



AN ACT OF VILLAINY

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CHAPTER ONE

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Murder in fiction is not nearly as thrilling as murder in real life.

This wicked thought slipped unbidden into my mind as my husband, Milo, and I exited a West End theatre after a performance of *Death Comes at Midnight*, an original drama sorely lacking originality.

My dearth of enthusiasm was not entirely the fault of the play. Truth be told, I rather suspected the blame should be laid at the feet of my recent endeavours in detection. I had found myself immersed in several mysteries as of late and, in consequence, the play's puzzle had proven less than enthralling.

It hadn't helped matters that Milo had, annoyingly, deduced the culprit and his motives not twenty minutes into the first act, and I had spent the remainder of the performance hoping that he would be proven wrong.

'Perhaps you'll guess the killer correctly next time, darling,' he said, deducing my thoughts as easily as he had the solution to the play.

'It was too obvious,' I retorted. 'I was looking for a cleverer motive.'

‘Ah, I see,’ he replied with a smile.

‘Mysteries are rarely ever that straightforward, as you well know.’

‘All the same, it’s nice to take part in a mystery where loaded guns aren’t being waved about,’ he answered dryly.

‘I suppose,’ I said, though I still felt attempting to solve a fictional crime was disappointing in comparison to the real thing.

I took Milo’s arm and we walked along Shaftesbury Avenue, making our way through the crowds of people coming out of other theatres into the brightly lit streets. It was a lovely evening, clear and cool, and I was glad that we had decided to walk to a restaurant in Covent Garden rather than take a cab. There was something magical about strolling through this part of town late at night, surrounded by other theatregoers, all of us laughing and talking about the performances we had just seen.

‘I say, Milo Ames, is that you?’

We stopped and turned at the sound of the voice behind us.

It was Gerard Holloway, an old friend of Milo’s. He came towards us through the crowd, smiling.

‘It is you. And Mrs Ames. How delightful.’ It did not escape my notice that he had not been certain it would be me on my husband’s arm. Milo’s reputation had been less than sterling in the past, and I suspected Mr Holloway had encountered Milo on other occasions when I had not been the woman in his company.

‘How are you, Holloway?’ Milo asked.

‘Never better,’ he said.

I had always liked Gerard Holloway. He cut a dashing figure. Tall and well built, he had a handsome, friendly face

with a thin dark moustache above a mouth that was generally smiling. His pleasant appearance was complemented by his amiable disposition. The youngest of an earl's four sons, he had had the liberty to eschew duty and politics and had devoted his energies and wealth to a more creative milieu. He was a patron of the arts, known to frequent the theatre district, and was often looked to as the last word on the current trends in London theatre.

'Have you been to a play?' he asked.

'Yes, we've just seen *Death Comes at Midnight*,' I told him.

'Of course. A mystery. That's rather in your line, isn't it?' he said with a smile. It had not escaped society's notice that Milo and I had been entangled in more than one murder investigation, and we had yet to live down our reputation. 'How did you like it?'

'A bit predictable,' Milo said.

'I thought the same,' Mr Holloway said. 'It's only meant to be light entertainment, of course, so I suppose one shouldn't judge too harshly. But so many plays these days aren't what they used to be. I hope to do something on that score, however. I'm producing a new play of my own, *The Price of Victory*.'

'Yes, I heard something about that,' Milo said. 'Wrote it yourself, didn't you?'

'Yes. The script's given me a devil of a time, but we've smoothed it over.' He was warming to the subject now, the spark of enthusiasm gleaming in his dark eyes. 'We've got Christopher Landon, quite a rising star, as our lead man. And Balthazar Lebeau in a supporting role.'

'Lebeau is still acting, is he?' Milo asked.

'In a manner of speaking. Half the time, I don't know

how the man manages to put one foot in front of the other, let alone turn out a decent performance, but his name still holds a certain sway. Besides, we have a bit of a history, and I feel I owe him a chance. Anyway, I think it's going to be a great success. We'll be opening this weekend. I hope you'll come and see it.'

'We'd like that very much,' I said, though I knew that Milo would probably be annoyed with me later for having agreed to see a play we would be required to praise, whatever its merits. My husband had very little patience for such things, and, even though Mr Holloway was an old friend, I knew Milo would likely try to get out of attending.

'Good, good,' Mr Holloway said. 'We've been working very hard on it. It's rather my pet project. That's why I decided to direct it as well. It's my first time at the helm, so to speak. I'm afraid I'm making a nuisance of myself about every last detail, but so far they haven't kicked me out.'

Such a thing was unlikely, given that he had no doubt financed the entire venture. Mr Holloway was incredibly wealthy, and, in addition to his interest in London's art world, he and his wife were involved in numerous charities throughout the city.

'How is Georgina?' I asked. It had been some time since I had seen Mrs Holloway, though, over the years, we had formed a warm friendship through mutual social engagements and had worked on several charity committees together.

A strange expression flickered almost imperceptibly across his face, and he hesitated ever so slightly. 'She's quite well.'

'I'm glad to hear it. It's been a while since I've seen her. I'll have to ring her up.'

‘Yes, I’m sure she’d like that,’ he said. ‘Well, I’m afraid I must be off, but I do hope you’ll come to the play.’

‘Thank you,’ I told him. ‘We’ll look forward to it.’

He hesitated, as though he wanted to say something else. Then he added, ‘And, Ames, perhaps we might have a drink together soon?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Perhaps at my club? Are you free tomorrow afternoon? Say three o’clock?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ Milo said. ‘I’ll stop by.’

‘Excellent,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you then. Good evening, Mrs Ames.’

He tipped his hat then and left us.

‘Laid that on a bit thick, didn’t you?’ Milo said mildly as I took his arm again and we resumed walking.

As I had anticipated, he was less than pleased that I had agreed to attend an amateur performance. ‘I couldn’t very well refuse his invitation,’ I pointed out. ‘It’s only one evening; it won’t hurt to attend. Besides, you know Gerard Holloway never does things in half measures. I’m sure it will be a good play.’

‘That’s not what I mean,’ he said.

I was suddenly confused. ‘Well, what do you mean?’

‘Asking about Georgina.’

I hadn’t the faintest idea what he was getting at. ‘Why shouldn’t I have asked about her?’

‘Because Gerard Holloway’s new play just happens to star his mistress.’

I stopped walking and turned to face him. ‘What?’

He smiled. ‘My sweet, innocent darling. You really didn’t know?’

‘No,’ I said, genuinely shocked. Perhaps it was dreadfully naive of me, especially given the less than perfect state my own marriage had once been in, but I still managed to be rather taken aback at the rampant infidelity in our social circle.

‘It’s been the talk of London. She’s the theatre’s newest darling, as well as Holloway’s. Flora Bell, she calls herself. I’m rather surprised you haven’t heard something about it.’

I had long ago developed an aversion to the gossip columns. I could find no amusement in the troubles of others.

‘It did cross my mind that he didn’t mention the female lead in his play,’ I said. ‘And I thought he looked a bit strange when I asked about Georgina.’

‘I expect he thought you were pointedly mentioning her.’

‘I hope he did,’ I replied. ‘Someone ought to remind him of her. Poor Georgina. She must be dreadfully upset.’

Of all the couples that I knew, the Holloways were perhaps the last I would have expected to have this sort of trouble. The pair had been a love match. They had married young and had always seemed very much devoted to each other. Their romance had, in fact, been the sort of fairy tale young women dreamt about. They had grown up together and suddenly found one day that they were in love. After an opulent wedding that had been the talk of London, he had whisked her away on a summer-long wedding trip, and that had only been the beginning. From then on, they had travelled to countless exotic locales, doing all manner of adventurous things.

Whenever I had seen them together, I had admired their relationship. I had often noticed between them the little unspoken hints of affection that truly happy couples shared, the subtle gestures and glances that spoke volumes. It was astounding to me that he had taken a mistress.

I didn't know why, but this news felt like something of a personal blow.

'She needn't worry,' Milo said lightly. 'These things never last.'

I felt a little pang of sadness at this careless comment. Milo would know about such things, of course. But the knowledge that an affair would be short-lived did not make it any easier for the wife in question. Georgina was a strong woman, and I knew it was not likely she would take her husband's infidelity in stride. This could very well be the end of the Holloways' marriage.

'It may not last,' I said quietly, 'but the consequences of it surely will.'

I didn't look at him, but I saw him glance my way out of the corner of his eye. He was aware, I knew, that I was thinking of the impact of past scandals upon our own marriage. We had surmounted our difficulties and the past was not something I liked to dwell on, but I could not help but feel exceedingly sorry for Georgina Holloway.

We let the subject drop as we reached the restaurant, but I was feeling much less carefree than I had been a few moments before.

I ought to have recognised the feeling then, but I didn't. Couched as it was, in the guise of concern about my friend's connubial disharmony, I am ashamed to say I hadn't an inkling that my unsettled feeling meant we were on the precipice of another mystery.

CHAPTER TWO

The Holloways' marriage trouble was still on my mind the next morning as I sat down to breakfast. I didn't know why I couldn't seem to forget the matter. They were not, after all, the first couple of our acquaintance whose marriage had gone by the wayside. I had always felt, however, that their relationship was different from most, stronger somehow. Surely it was a shame to throw something so valuable away?

The more I considered it, the more certain I was that Gerard Holloway still loved his wife and was making a terrible mistake. If only he could be made to realise it before it was too late. The trouble with men was that it was very difficult to make them see how stupid they were being.

Milo's paper was folded by his plate, and, as he was still in bed, I picked it up, deciding to peruse the gossip columns over breakfast to see if there was any mention of Gerard Holloway and Flora Bell. It wasn't just morbid curiosity on my part. I felt the stirrings of the desire to take action.

I was glad that Milo was not awake, for he would know what I was thinking about and tell me not to interfere.

I flipped through the pages until I found what I was looking for. Nestled between wedding announcements and a notice about a charity gala, there was one small item that was clearly related to the matter:

A certain earl's son has continued to be seen in company with a certain actress. The lady in question seems to have captured his heart along with the lead in a new play. It remains to be seen whether her talents will translate to the stage.

I put the paper aside in disgust. Poor Georgina must be heartbroken. In that moment, I made up my mind. I was going to do what I could do to remedy the situation. At the very least, I could offer Georgina support and sympathy.

Now I just had to find a way to go about it. I could not very well show up at her door saying that I had heard about her husband's affair. We weren't on close enough terms for that. There had to be some other way for me to put myself into her company.

In the end, the means for doing so came from a most unexpected source. I glanced back at the paper, and my eyes fell on the notice for the charity gala. This time I noticed the names written there:

The charity gala held by the Honourable Mr and Mrs Gerard Holloway will commence following the opening-night performance of Mr Holloway's new play, The Price of Victory, at the Penworth Theatre. The play, which features Miss Flora Bell and Mr Christopher Landon, is expected to be a great success.

The notice gave the date as the Saturday three days hence and said that all tickets to the gala had long ago been sold, but tickets to the play were still available for the following weeks. Apparently, the opening-night performance was exclusive to gala-goers, the proceeds going to a notable charity. This sort of elaborate philanthropic function was very much in the Holloways' style, and they had had a great deal of success with it in the past.

I wondered why it was that Mr Holloway hadn't mentioned the gala last night. Milo and I would have gladly contributed to the cause, even without tickets. Perhaps he had not wanted to mention the charity event, as it would only lead to conversation about Georgina. I imagined the whole thing must be very awkward for the Holloways, given the circumstances.

I glanced again at the odious bit of gossip beneath the gala notice. No doubt the snide remark about Mr Holloway had been purposefully placed there. I felt another twinge of sympathy for Georgina. She would see her charity event through to the end, but I could only imagine how embarrassing this was for her.

My mind began turning, wondering how I could possibly be of some help.

I picked up my cup and had just drained the last of my coffee when there was a knock at the door. I glanced at the clock. It was very early. I wasn't sure who could be calling at this time of day.

A moment later, I heard the door open and the murmur of voices, and then my maid, Winnelda, hurried into the room.

'Your mother's here!' she whispered, her eyes wide. Winnelda served as my lady's maid, but she had never been properly trained for the position and was thus wont to make

her emotions and opinions plain. Not that I blamed her in this instance. My mother could no doubt find a way to rattle the king himself. ‘She went right to the sitting room.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I’ll go and speak with her.’

I didn’t know what my mother was doing here at this hour. What was more, I didn’t know what she was doing in London. She and my father spent the majority of their time in the country, and when they did come to town we did not spend much time together. It was not that there was any animosity between us, but they had always treated me as they treated each other: with polite reserve tempered by the occasional hint of vague affection. Over the years, we had fallen into a comfortably distant relationship that seemed to work well for all concerned.

I walked to the sitting room and found my mother standing before the mirror, checking her lipstick. With the reflection of my face beside hers, I had to admit that we looked a good bit alike. We had the same dark hair, the same grey eyes, and the same mouth. She caught sight of me in the glass then and turned to face me. She was dressed in a black suit accented with rows of pearls and an ermine stole.

‘Hello, Mother,’ I said.

‘Hello, dearest,’ she said, holding out her fur-draped arms. I obediently went to her, and she embraced me, brushing kisses across my cheeks. She smelt, as she always had, of vanilla and rosewater.

The formalities thus observed, she stepped back and ran her eyes over me. ‘It’s been far too long since I’ve seen you. Capri, Como, and then Paris and not a single letter to your dear mother. You’re looking well, perhaps a bit too thin. And you’ve been in the sun. You’ll ruin your complexion that way.’

‘Can I offer you some breakfast?’ I asked.

‘Thank you, no. You know I take only tea in the morning. It’s much too early for eating.’

‘Yes, I was rather surprised you called so early.’

‘I’ve a busy day scheduled, and I wanted to see you first thing.’ She moved to a chair near the fireplace and took a seat.

I followed her lead and sat on the sofa. ‘How is Father?’

‘He’s much the same as always, I suppose,’ she said absently, shifting her fur on her shoulders. ‘But I haven’t come for pleasantries. I’ve come to enlist your aid.’

‘Oh?’

‘Lady Honoria is holding a charity event, and I told her that I would speak to you about taking part in it.’

‘What sort of charity event?’ I asked warily. I knew Lady Honoria and her lavish charity events, and I wondered what this one might entail.

‘It’s an auction. A great many items will be listed, and she wants society ladies to model the items to make them more attractive to buyers.’

Under different circumstances, it might have been the type of thing that I would have enjoyed. As it was, I felt certain that, with my mother involved, it would prove to be a taxing experience. I would certainly donate to benefit the cause, but I did not care to model items at the auction.

‘I don’t think I’ll have the time,’ I said. ‘I’m so busy as of late.’

‘Nonsense,’ she said. ‘It’s for a good cause. Surely it’s a much more worthwhile use of your time than your recent – and frankly vulgar – hobbies.’ She waved a hand, and I knew she was dismissing my distasteful forays into the world of detection.

‘All the same,’ I said. ‘I’m not sure . . .’

‘Surely you don’t mean to disappoint Lady Honoria.’

Inwardly, I sighed. I could feel myself weakening. While I hated to give in to my mother, it was, after all, for a good cause. Besides, I could not hold it against Lady Honoria that my mother had commandeered her charity event.

‘When is it?’ I asked resignedly.

‘Saturday evening.’

I seized suddenly upon an idea as one in danger of drowning seizes upon a life preserver. ‘I’m afraid we’ve somewhere else to be on Saturday.’

‘Some nightclub, no doubt. Surely you can put that off. You will be in rather good company. Lady Margaret Allworth, Mrs Camden . . .’

‘No, I’m afraid I’m going to the Holloways’ charity gala,’ I interrupted. I had no idea, of course, if I could procure tickets, but my mother didn’t need to know that.

She looked up suddenly. ‘Gerard and Georgina Holloway?’

‘Yes, there is the premier performance of Mr Holloway’s new play and a party to follow,’ I said. ‘I’m sure it will be a very nice event.’

‘Hmm. I suppose,’ she said grudgingly. Though I was sure my mother would have liked nothing better than to disparage my plans when they conflicted with hers, the Holloway name held too much sway for her to do so.

‘Perhaps next time I may be of assistance to Lady Honoria,’ I offered.

‘I shall count on it.’ My mother’s objective effectively thwarted, she had no further use for me. She rose from her seat and I rose with her.

‘Where is your husband?’ she asked as she pulled on her gloves. ‘Still abed? Or has he run off again?’ There was no malice in the words. It was simply the delightful way she had

of saying things that were probably better left unsaid.

‘Good morning, Mrs Ames,’ said Milo dryly from the doorway. My maiden name having been, by coincidence, the same as my married name, it was always a bit unnerving to hear my mother referred to as ‘Mrs Ames’ by my husband.

She turned to him, unabashed. ‘Oh, you are here. Well, what a nice surprise.’

‘I might say the same thing,’ he said, moving to her side and brushing a kiss across her cheek.

Her eyes swept over him. He had not yet dressed and was wearing a black dressing gown over his nightclothes.

‘You seem to be handsomer every time I see you.’ The way she said it left doubt as to whether it was a compliment, and her next words confirmed this impression. ‘Rather flies in the face of the idea that blameless living keeps one young.’

‘It’s love that keeps one young,’ he replied, unflustered. ‘So, with Amory at my side, I shall probably never age.’

‘Hmm,’ she said, her favourite means of expressing nonverbal disapproval.

I had always been somewhat amused by the relationship between Milo and my mother. I had been engaged to another man when I had met Milo, but my mother had not balked at the idea of my marrying Milo instead. It was not that she was a romantic woman, not by any means. Indeed, I had never seen much more than an average regard between her and my father, and any of my adolescent infatuations with boys she deemed unsuitable had been met with stern reminders that I was to marry well. Frankly, I would have expected the potential scandal of a broken engagement to outweigh my long-term happiness on her scale of importance, but Milo had managed to charm her quite easily, his good looks and winning manner

supplemented by extensive wealth and excellent connections.

He might have gone on charming her, despite his numerous transgressions, had he been a bit more discreet. But indiscretion was the one thing my mother could not abide, and I suspected it would take many years of very good behaviour before she would be willing to accept that his reformation was legitimate.

Milo, for his part, had given up trying to impress her long ago. He was not one to waste effort when it didn't benefit him, and, now that he had won me, there was very little reason for him to care whether my mother liked him or not.

It all made things very interesting for me when they were in a room together.

My mother turned back to me. 'I'll come to see you again before I leave town if I find the time.'

'Very well, Mother.'

'I'll show myself out. So nice to have seen you, dear,' she said as she walked towards the door.

'And you. Send my regards to Father.'

She went out without further comment and, hearing the front door close behind her, I sat down on the sofa with a heavy sigh.

'Well. She remains as charming as ever,' Milo observed.

I smiled wryly. 'You might have stayed in the bedroom and avoided her.'

'I heard her voice and thought I should rally to your defence,' he replied. 'What did she want?'

'She wants me to take part in a charity event.'

'Don't tell me you've accepted?'

'No, I said I was too busy.' I debated confessing my developing plans to Milo. It was sometimes better to let him know when everything was accomplished than to try to win his approval ahead of time.

‘Well, thank heavens for that,’ he said. ‘One thing I can say for your mother: there’s nothing like a visit from her to clear one’s head early in the morning.’

‘She’s had the opposite effect on me,’ I said, rubbing my temple. ‘I’ve now got a roaring headache.’

‘I think some coffee would serve us both well.’ He turned his head ever so slightly towards the door. ‘Winnelda.’

She came instantly into the room. No doubt she had been hovering just outside, probably trying to be certain that my mother had gone.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Bring us some coffee, will you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

She went out again, and Milo came to sit across from me.

‘What are your plans today?’ I asked.

‘I’ve got to see Ludlow about a few business matters. I’ll probably eat lunch out. And old Felix Hill is selling a horse I might want to have a look at. Do you have anything scheduled today?’

‘Nothing in particular,’ I said absently. His plans would give me plenty of time to implement my own.

Winnelda brought in a tray with the coffee things, and I poured a cup for Milo.

‘You’re not forgetting drinks with Gerard Holloway?’ I asked, stirring milk and sugar into the coffee.

‘No,’ he said, taking the cup. ‘I suppose I’ll go round to his club this afternoon and see him.’

‘He seemed very eager to speak with you,’ I said. ‘What do you suppose he wants to talk to you about?’

‘I haven’t the faintest idea,’ he said, bringing his cup to his lips. ‘Perhaps he’s looking for investors in his play or some

such thing, though he ought to know that I have no interest in the theatre.'

'I wonder if you might have the opportunity to talk to him about his marriage,' I said casually.

Milo looked up from his coffee. 'Amory . . .' He somehow managed to convey both wariness and a warning in the simple utterance of my name, and I knew that I had been correct in my assumption that he would not endorse my plan to help the Holloways mend their broken relationship.

'Oh, I don't mean anything invasive, of course, but you might find a way to remind him what a lovely woman Georgina is.'

'No, Amory.'

'You know how happy they have always been together,' I said. 'It seems a shame that he should throw it all away for an actress.'

'That may well be, darling, but it's really none of our concern, and I have no intention of expressing any opinions on the matter.'

'Oh, I'm sure he'll broach the subject,' I said. 'Gentlemen like to brag about their conquests.'

'Do they?' he replied.

'Don't they?' I challenged.

'I'm afraid I don't remember,' he said. 'It has been far too long since I made any conquests.'

'Hmm,' I said sceptically.

He set his cup down in the saucer. 'I hesitate to point this out, darling, but you're starting to sound like your mother.'

He was quite lucky he escaped the sitting room unscathed.