



MURDER AT THE BRIGHTWELL

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CHAPTER ONE

Kent, England

1932

It is an impossibly great trial to be married to a man one loves and hates in equal proportions.

It was late June and I was dining alone in the breakfast room when Milo blew in from the south.

‘Hello, darling,’ he said, brushing a light kiss across my cheek. He dropped into the seat beside me and began buttering a piece of toast, as though it had been two hours since I had seen him last, rather than two months.

I took a sip of coffee. ‘Hello, Milo. How good of you to drop in.’

‘You’re looking well, Amory.’

I had thought the same of him. His time on the Riviera had obviously served him well. His skin was smooth and golden, setting off the bright blue of his eyes. He was wearing a dark grey suit, lounging in that casual way he had of looking relaxed and at home in expensive and impeccably tailored clothes.

‘I hadn’t expected to see you back so soon,’ I said. His last letter, an offhanded attempt at keeping me informed of his whereabouts, had arrived three weeks before and hinted at the fact that he should probably not return home until late July.

‘Monte Carlo grew so tedious; I simply had to get away.’

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘Nothing to replace the dull routine of roulette, champagne, and beautiful women like a rousing jaunt to your country house for toast and coffee with your wife.’

Without really meaning to do so, I had poured a cup of coffee, two sugars, no milk, and handed it to him.

‘You know, I believe I’ve missed you, Amory.’

He looked me in the eyes then and smiled. Despite myself, I nearly caught my breath. He had that habit, of startling, dazzling one with his sudden and complete attention.

Grimes, our butler, appeared at the door just then. ‘Someone to see you in the morning room, Madam.’ He did not acknowledge Milo. Grimes, it had long been apparent, was no great admirer of my husband. He treated him with just enough respect that his obvious distaste should not cross the boundary into impropriety.

‘Thank you, Grimes. I will go to the morning room directly.’

‘Very good, Madam.’ He disappeared as noiselessly as he had come.

The fact that Grimes’ announcement had been so vague as to keep Milo in the dark as to the identity of my visitor was not lost on my husband. He turned to me and smiled as he buttered a second piece of toast. ‘Have I interrupted a tryst with your secret lover by my unexpected arrival?’

I set my napkin down and rose. ‘I have no secrets from you,

Milo.’ I turned as I reached the door and flashed his smile back at him. ‘If I had a lover, I would certainly inform you of it.’

On my way to the morning room, I stopped at the large gilt mirror in the hallway to be sure the encounter with my wayward husband had not left me looking as askew as I felt. My reflection looked placidly back at me, grey eyes calm, waved dark hair in place, and I was reassured.

It took time, I had learnt, to prepare myself for Milo. Unfortunately, he did not often oblige me by giving notice of his arrival.

I reached the door to the morning room, wondering who my visitor might be. Grimes’ mysterious announcement was a reflection on my husband’s presence, not the presence of my visitor, so I would not have been surprised to find as commonplace a guest as my cousin Laurel behind the solid oak door. I entered the room and found myself surprised for the second time that morning.

The man seated on the white Louis XVI sofa was not my cousin Laurel. He was, in fact, my former fiancé.

‘Gil.’

‘Hello, Amory.’ He had risen from his seat as I entered and we stared at one another.

Gilmore Trent and I had known each other for years and had been engaged for all of a month when I had met Milo. The two men could not have been more different. Gil was fair; Milo was dark. Gil was calm and reassuring; Milo was reckless and exciting. In comparison to Milo’s charming unpredictability, Gil’s steadiness had seemed dull. Young fool that I had been, I had chosen illusion over substance. Gil had

taken it well, wished me happiness in that sincere way of his, and that was the last that I had seen of him. Until now.

‘How have you been?’ I asked, moving forward to take his hand. His grip was warm and firm, familiar.

‘Quite well. And you? You look wonderful. Haven’t changed a bit.’ He smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners, and I felt instantly at ease. He was still the same old Gil.

I motioned to the sofa. ‘Sit down. Would you care for some tea? Or perhaps breakfast?’

‘No, no. Thank you. I realise I have already imposed upon you, dropping in unannounced as I have.’

A pair of blue silk-upholstered chairs sat across from him, and I sank into one, somehow glad Grimes had chosen the intimate morning room over one of the more ostentatious sitting rooms. ‘Nonsense. I’m delighted to see you.’ I realised that I meant it. It was awfully good to see him. Gil had kept out of society and I had wondered, more than once, in the five years since my marriage what had become of him.

‘It’s good to see you too, Amory.’ He was looking at me attentively, trying to determine, I supposed, how the years had changed me. Despite his claim that I was still the same, I knew the woman before him was quite different from the girl he had once known.

Almost without realising it, I had been appraising him as well. Five years seemed to have altered him very little. Gil was very good-looking in a solid and conventional sort of way, not stunning in the same sense as Milo, but very handsome. He had dark blond hair and smooth, pleasant features. His eyes were a light, warm brown, with chocolaty flecks drawn out today by his brown tweed suit.

‘I should have written to you before my visit,’ he went on, ‘but, to tell the truth . . . I wasn’t sure you would see me.’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ I smiled, suddenly happy to be sitting here with an old friend, despite what had passed between us. ‘After all, the bad behaviour was entirely on my part. I am surprised that you would care to see me.’

‘All water under the bridge.’ He leant forward slightly, lending sincerity to his words. ‘I told you at the time, there was no one to blame.’

‘That is kind of you, Gil.’

He spoke lightly, but his lips twitched up at the corners as though his mouth could not quite decide if he was serious, could not quite support a smile. ‘Yes. Well, one can’t stop love, can one?’

‘No.’ My smile faded. ‘One can’t.’

He leant back in his seat then, dismissing the intimacy of the moment. ‘How is Milo?’

‘He’s very well. He returned only this morning from the Riviera.’

‘Yes, I had read something about his being in Monte Carlo in the society columns.’ I could only imagine what it might have been. Within six months of my marriage I had learnt it was better not to know what the society columns said about Milo.

For just a moment the spectre of my husband hung between us in the air.

I picked up the box of cigarettes on the table and offered one to him, knowing he didn’t smoke. To my surprise, he accepted, pulling a lighter from his pocket. He touched the flame to the tip of his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

‘What have you been doing these past few years?’ I asked,

immediately wondering if the question was appropriate. It seemed that some shadow of the past tainted nearly every topic. I knew that he had left England for a time after we had parted ways. Perhaps his travel since our parting was not something he wished to discuss. After all, there had been a time when we had travelled together. In the old days, before either of us had ever thought of marriage, our families had often been thrown together on various holidays abroad, and Gil and I had become fast friends and confidants. He had good-naturedly accompanied me in searching out scenic spots or exploring ancient ruins, and our evenings had been occupied by keeping one another company in hotel sitting rooms as our parents frequented foreign nightspots until dawn. Sometimes I still thought fondly of our adventures together and of those long, comfortable conversations before the fire.

He blew out a puff of smoke. 'I've travelled some. Kept busy.'

'I expect you enjoyed seeing more of the world. Do you remember the time we were in Egypt . . .'

He sat forward suddenly, grounding out his cigarette in the crystal ashtray on the table. 'Look here, Amory. I might as well tell you why I've come.'

Years of practise in hiding my thoughts allowed me to keep my features from registering surprise at his sudden change of manner. 'Certainly.'

He looked me in the eyes. 'I've come to ask a favour.'

'Of course, Gil. I'd be happy to do anything . . .'

He held up a hand. 'Hear me out, before you say yes.' He was agitated about something, uneasy, so unlike his normally-contained self.

He stood and walked to the window, gazing out into the

green lawn that went on and on before ending abruptly at the lake that marked the eastern boundary of the property.

I waited, knowing it would do little good to press him. Gil wouldn't speak until he was ready. I wondered if perhaps he had come to ask me for money. The Trents were well-off, but the recent economic difficulties had been far-reaching and more than a few of my friends had found themselves in very reduced circumstances. If that was the case, I would be only too happy to help.

'I don't need money, if that's what you're thinking,' he said, his back still to me.

Despite the tension of the situation, I laughed. 'Still reading my mind.'

He turned, regarding me with a solemn expression. 'It's not so hard to read your mind, but your eyes are harder to read than they used to be.'

'Concealment comes with practise,' I replied.

'Yes, I suppose it does.' He walked back to the sofa and sat down.

When he spoke, his tone had returned to normal. 'Have you seen anything of Emmeline these past years?'

I wondered briefly if he had decided not to ask me the favour, reverting instead to polite conversation. Emmeline was Gil's sister. She was younger than me by three years and been away at school in France during much of our acquaintance, but we had been friends. After my engagement to Gil had ended, however, Emmeline and I had drifted apart.

'Once or twice at London affairs,' I answered.

'Was she . . . do you remember the chap she was with?'

I cast my mind back to the last society dinner at which I had

seen Emmeline Trent. There had been a young man, handsome and charming, if I recalled correctly. Something about my memory of him nagged at me, and I tried to recall what it was.

‘I remember him,’ I said. ‘His name was Rupert something-or-other.’

‘Rupert Howe, yes. She plans to marry him.’

I said nothing. There was more to come; that much was certain.

‘He’s not a good sort, Amory. I’m sure of it.’

‘That may be, Gil,’ I said gently, ‘but, after all, Emmeline is a grown woman.’ Emmeline would be twenty-three by now, older than I had been when I married.

‘It’s not like that, Amory. It isn’t just that I don’t like the fellow. It’s that I don’t trust him. There’s something . . . I don’t know . . .’ His voice trailed off and he looked up at me. ‘Emmeline has always liked you, looked up to you. I thought that, perhaps . . .’

Was this why he had come? I had no influence on Emmeline. ‘If she won’t listen to you,’ I said, ‘whatever makes you think she will care what I have to say?’

He paused, and I could see that he was formulating his words, planning out what he would say. Gil had always been like that, careful to think before speaking. ‘There’s a large party going down to the southern coast tomorrow. Emmeline and Rupert, and several other people I’m sure you know. We’ll be staying at the Brightwell Hotel. I came to ask you if you would go, on the pretext of a holiday.’

I was surprised at the invitation. I had not seen Gil in five years and suddenly here he was, asking me to take a trip to the seaside. ‘I still don’t understand. What can I do, Gil? Why come to me?’

‘I . . . Amory,’ his eyes came up to mine, the brown flecks darker than they had been. ‘I want you to accompany me . . . to appear to be *with* me. You understand?’

I did understand him, just as easily as I once had. I saw just what he meant. I was to go with him to the seaside, to give the impression that I had left Milo. That my marriage had been a mistake. Emmeline had seen the society columns, the reports of my husband gallivanting across Europe without me; she would believe it.

I suddenly comprehended that there would be good reason for me to talk to Emmeline, how I would have authority when Gil didn’t.

Gil had said he didn’t trust Rupert Howe. I knew he was right. I knew Gil had seen in Rupert the same thing that had caught my attention when I had met him.

Emmeline’s Rupert had reminded me of Milo.

My decision was almost immediate. ‘I should be delighted to come,’ I said. ‘I should like to keep Emmeline from making a mistake, if I possibly can.’

Gil smiled warmly, relief washing across his features, and I found myself returning the smile. The prospect of a week at the seaside in the company of old friends was not an unappealing one, at that.

Of course, had I known the mayhem that awaited, I may have been a bit more reluctant to offer my services.