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The Unseen Hand

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CHAPTER ONE

Autumn, 1917

Millie Jenks was in agony. After six weeks as a member of the hotel staff, she was still plagued by uncertainty. Desperate to retain her job, she was terrified by the thought that she might make a mistake that led to her dismissal. All that she had to do that morning was to obey an order. What would have been a simple task to any other employee was to Millie a crushing responsibility. It gave her a sleepless night in the cold, tiny, airless bedroom she occupied in the basement. An hour before she was needed, she was dressed and ready, one eye fixed on the clock. When there were still ten minutes to go, she made her way silently up two flights of stairs and stood outside the appropriate door, counting the seconds as they ticked past in her head. In her palm was the master key she'd been given in case the guest couldn't be roused by a sharp knock. She moved it nervously from hand to hand.

At what she felt was the exact time specified, she took a deep breath then rapped on the door. There was no response from inside the room. When a second knock failed to awaken the guest, Millie inserted the master key and opened the door slowly. The bedside lamp was on, creating a pool of light. On the carpet was a sight that made her gasp in surprise. Expecting to wake an elderly lady, she was instead looking down at a much younger one, fully clothed and stretched out on the floor. When she bent down to help the woman up, she saw the tortured expression on her face.

Millie froze in horror.

CHAPTER TWO

As the police car sped through the streets in the gloom, the detectives sat in the rear seats. London was slowly starting to wake up but Marmion and Keedy were still half-asleep. They were responding to a phone call from Scotland Yard and it had robbed both of them of any breakfast. It put them in a resentful mood.

‘Where are we going, Harv?’ asked Keedy, sourly.

‘The Lotus Hotel.’

‘I’ve never heard of it.’

‘Neither have I, Joe.’

‘Where the hell is it?’

‘It’s somewhere in Chelsea.’

‘And what are we supposed to find there?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ said Marmion through an involuntary yawn. ‘All I can tell you is that there’s been an unexplained death.’

According to Chat, the man who raised the alarm was in a real panic.’

‘I don’t blame him. *I’m* always in a panic when I speak to our beloved superintendent.’

‘It seems that the woman who died is a complete stranger. She wasn’t a guest at the hotel.’

‘Then what was she doing there?’

‘That’s one of the things we need to find out, Joe.’

Harvey Marmion had mixed feelings about the telephone that Superintendent Chatfield had had installed in the inspector’s house. It meant that he could be summoned from his bed at all hours. At the same time, it enabled his wife to contact him at Scotland Yard in an emergency and allowed him – in defiance of the superintendent’s orders – to ring her when he was at work. As he yawned again, Marmion decided that, on balance, the telephone was more of a blessing than a nuisance.

‘So Chat rang you in person, did he?’ asked Keedy.

‘Oh, yes. I’d never mistake that voice of his.’

‘He spends more time in his office than he does at home. Doesn’t he *ever* go to bed?’

‘He has four children, Joe, so he must have climbed between the sheets at some point in time.’

Keedy laughed. He was about to make a ribald comment but decided against it. Engaged to Marmion’s daughter, he had to be careful when indulging in coarse banter in case his future father-in-law got hold of the wrong idea. As it happened, there was no time to poke fun at the superintendent’s private life because, after turning a corner, the car slowed down and pulled up outside the hotel.

They got out of the vehicle to find that they were in a quiet backstreet in one of the more prosperous parts of Chelsea. The Lotus Hotel had a

relatively narrow frontage and looked at first glance to be identical to the houses either side of it. Marmion's first impression was that there was something almost apologetic about it, as if it was concealing its real identity. A small brass plate bearing its name was the only indication that it was actually a hotel. Before they could go into the building, someone came out to greet them. He was a tall, slim, excessively well-groomed man in his forties who seemed to glide along.

'Thank goodness you're here at last!' he said with evident relief. 'I'm Rex Chell, the manager. Please come inside.'

He hustled the pair of them into the lobby as if anxious to get them out of sight. Once inside, they realised that the hotel was an optical illusion. It seemed to grow in size before their eyes and open out in all directions as it incorporated adjacent buildings. There was a pervading air of opulence. While Marmion performed the introductions, Keedy was appraising the manager. Poised and well spoken, Chell was quite immaculate. He explained the situation smoothly and succinctly. Marmion took over.

'So it was Miss Jenks who actually made the discovery?'

'Yes, Inspector,' said Chell.

'Where is she now?'

'The girl is in my office, still shaking like a leaf, I daresay.'

'We'll need to take a statement from her in due course – and from the night porter. He was the person who contacted the police.'

'When he'd done that, he got in touch with me.'

'What did you advise?'

'The first thing he had to do,' said Chell, sternly, 'was to pull himself together. Then he was to console Miss Jenks. I got here as quickly as I could to deal with the emergency. Restoring calm was my first priority. We can't possibly have turbulence at the Lotus.'

‘You may not be able to avoid it, sir.’

‘Nothing must damage our ethos.’

‘A Home Office pathologist will be arriving soon,’ said Marmion. ‘Unless you sneak him in through the back door, *someone* is going to notice him.’

‘Can’t you just spirit the body away before the guests start to wake up properly?’

‘We need to establish the cause of death first, sir.’

‘I can tell you that, Inspector. The woman died of natural means.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I examined her myself.’

‘Are you a qualified doctor?’ asked Keedy, pointedly.

‘I was very thorough, Sergeant. There’s not a mark on her.’

‘I beg leave to doubt that, sir.’

‘Why don’t you let us be the judges?’ suggested Marmion. ‘I suspect that we’ve had a lot more experience of dealing with dead bodies than you have.’

Chell gave a reluctant nod of agreement, then led them upstairs and along a corridor. There was no danger of their waking other guests because the pile on the carpet was thick. Using a master key, the manager let them into the room, then locked it behind them. Marmion and Keedy had their first look at the woman who’d deprived them of any breakfast that morning. Pale, lean and well dressed, she was still stretched out in the undignified position into which she’d fallen. Only one side of her face was visible. Keedy knelt down to examine her, moving her slightly from time to time.

‘You see?’ said Chell as if he’d been vindicated. ‘No blood, no sign of injury, no indication of anything untoward.’

‘I’m afraid that you’re wrong,’ said Keedy.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look at her face.’ He turned her over gently so that they could study her properly. Though she’d been an attractive woman, her features were now distorted. ‘I’ve seen expressions like this before.’

‘The sergeant used to work in the family undertaking business,’ explained Marmion. ‘He knows what to look for.’

‘My immediate suspicion is that she was killed by some sort of poison. We just need to find out how it was administered.’

Removing her jacket with a care that bordered on tenderness, Keedy exposed a silk blouse. He undid the button on one wrist and peeled back the sleeve. A thin, pale, blue-veined arm came into view, but it had no marks on it. When he peeled back the other sleeve, however, there was clear evidence of a recent injection. Keedy looked up at Chell.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘we’ve now got some idea of *how* she died. The question is this – are we looking at a case of suicide or of murder?’

CHAPTER THREE

The pathologist soon arrived and was whisked upstairs by the woman acting as Chell's deputy while he was busy with the detectives. The manager was glad that the man came alone without any uniformed policemen in tow. He still nursed the faint hope that the crisis could somehow be hidden from the guests. Marmion shattered that hope. While the pathologist conducted his examination, the inspector took the manager aside.

'I'm afraid that your ethos is in danger, sir.'

'It's something we pride ourselves on,' said Chell, stiffly.

'You won't be able to do that any more. The Lotus Hotel has become a murder scene.'

'Surely not! The sergeant thought it might be a case of suicide.'

'That was before I had a good look around the room,' said Keedy. 'If the deceased had injected herself, where's the syringe? I can't find one. The only explanation is that the killer took it away.'

Chell was shaken. 'Things like this just don't happen at the Lotus.'

'What was the name of the guest staying here?' asked Marmion.

'Lady Diana Brice-Cadmire.'

'Then why didn't she spend the night in this bed? Clearly, it hasn't been slept in. And your guest would surely have brought luggage, wouldn't she? What happened to it?'

'I don't know.'

'Let's go back to what you told us earlier,' said Marmion. 'Lady Thingamajig had asked to be awakened early so that she could leave the premises at 6 a.m. Is that correct?'

'Yes,' said the other. 'A taxi was booked.'

'What happened to it?'

'Oh, it arrived on time, Inspector. By that stage, I'd got here and taken charge. I told the driver that there'd been a change of plan and that he was no longer needed. When he'd rid himself of every expletive in the English language, he went off in a rage.'

'Who can blame him?' said Keedy.

'What sort of person is the lady who was here?' asked Marmion with a glance at the bed. 'Is she in the habit of reserving a room and not sleeping in it?'

'She's been a model guest, Inspector.'

'Not the kind to make a moonlight flit, then?'

Chell was offended. 'Our guests tend to come from the upper echelons of society,' he said, haughtily. 'Their conduct is always above reproach. Our clientele is exclusively female. They appreciate our high standards.'

Marmion bit back the ironic observation he was about to make. Seeing that the pathologist had finished his preliminary examination, he asked the manager to take Keedy to his office so that the sergeant could question Millie Jenks and the night porter. After a rueful look at

the body, Chell led the way out of the room and closed the door softly behind him. Removing his spectacles, the pathologist got to his feet. He was a short, stubby man in his fifties with a puffy face. Over the years, he and Marmion had met at several murder scenes.

‘You’ll have trouble solving this one, Harvey,’ he said.

‘None of them is ever easy.’

‘The sergeant’s guess was right. In all probability, the woman was poisoned. I can’t tell you exactly which poison was used but it was a fatal dose. When we’ve opened her up and had a proper look at her,’ he went on, airily, ‘we may have to call in a toxicologist.’

‘The sooner we have the post-mortem report, the better.’

‘These things can’t be rushed.’

‘Do you have any idea of the time of death?’

‘She was killed at some time in the night. Rigor mortis hasn’t occurred yet and that can start to manifest itself as early as four hours after death in some cases. Let me have a closer look at her and I might be able to narrow it down a little.’

‘When it’s been photographed, I’ll get the body moved.’

‘You’ve now got the problem of identifying her.’

‘We have one useful clue,’ said Marmion. ‘She’s wearing a wedding ring and the other rings on her fingers look as if they cost a pretty penny. That tells me she has a rich and indulgent husband. He’ll soon report her missing.’

‘It looks as if we’re pioneers,’ the other remarked. ‘The manager said that this hotel caters only for women. That means we’re probably the first men privileged to get inside one of these rooms – apart from the killer, that is.’

‘How do you know the murder was committed by a man?’ asked Marmion. ‘Women can use a syringe just as well – even in the upper echelons of society.’

* * *

When he was conducted to the office by the manager, Keedy made the acquaintance of Millie Jenks and Leonard Rogan, the night porter. As the newcomers entered, Millie was sobbing into a handkerchief, but she put it away when she saw Chell and sat up straight. Rogan was already on his feet, shaking hands with the sergeant when introduced and showing the same deference towards the manager as his companion. The night porter was a short, balding, straight-backed man in his fifties in a smart uniform. He turned to Chell.

‘I’ve tried to calm her down, sir,’ he said, ‘but she’s too upset.’

‘I’m all right now,’ claimed Millie, bravely.

‘Mrs Gosling is the best person to look after her.’

‘Don’t presume to tell me my job, Rogan,’ said Chell, acidly. ‘I’d already made that decision of my own accord. Before I summon Mrs Gosling, I’d prefer to let the sergeant question the girl.’

Rogan was quashed. ‘Very well, sir,’ he mumbled.

‘I’ll leave the pair of them to you,’ Chell continued, looking at Keedy. ‘Guests will begin to stir from their beds fairly soon. They’ll become aware of the commotion. I need to be there to reassure them. Don’t snivel,’ he warned Millie. ‘Try to maintain some dignity.’

He swept out and closed the door behind him. Keedy took a quick inventory of the room, noting its generous size, the large desk, the gleaming furniture, the thick carpet and the well-stocked bookshelves. The office belonged to a man who loved order. Nothing was out of place.

He produced his notebook and smiled at Millie.

‘If it helps,’ he said, gently, ‘feel free to use your handkerchief. I know how much of a shock you must have had.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ she said, pathetically grateful.

‘In your own words, tell me what happened. There’s no rush. I won’t

hurry you along. I just want the facts. If you need to stop at any point, I'll be happy to wait until you start again.'

'You're very kind, Sergeant.'

He opened his notebook. 'I'm ready when you are, Miss Jenks.'

It took her some time to compose herself. Then, after clearing her throat, she told her tale. It was garbled for the most part but Keedy was able to pick out the salient details.

'Thank you,' he said. 'This is all very helpful.'

She was still apprehensive. 'I won't get the sack, will I?'

'I shouldn't think so. You've done nothing wrong.'

'The manager made me feel as if I had.'

'You were simply obeying a request, Miss Jenks.'

'My name won't be in the papers, will it?'

'It's highly unlikely,' said Keedy. 'From what I've seen of him, I think that Mr Chell will give reporters a bare minimum of information. He's keen to protect the reputation of the hotel. For our part, we always exercise discretion when dealing with the press.'

'See?' interjected Rogan. 'It's like I told you, Millie. You're in the clear. So am I. We're not at fault.' He grinned helpfully. 'Is it my turn now, Sergeant?'

Keedy nodded. 'My pencil is poised.'

The night porter not only had his story ready, he had clearly been rehearsing it. Summoned by Millie, he'd gone to inspect the body, then contacted the police and the manager. Rogan stressed how quick and resourceful he'd been, pointing out that he'd rung Scotland Yard rather than the local police station because he knew that Chell would hate the idea of uniformed officers arriving at the hotel. Though he was grateful for a coherent recitation of the facts, Keedy felt that there was something missing.

‘How long are you on duty, as a rule?’ he asked.

‘It’s usually around ten hours,’ replied the other.

‘How do you manage to stay awake?’

‘I *make* myself, Sergeant. Besides, it’s not as if I’m entirely alone. I often have to let in guests who come back here late – after midnight, in some cases. Then, of course, we have the kitchen staff. They have to be up at the crack of dawn if anyone wants an early breakfast. Millie and the other girls must be on duty to serve it.’

‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘Mrs Gosling expects us to be out of bed by six o’clock. The guests’ needs come first.’

‘Do you like working here?’ asked Keedy.

‘I did until today.’

‘What about you, Rogan?’

‘It’s a privilege to work at the Lotus,’ he said, loyally. ‘There’s nowhere quite like it. The guests are always so well behaved. That’s not been the case in other hotels where I’ve worked. I’ve had to deal with some very nasty situations, I can tell you. Some men get completely out of control when they’ve had too much to drink.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Then there are those who think the female members of staff are there for them to take liberties with. We’ve never had that kind of problem here.’

‘And we’ve never had anyone die at the hotel,’ Millie piped up, ‘as that poor woman did this morning. What on earth was wrong with her, Sergeant? Did she have some terrible disease?’

After looking from one to the other, Keedy inhaled deeply.

‘There’s something you both ought to know . . .’