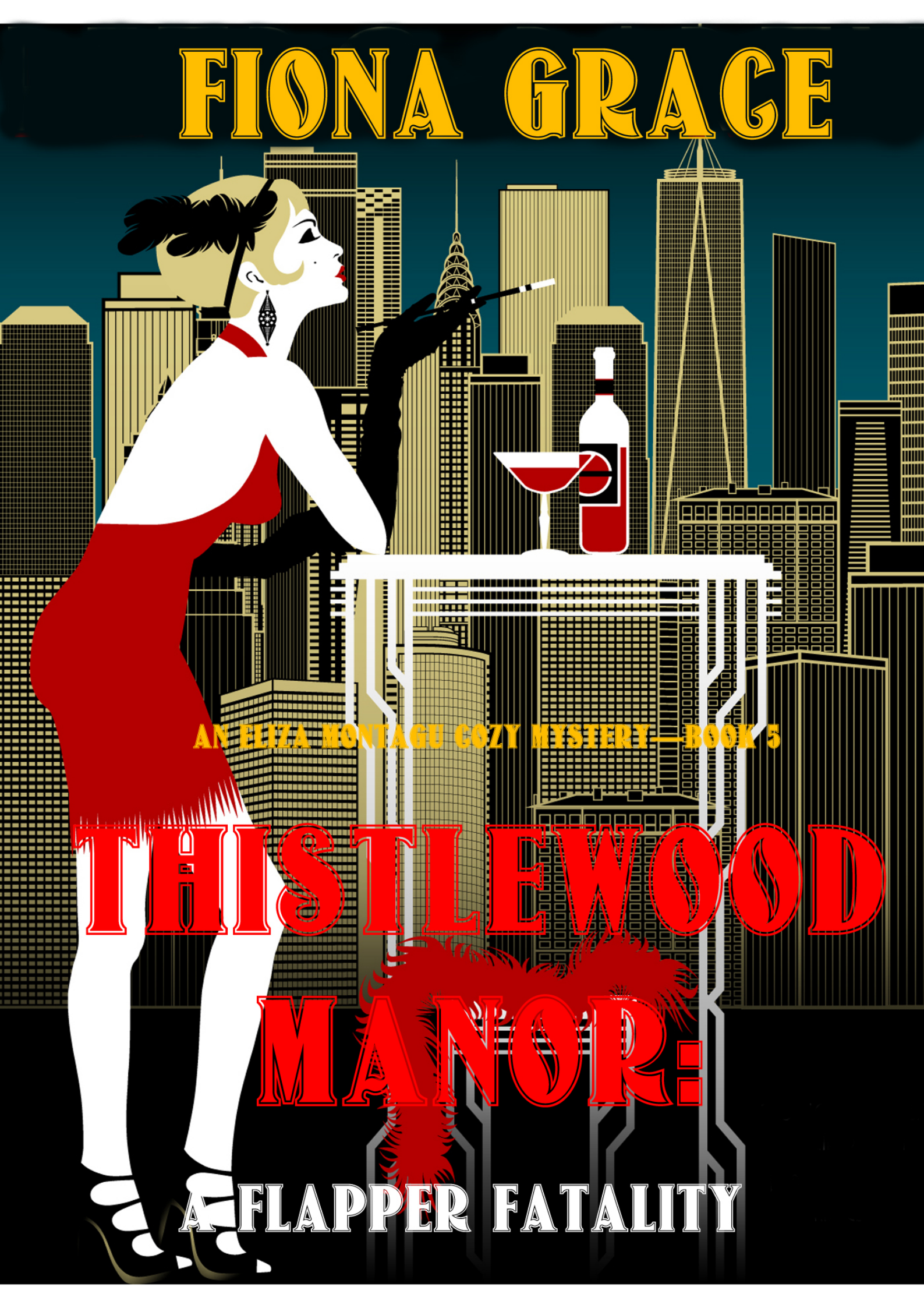


FIONA GRACE

AN ELIZA MONTAGU COZY MYSTERY — BOOK 5

THISTLEWOOD MANOR:

A FLAPPER FATALITY



THISTLEWOOD
MANOR:

A FLAPPER FATALITY

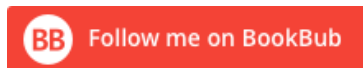
(An Eliza Montagu Cozy Mystery—Book
Five)

FIONA GRACE

Fiona Grace

Fiona Grace is author of the LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the TUSCAN VINEYARD COZY MYSTERY series, comprising seven books; of the DUBIOUS WITCH COZY MYSTERY series, comprising three books; of the BEACHFRONT BAKERY COZY MYSTERY series, comprising six books; of the CATS AND DOGS COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the ELIZA MONTAGU COZY MYSTERY series, comprising seven books (and counting); and of the ENDLESS HARBOR ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising five books (and counting).

Fiona would love to hear from you, so please visit www.fionagraceauthor.com to receive free ebooks, hear the latest news, and stay in touch.



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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

Butterflies twisted in Eliza's stomach as she worked her way through the maze of hallways that comprised the west wing of Thistlewood Manor. She loved the family estate, but the size of it could be wildly inconvenient when one was trying to get somewhere in a hurry. Thankfully, Eliza knew the place intimately—she had spent her entire childhood exploring every nook and cranny, and a lovely byproduct of that, she realized now, was that she knew every imaginable shortcut hiding within its walls.

She took advantage of every bit of that knowledge today as she raced through each hidden passageway before finally arriving in the grand foyer. She then raced across the intricate marble floors and past the spiral staircase.

Almost there, she thought, as she wrapped her hand around the brass doorknob of the French doors, prepared to step outside into the family garden.

But just as the doors began to creak open, she heard another sound: it was Parkins, the family's butler.

"Lady Eliza!" he called out.

She stopped in her tracks.

"I'm so glad I caught you," Parkins said.

Eliza turned to face him as he came down the stairs, doing her best to give him her full attention. As much as she hated the idea of being delayed, she hated the idea of making Parkins feel unimportant far more.

"The National Gallery is hosting a new exhibit featuring work by someone named..." Parkins paused for a moment and pulled a note out of his pocket. Eliza did her best not to let the additional delay make her twitchy.

"Ah, there it is—Wassily Kandinsky. Have you heard of him?"

Eliza nodded. She was reasonably certain everyone even remotely related to the art world had heard of Kandinsky. He was quickly establishing himself as one of the most important painters of the 20th century. Eliza had never seen his work in person, but she had seen pictures of it in a great number of books. At first, she hadn't been quite sure what to make of it, but she had quickly fallen in love with the way he used colors as though they were words, and his paintings somehow felt like poetry. She didn't always understand precisely what he was doing, but she understood what he was *feeling*, and that seemed to her to be some sort of magic.

"Your father was reading about it in the paper this morning," Parkins continued. "It appears as though there's some sort of opening night gala where you can not only see the works but also meet the painter, and Lord Montagu was wondering if you might like him to request a ticket."

"I—yes. Please tell him that would be absolutely brilliant, Parkins. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Parkins replied, at which point Eliza felt safe enough to turn back to the French doors. But then—

"As long as I have you—"

Eliza sighed as she turned back around. She loved Parkins dearly, and she always enjoyed talking with him, but at that exact moment... Well, at that exact moment, she had somewhere else that she very much needed and very much wanted to be.

"Rene was wondering about supper tomorrow," Parkins continued. "Do you anticipate being here for that? Apparently, he's found some aubergine that—"

"Yes," Eliza interrupted. "I'll be here."

"Also, Lady Mercy was wondering—"

Not again! Eliza thought. She appreciated how conscientious Parkins was in delivering every imaginable message, but goodness, she did not have time for yet another inquiry at that moment, not when every fiber of her being was yearning to get to the garden.

“I’m so sorry, Parkins,” Eliza interrupted, unable to wait a moment longer. “But I’m afraid I really must be going. I have important business in the garden, but I shall connect with my sister later, I promise.”

“Important business in the garden?” Parkins asked, perplexed. Eliza couldn’t blame him. The garden was not the sort of place where important business was done. She should have covered better.

“Yes, there’s some... well, you know what they say about people who don’t harvest their strawberries by the end of May, Parkins,” she replied, hoping he wouldn’t think too deeply about that sentence.

“Can’t say that I do, Miss,” he replied with a smile.

Parkins was onto her; Eliza was all but sure of it. But she also knew he was far too polite to ever say anything about it, so her secret was safe with him.

“I’ll see you later, Parkins.”

“Of course, Lady Eliza. Good luck with your important business,” he replied with a smile.

If Parkins was the sort of person who winked, Eliza felt certain he would have done so just then, and she felt her face flush with embarrassment at having been caught. But her thoughts didn’t stay there long. They were already out in the garden.

Thankfully, now that she had successfully managed to extricate herself from Parkins, Eliza was safe to finally make her way out into the garden, too.

It was a perfect day outside. The gorgeous buds of March and early April had given way to full-blown blossoms, and the whole place was alive with the delicate scent of gardenia and honeysuckle and lavender.

Eliza made her way past bright purple columbines and dainty bleeding heart plants and through a field of enormous, vibrant aliums before turning into the hedge maze. On a normal day, she would have stopped to soak it all in—to relish the new life exploding all around her and to appreciate the way

the bees buzzed back and forth from flower to flower in a beautiful display of symbiosis—but not today. Today, she had something even more beautiful in mind.

She snuck into the secret garden that her brother Cedric had created for her when she was a small child, and as soon as she stepped inside, she felt her heart skip a beat.

“You made it,” Oliver said with that charming grin of his that always made Eliza’s heart melt.

Eliza did not bother to respond. She simply rushed over and kissed him.

“Well, hello to you too,” he said with a laugh.

“Forgive the lack of formalities, but I’ve been waiting all week to do that,” she replied.

Eliza and Oliver had been seeing each other for several months now, but their desire to keep their relationship a secret from their families, who would most certainly insist on an immediate engagement, meant their time together was reduced to clandestine moments like this one, stolen only when both of them could find excuses to get away.

Usually, they were better at that. Now that they were finally together, they were eager to stay that way, so they had spent the last several months creating increasingly elaborate stories to justify their absence and then sneaking off to spaces where they could be alone. This week, however, business obligations, both his and hers, had made it nearly impossible to find the time necessary to do so.

As a deeply independent woman, Eliza found herself both surprised and slightly frightened by the fact that six days away from Oliver had seemed like entirely too many. She could not quite believe just how much she’d missed him.

“I missed you too,” Ollie said as though he could read her mind. Then he kissed her again, and there was something about Oliver’s lips on hers that made Eliza’s whole body feel warm.

“How long do you have?” Eliza asked.

“At least half an hour. You?”

“About the same. I suspect I can steal at least three quarters of an hour, perhaps even a bit more if I’m willing to undergo a lecture from Great Aunt Martha about being late for tea.”

“Ooh, I don’t know,” Oliver replied. “Great Aunt Martha is a world-class lecturer. Her stare, alone, could wither even the greatest of men down to nothing.”

“Eh—you’re worth it,” Eliza said with a grin before passionately kissing him again.

Oliver put his hand on the side of her face, and she felt as though she might literally melt. She’d never felt this way about anyone before. She felt like a romantic heroine in a Jane Austen novel. She had always thought that sort of thing was a bit silly. But now, she suspected it may well be the very best thing in the world—even if it did make her feel terribly cliché.

“Would you like to sit?” Oliver asked.

“That would be lovely.”

He led her over to a nearby bench, where they sat, his hand on hers. Eliza was reasonably certain she had never been so happy as she had been these last few months. Sitting with Oliver felt like coming home.

“So, tell me all about your day,” he began.

“Are you sure you want to spend the time we have talking?” Eliza asked.

This time, Oliver was the one to blush.

“You really are a hell of a dame, Eliza Montague,” he said with a smile. “And I am so very lucky you’re mine.”

With that, he kissed her again, and Eliza felt her heart beat faster. She wanted to freeze time. To stay in this moment forever. But then—

“Eliza! Eliza are you out here!”

Oh, Mercy, you always did have impeccable timing, Eliza thought with a sigh as she pulled away from Oliver.

“Do you have to go?” He asked. “Maybe if we’re really still and quiet, she’ll just go away.”

“Or she’ll keep looking. And then she’ll find us here. Alone. Together. And—“

“Blimey, I know you’re right,” he replied, caressing the side of her face one more time before standing up and offering Eliza his hand. “I just so wish you weren’t.”

“Eliza if you’re out here, I need to speak with you now!” Mercy yelled. Eliza felt a pit start to form in her stomach at the sound of the urgency creeping into Mercy’s voice.

“You stay here,” Eliza whispered to Oliver. “If we come out together, she’ll get suspicious.”

Oliver nodded, and Eliza slipped back into the topiary maze.

“Over here!” She called to Mercy. “Is everything alright?”

Eliza made her way through the maze and headed toward the direction of Mercy’s voice. She found her near a patch of cheerful-looking pansies, and her stomach sank the moment she saw the look on Mercy’s face.

“What’s happened?” Eliza asked.

“Mother asked me to come get you. The family is gathering in the drawing room.”

“Do you know why?”

“No,” Mercy replied. “But historically speaking...”

Eliza didn’t need Mercy to finish that sentence to know where it was going. Even as a child, she’d known that the entire family being summoned like this could not possibly lead to anything good.

CHAPTER ONE

Eliza had mixed feelings about the drawing room at Thistlewood Manor. As a child, it had always been an object of mystery and fascination for her. The adults would spend hours there each evening, having their last smoke or sherry of the night as Eliza was ushered off by a governess or lady's maid, never allowed to enter but always desperately trying to catch a glimpse or a snippet of conversation.

Eliza would likely never have had any lasting interest in the drawing room were it not for the fact that her curiosity was so actively discouraged. It being forbidden made it all the more interesting. Sometimes, she wondered if the same was true of Oliver, if the fact that they had to keep their relationship secret made it even more exciting, though she was certain her feelings for Oliver were real enough that there was no risk of her falling out of love with him the same way she had with the drawing room.

As soon as she was permitted to enter the drawing room anytime she pleased, the bloom was off the rose. The drawing room in the evening was no longer interesting or mysterious—it was just yet another place where her mother or Great Aunt Martha could criticize her for failing to conform to their desires and expectations. In fact, by the time she had left Thistlewood Manor to move to London, she hated the drawing room most of all.

But a funny thing had happened upon her return. After several years away, she suddenly found herself beginning to appreciate the space. Yes, it was still a place where she was subjected to barbs from her mother and Great Aunt Martha, but it was also a place where she and Mercy talked about books they were reading before bed or Melville introduced her to new music. It was a place she and Cedric and Lord Montagu spoke about new business strategies over fine whiskey, and she and Molly laughed as they listened to the latest radio plays. In truth, it had become one of her very favorite rooms in the

estate, and she desperately hoped it was not about to be ruined by whatever news the family had been summoned here to hear.

Much as she wanted to believe it could be good news, Eliza was reasonably certain that wasn't the case. Although her family spent most nights in the drawing room together, at least when they were all in town, it was more a function of happenstance than careful planning. They simply wandered in—or, more often than not, in Melville's case, stumbled in—when the day's activities were done, and they found themselves longing for a bit of company before they retired for the evening.

Eliza could think of only a handful of times when the entire family had been actively summoned to the drawing room. There was the night they learned Great Uncle Phillip had died; the night they were summoned by the doctor who was concerned Cedric might not survive his battle with the Spanish flu; the night they learned their cousin had been killed in the Great War...

“This is bad, isn't it?” Mercy asked.

“I suspect so,” Eliza said, taking her hand. “But whatever news awaits us, we'll face it together.”

Upon entering the dining room, Mercy and Eliza were greeted by Cedric, Melville, Molly, and Lady Montagu. It was clear from the grim looks on their faces that they were all thinking the same thing. Whatever news they were being summoned to hear most certainly wasn't going to be good.

Eliza tried hard not to let her mind wander. She knew trying to figure out the cause of their summoning was a fool's errand that would only serve to work her up about things that very well might not be happening. Besides, she would find out whatever it was that was going on soon enough.

Still, she couldn't help but notice that her father wasn't there yet. And after his recent heart attack...

She shoved the thought away.

No point in getting yourself all in a tizzy about something that very well might not be true, she reminded herself gently.

Best to wait and see.

“Do you know what this is all about?” Cedric asked her. Eliza couldn’t help but notice just how tightly he was gripping Molly’s hand.

“I don’t,” Eliza replied. “I was hoping you did.”

As Cedric shook his head, Eliza turned her attention to her mother. “Have you heard anything?”

“No,” Lady Montagu answered. “Your father asked me to assemble everyone, but he didn’t say a word about why.”

Eliza felt the sense of dread that had wrapped itself around her loosen just slightly. If Lord Montagu was the one to summon them here, at least that meant he wasn’t dead.

“Was no one even going to bother to ask if I knew anything?” Melville asked, his tone dripping with mock indignity.

“Do you know anything?” Mercy asked.

“Not a bloody clue,” Melville replied, taking a puff of his pipe. “But it’s nice to feel included.”

Eliza could not help but laugh in spite of herself. This was classic Melville—always finding a way to bring levity to even the darkest of moments.

The room settled back into a heavy silence, and Eliza scoured the place for something, anything, to take her mind off the impending announcement. As she did, she was surprised and delighted to spot Oliver by the doorway.

“Mind if I join you all for a cognac?” he asked.

Eliza couldn’t help but smile. Oliver knew something was going on. Even if he hadn’t heard Mercy’s tone in the garden, a simple survey of the room would have told him that something was amiss. He was far too socially savvy to just waltz in here unawares. Eliza was certain he knew something was wrong and also that he was clear on the fact that this was likely meant to be just a family gathering. But he also knew Lady Montagu was far too bound by convention and niceties to say no to his request, and for the first time, Eliza found

herself grateful for her mother's incredibly predictable nature. She was also deeply grateful to Oliver for exploiting it. This way, whatever was coming, at least she wouldn't have to face it alone.

“Not at all,” Lady Montagu replied. “I can have Parkins —”

“No need, mother,” Melville interrupted. “I already snagged a bottle.”

Oliver shot Eliza a reassuring “I'm here” look before joining Melville, who was on the hunt for glasses. He had just managed to procure them when Lord Montagu entered. Eliza couldn't help but feel relieved that, while he did look gravely serious, he at least did not look gravely ill.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said as he sank into one of their overstuffed leather armchairs.

“Is everything alright?” Eliza asked, more as a way to keep the conversation going than as a genuine question. She was certain she already knew the answer, but her father had gone silent, and she was hoping to get him started again.

“I'm afraid not,” he replied—and despite the fact that Eliza had been fully anticipating that answer, she could not help but feel slightly rattled by it anyway.

“It's your Great Aunt Martha,” her father finally continued. “I'm sorry to say that she's taken ill. I've spoken with the doctors, and it appears as though she may not have much time.”

As her father looked down at the floor, overcome by an unexpected wave of emotion, Lady Montagu reached over and gently took his hand. Physical signs of affection were a rarity from Eliza's mother, and moments of softness rarer still—so much so that Eliza could not help but be touched by the gesture.

“I would encourage you to try and visit her over the next few days if you can. And if there's anything left unsaid between you... well, now's the time,” her father added, his eyes never leaving the floor. “In the meantime, your mother

and I will be working to coordinate her care and keep her as comfortable as possible.”

“But, you’re scheduled to meet with Lord Cooper tomorrow...” Cedric said.

“I know,” her father replied. “But I’m afraid that simply won’t be possible.”

“I could go,” Eliza offered. “We can’t just cancel, and I know all of the ins and outs of the presentation. There are no questions they could ask at this point that I couldn’t answer.”

“I don’t doubt that for a moment, Eliza,” he said, finally looking up and shifting his gaze to her. “But this isn’t about preparation. It’s about...”

“What?” She asked wearily. “What’s it about then?”

“It’s about the fact that you’re a woman. And while I have absolute confidence in your business acumen, he—well... You see the Lord Cooper comes from a very traditional family, and —”

“He’s not going to want to work with you,” Cedric interrupted. He never really was as gentle as her father. Never as patient either.

“They might if we went with her,” Melville offered.

“Are you actually volunteering to work?” Eliza asked, surprised. “Should I have Parkins look outside to see if pigs have begun flying or check the news to see if hell has frozen over?”

Melville laughed.

“Not in the slightest, old girl. I’m merely offering to go with you. You can still do all of the work. I’ll just enjoy their beautiful wine cellar and, from what I hear, their equally beautiful daughters.”

Now that, Eliza thought. Sounds much more like our Melville.

“I don’t mean to overstep,” Oliver jumped in, “but I’ve done business with the Coopers in the past. I know how they

work and how they think. If you'd like, I could come along as Eliza's... advisor."

Eliza could not help but smile. If anyone else had suggested she needed an advisor, she would have been thoroughly insulted, but she knew full well that Oliver wasn't proposing this because he genuinely thought she needed his guidance. He was proposing it because this provided the perfect cover for them to get away together. Sure, Cedric and Melville would likely come on the trip with them, but it would be far easier to hide from two sets of prying eyes than a whole house full of them.

"That would certainly make it easier," Lord Montagu said. "And it really would be terrible to have to reschedule altogether—what, with all of the money that's on the line."

"Exactly," Eliza replied.

"Let us worry about Lord Cooper," Cedric offered. "That way, all you have to do is focus on Great Aunt Martha."

"Are you certain you feel alright with this?" Lord Montagu asked Eliza.

"Of course," Eliza said. "Absolutely certain."

The truth was that Eliza felt a great deal more than "alright" with this. In fact, she was positively giddy at the prospect. A chance to further establish her place in the business while also getting time away with Oliver? Were it not for the sad circumstances that created this opportunity, she would have been tempted to dance for joy right then and there.

CHAPTER TWO

Unfortunately, the more Eliza thought about the trip, the more her feelings began to change, and her enthusiasm began to fade. She had been so excited by the prospect of some much-needed time away with Oliver that she'd failed to adequately process how frustratingly ridiculous the whole thing was. She shouldn't need three escorts to go to a business meeting, and the fact that Lord Cooper would likely be unwilling to deal with her alone, solely because she was a woman, drove Eliza positively batty.

"These backwards men stuck in their old-fashioned, outdated, misogynistic traditions," she muttered angrily as she scanned her wardrobe, trying to figure out what outfit Lord Cooper would be least likely to write her off as some sort of dizzy dame in.

"Is everything alright, Lady Eliza?" Eliza's lady's maid, Sarah, asked.

Eliza had initially resisted the idea of having a full-time lady's maid when she had first moved back to Thistlewood Manor. After all, she had taken care of herself when she'd lived in London, and she'd done just fine. And, besides, the idea of hiring someone whose full-time job was simply to take care of her seemed ludicrous to Eliza. But then, they met Sarah at a ball that winter and, horrified by the way she was being treated by her boss, Mercy offered her a job. Eliza was fully in support of that decision despite the fact that she wasn't entirely sure where on staff they would find a position for her. Like Mercy, Eliza was of the opinion that the specifics were unimportant; the only thing that mattered was getting Sarah out. So they brought her home to Thistlewood that night, and after much debate with Parkins and Lady Montagu, it was finally decided that Sarah could stay on as Eliza's lady's maid. Eliza objected at first, thinking Sarah's talents could be much better utilized elsewhere, but she quickly relented when she

realized that her only choice was between having Sarah stay on as her lady's maid or having her not stay on at all.

Though Sarah and Mercy were far closer friends than Sarah and Eliza, Eliza still found her to be very pleasant company, and eventually, she became quite fond of having a lady's maid again—not because she had someone to take care of her, but because she had someone to keep her company as she took care of herself.

“Lady Eliza, is everything alright?” Sarah repeated. “You seem...”

“Yes, everything is fine, Sarah. Or, at least, fine enough. I apologize for not answering you. My mind is just elsewhere at the moment.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

For a moment, Eliza debated that question. She felt guilty complaining, but she also felt like it might be good to get some of this off her chest. Otherwise, she worried it might spill over into the trip, and she couldn't risk bringing negativity, or worse, confrontation to their travels. Not with investors this important to the family business, and especially not with this much money at stake.

“It's this trip,” Eliza lamented as she handed Sarah an emerald green dress to place into her travel trunk.

“I thought you were excited for the trip, m'lady,” Sarah replied, confused.

“I was. I am. I mean—I don't know. It all just feels so bloody unfair,” Eliza grouched. “I am father's righthand now. I've proven myself over and over again as an asset to this business. He trusts me with it completely. But none of that matters in the eyes of our associates. They are utterly unwilling to see that because when they look at me, all they're capable of seeing is a woman.”

“I know how that is,” Sarah offered. “Men never do see us for our brains or accomplishments, only our sex and our ability to give 'em babies.”

“Exactly!” Eliza exclaimed. “And it’s absurd because I am every bit as capable of identifying a good business deal or strategy as any man. They just refuse to accept that.”

“Course they do. They can’t accept that we’re as good at work as we are. We’re already better at home. If we’re better there too, what would we need ‘em for?”

Eliza couldn’t help but laugh at that.

“I suppose you’re right,” she said as she pulled a cerulean dress with a belted waist that flared mid-calf out of the wardrobe and handed it to Sarah as well. “But it’s a terrible shame that their fragile egos keep getting in the way of progress.”

“I couldn’t agree more, m’lady,” Sarah replied, holding up a beret in one hand and a turban in the other for Eliza’s review. “Would you like me to pack one of these? I think they’d look real sharp with the blue dress.”

“Yes, please. Let’s take that one,” Eliza said, pointing to the beret. “I agree. It will look quite sharp. You’ve got an excellent eye for that sort of thing, Sarah.”

“Thank you, m’lady,” Sarah replied, a soft blush beginning to creep into her cheeks.

“It’s just infuriating that now Cedric and Melville have to go,” Eliza ranted, seemingly unable to drop the subject much as she wished she could. She never wanted to be perceived as a complainer, but she couldn’t help but find the whole thing maddening.

“I’m not even sure Melville knows what we’re going there to propose. He’s missed the last several meetings where we’ve discussed it, and he’s been bored and disinterested at all of the ones he’s actually bothered to attend. And Cedric,” Eliza began as Sarah worked to close the travel trunk. “Well, Cedric could have been an asset, but he’s been too busy sulking because father has elevated me over him in the business.”

Sarah started to pull the trunk off the bed, but Eliza interceded.

“Let me help with that. From the looks of it, I imagine it will be quite heavy.”

Sarah nodded, and together, they pulled the trunk from the bed. Now that she was finally packed, there was little else to do but find her shoes and head down to the car. The only problem was that she wasn't entirely certain where the shoes she wanted to wear had run off to, so Eliza began a search for them. As she looked, she continued ranting.

“And now I have to deal with the two of them, staring over my shoulder the whole time, like I'm some sort of errant child,” she continued, still utterly unable to stop herself. “When in reality, I'm the only person in the room who actually has any idea what's going on. It's insulting. And they'll wind up getting all of the credit for my work, even though they don't deserve it. Even though they've barely contributed anything, and—”

Having finally located her shoes, Eliza turned to leave and was stunned to find Cedric standing in her doorway.

“Stephenson's pulled the car around, so I thought I would come and see if you were ready. Though, I suppose I shouldn't have bothered. After all, that was me being helpful, and me contributing anything of value seems terrible out of keeping with your concept of me. I'd hate to rattle your confidence before this big meeting you're apparently going to handle all by yourself by highlighting the fact that, perhaps, you don't actually know as much as you think you do.”

Eliza was mortified. Yes, she was frustrated by her brothers' forced presence on the trip. And yes, she did believe she'd done far more work on this than they had. She stood by what she'd said. She'd just never, in a million years, wanted either of them to actually *hear* it.

“Cedric, I...” she began. She knew she should say something, but, in truth, she wasn't entirely sure how to finish that sentence. Eliza knew he'd never accept an apology without an admission of wrongdoing, and while she did feel terrible that he'd overheard her, in all reality, she meant what

she'd said. And she knew that would hurt him far more than a failure to adequately apologize.

"We should go," Cedric interrupted. "It's rude to keep Stevenson waiting. I know social niceties and basic respect aren't really your strong suit, Eliza, but that's alright. We'll help you. Perhaps that's why father felt you needed an escort."

Eliza felt her face flush with fury as she followed Cedric into the hall and down to the car. She wanted to say something back—to defend herself or take exception with his condescending tone, but she knew it wouldn't do any good. Cedric was angry and hurt, and when he got like that, there was nothing that would shift his attitude but time.

Unfortunately, they were about to have to spend that time crammed in a car together, and with each step she took, Eliza began dreading more and more what she was increasingly certain was going to be a very, very long drive.

As it turned out, Eliza could not have been more right. They were less than an hour into the drive, and already things were excruciatingly awkward. Of all the Montagu children, none had inherited their mother's powers of passive aggression quite so much as Cedric, and he was putting those skills to exceptionally good use today. Every few minutes, he managed to shift the conversation in a direction that would allow him to get in a little jab—some subtle dig to remind Eliza that he was nowhere near ready to let go of his outrage over her comments to Sarah. At present, this was manifesting in an utterly ridiculous conversation about objects on the side of the road, which had been going on in this manner, unabated, for at least five minutes.

"Melville, did you see that?" Cedric asked for at least the fifth time.

"I doubt it, old chap, as I haven't been able to see the last six things you've referenced either."

“There. Up ahead. There’s quite an interesting—you really don’t see it?”

This time, Melville didn’t even bother looking up before replying, “Sorry, mate. Can’t say that I do.”

“Perhaps if we had a better understanding of what you were looking at,” Oliver offered. Thus far, Cedric’s descriptions had all been painfully vague—a function, she suspected, of him building towards yet another dig, though where exactly he was taking it, Eliza couldn’t be quite sure.

“I’d ask Eliza to look,” Cedric replied, his voice dripping in venom, “but I’d hate to have her thinking I was peering over her shoulder.”

And there it was.

“You really are never going to let this go, are you?” Eliza said.

“It’s only been an hour, ‘Liza. I think we’re a far cry from being able to draw conclusions about forever.”

“I think I’ve missed something,” Melville said, pulling a flask from his jacket pocket. “But whatever it is, I’m reasonably certain it calls for scotch.”

As Melville took a swig from his flask, Oliver looked at Eliza, concerned.

“Is everything alright?”

“It depends on your definition of alright,” Cedric jumped in.

“Look, Cedric, I understand that you’re upset,” Eliza began. “But—”

“No, Eliza,” Cedric interrupted. Eliza could tell by his tone that he was struggling to control his temper. “I’m not upset. I am furious. I am offended. I am outraged. I am—”

“Blimey, what the devil did I miss here?” Melville asked.

“Oh, just our dear sister talking about how useless we both are. How we don’t bring anything of value to the business and —”

“I’m sure she didn’t—” Oliver began, but he stopped on Eliza’s look. Cedric was right. While those weren’t exactly her words, that was certainly the basic gist of the conversation she’d had with Sarah, and she didn’t want Oliver to get caught defending her only to find out he was wrong. Thankfully, he read the look correctly.

“Oh...” he said quietly.

“Yes,” Cedric replied, his voice sharp. “Oh. So you’ll forgive me if I’m more than a bit upset by her hubris.”

Eliza looked out the window and sighed. If the drive there was any indication, it was going to be an exceptionally difficult trip. With everything that was at stake, she and her brothers had to be at their absolute best, but as they drew closer and closer to the Cooper Estate, Eliza was becoming increasingly worried that Cedric’s attitude was going to make that utterly impossible.

CHAPTER THREE

As the Cooper Estate finally appeared on the horizon, Eliza found herself absolutely thrilled, not just because it meant she would finally be able to escape the small, enclosed space she'd been trapped in with Cedric and Melville for the last several hours, but also because it was one of the most stunningly beautiful estates Eliza had ever seen.

The main house itself was surrounded by a literal moat, which, prior to that moment, Eliza had only ever seen in paintings and books. Once they passed the moat, they entered the exterior garden, which was comprised of a series of perfectly-pruned topiaries that felt like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Once they passed the topiaries, they approached the car park, which was surrounded by more manicured garden beds, all of which seemed to almost overflow with tulips, roses, and daffodils, swaying gently in the breeze as though dancing with the wind. Those gave way to a garden design that felt almost wild in its use of climbing wisteria, which effortlessly made its way up the facade of the estate, but also peaceful and reflective thanks to the inclusion of multiple fishponds.

The windows were also particularly remarkable. Around the Great Hall, their historic panes had been replaced by centuries-old stained glass designed to showcase the family's coat of arms. The way they glistened in the sunlight was unlike anything Eliza had ever seen before. The place was genuinely breathtaking, and if the outside was this spectacular, she could only begin to imagine what sort of wonders the inside must hold.

As Stevenson pulled into the car park, Eliza studied the ornate pillars and the intricate design work on the trim, desperate to get closer and better understand the magic of the architect's vision. She stepped out of the car and found herself almost overwhelmed by the artistry of the whole place. But before she could take the time to admire it any further, she

heard Cedric start another stream of snark—this time with Stevenson.

“Oh, don’t bother helping Eliza with her bags, old bean,” he began. “We certainly wouldn’t want her thinking we’re undermining her feminine power by suggesting she needs a man to help her.”

“But it’s—it’s quite heavy, Master Cedric,” Stevenson stammered, unsure how to navigate Cedric’s current state successfully.

“You really should get some new material, Cedric,” Eliza said. “Because this bit is getting quite old.”

“So do you not want me to...?” Stevenson asked, not quite sure how to finish that sentence or even entirely who to direct it to.

“It’s fine old chap,” Oliver interjected. “I can get it for her.”

With that, he pulled both his trunk and Eliza’s out of the car. Eliza could tell Stevenson was trying to remain calm, but having someone else fulfill part of his duties appeared to have rattled him a bit.

“Are there some sort of shenanigans afoot?” he asked cautiously.

“Not at all,” Eliza reassured him. “Cedric and I are just having a bit of a... tête a tête, that’s all.”

“Good. Because you know how I feel about shenanigans.”

“I do,” Eliza said with a grin. “Much like fun, you think it has no place in polite society.”

“Exactly,” Stevenson replied. He started to leave, but before he’d made it back to the driver’s seat, he turned to face Eliza.

“I do hope you and Cedric will resolve this soon, Lady Eliza. This meeting was very important to your father and, with everything that’s going on... well, he deserves to have you at your best.”

Eliza was deeply taken aback by that. Stevenson was never, ever one to speak out of turn, and for him to come that close to chastising a member of the family—particularly a fully-grown member of the family—that would take a great deal for him.

Stevenson had been with the family for as long as Eliza could remember, and in that time, he'd likely spent hundreds, if not thousands of hours in the car with Lord Montagu. Eliza had always known Stevenson had a soft spot—or, at least, as close to a soft spot as Stevenson was capable of possessing—for her father. But she'd never realized until this moment just how deep that fondness must have run.

“I apologize if I’ve spoken out of turn,” he began, suddenly returning to his typical demeanor. “I shall do my best to ensure it never happens again.”

“No, you’re right, Stevenson,” Eliza said. “Thank you. I appreciate the reminder.”

And she did. Stevenson was right—executing this business deal successfully and doing so in a way that would make her father proud was the only thing that mattered. Did she have a right to be angry that Lord Cooper would likely be resistant to dealing with her exclusively just because she was a woman? Absolutely. And did she also have a right to be annoyed with Cedric for treating her the way that he had? Undoubtedly so. But being angry or annoyed wasn’t going to change anything for the better. In fact, it risked unraveling everything, and Eliza simply could not let that happen.

You must push this aside, Eliza, she told herself as she joined Cedric, Melville, and Oliver and began walking up to the estate. *There are far more important things here than Cedric’s ego, or yours, for that matter.*

As she approached the stunning entranceway, which, for whatever reason, reminded Eliza of the acropolis in its use of columns, she vowed to let go of her issues with Cedric, Melville, and Lord Cooper and focus on the matter at hand. She had important work to do, and she recommitted to

focusing exclusively on that work during her stay here. Well, that and Oliver...

She snuck a glance at Oliver Fairfax and smiled. Nothing helped the worry and stress of the day melt away quite like the sight of that charming, dimpled grin, which he flashed her way the moment he caught her staring at him.

Perhaps having Melville and Cedric tag along wouldn't be so bad after all. Without them here to chaperone, her family would never have allowed Oliver to come, and the joy she was going to derive from his presence on this trip might just be enough to counterbalance the annoyance she was going to feel at theirs.

As they began climbing the steps toward the main house, the enormous, oak front door swung open, and the Cooper family emerged. Lord Cooper, a stately man with a distinguished mustache, immediately made a beeline toward Cedric.

"You must be Cedric," he began, extending his hand to him. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Your father has spoken of you often. I'm sorry he was unable to make it today."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well. I know father was terribly disappointed to miss the meeting, but—"

"Family first. Of course. I understand," Lord Cooper began before turning his attention to Melville.

"And you must be Melville. Your father spoke of you often as well."

"Only good things I hope," Melville said with a laugh. Eliza could not help but notice the way the slightest hint of shame flitted across his face as Lord Cooper avoided responding altogether and, instead, turned his attention to Oliver.

"And Lord Fairfax! Were we expecting you?"

"No," Cedric said. "He's a surprise."

"A pleasant one, I hope," Oliver added.

"Yes, of course," Lady Cooper interjected.

“And this must be your wife,” Lord Cooper said, turning his attention to Eliza. “I apologize, I hadn’t heard you had gotten married.

Eliza immediately felt a crimson blush climbing into her cheeks.

“I’m not—” she began, at the same moment Oliver started to sputter, “She isn’t—I mean—we’re not.”

“I’m not his wife,” Eliza said, forcing herself to maintain her composure. “I’m Eliza, Lord Montagu’s daughter.”

“Oh!” Lord Cooper exclaimed, visibly surprised by both this explanation and her presence. “Forgive me, I didn’t—well, no matter. My daughters should certainly be able to keep you entertained while the men and I talk business.”

“Actually—” Eliza began, but before she could say anything else, Lord Cooper had already moved on to introductions.

“This is my eldest daughter, Ada, and my middle daughter, Elsie, and our youngest, Beatrice.”

Eliza could not help but sigh at the way Melville was looking at Elsie. If she knew her brother— and she was reasonably certain she did—having him along now was going to be even worse than she initially thought.

Eliza loved her brother—truly she did—but if she was being honest with herself, she had to admit that he was a bit of a rake. Worse, he was a very charming rake, which was a dangerous combination. Plus, he had no interest in marrying at this point, which meant any dalliances he had would be just that—dalliances.

That was the thing about being a man—it was socially acceptable for him to remain unmarried far longer than it would have been for someone like Eliza. She’d always envied that. Men were not only permitted but perhaps even expected to grow and establish themselves and travel and have adventures before they settled down. Women were expected to go directly from children to wives with no life in between.

Eliza felt certain her mother would convince Melville to settle down eventually, but it would be a long, long time before that actually happened. The problem was that virtually every woman he spent time with was convinced she was going to be the one to finally do it, to change him or convince him to settle down. When they invariably discovered they weren't, they were left heartbroken.

Eliza had long since accepted the fact that loving her brother meant finding ways to warn women off him when she could and look past it when she couldn't. After all, she didn't have to love all of his behavior in order to love him. But this—this was different, more complicated. If he engaged in those sorts of shenanigans with Elsie, he could not only break her heart, he could do serious damage to the family business, which meant now, in addition to trying to get Lord Cooper to listen to her and dealing with both of her brothers being mad at her, Eliza was also going to have to spend the next few days trying to keep Melville away from Elsie, lest he blow the whole thing to pieces.

“And this is Lord Edwards,” Lord Cooper said, gesturing towards a man in his early thirties that Eliza likely would have found quite handsome had Oliver not so firmly occupied that space in her heart and mind.

“He's a close friend of the family,” Lord Cooper continued, “and an occasional business associate who is staying with us this week.”

“Pleasure to meet you all,” Lord Edwards offered.

“Likewise,” Eliza responded.

“And this, of course, is my wife, Lady Cooper,” Lord Cooper said, gesturing to the unusually tall woman beside him. Though her face was a bit severe, there was something about her, an underlying warmth perhaps, that Eliza responded positively to.

“We'll have our butler, Johnson, show you to your rooms shortly, but in the meantime, Eliza, I'm certain Lady Cooper would be delighted to give you a tour of the estate while the gents and I talk business.”

“Oh,” Eliza began. “I’m afraid there’s been some sort of misunderstanding. I’m actually quite involved with the business. In fact, I’ll be taking the lead on our presentation.”

Lord Cooper laughed heartily before realizing that no one else was laughing with him.

“Oh! Oh you’re serious!”

“Yes,” Eliza said, doing her best to try and hide her annoyance. “Quite. In fact, if you’d like to discuss—”

“No, there’s no need,” Lord Cooper interrupted. “You’ve had a long trip, I’m sure. We can certainly speak later. In the meantime, I can’t have you deprive Lady Cooper of the chance to show you around. She loves getting to share details of the estate.”

“But what will—”

“The men and I can have a cigar together while we wait. And if business happens to come up during the time—well, we can certainly fill you in later.”

Eliza opened her mouth to object, but before she could say anything, Lady Cooper had already taken her hand.

“Come along, dear,” she said, leading Eliza toward the front door. “There’s a great deal to show you. We can start with the Great Hall.”

Having no other choice, Eliza followed Lady Cooper into the house, leaving her brothers and, she feared, her business opportunities behind her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eliza did her best to focus on Lady Cooper as she guided Eliza through the doorway and into the Great Hall. She desperately wanted to be back with the men talking business—after all, that was the purpose of her visit—but that had hardly been presented as an option.

For a very brief moment, she'd considered rejecting Lady Cooper's offer of a tour and insisting on staying behind with the men, but she knew that, realistically, that plan would have backfired. It would only have served to make Lord Cooper less willing to deal with her, as it would likely have resulted in him viewing her as some uppity, entitled dame, and it would also likely have offended Lady Cooper. Eliza knew enough about these sorts of marriages to know that, while having Lady Cooper on her side might not necessarily prove to be beneficial, turning her into an enemy could have serious consequences.

So, although every fiber of her being was screaming to go back outside, she stepped into the Great Hall and forced herself to be present—to focus on what she was seeing and what Lady Cooper was saying. Thankfully, this was made easier by the fact that the inside of the estate was even more exquisite than Eliza ever could have imagined.

“It's just over 20 yards high,” Lady Cooper said, as she gestured towards the stunning, painted ceiling. The only ceiling Eliza had ever seen to rival it was the Sistine Chapel, and she could not help but wonder if the artist who painted the Great Hall's ceiling had borrowed techniques from Michelangelo. Eliza had read extensively about how the Renaissance artist had managed to execute his vision, and she liked imagining a similar artist in the Great Hall, high up on a scaffold, craning his neck as he applied the Buon fresco technique on the larger swaths and used fresco secco on the detail work.

“It’s extraordinary,” Eliza said, her voice hushed to a whisper by her reverence.

“If you like that,” Lady Cooper began, “just wait until I show you the Long Gallery. We’ve got watercolors and oil paintings in virtually every style imaginable, and some of the paintings are as much as four-thousand years old,” Lady Cooper continued as she guided Eliza through a maze of hallways.

As she opened the door to the Long Gallery, Eliza felt the same rush she experienced every time she stepped into the National Gallery in London. The Long Gallery contained a breathtaking display of talent, and she felt enormously privileged to get to witness it: the walls were covered, almost from floor to ceiling, in a dazzling variety of landscapes and portraits, and in the center of the long, narrow room was a collection of sculptures. The room housed impressionist pieces and baroque works, even some examples of neoclassicism and, to Eliza’s surprise, fauvism. And then, there was the Renaissance art, some of the oldest Eliza had ever seen in person outside of a museum.

“It’s...” Eliza began, finding herself utterly unable to finish that sentence.

“Quite something, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Eliza agreed. “Quite something indeed.”

It was so extraordinary, in fact, that for just a few minutes, Eliza forgot all about her fight with Cedric and her fears about Melville and the very likely reality that, right at this very moment, her brothers were mucking up the business deal, her father had entrusted her to handle. But all of that came crashing back the second they exited the Long Gallery.

“The interesting thing about this house,” Lady Cooper began as she ushered Eliza into an adjacent wing, “is that it actually has two long rooms. The second was literally just called ‘the long room’ for centuries, but in the 1700s, one of our distant relatives bequeathed the estate more than 10,000 volumes of rare books, so now it’s known as the library.”

You like books, Eliza, she told herself as Lady Cooper swung open the door to the library. *Just focus on the books.*

After all, obsessing over what may or may not have been happening outside as her brothers and Lord Cooper smoked their pipes and chatted about business was not going to do her any good. Whatever was happening, worrying about it certainly wasn't going to change things. The best thing she could do—the only thing she could do—was focus on showing Lady Cooper the level of respect and attention she deserved.

“It’s a remarkable collection you have here,” Eliza said truthfully. It was too much like the Long Gallery; it was easily one of the most impressive she had ever seen. Every genre imaginable was represented here, and they had a wide variety of signed first additions, including several signed by Tolkien and a copy of Shakespeare’s 1623 Folio, which gave Eliza literal goosebumps.

“It’s my favorite room of the house,” Lady Cooper replied. “I could spend hours every day here if life allowed.”

“Me, too,” Eliza replied.

“Our guests’ favorite tend to be the priest holes, though.”

“The what?” Eliza asked.

“The priest holes,” Lady Cooper repeated. “During the 1500s, this estate was used as a safe house for priests during the Civil War. In the event of a raid, they would come here and hide in the Priest holes, which were constructed in a variety of locations throughout the house. This one here, “she began, ushering Eliza towards the fireplace and pointing to an alcove carved out in the back, “is one of our largest. At the height of the war, nearly a dozen priests sought safety in this one.”

“That’s fascinating,” Eliza replied, awed by both the space and the history.

“Our girls loved playing here when they were younger,” Lady Cooper said. “Nearly drove the governesses mad.”

Eliza laughed. “That sounds like precisely the sort of thing my brothers and I would have done.”

“You could hardly blame them,” Lady Cooper added. “Old houses like these really were made for games of hide and seek. There’s also several secret tunnels out in the garden that the priests would use to enter the estate. We’ve actually put tables in there, which make for an excellent picnic spot if you’re so inclined.”

“Thank you. That does sound lovely. I’m not sure if time will allow, but—”

“But you must eat at some point,” Lady Cooper interjected. “And I’m of the mind that, this time of year, there is absolutely no better spot for it. Our chef is absolutely aces at creating picnic menus as well. I’m certain you’d enjoy it.”

“I may take you up on that then,” Eliza replied. After all, Lady Cooper was right. She would have to eat at some point. And she could think of few things that sounded more magical than a picnic lunch in spring with Oliver, alone in a secret garden tunnel.

“There are several other places I could show you,” Lady Cooper said, “but if we tour the whole house now, we’ll never make it to dinner. And I imagine you’d like some time to get settled in your room first?”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind, that would be lovely,” Eliza replied. “But thank you so much for the tour. It’s been fascinating to learn about your home. It may well be my favorite I have ever visited.”

“Oh, I’m delighted to hear that!” Lady Cooper exclaimed. “Lord Cooper always finds it a bit silly, but I do so love sharing the history of the place with people. It just makes it feel so alive here.”

“I understand completely,” Eliza replied as she followed Lady Cooper back outside, where the men were laughing and smoking their pipes. She did her best to shove aside the sense of jealousy that threatened to place a stronghold on her stomach, but she felt the twinges of it anyway.

“Have you finished with the tour then, love?” Lord Cooper asked as Eliza and Lady Cooper approached.

“We have,” Lady Cooper replied. “I mean, there certainly wasn’t time to show her everything, but we were able to do the highlights. And I imagine she and these young men would like some time to get settled into their rooms before dinner.”

“Of course. I’ll have some of our footmen come and get your luggage,” Lord Cooper said. “In the meantime, I’m certain Johnson would be happy to show you to your rooms. Come with me.”

Eliza, her brothers, and Oliver all did as they were told and followed Lord Cooper back into the house, where Eliza could not help but pause for just a moment to once again admire that extraordinary ceiling.

“Johnson,” Lord Cooper bellowed, at which point a portly man in his 50s appeared almost simultaneously.

“Yes, My Lord,” he said with a little bow.

“Show our guests to their rooms, please. You may put them in the East Wing.”

“Of course, My Lord,” Johnson said, before turning his attention to Eliza, Melville, Cedric, and Oliver. “Please, follow me.”

Once again, they did as they were told, and they followed Johnson up an enormous marble spiral staircase with the most intricately carved wooden handrail Eliza had ever seen. Johnson disembarked on the third floor, and they followed him down a hallway lined with stunning oil portraits of the family members that, based on the range of techniques displayed, Eliza guessed would have to date back centuries.

Johnson stopped in front of a group of bedrooms towards the end of the hallway.

“Lord and Lady Cooper’s daughters sleep in these three rooms,” he said, gesturing to the three rooms on their left. “But these four are all open,” he continued, gesturing towards the rooms on their right.

“You may take this one,” he said, handing Eliza a key to the first room. “And you can have this one,” he added, handing the next key to Melville. He continued on, handing the next

key to Cedric and the final key to Oliver before saying, “Supper is served promptly at six. Should you need anything before then, I am at your service.”

He gave a small bow then and scurried off. Eliza couldn’t help but feel for him. She could tell he did not have the sort of dynamic Parkins did with their family. Parkins was excessively formal as well, but his formality came from a deep sense of propriety. Johnson’s seemed to come from a deep place of fear.

As Eliza started to open the door to her room, she heard Oliver’s voice crop up beside her.

“Melville, old chap,” he began. “I was wondering if you might be interested in switching rooms with Eliza.”

“Is there something wrong with hers?” he asked.

“Oh no, not at all. It’s just—well, I’ve come to advise Eliza. And should we need to do so, say, early in the morning, I’d hate to disrupt you by having to walk all the way over here and knock on the door. This way, I could simply knock on the adjoining wall when I was ready.”

It was a terribly transparent excuse, and for a moment, Eliza found herself anxious Melville might become suspicious. But he simply said, “Okay,” and handed Eliza his key. Initially, Eliza was baffled by that. Melville wasn’t always the most observant fellow, but even he had to know this was an unusual request. But then, it dawned on Eliza that switching rooms meant he would be right by Lord and Lady Cooper’s daughters’ rooms. And then, suddenly, it all made sense.

Typical Melville, she thought. Although, this time, she couldn’t really begrudge him the desire to sneak out in the night and see someone he fancied. After all, at this exact moment, she was hoping to do precisely the same thing that evening.

CHAPTER FIVE

Before Eliza could get some time alone with Oliver Fairfax, however, the gathering all had to get through supper, something Eliza typically deeply enjoyed, but she couldn't help but find all of the pomp and circumstance surrounding this one a bit off-putting.

Despite the fact that the gathering was fairly small—just the Montagus, the Coopers, Oliver, and Lord Edwards—it had all the grandiosity one would expect from a ball or feast celebration. The chef had made more than forty dishes, each served as an individual course by a parade of servants in tuxes and tails.

Normally, Eliza wouldn't have minded the slow pace of the evening, as it would have provided her with more time to try and win over Lord Cooper, but every attempt she made to talk with him was quickly thwarted, either by the arrival of a servant with yet another course, or by Lady Cooper interjecting with a detail about the estate or, more often than not, just by Lord Cooper's general disinterest in Eliza.

And then, there was Melville, whose flirtation with Elsie, the Cooper's middle daughter, was getting more and more blatant with each downing of a glass of wine. Based on the scuttlebutt Eliza had been able to gather from the servants, she had opted not to warn Elsie about Melville's tendency to leave hearts scattered in his wake. In fact, if Elsie was as conniving and cruel as they painted her out to be, she was more worried about Elsie hurting Melville than the other way around. But either way, in light of their family's business dealings, this flirtation of his seemed like a powder keg, and while Eliza wasn't quite sure when or how it was going to explode, she was terrified that not only was it going to do so, but it would happen at the worst possible moment.

Of course, Cedric's attempts at shooting daggers at her, combined with the condescending smile he would flash any time Eliza's attempted to talk business with Lord Cooper

failed while his went swimmingly, certainly wasn't helping. Despite her best efforts, Eliza was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain a positive attitude.

Try to just focus on the food, she thought. After all, in an otherwise frustrating evening, the food had proven to be an absolutely exquisite bright spot. The vegetables were all grown on the property and harvested that morning, so they were practically served right out of the ground. The glazed carrots were such a thing of beauty they rivaled some of the paintings in the Long Gallery. There was tremendous variety in the preparation of the veg—some braised, some glazed, some basted in an almost sinful amount of butter—but each was utterly scrummy in their own way, and Eliza couldn't fault the chef for opting to serve each one as their own course. While she wished the dinner was shorter, she had to agree that each of the twenty-plus courses she'd had thus far had been worthy of the spotlight.

It wasn't just vegetables, of course. The soups were also exceptional. There had been a crystal clear consommé, a rich, velvety cream of watercress soup, and a surprisingly spicy and complex Mulligatawny.

And then, there were mains. A lamb shank that had been so beautifully braised the meat was literally falling off the bone. A perfectly roasted chicken with potatoes so simultaneously crispy and creamy they seemed worthy of scientific study. A flawless beef Wellington with the single greatest duxelles Eliza had ever tasted. It was so good, in fact, that it inspired Eliza to try again with Lord Cooper. If the chef could find a way to make mushrooms taste like actual magic, surely she could find a way to make Lord Cooper listen to her.

"I believe the last time my father was here he shared a bit about the factory we were purchasing," Eliza began, as she took a bite of duck. The fat had been rendered just right, so the skin was impossibly crispy, and the meat was incredibly moist.

"Mmm-hmm," Lord Copper murmured disinterestedly.

"It's been a very successful venture thus far," she persisted. "By streamlining our processes and expanding our customer

base, we've already seen considerable improvement in our profit margins. In fact, we're on track to see a thirty percent increase in yield this quarter."

"Very impressive," he muttered in a way that not only seemed disinterested but also made it unclear to Eliza whether he was speaking about their yield or the duck.

"We're looking to purchase another one, actually. Based on the success here, we think expanding into another area of manufacturing, one where we can also have our farmers serve as a customer base, would further enhance our—"

"Do ask the chef what spice this is," Lord Cooper interrupted, turning his attention towards the servant.

Eliza sighed. Getting Lord Cooper to listen to her was going to be the very definition of an uphill battle.

As the servants whisked away their current plates and replaced them with a crystal glass of Eton mess, Oliver caught Eliza's eye and threw her a sympathetic smile. That, combined with the sweetness of the Chantilly cream and the tartness from the extraordinarily fresh strawberries was almost enough to make her feel like maybe she could turn things around. Not quite. But almost.

Despite her best efforts and the deliciousness of the dessert course, which included a gorgeous Victoria sponge, a zesty spotted dick, and a delightful sticky toffee pudding, Eliza never managed to turn her experience with dinner around. Lord Cooper remained resistant to every attempt at conversation she made, Cedric continued to seemingly loathe even just the sight of her, and Melville's advances toward Elsie were so obvious that Eliza was fairly certain they could have been seen from space. But she still had very high hopes for the evening. After all, Oliver Fairfax was just on the other side of her bedroom wall. She was fairly certain he was planning to come to see her that evening. After all, she couldn't fathom

what else that business with Melville and the room switching could have been about.

But she'd been lying there, in an enormous, four-poster bed, for nearly an hour, and he still hadn't arrived, and even the luxury of the highest thread-count sheets she'd ever encountered wasn't enough to keep her from growing impatient.

Finally, she decided she couldn't wait anymore. If Oliver Fairfax couldn't manage to come to see her, she was simply going to have to go see him. She knew there was an element of risk in that if anyone saw her, there would certainly be questions about what a woman was doing out of bed at that time of night, but his room was right next door to hers, and she could always say she was having trouble sleeping and hoped a walk would help. The excuse might not convince, of course, but seeing Oliver was worth the risk.

She opened the door to her bedroom as quietly as she could, which, unfortunately, wasn't very quiet. While she loved these sorts of big, old oak doors, she always resented their tendency towards creaking.

As she started to step outside, she was surprised to see she wasn't alone in the hallway. There was someone stepping into a nearby room. Though she could not see his face, she didn't need to know it was Melville. She recognized the cowlick on the back of his head, not to mention the drunken swagger he moved with after he'd had a few too many. Plus, the room he was sneaking into belonged to Elsie, the girl he'd been flirting with all evening. It hardly took a detective to put those clues together.

Thankfully, Melville was so focused on sneaking into Elsie's room that he didn't notice Eliza sneaking out of hers. As Melville disappeared into Elsie's room, Eliza breathed a sigh of relief, tiptoed over to Oliver's room and quietly knocked on the door.

To her surprise, Oliver didn't answer. She knocked again, slightly louder this time, and desperately hoped no one else would hear. They didn't, but apparently, neither did Oliver,

and Eliza couldn't help but find herself a bit annoyed that he was leaving her standing out in the hallway.

She didn't want to risk knocking again—it seemed like a small miracle to her that she hadn't been caught already—but she also wasn't about to admit defeat and just go back to her room. So, gingerly, she tried the doorknob. Thankfully, it turned easily, and while the door creaked as well, it was considerably quieter than the door to her room had been.

Eliza smiled as she walked into Oliver's room, fully expecting to see him lounging in the bed and to watch his face light up when he saw her. But, to her surprise, Oliver Fairfax was nowhere to be seen.

It was far too late for him to be out wandering the estate, and she couldn't imagine any legitimate business that would have called him away, particularly without telling her first. But the fact remained that he wasn't in his room, and Eliza could not for the life of her figure out where he might be.

Then, she saw the embroidered silk curtains move slightly in the breeze, and it hit her: he must have snuck out to see her at the same time she was sneaking out to see him! Only he had been even more worried about being caught than she was and had decided to take the risk of climbing across their balconies in an effort to avoid it.

She slipped out on the balcony to confirm her suspicions just in time to see Oliver stepping through the door into her bedroom. Eliza couldn't help but laugh. Sometimes, they were too alike for their own good.

She hurried out of his room as swiftly as she could, eager to meet him in her room before his discovery that her room was empty prompted him to leave, but she was forced to freeze as soon as she cracked open the door.

Cedric was out in the hallway. Unlike Melville, Eliza couldn't fathom what he might be doing there. He was quite happy with Molly, so she couldn't imagine he would be out seeing a girl, though she certainly never would have imagined him having an affair and impregnating one of the family's servants, either, so she couldn't really put anything past him. It

was possible he was out talking business with Lord Cooper in an effort to further keep her out of the discussions, a thought that made her blood boil, but it seemed awfully late, even for that.

Whatever he was doing out here, it was likely to remain a mystery. Eliza just hoped the fact that she had snuck out of her bedroom would remain a mystery to Cedric as well.

Thankfully, he didn't appear to notice her as he slipped back into his bedroom without glancing her way. Eliza waited a few more seconds just to be safe and then opened the door as quickly as she could, once again cursing the creaking, and stepped inside, eager to finally see Oliver. Only once again, she found her room empty. She sighed as she hurried out onto the balcony.

She caught him just as he was about to step back into his room.

"Oliver," she whispered as loudly as she thought she could risk without waking anyone.

He turned quickly and crossed to the corner of the balcony closest to Eliza.

"I thought you must have gone to my room," he whispered.

"I did! But then I realized you must have gone to my room, and—"

Oliver laughed then. Blimey, she loved his laugh.

"Well, we've really mucked this up then, haven't we?" he said with a smile.

"Indeed. Though I did manage to successfully avoid Melville and Cedric, both of whom were out in the hallway."

"Blimey, we got lucky then didn't we?"

"Yes, though it certainly would have been better if we'd also both managed to be in the same room at the same time."

"Truer words..." Oliver said, once again flashing her that dimpled grin of his. Eliza was a fully-grown woman, and it

never failed to seem utterly ridiculous to her that this man could still give her butterflies in her stomach.

“Do you want me to try and climb back over?” he whispered.

In truth, she wanted that very much. But that climb looked incredibly dangerous, and she’d never forgive herself if something happened to him. And with both Cedric and Melville clearly awake and potentially roaming about, using the hallway didn’t seem like a smart idea either.

“More than anything,” she whispered back. “But I don’t think you should. That seems terribly dangerous, and I think the risk of getting caught is too high if we use the hallway. Besides, it’s getting awfully late. Perhaps we should just take this as a sign from the universe that tonight isn’t our night and try again tomorrow?”

Oliver nodded.

“That seems prudent, even if it is terribly disappointing,” he said.

“Goodnight, Oliver,” she whispered, secretly wishing he wouldn’t go, even if it was the smartest choice.

“Until tomorrow, my love,” he whispered back as he disappeared into his room, leaving a deeply disappointed Eliza alone on the balcony.

CHAPTER SIX

Eliza woke with a start. She thought she must have been having a nightmare, but she couldn't remember anything about it, only that it seemed to have ended with the sound of a man screaming.

It took a full three seconds before Eliza realized it hadn't been a nightmare. The scream she'd heard was real, and she could still hear it coming from somewhere very close by.

Based on their register, she was certain the person screaming was a man, but she'd never heard a man make a noise like that. There was a fear there, an almost unadulterated terror that chilled Eliza to the bone.

She rushed out of bed and into the hallway without stopping to put on her dressing gown. She knew her mother would have been utterly horrified by that, but this certainly did not seem, to Eliza anyway, like the time to prioritize propriety. Something was terribly wrong—she could feel it. Based on how close the scream sounded to her bedroom, she was terrified that something terrible had happened to someone she loved dearly.

She nearly smashed into Oliver as soon as she opened the door, and she breathed a sigh of relief at the knowledge that he appeared to be okay.

“I heard—” he began.

“Screaming,” Eliza interjected. I know. I heard it too. And if it wasn't you—”

She turned then and began walking towards Elsie's room.

“Where are you going?” Oliver asked. “It was a man's voice, and all of the men on this floor are—”

“Not all of the men on this floor are in their assigned rooms,” Eliza said, the knot in her stomach growing deeper by the moment. “Or, at least, they weren't last night.”

Eliza knew etiquette would dictate she knock, but much like with the dressing gown, she decided propriety needed to take a backseat this time.

As she pushed open the door, she did the best she could to also push down the rising sense of dread that was lodging itself in her chest, but the moment she laid eyes on Elsie's bed, she knew there would be no shoving the dread down now, for there, in Elsie's bed, sat Melville, looking more panicked than Eliza had ever seen him. Next to him was Elsie, or, more accurately, Elsie's body.

Melville was clearly in shock. He didn't even move when Eliza opened the door. He just kept shaking Elsie in hopes she'd wake up.

"Bloody hell..." Eliza heard Oliver say from the doorway.

"Get him out of here," Eliza replied, her brain finally kicking in. "Now. People will be here any moment and—"

"Right. Of course," Oliver said, rushing over to Melville. Gently, he put his arm around him and said, "C'mon, Old Chap, let's get you out of here."

But Melville didn't move. Eliza could feel herself starting to panic. Melville's scream had been terribly loud. There was no realistic scenario where it had not been heard by anyone else. If they didn't get him out of here soon...

"Alright, mate, I'm just going to lift you up then, alright?" Oliver said, clearly recognizing the urgency of the situation. He pulled Melville out of the bed and dragged him across the room as Melville mumbled, "I don't know what—I didn't—I don't know—" over and over again.

Eliza had had the tremendous misfortune of discovering four dead bodies in her life, and in each instance, she had rushed to their side to make absolutely certain there was no hope. She'd checked their pulse, listened for breath sounds, and even looked to see if any fog developed when she placed a mirror near their mouth and nose. This time, however, she did none of that. It was clear from the look of the body that Elsie had been gone for several hours now, at least.

So, rather than step any further into the room, Eliza opted to step back out. As she entered the hallway, she saw a host of people rushing toward the room. Cedric and the girl's two sisters were nearly at the door already, and there were a handful of servants stepping off the staircase and onto the landing. She imagined the rest of the family wouldn't be far behind.

"Is everything alright? I thought I heard screaming," Ada said as she hurried toward her sister's room. Unlike Eliza, she and Beatrice had both taken the time to put their dressing gowns on before stepping outside. Eliza felt a tremendous surge of gratitude for their rigid adherence to societal expectations. If not for that, they would most likely have made it to Elsie's room before Eliza had a chance to get Melville out.

"I'm afraid not," Eliza said gently. "I heard the scream as well, and when I came to look..." she paused.

While Eliza had seen dead bodies before, she had never had to be the one to tell the family members. Their lives would be forever marked by this moment, separated into a clear before and after. And while she knew there was no way to make this better, she also knew there were a million things she could do to make it worse, and making it worse was the very last thing she wanted to do.

"I'm so sorry," she said as gently as she could. "But I'm afraid your sister is..."

She hoped they would get it, that they would somehow magically understand without her having to say the word, but they didn't; they just stared at her expectantly. The servants had made their way to the room now, and they, too, stared at Eliza, waiting for her to say the word everyone was afraid was coming but no one dared speak out loud.

"Dead," Eliza said finally. "I'm so sorry."

For a moment, no one moved. It was as though the whole world had slipped into slow motion. And then, Ada let out a wail that sounded more like a wounded animal than a human. She collapsed into Beatrice's arms, and the two cried together.

The servants took over the task of filling in any other servants who arrived, and so, for a moment, no one spoke to Eliza. She looked out on the heartbreaking tableau and ached for the Cooper family. It was an unspeakable loss. If something like this were to happen to Mercy or Cedric or Melville...

It made her feel terribly guilty for having quarreled with Cedric on the way here. It also made her terribly concerned for Melville. She and Oliver had managed to get him out of the room in time, but that was far from a final victory. Given his behavior at dinner the night before, he would no doubt fall under suspicion, and it wasn't as though he would have an alibi. Eliza also wasn't entirely sure Melville had the constitution necessary to hold up under intense questioning, which was likely to be an issue.

She was trying to work out how to best handle things when one of the servants approached her.

"I'm sorry, m'lady. But I thought one of you should know that Lord Cooper is on his way up. He'll likely have questions, and..."

"Of course," Eliza replied. "Thank you for telling me. I can speak with him when he arrives, but first, if you'll excuse me, there's something I have to do."

With that, Eliza went into Elsie's room and covered her body with a sheet. In case she wasn't able to stop Lord Cooper from entering, she wanted to at least try and prevent him from seeing his daughter that way.

Lord Cooper had just arrived when Eliza stepped back out into the hallway. He was clearly agitated, and his voice bellowed through the hallway, "I demand to know what all this commotion is about," he insisted.

"Why don't we speak in private," Eliza suggested.

"I will not be told what to do in my own house," Lord Cooper said, his patience growing increasingly thin. "Now, I insist someone tell me what is going on this instant!"

“I’m so sorry to tell you this, Lord Cooper,” Eliza began. “But it’s your daughter, Elsie.”

The color began to drain from Lord Cooper’s face, and for a moment, he seemed smaller, somehow.

“What—what about her? What happened?”

“I’m afraid she’s passed on,” Eliza said.

Lord Cooper stared at her, eyes wide and unblinking. It occurred to Eliza that, much as she hated to, she might need to be more direct.

“She’s dead, Lord Cooper. I’m so sorry.”

Once again, it seemed to Eliza as though the world was operating in slow motion. For a moment, no one moved. No one spoke. And then, for just a micro-second, Lord Cooper experienced what seemed to Eliza to be a torrent of grief. He let out a quick sob and then immediately choked all that emotion back down.

“Someone will need to call the constable,” he said, his voice low and threatening. “We will find who did this, and rest assured, I will make them pay.”

Eliza once again felt her chest tighten. She knew in her heart that Melville could not have done this, but she couldn’t help but worry that this might turn out to be one of those situations where the truth simply did not matter. And if that was the case, her beloved brother could be in truly grave danger.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Eliza waited for the constable to arrive, for the very first time, she found herself longing for Constable Salsbury. Much as she despised his aggressive, condescending attitude, at least with Constable Salsbury, Eliza knew what to expect. She didn't like him, but she knew him, which meant she knew how to navigate him. Were it Salsbury, she would know how to coach Melville to guide him through this process in a way that would, hopefully at least, keep him out of jail.

But knowing absolutely nothing about this constable meant that she had no concrete knowledge to use to coach Melville, which made trying to prepare an effective strategy to handle this investigation all but impossible. It also didn't help, of course, that Melville was both in shock and completely hung over.

For a brief moment, Eliza allowed herself to hope that there wouldn't actually be an interrogation. Perhaps there wouldn't even be an investigation. After all, Eliza hadn't seen any direct proof that Elsie was murdered when she was in her bedroom; the last death Eliza had investigated had been ruled an accidental death even when it was an actual murder, so it wasn't like it would be impossible for the constable to decide this was natural causes or an accident or something else that would not require Melville to be interviewed.

But realistically, Eliza knew that was just wishful thinking. Twenty-something flappers didn't just drop dead in the middle of the night for no reason—especially twenty-somethings from wealthy families who, to Eliza's knowledge, didn't have any pre-existing conditions and had the benefits of growing up with the best healthcare and amenities money could buy. She also couldn't fathom what sort of accident could have killed Elsie when she was simply lying in bed.

Much as Eliza hated to admit it, she didn't think there was any possible outcome of the constable's visit other than the opening of a murder investigation, and once that happened,

there was no possible scenario where Melville was not going to be questioned. Even with Eliza and Oliver having gotten him out of Elsie's room before anyone else saw, the constable would still want to speak with him. Realistically, he would likely want to speak with everyone, but he would most certainly want to speak with the stranger who arrived the day before Elsie's death, drank too much, and quite clearly fancied the victim.

Eliza could already see the way those accusations would shape up. Someone or other would tell the constable that Melville had made advances towards Elsie during dinner that evening. The constable would spin a tale to Melville—talking about how he had clearly wanted something to happen between them and suggesting that, perhaps, Elsie had rebuffed him. Perhaps Melville couldn't handle that. After all, he was a handsome man from a wealthy family; he likely didn't have a great deal of experience with rejection. Perhaps he couldn't handle it. Perhaps that's why he killed her?

Eliza tried to explain this likely line of questioning to Melville as Oliver procured yet another cup of coffee in an attempt to sober him up. She needed him to be prepared for the sort of things the constable might say, even if she couldn't anticipate what sort of strategy would be best to diffuse the situation. She was not sure, however, if Melville was following her. In truth, she wasn't even entirely certain he was listening.

"I've never seen him like this," Eliza said to Oliver. "I don't know what to do. It's been over an hour. The constable is bound to be here any minute. And if he sees him like this..."

"I know," Oliver said gently. Instinctively, he reached out to take Eliza's hand but swiftly remembered that, even if Melville wasn't entirely there, they also weren't entirely alone. He pulled his hand back quickly, but Eliza still found herself comforted by the gesture.

"And it's not just the constable," Eliza continued. "If anyone sees him like this. I mean, he's practically catatonic. They're bound to know..."

“I know it’s tempting to run down that road. I know you’re scared, and it’s completely understandable. Melville is your brother, and this is a serious situation. But you can’t let yourself fall into fear right now. Melville needs you focused.”

“I know. You’re right,” Eliza agreed. Much as she loved him, she hated it when he was right.

“Right now, Melville is safe. You did a smashing job of finding a space we could take him where he could recover in private.”

Oliver was right about that, too. In the immediate aftermath of the discovery of Elsie’s body, Oliver had taken Melville back to his room, but he and Eliza both knew that wasn’t a viable long-term option. That hallway was absolutely chock-full of onlookers, and they couldn’t have the sort of conversations with Melville that they were going to need to have with that many people in earshot. They also couldn’t risk him being seen, not like this, so they needed a place to take him that was both completely private and as close to soundproof as possible.

Initially, both Eliza and Oliver had been at a loss, but that’s when Eliza remembered the priest holes. As annoyed as Eliza had been at the time about being pulled away from the men and their business discussion, she guided Oliver and Melville into the priest hole behind the fireplace in the second library, a spot she only knew about precisely because that had happened, she could not have been more grateful for having been forced to go on that tour.

For the moment, at least, they were all safe, and they could plan and strategize in peace. They could certainly get caught on exit, but hopefully, by then, Melville would have pulled it together enough for Eliza to claim she was simply trying to distract herself from the awful events of the morning by showing the boys what they missed on the tour. Oliver’s frequent trips for coffee also seemed like a risk, but the risk of not sobering Melville up seemed much greater, so Eliza had no choice but to trust that he would be able to continue avoiding detection. After all, there was no real reason for anyone to be in this part of the house this early in the morning anyway.

“We will have to go soon though,” Oliver said. “We can’t risk the constable coming and asking to speak to us only to find we’re nowhere to be found. That will only serve to start him off with suspicion.”

“I know,” Eliza agreed. “But I can’t very well take him out like this.”

Eliza had to believe Melville was sober by now. He’d had a fair amount to drink the night before, but he had a fair amount to drink most nights. Historically, he was good at holding his liquor. And besides, they’d given him enough coffee to sober up a small army at this point. There was no way this was just a hangover. He was in legitimate shock, and she had to find some way to pull him out of it.

“Mel,” she said, kneeling in front of him and taking his hands. “Mel, I need you to listen to me. I know what you saw this morning was awful. I know you’re scared. And I know you don’t know how to process everything you’re feeling right now, but you have got to pull yourself together. Right now. Do you hear me?”

Still, Melville said nothing. Eliza wished her father was here. He’d know what to do. He always knew what to do. She tried to channel him, but everything she could think of just sounded ridiculous coming from her. So, instead, she tried to just be the truest version of herself.

“Mel, you are one of the people I love most in the world. I can’t let you go to prison. Not only would it break my heart but you and I both know mother would kill me. So much as I’m loathe to say something like ‘stiff upper lip,’ I’m going to need you to step right into that British cliché and put your emotions aside for now. Because I’m not going back to Thistlewood without you. Life would be extraordinarily dull, and I refuse to be the only troublemaker left. Do you understand me?”

Melville still didn’t respond, and Eliza’s heart sank. But then, something shifted. It took a moment, but there was a nod. And then, finally, for the first time since they had carted him out of Elsie’s room, Melville spoke.

“I didn’t do this, ‘Liza.”

“I know,” Eliza replied. “Now we just need to prove it.”

Waiting on Melville to return from questioning was agony. Eliza wasn’t sure she had ever felt so antsy. Elsie’s death had been ruled a murder, just as she’d suspected, and after speaking with the family, Melville was the first person the constable called in for questioning.

Everyone had been asked to wait in the drawing room so that the constable could easily come to find them if he had questions, which only made things worse. Eliza longed to find comfort in Oliver’s arms or, at the very least, be able to pace somewhere, but she couldn’t. Not only could she not risk arousing the others’ suspicion, but she also couldn’t risk arousing Cedric’s. She knew she’d likely have to tell him about Melville’s indiscretion eventually, but she didn’t want to do so unless she absolutely had to. Right now, the fewer people who knew that Melville had spent the night in the room with the victim, the better.

Keeping it a secret from Cedric, however, was only serving to make Eliza more nervous, which was, in turn, only serving to further strain the dynamic between them, and Eliza wasn’t really in the mood to handle that sort of added stress.

“He’ll be alright,” Oliver whispered, clearly able to see that Eliza was struggling and desperate to be able to do something about it.

“You can’t know that,” Eliza whispered back.

“No, but I know you. And I know you won’t rest until he is.”

That much, at least, was true. And it did provide Eliza with a measure of comfort. Still, she was desperate for him to finish up. He’d been in that interrogation for more than a quarter of

an hour already, and waiting was making Eliza want to crawl out of her skin.

Thankfully, she didn't have to wait terribly long. Melville emerged approximately five minutes later, and while he definitely looked worse for wear, he at least wasn't in handcuffs, which, if nothing else, meant all was not yet lost. She wanted to run to him, but she knew that was hardly the sort of behavior that would turn suspicion off of him, so instead, she stayed seated, doing her best to appear calm as she waited for him to come to tell her how it went.

Unfortunately, she didn't get to find out because before Melville had made it across the room, the constable was already calling Eliza's name.

"I'd like to speak with you next, Lady Montagu."

Eliza knew that, as the person who found the body, she would be high on the list of people the constable wanted to speak to, so the fact that he wanted to talk with her now was not necessarily an indication that things had gone poorly with Melville. Still, she could not help but worry that it was.

She followed the constable, called Constable Brown, through a maze of hallways and into Lord Cooper's study. It was a beautiful room, rich with the smell of leather and old books, and precisely the sort of place Eliza would typically have loved to spend time under different circumstances. At this moment, however, Eliza was desperate to get in and out as quickly as possible.

"How can I help you, constable," she asked as she took a seat in one of the overstuffed armchairs.

"I'm told you were the one who found the body," he began.

"Yes."

"Can you tell me precisely what happened?"

"Of course. I heard a scream, and it sounded like it was coming from Elsie's room, so I went next door to see if she was alright. That's when I found her."

“Found her how, exactly?”

“In bed. It was clear she’d been dead for quite some time, so I didn’t examine her, but I did cover her with a sheet. I hope you don’t see that as interfering with the crime scene. I just knew Lord Cooper was coming, and I didn’t want—”

“Of course,” Constable Brown interrupted. “I understand. It was a kindness.”

“Exactly.”

“Is there anything else I should know?” he asked.

“No,” Eliza said, which wasn’t a lie, exactly. There was certainly something she wasn’t telling him, but that wasn’t the question he had asked.

“I’m afraid I must disagree, Lady Montagu.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. See it’s come to my attention that your brother, Melville, was in the victim’s room this morning. And given the fact that this is a murder investigation and I am a constable, that seems like precisely the sort of thing I should know.”

Eliza felt her chest begin to tighten. She’d taken a calculated risk, not sharing that detail, and it had decidedly backfired. She was in trouble, and she knew it. Though nowhere near as much trouble as Melville would be now that his secret had gotten out...

CHAPTER EIGHT

For the life of her, Eliza couldn't figure out how Constable Brown knew Melville had been in the victim's room. She was reasonably certain no one had seen him sneak in the night before. After all, if someone else had been in the hallway when Melville was going into Elsie's room, Eliza likely would have seen them when she snuck out to see Oliver. And she knew no one had seen him this morning. Oliver was adamant that he had gotten Melville out of the room and down the hall without detection.

Perhaps someone had seen him sneaking in before Eliza opened her door to see Oliver. Or perhaps someone had simply assumed it was him based on the fact that they'd heard a man screaming and had told the inspector they'd seen him in order to lead the investigation that way. She knew from experience that, in a murder investigation, it was not uncommon for a victim's family to become convinced they knew who the murderer was and to do anything possible to throw suspicion their way. That could certainly have been the case here.

Whatever the case, Eliza didn't have time to focus on how Constable Brown came to know about Melville's presence in Elsie's room that morning. Right now, she needed to focus on what on earth she was going to do about it.

"That will be all, Miss Montagu," Constable Brown said, jarring Eliza from her thoughts.

"But— but we haven't even—"

"I have everything I need," Constable Brown interrupted. "For the sake of paperwork, I needed proof I had spoken to the person who found the body, which I have done. That was the last thing standing in the way of me being able to make an arrest, so if you'll excuse me, I need to go find your brother."

Inspector Brown stood up to go, and Eliza felt her heart lodge deep in her throat. For a moment, she could barely breathe.

Hell's bells, Eliza. Now is not the time to panic, she thought. You must focus. You have to do something!

“Wait!” Eliza exclaimed as Constable Brown prepared to open the door. She had no idea what the rest of that sentence was going to be, but it at least stalled him and kept him in the room long enough for her to figure it out.

He turned back to her, and Eliza began frantically searching her brain for something, anything, that would make him reconsider. Unfortunately, the only thing she could come up with was the truth, which, even she had to admit, didn't seem terribly compelling. Either way, though, she had to try.

“Please,” she began. “I'm begging you. Melville didn't do this.”

“Forgive me, Miss Montagu, but I find that hard to believe. There is strong circumstantial evidence, and I cannot simply take your word for it. Particularly when you've lied to me once already.”

“But I didn't lie,” Eliza insisted. “You asked if there was anything else you should know, and I said no, which was the truth. Telling you about Melville wouldn't have served anyone, including you. If you didn't already know about it, it would have made you far more likely to waste valuable investigative time pursuing him as a suspect instead of hunting down the real killer.”

Constable Brown scoffed. “That is quite some logic you've got there, doll, I'll give you that.”

Eliza bristled slightly, but she resisted the urge to remind him that her name wasn't “doll.”

“And what makes you so certain your brother isn't the real killer?” he asked, his tone dripping with skepticism and just a hint of condescension.

“Melville could never... I mean, he just—he couldn't...” Eliza knew it wasn't exactly a compelling argument, but at the moment, it was the only one she had.

“Oh, well in that case, I'll just cross him off my suspect list,” Constable Brown said sarcastically. “I mean, if his own

sister, who is both highly motivated to keep him out of jail and already a proven liar, says he couldn't have done it, well, then, he simply must be innocent."

There was something in the combination of the anger she felt at having been spoken to that way and the increasing panic she was feeling about Melville that finally kicked her brain into high gear, and that meant she finally had an argument with Constable Brown that went beyond her mere belief in her brother.

"Why would he have stayed there then?" she asked, a smile dancing across her face.

"What?"

"Why would he have stayed there," Eliza repeated. "If he killed her, why would he have stayed in the room? Tell me, constable, in your experience, do murderers typically kill someone and then, rather than fleeing, simply lay down beside them and go to sleep?"

She had him there, and they both knew it. Eliza could not help but delight in watching him squirm a bit as he tried to find a way to refute the logic of her argument.

"He could have..."

"What?" Eliza asked. "What could possibly have possessed him to stay at the scene of the crime and risk getting caught? And not only risk it, but actively call attention to himself by literally screaming while lying next to her this morning."

"You are right," he said reluctantly. "That does seem unlikely. Not impossible of course, but..."

"But hardly an open and shut case."

"Perhaps," he said, which was as close to an agreement as Eliza suspected she was likely to get. "At the very least, it is enough to justify further investigation, I suppose."

"That's all I ask," Eliza said, hoping to begin to loosen the stranglehold fear currently had on her heart. "I'm confident

you'll find the real killer so long as you look past Melville's... indiscretion."

"I can't simply write him off as a suspect either, of course. But perhaps we could find a middle ground."

"Okay..." Eliza said, eager to find out what, exactly, a middle ground would look like in this circumstance.

"Many of these old estates have basements with a dungeon of sorts. Given this estate's history, I reckon they would. Assuming they do, I would be willing to hold your brother there while I investigate. That way, I don't have to take him to prison, but I don't risk him simply running off either."

Eliza considered his proposal for a moment. The idea of Melville being locked away in a dungeon sounded horrendous, but at least here, he would be safe. Who could say what would happen to him in prison? Melville was a sensitive sort, not to mention deeply privileged, and prison—well, prison would be a particularly bad place for a man like him. And then, of course, there was the fact that her mother would murder her if she allowed Melville to be arrested.

"That sounds like an excellent compromise," Eliza said, though, in truth, her heart ached for her brother. He'd already suffered one trauma this morning, and now, he was to be locked up in a dungeon on suspicion of murder. Given how utterly gutted he'd been that morning, Eliza wasn't sure he was stable enough to handle this.

The one thing she was sure of, however, was that she had to solve this case and get Melville out of there. And she had to do it fast.

"Blimey, Eliza, what are you—" Cedric began as Eliza ushered both he and Oliver toward the priest hole in the Long Hall.

“Hurry, we don’t have much time,” she interrupted, nearly shoving him through the fireplace.

“Eliza what’s—” Oliver started, but Eliza didn’t let him finish either. There simply wasn’t time.

“As we speak, Constable Brown is working with the Coopers to determine whether they have a suitable holding cell for Melville. He suspects, based on the age of the estate, that there may be a dungeon of sorts, and, if there is—”

“Why on earth would he want to lock Mel in a dungeon?” Cedric asked. “I mean, sure, he was flirting with Elsie, but that’s hardly reason enough to—”

“It wasn’t just the flirting...” Oliver said.

“We found Melville in her room this morning,” Eliza added. “He woke up next to her dead body.”

“Bloody hell, Eliza! Why didn’t you tell me? I mean, I know you think I’m useless, but—”

“Cedric, I understand that you’re mad at me, but we simply do not have time for your grudges right now. Not when Melville’s freedom is on the line.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Cedric replied—though it did take him a moment of indignation to get there.

“We were hoping to keep it quiet,” Eliza said, “but somehow or other, Constable Brown found out. He was all set to arrest him until I pointed out that no criminal worth their salt would murder someone and then go to sleep next to the body—much less wake the whole house by screaming about it the next morning.”

“Smart,” Oliver interjected.

“He’s agreed to at least run an investigation rather than simply carting Mel off to prison, but I don’t think we can just —”

“Sit back and wait on that,” Cedric finished for her.

“Exactly,” Eliza said. “Which is why I need your help. I want to investigate what happened to Elsie, but I can’t do it

alone. The Coopers are convinced Mel did it. I suspect they will view us as guilty by association, and that means eyes will be on us at all times. We'll have to work together to keep those eyes from interfering with our investigation."

"Of course," Oliver said. "We're here. Whatever you need, whenever you need it. Right Cedric?"

"It's Melville," Cedric said. "You shouldn't even have to ask."

"So what's the plan?" Oliver asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Eliza replied. "But we need to develop one quickly. With Mel's life on the line, there simply isn't a minute to spare."

CHAPTER NINE

Constable Brown had been right about the Cooper Estate having a dungeon. That shouldn't have come as a surprise, of course. After all, the house had a literal moat. It would have been far stranger had it *not* had a dungeon. Still, as she prepared to go visit Melville, there was something about the whole thing that struck Eliza as almost surreal— as though they had left Thistlewood Manor and accidentally stumbled into the pages of a Medieval novel. This just didn't seem like the sort of thing that could truly happen in real life. Not in this time period, anyway.

Nevertheless, it was happening, and Eliza needed to deal with that accordingly. She, Oliver, and Cedric were all in agreement that they needed to begin investigating immediately, and the first step in that process would be speaking to Melville to see if he had any information that might be of use. Although there had been a bit of back and forth initially, eventually, they had all also agreed that Eliza was the best person to try and get that information from him. She was closer to Melville than anyone else, and also far more intimately familiar with what it feels like to be the prime suspect in a murder investigation.

Initially, Lord Cooper had balked at the idea of Eliza going to see her brother. He was so convinced Melville was a murderer that she was reasonably sure he'd prevent him from having food and water, were it up to him, so visitors were initially viewed as entirely out of the question. However, Eliza reminded him that Melville was being held in the dungeon and not in prison precisely because Constable Brown could not rule out the idea that someone else was the murderer, and it would not look good for Lord Cooper to have thrown an innocent houseguest into solitary confinement in his basement dungeon without cause—a story, Eliza assured him, she would tell everyone who would listen should he stand in the way of her seeing her brother.

She knew this sort of stance was likely to make it far harder to accomplish what she'd initially set out to do on this trip from a business standpoint, but she also recognized that the whole "him thinking her brother murdered his daughter" situation had likely already done that damage anyway. And besides, her brother's life was far more important than a business deal, no matter how lucrative, so Eliza was not about to hesitate to use whatever tactic was necessary to help her clear his name.

Thankfully, while threatening to tell the entire aristocracy about the whole sordid affair was potentially dangerous to their business dealings, it was also highly effective, and upon hearing Eliza make that threat, Lord Cooper immediately ordered their butler, Johnson, to escort Eliza to the dungeon to see Melville.

"It's in the keep," Johnson explained as they stepped out into the front garden and began making their way across the estate. As they walked, Eliza did her best to focus on the flowers—to let the way they seemed to joyfully sway in the breeze soothe her in hopes that it would allow her to bring her very best, most calm, most focused self to the conversation with Melville. He deserved that. After everything he'd been through, he needed it.

"Have you ever been to an estate with a keep before?" Johnson asked.

"No," Eliza said, taking in the fragrant smell of blooming jasmine.

"They're fascinating structures. Built by nobility in the Middle Ages as a refuge should the castle ever fall to some sort of rebellion. The one you see there," he began, pointing to a large, fortified tower on the far end of the estate, "is called a Shell Keep. That's what they call the round ones, you see. The square ones are called Normans."

Eliza nodded. The history of this place really was fascinating, but she was finding it exceptionally difficult to truly engage with it. Truthfully, she was finding it difficult to engage with much of anything other than the fact that her

brother was being held in a dungeon on suspicion of murder, and she was positively desperate to get him out.

Johnson must have picked up on the fact that Eliza was distracted because he didn't say much after that. Instead, he simply guided her through the garden, not stopping to say another word until they were standing in front of the keep.

As they arrived, he pulled a skeleton key out of his pants pocket and slipped it into a truly impressive lock.

"After you, m'lady," he said as he pushed open the enormous stone door.

"Thank you, Johnson," Eliza said as she followed him inside.

The keep was exceptionally tall and narrow, and that, combined with the thick, white stone, made Eliza feel claustrophobic. It was also damp, and there was a constant sound of dripping, the source of which Eliza could not identify but nonetheless echoed throughout the tightly enclosed space.

Eliza approached the tight spiral staircase, but Johnson stopped her.

"He's not up there, ma'am."

"He's not—but then where...?"

Eliza was baffled by this. Certainly, she had expected the dungeon to be in some sort of basement, but this was the bottom floor. The only stairs inside the keep led straight up, so if he wasn't up, she could not fathom where he would be.

"The upstairs was reserved for keeping nobility safe in the event of an attack," Johnson began. "They needed a separate area for anyone who was caught trying to launch one. That's why they built the dungeon."

"Is it separate from the keep?" Eliza asked, deeply confused as to why Johnson would have brought her in here in the first place if Melville was being stored elsewhere.

"No. The entrance just isn't immediately visible," Johnson explained, walking over to a spot by the wall and pushing aside a small wooden table.

“Is that a trap door?” Eliza asked, pointing to a series of slats on the floor that had previously been obscured by the table.

Johnson nodded.

“So Melville is...”

Johnson nodded again before going over to the slats and lifting them to reveal a terrifyingly small hole in the floor.

“You can speak to him through here. Just make sure to speak loudly, as it’s quite a ways down.”

“I’m not yelling to my brother through a hole in the floor,” Eliza said, indignation beginning to rise in her chest. It was one thing to secure Melville because he was under suspicion, but to trap him alone in a hole like this? It felt wrong on so many levels that Eliza could barely contain her frustration.

“I’m sorry, miss, but—”

“How did you get him down there?” Eliza asked.

“There’s a rope ladder, but—”

“Brilliant,” Eliza interrupted. “Where?”

“I can’t let you—”

“I assure you, you can,” Eliza insisted.

“It’s just that it’s very dark down there. The climb could be dangerous, and it’s simply no place for a lady.”

“Be that as it may,” Eliza began, “I will be getting down there one way or another. I would prefer it if you would help me do so safely, but I’m not above jumping if I have to.”

“You can’t be serious,” Johnson said, incredulous.

“I assure you, Johnson, I am not the sort of woman you want to engage in a battle of wills. Many have tried, but none have emerged successful, and I can guarantee you that will be the case here. So will you be helping me or not?”

Eliza felt a bit guilty about putting Johnson in that position but nowhere near guilty enough to change strategies. She didn’t just need to speak with Melville, she needed to see him

to ensure he was alright. And she simply could not do that by shouting at him through a hole in the floor.

“I—I’ll get the ladder,” he said finally.

Johnson retrieved a bundle of rope from the drawer in the table, hooked it around two handles on the trap door, and dropped it into the hole.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked Eliza, his face visibly pained with concern. “There’s a considerable drop off when you reach the end of the rope ladder, so you’ll have to let go about two yards before you reach the floor. A tiny thing like you, it could be—”

“I appreciate your concern, Johnson, but I’ll be just fine. I’ve found my way out of far worse scrapes than this, I assure you,” Eliza said, beginning to make her way down the ladder.

“I’ll stay here until you’re ready to go,” Johnson said. “So if you need anything...”

“I appreciate it old chap, but there’s no need to worry,” Eliza lied. In truth, there was a great deal to worry about, though her ability to successfully make it down this ladder was quite low on her list.

He was right, though. It was quite dark, and Eliza could see why he had concerns about her ability to make it down safely. The more she lowered herself down into the dungeon, the more she began to have similar concerns. But that simply couldn’t be her focus right now. All of her attention belonged to Melville.

As methodically as she could, Eliza worked her way down the ladder. She felt her stomach jump slightly as she ran out of rope, but she forced herself to steady her nerves and simply let go. She had no other choice. She had to get to Melville.

She landed on the ground moments later. The packed dirt was hardly a cushioned way to break her fall, but she didn’t appear to be injured, which she was grateful for. She was also grateful for the small torch they had placed in the corner of the dungeon, which allowed her to see Melville and prevented him from being submerged in perpetual darkness.

Eliza had thought a great deal about what the ideal greeting would be when she saw him. She wanted something that struck the right balance between caring and hopeful. But when the moment arrived, and she actually saw him there, chained up to the wall in this tiny, dirty dungeon, she was too overcome by emotion to speak. Instead, she simply rushed over and wrapped her arms around him.

“Are you alright?” Eliza asked, finally able to gather herself.

“No,” Melville said; his tone was unlike anything she’d ever heard from him before. The shock had clearly worn off, and there was more than just confusion in his voice now. There was abject terror.

“I know this all seems scary, but—”

“I’m in a dungeon, ‘Liza!” He said, his voice a mix of fear and rage. “Like some sort of medieval murderer! I didn’t do this! I didn’t...”

His voice trailed off for a moment, and for the first time in her life, she saw her brother—her brother who was always the life of any party, who was more adept at covering any hint of real emotion with a quick-witted quip than anyone she had ever met, and who never truly seemed bothered by much of anything—start to get truly emotional.

“I can’t go to prison, Eliza,” he said, choking back tears. “I—I won’t survive it. I—”

“Shh, it’s okay,” Eliza said, taking his hand gently. “You’re not—this isn’t—we’ll figure it out.”

“You can’t know that,” Melville said. “They already think I’m guilty. Bloody hell, Eliza, I’ve only been down here what, an hour? And I already feel as though I’m losing my mind. I can’t spend the rest of my life like this. I can’t—”

“You won’t,” Eliza insisted, feeling more desperate now than ever to get to the bottom of things. “I don’t know what happened with Elsie, but I am certain you didn’t kill her. And I am equally certain I’m going to find out who did.”

“And how exactly are you going to do that?” Melville asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” Eliza said truthfully. “But I know it starts with you telling me absolutely everything you remember about last night.”

CHAPTER TEN

“You’re back,” Oliver whispered, approaching Eliza as soon as he saw her part ways with Johnson upon entering the main house. “And you’re filthy... What happened?”

“I’ll tell you everything in a moment,” Eliza replied. “Just not here.”

“I can have Cedric try and distract everyone so we can slip away if you’d like,” Oliver offered.

“Smashing,” Eliza whispered back. “That’s a brilliant plan. Meet you outside in 5?”

Oliver nodded.

On the way back from the keep, Eliza had asked Johnson a number of questions about the garden. This was partially motivated by a desire to put him at ease, as she felt guilty about not having been better at engaging with him on the way over. She also had an ulterior motive, however. Yesterday, when Lady Cooper had given Eliza the tour of the estate, she had mentioned that the garden had two secret tunnels, and it now occurred to Eliza that those could be excellent locations for them to meet to discuss the investigation away from prying eyes and ears. Unfortunately, Lady Cooper hadn’t provided any information on where exactly they were located or how to enter them, and the gardens on the estate were so large that the likelihood of Eliza just stumbling upon them seemed incredibly slim.

She knew she couldn’t just come right out and ask about the tunnels without raising suspicion. After all, the entire Cooper household believed Melville was a murderer, and they were already deeply distrusting of Eliza, Oliver, and Cedric as a result. However, she suspected that if she gave Johnson uninterrupted time to just share details about the garden with her, he might wind up inadvertently disclosing precisely the information she was looking for.

Thankfully, her suspicions were right. He was less than ten minutes into a description of the garden that he had clearly given to hundreds of visitors before when he began talking about the tunnels, and while he did not give Eliza an exact location, she was confident she had more than enough to go on to find them. Now, she just needed Oliver to hurry up and join her so that they could find them together.

Luckily, she didn't have to wait long as Oliver emerged through the French doors that led out into the garden just moments later.

"Cedric's going to do everything he can to keep them distracted," he said as he approached Eliza. "But I'm not sure how long he'll be able to keep that up, so we should probably hurry."

"Of course," Eliza agreed. "Follow me."

Eliza led Oliver through an array of stunning lime trees and twisted turkey oaks on their way to the orangery, where Oliver quickly stopped to pluck two ripe oranges from a nearby tree.

"I figured you'd be hungry," he said with a grin. "I may have also slipped a few scones they had set up for tea into my pocket on the way out the door."

Eliza looked at him and smiled. "I have never loved you more."

Oliver laughed and, glancing quickly behind them to make sure they were alone, slipped his hand into hers. Eliza felt her whole body begin to relax as that familiar sense of warmth and safety washed over her.

Together, they walked hand in hand through a stunning blanket of bluebells before passing through the walled garden, which featured enough fruit and veg to feed a small village, and stepping out into an area of the garden Johnson had explained was known as "the wilderness."

The wilderness was exquisite, filled with an array of tree-lined avenues and rich with shrub roses that felt both wild and enchanting. The air was heavy with the scent of azalea and

rhododendron, and under different circumstances, Eliza could have stayed there exploring all day.

But today, she was focused on finding the beech hedges that would lead her into the secret garden, which is where Johnson said the tunnels were located. It wasn't long before she spotted the thick, green hedges, which she and Oliver pushed through before emerging into a large, open courtyard with a brick walking path and several stunning statues.

They followed a pathway lined with Japanese anemones and bright purple irises to a wall covered in peonies, where Eliza spotted a sculpture of Dionysus, just as Johnson said she would.

“Help me move it?” she asked Oliver, who blinked back in confusion.

“Why would we—”

“Just trust me,” Eliza said. Oliver obliged, helping her push the statue to the side. As soon as they did, he understood the purpose of Eliza's request.

“Blimey, this place certainly is full of surprises,” Oliver said, gesturing towards the trap door that had revealed itself the moment the statue was moved.

He bent down and lifted the door, revealing a long ladder into the tunnel.

“After you m'lady,” he said, offering Eliza his hand.

Eliza took it and lowered herself into the tunnel. Thankfully, this one was much less deep than the dungeon Melville was being kept in, and though it was dark, there were an abundance of oil lamps lining the walls, which Oliver was able to swiftly light using the matches he carried for his pipe.

Unlike the dungeon, there was something sort of enchanting about this tunnel, which felt much more open while still remaining intimate and featured a lovely little picnic table about twenty meters in.

As Eliza took a seat, Oliver pulled out the oranges he had picked, along with the apple cinnamon scones he had snagged

from the tea tray, and laid them out on the picnic table.

“You are positively brilliant,” she said as she took a bite of the scone, which was absolutely scrummy, the perfect blend of crumbly and light with just enough sharpness from the apple to balance out the sweetness of the batter and the warmth of the cinnamon.

“You’re pretty clever yourself,” Oliver said. “These tunnels are—”

“Perfect for our purposes.”

“Exactly,” Oliver agreed. “So, tell me about Melville. How was it?”

“Heartbreaking,” Eliza said, desperate to focus on the scone and force the image of a chained up, terrified Melville out of her mind.

“Was he able to give you anything useful.”

“Perhaps. He’s very foggy on the details. Consequences of having too much to drink and whatnot. He’s adamant Elsie invited him in, though.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Oliver said. “Your brother may be a bit of a rake, but he’s not... he would never...”

“I know,” Eliza agreed, taking a bite of the orange, which was bright and sweet and lovely. “He did have one piece of information that may prove helpful. It’s not much, but he said he has a memory of seeing some sort of green, billowy fabric. Just flashes, so there’s not much to go on, but—”

“Any chance it was Elsie’s?” Oliver asked.

“Possible, but unlikely. She wasn’t wearing anything green last night, and she also wasn’t wearing anything green when I saw her this morning. So, if it was hers, she would have had to change into it after she went to bed, and then gotten out of bed to change into something completely different before morning. I think the far more likely explanation is that it belonged to the real killer.”

“I don’t remember anyone else wearing green last night either,” Oliver said.

“Neither do I,” Eliza replied. “So it’s not a particularly helpful lead now. But anything is better than nothing, and perhaps it will become a more useful detail as our investigation unfolds.”

“Speaking of,” Oliver began. “What’s next?”

“We need to identify some potential alternate suspects. Anyone with motive.”

“I may not be able to help with that yet,” Oliver said, “But I think I can shed some light on opportunity.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you,” Eliza grinned. “You always were terribly clever.”

“I can’t say for certain, but from what I’m hearing, Constable Brown believes the most likely cause of death was poisoning. And if that’s the case—”

“We should start with anyone who had access to her food,” Eliza interjected.

“Precisely. We’ll need to be as covert as possible, though. Even just discovering that was a challenge with the way the Lord and his family were peering over my shoulder every minute.”

“Of course,” Eliza said. “We should try and engage Cedric as well. Ideally, we’ll need to speak with both the kitchen staff and the servers, and that will take some doing given the circumstances.”

“I’ll speak with Cedric. You’ve always had a way with the servants, so—”

“I’ll start there.”

“Bril,” Oliver said, standing up from the table. He took Eliza’s hand once more as they worked their way back out of the secret tunnel and back into the house.

Finding ways to speak with the servants was even more challenging than Eliza had initially feared. Not only was it difficult to do so without raising the family's suspicion, but the servants were also incredibly tight-lipped. She tried unsuccessfully to speak with three separate members of the kitchen staff before giving up and deciding she needed to take a different tack.

She made her way into the kitchen, where she gathered all of the ingredients for an apple tarte tatin. It was the first dish Rene had taught her how to make, and it remained one of her favorites to cook.

People began to stare as she placed the butter and sugar in a pan, cooking them down into a deep, rich caramel. As she worked the dough, their chef, John, appeared beside her.

"What are you doing?" he asked, more baffled than anything else.

"Making a tarte tatin," she replied matter-of-factly."

"I—but—" he stammered.

"I know it's unusual for a guest to just appear in your kitchen," Eliza said. "And probably unheard of for them to start cooking themselves. But I know you and your staff have likely had a very difficult day, and I thought it might be nice for someone to cook for you for a change."

She waited for the chef to reply, but he seemed too stunned to speak.

"I learned from our family's chef, Rene. It's an old family recipe of his, and it's quite scrummy. I'll just get it in the oven, and then I'll leave you be."

"Thank you," he said finally, the skepticism in his voice apparent.

"You're welcome," Eliza said. "I'm sorry for your loss. I'm not sure how it is in this house, but in ours, many of the members of the family and the staff are quite close. We lost a member of the kitchen staff last year, and it was devastating. I'm certain they would feel the same if they lost one of us."

“Your house sounds very different from this one,” John replied. “Servants and the family rarely mix. And Elsie—well, it is a tragedy what happened to her, but she was a cruel young woman. Very manipulative and deeply unkind. I can assure you, no one here will be shedding any tears over her absence.”

“I see,” Eliza said, surprised. She’d heard rumors about Elsie’s cruelty prior to coming to the estate, so the fact that she was not exactly beloved was far from shocking. Still, you had to be a particularly vicious person for an entire staff to be that adamant about not mourning your death. And while that was good to know, it also meant that their suspect pool was likely quite large.

“I appreciate the gesture,” John said, “and I very much look forward to trying your tart, but I’m afraid I must ask you to leave now. We have to begin getting supper ready, and my staff will need every bit of available cooking space in order to make that happen.”

“Of course,” Eliza said. She was reluctant to leave without asking more questions, but she knew better than to push. At least not yet. She didn’t want to raise too much suspicion.

“I hope you’ll enjoy the tart,” she added as she made her way out of the kitchen and back down the hall.

She began working her way back to the floor where she, Oliver, and Cedric were staying in hopes of finding them and sharing what she’d learned, but on her way, she turned a corner and bumped into Beatrice, who looked positively terrified by the sight of Eliza.

“I’m so sorry,” Eliza began, “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s—it’s quite alright. I’m sorry. I was in your way. It won’t happen again,” Beatrice stammered, clearly frightened.

“It’s not your fault! I should have been paying better attention to where I was going.”

Beatrice averted her eyes, unable to answer or look at Eliza.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Beatrice. I have a sister, too. Her name is Mercy. And if anything ever happened to her,

why, I would be positively inconsolable.”

“We must have very different sisters then,” Beatrice said coolly. “Elsie was my sister, yes. But we were not close. She was cruel and conniving and manipulative, and she had father so utterly wrapped around her little finger that none of us could do a thing about it. She made this whole house a terror, and I’m not nearly as upset about the fact that she’s gone as I am about the fact that my house is full of at least one, if not multiple, killers.”

“I can understand your concern, Beatrice, but I assure you ___”

“Forgive me, Lady Montagu, but I’m afraid your assurances mean very little to me. I’m reasonably certain your brother is a murderer. At the very least, I think you are trying to cover up his crime. At worst, I think you are complicit in it. Either way, I do not feel terribly comfortable speaking with you.”

With that, Beatrice hurried off, disappearing into her room before Eliza could say another word.

Eliza sighed. She was no closer to figuring out who had killed Elsie now than she had been at the start, but one thing was certain. If Elsie was so awful that even her own sister was not mourning her death, they were going to have no shortage of suspects to work their way through. And she needed to hurry. Between Melville’s desperation and the Coopers’ active suspicion, she could not shake the feeling they were running out of time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eliza had conducted four murder investigations prior to this one, and all of them had required a measure of stealth. The first time, she had been the prime suspect, so all eyes were on her from the start. By the second time, both Constable Salsbury and Inspector Abernathy knew she would be inclined to investigate things on her own, and while her investigation ultimately proved helpful to them, as she had been the one to ultimately catch the real killer, they were still quick to try and prevent Eliza from doing any sort of unauthorized digging on her own. In addition to their argument that it was a breach of protocol, she suspected they also just very much did not appreciate having some untrained girl conduct investigations that ultimately turned out to be more effective at getting at the truth than their own.

As such, Eliza was used to having to investigate in secret, sneaking around and conducting interviews as quietly and unobtrusively as possible. But the level of stealth required here, in a place where she had far fewer allies and a small guest list meant she also had far fewer places to hide—this was something new and far more challenging. Everywhere she went, people eyed her with fear and suspicion, and getting anyone to talk to her was nearly impossible. Even just getting anywhere unnoticed was proving unreasonably difficult, and Eliza couldn't fathom how she was ever going to solve this case if she couldn't even figure out a way to meet with Cedric and Oliver for an update without causing an uproar.

Three times now, she had tried to leave her room to connect with them, and three times, she had bumped into a servant who, clearly on orders of Lord Cooper, had asked where she was going and reminded her that, in order to allow for proper mourning, all guests had been asked to stay in their rooms until supper. This was nonsense, of course. Her leaving her bedroom would not interfere with his mourning process. But Lord Cooper did not want Eliza and Oliver and Cedric in his house. He did not trust them and, given his belief that

Melville murdered his daughter, didn't want to have to even look at them. Keeping them locked in their room was his way of trying to control and contain them until he finally had the ability to have them removed from the estate altogether.

Eliza, however, had never been particularly easy to control or contain, a fact Lady Montagu had been lamenting basically since her birth. She'd faced far greater adversaries than Lord Cooper, and she'd won even with far less motivation. With her brother's life on the line? There was simply no way she was going to allow this man to keep her from doing everything necessary to clear Melville's name, and to do that, she was going to have to find a way to leave her room.

She poked her head back into the hallway but once again found it guarded by a servant. She considered simply defying their request that she stay in the room, but she knew that would only serve to further raise Lord Cooper's hackles, and it would also potentially get the servant in trouble, neither of which were desirable. So, instead, she decided that, if she couldn't use the hallway to get to Oliver and Cedric, she would simply have to find a more creative route.

Given Lord Cooper's mandate and their very persistent monitor, Eliza was reasonably certain they would each be in their rooms, which, thankfully, meant they were all on the same floor. That meant the balcony was an option.

It wasn't a good option, of course. They were quite high up, and while Eliza doubted she could fall to her death from this height, she could most certainly do considerable damage. The distance between their balconies was also considerable, and being almost a third meter shorter than Oliver meant she had a much smaller wingspan to work with. But, what she lacked in height, she made up for in determination. Eliza had made up her mind to find a way to get to Oliver and Cedric, and she wasn't about to let a little thing like physics stop her now.

She stood out on the balcony and tried to determine the best approach. Oliver was tall enough that he had been able to simply step over the railing on his balcony and reach over and grab hers, but Eliza's height made that impossible. There was

no way she could hold onto the balcony on her side and also reach the balcony on his. She needed some sort of extender—and that's when she thought of the bed sheets.

She went back into her bedroom and pulled the impossibly soft linens off the bed. Working as quickly as she could, she looped them through the balcony's handrail and tied them off using an exceptionally strong sailor's knot Parkins had taught her as a child when she had been endlessly fascinated by his service in the royal navy.

She stepped over the railing and out onto the outer edge of the balcony, doing everything she could to steady her breathing and ignore how terrifyingly high up she was, and then she used the bed sheets as an extender of sorts, which allowed her to lean further away from her balcony without falling.

The extra third of a meter or so that bought her was enough to allow her to catch the other balcony with her right hand. From there, she twisted her body so that it was entirely facing Oliver's balcony and, with a breath and a prayer, let go of the bed sheet and took a sort of leap, holding onto his balcony with her right hand for dear life until her left hand had time to catch on.

Her feet didn't quite make it, but she was able to scramble and pull them up the wall and onto the floor without any real trouble, and soon, she found herself safely on the inside of Oliver's balcony. She breathed a sigh of relief and took a moment to gather herself before knocking on the French door to Oliver's bedroom.

It took him a moment to answer, and when he did, he was clearly stunned to see her, though Eliza couldn't imagine who else he would have been expecting to have climbed over to his balcony.

"Should I be worried you were expecting another girl to sneak out onto your balcony?" she asked with a grin.

"No," Oliver laughed. "I just—I can't believe you managed that climb."

“Well, I needed to see you, and I figured if they wouldn’t allow us to exit the front door, then I’d simply have to use the back.”

Oliver flashed that charming grin of his, and Eliza once again felt herself going weak in the knees.

“It’s good to see you,” he said as he took her face in his hands and kissed her.

“You too,” she said. “But this isn’t a social call.”

“I figured as much. Shall I go get Cedric?”

“Yes, please.”

Eliza settled down into Oliver’s impossibly comfortable bed and, as she waited for him to return with Cedric, imagined what it would be like to lie here next to him. The time for that fantasy was short-lived, however, as Oliver was exceptionally swift in his return.

He and Cedric quickly made their way off of the balcony and into the room, where having no other furniture options, they each perched on the side of the bed.

“So,” Eliza began. “Tell me everything you learned before Lord Cooper sequestered us in here.”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” Cedric began. “The only thing I learned was that the business deal is on the brink of collapse.”

“That’s hardly a surprise,” Eliza said. “Given the circumstances.”

“Precisely. But it is a problem. And one we must deal with just as soon as we...”

“Get our brother out of the dungeon he’s locked in?” Eliza finished for him.

“Yes. That exactly.”

“I’m afraid I wasn’t much more successful,” Eliza said. “Though I did learn that the rumors of Elsie’s cruelty were true, and they extended not just to the staff but to her sisters as well.”

“That’s what I heard,” Oliver said. “I was speaking with the servants, and—”

“You got the servants to talk?” Eliza asked. “How? I couldn’t get any of them to give me the time of day.”

“I have my ways,” Oliver said, once again flashing that charming grin of his, and suddenly Eliza understood *exactly* how he’d gotten them to talk to him.

“Anyway, it turns out that there was one particular servant to whom Elsie was particularly mean. Her name is Rosie, and it just so happens that she was the one who prepared Elsie’s food last night.”

Eliza couldn’t help but grin then, too. This was a lead—a real one. And if she was lucky, it might be just what she needed to clear Melville’s name and get him out of that wretched place.

Finding her way to the servant Oliver had mentioned was no small task. They had discussed waiting until they were all released from their rooms for supper, but Eliza refused to let Melville sit in that dungeon one moment more than he had to.

They explored various methods of escape and ultimately decided the bedsheets were once again the best option. They took both Cedric’s and Oliver’s and tied them together to create a makeshift rope. Hung over the balcony, they weren’t quite enough to reach all the way to the ground, but it was enough to get someone close enough to safely jump.

Oliver had wanted to be the one to do it, and at first, that seemed like a logical choice. After all, the servants seemed more inclined to talk to him. But they weren’t entirely certain the bedsheets could hold his weight, and Eliza had made inroads with the chef, which could prove useful, so ultimately, it was decided she would be the one to go.

Her heart pounded as she worked her way carefully down the bedsheets, and there were several moments where she was unsure she was physically strong enough to do this safely, but any time she thought she couldn't hold on, she pictured Melville in that dungeon, terrified and alone, and it gave her the strength necessary to hold on.

Getting to the kitchen had been easier than she thought. Because the Coopers were expecting her to still be in her room, no one was patrolling the other areas, so she was able to stroll right in with relative ease.

“Ah, if it isn't the rich girl who cooks,” Chef John said upon Eliza's entrance, and there was a warmth in his tone that made her hopeful she had gained an ally here.

“I must say, that was the single best tarte tatin I have ever eaten,” he continued.

“Thank you!” Eliza said, genuinely chuffed. “That's high praise.”

“If you can cook like that, you're welcome in my kitchen anytime.”

Eliza smiled. “I'm delighted to hear that, as the kitchen is typically my favorite room in any home.”

“Did you come to make us another dessert, or is there something I can do for you?”

“I am always happy to make you a dessert, but at the moment, I was hoping I could speak with Rosie?”

“Sure, she's right over there,” he said, pointing to a small, somewhat mousey girl who was busy peeling potatoes. “What do you want with her?”

“Oh, I was just hoping to ask her a few questions about last night,” Eliza replied.

But before she could get another word out, Rosie dropped the potato peeler and took off running.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chasing after Rosie was made infinitely more complicated by the fact that Eliza did not know the Cooper Estate the way she knew Thistlewood Manor. There were hundreds of rooms and dozens of hallways, and there was no way for Eliza to take a shortcut or anticipate Rosie's next move because she simply did not know the architecture or the layout well enough.

There was also the small matter of not wanting to rouse suspicion, something that even Eliza had to admit seemed utterly unavoidable as she chased Rosie out of the kitchen, down a series of hallways and out into the garden.

For a moment, she considered stopping. After all, if Rosie wasn't the murderer, she was doing far more harm chasing her like this than good. But Rosie had taken off running the moment Eliza asked about her. What possible reason could she have for behaving that way if she wasn't guilty of something? And if she was guilty of something—particularly something like murder, Eliza could not take the chance of letting her get away. Not when Melville was sitting in a dungeon, alone and scared, accused of a crime he did not commit.

So, Eliza did her best to ignore the fact that people were staring, and she was certain word would get back to Lord Cooper, and that word would *not* be good and focused in exclusively on Rosie.

Hell's bells, she's fast! Eliza thought as she chased Rosie through the front garden, past the daffodils and through the Parterre, where wild Wisteria abounded. Since moving back to Thistlewood Manor from London, Eliza had made it a point to go for a run every morning if the weather allowed. Generally speaking, she considered herself fairly quick on her feet, both literally and metaphorically, so she was surprised by just how effortlessly Rosie seemed to be outpacing her.

As she sprinted up the thick, stone steps and through the Orangery, Eliza felt a stitch forming in her side. It hurt to

breathe, and she longed to stop—to stretch it out and wait until the pain subsided before running again, but she knew she couldn't risk that. Rosie could be the key to her brother's freedom, and no matter how much pain she was in, she simply could not let her get away.

Unfortunately, she also could not keep the pain from slowing her down, and by the time they made it to the wilderness, Eliza had nearly lost track of Rosie entirely. She had a rough idea where Rosie was headed, so she persisted, moving through the bluebells as swiftly as she could despite the fact that her breath was coming in quick gasps now, and she could no longer stand up straight.

It was a valiant effort, but by the time they got midway through the hedge maze, Eliza could no longer see Rosie at all.

Blast! She thought as she hit a dead end and did her best to guess whether Rosie would have gone left or right. While it may have been understandable, given the circumstances, Eliza was absolutely furious with herself for letting Rosie out of her sight.

She searched for footprints or any sign of disturbance but found none. Apparently, Rosie was every bit as stealthy as she was fast.

Eliza sighed. A hedge maze was the absolute worst place to lose someone, particularly when it was one you were unfamiliar with, and the person you were pursuing had likely explored it countless times.

This is going to be impossible.

But giving up wasn't an option, so Eliza pushed forward, turning this way and that and scanning her surroundings for even the slightest hint of someone else's presence. Unfortunately, no matter how hard she tried, nothing seemed to materialize, and with each passing second, Eliza felt as though she was running closer and closer to being out of options.

As Eliza turned yet another corner, she came upon an ornate stone bench. Looking at it, she was suddenly struck by

how utterly exhausted she was. It had been an endlessly trying day—and one which had gotten off to an exceptionally early start, and at that moment, Eliza felt as though every bone in her body had been transformed into lead.

Perhaps it won't be the worst thing if I sat, just for a moment?

Her whole being was crying out for rest, and besides, it wasn't like chasing after Rosie was getting her anywhere anyway. She needed a moment to think—to regroup.

This was precisely the place that would be perfect for that sort of thing.

So, with a bit of guilt but also tremendous relief, Eliza took a seat on the bench in the corner. She took a deep breath and let her body melt for a moment, releasing the tension in her shoulders for what she realized was easily the first time all day.

She knew she needed to make a new plan, but her brain just felt so crowded. Everything was screaming at her, and she had to turn down the volume if she was ever really going to be able to hear herself think.

So, instead of obsessing over what to do next, she simply took another deep breath. She did her best to focus on soaking in the beauty of her surroundings. She caught the subtle scent of jasmine on the breeze and listened to the gentle tune of a nearby robin. There was something in both the familiar scent and the familiar song that soothed her, and while everything still weighed heavy on her heart, with a few more deep breaths, it at least felt like a weight she could continue to carry.

Just a few more seconds, she thought as she let herself be carried away by the robin's song one more time.

But as she listened, she noticed there was something else, too. It was subtle, but there was definitely another sound there. Eliza couldn't identify exactly what it was, but she had a feeling she knew what was causing it.

She leaped to her feet and ran towards the location of the noise, rounding the corner just in time to see Rosie.

She must have thought I'd left and come out of hiding, Eliza realized, suddenly feeling very good about that decision to sit and rest. If she hadn't, Rosie might have heard her continued pursuit and never come out.

"Wait, please!" Eliza exclaimed as Rosie scanned her surroundings like a wild animal who had been trapped in a corner very much against its will.

Rosie tried to make a move, but each time she attempted a breakaway, she realized there was simply no way she was going to make it past Eliza. So instead, she simply froze, looking at Eliza with panic-stricken eyes.

"Please don't hurt me, miss. I—I've got a family."

Eliza was taken aback by Rosie's pleadings. She'd assumed Rosie had run because she was afraid of getting caught—not because she was afraid of getting hurt.

"I—I won't hurt you," Eliza said, doing her best to sound reassuring.

"My mum—she'd be heartbroken if anything happened to me. Me brother too. And there's a gent in the kitchen I fancy. I haven't told 'im that yet, but if I get the chance—"

"—Rosie, I think there must be some misunderstanding," Eliza interrupted, desperate to soothe the poor girl, who seemed to genuinely be in fear for her life. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk."

"Sure, talk," Rosie repeated, obviously completely unconvinced. "I've heard all about you and your brothers, I 'ave. I know what you do to girls like me."

"And what is that, exactly?" Eliza asked, curious to see what sort of insanity the rumor mill had churned up this time.

"You travel all around the countryside, killin' girls for sport."

"What?!" Eliza asked, stunned. All of the insane rumors she could possibly have dreamed up did not even come close to comparing to the absurdity of that assertion.

“You’re a gang of killers, you are,” Rosie reiterated. “But I—I won’t let you take me. I—”

“Rosie, I don’t know where you heard that, but I promise you, it’s not true.”

“Sounds like somethin’ a killer would say,” Rosie insisted.

Eliza sighed. This was going to be harder than she thought.

“I really do just want to talk,” Eliza said finally.

“You can do so over there,” Rosie said, gesturing to the other side of the row they were in.

“If that would make you more comfortable, I’d be happy to move,” Eliza offered. She walked over to the other side of the row and even sat down in case that made Rosie more comfortable.

“How’s this?” she asked. “Is that better?”

“I guess,” Rosie responded, clearly unsure how to process Eliza being so accommodating. “If you’re not tryin’ to kill me, whydya chase me out ‘ere?”

“I just wanted to ask you some questions about Elsie,” Eliza replied. “I’m trying to clear my brother’s name. He didn’t do this.”

“Says you,” Rosie retorted.

“Yes,” Eliza said. “And I understand that, as his sister, I’m a bit biased. But that doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

Rosie didn’t seem to have a quick-witted response to that one, so Eliza continued.

“I’m trying to find the real killer, and since they think she might have been poisoned, the kitchen staff are the most obvious suspects, and—”

“It wasn’t one of us,” Rosie interrupted. “I can promise you that. We hated Ms. Elsie, but none of us would kill her. We never know who the food is goin’ to when we cook it, and you can’t count on the servers to take it to someone specific. The family doesn’t do assigned seating arrangements, so any of the servants could be servin’ anyone on any given night.

Besides, why would we pick poison if we're the ones makin' and servin' the food? We'd have to know suspicion would fall right on us—and we may be poor, but we ain't stupid."

"Of course not. I wasn't trying to imply—"

"If all you really wanted was to talk, we've done that," Rosie interjected. "So can I go now?"

Eliza debated that for a moment. She didn't feel like she'd really gotten anywhere, but she was also reasonably certain this was as far as she was going to get with Rosie anyway. And besides, holding the poor girl against her will wasn't exactly going to help with her and her brother's reputation.

"Of course," Eliza replied. "Thank you for talking to me."

Rosie didn't even bother to answer. She simply disappeared back into the hedge maze, taking any hope Eliza had of a lead right along with her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Reluctantly, Eliza began the trudge through the garden and back to the estate. She hated the idea of having to tell Oliver and Cedrick that the whole escapade had been for naught and that they were no closer now than they had been before—though she did at least very much like the idea of seeing Oliver. It had been a terribly depressing day thus far, and the only thing she could fathom possibly making any of it feel better was a moment or two in his arms.

Perhaps it was the fact that her mind was there already wrapped in the warmth and safety of his embrace, or the fact that the maze was just so bloody confusing, but whatever the case, Eliza quickly found herself utterly lost. She wandered amongst the yew trees and topiaries, eventually inadvertently venturing into a part of the garden she'd never seen before.

About fifty yards ahead of her was the most charming cottage Eliza had ever seen. The stonework was absolutely lovely, and a patch of cheery purple pansies adorned the path that led to the rich oak door. There was a chimney from which a perfect puff of smoke plumed, and an adorable sheep grazed lazily on the lawn. Eliza could not help but feel as though she'd stumbled into some sort of storybook.

She quickly found herself wondering about the person who lived there. The Coopers hadn't mentioned there being anyone else on the property, and the Inspector did not appear to have considered them as part of his investigation. Perhaps he didn't even know they were there. And perhaps there was a reason Lord Cooper had kept their presence a secret...

For a moment, Eliza was tempted to explore, to walk around the cottage a bit or, perhaps, even knock on the door and see what she could learn about the inhabitant, but she knew she needed to be getting back. Oliver and Cedric were waiting for her, and she had been gone so long by this point that there was a good chance they had begun to worry.

Worse, it seemed highly unlikely that they would have managed to keep her absence a secret from the family all this time. Between her escapade running through the house after Rosie and the fact that the Coopers were bound to have let everyone out for tea by this point, it seemed almost impossible that Eliza's escape could have gone unnoticed, and besides, her escaping wasn't exactly going to do anything to further support their family's claims of innocence.

So, much as she didn't want to, Eliza decided to leave her investigation of the cottage for a later time and, instead, focus on finding her way back to the estate, back to Oliver.

She meandered alongside a bed of alliums, which she followed until she came upon a pond filled with newts. A few yards later, she found a path lined with nepeta, which looked vaguely familiar, so she followed it in hopes that it would lead her back to the main estate.

Her instincts on that were good, and she soon saw the main house begin to emerge from beyond the tree line. Unfortunately, not long after that, something else appeared in Eliza's eye line: Constable Brown.

"There you are, Miss Montagu," he exclaimed, his tone somehow simultaneously delighted and threatening. "I've been searching everywhere for you. Seems you've had quite the series of adventures today."

"I'm not sure I would go quite so far as to classify a walk in the garden as an adventure," Eliza replied, careful not to give too much away as she wasn't sure exactly what the constable knew yet.

"A walk, no. But a chase? Well, that certainly rises to the level of adventure in my book," Constable Brown said, his tone still objectively light but with a threatening undercurrent.

"I wasn't—" Eliza began, but Constable Brown stopped her before she could finish her sentence.

"I would think very carefully about the words you choose to use next, Miss Montagu," he warned. "You've already lied to me once today. It would be wise not to do it again."

“It was nothing,” Eliza insisted. “Just a girlish game.”

Typically, Eliza was loathe to use “girlish” as a diminutive adjective, but in this case, she thought it might serve her. If she could convince Constable Brown to dismiss this as some sort of feminine flight of fancy, perhaps it would keep him from asking too many questions.

The look on his face made it clear to Eliza, however, that she was going to have no such luck.

“Nice try, Miss Montagu,” he said, his eyes narrowing just slightly. “I’ll be keeping my eye on you.”

“I would expect nothing less,” she replied, hoping that the air of confidence she projected as she walked away would be enough to keep him from sensing the ball of fear that was growing larger and larger within her chest.

Eliza spotted Oliver just as she was about to walk back into the estate.

“What are you doing out here?” She asked, surprised that Lord Cooper had let him out of his sight long enough for him to get outside.

“Looking for you,” he replied. “Your chase scene is quite the talk of the estate. Seems you’re a regular action hero these days.”

Eliza laughed.

“I guess it was too much to hope that would have stayed quiet,” she replied.

“Oh most definitely,” Oliver replied. “But it did have one unexpected advantage.”

“Oh really? Do tell.”

“Lord Cooper has given up on trying to keep us all trapped in our rooms. I think he’s decided you’re essentially Houdini

at this point, so it simply isn't worth it.”

“Well that's certainly an improvement.”

“Indeed.”

For a moment, their typical rapid-fire banter subsided, and Eliza found herself lost in Oliver's eyes. He stepped closer to her, and Eliza could feel the chemistry practically vibrating between them.

She stepped closer, too. They were practically touching now. He reached his hand up towards the side of her face, and Eliza's heart raced with the excitement of the things she knew came next. The way he would take her face in his hands and then bend down gently to kiss her; the way his lips would feel against hers; the way her face would flush and her heart would soar and everything else in the world would fade into a soft blur except this moment and him and the magic between them.

But, alas, she never got that far because before Oliver could even so much as take her face in his hand, Cedric came bursting through the French doors and out into the garden, and Oliver leaped back from her as though he had been shot out of a cannon.

Bloody nice timing you've got there, Cedric, she silently bemoaned.

“Cedric, old chap! What brings you out here?” Oliver asked, his voice pitched just a little too high to believably come across as normal.

Luckily for both of them, Cedric was utterly clueless.

“I was looking for the two of you,” he replied. “Anything of value come from your escapade, Liza?”

“Not yet,” she said. “I spoke with the chef, and he pointed me towards Rosie. She ran when I went to question her, so I thought she was guilty, but she's adamant it wasn't her. In fact, she's adamant it was't anyone who worked in the kitchen.”

“And what, we're just supposed to take her word for it?” Cedric asked.

“No,” Eliza replied. “But her logic was sound, and I’m inclined to believe her. I don’t think she did this, and I don’t think any of the other cooks did either.”

“So we’re just at a dead end, then?” Oliver asked.

“Great,” Cedric replied, annoyed. “Bloody great. Our brother’s trapped in a dungeon, and all you’ve managed to do is make a scene.”

“That’s not—” Eliza said before taking a deep breath and trying to calm herself. Now was not the time to get into a fight with her brother, no matter how much of a cad he may have been being.

“This is how these things go, Cedric,” she said, as non-confrontationally as she could manage. “You run down various avenues, and many of them don’t pan out. But if you’re lucky, they lead you to your next line of investigation, so you’re not just stuck at a standstill.”

“And did it?” Oliver asked. “Lead you to a new avenue of investigation, I mean?”

“Perhaps,” Eliza said. “I can’t say for sure yet. But there’s a mysterious cabin on the edge of the property that I think may be worth looking into—unless anyone else has any other ideas.”

“None here,” Oliver replied.

“Here either,” Cedric added. “We’ll try to keep them distracted so you can investigate.”

“Brilliant,” Eliza replied. “I’ll report back as soon as I can.”

“Good,” Cedric said.

“And Eliza?” Cedric added as she started walking away.

“Yes?”

“You had better find something. Melville isn’t built for this.”

“I know,” Eliza replied, the weight of expectations nearly crushing her as she headed back into the garden.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As she walked towards the storybook cottage, Eliza found herself struck by a pang of loneliness. Back home, she would always have done this sort of walk with her dog, Scout, and she couldn't help but think about how much he would have loved it here.

There were so many places to explore in a garden like this, and with Spring having fully sprung, the opportunity for new and exciting smells was virtually endless. She could see Scout now, traipsing through the tulips or jaunting through the jonquils, nose to the ground and tail high in the air, wagging so hard it could power a city block.

I'll have to take him for a special walk when I get home, she thought. *Somewhere outside of Thistlewood.* He deserved a new adventure, and Eliza was determined to provide it for him. Just as soon as she could solve this case and clear her brother of murder.

Although the pressure to find something of value was nearly crushing, Eliza couldn't help but smile as she approached the cottage. There was just something about the place. It was so utterly charming that one could not help but be cheered by the sight of it.

Eliza knocked on the door, unsure of precisely what she would do if the inhabitant answered but confident enough by now to believe she would figure it out on the way. After all, this was far from the first time she'd approached someone during a murder investigation without a clear plan. Over the last few months, she'd learned that, in these sorts of scenarios, sometimes one must simply be brave enough to experiment, to try and fail until one find something that works.

Unfortunately, her knock went unanswered. She tried again but to no avail. Whoever lived there clearly wasn't home.

That left Eliza at a crossroads of sorts. Obviously, the socially appropriate thing would be to simply leave and come

back again later when the occupant had, hopefully, returned. While Eliza was not typically one to be bound by social norms, even she would typically have been inclined to adhere to that one. But Melville was locked in a dungeon, alone and scared for his life, and right now, there was nothing on earth that felt quite as important as getting him out.

So, instead of turning to leave, Eliza checked quickly over her shoulder and, certain that no one could see her, gently tried turning the handle. It easily gave way, which left her with a decision to make: go inside and risk getting caught while massively invading someone's privacy (and, if she was being totally honest, probably breaking the law) or come back later and risk missing out on some potentially important information that could help clear Melville's name.

Ultimately, she decided that the chance to find something that might help Melville was worth undertaking the potential risk. So as quietly and unobtrusively as she could, she slipped through the door and into the cottage.

The place was every bit as charming on the inside as it was on the outside, with rich leather chairs and a warm stone fireplace and a bowl of beautiful, freshly-picked oranges in the center of the farmhouse table. It was tremendously homey, but there was also something that made it feel strangely un-lived in, like the sort of place someone came to when on vacation but not somewhere they stayed all the time.

Regardless of the permanency of their living situation, Eliza felt terribly guilty about invading someone else's space like this. But, as she reminded herself frequently as she moved throughout the house, she'd done it once before when working on a previous case and doing so had allowed her to uncover a key piece of evidence. While it hadn't ultimately cracked the case, it had certainly opened up new avenues of investigation, and it had also allowed her to make connections that helped her apprehend the real killer. It had been worth the risk she'd taken then, and she very much hoped the same would be true now.

She wandered swiftly through the cottage, doing her best to be both speedy and thorough. She wasn't sure precisely

what she was looking for, but she hoped she would know it when she saw it. As she moved through the bedroom, she was reminded of the clue she'd gotten from Melville, the flash of green fabric, so she hurried to the wardrobe in the hope of finding something inside that would match that description.

Unfortunately, she had no such luck. In fact, there wasn't anything in the cottage that seemed to shed any light whatsoever on its inhabitant or on the murder. So, with a deep sigh, Eliza let herself out of the cottage and began the trek back to the estate.

Disappointed though she was, Eliza knew she couldn't let herself get bogged down in those feelings, not when Melville's freedom was at stake. So she pushed them aside and did her best to focus on what came next.

She knew she still wanted to learn more about the inhabitant of the cottage, and if she wasn't going to be able to do that by speaking to them directly, then she needed to find someone who would be willing to share information with her. She was reasonably certain her tarte tatin had allowed her to make some headway with Chef John earlier, and while her pursuit of Rosie may have set things back a bit, she was reasonably certain she had also successfully convinced Rosie that she and her brothers were not some sort of gang of murderous marauders. Those two things combined made her think the kitchen might be the best place for her to go to get some answers, and even if they wouldn't talk to her, perhaps she could at least get something to eat. After all, she'd missed high tea, and the running around had left her positively famished.

Eliza made her way to the kitchen as quickly as she could, hoping that Rene's recipe had worked enough magic to earn her some friends or, at the very least, someone who was willing to talk to her. Thankfully, judging by Chef John's smile as she walked into the room, that appeared to be the case.

"Ah, Miss Montagu," he said with a grin. "Shall I pull up a chair for you, or are you planning to make an abrupt exit again?"

“My apologies for that. I just...” Eliza trailed off, unsure how to finish that sentence in a way that didn’t sound bad. After all, the truth—“I chased your cook through the garden because I thought she might be a murderer”—didn’t seem likely to win her any favors.

“No need to apologize,” the chef interrupted. “A lady who can cook and compete in track and field? You are easily the most interesting guest we’ve had in ages.”

Eliza laughed.

“Are you hungry? If you promise to share that tarte tatin recipe with me, I’ll make you anything you want.”

“Oh, no need to go out of your way. If you have any leftovers from tea—”

“Of course. Give me just a moment,” John said, grabbing a plate and quickly piling it high with delectable tea sandwiches—cucumber with mint, coronation chicken, and smoked salmon with cream cheese—as well as gorgeous, crumbly scones with silky clotted cream and a stunning Victoria sponge with lemon curd.

“You promise to share that recipe?” he asked, grinning as he held the plate just out of Eliza’s reach.

“Of course,” she replied.

“Alright then,” he said, finally placing the plate in front of her. She went for the Victoria sponge first; her troubles temporarily melted away as she savored the impossibly light cake and the way its sweetness played off the sharpness of the creamy lemon curd.

“I take it it’s to your satisfaction?” John asked.

“It’s the bee’s knees,” Eliza replied.

“Wonderful. Is that all you came for? Just the food? Because I could have sent that up for you...”

“No,” Eliza admitted. “Though I assure you, the cake alone would have been worth the trip.”

John's face lit up at that, and Eliza felt grateful to finally feel as though she was making a friend in the house.

"I stumbled upon a little cottage during my, uh, jaunt in the garden today. I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about it? I wasn't aware of anyone else living on the estate?"

"Ah, you must be referring to Lord Edward's place," John explained.

"Oh! I didn't realize he lived here."

"He doesn't—or, at least, not entirely. He has his own estate, of course. But he's here quite often. His family does a great deal of business with the Coopers, and he and Lord Cooper are frequent hunting companions. There are several months of the year where he spends more time here than at home."

He's basically their Oliver, Eliza thought, recognizing that relationship immediately.

"But why set him up in the cottage?" Eliza asked. "Why not simply allow him to stay in the main house?"

"Because Lord Cooper has daughters."

"Oh!" Eliza said, surprised and potentially very intrigued. "Does he have a reputation for—"

"Oh, no, nothing like that," John quickly interjected. "It's just that, there's an expectation that Lord Edwards will be marrying into the family. And until that happens, Lady Cooper is eager to avoid even the slightest hint of impropriety."

"Which daughter is he expected to marry?" Eliza asked, desperately hoping the answer was Elsie. If it was, it could make Lord Edwards a viable suspect. After all, a lover's quarrel was an excellent motive for murder, and the fact that she and Melville had wound up in bed together was enough to make any potential fiancée jealous. Perhaps even jealous enough to do something foolish.

"The youngest," Chef John answered, officially dashing Eliza's hopes. But she couldn't help but feel as though there

was still something there to investigate. Her gut was telling her this wasn't a dead end. At least, not yet.

She needed to speak with Beatrice.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It took some searching, but Eliza eventually managed to locate Beatrice in the drawing room. She was sat at a stunning grand piano playing a concerto that Eliza was fairly sure had been written by Bach, but upon further reflection, could also have been Schubert.

“May I help you?” Beatrice asked coolly when it became clear that Eliza was not going to leave simply because Beatrice was ignoring her.

“I was hoping we could talk,” Eliza replied.

“You can talk,” Beatrice countered, fingers still flying across the ivory and black keys. “Hardly seems I can stop you.”

Eliza sighed. She wasn’t exactly expecting a warm reception from Beatrice, but she hadn’t expected her to be this dismissive either. The last time they’d spoken, Beatrice had seemed genuinely frightened of her, and while that wasn’t ideal, Eliza felt far more prepared to ease Beatrice’s fear than she did her rage.

“I think we may have gotten off on the wrong foot,” Eliza began. “I understand that tensions are high, but—”

“High?” Beatrice asked, nearly exploding. “Tensions are not merely high, Ms. Montagu. My mother has taken to her bed. She has not stopped sobbing all morning. My father is more upset than I have ever seen him, and your family is still just here, traipsing about as though nothing has happened, making everything worse.”

Beatrice somehow managed to play all the way through that rant, hitting the keys harder with each escalation of her frustration until the concerto descended into a cacophony of rage.

“And now you’ve made me lose my place,” she said, glaring at Eliza through narrowed eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Eliza said. “Truly. About all of it. And believe me, if we could leave, we would, but I cannot go anywhere until I’ve cleared my brother’s name.”

Beatrice studied her for a moment. Her face softened.

“You really believe that, don’t you? That he’s innocent, I mean.”

“I don’t just believe it,” Eliza said firmly. “I know it. With every fiber of my being. And I’m not leaving here until I’ve proven it.”

“And you think I can help?” Beatrice asked skeptically.

“Perhaps,” Eliza said. “At the very least, I think it’s worth a conversation to find out.”

Beatrice considered that logic for a moment before finally nodding.

“Alright,” she said. “The sooner you’re gone, the sooner we can back to some semblance of normalcy. And if answering your questions will help accelerate that, then I’m willing to do it.”

“Thank you,” Eliza replied. “I truly appreciate it.”

“So, what do you want to know?” Beatrice asked.

“I was hoping you could tell me a bit about Lord Edwards,” Eliza began. “I heard the two of you—”

“There is no ‘two of us’,” Beatrice interrupted. “At least, not as far as I was concerned. I know there was talk of us getting married, but I had no interest whatsoever in doing so.”

“Ah—parents pushing you into a marriage you don’t want. Now that’s a situation I’m intimately familiar with. We might actually be kindred spirits, you and I.”

“I take it you are also the family disappointment?” Beatrice asked with just the slightest hint of a smile.

“Most days,” Eliza said. “Sometimes Melville and I share the title.”

Beatrice laughed in spite of herself, and Eliza felt her heart soar with hope. This was exactly the sort of inroad she needed if she was going to get answers.

“Is your objection to him or marriage in general?” Eliza asked.

“A bit of both,” Beatrice responded. “I find the whole ritual terribly antiquated.”

“As do I!” Eliza exclaimed, thrilled to find common ground.

“I want to have my own life. My own adventures. And none of that is possible if I’m shackled to some man and his title.”

That one gave Eliza a moment of pause. It was precisely the sort of thing she worried about now that she had begun to see a future with Oliver. Was loving him going to require her to give away parts of herself she was unwilling to lose?

She shoved the thought away quickly, both because it was unpleasant and because now was the absolute worst time for an existential crisis. She needed to focus on the matter at hand.

“I understand completely,” she began. “Though, if you had to be shackled to someone, at least Lord Edwards isn’t entirely unpleasant to look at.”

Beatrice laughed.

“No, I suppose not.”

“Although that hardly matters if he’s a bore,” Eliza added.

“It’s not that,” Beatrice replied. “He’s just not... he’s not for me, that’s all. And to be honest, I don’t think I’m for him either.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He always seemed much more interested in Elsie,” Beatrice explained. “In fact, if rumors is to be believed, he made some advances towards her.”

“Was she interested?”

“No,” Beatrice replied. “From what I’ve heard, she spurned him quite aggressively. Publicly, too. The tittle-tattle is that he was quite embarrassed. But that was typical Elsie. Never cared about anyone’s feelings but her own.”

“Thank you, Beatrice. This has been both helpful and deeply illuminating,” Eliza said.

Beatrice returned to the piano, the sounds of the concerto filling the room as Eliza rushed off to tell Oliver the good news. Finally, after all the back and forth and dead ends, they had a truly viable suspect.

“Come with me,” Eliza whispered as she leaned down over Oliver’s shoulder. He was sitting in the Great Library reading some work or other by Dickens, and he was utterly startled by Eliza’s arrival. In fact, he nearly jumped out of his skin when he first heard her, but his surprise quickly turned to delight at the sight of her.

Wordlessly, he grinned and followed Eliza out of the Great Library, down the hall, and towards the foyer. Checking quickly to make sure they weren’t followed, they opened the French doors that led out into the garden and stepped outside.

As soon as they entered the walled garden, Oliver slipped his hand into hers, and Eliza felt her whole body start to relax. She wasn’t sure she would ever get used to just how comforting she found his presence.

Together, they made their way to a more secluded part of the garden, where Oliver gestured towards a large, rod iron bench.

“Would you like to sit?” He asked.

Eliza nodded, and the two sat down on the bench. Their knees were just barely touched, but still, Eliza could feel herself beginning to flush. Oliver took her face in his hands and kissed her, and Eliza felt warm all over.

“Sorry,” he said with that charming grin of his. “Just had to do that first. I’ve been thinking about it all day.”

Eliza felt herself blushing.

“But I’m assuming you brought me out here for a different reason?” he asked.

“I did,” Eliza said with a smile. “Though it would have been worth it just for that.”

This time, Oliver was the one blushing.

“I think I have a solid lead,” she continued.

“Oh! Do tell!”

“The cabin in the woods—it belongs to Lord Edwards. Apparently there was an expectation that he would marry Beatrice, but I just spoke with her, and it turns out she had no interest in proceeding with the marriage.”

“I can see why that might motivate him to kill Beatrice—crime of passion and all that. But not Elsie. What would that have to do with her?”

“As it turns out, he wasn’t interested in Beatrice either. But he was quite interested in Elsie.”

“Ah,” Oliver said, finally starting to put the pieces together. “And I take it Elsie did not share his interest?”

“She did not,” Eliza said. “And she apparently opted to make that quite clear in a very public forum.”

“Must have been very embarrassing for him,” Oliver said.

“Exactly. And then, to have Melville show up and almost immediately fall into bed with her? I imagine that would have been quite the blow to his ego. Could have been a trigger.”

“Men have certainly killed for less,” Oliver mused, a statement that Eliza found both depressing and entirely accurate.

“So what do we do now?” Oliver asked. “What’s the play?”

“Normally, I would go speak with him, but I was actually thinking there might be a better approach.”

“And what’s that?”

“I think you should do it,” Eliza began. “You could get him talking—pretend you’re just like him. That you know what it is to be spurned by the object of your affection. Make him feel safe.”

“Do you really think that would work?” Oliver asked.

“I have no idea,” Eliza said truthfully. “But I think it’s the best chance we’ve got. And with Melville stuck alone in that dungeon, at the very least, I think we have to try.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Remember,” Eliza said as they approached the cottage. “This man has taken a serious blow to his ego, so the more you can build him up and make him feel understood, the more likely he is to talk.”

“I know the type, love,” Oliver said, doing his best to sound reassuring without being dismissive, a line Eliza knew was hard to walk but nevertheless always appreciated him trying.

“And look for any hint of green fabric,” Eliza added. She wished she could stop talking—she didn’t want Oliver to think that she had any doubts about his ability to do this—but she was just so nervous. It was hard handing this part of the investigation over to someone else. She’d never had to do that before, and while she knew it was strategically smart, it felt fundamentally wrong, somehow.

“That was the one thing Melville thought he remembered from last night,” she continued, still unable to stop herself. “I looked while I was in the cottage, but—”

“I thought he wasn’t in when you came by earlier?” Oliver interrupted.

“He wasn’t,” Eliza replied.

“So you just...?”

“The door was unlocked,” Eliza said. “I know that doesn’t entirely justify it, but Melville is in a dungeon and desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Oliver couldn’t argue with that, so Eliza continued.

“I was moving quickly in hopes of avoiding detection, so it’s possible I missed something. I tend to doubt it, but still, it would be wise to keep an eye out just in case.”

“Of course,” Oliver said. “I will keep an eye out for anything that even resembles green fabric.”

“Smashing,” Eliza replied. “Thank you.”

“Is that it?” Oliver asked as they approached a clearing that offered the first glimpse of the cottage.

“It is,” Eliza confirmed.

“What will you do while I’m in there?”

“I’m going to see if I can find some way to listen in. In these sorts of conversations, you have to be so quick on your feet—constantly planning your next move and trying to anticipate their responses—that it would be easy to miss an important detail here or there. I figure if I can listen in then you can just focus on having the conversation, and I can focus on analyzing it for any signs of clues or hints that might help with Melville.”

“That sounds like a brilliant plan,” Oliver said as they approached the cottage, giving her hand a quick squeeze before letting it go. “I’ll meet you back out here shortly.”

“Good luck in there,” Eliza offered.

“Thank you,” he said, and he quickly pulled her into him for one last kiss. Then he approached the door, and Eliza ensconced herself in some nearby bushes to ensure she would escape detection should Lord Edwards actually answer the door this time.

Eliza held her breath as Oliver knocked on the door, practically willing it to open. Thankfully, she didn’t have to wait long for that wish to come to fruition, as Lord Edwards appeared momentarily after opening the door and regarding Oliver with an expression of surprise.

“Hello,” Lord Edwards said finally. “Can I help you, Lord...”

“Please, call me Oliver.”

“Phillip,” Lord Edwards replied.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, Phillip,” Oliver began. “I just couldn’t sit in that house any longer. The way everyone’s watching us—it’s like being in some sort of fishbowl. And I thought a walk would be enough to help things feel less...”

claustrophobic, but there's really just only so much time one can spend in the gardens alone before they start to lose their magic."

"I think the transcendentalists would likely have something to say about that," Lord Edwards said with a smile.

"Perhaps," Oliver replied. "But I never was much of a Thoreau man, myself. And I think I could take him in a fight."

Lord Edwards laughed before opening the door a bit wider.

"Well, then, by all means, please come in. If you could take on Thoreau, I'd hate to see what you could do with me."

Oliver laughed and patted him on the back, saying, "Thanks, old sport," as he crossed the threshold. Lord Edwards quickly closed the door behind them, leaving Eliza with no ability to continue listening to the conversation.

Once she was certain they were thoroughly settled inside, Eliza slipped out of the bushes where she had been hiding and, quietly as she could, made her way to the house. Normally, she wouldn't have held out much hope of finding an ideal spot from which to eavesdrop, but the weather was absolutely gorgeous today. Warm, but not too warm, with a gentle breeze that carried with it the scent of jonquils and jasmine, precisely the sort of weather that might entice one to open a window, and if Lord Edwards had done that, Eliza would have exactly the access point she needed to continue listening in.

Doing her best to move quickly but quietly, Eliza made her way around the house, searching for any hint of an open window. Thankfully, she found one towards the back of the cottage that seemed to be exceptionally well located. She approached it cautiously, then peaked her head up just long enough to see what was inside, and quickly discovered that this placed her just outside of the kitchen where Lord Edwards and Oliver were currently having a spot of tea.

Smashing! Eliza thought. *What luck!*

She crouched down beside the window, still out of sight but close enough to listen to the conversation if she strained her ears enough.

“I should never have come here,” she heard Oliver saying.

“Why did you come?” Lord Edwards asked. “I understand Melville and Cedric’s decision to come. With their father unable to attend, it makes sense that they would want to be here to represent the family’s business interests. But as I understand it, you’re not terribly involved in their business, correct?”

“Correct,” Oliver affirmed. “I mean, I do business with them, but nothing pertinent to what they’re doing here.

“Then why come?” Lord Edwards asked, genuinely confused.

“Can I trust you with a secret?” Oliver asked.

Smart, Eliza thought. Asking to share a secret with Lord Edwards was a brilliant way of creating an almost instant friendship and increasing the feelings of trust between them. Lord Edwards was far more likely to share something personal with him if Oliver had already gone ahead and shared something personal first.

I knew he was the right person for this. Eliza felt her heart swell with pride. Oliver really was so very bright and so good with people, both of which were qualities she found terribly attractive. She couldn’t help listening to him now and feeling as though he was the right person for, well, pretty much everything.

“Of course,” Lord Edwards replied. “Anything you wish to share shall never leave this table.”

“Brilliant,” Oliver said, taking his time before adding, “This is hard to even say out loud. I’ve never told anyone.”

“Would it help if we switched from tea to brandy?” Lord Edwards asked.

“You know, mate, I think it probably would,” Oliver replied with a laugh.

Eliza heard the sound of a chair being pushed back from the table, followed by footsteps which, Eliza assumed, were a sign that Lord Edwards had gone to grab the brandy. This, too,

seemed to Eliza like an excellent step forward in their quest to get Lord Edwards to talk.

Eliza listened as Lord Edwards poured two glasses, one of which he handed to Oliver. She could practically see him sitting there, taking a swig and then leaning in as though he was working up the courage to share something very deep and difficult.

“I’m in love with Miss Montagu,” Oliver said finally, and Eliza felt her stomach buzz with butterflies. When she’d told Oliver to try and find common ground, this had not been at all what she was expecting. She’d never heard him admit that to anyone else before, and even if it was part of a larger ploy, she still couldn’t help but be impacted by what somehow felt like a fairly momentous occasion.

“Ah, I see,” Lord Edwards replied.

“I came here hoping to spend time with her. I’ve long known she’s not the marrying kind, but I was hoping if we could get some time together here, away from everything...”

“I take it it’s not gone as you’d hoped?”

“Not in the slightest,” Oliver said with a sigh. “And while I’d like to blame it on the murder, at some point, I think I’m just going to have to accept the truth. I think she’s the most beautiful dame in all of England, and she—well, she barely even knows I’m alive.”

“I’m sorry, old chap,” Lord Edwards offered. “I understand the feeling. I’ve been there myself.”

“I’m sorry, mate. It’s a terrible place to be.”

Eliza was struggling with just how slow Oliver was playing this. She wanted him to ask more questions—to inquire about the girl he’d been in this place with, but she tried to push her anxiety to the side. She’d decided that Oliver was the best person for this job, and now she needed to trust him to do it.

Luckily, Oliver’s instincts to sit back and let Lord Edwards come to him turned out to be good ones, as Lord Edwards quickly began opening up without him having to push at all,

which was vastly superior to doing so under interrogation. They were far more likely to get honest, unfiltered information this way.

“I was actually quite taken with Elsie for a time,” he said.

“The victim? I’m so sorry. You must be terribly shaken by the loss.”

“Not as much as you’d think,” Lord Edwards said.

“Unrequited love is awful, but I moved on from that feeling with Elsie quite quickly.

“How?” Oliver asked.

“I truly got to know her,” Lord Edwards replied matter-of-factly. “And I quickly came to realize that her heart was every bit as black as her face was beautiful. Elsie was a gorgeous girl on the outside, but on the inside, she was manipulative and calculating and cruel. Sometimes, not having them love you back is the very best thing that can happen to a man. You’ll see.”

He placed a reassuring hand on Oliver’s shoulder.

Eliza felt her heart sink. If Lord Edwards was no longer interested in Elsie, then he had no reason to be jealous of Melville or angry about the two of them spending the evening together. In fact, he had no motive whatsoever. And if that was the case, then she and Oliver had officially found themselves at yet another dead end.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“You were wonderful back there,” Eliza said, trying to hide her disappointment as she and Oliver made their way back to the main estate.

“Thank you,” Oliver said, once again slipping his hand into hers.

Eliza felt overwhelmed by the desire to ask him to hold her. She was so terribly worried about Melville and so frustrated by her inability to solve everything, and so disheartened by their once promising lead turning out to be yet another dead end, and the only thing she could possibly imagine making any of that feel any better was the warmth of his embrace. But they were within sight of the estate now—too close to prying eyes. So, instead, she simply said:

“I know it wasn’t the outcome we were hoping for, but you did everything right.”

If she couldn’t make herself feel better, at least she could try and cheer Oliver up. She could tell he was as upset by the dead end as she was.

“Thank you,” he replied, also doing his best to try and hide his disappointment. “Certainly would have been easier if he’d been the killer, but...”

“But at least now we won’t waste any more time pursuing that avenue of investigation,” Eliza offered. “And that matters. Time is everything here, and you saved us a great deal by getting to the bottom of things with Lord Edwards. And confirming that he not only had no motive, but he also had an alibi was exceptionally smart. Knowing that he was with Ada discussing the hunting trip helps rule them both out, which will benefit us greatly in the long run.”

Oliver did his best to muster that charming smile of his, but it was half-hearted at best.

“You are very kind, ‘Liza.”

“Careful,” Eliza said, summing her best smile in return. “Can’t have word of that getting out. It would be terrible for my reputation.”

Oliver laughed—a real laugh this time—and for just a moment, Eliza felt the weight on her shoulders lift ever so slightly.

“I wish...”

“Me too,” Oliver replied. “Oh, Eliza, me too.”

As they approached the entrance to the main house, Oliver let go of Eliza’s hand, and she found herself cursing this place and all of the societal nonsense that kept her from being able to just be with the man she loved without having to worry about scandal or expectations or familial pressure.

“What now?” he asked as they approached the magnificent spiral staircase in the center of the Great Hall.

“We should probably dress for dinner,” Eliza replied.

“That seems so... I mean, shouldn’t we... with Melville in the dungeon and all...” Oliver sputtered, and although he was seemingly unable to finish that thought, Eliza understood exactly what he was saying.

“I know,” she replied. “But without any other ideas or prospective avenues of investigation, there’s not much else we can do. Sometimes, in cases like this, the best thing you can do is try and clear your mind and find a sense of normalcy so that the next idea can come to you.”

“We will figure this out, Liza,” he said, turning to look at her. Those bright blue eyes of his seemed to bore directly into her soul, and she never ceased to be amazed by just how much comfort she could take in even the simplest of reassurances from him.

She nodded, unable to find the words she wanted. Because as much as she appreciated his reassurance, and as much comfort as she found in it, the truth was that Eliza wasn’t sure he was right. With every passing minute, she was feeling less and less confident in her ability to solve this, and with

Melville's life on the line, the fear of that was almost more than she could bear.

By the time she closed the door to the guest room behind her, alone with her thoughts and with nothing to distract her from them, Eliza was near tears. It was all just too much, and she was so very tired—tired of not knowing what to do, tired of dead ends, tired of missing Oliver, tired of keeping secrets, tired of feeling as though the weight of the world was on her shoulders and she had no choice but to carry it alone.

But she also knew neither tears nor those thoughts were productive. She couldn't afford to waste time on either, so instead, she did her best to try and rally. She took a few deep breaths and began forcing herself to go through the motions of dressing for dinner, hoping that if she behaved as though everything was okay; eventually, her brain would have some sort of revelation that would actually make that true. It seemed a ludicrous idea on the surface, but she'd seen it work during investigations before. And if it had worked then, who was to say it couldn't work now?

As she pulled on her dinner gloves and examined herself in the mirror, she thought back to dinner the previous evening. How she wished Melville could have just focused on business instead of following his baser instincts. If he had, they wouldn't have been in this mess.

And then, she thought of Melville again, how scared and alone he looked in that dungeon and just how little she had to go on to help him. After all, a possible glimpse of green fabric hardly seemed like the sort of clue that was going to break the case wide open.

But that's when it struck her—if the killer had been wearing green that night, and Melville had caught a glimpse of them, that meant, at some point, the killer had actually been in the room with him and Elsie. And if that was the case, did poison really make sense as the cause of death? If someone was going to poison Elsie, it would have been far easier to deliver that poison during dinner. What sort of person would forgo that route and simply show up in her room with poison

in the middle of the night? And how would they persuade her to eat it?

It occurred to Eliza now that the most logical answer to that question was that they wouldn't. And if that was the case, poison was quite likely not the cause of death at all.

Eliza hurried out of her room, eager to explore this new avenue of investigation. Perhaps if she could figure out the actual cause of death, it would get her closer to finding the killer. She considered knocking on Oliver's door and sharing her theory with him, but she decided to hold off. She wanted to ensure there was something of value here before she got his hopes up. So, instead of bringing him with her, she hurried downstairs, eager to draw some sort of conclusion before they were all expected at dinner.

Eliza wasn't entirely sure how to go about investigating this idea, but she felt like the kitchen was as good a place to start as any. After all, there were at least two members of the staff there that she thought might be willing to talk to her, and Rosie had been adamant all along that no one on the staff would have poisoned Elsie. Perhaps she, too, was skeptical of the idea of poison. If so, getting her opinion could prove useful.

The kitchen was a flurry of activity when Eliza arrived, which didn't exactly come as a surprise. After all, the lead-up to any sort of meal was usually a very busy time in the kitchen, but that was especially true with dinner in these sorts of houses.

"It's not a great time," Chef John said when he saw her. "Unless you want to jump in and help, of course."

He was clearly joking, but Eliza saw an opportunity. Rosie was in the corner, working on dessert, and helping her would provide excellent cover for a conversation.

"Hand me a whisk," Eliza said with a smile.

Chef John stared at her for a moment, trying to decipher whether she was kidding.

“I’m at my best with pastry, but you could certainly put me on something savory if you prefer.”

“No... pastry... pastry will be fine,” he stammered, clearly taken aback by Eliza’s willingness to help. “Rosie’s working on a treacle tart if you’d like to assist.”

“Of course,” Eliza said, approaching Rosie and silently delighting in the fact that her plan appeared to be working.

“You are a fascinating woman, Lady Montagu,” Chef John said as Eliza crossed over to Rosie and began working on making custard to go alongside the tart.

“Thank you,” Eliza replied with a grin. “I find life too short to be anything but.”

Eliza worked quietly on the custard for a few minutes. She wanted to be very intentional in her approach with Rosie. She knew she was prone to be skittish, and Eliza didn’t want to come on too strong.

“That’s a gorgeous pie crust,” she said finally, once she could tell Rosie had started to relax.

“Thank you,” Rosie said, looking up at her shyly with just a hint of a smile. “I’m impressed you know ‘ow to make a custard. I don’t think any of the Coopers even know ‘ow to find the kitchen.”

Eliza laughed.

“I like baking. It soothes me.”

“Me too,” Rosie agreed.

“Thank you again for talking to me this morning,” Eliza said. “I know you were scared, but it was very helpful.”

“You’re welcome,” Rosie replied. “Sorry for thinkin’ you were a family of murderers and such. If it ‘elps any, I don’t think so anymore.”

“That does help,” Eliza said, scalding her milk with vanilla bean. “I was actually thinking about something else you said earlier.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“You just seemed so certain that none of the kitchen staff would have poisoned the food. And that got me to wondering if, perhaps, maybe Elsie wasn’t ever even poisoned at all.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me. The idea of someone poisonin’ her didn’t never make no sense to me in the first place.”

“But it would have to be something similar. Something that mimics the signs of poisoning. Otherwise Constable Brown probably would have arrived at a different cause of death,” Eliza mused as she whisked sugar, cornstarch, and salt into her egg yolks. “I just can’t figure out what that would be...”

“Would allergies work like that?” Rosie asked as she put the pie crust into the oven.

“Maybe,” Eliza said, that familiar beat of hope rising up in her chest. “Why? Was Elsie allergic to something?”

“Oh, yes. Deathly allergic to peaches, she was. Even the slightest drop of peach nectar and her throat would close right up. That’s why we never serve dishes with peaches in them. Don’t even ‘ave any in the kitchen.”

But that didn’t mean they didn’t have them somewhere, Eliza thought. And if that was all it took—just a drop of nectar to essentially suffocate her, well, the killer could likely have administered that to Elsie in her sleep.

If that was the case, it meant the killer was not only someone who knew about Elsie’s allergy but also someone who had access to her bedroom, and that narrowed the suspect list considerably.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Eliza's mind was racing. She knew that this was important information, but she wasn't sure how to make all of the pieces fit together. More than that, she wasn't sure how to use this information to her advantage—at least not yet.

So, she did what she always did when she felt overwhelmed and under-informed. She gathered more information.

“If you're right and it was her allergy,” Eliza began, “where do you think the killer would have gotten the peaches? You said you all don't keep any in the kitchen, right?”

“No,” Rosie said. “They're strictly forbidden. But there is a peach tree towards the back of the property. It's an heirloom tree of some sort. Been on the property for generations. They couldn't bring themselves to cut it down just 'cause Elsie was allergic, so we all just steer clear of it instead.”

“Where, exactly?” Eliza asked. She wasn't sure what good finding this tree would do, but she felt in her gut as though looking for it was the next logical step.

“There's a walled garden a few kilometers out. Mostly veg and herbs and such, but they've got some fruit trees, too. Peach tree is in there,” Rosie said.

“Thank you, Rosie. You've been a huge help.”

“Thank you,” Rosie countered. “It was nice not 'avin' to make that custard all alone. You can come talk to me anytime if you're gonna do the cookin' while you're 'ere.”

Eliza smiled before hurrying out of the kitchen and back to Oliver's room. She'd barely made it to the lobby, however, when she bumped into him.

“You're a surprise!” she said with a smile.

“I was looking for you,” he replied. “I came by your room to see if I could escort you to dinner, but you weren't there.”

“I had an idea I wanted to explore,” Eliza said.

“Why didn’t you come get me?”

“That’s what I was doing now,” Eliza replied. “I think I’ve figured out what killed Elsie, and it wasn’t poison.”

“Do tell!”

“Come with me,” Eliza said, guiding him out to the garden.

“What are we looking for?” Oliver asked.

“A peach tree.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I think that’s what killed her. Poison didn’t make sense. Melville saw someone in Elsie’s room that night, and sneaking in to force her to eat poison just isn’t a viable theory of the crime. But Elsie was fatally allergic to peaches. And sneaking in to slip her some peach nectar in her sleep? Well, that... that seems like a plausible explanation.”

“So what are you hoping to accomplish by finding the tree?” Oliver asked.

“I’m not sure. But Rosie said they don’t keep any peaches in the kitchen, so I figured if I could at least prove that they had some on the grounds, perhaps Constable Brown would be more inclined to believe my theory.”

“So you wanted to make sure the tree was blooming before you went to him?”

“Exactly,” Eliza replied.

“Have I told you lately how endlessly attractive I find your intellect?” Oliver asked.

“Have I told you lately how much I appreciate the fact that you can keep up with me?” Eliza replied, the twinkle starting to come back into her eye.

She grabbed Oliver’s hand as they hurried through the garden, ultimately coming upon the spot where Rosie had told Eliza she could find the peach tree. Eliza’s heart sank the

moment she laid eyes on it. It was nowhere near blooming season. Wherever the killer got the peaches, it certainly wasn't from here.

“Just because this tree doesn't have peaches doesn't mean the killer couldn't still have gotten them from somewhere,” Oliver said, squeezing Eliza's hand gently. “I know this is disappointing, but there are lots of other possibilities.”

“That's true,” Eliza agreed, doing her best not to lose hope. “After all, they could have preserved them and hidden them somewhere. Could have jarred them or canned them...”

“Exactly,” Oliver agreed.

“The question is, what do we do with that information? I mean, we can't very well search every room on the property. There are hundreds of them, and besides, the Coopers are suspicious enough of us as it is.”

“That's true,” Oliver said. “But you know who could search every room...”

Eliza knew the answer to that question immediately. She'd already been considering it herself. But getting Constable Brown to help them meant having to admit to him that she'd been running a parallel investigation, and Eliza couldn't imagine that ending in anything other than a kerfuffle.

Still, if she was being honest, she had little other choice.

“We need to find Constable Brown,” she said finally, desperately hoping he'd find this theory of the crime convincing enough to make telling him worth any potential consequences.

It took some asking around, but Eliza was eventually able to locate Constable Brown in a makeshift office they had set up for him in one of Lord Cooper's studies. Oliver had offered to come in with her, but Eliza felt like this was the sort of conversation she should have alone—a decision she quickly began to regret as she stood outside the study door, trying to gather her courage without any backup.

Hell's bells, Eliza, you're being ridiculous. You've never needed a man to help make you brave before, and you're not

about to start being that sort of woman now, she thought as she summoned her courage and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Constable Brown called out, so Eliza pushed open the thick oak door and did her best to stride in with confidence.

“Lady Montagu, this is a surprise,” he said, eyeing her curiously. “What brings you here?”

“I—I had a theory I wanted to share,” Eliza replied.

“A theory?”

“Yes. I’ve been doing some digging—”

“Some investigating you mean?”

“You could call it that...”

“And refresh my memory,” he said, his tone dripping with condescension in a way Eliza found utterly infuriating. “Was that something we asked you to do?”

“No,” Eliza replied. “But—”

“But you took it upon yourself anyway,” he interrupted, clearly more than slightly miffed that Eliza had stepped into what he clearly viewed as his domain.

Eliza paused for a moment. She wanted to find the right answer—the right word or phrase to make him understand. But ultimately, all that came out was, “Melville is my brother.”

And to her surprise, that sincerity seemed to be enough.

“I have a brother, too,” Constable Brown said, gesturing towards a chair and inviting Eliza to sit. “If he was locked in a dungeon under suspicion of murder, I’d most certainly be disobeying orders as well.”

Eliza smiled. Perhaps there was hope for this conversation after all.

“So, tell me, Miss Montagu,” Constable Brown continued. “What did you find?”

“I don’t think the victim was poisoned,” Eliza began.

“And what makes you say that?”

“The time of death was quite a while after dinner. Typically, poison would be much faster acting. Plus, Melville has a memory of someone else being in the room. If someone was going to poison Elsie, it would have been far easier to do it at dinner. Sneaking into her room at night to try and force feed her something poisoned hardly seems like a rational approach.”

“That may be true, but her death had all the hallmarks of a poisoning. If it wasn’t poison, what do you propose it was?”

“Anaphylaxis,” Eliza replied. “The victim had a severe allergy to peaches. Even just a drop of peach nectar would have been enough to cause her throat to close up, essentially suffocating her. Force feeding her poison in the middle of the night seems highly improbable, but slipping her a drop of peach nectar in her sleep? Well that... that someone could do.”

“It’s an interesting theory...” Constable Brown said, stroking his considerable mustache.

“And one that effectively exonerates my brother,” Eliza replied. “He didn’t know anything about her peach allergy. None of my family members did, nor did Lord Fairfax. But virtually everyone else here knew, and they could easily have procured peaches—kept them canned or preserved in a jar in their rooms somewhere.”

“That’s true...”

“And if you were to find such a jar, it would pretty clearly indicate that person was the killer and not my brother, would it not?”

“Perhaps,” Constable Brown began. “But that’s assuming I find something. It’s entirely possible the killer disposed of the evidence. Or that there were never any peaches at all and this whole theory is just tosh.”

“But you’ll never know unless you look,” Eliza insisted. “And with something as serious as a murder investigation, don’t you think it’s essential you run down every possible lead before you draw a conclusion?”

Constable Brown stared at Eliza, and for a moment, she worried that she'd gone too far. He'd been open to her theory, but that didn't mean she didn't still need to be cautious in her presentation. Men often didn't take kindly to being challenged by women, and she could not afford to present this in a way that caused his ego to get in the way of his common sense or his integrity.

Thankfully, Constable Brown seemed to be made of stronger stuff than Eliza initially gave him credit for.

“Go find the butler, please,” he said to Eliza finally. “And ask him to have everyone assemble in the parlor immediately. I'm going to need to have the house clear if I'm going to search everyone's rooms.

Eliza could not quite decide if her heart was pounding out of excitement or terror. If he found what he was looking for, Melville would be saved. But if his search turned up empty? What hope would there be for Melville then?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The atmosphere in the parlor that night was exceptionally tense, even by Eliza's standards—and as a suffragette and perpetual defier of familial expectations, she had been in a *lot* of tense environments, so that was really saying something.

It was so tense, in fact, that it made Eliza think of Great Aunt Martha, which hit her with an unexpected pang of sadness. She and Great Aunt Martha had certainly never been close. In fact, Great Aunt Martha's perpetual disapproval was one of the key factors that initially drove Eliza away from Thistlewood Manor in the first place. But, while they had never truly buried the hatchet, they had come to regard each other with what was, at the very least, a begrudging tolerance that, if she was being totally honest, deep down Eliza hoped would ultimately result in a mended relationship someday. The idea that she may not have that opportunity now stung in a way she had not anticipated.

This is not a helpful train of thought, Eliza told herself as she sat awkwardly congregated with Cedric and Oliver on the opposite side of the room from the Coopers, who were joined by Lord Edwards and some other man Eliza had not met upon arrival. *You need to focus on the matter at hand. You need to focus on Melville.*

“Do you know who that is?” Eliza asked, gesturing towards the man next to Lord Cooper.

“A cousin of some sort,” Cedric said. “Called Elliot, I think. He came up a few times when I was asking around to try and gather information, though never in any particularly interesting contexts. He's in from out of town.”

“Any idea why he wasn't at dinner the night we arrived?” Eliza asked

“Supposedly he'd been under the weather,” Cedric replied.

“Supposedly?” Oliver asked. “Is there speculation that may be untrue?”

“No,” Cedric said. “I just don’t trust anyone at this point.”

“Fair enough,” Eliza replied.

“That was a smart idea, with the peaches,” Cedric added, and for a moment, Eliza felt her heart swell with pride. Acknowledgment had not come easy from Cedric lately, and it felt good to finally receive some—even if it was for something other than the family business.

“You know,” he continued, “I know you’re excited about helping father and all, but if your role in the business doesn’t pan out, you could open quite the lady’s detective agency.”

And there was the fistful of knuckles that came with that compliment. He said it with a smile, a cadence almost like a joke, but Eliza knew what was underneath that statement. Cedric still wasn’t okay with the increased responsibility their father had entrusted her with. And he certainly hadn’t forgiven her for the comments he had overheard just before they left on the trip.

Eliza sighed. She wanted to lecture Cedric to talk about how she’d earned their father’s trust and this responsibility and how he needed to let this go, not just because he was being ridiculous, but because their brother was quite literally rotting in a dungeon. They had far bigger things to be worrying about right now. But she knew better. Cedric never had been able to take direction from her. It was a considerable part of the reason he found her role in the business so objectionable.

Oliver touched his nose, a secret code he and Eliza had developed early on in their relationship as a way for him to tell her he was thinking about her and wishing he could hold her.

Eliza smiled and pushed her hair gently behind her ear, her side of the code that was meant to signal, “You too. Blimey I wish we could get out of here.”

Oliver flashed that charming grin of his before asking, “So, the constable is searching everyone’s room?”

Eliza was certain he knew the answer to that question. She knew he was just trying to change the subject to break the tension between her and Cedric, and while she hated that things between them had gotten so tense that Oliver felt compelled to do so, she nevertheless appreciated the effort.

“Yes,” Eliza replied. “He asked for everyone to be assembled in the parlor while he conducted the search.”

“What about the servants?”

“The butler is having them wait in the Great Hall. I told him the constable wanted everyone in the parlor, but he insisted that ‘everyone’ could not possibly have included the servants.”

It was a classicist distinction Eliza had always loathed, one that seemed to suggest servants weren’t people simply because they were not rich, but she knew better than to get into an argument about it. She and her family were already unpopular enough in this house as it was, a fact that was made abundantly apparent by the way everyone on the Cooper’s side of the parlor was glaring at them.

Eliza studied the family carefully. She was inclined to believe Rosie when she said none of the kitchen staff had poisoned Elsie. And while she was certain that Elsie had been horrible to all of the staff members, not just those in the kitchen, Eliza was nonetheless skeptical of the idea that any of them would have killed her either. After all, they were used to being treated poorly by members of the family—that seemed to be the way of things in this house, and unfortunately, that was the way of things for much of the aristocracy. But that also meant they had a tolerance level that would typically be far too high for them to murder an employer over some harsh words or condescending conversations.

The Coopers, however, well, that was a different story entirely. They were used to the perpetual deference and servitude afforded to them by their titles. The cousin likely was as well. If Elsie had defied that, treating any of them as poorly as she treated the servants, they would have been far less likely to handle it with grace. And based on her

conversations with Beatrice, as well as Oliver's conversation with Lord Edwards, Eliza strongly suspected Elsie's poor behavior extended into virtually all of her interactions, not just with those she deemed beneath her station.

The more she thought about it, the more convinced Eliza became that the killer must have been a member of Elsie's own family. They would have been deeply familiar with her allergy, and they also would have had the easiest access to her bedroom. A servant headed towards that hall late at night would certainly have been noticed and deemed suspicious, but a family member? Why, they would have just been perceived as someone on their way to bed.

They also would have witnessed Melville's behavior with Elsie at dinner that night. They would have known that he would provide the perfect cover, an obvious suspect designed to throw suspicion off of them. That was likely why they chose that night to kill Elsie in the first place. Eliza's family's visit provided the killer with their best chance of escaping detection.

Whoever this killer was, they were smart. Eliza could only hope that she, Oliver, and Cedric were smarter.

It had been almost two hours since they were first corralled into the parlor, and much as she tried not to, Eliza was starting to lose hope. Surely, if there was something to be found, Constable Brown would have located it by now.

"There are an awful lot of rooms here," Oliver said as though he could read her mind. "It's going to take time to search them all, especially if he's being diligent about it."

"And we want that," Cedric added. "The last thing we need is for him to waste this lead by rushing and miss something that could clear Melville's name."

"You're right," Eliza agreed. "I just hate waiting."

“Patience never was your virtue,” Cedric said.

Eliza couldn’t argue with that one. “No,” she said with a half-laugh. “No it most certainly is not.”

“I wish they’d had us wait in the library or the drawing room. At least there we would have had something to do,” Oliver said.

“I wonder if that was part of his strategy,” Eliza mused. “Keep us in here so we get antsy, just in case that makes the killer more likely to slip up.”

“If it is, Constable Brown is far cleverer than I gave him credit for,” Cedric said. “If Melville were here, he’d likely confess to murder just to escape the boredom.”

Eliza laughed. Melville really would have done just about anything to avoid being stuck in a dull social situation like this one. But then, her mind flashed to that image of him in the dungeon, alone and scared, and suddenly, Eliza didn’t feel at all like laughing anymore.

She took a deep breath to try and steady her nerves and was just about to open her mouth to say something when, suddenly, Constable Brown burst into the room.

All heads in the room snapped immediately to the doorway, and there was a collective gasp as the room caught sight of what was in his hands.

Constable Brown was holding a tall glass jar jam-packed with peach slices soaking in thick, syrupy nectar.

For a moment, everyone was absolutely silent. It wasn’t until the constable sat the jar down on the table that the murmuring began, gaining speed, until it reached a fever pitch of questions, obfuscations, and accusations.

“Whose is it?”

“I’ve never seen that jar before in my life!”

“Do you know whose it is?”

“Don’t look at me, I’m as lost as you are.”

“Surely, it doesn’t belong to one of us. It must be those Montagus. I knew it all along.”

“How would we have known about the allergy?”

“You must have—”

“They must have—”

“Quiet!” Constable Brown exclaimed, his voice rising above the din. It took a moment, but soon, the room was so silent, you could hear a pin drop.

“I know who the killer is.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Everyone stared anxiously at Constable Brown, eagerly anticipating the reveal of the killer, but he said nothing. He clearly had a flare for the dramatic, and Eliza could tell that, despite the seriousness of the subject matter, he was enjoying this a bit.

Eliza couldn't exactly blame him. A man like that, a working class bloke, would typically have been utterly ignored and disregarded in a house like this. But not now. Now, his voice was the single most important in the room. He had everyone enraptured and hanging on his every word. She could understand the desire to hold onto that feeling as long as possible.

But just because she understood it didn't mean she wasn't terribly eager for him to hurry up and get on with it already. After all, he'd said he knew who the killer was. And the sooner Elsie's real murderer was arrested, the sooner they could get Melville out of the dungeon.

"Well...?" she said finally, hoping a little cueing would spur him on towards a swifter reveal.

"The peaches," he began, pausing dramatically and taking his time with each word, "were found in the room belonging to the victim's cousin, Elliot Cooper."

For a moment, no one spoke; they just turned and stared at Elliot—the rest of the Cooper family outraged and betrayed, Eliza, Cedric, and Oliver more curious than anything. Elliot hadn't even been on their radar as a potential suspect, so discovering he was the killer was a shock. Eliza had so many questions: what was his motive? And why hadn't he come up in their investigation in any real way? But she knew better than to voice any of those curiosities. Elliot's arrest was Melville's ticket to freedom, and she wasn't about to look that gift horse in the mouth.

The Coopers, on the other hand, had no problem voicing their questions.

“How could you?” Lord Cooper demanded, his voice was low, but he clenched his hands rapidly into fists.

“You’ve known each other since you were children” Lady Cooper added, her voice shaking and her chin quivering. “You—you were a guest in our home. We’re family. Why? Why would you...?”

“What could she possibly have done to deserve this?” Ada added.

Elliot was clearly shaken. He kept opening his mouth as if to say something and then closing it again. He reminded Eliza of a fish taken out of water, desperately grasping for oxygen but unable to find any.

“Answer her!” Lord Cooper thundered, and if ever there had been a time when a voice could have shaken an entire room, this would have been it.

“I—I—” Elliot stammered. “I—”

“Out with it then,” Lady Cooper demanded. “You took our daughter away from us. The very least you can do is—”

“I—” Elliot tried again. “I’ve never seen those before in my life. I—I don’t know where they came from, but—”

“They came from your bedroom,” Constable Brown interrupted.

“I understand that,” Elliot replied. “But I didn’t—I’m not—I’ve never seen them. I promise. I didn’t kill Elsie! I wouldn’t—I couldn’t—I... Someone must have planted them there. Don’t you see? I’m being framed!”

“A likely story,” Ada said dismissively.

“But it’s true! I—”

“Take him away,” Lord Cooper said, turning his attention to Constable Brown. “I cannot bare the sight of him.”

Constable Brown began to approach Elliot, whose panic was growing more intense by the moment.

“Bloody hell, I didn’t do this!” he cried! “You can’t— someone planted that jar! I didn’t do this!”

But Constable Brown continued to advance, and he pulled out his handcuffs as he approached.

“Place your hands behind your back, please.”

“This— this is an outrage,” Elliot cried. “Just because they were in my room doesn’t mean—I have no motive! I didn’t want Elsie dead. I—”

Constable Brown was tired of waiting for Elliot to comply, so he reached out and grabbed the man’s arms and pulled Elliot’s hands behind his back.

“You can’t just—I didn’t—” Elliot insisted, panic beginning to overwhelm him, but Constable Brown paid him no mind.

“You’re under arrest for the murder of Elsie Cooper,” Constable Brown said as he handcuffed Elliot and began to lead him away.

At first, it appeared as though Constable Brown was actively dragging an uncooperative Elliot out of the room, but upon further reflection, it occurred to Eliza that Elliot just had a profound limp. His protestations of innocence got quieter as he was led away, transitioning from shouted objections to mere whimpers, which were somehow even more painful to witness. There was something so pitiful about the whole scene that Eliza had to remind herself that Elliot was a cold-blooded killer to keep the scene from being utterly heartbreaking. After all, now wasn’t the time for heartbreak. It was a time for celebration. Finally, in no small part, thanks to the work she, Oliver and Cedric had done, Melville was about to be free.

The initial plan had been for the butler to go retrieve Melville alone, but Eliza wouldn’t hear of it. She had already been kept apart from Melville for far more time than she was

comfortable with, and she wasn't about to let that continue on one moment longer than it had to. Melville needed her, and, blimey, come hell or high water, she was going to be there.

Of course, once Eliza had successfully convinced the Coopers to let her attend Melville's release, Cedric insisted he had to come too. Not wanting to be left out, Oliver had also requested to join, which was how the three of them all wound up following Johnson through the garden after dark on a joint quest to get to the keep and free Melville.

"Blimey, this is grim," Cedric said as he entered the keep.

"It gets worse," Eliza replied. "You should see where they've put him."

Cedric audibly gasped as Johnson raised the trapdoor down to the dungeon.

"This is—why didn't you tell me...?" Cedric trailed off.

"It didn't... you were already motivated enough to get him out," Eliza replied. "And you knew he was in a dungeon. Describing how bad it was in great detail seemed like I would just be handing you an unnecessary burden."

Cedric stared at Eliza for a moment, trying to determine if this was an acceptable answer.

"We're getting him out, mate," Oliver interjected, a supportive hand on his shoulder. "That's the important bit."

"You're right," Cedric said finally. "You're right."

As Johnson dangled the rope ladder down into the dungeon, Eliza found herself holding her breath.

"Lord Montagu," Johnson called down. "I'm not sure if you can see it, but I've lowered the rope ladder. It should be alongside the north wall."

"Does this mean..." Melville began, his voice was small and thin. Eliza could tell from his tone that he was almost afraid to be hopeful.

"We're getting you out of here, Melville," Eliza replied, unable to wait for Johnson to answer him. "There's been an

arrest. We've cleared your name."

"So you'd best hurry and climb up here to hug your sister before she has a heart attack," Oliver said with a laugh.

Time seemed to stop as Eliza listened to the rustling of the rope ladder as Melville climbed up from the dungeon. She wasn't sure she'd ever been more eager to see someone than she was at this moment.

"Are you alright?" Eliza asked as he finally emerged. He looked thin and pale—and also smaller somehow.

It'll pass, she tried to reassure herself. Just the side effect of a few rough days is all. He'll be back to himself in no time.

"I could use a drink," he said with a grin, and just like that, Melville seemed like Melville again.

That really was no time at all, Eliza thought with a smile. She knew there would be lasting effects from this—that Melville would need some time to recover—but at that moment, she knew she had her brother back, and her heart soared at the thought.

"Way ahead of you, mate," Oliver replied, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a thin, silver flask.

"Is that my...?" Melville asked.

"Yes," Oliver replied. "I would have just brought mine, but I don't typically carry a flask around. I knew there was no way you would embark on a business trip without one, though, so, I ventured into your room and looked about a bit, and there it was. I assumed you wouldn't mind the slight invasion of privacy if it meant having immediate access to quality scotch."

"Oliver Fairfax," Melville said, reaching for the flask, "I have never loved you more."

Melville took a swig from the flask and smiled before continuing, "In fact, I'm not sure I've ever loved anyone more."

Oliver laughed and gave him a supportive slap on the back. "Let's get you out of here, shall we, old sport?"

“Yes, please,” Melville replied, taking another swig. “Now talk to me about food. I am positively famished.”

“I’m sure I could get the chef to whip you up something,” Eliza said as they began the walk back to the main house. “He and I have become rather friendly.”

“Of course you have,” Melville replied with a grin. “I’m reasonably certain there isn’t a chef alive you couldn’t win over.”

“Given the hour,” Cedric began, “we should also probably figured out where we’ll be staying this evening.”

“That’s true,” Eliza said. “Now that we’re not under Constable Brown’s orders to stay, our position here is considerably less clear.”

“Do you think Lord Cooper would be amenable to us staying another night?” Melville asked.

“That’s hard to say,” Eliza replied. “On the one hand, he at least no longer thinks we’re some sort of gang of murderous marauders.”

“That’s true,” Melville said. “And certainly an improvement.”

“Yes,” Eliza agreed. “But I also can’t imagine he or Lady Cooper are particularly thrilled about your... indiscretion with their late daughter.”

“That is likely also true,” Melville said.

“Perhaps we could speak with Lord Cooper when we get back,” Oliver suggested. “They may not be thrilled by the idea of us staying here, but it is quite late already. And while they may still be upset about Melville’s... escapades, they also threw him in a dungeon unnecessarily, so...”

“So perhaps if we can forget about that, they can forget about this,” Eliza offered.

“Exactly,” Oliver replied.

“At the very least, it seems worth lobbying for,” Cedric said.

“I agree,” Eliza replied. “We need more time here. We’ve been so focused on clearing Melville’s name that we have completely forsaken the trip’s original purpose. We had a business deal to make, and I’d very much like the chance to save it.”

Cedric laughed in a way that was more condescending than amused.

“Ever the optimist, our sister,” he said in a tone that made Eliza’s blood boil.

I’ll show him, she thought, as she prepared to enter the estate and track down Lord Cooper. If I can just get Lord Cooper to give us one more night here, I can turn this around. He’ll see.

After all, her father depended on her, and Cedric. She needed to prove him wrong about so many things. Sure, there were obstacles in her way, but that didn’t matter. As far as Eliza was concerned, at this stage, failure simply wasn’t an option.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

It had taken some careful negotiation, but eventually, Eliza had persuaded Lord Cooper to allow them to stay one more night. He only had one condition—that all of them agreed to stay in their own rooms that evening. Given what had gone on between Melville and his daughter, Eliza couldn't blame Lord Cooper for including that caveat. The problem was, as she lay in bed that evening, she found herself overwhelmed by the desire to go knock on Oliver's door.

Unlike their first night here, this time it wasn't because she found herself deeply desiring his company—though that was certainly true, too. That was always true. This time, though, it was because her brain was incessantly playing with a theory, hanging on to it like a dog with a chew toy, and she desperately needed to talk it through with someone.

She got out of bed and started for the door at least half a dozen times, but each time, she remembered just how stern Lord Cooper had looked when setting the parameters for their stay and turned back around. Much as she wanted to speak with Oliver tonight, she still had the business deal to consider. She couldn't afford to jeopardize it further by defying his wishes and creating an even larger rift between them. So, much as it pained her, Eliza did her best to lay in bed and make do with imagining what Oliver would say if he were here.

This went on for an hour or so. Eliza tried to imagine what Oliver would say, and finding that wholly inadequate, she slipped out of bed and walked to the door, and reminded herself of all of the reasons leaving her room was a bad idea, returned to bed, tried to imagine what Oliver would say, and repeated the process ad nauseam until her seemingly endless loop was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Eliza jumped up and swiftly pulled on her dressing gown, just in case it was someone other than Oliver, and made her way to the door.

“Ollie!” she said with a smile as, to her delight, she opened the door to find him standing there, all tall and handsome and hers.

“I’m sorry,” he said, returning Eliza’s smile. “But if it’s our last night here, I couldn’t let it go by without stealing some time alone you.”

Eliza blushed in spite of herself.

“Hurry, come in before someone sees you out here.”

Oliver did as he was told, swiftly entering the room and closing the door behind him. As soon as the door closed, he placed his hand on the side of Eliza’s face, leaned down, and kissed her—and suddenly, she could barely even remember the problem her brain had been turning over and over for the last hour.

Eliza sighed happily.

“Hell’s bells, I’ve missed that,” she grinned.

“Me too. I think I can do better, though. Might need to try again.”

Eliza laughed as Oliver leaned down and kissed her, soft and slow. She would have hated his ability to make her weak in the knees like this—like she was some sort of Jane Austen heroine—were it not for the fact that, much to her surprise, she found it so thoroughly enjoyable.

“Definitely an incremental improvement,” she said with a smile.

“Harsh grader!” he replied.

He took her hand and gestured towards the bed.

“Shall we sit?”

“I’d like that.

Hand in hand, they walked over to the bed. Having him close to her like this, here, made Eliza’s heart race.

But as she glanced up and caught a glimpse of the door, her heart seemed to stop beating altogether.

There, in the doorway, stood Melville, looking utterly gobsmacked.

Bloody hell, Eliza thought. *How could we have been so foolish as to not lock the door?*

For a moment, no one spoke. Eliza was too busy berating herself for not only not locking the door but also failing to hear it being opened, and while she couldn't say for sure, she strongly suspected Oliver was busy doing the same. Melville—well, Melville had likely just been stunned into silence.

“I... I should go,” he said finally, turning towards the door.

“No wait!” Eliza called out. “Please. We should talk about this.”

Melville stopped and, after a moment's debate, hesitantly made his way to the chair opposite Eliza's bed.

“Okay... but I feel like this is the sort of situation where the less I know the better. Blimey, if there was some sort of option where I could un-know this, I would absolutely take it.”

“I just...” Eliza began. “I need you to promise not to tell anyone.”

“How long have you—?”

“Does it matter?” Oliver asked.

“No, I suppose not,” Melville replied. “But I do think I need to at least know if you're serious about my sister.”

“I love her, Mel,” Ollie said, taking Eliza's hand.

Eliza detected a hint of a smile on Melville's face, and at that moment, she realized that, much as she was worried about someone else knowing their secret, it was also really nice to finally be able to share this with him. For the first time in her life, she was truly in love, and there was a measure of joy associated with not having to hide it.

“Then why the secrecy?” Melville asked.

“Have you met our mother?” Eliza replied.

“I retract the question,” Mel said with a laugh.

“Can I assume that means we can count on you to keep our secret?” Oliver asked.

“As long as no one asks me directly, I won’t bring it up,” Melville replied. “But it would behoove you to get into the practice of locking the door. Because while I’m willing to keep your secret, I won’t lie for you.”

“Trust me,” Eliza said, “This is a lesson very well learned, and definitely the sort of mistake you only make once.”

“Good,” Melville replied. “You’re lucky it was me who walked in. Can you imagine Cedric?”

“To be frank, neither one of you are in a position to judge,” Eliza replied. “Between his relationship with Molly and your... flights of fancy.”

“True,” Melville said. “But have you met our brother?”

Eliza laughed. “You’re right. Never one to let hypocrisy stop him.”

The room settled into a brief silence again before Melville, recognizing that the conversation had ended, looked at Oliver and grinned.

“Guess I should let you two get back to your evening,” he said with a wink.

“Actually, could you stay for a moment?” Eliza asked. “There’s something I would like to get both of your thoughts on.”

“Okay...” Melville said curiously.

“I’ve been thinking about the murder.”

“Blimey, she really does know how to kill a mood, doesn’t she?” Mel laughed.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Eliza continued. “What was his motive? He didn’t come up at any point in the investigation. There was no mention of him having any sort of grudge against the victim or the two of them being in conflict.”

“True,” Oliver said. “But just because no one else was aware of it doesn’t mean it wasn’t happening.”

“You two are proof of that,” Melville grinned.

“You really are going to be insufferable now that you know about this, aren’t you?” Eliza asked.

“Oh, absolutely,” Melville laughed.

“But then why keep the peaches?” Eliza asked, returning her attention to the matter at hand. “It was the only thing linking him to the crime.”

“Perhaps he thought it would be more dangerous to dispose of them?” Oliver offered.

“Maybe,” Eliza replied. “But he just—he seemed genuinely surprised by the allegations. His insistence he was innocent... If he really is the killer, his acting skills would rival John Barrymore’s.”

“To be honest, the idea of him as the killer seems a bit off to me, too,” Melville said. “But are you sure this is a wise road for us to go down? After all, it was his arrest that got me out of prison. If we pull this thread...”

“We can’t just let an innocent man go to prison, Mel,” Eliza said. “And besides, the fact that the killer knew about her peach allergy clears you anyway.”

“Perhaps...”

“What makes it seem off to you?” Eliza asked.

“I don’t know. It just seemed... strange for her cousin to have a key to her bedroom.”

“You mean the door was locked?” Eliza queried. This was completely new information to her and, if true, would change things considerably.

“Of course,” Mel said. “Unlike some people, I have the good sense to ensure no one can walk in on me during a... private moment.”

Eliza opted to ignore the obvious dig. She was too focused on trying to piece together the pieces that were tugging at her

brain to engage in a witty back-and-forth.

“So, then, whoever killed her would have had to come in through the balcony.”

“I suppose,” Melville said.

“Which means they would have had to climb up the trellis.”

“That sounds right,” Oliver affirmed.

“Elliot had a significant limp,” Eliza said. “I’m not sure he could have physically done that.”

“So... what does that mean?” Melville asked. “Are you saying you’re sure he was framed?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Eliza said. “But I am certain I need to go there and see for myself.”

Much as she tried, Eliza could not ignore the growing pit in her stomach. If going to the trellis revealed what she suspected it would, she knew she would have no choice but to accept the fact that she had just helped get an innocent man arrested for a crime he did not commit.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The older the house, the harder it is to sneak out of. There were ancient floorboards and un-greased door hinges everywhere, just waiting to betray you and call out one's position. At Thistlewood Manor, Eliza had had nearly three decades to identify each one, so she had become a master at avoiding any spots that might alert someone to her presence if she was trying to make a discreet exit. Unfortunately, she had no such background at the Cooper Estate, which made sneaking out undetected seem nearly impossible.

She considered climbing over the balcony using the bedsheets again, but Lord Cooper had asked the servants to remove all additional linens from her room after her last escape, leaving her with just the top sheet. Combining that with the one in Oliver's room and the one in Melville's room might get her enough length to reach the ground, but that climb had felt very treacherous the last time she'd done it, and she wasn't exactly eager for a repeat.

Besides, this time, Eliza didn't just need a way to get out of her room, she also needed a way to get back in, and she wasn't confident that she or Oliver or Melville had the upper-body strength required to climb up three stories worth of make-shift sheet ladder. As such, the best option seemed to be just taking the risk of sneaking down the hallway and using the stairs like a normal person, all the while desperately hoping they got their footing just right and managed to avoid being betrayed by any loose floorboards.

For a moment, Eliza considered just not sneaking out in the first place. After all, Lord Cooper had been very clear about the need for them to stay in their own rooms. It was his only requirement for them to be allowed to stay one more night, and he was a big investor in her family's company. Being caught actively defying him would likely demolish any hope she had of saving her family's business dealings.

But if she was right, if the only way up to Elsie's room was as difficult to climb as she thought it was, then an innocent man had just been taken to prison, where he would be tried and potentially hanged for a murder he did not commit. And while it not only felt unfair to leave him in that position one moment longer than she had to, there was also the matter of the real killer.

Every minute Elliot spent in jail for Elsie's murder, the real killer would become safer from arrest. What if the killer were to take advantage of this time, when no one suspected them and the investigation was closed and use it to destroy any remaining evidence that might connect them to the crime? Or what if they seized the opportunity to flee the country, taking any remaining evidence with them and not only successfully avoiding prosecution but also any possibility of extradition?

No, much as she hated to potentially jeopardize her family's relationship with a very important investor, given the stakes, this simply couldn't wait, not when a man's life and justice for Elsie were both at risk. So, anxious as she was about the potential consequences, Eliza reminded Oliver and Melville one last time to be as quiet as humanly possible and test each step carefully. Then, she slipped out into the hallway.

In an effort to make as little noise as possible, Eliza had opted to forgo shoes. She used her bare feet to carefully test each floorboard, putting just a hint of weight on it first, and slowly, steadily, increasing the amount until she had proof that it was likely to be able to handle it without creaking. Several times she found herself in a position where the floorboard started to creak the moment she put anything even resembling a substantial portion of her weight on it, but the slow pace and deliberate approach allowed her to step back immediately and skip that board, thereby reducing their risk of detection.

Oliver and Melville weren't quite as skilled at this technique as Eliza, which meant there were multiple moments as they crept down the hallway where one or both of them accidentally put too much weight on a board, and there was a fairly substantial creak that Eliza was certain would give them away. Eliza's heart raced as she waited for them to be found

out, for someone to pop round the corner and lecture them for defying the Lord's wishes—but that someone never came.

She desperately hoped that luck would continue as they crept down the stairs, which, thankfully, were made of marble and, therefore, much better suited to a silent descent. She opted not to use the handrail, as that was wood and less likely to remain silent, and while that made her a bit nervous, as the stairs were quite steep and it was very dark, as she stepped onto the landing in the Great Hall, still safe and undetected, she felt confident it had been the right decision.

The Great Hall was mercifully also in possession of marble floors, which increased their chances of successfully making it to the back door without arousing suspicion considerably. The problem, Eliza thought as she tiptoed across it, was going to come with the French doors that opened out onto the back garden. She knew for a fact those had a tendency to squeak—she'd heard them do so before—but unfortunately, the front door had a similar tendency, which made it no better.

She considered crossing through the east wing and trying to slip out a different door, but she decided the risk of that was simply too great. The floors there were wood as well, which meant their location could easily be given away by any number of floorboards, and, as proven upstairs, Melville and Oliver were simply not light enough on their feet to be trusted with more of those. It would also mean crossing closer to peoples' bedrooms, which increased the likelihood that someone would be close by enough to hear them. Here, at least, even if the door creaked quite loudly unless someone was out of their room, it was unlikely anyone would hear them, and given the late hour, it seemed reasonably unlikely that anyone would be out of their rooms.

That knowledge, however, did not keep Eliza's heart from pounding as she gingerly wrapped her hand around the door handle and, with bated breath, gently began to push it open. As she feared, it immediately began to creak, and she stopped for a moment to regroup.

You can do this, Eliza, she reassured herself. Just take it slow and steady.

Eliza took a deep breath before once again gently pushing the door open. It continued to creak, and the pounding of Eliza's heart was so loud she thought it might burst her eardrum, but she stayed the course, pushing it open just wide enough for her, Melville, and Oliver to slip through.

As quickly as she could, she tiptoed outside, followed swiftly by her two companions. She debated whether or not to close the door, as she knew doing so would create even more creaking, but she ultimately decided that was the safest option. If she didn't close the door and anyone had heard the creaking, seeing it open might prompt them to start an outside search. Finding it closed, she hoped, might allow them to believe they had simply imagined it or that whatever they thought they'd heard was just the wind.

Eliza shut the door quickly, cringing with each creak, and then slipped out onto the back patio. Despite the fact that spring was in full bloom, it still got quite chilly at night, and the marble felt freezing under her bare feet. She rushed into the nearby grass but quickly found that it was no better, as it was already wet with late-night dew.

Frozen feet are a small price to pay for the truth, Eliza reminded herself as she made her way across the lawn and over to the spot below Elsie's room.

One didn't need to be a medical expert or an experienced climber to look at the area outside of Elsie's room and know that this exonerated Elliot. The only way up to her room from the outside was to climb a very rickety lattice trellis, a task which would require significant athleticism and also very steady footing. Elliot could barely walk. There was simply no way he could have managed that sort of climb.

Eliza was just about to share this conclusion and suggest they head back when she heard a rustling behind her. She turned around and, just for a moment, caught sight of a person out of the corner of her eye: a person wearing a green cloak.

The moment she saw the cloak, Eliza knew she must be looking at the real killer, and while she knew pursuing them

could be dangerous, she also knew she couldn't let them get away. So without a second thought, she took off after them.

Oliver, eager to protect Eliza from danger, swiftly took off after her, and Melville, smart enough to recognize that were he to be caught outside at this hour after defying the Lord, and after having slept with the victim, he would likely be in considerably more trouble than the rest of them, opted to assume Eliza and Oliver had it covered and slip back upstairs before anyone realized he was a part of this.

The person in the green cloak was fast, but Eliza was faster. Her morning runs were proving exceedingly useful. All that practice allowed her to not only outpace Oliver but also the potential killer, and before she knew it, despite his head start, Eliza was just a few feet behind him.

Just a little faster, Eliza, she thought, desperately willing her feet to find another gear, which seemed to work because, with each passing second, she was closing the distance between them. Soon, she was close enough that she could nearly reach out and touch his cloak, and so she decided to take a risk.

Reasonably confident that she was close enough for it to work, Eliza took a flying leap forward and, to her delight, landed directly on the killer. The killer toppled to the ground, and they tussled for a bit. She had just managed to flip the figure over and pull off their hood when Oliver arrived.

“Bloody hell, what are you doing?” the man beneath her asked as Eliza did her best to pin down his hands.

“Detaining you for the murder of Elsie Cooper,” Eliza replied.

“I didn't—” the man began, clearly stunned by the accusation, but before he could finish that sentence, an unexpected light shone brightly on their faces.

“You three! What do you think you're doing?” a nearby man barked at them.

They must have had footmen patrolling the grounds, Eliza thought. She hoped this would be easy enough to explain, but

she couldn't stop her stomach from sinking regardless.

“I—I caught the killer,” Eliza replied.

“The killer's already in custody,” the footman replied. “So now the three of you are coming with me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Although the walk back to the estate was quite short, it felt to Eliza as though it took an eternity. She did her best to persuade the footman that she and Oliver weren't the ones he wanted, and that the man they'd captured was the real culprit and the only one he truly needed to bring before Lord Cooper, but the footman was not convinced.

Eliza couldn't blame him. Lord Cooper had clearly instructed him to patrol the grounds for precisely this reason. If she were in his position, she wouldn't be inclined to defy Lord Cooper's instructions either; there was simply far too much for the footman to lose if Lord Cooper were to find out he'd let Eliza and Oliver go. Lord Cooper could deem the poor man insubordinate and fire him, and then where would he be?

Still, Eliza couldn't help but wish that there was something she could say that would change the footman's mind. After all, she was reasonably certain that this was going to destroy any shred of hope they had of preserving the business relationship, and that would be devastating, not only for the business, but also for her father, and that was the part that truly pained Eliza.

As the footman marched them through the French doors and back into the main house, Eliza could not stop herself from conjuring an image of her father when he heard the news. He would try to cover, of course. He wouldn't want her to feel bad, and he'd understand that she was simply doing what she felt she had to, that with both justice and a man's life at stake, she had no other choice, but she'd be able to see it anyway. The fear in his eyes about what this might mean for their business and his legacy. The disappointment in her inability to salvage a deal he'd spent decades building. The guilt over having entrusted her with this in the first place.

He had enough to carry with Great Aunt Martha as it was. The prospect of adding even more pain to his plate wounded Eliza to her core. And then there was the question of his heart...

Hell's bells, Eliza, you have to stop this, she chastised herself. You're acting as though the match is already over, and it isn't. Besides, getting yourself all worked up about the potential consequences certainly isn't helping anything. Right now, you need to be focused on what you're going to say to Lord Cooper.

She was right about that. How she played the next few minutes had the potential, not only to impact just how deep the damage between their families went, but also to impact whether or not she was actually able to accomplish her ultimate goal of bringing Elsie's killer to justice. Eliza needed Lord Cooper to believe her theory that Elliot wasn't the real killer, that it was this man in the green cloak, whomever he might be. And to do that, she needed to be able to cogently lay out a compelling case.

The problem was that, by the time she'd finally managed to focus on the task at hand, the footman had already deposited them in Lord Cooper's study, leaving her virtually no time whatsoever to actually formulate said case before Lord Cooper burst in, looking very tired and very, very angry.

"Tell me, Miss Montagu," he began, fury creeping into the edge of a tone he was clearly working very hard to keep in check. "Is there something wrong with your hearing?"

"No, sir," she replied. She wasn't typically one for meekness, but this seemed like a situation where anything else would be unnecessarily inflammatory.

"Perhaps your brain, then. Are you, perhaps, deeply daft, Miss Montagu?"

"That's not—" Oliver began, but Eliza shook her head and shot him a look that quickly stopped him.

"No, Lord Cooper," she replied. "I'm not daft."

"So, if you're not deaf, and you're not daft, then you did, in fact, both hear and understand me when I specifically instructed you to stay in your room this evening, yes?"

"I did, sir."

“Then what, pray tell, possessed you to go wandering around the estate in the middle of the night in direct defiance of my wishes?”

“Justice, sir,” Eliza replied.

Lord Cooper stared at her for a moment in disbelief before shaking his head. “Bloody hell, you really are something, aren’t you?” he said in a way that made it profoundly clear that was *not* a compliment.

“Elliot is not the killer, sir. And I can prove it.”

“You can—”

“I can,” Eliza interrupted. “And as important as it was to me to honor your request, it was more important that I get to the truth. I hope you can understand that. I have to imagine you want your daughter’s killer brought to justice too, and that won’t happen as long as Elliot is the one in jail for her murder.”

For a moment, Lord Cooper looked as though he might actually blow his top. But then, something shifted. It was as though he truly heard Eliza for the first time. Perhaps he’d had his doubts about Elliot, too. Whatever the case, he seemed significantly calmer when he turned back to her and said, “You have three minutes to convince me.”

“Elliot couldn’t have done it,” Eliza began. “The door to Elsie’s room was locked, and he wouldn’t have had any reason to have a key, correct?”

“No,” Lord Cooper said, his skepticism continuing to fade. “No, he would not.”

“Which means he would have had to come in through the balcony. And that would have required—”

“Climbing the trellis,” Lord Cooper interrupted.

“Yes,” Eliza said. “Up the equivalent of three flights of stairs.”

“Elliot could never have done that,” Lord Cooper said, and Eliza felt her chest finally loosen and her lungs begin to fill

with air for the first time since they were caught. “He can barely walk,” he continued. “There’s no way he could have...”

“Exactly,” Eliza agreed. “That’s why Oliver and I were out of our rooms. I had a suspicion Elliot couldn’t have made it up to Elsie’s room, but I wanted to confirm that I was right, that there was no possible way he could have climbed up there.”

“And you were,” Lord Cooper added.

“Yes, I was.”

“And where do you fit into all this?” Lord Cooper asked the man Eliza had apprehended.

“We heard him rustling around behind us when we were examining Elsie’s window. He fled when we noticed him, and I chased him down. I had just caught him when your footman spotted us and dragged us here. I don’t know who he is, but—”

“His name is Charles,” Lord Cooper began. “Charles Campbell. And he used to date my daughter...”

Eliza could tell Lord Cooper was already beginning to put the pieces together, but she wanted to drive the point home anyway.

“The fact that you’ve used the phrase *used to* makes me think he likely had motive,” Eliza began. “And as someone who was close with her, he would have known about her peach allergy. He also certainly looks fit enough to have climbed that trellis—”

“He is,” Lord Cooper interrupted. “I can promise you that.”

“And the one thing my brother Melville remembers from that night is a flash of billowing green fabric. And as you can see, he’s—”

“He’s wearing a green cloak,” Lord Cooper said, the final puzzle piece officially falling into place.

“Yes,” Eliza said. “Yes he is. Which is why I think we need to call the constable.”

“I agree,” Lord Cooper replied. “I’ll go do that now. Because frankly, Charles, if I have to spend much more time standing here looking at you, I’m liable to kill you myself.”

With that, Lord Cooper stormed off, leaving a grateful Oliver and Eliza and an absolutely terrified Charles behind him.

The moment the door closed behind him, Charles turned to Eliza in a panic.

“Look, I understand... I mean, I—I know how this looks, but...”

“But what?” Oliver asked.

“But I didn’t do this. I could never...I—”

“You what?” Eliza asked, anxiety creeping back into her stomach. There was something about this man’s panic that made Eliza wonder, despite just how strong the evidence was against him if somehow she’d gotten this wrong.

“I loved her,” he replied, perilously close to tears. “She didn’t—she didn’t feel the same way about me that I felt about her, but I... I loved her. And I could never have hurt her. Not ever. I’m absolutely gutted she’s dead. I—I came here looking for her killer. I heard it was some Melville fellow, and I—I’m ashamed to say I’d come here looking for revenge. If you hadn’t found me I might have... I mean, I wanted to. I was planning to. I don’t know if I could ultimately have gone through with it, but—”

“But you were going to kill my brother,” Eliza interjected, suddenly more grateful to have snuck outside that night than she had ever been for anything in her entire life.

“Your brother?”

“Yes,” Eliza said. “My brother. And I can assure you, he was not Elsie’s killer, so had you murdered him, you would have done so in vain.”

“Bloody hell...” Charles began.

“Yes,” Eliza said. “Bloody hell indeed.”

“So if you didn’t kill Elsie—” Oliver began.

“I didn’t,” Charles interrupted. “I swear, I didn’t. I wasn’t even anywhere near here last night.”

“Can you prove that?” Eliza asked.

“No,” Charles replied. “But I assure you, it’s the truth. May God strike me dead if—”

“I believe you,” Eliza interrupted. “No need to bring God into it.”

“But if you didn’t kill her,” Oliver said, “And Melville didn’t kill her, and Elliot didn’t kill her, then who did?”

Suddenly, a chill ran down Eliza’s spine. It was so obvious that she didn’t know how she hadn’t seen it before.

“I think I know the answer to that question,” Eliza replied. “And we need the constable. Now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Despite the late hour, as they waited for Constable Brown to arrive, Johnson, who had evidently been woken by Lord Cooper, came to the study and asked Eliza, Oliver, and Charles to follow him to the parlor. When they arrived, they found Lady Cooper, as well as Ada, the Cooper's eldest daughter, and Beatrice, their youngest, already there waiting, along with Melville, Lord Cooper, and Lord Edwards. Apparently, Lord Cooper had requested they be woken up and brought to the parlor as well, insisting that seeing the real killer caught and brought to justice would be an important part of each of their healing processes.

The problem was that Eliza was increasingly convinced Lord Cooper was wrong about who the killer actually was, and the more she spoke with Charles, the more convinced she became. She just hoped she could convince everyone else she was right about this too, though admittedly, the odds weren't in her favor. After all, she'd been wrong twice already. But she was certain she was right this time. She just needed to find some way to convince the killer to show their hand, or better yet, pressure them into confessing altogether.

Unfortunately, before she'd had time to fully formulate a plan, Johnson returned to the parlor, opening the door and revealing a bleary-eyed Constable Brown.

"It's the middle of the night," the constable said, his annoyance evident in his tone. "So this had better be good."

"I do apologize for the late hour," Lord Cooper began, "But this simply couldn't wait. You see, you arrested the wrong man for my daughter's murder."

"Oh really?" Constable Brown said skeptically. "And what makes you say that?"

"Elliot could never have killed Elsie. It would have required a level of physical fitness that Elliot simply did not possess. But that man there, Charles Campbell, he is—"

“Not the killer either,” Eliza interrupted. She knew interrupting the Lord was probably not the smartest decision from a business standpoint. He certainly didn’t seem like the sort of man who would appreciate being interrupted, especially not by a woman. But she was also certain he would like being openly disproven by a woman even less, which is what would have happened if she had let him continue. And besides, as angry as he was likely to be about this, it was almost certainly going to pale in comparison to what Eliza was about to suggest next.

“So you got me up in the middle of the night to bring me down here to introduce me to someone who is *not* the killer?” Constable Brown asked incredulously, his annoyance and confusion matched only by that of Lord Cooper.

“No,” Eliza replied. “We know who the real killer is. It’s just not Charles Campbell.”

Lord Cooper glared at Eliza with a degree of rage she’d rarely witnessed before, even at things like the suffragette rallies, which were full of deeply angry men, but she opted to continue anyway. She knew what she was going to say next was only going to anger him further, but she had no choice. Not if Elsie’s real murderer was ever going to be punished. Not if they were ever going to actually get to the truth.

“There are four key components one has to consider when determining who was responsible for Elsie’s death. The first is the clue we got from Melville, who saw a flash of green fabric that evening. That’s what led me to think Charles Campbell was the killer. After all, he was wearing a green cloak tonight, and from what I hear, it’s a signature piece of his. He also fit the second criteria. Because the door to Elsie’s room was locked, whoever killed her had to be in good enough shape to climb up the trellis onto her balcony, and from the look of him, that certainly wouldn’t have been a problem for Charles either. As Elsie’s former suitor, he also would have known about her peach allergy, which was the third criteria. By all accounts, he looked like the perfect suspect... which is exactly what the killer wanted us to think.”

“Or he’s just the killer, and you’ve once again overstepped and mucked everything up,” Ada interrupted.

“I can see why you’d want that to be the case,” Eliza replied. “But it’s not. Elsie’s killer—blimey they were smart. They went out of their way to frame not just one but two separate men. And it would have worked, too, were it not for the fact that Charles had no reason to kill Elsie. He loved her. And it stands to reason that if the real killer framed Elliot, they could just as easily have tried to frame Charles too.”

“The idea that loving her means Charles didn’t have motive is absurd,” Ada replied. “Love is the oldest motive in the book, and finding out that love was not only unrequited, but that she’d also had relations with your brother? Why, that’s enough to drive almost any man to a crime of passion.”

“That’s true,” Eliza said. “But he didn’t find out about Melville until after Elsie’s death. None of us did. And besides, the oldest motive in the book isn’t love—it’s jealousy. And Charles certainly wasn’t the only one who had cause to be jealous. After all, you’re the eldest daughter. The expectation is that you would be married off first. The parade of suitors should have belonged to you, not Elsie.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” Ada said, an edge starting to creep in to the tone of her voice.

“I’m suggesting that you killed your sister,” Eliza said bluntly. She wasn’t sure if coming at it so directly was the best approach, but she wanted to see if hearing the truth stated so matter-of-factly might be enough to knock Ada off balance.

There was a flash of something in Ada’s face that told Eliza she was on the right track, but it disappeared every bit as quickly as it came. And before Eliza could get another word out, Lord Cooper jumped in, his face flushed red with fury.

“That’s quite enough,” he roared. “You come here into my house. Your brother does unspeakable things with my daughter. You defy my orders and leave your rooms, despite being explicitly instructed not to. You have me woken up in the middle of the night to sell me on a theory of the crime, only to trick me into having the constable brought here so you

could accuse one of my only two surviving children of murder? You are a despicable woman, and I want you and your family out of my house this instant!”

Eliza’s heart felt as though it was going to pound out of her chest. If Lord Cooper got his way, everything she’d done would all have been for naught. She wouldn’t have caught the real murderer. An innocent man would likely be imprisoned, and potentially hanged, for a crime he didn’t commit. She would have failed on literally every level, and she wasn’t sure she could live with that.

Thankfully, before Johnson could forcibly escort them out, which was very clearly what Lord Cooper deemed to be the next step, Constable Brown intervened.

“Let her speak,” he said to a furious Lord Cooper before turning his attention to Eliza. “I asked around about you. Spoke to a man named Inspector Abernathy who told me you were infuriating and meddlesome, which certainly tracks with my experience, but also that you were quite often annoyingly right and almost always worth listening to. So let’s hear it.”

Eliza did her best to repress a smile. She knew it wasn’t the time or the place for it, but she couldn’t help feeling grateful that, after all this time, Inspector Abernathy had finally acknowledged her value.

“Elsie was cruel,” Eliza began. “Not just to the help, but also to her sisters. You told me as much yourself, Beatrice.”

“Yes, but I didn’t—I mean, I certainly wasn’t suggesting she was cruel enough that one of us would kill her.”

“True,” Eliza said. “But it was nevertheless the case. And despite her cruel nature, unlike Ada, Elsie had a host of men simply desperate to be with her. Lord Edwards pursued her despite being promised to you, Beatrice. And Charles here, well, Charles was also madly in love with her, despite—”

“Despite having initially been courting Ada,” Beatrice interrupted, and just like that, Eliza could tell from the switch in her tone that she had an ally in her theory of the crime.

“You were furious about that,” Beatrice continued.

“I wouldn’t say furious...” Ada replied.

“I would,” Beatrice said. “If anything, furious is an understatement. You were enraged. You complained about it for weeks. You went on and on and on about how Beatrice could have anyone she wanted, and that it was a special kind of cruelty for her to take the one man who was supposed to want you. And then she didn’t even really want him! She just took him because she could.”

“Okay, I was angry, but—”

“You kept saying that it wasn’t fair that she never had any consequences for her actions. That there should be consequences. That she should have to pay...” Beatrice said, trailing off as the true horror of what had happened really struck her.

“That doesn’t mean I—” Ada insisted before switching tact and saying, “It is ludicrous that we’re even having this conversation, but since it appears I must defend myself, it seems worth pointing out that I have an alibi.”

“That’s true,” Lord Edwards said. “She was with me that evening. She came to speak with me about plans for one of our upcoming fox hunts. She was hoping I could persuade her father to let her join us.”

“Yes,” Eliza interrupted. “A clever ruse on her part. But it certainly doesn’t clear her name. She was with you that evening, but certainly not all night. Going to your cabin not only gave her the appearance of an alibi, but it also gave her an excuse to be outside on the grounds that evening. Your cabin is not far from the main house. She could easily have climbed up the trellis on her way back, and if anyone spotted her walking about, she could have simply dismissed it by saying she was returning from Lord Edwards’ cabin.”

“It was a clever plan,” Melville said. “You have to give her that.”

“But what about the cloak?” Constable Brown asked. “You said your brother had a memory of a flash of billowing green

fabric. It would appear as though that points much more strongly to Charles than it does to Miss Cooper.”

“Yes, it would appear that way, but Ada knew that. She knew if anyone saw someone lurking around in a green cloak, they would have immediately assumed it was Charles. The cloak is a signature of his. It was an easy way to frame him, just like the peaches were an easy way to frame Elliot.”

“But that would mean I had to have some sort of identical green cloak, which seems to strain credulity,” Ada said, and while she did her best to appear calm, Eliza could hear the panic beginning to creep into her voice. She was caught, and she knew it.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Lord Cooper said, prompting everyone, including Eliza, to turn to him in surprise. He’d been utterly silent through the entirety of the conversation, and the last thing she expected was for him to jump in now, presumably to offer information in support of her theory.

“I bought you a cloak just like it,” he continued, the heartbreak in his voice evident. “I brought it back from a trip to France. You’d made quite a show of telling me how much you liked the one Charles had. I thought I was bringing you back a lovely surprise, but really, I was just inadvertently helping you kill my Elsie and get away with it, wasn’t I?”

For a moment, no one spoke. The combination of pain and regret in Lord Cooper’s voice were excruciating to hear. And then, there was Ada, whose calm facade was quickly beginning to fade. With every passing moment, she looked more and more like a caged animal.

And then, suddenly and without warning, she grabbed a large, silver candlestick and leapt at Eliza.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

For a moment, it was as though time stood still. Eliza saw Ada and the candlestick coming towards her, but she couldn't quite register what was happening in time to convince her body to do anything about it.

She'd anticipated Ada might get upset, but she had assumed she'd just keep denying everything. Or, perhaps, if she was feeling really panicked and cornered, try to run. But it had never occurred to Eliza that Ada would attack her, not here with everyone, including her family and Constable Brown standing around watching.

The candlestick Ada was holding was very substantial. It was, no doubt, made of solid silver, and it appeared to be quite weighty. If Ada succeeded in striking her, particularly on the head, she could do considerable damage, and if Ada managed to land multiple blows, well, Eliza could be in real trouble.

Eliza knew all this, but her brain was too busy trying to process what was happening to do much of anything about it, it seemed. She suspected the same was likely true of everyone else as well because Ada was getting perilously close to making contact with Eliza's head, and no one else had made any sort of move to stop Ada yet either.

And then, all of a sudden, as though they had all been released from some sort of spell, their collective shock wore off, and everyone sprang into action.

Hell's bells, Eliza, move, she thought, as she ducked just in time to avoid Ada's first swing. Before Ada could launch a second attack, Oliver had thrown himself into the fray and was working to grab her arm. Constable Brown was also rushing into the center of things, pulling out his handcuffs and preparing to arrest Ada, all the while, Lady Cooper was shouting, "Good heavens, Ada, put that down! You are a Cooper! This is not the way we do things!"

It took a bit of coordination and some bobbing and weaving on Eliza's part, but eventually, Constable Brown was able to arrest Ada, and Eliza was able to escape her attack unscathed.

As she struggled to catch her breath, Oliver put a hand on her back.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Eliza nodded, at which point Oliver seemed to remember where they were and immediately removed his hand and straightened up, clearly embarrassed and desperately hoping no one had noticed, though the grin on Melville's face and subsequent wink he shot in Eliza's direction strongly suggested that was not the case.

Thankfully, the brief slip seemed to escape everyone else's notice, as they were all far more interested in what was happening with Ada, who was being handcuffed by Constable Brown.

"Ada Cooper, you are under arrest for the murder of your sister, Elsie Cooper," he said as he began to lead Ada out of the room. As everyone watched, jaws agape, Constable Brown turned to Eliza and said, "Thank you, miss," before he and Ada disappeared out the door.

"Well, no doubt you got the right one this time," Melville said.

"Indeed," Eliza agreed.

"Don't know about you, but I could use a drink," Melville added.

"I'm not sure I've ever agreed with you more than I do in this moment," Eliza said with a smile.

Despite the late hour, brandy sounded mighty good right now, and so she, Oliver, and Melville set off in search of some. She knew she might regret that decision in the morning, but right now, she didn't care. That was future Eliza's problem. Right now, all she wanted was to take a moment with her brother and the love of her life to celebrate the fact that they had solved a murder and kept Melville out of jail. She'd felt

the weight of responsibility far too heavily these past few days. She'd pick it back up again tomorrow morning, but just for right now, she was reasonably certain she'd earned at least half an hour off.

The half-hour turned into an hour, and one drink turned into three, which meant Eliza was far less functional than she'd hoped to be when she woke the next morning. In fact, as the sun peeked through her curtains, gently rousing her awake, Eliza found herself irrationally angry at it for not having had the basic courtesy of waiting for a more reasonable hour to rise.

She rolled over and covered her head with the pillow, but it wasn't enough to block out the light. Much as she wished it weren't the case, she was officially awake, so she decided she might as well accept and get on with it.

Food, she thought as she dragged herself out of bed and began to force herself to dress for the day. *Food will fix this problem.*

She felt certain that, despite the early hour, the chef would have breakfast made and ready, so as soon as she was passably presentable, she made her way downstairs. When she arrived in the dining room, Eliza was surprised to find it nearly empty. Perhaps she shouldn't have been. After all, Melville was a notoriously late riser even on the best of nights, and while Oliver was typically a bit better, he'd been up even later than Eliza had. The Coopers and Lord Edward had also been up in the middle of the night dealing with the arrest, and she imagined sleep did not come easy for any of them in the aftermath of discovering Ada was a murderer.

Still, arriving at breakfast and finding Cedric was the only person there caught Eliza slightly off guard. The spread laid out before them was so spectacular, however, that she didn't find herself thinking about that for long. She was too busy

trying to decide whether it would be better to start with bubble and squeak or baked beans on toast or what appeared to be the fluffiest crumpet she had ever seen.

Ultimately, she decided on the crumpet, though she also loaded her plate up with the baked beans and the bubble and squeak, along with some kippers and scones with sultanas and a slice of eggy bread that she planned to eat with their fresh blueberry compote.

“Awfully quiet this morning,” Cedric said as Eliza took her first bite of the impossibly light crumpet.

“Well, it was an awfully late night for everyone,” Eliza said before realizing that Cedric hadn’t actually been there for the reveal or the arrest and, as such, might have absolutely no idea what she was talking about, a realization that was further reinforced by the look on his face.

“There was an unexpected turn of events,” she began.

“Do tell,” Cedric said as he heaped baked beans onto a piece of toast until he’d formed a perilous baked-bean tower of sorts.

“There was something about the idea of Elliot as the killer that didn’t feel right with me, so after we all went to bed, I spoke with Melville about it.”

“We weren’t supposed to leave our rooms,” Cedric said, a hint of annoyance creeping into his voice.

“I know,” Eliza said. “But it was good that I did because that’s how I discovered that the door to Elsie’s bedroom was locked. With that limp of his, Elliot would never have been able to climb all the way up to her balcony, so—”

“So he wasn’t the killer,” Cedric interrupted.

“Precisely.”

“Well, I’m assuming you’ve figured out who was, otherwise you wouldn’t be sitting her so calmly eating a crumpet.”

“It was her older sister, Ada.”

“Interesting...” Cedric said. “What prompted that?”

“Jealousy,” Eliza replied. “Sibling rivalry. Ada got tired of her sister just constantly getting what she wanted and never having any consequences for her actions.”

“Can’t imagine what that’s like,” Cedric said snidely.

His words hit Eliza squarely in the stomach like a quick, sharp stab. She and Cedric had worked so well together when they were trying to solve the murder that Eliza had allowed herself to forget just how strained things had gotten between them.

The whole situation was as heartbreaking as it was frustrating. She did not deserve Cedric’s ire. She had earned her role in the family business, and she was absolutely certain that if the exact same opportunities had been handed to Melville, assuming Melville actually cared about the company and had done even half the work she’d done so far, Cedric would not be behaving like this. Cedric’s problem wasn’t with her or even with her work. It was with being part of a changing world that allowed him to be outpaced by his little sister.

But it was also precisely that fact, that fact that she was his little sister, that made the whole thing so painful. Because despite the recent strain in their relationship, the truth was that growing up, she and Cedric had been quite close. They had had their differences, certainly, and there was no shortage of topics on which they disagreed, but Eliza had always loved him fiercely. She had looked up to him and trusted him, and in his most vulnerable moments, she had been the one he had gone to. It seemed utterly ludicrous to Eliza that he would let his ego get in the way of that, but she also wasn’t sure there was anything she could do to stop it. After all, Cedric was nothing if not set in his ways.

Still, as she dug into her delightfully savory eggy bread, she found herself desperately trying to think of something, anything, she could say to break the tension and cross the gulf between them. Unfortunately, before she could come up with something, Johnson appeared.

“Miss Montagu,” he began, “I’m sorry to interrupt your breakfast, but Lord Cooper has requested your presence in his study.”

“Of course,” Eliza said, pushing back her chair and desperately hoping this was good news. On the one hand, she had solved his daughter’s murder, which seemed like it might have bought her some goodwill. On the other hand, she’d gotten his other daughter arrested, which hardly seemed like a solid foundation from which to build a business relationship.

Either way, the fact that he was willing to speak with her meant Eliza had a chance to plead her case, and that was not an opportunity she took lightly. She just wished she’d had more time to prepare.

As Johnson led her to the Great Hall, up the spiral staircase, and down to Lord Cooper’s study, Eliza did her best to quickly review her pitch in her head—to make a mental list of every compelling reason she could think of that he should increase his investment in their company and support their expansion. But the walk simply wasn’t long enough for her to flesh everything out, and she arrived at the door to Lord Cooper’s study feeling anxious and underprepared.

“Miss Montagu, please, sit down,” Lord Cooper said as she entered, gesturing to the chair across from him.

Eliza did as she was told, frantically trying to gather her thoughts one last time, but before she could say anything, Lord Cooper had already jumped in.

“I know we haven’t spoken much,” he began, “And I don’t think it’s any secret that I had some initial reservations about doing business with you.”

“Yes, I—I had pieced that together,” Eliza replied.

“It’s just that I’m used to business being done a certain way. By certain... people. And you, my dear, are not at all what I’m used to.”

“I’m not really what anyone is used to,” Eliza said with what she hoped was a disarming smile.

“But you have nevertheless impressed me,” Lord Cooper continued, and Eliza felt instantly lighter. “You are clearly clever and deeply determined, both of which are qualities I admire. You simply will not take no for an answer, and you’re willing to take risks. While those are not ideal qualities in a house guest, they are precisely the sort of things I look for in a business associate.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ve both had a long night, and I know you have a considerable trip home ahead of you, so I’ll keep this brief,” Lord Cooper continued. “Despite the difficulties of the last few days, I am committed to maintaining our families’ business relationship, Miss Montagu, and I am also willing to give you whatever additional money it is you came here to ask for. Simply have your father draw up the paperwork, and I shall sign it.”

Eliza was stunned. This was far better news than she could have ever imagined. It was so good, in fact, that for a moment, she wondered if she actually had imagined it. Perhaps the sun hadn’t actually woken her up this morning, and this had all just been a delightful dream. Silly though it was, she actually pinched herself to check.

Nope, she thought as she felt the pain of the pinch. This is real, Eliza. You did it!

“Thank you,” she said, doing her best not to appear as surprised as she felt.

“Just promise me you’ll continue following those instincts of yours,” he said.

“Oh, you can count on that,” Eliza replied. “I’ve never known how to live any other way.”

“Brilliant,” Lord Cooper replied. “Travel safe, Miss Montagu. I look forward to working with you in the future.”

“Yes, you as well,” Eliza said, rising from her chair and repressing the urge to literally skip out the door. Melville’s name was clear. The real murderer was caught. The business deal was not only saved but also secured. She had

accomplished everything she'd come here to do and then some.

For this one, blissful moment, everything in her world was as it should be. Eliza was eager to celebrate, and she knew just who she wanted to celebrate with. Thankfully, Oliver was right here in the castle with her, and if she hurried, she just might be able to sneak in a celebration with him before they had to head back home. After all, this estate was full of hiding places, and thanks to her tour and investigation, Eliza was familiar with them all. It seemed wrong to return to Thistlewood Manor without using at least one of them for something fun for a change. The house was practically begging for it.

EPILOGUE

“How do you think Great Aunt Martha is doing?” Eliza asked as she, Oliver, Melville, and Cedric climbed out of the car and prepared to re-enter Thistlewood Manor after what was, in all reality, only a few days away, though to Eliza, it somehow felt as though years had passed.

“She’s a tough old bird,” Oliver offered reassuringly.

“Yes,” Melville agreed. “Key word being *old*.”

Eliza shot him a look, which prompted him to respond, “What? It’s true! I’m just saying she’s had a good long life, and while, of course, we’ll miss her, it has to happen sometime.”

“She’s had her affairs in order for ages,” Cedric added. “I have to imagine she’s ready to go.”

“But mother and father will be gutted,” Eliza said.

“I know something that would cheer mother up immensely,” Melville whispered, falling back so only Eliza could hear.

“You wouldn’t...” she said, shaking her head.

“Wouldn’t I?” he replied with a devilish grin.

“I should have left you in that dungeon,” Eliza replied with a playful shove.

Melville laughed.

“Yes, I suppose saving me from a wrongful murder conviction should at least have bought my silence for a while,” Melville said.

“I should certainly hope so,” Eliza said with a grin.

“Everything alright back there?” Oliver asked, noticing that Eliza and Melville had fallen behind.

“Yes, everything’s fine,” Eliza replied. “Just engaging in a lovely game of quid pro quo.”

Oliver shot her a curious look, but before Eliza could say anything else, Cedric opened the door to Thistlewood Manor, where they were immediately greeted by Parkins.

“I’m so sorry,” he began. “I should have had someone outside to greet you, but we weren’t expecting you quite so soon.”

“It’s perfectly alright, Parkins,” Eliza offered. “We weren’t expecting to be here quite so soon either.”

“We made exceptionally good time on the way home,” Cedric added.

“Well, if it isn’t my conquering heroes,” Lord Montagu said, looking down at them over the railing of the spiral staircase.

“Father!” Eliza exclaimed. “It’s lovely to see you.”

“It’s lovely to see you too, my dear,” he said as he made his way down the stairs to see them. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

Eliza saw Cedric visibly wince at that. In an effort to help smooth things over, she offered, “It was a team effort.”

“And you my boy,” Lord Montagu continued, patting Melville on the back. “It sounds like you’ve had quite the harrowing experience.”

“It was definitely not ideal,” Melville replied. “And they didn’t even have the courtesy to bring me any alcohol to help pass the time or improve the experience.”

“You should spread that bit of feedback. You know, to warn future travelers,” Oliver teased. “Dungeon accommodations are nowhere near up to snuff.”

Everyone laughed, and Eliza was struck by just how good it felt to finally be home again.

“Truly though,” Lord Montagu began, “your mother and I are very happy to have you home safe.”

He turned to Eliza then, beaming with pride, and even the twinge of jealousy she detected from Cedric wasn't enough to dampen her delight.

“And we're very grateful to you, for catching the real killer and keeping Melville out of jail. Your mother would have had an absolute heart attack if he had gone to prison. I mean, blimey, can you imagine the scandal?”

“You would have had no choice but to pack up and move to Scotland,” Melville laughed.

“And to save the business deal on top of it?” Her father continued. “It's more than I could have hoped for. More than I suspect I could have even done myself.”

“Oh, that's not—”

“It is,” Lord Montagu insisted, suddenly very serious. “You did absolutely exceptional work, Eliza, and I am enormously proud to call you my daughter.”

Eliza began to blush then. It was rare that she found herself feeling genuinely overwhelmed and even rarer that she found herself speechless, but at that moment, she was decidedly both.

“Thank you,” she managed finally.

“How is Great Aunt Martha?” Cedric asked. It was a question, Eliza suspected, that was a direct indication of his desire for a subject change. She couldn't imagine watching their father put the success of both the investigation and the business deal squarely on her shoulders was going to do anything to improve the tension between them.

Thank God Melville and I are at least in a good place, Eliza thought, as she looked over at her brother and once again found herself overcome with gratitude that he was here with her now and not still trapped in that horrible dungeon.

“She's still quite unwell, I'm afraid,” Lord Montagu replied. “It was good you made it possible for me to stay here with her.”

“We were glad to do it,” Eliza replied.

“Not sure I would have agreed if I’d known it was going to involve getting thrown in a dungeon, but, I suppose we all have to make sacrifices for family.”

Lord Montagu laughed.

“It is so good to have you all home,” he said with a smile.

“It’s good to be home,” Cedric replied.

“I should let you all get settled,” Lord Montagu said before turning his attention to Oliver. “I do hope you’ll stay for dinner this evening. Rene has a very special meal planned.”

“You can’t possibly say no to that,” Eliza grinned.

“No, no I cannot,” Oliver replied with that charming smile of his.

Together, they made their way to the staircase, but before Eliza could head upstairs to her room, Lord Montagu stopped her.

“There’s one more thing, my girl.”

“Is everything alright?” Eliza asked, the seriousness in her father’s tone immediately setting off alarm bells.”

“Yes. Or, well, it—it will be. It’s just... your Great Aunt Martha would like to speak with you.”

“Oh!” Eliza said, surprised. “Alright...Do you know when?”

“Now would be best,” her father replied. “We may not have much... she’s been waiting for you.”

“Of course,” Eliza replied. “I’ll go right now.”

As Eliza made her way to Great Aunt Martha’s room, she did her best to prepare for the conversation, but it was difficult to prepare when she had no idea what it was Great Aunt Martha wanted to discuss. The two of them rarely, if ever, had conversations one-on-one. In fact, the only one she could remember off hand was the confrontation they had had years ago that ultimately prompted her to move out of Thistlewood Manor in the first place.

Eliza hoped against hope that a sequel to that conversation wasn't what Great Aunt Martha had in mind. The last thing she wanted was another confrontation, especially given the circumstances.

As she arrived at the door to Great Aunt Martha's room, she felt her hands begin to shake. Doing her best to maintain her composure, Eliza took a deep breath, steeled herself, and stepped inside.

Despite her small stature, Great Aunt Martha had always been, to Eliza, a tremendously big presence, but she seemed so small there now, lying in the grand, four-poster bed. Eliza felt her stomach do a flip flop as she approached and took a seat in the armchair that had been set up beside it.

"Father said you wanted to speak with me," she said anxiously.

"Yes," Great Aunt Martha said, her voice weak and frail. "Thank you for coming."

And, in that moment, Great Aunt Martha did something Eliza never would have expected. She reached over and took Eliza's hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, to Eliza's continued surprise.

"For what?" Eliza asked.

"For everything. I was wrong in the way I treated you. I'm old, and I got stuck in my ways, but I was young like you once. I wanted things, too. I just wasn't brave enough to fight for them. Not like you."

Eliza was stunned. Over the years, Great Aunt Martha had likely used a hundred different adjectives to describe her. Foolish. Hard-headed. Reckless. Ungrateful. But never, ever, something like brave.

"I know I haven't always been the best at showing it," she continued. "I haven't even been very good at admitting it. But I'm proud of you, Eliza. Of the woman you are and the person you are becoming."

Eliza felt the unexpected sting of tears in her eyes. Until this very moment, she hadn't realized just how badly she'd needed to hear Great Aunt Martha say that. It was healing in ways she would never have anticipated.

"I... thank you," Eliza stammered. "That... it means more than you know."

"Never let anyone dampen that spirit of yours. Not even me."

Great Aunt Martha laughed weakly at that, and Eliza smiled through her tears.

"You deserve to have everything you want, love. Promise me you want stop fighting until you get it."

"Yes ma'am," Eliza said, doing her best to maintain her composure.

"Good," Great Aunt Martha said. "No get out of here and go take what you want. And if you don't mind an old woman offering some unsolicited advice, may I suggest that you consider starting with Oliver Fairfax?"

"Yes ma'am," Eliza said with a grin. "Yes, you may."

With that, Great Aunt Martha squeezed Eliza's hand and gestured towards the door. Knowing that meant the time had come for her to leave, Eliza got up and exited the room, vowing to take her Great Aunt Martha's advice, not only to continue fighting for what she wanted, but also to go spend some time with Oliver Fairfax.

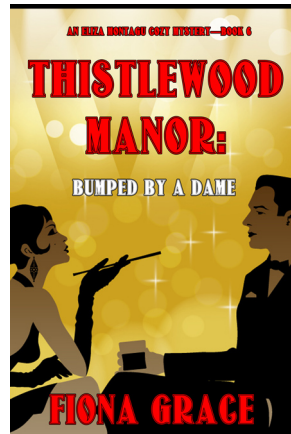
She found him in the drawing room and immediately, wordlessly, led him into the library where, once she was certain no one was about, she gave him a long, deep kiss.

Caught off guard, he looked at her and smiled. "What prompted that?"

"Great Aunt Martha said I should continue taking what I want from life. And right now you, Oliver, you are what I want."

With that, she kissed him again, her whole body buzzing with the feeling of fulfillment and bliss.

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THISTLEWOOD MANOR: BUMPED BY A DAME
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The time has come, it seems, for Oliver to finally propose, and Eliza is ecstatic. Finally, her whole life seems to come into place.

Until Eliza catches Oliver with his ex.

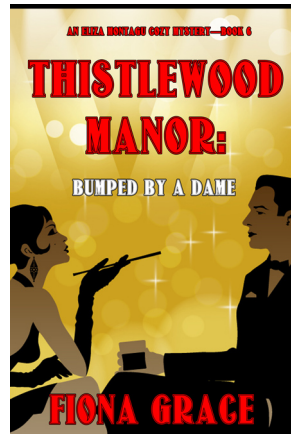
His ex ends up murdered.

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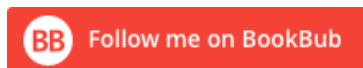


THISTLEWOOD MANOR: BUMPED BY A DAME
(An Eliza Montagu Cozy Mystery—Book 6)

Fiona Grace

Fiona Grace is author of the LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the TUSCAN VINEYARD COZY MYSTERY series, comprising seven books; of the DUBIOUS WITCH COZY MYSTERY series, comprising three books; of the BEACHFRONT BAKERY COZY MYSTERY series, comprising six books; of the CATS AND DOGS COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the ELIZA MONTAGU COZY MYSTERY series, comprising seven books (and counting); and of the ENDLESS HARBOR ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising five books (and counting).

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