

CHAPTER ONE

“What are your feelings on mummies?”

I look across the drawing room table at Annis. We’re in the middle of a brutal game of cards. Sure, I suspect “cards” and “brutal” should never be used in the same sentence, but this is Annis, who could turn Go Fish into a blood sport.

This particular game is *écarté*, which is similar to whist, except it’s for two people. While playing a card game with my boss’s sister might seem like a reprieve from my housemaid chores, it’s actually the opposite, because those chores aren’t going anywhere. This just means I’ll be stuck folding the damn laundry after I should be done with work and chilling.

But what Annis wants, Annis gets, and if she demands I play cards with her, I don’t have much choice. Okay, yes, I could refuse. After all, I’m not really a housemaid in 1869 Edinburgh. I’m a twenty-first-century police detective who is—for reasons the universe refuses to divulge—trapped in the body of Dr. Duncan Gray’s twenty-year-old housemaid.

Gray knows my story. His other sister, Isla, knows it. But they’re not here, having abandoned me for some secret mission that I’m not pissy about *at all*. I’m stuck with Annis, who doesn’t know my secret, and if I tell her that entertaining unannounced guests isn’t my job? Well, that isn’t something a Victorian housemaid tells a dowager countess.

So I’m playing *écarté*, and she’s slaughtering me, despite the fact

that I've actually been getting good at this game. No one plays like Annis. At least the bloodshed is only figurative. This time.

"Mummies?" She waves a hand in front of my face. "Are you listening to me, Mallory?"

"What are my . . . feelings? On . . . mummies?"

"Have you been nipping whisky while my sister is out? That might explain this." She waves at the cards. "The only other explanation is that you feel obligated to let me win. I expected better of you."

I ignore the jabs. With Annis, you choose your battles, or you won't stop fighting until you drop of exhaustion and she declares herself victor.

"I fear, Lady Annis, that I am a poor substitute for Dr. Gray and Mrs. Ballantyne. I do not travel in the proper social circles, and while I am certain there is some custom where one stops in the midst of a card game to ask one's partner's feelings on mummies, I do not know the appropriate response. Please forgive me. I am such a dunce."

Her eyes narrow. "No, you are rude, disrespectful, and sarcastic. Fortunately for you, I find those all admirable qualities in a young woman, so long as she is not *my* maid. Now, mummies. Your feelings on mummies."

"You are talking about Egyptian mummies, yes? This isn't some secret code among the nobility, where 'mummies' really means 'morphine'? I have strong feelings on morphine. It is bad. Don't take it. There, now, I want to discard these." I slap down two cards.

"There is nothing wrong with a little morphine under the right circumstances. The problem is laudanum, which dulls the wits. That I cannot abide. But yes, I mean Egyptian mummies. Have you ever wanted to unwrap one?"

I blink. Did I hear that right? I peer at Annis, focused on her eyes, which seem as cobra-bright as ever. No signs of whisky *or* morphine.

"Have I ever wanted to . . . unwrap a mummy?" I say.

"And see what's underneath all those bandages."

I relax. Right. I remember where I am. Victorian Scotland during the rise of the British Empire, when Egyptian mummies were all the rage. What seems like a non sequitur to me is just Annis making actual conversation. She must have read an article on an excavation and thought it might interest me.

I'm actually flattered that she'd make the effort. That's not usually Annis's style. We do get on, though, despite my grumbling about her roping me into the role of companion. Lady Annis Leslie is not a nice woman. But she is interesting, and as long as she continues to repair her relationship with Gray and Isla, I can admit that I don't mind her company.

"A withered corpse," I say, as I examine my cards. "That's what lies beneath the wrappings. A desiccated human corpse without a stomach, liver, lungs, or intestines. Oh, and the brains. They take out the brains through the nose."

Silence. With most people, I'd presume I'd offended their sensibilities. But the woman across from me is a Gray, born to a father who made his fortune as an undertaker and a mother who shared her love of science with all her children. In this house, no one is going to faint at the mention of pulling brains out nostrils. Instead, it'd be an invitation to a heated discussion of the procedure.

So when Annis goes quiet, I look up, confused.

"Where did you read that?" she asks.

From the way she's staring at me, I want to tartly remind her that I can read, very well thank you. But then she might insist on knowing exactly where I read it, and I wouldn't know what to say, so I tell her the truth. "I'm sure I've read it somewhere, but I've seen mummies, too. In museums."

"Which one?"

I go still as I realize my mistake. This is the source of her confusion—we aren't in a world where kids go to museums on school trips, especially not girls like Catriona Mitchell, whose body I inhabit.

I flutter my hand. "I do not recall. Somewhere on my travels."

"What travels?" She peers at me. "You are a nearly illiterate housemaid who has likely never left Edinburgh."

"I am not nearly illiterate. I realize that I had presented myself as such, before the injury to my head, but I now suspect that I always knew how to read. I chose not to for some unknown reason. My reading skills are, in fact, excellent."

"Head injury" is the excuse given for those who don't know my secret. I crossed over when Catriona and I were both strangled, and she *did* receive a head injury, one that left her unconscious for days. Gray explains my personality changes—and peccadilloes—as brain trauma. It

also lets me use my own name—I feel like a different person, and so I have asked to be called Mallory instead of Catriona.

I sip my tea. “Now, let us return to this rousing game of—”

“You have never left Edinburgh, Mallory.”

“Of course I have. I was in Leith just last week.”

Her eyes narrow. “You did not see a mummy in Leith.”

“Are you certain? One sees all sorts of oddities in Leith. Why, on this last trip—”

“There are no museums in Leith.”

“Perhaps it is a secret museum. I am sorry, Lady Annis, if you have never been invited to tour it, but they have a strict policy against admitting those accused of poisoning their husbands, even if they were found innocent.” At this point, I’m willing to do anything to distract her, even bringing up her recent past.

“I am certain you find that very amusing.”

“As do you, who finds a way to bring it into most conversations. I do not know where I saw a mummy, Lady Annis. That is part of the damage to my brain. I only recall seeing one. Perhaps I heard someone speaking of it, and I misremember the story as having experienced it myself. The mind is a mysterious thing.”

“As you keep reminding me, whenever I point out that you do not, in any way, behave like a twenty-year-old housemaid.”

“Housemaids behave in all sorts of ways. As Catriona, I was a thief with a clear tendency toward sociopathy. As Mallory, I am, as you put it, rude, disrespectful, and sarcastic. If you prefer sociopathy . . .”

“I do not know, having never heard the word.”

“My apologies. Again”—I tap my head—“this causes all sorts of problems, including my propensity for inventing new language. I am only lucky to have found such a tolerant family, willing to overlook my foibles.”

“No housemaid should know the word ‘foible.’ ”

“Have I used it incorrectly?”

She shakes her head. “You have far too much fun teasing me with whatever secrets you hold.”

“I hold none. Not even in this hand of cards, which is wretched. Now, if I may be so bold, Lady Annis, may I ask why you mentioned mummies?”

“Perhaps because I was about to offer an opportunity a girl like you

is unlikely to encounter in her lifetime. However, as you insist on needling me most disrespectfully, I am inclined to rescind the offer."

"You cannot rescind what you did not offer." I peer at her. "It's something about mummies?"

"An unwrapping party."

"A . . . mummy-unwrapping party?"

She flaps a hand. "They call it a scientific demonstration, but it is a party. An evening get-together at the home of Sir Alastair Christie, newly returned from Egypt with two mummies, one of which he intends to unwrap, in what may well be the event of the season—or the week, at least. The unwrapping will be done by Sir Alastair, who is also a surgeon with the Royal Infirmary. Sir Alastair is quite the bore and will insist on lecturing, too, but it is a small price to pay to see a mummy unwrapped."

I school my expression. I've learned to do that a lot here, just as I've learned not to actually speak to outsiders the way I've been talking to Annis.

I'm sure at some point, if Annis remains in our lives, she'll need to know the truth. But no one—particularly me—is rushing to tell her just yet. It does, however, give me the excuse to rumple the composure of Gray and Isla's unflappable elder sister.

As for a mummy unwrapping, yes, I will fully admit that ten-year-old Mallory would have salivated at the thought. Thirty-year-old Mallory is horrified. It's like hosting a party to dig up a grave and ogle the corpse within. Except even Victorian Scots would know *that* was wrong. *This* is acceptable because the person inside those wrappings is Egyptian. I don't expect Annis to understand that, even if Gray—her half brother—is a man of color himself.

Does the idea of unwrapping a mummy offend me? Yep. Would it offend everyone in my own time? Nope. Would everyone in *this* time be okay with it? Nope. I suspect that's one reason this unwrapping is being swathed in the respectable cloak of science.

"You're inviting me to this . . . party?" I say carefully.

"I am inviting Duncan and Isla, who may bring you and that detective friend."

"Hugh, Lady Annis," I say. "His name is Hugh McCreadie, and you have known him more than half your life, as he is your brother's best friend."

"Yes, yes. Hugh. He may come."

"I thought this was an exclusive party. You can just add a plus-four to your invitation?"

"I do as I wish," she says. "I am Lady Annis Leslie." She sips her tea and sets the cup down with a decisive click. "The only reason I have been invited is to add an air of delicious scandal to the proceedings. The notorious widowed countess."

"Ah."

"So I decided that if they want scandal . . ." She trails off with an elegant shrug.

"You'll give them scandal," I say. "By extending the invitation to your chemist sister, illegitimate brother, and their detective friend . . . along with the housemaid your brother insists on calling his assistant."

Her lips curve in a smile. "Precisely."

I sigh. "This sounds like a very bad idea."

"All the best ideas are."

I'm opening my mouth when the back door clicks open. I won't say I've been listening for it. I won't say I have to restrain myself from leaping up like an abandoned puppy hearing her family return. If any of that is true, I blame Annis and this endless game of *écarté*.

"Go to him," Annis says with a sigh. Then her brows rise. "Oh, do not give me that look, child. The only person you fool is my brother, who is too endlessly distracted to notice."

I don't bother arguing. Let Annis have her fun. I perked up because both Isla and Gray are home, and I might discover what they were up to, which could be something exciting, like the start of a new case.

I walk with all due dignity from the drawing room and down the stairs to the ground level, where I can hear Isla's voice. When my footsteps click closer, she calls, "Mallory?"

"Coming."

I see Isla first. She's a handsome thirty-four-year-old woman, about a half foot taller than me, with pale skin, freckles, and copper curls. Gray is behind her. Three years younger than his sister, roughly six feet, broad-shouldered, with a square jaw, brown skin and eyes, and wavy dark hair already breaking free of its pomade.

They are in the rear foyer, removing winter outerwear.

Isla smiles. "Mallory. We have brought you a present."

She gestures, and only then do I notice the young woman nearly

shrunk into the shadows. She is about eighteen, tiny and fine-boned, wearing a brown dress that makes her resemble a wren. A wren ready to take flight at the first opportunity.

"Lorna?" Isla says. "This is Mallory. It is her job you will be taking over as our housemaid."

"Another one?" says a voice. I glance up to see Annis descending the stairs.

"I thought I was choosing a maid for you," Annis says.

"No, dear Annis." Isla folds her gloves with care. "You offered to do so, and we told you no. Absolutely, unreservedly no. We have very specific requirements—"

"Which I understand perfectly, having grown up in this house. What is this? The fourth girl you've hired to take Mallory's place?"

"Third."

"Was there not another one, in September, who lasted barely a half day before—"

"Fine. Fourth."

"In as many months." She peers at the girl and says, "No, she will not do."

"Annis . . ." Gray says.

"You wish to consider her? I strongly advise against it, but if you insist, I will conduct the interview."

"Annis," Isla says with exasperation. "We have already hired—"

"Then you can unhire her, with appropriate compensation." She turns to poor Lorna. "First question. You are gathering my brother's shirts, and you realize the red stains are blood. What do you do?"

"Annis . . ." Isla says, but Gray's look says to let her go.

"I soak it in cold water, ma'am," Lorna says in a barely audible voice. "Then I take it to the laundress. I understand Dr. Gray is a surgeon, and even if he does not practice as one, he does assist the police with examining the dead."

"As we have explained," Gray says.

Annis ignores him. "Next question. You are cleaning the funerary parlor downstairs, and you find that my brother has left a jar with a preserved human head on the desk."

"I do not have jars with heads, Annis," Gray says. "That would be the height of disrespect. I have body parts, yes, but only if they are valuable specimens in the study of forensic science."

She turns to Lorna. "There is a floating human head with the eyes open and staring at you. What do you do?"

"I . . ." Lorna shivers before straightening. "I would like to say that I continue to clean the room, but I must admit that I would not. I would close the door and respectfully request that the groom remove it so that I might continue."

"You do not need to involve Simon," Isla says. "Anyone in the household would remove it for you, although personally, I would rather not."

"On the subject of the groom," Annis says. "What are your thoughts on them?"

"On . . . grooms?"

"One of your predecessors was let go for setting her cap on Simon and refusing to take no for an answer. See that you do not do the same. It is pointless. You are a girl. He is not interested."

"Annis!" Isla says, but Lorna seems not to take her meaning and only nods.

"I would never do such a thing," Lorna says, her voice coming a little stronger now, as if she is gaining confidence in this world's-strangest-maid-interview. "It is not wrong to express a romantic interest, but it is wrong to pursue it once it is declined."

"Good answer," I say.

Annis snorts and continues, "Question four. You are walking through the courtyard and see that someone has left open the door to the poison garden. What do you do?"

"P-poison . . . ?"

"A garden filled with deadly plants."

"They aren't *all* deadly," I say, only to realize that might not help.

When poor Lorna falters, Annis goes for the kill. "It used to be my garden. Did you know my husband died this past spring of poison? Unconnected, of course. I have not used the garden in decades. Now it belongs to Isla. I would not overly concern yourself about the poison there, though. It is my sister's laboratory you need to worry about. She —"

"Annis," Isla snaps. She turns to the girl. "Yes, there is a garden of poisonous plants, for study only, and it is never unlocked. Nor will you ever be required to clean my laboratory. In fact, it is also kept locked, and the staff are not permitted entry."

Judging by Lorna's face, this is not as reassuring as Isla intends.

"I . . ." Lorna squares her thin shoulders. "I know you are a chemist, ma'am, and I understand there may be poisonous substances in the house."

Annis eyes her. Then she says, "Last question. What are you?"

"What . . . am I?"

"Thief, pickpocket, con artist, prostit—"

"Annis!" Isla says. "That is enough. She is a maid, nothing more."

Annis looks at Lorna. "I know my sister's hiring practices. There is no shame in saying you have picked pockets or lifted your skirts, so long as you do not intend to continue while you are here. Well, no, if you lift your skirts without charging for it, that is no one's business but your own. Unless you intend to lift them for my brother. He will not properly appreciate it. Nor would I. You are far too young for either of us."

"All right, Annis," Gray says as Isla sputters, unable to form words. "You have had your fun terrorizing the poor child, and the fact she is still standing here is proof enough that she has the constitution we require." He turns to Lorna. "My sister is correct that we typically hire staff who have fallen afoul of the law, sometimes with cause and sometimes without. Their stories are their own business, and I trust you will respect that, Lorna."

"Yes, sir."

He turns to Annis. "Lorna has no such story. In light of our recent troubles with hiring a maid, we decided to make a more traditional choice."

"You hired an ordinary girl?"

"Yes."

"Then no. She will not do." Annis looks at Lorna. "I shall find you employment in my own house and compensate you for the inconvenience. There. The matter is settled."

"You are not stealing our maid, Annis," Isla says.

"I am not stealing her. I am replacing her with someone suitable to your needs, whom I shall choose. This one will not do. She does not suit." Annis waves at Lorna. "Do not bother to unpack your bag, child. You are not staying."

"I will show you to your room, Lorna," Isla says. "Because you are staying, and the first lesson you shall need to learn is this: my sister

does not live here, and therefore you need do nothing"—she glares at Annis—"nothing she asks of you."

"Oh, I do not ask, dear Isla. I tell."

"Not in this house you don't. I have no idea why you have graced us with your presence, Annis—"

"To invite you to a mummy unwrapping."

Isla stops. She stares. I wait for her to ask what the devil her sister is talking about. Instead, she says, "Sir Alastair's party?"

A look of satisfaction settles over Annis's face. "If there is another, I have not heard of it. That is the only one that matters. The scientific event of the season. I came to invite you, Duncan, your policeman friend, and Mallory. I presume you will wish to go?"

"I—Yes," Isla says. "I very much wish—I mean, I will consider it, of course, if it fits into my calendar."

"I am quite certain you can make room in your calendar. As for this girl—"

"The girl stays," Isla says. "Lorna, come and I will show you to your quarters. Then I will give you a tour of the house."

"I can do that," I say.

"Duncan has need of you," Isla says.

"I am certain he does," Annis murmurs, too low for anyone else to hear. I refrain from attempting to murder her with a glare.

"Quite so," Gray says. "I have brought you something, Mallory." His lips twitch in a faint smile. "A gift that is not fit for present company. Come down to the funerary parlor, and I shall show it to you in private."

Annis starts to say something, but at a look from me, she settles for a very unladylike snicker. I politely take my leave of Isla and Lorna and follow Gray down the hall to the funerary parlor.

CHAPTER TWO

A funeral parlor in the nineteenth century bears little resemblance to what we'd find in the modern era. While Gray is called an undertaker, his job better fits the modern title of funeral director.

This isn't a place to hold a funeral or a visitation. The only bodies that ever find their way to the Gray funerary parlor are those undergoing autopsy in Gray's laboratory. He has degrees in both surgery and medicine but has never practiced. Part of that is because his father died, and despite being the youngest child—and, technically, illegitimate—he inherited the business. Also, he's not allowed to practice due to a small matter of grave robbing. In his defense, he was only trying to prove that a man died of murder when no one would listen to him. But still, the offense was enough to mean he can't practice either medicine or surgery.

So he's an undertaker, and in *that* capacity, he doesn't interact with actual corpses. His job is directing the funeral arrangements. The "funerary parlor"—situated on the ground floor of his family's town house—is for making those arrangements. There's a very comfortable reception room for meeting the grieving families and discussing details. Then there's Gray's office and then, finally, the room no mourner will ever enter: the laboratory.

Gray is not a coroner. He can't be, because, again, he's not allowed to practice medicine. In Victorian Edinburgh, one elected official plays the

role of coroner for all suspicious deaths and homicide. That's the police surgeon, a role currently held by an incompetent ass named Dr. Addington.

Being a privileged brat who got the job through family connections, Addington does not actually *want* to deal with the dead. Ew, gross. Also, he doesn't want to conduct autopsies in the police dead rooms. Again, gross. Gray magnanimously allows Addington to work in his own laboratory, and Addington magnanimously allows Gray to examine the bodies once he's done.

Gray's true passion is forensics. He's a pioneer in the field. This arrangement with Addington works out well for everyone, particularly the people of Edinburgh, who get a qualified medical professional following up on—and correcting—their police surgeon's work.

"Did you say you got me a present?" I say as we step into the funerary parlor.

He closes the hall door behind us. "I did."

"Hiring a new maid is a present."

"Only if she works out," he murmurs.

"You don't think she will."

"I remain optimistic. But I have brought a proper present."

"A pony? Tell me it's a pony." I head into his office and flop onto the chair as best I can flop in a corset and endless layers of long skirts. "As a kid, I asked for a pony every year, and every year, I suffered vast disappointment."

He frowns. "Your parents did not buy you a pony? They were quite well off, were they not?"

"We lived in the city. With a yard smaller than yours. And no stable."

"That is no excuse. If a girl wishes for a pony, and her parents can afford one, she should have one. It is only right."

I shake my head. I can't tell whether he's joking.

When I first arrived here, waking up in Catriona's body, I'd found Duncan Gray dour, stiff, and forbidding. It was a long time before I suspected he might be capable of smiling, and even then, I wasn't sure. Now I've seen him smile and heard him laugh, but I've also learned to interpret the barest of lip twitches and glints in his dark eyes. Right now, though, he was already relaxed and in a fine mood, which means it's impossible to tell whether he's kidding.

He might not be. Gray grew up in a world where girls—and boys—of the upper middle class do indeed get ponies. I can tell him stories of the twenty-first century, including the lack of horses, but he can't quite picture it. It's like me, having come here after seeing the Victorian era portrayed many times and still feeling as if I'd walked into an alternate version, where little was as I expected.

Gray lifts a wrapped package and places it on his office desk. "Not a pony, I fear."

"Part of a pony?"

His lips twitch. "That would be wrong. One should not give parts of anything as gifts. Or so I am told." A definite glint in his eyes now.

I look down at the package. It's wrapped in brown paper, as so many things are in a world without plastic or other wrappings. I envy Gray's ability to wrap packages. I know how odd that sounds, but when we've been on crime scenes, I'm at a loss, looking about for some way to transport evidence, and I'll still be looking after he's wrapped it in a waterproof parcel so pretty it makes bloodstained-knife evidence look like a Christmas present.

Of course, if the knife *doesn't* have blood on it, he and McCreadie are just as likely to stuff it in their pocket. Chain of custody for evidence isn't really a thing when courts don't yet admit fingerprint evidence.

"It's too pretty to open," I say as he watches with obvious impatience. "I think I'll just put it beside my bed." I pick up the parcel. "Yes, that seems like a fine idea. I will display this beautifully wrapped package by my bed, never to unwrap it."

"I realize you are teasing me, but I would die of shock if you managed to leave it there, without peeking, for more than a day. Also, I would not suggest storing it by your bed, given the . . . nature of the contents."

I look at him and arch a brow. "Interesting. So it is perishable? Can I eat it?"

That lip twitch, stronger now. "I believe there are laws against such a thing."

I eye the package. "Curiouser and curiouser."

He reaches to take it away. "If you do not want it—"

I snatch it from his hands. Then I take a knife from his desk and cut the twine. It's not *just* brown paper. It's waxed brown paper, suggesting the contents are indeed perishable.

I keep unwrapping it and—

I clap my hands to my mouth with a squeak of girlish delight. “Oh, Dr. Gray! You have brought me a body part!” I wag my finger at him. “Such a tease. You said parts aren’t proper gifts, and so I barely dared hope. But no, you have brought me . . .”

I reach and pick up the pickled appendage. “A third hand. This will make cleaning the chamber pots so much easier. I no longer have to use my own hands. I can use this one.” I let out a deep sigh of happiness.

“You no longer need to clean chamber pots at all,” he says. “We have a maid. Not that I expected you to clean them before that, as you well know.”

I don’t rise to the bait. That has been an ongoing issue since Isla and Gray realized my real identity. I’m an educated professional woman from the future. I should not be cleaning their chamber pots. That’s their opinion. Mine is that chamber pots needed cleaning, and it was hardly their fault the universe threw me into the body of their housemaid.

“I know you are making light,” he says, “but I realize it is hardly a normal gift. I only thought . . .” He clears his throat. “I thought it was an intriguing specimen, one we might examine together to determine why it is in such condition.”

I smile up at him. “I might have wanted a pony when I was five, but at my age, nothing is better than a puzzle.” I set the hand down. “It is interesting.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

He leans over the hand, close enough that I can smell the beeswax and almond oil of his hair pomade. Annis might tease me about her brother but if my heart gives a little patter when he’s that close, it’s mostly because I’m seeing a secret side of Duncan Gray, one I’ve earned, damn it. Not just the relaxed version, but the enthusiastic one, so eager to dive into this mystery that he forgets to keep a proper degree of physical space between us.

“I found it in a shop,” he says. “They were selling it, which is quite illegal, obviously, but they were claiming it was not an actual hand. With it being so shriveled, I understand why it would seem fake, so I will not accuse them of knowingly trafficking in human parts. On closer inspection, I do not think it is as old as it appears. It seems to have been . . .”

“Pickled?”

"Precisely. Pickled and then dried, so that it might be handled. Then there is something dripped on it, which appears to be—"

"Wax!" I say. "I know what it is. A Hand of Glory."

"A hand of . . . ?"

"Glory. Don't ask me why it's called that." I lift the hand. "If this is a proper one, it was harvested from a hanged man, preferably a murderer who committed the crime with this particular hand. It's chopped off, pickled and dried and then used to hold a candle between the fingers."

Gray's expression says he's insulted that I can't even attempt to devise a more credible story.

I continue, "The hand—with the candle—is then used by thieves."

"Thieves . . ."

"Now, if I'm remembering correctly, there are various explanations for what it's supposed to do. Some say the candle will flicker out if anyone in the house wakes, warning the thief. Others say it will keep everyone asleep. For a thief, though, either way it's . . ." I wave the appendage. "Handy."

His eyes narrow.

"I'm serious," I say. "Look it up. It's folk magic."

"Which you know because, in the twenty-first century, thieves run around using pickled hands to rob houses."

"Sarcasm does not become you, Dr. Gray. I know what this is because, when not dreaming of ponies, I was a ghoulish little brat who thrived on the macabre. In this case, I read about it in a novel, and I was annoyed with the author for making up something ridiculous. So I did my research, and found it's a real thing. And, being so bizarre, naturally I remembered it. You found yourself a Hand of Glory, which you have now given to a thief. Well done, sir."

He shakes his head. "I suppose with that mystery solved, I ought to dispose of it." He sounds so disappointed that I feel a pang of guilt for having accidentally robbed him of his puzzle.

"I think we should still dissect it," I say. "We don't know how it was prepared, which could prove interesting. Also, I think we should discover where it came from, in case someone is . . ." I waggle my brows. "Grave robbing."

He sighs with the slightest roll of his eyes. "You are far too interested in grave robbing, Mallory."

"Oh, I'm not the only one."

"It was a misunderstanding," he says with a mock glare. "But yes, we will put this aside for further examination. However, on the topic of human remains . . ."

"My favorite topic."

"Even if they are wrapped in bandages to be unrolled at a party?"

I make a face. I don't mean to—seeing Isla's excitement, I'd decided to keep my thoughts on mummy unwrapping to myself. I quickly hide the reaction, but Gray catches it and exhales.

"So I am not the only one who finds such a thing in poor taste?" he says.

"You are not." I wave at the hand. "This is different. You rescued it from a shop, and it's only a hand. You'll treat it as a scientific specimen and dispose of it appropriately when you're done. I know they're having a surgeon unwrap the mummified remains and calling it science . . ."

"It would be science if it were the first mummy unwrapped, or if we had reason to believe it was unusual in a way that would prove useful. Experts have already dissected mummies. We understand how the process was accomplished. Now the dead should be left in peace, as that was the intended purpose of mummifying them in the first place. A person who lived thousands of years ago died, expecting to rest for eternity as their religion dictated."

He pauses, looking abashed. "That was a lecture, wasn't it?"

"If so, it was to an appreciative audience. I understand that graves were robbed to advance medicine, and thankfully that's no longer necessary. I agree with exhuming a body if it means catching a killer. But people have the right to have their beliefs respected. So there's *my* lecture."

"Then we are agreed that an unwrapping party is not an event we wish to attend."

I shrug. "I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't be fascinated. Same as I'm fascinated by this." I wave at the hand. "Even as an adult, I still have a macabre turn of mind, as you well know."

A faint smile. "A turn of mind that we share, and I agree. Having never seen an unwrapping, I am curious. If a colleague had invited me to this, I would politely demur. But Isla . . ."

"Isla wants to go, and I don't want to shame her for that."

He meets my gaze. "Precisely. Hugh will also want to go. If you would rather not, I will understand."

"The unwrapping is happening whether I attend or not. I don't see the point in standing on principle, not when Isla might question why I'd refuse something that should interest me."

"So we are going to a mummy unwrapping?"

"It seems so."

CHAPTER THREE

Three days later, we are on our way to the mummy-unwrapping party, with me wearing a gorgeous new gown that makes me happier than I ever thought a dress could make me. Chamberpot scrubbing isn't the only bone of contention between myself and my employers. Wages are another issue. A housemaid makes relatively little on top of room and board. Gray and Isla pay more, of course, but that doesn't mean I can buy dresses for which I have no practical use, especially when they'd cost the equivalent of a designer gown in my own time.

I can't just pop into a discount shop and buy something off the rack either. Even if I chose to splurge, I then need to match it with proper boots and gloves and jewelry and winter cape and a crinoline cage instead of my multiple layers of petticoats. I have a decent secondhand brushed-wool "going out" dress that takes me almost everywhere. It will not take me to an exclusive party at the home of Sir Alastair Christie.

Here, Annis plays fairy godmother. Or she does when Isla insists on it. Isla may not have her sister's gift for manipulation, but she did grow up bearing witness to it.

"Annis wants you at that party," Isla said the day we were first invited.

"She wants the shock value of bringing a housemaid to that party," I said.

"Perhaps, but she likes you. You are interesting, and she loves interesting people."

"I'm a puzzle to be solved."

"Also fine company. The point is that she wants you at the party, and so she must ensure you have everything you need. I will insist she play your fairy godmother for this particular ball." Isla's lips twitched. "Please be sure you take full advantage of it. Remember that if Duncan seems well-off, he is a pauper compared to Annis."

I did take advantage. That's not my usual style, but there's a vast difference between accepting the ridiculous wage Gray tried to offer me as his assistant and letting his wealthy sister buy a dress suitable for a party she wants me to attend as scandal-bait.

The gown is silk, which I could never afford in this era—and probably not in my own. It's turquoise with black embroidery and beadwork, trimmed in black taffeta. The neckline is high, and the bodice is tight enough that I need help with my corset strings. Unlike my second-hand dress, this one is in the latest style, with a flat front and a small bustle. My gloves are black silk, as are my lace-trimmed boots.

The accessory I'm most pleased with, though, is my poison ring. It's the first chance I've had to wear it since Gray gave it to me for Catriona's twentieth birthday last month. It's a gorgeous black enamel and gold piece, antique even in this time. The best part, though, is the tiny compartment for, yes, poison. Okay, they're not actually used for poison. Women store pills in there, maybe a bit of scent. But anyone seeing it knows it *could* contain poison.

The ring is in honor of our last case, which had involved a poisoning ring. I'd been terribly disappointed to realize that only meant a suspected ring of poisoners. Gray gave me this to make up for it.

Annis fetches us in her coach. Can I say that's a bit inconvenient? It means McCreadie needs to come to the town house, rather than have us pick him up on the way. Then we have to wait for Annis, and she's late—as usual. Also, coaches really aren't made to fit five people, especially when three of them are women in full Victorian evening gowns.

Gray helps me in, and then slides in beside me, which has Annis wagging her brows. I swear the woman is as bad as that annoying friend in fifth grade, always whisper-singing "Jason and Maria, sitting in a tree . . ." Okay, in fifth grade that annoying friend had been me, but at least *I've* outgrown it.

Gray takes the spot next to me to allow Isla to sit beside McCreadie, because they are the ones who deserve the juvenile singing, and while Gray and I won't subject them to that, we are not above doing everything we can to nudge them together.

Isla is a widow almost out of her mourning period, and her dress now is a gorgeous rich lilac. Following the death of Prince Albert, there are very strict social rules for a widow of Isla's class, with a two-year public show of mourning for the loss of an asshole that Gray had paid to stay away from Isla. There are, of course, no such expectations placed on widowers. How could one expect them to find a new bride if their dress publicly reminds everyone they lost their last one?

Isla and McCreadie have known each other since childhood. In a proper romantic tale, they'd have grown up together, realized they loved one another, and married. It didn't work like that. Maybe they didn't realize how they felt until it was too late, with Isla married and McCreadie engaged. I don't pry. Oh, I totally would, if that were an option, but when two people refuse to admit they're crazy about each other, you can't exactly ask how long they've been that way and why they've never acted on it. You have to wait for them to figure it out, which is extremely frustrating.

McCreadie is a police detective. A "criminal officer," as it were, a relatively recent position in a relatively recent institution, formal policing only dating to the early part of this century. It isn't a case of Gray befriending a poor boy from the lower classes. McCreadie's family comes from the Grays' social stratum, and the boys met at private school.

McCreadie is now estranged from his family, and again, it's not the sort of thing I can ask about. I only know what I see, which is a very good-looking guy—despite luxurious period-appropriate whiskers—who is clever and good-natured and decent in every possible way, making him the perfect match for brilliant, strong-willed, and kind-hearted Isla. But enough about that. For now.

As always, McCreadie is dressed like he stepped out of a Victorian advertisement. Gray might be nattily attired—in a single-breasted mid-thigh silk jacket with a high starched collar and cravat—but next to McCreadie, he looks like he rolled out of bed and pulled on whatever was at hand. It's not that McCreadie is dressed any differently. Men's black-tie wear here is as limited as it is in my time. McCreadie's attire

just somehow always manages to be a little better, in the cut and fit and the fabric.

The least fashionably dressed person in our entourage is the one who can best afford it. Annis is in deep mourning, and even coming to such an event could be scandalous. She must wear head-to-toe black, and it can't even be a fashionable black gown. It must be as shapeless as possible, and so on her buxom figure, it looks like she's wearing sack-cloth, as if she's being punished for having outlived her husband.

The coach stays in the New Town, naturally. There is a definite "right side of the tracks" in Edinburgh, and it's the New Town. The coach takes us from Robert Street toward grander homes, and it stops at one that I'd mistake for two town houses if it weren't for its single entrance.

Or I think it's only a single entrance. It's hard to tell from our vantage point, at the end of a queue of coaches.

I try not to plaster myself against the window. I haven't been on this street. Gray's town house is stately and beautifully appointed inside, but the exterior could best be described as austere, rather like its current owner. These town houses are fancier Georgian architecture, complete with decorated embedded columns and wide, central front steps.

"Is there some problem ahead?" Annis grumbles. "At this rate, we shall miss the unwrapping altogether."

"We could get out and walk," Gray says. "It is but a few hundred feet."

"It is November, Duncan. *November*. There is . . ." She nods her chin at the sidewalk and says "snow" with the same expression one might give a pile of horse dung.

"It's only a sprinkle," I say. "It looks lovely."

I gaze out the window. With the darkness and the party, the house is so well lit that it twinkles. The coach is cold enough for me to see my breath, and with the fur muff warming my hands, I feel as if I'm heading off to a holiday party instead.

Gray leans over, his shoulder brushing mine as he whispers, "Would you like to walk? You may borrow my coat."

I glance toward Annis, expecting some comment, but she is too busy rapping on the roof for the driver to move.

The line inches forward, and I look through the window again. I *would* like to get out. It's both too cold and too warm in here. Too cold

on my face and too warm where I'm bundled in layers. We usually do walk wherever we can, but winter fancy-dress parties here are like ones in my time, where you expect to be dropped at the door to avoid needing to bundle up over your party best.

When the coach stops again, I lean to whisper, "Would it be unseemly to walk?"

"Does it matter?" Gray says, his eyes dancing.

I'm supposed to say it doesn't. That's what he expects and what he wants—the Mallory who flouts convention and lets him do the same. I know how much both Gray and Isla enjoy pushing against the constraints they've battled all their lives, and when it comes to that, I'm a terrible enabler.

Gray and Isla exist in a bubble where no one expects them to conform to all social conventions. Coming from a notably eccentric family gives them latitude, as does the fact that they are merely middle class. But bubbles are fragile things, and they must still live and work within this world.

It may seem as if I'm overthinking this. It's just walking a couple of hundred feet to a party. But if walking calls attention to us, and if it invites whispers and sneers and mockery, then that could damage an evening Isla is very much looking forward to.

The coach thankfully rolls forward again. When it stops, McCreadie is the one pushing open the door to look out. He's frowning, as if he heard something, and when I catch it, I kick myself.

I might not be a cop in this world, but for me, a career in law enforcement was more than something that paid the bills. I chose policing because underneath my sarcasm, I'm an idealist and a humanist. McCreadie is the same—a public servant who understands the meaning of the word, committed to being a torchbearer through the shadows. He's heard something concerning outside, and I was too engrossed in my own minor drama to notice.

Now I pick up the sound of angry voices, and when McCreadie steps out of the coach, I start to rise. Naturally, Gray is already moving past me. In his case, it's not so much bearing a torch through the shadows as wondering whether those shadows hide anything interesting.

"I guess we are walking," Annis says with a huff. "Leave your muff

in the coach, Mallory. One cannot trust servants, as I am certain you know from experience.”

I ignore her and hike my skirts, and I’m ready to hop out of the coach when I see McCreadie there, hand raised to help me down. Right. Formal event. No skirt hiking and coach hopping.

“Here, let me help you, Miss Mallory,” McCreadie says, loud enough that I know the words are a reproach to his friend, already making his way along the sidewalk, oblivious to everything but the siren’s call of adventure.

This particular siren’s call seems to be the rather shrill voice of a young woman. She’s following two guests up the steps into the town house, haranguing them about something I can’t quite catch.

Two footmen slide behind the guests like closing doors. The young woman glares at them and strides back to await new victims. The next coach pulls up, and she is right there, waiting for the guests to descend. When they do not—likely trying to figure out how to avoid her—she spots our party walking along the sidewalk.

I have caught up with Gray, and he has slowed enough to notice me and offer his arm, though the gesture seems more reflexive than genuine. I still take it. It’s awkward enough walking into a party where I know I don’t belong, and I will fully admit that I would rather do it on the arm of a dashing gentleman.

Speaking of gentlemen and dashing, McCreadie dashes in front of us, cutting Gray off from reaching the young woman first. The young woman turns, and I get a glimpse of her. She’s maybe in her midtwenties, with dark hair swept back in what looks like an intentionally severe style and spectacles poised on her nose. Her outfit is drab and her boots are scuffed and . . .

Will I sound terrible if I say she looks like a stereotypical bluestocking? There is a type. There has always been a type, and it originated before this time period, and continues to be used in memes right up to the modern day.

See this feminist? See how pinched and unattractive she is? Of course she’s a champion of women’s rights—she can’t win a man to take care of her.

Except this young woman is neither pinched nor unattractive. She seems to be intentionally dressing this way, and I’m not sure whether it’s a uniform of sorts, , or it’s just a way to deflect attention from her looks.

Sometimes, it's easier to be taken seriously if you pull on a cloak of sexual unattractiveness. Unfortunately for me, that's a whole lot harder to do these days, cast into the body of a shapely blond twenty-year-old with the face of an angelic milkmaid.

The young woman disappears from view once McCreadie cuts in front of us, but not before she sees our group heading her way, and her eyes flash like a hawk spotting mice.

"You there," she says, the clacking of boots telling me she's bearing down on us.

"Yes, hello," McCreadie calls back. "I heard a commotion and came to see if you were in need of aid." He takes off his hat, bowing his head. "Detective Hugh McCreadie of the—"

"You're going to this party, Detective?" she cuts in.

"That is my intention, along with—"

"Then I want Sir Alastair arrested. There are laws against disturbing the dead."

"Ah, I presume you refer to the—"

"You do not think it counts? Because the deceased is not a Scot?"

"Perhaps," Gray says, his voice low with warning, "you might let Detective McCreadie finish a sentence before deciding what he does and does not mean?"

"Oh, you wish me to be polite, is that it? Being polite gets us nowhere. The only language your sort understand—"

As she catches sight of Gray, she stops. Her mouth works. Then she finds her voice.

"*You* are here, Dr. Gray? I would have hoped for better, though I suppose that is foolish of me. You are not known for speaking out against injustice. Better to hide behind your family name and pretend you have nothing in common with the poor man whose corpse they are about to defile."

"Defiling requires cutting into it," Gray says, his voice mild now that the rudeness is directed at him. "I do so all the time with men—and women—of every sort. I am an equal-opportunity ghoul."

His smile is all teeth and no humor, and the young woman pauses again. She finds her mental footing quickly, though, and says, "This is not the same, and you know it. This is an outrage perpetrated against a man ripped from foreign soil and brought here for the amusement of bored toffs."

"I would agree," Gray says.

Pause. Pause. Her eyes flash as she tries to regroup. Then she thrusts her chin up. "You agree, and yet you do nothing."

"I *do* something. I attend to ensure the proceedings are as respectful as possible."

"Look," I say. "I understand this upsets you, but I'm not sure who you think you're going to convince."

I wave at a well-dressed couple sneaking into the party behind her, taking advantage of her distraction.

"Them?" I say. "Those other ones back there?" I motion to the queue of coaches. "They don't care. If you want to have an impact when you do this sort of thing, you need a public record of it. Alert the press. Raise a fuss where it can be heard."

"Yes," Isla murmurs. "I know you are upset, Miss King, but this display will not achieve what you intend."

The young woman looks sharply at Isla. "Do we know one another?"

"I follow news of the Edinburgh Seven most keenly," Isla says. "I supported your fight to be admitted to medical school, and I am thrilled that you won it. I have heard Miss Jex-Blake speak, and I am thrilled at what she—what you all—have accomplished."

"You supported our victory? Odd that I have not seen you before. Ah, you *quietly* supported us, yes? From the safety of your drawing room?"

Isla flinches. I know why she doesn't more actively support the Seven. Poking her head over that parapet puts a target on it. She's a woman in a male occupation, doing backflips to avoid being noticed.

"You are one of the Seven?" Annis says, moving forward. "Then convey my words of appreciation to the illustrious Miss Jex-Blake. I do not understand why anyone would wish to practice medicine, but I support her right to do so. I would advise, however, that she keep you"—a feral smile—"on a shorter leash. Now, come, children, we have a corpse-defiling to attend."