be working in Lettice’s favour.

The seamstress helped Lettice add two strips of gold fabric to her shoulders like straps, pinning them at the back under her shoulder blades. Tucking the fabric either side of her breasts and under her arm, Lettice managed the pins.

‘Now for the finale.’ Lettice chuckled. She took some gold crinoline and had the seamstress sew it into a circular skirt. They attached the skirt below the knees, the fabric giving her a similar shape to Madame Pomfrit’s own mermaid costume. By the time the gong rang, Lettice stood in front of the mirror, Madame Pomfrit scrutinising her efforts from the chaise. The haughty woman shot Lettice an approving glance.

‘I like this technique,’ she said, walking around Lettice’s creation.

The sound of the gong echoed again.

Lettice let out a relieved cry. The seamstresses all clapped and Lettice took a bow. It wasn’t couture, but she’d managed to eclipse the simple shift she wore underneath. Even if her gown unravelled, she wouldn't be naked. That was about as good as it got.

‘I'll be in touch,’ said Madame Pomfrit quite seriously, and Lettice used every ounce of her being not to burst out laughing. The last thing she wanted would be to work in a modiste’s establishment, pandering to pompous ladies.

Meri passed by the embellishment table and selected a new mask before she returned to Lettice’s side.

‘I think this one will suit better,’ she whispered, handing it over. It was made of green silk, perfectly matching the fabric of the gown. Lettice gratefully swapped it, feeling the need more than ever to be anonymous. After all, she was about to step out on stage in a piece of fabric held together purely by safety pins.

The footman opened the door, and they exited back into the hallway as another maid approached, followed by Mr William Davis. He still wore the expensive black suit and didn't have a spot of flour upon his clothing, so he couldn't have come from the kitchen.

Madame Pomfrit poked her head out the door again. ‘My darling William!’ she cried, ‘Is it really you?’ She exited the room, hands outstretched.

‘It's me, my dearest,’ William replied, taking her hands in his.

‘I thought we lost you in the war! Come, we have much to catch up on.’

‘*Ahem*.’ Meri cleared her throat. ‘Off we go, miss.’

She took Lettice by the elbow while Madame Pomfrit and Mr Davis disappeared inside the purple room. Lettice desperately wanted to hear how they knew each other, but she had to keep focused.

‘What’s next?’ Lettice hadn’t meant to ask Meri a question she knew the maid couldn't answer, but it had blurted out.

Meri sang, going up and down the scale. ‘*Mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi, mi,* miss…’

Lettice knew exactly what she was destined for next. The singing room would pose a new challenge. She had managed to bake a French buttercream-topped ginger puff in thirty minutes, and fashion a designer gown. How hard could it be finding a tune to sing with an orchestra? She had this one in the bag.

Or so she thought.

As she ventured along the corridor, Lettice heard the orchestra, but it wasn’t the wedding march. It sounded like a cymbal crashing, not even remotely to a beat. She supposed one of the hopefuls was taking their turn with the orchestra. Then it struck her: her pretend wedding had occurred in the ballroom. How could anyone else’s wedding occur in the ballroom if they were all to rotate through the rooms, taking their turns on the stage with the orchestra?

Arriving at her next destination, Lettice pushed the thought from her mind. She was astonished to see a police constable guarding the door beside the footman. The footman glanced at the constable for approval first, then opened the door. The walls were painted a light pink, and in the centre of the room, a woman lounged on a damask chaise. Dressed in a stunning figure-hugging red gown cut on the bias, with a white fur wrapped around her shoulders, was Miss Elvira Fontaine. On recognising the starlet, Lettice gasped.

‘Come in and take a seat,’ Miss Fontaine said, patting the chaise.

Lettice obliged. She had never met anyone truly famous. Elvira Fontaine was hot property with her song, *We’ll Meet Sometime*, on all the airwaves. Lettice’s throat went dry. She couldn’t believe she was meeting one of her idols. No band accompanied Miss Fontaine, only Lettice and her maid, along with a black grand piano positioned in the far-right corner of the room.

Lettice couldn't believe she was sitting in the presence of Miss Elvira Fontaine, let alone the fact that she'd never seen a grand piano in her Aunt Hattie’s manor. Once again Aunt Hattie had gone beyond the pale in sparing no expense. The decadence of it made Lettice feel uneasy in her stomach. Or maybe it was because she was sitting next to a famous singer.

Miss Fontaine smiled. ‘Now, what are you going to sing for me?’

Lettice frowned, unable to muster a coherent thought.

‘Sing for you?’ she mumbled. ‘Here and now?’

Miss Fontaine nodded. ‘It must be here and now. I'm not supposed to be here, you understand?’

‘We won’t be singing with the orchestra?’

‘Not with me, but how you perform here will determine if you’ve got what it takes against a truly formidable singing foe.’

Suddenly it all became clear to Lettice. Miss Fontaine was vetting the contestants.

‘Only one will perform on the ballroom stage. Do you think you have what it takes?’

‘I don't know,’ Lettice choked out.

‘We haven't got long, so here’s how it’s going to work. You choose two songs and with my very bad accompaniment, we'll see what you've got.’

Lettice nodded while Meri clapped quietly. Lettice had forgotten her maid was even present and standing by the door. She was clearly as excited to see Miss Fontaine in person as Lettice was. As dreams go, seeing her words in print was top of the list. Singing with Miss Elvira Fontaine was a very close second.

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Miss Fontaine moved to the piano, playing a few chords to warm up her fingers. Then she turned to Lettice. ‘What will your first song be?’

Lettice knew it was positively ordinary to want to sing a star’s most famous song with them. She couldn't let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity pass. There was no question, especially since Lettice didn't care for Aunt Hattie's meddlesome contest anyway.

‘*We’ll Meet Sometime*,’ Lettice replied, her grin stretching from ear to ear.

‘Excellent choice.’

Miss Fontaine smiled as she tickled the piano keys, stumbling here and there. Lettice didn't care. Doing her best to emulate the music legend, she sang the song with every bit of heart she could muster. As the song finished, words could not express her immense pleasure when Elvira Fontaine clapped her approval.

‘Brava,’ Meri chimed in, while Lettice took a bow.

‘I see we're going to have quite the contest.’ Miss Fontaine laughed. ‘I'd like to hear more to truly decide if you are a contender. Would you sing for me once more?’

‘I don't know if you know this one?’ Lettice began to sing. ‘*I’ll be seeing him, in all the roundabout places*…’

‘I don't know it,’ Miss Fontaine said, ‘but keep going.’

Lettice cleared her throat and sang as much of the song as she could remember before she stumbled and stopped. Miss Fontaine clapped again.

She paused a moment, writing something down on a card she took from the chaise. ‘I think I've got exactly what I need.’

The sound of the gong made them both look up.

Lettice couldn't believe it had already been thirty minutes, when it felt like five. No amount of time with Miss Elvira Fontaine would ever be enough. For those brief minutes, she had sung for a legend, and the legend seemed to enjoy her songs. Even if she never stood a chance against her competition, whom she suspected was Miss Dahlia Delvine, she’d sung her heart out, taking her one step closer to the publishing room.

The gong sounded its second warning as Meri returned to her side.

Miss Fontaine reached out to shake Lettice’s hand. ‘It was a pleasure to meet you.’

‘Thank you,’ Lettice rasped, still not quite believing who she had sung for.

‘We must be off, miss,’ Meri said. She moved to the door, rapping on it for the footman to open.

‘Good luck,’ Miss Fontaine called, as Lettice and Meri hurried past the footman and policeman on guard.

‘I hope you’re ready to take to the stage again,’ Meri whispered, ushering Lettice round the back of the ballroom stage and to the hallway on the other side. ‘Your fifth room is the red room, or music room.’

Lettice’s heart sank. She’d come so far, overcoming many obstacles.

One more room, Lettice reassured herself. *Just one more room*.

Entering the music room, she saw the walls were as Meri had predicted —painted red with gold trim. Lettice thought they looked truly regal. On rows of tables, she found a selection of instruments: violins; cellos; the usual woodwind instruments like flute, piccolo, oboe, clarinet, saxophone, and bassoon; even a double bass standing against a wall. Lettice suppressed an inclination to teach her aunt a salutary lesson by selecting from the brass selection: horn, trumpet, trombone, and tuba. And beside those was the percussion selection—maybe a percussion instrument would serve her purpose even more dramatically? She could imagine her aunt’s face when she came out with the timpani, or perhaps even the cymbals, as one of the other contestants had obviously chosen. Lettice had spent enough time in violin lessons to pass as someone with hopes of joining the philharmonic orchestra.

Meri motioned towards a table laid with papers.

‘Your aunt has instructed me to show you the instruments and sheet music,’ she said. ‘Once you’ve chosen what you want to play and on which instrument, you have a few moments to practice. Then it’s time to take the stage.’

‘Thank you, Meri. I guess I’d better choose some music then.’ Lettice tried to sound positive, even though her thoughts were racing. She wanted a publishing opportunity more than anything in the world, but she almost felt excited about the chance to play in front of an audience—with an orchestra, no less—on the big stage. She therefore had to choose a music piece worthy of a philharmonic orchestral audition.

Scanning the music sheets, she saw several pieces were way beyond her capability. She had to choose something familiar, something that would help convince the judges she truly wished to become a member of a philharmonic orchestra. She couldn’t think of anything less tenable, but thoughts like that wouldn’t convince anyone.

Then it came to her, remembering the music she’d heard earlier—a piece she knew so well. *Violin Concerto in D Major* by Igor Stravinsky. Selecting the sheet music, she scanned the notes and settled on it with a sigh.

Next, she chose a violin, the oldest one of three. The wood was scarred and scratched, and it appeared as though it had been singing for its supper for many decades. Lettice hoped they could make beautiful music together; her publishing career depended on it. Running the bow across the strings, she took a deep breath and said, ‘I’m ready.’

Meri headed to the far-left corner of the room, and selected a music stand, then ushered Lettice from the room. As they climbed the stage stairs, Monsieur Durand wound the current piece down. By the time Lettice ascended the stage, Aunt Hattie was waving excitedly. She rose from her seat beside Mr Laurent and waddled to the microphone.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, for our wonderful fifth performance at *Music, Mayhem and Matrimony*, welcome to the stage, Miss Lettice Marie, playing …’ She paused.

Lettice hurried towards the conductor, showing him the piece she had selected. He smiled.

‘*Violin Concerto in D Major* by Igor Stravinsky,’ he called out.

‘Aria number one,’ Lettice clarified, as Meri positioned the stand and sheet music on the stage and hurried down the stairs.

‘An excellent choice, *mademoiselle*,’ the conductor replied, as the orchestra members shuffled their music to the correct piece. The conductor pointed to the oboe, and the performer played the tuning note. Lettice tuned the violin to the oboe’s sound, then nodded to the conductor. He tapped his baton on the podium, signalling the audience for complete silence. As the voices quietened, Lettice noticed her breathing had quickened. She soon tamped it down. She had to keep it together. No accomplished violinist would display weakness, and she had to play the part.

Aunt Hattie took her seat again as Lettice lifted her violin and gave the conductor a nod.

The conductor moved his baton, and as one, Lettice and the orchestra began. A little more staccato at first than the piece warranted, but at least she was keeping up. She must have held her breath for perhaps a minute, her eyes darting from side to side as she frantically read the music. When she realised the piece was heading towards her moment to shine, she wondered if she would pass out. The conductor smiled at her in encouragement, and she gained the strength to keep going. Continuing, she soon enjoyed the moment and honestly understood why violinists aspired to this level of performance.

Then, suddenly, with a snap that reverberated up her arm, one of the violin’s strings broke.

Lettice gasped, her breaths coming in short and sharp. The conductor paused, then one of the violinists sprang forward, offering Lettice his instrument, as was custom. She took it with shaking hands, and the conductor stirred the orchestra again. Within a few moments, she found her rhythm. Her solo started out so well, her movements flowing through her body like an old friend returning after a long sabbatical. Building to the crescendo, Lettice felt victory in her sights.

There were only a few pages left in the aria, her bowing so vigorous that her chest heaved, when one of her safety pins went flying from her gown and landed at her feet. Before she could react, another string broke on her violin.

Determined, Lettice continued playing, even as two more safety pins dropped to the floor and her slippery green satin drapery started to unravel. Suddenly every movement of the bow sounded like an aging feline. Lettice soldiered on, her entire gown unravelling in front of the audience. She was soon left standing in nothing but the cream shift. Positively scandalous!

Despite knowing her performance was beyond repair, Lettice did not give up. She made it to the bitter end, and her cheeks burned as she took a bow. The audience clapped half-heartedly, and the conductor bowed, avoiding eye contact as he turned back to the orchestra.

Aunt Hattie stumbled to the microphone.

‘Oh dear, this is quite a business, isn’t it?’ she huffed. ‘The rules are quite specific. I allowed for one performance to be lacking. With two at once literally unravelling before our very eyes… Regretfully, Miss Marie, after today’s disastrous performance and your unfortunate wardrobe malfunction, I am sorry to say you are disqualified from the contest.’

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Lettice dropped the violin and the clang echoed around the stage. She took in sharp breaths, tears welling in her eyes. Wiping them on her sleeve, she gathered up the fabric, and rewrapped it around herself. The crowd booed as she shuffled off the stage. Lettice was unsure if it was in sympathy or in malice.

‘It’s not right,’ someone in the crowd piped up. ‘Give the girl a chance.’

‘Hear, hear!’ many voices in the crowd joined in. Lettice didn’t care. All she wanted was to be off the stage. She was met by Meri at the bottom of the stairs. Her maid embraced her, shielding her body from view.

‘I’ve got you, miss,’ Meri reassured her. ‘Let’s get you back to the cloakroom.’

They hurried towards the stage doors.

‘She deserves a proper send off,’ a woman called, and the crowd joined in, applauding as Meri and Lettice hastened out of the ballroom. They fled down the hallway, passing the footmen posted at each room, and headed to the cloakroom.

Inside, Lettice and Meri took seats beside each other. Lettice pulled her mask down to hang around her neck and collapsed into her maid’s arms, letting the tears flow.

The gong sounded, signalling the last of the six stations to begin—the final room Lettice had been working her way towards. Since the moment she stepped inside Marigold Manor, it had been her one goal, and here it was slipping out of her fingertips. Waves of defeat washed over her. Then

came a knock at the door. Lettice felt a wave of humiliation rise and slap her in the face. Standing in the doorway was Mr Gilbert Lewis. Burying her head in her hands, she let the grief flow about losing her shot with a publisher.

Gilbert pulled up a chair beside Lettice. Tapping Meri on the arm, he said, ‘Permit me.’

Meri shifted Lettice’s arms into his embrace and moved away.

Enveloping her, Gilbert whispered, ‘There, there,’ tenderly in her ear.

The gong rang out again as Lettice continued to sob, blurting out a plethora of reasons why her hopes and dreams of publishing her very first children’s book—or *any* kind of book for that matter—had gone down the privy.

Gilbert patted her back, listening intently, when Lettice eventually looked up into his vivid blue eyes, realising he wasn’t Meri.

‘Oh goodness,’ she gasped, stiffening in his embrace.

Gilbert winced, tactfully withdrawing his hold, and Lettice regretted the words the moment they left her lips. She also regretted the absence of his arms, even though she had rebuffed his attempt to console her.

She was a train wreck. One moment she was baking biscuits, draping couture gowns, and singing with a superstar, the next minute she was breaking strings on a vintage violin—which had probably been played by some musical maestro she’d never live up to—and unravelling more than her fake couture gown. Her entire existence to date had revolved around being an independent woman, free from the societal constraints of Aunt Hattie’s money and influence. How had she let this happen? How had she let this mild-mannered man infiltrate her defences? She would never let a stranger into her space without feeling her skin flinch and she certainly hadn’t invited him into her reality. He was thrust upon her in a preposterously staged wedding ceremony. Yet … she had had more fun making up ludicrous vows with a stranger, who seemed to entertain her sense of humour without batting an eyelid, even joining in the ruse, than any man she had ever met before.

‘So, you write children’s books?’ Gilbert asked.

‘And illustrate them too,’ Lettice said, trying to control her shuddering breath.

‘I’d love to see them sometime.’

Lettice swallowed hard. ‘I don’t know where they are,’ was all she could muster in reply.

She was taken aback by his expressing interest in her creations at all, let alone the fact that she wrote children’s books. Most men wouldn’t look at an illustrated book past the first page or two. Lettice thought it a great shame, as so much of the world could be discovered in the pages of an illustrated book.

‘Someone took them,’ Lettice sniffed. ‘I don’t remember who.’

‘It was Rilla, miss,’ Meri piped up. ‘She had me deliver them to Miss Louisa Pemberton.’

‘*The* Miss Louisa Pemberton?’ Lettice said, surprised. ‘You mean to say my work has been hand delivered to Miss Louisa Pemberton, the most promising London publisher in the last five years, even though I’ve been disqualified?’

‘She requested any work for review to be brought to her before she met with the potentials. Her words were, “So I have time to speak to their work”.’

‘It doesn’t signify,’ Lettice sniffled. ‘I’m disqualified from the contest. She’ll never read it.’

‘She does still have it in her possession, does she not?’ Gilbert enquired.

‘Yes, it seems so,’ Lettice said, her hopes beginning to rise.

‘So, go to her,’ Gilbert suggested. ‘Ask her to return it to you, unless she has time to speak to your work.’

Lettice pondered a moment. ‘You mean me to bypass Aunt Hattie’s stipulations and go directly to the source?’ This struck a chord in Lettice’s heart. She couldn’t help remembering saying those outrageous vows in front of an entire crowd of people.

‘Why not?’ Gilbert replied. ‘She is here. She is willing to read manuscripts for consideration. Don’t wait for an invitation. Assume you are the most valuable person in the room and pitch her your ideas.’

‘You’re right!’ Lettice sat up straight. ‘Why would I stand by Aunt Hattie’s rules? If she wanted to give people an opportunity beyond making them perform like monkeys, she wouldn’t set such strict rules.’

‘Spoken like a smart woman, who would never back down from an argument she knew she could win,’ Gilbert suggested.

‘You mean one of history’s greatest women?’

‘Certainly, one of the greatest women in my history,’ Gilbert said.

In a moment of pure wretchedness, Lettice thought he might be speaking about his wife.

‘My mother was a formidable foe when defending her opinion,’ he added.

Thank goodness, thought Lettice, almost unable to contain her relief.

‘She *was* or *is*?’ she said, then realised how rude and insensitive this sounded if his mother had died.

‘She passed a few years back, but the lessons she taught me have nestled under my skin.’

‘She sounds like an amazing woman.’

‘She was, and if she were here, she would scold you for sitting back and not shooting your shot with this Miss Louisa Pemberton.’

‘You are right.’ Lettice wiped her tears and stood.

‘I am sometimes in the habit of being so,’ Gilbert replied with a wry grin. ‘Lady Marigold said so anyway.’

‘I may not be a part of the contest anymore,’ Lettice said, ‘but I can be a part of the journey. I can support the other hopefuls, and when the time is right I’ll approach her.’

‘Brava.’ Meri clapped. ‘Now, miss, what are you going to do?’

Lettice’s impish side returned. ‘Find me the butterfly costume. I’m going back into the ballroom.’

‘That’s the spirit, miss.’ Meri nodded and hurried off to complete Lettice’s task.

‘I think you look positively radiant in your current attire,’ Gilbert commented.

Lettice chuckled, the remnants of her attempt at couture trailing on the floor behind her.

‘Well, I had better return to the ballroom,’ Gilbert said, ‘while you and your maid sort it out.’

‘You have made this all make sense,’ Lettice told him, thoughtful.

‘Anytime, milady. Anytime—now, or in the future.’ He bowed, then turned on his heel and was gone.

Lettice rolled his words over in her mind again. *Anytime now or in the future*. She felt her cheeks heat at the thought of their meaning. Before she had a chance to further turn them into an act in the melodrama of her life, Meri returned with her butterfly gown.

‘Let’s get you dressed.’

She helped Lettice out of her shift and into the silvery gown.

‘It would be a shame to waste the fabric, though,’ Meri considered.

‘I fear I’ve caused some defects with the safety pins,’ Lettice confessed.

‘I’ll fold it up and return it to Madame Pomfrit. I’m sure her seamstresses can still make something stunning.’

‘You are quite wise for someone so young,’ Lettice said.

‘My mam made all our clothes when we were little. She was quite skilled with a needle and thread; never wasted anything.’ Meri smiled, remembering. ‘Taught me how to stretch a meal as well.’

Lettice realised in all of her grief about her parents’ deaths, she had never once, as a child, felt true hunger or wanted for clothing. Aunt Hattie had provided it all.

Meri went to reposition the green silk mask from around her neck. Lettice stayed her hand. There seemed no need for the pretence now. She removed the mask. Everyone had witnessed her shame, and Aunt Hattie had expelled her from the contest. If she was returning to the ballroom to witness the winner’s announcement, she wasn’t going incognito.

‘Will you join me?’ Lettice held out her hand, and Meri took it. They ventured into the ballroom, right as Mr Jacob Patrick was playing the most vigorous violin solo. It was obvious he was a skilled performer, and most likely it was his heart’s desire to join the philharmonic orchestra.

The footman closed the doors behind them, and Lettice and Meri positioned themselves beside him, watching the rest of the performance with their heads held high. At the conclusion of Mr Patrick’s solo, he took a bow, and the crowd clapped in rousing applause. Aunt Hattie returned to the microphone, quietening the audience.

‘Thank you, Mr Patrick. That was a magnificent performance. Our judges have been busy keeping score, and in a few moments I will announce the winners in each category. However, there is one category we are still to judge. The culinary category!’ Aunt Hattie started the applause and the orchestra struck up a jaunty tune.

Mr Patrick remained on stage, stowing his violin on a stand while the footman to the right of the stage entrance opened the door.

Miss Delvine led the procession of contestants, her head held high despite her ill-fitting gown, followed by Miss Appleby tiptoeing in a flowing white dress. The dress was makeshift at best, and Lettice guessed that styling was not her forte. Perhaps she came to be matched. Behind her

came Mr William Davis, clad in a purple coat with black embellishments on the cuffs. The fabric of the coat shimmered, and Lettice couldn’t believe he had managed to whip it up in the short space of time they were allocated. When he entered the ballroom, he owned it. The crowd gasped at Mr Davis flouting conventional colours, prompting a mix of horror and confusion. Lettice was the first to begin the applause. It was clear Mr William Davis had a head for fashion, and Lettice hoped it would be the start of a wonderful partnership.

Mr Chester Bembridge paced into the ballroom, following Mr Davis’s entrance to a truly mediocre reaction. He walked onto the stage with a look of contempt, seemingly disinterested in anything going on before him.

Rilla entered the ballroom, carrying the silver tray, and hurried up the stairs.

Lettice noticed the tray held rows of biscuits, numbered with sign cards from one to five—the number of contestants. She was the sixth. It stung a little that she never had the chance to dress her biscuits with the French buttercream, and they would not even be sampled after all her hard work.

Rilla went to stand on the other side of Shackleton.

‘Now that we have all of our contestants on stage’ – Aunt Hattie shot Lettice a withering glance – ‘please welcome the remainder of our judges.’

The conductor struck up the orchestra and Madame Pomfrit came gliding into the room and onto the stage. Mrs McLaughlin was next, followed by Miss Bettina Gainsbury entering the ballroom on Gilbert’s arm. Miss Gainsbury looked every bit the frazzled bride, Lettice calculating she would have been married three times today. Mr Gilbert Lewis appeared as put together as he had the moment she had exchanged pretend vows with him. Lettice decided marrying once was enough for any lifetime, even if it had been fake.

With a horrible realisation, she couldn’t stomach the thought of Miss Delvine and Miss Appleby exchanging vows with the dashing Mr Gilbert Lewis.

As Miss Gainsbury and Gilbert approached the table, Reverend Telford stood and offered Miss Gainsbury his seat. Lettice realised he wasn't an aging vicar at all. She had paid so little attention during her wedding vows. Now it occurred to her, the way he anticipated Miss Gainsbury’s needs and then proceeded to stare longingly at her, the good reverend might be in the market for a wife.

Gilbert didn’t stop at the table, instead moving to join Rilla and Shackleton to the right of the stage. Shackleton held a tray with a silver pitcher and tumblers that Lettice imagined was for the judges’ refreshment.

The next person through the door held Lettice’s publishing hopes and dreams in the palm of her hand. Miss Louisa Pemberton was dressed in a smart red suit, her red rouged lips matching her shiny red shoes. With hair cut in a stylish bob, Lettice thought they might get along quite well. Ms Pemberton mounted the stairs gracefully, making her way over to sit beside Chief Inspector Zephyr Swift.

With a signal from Aunt Hattie, the conductor drew the orchestra to a close.

Aunt Hattie clapped into the microphone, inducing the crowd to quiet.

‘Our judges have made their decisions in all the categories, bar the culinary arts. One of our categories was decided in secret, our famous judge being the one and only Miss Elvira Fontaine.’ The crowd whistled and cheered, and Lettice expected they thought her aunt was introducing her to come on stage. Aunt Hattie gestured for the audience to calm down. ‘I know what you are thinking,’ she trilled, ‘but no. Miss Fontaine has been spirited off to parts unknown again. This was not before determining who will take her grand prize, earning themselves a place on tour with the incredible singer along with a once-in-a-lifetime record deal.’

‘*Wahoo!*’ shouted someone in the crowd, and everyone laughed.

‘If you please, maestro,’ Aunt Hattie said, turning to the conductor. ‘We need a little mood music to welcome our winner to the microphone.’

The conductor struck up the beginning of a song Lettice knew well. With a few flicks of the baton, he reduced the orchestra to a low drumroll and Aunt Hattie motioned, arms outstretched, towards all the hopefuls standing on stage.

‘Welcome to the microphone, Miss Dahlia Delvine!’

She clapped vigorously and the crowd followed her lead, giving the singer a rousing round of applause. Miss Delvine closed her eyes and raised her face and hands to the heavens. She kissed her fingertips and flicked them forwards, hands splayed, sending her grateful sentiments into the crowd.

The conductor stirred the orchestra into full effect. Miss Delvine stepped confidently up to the microphone and sang, *‘I’ll be seeing him, in all the ways my heart betrays, in all the days of sunshine rays, I’ll always*

think of him that way. I'll find you at the garden gate and follow you home soon, I'll be looking at the moon, and I'll come home again with you!'

The crowd cheered, and Miss Delvine took a long, long bow, before stepping back into line with her fellow hopefuls, her face beaming with pride. Lettice silently wished her the best of luck.

Aunt Hattie returned to the microphone, beaming. Lettice recognised the pure joy in her aunt's demeanour. She truly did seem to have the best intentions, although Lettice still smarted from her aunt's words. She pushed the thoughts aside, determined to celebrate with everyone else despite her own heartbreak.

'Now for the moment we've all been waiting for,' Aunt Hattie continued, 'especially my dear Doctor Oddling as I know he is quite partial to a biscuit or four.' The crowd laughed and Aunt Hattie revelled in it.

Lettice realised her aunt had always been confident—any ventures she dreamed up, she had the means and tenacity to make it happen.

Lettice decided to channel a little of her Aunt Hattie. She vowed before the day was done, she would have her moment with Miss Louisa Pemberton.

'Let the tasting begin,' Aunt Hattie said, clapping. Then she moved to take her seat beside Mr Laurent, her oldest friend and lawyer.

Rilla left her position beside Shackleton, approaching the judges' table from behind. For the second time that day Lettice made a vow: when all of this was over, she and Meri would decorate those ginger biscuits and eat every last one. Well, maybe not *every* one. Perhaps she would offer one to good old Doctor Oddling and his sweet tooth.

Rilla offered the tray to Aunt Hattie, who took the first biscuit in front on the left marked with number one. She held it up to the light, as though she was inspecting a diamond. Rilla moved the tray along, serving Mr Laurent next, followed by Doctor Oddling and Chief Inspector Zephyr Swift. Madame Pomfrit and Mrs McLaughlin were next to be served, then the Reverend Telford and Miss Pemberton. Miss Gainsbury went to take a biscuit, but Rilla quickly passed her by. Reverend Telford broke his biscuit in half, giving half to Miss Gainsbury who took it with a nervous giggle.

'Bottoms up,' cried Aunt Hattie, and every one of the judges—and Miss Gainsbury—took a bite. The crowd *ooh*ed in anticipation. Mrs McLaughlin took a bite and her head tipped up to the heavens in appreciation.

'Pray tell us: who baked this biscuit?' Aunt Hattie called.

Rilla held up her index finger: one.

‘Contestant number one, Miss Candy Appleby, take a bow for the most delicious caramel cardamom biscuit I have ever tasted,’ Aunt Hattie proclaimed.

Miss Appleby curtsied, her cheeks glowing.

‘Well, that one will be hard to beat,’ Aunt Hattie said as she wiped the crumbs from the corner of her mouth and licked her fingers. ‘Onto tasting number two.’

The crowd clapped and Rilla moved the silver tray back into position in front of her mistress.

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Aunt Hattie reached for the biscuit marked with a two, wasting no time devouring it. The rest of the judges took their biscuits, waiting for Aunt Hattie's signal as before. Lettice watched with a frown. It was positively bad-mannered of her aunt to begin the tasting before the other judges were served. Then again, Aunt Hattie made the rules and broke them as often as one changed their undergarments.

As Rilla made her way along the front of the table, each of the judges taking their next biscuit, Aunt Hattie clawed at the bodice of her gown, as if she was making room to breathe.

Swallowing hard, she croaked, 'Water!'

Shackleton hurried to her and poured a glass from the silver pitcher.

Aunt Hattie took a sip, then began to cough, her face turning bright red. She stood, dropping the glass, her eyes bulging with each cough.

'Milady,' Shackleton cried, dropping the tray, the water pitcher and tumblers crashing to the floor.

'Lady Marigold!' cried Rilla, dropping the tray of biscuits and hurrying to her mistress.

Aunt Hattie's eyes went wide, and Lettice was already running across the ballroom.

Aunt Hattie coughed a couple more times and reached down for her fountain pen. She scrawled an urgent message on her judging paper, before clutching at her chest.

Shackleton reached for his mistress, but she teetered backwards and crumpled to the floor.

The audience erupted in chaos, as Lettice leapt onto the stage, her breathing ragged.

‘Aunt Hattie,’ she screamed, slipping in the glassy water, but recovering quickly. Doctor Oddling was already there, huddled beside her aunt’s motionless form. He took a stethoscope from his pocket and pressed it to Aunt Hattie’s chest.

After a few seconds, he looked up at Lettice, his face ashen as he removed the stethoscope. Through streaming tears, she read the words on his lips.

‘Dead.’

Lettice let go a sob. Her only living relative was now gone, and she was all alone in the world.

Lettice fell over her aunt, allowing the tears to flow unbridled. Meri was suddenly at her side, whispering consoling words, while murmuring voices from the audience washed over her.

‘It can’t have been an accident,’ Mr Laurent rasped.

Lettice looked up: the chief was on her feet, Aunt Hattie’s note in her hand. She grasped the microphone, drawing it close and shouting, ‘Seal the doors! Nobody goes in or out!’

Many of the audience members had already departed. The footman shut the doors, securing the last few stragglers inside.

‘If you please,’ said Chief Inspector Swift, gesturing around the stage. ‘No one on the stage must leave.’

The chief inspector looked at the composer. ‘The orchestra may leave. You too, maestro. No one else on stage may exit this ballroom before I’ve had a chance to question them. Except you.’ She pointed to Rilla. ‘There is a constable guarding one of these rooms, the one with Miss Fontaine?’

‘The pink room,’ Rilla replied. With a last look at Aunt Hattie, she stood up and wiped her eyes.

‘Fetch the constable right away, and on your way, tell every footman to return to the ballroom,’ the inspector directed. ‘It’s going to be a long night.’

‘Right away,’ Rilla said, and hastened away.

‘What is it?’ Lettice gulped. ‘What is happening?’ She glanced up at the chief inspector, who reached a hand down and helped Lettice to stand.

‘We mustn’t touch the body now, miss. An autopsy is needed to determine the cause of death.’

‘Cause of death?’ said Mr Chester Bembridge, haughtily. ‘What the deuce are you talking about? It’s as plain as a pikestaff the lady died of a heart attack. And I will not permit you to place a hand on her body without my express permission.’

Lettice stood up, uncertain if she had heard Mr Bembridge correctly.

‘What right do you have to tell the chief inspector what can or can’t be done with my aunt’s body?’ she demanded.

‘My sentiments exactly,’ said the chief, stepping closer to the imposing man. Although Mr Bembridge stood a head above the chief inspector, Miss Zephyr Swift did not appear intimidated in the slightest.

‘I have every right,’ Mr Bembridge replied, his voice hard. ‘You see…’ He paused dramatically. ‘I’m her husband!’

Lettice looked from Mr Bembridge to Chief Inspector Swift and shook her head.

‘Lies,’ she said quietly. ‘My aunt has never been married.’

Mr Laurent shifted uncomfortably. ‘Actually,’ he said. ‘She *has* been married.’

Lettice gasped and suddenly it was all too much. It had been a long day and so much had happened. It felt as though everything was out of control, and Aunt Hattie was dead!

The room began to spin. Then, suddenly, everything went dark.



Lettice opened her eyes and found herself, once again, in the arms of Mr Gilbert Lewis.

‘It’s you,’ she said hoarsely, relieved.

Gilbert smiled down at her, stroking a stray hair from her forehead.

‘What happened?’ she asked, sitting up to find a crowd full of familiar faces staring down at her.

‘You fainted,’ Gilbert said, and Mr Bembridge snickered.

‘A wilting flower, it seems,’ he muttered, and Lettice resisted the urge to stand up and sock the man in the chops.

She remembered the moment right before she fainted. ‘You claim to be my aunt’s husband,’ she said coldly. ‘What proof do you have?’

Mr Bembridge repositioned his bow tie. He unbuttoned his jacket coat, reached into the pocket, and pulled out two documents.

‘First,’ he said, taking off his mask, ‘you should probably call me Benedict.’

Mr Laurent gasped and Lettice’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

‘That’s the way of it,’ Mr Bembridge said, smiling. ‘Benedict Morwell, at your service.’ He thrust the papers into Mr Laurent’s hands.

The lawyer’s eyes danced from left to right, taking in all the details of the first page, then the second. He let out a lengthy sigh, then shook his head. ‘He is correct. Mr Benedict Morwell, by birth, currently known as Mr Chester Bembridge, did marry Lady Harriet Louise Marigold in 1918, not more than two days after your dear parents and your grandfather’—he looked to Lettice—‘may they rest in peace, departed this earth for their heavenly resting place.’

‘You married my aunt two days after my family died?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ was Benedict Morwell’s smug reply. ‘Your father didn’t make a will, never knowing he’d become Lord Marigold, so the prior lord’s stipulations withstood. You had not reached your majority, and she could not inherit unless she married. I am her legal husband, and I do not wish for my wife’s body to be desecrated in any way before her cremation.’

‘It is not your decision,’ the chief inspector replied. ‘I have reason to believe Lady Harriet Marigold’s death was, in fact, murder.’

‘*What?*’ Lettice gasped, then clutched onto Gilbert for support. ‘What brings you to that conclusion, inspector?’

The chief inspector handed Lettice the document Aunt Hattie had scrawled in front of hundreds of witnesses.

‘*I leave it all to Lettice*,’ Lettice read with incredulity—Aunt Hattie’s final words, finished with her very distinctive signature. Lettice glanced at her aunt’s body, and suddenly she felt ill. She looked up at the chief inspector. ‘You think someone killed her?’

Chief Inspector Swift nodded. ‘Of course, further investigation is required.’

‘Investigation of whom?’ Lettice asked in disbelief.

The chief inspector grimaced. ‘Every single person in this room. Would you agree, Doctor Oddling?’

Doctor Oddling shook his head. ‘Judging by the symptoms, Lady Harriet Marigold did not die of a heart attack, as Mr Benedict Morwell proclaims. I suspect she was in fact poisoned with either cyanide—which would be immediate—or digitalis from the foxglove plant. If ingested it would take effect in as little as thirty minutes.’

‘Someone killed my aunt?’ Lettice asked, tears welling once more, ‘to what gain?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ the chief inspector replied. ‘To inherit a fortune.’

‘You believe I poisoned my own aunt to inherit her fortune?’ said Lettice, shocked.

The chief inspector shook her head. ‘I believe you are, in fact, the only one who could *not* have poisoned your aunt. Someone killed her with a biscuit. Whose biscuit is still to be determined.’

Lettice frowned. ‘So, I'm not a suspect?

‘How could you be? We all witnessed your aunt disqualifying you, taking you out of the contest including the tasting. Not to mention in her dying moments, Lady Marigold made her last will and testament, leaving everything to you. It tells me, prior to today, Lady Marigold’s fortune was in fact promised to her legally wedded husband; a fact you could not have known before Lady Marigold made her final will.’

‘That is correct,’ Mr Laurent said, nodding. ‘I didn't recognise him in the mask, and you have to remember it has been some twenty years since I've clamped eyes on Mr Benedict Morwell. The last time I saw him, I paid him a tidy sum to disappear. The agreement was that on Lady Marigold’s death, Mr Morwell would inherit her fortune.’

‘Which brings me to my first observation,’ the chief inspector said. ‘We know contestant number one, Miss Candy Appleby, baked the delicious biscuit. Considering we all ate the same biscuit and are still standing, this excludes her from the suspect list.’

‘So, who baked the second round of biscuits, giving my aunt a lethal dose?’ Lettice asked.

Mr Laurent went to the judging table and shuffled his notes, then shook his head. ‘I can't find any notes as to which order the contestants would be judged.’

‘That's because Lady Marigold didn't keep notes,’ said Gilbert. ‘*I* did.’

Lettice turned to Gilbert, stifling a gasp. Wrenching herself out of his arms, she faced him with a frown.

‘What did you say?’

Gilbert reached out to her. ‘Calm down. I can explain everything.’

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The doors closest to the music room burst open, pushing the footman out of the way. The constable bounded in, followed by Rilla, and several footmen behind them.

‘Chief Inspector,’ the young constable said, saluting.

The chief inspector waved him up onto the stage.

Lettice noticed that Rilla went to sit beside Shackleton. The old man was slumped next to Aunt Hattie’s body.

The footmen all dispersed into the room, mingling with the maids.

‘Hold that thought,’ the chief inspector said, pointing to Gilbert. Gilbert hadn't taken his eyes off Lettice. ‘First things first. Constable Grayson, I need you to notify the coroner. We have a deceased person, and we must render her the respect she deserves as soon as possible. Then call the Yard and have them send a team.’

Lettice suspected she wanted as much help as possible with such a large group to question.

‘Yes, chief inspector,’ Grayson replied.

‘The maid.’ The chief pointed to Rilla. ‘What is your name?’

‘Rilla Vaughan.’

‘Miss Vaughan, Lady Marigold has a telephone, I presume?’

‘Yes ma'am. Milady keeps one in the west hallway entrance, near the music room.’

‘Show the constable where it is, then return with a dustpan and some clean linens to mop up this mess. Both the soaked water towels and the

biscuits will need to be kept for the coroner.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Rilla curtsied, and she and the constable departed on their errands.

‘You won’t need to test the water-soaked towels,’ Doctor Oddling’s gravelly voice said. ‘Digitalis is an extremely bitter poison. One sip and it would be wholly apparent. I doubt anyone could drink water laced with digitalis and not immediately spit the infernal stuff out.’

‘Are you saying it had to be in the biscuits then?’ the chief inspector said.

‘Definitely,’ Doctor Oddling confirmed.

‘It’s hardly a secret as to who baked which biscuits,’ Lettice said. ‘Mr Lewis can give us the contestant order, surely. Plus, we can readily identify them. Mine are still languishing in the kitchen undecorated. Which contestant was due to be judged next?’

‘For the answer to that,’ said the chief inspector, ‘I believe we must return to the thought I asked Mr Lewis to hold earlier.’

Gilbert nodded. ‘Lady Marigold didn’t care for logistics, so the colour-coded rooms assisted the maids in managing their charges throughout the contest, along with a rotation of who would go where.’ Gilbert pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to the chief inspector.

Lettice couldn’t hold it in any longer. ‘Why were you assisting my aunt in the first place?’

‘Because I am your aunt’s steward,’ Gilbert replied. ‘When your aunt’s less-than-ideal matchmaking skills failed again—that is, the Marquis of Mayweather skipped town, breaking his agreement with Lady Marigold—I had to step in as the fake groom.’

‘Where are the maids who accompanied the hopefuls?’ the chief inspector asked.

‘They’re all back in my kitchen,’ said Mrs McLaughlin. ‘I was instructed to gather a formidable staff for the event, with Lady Marigold needing most of them to accompany the hopefuls. Since they weren’t the ones baking the biscuits, I agreed to a skeleton staff in the kitchen. But they are all my staff.’

‘We need all those maids present and accounted for,’ the chief inspector suggested. ‘Any of them could have been party to the poisoning, as well as the footmen.’

‘By all means, your constable can fetch my maids,’ Mrs McLaughlin replied. ‘I will tell you right now, I might have a mind like a sieve for many things, but biscuits I never forget. I watched every single one of those biscuits being baked and no one was allowed to assist. I think I would have noticed foxglove being added. It’s a very distinctive purple flower.’

‘Poisons can be masked in appearance quite often,’ said Doctor Oddling. ‘The taste is hard to disguise. Another ingredient could have masked the colour, for sure. I would be surprised if one could mask the taste. Besides, a single flower or leaf would not cause death, it would have to be concentrated.’

‘In that case,’ Mrs McLaughlin replied, ‘there was only one biscuit made in my kitchen which used the bitterest dark chocolate you can acquire, coupled with a burnt butter slurry. That biscuit was the very same biscuit in line for the second tasting.’

‘Whose biscuit was it?’ Lettice blurted out.

Mrs McLaughlin jabbed a finger in the direction of Mr Benedict Morwell.

‘So I am not the best baker in the world,’ Benedict Morwell replied, his hands up in surrender. ‘You said so yourself: you watched every single ingredient that went into those biscuits. There was nothing I didn’t obtain from this kitchen.’

Lettice should have anticipated what came next.

‘In fact, I know exactly how to prove I didn’t do it.’ Benedict Morwell dived towards where the biscuits had fallen. He snatched up one of the dark chocolate biscuits and shoved it in his mouth, gobbling the whole thing up in seconds.

‘Pull a stunt like that again,’ the chief inspector replied quietly, ‘and I will have you arrested for hindering an investigation.’

‘Well, it proved my point, didn’t it?’ Benedict Morwell pinched his own cheek and lifted one of his arms which stayed in the position he held it in. ‘Officially still breathing,’ he said.

‘You are an abominable human being, Benedict Morwell,’ Lettice muttered.

‘If it *were* digitalis,’ Dr Oddling pointed out, ‘you wouldn’t know for another thirty minutes. Lady Marigold died soon after ingesting the biscuit. My money is on cyanide.’

‘And that brings me to my next line of questioning,’ the chief inspector said. ‘First’—she pointed to a constable standing closest to the ballroom central doors—‘go to the kitchens and bring all the maids here. Quick smart.’

‘Out the main doors, first door on your left,’ Mrs McLaughlin called.

The constable departed on his errand.

‘Now, how were the ingredients chosen?’ the chief inspector enquired.

‘The pantry, of course,’ Mrs McLaughlin replied. ‘They’re stocked with every ingredient imaginable, from flour to spices. Eggs and butter and milk are in the larder.’

‘And you supervised the preparation of all of these ingredients?’ the chief inspector continued.

‘Of course, I’ve tested every one of ’em.’ Mrs McLaughlin raised her voice in frustration. ‘Ain’t nothing in my kitchen but the finest ingredients, as Lady Marigold requested. If the foxglove was added, it wasn’t from my kitchen!’

A moment later, the constable returned with the maids. Lettice noticed Flick in an instant and the girl waved shyly at her.

‘There have been quite a few assumptions made already in regard to the manner of death,’ Doctor Oddling piped up. ‘Assumptions which will only be confirmed on autopsy.’

‘I am well aware of that, Doctor Oddling,’ the chief inspector replied. ‘With a group this large, it is imperative I gather as many details as possible before the body is removed.’

‘Granted.’ Doctor Oddling shrugged as Rilla returned with Grayson. He carried the linen and towels, setting it down on the judges’ table, while Rilla placed the dustpan on the floor near the glass.

‘Everyone stand back,’ the chief inspector instructed, as she and Grayson unfolded a linen sheet and placed it over Lady Marigold’s body. Opening another sheet, the chief spread it out on the table. ‘Now, gather up all those biscuits, and place them on the linen. And take care, Grayson. Do not be tempted to touch your hands to your face or mouth before washing them. Any one of these biscuits could be poisoned.’

‘Did anyone notice Aunt Hattie’s expression when she ate the biscuit?’ Lettice enquired.

‘I’ll be the one to ask the questions,’ the chief inspector warned.

Lettice couldn’t let it go.

‘With all due respect, chief inspector,’ she pushed back. ‘You said yourself I am the only one you can one hundred per cent rule out as a suspect, and I have questions I know can help forward your investigation.’

The chief inspector seemed to consider this. ‘It’s unconventional,’ she said, ‘but I like your spunk. I'd rather you an ally than a hindrance. What is your next question?’

Lettice turned to Benedict Morwell.

‘Why did you marry my aunt two days after my parents’ and grandfather’s deaths? Were you secret lovers?’

‘Yes, that was it,’ Mr Morwell replied. ‘My darling Hatbox, I used to call her.’

Lettice wasn’t buying it. ‘And pray tell, where did you meet my aunt? An heiress with a fortune so formidable I doubt you’d run in the same circles. Hardly the standard her father would have approved of.’

Mr Morwell’s expression betrayed his disdain. Lettice was unsure if it was for her, or for her grandfather. She had few memories of the man, but Aunt Hattie had once said he was a tyrant with a controlling nature.

‘He’s the *reason* she married me,’ Mr Morwell said.

Lettice was confused.

‘The reason?’ she repeated.

The chief inspector interrupted. ‘I am all for furthering this investigation, miss, but this is wasting valuable time.’

‘I believe her question might be valid,’ said Mr Laurent, ‘when you hear what I have to say on the matter.’

‘Go ahead,’ said the chief inspector, sighing.

Mr Morwell nodded. ‘The year 1918 marked the tragic passing of three of the most precious kin to Lady Harriet Marigold all in the same week. First, her dear brother was killed in the war. Her father suffered a heart turn the next day and was rumoured to have died from a broken heart over his only son. Then, her brother’s wife—Lettice’s mother—was en route to collect his remains and was killed when the carriage overturned.’

Lettice’s hand went to her mouth.

‘What is it?’ Gilbert asked, still standing tantalisingly close.

The absence of his comforting arms felt like another betrayal. Lettice would get to his initial betrayal soon enough.

She cleared her throat. ‘Aunt Hattie only told me they died during the war—never that Mama was killed in a carriage accident.’

‘You were very young,’ Mr Laurent replied. ‘Lady Marigold made the decision to shield you from the truth.’

‘She had no right,’ Lettice grumbled.

‘I had hoped she would share it with you someday,’ Mr Laurent said, and shrugged. ‘That day was stolen from you today. My condolences.’

Lettice sighed. ‘Thank you.’

‘Yes, thank you. I accept your condolences on behalf of my dear wife,’ Mr Morwell said, his eyes narrow.

‘If she was so dear to you, where have you been for the last twenty years?’ Lettice asked, barely keeping the edge from her voice.

‘Go ahead, sir,’ Mr Morwell said, motioning to Mr Laurent.

‘Lord Marigold was a particularly controlling man. His will was iron clad, stating no female in the line shall inherit his fortune unless she were married.’

‘With my father’s death, Aunt Hattie wasn’t the natural successor,’ said Lettice. ‘She could only inherit if she were married?’

‘Correct.’ Mr Laurent nodded. ‘Via letter from the War Office, we learned of your father’s fatal wounding on the battlefield, then the subsequent loss of your grandfather and your mother. Lady Marigold was thrust into an untenable position during the most grievous time in her life, and there was you to consider.’

‘Me?’ Lettice frowned. ‘Why would the inheritance affect me?’

‘When I use the term ironclad, I *mean* it was ironclad.’ Mr Laurent shook his head. ‘Flowing down the generations. The man truly stitched up every female in his lineage. Rumour has it that his mother was a tyrant, and because of her he hated all women.’

Lettice put the pieces of the puzzle together.

‘Since I was unable to be wed at the age of ten, I was unable to succeed. And neither could Aunt Hattie, unless she married.’

Mr Laurent nodded gravely. ‘And as an unwed woman at the time, Lady Marigold could not have taken you into her care either.’

Lettice glared at Benedict Morwell. ‘So in order to inherit the fortune which was rightfully hers, as well as ensure my safety, Aunt Hattie entered into a marriage with a scoundrel.’

‘Now, now, that’s no way to talk to your uncle,’ Mr Morwell said, grinning.

‘It is unfortunately accurate though,’ Mr Laurent replied. ‘Lady Marigold required a most expedient marriage, or the government would have entailed her estate to some distant cousin of her father. Thus, she had me draw up a contract with Mr Benedict Morwell.’

‘And who *is* Mr Benedict Morwell?’ Lettice stared the man down. ‘Where did she make your acquaintance?’

Mr Morwell took aim with an imaginary gun, cocked the barrel and fired. ‘Boom!’ he cried, then laughed.

Mr Laurent shook his head yet again, his disdain for Benedict Morwell obvious.

‘He was the gamekeeper’s son,’ the lawyer spat, ‘and he was paid handsomely for his part, I might add.’

‘Ah, yes.’ Mr Morwell rubbed his hands together. ‘What price can you put on true love?’

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‘True love?’ said Lettice. ‘That is why you are here? Seems a great coincidence.’

‘On the contrary,’ Mr Morwell said, chuckling. ‘You can imagine my excitement when I was chosen for the contest, and I learned it would be a masquerade. It was the perfect way to apprise my dear Hatbox of my return.’

‘To rekindle a non-existent relationship, or to kill her?’ said Lettice venomously. ‘If you truly wanted to return to her life, why did you use a *nom de plume*?’

‘It would hardly have been a surprise without it, would it?’ Mr Morwell countered.

‘Quite convenient that a masquerade was part of the contest, hiding your identity. At what point did you plan on revealing your dark secret?’

‘Dark secret.’ He laughed. ‘The only thing dark about my return was my dark chocolate biscuit, which, by the way, I have proved was not the biscuit that killed her.’

‘Nothing has been proved,’ the chief inspector clarified.

‘And everything will be tested, won’t it, chief inspector?’ Lettice reminded her.

‘The moment the coroner and backup from Scotland Yard arrives, there will be many samples taken, including all of those biscuits.’

‘As I’ve proved,’ Mr Morwell countered, ‘you won’t find any poison in any of *my* biscuits.’

The doors opened again. It was the footman, looking harried.

‘The coroner and more police,’ he announced.

A group of uniformed police officers entered the room, paying their respects to the chief inspector, followed by an elderly man with a snow-white beard and moustache. He was dressed in a brown suit, and he pushed a stainless-steel trolley.

Chief Inspector Zephyr Swift sighed with relief, but Lettice wasn’t convinced this man would understand the urgency or gravity of the situation. She didn’t think the coroner usually attended the scene to collect a body—surely a morgue attendant would do this? She didn’t care about procedure. She wanted answers and she wanted them now.

‘Thank you for coming, Dr Lilley,’ the chief inspector said. ‘I have reason to suspect the victim has been poisoned with a biscuit made in the Marigold kitchens.’ She pointed to Grayson. ‘The constable has a bundle of biscuits ready for testing.’

‘I see, ma’am,’ Dr Lilley replied. He reached for a leather bag under his trolley. ‘I’ll take those,’ he said, placing the wrapped biscuits inside the bag and returning it to the trolley.

The chief inspector pointed to another two officers standing nearby. ‘Clean up this glass and take it to the kitchen, then the two of you get to work collecting all the ingredients on display on the pantry shelving, as well as the cupboard larder. Package them all up for testing and transport them directly to the coroner’s wagon.’

‘You’ll find butcher’s paper under the bench on the right,’ Mrs McLaughlin called.

‘Yes ma’am.’

The two officers made light work of cleaning up the glass.

‘You lot!’ The chief inspector pointed to the remaining group of officers. ‘Station yourselves at each of the ballroom doors. No one goes in or out without my permission or Constable Grayson’s.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ they answered in unison, and set about dividing up to cover the doors.

‘I’m going to brief the coroner more thoroughly,’ said the chief inspector, signalling for Dr Lilley to follow her out of the ballroom via the stage doors.

Lettice hoped the briefing would be succinct—the longer her aunt’s body lay unattended on the cold ballroom floor, the more her anxious

thoughts escalated. If someone had intentionally taken her precious aunt from her, she would do everything in her power to discover the identity of the person and bring them to justice.

In the chief inspector's absence, Lettice became aware of quiet whispers around the ballroom. She could only assume the topic of speculation was the who, where, and why of her aunt's death, and whether it was even suspicious. Lettice's instinct was telling her it was murder.

Benedict Morwell had taken a seat on one of the empty chairs abandoned by the orchestra and was currently studying his fingernails.

What an odious man, thought Lettice. *He has to have been responsible. Rekindling Aunt Hattie's love—I don't buy it.*

No, somehow Benedict Morwell was to blame, and she would prove it if it was the last thing she did.

Distracted by her churning thoughts, Lettice had forgotten Gilbert remained close by her side.

'I think he did it,' Gilbert whispered in her ear.

Lettice shot him a glare. 'Who's to say *you* didn't do it and are trying to implicate him?'

Gilbert sighed, rubbing his forehead. 'I can assure you, I didn't do it. Not only was I Lady Marigold's steward, I was also her friend. She was quite dear to me. I am as shocked as you, and I want answers. If that mongrel did it, I want him locked away indefinitely.'

Lettice nodded and kept her voice low. 'You're not buying his proclamations of love either?'

'It's very convenient. Too convenient. No one turns up after twenty years expecting to rekindle a marriage of convenience. No, he wanted something from Lady Marigold.'

'He certainly stands to benefit the most upon Aunt Hattie's death,' Lettice pondered.

'Exactly,' Gilbert replied, as the chief inspector and the coroner returned to the ballroom. The chief inspector lifted the linen, allowing Dr Lilley to begin his inspection, and Lettice felt another wave of sadness wash over her.

'Oh poor dear Aunt Hattie,' she choked out, and Gilbert gently took her hand. 'She didn't deserve this. How horrific to be on the verge of death and all you can think of is your will.'

‘She was one strong lady,’ Gilbert said, giving her hand a squeeze. ‘It wasn’t her will she was thinking of. It was you.’

Lettice nodded and sighed. ‘I won’t rest until we get to the bottom of this.’

‘I’ll assist you in any way possible,’ he said, releasing her hand.

Lettice resisted the urge to take it back and hold it, for how long she did not know.

The chief inspector signalled to one of the officers guarding the doors, to assist Dr Lilley in lifting Aunt Hattie’s body onto the trolley. The old man did it with tender care, ensuring her arms and legs were secured by the sheet and fussing over tying the corners. Lettice realised Dr Lilley was exactly the person for the job. She felt reassured he would treat her aunt with dignity and respect, something her supposed husband seemed incapable of.

Meanwhile, Benedict Morwell fiddled with the violin which Mr Patrick had secured in its stand after his outstanding performance.

Lettice was incensed he wasn’t even attempting to keep up the guise of his rekindled love—he hadn’t even spared Aunt Hattie one final glance.

Once the coroner had departed with the trolley and Aunt Hattie’s body, the chief stepped up to the microphone.

‘Now that’s been taken care of, I will begin questioning each of you, so you had better settle in. We’ll start with the maids.’ She pointed to the first one standing in line, then called to Grayson.

‘Yes, chief inspector?’ replied the constable.

‘You will assist me. Accompany the first maid out of the ballroom and find me a room.’

’Yes, chief inspector.’

‘I wish to accompany you, too,’ Lettice called after them, shooting Gilbert a pleading glance before she hurried to catch up. The chief inspector didn’t stop her.

Knowing the house well, regardless of the renovations, Lettice suggested they adjourn to the ballroom’s cloakroom. It was large enough, with chairs situated around the edge of the room, and small enough to make one feel a little claustrophobic, especially if one had something to hide. The trunk Flick had taken Lettice’s black dress from was still sitting in the same position, left open with a bundle of maid uniforms inside.

‘Perfect,’ the chief inspector said, nodding, and they filed into the room. Grayson placed a chair in the middle of the room, ushering the maid to take

a seat. She wore the same uniform—black dress with a white collar—as the rest of the staff. Lettice didn't know this girl, but then, it had been a year since she'd been home.

'What is your name, miss?' the chief inspector enquired as Grayson pulled out two more chairs for her and Lettice. He took his place by the door.

'Maudie Pinkerton, ma'am,' the maid replied.

The chief inspector smiled. 'Tell me, Miss Pinkerton, how long have you worked for Lady Marigold?'

'Only a couple of weeks, ma'am.'

'And who were you tasked to accompany during the contest?'

'Miss Appleby, ma'am.'

'And what did she bake?'

'The caramel cardamom biscuit, ma'am.'

'Right, yes.' The chief inspector smiled and licked her lips. 'It was a truly magnificent taste. Did you at any time assist Miss Appleby in the making of the biscuits?'

'No, ma'am. Lady Marigold forbade us from helping. We were only to keep to the gong, moving to the next room when we heard it ring.'

'Have you got the schedule written down?'

'Of course, ma'am. I have it right here.' She reached into her apron pocket, pulled out a folded piece of paper, and passed it to the chief inspector.

Lettice leaned in close, hoping to discern something from the note.

'We shall have to keep this,' said the chief inspector, fanning herself with the paper.

'Yes, ma'am,' Miss Pinkerton replied.

'That will be all. Grayson will escort you back to the ballroom.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Miss Pinkerton rose with a grim expression and nodded once before following Grayson out.

'Bring in the next one,' called the chief inspector.

'Yes, chief inspector,' Grayson replied.

She turned to Lettice. 'It will be important to collect those schedules to ensure everything lines up.' She took out the master schedule that Gilbert had given her. 'According to this, Candy Appleby's first room was the kitchen.'

Lettice remembered exactly where she was, and a tiny shudder overcame her body. What seemed like an age had passed, when actually it was only a couple of hours since she had married Mr Gilbert Lewis in jest. The memory was emblazoned on her mind. She pushed it aside.

She and the chief compared the two schedules and the chief asked, ‘What was your first room?’

Lettice let out another tiny shudder. ‘The blue room,’ she said.

‘Oh, yes.’ The chief chuckled. ‘The dashing Mr Gilbert Lewis.’

Lettice took in a slight breath, holding it a moment too long, before it gushed out again. ‘*Isn’t* he?’

No, Lettice, she warned herself, *you must keep focused*.

‘Everything has a time and a place,’ the chief inspector said.

‘Yes, chief inspector,’ Lettice replied, wincing.

‘Call me Zephyr.’

‘What is your plan, then? To question all the maids first?’

‘Yes. I want to compare if their accounts align. Until we know if the kitchen was clean of poisonous ingredients, we have to assume any one of them could have added something while the competitor had their back turned.’

‘Interesting. What about Chester Bembri—I mean, Benedict Morwell,’ Lettice said, quickly correcting herself.

‘All in good time,’ the chief replied. ‘For now, we'll let him stew.’

‘Agreed,’ said Lettice. She liked this inspector.

Grayson returned with the next maid, another whom Lettice did not recognise. Her story aligned with that of the first maid. She accompanied Mr William Davis. He was slow and meticulous but produced a very nice biscuit.

The following two maids had the same responses, vowing they had never touched the ingredients and only observed the proceedings. Mrs McLaughlin swore the same. When Meri arrived to be questioned, she detailed everything that had happened, once again corroborating Lettice’s account. However, the chief said it was important to cover every base.

The last maid to be questioned was the one assigned to Mr Chester Bembridge, or Benedict Morwell as he was known to them now. She was a nervous girl—Lettice wasn’t sure if it was because she knew more than she was letting on, or if it was her disposition. She wore the same uniform as

the others, and once again it was spotless, showing no evidence of the culinary arts of the morning.

‘You were tasked to Mr Chester Bembridge, correct?’ the chief inspector began.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ the maid replied.

‘What is your name?’

‘Petunia Tuppence, ma’am.’

‘Miss Tuppence, did you at any time assist Mr Bembridge?’ the chief asked, pressing on and ignoring the girl’s distress; tears were welling in her eyes.

Lettice knew tears were a powerful tool for some. She wasn’t sure this scrap of a girl had a crumb of spite in her tiny frame. Still, she had to let the chief inspector do her duty.

‘No, ma’am,’ Miss Tuppence sobbed. ‘I didn’t do nothing, ma’am. I did what Lady Marigold ordered. I didn’t help him do nothing.’

‘You never picked up any of the ingredients, offered him a pot or pan, or helped him load trays into the oven?’

‘No, ma’am, he did it all himself. Even putting them in the oven. He seemed quite good at it, too. He even made a burnt butter slurry, which is hard to get right. Too long and it tastes like a burnt shoe; too little, you might as well have not bothered.’

‘And at any time, did Mr Bembridge have any conversations with any of the other maids, or perhaps Mrs McLaughlin?’

‘No, ma’am, it was as I said. He did it all without no one assisting him or talking to him. It was like he was in another world or something.’

‘Thank you, Miss Tuppence,’ the chief said, smiling gently. ‘You may go.’

Miss Tuppence stood, but hesitated. ‘I won’t be losing my job, ma’am?’

‘Not today,’ Lettice replied. She didn't have the heart to tell the girl she had no idea what would happen to Aunt Hattie’s staff, or the estate for that matter. All she knew was that her aunt was dead, and perhaps Benedict Morwell would prevail in taking control of Marigold Manor. Right now, she couldn't think about that.

‘Thank you, miss.’ Miss Tuppence curtseyed, and left the room sobbing, with Grayson following.

‘What about Flick?’ Lettice said, suddenly remembering.

‘Flick?’ the chief inspector said. ‘Who is Flick?’

‘Miss Warren. She’s another maid. She brought me my dress.’

‘To the blue room?’

Lettice nodded. Then she frowned. ‘Now that I think about it, it was strange. There was a coat rack containing very nice gowns and suits, and yet Miss Warren arrived with a specific gown for me. She assisted me, along with Miss West, to put the gown on. I can't think why she arrived with another, when there was a selection on the rack which would have suited my needs.’

‘Shall we question her next?’ the chief inspector asked, and Lettice agreed.

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When Miss Warren arrived with Grayson, she gave them both a half curtsey. Lettice smiled, trying to hold back her suspicions. She liked Flick, but they'd only met that day.

'Miss Felicity Warren, is it?' the chief inspector began.

'Yes, ma'am,' Miss Warren replied calmly.

'What is your position in the household, Miss Warren?'

'Serving maid,' she said. 'Sometimes I'm in the scullery. I'm handy with a needle and thread, you see, so lately Lady Marigold has had me making a gown.'

'I see,' replied the chief. 'And were you in the kitchen at all during the contest?'

'No, ma'am.'

'What was your role?'

'I was in the blue room, ma'am. Helping the ladies get dressed for the pretend nuptials and providing the suits for the men.'

Lettice couldn't help herself. 'You brought me a gown, not from the rack in the room. Why was that?'

'Yours was specially made. Lady Marigold had me working on it for the past few days.'

'You never mentioned you made the gown,' Lettice said, frowning.

'No, miss. Lady Marigold forbade me.'

'Why was the gown upstairs and not on the rack?' the chief asked.

‘I was still finishing it, ma’am. A gown like that, with fine satin—it had to be kept pressed and stored flat.’

‘Why didn’t Aunt Hattie have Madame Pomfrit make it?’ asked Lettice, perplexed.

‘I asked her the same thing, and she said she’d trust Madame Pomfrit with her life. When it came to this particular gown, she couldn’t trust that *madame* wouldn’t’—Miss Warren paused and flashed an apologetic look—‘flap her mouth about it.’

‘How did you know my measurements?’ asked Lettice.

Miss Warren shrugged. ‘Lady Marigold gave me one of your old gowns to work from.’

‘And you never left the wedding room during the whole contest?’ asked the chief inspector, obviously trying to get the questioning back on track.

Miss Warren looked at Lettice and bit her lip.

‘With each wedding, I was to help the bride or groom get dressed. Then they had the nuptials in the blue room. On account of Miss Lettice’s wedding being in the ballroom, Meri and I peeped through the keyhole.’

‘She did,’ Lettice confirmed. ‘I saw her return in the direction of the blue room when Meri took me to my next destination, which was the green room.’

‘You were such a beautiful bride, and in a dress I made from scratch.’ Miss Warren sighed. ‘I was so proud.’

‘You did very well,’ Lettice replied. ‘But why was my wedding in the ballroom?’

‘Lady Marigold told us the first wedding would be in the ballroom.’

‘Shouldn’t there have been someone playing with the orchestra?’ Lettice wondered. ‘One of the contestants?’

‘They did. After you left,’ Miss Warren said. ‘I remember hearing it. It was why we were told we had to hurry, on account of the first contestant playing with the orchestra.’

The chief inspector nodded and made a note.

‘All right. That will be all,’ she said, and Grayson showed Miss Warren out. Waiting for the girl and the constable to be out of earshot, the chief inspector turned to Lettice. ‘What do you make of it?’

‘I can't fathom,’ Lettice said shaking her head, ‘why my aunt would go to all the trouble of having a special dress prepared for me and staging my

fake wedding in the ballroom, unlike the other contestants who had off-the-rack costumes.'

'It's anyone's guess,' the chief said, shrugging. 'Perhaps she wanted to see her only niece married, even it if was staged. Whatever the reason, your aunt seemed to do an awful lot of planning to ensure her secrets were locked tight.'

'I never knew.' Lettice sighed. 'I never knew the sacrifices she made for me. She never remarried, because she was already married and had to stay married in order to ensure my safety and her security.'

'Thank goodness times are changing,' the chief inspector consoled. 'Women have more choices these days.'

'And you are living proof,' Lettice said, thoughtfully. 'It's an honour to work with you.'

'You definitely have promise as a young investigator. Your insights have been astute so far.'

'Where to next, then?' Lettice said, feeling impatient for more answers.

'Let's return to the ballroom and see how they're all fairing.'

Lettice knew exactly what Chief Inspector Swift meant. They were going to see how Mr Morwell was enjoying being trapped in a ballroom full of people who suspected he had murdered Lady Marigold. She was also keen to find out if Gilbert had gleaned any further information.

When they entered the room, Lettice couldn't believe the absurd scene playing out before her. Mr Morwell was playing shuttlecock against one of the walls, using Mr Patrick's violin, causing Mr Patrick's jaw to clench with every swing. Miss Delvine stood at the microphone, eyes closed as she hummed a soft tune. She repeated the refrain '*…crossing to the other side…*' a few times before her song ceased, and she stepped back from the microphone.

Miss Pemberton had taken up a seat beside Mr Laurent, while Doctor Oddling sat very still, dozing in his chair beside her. Miss Pemberton was scribbling furiously on the back of her judging sheet. Lettice wondered if perhaps Miss Pemberton was a budding author herself. She longed to chat with the woman about her writing, wondering if Miss Pemberton had read any of her work during the morning chaos. Mr Morwell took another swing at the shuttlecock, then swayed. He produced a tiny flask from inside his sock and took a swig.

‘Where did you get the shuttlecock?’ the chief said, swiping it from the ground, then grabbing the flask out of Mr Morwell’s hand.

‘Hey, that’s no way to treat the lord of the house,’ Mr Morwell slurred. ‘Soon to be, at least.’ He smiled to himself and turned towards Mrs McLaughlin. ‘Hey you! Baker woman!’

Mrs McLaughlin cocked an eyebrow at him. She was seated on one of the orchestra chairs, one boot off, rubbing her toes.

‘Make me a sandwich,’ he commanded. ‘Quail or pheasant. Have you got some? Or should I go and shoot some myself?’

‘The only thing you’ll be shooting for today will be the water closet,’ Mrs McLaughlin replied. ‘And perhaps your freedom,’ she muttered under her breath, loud enough for Lettice to hear.

‘Excuse me, ma’am.’ Meri stepped forward, addressing the chief inspector. ‘If you will permit, some of the ladies need to use the lavatory.’

The chief inspector sighed. ‘Very well. One of my officers can escort them.’

Gilbert did not join the line for the lavatory, and Lettice was relieved. She wanted to check back in with him, and not under the watchful eyes of the captive audience.

‘What have you learned?’ she whispered to him as the chief inspector moved to sit beside Mr Laurent in what was Aunt Hattie’s seat on the stage. Mr Laurent shook his head, pointing out something in the documents laying before him. Lettice didn’t want to think of what ramifications Aunt Hattie’s actions may have caused. She did not care for her aunt’s wealth. She’d done very well without it and never once considered it might all be hers one day. She would much rather have her aunt here again making awkward matchmaking attempts on her behalf.

‘Not much,’ Gilbert replied, sighing, ‘except Benedict Morwell is a first-rate cad. If you had been much longer, I thought perhaps Mr Patrick might have rearranged his ears after witnessing the grave misuse of what I think is quite an expensive violin.’

‘When did he start drinking?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t see. He wasn’t the only one putting on a show while you were gone, though. Miss Appleby has been sobbing to herself in the corner, with the occasional remark about, “a most advantageous match she was promised”.’

‘Promised?’ Lettice questioned.

‘She’s mad. No one was promised anything. Everyone who received your aunt’s invitation had the same opportunity. No one was promised their heart’s desire, only the chance to fulfil it.’

‘Really?’ Lettice replied, perplexed. ‘Why didn’t I get an invitation like the others?’

Gilbert shook his head. ‘Lady Marigold told me not to worry about your invitation. She would take care of it herself.’

‘So you were the one who selected the contestants?’

Gilbert shook his head again. ‘Oh no, there were literally hundreds of potentials. Rilla helped me. She whittled down the applicants to forty, which I whittled down further to the final five—or six, if you include yourself.’

‘And Mr Chester Bembridge was for certain in the final five?’

Gilbert scratched his chin. ‘That’s the thing. I’ve been racking my brain, trying to remember. I thought I had offered an invitation to a Mr Chester Banbury. Mr Chester Bembridge arrived with his invitation on your aunt’s stationery, so I didn’t think anything of it.’

‘I have to let Zephyr know about this,’ Lettice whispered urgently.

‘Zephyr?’ Gilbert said, smiling. ‘On good terms now, are we?’

‘She insisted. Besides, we can’t solve this without her. We need her on our side.’

‘Granted.’ Gilbert nodded, just as the chief inspector returned to the microphone.

‘There’s been an interesting development,’ Chief Inspector Swift announced. ‘Mr Laurent will explain.’

Mr Laurent hurried to the microphone, holding two pieces of paper. To Lettice, it looked like the marriage license she and Gilbert had signed, along with her aunt’s makeshift will.

‘My apologies for rendering this information to you in a public forum. I fear you have both fallen prey to one of your aunt’s matchmaking schemes.’

Lettice and Gilbert looked at each other.

‘Both, as in Mr Lewis and myself?’ Lettice clarified.

‘The very same,’ Mr Laurent replied, ‘and I unfortunately have been party to the deception, which I am sorry to report.’

‘What deception?’ Gilbert asked, his voice echoing around the ballroom.

‘When Lady Marigold proposed this scheme to me,’ Mr Laurent explained, ‘it was all a bit of a lark. “Bring a real marriage license,” she said, so that after the soiree, she could display it in the hallway for all to see. She told me she wanted to create a themed experience, you see, for spinster ladies and bachelors. They could roleplay getting married without the actual bonds of marriage, and those who couldn’t afford to be married could also have a chance to play at being married in a superior wedding destination.

‘I didn’t think anything of it,’ Mr Laurent went on, ‘Hattie—Lady Marigold—did love a lark. The problem is, after examining the documents, there seems to have been some miscommunication.’

‘What miscommunication?’ Lettice asked, a sick dread rising in her chest.

‘It seems when Mr Lewis signed his name in jest, he was labouring under a misapprehension. He thought the marriage certificate was fake, not a legal document.’

‘That is correct,’ said Gilbert, frowning. ‘So, what is the confusion?’

Mr Laurent faltered. Lettice could see his forehead shining with sweat. ‘Lady Marigold told me it would all be in fun, and Miss Lettice would sign it under the name of Lettice Marie.’

Lettice gasped as realisation hit her like a brick.

‘Yes,’ said Gilbert, ‘and that is what she did, isn’t it? I saw her sign it with my own two eyes.’

Lettice shook her head, her heart beating fast.

Mr Laurent grimaced. ‘The mind is a marvellous thing, isn’t it? Sometimes it brings such clarity. Other times, with say, the chaos of an audience clapping and cheering, one often remembers things the way they want to.’

‘What are you saying? Spit it out!’ Lettice pleaded.

‘I’m telling you when Miss Lettice Marie Marigold, signed her name, she did so as Lettice Marigold, instead of Lettice Marie, thus rendering her marriage to Mr Gilbert Lewis, yourself, completely and utterly … legal.’

‘What?’ Gilbert let out a laugh, the gravity of the situation not yet apparent.

‘I am so sorry,’ Lettice muttered. ‘I had no idea.’ A small voice whispered in her mind—Aunt Hattie did. Aunt Hattie had finally managed to get her married off. She’d received no instructions on how she should

have signed, or the ramifications of using her full name. Aunt Hattie had set her up, entrapping her in a *bonafide* marriage!

Panic set in and Lettice's hands shook. Gilbert took them in his, reassuring her.

'We will fix this, Lettice, I promise you,' he vowed. 'We will get to the bottom of this.'

Mr Morwell laughed hysterically and mumbled, 'Stitched me up.'

He staggered a few paces before falling down drunk. One of the policemen strolled over and tapped Mr Morwell on the cheek. The rotten drunk groaned and rolled onto his side, snoring loudly. Lettice shook her head, wondering what Benedict Morwell had meant by the cryptic words, 'Stitched me up.'

Mr Laurent held up a hand to get Lettice and Gilbert's attention.

'Unfortunately, due to Lady Marigold's final act, if it is recognised as her legal will, and I have no doubt that will be the case, Miss Lettice—that is, *Mrs Gilbert Lewis*—must remain married in order to inherit the Marigold fortune.'

With the last sentence, Lettice felt the walls melt again and she slumped into Gilbert's arms.

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Lettice awoke for the second time that day in Mr Gilbert Lewis's arms.

'We have to stop meeting like this,' he whispered before sitting her upright.

Doctor Oddling was crouched, taking her pulse, and with a nod, he stood up again. The chief inspector offered her tea that someone must have fetched while Lettice was unconscious. She took the teacup from a tray that had Aunt Hattie's sign upon it.

'The sign,' Lettice said, eyes wide.

'What sign?' Gilbert said softly.

Lettice reached for the metal sign with the words *Lady Marigold* engraved in the silver. 'It was on her tray, when Rilla brought the tea. I wondered about it. Why would Aunt Hattie need her own sign in her own house?'

'It was for the contest,' Gilbert clarified. 'Lady Marigold was very particular about her tea. She liked it extremely strong. She was always sending it back to the kitchen, so Rilla suggested signs to help the kitchen staff identify her tray.'

'Rilla suggested it,' Lettice said, two puzzle pieces clicking together in her mind. Wishing she hadn't even mentioned it, she held back from expounding any further. If what she suspected were true, she would need the autopsy results before making her theory known, and she still needed more information from Gilbert.

‘Back to the situation at hand,’ Mr Laurent said, interrupting her thoughts. ‘Through Lady Marigold’s impulsive will and your legal marriage, and assuming the will is also legal, you, my dear, are now the new Lady Marigold of Marigold Manor.’

Lettice ran her hands through her hair in an unconscious effort to calm herself down.

‘Let me get this straight,’ Lettice said. ‘Due to my mistake with the signature, I am now unintentionally legally wed to Mr Gilbert Lewis and the owner of Marigold Manor?’

‘Correct,’ Mr Laurent replied. ‘Lord Marigold’s instructions make that very situation possible, which, I would like to add, really does lump coals on his grave. He was an insufferable tyrant.’

‘This is preposterous.’ Lettice looked to Gilbert. ‘We can’t be married, can we?’

‘It seems we are,’ said Gilbert quietly.

‘It will take some time to ratify the new will,’ Mr Laurent advised.

‘What happens until all the paperwork is official?’ the chief inspector asked.

‘We have no choice but to honour Lady Marigold’s previous will,’ Mr Laurent replied.

Lettice reached for Gilbert’s hand, and he took hers and held it as though he hadn’t given it a second thought.

‘Which means...’ Lettice swallowed hard. ‘Mr Benedict Morwell is the new Lord of Marigold Manor.’

One of the maids gasped, and Lettice could understand why. She couldn’t imagine anyone was safe when Benedict Morwell woke from his drunken stupor.

‘I think we are all in agreement the process needs to be expedited,’ the chief inspector said.

‘Will you permit me to use the telephone in order to put things in motion?’ Mr Laurent asked.

‘I will,’ the chief inspector responded. ‘Rilla can accompany you. I am waiting on the coroner’s report as well, so be brief in your communications.’

‘Of course,’ Mr Laurent said, turning on his heel and heading towards the music room door.

‘He doesn’t leave your sight,’ the chief inspector instructed.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Rilla replied, following Mr Laurent out to the telephone.

Gilbert squeezed Lettice’s hand. ‘Perhaps we can take a seat in the orchestra chairs for a moment. I believe we have much to discuss.’

Lettice nodded.

‘May we have a moment to speak quietly?’ Gilbert asked the chief inspector, who nodded curtly in agreement.

They moved to the chairs and took seats facing each other. Lettice leaned in, taking the chance to speak first.

‘I don’t blame you,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t blame Aunt Hattie either. I blame myself. It’s a terrible mess, isn’t it?’

‘It is a little,’ Gilbert conceded quietly. ‘I want you to know I will honour whatever you choose to do about this in the future. For now, I think it is imperative we keep a united front and remain as we are.’

‘Remain as husband and wife?’ Lettice let the words roll over her tongue. ‘You think Benedict Morwell will turn me out on the street the moment he wakes up?’

‘I think he killed your aunt and will do anything in his power to claim her fortune.’

‘That’s what I’ve been turning over in my mind.’ Lettice glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening. ‘I think he did it, but I don’t think he could have done it alone. You saw for yourself: he ate his own biscuit and didn’t drop dead.’

‘Who are you thinking?’

‘It pains me to say this, but I remembered something about this morning. When I first arrived, Aunt Hattie was in the drawing room. There was a tea tray already on the coffee table, with a sign engraved with her name on it. There was a used cup and saucer on the tray, and there were chocolate crumbs on the saucer.’

‘You think Rilla suggested the signs, so she could be sure on which tray to place the poisoned biscuit?’

‘It makes sense, don’t you think? If she’s somehow connected to Benedict Morwell...’

‘How to prove it, though? We know Lady Marigold ate Miss Appleby’s caramel cardamom biscuit, and Mr Bembridge’s—that is, Benedict Morwell’s—dark chocolate burnt butter biscuit. When the coroner tests and reports the stomach contents, we’ll know exactly what poisoned her.’

Lettice nodded. ‘And cyanide would have been immediate.’

‘How would Benedict have baked cyanide into one biscuit and not all the others?’ said Gilbert. ‘As evidenced by his eating one to prove his innocence?’

‘That’s just it,’ Lettice said. ‘He knew the biscuits he’d baked for the contest weren’t poisoned. We saw first-hand how he managed to hide a shuttlecock *and* a flask in his sock. Maybe he was hiding a biscuit in his coat pocket and when Rilla showed him to the door, they exchanged biscuits, and she served the poisoned one to Aunt Hattie before the contest began.’

‘It would make more sense in the timeline,’ Gilbert conceded.

‘If digitalis poisoning can work in as little as thirty minutes but could also take longer,’ Lettice pondered, ‘then maybe they planned this big song-and-dance of proving his innocence.’

‘If your hunch is correct,’ said Gilbert, ‘then where did Rilla hide the biscuit before delivering it to Lady Marigold’s labelled tea tray?’

At that moment, Mr Laurent and Rilla returned to the ballroom through the music room door. Mr Laurent went straight to sit at the judges’ table, while Rilla returned to Shackleton’s side.

Lettice took in a sharp breath.

‘Oh, why didn’t I see it before?’ she said. ‘Of course! Rilla’s apron.’

‘What apron?’ said Gilbert. ‘She’s not wearing an apron.’

Lettice nodded excitedly. ‘When I first arrived this morning, Rilla was wearing an apron. She wore it all morning. When the inspector sent her out of the room to fetch the constable the first time, my mind latched onto something—something out of place.’

‘Like a niggle in the back of your mind,’ Gilbert suggested.

‘Exactly. Like a hangnail you cannot ignore until you fix it. Well, it’s occurred to me, with Benedict going out of his way to prove his biscuits were okay, that he must have had an accomplice. A *maid*, practically invisible as one of many, who was able to discard the evidence: her apron.’

Gilbert sighed. ‘How will we prove it? We can hardly come out and accuse her.’

‘She’s stuck in this room like the rest of us. If I share my theory with Zephyr, she can order Rilla to stay here, while, under the guise of conducting further interviews with the chief inspector, I can search for the apron. Surely after having a biscuit in the pocket, there would be at least a few crumbs?’

‘It’s a solid plan,’ Gilbert agreed. ‘And while I’m stuck here with the rest of the captives, I can observe the two of them for any signs they are acquainted.’

‘Okay, pretend husband,’ Lettice said, smiling. ‘I’ll report back when I have something further.’

‘I look forward to it, my fake wife,’ said Gilbert, taking her hand in his and giving it a squeeze.

Lettice had to fight the urge to stay right where she was and become lost in the pretence. She had to find the apron. Standing and turning on her heel, she hurried to where the chief inspector sat talking to Doctor Oddling.

‘We must be due for our next interview,’ Lettice began. ‘We agreed Mrs McLaughlin would be next, didn’t we?’

The chief inspector didn’t miss a beat.

‘Constable Grayson, accompany Mrs McLaughlin to the cloakroom and remain with her until our return.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

The constable headed towards Mrs McLaughlin and accompanied her out of the room.

‘What have you got?’ said the chief inspector the moment they had exited the ballroom. Lettice filled her in on her theory of Benedict Morwell having an accomplice, reminding the chief it was Rilla who suggested the tea tray labels.

‘We need to know more about Rilla, then. When did she come to work for Lady Marigold?’

Lettice shook her head. ‘I couldn’t tell you. I haven’t visited Aunt Hattie for a year, and believe you me, the guilt weighs heavily.’

‘I’ll ask the questions,’ the chief inspector instructed. ‘Let’s go.’

The moment they entered the cloakroom, Mrs McLaughlin was on her feet.

‘I defy anyone to find a speck of poison in my kitchen,’ she said, fixing for a fight.

‘Tell me about Miss Vaughan,’ the chief inspector said calmly. She motioned for Mrs McLaughlin to sit.

‘Rilla?’ Mrs McLaughlin frowned. ‘What do you want to know about her?’

‘How long has she been in Lady Marigold’s service?’

‘About six months, I believe. Came to Lady Marigold with a glowing reference from Lady Charlotte Vanberry. Well, that’s what Rilla told me anyway. She’s kept her nose clean, nothing out of the ordinary. Except … she sneaked into my kitchen last week, asking me to teach her how to bake.’

‘She asked you to *teach* her how to bake?’ Lettice clarified. ‘Not just for permission to bake?’

‘She did. I thought it was odd at the time. Goodness, she was a wretched cook too.’

‘The biscuits were not a success?’ said the chief inspector.

‘Oh, no. She’d never have a position in my kitchen. Couldn’t bake to save herself!’

‘Does she work here every day of the week?’ the chief inspector asked.

‘Every day except Sunday, I believe. She’s a devout churchgoer apparently. Goes every Sunday, rain, hail or shine.’

‘Which parish?’

‘Reverend Telford’s down the lane.’

‘Have you ever noticed her befriending anyone else in the house?’ Lettice couldn’t help herself, interjecting with questions.

‘Not that I know of,’ Mrs McLaughlin said. ‘She keeps to herself, mostly.’

‘Thank you, Mrs McLaughlin. You may return with the constable.’

‘What? That’s it? You don’t want to search the kitchen?’

‘Will we find anything?’ the chief inspector replied.

‘Nothing that ain’t going to tantalise your tastebuds.’

‘Then you are free to go,’ the chief inspector said, nodding. ‘Oh, and Grayson? Send in Reverend Telford, if you please.’

‘Rightio.’

Mrs McLaughlin departed, seemingly relieved. Grayson hurried after her.

‘*My* line of questioning,’ the chief inspector reminded Lettice as they waited, and Lettice bit her lip.

When Grayson and Reverend Telford arrived moments later, Lettice noticed the reverend’s hands were shaking.

‘Take a seat,’ the chief inspector instructed.

The reverend sat, and began wringing his hands.

‘Tell us about Miss Vaughan,’ the chief inspector said, skipping over any pleasantries.

‘Who?’ the reverend responded, his brows knitting together in confusion.

‘Rilla Vaughan. Lady Marigold’s lady’s maid.’

‘Is she? I wouldn’t know anything about that.’

The chief frowned. ‘Then you’ve never had a Miss Vaughan attend your sermons?’

‘Only about five people attend my sermons.’ Reverend Telford swallowed hard. ‘I would remember the woman you are suggesting, as four of the parishioners are my cousins, all males, and the only female is my mother.’

Lettice bit her lip again. It was anyone’s guess why such a young man was stuck in a country church of five parishioners.

‘And apart from today, have you ever seen Mr Benedict Morwell? Chester Bembridge, as he was initially known.’

‘I’ve never seen him before in my life. I’ve only been in the village for two months. Lady Marigold invited me to judge the contest, to help me settle more into the parish and meet more of my parishioners. May I say, she was a kind-hearted soul, Miss Marigold.’

‘That she was,’ Lettice said, holding back tears.

She was starting to get a picture of how her aunt was perceived by the people in the surrounding village. Lady Marigold was well liked, and it seemed unlikely she would be murdered by anyone closely acquainted with her. Lettice knew she had to continue this line of enquiry about Rilla. There was also the danger if Rilla had played a part in Aunt Hattie’s death, she might turn her attentions to Lettice and anyone she cared for.

‘That will be all, reverend,’ the chief inspector said, then motioned for him to follow Grayson back to the ballroom.

When the reverend departed, Lettice wasted no time. ‘We have to call Gilbert in next.’

‘What would you ask of your … new husband?’

‘It’s not what you think,’ Lettice clarified. ‘Mrs McLaughlin said Rilla came with a glowing reference from Lady Charlotte Vanberry. If it is the case, then as Aunt Hattie’s steward, Gilbert would most likely have kept the reference.’

‘Yes.’ The chief inspector waved her on. ‘And…?’

‘We need to know more about Rilla, and who better to question than her former employer? If Gilbert can find the reference, we can find her address.’

‘And you are going to interview this Lady Charlotte Vanberry, by yourself, hoping to achieve what?’

‘I won’t go alone,’ Lettice said, smiling. ‘I’ll take Gilbert with me. What better time than when he is supposedly being interviewed by the chief inspector? No one will know we have left the manor and, more importantly, Rilla will never suspect we are onto her.’

Chief Inspector Swift looked unsure. ‘We have to establish a connection between Benedict Morwell and Rilla Vaughan. I am not certain your questioning of potential witnesses would be the wisest of moves. However, you have proved yourself reliable, so I am willing to take the chance.’

‘I trust Gilbert,’ Lettice told herself as much as she told the chief inspector. ‘He wants to find Aunt Hattie’s killer as much as I do.’

‘We will play your hunch,’ the chief inspector said, and signalled Grayson. ‘Bring Mr Lewis back again.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Grayson departed. The chief inspector waited until the door closed behind him.

‘And no dilly-dallying off in secret rooms, getting to know your husband,’ she said, a small smile playing on her lips.

‘There is no chance of that,’ Lettice said haughtily, although the thought of it didn’t repulse her. ‘Plus, while we are looking, we can search for the apron. Oh, wait a minute!’ Lettice dived for the open trunk nearby. She pulled out the maid’s uniforms one by one. There was no apron.

‘Of course, it wouldn’t be so easy, hidden in plain sight,’ she said, deflated.

‘It could have been. In this case, it wasn’t,’ the chief inspector said encouragingly. ‘If you find it, though, leave it in its place and let me know with a signal. Rub your earlobe.’

Lettice sighed. ‘Could this day get any odder? Secret ear codes and poison for breakfast…’

The chief grimaced. ‘When Gilbert arrives, slip away quietly with him. I want to take the time to gather my thoughts and work out what’s next.’

‘Of course,’ Lettice agreed. Her own thoughts were running wild—many of them nothing to do with the investigation and everything to do

with Mr Gilbert Lewis.

When Grayson and Gilbert arrived, Lettice took Gilbert by the hand and led him out of the room with her finger on his lips.

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They moved quickly and quietly along the hallway that surrounded the ballroom. Lettice was happy Gilbert was playing along so easily. Suddenly she stopped and turned to him.

‘What is it?’ Gilbert whispered.

Lettice pursed her lips. ‘I don't actually know where your steward office is.’

‘Opposite direction and up the stairs.’ Gilbert pointed.

Lettice huffed. ‘Well, lead the way, but we have to be quiet.’

‘Come on,’ Gilbert said, and winked. Then he instinctively laced his fingers with hers. Lettice had never had anyone hold her hand in such an intimate fashion and she felt a thrill through her body.

They retraced their path, then climbed the stairs, trying their best to avoid any creaks. Gilbert led Lettice to a room four doors down from Aunt Hattie’s upstairs drawing room. Lettice had been in every room in the house, but not in this room for a long time. It had been her grandfather’s office. Her grandfather—the tyrant who had forced Aunt Hattie into marrying.

‘I hate this room,’ Lettice said. Having no real memories of her grandfather, she hated the essence of it and what it stood for.

‘I can understand why,’ said Gilbert. ‘I intend to change that.’

Lettice didn't know how he intended to do it, but there was a job to be done.

‘And what exactly are we here for?’ Gilbert added.

‘As Aunt Hattie’s steward,’ Lettice replied, ‘you would keep important documents for her, wouldn’t you?’

‘Most definitely.’

‘Would you keep letters of reference for, say, Rilla Vaughan?’

‘I keep them all in my filing cabinet. I've never had any complaints about her from your aunt, though. As far as I know, she has been a good lady’s maid. You really think she could be conspiring with Benedict Morwell?’

‘Something is not right with her, I know it,’ said Lettice.

In the middle of the room sat her grandfather’s huge mahogany desk, cleared of all his old paraphernalia. The office surfaces were quite sparse now that the room was Gilbert’s. On one wall, there was a modern metal filing cabinet adjacent to the desk. Gilbert went over and rifled through the middle drawer, taking more time than Lettice cared for. Perhaps as a librarian, she could assist him in his filing system and potentially make the office a little more welcoming.

‘Here it is,’ he said, as he pulled out a piece of paper. ‘From Lady Charlotte Vanberry.’

The handwriting was neat and flowing, from a modern fountain pen. The reference was glowing, expounding on the virtues of Rilla’s areas of talent and expertise, including the culinary arts, hairdressing, bookkeeping, and event organisation. Lettice frowned, pointing at the culinary arts.

‘That's where they went wrong.’

‘How so?’

‘When Zephyr and I interviewed Mrs McLaughlin, she told us Rilla had come to her asking to be taught how to bake. But by Mrs McLaughlin’s account, the girl was hopeless.’

‘You think she wanted to try to bake a chocolate biscuit, to replace the one Benedict Morwell intended to give her? To thwart him?’

‘I don’t know her reason for it,’ Lettice conceded. ‘At least we know if ever she tried, she couldn’t have done it without assistance. Not successfully, anyway.’

‘Well, I like to think Lady Marigold shared almost everything with me in her business affairs. I never knew anything about what went on behind the scenes with the staff. I was told to file this away and Rilla would be starting as a new lady’s maid. That is all.’

‘And how long ago was this?’

‘Six months ago.’

Lettice studied the reference from start to finish. The last line was another giveaway.

‘Look at this.’ She pointed to the line. ‘*Please send all correspondence to my courier at 26 Battery Street.*’ Lettice knew the street—it was in the nearby village. In fact, it was right behind Reverend Telford’s church.

‘That is odd,’ said Gilbert. ‘Lady Charlotte Vanberry has a manor in the Peak District.’ He pointed to the address at the top of the letter. ‘By my calculations, the Vanberry estate would be at least an hour by train.’

‘I think we are about to find out who Lady Charlotte Vanberry really is.’

Returning downstairs, they knocked on the door of the cloakroom. Constable Grayson opened it and waved them in. The chief inspector was making notes, drawing them, in fact, and laying it all out. Lettice liked the idea, apart from the sketch of a dead body, which was her beloved aunt.

Lettice quickly divulged all they had found and explained their plan. They departed immediately, sneaking out the back of the ballroom’s stage door. Passing by the older parts of the house, including the original kitchen, they emerged in the extensive gardens, with lush green hedges and roses in full bloom. Approaching the main road, they turned right, walking towards the church and passing the graveyard, before they traversed behind it and into Battery Street. It was quite a long road, and number twenty-six was far enough away from the vicarage. It could be possible the vicar had never encountered the occupants of the mysterious cottage.

Gilbert knocked on the door, and a little girl, about three years old, peeped her head out from behind. They heard footfalls, then a tall, willowy lady, with curly grey hair, opened the door. She was dressed in a green pinafore with a red apron and red slippers. Lettice liked the woman's style. A small embroidered motif on the bottom of the apron spelled out the name, *Agnes*. The little girl giggled, holding up a doll for Lettice to see.

Lettice took it and smiled in approval. ‘I like this dolly. I had one just like her when I was a little girl.’

‘May I help you?’ the lady asked with a wary smile. She took the little girl’s hand and pulled her close. From her accent, Lettice thought the lady sounded educated. She had kind eyes.

‘We are looking for the correspondence address for Lady Charlotte Vanberry,’ Lettice said. She suddenly realised she was still dressed in her butterfly gown. At least she had managed to lose the mask.

‘There is nobody here by the name of Lady Charlotte Vanberry, and I certainly don't collect correspondence for her.’

‘Is it only the two of you?’ Lettice pressed.

The lady shook her head. ‘My daughter returns on Sundays. And *he* is here on-again off-again.’

‘The little girl’s father?’ Gilbert clarified.

‘He does a lot of travelling, my son-in-law. We never quite know when we’ll see him next.’

‘And the girl's mother?’ Lettice asked, smiling, hoping to prevail upon good manners. It was a trick she had seen Aunt Hattie pull off time and again, gathering way more information than she probably should have been privy to, especially in the crush of a ballroom.

‘Her mother—my daughter—works nearby. She is very busy, so only gets to visit on Sundays. But we make do, don't we, Isabella?’

‘And may we know your name, ma’am’? Gilbert enquired.

‘I’m Agnes Vaughan,’ the woman replied.

‘I'm hungry, Granny,’ Isabella said.

Lettice gave the doll a kiss then returned it to her.

‘Well, I'm not sure where we got our misinformation from,’ Gilbert said. ‘We certainly aren't going to find Lady Charlotte Vanberry here. I am a man of business though, so if your son-in-law is ever in need of some honest work, tell him to ask for Mr Gilbert Lewis in the village.’

‘He’s in town right now,’ Agnes said. ‘I'll tell him to come by.’

‘Good day,’ said Lettice, then she bent to give Isabella a wave. ‘See you again soon,’ she whispered, and Isabella blew her a kiss.

Gilbert folded Lettice’s hand into the crook of his arm and they strolled along the street like a newlywed couple—which was technically true—enjoying each other’s presence. Lettice knew she couldn't let herself get used to this, though.

‘Are you thinking what I'm thinking?’ she enquired, keeping up the façade of promenading with her beau.

‘I'm thinking Mr Benedict Morwell, most likely known as Mr Chester Bembridge in these parts, has fathered a child to one Miss Rilla Vaughan, and he has somehow involved her in his heinous murder plot.’

‘Great minds think alike,’ said Lettice, tipping her head like a fashionable lady, causing them both to laugh.

When they reached the end of the street, they turned left, retracing their steps.

‘We’d better hurry back,’ Lettice said, picking up the pace. ‘Surely there's only so long before the ballroom captives begin to get suspicious. Especially if the chief inspector doesn’t call another person to interview soon.’

‘Can you run?’ Gilbert looked at her as if sizing up her weight, lest she expect him to carry her back to the manor.

Lettice hitched up her gown and took off. Gilbert gave chase, and by the time they made it to the ballroom stage door, they were both panting. Gathering themselves, they slipped back into the manor, passed down the corridor and into the cloakroom.

‘We have news,’ Lettice said, as she and Gilbert took a seat beside one another.

‘Go ahead,’ the chief inspector said, and she listened intently to Lettice’s retelling.

‘It’s all circumstantial at best,’ she declared when Lettice finished. ‘We need more proof. We need to definitively link the two of them. First, Gilbert must return to the ballroom. He’s already been out here too long. Once he returns you can begin your search for the apron.’

Lettice couldn’t bear the thought of Gilbert leaving her side, but it had to be done. They had to keep up the ruse or either Rilla or Benedict could further their crimes. Right now, they had them where they needed them; caged in a ballroom.

Gilbert departed, glancing back and smiling as he accompanied Grayson through the door.

As soon as he was gone, Lettice’s thoughts returned to the apron. ‘Where would she have hidden it?’

‘She must have hidden it when I sent her to fetch the constable. More fool me,’ said the chief inspector. ‘I made the mistake of assuming a female of lower station would be innocent and not be involved in such a scheme. I won’t make that mistake again.’

‘Neither will I,’ Lettice agreed. ‘The apron could be anywhere! When Rilla exited the ballroom, she would have fetched the constable from the first room—the pink room. It was only a few minutes before she returned, not giving her enough time to devise an elaborate concealment.’

‘I agree, it must have been on her direct route. Is there anything in the hallway where one could hide an apron, and no one would be the wiser?’

‘There isn’t. It’s completely clear. Not even a sideboard.’

‘You remember her wearing the apron upon her first departure, then not upon her return, or could it have been later? I sent her with Mr Laurent also, remember?’

‘She certainly wasn’t wearing it upon her return with Mr Laurent. I can’t quite picture if she was wearing it on her departure with him. We need to clarify if she was wearing an apron when she fetched Constable Grayson — that way we could see if she hid it before she met him, or if it was after she returned and was sent out again.’

‘Ahh, Grayson, just who we need,’ the chief inspector said, as he arrived in the room. ‘Cast your mind back. When Rilla Vaughan first fetched you from guarding Miss Fontaine’s room, was she wearing a white apron?’

Grayson frowned, his eyes moving from side to side as he tried to recall. ‘She came into the room in a hurry, bidding me to join you in the ballroom. I was fetching Miss Fontaine to her driver, so I was busy ensuring her safety, ma’am. I can’t recall if the maid was wearing an apron, I’m sorry.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ Lettice reassured him. ‘I can’t be certain either. Mr Laurent was gone for quite some time as well, and they returned via the music room entrance. Perhaps we should question him over what Rilla was doing while he was speaking on the telephone, to see if that gives us any clues.’

The chief inspector nodded. ‘Send for Mr Laurent,’ she told Constable Grayson.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he said, and departed hastily.

‘*Wait*,’ the chief called, and Grayson stopped dead in his tracks. She waved him back. ‘It will be obvious we are homing in on Rilla if we question Mr Laurent next. I trust my officers, but I wouldn’t put it past Benedict and Rilla to conspire to give them the slip. It’s not as though we have forbidden the ballroom captives from speaking with one another. We can’t give them an inkling we are searching for the apron.’

‘Who next then?’ Lettice said. ‘Madame Pomfrit or Doctor Oddling?’

‘Doctor Oddling next,’ the chief inspector said. ‘I want his professional opinion, which will give us the bonus of buying some time while our suspects are stewing in the ballroom.’

‘Doctor Oddling then?’ Constable Grayson clarified, and with a nod from the chief he was off.

‘Then Madame Pomfrit, followed by Mr Laurent?’ Lettice enquired.

‘I think so,’ the chief inspector said. ‘I want to draw this out for as long as we can for those ballroom captives.’

‘What about Miss Louisa Pemberton?’ Lettice asked. She wanted to meet this woman more than anything in the world, although to meet her during the course of her aunt’s murder investigation was less than ideal.

‘Yes … we can see her after Madame Pomfrit. That will draw it out even further.’

Lettice nodded. ‘If it’s okay with you, I would prefer to be absent from the room when you question her. You can have Grayson sit in on that one.’

The chief tilted her head, perplexed. ‘Why?’

Lettice sighed. ‘My greatest wish is to be a published author one day,’ she said. ‘It was how Aunt Hattie lured me here, with the promise of making all my publishing dreams come true. Some of my manuscripts were provided to Miss Pemberton today, for her to look at before my pitching session in the contest.’

‘Except you were expelled from the contest, so you never had a chance to meet her?’

‘I hope one day to make it happen,’ Lettice replied, nodding. ‘For today, I don’t want to be remembered by her as the girl who lost her aunt and was involved in her murder investigation.’

‘Fair point,’ the chief inspector said.

‘Also, I would not be able to concentrate. I need my aunt’s murderer brought to justice and I can’t muddy the waters with thoughts of the books I have lovingly created.’

‘Well, this will give you the perfect opportunity to begin your search. You’ll have time to cover at least the singing room and the music room. Where would you like to start?’

‘It seems the singing room is the most obvious—I swear I didn’t see the apron on her the first time she returned. I could be wrong.’

‘Okay, then,’ the chief inspector said. ‘After we speak to Doctor Oddling, slip out of the room before Madame Pomfrit arrives. I don’t want this getting back to the ballroom. And keep out of sight, whatever you do.’

‘I will,’ Lettice agreed, as Grayson arrived with Doctor Oddling.

The chief inspector motioned. ‘Take a seat.’

Doctor Oddling shuffled to the chair beside Lettice and lowered himself into it. He patted her hand kindly. ‘Our dear Lady Marigold. Gone too soon.’

Lettice felt herself choking up but took a deep breath to calm her mind as the chief began.

‘Thank you for your insight earlier, Doctor Oddling, into the circumstances of Lady Marigold’s death.’

‘I’ve seen many things in my life,’ Dr Oddling said, ‘and poison has its own particular level of malice—so often disguised as a heart attack.’

‘Am I to assume Lady Marigold was in good health, prior to today?’

Doctor Oddling shrugged. ‘Apart from her seasonal allergies, which she was suffering from considerably over the last few weeks, being the end of spring.’

‘Apart from that, she had no maladies and took no medicines?’ the chief inspector clarified.

‘Lady Marigold was fifty-five and she was as robust as they come. Not as sporting as she used to be, but not much would stop her.’

Lettice agreed with the observation. It was what made Aunt Hattie so formidable and so incorrigible.

‘Did you see her this morning, before the contest?’

Doctor Oddling shook his head. ‘I did not. I wished I had now. I might have been able to gauge if there were any signs of illness present. She seemed in good health apart from a bit of a stuffy nose.’

Now that Lettice thought about it, her aunt had sounded slightly nasal when she addressed the crowd.

‘Could her allergies perhaps have altered her sense of taste?’ asked the chief inspector.

‘Oh my, yes,’ Doctor Oddling said, shifting forward in his seat and frowning. ‘She complained of it once to me a few years ago. Each spring, she told me, she may as well eat an old boiled up shoe, her nasal passages were so blocked. She couldn’t taste a thing. I tried to offer her a vapour, to help clear them. She refused. Stubborn, she was. And proud.’

‘She favoured anything sweet and couldn’t stop herself when she started,’ Lettice added. ‘I remember from when I was a child.’

‘Tell me about poisons and how to discover what, if any, killed Lady Marigold?’

‘Well, as you probably know,’ said Doctor Oddling, ‘in due course of the autopsy, the stomach contents will be noted and tested. I hope the coroner will achieve this within twenty-four hours. I suspect it will depend on his backlog of work. As far as the testing goes, it’s a relatively simple procedure of adding elements to record their reaction.’

‘Could it be determined if Lady Marigold ate something before the contest, leaving it partially digested at the time of death?’

‘Definitely,’ Doctor Oddling replied. ‘What she ate during the tasting would be readily identifiable, and quite distinct from what could potentially have been in her stomach prior to the commencement of the contest.’

‘It is as I suspected, then,’ Lettice said, accidentally betraying her thoughts.

‘That will be all, Doctor Oddling,’ the chief inspector said. ‘You may return with Constable Grayson.’

Doctor Oddling stood slowly, as if he wanted to add something else.

‘Good day then,’ he said making his way out the room with a pained look on his face.

‘Madame Pomfrit next,’ the chief inspector called.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ came the reply from Constable Grayson.

‘Quickly, time for you to depart,’ the chief inspector whispered urgently to Lettice. And Lettice did exactly that.

Ensuring the coast was clear, she moved quickly towards the pink room. As soon as the doctor and Constable Grayson entered the ballroom, and the footman pulled the doors shut, she hurried inside.

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The room was as Lettice remembered: pink walls, damask chaise in the middle of the space, grand piano in the far-right corner. Apart from that, the whole room was sparse—not many places to hide something like an apron.

She crossed the room to the piano. Her first hunch was that it might have been concealed there, in the cavernous space of the grand. Lifting the lid, she gasped as a flash of white deceived her into thinking she'd found it.

Instead, there was a bundle of letters. She picked it up and looked closely at the top envelope. The handwriting was unmistakable, and the penny dropped. They were in the same hand as Rilla's reference, penned by the elusive Lady Charlotte Vanberry!

Lettice shuffled through the pile, her heart racing. Why would they have been deposited here? Unless … suspecting she'd been found out, Rilla had deposited them there. Maybe she had carried them in her apron pocket along with the biscuit.

Lettice pulled up a chair and began to read a letter dated eight months earlier.

Vanberry House, the Peak District.

Dearest Hattie,

What a joy to correspond with you again after such a long time. Perhaps too long, but friendship knows not the passing of time, does it? What has transpired these many years, you are no doubt wondering.

After my betrothal to my dear Lord Vanberry, I took up oil painting to pass the time. On the advice of a dear friend, whose judgement I value highly, I decided to launch my own little art school, to help those who would benefit from my skills.

You were always finding ways to help others, so I know you will understand. Perhaps you will start your own venture? With your talent for spotting an excellent musician, and always dressed in the highest of fashion, I wonder if some kind of contest would be right up your ally—to nurture fresh new talent and help the younger generation find their feet in the world.

Do write and tell me your news.

Your dear friend,
Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

Lettice couldn't believe what she was reading. Could it be this Lady Charlotte Vanberry was actually the fictional creation of Benedict Morwell and Rilla Vaughan? Could this be the trigger that started it all and led to Aunt Hattie's untimely death? The contest was a thought carefully planted into her consciousness by Benedict and Rilla, in the guise of a caring old friend.

Shuffling to the next letter in the stack, this one dated seven months earlier, Lettice began to read.

Vanberry House, the Peak District.

Dearest Hattie,

What a joy it was to receive your letter. You must be so proud of your niece. Who would have guessed she would become a city dweller and librarian?

I am so glad you liked my suggestion and I adore your idea of a soiree. Wouldn't it be a lark? You could have your lady's maid post an advertisement on your behalf in the local paper, asking people to nominate themselves for the chance to fulfil their wildest dreams.

Be sure to invite me as well, being your oldest friend.

Your dear friend,
Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

Lettice was surprised at how presumptuous the letters were becoming. She had to show these to the chief inspector and Gilbert as soon as possible. The apron forgotten for now, she decided to keep going, opening the next letter in the stack which was dated six months earlier.

Vanberry House, the Peak District.

Dearest Hattie,

I cannot believe you don't have a lady's maid. I have two, and to be honest with you, I probably only need one. I've decided to send one of them to you. Her name is Miss Rilla Vaughan. She has been a wonderful part of my household. I will feel better knowing she is with you. She is an accomplished organiser and loyal to a fault.

There is absolutely no need to thank me, and I will not take no for an answer. You may well remember my extremely stubborn

streak. Along with my reference, she will arrive on the afternoon train on the day of the seventh.

Your dear friend,
Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

Lettice couldn't stop now. The evidence was mounting. Another letter, dated five months earlier:

Vanberry House, the Peak District.

Dearest Hattie,

What an inventive idea to run the contests simultaneously. How wonderful you are offering opportunities for those less fortunate than ourselves. With your connections, surely you could find a modiste, an orchestra, even a publisher for any aspiring writers. Don't forget the singers too. Do you know any famous singers who could coach the contestants before they take the stage?

Your dear friend,
Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

P.S. How is Rilla working out? I trust she is meeting your every need.

So Aunt Hattie had taken the spark of an idea and run with it, with "Lady Charlotte's" encouragement. Lettice read the next letter, dated four months

earlier.

Vanberry House, the Peak District.

Dearest Hattie,

It brings me immense joy to hear Rilla's placement has worked to your advantage. The soiree seems to be taking shape, and I've had the most wonderful idea. Why don't you make it a masquerade, to give the whole thing a touch of mystery? I must say, I'm impressed by how many people you have in your acquaintance. Miss Fontaine is the ultimate star and I'm sure she'll insist on keeping her attendance secret. What a surprise the contestants will have!

Your dear friend,
Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

P.S. I've had the most delicious Idea. I will write soon.

Lettice could guess exactly what the fake Lady's "delicious" idea would be. The next letter was from three months earlier.

Vanberry House, the Peak District.

Dearest Hattie,

As promised, I write to you with the most delicious idea—another contest you might consider. Why not seek out a pastry chef

and have a baking contest, with the prize being an apprenticeship with one of the best in the country?

Your dear friend,
Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

Lettice had it—proof Benedict and Rilla had planned this whole thing from the beginning, influencing Aunt Hattie in a scheme which led to her ultimate demise.

It was pointless stopping now—there were only two letters left, and this one was from two months earlier:

Vanberry House, the Peak District.

Dearest Hattie,

Your soiree is going to be the talk of the town! I am so proud of the event you have created under your own steam. I must admit, your latest addition to the contest must be your most bizarre idea yet. Staging a fake wedding and having the contestants recite vows to give them an experience they might never afford is pure genius. You always knew how to throw a party.

Your dear friend,
Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

Lettice wasn't surprised her aunt could not resist throwing in some kind of match-making element. She felt a little relieved knowing Aunt Hattie had

added the nuptials, not to entrap her into marriage, but to give hope to those who needed it.

She loved that about her aunt. She was generous to a fault.

There was one last letter, dated a month earlier.

Vanberry House, the Peak District.

Dearest Hattie,

Brava on the newspaper advertisement for "Music, Mayhem and Matrimony!". Your soiree has taken flight. I can't wait to hear about all the potential contestants whose letters you will have to wade through. You'll have quite the job whittling down to only six. I trust it will be a most magnificent event. I regret I will be unable to attend —my gout has flared up, and my doctor has informed me it is too dangerous for me to travel.

I will be there with you in spirit, dear friend, and I expect a full report at its conclusion.

Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

Lettice felt ill reading the last letter. Their elaborate trap was set, and Aunt Hattie had walked right into it. That they asked for a full report, knowing she would not live to report anything, made Lettice hot with fury. She hurried back to the cloakroom, only to come face-to-face with Miss Louisa Pemberton, who was being escorted by Constable Grayson back to the ballroom. Lettice smiled at the publisher awkwardly but held her tongue.

'We need Gilbert,' Lettice said, thrusting the letters in the chief inspector's hand.

'Where were these?' the chief inspector said, frowning at the bundle she held.

‘In the grand piano. Rilla must have stowed them there when she went to fetch Constable Grayson from the singing room. Remember he said he was handing over Miss Fontaine’s protection to the driver? He must have been distracted long enough for her to stash them in the piano.’

‘And what are they?’ The chief inspector shuffled through the stack.

‘They’re letters from Lady Charlotte Vanberry, penned in the same hand as her reference, which no doubt will match a certain signature on the marriage certificate of Benedict Morwell and Aunt Hattie!’

‘A signature compared to a full letter is quite a stretch,’ the chief inspector pointed out.

‘Maybe,’ Lettice replied. ‘Wait until you read them. But first, I need Gilbert to confirm something. Can we bring him back from the ballroom?’

‘Certainly,’ the chief inspector said. ‘I’ve spoken to Madame Pomfrit and Miss Pemberton. The next in line would be Shackleton. If we interview Gilbert again instead, it will go a long way in casting doubt on him and, with luck, keep Rilla from discovering our evidence trail is leading directly to her.’

‘Has Benedict Morwell roused from his drunken stupor yet?’

‘Still sleeping like a baby,’ the chief inspector said, shaking her head.

When Grayson returned, the chief inspector instructed him to bring Mr Lewis back.

Lettice smiled and felt her cheeks flush at the sight of him.

‘What is it?’ Gilbert said, returning the smile. Realising the chief inspector and the constable were watching the pair, he cleared his throat and adjusted his bow tie.

‘Take a seat,’ the chief inspector said.

Gilbert obliged, and Lettice sat close beside him. The chief inspector shuffled through the letters, finding the first missive.

‘What are they?’ Gilbert asked.

The chief inspector handed the rest of the letters to him.

‘You've never seen these before?’ said Lettice.

‘From Lady Charlotte Vanberry?’ Gilbert asked. Upon reading the first missive in the stack, his eyes went wide.

‘Eight letters dating from eight months ago,’ Lettice said.

The chief inspector read the letter she held, before handing it over to Gilbert. By the look on Gilbert’s face, he was as astounded at the audacity as Lettice was. With each letter, his disgust visibly grew.

‘You’ve never seen these letters before?’ Lettice repeated.

‘No,’ Gilbert replied. ‘I am not involved in every part of Lady Marigold’s business. She never shared her private letters. Shackleton would have delivered them to her directly.’

‘Which means if we try to interview him next,’ said the chief inspector, ‘it could tip Rilla and Benedict off.’

‘I think it is from the same hand as Rilla’s reference,’ Lettice said, ‘and if the handwriting matches the marriage certificate Mr Laurent holds, then we have more evidence they instigated this elaborate ruse.’

‘I didn’t see the marriage certificate Benedict produced,’ Gilbert said. ‘Surely comparing them now will alert Rilla we’re onto them. She’s smart; she’ll know we have found the letters.’

‘Agreed.’ The chief inspector nodded. ‘We must keep these details between us. When the time is right, the evidence will prove our case.’

‘We still need to find the apron, to prove Rilla gave Aunt Hattie the biscuit before the contest commenced,’ said Lettice.

The chief sighed. ‘The autopsy report will clinch it for her. It will be harder to make it stick for Benedict.’

‘Do you even need to make it stick initially?’ asked Gilbert. ‘Can't you arrest him on suspicion?’

Lettice gasped. ‘That’s it! When the autopsy report is finally telephoned through, arrest Benedict Morwell and release everyone in the ballroom…’

‘I see where you’re going with this,’ the chief inspector said. ‘That way, we set a trap for Rilla to fetch the apron. If you didn’t find it in the singing room, the next best place would be the music room. We can have Grayson hiding in there, ready to arrest her the moment she retrieves it.’

‘Exactly,’ said Lettice. ‘And if we bring Shackleton in now, it could tip Rilla off about the letters. She would know Shackleton would be the only one to deliver letters to Aunt Hattie.’

‘And as I suspected earlier,’ Gilbert added, ‘Rilla must have tampered with the acceptance letters, ensuring Mr Chester Bembridge—also known as Benedict Morwell—was offered a place in the contest instead of Mr Chester Banbury, a contestant I remember selecting.’

‘Correct. She has been engineering this since the day she arrived. Wait a minute—’ Lettice tapped her lip, considering something. ‘Didn’t Mrs McLaughlin say Rilla came to her in the kitchen, asking to be taught how to bake, and she couldn’t cook to save herself?’

‘I wasn’t privy to those details either,’ Gilbert said, frowning. ‘All I knew when Rilla arrived was that Lady Marigold had employed a new maid and given her the title of lady’s maid.’

‘Do we know if Rilla can actually cook, or if it was all part of her ruse?’ the chief inspector asked.

‘We didn’t ask her mother. We certainly could, couldn’t we?’

‘It’s low on the priority list,’ replied the chief inspector. ‘I must continue to question everyone in the ballroom, to stall for time while we wait for the autopsy.’

‘You still have all the contestants to question,’ Gilbert pointed out, ‘as well as Miss Gainsbury, the fake bride.’

‘We do,’ said the chief inspector. ‘And if need be, we can bring every single one of the footmen in for questioning and drag it out until we get the official cause of death.’

‘I doubt we will need to go to those lengths,’ Lettice said. ‘Who will we talk to next?’

‘The order is insignificant,’ the chief inspector reminded her, ‘as long as it buys us time.’

‘Or is it?’ Lettice said. ‘When are you going to interview Rilla Vaughan? Why don’t we ask her how she came to be Aunt Hattie’s lady’s maid? I want to see exactly what kind of story she weaves.’

‘It makes sense,’ Gilbert said. ‘Perhaps you could interview Shackleton now, followed by Rilla, as they were the closest staff to Lady Marigold, and then start running through the contestants one by one. It will look as though you are eliminating those closest to Lady Marigold, then moving on to those who had only recently come into her acquaintance.’

‘Agreed. Shackleton it is then,’ the chief inspector said.

‘I should return to the ballroom,’ said Gilbert, ‘giving my best performance of being nervous and agitated under suspicion, in order to put them at ease.’

‘Come back soon,’ Lettice whispered.

‘I will await your summons,’ Gilbert replied, flashing her a warm smile.

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Shackleton was so distressed when he entered the room, it took Lettice quite some time to calm him before the chief inspector could even ask her first question.

‘Mr Shackleton,’ the chief inspector began. ‘How long have you been in Lady Marigold’s service?’

Shackleton blew his nose into a handkerchief.

‘I've known her since she was born,’ the butler sobbed. ‘I served her father and brother and his wife; may they rest in peace. She was always a spirited child. Lord Marigold—Lady Harriet’s father—was a terrible tyrant. What he did to Hattie, with that will of his, ruined her chances of a happy marriage.’

‘Did you ever meet Mr Benedict Morwell?’ the chief inspector enquired.

Shackleton shook his head. ‘I never set eyes on the louse. Lady Marigold did it all in secret. Only Mr Laurent knew the details of the marriage. It was some years later that she confided in me about her situation. She told me she wouldn’t let the same thing happen to Lettice.’

Lettice held back tears as she listened intently. She had no idea of the immense sacrifice her aunt had made on her behalf. All those years she’d honoured a marriage of convenience and never once seized the chance for happiness for herself. Lettice always knew her aunt didn’t want to marry. She was happy as she was. To have her choice taken away—to go against her will, in order to ensure her own safety and that of her niece—by a

spiteful family member, was unconscionable. Lettice decided she'd do everything in her power to make Aunt Hattie's sacrifice worth it.

The chief inspector handed Shackleton the letters written by Lady Charlotte Vanberry. He perused them a moment with a furrowed brow.

'Do you remember Lady Marigold receiving these letters?' asked the chief.

'I believe I do, because they arrived in such an odd fashion. Slipped under the front door, it seemed. Lady Marigold never mentioned them or questioned them, though she did have me take the replies to a house not far from here. She said the lady asked for the replies to be sent to her courier's house and how convenient it was, since Lady Vanberry lived at least an hour away by train.'

'Very convenient,' Lettice said under her breath.

'And what address was that?' the chief inspector asked.

'It was 26 Battery Street,' Shackleton replied.

'And did you by chance ever see Rilla Vaughan at that address?'

'Miss Vaughan, the lady's maid?' Shackleton clarified, and the chief nodded. 'I can't say I ever did.'

'And to your knowledge, did Miss Vaughan leave Marigold Manor yesterday?'

'She did not,' said Shackleton, emphatically. 'Lady Marigold had her busy with the preparations for the contest.'

'That will be all, then. Thank you for your time,' the chief inspector said.

'Thank you, Shackleton,' Lettice added. 'My aunt valued you greatly.'

She had no idea what was to happen to all the staff if Benedict Morwell succeeded in taking her inheritance from her. If she inherited the estate, none of the staff would go wanting.

Shackleton bowed, then left the room with Constable Grayson, who looked to the chief for the next witness.

'Keep them kicking their heels for a few more moments, while I decide who is next,' the chief told him.

A chill settled over Lettice, and she rubbed her shoulders. It was unbelievable the lengths those two had gone to, to ensure Aunt Hattie's demise. It made her angry and scared at the same time. It occurred to her she would probably never be safe from Benedict Morwell, even if she did succeed in stepping into Aunt Hattie's shoes. He could be lurking at any

moment, ready to eliminate her and become the sole beneficiary. Lettice had to put the thought aside, or she would lose herself to the terror of it.

‘I don't think I can face her yet,’ Lettice said, wringing her hands.

The chief inspector seemed to understand the reason implicitly.

‘I’ll let the two of them stew a little longer and you can make yourself scarce while they’re being questioned.’

Lettice decided the only way she could bear being face-to-face with Benedict Morwell or Rilla Vaughan would be with Gilbert by her side. The thought of relying on a man she had met only that day was almost as bizarre as facing Aunt Hattie’s murderers. Not in her wildest dreams could she have imagined when she boarded the train from London that her day would include a fake marriage and witnessing her aunt’s untimely demise.

‘I propose we have a chat with each of the contestants before we cross that bridge,’ the chief inspector went on.

‘Who first?’ Lettice asked, putting Gilbert out of her mind.

‘Take your pick.’

‘How about Mr Jacob Patrick? He’s the one we know the least about.’

When Grayson returned with Mr Patrick, Lettice noticed he carried himself like a true gentleman. He brought with him the violin he had played, and Lettice wondered why until she remembered: Benedict Morwell might destroy it if it was left unattended.

‘Thank you, Mr Patrick,’ the chief began. ‘Can you tell us how you came to be one of the contestants?’

He sat upright with the violin on his lap, his back ramrod straight.

‘My mother saw an advertisement in the newspaper. She is my greatest supporter and is always on the lookout for opportunities for me.’

‘Shall we assume your great passion was not fashion or baking or penning the next Agatha Christie or marrying Miss Gainsbury?’ said the chief inspector.

Mr Patrick nodded. ‘I would hope my great passion was evident in my performance?’

‘It certainly was,’ Lettice cut in. ‘I had the pleasure of watching you play and your technique was masterful. How is it you are not already in the employment of an illustrious orchestra?’

‘For the same reason everyone else is here today,’ he replied. ‘The war. It took so much from everyone, some more than others.’

‘You fought, then?’ the chief asked. The scars evident on Jacob Patrick’s neck beneath his ill-fitting coat and shirt were apparent to anyone who stood close enough.

‘I fought and survived, and I vowed to bring something more than a talent for marksmanship to the rest of my days. The violin is the only thing that brings me peace from the nightmares, and that is why Lady Marigold accepted my nomination.’

‘She wrote to you personally?’ Lettice asked.

Mr Patrick shook his head. ‘I believe it was her steward, Mr Lewis, who replied on her behalf. He was very moved by my story.’

Lettice knew in her heart Mr Gilbert Lewis was the best of men not more than a few hours after meeting him. Once again, he’d proved it.

The chief inspector nodded. ‘That will be all, Mr Patrick.’

Jacob Patrick picked up his bow and violin and with a curt nod, walked stiffly out.

‘Miss Dahlia Delvine,’ the chief called, and Grayson turned on his heel and followed the violinist from the room.

Miss Delvine arrived looking as calm and collected as she had been when Lettice first met her. The woman had a certain sophistication, which Lettice expected would see her to the big stage one day.

‘Take a seat, Miss Delvine,’ the chief inspector said.

‘Dahlia. But everyone calls me Darly.’

‘How did you come to be in Lady Marigold’s contest, Miss Delvine?’

‘I was born to sing. My mama said I was singing the moment I came out of the womb. After the war, I was working in the veterans’ hospital, tending to the sick and ministering to their souls in song, when my dear friend Clarabelle came to me with an advertisement. She said if anyone deserved a shot, it was me. She helped me write the letter, and a few weeks later, I received a reply from Mr Lewis.’

‘What did he say?’ Lettice asked, out of curiosity more than anything.

‘He said he’d read my letter, and he thought a chance like this would not only change my life, but perhaps the world, because folks like me should have their moment to shine.’

Lettice blinked, unable to express the depth of respect she was building for Gilbert.

‘With a voice like yours, you *will* change the world,’ said Lettice truthfully. ‘Thank you for having the courage to come here today.’

‘It’s my pleasure. I heard Lady Marigold was your aunt. Is that true?’

Lettice nodded.

‘My condolences. I’ve never been given an opportunity like this before. I’m sorry she was taken from you.’

‘Thank you, Miss Delvine, you may return to the ballroom,’ the chief inspector said.

Dahlia tipped her head in farewell. She returned to the ballroom, Grayson following, unable to keep his eyes off her, even in her ill-fitting gown.

‘Mr William Davis next,’ the chief inspector called out.

Lettice was unsure if Grayson even heard. When he returned a few moments later, with Mr William Davis still dressed in his purple coat, Grayson wasn’t sure where to look. It was unusual to see a man dressed in such flamboyant colours, to be sure. Lettice thought Mr Davis looked impeccable, and it was beyond her how he could have fashioned the coat, even with three seamstresses at his beck and call.

‘Mr Davis, take a seat please,’ the chief said.

William Davis obliged, his burly form eclipsing the chair. He pulled it off with more grace than Lettice had in her little finger.

‘Can you tell us how you came to be in Lady Marigold’s contest, Mr Davis?’

‘They call me Willy, and how I came to be in the contest is a story I’m not sure I am permitted to tell.’

‘How so?’ the chief inspector responded.

‘I don’t believe my presence in the contest was wholly random. I couldn’t say for sure.’

‘The details and outcome of the contest have no bearing on the investigation of Lady Marigold’s death,’ the chief said. ‘The truth is all we ask in this context, so tell us your story. Please.’

‘If you say so.’ Mr Davis nodded. ‘Before the war, I was working in Madame Pomfrit’s fabric shop. I’d gone begging for a job. She only agreed when I was able to prove to her that I knew the difference between silk and satin, velvet and chiffon, taffeta and lace, and so on.’

Lettice was impressed—even she would be hard pressed to identify all those fabrics.

‘How did you come to know so much about fabrics?’ the chief inspector said.

‘My mother was a seamstress in Madame’s shop. When she died, I was all alone and all I knew was how to sew, so I went to Madame Pomfrit’s and told her who I was. She knew nothing of me and told me my mother was one of the best seamstresses she’d ever employed. And so, since I’d been taught by the best, she decided to take a chance on me.’

‘Why did you leave her employment?’ Lettice said. ‘I overheard her telling you it was good to see you again.’

Mr Davis shrugged. ‘The war. Madame had to let me go, so I enlisted. After the war, I stayed with friends and distant relatives and scraped together a living. I was shining shoes in the street, making enough to keep me, when one day I ran into Madame again. She said she didn’t have a position at the moment, but she had seen an advertisement for a contest aimed at making people’s dreams come true. She told me she knew Lady Marigold and would put in a good word for me.’

Lettice couldn’t help herself. ‘Did you receive a letter also from Mr Lewis?’

‘I did. How did you know?’

Lettice smiled. ‘What did he have to say?’

‘He said on account of Madame’s recommendation, he would be honoured to offer me a place in the contest, as long as I was willing to play the game in its entirety and wasn’t afraid to express myself.’

Lettice wondered for a moment if Mr Lewis was too good to be true. Then came the realisation she was married to him.

‘With the contest results in jeopardy,’ said Lettice, ‘what will you do if it doesn’t make your dreams come true?’

‘I’ll keep on shining shoes and dreaming,’ said Mr Davis. ‘I won’t rest until I have my own little shop, making gowns for anyone who cares to wear them.’

Lettice smiled, and her heart warmed. They had already heard Mr Patrick and Miss Delvine’s ambitions. The addition of Mr Davis’s story only strengthened her resolve to do whatever she could to make their dreams come true.

‘That will be all, Mr Davis,’ the chief inspector said, nodding. ‘You may return to the ballroom.’

Grayson looked to the chief with what Lettice thought was a mix of confusion and respect as he showed Willy back to the ballroom.

‘Miss Candy Appleby,’ the chief called as they departed.

Miss Appleby crept shyly into the room, as though she didn’t want to take up too much space in the world. Lettice wondered why a girl with such a clever talent for baking would have so little confidence when she entered a room. But who was *she* to judge? She didn’t know the girl’s circumstances.

‘Miss Appleby,’ the chief inspector began. ‘How did you come to be in Lady Marigold’s contest?’

Candy bit her lip nervously. ‘I didn’t poison her! Honest, I didn’t! Lady Marigold was so kind to me, always paying me too much for my biscuits. I bake them in my mam’s oven and then sell them on the village streets, you see. Miss Hattie would always find me no matter where I was selling. She’d always buy two cinnamon biscuits, and one jam-topped for Mr Lewis because, she told me, he loved strawberries.’

‘We don’t think you poisoned Lady Marigold,’ the chief said. ‘You’re not a suspect. We need to determine who did, so we have to question everyone.’

Miss Appleby relaxed after that. And they couldn’t stop her talking.

‘I didn’t even know she was a lady. She was always dressed in a normal sort of day dress when she bought the biscuits, nothing fancy. Mr Lewis always drove her, which I thought was a bit odd, because motorcars are so expensive. Miss Hattie told me I had a gift for baking, and I had better not waste my time looking for a man to make my life better. That was just it, though—when she invited me to the contest, I thought she was trying to set me up with a marquis or some such. It made more sense when I realised she got me to come and bake for the judges.’

‘I believe it is exactly what Lady Marigold had planned for you, and she was right,’ the chief inspector said, touching her lips as though she was remembering the taste of Miss Appleby’s caramel cardamom biscuit. ‘You mustn’t waste your life waiting for a marquis to fulfil your dreams. You must go ahead and make them happen yourself.’

Lettice nodded in enthusiastic agreement as the chief inspector told Miss Appleby, ‘I have no more questions. You are free to return to the ballroom.’

Grayson didn’t even wait for the chief inspector’s next instruction, no doubt knowing the only one left in the ballroom to question—apart from Benedict Morwell and Rilla Vaughan—was Miss Bettina Gainsbury.

Miss Gainsbury hobbled into the room and plonked down beside Lettice. She promptly removed a shoe and rubbed the ball of her foot. Lettice estimated Miss Bettina Gainsbury was possibly a few years older than herself.

‘These heels have been rubbing something awful,’ she said, and the chief inspector raised her eyebrows.

‘How did you come to be Lady Marigold’s *bride* today, Miss Gainsbury?’ The chief lingered a little too long on the word ‘bride’ and Lettice flashed a look at her, reading her disdain.

Miss Gainsbury didn’t seem to notice as she took her time putting her shoe back on.

‘Aw, that’s better.’ She sighed. ‘Well, this is how it was. I was working out front of the public house one evening, when Lady Marigold came driving past in her flashy new motorcar. Mr Lewis had taken her out for a spin and Lady Marigold had asked him to stop. I climbed in her car, and we all went for a lovely drive. I thought she wanted something else for Mr Gilbert Lewis at the time, to be honest. He assured me that Lady Marigold merely wanted to offer me a lift home for my safety.’

Lettice pursed her lips, well aware of what kind of employment Bettina Gainsbury was engaged in out the front of a public house. She didn’t judge the girl, knowing how hard life had been for many—especially single women—before the war, but especially since.

‘When did she ask you to become her fake bride?’

‘That very night. She said Mr Lewis would pay me handsomely if I was to agree to pretend to be a bride during her soiree and get married a few times, and I might even meet a man who would do it in earnest and—’

‘*Ahem,*’ the chief inspector cut in. ‘And what happened next?’

‘They put me up in a beautiful room, and Lady Marigold said I could have any gown I wanted. And if I chose to, I could stay on in her household and work under the cook.’

‘It was generous of her,’ the chief said, smiling.

Miss Gainsbury suddenly looked sad. ‘I only knew her a day. She was kinder to me than me own mam was, and I’ll never forget her for it.’

‘When you said *they* put you up in a beautiful room, was it Miss Vaughan, Lady Marigold’s maid?’

‘No, not her, it was Meri. I shared with her and Flick last night. They said they’d show me the ropes when the contest was over.’

Lettice smiled. She liked both girls very much. She made a mental note that, if she ever inherited Marigold Manor, Meri and Flick would be elevated in her household. She would make sure of it.

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The time had come. Lettice sat beside the chief inspector feeling Gilbert’s absence. She didn’t think she could bear what was to come without him. In truth, she didn’t want to.

‘You don't have to be in here when I question her,’ the chief reminded her. ‘I won't ask many questions, only a few basic details, so as not to tip her off until we have the autopsy results and can make the arrest.’

Lettice nodded. ‘I can do this. I want to look her in the eye and see for myself if she’s lying.’

‘So be it,’ the chief replied. ‘Constable Grayson, fetch Miss Rilla Vaughan, and while you are in the ballroom, take note of whether Mr Morwell is still sleeping off the contents of his hip flask.’

‘Yes, ma'am.’ Grayson departed and returned quickly, holding the door open for Miss Vaughan. She entered the room with her hands clasped in front of her, as though she was about to attend Sunday service. Lettice wasn't sure what tactic Rilla was using; perhaps it was to keep her hands from visibly shaking.

‘Please take a seat, Miss Vaughan,’ the chief inspector said. ‘Can you tell us how long you have been in Lady Marigold’s employment?’

‘Six months,’ Rilla said without flinching. She stared straight ahead, like a soldier on guard.

‘And where were you prior to coming into Lady Marigold’s service?’

‘I worked for Lady Charlotte Vanberry,’ she replied.

Lettice watched her closely to see if she was lying. It was hard to tell. Rilla was unmoving and as inscrutable as stone.

‘I see,’ said the chief inspector. ‘And have you baked anything in the kitchen in the last few days. Anything at all?’

‘No ma’am,’ she said, then swallowed hard.

‘Mrs McLaughlin told me that on your arrival; you couldn't bake to save your life. Would it be an accurate description of your skills?’

‘I couldn't bake to save a life,’ Miss Vaughan said, and Lettice was struck by her reply. Was there some cryptic meaning in those words?

She didn't say, ‘I couldn't bake to save *my* life.’ She said, ‘I couldn't bake to save *a* life’, which would imply exactly that. She couldn't bake … *to save a life*.

Lettice was struck by another thought. What if Rilla was not a willing participant in today's heinous act? What if she couldn't bake, to save her daughter's life? Somehow in those unflinching brown eyes, Lettice detected something other than sorrow. Rilla Vaughan was resigned to her fate. Lettice hoped the chief inspector would end the interview soon. She had to talk to Gilbert.

‘That will be all,’ the chief said, and Miss Vaughan hurried from the room.

Grayson scurried after her, returning a few minutes later for his next instruction. Lettice was formulating how to approach Chief Inspector Swift with her theory, when the chief blew out a breath and said, ‘I think he forced her to do it.’

Lettice shouldn't have been surprised. Chief Inspector Zephyr Swift was astute. She hadn’t reached the position of chief inspector by chance.

‘Agreed,’ said Lettice.

‘We can only assume the little girl you met with Agnes Vaughan was Rilla and Benedict’s daughter. I think he fathered her,’ the chief said, ‘and cares nothing for her, using them both in his scheme.’

Lettice wondered if there ever was any love between Miss Rilla Vaughan and Mr Benedict Morwell.

‘He must have baked the biscuits yesterday,’ Lettice calculated. ‘Shackleton said Rilla never left the Manor. I think Mrs McLaughlin would have noticed a batch of biscuits being baked in her kitchen, don’t you?’

‘It’s still circumstantial,’ the chief said. ‘We need a confession.’

Lettice nodded. But before she could reply, she noticed a faint jingling sound in the distance.

‘Grayson—the telephone,’ the chief inspector shouted. Grayson took off at a run, and the chief and Lettice followed in haste.

Grayson answered and handed over the receiver saying, ‘It's the coroner, ma’am.’

As the chief inspector listened to the coroner, Lettice was tempted to try to listen in at the earpiece. She thought better of it.

After muttering her thanks to the coroner, the chief hung up, her face unreadable.

‘What was it? What was the cause?’ Lettice asked.

‘Let's go back to the cloakroom,’ the chief suggested. ‘Where we can’t be overheard. And perhaps we should fetch Gilbert?’

‘Yes,’ Lettice said, and the chief motioned for Grayson to retrieve him.

They hastened back, with Lettice barely able to breathe in anticipation.

In the cloakroom, she and the chief inspector sat in silence, waiting for Gilbert and Grayson to return. They arrived a few moments later, and Gilbert strode to Lettice’s side. She flashed him a smile of thanks.

‘And?’ Lettice said, bracing herself for the horrible truth to come. She clutched Gilbert’s forearm and nodded for the chief inspector to continue.

The chief breathed a sigh. ‘The coroner has confirmed Lady Marigold was poisoned with digitalis.’

Lettice gasped, her hand over her mouth. ‘What about her stomach contents?’ she asked quietly.

The chief inspector nodded. ‘Undigested caramel cardamom biscuit—the one Miss Appleby baked; undigested bitter chocolate and burnt butter biscuit; and a digested brown substance, most likely an earlier version of the bitter chocolate and burnt butter biscuit, which is what contained the foxglove.’

Lettice weighed the information. Her poor dear aunt had been poisoned by a chocolate biscuit.

‘And the rest of the biscuits? Did he test those?’

‘None of the contestants’ biscuits tested positive for any poison, including Benedict Morwell’s remaining bitter chocolate and burnt butter biscuits.’

‘What about the kitchen ingredients?’ said Gilbert.

‘The coroner is still working through them. The general ingredients used to bake the cardamom biscuit, as well as the chocolate biscuit, were tested, and nothing was detected so far.’

‘Benedict Morwell must have baked the biscuit yesterday,’ said Lettice. ‘And we didn’t ask Mrs Vaughan if he’d been baking in her kitchen, as it would have been quite obvious.’

‘We can’t assume he baked the biscuit either; maybe it was Mrs Vaughan,’ said the chief inspector.

‘You mean there could be two accomplices?’ said Lettice.

‘We need to question Mrs Vaughan immediately after we take Mr Morwell into custody,’ the chief replied.

‘If it's only an arrest for a ruse, how will you be able to keep him detained?’ asked Gilbert.

‘I actually think it would benefit us not to keep him detained,’ said the chief. ‘If he thinks he's got away with it, he's liable to make mistakes. We will be watching him the moment he is released, and if we have Miss Vaughan in custody, she's more likely to talk.’

‘When do you want to make the announcement about the autopsy results?’ Lettice asked, her anxiety growing.

‘We should do it now,’ the chief inspector replied. ‘We've had them captive in the ballroom for almost three hours. Once Miss Vaughan is detained, I will question her here. I don't want to allow her time to get her story straight.’

‘Will you put her in cuffs?’

‘Yes, and Constable Grayson will be there at all times.’

‘I want to be there too,’ Lettice said.

‘Are you sure? It might be difficult to hear from the horse’s mouth how they plotted to kill your aunt,’ the chief inspector said.

Lettice shook her head. ‘I saw something in her eyes. As you said, I think he forced her into it. When faced with arrest and the chance of never seeing her child again—or the gallows—I believe she will be more willing to share everything.’

‘Very well,’ the chief said. ‘Grayson, go to the music room and hide. Watch Miss Vaughan like a hawk when she enters. If she uncovers anything hidden, especially an apron, arrest her on the spot and bring her directly to the ballroom.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Grayson said, heading down the opposite hallway towards the music room. Approaching the ballroom, Lettice wanted nothing more than to run and hide. There was one consolation—she would be returning with Gilbert by her side.

As they entered the noisy ballroom, a hush settled over the crowd. Benedict Morwell had moved and was now lounging across three orchestra chairs, as though he was having an afternoon sabbatical. Miss Vaughan stood beside Shackleton near the judge’s table. She was staring as though in a trance. Shackleton sat, head in his hands, as though he was trying to block out the rest of the world. Miss Delvine, Mr Patrick, Mr Davis, and Miss Appleby all huddled together in the centre of the room, while closer to Rilla and Shackleton, sat the group of maids, including Miss West, Miss Warren, Mrs McLaughlin, and Miss Gainsbury.

The remaining judges were still seated at the long table, with Mr Laurent, Reverend Telford, Doctor Oddling, Madame Pomfrit, and Miss Pemberton. Each of the doors was guarded by police officers and Lettice felt relieved there was no way Rilla Vaughan could escape. Benedict Morwell stretched out his arms and legs, like a cat sunning himself.

The chief inspector mounted the stage and stepped up to the microphone. All eyes were on her. Lettice reached for Gilbert’s hand, the warmth of his body reassuring her.

The chief cleared her throat. ‘First, I would like to thank everyone for their patience. I have received word from the coroner: none of the biscuits on the tray contained poison; nor did the ingredients taken from the kitchen.’

A ripple went through the tired crowd.

Benedict Morwell shifted in his seat and looked smug. ‘As I told you,’ he bellowed. ‘I never poisoned her biscuits.’

Lettice’s stomach heaved, even though she hadn’t eaten since the terrible events of the morning. She swallowed and did her best not to glare at Benedict Morwell.

‘Further,’ the chief said, quieting the room again, ‘the cause of Lady Marigold’s death is without doubt poison by digitalis from the foxglove plant. She had consumed it before the contest—in a biscuit.’

Lettice watched Mr Morwell carefully. He shifted in his seat but did not say anything.

‘It is my belief,’ the chief continued, ‘the biscuit was baked by Mr Benedict Morwell.’

He sat up straight, looking surprised. With a nod from Chief Inspector Swift, the two nearest police officers left their stations and approached the stage.

‘Complete fiction,’ Mr Morwell bellowed. ‘You've got nothing on me. You’ll have to speak to my lawyer.’

The chief abandoned the microphone and turned to Mr Morwell. Lettice could still hear her as she said, ‘Mr Benedict Morwell, you are under arrest for the murder of Lady Harriet Marie Marigold.’ The chief signalled to the officers, who had by now mounted the stage. ‘Put him in cuffs.’

The deed was done before the slightly inebriated Mr Morwell could react.

‘You won’t get away with this!’ he shouted. Then he turned to Miss Vaughan and said, ‘don’t forget your duty,’ as the constables seized him under the arms.

‘*I did it!*’ Miss Vaughan screamed suddenly. ‘I did a terrible thing.’

For a moment everything was still and silent, and Benedict Morwell stopped resisting arrest. A thin smile crept upon his lips, and Lettice thought she saw the slightest nod in Rilla’s direction.

‘Stop. Let him go,’ the chief inspector commanded, her voice almost weary.

Mr Morwell shrugged off the officer’s grip and dusted himself off.

The chief motioned towards Miss Vaughan.

‘Take her into custody instead. We’ll question her on the premises.’

The officers moved to Miss Vaughan, snapping a pair of handcuffs on her wrists. She didn't even flinch.

‘Finally, some respect,’ Mr Morwell sneered. ‘I will have you know, until proven otherwise, I am the lord of this manor!’

Lettice didn’t contradict him. She was too busy looking at Rilla Vaughan. The same look of resignation had settled upon the woman’s features.

‘No one else leaves this ballroom until we have our confession,’ the chief inspector commanded.

‘At least send the cook for refreshments,’ Mr Morwell complained. ‘I, for one, am famished.’

The chief thought for a moment before nodding. She pointed to one of the officers. ‘I think we can handle Miss Vaughan ourselves. Take Mrs McLaughlin and two of the maids to the kitchen and prepare refreshments.’

‘Right, you two.’ Mrs McLaughlin pointed to Meri and Flick. ‘Come with me.’

As they left the ballroom, Mr Morwell huffed. ‘About time someone listened to me.’

‘The moment I file the official paperwork,’ Mr Laurent said menacingly, ‘*you*, you repulsive little toad, will be out on your ear.’

‘Until then you can start preparing for the sale of this rat-infested hole,’ countered Mr Morwell, ‘because by the time your official paperwork goes through, I will have sold Marigold Manor to the highest bidder.’

‘Sold?’ Lettice whispered. Gilbert squeezed her hand. To comfort her, or in anger, she wasn’t sure.

‘Do not engage with him,’ he whispered.

Lettice swallowed hard. She had to keep it together. She couldn't let Benedict Morwell see her weakness, or he will have won.

‘Come, Miss Marigold,’ the chief inspector said, ‘it's time to hear exactly how and why your aunt was killed.’

Lettice let go of Gilbert’s hand and went to the chief’s side as the other officer led Miss Vaughan out in cuffs.

They headed back to the cloakroom. Lettice watched Rilla’s every heavy step, as though she was trudging to her doom. Perhaps she knew her day of reckoning had come. They entered the room, the officer standing guard by the door, and Miss Vaughan was positioned on the witness seat, with Lettice and the chief inspector sitting opposite.

‘Is there anything you need before we begin?’ the chief asked, leaning in towards Rilla.

She shook her head.

‘You have confessed to the murder of Lady Harriet Marigold. Is that still your stance?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Miss Vaughan rasped, and Lettice held her breath. She had to see this through. Something was niggling at her subconscious, though. Something wasn't right.

‘Please tell us: how did you achieve this?’ the chief inspector said.

‘I baked a biscuit with the foxglove in it and gave it to Lady Marigold with her morning coffee and chocolate.’

‘And where did you keep this biscuit until you placed it on Lady Marigold’s tray?’

‘In my apron pocket,’ Miss Vaughan said, and Lettice drew a sharp breath.

She *knew* that's how she had achieved it. What didn't ring true, though, was Rilla baking the biscuit. She had not left the manor in order to achieve this, and she had said it herself; she couldn't bake. She *would* take the blame to save her daughter's life, however. Lettice was sure. She knew the chief inspector wasn't buying any of this story either.

‘And where did you stow the apron?’ the chief said.

‘In the tuba,’ Miss Vaughan replied.

The chief inspector turned to the officer standing guard.

‘Retrieve it from the music room. And be warned—announce yourself upon entering, or Grayson may arrest you unintentionally.’

Miss Vaughan sobbed softly, and Lettice moved her chair to sit beside her. Everything within her should have detested this woman. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't shake the feeling Miss Rilla Vaughan was a victim too.

The officer returned with Grayson and the apron a few moments later.

The chief inspector opened the apron pocket, glanced in and showed it to Lettice. The crumbs were apparent. This was exactly the evidence they needed.

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The chief inspector carefully folded the apron and placed it in her lap. She offered Miss Vaughan a handkerchief from her pocket. Miss Vaughan took it, drying her tears. The chief paused, smiling gently before the real interrogation began.

‘This apron no doubt holds the crumbs of a most lethal biscuit. One you have confessed to delivering to Lady Harriet Marigold. Is that correct?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Miss Vaughan replied. Her tears quenched, the only thing remaining was her steely resolve.

‘Then tell me, why did Mrs McLaughlin inform us you went to her asking her to teach you how to bake? In her words, she said, “The girl couldn't cook to save her life”.’

‘I was lying, pretending I couldn't cook,’ Miss Vaughan said.

‘Well, there's only one way to confirm your story. Let's see you bake a chocolate biscuit, one appropriate enough for Lady Harriet Marigold to devour without detecting its deadly contents.’

Miss Vaughan’s bottom lip quivered, and Lettice knew the chief inspector had achieved what she set out to do.

‘I can't,’ Miss Vaughan muttered. ‘I can't cook. I’ve never been able to. My mother tried to teach me, but I don't have a knack for it.’

‘*You* don't, but Mr Benedict Morwell proved to be an excellent student of your mother, didn't he?’

Miss Vaughan gasped. ‘You've talked to my mother?’

‘We have,’ said the chief, stretching the truth. ‘She had an excellent story to tell.’

‘I thought he had gone for good. He left us alone the moment the baby was born, but then he returned.’

‘And when was this?’ the chief inspector said.

‘About a year ago. Isabella had turned two.’

‘How did it all begin? The scheme, that is,’ the chief clarified.

‘He came to my mother's, charming her the way he does. He pretended to love the baby. Said he'd make amends. He wanted to learn to cook amazing biscuits and pastries like my mother did. She was a school mistress before Isabella came along, but my grandmother had taught her to bake. She gave up her position in the school to help me and the baby, and I took a job as a secretary. My mother educated me well, you see.’

‘So, she would stay at home with the baby,’ the chief inspector clarified, ‘and Mr Benedict Morwell would assist her?’

‘He did. My mother loves to educate, so when he wanted to learn how to cook, she had no cause to be suspicious.’

‘When did he first detail his scheme?’ Lettice asked, unable to help herself.

‘About ten months ago. He said he knew the lady in the manor. They’d had a long-time agreement, and she’d refused to pay him. He had some expensive stationary. He started writing letters to her and he had me slide them under the door. He told me I was to give up my job as a secretary, and I was to be Lady Marigold’s maid. I could only visit home once a week, and he said he would take care of my mother and the baby.’

‘And when you returned home for your weekly visit,’ the chief said, ‘he would detail what you were to do next? He put the idea of the soiree in Lady Marigold’s head, and she took it and ran with it?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Did you manipulate the invitations sent to the contestants to ensure Mr Chester Bembridge was included?’ Lettice asked.

‘I did. I thought he was throwing a party, and he would somehow maybe steal what he was owed from her, while she was distracted by her guests.’

‘When did my aunt include the marriage in the contest?’ Lettice asked.

‘A few weeks ago. A marquis came to visit, and that's when Lady Marigold had the idea. She’d employed all the staff by this point.’

Lettice considered this. ‘She and Mr Lewis picked up Miss Gainsbury last night, because for the contest to work, everyone needed to play along and get married.’

Miss Vaughan nodded.

‘Back to the biscuit,’ the chief inspector said. ‘Did Benedict Morwell bake the poison into it and pass it to you when he arrived?’

‘That's just it,’ Miss Vaughan sobbed. ‘I didn't know it was poisoned. He told me it would send Lady Marigold to the privy and then he could sneak up to take her jewels. He said she had many, but I never saw them in the whole time I have worked here.’

‘My aunt doesn't keep any jewels in the house,’ Lettice replied. ‘Mr Laurent keeps everything important in his safe. The family jewels and—I now know—her marriage certificate.’

‘I didn't know it would kill her, ma’am,’ Miss Vaughan cried, and Lettice took her in her arms and rubbed her back gently.

‘We never thought you acted alone, Miss Vaughan,’ the chief inspector said. ‘It’s up to a judge to determine your guilt in the proceedings. Are you willing to testify to all you have told us, against Mr Morwell?’

Miss Vaughan shook her head. ‘I can't. He will kill Isabella, I know he will. He pretends to love her, but he has no love in his heart. The only thing he cares about is money.’

‘We will protect you and your child,’ the chief inspector said.

‘Will you? You believe me?’

‘We do,’ Lettice replied.

‘You will have to play your part though,’ the chief instructed. ‘You will have to be taken into custody until we are able to gather all our evidence, and then we will arrest Mr Morwell for orchestrating the murder of Lady Marigold. It could be some days from now.’

‘How will you keep them safe?’

‘I will send Grayson this moment,’ the chief inspector replied. ‘He will take them to a safe house. I promise you they will not be harmed.’

Miss Vaughan drew a slow breath, held it a moment, then nodded.

‘We will keep you here a little while longer,’ said the chief. ‘With any luck, Benedict Morwell will betray himself.’

‘I think I know how to keep him busy,’ said Lettice.

The chief inspector frowned. ‘Elaborate.’

‘I don't know all the details of the contest; I will have to consult with Gilbert for those, and I won’t attempt this as the lady of the manor. I will achieve it by saying I am fulfilling my aunt’s last wishes that were kept in trust.’

‘I see what you're getting at,’ said the chief. ‘You are going to award the contest winners?’

‘You heard their stories. Every one of them hoped this contest would change their life. I'm going to make sure it happens.’

‘You get back out there with the constable.’ The chief inspector motioned to the man standing guard at the door, then she turned to Lettice. ‘You consult with Gilbert, while I send Grayson to take Mrs Vaughan and Isabella into his care.’

Lettice didn’t waste a moment. She returned to the ballroom to find Mr Patrick playing the violin. He was accompanying Benedict Morwell, who stood at the microphone singing a drunken song.

Gilbert sighed with relief when he saw her.

‘How long has this been going on?’ Lettice whispered.

‘He's been entertaining us all as the lord of the manor,’ Gilbert replied. ‘What’s happening?’

‘The trap is set,’ Lettice said. ‘Tell me, did the contest have some kind of fund to guarantee it?’

‘Yes,’ Gilbert said, his brows knit in earnest. ‘Lady Marigold wanted to make this a regular event. She had Mr Laurent set up a trust fund with very specific rules—the money can only be used in furthering the hopes of the contest entrants.’

‘Perfect,’ Lettice said. ‘Will you stand by my side when I do this?’

‘I would not have it any other way,’ Gilbert replied.

The chief inspector entered the ballroom. Upon seeing Benedict Morwell at the microphone, she chose not to approach him.

‘The culprit has been detained,’ she called. ‘If everyone has been fed and watered, Miss Lettice Marigold, Lady Harriet Marigold’s niece, will announce the contest winners.’

Mr Morwell pushed the microphone stand aside.

‘You will not spend my money!’ he shouted, then took a knife from his sock and ran at Lettice.

Gilbert thrust a hand out to fend off the knife. Lettice bent low and pivoted. She swept a leg to the side, contacting Benedict Morwell’s knee

with a sickening crunch. He let out a guttural scream and crumpled to the ground. Doctor Oddling was on his feet, hurrying to the subdued Mr Morwell, while Gilbert threw his arms around Lettice.

‘What a move,’ he panted. ‘I thought for a moment I'd lost you, when I've only just found you.’

Lettice laughed, revelling in Gilbert’s embrace.

‘Take him into custody,’ said the chief inspector. She pointed at Mr Morwell as the doctor knelt beside him, examining the groaning man’s knee.

‘It’s broken,’ Doctor Oddling said. ‘We're going to need a stretcher.’

At that moment, the ballroom doors burst open, and Grayson ran into the room carrying a small child in his arms. Mrs Vaughan followed.

‘*You've killed her!*’ the older woman shrieked.

Doctor Oddling was back on his feet, racing to the child. Grayson put the pale girl down on the judges’ table, while Doctor Oddling pulled his stethoscope from his pocket. He placed it on the child's chest, listened a moment, then nodded.

‘She's still breathing,’ he said, ‘but her pulse is racing.’

There were brown stains around the child’s lips.

‘What has she eaten?’ the doctor demanded.

Mrs Vaughan shook her head. ‘She must have found some chocolate in his room.’ She pointed at Benedict Morwell. ‘He must have stashed it there after he made his batch of biscuits.’

The chief inspector nodded with the look of one who had completed the last piece of a puzzle.

‘We need to get her to a hospital,’ Doctor Oddling said.

‘We can take Lady Marigold’s car,’ Gilbert suggested. ‘I have the keys.’

‘We must go this instant,’ Mrs Vaughan said, her breath shuddering.

The chief inspector shook her head. ‘I'm afraid you will have to accompany your daughter to the station for questioning.’

‘I’ll go with her,’ Lettice said quickly. ‘I won't leave her side.’

‘I’ll send an ambulance for Mr Morwell,’ Doctor Oddling said.

The chief inspector nodded. ‘My officers will follow Mr Lewis and Miss Marigold to the hospital, until Mr Morwell is well enough to be taken into official custody.’

With that, Gilbert took the little girl in his arms, and Lettice and the good doctor headed to Lady Marigold’s motorcar, which was parked to the

side of the manor’s grand entrance. The officers followed, then departed to their own vehicle.

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Lettice sat in the back seat and Gilbert handed her the unconscious child. Doctor Oddling climbed in beside her, resting his fingers at the young girl’s wrist. Gilbert climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. It grumbled into motion, and they set off.

‘Will she die?’ Lettice asked.

‘Hard to tell,’ Doctor Oddling replied. ‘It depends on how much she has ingested. Children are delicate, but also resilient. The hospital is two miles away. We should get there in good time.’

‘Step on it,’ said Lettice, and Gilbert obliged.

‘What is her name?’ Doctor Oddling asked.

‘Isabella,’ Lettice replied. ‘Isabella Vaughan.’

‘I'll do everything in my power to keep you on this earth, Isabella Vaughan,’ Doctor Oddling vowed.

Lettice held back tears. For her aunt to lose her life in such a way, at the hand of a truly devious villain, was horrifying. For this little girl to be caught up in the crossfire was tragic. Lettice made a silent promise to do everything for this child, as Aunt Hattie had done for her.

When they arrived at the hospital, Doctor Oddling was a show of force. He commanded the attendants like a concert performance. Lettice kept her word, never leaving the little girl’s side. Gilbert was right beside her too. They spent a sleepless night, nurses coming and going, and Doctor Oddling returning every half hour with his stethoscope to monitor the little girl.

As the sun rose, Isabella opened her eyes and croaked out, ‘Mummy?’

Lettice never thought one word from a tiny child could bring her more joy.

‘Your mummy will be here when she can,’ Lettice soothed.

‘Where’s my nanny?’ the little girl asked.

Gilbert stood up, stretching his back. ‘I'll go and collect Mrs Vaughan,’ he said. ‘I trust the chief inspector will be done with her by now.’

‘They're both coming home with me,’ Lettice said.

‘I'd hoped so,’ Gilbert replied, and he left the hospital room as Doctor Oddling bustled back in.

‘How's my little patient?’ he asked, and proceeded to make a game of listening to the little girl’s chest.

Isabella giggled, breathing easily. Lettice saw the doctor’s shoulders relax.

‘You have one healthy ticker,’ Doctor Oddling said.

‘Gilbert will return with her grandmother,’ Lettice told him.

‘She's out of the woods and free to go when they arrive.’

‘Thank you, Doctor Oddling.’ Lettice held out her hand, and he took it and patted it.

‘Anything for my dear friend Hattie and her lovely niece, Lady Marigold.’ He winked and then was gone from the room. A nurse arrived with a bowl of broth. Lettice fed it to the little girl, who sipped it eagerly.

‘Where did you find the chocolate?’ Lettice said casually to Isabella.

‘In Daddy’s bedroom. He keeps a secret tin, but I found it.’

‘How much chocolate did you eat?’ Lettice asked, happy the little girl was sharing freely.

‘Only a tiny bite,’ Isabella replied. ‘I gave the rest to Mr Whiskers. We had a tea party.’

‘Mr Whiskers?’ Lettice pressed. ‘Who is Mr Whiskers?’ But she didn’t need to hear the answer. She suspected if she was to enter 26 Battery Street, she would find a very dead mouse in Benedict Morwell’s bedroom.

‘Will you tell my friend Zephyr all about Mr Whiskers?’ Lettice asked, spying the chief inspector in the doorway, dark circles under her eyes from a sleepless night.

‘I will,’ Isabella said. She motioned at the empty bowl. ‘If I can have more?’

‘I’ll ask the nurse to bring you more at once,’ said Lettice as the nurse also returned to the room.

‘Another bowl?’ Lettice said, and the nurse nodded.

‘Tell me all about Mr Whiskers,’ the chief inspector said, and Isabella, fortified by her broth, gave the chief enough evidence to send Benedict Morwell to a jail cell for the rest of his natural life.



When Gilbert returned with Mrs Vaughan, she looked as though she had slept about as much as the chief inspector. They all piled into Aunt Hattie’s car, Isabella chattering the whole way. Lettice was relieved about that. She needed time to process the events of the previous day, including her growing feelings for—and the fact of her matrimony with—Gilbert. They arrived back at Marigold Manor, met by Shackleton, who knelt before Lettice and the little girl and kissed both their hands.

Mrs McLaughlin came barrelling down the corridor.

‘Right, you two—to bed,’ she ordered, pointing at Lettice and Gilbert. ‘And you two, to the kitchen.’ She pointed at Isabella and Mrs Vaughan. ‘I've got a surprise for you.’

Isabella clapped and giggled, and her grandmother followed Mrs McLaughlin’s orders. So did Lettice and Gilbert.

Lettice climbed the stairs wearily and hesitated at the top. Her childhood bedroom was right beside Aunt Hattie’s. Even if her makeshift will was ratified, leaving Lettice her entire estate, she didn't feel right sleeping in her aunt’s room. She wanted to return to her old room, which happened to be right beside Gilbert’s bedroom. He walked her to the door. Lettice wasn’t sure what she should say. She was technically married to this man.

Gilbert kissed her cheek and stepped into his own room. ‘Sleep well,’ he said.

‘You too.’

Lettice couldn't remember even climbing into bed. She awoke to the afternoon sun shining through her window and a knock at the door. It was opened before she could reply. Meri strode into the room carrying a tray laden with scrambled eggs and bacon, toast, and a pot of tea. Lettice was grateful there was no silver name tag. She could never look at that sign again without shuddering, and made a mental note to discard it at the first

opportunity. Then she remembered the chief inspector would want it as evidence and thought better of it.

‘Sorry, miss,’ Meri said, ‘I probably should have waited for your reply, but this tray is heavy. I haven’t been a maid for long, and I don’t know how to do it.’

‘You won’t be a maid in my household,’ Lettice said. ‘You will be my assistant. Very different to a maid.’

‘Oh, I like the sound of that. *Assistant*…’ Meri repeated. ‘Like Mr Lewis being Lady Marigold’s steward, but a girl version?’

‘Something like that,’ Lettice replied. Then she realised she had no right to make decisions as Lady Marigold—yet. The thought made her shudder. Then another thought nestled even further in the pit of her stomach. Would Gilbert remain as her husband or her steward?

‘Mrs McLaughlin has made you a hearty breakfast,’ Meri said, sitting on the bed.

Lettice was still wearing the butterfly gown. It looked a little worse for wear.

‘Goodness gracious,’ Meri said, turning back the bed clothes further. ‘You slept in that gown? Must have been right uncomfortable.’

Lettice didn't care. Her body had needed sleep.

‘What time is it?’

‘Six in the evening, miss.’ Meri placed the tray on the bed and Lettice plucked a rasher of bacon with her bare fingers, realising how long it had been since she’d eaten.

‘Is Mr Lewis awake?’

‘That one's a hard worker, he is.’ Meri chuckled. ‘He only slept a few hours, and he was up having meetings with Mr Laurent first. Then the chief inspector came by. She looked like something the cat dragged in, so Mrs McLaughlin sent her to bed too. She hasn't woken yet either. Not even Mrs McLaughlin’s bacon could rouse her.’

‘What did Mr Lewis and Mr Laurent discuss?’

‘How would I know?’ Meri asked, looking sheepish.

‘Were you listening at the keyhole?’

‘Only for a second,’ she replied, conspiratorially. ‘I heard the words *options* and *annulment*. Mr Laurent is a right royal mumbler isn’t he?’

‘What did Mr Lewis say?’

‘He said it was “entirely up to Lettice”, then they started talking about something else. I think it was the stock on the farm or some such thing.’

Lettice had no idea how vast the estate was. Now that she thought about it, she'd never heard of needing a steward for a small estate, so Aunt Hattie’s must have been considerable. She put the thought aside and ate a little, while Meri fussed around opening curtains and straightening cushions.

The blunt edge of her hunger now quelled, Lettice suddenly remembered. ‘The baby girl—Isabella. How is she?’

‘I wouldn't call her that if I were you,’ Meri said, laughing. ‘She slept on and off all day and has been making a merry mess with Mrs McLaughlin. Poor Mrs Vaughan has a lot to put in order for Miss Rilla.’

‘I'll need to hire a nurse for her,’ Lettice said, wondering how she should go about it. Should she ask Mr Laurent or Mr Lewis?

‘Has Mrs Vaughan gone to see Rilla?’

‘Yes,’ Meri said, nodding. ‘I doubt she would have learned much on account of the chief inspector being here, sleeping.’

‘She probably wants to see her daughter,’ Lettice said. ‘The three of them must have been living a nightmare with that odious man.’

‘Doctor Oddling called to check on the littl’un. He said to tell you that he’s set your handiwork on Mr Morwell’s knee in order and you did a thorough job.’

‘Benedict Morwell won't be gadding about his cell very readily,’ Lettice said, unable to hide her vehemence.

‘Wherever did you learn to do that, miss?’

‘Judo lessons at a French boarding school,’ Lettice replied, her time in Provence still as vivid as the day she had left.

Meri poured Lettice some tea, adding the milk afterwards, and it reminded her of the strange ritual her aunt had performed, putting the milk in first. Thoughts of her aunt came flooding in, and Lettice had to push them aside. There was a time for grieving, and that would have to be later.

There was a knock at the door, and Meri crossed the room to open it. Gilbert stood outside with Mr Laurent.

‘I beg your pardon, ma’am,’ said Gilbert, returning to formality. ‘They said you were awake and we came the moment we heard. I had to see…’ Gilbert paused, seeming to realise Lettice was still in bed, wearing the butterfly gown. ‘We will return when you are ready.’

Meri launched into action at that very moment to unpack Lettice's portmanteau.

'We have much to discuss,' Mr Laurent said. He bowed and left, leaving Gilbert standing in the doorway looking pained.

'I'm so sorry, Gilbert,' Lettice said, and his features seemed to relax a little. 'I should have got up sooner, but I was exhausted.'

'No, Lettice, please. Don't apologise. I wanted you to sleep. I wanted…' He stopped again, pausing a moment to gather his thoughts. 'Mrs McLaughlin has a nice dinner planned for tonight.' He smiled. 'I'll see you then. The chief inspector will join us because Mr Laurent has some important documents he needs to share. They both agreed you should see them first.'

'I see,' said Lettice, unsure what kind of documents. But she trusted Chief Inspector Swift.

'Then after dinner, perhaps you and I will meet with Mr Laurent,' he suggested.

Lettice didn't want to ponder what Mr Laurent would discuss with her and Gilbert. For now, she needed to adjust to life without Aunt Hattie and to turn her attention to the future of the manor and … dinner.

'Good evening to you,' Gilbert said, not waiting for her reply before hurrying off in Mr Laurent's direction.

'He's got a right thing for you,' Meri said, unfolding Lettice's nightgown and spare travelling suit. She frowned. 'Is this all you brought with you?'

'I didn't know I would be staying more than a night,' said Lettice, ignoring Meri's unwelcome observation.

'Well, we'll have to put Madame Pomfrit to work, won't we? It won't do having the lady of the manor dressed in a plaid travelling suit, will it?'

'It will do fine,' Lettice said defensively, knowing, however, that Meri was right. 'I could hardly even afford a pair of slippers made by Madame Pomfrit,' Lettice joked, and Meri laughed.

'You'll be able to afford a thousand slippers soon,' Meri said, returning to the portmanteau.

'I think I'd like to take a bath before dinner,' Lettice said, changing the subject.

'Of course,' Meri said, with a twinkle in her eye. 'You should.'

‘Whatever are you implying? I can certainly count on your honesty, Miss Meredith West.’

‘If you think I'm trouble, don't let Flick or Bettina in the room. Those two have got mouths that run faster than the Nile.’

Lettice laughed. ‘Does the Nile even run fast?’

Meri shrugged. ‘I don’t know, but I'm going there someday.’

‘Me too,’ Lettice said. ‘Perhaps we'll go together?’

Meri snorted. ‘Two’s company, three’s a crowd. Anyway, enough gabbing. I’ll see about your bath.’

‘You don't have to do that,’ said Lettice. ‘Assistant, remember? Not maid.’

‘I know, but I figure you deserve a little luxury after what you went through last night. Plus, I value my knees.’ Meri tapped her nose, and left the room to organise the bath. Lettice chuckled, realising exactly what she meant. Benedict Morwell would be immobilised for at least six weeks, after she inflicted a move Kawaishi Sensei, her Judo instructor at *Le Pensionnat de Jeunes Filles*, had taught her.

Lettice knew she must finally drag herself out of bed. The only thing keeping her going was the promise of hot water, and perhaps a seat next to Mr Gilbert Lewis at dinner.

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Lettice slid into the claw foot bath, sinking her body and her worries deep in the water. There was so much to know, so much to ask, and so much to do. All she could do now was to make herself presentable for dinner. When she finally dragged herself from the tub, she slipped into the fluffy white gown hanging on a hook beside the bath. Mrs McCaffrey's boarding house didn't have running water, and Lettice wondered when Aunt Hattie had installed it in Marigold Manor. She could only assume it ran throughout the house, which even Lettice could guess would be fiendishly expensive.

Returning to her bedroom, she found a vivid green silk gown laid out on the bed. It reminded her of the style of Miss Delvine's original dress, before her ill-equipped attempt at fashioning a couture gown. That brought Lettice back to reality. Had all the contestants gone home, or had they stayed? Marigold Manor had at least fifty rooms, so it would be possible for a stately home such as this to accommodate them. Aunt Hattie had not maintained a staff after the war, so whenever she entertained, she employed extra staff and paid them well. When the event was over, everything went back as it was before: Aunt Hattie, Shackleton the butler, and Mrs Nowland the cook. Lettice wondered what had happened to her. In addition, there was usually one or two kitchen maids and the odd footman, but not even a housekeeper, which made Lettice wonder how the rooms were maintained. Maybe Hattie was more hands-on than she ever imagined. There was one addition she was glad her aunt had added to her staff: the dashing Mr Gilbert Lewis.

Lettice hadn't visited her aunt for a year, and the changes, when she thought about them, were dramatic. Like Aunt Hattie owning a motorcar. It was driven solely by her steward, it seemed, as there didn't appear to be a driver. Aunt Hattie having a steward and a lady's maid whom Lettice hadn't known about, as well as a secret husband … it was all so discombobulating.

Lettice found what she needed in the drawers nearby thanks to Meri's neat unpacking. Slipping on her undergarments, she eyed the gown, which had a metal zipper at the back. It was as beautiful as the butterfly gown, but even more fashionable. Lettice had never worn anything so fashionable before. She wondered if Aunt Hattie had commissioned those two gowns from Madame Pomfrit, to distract her from the gown Flick had made. She also didn't know why two unique and stunning gowns would have been made for her, merely to attend a contest.

'Hurry up, so I can do your hair,' said Meri, returning to the room. She bit her lip, no doubt realising Lettice's short, bobbed style didn't need much fixing.

'Spin around,' she instructed, 'and I'll zip you up.'

Lettice obeyed, having no idea how one was meant to manage a zipper that ran from the small of her back to her neckline.

Meri turned her around and looked at her. 'Stunning,' she said.

Lettice frowned. 'What happened to being honest?'

'I am, miss,' Meri said thoughtfully, and headed to the dressing table. 'You'll need some of these satin slippers Madame Pomfrit makes.' She brought a box out from under the dressing table. Lettice opened it to reveal the sweetest pair of slippers in green. Lettice laughed, wondering if she had stepped in to a fairy tale. She tried them on, and they fit perfectly.

Meri nodded approvingly. 'Off you go, it's almost seven. They'll be waiting for you in the dining room.'

Descending the stairs, Lettice made her way to the dining room in silence. As she entered the room, her chest tightened a little. Gilbert had changed into a new suit, as had Mr Laurent. Chief Inspector Swift was dressed in a stunning red gown, her long dark hair now flowing down her back.

They each turned as she entered, Gilbert and Mr Laurent standing and bowing. The chief inspector held out a hand to her and Lettice took it, folding into the older woman's embrace. If somebody had told her twenty-

four hours ago that she would be hugging the chief inspector, Lettice would have thought them mad.

‘Come and have a drink with us,’ the chief said, handing Lettice something from a small table. It had bubbles and tasted of lemons. Gilbert and Mr Laurent each took a glass.

‘To catching criminals,’ the chief inspector toasted. All four clinked their glasses and drank. ‘Now, down to business. The documents.’

Mr Laurent nodded and pulled some papers from inside his waistcoat.

‘Let's go to the table,’ Gilbert suggested.

They all moved to the dining table and Gilbert held out a chair for Lettice, while Mr Laurent did the same for the chief inspector. Mr Laurent spread three documents across the table and Lettice watched intently as he explained.

‘The first document is the official marriage certificate of Mr Benedict Morwell and Lady Harriet Marigold.’ He pointed to the signature of Benedict Morwell. Morwell hadn’t even had the wherewithal to change his handwriting. Lettice leaned in, looking closely. Mr Laurent pointed to the other two documents. ‘See? They match this letter from Lady Charlotte Vanberry, and also the reference for Miss Rilla Vaughan. All in the same hand.’

‘That’s confidence for you,’ Gilbert said. ‘He was sure he wouldn’t get caught.’

‘Correct,’ Mr Laurent agreed. ‘He certainly went to great lengths to deceive Lady Marigold but forgot about covering up the evidence.’

‘He must have instructed Rilla to retrieve the letters,’ Lettice suggested.

The chief inspector nodded. ‘In the commotion of the contest, Lady Marigold was distracted, and Rilla was able to secure them from her bedroom closet, no doubt while Lady Marigold was dressing. The apron was the key to hiding both the letters and the poisoned biscuit.’

‘What will you do with these now?’ Lettice asked.

‘They'll be taken into evidence, along with the new will,’ the chief replied.

Mr Laurent pulled a piece of paper out of his coat pocket—the paper on which Aunt Hattie had scrawled her will, moments before her death. Lettice reached for it, and Mr Laurent handed it over. She ran her fingers over the lettering, written in anguish and most likely in immense pain. She wanted to

hold on to the last thing her aunt had touched, but instead handed it back to Mr Laurent.

The chief inspector gathered the documents and placed them into a leather satchel.

‘How long till I can apply for probate?’ Mr Laurent asked her.

‘I’ll have these photographed at the station, so you can get the process in order. Come for the will tomorrow.’

The dining room doors burst open, and Mrs McLaughlin barged in. On one arm she carried a tray of roasted pheasant, and on the other, a giggling Isabella Vaughan. Flick followed her with a tray of roast potatoes and carrots. Lettice’s mouth watered at the sight of the food. Despite having eaten recently, she felt she could stomach more.

‘It's all I could muster, since the events of yesterday,’ Mrs McLaughlin said, as Meri followed her with a tray of plates and cutlery.

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to serve yourself, milady,’ Meri said, and Lettice laughed at the contrast of Meri in the bedroom zipping up her gown one minute and handing out plates and cutlery the next.

Isabella broke from Mrs McLaughlin’s arms and climbed into Lettice’s lap. Lettice gave the little girl a tight hug.

‘Now, there is dessert, so don’t forget to leave room,’ Mrs McLaughlin instructed as she positioned the platters in the centre of the table. ‘Come on, Bella. Let’s go. There’s more in the kitchen and you can help me assemble the trifle. The ladies and gentlemen have much to discuss, so let’s leave them to it.’

‘I want to stay with Lettice,’ Isabella said, balling her hands into little fists in front of her chest.

Lettice laughed, and for some reason she wasn’t ready to relinquish the child either, having seen her at heaven’s gates the night before.

‘She can stay until her nanny returns,’ Lettice said, smiling, and Isabella cheered. ‘Thank you, Mrs McLaughlin,’ she added, tears threatening to spill. ‘For everything.’

‘When you’ve had enough of her, send word to the kitchen,’ Mrs McLaughlin replied, departing the room with Meri and Flick following.

‘Shall I be mother?’ Mr Laurent said, taking the serving spoons from the tray.

‘Yes, please,’ said Lettice, holding out her plate.

‘Me too,’ said Isabella, lifting the heavy plate and dropping it back down on the table with a clatter.

‘I’ll serve you,’ said Gilbert, standing up and reaching for the plate.

‘Thank you,’ Lettice mouthed, as she tickled the little girl on the tummy. Mr Laurent served her some pheasant, while Gilbert took care of the carrots and potatoes for everyone, including two little ones for Isabella. Lettice hoped the little girl wouldn’t choke. They hadn’t brought her back from the brink only to succumb to a baked potato.

The doors opened again.

‘Forgot the gravy,’ said Flick, hurrying into the room carrying a silver sauce boat. She placed it on the table before dashing out again.

Gilbert passed the gravy to Lettice, their eyes locking. She wanted so much to see into those vivid blue depths, to discuss their future. She accepted the gravy, pouring a generous splash over everything, including Isabella’s potatoes at her insistence. The chief inspector watched on with a bemused expression.

‘*Bon appétit*,’ said Mr Laurent, taking the lead.

They ate in silence, apart from the clinking of cutlery and Isabella’s loud munching and slurping of the gravy, which she licked off her fingers.

Lettice leant over and whispered to Gilbert, ‘Where is Mrs Vaughan?’

‘The officers took her home to pack some clothes. I insisted they would stay here, as per your wishes.’

‘Thank you for taking care of them,’ Lettice said, smiling.

After finishing her baked potatoes, Isabella snuggled into Lettice’s lap and promptly went to sleep. Lettice loved the feeling of the little girl’s chest rising and falling against hers. Eating with one hand was not easy, so when Gilbert reached over and started cutting her food into easy bites, she held her breath.

‘Thank you,’ she murmured, and looked up as Meri came in.

‘Mrs Vaughan has returned,’ Meri announced, and Agnes Vaughan shuffled into the room looking as though the weight of the world was on her shoulders. She hurried to her granddaughter, taking her from Lettice’s lap.

‘Thank you,’ Mrs Vaughan said. ‘I know I have no right after what my Rilla has done, but I thank you anyway. We’ll only stay a few days, while they sort this all out.’

‘You will stay as long as you need,’ Lettice said reaching up and squeezing the older woman’s arm. ‘Will you accept my help in Rilla’s

defence?’

‘We couldn't, milady, after what she's done.’

Lettice shook her head. ‘Your daughter did not act out of malice. She was backed into a corner, and for that I do not blame her. I believe Mr Laurent will agree with me when the details of Rilla’s involvement become clear.’

‘It is not Miss Vaughan I will be seeking to punish with the full extent of the law,’ the chief inspector said. ‘Her testimony will be vital, however—along with yours—and for that I am willing to make a deal with Rilla to keep her out of jail.’

‘Oh, thank you, milady.’ Mrs Vaughan rushed to the chief inspector, holding out a hand as she juggled the sleeping girl in her arms.

‘I know what it's like to be coerced,’ the chief inspector said. ‘If we can prove Miss Vaughan played her part without malicious intent—’

‘I am willing to represent her free of charge,’ Mr Laurent interrupted. ‘It is what Lady Marigold would have wanted me to do, to ensure that snake of a husband is brought to justice.’

‘Thank you. Thank you, all of you,’ Mrs Vaughan said, and Isabella stirred. ‘I best get her to bed.’

‘Then Meri can bring a tray to your room,’ Lettice said, and Meri nodded.

When they were gone, Lettice stood and went to Mr Laurent, giving him an awkward hug, despite social convention.

‘I don’t know what we would have done without your knowledge of Aunt Hattie's affairs,’ she told him.

The older man accepted her display of gratification, looking a little embarrassed when Meri returned to the dining room.

‘If you please, miss,’ Meri said apologetically, ‘Mrs Vaughan said for me to give you this. She said they found it in Benedict’s bedroom. She was meant to give it to you when she came to fetch Isabella, but your generosity overwhelmed her.’

Meri handed an envelope to Lettice, who took it with curiosity. She glanced at the return address.

‘Lord Rain Vanberry, Vanberry Estate, the Peak District!’

‘Lord Vanberry?’ Gilbert said, recognising the name.

‘The husband to Lady Charlotte Vanberry?’ the chief inspector continued. ‘Benedict’s alter ego?’

‘There is always an element of truth in fiction, I suppose,’ Lettice said. ‘Why would Benedict Morwell have a letter from Lord Rain Vanberry?’ She turned the envelope over, running her fingers over the address as she read aloud, ‘To Lady Harriet Marigold…’

Lettice paused. A sick feeling washed over her as she opened the envelope and read the letter aloud.

‘My dearest Hattie. For the last time, I am begging you—annul this preposterous marriage to Benedict Morwell and give me the chance to prove to you I will make right with my family. There is no other for me, and I know you feel the same. Your father is controlling you from beyond the grave, forcing you to marry a man you do not love, for the sake of the child…’ Lettice gasped, and her throat clenched. She took a breath before reading on. ‘Nothing should keep us apart, not in this life or the next. I promise you, I will square things with my family. They must accept you or I will cut every one of them off. Please, I await your reply in earnest. Yours…’

Lettice placed the letter on the table with a shaking hand. For a moment there was silence.

‘I believe I will need *that* for evidence,’ the chief inspector said finally.

‘Yes, of course,’ Lettice replied, handing the letter to the chief inspector.

‘It certainly ties Benedict Morwell to the Vanberry estate,’ said Gilbert. ‘How would Morwell have known to impersonate Lady Charlotte Vanberry?’

‘A peerage would give him that detail quite readily,’ the chief said, ‘and those letters were quite devoid of familiar information.’

‘Who was Lady Charlotte to Aunt Hattie?’ Lettice wondered.

‘Her best friend,’ Mr Laurent said. ‘I don’t know when exactly it was. About three months after Lady Marigold married Benedict Morwell in secret, she had a falling out with Charlotte. It was two weeks after the banns were released announcing Lord Rain Vanberry and Miss Charlotte Ellingham’s impending nuptials. I never saw her at Marigold Manor again, and Lady Marigold would not speak of her. Their mothers were friends as well, you see, and I represented the older Mrs Ellingham at one point. She inherited a small estate after Charlotte was already married.’

‘Benedict played on Lady Marigold’s loneliness, rekindling a friendship lost to heartbreak and youth,’ Gilbert said. ‘If I had known about the letters,

I could have intervened. As far as I knew, the contest was all Lady Marigold's idea.'

'You could not have known,' Lettice reassured him.

'Every bit of evidence we have tying Benedict Morwell to the crime will be used,' said the chief inspector. 'So this is still valuable.'

Lettice wanted to agree. Another part wanted to bury the letter with her aunt.

That reminded her there was still a funeral to organise, not to mention a sham of a marriage to sort out. For tonight, she was safe and fed, and that was all she would bring herself to consider. When the chief inspector and Mr Laurent left for the night, promising to return when they had more details to share, Lettice and Gilbert retired to their respective rooms next door to one another.

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Lettice was grateful to find Meri had laid out her nightgown on the bed. Managing the zipper all by herself, she removed her stunning silk gown and hung it in the closet. Depositing her slippers beside the bed, she completed her nightly beauty routine in the adjoining washroom, then settled under the covers. She was aware slumber might be a little elusive after having slept most of the day.

Tossing and turning for what seemed like hours, a plan formed in her mind. The sound of movement from the direction of Gilbert's room sent her senses on high alert. It was the incentive she needed to don those green slippers and make her way to Gilbert's bedroom, against all propriety.

Gilbert was reading by lamplight, and was startled when he saw Lettice sneaking in.

'I'd hoped you'd come,' he said huskily, recovering quickly.

Lettice knew the scandal that could arise from an unmarried woman sneaking into a man's bedroom. She wasn't unmarried, though, was she?

'No, no,' she whispered. 'It's not what you think.'

'I'm not even going to consider what you think I think,' Gilbert said. 'Relax. Your virtue is safe with me. I merely meant I wanted to talk to you, away from prying eyes.'

'Oh,' Lettice said, swallowing her disappointment. It was not that she had come expecting more of an amorous reception. A girl could surely hope when entering a man's bedroom in the wee hours of the morning that he would at least consider it improper.

‘Sit down,’ Gilbert said, laughing gently. ‘I meant it. I don’t expect you to honour your marriage vows anytime soon.’

‘Good.’ Lettice breathed out a sigh. ‘I mean, it’s good to know, and I'm glad we cleared that up.’

‘We haven't cleared anything up,’ Gilbert said, frowning.

‘I need to know,’ Lettice said, shaking her head. ‘Deep down, did you realise Aunt Hattie was trying to trap you into a marriage?’

‘Absolutely not,’ said Gilbert emphatically. ‘I would never agree to marry someone I met that day. I was as in the dark as you were.’

‘What *was* the plan then?’ Lettice asked with concern. ‘Was Aunt Hattie even more meddlesome than I ever thought possible? Was I meant to marry some marquis?’

Gilbert shrugged. ‘Lady Marigold suggested to me during the contest, if you were to meet someone eligible, perhaps a marquis, you might get so caught up in the excitement of the act of marrying him, you would actually consider marrying in earnest someday.’

‘So, if the Marquis of Mayweather had attended, I wouldn't be married right now, because I wasn’t meant to sign my name Lettice Marigold?’

‘Yes, it was as simple as that. The document couldn't be legal without your legal signature.’

‘Why didn't you sign something else then?’

Gilbert rubbed his forehead. ‘I was meant to, actually; that was the plan. I got so caught up in—’ He stopped himself.

‘I did too,’ Lettice said. ‘I shouldn’t have signed my full name. I should have known better, although it might have been helpful if somebody had told me what was going on.’

‘I bitterly regret not sharing the knowledge with you,’ Gilbert said.

‘Bitterly?’ Lettice’s pride was a little dented by his passionate regret in accidentally marrying her. ‘Well, if there's one thing I will not do in this lifetime, it’s repeat Aunt Hattie's mistake.’

‘An annulment it is then?’ Gilbert asked.

‘It’s what we both want. I will make the arrangements with Mr Laurent at first light.’

‘How do you know it’s what I want?’ Gilbert asked quietly.

‘Meri heard you discussing it with Mr Laurent. Don't worry, I have no plans to trap yet another male into marrying into the Marigold line in order

to receive an inheritance.’ Lettice’s back stiffened and she pushed herself up to leave.

‘Wait a minute,’ Gilbert said, reaching for her hand. ‘This is all too fast.’

Lettice allowed him to hold it, drinking in the warmth of his touch, but she couldn’t allow it. She couldn't allow the want of her body to dictate her future.

‘You want to be stuck married to me?’ Lettice said, retracting her hand from his. ‘You want half of my inheritance, my fortune?’

‘Absolutely not.’ Gilbert laughed. ‘I don't want Lady Marigold’s fortune. I haven’t done so badly for myself over the years. I’ve been a steward for seven stately homes. Regardless of what you decide in the marriage, I intend to stay on as your steward. If you’ll have me.’

‘You do?’ Lettice was perplexed. ‘To what end?’

‘To finish what Lady Marigold started.’

‘What did Aunt Hattie start?’

Gilbert rubbed his eyes, then, taking a deep breath, he paused, contemplating his reply. ‘I don't know what happened between the two of you. I do know I worked for Lady Marigold for about ten months, and in that time, apart from the contest, which she started planning six months ago, Lady Marigold had many projects she was pursuing. She had weekly appointments in aid of these projects.’

‘What appointments?’ Lettice said.

‘I can share her schedule with you tomorrow, and when you are ready, I'd like to show you the extent of the estate and the good she was pursuing.’

‘I'd like it very much,’ said Lettice. ‘So … you don't want an immediate annulment?’

‘An annulment would rob you of the chance to inherit the title and estate, leaving you destitute.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t be destitute,’ Lettice countered. ‘I do have a job.’

‘A very important one too,’ Gilbert said, smiling. ‘Look, an annulment is not important to me at this stage. What is important is giving Lady Marigold a proper burial and making sure that scoundrel Benedict Morwell pays for his crimes. And when Mr Laurent has managed to file Lady Marigold’s new will, and you are granted probate and your title and estate, we can decide what we do from there. What do you think?’

‘A marriage of convenience is what it must be … all it *can* be,’ Lettice said, feeling a tug of unexpected regret.

She had to do it—she had to cut off this insanity right here and now. She couldn't spend her days touring Aunt Hattie's estate on the arm of her fake husband without losing every ounce of resolve. She vowed she would not repeat the mistakes of her aunt. She had to ensure Gilbert knew exactly what he would be getting into if he agreed to stay married to her for now.

'Let's see where things take us,' Gilbert said plainly. 'I will go on this journey with you for however long it takes to sort out the details.'

Lettice nodded calmly, while every fibre of her being protested about claiming her rightful inheritance by trapping another man in a marriage of convenience. Forever was a long time, but Gilbert was right—now was not the time for rash decisions.

'The sun will rise soon,' Gilbert said with a yawn. 'You don't want to be found in my bedroom, do you?'

'You're right, I must go. I will see you at breakfast.' She wanted to hug him. She wanted him to take her in his arms, so she could inhale his sandalwood scent. She wanted him to tell her it would all be okay. They would work it out and he would be by her side, not because he had to be, but because he wanted to be. Instead, she offered him her hand to shake in acknowledgement of their agreement to remain in a marriage of convenience ... for now.



Lettice slept through breakfast, something she was never wont to do. The events of the past few days had clearly caught up with her. She was woken by tiny fingers probing the depths of her nose. It was not the kind of wake-up Lettice expected her life to hold. It could have been worse, she thought.

'Come, Bella,' Mrs Vaughan scolded. 'Leave Lettice to her ablutions.'

After performing said ablutions, Lettice dressed hastily in her plaid travelling suit and hurried down to the morning room. Mrs McLaughlin had put on a wonderful spread and had not yet cleared it away, anticipating her hunger.

After eating, Lettice made her way down to the kitchen, where she found Mrs McLaughlin kneading bread, while Isabella was drawing at the bench.

'There's my girl,' the cook said, 'or is it milady now?'

‘Not yet,’ Lettice said, ‘which is why I'm still here. I don't know how long it will take to sort out my aunt’s estate, and I don't know if I will even inherit it. I do know your cooking is second to none, and if I’m to achieve what I think Aunt Hattie would approve of, I need someone running this operation.’

‘Operation?’ said Mrs McLaughlin, surprised.

‘I don't have all the details yet, and I don’t know when I can tell you, but will you stay with me?’

Mrs McLaughlin stopped kneading the dough and wiped her hands on her apron.

‘The truth is,’ she said, ‘Lady Marigold saved me. If her niece wants me to stay on and help her through the worst time of her life, I feel I have an obligation to do so.’

‘How did Aunt Hattie save you?’

‘I once ran a big kitchen in Paris—built it from nothing against all odds! I was up against it, night and day, proving my seat at a man’s table. Then my mam passed away, may she rest in peace. I came home to bury her, and when I returned, a man had my job. No questions asked.’ She dusted off her hands. ‘No reference, no wages owing. I didn't exist. Then Lady Marigold drove past the public house in that car of hers with Mr Lewis at the wheel. I was outside, sitting at a table, looking as though the world was on my shoulders, perhaps. She stepped out in her yellow day dress, parked herself beside me and asked why I looked so glum.’

‘It seems Aunt Hattie frequented the public house more than I ever would have imagined,’ said Lettice.

‘You’ve been talking to Bettina, I see.’ Mrs McLaughlin laughed. ‘She was a soft heart to the core, your aunt.’

‘I wuv Bettina,’ said Isabella.

‘I’m sure you do,’ Lettice replied, a little lost in thought. Lettice loved hearing stories about her aunt; stories she never would have discovered had tragedy not struck.

‘How did she rope you into the contest?’

‘It made sense. She wanted to offer a young’un an apprenticeship—a leg up, as they say. I have a lot of knowledge, and even more of an obsession with making foods you won't forget anytime soon. Plus, I needed a job, didn't I?’

‘I don't know what I can promise right now,’ Lettice repeated. ‘But I'd like you to come for the ride and see out the apprenticeship as well.’

‘What about Bettina and Flick and Meri and the other maids?’

‘I wuv, Bettina and Flick and Mewy,’ Isabella asserted.

‘They are wonderful, aren’t they?’ Lettice laughed. She turned to Mrs McLaughlin. ‘You need a staff, don’t you?’

‘They'll do, though some of them need more training than others. I get the feeling you have greater things in store for a few of them?’

‘I might,’ Lettice said, keeping the details to herself.

‘It’s a deal.’ Mrs McLaughlin held out a dusty hand and Lettice shook it.

And with that, Lettice had hired her first staff member, on the first day of her marriage of convenience, in a stately home which may or may not have been hers.

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A little while later, with a box of wooden blocks Bettina had found, Lettice and Isabella joined Gilbert and Mr Laurent as they conversed in the drawing room. Gilbert began making a tower out of the blocks on the floor, while Isabella was smashing them down then shouting, ‘Again! Again!’

‘I’m sorry to say, I must depart,’ said Mr Laurent, as Shackleton arrived carrying a tea tray. Lettice hadn’t seen the elderly man since the ballroom. She suspected Aunt Hattie’s death was affecting him deeply.

‘I trust milady slept well,’ Shackleton said, offering Lettice some tea.

She accepted and thanked him.

‘Very good, milady,’ he said, and bowed. She wanted to say something to soothe his pain. He departed before she could think of anything.

Bettina arrived, gathering up Isabella in her arms.

‘Come on, rascal,’ she said. ‘You’re coming to bake biscuits with me and Mrs McLaughlin while your nanny has things to do for your mama.’

‘Mummy will be here soon?’ Isabella asked, her little lip quivering.

‘Soon enough if Mr Laurent has anything to do with it,’ Bettina said, racing the little girl out of the room in a barrage of giggles. Lettice thought news that Mr Laurent was representing Rilla travelled fast.

The front doorbell sounded, and Lettice stood instinctively to answer it, as she would in the boarding house. Before she knew it, Shackleton appeared in the doorway with Chief Inspector Zephyr Swift and Doctor Oddling.

‘I am on my way to the jailhouse,’ Mr Laurent said, shaking hands with Doctor Oddling and the chief inspector.

‘Her arraignment will be at 2pm,’ the chief inspector said. ‘I am not pressing the charge of murder, only conspiracy to commit.’

‘It still sounds terrible,’ Mrs Vaughan said, her voice shaking.

‘Trust me, Mrs Vaughan,’ Mr Laurent replied, ‘I have it in hand.’

Gilbert rose, shaking hands with Doctor Oddling and the chief inspector also. The doctor strode over to Lettice and took her hands in his.

‘How are you holding up, my dear?’

‘Keeping busy,’ Lettice replied. ‘What brings you here today?’

Lettice motioned for them all to adjourn to the chaises longues.

‘I wanted to bring you up to speed on the case,’ the chief inspector said. ‘We have all the evidence collected and filed, and charges have been laid against Mr Benedict Morwell.’

‘I see,’ Lettice said. ‘But Zephyr, you could have called me on the telephone. You must be very busy.’

‘It’s no trouble,’ the chief inspector said. ‘Once we’ve got the attention of the court, I will ask them to expedite the case so Miss Rilla Vaughan can return to her child.’

‘Thank you, Zephyr,’ Lettice said, nodding. ‘I want Isabella back with her mother as soon as possible.’

‘I won't be pushing for jail time for her. At best, it will be probation, which she could perhaps serve by helping at the orphanage. Mrs Vaughan has agreed to serve the time, right alongside her daughter, so Isabella can be with them both. Mrs Vaughan thinks she can do some good in the orphanage as well, on account of her being a former schoolmistress.’

‘That is wonderful news,’ Gilbert said, and Lettice noticed the way he lit up.

‘I can't thank you enough for the mercy you have shown Rilla,’ Lettice said.

‘You must take the credit for that one. Without your intervention, I may not have had the evidence to prove Miss Vaughan was a victim rather than an accomplice.’

‘Let's hope the judge agrees,’ said Lettice.

Doctor Oddling looked pained, and Lettice knew there was something else he wasn't telling her.

‘What is it, doctor?’ asked Lettice, concerned.

‘The investigation into the cause of your aunt’s death is over.’

Lettice frowned, not understanding. ‘Over?’

‘I should rephrase,’ Doctor Oddling said. ‘The investigation is continuing, but your aunt’s body is ready for burial.’

‘Oh,’ Lettice said, and the room swayed a little.

Gilbert took a protective step towards her, a look of worry on his face.

Doctor Oddling brought a glass of water from the sideboard. ‘Drink this,’ he instructed.

Lettice obeyed.

‘Lady Marigold wanted to be buried here,’ Doctor Oddling said. ‘In the church graveyard. Near her mother.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Lettice said, her eyes suddenly feeling hot.

‘I'll make the arrangements,’ said Gilbert.

‘Please do,’ Lettice said, blinking back tears that threatened to spill.

‘I will let the undertaker know for maybe tomorrow.’

‘Can it be arranged that soon?’

‘I'll make it happen,’ Gilbert said.



Lettice moved through life in a daze over the next twenty-four hours. Meri found some black mourning clothes for her in her aunt’s closet, the irony of which was not lost on Lettice.

Close to four hundred people attended the funeral—the church graveyard was overflowing. Until now, Lettice had no idea the impact Aunt Hattie had made on the village. Every other person was shaking her hand, telling her their story of Lady Marigold.

Reverend Telford gave a short eulogy and said a prayer over the coffin, before he gave the nod. Lettice said a brief goodbye and threw a handful of dirt, and then it was over to the men to lower Lady Harriet Marie Marigold to her final resting place.

Lettice let out a racking sob. Gilbert, who’d barely left her side, pulled her close and she did not resist. Wrapped in his arms, she stayed there for a long time, sobbing softly. When the last of the dirt was piled on, Lettice Marie Marigold vowed Mr Benedict Morwell would be held to account for his crime.

As they walked back to Marigold Manor, Gilbert stayed by her side.

The next few hours passed with a combination of raucous stories of Aunt Hattie's antics, bolstered by Mrs McLaughlin's tantalizing dishes. Lettice wanted to be strong, and she *was* strong. She was happy to have Gilbert by her side. Their marriage of convenience was proving to be more than convenient.

The following day she rose for breakfast and Gilbert was there waiting for her.

'You'd better eat up,' he advised. 'We have a busy day ahead.'

Lettice made a good go of it, with bacon and eggs and coffee in quick succession. She wanted to start the day and see everything Gilbert might show her.

The telephone rang a few moments later, and soon after, Meri peered through the door.

'The chief inspector is on the blower,' she said.

Lettice laughed, following her assistant out.

'Two weeks from today,' the chief inspector said, when Lettice held the earpiece to her ear, 'Benedict Morwell will come to trial.'

'We'll be there,' Lettice said instinctively, and she didn't elaborate as to who she meant by "we". In her heart, she meant Gilbert most particularly, and Mrs Vaughan, Mr Laurent, and Doctor Oddling.

The moment she put the telephone down it rang again.

'Marigold Manor,' she said, and Meri leaned in, listening into the earpiece.

'Lawrence Laurent speaking,' came the reply, and Lettice's heart gave a lurch. 'I need to inform you, Miss Marigold, we have a court date for Mr Benedict Morwell, and the probate has been granted. If you remain wedded … you will officially become Lady Lettice Marie Marigold of Marigold Manor.'

Lettice felt a sudden flush and dropped the telephone, her hands shaking.

Meri picked it up. 'Yes, she heard you sir. Good day,' she told Mr Laurent, before hanging up.

'Milady,' she said with a wide grin, and Lettice didn't know what else to say.

'Don't tell a soul,' Lettice whispered.

Meri dramatically zipped her lips, then threw away the imaginary key.

Lettice took a few deep breaths to settle her nerves, and stop the shaking in her hands, before rejoining Gilbert, who was eager to be off. Lettice was glad for his impatience. It was a good distraction, or he might have noticed her distress. As they made their way outside to the motorcar, she took light breaths and tried to act naturally, though her mind was full of questions and plans.

Dressed in a yellow sprig muslin she found in her aunt's closet, she gathered a shawl as well before heading out. It was a fine day as they climbed into Aunt Hattie's motorcar, though the temperature was a little fresh.

'Where to first?' Lettice asked, unable to contain her secret smile. She didn't want to ruin the moment with further talk of marriage or annulment. For now, she was Lady Lettice Marie Marigold, married to Mr Gilbert Lewis. She didn't even know if he had a middle name.

'We are due at the orphanage,' Gilbert said.

'What did Aunt Hattie do at the orphanage?'

'You'll see,' Gilbert said, smiling.

When they arrived, he opened Lettice's car door, took her hand, and helped her out. They were met by a middle-aged lady, hair scraped back into a bun. She wore a billowing black dress, secured at the wrists with white frilled cuffs, the fabric falling all the way to cover her ankles. In sturdy black boots, she stepped towards them with confidence, holding out her hand.

'I am Miss Marlo Cartwright. You can call me Marlo.'

Lettice shook her hand.

'Miss Marigold, we are deeply saddened by your loss,' Marlo said. 'The children will be most upset to miss story time with Lady Marigold.'

'Story time?' said Lettice in disbelief.

Marlo nodded. 'Miss Hattie read to the children every week, come rain, hail, or shine. I believe you are also a librarian—Lady Marigold spoke of you often. She told me she wasn't as good as her dear Lettice, who was a real librarian in the city, but she would read a book to the children, and she hoped one day to read one of your books.'

'One of mine?' Lettice frowned. 'She spoke of my books?'

'Yes, of course. She was proud of you and had no doubt you would succeed in your writing. Mr Lewis.' Marlo turned to Gilbert. 'Would you like to see the progress?'

‘Yes, very much. And perhaps, if Miss Marigold is up for it, she could read the children a story?’

‘It would be my honour,’ Lettice said, ‘but what’s this talk of progress?’

‘You didn't know Lady Marigold was building a school for the orphanage?’

‘Not only a school!’ Gilbert beamed. ‘A library too.’

‘Come, while the children are having their breakfast, we can have a walk through.’

Marlo led them into a red brick building with tall windows and high ceilings. At least a hundred children of varying ages sat at long tables, slurping bowls of porridge. What struck Lettice was the children were not dressed in drab or dirty clothing. They wore all the colours of the rainbow in well-made garments.

‘Children!’ Marlo clapped to get their attention. ‘Welcome Miss Lettice and Mr Gilbert.’

‘Welcome, Miss Lettice. Welcome, Mr Gilbert,’ the children replied in unison, many of them waving.

Lettice waved back. Having a crowd of children at her story times in the Mosely Public Library was one of the joys of Lettice’s employment.

‘Is it story time?’ one of the children called.

‘It certainly is,’ Lettice replied in a sing song voice, rising to the challenge.

The children erupted in claps and cheers.

‘After your breakfast,’ Marlo insisted. She turned to Lettice and Gilbert. ‘Come. We can go out this way.’

Marlo led them through the back of the building and into the sunshine. A wooden fence separated a large, grassed area, where Lettice imagined the children were able to play. Workmen continued hammering away at two new buildings behind the fence.

Gilbert pointed. ‘The one on the right is the new school room, while the left is going to be a library for the children.’

‘How long has Aunt Hattie been building this?’

‘A few months,’ Marlo said. ‘We don’t know what will happen now.’

‘Everything will continue,’ Lettice said, nodding.

‘Oh, thank you, Miss Marigold!’ Marlo clasped her hands. ‘Are you sure you’re comfortable reading to the children today? I don't expect you to, considering you are in mourning.’

Lettice had not donned mourning clothes, and it occurred to her perhaps this was the reason Marlo wore black.

‘Of course, I would love to. And forgive my attire. Aunt Hattie didn’t wear mourning clothes outside of funerals, so I decided I would honour her with her favourite colour instead.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Marlo nodded, smoothing her own black dress down.

‘Shall we go and tell a story now?’

‘Don’t you need a book?’ Gilbert wondered.

‘I don't need a book,’ Lettice said, winking. For the next twenty minutes, she took the children on a journey into a deep dark forest. They were entranced, and when Lettice finished, they cheered at the ending.

Gilbert and Marlo clapped in appreciation.

By the time Gilbert helped her back into the motorcar, Lettice’s heart was filled with joy, not only because of Aunt Hattie’s generosity, but also from the satisfaction of doing what she loved— telling stories to children.

‘I never knew,’ Lettice said, as they drove off. ‘She never once came to my library to watch me.’

‘She *did* actually,’ Gilbert replied. ‘Quite a few times she had me drive her to London. We sneaked into your story time at the Mosely.’

‘I think I would have remembered you,’ Lettice said, turning to look at his profile.

Gilbert chuckled.

‘You didn’t recognise us because Lady Marigold made us go incognito. Plus, it was chaos. I doubt anyone could concentrate on faces in the crowd.’

‘Who were you dressed as?’ said Lettice, incredulous.

‘I wore the reverend’s old cloak and hat,’ Gilbert said, ‘while Lady Marigold had a peacock feathered hat and veil which masked her face.’

Lettice suddenly had visions of the two of them dressed in their ridiculous outfits. She thought perhaps she remembered them and had thought it somewhat odd a vicar and a peacock-feathered lady had attended.

‘Impersonating a vicar,’ Lettice scolded. ‘The lengths you went to for my batty Aunt Hattie.’ Lettice let the nickname slip and she covered her mouth. ‘Oh dear, I shouldn’t have called her that.’

‘She *was* quite batty,’ Gilbert said, laughing. ‘Making me dress as a vicar to attend a children’s story time, to watch you in action, is certainly a little loopy.’

‘And what did you think? Of me, I mean.’

‘You were superb.’ Gilbert grinned. ‘I was convinced the pirates were going to win, but alas, Johnny Silver saved the day. And your drawings were wonderful.’

Lettice couldn’t believe Gilbert had attended her story time and that he liked her drawings.

‘Thank you for saying that. Thank you for *doing* that.’ She chuckled. ‘I don’t know many men who would have humoured Aunt Hattie on her wild adventures.’

Gilbert smiled, as though reminiscing. ‘She was quite something.’

The rest of the journey passed in silence and Lettice wondered if Gilbert was remembering old times with Aunt Hattie.

‘What she was doing at the orphanage—it’s wonderful,’ Lettice said breaking the silence when they were close to home. ‘What sparked the idea?’

‘You,’ Gilbert said. ‘You gave her the idea. She saw what you did at the Mosely, and she wanted to do it for the children who needed it the most … the ones who had no parents to dote on them and nurture their love of books and stories.’

‘I wish I'd known,’ Lettice said. ‘I wish she’d included me in her plan.’

‘She wanted it to be a surprise. She wanted you to finish the library, choosing all the books. She wanted to see your books on people’s shelves too.’

‘It will be my very great honour to finish the library,’ Lettice said, ignoring the comment about her own books. She'd come to Marigold Manor under the guise of pitching her books to Miss Louisa Pemberton, and everything had gone wrong.

‘I know you will make it a wonderful place for those children. Here we are,’ Gilbert said, sounding relieved, as they arrived back at Marigold Manor. Lettice didn't know if he was relieved to be out of her company or merely tired from the events of the last few days.

Shackleton met them at the door.

‘Good morning, milady, Mr Lewis.’ He bowed and handed a letter to Lettice. ‘This came for you, milady.’ Lettice perused the name on the envelope.

To Lady Marigold.

‘Thank you, Shackleton,’ Lettice said. ‘Would you perhaps bring some tea to the drawing room for Mr Lewis and me?’ Lettice would never get

used to saying things like that. She hadn't told anyone she was officially Lady Marigold and now did not seem the right time.

Lettice turned the letter over, reading the sender's name and address. She shot Gilbert a knowing look. He did not question her, seeming to understand.

After they were settled in the drawing room and Shackleton had brought the tea, Lettice handed the letter to Gilbert.

'To Lady Marigold,' he read. Then he turned the letter over. 'From Lady Charlotte Vanberry!' He gasped. 'The *real* Lady Charlotte perhaps?'

'Should I open it?' Lettice said, unsure. 'I don't think it will do any harm. Shackleton did give it to me, but it doesn't mean I have the right to read Aunt Hattie's mail.'

'I will then,' Gilbert said. 'As her steward, part of my duties included opening Lady Marigold's correspondence, though she never shared Lady Vanberry's letters with me.'

'Then we probably shouldn't now,' Lettice said.

'We at least need to let Lady Vanberry know of your aunt's passing.'

'You're right,' Lettice said.

She opened the letter and they nestled in side by side to read.

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21st September

Dearest Hattie,

You are probably wondering why I'm writing after such a long time. So much water has gone under the bridge between us. I'm hoping the passing of time has dulled the sharpness of our quarrel, and you will accept this missive as an olive branch.

It is with great regret I inform you of the passing of my late husband, Lord Rain Vanberry. We had many companionable years together, and no, I never had children.

Perhaps I could have written sooner. Perhaps we could have buried the hatchet and returned to our prior friendship. These are questions I would like you to ponder now. I wish to invite you to attend Rain's funeral, which will take place on the 22nd at 3pm at our estate. I hope you will attend. I believe he would have wanted you to, especially since I have happened upon a delicate matter, which I would like to share with you.

Your old friend,
Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

~

‘It has to be the real Lady Vanberry, surely,’ Lettice said. ‘This is dated only yesterday.’

‘Lady Marigold’s true love passed away the same week as her,’ said Gilbert. ‘How very sad.’

‘I don't think I can simply write back and tell her my aunt is dead.’

‘No.’ Gilbert shook his head. ‘Your reply should be in person. I think the Vanberry estate is about two hours’ drive from here.’

‘What could she possibly want, though?’ Lettice pondered.

‘I believe we owe it to your aunt to find out and to set Lady Vanberry at ease about Lady Marigold’s untimely passing. No one should learn about their old friend being murdered from a letter.’

‘You are right. We must go. Do you think we will make it in time for 3pm?’

‘*We?*’ Gilbert said, with a look of surprise.

‘Well … that is … would you accompany me?’ Lettice almost bit back the words, dreading to hear him say no. She didn't want to travel alone to some unknown estate, with some unknown lady, delivering possibly the most terrible news. Not to mention finding out what Lady Vanberry’s delicate matter was. She wanted Gilbert by her side but couldn’t admit it to him. Did their marriage of convenience extend to jaunts in the countryside?

‘I would be honoured to,’ Gilbert replied. ‘I do think we should share this with the chief inspector, though. Every bit of evidence we gather to corroborate Rilla’s version of events, with regard to the letters written from Lady Vanberry, helps strengthen her case.’

‘Absolutely,’ Lettice said. ‘I’ll telephone the chief inspector and have Mrs McLaughlin prepare a hamper for us.’

‘I’ll fuel up the motorcar,’ Gilbert said, standing. ‘Shall we meet back in the drawing room in half an hour?’

‘Thank you, Gil,’ Lettice said, and he smiled as he left the room.

Gilbert was already wearing a black suit, so he was suitably attired for a funeral. She, on the other hand, was dressed far too colourfully.

‘I had better find some more appropriate mourning clothes,’ Lettice said, thinking aloud, as Meri came into the room.

‘Mr Lewis said you needed my assistance?’

‘Thank you, Meri. Do you think you could find some travelling mourning clothes from Aunt Hattie’s wardrobe?’

‘I suspect I could. Shall I bring them to your room?’

‘Yes, please,’ Lettice said, ‘and with some urgency if you don’t mind, Meri. Mr Lewis and I need to depart for Vanberry House within the hour. Do you think you could ask Mrs McLaughlin to prepare a simple hamper for us?’

‘It would be my pleasure,’ Meri said, stifling a coy smile. Lettice could imagine exactly what Meri was thinking. She didn't have time to defend her situation.

She hurried to the telephone and placed a call to the chief inspector, informing her of their afternoon jaunt. The chief agreed Lady Vanberry’s testimony would be crucial at some point during the trial.

‘Shall I request she telephone you after our visit?’ Lettice asked.

‘Obtain her number, if she has one, as well as giving her mine here at the station,’ the chief said. Lettice rang off and hurried up the stairs to her bedroom. Meri had laid out a few options for mourning clothes and Lettice chose a black travelling suit, which she thought would be most comfortable. Within half an hour, she entered the drawing room, Lady Charlotte Vanberry’s letter secured in her pocket.

‘Very appropriate,’ Gilbert said, eyeing her all-black attire. ‘Although, I do prefer you in a bit of colour.’

Lettice’s cheeks burned with the idea that Gilbert took notice of her clothing and preferred her in any colour. She turned away, aware of the impropriety of his comment.

Meri arrived with the hamper and Gilbert quickly took charge of it, carrying it out to the motor.

‘Have a good trip, milady,’ said Meri, barely hiding a knowing smile.

‘Thank you for all your help,’ Lettice said, glaring at Meri.

Gilbert held the door, and she settled into the seat, trying to hide her own excitement for the journey ahead. Gilbert climbed into the driver’s side, and they set off for Vanberry House. Their goal was to arrive in time for the funeral of a man they had never met, to converse with a lady in mourning, who had a matter of some delicacy to discuss.

‘What do you think the matter of delicacy is?’ Lettice said, as they bumped along the open road. ‘Do you think it has anything to do with Lord Vanberry’s feelings for Aunt Hattie?’

‘It has to be something in his will, surely,’ Gilbert responded. ‘Otherwise, why wouldn't she have written it in a letter, or even telephoned perhaps?’

‘Aunt Hattie was quite forward thinking, installing a telephone. I don’t think we can assume it of every stately house.’

Gilbert sighed. ‘She did have grand plans for Marigold Manor.’

‘Really, what kind of plans?’

‘Modernisation, I suppose you'd call it.’

‘Running water and electricity must have been a costly endeavour. Did she run them throughout all fifty rooms?’

Gilbert nodded. ‘She did.’

‘It must have been a nightmare.’

‘Not really.’ Gilbert shrugged. ‘With only a skeleton staff to suit our needs, and so many rooms empty, it proved to be quite a speedy process.’

‘When was it all finished?’

‘Last week.’ Gilbert laughed. ‘Lady Marigold was in a royal state. She wanted it finished for the contest and for everything to go smoothly.’

‘Why specifically for the contest?’ Lettice asked, narrowing her eyes.

Gilbert rubbed his forehead. She had noticed him doing this when he didn't want to answer.

‘Lady Marigold had dreams, and knowing all we do now, the pieces of the puzzle have come together in their own way.’

‘What was her dream?’ asked Lettice a little impatiently, not due to any fault of Gilbert’s. More because she was disappointed in herself for not mending bridges with her aunt sooner, or she would have known all Gilbert was revealing now.

Gilbert sighed. ‘I think it all stemmed from her marriage to Benedict Morwell. She seemed taken with the idea of giving people the chance to fulfil their dreams, including their marriage ideals.’

‘Didn't it all start with Benedict Morwell’s letters, posing as Lady Vanberry?’

Gilbert frowned as he concentrated on the road ahead. ‘I think the idea of granting wishes was Morwell’s. Lady Marigold saw the genius of it and built the concept even further to include all manner of ambition.’

‘She always wanted me to publish my books,’ Lettice pondered. ‘That’s how she lured me back, after all. She knew I couldn't pass up a rare pitching opportunity to an amazing publisher. Is that why you told me it would be worth my while?’

‘I knew of your aspirations. I thought you would get the chance to pitch to Miss Pemberton during the contest, if you played along with the staged marriage.’

‘It certainly got me curious enough to accept her invitation,’ Lettice admitted.

‘Perhaps it was the only way she perceived she would ever get you to visit again.’

Lettice sighed. ‘You could be right. We parted on less-than-ideal terms last year.’

‘She did mention it.’

‘You became close with her?’ Lettice blurted. She immediately wished she could have kept that thought in her head.

‘She was quite special to me. A brilliant woman. I think perhaps she thought of me as her long-lost brother.’

‘My father,’ Lettice said wistfully.

‘According to your aunt, he was a very good man.’

‘He was the very best of men,’ Lettice said, her voice cracking. ‘Aunt Hattie reminded me often of the very scandalous but very great love that her brother and my mother shared.’

‘Scandalous?’ Gilbert asked.

Lettice nodded and looked out the window, her parents’ hazy faces in her mind. ‘My mother was a nurse in the local hospital—before the war, that is. My father broke his leg in a horse-riding accident, and she cared for him. It was love at first sight for my father. *His* father did not approve of the match. From all reports he was a terribly controlling man.’

‘I heard the same from Lady Marigold.’

‘And now we know he wasn't only controlling, he was spiteful too. He hated that my father married someone of lesser standing.’

‘So he made provisions in his will, as far as Mr Laurent reported. Provisions to ensure he wreaked havoc on the lives of his children, even from the grave.’

‘It seems that way. And through spite, he forced Aunt Hattie into a terrible alliance in order for her to ensure my safety.’

‘That is all we can assume, I suppose,’ Gilbert replied solemnly.

‘And all the while, she loved another she couldn’t have. Lord Rain Vanberry.’

‘Why is society so intent on engineering the unhappiest of marriages?’ Gilbert huffed. ‘Why couldn’t they leave everyone to their own devices and allow them to marry whom they wished?’

‘Greed, most often,’ Lettice replied. ‘In my aunt’s case, desperation on my behalf.’

‘Which is why I think her scheme fulfilled so many of her unfulfilled dreams. She wanted to run the whole house sort of like a hotel. Even those without great means could find happiness within the Marigold walls.’

‘The contest was therefore a test in essence,’ Lettice considered. ‘Which ended in her downfall.’

And she took you along with her, Lettice thought. She could forgive her aunt of many things, it seemed. Trapping one of the most wonderful men she had ever met into a marriage of convenience was not something she was willing to forgive her aunt for yet.

‘Do you have the time?’ Gilbert asked, jostling Lettice from her thoughts. She glanced at her watch.

‘Two-thirty.’

‘We’ve made good time,’ Gilbert said. ‘I’m loath to stop now. I don’t know how good the roads will be approaching the Vanberry Estate. Shall we press on?’

‘I think so,’ Lettice replied, wanting to get to the Vanberry Estate as soon as possible. She hated the thought of attending another funeral so soon. However, it was the only way they were going to be able to seek an audience with Lady Charlotte Vanberry.

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Vanberry House was considerably more lavish than Marigold Manor, the sheer immensity of it taking Lettice's breath away. She could only assume it was why her aunt was not favourable to Lord Vanberry's parents —possibly for the same reasons her own father had placed stipulations on his daughter's marriage.

The funeral was on the grounds of the Vanberry chapel, with a mausoleum to the side of the building. There were only a handful of people in attendance, and Lettice felt sad for a life to end with so few to mourn it.

Lady Vanberry spoke of her husband's great works, mentioning nothing of their love and devotion or their life together. Suddenly the words in her letter became clear: 'many companionable years together'. Not happy. Not wonderful. Companionable. The description gave Lettice a clear idea of exactly what kind of marriage the Vanberry's had agreed to.

When Lord Vanberry was finally laid to rest in the mausoleum, Lady Charlotte seemed to square her shoulders. She approached Lettice and Gilbert.

'May I help you?' she asked, eyes clear and devoid of tears.

'I'm Lettice Marigold, milady. I am the niece of Lady Harriet Marigold, and this is my …' Lettice cleared her throat. 'My husband, Mr Gilbert Lewis.'

'Hattie,' Lady Charlotte said, her eyes searching over Lettice's shoulder. 'Where is she? Did she send you in her stead, to prevent any rekindling of our old friendship?'

‘No, milady,’ Lettice replied solemnly. ‘I’m very sorry to tell you, my aunt is dead.’

‘Dead?’ Lady Vanberry gasped. ‘When one dies in their sleep or from a long illness, one says passed away. What has happened to my friend?’

‘May we come in and discuss it with you, perhaps?’ Gilbert suggested.

‘Yes, of course.’ Lady Vanberry nodded. ‘Come to the drawing room.’

A butler stood nearby, as well as a maid, which made Lettice wonder if she was Lady Vanberry’s lady’s maid. The butler took them through the house, showing them into a stunning drawing room.

‘Halston, bring some tea,’ Lady Vanberry commanded. ‘Cynthia, you may leave us.’

‘Yes, milady.’ The girl curtseyed and hurried away.

Lady Vanberry ushered them towards two damask chaises longues trimmed in gold.

Lettice and Gilbert took a seat on one, while Lady Vanberry lowered herself gradually onto the adjacent chaise. Halston returned swiftly with tea, and Lady Vanberry wasted no time pouring three cups and adding milk without even questioning. She took a sip and savoured the liquid. Lettice and Gilbert sipped their tea in politeness.

‘Well, I needed that,’ she said, breathing deeply. ‘It’s not every day one buries one’s husband of decades.’ She sighed then, as if happy for it all to be behind her. ‘Tell me about poor dear Hattie. What happened?’

Lettice cleared her throat. ‘The day before yesterday, my aunt was murdered. The culprit built an elaborate ruse, using letters he manufactured in your name, milady.’

Lady Vanberry’s face went white. ‘What a scoundrel! Who did this to her?’ She stopped then, her eyes wide. ‘It was that loathsome toad, Benedict Morwell, wasn't it?’ Lady Vanberry said it as more of a statement than a question.

Lettice opened her mouth to speak but Lady Vanberry cut her off. ‘I don’t want to know the details. All I want to know is, has he been apprehended?’

‘He has,’ Lettice said, feeling somewhat proud of her and Gilbert’s involvement in Benedict Morwell’s arrest. ‘Chief Inspector Zephyr Swift would like to have a word with you to clarify some details. Unfortunately, Benedict Morwell wrote to my aunt pretending to be you. He manipulated

her in that way. Chief Inspector Swift wants to be sure she can prove the letters were forged.'

'Of course. Absolutely,' Lady Vanberry responded. 'I will do anything in my power to make that—' She stopped herself. 'To make *him* pay for his crimes.'

'Thank you,' Lettice said. 'I will pass your details to the chief inspector upon our return, with a handwriting sample perhaps?'

'I will do all I can to help prove Benedict Morwell as the unconscionable human—the *murderer*—that he is,' she seethed.

'You mentioned you had a delicate matter to discuss with my aunt?' Lettice continued. 'Would you feel comfortable sharing it with us?'

Lady Vanberry sighed and lowered her teacup to her lap.

'I suppose it can't hurt now. First, though, I'll make it clear that although I had a great fondness for my husband, there was no love between us.'

'A marriage of convenience,' Lettice whispered, and Gilbert took her hand and squeezed it.

'Exactly.' Lady Vanberry smiled. 'There is more history I must share in order to explain.'

'If you would prefer to do so in Lettice's company alone,' Gilbert said, 'I will not take offence, milady.'

'Oh, no, it's quite all right,' Lady Vanberry said, and took a sip of her tea. 'We stopped with any pretence of love a few weeks into our marriage and I don't mind sharing the details. You may remain, Mr Lewis. I believe your wife will be glad of it, once you hear the details of what I must share. Before I was Lady Charlotte Vanberry, I was simply Charlotte Ellingham. I had no title, and I was not from nobility. I happened to be the best friend of Lady Harriet Marigold.'

'I see,' said Lettice, her brows knitting together as she listened intently.

'Hattie disclosed to me one day after attending the Seftons' ball, that she had met the man she was going to marry: Lord Rain Vanberry.' Lady Vanberry pointed at a portrait of a handsome man dressed fashionably in a black suit, with high collar points and a cravat. He had a kind look about him and Lettice decided she didn't dislike Lord Rain Vanberry. 'You can imagine my excitement for my friend. You see, I wasn't like Hattie. I didn't long for a husband. I intended never to take one, but to live a life of my choosing, having no obligations of a wealthy family to appease.'

Lettice wondered at Lady Vanberry's words. *Live a life of my choosing.*

'I was happy for my friend. A week later, your parents tragically died, and Hattie's father followed his son to the heavens. You can imagine my astonishment when, not long after, Hattie married the gamekeeper's son, Benedict Morwell.'

Lettice felt her eyes hot with tears and she blinked, hoping Lady Vanberry had not noticed.

'I went to Hattie, asking her what she was thinking marrying someone like Benedict Morwell. She assured me she knew what she was doing. And it was all for you.'

Aunt Hattie had done it for *her*. The sting of those words sliced Lettice's heart anew. A tear trickled down her cheek, and this time she didn't blink.

Gilbert reached into his pocket and handed her a handkerchief. She took it, wiped her eyes, and urged Lady Vanberry to continue.

'Lord Vanberry came to visit me the next day, begging me to pass on a letter to Hattie. I did so, but she would not concede. Before I knew it, three months later, Rain was offering me a deal. His tyrant of a father had passed away, the one who had forbidden his marriage to Hattie. He said he could never offer me a real marriage. Ours would be of the convenient persuasion. He promised everything I ever wanted would be at my fingertips.'

'Why would he suggest such a thing?' Lettice asked, perplexed, though that was exactly the kind of marriage she had proposed to Gilbert.

She couldn't look at him, fearing for the strength of her resolve. She wanted nothing less than a full, rich and honest marriage. Was it too soon to want this with Gilbert? She hardly knew him. Still…

She focused her attention on Lady Vanberry, who was responding to her question.

'Out of revenge,' Lady Vanberry said plainly. 'Lord Vanberry was determined never to further the Vanberry line, to spite his father right back to the grave. If he couldn't have Harriet Marigold mother his children, he would have none.'

Lettice blinked at the ferocity of Lord Vanberry's revenge. Still, she understood his sentiments more than she ever would admit.

'Which brings me to the two things I wanted to share with Hattie, may she rest in peace.'

'What are they?' Lettice asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

‘The first…’ Lady Vanberry paused to pull a bundle of letters from the folds of her mourning gown. ‘These are Rain’s love letters to Hattie, some returned unread, some never sent. I intended to give them to her today. I thought she deserved to know his devotion right up until his final moments.’ She handed them to Lettice. ‘I think you should do with them as you wish. Maybe bury them with Hattie. I will leave it up to your discretion.’

‘Thank you,’ Lettice said, taking the letters and pressing them to her chest. She didn’t feel it was right to read her aunt’s secret correspondence. But then, Aunt Hattie would never know.

‘What is the second thing you wish to share?’ asked Gilbert, clearly having a hard time keeping his own curiosity in check.

‘The second is something that was unbeknown to me for the duration of our marriage. Rain owned a cottage in La Cinque Terre, Italy. Monterosso, specifically, and he has left it to Hattie in his will. I think he purchased it as a honeymoon destination, but of course, his wish was never fulfilled. I have no need for an Italian cottage,’ Lady Vanberry mused, ‘so as you are no doubt my dear friend’s official heir, I will arrange the paperwork for the cottage to be turned over to you.’

Lettice gasped and choked out a thanks, her vision swimming with memories of Aunt Hattie. More recently, she recalled the letter from Lord Vanberry, and the memory of what had come between her and her aunt.



After obtaining the telephone number and handwriting sample the chief inspector had requested, Lettice and Gilbert started their journey home. Lettice was caught up in her thoughts, her eyes fixed on the scenery flying past. All she could think of was she’d give anything for one more minute with Aunt Hattie, to tell her how she felt. To thank her for everything she’d done. To make everything right again. She’d give up Marigold Manor, the Italian cottage, everything.

Gilbert reached out and touched her shoulder gently and she almost lost her hold on her emotions.

‘Would you like to talk about it?’ he offered.

She shook her head, but then she couldn’t hold back anymore. ‘I’ve ruined everything,’ she blurted.

‘What is this everything of which you speak?’

She tried to put her thoughts into words but then lost her courage and backpedalled.

‘It doesn't matter,’ she said, as her stomach played a symphony of its own volition.

They crossed a bridge over a gently flowing river and Gilbert turned right, slowing the motorcar until he found a space to pull over. The deep green bank of the river beckoned from beyond a low wall. The water sparkled golden in the sunlight and Lettice’s stomach growled again.

‘Why are we stopping?’ she asked.

‘I think we both need sustenance for the drive home,’ Gilbert said, stepping out of the motorcar and hurrying around to open her door. Extending his hand, he helped her out and then went to the trunk to retrieve the hamper and a blanket. She’d completely forgotten about the hamper she had requested from Mrs McLaughlin. Gilbert led her to a level patch of greenery and laid out the blanket.

‘Refreshments are served, milady.’ He bowed, and a small smile twitched on Lettice’s lips.

‘Thank you, kind sir,’ she replied, starting to feel herself again as she played along.

‘What do you think Mrs McLaughlin packed for us?’

Lettice shrugged. ‘Turkey and cranberry perhaps?’

Gilbert opened the brown paper parcel. ‘Ham and mustard I think.’ He handed Lettice one of the sandwiches and she didn’t waste a second diving in.

‘Mmmm,’ she said, ‘that’s better.’

‘I thought so,’ said Gilbert, and he took a bite of his sandwich too. He peered in the basket. ‘Now what do we have to drink?’ He pulled out a glass bottle with a corked stopper, filled with a yellow liquid. He pulled the cork and took a sniff. ‘Oomm, lemonade.’

Lettice smiled. ‘My favourite,’ she said, the sustenance of food clearly restoring her.

Gilbert produced two glasses from the basket, pouring lemonade into each one. He handed Lettice a glass and said, ‘To new beginnings.’

‘To new beginnings,’ she said, taking a sip.

Gilbert grinned mischievously. ‘Aren’t you curious? I know you are…’

Lettice knew exactly what he was talking about. She pulled the letters from her pocket. She found the earliest date of Lord Vanberry’s love missives to Aunt Hattie and began to read aloud.

Dearest Hattie,

This is pure madness. Why have you not answered my letter? I cannot stand to even think of that scoundrel breathing the same air as you, let alone touching your skin.

If only you had given me the chance to go to my father and propose our match. I am confident he would have eventually been brought to reason.

Please, I beg you, reconsider this marriage. That man will do nothing but cause you heartache, mark my words.

Your Rain.

Lettice put the letter down. ‘What do you make of it?’

Gilbert rubbed his chin. ‘I believe Lord Rain Vanberry was very much in love with Lady Harriet Marigold, and perhaps her with him. However, he allowed his family to dictate their circumstances.’

‘I don't think I've ever seen a more opulent house,’ Lettice said. ‘The Vanberry estate must be vast.’

‘There clearly were some promises made,’ Gilbert decided, ‘It sounds to me like Lady Marigold may have panicked after your father and her father passed away the same week.’

‘She made the best decision she could, knowing Lord Vanberry’s father might never allow the match. She must have decided she couldn’t take the chance.’

‘I believe she was right to do so,’ Gilbert said. ‘I’ve worked for many high society families with extensive estates not unlike Vanberry House.

There are alliances to be considered and succession to be planned.'

'Do you think if Aunt Hattie hadn't acted immediately, we would both have been destitute?'

'Yes, likely,' Gilbert agreed.

'She never told many people about Benedict Morwell, apart from Mr Laurent and her best friend, Charlotte.'

'She had assumed the role of your sole parent quite suddenly, remember? It is my opinion she did not consider any other option than to ensure your safety, even if it meant sacrificing her own happiness.'

'It pains me to hear it,' Lettice said. 'All those years, married to that man, extinguishing any chance at real love.'

'Shall we read on?' Gilbert suggested.

'I think so.'

Lettice pulled the next letter out of the bundle.

Dearest Hattie,

Is there no hope? Are you committing to this loveless marriage, sacrificing the love we shared and the chance of creating a family? Charlotte tells me it is because of the child that you have made such a rash decision. Anything else is completely out of character. Please, I beg you, let Charlotte bring you to me, so I may convince you of all the reasons my love for you will stand the test of time.

Yours in desperation,
R.

'He's getting more desperate,' Gilbert said. 'If he was so serious, why wouldn't he renounce his fortune and marry her anyway?'

Lettice pondered it a moment, and with immense clarity, the solution to the greatest problem she had ever faced became apparent. The only trouble was she didn't have the courage to proclaim it.

Pulling out the next letter, she continued to read.

Dearest H,

I can no longer even write your full name. Charlotte has come to me expounding on the reasons we can never be together. Reasons I should have foreseen and taken action on sooner. It is my fault. Please do not punish me for all eternity for this. Please let me make amends. Give me the chance to be a happy man and to call you my wife. Charlotte will come to you again soon with a plan. We will run away together. We will make it work. Please do not deny me. I would relinquish everything if you agreed to do this for me. Annul the marriage and run away with me.

Yours in misery,
R.

‘Our man has reached the pinnacle of his sacrifice,’ Gilbert suggested. ‘He no longer cares for his wealth, willing to give it all up for the one he loved. He neglected to include one thing: he clearly did not realise the blood ties our dear Hattie was bound to.’

‘Me,’ Lettice said softly. ‘Perhaps we could have had a very different life if he had asked her to run away with Hattie *and* me.’

‘I guess we will never know,’ Gilbert said. ‘What is important here is Lady Marigold chose you over her love. Filial duty aside, she loved you.’

‘I know,’ Lettice said. ‘I never showed appreciation. Never thanked her. I took it for granted. And when she did try to extend the olive branch, setting up a publisher to attend the contest, I didn’t even acknowledge the great lengths she had gone to, to see my dreams come to fruition.’

‘We are all a much better version of ourselves when we look with hindsight,’ Gilbert said. ‘What matters now is you go forwards and make

your mark, honouring Lady Marigold's legacy.'

'I'll try,' Lettice said, tears welling once again. 'Will you help me?'

'You know I will,' Gilbert said, reaching out to pat her arm. She melted into his embrace, wondering if she was perhaps floating outside of her body when Gilbert tipped her nose up and gently kissed her lips.

Her mind was screaming no. Her heart was saying yes, while her body was wanting more, and Lettice gave in to what her heart and body had mandated. She kissed Mr Gilbert Lewis, her *for-the-moment husband.* There was no doubt in her mind she wanted him body and soul. The truth of the matter was she could not have him. Not the way she wanted—unfettered and without obligation. What she had to decide now, was how much she was willing to sacrifice. Could she give up her claim to Aunt Hattie's fortune, relinquishing the orphanage and the school and the library, as well as all the plans for Marigold Manor, to become the dream ship Aunt Hattie had proposed? Could she give it all up for the honour and respect of a man?

'Let's read the next letter,' Gilbert suggested, 'before we lose the courage.'

Lettice found the missive, her hands shaking from the weight of the decision she had yet to make.

Gilbert smiled softly at her, as she opened the letter and began to read.

Dear H,

I am heartbroken. Charlotte says you will not reconsider. Your love for me is clearly naught and therefore I am naught to you. I will never give up loving you and as a token of my love, I vow never to take a true wife. Charlotte has agreed to a marriage of convenience. It is best for everyone, now that Father has passed. It doesn't matter who I marry, and my mother says she will love whomever I choose—a bitter pill to swallow, indeed, since she never stood up to my father in life. I suppose that is the way of tyrants and their wives.

I will never forget our dream of honeymooning in Monterosso. I will never forget the Hattie I once knew. You will not hear from me

again. Wish me luck in my marriage, if you can at least give me that.

Yours eternally,
R.

‘He says she will never hear from him again. Yet there are many more letters,’ Lettice said. She opened the next of Lord Rain Vanberry’s letters. These were more like journal entries. Each year he wrote one to his dearest Hattie, detailing the highs and lows of his life, never changing the ending, always ending with “Yours eternally, R”.

‘He kept to his word then,’ Gilbert said quietly. ‘His parting gift to Lady Marigold must have been the cottage.’

‘And she never lived to see it, or him, ever again. All because of Benedict Morwell.’ Lettice clenched her jaw. Gilbert nodded and put his hand on hers and she felt an electric zap go right through her body.

‘Come, we’d best get back on the road.’ He pulled her up and quickly stowed the hamper and blanket in the trunk.

Lettice rubbed her shoulders, her mourning dress no longer providing enough warmth. Gilbert returned to her, rubbing heat into her shoulders before giving her one more kiss. He grinned, stepped back, and helped her into the car.

She offered no resistance, her resolve rising with his touch. And as they pulled onto the road and headed back to Marigold Manor, Lettice Marie Marigold knew what had to be done.

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Lettice’s first order of business was to telephone the chief inspector and offer a couple of the later diary-style letters in Lord Vanberry’s hand. Lady Vanberry had also given her a sample of her own handwriting, in order to compare to the letters penned by Benedict Morwell.

‘Excellent work,’ said the chief inspector. ‘We will need those samples for when we go to trial.’

Lettice rang off, calculating her next move. She decided to visit the kitchen and run her idea past Mrs McLaughlin. Meri and Flick and Bettina were all there and heard every word. They seemed excited by her suggestion.

‘You want to reprise the contest?’ Mrs McLaughlin clarified.

‘Not in its entirety. I want to gather all the contestants and the judges, as well as the orchestra, and present the scholarships to the winners. And we’ll need food.’

‘We certainly will,’ Mrs McLaughlin agreed. ‘I'll get started on the menus now. I’ve been training up Meri and Flick and Bettina. We’ll make canapes.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Lettice. ‘Can we pull it off in a week?’

‘Challenge accepted,’ Mrs McLaughlin said. ‘In the meantime, dinner will be served in twenty minutes.’

Lettice had no stomach for food, having picnicked with Gilbert less than an hour before. She hadn’t the heart to confess to Mrs McLaughlin. Confident her plan was in good hands, she headed upstairs to wash and

dress for dinner, leaving Meri busy helping in the kitchen. With two new zippered gowns that had appeared in her closet—clearly purchases from Madame Pomfrit's—she didn't need Meri's help.

Peering at the gowns, Lettice couldn't help thinking her aunt did mean for her to be married. She pushed the thought aside and dressed in a cornflour blue satin gown with scalloped sleeves, which suited her bobbed hair style quite well. And since her hair lent itself to little fuss, she was ready quickly.

She stepped into the hallway, and Gilbert came out of his room at the same time. His breath caught, and Lettice's ears tingled.

'There's my wife,' Gilbert said, holding out his hands to her, breaking her out of her reverie.

She let him take them. The hairs on the back of her neck were standing up. In everything that had happened, the one little detail she couldn't let go of was the fact Aunt Hattie forced him against his will into this marriage. She wanted him body, mind and soul, but on equal footing. A forced marriage should not have been the sum of their relationship. If they were going to have any chance together, Lettice needed to wipe the slate clean. There was no child to save anymore; she was a capable woman with her own means, albeit a great deal less means than Aunt Hattie's fortune. She was willing to take the chance some distant relative would be found to succeed her, if it would mean she could come to Gilbert as his equal. Then they could find their way back to each other.

Right now, she couldn't help herself playing the role of fake wife. These kisses could be her last, when Gilbert learned of her intention. He drew her to him, and she touched the pulse point at his neck. His heart was beating, slow and steady, as calm and collected as he had always been, since they first exchanged vows.

'I missed you,' he whispered in her ear. 'Did you square everything away with the chief inspector?'

'I did,' she said, smiling as he kissed the nape of her neck.

'*Ahem*.' Mr Laurent cleared his throat. 'I hoped I would find you both before dinner. I've had an interesting letter from Lady Charlotte Vanberry to Lady Marigold's estate.'

'We know about the Italian cottage,' Lettice said, pulling away from Gilbert.

‘Oh,’ said Mr Laurent. ‘Very well. As you were.’ He turned and headed down the stairs.

‘I think we’ve been caught,’ Lettice said.

Gilbert resumed his previous position of enfolding her in his arms and kissing her neck.

‘Let’s go to Monterosso,’ he whispered. ‘We can check out your new cottage.’

Everything in Lettice wanted to scream *yes*.

‘We can’t go anywhere,’ she said, laughing. ‘The trial will be soon.’

‘Right. Yes.’ Gilbert straightened up and became serious. ‘We’d best get to dinner then,’ he said, extending his elbow.

Lettice slipped her hand into the crook of his arm, and they descended the stairs together.

Mrs McLaughlin served up an impeccable dinner. Lettice felt a little smug that some stupid man had usurped Mrs McLaughlin’s position and tossed aside her superior talent, most likely because his pride was challenged. She was in Lettice’s kitchen now, and while Lettice was lady of the manor, for as little time as she had, she was going to enjoy that woman’s cooking.

‘I have an idea I would like to run past the two of you,’ Lettice began, as Gilbert and Mr Laurent both ate heartily. Gilbert hadn’t spoiled his appetite with the picnic, it seemed. ‘Correct me if I am wrong, but the contest was funded to perpetuate annually?’

‘Perpetuate, yes,’ said Mr Laurent. ‘Actually, Lady Marigold poured a considerable amount into it to fund each of the scholarships. So much so, that it could be held monthly.’

‘Why don’t we finish what she started then?’ Lettice proposed. ‘Let’s get everyone back together, including all the judges and the orchestra. It was quite clear to me what each of the contestants deserved. We shouldn’t leave them disappointed.’

‘When would you like to do this?’ asked Gilbert.

‘A week from today. I’ve already spoken to Mrs McLaughlin. She thinks she can pull it off.’

Gilbert laughed. ‘I should have known this was not a fact-finding mission. More like a *fait accompli*.’

‘I wonder where she gets it from,’ Mr Laurent mused.

‘Do you have contact details for everyone?’ Lettice asked.

‘It won’t be easy tracking down the contestants again,’ Gilbert said. ‘None of them have telephones. I’ll have to visit each of them in turn, but I do have their addresses from their initial nominations though.’

‘What about the judges?’

‘Easy enough. All of them have telephones,’ Gilbert said.

‘How about I gather all of the judges and have the conductor rally the orchestra?’ suggested Mr Laurent.

‘While I contact the contestants,’ said Gilbert.

Lettice nodded. ‘Let’s invite them all for Saturday, 7pm sharp, for an encore of Music, Mayhem—perhaps without the Matrimony—but you get the notion.’

‘We need an audience though,’ Gilbert added. ‘What is the point of bringing all the contestants back without an audience to appreciate them?’

‘I’ll put an advertisement in the newspaper,’ said Lettice. ‘I don’t think it will take much to gather an audience. I’ll offer a lucky seat prize, with an all-expenses paid trip to Monterosso, funded by the trust.’

‘I think that is well within the brief of what Lady Marigold was trying to do—to bring hope back to the people,’ said Mr Laurent. ‘As the trust manager, I approve.’

‘Thank you,’ Lettice said, a warm feeling settling in her chest. She would honour her aunt’s legacy if it was the last thing she did.

‘We are all in agreement?’ Gilbert asked.

‘We are,’ said Lettice and just like that, her plan was coming together.

‘Then I have work to do,’ said Gilbert, rising from the table. He nodded to her and then to Mr Laurent and was gone.

Lettice watched after him, feeling her face flush. She wanted more than anything to tell him how she felt, to express her gratitude for all he had done for her and for her aunt, and also to open her heart up to him. Yet if she did, she did not trust herself to follow through with her plan. From now on, she must curb her interactions with Mr Gilbert Lewis, or she might remain in a marriage of convenience and become Lady Lettice Marigold for good—a house built on lies and entrapment. She couldn’t allow it to happen.

‘I need you to do something else for me,’ Lettice said in a low voice to Mr Laurent, ‘and I need it to be in the strictest of confidence.’

Mr Laurent cocked an eyebrow. ‘You are more like your aunt than you realise.’

~

Lettice knew her plan could come together within a week. What she wasn't sure of was if she would have the strength to follow through with her ultimate scheme. In order to distract herself, and to avoid Gilbert, she spent some part of each day playing with Isabella while Mrs Vaughan visited Rilla.

Mrs McLaughlin had a superior menu planned for after the contest winners were awarded, and Lettice looked forward to what would be her last meal as the lady of the house.

Gilbert came and went throughout the week, managing to track down each of the contestants one by one, while Mr Laurent rallied the judges including Madame Pomfrit, Reverend Telford, Doctor Oddling, Chief Inspector Swift, Miss Louisa Pemberton and, of course, Mrs McLaughlin.

'Which gown will you wear?' asked Meri on the afternoon of the great encore.

'I think the butterfly gown,' Lettice said, 'sans that dreadful mask.'

'It's lucky I washed and pressed it.' Meri laughed, taking the gown from the wardrobe and helping her into the familiar butterfly wings.

'Have the contestants all arrived?' Lettice asked.

Meri nodded. 'Miss Delvine was first, followed by Mr Patrick then Mr Davis.'

'What about Miss Appleby?' Lettice wondered.

Meri nodded. 'Apparently she came in the back door and went straight to the kitchen.'

'I'm ready,' Lettice said, not feeling ready at all. She had to press on. Her entire future happiness, or misery, depended on it.

Gilbert met her at the top of the stairs, dressed in the suit he had worn to the original *Music, Mayhem and Matrimony*. Lettice's hands were shaking as he took hers in his, and he pulled her in to kiss her gently. She felt a shiver overcome her and had to work hard to keep her composure.

'Let's get this party started,' he said, with a glint in his eye.

Lettice did her best to play the part of the happy hostess. What she was about to do would either break Gilbert's heart or prove the two of them were never meant to be.

When they entered the ballroom, Lettice was overjoyed to see the orchestra on stage, the conductor weaving a delicate melody. The

advertisement had certainly done its job, too—the ballroom was packed to the rafters, every one of them eligible to win an all-expenses-paid trip to Monterosso, La Cinque Terre, Italy.

The judges were seated at the long table on stage. On the far left sat Mr Lawrence Laurent, beside Reverend Telford, Chief Inspector Zephyr Swift, Madame Pomfrit, Mrs McLaughlin, Doctor Oddling, and Miss Louisa Pemberton.

The contestants were seated on chairs to the left of the stage, including Mr Jacob Patrick wearing his black suit coat and tails with a white shirt and bow tie. He gripped his violin and bow anxiously while next to him, Miss Dahlia Delvine sat dressed in her midnight blue dress and blue beehive wig. Lettice thought she looked every bit the picture of a starlet. Mr William Davis had donned his purple coat which had gained quite a few embellishments on the lapels. Lettice knew he must have finished what he started on his first visit to the Marigold—he wore it with such pride. Miss Candy Appleby wore her gorgeous pink gown resembling spun sugar, and Lettice thought she noticed a spot of flour on her cheek.

Shackleton kept position at the wall near the judges' table, his stiff demeanour intact. He held the silver tray with a pitcher of water and a stack of glasses.

Gilbert accompanied Lettice onto the stage. Shackleton poured her some water, and she took a sip, before Gilbert gave her one last kiss on the cheek and went to join the judges. The conductor drew the orchestra to a close as Lettice approached the microphone. The audience clapped and Lettice paused a moment, waiting for quiet.

'Welcome, everyone, to our reprisal of Music and Mayhem—but probably not Matrimony this time.' The crowd laughed and Lettice cast a look towards Gilbert, who tipped an imaginary hat with a wry smile. 'My name is Lettice Marigold, and with the death of my dear Aunt Hattie, I am sorry to say I am a poor substitute for this evening's announcements.' The crowd clapped again, and Lettice felt the tears prickling. She managed to keep them at bay.

'We have some very deserving hopefuls, who not only impressed the judges, but have also shown such deep compassion for my situation as the new Lady Marigold. Without further ado, it is my pleasure to welcome to the stage Mr Jacob Patrick, who, after tonight, will begin his tenure with the incredible philharmonic orchestra you see before you.'

Mr Patrick rose from his seat, then turned to bow to the conductor. For the next ten minutes, Jacob Patrick's violin took the audience on a journey Lettice was sure none would ever forget. At the conclusion of his solo, the entire orchestra and the conductor stood and clapped, while the audience joined in with rousing applause.

'A truly magnificent performance,' said Lettice, 'from a singularly talented performer. My Aunt Hattie would have been proud to witness your rise, and we at Marigold Manor wish you every success.'

Mr Patrick took another bow and shook his clasped hands together in appreciation as the crowd applauded him back to his seat.

'Next,' said Lettice, 'we have a formidable opponent, as was once described to me, for the incredible opportunity of joining Miss Elvira Fontaine on tour, along with a record deal with Elvira's brand-new label, Fontaine Records. Please welcome to the stage Miss Dahlia Delvine.'

Lettice watched in awe as Dahlia wooed the crowd with her incredible stage presence and even more impressive voice. The crowd awarded her with a standing ovation and Lettice knew she was witnessing history in the making. Miss Dahlia Delvine was definitely going places.

'Next, we have a truly unique talent—one who I'm sure will take the couture industry by storm. Please welcome Mr William Davis to the stage.'

William strode elegantly to the stage, and Madame Pomfrit rose from her seat, giving him a standing ovation.

Suddenly, the doors at the back of the ballroom burst open, and in strutted Meri, Flick and Bettina, all dressed in exquisite gowns of William's making. The girls paraded back and forth on the stage, with William fussing over each of them, before they headed down the centre ballroom aisle and out the doors again to a roaring crowd. Madame Pomfrit gave William a hug, and he blew kisses to the audience before returning to his seat.

'Finally,' Lettice said, 'Mrs McLaughlin, please take the stage.'

The audience clapped and Mrs McLaughlin squared up to the microphone. She had taken off her dirty apron for the moment.

'It is my great pleasure to introduce my new protégé, Miss Candy Appleby.' Mrs McLaughlin pointed towards Miss Appleby, who stood, beaming, and bowed to the audience. 'And don't we have a treat in store for you tonight.'

The doors burst open again and Meri, Flick and Bettina, still wearing their couture gowns, carried in silver trays laden with what Lettice guessed

would be Miss Appleby’s signature caramel cardamom-flavoured biscuits. They offered them around to the audience members, and within seconds the smell of burnt sugar and cardamom mingled with appreciative murmurs throughout the ballroom.

‘What an incredible evening we have had! And this brings me to our grand door prize. Check your seats,’ Lettice advised, ‘for ticket number 222. The winner will be on their way to Italy for an all-expenses-paid trip to Monterosso, La Cinque Terre!’

A nun held up her ticket, calling out, ‘It’s me!’ She made her way to the stage while the audience clapped.

‘Congratulations,’ Lettice said with a big smile. She shook the nun’s hand before Shackleton ushered the woman off the stage and out the doors.

‘Will you give all of our hopefuls one final round of applause!’ Lettice said, and she felt as though her heart would burst. She had done it. She had fulfilled so many dreams, including her aunt’s.

She turned back to the microphone to wind down the presentation and announce the refreshments, when Miss Louisa Pemberton stood with a hand in the air.

‘Excuse me,’ she called. ‘Lady Marigold, there is one more award to be announced.’

Lettice had vowed to have her moment in the sun with Miss Pemberton, but when it all came down to it, it had seemed hopeless to even try to discuss her works with the publisher. With everything that had happened, it had been far from the front of her mind. She’d omitted to include Miss Pemberton in the night’s proceedings, while knowing, deep down, Gilbert would ensure her presence.

‘Yes, of course,’ Lettice replied, ‘I beg your pardon. Please welcome Miss Louisa Pemberton to the microphone.’ Lettice moved away, but Miss Pemberton caught her elbow to prevent her from leaving.

‘Oh, no you don’t,’ she said, laughing, ‘because you, my dear, are the recipient of the Lady Harriet Marigold award for Outstanding New Talent in Children’s Fiction.’

‘I am?’ Lettice gasped, unable to believe her ears. A thought flashed in her mind: had Aunt Hattie set her up to win, and Miss Louisa Pemberton was merely humouring Lettice, because of her connection? She couldn’t very well refuse the award in front of an entire audience.

‘Your children’s books are brilliant,’ Miss Pemberton went on, ‘not only engaging the reader most wonderfully by your lively text, but also your watercolour illustrations are second to none.’

Lettice felt a wave of something wash over her and she thought she might faint. The audience cheered, and Lettice rallied. She was unable to put it into words, the exquisite knowledge that someone truly influential in the publishing world loved her work and it might one day be found on a bookshelf for all to read. It was too much to fathom.

‘Thank you,’ Lettice said, her tears flowing now.

Gilbert beamed up at her, while Miss Pemberton returned to her seat with a broad smile upon her face. Lettice smiled back at Gilbert a moment longer, drinking in this last exchange, before she had to rip his heart in two.

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The audience applauded again, and Lettice took deep breaths, gathering her courage.

‘My last duty for the night,’ she began, ‘is probably going to be the hardest thing I have ever done.’ The crowd hushed, and Lettice turned her attention to Gilbert. ‘Gilbert Lewis, I want you to know that, beside my father, you are the kindest and gentlest man I have ever made the acquaintance of. Which is why I need to do this.’

Gilbert frowned, pushing himself to stand, when Mr Laurent stayed his arm, handing him a document.

Lettice cleared her throat. ‘The paper Mr Laurent is handing you is your freedom—the annulment of our fake marriage.’

Gilbert took the paper, staring at its contents, his face ashen.

‘Although my aunt had the best of intentions,’ Lettice continued, ‘she tricked you into marrying me so I may inherit her fortune upon her passing.’

Lettice swallowed hard. The room was silent as she continued. ‘Little did she know the events that would befall her, and her passing would be happening all too soon. This is no excuse for me to perpetuate her lie. I am hereby officially annulling our marriage, Mr Gilbert Lewis, and therefore, according to the succession conditions stipulated by my grandfather, I must relinquish my claim to the title and estate of Marigold Manor.’

Lettice choked back a sob and Gilbert looked confused for a few seconds, before a small smile played on his lips.

‘Did you do this for me?’

‘Yes,’ Lettice sobbed, the tears flowing freely now, and Gilbert was closing the distance, the annulment clutched in his hand. He made a show of crumpling the document in front of the entire audience and throwing it over his shoulder. He strode to Lettice, took her in his arms and kissed her most ardently for several moments, prompting applause and cheers from the audience.

‘Are you sure about this?’ she gulped as Gilbert drew back, looking deep into her eyes.

‘I have loved you ever since the day I met you,’ he declared.

There was a moment of pause, and then, clasping her hands in his, he dropped onto one knee. The audience fell silent as Lettice gasped and looked down at him.

‘Lady Lettice Marie Marigold,’ he said, ‘would you do the honour of becoming my wife…’ He paused. ‘Again?’

‘*Yes!*’ Lettice cried, crumpling into his arms. The conductor struck up the orchestra and Mr Patrick played the wedding march. Gilbert pulled Lettice to her feet, and they turned and faced the audience, who were all cheering now. Lettice wiped away her tears and with a nod from Gilbert, they headed off the stage and down the aisle to claps in time to the music.

Once out of the ballroom, Gilbert shut the doors behind him and drew her to him once more.

‘Oh Gil, do you really mean it? Do you want to be married to someone like me?’

Gilbert frowned and shook his head. ‘And you called your aunt the batty one.’ He took her hands in his once more and brought them to his lips to kiss her fingertips. ‘Lettice Marie Marigold,’ he said, ‘I fell in love with you that day I watched you at the Mosely delivering story time. I never thought we would meet again, so when you came back into my life, I vowed to myself I would never let you get away.’

Lettice laughed through glistening tears. ‘I love you, Gil.’

‘I love you too, my darling Letty.’ He smiled, shaking his head. ‘And you can park your annulment right beside your marriage of convenience.’ He laughed and kissed her once more, as Mrs McLaughlin bustled past carrying a tray of delicacies. She was followed by Bettina, Meri, Flick, and the rest of the maids all carrying similar trays.

‘Well, don’t stand there mooning over your husband,’ Mrs McLaughlin called. ‘Get back on that microphone and tell them refreshments are on their way!’

Not even the newly minted Lady Lettice Marie Marigold would have the nerve to defy one of Mrs McLaughlin’s orders. Taking her husband by the hand, she dragged Gilbert back down the aisle, up onto the stage and to the microphone, where they both leaned in and announced, ‘Dinner is served.’

They then resumed their kiss to rousing applause.



The following week was a whirlwind. One minute, Lettice and Gilbert were planning their life together, including a much-anticipated honeymoon to Monterosso, La Cinque Terre. The next minute, Lettice was sitting beside Miss Rilla Vaughan, holding her hand, before she was called to the witness stand to give evidence against Benedict Morwell.

The jury saw through his greed-fuelled lies and found Mr Benedict Morwell guilty of the murder of Lady Harriet Marigold. Miss Rilla Vaughan was given two years’ probation and the chief inspector suggested she could make good use of her time running the brand-new Harriet Marigold Library. Mrs Vaughan accepted a position as the orphanage’s schoolmistress, enabling Isabella to receive her education right alongside her mother’s probation and her grandmother’s expert teaching.

Lettice and Gilbert handed over the reins of *Music, Mayhem and Matrimony* to Meri, Bettina and Flick. They ran it as a monthly event, showcasing new talent in areas of music, fashion, and the culinary arts. As well, they allowed underprivileged brides and grooms their chance to be married, in a singularly unique wedding venue, all funded by the Lady Harriet Marigold Trust Fund.

After training Miss Candy Appleby in the running of an extremely busy and successful wedding destination kitchen, Mrs McLaughlin returned to France and opened her own restaurant, employing an all-female staff. Before she left, she schooled Miss Appleby on how to make a bitter chocolate and burnt butter biscuit. Written in her own hand and obtained as a signed agreement, Chef Appleby vowed to bake one bitter chocolate and

burnt butter biscuit per month and deliver it to Mr Benedict Morwell's jail cell, with a note reading, 'From the estate of your late wife. Enjoy!'

Lettice fulfilled her Aunt Hattie's dream, along with her own, when her first children's picture book was published, and she read it to the orphaned students attending the Lady Harriet Marigold Children's Library story time.

Before departing on their long-awaited honeymoon, Lettice discovered a wonderful surprise which made boat travel untenable for at least a few months. Gilbert was over the moon and did everything he could to keep her comfortable, as their child began to grow. In the meantime, they had a small ceremony to bury Lord Rain Vanberry's letters in Aunt Hattie's grave. Lettice found it in her heart to be thankful for Aunt Hattie's *Music, Mayhem and Matrimony* soiree eventually, and she hoped with all her might the two lovers, Lady Harriet Marigold and Lord Rain Vanberry, were finally united.

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Right when they have the killer in their sights, Rix's past catches up with him.

One thing is certain, matrimony with a twist of *murder* was not on the playbill…

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