



# Mrs. Holloway's Christmas Pudding

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When Cook Kat Holloway is blamed when a dinner guest mysteriously takes ill after eating one of her meals, she sets out to prove she had nothing to do with the gentleman's sickness. She discovers a whole host of people who might wish to do away with the man, and she and her friends—Daniel McAdam, Lady Cynthia, Mr. Thanos, and various members of the household staff—begin to hunt for the would-be killer.

Simultaneously tasked with crafting the perfect Christmas feast, including the pièce de résistance, the Christmas plum pudding, Kat frantically works to finish all, fearing she'll have to choose between stopping a murderer and cherishing her few precious Christmas moments with her daughter.

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## Chapter 1

December 1882

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“Mr. Whitaker is very ill.” Mrs. Bywater’s words rang through the kitchen as my young assistant, Tess, and I cleaned up from supper and began preparing for tomorrow’s breakfast. “What on earth did you put in the plum tart, Mrs. Holloway?”

I turned abruptly, my fingers floury from the bread dough I’d been mixing.

Cooks were often the first to be blamed when a dinner party guest fell sick. Mrs. Bywater’s words stung me all the more, because a few years ago I had been accused of actually murdering an employer, though with a carving knife, before the details of the case had become known.

No matter what, such an allegation must be nipped in the bud.

“He did not grow ill from my cooking,” I said firmly. “I test every dish before it goes up, and Tess tastes them too. There was nothing wrong with the food.”

“And yet, my husband’s friend Mr. Whitaker became quite sick and had to be taken home to be looked after by his doctor,” Mrs. Bywater snapped. “Mrs. Whitaker is at her wit’s end.”

“I cannot help that, madam,” I replied, striving to keep my temper. “If the gentleman

is ill, it has nothing to do with my meal.”

I spied Mr. Davis, the butler, who had entered the passageway outside the kitchen. As he stood behind Mrs. Bywater, he let outrage show on his face. He did not like servants being the first accused either.

Tess’s freckled face darkened, and I feared she’d pipe up in my defense. Tess had a very frank way of speaking, and her runaway tongue might get her dismissed.

We were interrupted by a click of heels in the corridor, and the next moment, Lady Cynthia Shires, splendid in a gray gown trimmed with black, swept into the room.

“Absolute nonsense, Auntie,” she said loudly. “Mrs. Whitaker herself says Mr. Whitaker’s doctor has treated him for weakness over the past few years. Besides, if Mrs. Holloway’s cooking had been the culprit, we’d all be rolling about in agony.”

I winced at her blunt way of putting it, but Cynthia had a point. One person was unlikely to eat the only tainted bite in a whole dish.

Mrs. Bywater pressed a hand to her slim waist. “I have been feeling a bit dyspeptic myself. I am certain it was the plum tart. Should have boiled those plums first, Mrs. Holloway, and in any case, kept them back for the Christmas pudding.”

I pressed my lips together to rein in a sharp retort. We’d had an excess of the fruit, which Mrs. Bywater had found at an agreeable price and spontaneously ordered several crates of. Plenty for the plum puddings for Christmas and New Year’s, she’d said.

In vain had I pointed out that “plum” pudding didn’t actually have any plums in it. Currants, raisins, citrus peel, and other dried fruits, yes—these held together with plenty of breadcrumbs, suet, spices, and brandy.

Mrs. Bywater said my notions were silly, and of course we'd have plums in the Christmas pudding.

As she was mistress of the household, I'd ceased arguing. I'd been trying to use up the plums in other ways, but Mrs. Bywater complained every time I served them that I was wasting them. Not that she didn't eat an entire bowlful whenever they were put in front of her.

Though she consumed her food heartily enough, Mrs. Bywater was of a slender stature, with graying dark hair twisted into a simple knot. Her light-brown eyes stared into mine with the stubbornness of one who will not be told she is wrong.

"Mr. Whitaker's illness came from elsewhere," I repeated. I had a stubbornness of my own. "A sherry before his arrival tonight, perhaps. Or his afternoon tea."

Mrs. Bywater gazed at me as though I were a simpleton. "It was never his tea, or his sherry. What a notion. Find out which dish was responsible, Mrs. Holloway, and throw anything left of it into the slop pail. I suppose it won't even be fit for the dogs the coachman insists on keeping. If it was the plums, wash them and boil them down before you use any more."

I should have curtsied and agreed to obey, but my legs refused to bend. I knew full well my preparations had nothing to do with any illnesses, though I also knew Mrs. Bywater would never believe me.

Mrs. Bywater gave a jerk of her head, as though finding me impertinent and defiant. "You should have more care for what comes out of this kitchen, Mrs. Holloway. Else you might have to find another to work in."

Dealing that blow, which made my heart thump in fear and anger, she turned on her heel and tramped out of the kitchen. We listened to her stride down the hall to the

back stairs and up them, every step emphasizing her disapprobation.

Once the door at the top banged shut, Mr. Davis stormed into the kitchen.

“Mr. Whitaker was already ill before he began to dine,” he said in irritation. “Hobbled in, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief, and groaned all the way through the meal. I hope he didn’t give anyone in the household his ague.”

“Mrs. Whitaker told us her husband’s digestion was delicate,” Cynthia said. “Didn’t stop the man from stuffing himself with everything on offer. Probably doesn’t eat half so well at home. Auntie tucked in quite thoroughly herself. If she’s dyspeptic, it’s because she laced herself too tightly before gorging.”

“Is Mr. Whitaker so very ill?” I asked, concerned.

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“Yes, poor chap,” Cynthia answered. “He had to be carried out by two of the footmen and put into his carriage. Mrs. Whitaker is quite worried. It’s too bad—I rather like the man. ”

Life was precarious, and a chill or fever could carry one off without warning. Even if Mr. Whitaker was in the last stages of consumption, however, Mrs. Bywater would find a way to blame me. It was an ongoing battle between the two of us, Mrs. Bywater ever seeking an excuse to be rid of me.

“I will need to find out exactly what happened,” I decided.

“We know it’s nothing to do with you,” Cynthia said quickly.

I appreciated her loyalty, but her friendship wouldn’t help if Mrs. Bywater sacked me, which she likely would if Mr. Whitaker died.

If I lost my post, it would be a disaster. Most of the salary I earned went directly to my friends, Joanna and Sam Millburn, for the keeping of my daughter. If I had no way to pay Joanna, the Millburns might not have the wherewithal to look after Grace.

Cynthia knew this, as did Tess, though Mr. Davis did not. An unmarried cook with a daughter was not the sort of person Mrs. Bywater would let remain in her employ, so I had sworn Cynthia and Tess to secrecy.

I suppressed a sigh. “I will simply have to prove to Mrs. Bywater for once and for all that none of my dishes were tainted.”

Very annoying as I was especially busy with preparations for the upcoming Christmas dinner. Mrs. Bywater had decided the family would stay in Town this year, with Cynthia's family traveling up to see her, instead of she going to them. I was glad of Cynthia's presence, because I liked her and missed her when she went to her father's estate, but it did mean more work for me and less time I could spend with Grace.

"Why should you have to prove it?" Mr. Davis began, jerking me from my thoughts, but Cynthia interrupted him.

"Because Auntie won't leave off until Mrs. Holloway has thrown away every morsel in the house, which is ridiculous. She would then complain about the expense of replacing it all."

"Course, we'd be rid of all them plums," Tess murmured behind me.

Cynthia acknowledged this with a grin. "I'll help, Mrs. Holloway. Glad to."

She was kind to me, this fair-haired, blue-eyed earl's daughter who defied convention, befriended a cook, and went about with her friends dressed in gentlemen's suits. Her eccentric ways couldn't hide a good heart or a quick mind, and I was forever grateful she had come into my life.

"Thank you," I said with sincerity. "I'll need to know exactly what Mr. Whitaker ate, and also what sort of illnesses he suffers from."

"I can help with that." Cynthia bounced on her toes in her restlessness. "Round up all your friends, Mrs. Holloway. We'll rush about for you. Won't we?"

She directed the question at Mr. Davis and Tess. Tess agreed eagerly, and Mr. Davis gave her a conceding nod.

“I will list the dishes he partook of,” Mr. Davis said. He turned and glided from the room, his footsteps quiet as he made his way to the butler’s pantry.

“All your friends, Mrs. H.” Cynthia’s eyes danced. “Will you send for him, or shall I?”

It wouldn’t be as easy as Cynthia surmised to locate Daniel McAdam, the person to whom she’d been referring to when she’d said All your friends. Daniel had been in Ireland until recently, doing secretive things for the man he worked for, an icicle of a being called Mr. Monaghan.

It was by no means certain Daniel would answer my summons. He sometimes disappeared for long stretches at a time, doing who knew what for his guvnor. I did not know if I’d even need his help. He was good at catching those who set off incendiary devices and tried to assassinate the queen, but Mr. Whitaker’s illness was hardly in the same league. But I welcomed Daniel’s thoughts on any problem and supposed it did no harm to send word to him.

Once Cynthia went upstairs, I took my basket of scraps out to the beggars who habitually came to stand in the shadows in Mount Street. They knew I would emerge to dispense the leftovers at a certain hour every evening. I didn’t worry they’d take sick from them, because as I’d said to Mrs. Bywater, Tess and I ate a little of everything, so we’d discover if something was off.

The tall young man with Daniel’s eyes was there and gave me a cheerful greeting. I asked him to tell his father I wished to speak to him. James agreed with his usual energy and bounded off after he accepted the small piece of plum tart I’d tucked into his hand.

I decided there was no sense in me waiting for Daniel this evening, so I finished my chores, sent Tess to bed, and retired myself.



There was also no sense in me fretting too much about Mr. Whitaker. A man with a weak constitution having to be taken home and put to bed likely had nothing to do with what he had or hadn't eaten that day. Mr. Davis had given me, before he'd gone to bed, a list of all the dishes Mr. Whitaker had consumed, which had been most of them. Everyone else had eaten the same, he told me. I'd thanked Mr. Davis, the information confirming my own convictions.

Some people could not stomach certain foods, it was true. I always tried to provide a variety of dishes at dinner parties so those with a sensitivity could find something of which they could partake.

Nonetheless, I was always most careful with my ingredients, making sure all were fresh as could be before I put them into any of my dishes. I could sleep with a clear conscience on that note.

Even so, I tossed restlessly and returned, sandy-eyed, to the kitchen in the morning.

Surely Mr. Whitaker would have recovered from his distress by now, I reasoned as I began to prepare breakfast. He'd be fine after a night's rest, wouldn't he?

The best way to discover what was happening in another house in Mayfair was to ask the servants. Tess, who was a friendly chatterbox, had plenty of mates in the neighboring houses of Mount Street, South Audley Street, and beyond. It did not take much doing to send Tess on an errand where she could strike up a conversation with another maid on a similar errand. Through the gossip that permeated Mayfair, she soon returned with an answer.

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“Mr. Whitaker is still powerfully ill,” Tess announced as she set a basket of greens and winter vegetables on the table. “The family lives in Brook Street, so my pal Sally says. At Number 18. She’s friendly with the cook’s assistant there, name of Agnes. Mr. Whitaker was insensible when they brought him home and is still in his bed. His doctor has been there all night, and Mrs. Whitaker is certain they’ll be laying him out in no time. She’s sure someone poisoned him.”

I did not like the sound of that, but I forced myself to resume my confidence. “Well, he was not poisoned here. As Cynthia stated, everyone at the supper would have taken sick if he had been, and the two of us as well.”

“Stands to reason, don’t it?” Tess agreed. “As far as I’ve heard, Mrs. Whitaker ain’t blaming Mrs. Bywater and her dinner party, but she’s still convinced someone fed her husband poison of some sort. His doctor fears he won’t recover. Such a shame,” Tess continued with sympathy. “And so close to Christmas too.”

She had a good heart, did Tess. “Please speak to your pal whenever you can,” I instructed as I sorted through the produce she’d bought. “And let me know if there’s any change in Mr. Whitaker’s condition.” If Mrs. Whitaker was correct, and there was a poisoner lurking in Mayfair, I wanted to know about it.

“Right you are, Mrs. H. I found some lovely parsnips.” Tess took up two pale carrot-shaped vegetables and waved them about. “Can we roast ’em with them potatoes you have for tonight’s supper? I know they’ll taste ever so nice.”

The rest of our day was taken up with the usual preparations for meals for the family and staff. Mrs. Bywater inserted herself into the larder at one point, asking if I’d

thrown out everything from last night's meal, and I had to reassure her that all was gone. I was quite relieved when she went upstairs again.

I was still out of sorts when Lady Cynthia bounded down the outside stairs not long after the midday meal went up, her nose twitching in excitement. She was dressed in a gentleman's suit, which she wore when she visited her more unconventional friends.

"Your aunt believed you'd be home for luncheon," I warned her. "Several of her friends came to discuss books with her."

Cynthia seated herself at my table. "Too busy to put on a frock and fuss. I doubt the ladies have actually read the books in question, in any case. I wager they tell each other what they've read about them and don't bother to open the covers. A tedious afternoon avoided. I say, do you have a scone or something of the sort I can feast on?"

I knew Cynthia sought refuge here for a quick meal out from under her aunt's watchful eye. I rounded up a few currant scones with some lemon curd and blackberry jam, and threw in a slice of plum tart for good measure.

Cynthia, as always, had a robust appetite. She made quick work of the food, licking her fingers clean of jam as I told her what Tess had reported to me this morning.

"Yes, Whitaker is in a bad way," Cynthia said when I finished. "I've asked some of my chums who know the family about him. Tess has the right of it. My friends tell me that Mrs. Whitaker is convinced her husband's been poisoned."

"It's a bit strange she is insisting on it," I said as I brought out the parsnips to slice. "When a husband has been dispatched by poison, it is usually the wife who is the first suspect."

“I thought of that.” Cynthia skimmed lemon curd from her scone and sucked the bright yellow paste from her fingertip. “She was sitting nowhere near him during dinner. In fact, I sat across from Mr. Whitaker. Auntie seemed to think he’d be impressed by an earl’s daughter.” She scoffed. “He was not, though he tried to be jolly about being saddled with me. I could tell he was unwell. He looked a bit pasty.”

“Who else was near him?” I asked, eager for more details.

“His wastrel nephew, Herbert,” Cynthia replied. “Herbert stands to inherit Mr. Whitaker’s fortune if Whitaker pops off.”

“Oh,” I said, intrigued. “And was he sitting next to Mr. Whitaker?”

“No, indeed.” Cynthia widened her eyes. “Auntie would never let two gentlemen sit together at her table, or two ladies either. Horrors. Whitaker was flanked by two of Auntie’s friends who nattered at him like mad. Again, he was polite and made the best of it. The wastrel nephew was one seat down from him. I suppose Herbert could have dropped a dollop of poison into one of the dishes that was being passed around. Of course, there’d be no certainty that Mr. Whitaker would be served the poisoned dose.”

“No,” I agreed. “Much too complicated. What I imagine is that Mr. Whitaker was given the poison—if indeed it is poison—before he ever entered this house.”

“That makes much more sense. Whitaker did arrive with his wife and the nephew, so either of them could have slipped a jolly good dose of arsenic into his sherry. There’s also a friend, a Mr. Hardy. Apparently, he owes Whitaker a vast amount of money.”

A desperate person wanting to get out of debt made an excellent suspect. The nephew was a good prospect as well. I laid aside the parsnips, pulled my notebook from my pocket, and began to scribble with my stub of a pencil.

“Is there anyone else in his life who might be happier with him out of it?” I asked.

Cynthia, finished with her repast, rocked back in the chair. “I’m not sure. I put the question to Judith, who knows everyone in London. She and Bobby are back from Paris, by the way—well, obviously, since I spoke to them.”

She referred to her friends Miss Judith Townsend and Lady Roberta Perry. I’d asked them to help me with a problem not long ago, and on my advice, they’d gone to Paris to finish the business.

“Was their journey fruitful?” I asked, perking up a little.

“Indeed.” Cynthia’s eyes sparkled. “Judith is most grateful to you.”

“I am glad,” I said, pleased Miss Townsend had found what she’d sought.

“Anyway, Judith believes Whitaker has a ladybird tucked away somewhere,” Cynthia went on. “That is something to find out.”

“I would think the ladybird would want him to stay well and healthy.” I scribbled another note. “If he dies, she’s cut off, isn’t she? Unless he has a remarkably generous will.”

“No idea,” Cynthia said, surprisingly cheerful for someone discussing potential murderers. “Ah, here’s McAdam.”

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### Chapter 2

My pencil cut a jagged swath across the page as Cynthia unceremoniously announced Daniel's arrival.

I had not seen much of Daniel since his return from Ireland. He'd delivered a bag of salt to my kitchen a few weeks ago, which had been his way of telling me he was back in London. After that, his visits had been fleeting and never when he could speak to me alone.

Here he was now, handsome in his patched coat, neckcloth carelessly knotted about his throat. He'd removed his cap from his thick dark hair, letting the hat hang negligently from his fingers.

I watched him note the position of everyone in the room—Tess peeling potatoes, Elsie washing up from the luncheon, Cynthia tilted back in her chair, and the footmen scrubbing silver across the passageway in the servants' hall. He didn't blatantly glance about, but he quietly made certain he knew who could hear anything said in the kitchen.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Holloway." Daniel gave me brief nod and Cynthia a deeper, more deferential one. "Your ladyship."

He also had greetings for Tess and Elsie, and he waved at the footmen, who happily looked up from their tasks to grin back. Daniel had time for everyone.

"To what do I owe this honor, Mr. McAdam?" I asked primly as I set aside my

notebook and began to slice the parsnips. One would never guess he'd kissed me good-bye, most passionately, before his departure for Ireland.

"Happened to be passing." Daniel gave me an affable shrug. "Wondered if you had any orders for me. Something you need to stock? I can find you all the best foodstuffs, you know."

He winked as he played the part of a deliveryman who was trying to drum up business—he did a little selling of goods on the side.

"Nothing today, I am afraid." I answered in the tone of cook who didn't like to be coaxed into purchasing more than I needed. "Another time, Mr. McAdam."

I knew full well Daniel's question was to convey that James had told him I was asking for his help. My answer meant I couldn't speak to him about it now and that we should meet later.

"Did you hear how one of the master's guests was poisoned?" Tess blurted out. "He's ever so ill, and the mistress is blaming Mrs. Holloway."

Daniel's gaze shot to me, concern filling his eyes. He'd understand how distressing this would be for me, though I hoped this time I'd not land in Newgate.

"I told Auntie it was all rot," Cynthia said. "We're trying to work out who gave him the poison, if anyone did at all."

"I wager it were his wife," Tess said. "Angry about his ladybird."

"That is enough gossip from you," I told her severely, but I was pleased she'd broached the subject. I might have had to wait for days before Daniel could visit me in private.

“We are back to why Mrs. Whitaker would announce he’d been poisoned if she’d done it herself,” Cynthia said. “She’d be safer to say that it was another manifestation of his ongoing illness.”

“Unless she wanted to shift the blame to someone else,” Tess suggested, ignoring my command. “Probably the ladylove. Two birds with one stone. That’s what I would do.”

“Would you?” Daniel asked Tess teasingly. “I ought to warn your Constable Greene then.”

Tess flushed. “Caleb’s all right. He’d never dream of having a ladybird.”

I knew a bit more than Tess about the male sex, and yes, it was perfectly possible for any of them to stray. Men had so little control of their yearnings in that direction. The more virtuous a man proclaimed himself, the more adept he was at hiding his sins.

I admitted that Caleb Greene, the constable who walked our street, was a good lad, earnest and kind. I prayed he remained so, for Tess’s sake.

“I would like to hear what the doctor has to say.” I set the slices of parsnip on a plate. “I doubt he’d speak to a cook about his patient, but it would be helpful to know what poison he might suspect. Something easily obtainable?”

“Or something more obscure, like a rare snake venom?” Cynthia asked in excitement. “Thanos might be able to help there, Mrs. H. He can talk about compounds and concoctions no one else but another scientific mind would understand.”

Mr. Elgin Thanos lectured at the Polytechnic in Cavendish Square. He was foremost a mathematician, but he knew much about chemistry and electromagnetism and many other obscure subjects that were beyond my grasp. Cynthia assisted him most days,



helping him prepare for his talks, writing things on the blackboard for him, and making certain he could find his books, pens, and bits of paper, and wore matching boots.

Mr. Thanos was also a kind young gentleman and a great friend of Daniel's, who had assisted us on many cases.

"I doubt it will be a rare snake venom," I said. "That only happens in stories and on the stage, does it not, Daniel? I mean, Mr. McAdam?"

Daniel shrugged. "Anyone can bring back strange substances from the far corners of the British Empire. But I agree, Mrs. Holloway. An untraceable poison isn't as likely as what can be found around a house. Arsenic and such."

"One must be very careful what one buys at the market," I said. "All sorts of powders might be used to fill in an order of flour. That is why I test all my food before it's served," I finished with indignation.

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“Even so, Thanos can find out the particulars once we know more,” Cynthia broke in. “The mum of one of my friends sees Mr. Whitaker’s doctor—Dr. Burnley—about her ailments. I might be able to ask the man point blank about Mr. Whitaker’s health or have my chum do it.”

“If he is a proper doctor, he will not tell you,” I said. “I believe it’s bad form to discuss a patient.”

“I’ll wheedle it out of him then,” Cynthia said with confidence. She leaned toward Daniel and spoke softly, “What about you, McAdam? Will you put on a disguise and quiz the family?”

Daniel chuckled. “No need, your ladyship. I deliver to many homes in Mayfair.”

Cynthia looked disappointed. She found it much more fun when Daniel pretended to be a man of the City or an inane upper-class gentleman to do his investigations. I preferred him to remain himself.

A delivery man could go to any house and talk to the servants there, including those of the wastrel nephew and the ladybird. Even if the household hadn’t ordered anything, Daniel could claim he’d brought the delivery by mistake and then charm the staff below stairs into giving him a cup of tea and a crumpet or two.

Speaking of that ...

“I suppose you expect me to feed you,” I said to Daniel. “You ever manage to turn up right after a meal, do you not, Mr. McAdam?”

Daniel rubbed his hands together. “Because I know I’ll find the best food here. There are houses with cooks so unskilled I have to protest like mad to keep from eating what they offer.”

His flattery pleased me, but I strove to hide it. “So that is the secret of why you visit me.” I rose and clumped to the dresser to fetch him a plate.

Cynthia laughed at my feigned grumpiness. I spooned out a large slice of plum tart and dolloped a good portion of leftover Chantilly cream next to it.

“Have a care, McAdam,” Cynthia said as I set the plate in front of Daniel. “That is the exact tart my aunt claims poisoned Mr. Whitaker.”

Daniel forked up a large portion and slid the pastry through the cream. “Then I will die a happy man, your ladyship.” He shoved the whole concoction into his mouth, smiling as he chewed.

“I always say you’re a daft man, Mr. McAdam.” I sat down, elbows on the table and sipped tea.

Daniel sent me a wink from his sparkling blue eyes, which warmed me all the way through.

I was not one to sit idly and let others ask questions for me, especially when my livelihood might be at stake. After Daniel and Cynthia departed, I finished the preliminary preparations for that evening’s supper and told Tess I was going out.

Shopping for goods, of course. A cook couldn’t leave her place of employment on a whim, and my day out wasn’t until tomorrow. Besides, that day was for Grace.

Brook Street lay a short way from the house in Mount Street. I walked to Berkeley

Square, then headed north a few blocks on Davies Street, passing Brook's Mews before I turned to Brook Street itself.

I tucked my basket more securely under my arm and walked the length of the road, trying to appear purposeful. The street was not long, running from Hanover Square to Grosvenor Square, and I traversed it quickly. Number 18 lay near New Bond Street. The house had a portico with round columns between the pavement and the door, a relic from a past age.

Iron railings separated me from the stairs down to the kitchen. I peered into the recesses of the stairwell, wondering if I should boldly descend. The cook of this house would be familiar with Mr. Whitaker's digestion and what foods bothered him. I'd come here with the purpose of inventing an excuse to speak to her, but while I debated, someone ascended the stairs from the house next to the Whitakers' and paused to stare at me.

"Is it Mrs. Holloway?" a stout woman in a black hat with too many feathers asked.

"Mrs. ... Cullen." I recalled the name from my encounters with this cook at the greengrocers. "Good afternoon."

"If you've come to have a chat, love, I'm off on my day out."

"Oh, I see." I strove to sound downcast. I'd known from our casual acquaintance that Mrs. Cullen worked in Brook Street but not in which house. She had often encouraged me to visit her when I had a moment.

Middle aged, with a round face under her out-of-date hat, Mrs. Cullen liked to talk. And talk. I'd avoided the visit knowing she looked for an opportunity to converse at length. I didn't mind letting a person chatter away to me, but not for several hours at a time. However, she was in a position to know much, if not all, of what happened in

the house next to hers, especially if she spoke often with the Whitakers' kitchen staff.

"Thought I'd take the chance," I continued, lingering. "Oh, well."

"Walk with me a bit, if you like," Mrs. Cullen said. "I'm off to visit my sister, and I catch the omnibus at Oxford Street."

On any other day, I'd find an excuse not to stroll with Mrs. Cullen while her jaw wagged with her many trains of thought, but this afternoon, I readily fell into step beside her.

"Terrible about Mr. Whitaker next door," I prompted.

"Isn't it just?" As predicted, Mrs. Cullen was off, happy of the excuse to tell me all. "Mrs. Whitaker is most distraught. She's telling all who will listen that her husband's been poisoned. Terrifying." She pressed a gloved hand to her ample bosom. "And me living right next door."

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“I heard that Mr. Whitaker is a rather sickly man,” I said.

“He is indeed, Mrs. Holloway.” Mrs. Cullen began a litany of every ailment Mr. Whitaker had suffered from since she’d come to work in Brook Street three years before. He had poor digestion and a weak heart, and sometimes couldn’t leave the house for days. Or he’d take a constitutional, all bundled up in coat, muffler, and wooly hat, so that a person could barely see there was a man inside at all.

“Why is Mrs. Whitaker convinced it’s poison?” I asked, trying to sound in awe of Mrs. Cullen’s observations.

“Because it came on sudden-like. He’s been moaning and groaning, can’t rise from his bed, their housekeeper says. Housekeeper’s blaming the food at a house party they went to, but no one else from that meal has been sick, so Mrs. Whitaker claims.” Mrs. Cullen sounded disappointed, as though she’d prefer to see everyone who’d dined at our table struggling to live this morning.

Mrs. Cullen appeared to have no idea that the dinner party in question had taken place at the house I worked in, and I did not enlighten her.

“Then it must be illness,” I concluded.

“So says the doctor. He’s our doctor too, and he’s quite frustrated with Mrs. Whitaker. What does she know about poisons? he’s asking. He’s only seen the like of Mr. Whitaker’s symptoms in true maladies.”

“There must be some reason she is insisting,” I said.

“I think she fed her husband the poison herself.” Mrs. Cullen gave me a decided nod. “And is trying to push the blame onto Mr. Whitaker’s nephew, Mr. Herbert, a young man who is good for nothing. Wears grand clothes, runs with an extravagant crowd, and is always touching his uncle for money. He inherits the lot if Mr. Whitaker pushes off.”

“Perhaps he gave Mr. Whitaker the poison,” I suggested. “Would he have had the chance?”

“Of course he would. Mr. Herbert is in and out of the house all time, runs tame there. The Whitakers never had any children. From what I understand, Mr. Whitaker could never come up to scratch.” Mrs. Cullen spoke without embarrassment about the man’s rumored infertility. “Mrs. Whitaker says she’s not bothered—bearing a child is dangerous for a woman, isn’t it? Mr. Herbert is a handful enough without her having to worry over children of her own, Mrs. Whitaker says. She’s besotted with her husband, never thought of annulling the marriage to catch a man who could fill her nursery. I understand her point of view. I’ve never wanted a husband and little ones to be a slave to. Children are a nuisance, and we have a much easier time without them, don’t we, Mrs. Holloway?”

I nodded dispassionately and inwardly apologized to Grace for pretending to agree.

When Grace had arrived in my life, I’d been terrified. I’d had no idea what to do with a tiny baby, though it was true Grace had been a sunny-natured infant. Without my friend Joanna’s help I think I would have gone mad or fallen into deep despair.

Even so, I’d never trade Grace for the world. Her father, deceased now, had been an awful person, but he’d given me one good thing—Grace.

Not all women wanted children, I knew. It was a myth, usually voiced by men, that women were only fulfilled when taking care of husbands and nurturing children. This

lofty idea ignored the fact that some husbands could be brutes. Likewise, that some women worked themselves to an early death trying to feed and look after their many children, which came courtesy of their brutish husbands. My life might have gone that way if Mr. Bristow hadn't gotten himself killed.

So, I both agreed with Mrs. Cullen that a woman needed more in her life than squeezing out children and disagreed that we were better off without them.

"Gentlemen like having sons to carry on their name," I ventured. "Mr. Whitaker is not bothered that he doesn't? Or perhaps he is but hides it well."

"He's looked upon his nephew as his own son since his brother passed on," Mrs. Cullen said. "The brother never had much in the way of money, and Mr. Whitaker has rather indulged Mr. Herbert, knowing he'd inherited nothing. But he's spoiled the young man. And this is how Mr. Herbert thanks him."

"You said you believed Mrs. Whitaker poisoned her husband," I reminded her.

"She could have. But you are right, Mr. Herbert could have done it, well enough. He was here last night, before they all left for the dinner, and didn't they have a row? We could hear it downstairs in my kitchen, the two of them standing on the doorstep next door, yelling like stevedores. At least, Mr. Herbert was shouting. Mr. Whitaker never raises his voice."

"I wonder what they could have been arguing about." I put on a tone of mild curiosity in attempt to disguise my blatant hint.

Mrs. Cullen didn't need much of a push. "I can tell you exactly. Mr. Herbert had made a very foolish investment with an unscrupulous gentleman and now owes this gentleman quite a lot of money."



If Mr. Herbert stood to inherit Mr. Whitaker's wealth, this would give him a strong motivation to rid himself of his uncle. Herbert could pay off the unscrupulous gentleman and then wallow in his uncle's money until he squandered the lot.

I wondered what would happen to Mrs. Whitaker when Herbert inherited. Would he feel an obligation to look after his aunt? Or would he abandon her?

Had Mr. Whitaker provided for his wife in his will? Or had Mrs. Whitaker's family set up a dower that would keep her well for the rest of her life?

Things I would have to discover. If Mrs. Whitaker became fully dependent on her nephew, who was a spendthrift, she'd be less likely to want to polish off her husband.

However, not all murders were about money, I'd come to discover. Some were caused by intense hatred, some by fear, some by desperation.

I supposed that Mrs. Whitaker might bear great anger at her husband for not giving her children, professing disinterest in offspring to hide the fact. Or perhaps she would do anything to get out of a marriage that was binding her. It was difficult for a woman to be granted a divorce or even an annulment without very obvious cause, or without the support of a prominent family behind her.

"Goodness, we're at Hanover Square already," Mrs. Cullen announced.

We had emerged onto the wide square with a garden in its midst. Fine homes marched along on either side of us, but commercial interests, in the form of a bank, had intruded on one end.

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Not far from that was the Oriental Club, where gentlemen who'd been in India and other parts of the Eastern world could gather with their mates and have a chinwag about all they'd seen. Mr. Davis had told me that the Duke of Wellington, that hero who'd tossed Napoleon out of Spain and then trounced him at Waterloo, had been its president long ago.

I briefly wondered if the gentlemen of the club insisted on Indian cuisine to remind them of their travels, and if so, whether their chef would share recipes. Mrs. Bywater would never hold with me putting curried dishes on the table, but I might like to try some for myself.

We strolled through the square and continued to Oxford Street, where an overfull omnibus rumbled toward us.

"We've had such an interesting chat that I hate to leave you," Mrs. Cullen said. "Perhaps the omnibus can take you to a market?" She asked the question hopefully.

"My usual is the other direction, Mrs. Cullen. So happy to have met you today."

"Indeed, Mrs. Holloway." She quickened her pace as the omnibus rolled to a stop, disgorging passengers. "Perhaps you can return for a cup of tea on your day out. I would welcome the company."

"Perhaps," I said, promising nothing. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Cullen."

"Afternoon, Mrs. Holloway." Mrs. Cullen trotted to the omnibus, admonishing the driver to wait for her. I heard her voice raised to someone inside, telling him he was a

perfectly fit young man and could give up his seat to a lady who was obviously huffing and puffing.

The omnibus lumbered into traffic, Mrs. Cullen's stentorian strains fading. I turned my feet the other way, heading down Oxford Street toward the greengrocer I did not really need to visit.

I purchased some fresh herbs there, having to pick through them before I found some that were not too wilted. One must shop for produce early in the morning, because all the best bits are gone before noon.

I could not reasonably extend my errand any longer, so I returned home after this.

Tess had continued with supper preparations in my absence. I divested myself of my coat and the herbs and joined her to finish the meal.

Supper went up and was consumed in its entirety. No one fell ill tonight, and Mrs. Bywater did not come down to accuse me of serving tainted food. I noted that her worries on that account had not prevented her from eating heartily this evening.

Tess and I finished feeding the staff then prepared for breakfast in the morning, as usual. Once Tess and the other servants had gone to bed, I sat alone at my table, the rest of the house asleep, making notes about today's meals in my little book.

A muffled tap on the outside door made me drop my pencil. I hurried to unlock it, knowing who stood on the other side. Daniel had begun to knock in a certain pattern when he visited at night, so I'd know it was he and not a burglar or other criminal trying to gain entry. I did tell him that someone bent on committing a crime would hardly knock, but he insisted.

I opened the door, not minding at all when Daniel took a step inside, cupped my face

in his gloved hands, and kissed me.

He melted me, did Daniel McAdam. I wanted to stand so with him the rest of the night, but the December wind pouring down the stairs was raw. I pulled him inside and bolted the door.

“It’s too cold for you to be wandering about outdoors.” I hastened to the tea kettle and poured more hot water into the pot, setting out another cup. “Come and warm yourself.”

“My intent exactly, Kat.” Daniel peeled off his coat and gloves, hanging them up with his hat, then took a stool at the table.

While the tea steeped, I found some tea cakes and another wedge of plum tart, setting all in front of him.

“Did you come with news?” I asked as I poured the tea. “Or is this a social visit?”

“Both.” Daniel curved his hands around the mug I slid to him and took a grateful sip of the hot brew. “As ever, I come to gaze upon you and listen to your voice, even when you explain to me what a fool I am. But I also came to tell you about Mr. Whitaker’s supposed ladybird.”

“Did you?” The small dart of uneasiness that touched me surprised me. I wondered if Daniel had visited the young lady in his guise of vacant upper-class gentleman or the suave City gent. Either way, I did not like the idea of him sitting alone with a seductress.

“Yes.” Daniel took another sip of tea, oblivious of my apprehension. “She is not, in fact, his mistress. She is, instead, his daughter.”

## Chapter 3

I stared at Daniel, dumbfounded, my teacup halfway to my lips. Of all the things I expected him to tell me, it was not this.

“But Mrs. Cullen said he was ... incapable.”

“Who is Mrs. Cullen?” Daniel asked in perplexity.

“The cook to the Whitakers’ next-door neighbor. She told me Mr. Whitaker could not sire children.”

Daniel’s brows rose. “You learned much quickly.” He turned to his tea cakes, breaking one apart. “It is true that Whitaker and his wife have never had children. The lady, Miss McCafferty, is the offspring of an early dalliance, before Whitaker met his wife.”

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I pushed aside my surprise to think this through. “She cannot be a young woman.” The Whitakers, if I were to judge from what little I’d glimpsed of them, were in their late fifties or early sixties.

“She is thirty-two. The Whitakers have been married for thirty years.”

“Then it must be Mrs. Whitaker who cannot have children,” I concluded. Pity touched me.

Daniel shrugged. “Perhaps Whitaker suffered from some illness or accident between his dalliance and his marriage. According to Miss McCafferty, she learned only a few years ago that her father was alive. Whitaker heard her mother had died, and that she’d borne a child at the relevant time. Whitaker had a private inquiry agent locate her, and also determine that she was indeed his daughter. He’s been visiting her since then, giving her funds and getting to know her. Miss McCafferty says Mr. Whitaker is a pleasant gentleman, and she is happy he found her. She is an agreeable young woman herself.”

I was back to my twinge of disquiet, which I did not understand. “I am pleased you found her so,” I said, a bit stiffly.

Daniel’s brows creased. “I never spoke to the lady.”

“Oh.” I gazed at him in confusion. “Then how do you know all this?”

“I sent Errol to call on her.” Daniel grinned. “Mr. Fielding, the humble vicar, petitioning for one of his many charities. He ingratiated himself into Miss

McCafferty's sitting room, and she told him everything."

"Oh." The syllable escaped my mouth again.

It made perfect sense that Daniel would bid Mr. Fielding, his scoundrel foster brother, to undertake the task. Mr. Fielding truly was a vicar—he had a living in Shadwell and had recently been made an assistant bishop to his parish. A vicar would seem harmless and be welcomed in to chat with the lady of the house.

"Are you well, Kat?" Daniel peered at me in puzzlement.

"Of course. I didn't understand that Mr. Fielding had obtained the information, not you. That is all."

Daniel studied me a while longer, then his face cleared, and his eyes began to twinkle. "Kat Holloway, were you afraid I would succumb to the lady's charms?"

I straightened my spine, indignant. "Of course not."

"I'd be pleased if you were." Daniel shoved aside his tea and reached across the table to clasp my hands. "Tell me you were worried I'd look elsewhere, my Kat. It would mean you care where my yearnings lay."

I slid free of his grip. "Do not be ridiculous. If you had visited with Miss McCafferty, it would only be to ascertain whether she had a motive to murder Mr. Whitaker. Nothing more. I know this."

"I prefer your worry. A worry quite unfounded, I will add." Daniel reached for my hands again, this time not letting me pull away. "I have eyes for no other lady than your good self, my dear Kat. That is the truth, and that will never change."

My voice softened, in spite of myself. “How can you say never? You do not know how long we will be friends, or when our lives will take us apart. None of us can tell what the future will bring.”

So many things could happen to Daniel as he drove about the city or hunted sinister criminals for Mr. Monaghan. So might they happen to Grace, or James, or Joanna and Sam and their family. We never knew how long we had with anyone.

I ended up clinging to Daniel’s hands, and his amusement changed to concern.

“We take it one day at a time, my love,” he said in soothing tones. “Treasure what we have while we have it.”

“I do treasure it.” I met his gaze, my eyes stinging. “Each and every time I am with you.”

Daniel rose and came to me without releasing me. He lifted me from the chair and slid his arms around me. “What you say now pleases me even more.”

The kitchen went quiet as we created another moment to cherish in lonely nights to come.

Daniel’s kisses always left me breathless. When he finally eased from me, brushing my lips with his thumb, I had to sit down rather suddenly.

“Eat your tart,” I said, the words faint. “I must rid myself of all these blasted plums.”

Daniel’s laughter rang out. The lower floor was empty, so I did not worry about anyone overhearing.

“The trials and tribulations of a put-upon cook.” Daniel continued to chuckle as he



resumed his seat and lifted his fork. “Do tell me what you discovered from the Whitaker’s neighbor’s cook.”

My voice grew strong again as I recounted Mrs. Cullen’s tale, checking the notes I’d made tonight to be certain I told him all.

“Hmm,” Daniel said when I finished. “We have a nephew who needs his uncle’s funds, a wife who apparently dotes on her husband, and a daughter happy she’s found her father. The nephew is the most likely candidate, but would he have a chance to slip something into his uncle’s sherry without being noticed?”

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“There is also the man who owes Mr. Whitaker money. Cynthia mentioned him—what was his name?” I consulted my notes. “Hardy, that was it. We must find out about Mr. Hardy.”

“Again, this man needs to have had the opportunity to give Mr. Whitaker poison. The wife is still the most likely person, or one of Whitaker’s servants. If any are unhappy with their lot and blame the master, it would be easy for one of them to slip a dollop into his soup.”

“If every disgruntled servant doctored their master’s soup or tea or sherry, there would be an amazing number of deaths in Mayfair,” I said.

Daniel laughed again. “I take your point. Also, servants are usually the first to be accused. Mrs. Bywater was very quick to point at you.”

“She was indeed.” I shivered. “She would be happier if she could find a good reason to dismiss me. I’d give notice and seek another house to work in, but I stay because of Lady Cynthia and Tess. They’d be unhappy if I left.”

“A good many people would be.” Daniel swallowed another bite of tart. “They need you, Kat. Mrs. Bywater needs you as well, though she doesn’t understand that. From what I have observed, she is a lady who wants very much to be in charge of everything. When she comes across a person she cannot control absolutely—you, for instance, and Lady Cynthia—she compensates for this by finding fault wherever she can.”

This described Mrs. Bywater exactly. Should I pity her, rather than grow irritated

with her? A difficult thing to do.

I turned to a clean page in my notebook. “What next? I suppose we must discover whether Miss McCafferty benefits if Mr. Whitaker dies. If he visits her regularly, she herself could feed him a slow poison. Or perhaps Mr. Whitaker meets this Mr. Hardy who owes him money at their club, and Mr. Hardy puts something into his brandy or whiskey, or whatever Mr. Whitaker consumes there.”

“I will send Errol back to Miss McCafferty to find out more.” Daniel finished off the tart and pushed away his plate. “Thanos is looking into what poisons produce the symptoms Mr. Whitaker exhibits. Tomorrow is your day out. Would you find a moment to stop by Mr. Thanos’s flat and hear his report?”

“Won’t he be at the Polytechnic?” I asked in surprise.

“Not tomorrow morning.” Daniel rose, and I hopped to my feet. “He would enjoy living at the Poly, but Lady Cynthia and I have convinced him to spend a few mornings at home resting and reading, to prepare for his lectures the rest of the week.”

“Of course,” I said. “I cannot stay long, though.”

“No, indeed, and I will not ask you to. I have an idea—you stop at Thanos’s flat, and then I will accompany you to the Millburns’. There is a pantomime at the Savoy Theatre tomorrow afternoon. Do you think Grace would enjoy it?”

I brightened. “I believe she would.” I had not seen a panto in a very long time, myself. “I would as well,” I said with enthusiasm.

Daniel chuckled. “I will try not to be aggrieved that you grow more animated about viewing a stage performance than you do about seeing me.”

My brows rose. “Well, it’s a rare thing for me to attend such entertainment, whereas I speak with you frequently.” A smile accompanied my words, so he’d know I was teasing.

Daniel studied me as though he wasn’t certain, but he drew near and kissed my lips. “I look forward to it, Mrs. Holloway.”

Before leaving in the morning, I helped Tess with breakfast and made more notes on my plans for Christmas dinner.

Mrs. Bywater had given me a list of all she wanted, which was overlong and ridiculous for their gathering of six people. Possibly eight or ten, Mrs. Redfern, the housekeeper, had mentioned to me, tight-lipped, yesterday evening, which annoyed me. Adding last-minute guests meant each person would have to take smaller helpings. If I made too much food to compensate for possible extra servings, I’d be berated for wasting it.

Soup would figure largely into this menu, I’d decided. Cynthia’s father had promised game from his estate, which could be put into a stew. Not trusting the earl entirely, I planned a julienne of vegetables soup and a thick carrot one as well. Several fish dishes would finish off the first course.

Mrs. Bywater insisted on a whole roast goose, and the best vendor for fowl in Covent Garden promised me one. In case he could not provide it for some reason, I would include a fricassee of chicken and leg of mutton.

Plenty of tarts, breads, and cakes would follow, including the *pièce de résistance*, the Christmas pudding. This would be served with brandy poured over it and flamed, with hard sauce on the side.

“Hard sauce?” Tess asked me this morning. “Why would someone want sauce that’s

hard? Do you need a chisel to eat it?" She chortled at the notion.

"It is a misnomer," I assured her as I arranged egg cups and piles of buttered toast on the platter to send upstairs. "Probably because of all the butter in it. It's a mixture of that, icing sugar, and brandy. You spoon it onto the hot pudding, and it melts over it. It's quite delicious."

"I should think it would be." Tess smacked her lips. "We'll have to taste a large portion, to make certain all is well."

"Of course, Tess." I ought to admonish her for wanting to help herself to the Bywaters' food, but I was in a good humor this morning. I always was, on Thursdays.

As soon as breakfast went up in the dumbwaiter, I pulled off my apron, changed to my second-best frock, and took up my coat. Tess waved me out, and I climbed the stairs to the street, breathing in the frigid air in release.

I had already sent a note to Joanna saying I'd be a tad late for my visit with Grace, and I turned my steps toward Regent Street. My path would take me along Brook Street to Hanover Square, as it had yesterday. Today, however, I heard soft footfalls behind me, ones that hurried when I did, slowed when I slowed. They stopped altogether when I halted, pretending to check for something in my handbag.

A lesser woman might have been frightened. I only quickened my pace, forcing my follower to keep up, and turned into Brook Street.

I gazed curiously at the Whitaker's home as I passed it. Curtains were drawn over most of the windows, but no black wreath had been hung on the door, to my relief. There was illness in the house, the facade told me, but not death.

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As I hastened past the house where Mrs. Cullen worked, hoping she would not emerge to engage me in long conversation, a plain black carriage halted at the Whitakers' doorway.

A man in a dark coat and tall hat descended, a large valise clutched in his hand. From his dress and nondescript carriage, I guessed he was the doctor. Dr. Burnley, Cynthia had said his name was.

The door opened before Dr. Burnley could rap upon it. A footman let him inside, but calmly, without agitation. This must be a routine visit, not an urgent summons.

I slowed my steps to watch, but there was little more to see. The footman shut the door and the carriage creaked away, the coachman heading to the mews to tend the horses until the doctor was ready to leave.

"I know you are there, James," I said to the air. "Come out here where I can speak to you."

A moment later, a tall lad materialized from the shadows of a stairwell across the street, beaming at me. "Sorry, Mrs. H.," he said as he jogged to me. "Dad told me to keep an eye on you. You don't always take care, he says."

### Chapter 4

James admitted this to me without shame, his warm smile so like his father's.

"I take plenty of care," I said impatiently. "I am off to meet him and Mr. Thanos, in

any case, not walking about alone in Seven Dials.” I forced my annoyance to recede. “It is fortunate you are here, no matter what the reason. Will you go to Brooks’s Mews and strike up a conversation with the driver of the doctor’s coach? It’s the one that stopped here a moment ago.”

“Aye, the doctor comes and goes a good deal at this house. Poor gent is very ill, ain’t he?”

I ought to have known James had already grasped what was going on. I also liked his compassion.

“He is indeed,” I said. “I have no excuse for chatting with the doctor, but maybe his coachman will gossip. Right now, information is what I need, and I believe I can walk all the way to Regent Street without you watching over me.”

James nodded readily. “I’ll have a chat with the coachman, never you worry. Also, the other grooms and coachmen there. They always know much about the families they work for.”

Probably more than the family knew themselves. The Bywaters’ coachman, Henry, enjoyed talking about the family to all and sundry. Particularly to me when he had reason to come into the kitchen or when I took food to the coach house. Henry had concluded he had no chance to woo me, but that did not stop him from trying to buttonhole me every time I came nigh him.

“Don’t tell Dad,” James added in sudden trepidation.

“It will be our secret,” I assured him.

James saluted me and dashed off, his long legs carrying him around the corner in a flash. I continued on toward Hanover Square and emerged into Regent Street a few

steps from the fine building that housed Mr. Thanos's rooms. He'd been provided them by the Polytechnic, which was not far up the road in Cavendish Square.

The landlady of this building knew me from my previous visits. She bade me a cordial good morning as I climbed the wide staircase to Mr. Thanos's floor.

The house, built more than sixty years ago, had grand columns and high ceilings, black-and-white tiled floors, and polished marble banisters. I skimmed my fingers along the railing, liking the smooth feeling of the stone, and arrived at a tall black door on an upper floor.

It opened as I approached, Daniel framed in the opening. Behind him, Mr. Thanos was rising, and Cynthia, in a man's coat, came forward to greet me.

Friends were wonderful things, I decided as I settled into an armchair before Mr. Thanos's fire. Cynthia insisted on pouring the tea the landlady had brought, and she spilled only a little.

"The doctor is calling on Mr. Whitaker as we speak," I said, and recounted how I'd seen him. I omitted that I'd asked James to follow his coachman. Daniel did not need to know his ploy to have me watched had not worked—I didn't want him admonishing the boy.

"I have heard of Dr. Burnley." Mr. Thanos took the teacup Cynthia handed him and sloshed even more into the saucer as she smiled at him. "A chappie I know at the Polytechnic knows him, or knows of him. Says he's quite good. His patients generally get well, apart from Mr. Whitaker, that is. But some illnesses can't be healed, sadly."

That was true. Certain maladies could send a person into a long decline, from which there was no recovery. I was always grateful for my own robust constitution.



“Mr. Whitaker’s symptoms are natural, then?” I asked.

I both hoped so and didn’t. If Mr. Whitaker was truly ill, then my reputation was clear, but I did not wish a serious illness on anyone. On the other hand, if poison was the culprit, an antidote might be found to help him.

“I have been reading up,” Mr. Thanos said. “Medicine is not my forte, except for electrical impulses of the brain and nerves, which are most fascinating. His symptoms Cyn—erm, Lady Cynthia—tells me her friend said are tiredness, a rapid heartbeat even when he’s resting, an inability to catch his breath, and pain when he needs to, erm, relieve himself.”

Mr. Thanos’s smooth face went very red, but I jotted this down in the notebook I’d slid into my handbag before I’d left the kitchen.

“Are these the same symptoms arsenic causes?” I asked him.

“No.” Mr. Thanos said the word sharply then looked apologetic.

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I couldn't blame him for snapping. At one time he had been the victim of arsenical poisoning, and he'd become quite ill. We'd feared he would not recover, but with Daniel and me nursing him, he'd come through.

"No," Mr. Thanos repeated in a softer tone. "From what Lady Cynthia's friend described, it is not arsenic. He does not have abdominal pain or jaundice."

"He did heave up your dinner," Cynthia informed me. "Hence why Auntie feared he'd eaten something untoward in our dining room. Don't worry, Mrs. H. I won't let her sack you for it as she threatens. The rest of us would have had our heads over basins if something had been in the food."

"Very true," Mr. Thanos agreed brightly.

"Conclusions," Daniel broke in. "Either Mr. Whitaker simply has an ongoing illness, or someone managed to give him a dose that no one else received."

I had listed all the possible ways Mr. Whitaker could have ingested poison, and now I read them out. "In his tea, sherry, whiskey, or other beverage before he arrived for dinner, suggesting a poison that acts within an hour or so. If someone wishes him to linger for a certain amount of time—weeks, perhaps—they could slip it into whatever he drinks before bed each night, or in any other draughts his doctor prescribes him. Some poisons can be rubbed into the skin, perhaps in a salve. Monkshood, for instance."

"You do have a gruesome knowledge of noxious substances," Daniel observed, his forehead creasing.

“A cook must always be careful,” I answered. “There are many things lying about households that might make their way into food if one is not watchful. Arsenic is used in dyes and also to keep away rodents, as is strychnine. Ergot of rye is a fungus that clings to rye and wheat and could get into the flour. It can be deadly. You usually deliver flour to me, Daniel.”

He blanched. “From a reputable source, I assure you. They make certain all they sell is pure.”

“Ergot of rye produces symptoms similar to Mr. Whitaker’s,” I continued. “Then there is ipecac, which is commonly given as a purge but is fatal in high doses. Tansy tea, which can also be a medicine, is present in many households, as is pennyroyal oil. Not to mention all the poisonous plants in the garden.”

“Damnation,” Cynthia said with fervor. “Makes me not want to eat another bite.”

“Mrs. Holloway’s cooking is always good,” Mr. Thanos said. “And safe.” He wasn’t being kind—he believed it. I sent him a smile.

“So, you see,” I went on, “the poison could have come from anywhere, even accidentally. If their cook had been careless, others would be ill, as Lady Cynthia has pointed out. Have any in their household been, do you know, Lady Cynthia?”

“My friend who shares the doctor with the Whitakers says not. Judith also had a chat with Mrs. Whitaker, who is an acquaintance of Judith’s mum. Mrs. Whitaker insists the only person in the house who is ill is her husband. None of the servants show any symptoms, and the nephew, who visits often, is right as rain. The old army friend, Mr. Hardy, who can’t pay Mr. Whitaker what he owes him, is another frequent visitor to the house. He is as vigorous as ever.” Cynthia poured droplets of tea from her saucer into her cup and took a sip. “Judith wonders if Mr. Hardy is looking to get his feet under Mrs. Whitaker’s table. Sounds as though he’s interested enough in her.”

“That is a possibility,” I conceded. “Suppose Mr. Hardy comes to visit as often as he can in the guise of a friend and taints Mr. Whitaker’s whiskey. If he and Mr. Whitaker meet at their club, Mr. Hardy would have opportunity there as well.”

“Hardy and Whitaker belong to the Oriental Club, as both did business in India some time ago,” Cynthia said. “They went out in the army and then stayed for a bit. It’s one reason Whitaker is so rich. Young Herbert wouldn’t be admitted to the club, except as a guest of his uncle, and not regularly. Herbert likely only visits Whitaker at the house in Brook Street.”

I sighed, discouraged. “Any of them could be hastening Mr. Whitaker to his grave.” I closed the notebook, but my voice hardened. “We cannot let them.”

Daniel’s affable persona fell away, and the grim man who chased criminals for the police appeared. “No, we won’t.”

This had gone beyond me proving I’d not served a contaminated meal and saving my job. Mr. Whitaker was a wealthy man, and several people stood to gain from his death. The nephew and the insolvent friend would benefit, and perhaps the daughter would too, if Mr. Whitaker had put her into his will. She might have decided she’d suffered from her illegitimacy long enough, and she’d had opportunity to doctor his tea.

I thought of the poor man suffering in his bed, and I determined to stop it. Daniel met my gaze, understanding. Cynthia and Mr. Thanos looked adamant as well. Between the four of us, I decided, the killer didn’t stand a chance.

Daniel escorted me from the sobering meeting at Mr. Thanos’s flat and the rest of the way to the Millburns’. We tramped down Oxford Street and over the Holborn Viaduct to Newgate Street in silence, making our way to Cheapside. From there we took a small turning called Clover Lane and arrived at the house where my daughter

lived.

Grace greeted me with her usual loving exuberance, and I sank into her embrace. My girl was getting so tall, I realized as I pulled away to look at her. She was my height now and possibly would grow even more.

I'd have to decide soon what was to become of her. I did not want her in service, as I had been, but there were not many choices for the daughter of a domestic.

I pressed aside such worries to think about later. Grace was pleased to see Daniel and excited about our treat out today.

Daniel took us to the Savoy Theatre just off the Strand, a fairly new place of entertainment, lavish and shining. Though I protested I could pay our way, Daniel wouldn't hear of it. He procured the tickets and ushered us inside, and I decided, for Grace's sake, to cease my fussing.

James slid into the seat beside Daniel as the first play started. He gave me a surreptitious nod then greeted his father and Grace with his customary cheerfulness.

Several pantos would run today. The first was Puss in Boots, a favorite, with plenty of songs, antics, and actors in amusing animal costumes. The lady in the breeches part was quite comely, with her long legs displayed in white tights. I would never have the courage to wear such attire, but she was so lively and funny as the hero with his magical cat, that I soon forgot about these concerns and settled in to enjoy the play.

Grace bounced in her seat, most unlike her, loudly shouting the responses to the actors. I found my voice hoarse as I yelled along with her, collapsing into laughter with my daughter.

Daniel also bellowed with enthusiasm. James was a master at it, his words booming over the crowd's. His voice had grown deep, James swiftly becoming a man.

Daniel squeezed my hand at one point, his broad smile warming me through.

## Page 12

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This is happiness, the words came to me. My resentment about my plight in life, my envy of those who had true homes to go to at Christmas, began to dissolve.

I had a beautiful daughter, dear friends, and a man with whom I could be wholly myself. Daniel not only admired me, but he put up with my insatiable curiosity, my quick temper, and my absolute need to put Grace first. Daniel had a good heart, and I knew I was lucky I had him in my life.

As I watched Puss and the following even more elaborate production of Aladdin, a sort of peace settled over me. These moments, stolen when I could take them, were joy. I would not trade them for all the riches in the world.

I clung to that feeling as we walked home, James darting off once we reached Cheapside.

Joanna invited Daniel to stay once we reached her house. I thought he'd beg off, saying he had much to do, but he accepted, and we sat in the parlor, sipping tea and enjoying conversation. Grace lingered with me instead of running back to her studies or to play with Joanna's oldest daughter who'd become her closest friend.

Joanna's husband, Sam, arrived home as the windows grew dark, and he joined us for tea and chatter. He and Daniel got along well, I observed, as the two men exchanged banter and laughter.

When I had to depart, bitterness stirred in my heart again. Joanna could remain in this warm house with her husband and children, whereas I had to return to drudgery before I went to sleep in my cold attic room alone.

Daniel, bless him, offered to see me home.

Once I tore myself from Grace, Daniel hailed a hansom, and we huddled together under the lap robe in the frigid December air.

“What is it, Kat?” Daniel asked, sensing my mood.

“Oh, I am merely being disgruntled.” I stretched my tired feet under the blanket. “Sometimes I wish I could chuck it all and run far away—with Grace, of course. Instead, I must argue with a woman who will have the perfect Christmas dinner, even though she has no knowledge about food and how it is prepared. If she is not ecstatically pleased with the Christmas meal, it will be all my fault, in her opinion.”

“Why don’t you then?” Daniel asked.

“Why don’t I what?”

“Chuck it all. Hand Mrs. Bywater your apron and tell her she must find another cook to put up with her. Go to a village in the country and set up the tea shop you dream of.”

I stared at him as he ran through this scenario, his teasing tone vanishing.

His sudden seriousness shook me from my doldrums, and my common sense returned. “Because, my dear Daniel, shoes and frocks for a girl who grows out of them each year cost money. So does food to eat and a roof to sleep under. I did not have the fortune to be born with coffers full of cash, you know.”

“I wish you did not always have to be worried about money,” Daniel said, almost fiercely.



“We all do, even gentlemen who sit in exclusive clubs.” I thought of Mr. Hardy and how desperate he might feel, owing Mr. Whitaker a large debt. “I will ask you in return, why do you not tell Mr. Monaghan to go hang and depart London with James for this picturesque village in the country? Whose inhabitants likely would not welcome strangers from London without some sort of introduction. We could be anybody.”

Daniel listened with a scowl that lightened as I ran through my speech. The softness reentered his voice as I finished.

“As always, Kat, you have more sense than any person I’ve ever known. You know good and well why I can’t tell Monaghan to go hang, as much as I’d like to. I want James to have a father who is not rotting in prison.”

“Mr. Monaghan would not dare,” I said with indignation.

“Indeed, he would. Even the hardest inspectors at the Yard are afraid of Monaghan. He is ruthless.” Daniel’s smile returned, and he kissed my cheek. “I will cling to the fact that when you spoke of retiring to our imaginary village, you implied that we’d go there together.”

I started. “Did I?”

“You did. I will also enjoy that you said it spontaneously, without thought.” Daniel brushed back a lock of my hair, which had straggled from beneath my hat when he’d kissed me. “I will think on this for the rest of the day and let it warm me in the winter’s darkness.”

For my part, I would remember his lips on my cheek, his touch on my hair, and his laughter as we’d enjoyed the panto.

“Leave off,” I said softly. “Daft man.”

James was waiting at the railings that evening after supper when I took scraps outside to the unfortunates.

“Doctor’s coachman was friendly enough,” he reported when I finished and turned to him. “Dr. Burnley’s a personable man, coachman says. Doesn’t mind a gab with his servants.”

“A good thing for us,” I observed.

James leaned negligently against the railings, his stance so like his father’s that my heart squeezed.

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“Coachman says he’s a good doctor too,” James continued. “Wants to heal his patients, not just collect his fee. He’s been tending the Whitaker family for ages. He’s worried about Mr. Whitaker’s health, thinking the man’s about to die.”

“Oh, dear. I am sorry to hear it.”

I truly was. It was Christmas, and Mrs. Whitaker didn’t need a tragedy just now. Losing a loved one was bad at any time, but in this season, it was doubly hard.

“The doctor’s starting to believe Mrs. Whitaker’s theory of poison,” James went on. “And trying to decide how to cure him.”

“Does he suspect what substance it is?” I asked with hope. If that was found, perhaps it could be counteracted.

“Coachman don’t know. He’s only repeating what he’s heard the doc mention in passing.”

“Of course.” I hid my disappointment.

It would be useful if I could sit Dr. Burnley down and ask him pointed questions, but I would have to invent some excuse to do so. He was not the Bywaters’ doctor and so would not call at the Mount Street house.

Not that a doctor visited often. When one of the staff fell sick, Mrs. Bywater dosed them with such foul-tasting remedies they recovered swiftly in order to get away from them. She didn’t believe in paying a doctor to attend servants, in any case.

“Coachman did hear the doctor quarreling with Mr. Whitaker lately,” James added. “A few weeks ago, that is. At the moment, the poor man can barely speak.”

“Oh? Does the coachman know what about?”

“No. Only heard him through the open door. Doc said something like, ‘you must put it right,’ or ‘you must do right by it.’ He’s not certain. It was only the one time, though. After that, they seemed to be friends again.”

It could mean nothing, or be the key to everything. So frustrating not to know.

“Tell your father what you’ve learned,” I said to James. “It might be important.” I hesitated. “Perhaps you don’t have to mention that I asked you to talk to the coachman instead of following me about.”

James’s smile grew broader. “I can turn Dad up sweet, don’t you worry.”

“You don’t need to turn him up sweet, James, dear. You ought to obey him when he gives you orders. He has your best interests at heart. Mine too, I suppose.”

His brown eyes sparkled with good humor. “Right you are, Mrs. H.”

I knew I was inconsistent with my advice to him, but Daniel always left me flummoxed.

“Run home and keep warm,” I bade him. “I will have plenty of leftover Christmas pudding in a few days. I’ll save some for you to feast on.”

James burst out laughing, a joyous sound. The beggars who’d remained to consume the food I’d given them brightened.

“I look forward to that, Mrs. H. A happy Christmas to you.”

“Happy Christmas, James.” I warmed as he bounded away, waving as he went. Daniel was blessed to have such a son, and I was blessed by him too.

“Mrs. Whitaker would like it if you called on her, Mrs. H.,” Cynthia startled me the next morning by saying.

She’d breezed downstairs after breakfast, dressed in a frock with easy lines, the sort she’d begun wearing in the last year or so. She was off to the Polytechnic to help Mr. Thanos and had stopped off in the kitchen on her way out.

“If I called on her?” I asked, mystified. “Why?”

“To help heal her husband,” Cynthia said, as though this were a perfectly reasonable explanation. “I said that you’d be able to.”

## Chapter 5

“You told her I would cure her husband?” I burst out. “Have you run mad?” I checked my amazement as I remembered to whom I spoke. “I beg your pardon, Lady Cynthia, but you have confounded me.”

Cynthia waved my apology aside. “I am telling it wrong. Judith says I always speak before I have my thoughts in order. I let on to my friend—the one whose mum also has Dr. Burnley for her physician—that you created dishes that made those feeling poorly ever so much better. She told Mrs. Whitaker, who said she’d welcome you to come and give her cook a few of your recipes. Mrs. Whitaker is desperate for her husband to get well.”

Her explanation made more sense, but it was still alarming. “You ought to have

promised no such thing.”

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While my broths and blancmanges were likely the reason ailing staff recovered, in spite of Mrs. Bywater's patent medicines, I could not guarantee to cure a bad illness or a poisoning.

"Nonsense. Your cooking will do him a world of good," Cynthia said resolutely. "And it would get you into the house, where you can do some sleuthing. I'll go with you, if you'd like."

Cynthia whirled, ready to rush to the Whitaker house on the moment, but I forestalled her.

"Better that I go on my own," I said quickly. "Besides, Mr. Thanos is counting on you."

Cynthia came to a stop, her skirt swinging. "That is a point. I say, I am sorry, Mrs. H. I thought you'd welcome an entrée into the lion's den."

"I do welcome it." I softened. "I had been looking for a way in. You startled me, is all. I can at least ease the man's suffering a little and perhaps his wife's anxiousness too."

"Excellent. Well, I'm off." Cynthia managed to sneak a scone off a plate before she strode out the door.

Today was Friday, and I had no business leaving the kitchen, but I would have to contrive some excuse. My next afternoon out was not until Monday, which this year was also Christmas Day.

Mrs. Bywater had hinted I should stay home to ensure that Christmas dinner went off without trouble, but I had stood firm. If I gave way in this one instance, Mrs. Bywater would try her best to deprive me of more days out. One must stick to one's principles. Besides, I'd be mad to give up the chance to spend Christmas afternoon with Grace.

I went through the recipes I'd created to aid with digestion and wrote out a few neatly in my notebook. The Whitakers' cook might not be able to read, which meant I'd have to tell her the recipes, or demonstrate them. Many cooks couldn't read at all but had prodigious memories for ingredients and their measurements. But if she could read, I'd leave the pages with her.

Mrs. Bywater found my excuse for me. She didn't come to the kitchen herself, but sent Mrs. Redfern down after luncheon with a message for me.

"The mistress received a note from Mrs. Whitaker." Mrs. Redfern was a haughty woman but shared my impatience with Mrs. Bywater, who had clearly not been raised to deal with a household of servants. "Lady Cynthia sang your praises, and Mrs. Whitaker asked if you could be spared for a few hours."

"Yes, Lady Cynthia mentioned it," I said quickly.

Tess hid a snort as she sauteed chops at the stove. She'd heard my conversation with Cynthia, and she found my ingenuousness amusing.

"Mrs. Whitaker has a bee in her bonnet about her husband being poisoned," Mrs. Redfern said. "The mistress did not say that, but it is obvious she believes it."

At least Mrs. Bywater wasn't continuing to declare that a noxious substance had come from my kitchen. Dare I hope she'd forgotten the matter and ceased blaming me? The lady could so often do an about-turn in her notions, much to our exasperation.



“I will go to Brook Street straightaway.” I untied my apron and took up my basket, where I’d already set the recipes as well as a few fresh herbs the Whitakers’ cook might not have. “I will return as soon as I am able.”

“Before the master is home, anyway,” Mrs. Redfern said. “He is weary of Mr. Whitaker, he says. I heard Mr. Bywater remark that the man has been ailing for years but probably will outlive us all.”

It was true that some frail people managed to hang on while those who seemed hardy could pop off at a moment’s notice.

I kept this observation to myself, donned coat and hat, and left for Brook Street.

Today I did not hesitate when I reached the stairs that led to the Whitakers’ kitchen but climbed down them at a swift pace. I rapped on the door at the bottom, which was opened by a red-faced and sweating young woman.

“What yer want?” she asked in breathless apprehension.

A stronger voice boomed behind her. “Who is it, Agnes?”

“I dunno, Mrs. Provost. Some woman.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Footsteps sounded, and an older woman with iron-gray hair under a cook’s cap glared around Agnes at me. “Well? Who are you?”

I met the woman’s gaze without flinching. “I am Mrs. Holloway, Lady Cynthia Shires’s cook. Mrs. Whitaker wished me to bring you some recipes.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Provost looked me up and down, obviously not pleased with what she saw. “So she told me. Well, you’d better come in.”

Not the most gracious welcome, but I slid inside and shrugged off my coat, hanging it up along with my hat. Mrs. Provost watched me sourly as I approached the kitchen table, which was strewn with vegetables and greens. All looked fresh and of good quality, which was a relief.

“You’re young for a cook,” Mrs. Provost said as I set my basket on a chair and removed the sheaf of recipes.

“I trained thoroughly and advanced quickly.” I was proud of how I’d risen from cook’s assistant to head cook at a rapid pace, due to both my skills and excellent instruction. My mother had found talented women to take me under their wing.

## Page 15

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“Hmph.” Mrs. Provost clearly did not approve. “Well, you’d better show me the recipes. The mistress believes we will magic the master back to health and rid him of her imagined poisons.”

“Perhaps not imagined,” I said. “Bad substances can enter food without our knowledge.”

“Not in this kitchen,” Mrs. Provost snapped. “I allowed you down here, Mrs. Holloway, only because Mrs. Cullen next door spoke highly of you.”

“That was kind of her,” I murmured.

“She’s a gossip busybody.” Mrs. Provost took up a chef’s knife and brought it down on a clump of unsuspecting parsley resting on the table. Green bits flew everywhere. “I took her at her word, but not to have you come into my kitchen and accuse me of all sorts.”

“Not accusing,” I said, my tone firm. “But we do not always know what is in our ingredients. Mr. Whitaker has been ill for some time, I hear.”

“Yes, but it’s nothing to do with me.”

Mrs. Provost continued to slice savagely, thrusting aside the parsley to start in on spring onions. Parsley should be chopped at the last minute, not left sitting about to lose its flavor, but I did not remark upon it.

“How long has he been poorly?” I asked.

The assistant, Agnes, answered. “A few years now, missus. Ever since he came back from Cheltenham, where he stayed with his nephew one summer. His friend Mr. Hardy was there too. Mrs. Whitaker thinks he over— over— over-something. Too much walking and riding, she meant. He’s been sickly ever since.”

Over-exerted himself possibly. If a man was not used to hearty country walks and riding breakneck across meadows, it might strain his already weak constitution.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Provost declared. “He was all right when he came home. But soon after, he started staying out much more than he used to. Spending nights at his club and such things. The doctor suspects he’s keeping another woman, and she has made him so ill. You know what tarts are like.”

The woman in question was not a tart, but his daughter, though it was clear Mrs. Provost did not know that. I supposed the shock of finding the daughter might have weakened Mr. Whitaker, but surely, he’d have recovered of that by now. Of the walking and riding as well. Mrs. Whitaker probably had the right of it.

I showed Mrs. Provost the recipes I’d brought—clear soups, bland custards, and a blancmange flavored with almonds. All slipped down easily and sat lightly on the stomach.

It turned out that Mrs. Provost could indeed read. She peered at my words, her lips moving as she made them out.

“Nothing remarkable in these recipes,” she pronounced when she finished. “I suppose we’d better make them, though, or the mistress will be displeased.”

Agnes gathered the ingredients, and we began. Mrs. Provost, for her ill temper, proved to be a competent cook. After an hour or so, we had a repast that should appeal to any invalid.

The house had no dumbwaiter, and the footmen, Mrs. Provost told me, were too proud to run errands for her. Possibly they didn't wish to venture into the kitchen and fall under the lash of Mrs. Provost's tongue.

I volunteered to carry the heavy tray upstairs, and neither Mrs. Provost nor Agnes argued with me. Neither of them helped me, either. They both obviously believed my errand was pointless.

I struggled with the door at the top of the stairs, which was wrenched open for me so suddenly that I nearly dropped the tray.

"Whoops." A tall young man with a shock of light-brown hair in a tailored suit steadied the tray and bathed me in a winsome smile. "Have a care. I heard you scrabbling at the door—lucky I did, isn't it? Who are you? A new maid?"

"I am Mrs. Holloway," I explained. "Your aunt asked me to prepare some dishes for your uncle."

"Ah, yes, the cook who made us such a wonderful meal the other night. I ate until I was stuffed and wished there was more."

"You are too kind," I said, inclining my head.

My guess that he was Mr. Herbert Whitaker, the wastrel nephew and heir, proved correct.

"My aunt dotes on my uncle, she does," Herbert said good-naturedly. "I'll show you to the sickroom, shall I?"

"That would be most welcome."

Herbert didn't relieve me of my burden but scampered up the stairs as though I could follow at his rapid pace. He waited for me with some patience in the hall two flights up and ushered me into a dark bedroom.

The chamber would have been a fine one were it not so gloomy. The curtains were pulled tightly shut, with only one gas lamp to light the winter day. A large bed with a heavily carved head and footboard dominated the room, flanked by matching night tables. Ponderous but comfortable-looking chairs and a chaise had been placed around the large room, with a full bookcase against one wall. Knitted throws waited on each chair so a person could bundle up cozily while he or she read.

Mr. Whitaker was not in the bed but on the chaise, wrapped in blankets, with a square table pulled next to him. On this lay a sheaf of newspapers as well as a pot of tea and a glass of what looked like cordial.

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Mr. Whitaker was painfully thin, his chest sunken, his cheeks gray. The whites of his eyes held a yellowish tinge.

“Good afternoon, Uncle,” Herbert sang out as he admitted me. “This is Mrs. Holloway. The cook who made such a splendid meal when we visited Mr. Bywater the other night.”

Mr. Whitaker sent me a wan smile. “Such a treat. I commend you for the meal, Mrs. Holloway. I was sorry to have taken a turn and not finished it. Did you come to find out why I’d left too much food on my plate?”

His good humor about his weak state was both charming and sad.

“Not at all.” I spoke in my best no-nonsense voice. “Mrs. Whitaker asked me to make a few dishes to settle your stomach, and I was happy to oblige.”

“You’re a cheerful cook.” Mr. Whitaker’s hands moved on the blanket. “A novelty in this house. Well, Mrs. Holloway, I will attempt a few mouthfuls, but I warn you, my appetite is not what it once was.”

“It will do you good, Uncle.” Herbert clasped his hands and kept his smile fixed on Mr. Whitaker. “If you eat up and rest as the doctor says, you’ll be well in no time.”

“You are young and optimistic,” Mr. Whitaker answered dryly. “Perhaps it is just as well for you that I am finished. You can come into your legacy and begin to live your life.”

“Do not say that,” Herbert exclaimed in trepidation. “No reason for me to settle down so soon. I’d rather be touching you for my allowance for years to come.”

I concentrated on dishing out a bit of custard garnished with fresh mint during this exchange, pretending not to listen. Herbert sounded genuinely concerned that his uncle might cease to be, rather than a young man eager to inherit a surfeit of wealth.

“It will be the making of you,” Mr. Whitaker assured him. “Your aunt will look after you. And you her.”

“Please don’t speak so, Uncle,” Herbert said in distress. “You’ve been ill like this before and recovered. No reason you shouldn’t again.”

“The very young believe no one will ever die,” Mr. Whitaker said to me as I set the bowl of custard on the table next to him. I’d added plenty of vanilla and a little nutmeg to warm the stomach. “But I’ve put everything to rights and can leave all in Mrs. Whitaker’s capable hands. I have no regrets.”

Interesting. Did he mean he’d told his wife about his by-blow daughter? Had he provided for the young woman? Or only for Herbert?

My speculations were interrupted by the arrival of the doctor himself. I’d only seen Dr. Burnley in a greatcoat and hat, and without them he proved to have a slight build and balding head, a graying moustache on his thin face. His brown eyes filled with concern as he took in the scene.

“What is that you’re eating?” he exclaimed as Mr. Whitaker finished off his first spoonful. “You must be very careful what you ingest.”

“It’s only a bit of custard,” I said. “It will do him no harm.”



“And very good custard, too.” Mr. Whitaker spooned up another mouthful. “Much better than those foul concoctions you feed me, Burnley.”

Doctor Burnley frowned in displeasure. “If you can keep it down, it might be all right. But you must rest.”

“I am tired of resting.” Mr. Whitaker ate another mouthful—nothing wrong with his appetite today. “It is wearying, all this resting.”

Herbert chuckled. “Very clever, Uncle.”

“Speaking of clever, Herbert, you must meet Mr. Hardy at our club for me,” Mr. Whitaker instructed.

I listened intently as I stirred the broth and added a bit of chopped parsley to the bowl.

“At the Oriental?” Herbert sounded pained. “Stuffy place full of tedious old men. If one doesn’t know anything about the East India Company, one is sneered at.”

“Several of those tedious old men paid me compliments on my bright and cheerful nephew last time I took you there,” Mr. Whitaker said. “The club will admit you as Mr. Hardy’s guest. You can stand it for one evening. I have come up with a scheme where Hardy can pay me back without humiliation. Not his fault the diamond mine failed. I have the papers my solicitor drew up—you have only to present them to him for his signature.”

“Why can’t your solicitor present them then?” Herbert asked, a bit petulantly.

“Because it’s better coming from a friend in a comfortable place, not in a cold solicitor’s office. Hardy has already agreed and will be waiting for you. And, he

knows that if I leave this world before he can, the estate will forgive the debt.”

A fine motive for murdering a man. Putting that fact together with Miss Townsend’s speculation that Mr. Hardy was sweet on Mrs. Whitaker made him a prime candidate.

“I think you are far kinder to him than he deserves,” Herbert said, sharing my opinion. “But I will meet with him.” He patted his uncle’s shoulder. “As long as you promise to eat up Mrs. Holloway’s food and get better.”

“I’m sure I will.” Mr. Whitaker smiled weakly. “Off you go, boy. A sickroom is no place for a robust young man.”

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Herbert squeezed his uncle's thin shoulder once more then gave him a good-natured farewell and turned to depart. As he passed me, he swallowed, his eyes red-rimmed and moist.

Was Herbert truly that worried his uncle would die? Or was he simply a fine actor?

I silently dished out soup and added a soft piece of bread to it as the doctor laid a hand on Mr. Whitaker's forehead and felt his pulse.

"And how are we today?" Dr. Burnley asked.

"We are three different people in this room," Mr. Whitaker answered. "Mrs. Holloway seems in good health. As do you. I am doing poorly. But the custard is helping." He reached for another spoonful.

"It was kind of you to bring up the food," the doctor said to me.

He did not continue the sentiment, but I heard in his tone the wish that I would leave.

"He is to eat all of it," I said sternly as I set out the soup and bread along with a helping of the blancmange. "His lady wife's orders."

Both men softened. "Her will is to be obeyed," Mr. Whitaker said. "Bless her."

"Yes, Mrs. Whitaker is likely why you are still alive," the doctor told him.

"I know you think she doesn't deserve me, Burnley, but I assure you, I adore her."

Mr. Whitaker took an eager slurp of the soup. “Thank you, Mrs. Holloway. If ever you consider changing houses, please speak to my wife.”

Mrs. Provost would not be happy to hear this, but I took it as the compliment he meant. I curtsied politely to both men, thanked Mr. Whitaker for his praise, and left the room.

Mr. Whitaker’s household had given me much to ponder. As I descended with the empty soup tureen and custard dishes, I thought about the way Dr. Burnley and Mr. Whitaker had spoken to each other. Friends who’d known each other a long time, I decided. The doctor’s manner, however, was disapproving, as though Mr. Whitaker’s illness personally displeased him.

The nephew, likewise, hadn’t been what I’d expected. Herbert had exuded fondness for his uncle and concern for his health. He’d inherit the lot, Cynthia had said, but it was true that not every young man relished such responsibility.

I returned to the kitchen and reported that the master had eaten heartily of the custard and was starting on the soup and blancmange.

Mrs. Provost sniffed. “It’s nothing I’d have given him to eat. We’ll see if it settles him, shall we?”

I could not linger to find out. I bade Agnes and Mrs. Provost a good afternoon and departed to walk home.

I let out a long breath once I was out in the street. Carts and carriages rattled past me, streams of horses’ breaths fogging in the cold air. The icy winter afternoon, as gloomy as it was, was preferable to the warm hush of the sickroom, where a brave man faced the knowledge that he wasn’t long for this world.

Something wet trickled to my cheek, and I wiped it away impatiently. This was no time to become maudlin.

Perhaps my food would make Mr. Whitaker better. A person could recover from poisoning if it was caught in time, and he was given good care. Depending on the poison, of course.

I wondered if Daniel could infiltrate the Oriental Club and find out more about Mr. Hardy—particularly whether he'd had opportunity to pour something foul into Mr. Whitaker's tea or whiskey on Tuesday afternoon. The fact that Mr. Whitaker was still alive was perhaps due to the fact that Mr. Hardy hadn't given him a deadly enough dose but hadn't had the chance to administer another.

I had to push aside my worries for the personable Mr. Whitaker once I reached home, and return to my duties. Tess eagerly asked what had happened, and I gave her a truncated version as we worked.

Today, I started the Christmas pudding, which, after boiling, would rest in the larder for several days before I warmed and served it. Some families enjoyed the tradition of "Stir-Up Sunday," where every member of the family, on the first Sunday in Advent, would come to the kitchen and give the pudding a good stir. Mrs. Bywater didn't hold with such things, she'd told me. Too unsanitary, was her view. I was to start the pudding no earlier than the week before Christmas.

I bade Tess grate the heels of stale bread until we had a heaping bowl of crumbs. She rubbed her arm when she finished, complaining that her elbow would never be the same again.

Into the bowl went thinly sliced orange and lemon peels, raisins, chopped currents, and chilled suet I'd saved for this purpose. Tess cracked open a couple dozen eggs, and I stirred these in with a liberal amount of a good brandy Mr. Davis had chosen for

me.

We made enough batter for several puddings—one for Christmas, one for New Year's, and an extra in case any visitors arrived in between. The Christmas one would have the trinkets Mrs. Bywater insisted be stirred into it, though I didn't much like adding inedible things to food. Mrs. Bywater, for reasons unknown to me, didn't worry about sanitariness in this instance.

I had some pretty molds—a domed one and two with serrated edges that would make pleasing shapes. Tess and I spooned the batter into these and covered them with damp, floured cloths, tying them tightly to the sides of the molds. We then set the puddings into pans of water to boil overnight.

Early the next morning, I came downstairs and lifted the puddings from their baths. I set them in the larder, where they'd drain and wait until Monday, when I'd boil one again for Mr. Davis to serve at Christmas dinner.

When I emerged from the larder, pleased that the puddings so far had gone well, Cynthia banged in from the outside stairs, strangely early for her.

She hadn't been to bed, I saw, from her rumpled male attire and disarranged hair. Stayed all night with Bobby and Miss Townsend, I guessed.

Her eyes were wide with distress, her movements agitated.

“Mr. Whitaker has taken a turn for the worse,” she announced. “He was very ill in the night, and the family fear he’ll not see Christmas.”

### Chapter 6

“This will not do.” My voice rang down the passageway, all my ideas of the previous day made topsy-turvy. “This will not do at all.”

“But how are we to help him?” Cynthia demanded. “He rallied after your soup and custards, so his nephew said. Bobby and I drove young Herbert to his uncle’s house early this morning, after following him to a gambling hall last night, I’m sorry to say. He became highly inebriated, and Bobby and I had to drag him out. We left him staggering into the house on Brook Street but he came running out a moment later, saying his uncle was in a bad way. He was weeping, poor lad. I hurried home to tell you.”

I paced the floor, pressing my fist into my palm. What could I do? I had no business rushing to the Whitakers’ home, no way to prove my theories.

I could send word to Inspector McGregor of Scotland Yard. But he might not be able to look into things until too late, if he took any notice of me at all.

Daniel could stop at the Whitakers’ and inquire, as could Cynthia’s friends. But Daniel wouldn’t be allowed past the kitchen, and none of Cynthia’s acquaintances were early risers.

My contemplations were cut short by the sound of hurried footsteps in the passageway. I popped out of the kitchen to see Mr. Davis heading into the housekeeper's parlor. Mrs. Redfern had not yet come down, so I hastened there to see what was the matter.

"Mr. Davis?"

Mr. Davis turned from rummaging in a cabinet where we kept things locked away from the underservants. He held a large black bottle.

"Paul is feeling poorly this morning," he said in annoyance. "Overindulgence, I say. He went to visit his aunt yesterday, and she fed him an early Christmas dinner. He ate heartily and drank just as much. The mistress wants him up and about his duties and has asked me for her favorite bottle so she can dose him. I think he'd be better off with weak tea, but the mistress insists."

I knew what was in the bottle. Mrs. Bywater spooned its contents liberally into servants who complained of the smallest stomachache. It was a very common remedy, and every household I'd worked in supplied it.

"We must go to Mr. Whitaker on the moment." I pulled off my apron and barked a command to Lady Cynthia, who'd followed me. "Hail a hansom, at once."

Instead of upbraiding me for forgetting my place, Cynthia instantly dashed back to the kitchen and out the door, her feet flashing by the high window as she hurtled herself upstairs to the street.

"Mrs. Holloway?" Mr. Davis asked in a baffled tone behind me.

"I will return as soon as I am able," I told Mr. Davis as I hurried to the kitchen. "Tess can see to breakfast. Do not let on I am gone to Mrs. Bywater, please."



Without waiting for his reply, I tossed down my apron and snatched up my coat before following Cynthia up the stairs.

When I reached the top, I turned toward South Audley Street, where the closest hansom stand would be, and found Cynthia already in one rolling toward me. The driver barely halted long enough for me to scramble inside, then we were off at a rapid pace to the Whitaker's home.

Once we reached the house on Brook Street, Cynthia plunged out of the hansom and ran past the portico's elegant columns to pull frantically on the doorbell. I thrust a shilling at the cabbie before I hastened down the stairs and into the kitchen, without bothering to knock.

Mrs. Provost swung from the stove where she was cooking eggs to death, and Agnes's head popped up from where she rolled out dough at the table.

"Mrs. Holloway," Mrs. Provost said, aghast. "What the devil do you mean, bursting in here?"

I ran through the kitchen without explanation, pushing past a startled maid on my way to the stairs. I dashed up them and through the green baize door into the quiet of the main house. On the ground floor, a footman was just opening the front door to Cynthia.

"Quick," I cried to her. "We must stop him."

"Must stop who?" Cynthia stepped around the footman who tried to block her way, and hurried after me as I mounted the stairs to the upper floors.

"Mr. Whitaker," I panted in answer to Cynthia's question.

Mrs. Whitaker herself stepped out of her husband's bedchamber as we reached the second-floor hallway.

“Lady Cynthia?” She took in Cynthia's male attire and then me panting next to her, her eyes widening. Mrs. Whitaker's face was lined, her expression that of one who'd lost hope. “What on earth?”

“Is the doctor here?” I demanded.

“Of course, he is. My husband is very ill, and does not need—”

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I charged through the door, bumping past the poor woman in my haste. Cynthia followed me, Mrs. Whitaker watching in bewildered indignation.

“Stop!” I shouted.

Dr. Burnley, who was doing nothing but gazing down at his patient, swung around and gaped at me.

I strode past him and grabbed a large black bottle from Mr. Whitaker’s lavishly carved nightstand, a bottle identical to what Mr. Davis had taken from the housekeeper’s parlor.

“Have you been giving him this?” I waved the bottle at the doctor.

Dr. Burnley’s thin face reddened. “Of course, I have, you impertinent woman. What are you doing in here? Mrs. Whitaker, why has—?”

“It’s ipecac.” I turned the bottle to show Cynthia its label. I uncorked it and took a sniff, wrinkling my nose at the acrid odor.

Cynthia stared at me. “What is the matter with that, Mrs. H.? Auntie uses ipecac all the time. She swears by it.”

“In the diluted form sold by apothecaries, it can be a good emetic, though too much is a bad thing.” Mrs. Bywater did like to give sick staff a good hearty dollop. “But if a doctor boils it down to concentrate it, or adds juice from the ipecac plant itself, he can poison his patient slowly, simply by instructing him to take his medicine.”

“Oh,” Cynthia said, enlightened. “So that when the patient dies, everyone will assume it was from his long illness. They’ll even praise the doctor for trying to help.”

“You are a cook,” Dr. Burnley snapped at me. “How dare you barge in here and disrupt a sickroom? Mr. Whitaker is in a bad way.”

Mr. Whitaker’s eyes were open, but his lids were heavy, his fingers like sticks where they clutched the blanket.

Dr. Burnley pointed a furious finger at me. “Get out.”

I lifted a spoon from the nightstand and trickled syrup from the bottle into it.

“If it is harmless, then take some yourself.” I held the spoon out to him. “There’s not much here. A tiny amount of ipecac won’t hurt you.”

The doctor backed away in alarm. Foolish man—the actors in the pantomime had been much better.

Mr. Whitaker’s voice rasped from the rumpled bed, while Mrs. Whitaker watched, stupefied. “Burnley? I think you should explain yourself.”

Dr. Burnley continued to glare at me. “You have no proof. Neither you nor this ... trollop ... have any business here.” He made a dismissing gesture to Cynthia.

Cynthia did not faint in dismay at his contempt for her. “I’d say the proof was in the bottle, eh, doctor?” she said cheerily. “We’ll just take that to Scotland Yard and have it tested, shall we?”

Dr. Burnley lunged for me. I sidestepped him, clutching the bottle to my chest. A little ipecac splashed onto my work dress before I could jam the cork back in.

“Good Lord, Burnley.” Mr. Whitaker’s voice was faint but stern. “You’ve just insulted the daughter of an earl who is also the niece of an old friend. Is this kind cook correct? You’ve been poisoning me all this time?”

Instead of denying it, Dr. Burnley lunged at me again, but Mrs. Whitaker got in his way.

“No.” She held out her arms, as though protecting me from an attacking dog. “If you have nothing to fear, Doctor, you will let the medicine be tested. And if you truly have been making my husband and your dear friend ill, tell me why.”

Dr. Burnley’s jaw hardened. “He has been keeping a mistress.” He hissed the word. “He pretends to be so devoted to you, but for the last few years, he has been going to another woman. Betraying you, humiliating you.” His eyes took on a new light, a doting one. “I did this for you, Angela.”

“Not a mistress,” I said quickly. This was not a time for secrets—the Whitakers would have to talk through this revelation later. “She is his daughter.”

Mr. Whitaker gasped. Burnley had leaned toward Mrs. Whitaker as he spoke and now he snapped upright.

“What are you talking about? This woman is mad.” Dr. Burnley glared at Mr. Whitaker while pointing at me.

“It is true,” Mr. Whitaker said. “From my misspent youth. Cristina McCafferty is a lovely young lady I am proud to say is mine.”

“A by-blow,” Dr. Burnley began with a sneer. “My dear Angela, how could he do that to you?”

“I know all about it,” Mrs. Whitaker said clearly. “He told me the day he found her. And I will thank you not to address me so familiarly.”

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Dr. Burnley recoiled as though he'd been slapped. He gazed at Mrs. Whitaker in anguish before he returned his angry glare to me, the woman who'd ruined all his plans.

He charged at me, shoving his beloved Mrs. Whitaker out of his way, ready to beat me to the ground. Cynthia seized his arm, hard enough that he had to waste a moment shaking her off.

I did not want to run and perhaps let him escape, so I looked around for a weapon to take him down. There was a poker at the fireplace, and I raced for it.

Dr. Burnley disentangled himself from Cynthia and came for me. He was nearly upon me when I dodged aside, adept at avoiding a man's fists.

Dr. Burnley hurtled after me, but in the next instant, the large form of Mrs. Provost filled the doorway, a rolling pin raised.

"That will be quite enough of that," Mrs. Provost announced.

I thought she would finish at simply threatening Dr. Burnley, but Mrs. Provost strode into the chamber and slammed the rolling pin into the doctor's middle. The small man let out his breath with an oof, and slowly collapsed to the floor, his arm over his stomach in agony.

Mrs. Provost raised the rolling pin again, as though ready to have a go at me, but Mrs. Whitaker once more stepped protectively in front of me.

“Fetch a constable.” Her command was firm, and even the formidable Mrs. Provost hesitated. “At once, please.”

“I’ll go.” Cynthia dashed out, light on her feet, and waved imperiously at the maids and footmen who’d gathered in the hall. “You—come with me.” She pointed at the footman who’d opened the front door for her. He jumped and complied, the two of them skimming out of sight.

“Mr. Whitaker needs a purge, I’m afraid,” I said to his wife. “I believe a dose of morphine is in order as well. From a reputable doctor, mind.”

Mr. Whitaker laughed weakly from his bed. “She’s a physician and a knight in shining armor as well as an excellent cook. I commend you, Mrs. Holloway.”

“Hush.” Mrs. Whitaker went to him and leaned down to wrap her arms carefully around him. “Oh, my darling, to think he was taking you away from me.”

“I will be well.” Mr. Whitaker patted her, reassuring her even though he could barely speak. “Never you worry. I’ll sit at the table and eat our Christmas pudding with you. You’ll see.”

“Humph,” Mrs. Provost said. “If I can get one boiled up in time.” She switched a glare to me. “I suppose you have a recipe for that too, Mrs. Holloway.”

Cynthia and the footman returned with a constable, who was skeptical at first, but Cynthia and Mrs. Whitaker convinced him to head for Scotland Yard.

Dr. Burnley was in no condition to run away while we waited. He remained on the floor of Mr. Whitaker’s bedroom, clutching his abdomen and moaning.

Inspector McGregor turned up within the hour, Daniel with him. The inspector was



not at all pleased to see me, but he listened to my babbled explanation without interruption, and gave the bottle to his sergeant for testing.

Dr. Burnley, when he could speak again, tried to claim that Mrs. Provost and I had attacked him for no reason. However, with the Whitakers, Lady Cynthia, and the staff who'd witnessed the struggle taking my side, Inspector McGregor brusquely arrested the doctor for attempted murder by poison.

Inspector McGregor betrayed no glee at catching a would-be murderer. He scowled at me as he followed his constables, who had Dr. Burnley in manacles, out of Mr. Whitaker's bedchamber.

"Happy Christmas, Inspector," I couldn't stop myself from saying.

The inspector grunted something, tipped his hat politely to Lady Cynthia and Mrs. Whitaker, and strode from the room.

After I made certain that Mr. Whitaker's servants settled him and his wife, Daniel, who had remained to help, walked us home.

"Thanos has invited James and me to Christmas supper at his flat," Daniel announced as we strolled down Davies Street toward Berkeley Square. "He would be most happy if both of you could join us."

Cynthia flushed, and not from the brisk wind. I imagined Mr. Thanos dithering about sending Cynthia an invitation directly, which would have been most improper. Having it come through Daniel was a wise solution.

"I am spending Christmas with Grace," I reminded them. "But perhaps I could stop on my way home."

“That would be splendid.” Daniel smiled at me.

“I will gratefully attend as well,” Cynthia said. “After I tear myself away from the very traditional Christmas luncheon Auntie insists on. Both Bobby and Judith are going to their respective families, so I’ll have no refuge with them.”

She spoke off-handedly but I could see she was quite pleased Mr. Thanos wanted to spend Christmas with her. Perhaps one day, Cynthia would be hosting Christmas feasts with Mr. Thanos at her side.

Daniel threaded his fingers through mine. “The Whitakers will have a happy Christmas after all.” He leaned to me. “Well done, Mrs. Holloway.”

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His whisper wound through me, warming me in the icy December air.

The next day, Christmas Eve, Daniel sent a note to me via James that a high concentration of ipecac had indeed been found in the bottle I'd taken from Mr. Whitaker's bedside, a much stronger elixir than should have been there. A magistrate, unhappy he had to listen to cases on Christmas Eve, decided there was enough evidence to lock up Dr. Burnley to await a trial.

Another doctor now attended Mr. Whitaker and was giving him the right medicines to help him recover.

I was relieved I'd found the solution in time. The Whitakers were a doting couple, their nephew was a cheerful lad, and now they had a daughter to bring into the family. A happy ending for all of them.

Not, I thought, for the gentleman who owed Mr. Whitaker so much money, but from what I'd heard Mr. Whitaker tell his nephew, he was being kind to Mr. Hardy about the repayment.

I speculated that Dr. Burnley had upped the dose after my visit to Mr. Whitaker, worried that I or Mrs. Provost could help by giving Mr. Whitaker food that would ease his symptoms. Either that or he'd pictured himself comforting the widowed Mrs. Whitaker through the rest of the Christmas season.

Dr. Burnley's arrest also absolved me of Mrs. Bywater's conviction that I'd served a tainted dish at her supper party. Now that I no longer had to worry about the mistress sacking me—for that, anyway—I was free to concentrate on Christmas dinner.

Tess and I prepared the tarts, cakes, and breads on Christmas Eve, and boiled down stock for the soups. Cynthia's father had indeed brought a few game birds to Town with him, which were plucked, cleaned, and in the stockpots before I went to bed.

On Christmas morning, I rose very, very early. The goose went straight into the oven, stuffed at the last minute. Then I had to fix breakfast for the family and servants, followed by cooking the vegetable dishes and accompaniments to the goose, as well as re-boiling the Christmas pudding for a few hours.

Tess and I worked like fury, and just before one, had all in readiness. The soup and fish course went up, the dishes quickly coming back empty. Mr. Davis himself supervised loading the roast goose into the dumbwaiter, then he ran upstairs to receive it in the dining room.

"I'll watch over the rest," Tess said to me as she cranked the dumbwaiter upward. "You go on. It's only Christmas one day a year."

"I hate to leave you to do the rest alone." I was torn, both wanting to be with Grace but wracked with guilt for leaving Tess on Christmas.

"I'm seeing my brother tomorrow for Boxing Day," Tess said. "And Caleb. I'll be all right."

She shooed me away, and I let her. I ran upstairs to change my frock for my best one then hurried out the door before Mrs. Bywater could think of an excuse to need me a few minutes longer.

I hugged Grace hard when I reached Joanna's home and had another happy surprise. Daniel was there, along with James. Joanna had invited them, saying nothing to me.

"I thought you would be with Mr. Thanos all day," I said to Daniel as we went into

the dining room, where the table had been decorated with paper chains in lively colors.

Daniel held my chair for me as he answered. “Elgin is engrossed in two problems—one involves calculating the distance to a cluster of stars, and the other is how to concoct a meal to please Lady Cynthia. His landlady is helping with that. I would be in the way.”

“Well, I am glad you are here,” I said in all sincerity.

Joanna and her cook had put together a splendid meal. There was a fine roasted a hen, a large salad of greens, a dish of stewed carrots, and a heap of tasty, roasted potatoes. Not only that, but Joanna had prepared her own Christmas pudding.

Sam carried it in proudly, bluish flames flickering from the brandy he’d ignited. He set down the domed concoction and lifted the knife, waiting for the fire to die.

“Not a plum in sight,” I murmured as Sam sliced into it.

“Pardon?” Joanna blinked at me, but Daniel chuckled.

“I’ll have a large helping.” I held out my plate when it was my turn to be served, and Sam obliged with a laugh.

We had Christmas crackers—somehow Daniel and I ending up pulling one apart together. I got the larger half, to Daniel’s great amusement. We all put on paper crowns and dug into the pudding.

Grace spooned plenty of hard sauce onto hers and eagerly scooped up her first bite. Joanna had made the sauce without brandy, in deference to the five children who’d eat it.

“I have a sixpence,” Grace cried, lifting it from her fork.

“So do I,” James declared.

“I believe I do as well,” Daniel said.

I bit down on something metal and gently spit a coin into my hand. “Sam, really. You don’t need to hand out so much money.”

Sam grinned. “It’s Christmas, Kat. We need a little joy at least once a year.”

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I knew the Millburns could ill afford passing out sixpences, but Sam had a good heart. I ceased admonishing him and decided I'd somehow slip mine back to Joanna.

It was a wonderful afternoon. I had managed to purchase a charming locket for Grace and one for Jane, a few toys for the younger children, and a secondhand book on mathematics for John, the oldest. His parents hoped they could find a tutor for him so he might continue his education.

The children and Grace exclaimed their thanks, though Joanna now accused me of being extravagant.

Joanna had bought me a pretty new notebook with a clasp I could write my kitchen notes in. It was so lovely I knew I'd keep it clean on a shelf rather than use it, but I did not tell her so.

Daniel had also brought various toys and gifts for his hosts and family, nothing too luxurious, but I could tell the items had cost a few coins.

He had nothing for me but sent me a wink as though hinting he'd give me my gift later. As I'd not realized he or James would be here, I'd kept their gifts in the bag I'd brought with me, along with ones for Mr. Thanos and Cynthia.

I hated to leave this happy home, but the afternoon too quickly drew to a close. I embraced my daughter, then Joanna, then my daughter again, reminding her—and myself—that Thursday would come soon.

I left them in that warm, comfortable house, and faced the chill darkness with Daniel

and James.

It wasn't long, though, before we were in Mr. Thanos's cozy flat, with Cynthia beaming at us across the table. I wasn't certain I'd be able to digest a second Christmas dinner, but when it was served—roast goose and dressing, with greens and crusty bread—I found that I could indeed eat more.

Instead of another pudding, we had a pear crumble with cream, which was light and delicious.

“Excellent,” I declared as I laid down my fork and rubbed my aching belly.

“Auntie raved about your Christmas pudding,” Cynthia told me. “Mr. Davis brought it in all aflame. Quite dramatic—he enjoyed it. Auntie said she was pleased you'd made it as she told you, and hadn't it turned out well?”

We all had a laugh about that and explained the joke to Mr. Thanos.

“Truly?” he asked in astonishment. “There are no plums in plum pudding? Then why is it called so?”

“I suppose there were at the beginning,” I said, sipping the very good wine Mr. Thanos had poured into all our glasses. “But it came to mean any dried fruit available in the winter.”

“How fascinating,” Mr. Thanos declared.

He might have asked more about the history of Christmas pudding, but I cut him off by handing out my gifts.

I'd bought Cynthia an inexpensive but pretty cravat pin, which Bobby had advised



me she'd like. Cynthia gushed over the brass knot as though it was made of the most lavish gold. For Mr. Thanos, a small case in which to keep his spectacles, which he was always misplacing. For James, a flat woolen cap, much like the ones his father wore, that he donned with a grin.

Cynthia surprised me with a brooch of silver worked in a sinuous pattern, which she told me Miss Townsend, who was an artist, had designed. I pinned it carefully to my dark gown, vowing to wear it only on special occasions, such as this one.

Again, Daniel did not produce a present for me, so I held back the one I'd brought for him. No one questioned us.

After that, I reluctantly declared I must return home, my afternoon out over. Cynthia accompanied me, eager to spend more time with her parents, though she'd never admit that.

Daniel walked us down the stairs, while James remained above to help clear up.

"I will call around later, Kat," he promised as he handed Cynthia and then me into a hansom. "I have many things to tell you."

I did not like how much I looked forward to that.

## Chapter 7

When I entered the kitchen that evening, once more in my work dress, the brooch securely in the bottom drawer of my wardrobe, Mr. Davis came to tell me about the success of the Christmas pudding.

"They ate every morsel," he announced. "Nothing left of the thing, Mrs. Holloway."

“I am pleased the family enjoyed it,” I said, deciding to accept the praise and have done. “Though I’m sorry you couldn’t feast on the leftovers. There are two more puddings in the larder. Perhaps you can have some at New Year’s.”

Mr. Davis gave a delicate shudder. “No, thank you, Mrs. Holloway. I won’t. Can’t abide the stuff.”

I hid a smile as he marched away to his butler’s pantry. Then I turned to Tess, who was tired but triumphant, and relieved her from her duties the rest of the night.

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Once Tess gratefully went up to bed I finished clearing up the mess and started preparations for tomorrow's breakfast. After that, I sat down to write my observations on the Christmas dinner. I noted my appreciation of Mr. Thanos's landlady's pear crumble—I would have to ask her for the recipe.

I did not use the new notebook Joanna had given me for any of this. That was already safely set aside with my cookbooks in the housekeeper's parlor.

As the house grew quiet, and Christmas Day slipped away for another year, Daniel arrived.

"There is no more pudding, I'm afraid," I said as I shut the door while Daniel hung up his coat.

"Ah well." Daniel approached the table, but he did not sit. "In spite of your suspicion that I come here only for your food, this time, I am delivering a gift."

I burned with curiosity about it but pretended not to as I filled the teapot and returned the kettle to the stove. "There is no need for that."

"It is not a matter of obligation." Daniel's smile stirred something inside me.

"Nor for me, but I have one for you anyway." I reached for the bag I'd set safely beside the kitchen dresser and shook out a jacket I'd found at the secondhand shop where I'd purchased James's hat.

Daniel was ever patching the sleeves of coats. This one was of tweed, whole, and

well-tailored. A gent must have tired of it and given it to his valet, who'd taken the jacket to the secondhand shop when he'd finished with it.

Daniel's amusement fell away. "Kat, this is a fine gift. Too fine for the likes of a deliveryman."

"It did have a few tears here and there, but I mended them," I said, flushing for some reason. "You can always wear it when you pretend to be a City gent."

"No, indeed. I will treasure it too much to waste it on a disguise. You will see me in it only when I am myself." Daniel's voice went soft. "This was kind of you."

I shrugged, a bit embarrassed. "I'd not have found it at all if I hadn't been looking for something for James."

"I was an afterthought. I see." Daniel's twinkling eyes told me he did not believe that. He set the coat aside and removed a small, paper-wrapped package from his pocket. "For you, my lady. A trifle that I hope you like."

I unwrapped it quickly, not bothering to hide my eagerness. When I saw what lay on the paper I'd torn apart, I stilled, the breath going out of me.

A pretty porcelain frame about two inches by three encased a sketch, done in colored pencils, of Grace. The artist had caught her liveliness, her beautiful smile with its hint of cheekiness, and the brilliant blue of her eyes.

My mouth hung open, and for once, I was speechless. I stared at the picture until it blurred, and a few tears spilled from my eyes.

Daniel was next to me, his warm breath on my cheek. "Presumptuous of me, I know, but I thought it would please you."

He sounded worried that I wouldn't like it. I turned to him, pressing the little sketch to my heart. "Of course, it pleases me. It pleases me to no end." I sniffled and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. "Who drew this?"

"James. He's quite good at sketching. I asked Grace if she would like to sit for a portrait for you, and she was most happy to. The three of us had the devil of a time keeping it secret."

"Oh, Daniel." My arms went around him while I continued to clutch the picture. "You wonderful, wonderful man."

He knew my heart, did Daniel. Knew it better sometimes than I did myself.

Daniel eased the sketch from me and set it on the table so I would not break the porcelain frame. "And here's me, wishing I'd remembered a sprig of mistletoe."

"We don't need mistletoe, my dear, dear friend."

Daniel's smile made every anxiety I'd experienced about Christmas dinner, Mrs. Bywater and my post, and Mr. Whitaker and family melt away like frost in the spring sunshine.

I pulled him to me and raised my lips to his, showing him without words how much he, and his gift, meant to me.

"Happy Christmas, Mrs. Holloway," Daniel whispered when the kiss eased to an end.

I touched his cheek. "Happy Christmas, Mr. McAdam."

We studied each other a long moment, and then demonstrated once more that mistletoe was in no way needed at all.