



# A MOST NOVEL REVENGE

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# CHAPTER ONE

England  
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‘Well, darling, who do you suppose will turn up dead this time?’

This sudden and wildly inappropriate question had come from my husband, who didn’t bother to take his eyes from the winding, snow-lined road as we drove along, the bright afternoon sunlight glinting off the drifts that lined it on either side.

‘Milo! What a dreadful thing to say.’

He was, as usual, unapologetic. ‘You must admit that people have had a habit of turning up dead in your company this past year.’

He had a point, though I didn’t like to admit it. Over the course of the last several months, I had been involved in two murder investigations, both of which had ended with my confronting killers at gunpoint.

What was more, I was not altogether certain that our current jaunt to the country would prove entirely without incident. The way this trip had begun, I was worried there might indeed be more trouble.

The entire thing had started two days ago upon receipt of the morning post. I had recognised the violet envelope and scrawling penmanship at once. A letter from my cousin Laurel.

I sliced open the envelope to find a hastily penned note, the contents of which had been overtly mysterious.

*I didn't want to send a wire, as that might call unwanted attention, but consider this just as urgent a summons. You must come to Lyongate at once. I won't tell you why. Perhaps that will entice you.*

Below this she had scribbled in a more hasty hand:

*Don't let my flippancy persuade you that I am not in earnest. You must come immediately.*

*Laurel*

*P.S. Bring Milo if you must.*

The letter, in and of itself, was not especially unusual. Laurel had a flair for the dramatic, a trait which often manifested itself in her correspondence. This time, however, it was what the letter didn't say that intrigued me. I could think of no conceivable reason why she should have chosen to set foot at Lyongate again. Not after what had happened there.

Seven years before, while Laurel was staying as a guest, the manor had been the scene of a tragic accident, the result of a weekend of revelry gone awry. It had caused a scandal that had reverberated throughout the country and had affected my cousin deeply.

Suffice it to say, the letter had served its purpose. And that was how we had come to be driving towards Shropshire at reckless speeds in Milo's new Aston Martin Le Mans. The sleek, black automobile had been his Christmas gift to himself, and he had insisted on driving us to the country. Markham, our driver, had been, I think, a bit put out by this development, as he was anxiously awaiting his time at the wheel. Markham needn't have worried, however, for I was quite sure that the novelty of Milo driving himself would quickly wear off.

Luckily, he was still enamoured enough of his vehicle that the allure of long stretches of open road had enticed him into agreeing to the journey. He, initially, had not been at all keen on going to Lyonsgate. His idea had been to winter in Italy, and I was certain this weekend would prove a poor substitute, on several levels.

'I really haven't the faintest idea why I agreed to come along,' Milo said, as though following my train of thought. 'I've no desire to spend the week at a draughty house in the middle of nowhere with a lot of tiresome people.'

My husband was not much of one to spend a quiet weekend in the country. He was, in fact, rather known for his extensive social forays, a trait which had contributed to the near ruin of our marriage only last year. We had come to terms, however, and I had waited with bated breath to see if his reformation would take. Thus far I had not been disappointed.

'I'm sure we shall be back in London before the week is out,' I assured him. 'There's no reason to suppose that there is actually anything amiss. You know how Laurel is.'

‘Yes,’ he said flatly. ‘What I don’t know is why you insist on indulging her.’

Laurel’s less than enthusiastic invitation to Milo in her letter’s postscript was, on the whole, indicative of the relationship between my cousin and my husband. Milo and Laurel had never been exceptionally fond of one another, though they normally did their best to be civil with varying results.

‘You must admit it is curious,’ I said. ‘What on earth could have induced her to go back to Lyonsgate?’

‘It’s been, what, six years now? I’m certain the horror has worn off.’

‘Seven years. From the way she spoke about it at the time, I was sure she’d never even set foot in Shropshire again.’

‘If she doesn’t want to be there, I’m not sure why we should. Do you even know Reginald Lyons?’

‘No.’ While I didn’t know the man who would be our host, I certainly knew *of* him. In fact, most of the country knew the name of Lyons, mainly because of what had taken place at their country home, Lyonsgate, during that fateful weekend in 1925.

It was only by happenstance that Laurel had been there. She had never run with a wild set, but she had been friends with Reggie Lyons and his sister Beatrice since they were quite young. Their father and his young wife had both succumbed to influenza while he was still in France, and Reggie had inherited the estate and the care of his sisters upon his return. I think it had been something of an adventure for my cousin to be invited to attend a weekend at Lyonsgate, which had become the unofficial

headquarters of one of England's premier young social groups after Reggie had fallen in with a woman called Isobel Van Allen.

The undisputed leader of her clique, Isobel Van Allen had been something of a legend in her own time. Of humble and mysterious beginnings, she had propelled herself into fashionable society with a winning combination of startling beauty, sharp wit, and a will of iron. By the time she had come into Reggie Lyons' life she had been several years older than the others in their set, with a worldly allure none of them could resist.

She had a great many wild friends, and when Reggie Lyons had become her lover, she had introduced him to them. His estate, Lyonsgate, had begun to host fabulous parties, the details of which made their way into the gossip columns. There had been photographs of outlandish-themed revels, and rumours of drugs and other illicit conduct had surfaced. They were not, of course, the only group of well-off young people drawn into a spiral of reckless hedonism in the years following the Great War, but the tragedy at Lyonsgate had made them one of the more infamous.

The days leading up to that particular event had no doubt seemed to indicate it would be a weekend like any other, but by the time the weekend was over, a young man was dead and the lives of the others had never been the same.

Milo took the next turn entirely too quickly, bringing my attention back to the present.

'I'd rather not end up in the ditch, if it's all the same to you,' I said lightly.

‘Of course not. I wouldn’t put the car in jeopardy.’

‘That’s comforting.’

He shot a smile at me. ‘Or you either, darling.’

‘There must be some reason why Laurel has asked me to come so urgently,’ I said, still preoccupied. ‘I think it might have something to do with Edwin Green’s death.’

Accounts varied of what had actually occurred that night at Lyonsgate. What was never contested was the fact that on a cold, dark morning after an evening of drunken revels, Edwin Green’s body had been found, nearly naked, on the frozen ground halfway between the summer house and the manor.

The inquest had declared it heart failure brought on by hypothermia and a combination of extreme inebriation and a deadly cocktail of drugs, the remnants of which had been found scattered about the summer house.

It might always have been seen as an unfortunate accident, the tragic consequences of a life lived too recklessly, had it not been for Isobel Van Allen. While the others had done their best to keep things quiet, she had spoken frequently with the press, alluding to the fact that there was more to the tragedy than met the eye.

She had always had an affinity for sensationalism and a gift for words, and she used them to her advantage. Six months after Edwin Green’s death, she had released a novel called *The Dead of Winter*. It had been touted as nothing more than fiction, but everyone knew the truth, that it was the account of what had happened at Lyonsgate.

Everyone who had been there had been drawn quite clearly, with different names, of course, all their vices

and secrets brought to life in colourful prose.

It wasn't so much the way the book had been done that caused the fuss. What had caused the scandal was that she had insinuated that Edwin Green's death had not been an accidental overdose and hypothermia as the coroner's inquest had ruled. Instead, she claimed it had been murder on the part of a young man called Bradford Glenn, who had been Edwin Green's rival for the affections of Beatrice Lyons. Bradford had, the book alleged, taken advantage of Edwin Green's condition and purposefully dragged him into the cold to die.

No legal measures had ever been taken, of course. There was no proof. But Mr Glenn had been ruined, nonetheless, and had disappeared from society.

As for Isobel Van Allen, her book had had the opposite effect to what she had intended. Though she had made a great deal of money, she had been ostracised and snubbed at every turn by those who enjoyed the book in private but shunned it publicly as nothing more than vulgar exploitation. Eventually she had gone off to Kenya. That was the last I had heard of her.

Reggie Lyons had shut up Lyonsgate and had gone to live abroad, Beatrice Lyons had married shortly afterwards, and the youngest Lyons sister had been sent off to boarding school.

Laurel had been greatly troubled by it all, but eventually the matter had gone to the back of all our minds. It was not something one much cared to remember.

So what was it that had brought the Lyonses back to Lyonsgate? And why had Laurel gone there? Why the urgent summons? I wanted to believe that it was nothing

more than my cousin's overactive imagination, but my instincts told me there was something more to it than that.

'It will certainly be interesting to view the scene of such a scandal,' I remarked.

'I thought we disliked scandals,' he said.

Milo and I had had more than our share of scandals in the past. Though he had been behaving beautifully as of late, more than a few indiscretions had been linked to his name since our marriage.

'We dislike personal scandals,' I corrected. 'But the death of Edwin Green has no direct bearing on us.'

'As of yet.'

He was, as it turns out, correct. I dislike it intensely when he is right.

It was early afternoon when we reached Lyonsgate. The entrance to the estate came almost without warning, a gate appearing suddenly to break up the wall of trees that lined the road. Milo screeched nearly to a stop and pulled into the drive. I breathed a sigh of relief that we had reached our destination in one piece. This car moved entirely too quickly for my comfort.

Before us the wrought-iron gate was guarded by two huge stone lions on massive pillars, their mouths open, teeth bared, in what might have been either half-hearted roars or aggressive yawns.

'A bit obvious, perhaps, but I suppose impressive enough,' Milo noted.

I had to agree with him. At least, it must have been impressive one time. Now, with dead vines creeping up the rails as though to strangle the weary-looking beasts, it

seemed a bit sad somehow. I knew that the Lyons family had not been in residence for many years, but it looked as though upkeep of the estate had not been a priority in their absence.

The gates were open wide to reveal a long drive. We pulled through and, once out of the little copse of trees, we had the first glimpse of the house. The afternoon sun shone brightly on walls of pale stone. It was impressive, beautiful in a sombre way, yet there was something haunting about it as well. Perhaps it was my imagination, knowing what I did about the history of the house, but it seemed to me that there was something forlorn in its appearance.

To the east, in the direction of the village, I could make out the lake and a distant building that was no doubt the summer house where Edwin Green had spent his last night. It looked quiet and peaceful in the light of a bright winter afternoon.

We pulled up before the house, and Milo came around to open my door. I stepped out of the car onto the gravel drive, looking up at the imposing stone facade. It was not what one would call a welcoming building. It was in the Tudor style and, if I remembered my history of English manors correctly, the main part of the house dated back to that period, with additional wings having been added by subsequent generations.

The house had clearly been neglected, and, though work had recently been done to refurbish it, an air of desertion still hung about the place. The stones were stained and scarred, at least what was visible of them beneath the tangled profusion of dried ivy. The oriel windows on the

lower floors had been cleaned and gleamed brightly in the sunlight, but the higher windows were streaked with dirt and grime.

A cold gust of wind blew just then, and I felt what might be termed a foreboding chill.

I heard the sound of approaching steps behind us, and we turned to see a woman coming around the house, leading a horse. She was a pretty girl with honey-coloured hair glinting in the afternoon sunlight. She was young, perhaps twenty-two or -three, and I guessed that she must be the younger Lyons sister.

The sun was in her eyes for a moment, but when she stepped into the shadow of the building she caught sight of us and walked in our direction.

‘I thought I heard a car,’ she said. As her eyes adjusted from the glare she caught sight of Milo and stopped, a flush spreading over her cheeks. ‘Oh. Hello.’

She looked up at him, dazzled. I had to admit that I sometimes forgot how very handsome Milo was until I observed other women’s reactions to meeting him. With his black hair, bright blue eyes, and striking good looks, he always managed to create quite a favourable first impression. All this was supplemented with a winning manner and excessive charm, which made my husband exceptionally popular with the ladies.

‘Hello,’ Milo replied. I was gratified that he seemed more interested in the horse than the pretty young woman leading it.

‘I’m Lucinda Lyons,’ the young woman said. ‘Lindy, to my friends.’ She smiled as she said it and, if I was not mistaken, batted her lashes.

‘How do you do, Miss Lyons. I’m Milo Ames, and this is my wife, Amory.’

She looked at me for almost the first time, as though she had only just noticed that I was there.

‘How do you do,’ I said, amused. It was not the first time Milo had absorbed all the female attention in the general vicinity.

‘You’re Laurel’s cousin, aren’t you?’ she said, recovering nicely. ‘I’ve heard so much about you. I’m very pleased to meet you at last.’

‘And I you. It was kind of your brother to invite us. The house is lovely,’ I said, looking behind me.

‘I don’t like it at all,’ she said without any particular emotion.

Her horse shifted its feet impatiently and she turned to speak soothingly to him. ‘There, there, Romeo. You mustn’t misbehave in front of our guests.’

‘It’s a beautiful animal,’ Milo said, stepping forward to touch the shining chestnut coat. Milo loved horses. I suspected that part of the reason he had agreed to come, other than the opportunity to frighten me to death with hairpin turns, was that he had thought Reginald Lyons would have begun building up the stables at Lyonsgate now that he had returned. Milo liked to be sure that his horses were better than everyone else’s.

‘Oh, here’s Henson,’ Miss Lyons said as the door opened and the butler stepped out onto the portico. ‘Mr and Mrs Ames have arrived, Henson,’ she called.

‘Very good, Miss Lucinda.’

She turned back to us. ‘He’ll see to you. I’ll just bring Romeo back to the stables. Lovely meeting both of you.’

Her eyes were still on Milo as she said this, and it seemed that she had to tear them from his face to begin leading her horse away.

‘A charming young woman,’ Milo observed as we walked towards the house.

‘I expect you say so because she was properly dazzled by you.’

‘She’s practically a child.’

‘“Practically a child” and “a child” are two very different things,’ I replied dryly.

Henson led us into the house, and a moment later Reginald Lyons came into the entrance hall to greet us. He was not quite what I had expected, not how I remembered Laurel describing him. He had a handsome, ruddy face and was quite tall and bit heavysset. He looked the part of a country squire in his tweeds and hunting boots.

I didn’t see much resemblance to his sister, and I judged him to be perhaps ten or twelve years older than she was. If I remembered correctly, Lucinda had a different mother than Reggie and Beatrice. Reggie had the same honey-coloured hair as his half-sister, but his eyes were dark brown rather than blue, and there was something troubled about them, a weariness that belied his robust facade.

‘Mr and Mrs Ames. Welcome to Lyonsgate,’ he said in a hearty tone.

‘Thank you for having us, Mr Lyons. The house is lovely.’

‘Thank you, thank you. I expect you’ll be looking for Laurel, but she’s out riding at the moment. Should be back soon enough.’

‘Your sister Lucinda just came back from her ride,’ I told him. ‘She’s a charming young woman.’

‘I was admiring her horse,’ Milo said. ‘It’s an excellent animal.’

Something flickered across Mr Lyons’ face, and then he nodded. ‘Thank you. I do enjoy horses. I’ll give you a tour of the stables later, if you like.’

‘I should like it very much indeed.’

‘I suppose first you’d like to be shown to your rooms . . .’

Before he could finish his sentence, there was movement on the staircase behind him.

A tall, dark, and very beautiful woman descended them to meet us in the entrance hall. I had never met her before, but I recognised her well enough.

It was Isobel Van Allen.