

## Chapter One

Maisie Lemmon turned the small tarnished mirror on the wall around and studied her reflection. Curly brown hair was tidily up in a bun, and her feathered hat sat at a jaunty angle on her head. Round cheeks had a healthy pink glow, and her full lips smiled back at her. A frown momentarily crossed her face as she noticed a piece of lettuce stuck between her teeth. That would never do. Not if she wanted to create a good impression. And she did.

After removing the offending greenery, she sighed once before turning the mirror back around to face the wall. For good measure, she draped it with a piece of floral cloth and hung a wreath of dill on the nail. Then she closed the cupboard door.

Any witch worth her salt knew that mirrors were dangerous things.

Her mother and grandmother would have a fit if they knew she had brought such a thing into the house, but they were no longer here and Maisie had always been a little self-conscious of her looks. She knew she wasn't ugly, but neither was she beautiful and willowy with pale skin and perfectly formed calves. Instead, she was plain, plump, and a little clumsy, so if the mirror gave her a boost of confidence, she didn't see much harm in it. However, she made sure its potential power remained well contained. One never knew who might utilise it to spy on her, or trap her in an endless maze of reflections.

She paused at the front door and picked up the local newspaper lying on the small table. The paper was yellowing with age. Her eyes roved over the script, despite knowing it by heart.

RECLUSIVE ALCHEMIST FINALLY MOVES INTO THE BIG HOUSE, the headline shouted, dwarfing the reports of a rogue weather worker, and an advert for a talisman to protect the newly deceased from necromancers. Despite being refused an interview with the owner, the reporter, Jason Ash, had spent several paragraphs describing the infamous alchemist, who had suddenly quit his job and left the country, only to turn up years later in Myrtleberry Dell. Rumours abounded in academic circles. Where did he go? What had he been up to in the intervening years? Vague quotes from the villagers and a photograph of the house through the large metal gates barring the wide driveway completed the piece.

Despite inheriting the house, Wilfred H Pepper had neglected to claim his property in the beginning. He was absent for so long, many people assumed he would eventually sell it on. It had been a welcome surprise when, years later, he had taken up residence. Since then, he had been spotted a few times in the village, but none of the villagers had been able to get him to mutter more than a few words. He was withdrawn and taciturn, a mystery, and, for all intents and purposes, a minor celebrity in the small community.

And Maisie needed him.

She placed the paper back on the growing pile and took a deep breath. “You can do this, Maisie,” she muttered to herself. “You’re their Hedge Witch. They need you.”

Grabbing her large floral tapestry bag, she opened the door to the small cottage and marched out, almost falling over the ginger tom stretched out on the front step.

“Goodness, Aly, what are you doing there?”

The cat meowed and stretched.

“Well, I don’t care how warm it is. I could be sprawled out on the gravel right now. It wouldn’t do to turn up at his door with a bloody nose.”

The cat looked at her with lidded eyes and licked its lips.

“You know how important this is to me, so I don’t give a fig for your opinion,” Maisie said with a sniff.

The cat turned around three times before curling back up on the mat. Maisie carefully

stepped over him, pulled the door shut behind her, and walked briskly down the garden path, edged with overgrown bushes and a plethora of flowers and herbs. She stopped to pick a few leaves of lemon verbena, which she rubbed on her neck and over her wrists. Lifting her hand to her nose, she sniffed and nodded. She opened the rickety wooden gate and carefully shut it behind her before continuing up the lane through the small wood towards the village.

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Myrtleberry Dell was a quaint collection of houses and shops a short distance from the main road leading from the capital in the north to the port in the south. In the past, travellers might occasionally stop at the small hotel or break their journey with a visit to the tearooms, but most of the cars sped past without ever sampling the charms on offer in the village. Since the opening of the bypass north of the village, even those few visitors had ceased coming altogether. However, all that was changing.

The self-proclaimed mayor of the village, Aberforth Flores, was an entrepreneur who was keen to entice more people to visit and stay, preferably with an open purse or wallet. There had been no elections or other candidates for the role. Indeed, the residents had been blissfully ignorant of their need for a civic figure to take the helm and steer the community into prosperity. Aberforth had filled the non-existent void, to the amusement of many, and taken it upon himself to propel the village into the heady realms of fame and fortune. To that end, he had created several local legends of highwaymen and their nefarious deeds, as well as a few ghosts. According to his internet searches, people loved visiting haunted buildings or sites with some obscure historical significance.

Now, the unassuming old oak on the village green had been upgraded to a hanging tree, allegedly used to despatch offenders for an assortment of crimes. The run-down hotel was rumoured to have welcomed royalty in the distant past. Aberforth himself hinted at a liaison between a minor prince and a local girl in his family tree, who, of course, could not be named to protect the monarchy. The story had proven very popular. Aberforth would pose for pictures in front of his house, his face in profile to better capture his nose, which bore an uncanny likeness to the current reigning sovereign.

The fictitious ghosts featured in the Myrtleberry Dell guidebook included a grey lady searching for her dead child, a soldier shot for desertion, and a headless horseman seen galloping across the green on a vital errand that was never completed. All three had supposedly obliged visitors in the recent past with a visitation, increasing the hopes of the gullible that they, too, would be the next lucky people. All of them left slightly disappointed and a few pounds poorer.

Since he also owned the large souvenir shop in a prime spot opposite the village green, Aberforth's motives were viewed as being slightly mercenary. Most of the residents had shrugged and returned to their own business, happy to let him take charge as long as it didn't interfere with their lives. However, even they grudgingly admitted over a pint of ale in *The Grizzled Wizard* that his antics had benefited them all financially. Several local businesses had even concocted their own stories, eager to cash in on the influx of unsuspecting tourists. The tea shop had rebranded their menu items, selling grey lady tea, headless gingerbread men biscuits, and Royal Victoria sponge cake, and when the parish council had paid for a new concrete path around the village hall, the hoof-prints of a galloping horse had mysteriously appeared in it overnight as it set.

The mayor had once braved the wrath of Maisie's mother by suggesting she might have a stall in the village to sell her potions from. Needless to say, once he had recovered from the tongue-lashing he received, he had been quick to apologise and retreat, never to darken her door again. Since her mother's death, however, Maisie had noticed Aberforth watching her with speculation, but he had never plucked up the courage to approach her outright.

She would give him short shrift if he tried.

As the village hedge witch, Maisie lived on the parish boundary in the same cottage as her forebears. Unlike many other small settlements, Myrtleberry Dell could boast of retaining its own spellcaster since the mists of time. The villagers respected Maisie for the long traditions she represented, and often consulted her for issues regarding love, important decisions, and cures for warts and other mild inconveniences. As she walked through the village, the residents would lift their hats or nod their heads politely. Occasionally, someone would apologetically stop her to ask her opinion on everything from the right way to prepare a posset to whether a red hat was better than a

blue one.

No matter what duty sent Maisie abroad, she always had a welcoming smile on her face and sufficient time for them all.

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After accepting a brace of pheasants from Edmund Wheatly as payment for a potion for his insomnia, Maisie was finally able to make her way up to the Big House.

Boasting three storeys and built on a small hill, the old manor house was clearly visible from almost all aspects of the village. History recorded it had once belonged to a wealthy landowner, a distant descendant of the Torrington family, who were Viscounts nearby. He had added a gatehouse to the manor and would hold court in the large room that doubled as a ballroom for parties. The oldest residents still talked of Christmases at the house when the entire village had been invited up for mulled wine and cakes.

Unfortunately, the lord's progeny had frittered away their inheritance, and the house had to be sold to pay off their debts. It had briefly belonged to a singer in a heavy metal band, who had died one night from an overdose after partying too hard. The house had then been bought by an eccentric elderly lady, but she had never occupied it, and the once grand residence lay empty for a long time afterwards. Now it was the domain of the antisocial alchemist, who had inherited the property as her only, and very distant, relation.

He had hired a part-time gardener and occasional cleaner, but neither of them saw their employer while they were at work as he kept to his rooms with strict instructions not to be disturbed. Even so, they had revelled in their position as the locals plied them with drinks in the *Wizard*, reporting the most minor facts to a breathless audience.

Despite various attempts by the villagers, the gentleman had refused to share anything of his life with them when he occasionally encountered them in shops or on the street, although, as is often the case, rumours flourished despite his reticence. Lacking any pertinent information, the stories included a scorned lover, an unnamed scandal, a broken heart, and a dark mysterious past leading

to his self-induced exile from modern society. There had even been a brief mention of vampires, which was thoroughly squashed when he had been spotted walking across a nearby field while the bright spring sun shone unobstructed above.

Maisie had never met him, but from the plethora of tall tales winging their way around the village, Maisie had deduced that he was quiet, methodical, scientifically minded, and dogged. All qualities that she lacked. It made him the perfect partner for her mission.

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While walking by the small river running along the west of the village, Maisie easily spotted Malachi Bell, the local postman. With a shock of bright red hair and a face covered in freckles, he was hard to miss, even when he was half-hidden by a weeping willow.

She noticed he was hurriedly stuffing something into his bag and wondered if a parcel had fallen out again. Now and then she would advise him to get a new bag, but he always refused, saying that he felt attached to the old one and would feel wrong with a shiny new satchel. Thinking of her collected treasures at home, Maisie could understand his reasons. Not being in any particular hurry to get to the Big House, she waved to him and walked past the bridge crossing the river to intercept him.

“Good morning,” she called. “How are you feeling today?”

Malachi’s face seemed much redder than usual, and he wiped his brow with a tatty handkerchief as she approached.

“I’m well. Thank you, Mistress Lemmon,” he replied.

Maisie could see the beads of sweat forming on his brow. Although it was a lovely day, there was still a slight chill in the breeze blowing across the water. She wondered whether his old complaint had returned.

“Are you sure?” she asked. She moved closer and glanced around to make sure they were alone. “I’m happy to make more of the tonic for your...” her eyes dipped down. “...troubles.”

“Oh, no, no. That won’t be necessary.” He swallowed.

She put a hand on his forehead. “You feel hot and you’re flushed. I really think you need one of my tonics. Pop by early tomorrow, and I’ll have one made up for you.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Think nothing of it. If you get a chance to bake one of those gorgeous lemon drizzle cakes, I’d love to have some.”

Maisie was very flexible when dealing with her customers. Those who didn’t have money to pay for her potions would often gift her with food or labour instead. She wasn’t wealthy, but neither was she living in abject poverty, and that suited her just fine.

“I’d be glad to,” Malachi said. He glanced at his watch. “Goodness, look at the time! I must get on. Lots of mail to deliver!”

He picked up his bag, and after fixing it to his bicycle, hurried away.

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Maisie finally reached the tall iron gates set in the wall surrounding the Big House. Thankfully, they were open, and she walked straight through. She had never been troubled with iron, like many witches were rumoured to be, but she didn’t like to push her luck too far. There was always a first time for everything.

As she made her way up the wide driveway, her gaze roved over the closely cropped lawn and perfectly straight flower beds. Bushes were neatly trimmed and the roses devoid of deadheads. Her fingers twitched. She suppressed the urge to fling leaves across the grass and sow dandelions between the evenly spaced shrubberies.

Maisie was more of a casual gardener. Some may even have said chaotic. Her own garden was a riot of colours and scents crammed together. She was happy to let her plants choose where they wanted to grow instead of imposing her will on them. In her mind, there was no such thing as a weed. All plants had their uses for those who had the skills and aptitude. In fact, some of the best medicines could be distilled from the leaves, roots, and flowers of the lowliest of plants.

Finally reaching the large double door, she looked with surprise at the prominent notice

attached to it.

*Wilfred H Pepper.*

*No hawkers, peddlers, or tinkers.*

*Deliveries may be left on the rear doorstep.*

*Go away.*

Maisie blinked. "How strange," she muttered. With a shrug, she grasped the brass knocker and banged it loudly three times.

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## Chapter Two

Unbeknownst to Maisie, the new owner of the property was currently in a crucial phase of experimentation.

Needing a place of solitude big enough to contain all the equipment and paraphernalia needed for his research, Wilfred H Pepper had been ecstatic to discover he already owned the perfect place; an old manor house in a secluded village off the beaten track.

As a young man, he had been apprenticed to an apothecary when he received news that a very distant relation had died intestate, leaving him their entire fortune by default. The dogged lawyer had spent many months tracing the family tree until Wilfred's name had finally appeared, the only eligible recipient still living.

Suddenly able to fulfil his dream of discovering the fabled philosopher's stone, he had quit his position immediately and set himself up as an alchemist, devouring ancient texts and filling his mind with dreams of renown. He spent many years travelling the globe, seeking knowledge and taking meticulous notes. Now he was ready to pursue his goal and achieve what no-one had yet been able. Fame and immortality would finally be his.

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Wilfred cursed as the sound of banging made him jump and spill some of the precious liquid from his test tube. Carefully placing it back in the wooden holder, he found a cloth and mopped up the small

puddle. He pushed his spectacles further up his nose and peered once more at his notebook. His finger traced the beautiful script while his mouth moved soundlessly as he read the instructions again.

The mercury liquid was vital to his research. The ability to lengthen one's life indefinitely and turn base metals into gold was a noble endeavour, and Wilfred deemed himself one of the world's finer alchemists. He felt sure that this latest concoction held the key to success. But he needed to be absolutely precise in his measurements.

He peered at the test tube, judging the remaining amount to be sufficient. He picked it up once more and poured it carefully into the beaker holding the lead, counting the drops as they fell. Fully engrossed in his work, he jerked his hand as more banging at the door startled him. Dismayed, he could only stare as the entire tube dumped over the metal and ran to the bottom.

Months of painstaking work was ruined.

He threw the offending tube across the room, immediately regretting it as it smashed into little pieces on the tiled floor. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead as the banging continued. Who was this imbecile who couldn't read a perfectly good notice?

Gritting his teeth, he marched out of his workroom and descended the large, sweeping staircase into the hallway. Grasping the handle firmly, he threw open the door.

“What?” he shouted.

“Well, that isn't exactly a polite greeting, but I will ignore it for now.”

Wilfred's mouth dropped open as a most peculiar woman pushed past him and entered the house. Her purple hat was askew, the pheasant feathers dangling to one side, and she held a pair of dead birds in one hand and a large tapestry bag in the other. She looked around the entrance hall and turned to him with a wide smile on her face.

“This is rather lovely,” she exclaimed. “I really must see the rest of the house.”

“Now wait one moment,” Wilfred began, as she crossed the floor and opened the door to the great hall. “You can't simply barge in here and poke your nose into everything. I am a busy man.”

“My goodness,” she said, turning in a circle as she gazed up. “I can see what they mean. I

can just imagine the scene, can't you? Musicians in that alcove, and waiters carrying trays of drinks and those little snacks. What are they called? Never mind, I'm certain they would be delicious."

Before he could answer her, she had hustled past and headed for the staircase.

"Madam, kindly leave these premises immediately."

"But I haven't seen the rest of the house," she said, her lip pouting slightly. "Besides, I haven't even told you why I'm here. Surely you must be curious?"

"Not in the slightest," Wilfred growled. He moved swiftly in front of her as she lifted her foot to ascend, blocking her way. She moved to his left, and he countered, both of them swaying from side to side in an awkward dance.

The woman huffed and stopped. "Fine. I'll simply have to come back another day to view the rest." She twisted away, her bright brown eyes roving over the framed portraits still hanging on the walls and the large chandelier gracing the hall ceiling.

"Well, aren't you going to offer me a cup of tea?" She asked.

"No."

She tutted loudly. "I find it helps the conversation along very nicely," she said as she turned suddenly and made for the kitchen. "Especially if accompanied by biscuits," she said over her shoulder. "I prefer shortbread myself, but any sort will do."

Before he could move, the woman had disappeared through the door.

"Confound her," he muttered as he belatedly followed her.

When he entered, she was already at the sink, filling up the kettle with water. The brace of pheasants had been dumped on his kitchen table, their heads hanging over the side, beady eyes trained on him as if to accuse him of the deed. Next to them sat the garish tapestry bag.

"I must say, you have a lovely view of the begonias from here." She set the kettle on the hob. "Such a large, airy space," she said, opening cupboards and peering inside.

"Blast it, woman. What do you think you are doing?"

She paused in her inspection of his food cupboard. "Making tea, of course. If I wasn't here on official business, I would have left already. It is very rude not to offer guests a drink."

“You are not my guest,” he muttered. His perfectly wonderful morning had evaporated, and he could feel his blood pressure rising. He rubbed his forehead again.

“Are you getting a headache? I have just the thing.” She opened her bag, rummaging inside it while talking to herself.

“I know I have some in here because Madelaine Lily asked me to drop a bottle in to Mr Peabody. She thinks the pain might be keeping him from sleep, and we all know how important that is. He has suffered terribly since the death of his wife, poor thing. She was in an accident, you know. Walked into the road without looking and was instantly killed. Dreadful business. Things like that don’t happen here. It caused quite a stir, I can tell you.

“Anyway, I was on my way to give it to him when the greengrocer called me over to look at his plums. They are wonderful this year,” she said, glancing up at Wilfred. “You should try them, although looking at your face, I suggest the rhubarb instead. It helps with constipation, you see. Anyway, knowing how much I adore pomegranates, he let me have a couple, and I completely forgot... Ah, here it is!”

She held up a small brown bottle. “Chamomile,” she announced with a grin. The kettle whistled, so she took it off the stove and poured the hot water into a brown teapot.

“Of course, mint tea would also help,” she continued. “But I don’t have any on me today. Next time I come, I’ll be sure to bring you some. Well, aren’t you going to sit down?”

In a daze, Wilfred moved to the table and sat heavily on one of the wooden chairs.

“That’s better,” she said. She opened a cupboard and took out two large mugs. Her nose puckered. “Of course, tea always tastes better in fine china cups, but I don’t expect you would know that. You really should pick the right vessel for the drink; otherwise, the taste is all wrong. Still, beggars can’t be choosers.” She poured out the brew, her hand hovering over the sugar bowl. “Sugar?” she asked.

“What? No,” Wilfred said, shaking his head. How had this woman managed to make herself right at home? “I really insist that you leave—”

“Where are my manners?” she exclaimed. “Honestly, I am so forgetful at times.” She offered

her hand across the table. “I’m Maisie Lemmon. I’m sure you’ve heard of me.”

Wilfred stared at her.

“Village Hedge Witch?” she said. “Keeper of the borders? Maker of potions and poultices?” She wagged her fingers. “Go on, I promise I won’t bite. Not unless you ask me to,” she added with a giggle.

“I don’t shake hands,” Wilfred said shortly, staring at hers as if it were a snake about to strike.

“Oh well, never mind.” She sat back and picked up her mug. She took a sip of her tea and raised her eyebrows. “This is quality stuff,” she said. “I didn’t expect that. Paint me surprised.”

“Paint you...? Madam, you’re not making any sense.”

“Straight to the point. I like a man of action,” she said, putting her cup down. “Unfortunately, we can’t spend all day chatting about the excellent quality of your tea, because we have work to do.”

“Work?”

“Let me explain. I was riding the hedge with Aloysius when she came to me. I could see right away that this wasn’t a normal visitation.”

Wilfred raised his hand to stop her. “I don’t understand any of this,” he said. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, of course you don’t. That’s why they call it a mystery. But we will get to the bottom of it, never fear.”

“Who is Aloysius?”

“My familiar. His full name is Aloysius Strangeclaw Bunkington Growler, but I call him Aly for short. He’s a big soft bundle of ginger fur, although he can use his claws if he has to. However, that’s beside the point. We were flying the hedge... What now?” she asked as Wilfred raised his hand again.

“I thought you said you were riding the hedge.”

“Riding, flying, it’s all the same thing. It’s still crossing the barrier into the spirit realm. That’s

when she came to me.”

“Who?”

Maisie closed her eyes and expelled a deep breath. “I was told you were clever. How are we going to solve this if I have to keep repeating myself?”

“You didn’t tell me who it was in the first place,” he exclaimed.

“I certainly did! I said... oh yes. You may be right.” Her cheeks flushed red. “I’m not used to being interrupted all the time. It puts me off my flow. Now, where was I?” She frowned for a moment.

“You were about to tell me who ‘she’ is.”

“Right. Greta Bitterroot. She was so distraught I had a great deal of trouble understanding her, but I finally figured it out. You see, she was murdered.”

Wilfred stared, his face blank.

“Didn’t you hear me?”

“Yes, but what has that got to do with me?”

“It has everything to do with you!”

He narrowed his eyes. “I hope you’re not accusing me of committing a crime,” he said darkly.

Maisie waved her hand. “Of course not. What a silly idea! No, Greta was very clear on the matter. You have to come with me and talk to the police.”

“What on earth for? I’ve never even met the woman. I certainly don’t know you. Quite frankly, this is none of my business.” He stood up. “I think you should leave now.”

“Mister Pepper,” Maisie said gently, “this is not a request. It’s an order, and a solemn one too. To ignore it would be...”

“Would be what?”

“Catastrophic! Calamity and bad luck will follow you all the days of your life. If you were to speak to me about the perils of certain chemicals, I would listen to you as an expert in your field.

The spirit realm is my area of expertise, and I am giving you a dire warning. Don't endanger your work, your life even, in a moment of ignorance."

Wilfred opened his mouth to speak, but the sound of shattering glass interrupted. Somehow, a beaker had fallen onto the stone floor.

"Oh my," Maisie said, her eyes wide. "Greta, dear, please leave it to me. I'm sure he'll help us. There's no need to get angry."

He swallowed. His work straddled the border between scientific endeavours and the arcane. It meant that he couldn't dismiss anything without investigation. Besides, he had heard of wrathful spirits taking their vengeance on the living. It wasn't something he could risk. His work demanded perfect concentration and accuracy. To invite chaos into his ordered world was unacceptable.

He looked across at the diminutive woman sitting at his table. She didn't appear malevolent, but he would not risk upsetting her either. "What do I have to do?" he said dejectedly.

Maisie smiled. The hardest part had been achieved. The rest, as they say, would be a piece of cake.

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### Chapter Three

Detective Vincent Overwood scratched his chin and leant back in his chair. He picked up his pen and clicked it as he ruminated, pushing a hand through his thinning black hair, now liberally sprinkled with grey. Scratching his head, he reread the clue.

“Ha!” he said triumphantly as the answer popped into his mind. He wrote the word ‘incompetent’ in the boxes for three down and puffed out a breath. “Now, seven across,” he muttered. “*Swear tie is misplaced, so to speak.* Must be an anagram.” He copied the letters out onto a notepad and pursed his lips. “We ta... No. Sweat? Too many letters.”

The rural police station of Myrtleberry Dell was surprisingly well-staffed. As well as himself on the roster, he supervised Sergeant Flowers, who was full time, and two part-time constables. It was ample personnel when the highlight of the week was persuading Eliza Posy to let her husband back into the house, or reprimanding the local teenagers for setting off bangers outside the library.

He still hadn’t fully adapted to the slower tempo of life in the village, although he enjoyed having the time for a leisurely lunch at *The Grizzled Wizard*. He even treated himself to a pint occasionally. There was usually no need to use the single patrol car provided for their use, as the majority of their business took place within walking distance of the station. As a result, his blood pressure had lowered significantly, and he was sleeping peacefully most nights. His indigestion had improved markedly, and he felt fitter and healthier. All in all, the move from the frantic pace of the city had been beneficial.

But he was bored. Needing something to challenge his brain, he had taken up solving cryptic crossword puzzles to fill the time, with mixed results.

When he had accepted the position of detective a few weeks previously, Vincent had been looking forward to a change of pace and a place to lick his wounds and recover. He had certainly got his wish. Now, however, he thought back on his life in the Magical Misdemeanours Department with longing, remembering the rush of adrenaline and the fast pace of a busy force in the metropolis. He was beginning to wonder whether he might have made a mistake.

He glanced up at the clock. Still too early to wander down to the pub for lunch. He licked his lips. The landlord had promised a beef and ale pie for today's special.

Someone rapped on his door. "Come in!" he shouted, hastily pulling an old case file on top of the crossword puzzle and opening it to a random page.

A young man in uniform poked his head around the door. "Sorry to disturb you, sir, but there are some people in reception who insist on speaking to you."

"About what, Sergeant Flowers?"

The young officer cleared his throat. "They say they want to report a murder."

"A murder?" Vincent pushed his chair back. "Sounds serious." He rubbed his hands together and stood up. As much as he had yearned for the peace and quiet of country living, nothing got the blood flowing quite like a murder.

"Yes, but..."

"Out with it, lad."

The sergeant squirmed and swallowed. He lowered his voice. "The thing is, it's about the death of Greta Bitterroot two months ago. We've already investigated, and the conclusion was a tragic accident. The case was closed. There was no murder," he finished with a whisper.

The detective sat back in his chair, disappointment clear on his face. "I see. So why didn't you simply tell them that?"

Sergeant Flower looked appalled. "But it's Mistress Lemmon, sir."

Vincent frowned. "What difference does that make?"

The sergeant glanced over his shoulder. “She’s our Hedge Witch, sir. You don’t argue with her sort. She can make life very difficult for you, should she choose. None of us would dare cross her, sir.”

“Poppycock. Let me talk to her.” He shut the folder and pushed up from his chair. Having dealt with many members of the public with a magical bent, and more than a few dangerous criminals wielding black magic, he felt quite capable of dealing with a woman utilising low folk magic.

Detective Overwood marched through the door and into reception, where the other two officers stood with their heads bowed. In front of them was a plump woman with a strange purple hat that looked as if it was about to fall off her head. She seemed to be lecturing them, her finger wagging in front of their noses as she spoke. Behind her was a thin, wiry man wearing a three-piece suit and horn-rimmed spectacles, who looked completely out of his depth. He kept glancing towards the door behind him as if he were about to make a run for it.

Squaring his shoulders, the detective approached the small group.

“As for you, Charles Wheatley,” her clear voice said, despite being lowered in a nod at discretion, “I have some barberry at home. Come to me when you’ve finished here, and I’ll make you a cream for your groin. That itch won’t go away on its own.”

“Yes, Mistress Lemmon.”

Vincent stood behind her and cleared his throat, but was unable to get a word out before the woman rounded on him.

“Ah, so you are the detective in charge. About time, I must say.” She waved a hand dismissively, and the constables dispersed quickly, relief on their faces. Sergeant Flowers had already disappeared. “Now, we need to work out a plan of attack. How are you going to bring this murderer to justice?”

“You are Mistress Lemmon, I believe?”

“Oh, silly me. I keep forgetting that you are new to Myrtleberry Dell, too.” She thrust her hand out. “Maisie Lemmon, Hedge Witch and Purveyor of Potions. And this dear man is Wilfred,”

she added, gesturing to the startled person behind her. “He is a very important alchemist. He lives at the Big House, you know.”

“It’s Mister Pepper,” the man corrected, “and I don’t shake hands.”

“Well, of course you don’t. He’s shy,” she confided in a loud whisper, “but I aim to cure him of that in no time. So, shall we convene in your office?”

Without waiting for an answer, Maisie walked towards the door of his sanctum.

“Er, just a moment,” Vincent said, struggling to keep up with her. “I really don’t think we have anything to talk about.”

Maisie turned quickly, and the detective almost collided with her.

“I beg your pardon?”

He found himself staring into a pair of dark brown eyes, and his finger moved to his collar, which suddenly felt far too tight. “There is no murder,” he said. “Mistress Bitterroot’s death was an accident.”

“This is precisely why we have come,” she replied. “You have made a mistake, and I am here to see justice done.” She pushed open the door and entered his office. “Ooh, what a lovely chair,” Maisie said as she sat down and spun it around. She looked down at his desk. “Is this the case file?”

The detective snatched it away before she could open it. “No, it is not. Now I must insist...”

“Do come in and shut the door, Wilfred, dear. Draughts can play havoc with your rheumatism.”

“I haven’t got—“

“What does the H stand for?” Maisie said.

Both men fell silent and looked at each other in puzzlement.

Maisie rolled her eyes. “The H in your name, Wilfred. Is it Herbert?”

Wilfred clamped his jaw shut.

“Don’t you worry. I have a knack for these things. I’ll winkle it out, eventually. Now, to business.” She turned her attention back to Vincent. “You must reopen Mistress Bitterroot’s case and find the dastardly devil who did the deed.” She smiled widely. “I have a way with words,” she said with a wink.

Vincent decided he needed to try a different tack. “Perhaps you’d better tell me why you believe she was murdered,” he said.

“She told me herself.”

Vincent’s mouth dropped open slightly. “The dead woman told you. That is rather unusual, wouldn’t you say?”

“Exactly!” Maisie said triumphantly.

The detective took out a handkerchief and wiped his mouth. “I’m not sure I follow.”

Maisie placed both arms on the desk and leant forward. She tilted her head to one side, and Vincent found his gaze riveted on her hat as the feathers listed even further. “Part of my duty as the village hedge witch is monitoring the borders. That’s where Greta came to me. She will never rest while her murderer goes unpunished. You don’t want that on your conscience, do you? Of course not.”

“Well, who murdered her?”

Maisie sighed. “That’s what we need to find out.”

“Can’t you just ask?”

“That’s not how these things work.”

“Of course not,” Vincent said with a shake of his head. “That would be far too helpful.”

“Dealing with spirits, especially those who have been wronged, is a delicate business.”

Maisie said, sitting back in the chair and spearing him with a disdainful gaze, which was diminished as a feather flipped over and tickled her nose. She brushed it back and sniffed. “You cannot question them. You can only take what they are willing to give.”

“Fine,” Detective Overwood said. He rubbed his chin. “Do you have any other evidence? A weapon, or a person acting suspiciously?”

“Of course not. That’s your job, isn’t it? Collecting evidence. You know, investigating.”

“What about you?” Detective Overwood said to Wilfred. “Do you have any further information to add?”

Maisie looked at him expectantly. Wilfred felt like a deer in headlights. He cleared his throat. “I... That is... No, I don’t.”

Maisie’s face fell.

“I didn’t even know about this woman until Mistress Lemmon told me earlier today,” he added by way of an explanation.

“In that case, there’s nothing we can do. I’m afraid you’re wasting your time.”

“Of course,” Wilfred said hurriedly. “We’ll leave you in peace.”

Maisie took a deep breath and stood up slowly. “I am very disappointed in you, Detective Overwood. I had hoped you would be more forthcoming. When two of the most respected people in the community urge you to look a little deeper, you should really take their advice. Murder is a serious offence, one that can have terrible repercussions, especially in a small community like ours.”

She picked up her bag and moved around the desk. “Let’s go, Wilfred. If the detective won’t help us, we’ll simply have to investigate on our own.”

“Now, see here,” Vincent said. “I can’t have you running around the village asking questions and making spurious accusations.”

Maisie pulled back her shoulders and fixed the detective with an icy glare. “You have a lot to learn about what I can and cannot do in this village,” she said. “As it were.”

Detective Overwood frowned. “As it were?”

“The answer to your anagram,” Maisie said. “Good day.”

Wilfred hurried out, with Maisie following more sedately. The door rattled in its frame as she pulled it shut. Vincent walked around his desk and sat heavily in his chair. “I’m not quite sure what just happened,” he murmured to himself. He looked down at his crossword puzzle.

“Blast the woman,” he said and reached for his pen. It wasn’t where he’d left it. He glanced down at the floor, but couldn’t see it. He wasn’t about to get on his hands and knees and crawl

under his desk, so he pulled open a drawer and picked out another one. Clicking the top, he inked in the letters. He looked at the next clue with a frown and pursed his lips. The clock on the wall ticked out the seconds.

Shaking his head, he threw down the pen and sat back, turning his chair to face the window. He sighed as his fingers tapped a rhythm out on the arm of his chair. The minutes passed as he stared at the clouds crawling lazily by. "Magic," he muttered. "I thought I'd left all that behind me."

Suddenly, he rose and crossed to the door. He opened it wide and leaned out. "Sergeant Flowers!" he bellowed. "Bring me the case file on the Bitterroot woman." If there *had* been a miscarriage of justice, he wasn't about to let it slide past. Not on his watch.

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