

A CHRISTMAS GUEST

ANNE PERRY



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A Christmas Guest

A Novel



Anne Perry



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PART ONE



“I do not accept it!” Mariah Ellison said indignantly. It was intolerable.

“I am afraid there is no alternative,” Emily replied. She was wearing a beautiful morning dress of pale water green with fashionably large sleeves and a sweeping skirt. With her fair coloring, it made her look prettier than she was, and having married money she had air above her station.

“Of course there is an alternative!” Grandmama snapped, staring up at her from her chair in the withdrawing room. “There is always an alternative. Why in heaven’s name should you wish to go to France? It is only a week and a half until Christmas!”

Emily sighed deeply. “We have been invited to spend Christmas in the Loire valley.”

“*Where* in France is immaterial. It is still not England. We shall have to cross the Channel. It will be rough and we shall all be ill.”

“I know it would be unpleasant for you,” Emily conceded. “And the train journey from Paris might be tedious, and perhaps cold at this time of year ...”

“What do you mean *perhaps*?” Grandmama snapped. “There is no possible doubt.”

“So perhaps it is as well that you were not invited.” Emily gave a very slight smile. “No, you will not have to worry how to decline with grace.”

Grandmama had a sharp suspicion that Emily was being sarcastic. She also had a unpleasant and surprisingly painful realization. “Do I take it that you are going to leave me alone in this house for Christmas while you go visiting wherever you said it was, in France?” She tried to keep her voice angry rather than betraying her sudden sense of being abandoned.

“Of course not, Grandmama,” Emily said cheerfully. “It would be quite miserable for you. But apart from that, you can’t stay here because there will be nobody to care for you.”

“Don’t be absurd!” Grandmama regained her temper with asperity. “There is a houseful of servants.” Emily’s Christmas parties were among the few things Grandmama had been looking forward to, although she would have choked rather than admit it. She would have attended as though it were a duty required of her, and then loved every moment. “You have sufficient housemaids for a duchess! I have never seen so many girls with mops and dusters in my life!”

“The servants are coming with us and you cannot stay here alone at Christmas. It would be wretched. I have made arrangements for you to go and stay with Mama and Joshua.”

“I have no desire to stay with your mother and Joshua,” Grandmama said instantly.

Caroline had been her daughter-in-law, until Edward’s death a few years ago had left her a widow of what Grandmama referred to as “an unfortunate age.” Instead of settling into a decent retirement from society, as the dear Queen had done, and as everyone had expected

her, Caroline had married again. That in itself was indiscreet enough, but instead of widower with means and position, which might have had considerable advantages and been looked upon with approval, she had married a man nearly two decades younger than herself. But worse than that, if anything could be, he was on the boards—an actor! A grown man who dressed up and strutted around on the stage, pretending to be someone else. And he was Jewish, for heaven's sake!

Caroline had lost what wits she had ever had, and poor Edward would be turning in his grave, if he knew. It was one of the many burdens of Grandmama's life that she had lived long enough to see it. "No desire at all," she repeated.

Emily stood quite still in the middle of the withdrawing room, the firelight casting a warm glow on her skin and the extravagant coils of her hair. "I'm sorry, Grandmama, but as I said there really is no choice," she repeated. "Jack and I are leaving tomorrow, and there is a great deal of packing to do, as we shall be gone for at least three weeks. You had best take a good supply of warmer gowns, and boots, and you may borrow my black shawl if you would care to?"

"Good gracious! Can they not afford a fire?" Grandmama said furiously. "Perhaps Joshua should consider a more respectable form of employment? If there is anything else on earth he is fitted for?"

"It has nothing to do with money," Emily retorted. "They are spending Christmas in a house on the south coast of Kent. The Romney Marshes, to be exact. I daresay the wind will be chill, and one often feels the cold more when away from home."

Grandmama was appalled! In fact she was so appalled it was several seconds before she could find any words at all to express her horror. "I think I misheard you," she said icily at last. "You mumble these days. Your diction used to be excellent, but since your marriage with Jack Radley you have allowed your standards to slip ... in several areas. I thought you said that your mother is going to spend Christmas in some bog by the sea. As that is obviously complete nonsense, you had better repeat yourself, and speak properly."

"They have taken a house in Romney Marsh," Emily said with deliberate clarity. "It is near the sea, and I believe the views will be very fine, if there is no fog, of course."

Grandmama looked for impertinence in Emily's face, and saw an innocence so wide-eyed as to be highly suspicious.

"It is unacceptable," she said in a tone that would have frozen water in a glass.

Emily stared at her for a moment, regathering her thoughts. "There is too much wind at this time of the year for there to be much fog," she said at last. "Perhaps you can watch the waves?"

"In a marsh?" Grandmama asked sarcastically.

"The house is actually in St. Mary in the Marsh," Emily replied. "It is very close to the sea. It will be pleasant. You don't have to go outside if it is cold and you don't wish to."

"Of course it will be cold! It is on the English Channel, in the middle of winter. I shall probably catch my death."

To give her credit, Emily did look a little uncomfortable. "No you won't," she said with forced cheer. "Mama and Joshua will look after you very well. You might even meet some interesting people."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Grandmama said furiously.



Nevertheless the old lady had no choice, and the next day she found herself sitting with her maid, Tilly, in Emily's carriage. It made slow progress out of the city traffic, then sped up as it reached the open road south of the river and proceeded toward Dover, roughly a hundred and forty-five miles southeast of London.

Of course she had known the journey would be dreadful. To make it in one day she had started out before dawn, and it would be late before they reached whatever godforsaken spot which Caroline had chosen to spend Christmas. Heaven alone knew what it would be like. In the best of circumstances it might be no more than a cottage without civilized facilities, and so cramped she would spend the entire time forced into their company. It was going to be the worst Christmas of her life!

Emily's thoughtlessness in gallivanting off to France, of all places, at this time of year, was beyond belief! It was an outrage against all family loyalty and duty.

The day was gray and still, and mercifully the rain was no more than a spattering now and then. They stopped for luncheon, and to change the horses, and again a little after four o'clock for afternoon tea. By that time, naturally, it was dark and she had not the faintest idea where she was. She was tired, her legs were cramped from the long sitting, and unavoidably she was rattled and jolted around with the constant movement. And of course it was cold—perishingly so.

They stopped again to inquire the way as lanes grew narrower and even more rutted and overhung. When at last they arrived at their destination she was in a temper fit to have lit a fire with the sheer heat of her words. She climbed out with the coachman's assistance, and stood on the gravel drive of what was obviously a fairly large house. All the lights seemed to be blazing and the front door was decorated with a magnificent wreath of holly.

Immediately she was aware of the smells of smoke and salt, and a sharp wind with an edge to it like a slap in the face. It was damp, so no doubt it was straight off the sea. Caroline had obviously lost not only her money but the last vestige of her senses as well.

The door opened and Caroline came down the steps now, smiling. She was still a remarkably handsome woman in her fifties, her dark mahogany hair only lightly sprinkled with the odd silver at the temples, which had a softening effect. She was dressed in deep warm red and it gave a glow to her skin.

"Welcome to St. Mary, Mama-in-law," she said a trifle guardedly.

The old lady could think of nothing whatever that met the situation, or her feelings. She was tired, confused, and utterly miserable in a strange place where she knew perfectly well she was unwanted.

It was several months since she had seen her erstwhile daughter-in-law. They had never been genuinely friends, although they had lived in the same house for over twenty years. During her son Edward's lifetime there had been a truce. Afterward Caroline had behaved disgracefully and would listen to no advice at all. It became necessary for Grandmama to find other accommodations because Caroline and Joshua moved around so much, as his ridiculous profession dictated. There was never a question of Grandmama living with Charlotte, the elder granddaughter. She had scandalized everyone by marrying a policeman, a man of no breeding, no money, and an occupation that defied polite description. Heaven only knew how

they survived!

So she had had no choice but to live with Emily, who at least had inherited very considerable means from her first husband.

“Come in and warm yourself.” Caroline offered her arm. Grandmama briskly declined it, leaning heavily on her stick instead. “Would you like a cup of tea, or hot cocoa?” Caroline continued.

Grandmama would, and said so, stepping inside to a spacious and well-lit hall. It was a trifle low-ceilinged perhaps, but floored with excellent parquet. The stairs swept up to a landing above and presumably several bedrooms. If the fires were kept stoked and the cooking were any good, it might be endurable after all.

The footman carried her cases in and Tilly followed behind him. Joshua came forward and welcomed her, taking her cape himself. She was escorted into the withdrawing room where there was a blazing fire in a hearth large enough to have accommodated half a tree.

“Perhaps you would enjoy a glass of sherry after such a long journey?” Joshua offered. He was a slender man of little above average height, but possessed of extraordinary grace, and the suppleness and beauty of an actor’s voice. He was not handsome in a traditional sense—his nose was rather too prominent, his features too mobile—but he had a presence one could not ignore. Every prejudice in her dictated that she dislike him, yet he had sensed her feelings far more accurately than Caroline had.

“Thank you,” she accepted. “I would.”

He poured a full glass from the crystal decanter and brought it to her. They sat and made conversation about the area, its features, and a little of its history. After half an hour she retired to bed, surprised to find it was still only quarter past ten, a perfectly reasonable hour. She had imagined it to be the middle of the night. It felt like it, and it was irritating to be wrong.



She awoke in the morning after having slept all night almost without moving. From the amount of light coming through the curtains it appeared to be quite late, possibly even after breakfast. She had barely bothered to look at her surroundings when she arrived. Now she saw that it was an agreeable room if a trifle old-fashioned, which normally she approved of. The modern style of having less furniture, making far too much open space—no tassels, frills, carvings, embroidered samplers, and photographs on the walls and on every available surface—she found too sparse. It made a place look as if no one lived there, or if they did, then they had no family or background they dared to display.

But here she was determined not to like anything. She had been put upon, dismissed from such home as she had, and packed off to the seaside like a maid who had got herself with a child, and needed to be removed until it all could be dealt with. It was a cruel and irresponsible way to treat one’s grandmother. But then all respect had disappeared in modern times. The young had no manners left at all.

She rose and dressed, with Tilly’s assistance, then went downstairs, more than ready for something to eat.

Then she found to her fury that Caroline and Joshua had risen early and gone for a walk toward the beach. She was obliged to have toast and marmalade and a lightly boiled egg.

sitting by herself in the dining room at one end of a finely polished mahogany table surrounded by fourteen chairs. It was agreeably warm in the house, and yet she felt cold, not of the body so much as of the mind. She did not belong here. She was acquainted with no one. Even the servants were strangers about whom she knew nothing at all, nor they of her. There was nothing to do and no one to talk to.

When she had finished she stood up and went to the long windows. It looked bitterly cold outside: a wind-ragged sky, clouds torn apart and streaming across a bleached blue as if the color had died in it. The trees were leafless; black branches wet and shivering, bending at the tops. There was nothing in the garden that looked even remotely like a flower. An old man walked along the lane beyond the gate, his hat jammed on his head, scarf ends whipped around his shoulders and flapping behind him. He did not even glance in her direction.

She went into the withdrawing room where the fire was roaring comfortably, and sat down to wait for Caroline and Joshua to return. She was going to be bored to weeping, and there was no help for it. It was a bitter thing to be so abandoned in her old age.

Might there be any sort of social life at all in this godforsaken spot? She rang the bell and in a few moments the maid appeared, a country girl by the look of her.

“Yes, Mrs. Ellison?” she said expectantly.

“What is your name?” Grandmama demanded.

“Abigail, ma’am.”

“Perhaps you can tell me, Abigail, what people do here, other than attend church? I presume there is a church?”

“Yes, ma’am. St. Mary the Virgin.”

“What else? Are there societies, parties? Do people hold musical evenings, or lectures? Or anything at all?”

The girl looked dumbfounded. “I don’t know, ma’am. I’ll ask Cook.” And before Grandmama could excuse her, she turned and fled.

“Fool!” Grandmama said under her breath. Where on earth was Caroline? How long would she walk in a howling gale? She was besotted with Joshua and behaving like a girl. It was ridiculous.

It turned out to be another hour and a half before they came in cheerful, windblown, and full of news about all kinds of local events that sounded provincial and desperately boring. Some old gentleman was going to speak about butterflies at the local church hall. A maiden lady intended to discuss her travels in an unknown area of Scotland, or worse than that, one that had been known and forgotten—doubtless for very good reasons.

“Does anyone play cards?” Grandmama inquired. “Other than Snap, or Old Maid?”

“I have no idea,” Caroline replied, moving closer to the fire. “I don’t play, so I have never asked.”

“It requires intelligence and concentration,” Grandmama told her waspishly.

“And a great deal of time on your hands,” Caroline added. “And nothing better to fill it with.”

“It is better than gossiping about your neighbors,” Grandmama rejoined. “Or licking your lips over other people’s misfortunes!”

Caroline gave her a chilly look, and controlled her temper with an effort the old lady could easily read in her face. “We shall be having luncheon at one,” she observed. “If you care to”

take a walk, it's wintry, but quite pleasant. And it might rain tomorrow."

"Of course it might rain tomorrow," Grandmama said tartly. "In a climate like ours that hardly a perspicacious remark. It might rain tomorrow, any day of the year!"

Caroline did not try to mask the irritation she felt, or the effort it cost her not to retaliate. The fact that she had to try so hard gave the old lady a small, perverse satisfaction. Good! At least she still had some semblance of moral duty left! After all, she had been Edward Ellison's wife most of her adult life! She owed Mariah Ellison something!

"Maybe I shall go for a walk this afternoon," she said. "That maid mentioned something about a church, I believe."

"St. Mary the Virgin," Caroline told her. "Yes, it's attractive. Norman to begin with. The soil is very soft here so the tower has huge buttresses supporting it."

"We are on a marsh," Grandmama sniffed. "Probably everything is sinking. It is a miracle we are not up to our knees in mud, or worse!"



And so it passed for most of the next two long-drawn-out days. Walking in the garden was miserable; almost everything had died back into the earth, the trees were leafless and black and seemed to drip incessantly. It was too late even for the last roses, and too early for the first snowdrops.

There was nothing worth doing, no one to speak to or visit. Those who did call were excruciatingly boring. They had nothing to talk about except people Grandmama did not know, or wish to. They had never been to London and knew nothing of fashion, society, or even current events of any importance in the world.

Then in the middle of the second afternoon a letter arrived for Joshua. He tore it open as they were having tea in the withdrawing room, the fire roaring halfway up the chimney, rain beating on the window in the dark as heavy clouds obscured even the shreds of winter light. There was hot tea on a silver tray and toasted crumpets with butter melted into them and golden syrup on top. Cook had made a particularly good Madeira cake and drop scones accompanied by butter, raspberry jam, and cream so thick one could have eaten it with a fork.

"It's a letter from Aunt Bedelia," Joshua said, looking at Caroline, a frown on his face. "She says Aunt Maude has returned without any warning, from the Middle East, and expects them to put her up for Christmas. But it's quite impossible. They have another guest of great importance whom they cannot turn out to make room for her."

"But it's Christmas!" Caroline said with dismay. "Surely they can make room somehow. They can't turn her away. She's family. Have they a very small house? Perhaps a neighbor would accommodate her, at least overnight?"

Joshua's face tightened. He looked troubled and a little embarrassed. "No, their house is large, at least five or six bedrooms."

"If they have plenty of room, then what is this about?" Caroline asked, an edge to her voice, as if she feared the answer.

Joshua lowered his eyes. "I don't know. I called her Aunt Bedelia, but actually she is my mother's cousin and I never knew her very well, or her sister Agnes. And Maude left England about the time I was born."

“Left England?” Caroline was astounded. “You mean permanently?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Why?”

Joshua colored unhappily. “I don’t know. No one will say.”

“It sounds as if they simply don’t want her there,” Grandmama said candidly. “As an excuse it is tissue-thin. What on earth do they expect you to do?”

Joshua looked straight at her and his eyes made her feel uncomfortable, although she had no idea why. He had fine eyes, a dark hazel-brown and very direct.

“Mama-in-law,” he replied, using a title for her to which he had no right at all. “They are sending her here.”

“That’s preposterous!” Grandmama said more loudly than she had intended. “What can you do about it?”

“Make her welcome,” he replied. “It will not be difficult. We have two other bedrooms.”

Caroline hesitated only a moment. “Of course,” she agreed, smiling. “There is plenty of everything. It will be no trouble at all.”

Grandmama could hardly believe it! They were going to have this wretched woman here. As if being banished herself, like secondhand furniture, were not bad enough, now she would have to divide what little attention or courtesy she received with some miserable woman whose own family could not endure her. They would have to cater to her needs and no doubt listen to endless, pointless stories of whatever benighted spot she had been in. It was a really far too much.

“I have a headache,” she announced, and rose to her feet. “I shall go and lie down in my room.” She stumped over to the door, deliberately leaning heavily on her stick, which actually she did not require.

“Good idea,” Caroline agreed tartly. “Dinner will be at eight.”

Grandmama could not immediately make up her mind whether to be an hour early, or fifteen minutes late. Perhaps early would be better. If she were late they were just rude enough to start without her, and she would miss the soup.



Maude Barrington arrived the following morning, alighting without assistance from the carriage that had brought her and walking with an easy step up to the front door where Joshua and Caroline were waiting for her. Grandmama had chosen to watch from the withdrawing room window, where she had an excellent view without either seeming inquisitive, which was so vulgar, or having to pretend to be pleased and welcoming, which would be farcical. She was furious.

Maude was quite tall and unbecomingly square-shouldered. A gentle curve would have been better, more feminine. Her hair appeared to be of no particular color but at least there was plenty of it. At the moment far too much poked out from underneath a hat that might have been fashionable once, but was now a disaster. She wore a traveling costume that looked as if it had been traipsed around most of the world, especially the hot and dusty parts, and now had no distinguishable shape or color left.

Maude herself could never have been pretty—her features were too strong. Her mouth in particular was anything but dainty. It was impossible to judge accurately how old she was.

other than between fifty and sixty. Her stride was that of a young woman—or perhaps young man would have been more accurate. Her skin was appalling! Either no one had ever told her not to sit in the sun, or she had totally ignored them. It was positively weather-beaten, burned, and a most unfortunate shade of ruddy brown. Heaven only knew where she had been! She looked like a native! No wonder her family did not want her there for Christmas. They might wish to entertain guests, and they could hardly lock her away.

But it was monstrous that they should wish her on Joshua and Caroline, not to mention their guests!

She heard voices in the hallway, and then footsteps up the stairs. No doubt at luncheon she would meet this miserable woman and have to be civil to her.

And so it turned out. One would have expected in the circumstances that the wretched creature would have remained silent, and spoken only when invited to do so. On the contrary, she engaged in conversation in answer to the merest question, and where a word or two would have been quite sufficient.

“I understand you have just returned from abroad,” Caroline said courteously. “I hope your trip was pleasant?” She left it open for an easy dismissal if it were not a subject Maude wished to discuss.

But apparently it was. A broad smile lit Maude’s face, bringing life to her eyes, even a touch of passion. “It was marvelous!” she said, her voice vibrant. “The world is more terrible and more beautiful than we can possibly imagine, or believe, even after one has seen great stretches of it. There are always new shocks and new miracles around each corner.”

“Were you away long?” Caroline asked, apparently forgetting what Joshua had told her. Perhaps she did not wish to appear to Maude as if they had been discussing her.

Maude smiled, showing excellent teeth, even though her mouth was much too big. “For two years,” she replied. “I fell in love.”



Caroline clearly did not know what to make of that. Maude’s hands were innocent of rings, and she had introduced herself by her maiden name. The only decent thing to do would have been to avoid the subject, but she had made that impossible. No wonder they had found her intolerable to have her at home. Really, this imposition was too much!

Maude glanced at Grandmama, and cannot have failed to see the disapproval in her face. “In love with the desert,” she explained lightly. “And cities like Marrakech. Have you ever been to a Muslim city in Africa, Mrs. Ellison?”

Grandmama was outraged.

“Certainly not!” she snapped. The question was ridiculous. What decent Englishwoman would do such a thing?

Maude was not to be stopped. She leaned forward over the table, soup forgotten. “It is flanked by an oasis facing the Atlas Mountains, and stretches out from the great red tower of the Koutoubya to the blue-palmed fringes and the sands beyond. The Almoravid princes who founded it came with their hordes from the black desert of Senegal, and built palaces of beauty to rival anything on earth.”

Caroline and Joshua forgot their soup also, though Grandmama did not.

“They imported masters of chiseled plaster, gilded cedar, and ceramic mosaics,” Maude

continued. "They created garden beyond garden, courts that led to the other courts and apartments, some high in the sunlight, others deep within walls and shadows and running water." She smiled at some inner delight. "One can walk in the green gloom of a cypress garden. Or breathe in the cool sweetness of a tunnel of jasmine where the light is soft and ever whispering with the sound of water and the murmur of pigeons as they preen themselves. There are alabaster urns, light through jeweled glass, and vermilion doors painted with arabesques in gold." She stopped for a moment to draw breath.

Grandmama felt excluded from this magic that Maude had seen, and from the table where Joshua and Caroline hung on every word. She was totally unnecessary here. She wanted to dismiss it all as foreign, and completely vulgar, but deeply against her will she was fascinated. Naturally she would not dream of saying so.

"And you were allowed to see all these things?" Caroline said in amazement.

"I lived there, for a while," Maude answered, her eyes bright with memory. "It was a superb time, something marvelous or terrible every week. I have never been more intensely alive! The world is so beautiful sometimes I felt as if I could hardly bear it. One gazes at things that hurt with the passion of their loveliness." She smiled but her eyes were misted with tears. "Dusk in a Persian garden, the sun's fire dying on the mountains in purple and amber and rose; the call of the little owls in the coolness of the night; dimpled water over stones; the perfume of jasmine in the moonlight, rich as sweet oil and clear as the starlight; firelight reflected on a copper drum."

She pushed her soup away, too filled with emotion to eat. "I could go on forever. I cannot imagine boredom. Surely it is worse than dying, like some terrible, corroding illness that leaves you neither the joy and the hunger of life nor the release of death. Even that exquisite squeezing of the heart because you cannot hold the light forever is better than not to have seen it or loved it at all."

Grandmama had no idea what on earth she was babbling about! Of course she hadn't. At least not more than a needle-sharp suspicion, like a wound too deep to feel at first, narrow as a blade of envy, cutting almost without awareness.

What would anyone reply to such a thing? There ought to be something, but what was there that met such a ... a baring of emotion? It was unseemly, like taking off one's clothes in public. No taste at all. That was what came of traveling to foreign parts, and not only foreign but heathen as well. It would be best to ignore the whole episode.

But of course that was quite impossible. The afternoon was cold but quite clear and sunny although the wind was sharp. Escape was the only solution.

"I shall go for a walk," she announced after luncheon was over. "Perhaps a breath of sea air would be pleasant."

"What an excellent idea," Maude said with enthusiasm. "It is a perfect day. Do you mind if I come with you?"

What could she say? She could hardly refuse. "I'm afraid there will be no jasmine flowers or owls, or sunset over the desert," she replied coolly. "And I daresay you will find it very chilly ... and ... ordinary."

A shadow crossed Maude's face, but whether it was the thought of the lonely marsh and sea wind, or the rejection implicit in Grandmama's reply, it was impossible to say.

Grandmama felt a jab of guilt. The woman had been refused the comfort or sanctuary of

her own home. She deserved at least civility. "But of course you are welcome to come," she added grudgingly. Blast the woman for putting her in a position where she had to say that.

Maude smiled. "Thank you."

They set out together, well wrapped up with capes and shawls, and of course strong winter boots. Grandmama closed the gate and immediately turned to the lane toward the sea. In the summer it would be overhung with may blossom and the hedgerows deep with flowers. Now it was merely sparse and wet. If the wind were cold enough, after all her living in the deserts and such places, the very damp of it alone should be sufficient to make Maude tire of the idea within half an hour at the most.

But Maude was indecently healthy and used to walking. It took Grandmama all her breath and strength to keep up with her. It was roughly a mile to the seashore itself and Maude did not hesitate in her stride even once. She seemed to take it for granted that the old lady would have no difficulty in keeping up, which was extremely irritating and quite thoughtless of her. Grandmama was at least fifteen years older, if not more, and of course she was a lady, not some creature who gallivanted all over the world and went around on her feet as if she had no carriage to her name.

The sky above them was wide and wild, an aching void of blue with just a few clouds like mares' tails shredded across the east on the horizon above the sea. Gulls, dazzling white in the winter sun, wheeled and soared in the air, letting out their shrill cries like noisy children. The wind rippled the grass, flowerless, and everything smelled of salt.

"This is wonderful!" Maude said happily. "I have never smelled anything so clean and so madly alive. It is as if the whole world were full of laughter. It is so good to be back in England. I forgot how the spirit of the land is still so untamed, in spite of all we've done. I was in Snave so short a time I had no chance to get out of the house!"

She is not sane, Grandmama thought to herself grimly. No wonder her family wants to get rid of her!

They breasted the rise and the whole panorama of the English Channel opened up before them, the long stretch of sand, wind, and water bleached till it gleamed bone pale in the light. The surf broke in ranks of white waves, hissing up the shore, foaming like lacquers consuming themselves, and rushing back again. Then a moment later they roared in inches higher, never tired of the game. The surface was cold, unshadowed blue, and it stretched on endlessly till it met the sky. They both knew that France was not much more than twenty miles away, but today the horizon was smudged and softened with mist that blurred the line.

Maude stood with her head high, wind unraveling the last of her hair from its pins and she was but taking her shawl as well.

"Isn't it glorious?" she asked. "Until this moment I had forgotten just how much I love the sea, its width, its shining, endless possibilities. It's never the same two moments together."

"It always looks the same to me," Grandmama said ungraciously. How could anyone be so pointlessly joyous? It was half-witted! "Cold, wet, and only too happy to drown you if you are foolish enough to give it the chance," she finished.

Maude burst into laughter. She stood on the shore with her eyes closed, her face lifted upward, smiling, and the wind billowing her shawl and her skirts.

Grandmama swiveled around and stamped back onto the tussock grass, or whatever it was, that tangled her feet, and started back along the lane. The woman was as mad as a hatter.

was unendurable that anyone should be expected to put up with her.



The following day was no better. Maude usurped every moment by regaling them with tales of boating on the Nile, buffalo standing in the water, unnameable insects, and tombs of kings who worshipped animals! All very fashionable, perhaps, but disgusting. Both Caroline and Joshua took hospitality too far, and pretended to be absorbed in it, even encouraging her by asking questions.

Of course the wretched woman obliged, particularly at the dinner table. And all through the roast beef, the Yorkshire pudding and the vegetables, followed by apple charlotte and cream, her captive audience were made to listen to descriptions of ruined gardens in Persia.

"I stood there in the sand of the stream splashing its way over the blue tiles, most of them broken," Maude said, smiling as her eyes misted with memory. "We were quite high up and looked through the old trees toward the flat, brown plain, and saw those roads: to the east toward Samarkand, to the west to Baghdad, and to the south to Isfahan, and my imagination soared into flight. The very names are like an incantation. As dusk drew around me and the pale colors deepened to gold and fire and that strange richness of porphyry, in my mind I could hear the camel bells and see that odd, lurching gait of theirs as they moved silently like dreams through the coming night, bound on adventures of the soul."

"Isn't it hard sometimes?" Caroline asked, not in criticism but perhaps even sympathy.

"Oh yes! Often," Maude agreed. "You are thirsty, your body aches, and of course you can become so tired you would sell everything you possess for a good night's sleep. But you know it will be worth it. And it always is. The pain is only for a moment, the joy is forever."

And so it went on. Now and then she picked at the macadamia nuts she had brought to the table to share, saying that her family had given them to her, knowing her weakness for them. Only Joshua accepted.

"Indigestible," Grandmama said, growing more and more irritated by it all.

"I know," Maude agreed. "I daresay I shall be sorry tonight. But a little peppermint water will help."

"I prefer not to be so foolish in the first place," Grandmama said icily.

"Do you have peppermint water?" Caroline asked. "I can give you some, if you wish?"

"I prefer to exercise a little self-control in the first place," Grandmama answered, as if the offer had been addressed to her.

Maude smiled. "Thank you, but I have one dose, and I'm sure that will be sufficient. There are not so many nuts, and I can't resist them."

She offered the dish to Joshua again and he took two more, and asked her to continue with her tales of Persia.

Grandmama tried to ignore it.

It seemed as if morning, noon, and night they were obliged to talk about or listen to accounts of some alien place, and pretend to be interested. She had been right in the very beginning: This was going to be the worst Christmas of her life. She would never forgive Emily for banishing her here. It was a monstrous thing to have done.



She awoke in the morning to hear one of the maids screeching and banging on the door. Was there no end to the lack of consideration in this house? She sat upright in bed just as the stupid girl burst through into the room, face ashen white, mouth wide open, and eyes like holes in her head.

“Pull yourself together, girl!” Grandmama snapped at her. “What on earth is the matter with you? Stand up straight and stop sniveling. Explain yourself!”

The girl made a masterful attempt, took a gulping breath, and spoke in between gasps. “Please ma’am, somethin’ terrible ’as ’appened. Miss Barrington’s stone cold dead in ’er bed, she is.”

“Nonsense!” Grandmama replied. “She was perfectly all right at dinner yesterday evening. She’s probably just very deeply asleep.”

“No, ma’am, she in’t. I knows dead when I sees it, an’ when I touches it. Dead as a skinned sheep, she is.”

“Don’t be impertinent! And disrespectful.” Grandmama climbed out of bed and the cold air assailed her flesh through her nightgown. She grasped a robe and glared at the girl. “Don’t speak of your betters like farmyard animals,” she added for good measure. “I shall go and waken Miss Barrington myself. Where is Tilly?”

“Please, ma’am, she’s got a terrible chill.”

“Then leave her alone. You may fetch Miss Barrington’s tea. And mine also. Fresh, mind. No leftovers.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The girl was happy to be relieved of responsibility, and of having to tell the master and mistress herself. She did not like the old lady, nor did any of the other servants like the miserable old body. Let her do the finding and the telling.

Grandmama marched along the corridor and banged with her closed hand on Maude’s door. There was no answer, as she had expected. She would rather enjoy waking her up from a sound, warm sleep, for no good reason but a maid’s hysterics.

She pushed the door open, went in, and closed it behind her. If there were going to be a bad tempered scene over the disturbance, better to have it privately.

The room was light, the curtains open.

“Miss Barrington!” she said very clearly.

There was no sound and no movement from the figure in the bed.

“Miss Barrington!” she repeated, considerably more loudly, and more peremptorily.

Still nothing. She walked over to the bed.

Maude lay on her back. Her eyes were closed, but her face was extremely pale, even a little blue, and she did not seem to be moving at all.

Grandmama felt a tinge of alarm. Drat the woman! She went a little closer and reached out to touch her, ready to leap back and apologize if her eyes flew open and she demanded to know what on earth Grandmama thought she was doing. It was really inexcusable to place anyone in this embarrassing position. Gadding about in heathen places had addled her wits and all sense of being an Englishwoman of any breeding at all.

The flesh that met her fingers was cold and quite stiff. There could be no doubt whatsoever that the stupid maid was correct. Maude was quite dead, and had been so probably most of the night.

Grandmama staggered backward and sat down very hard on the bedroom chair, suddenly

finding it difficult to breathe. This was terrible. Quite unfair. First of all Maude had arrived uninvited, and disrupted everything. Now she had died and made it even worse. They would have to spend Christmas in mourning! Instead of reds and golds, and carol singing, feasting and making merry, they would all be in black, mirrors covered, whispering in corners and being miserable and afraid. Servants were always afraid when there was a death in the house. Most likely Cook would give notice, and then where would they be? Eating cold meats!

She stood up. She had no reason to feel sad. It would be absurd. She had barely met Maude Barrington, certainly she had not known her. And there was nobody to feel sorry for. Her own family had not wanted her, even at Christmas, for heaven's sake! Perhaps they were tired of the endless stories about the bazaar at Marrakech and the Persian gardens or the boats on the Nile and the tombs of kings who had lived and died a thousand years or more before the first Christmas on earth, and worshipped gods of their own making, who had the heads of beasts.

But then her family could not have been nice people or they would not have turned Maude away at Christmas. They would have listened with affectation of interest, as Caroline and Joshua had done. Indeed, as she had done herself. She could imagine the water running over blue tiles in the sun. She did not know what jasmine smelled like, but no doubt it was beautiful. And to give her credit, Maude had loved the English countryside just as much, even in December. It was wretched that she should have died among people who were veritably strangers, taking her in out of charity because it was Christmas. Her own family had not loved her, wanted her.

Grandmama stood still in the middle of the bedroom with its flowered chintzes, heavy furniture, and dead ashes in the grate, and a hideous reality took her breath away. She herself was here out of charity as well, unloved and unwanted by anyone else. Caroline and Joshua were good people; that was why they had taken her in, not because they cared for her. They did not love her, they did not even like her. No one did. She knew that as well as she knew the feel of ice on her skin and the cold wind that cut to the bone.

She opened the door, her fingers fumbling on the handle, breath tight in her chest. Outside in the passage, she walked unsteadily to the other wing of the house, and Joshua and Caroline's room. She knocked more loudly than she had intended, and when Caroline opened the door to her she found her voice caught in her throat.

"The maid came and told me Maude died in the night." She gulped. Really this much emotion was ridiculous! She had barely known the woman. "I am afraid it is true."

Caroline looked stricken, but she could see from the old lady's face that there was no doubt. At her age she had seen enough death not to mistake it.

"You had better come into the dressing room and sit down," Caroline said gently. "I'll have Abby fetch you a cup of tea. I'm so sorry you had to be the one to find her." She held out her arm to support Grandmama as she stumbled across the room and into the wide, warren dressing room with its seats and wardrobes and one of Caroline's gowns already laid out for the day. Grandmama was angry with herself for being so close to weeping. It must be the shock. It was most unpleasant to grow old. "Thank you," she said grudgingly.

Caroline helped her into one of the chairs and looked at her for a moment as if to make sure she were not going to faint. Then, as Grandmama glared back at her, she turned and went out to set in motion all the endless arrangements that would have to be made.

The old lady sat still. The maid brought her tea and poured it for her, encouraging her to drink it. It was refreshing, spreading warmth from the inside. But it changed nothing. What was Maude dead? She had been in almost offensively good health the short time she had been here. What had she died of? Certainly not old age. Not any kind of wasting away or weakening. She could march like a soldier, and eat like one, too.

She closed her eyes and in her mind she saw Maude again, lying motionless in the bed. She did not look terrified or disturbed, or even in any pain. But there had been an empty bottle on the table beside her. Probably the peppermint water. The stupid woman had given herself indigestion guzzling all the nuts, just as Grandmama had told her she would. Why were some people so stupid? No self-control.

She drank the last of her tea and stood up. The room swayed around her for a moment. She took several deep breaths, then went out of the dressing room and back along the corridor to Maude's bedroom. There was no one else in sight. They must all be busy, and Caroline would be doing what she could to settle the staff. Staff always behaved erratically when someone died. At least one maid would have fainted, and someone would be having hysterics. As there were not enough to do!

She opened the door and slipped inside quickly, closing it after her, then turned to look. Yes, she had been quite right, there was an empty bottle on the bedside table. She walked over and picked it up. It said "peppermint water" on the label, but just to be certain she took out the cork and sniffed it experimentally. It was quite definitely peppermint, clean and sharp, filling her nose.

Maude had brought it with her, with only one dose left. She must use it regularly. Stupid woman! If she ate with any sense it would not be necessary. Curious that they should have even in Arabia, or Persia, or wherever it was she had come from most recently. And the label was in English, too.

She looked at it again. It was printed with the name and address of a local apothecary in Rye, just a few miles away around the Dungeness headland.

But Maude had said she had not left Snave, in fact not had the chance to go out at all. So someone had given it to her, with one dose in it. Presumably that was to treat the result of eating the macadamia nuts! But one dose? How very odd. Especially when they could have been all but certain that she would require it. Surely no household would be short of so ordinary a commodity, especially over Christmas, when it could be guaranteed that people would overindulge? There was something about it that was peculiar.

She picked up the bottle again and, keeping it concealed in the folds of her skirt, returned to her room, where she hid it in the drawer with her underclothes.

Then, with Tilly's assistance, she dressed in the darkest clothes she had with her—not quite black, but a gray that in the winter light would pass for it. She went downstairs to face the day.

Caroline was in the withdrawing room before the fire. Joshua had gone to fetch the local doctor so that the necessary authorities could be satisfied.

"Are you all right, Mama-in-law?" she asked anxiously. "It is a terrible experience for you."

"It was a much worse experience for Maude!" Grandmama replied with tart candor. There were troubling thoughts in her mind, but she was not quite certain exactly what they were. She could not share them, especially with Caroline, who had never detected anything, as far

as she knew. She might even wish to avoid scandal, and refuse even to consider it, and Maude deserved better than that! Perhaps it rested with Mariah Ellison, and no one else, to face the truth.

A few minutes later the doctor arrived and was taken upstairs.

“Heart failure,” he informed them when he came down again. “Very sad. She seemed in excellent health otherwise.”

“She was!” Grandmama said quickly, before anyone else could reply. “She was a wonderful traveler, walked miles, rode horses, and even camels. She never spoke of any ailment at all.”

“It can come without warning,” the doctor said gently.

“An attack that kills?” Grandmama demanded. “She did not look as if she were in that kind of agony!”

“No,” he agreed with a slight frown. “I think it more likely that her heart simply slowed and then stopped.”

“Slowed and then stopped?” Grandmama said incredulously.

“Mama-in-law!” Caroline remonstrated.

“I think it may well have been peaceful,” the doctor said to Grandmama. “If that is of comfort to you? Were you very fond of her?”

“She barely knew her!” Caroline said tartly.

“Yes, I was fond of her.” Grandmama contradicted her, equally tartly.

“I’m very sorry.” The doctor was still gentle. He turned to Joshua. “If I can assist with arrangements, of course I shall be happy to.”

“Thank you,” Joshua accepted.

“We shall have to inform the rest of her family,” Grandmama said loudly. “Bedell whatever-her-name-is.”

“I have been thinking how on earth I can write such a letter,” Caroline acknowledged. “What to say that will make it ... *better* sounds absurd. If I simply say that we are terribly sad to inform them, will that be best?” She looked worried, and “sad” would be no exaggeration. There was a grief in her face that was quite genuine.

Grandmama’s mind was racing. What was she allowing herself to think? Heart slowing down? Nuts that everyone knew were indigestible? One dose of peppermint water? Had Maude been murdered? Preposterous! That’s what came of allowing one’s daughter to marry a policeman. This was Caroline’s fault. If she had been a mother of the slightest responsibility at all she would never have permitted Charlotte to do such a thing! Thomas Pitt, as a law enforcement official, was not a suitable husband. He had absolutely nothing to commend him, except possibly height?

But if someone like Pitt could solve a crime, then most certainly Grandmama could. She would not be outwitted by a gamekeeper’s son, half her age!

And if Maude Barrington had been murdered, then Mariah Ellison would see that whoever had done so was brought to justice and answered to the last penny for such an act. Maude might have been an absurd woman, and a complete nuisance, but there was such a thing as justice.

Grandmama felt as if a light and a warmth had gone out of the air and a heaviness settled in its place, which she did not understand at all.

“You should not write,” she said firmly to Caroline. “It is far too dreadful and sudden

thing to put in a letter, when apparently they live so near. Snake, isn't it? Or something like that."

"Snake," Caroline corrected. "Yes. It's about four or five miles away. Still well within the Marsh. Do you think I should go over and tell them myself?" Her face tightened. "Yes, of course you're right."

"No!" Grandmama said quickly. "I agree it should be done personally. After all, she was their sister, however they treated her. Perhaps they will even feel an overwhelming guilt now." She thought that extremely unlikely. They were obviously quite shameless. "But I will go. You have arrangements to make for Christmas, and Joshua would miss you. And imagine I actually spent more time with Maude than you did anyway. I may be able to be of some comfort, inform them a little of her last days." She sounded sententious and she knew it. She watched Caroline's expression acutely. It would be a disaster if she were to come, for in fact it would make the entire journey a waste of time. In order to have a hope of accomplishing anything she would be obliged to tell Caroline what she suspected with increasing certainty the more she considered it.

A spark of hope lit in Caroline's eyes. "But that is a great deal to ask of you, Mama-in-law. Of course she was dubious. Mariah Ellison had never in her life been known to discomfort herself on someone else's behalf. It was totally out of character. But then Caroline did not know her very well. For nearly twenty years they had lived under the same roof, and for a part of it Grandmama had lived a lie. She had hidden her misery and self-loathing under the mantle of widowhood. But how could she have done anything else? The shame of her past continually burned inside her as if the physical pain were still raw and bleeding and she could barely walk. She had had to lie, for her son's sake. And the lie had grown bigger and bigger inside her, estranging her from everyone.

"You did not ask it of me," she said more sharply than she meant to. "I have offered. It is the answer that makes the greatest sense." Should she add that Caroline and Joshua had made her welcome here and it was a small repayment? No. Caroline would never believe that. They had allowed her in, she was not welcome, nor was she stupid enough to imagine that she could be. Caroline would be suspicious.

"I have nothing else to do," she added more realistically. "I am bored." That was believable. She was certainly not about to admit to Caroline, of all people, that she actually had admired Maude Barrington and felt a terrible anger that she should have been abandoned by her family, and very possibly murdered by one of them. She waited for Caroline's reaction. She must not push too hard.

"Are you certain you would not mind?" Caroline was still unconvinced.

"Quite certain," she replied. "It is still a pleasant morning. I shall compose myself, have a little luncheon, and then go. That is, if you can spare the carriage to take me there? I doubt there is any other way of travel in this benighted spot!" A sudden idea occurred to her. "Perhaps you fear that ..."

"No," Caroline said quickly. "It is most generous of you, and I think entirely appropriate. It shows far more care than any letter could do, no matter how sincere, or well written. Of course the coachman will take you. As you say, the weather is still quite clement. The afternoon would be perfect. I do appreciate it."

Grandmama smiled, trying to show less triumph than she felt. "Then I shall prepare

myself," she replied, finishing her tea and rising to her feet. She intended to remain at Snaveley for as long as it required to discover the truth of Maude's death, and to prove it. Knowledge alone was hardly adequate. Her visit might well stretch into several days. She must succeed. It was not a matter of sentimentality, it was a matter of principle, and she was a woman to whom such things mattered.

PART TWO



The journey was bumpy and cold, even with a traveling rug wrapped around from the waist downward. There was a bitter, whining wind coming in off the sea, though now and again it cleared the sky of clouds. The light was chill and hard over the low-lying heath. This was the invasion coast where Julius Caesar had landed fifty-five years before the birth of Christ. No such thing as Christmas then! He had gone home and been murdered the following year. That had been by his own people too, those he had known and trusted for years.

Eleven centuries after that, William, Duke of Normandy, had landed with his knights and archers and bowmen and killed King Harold at Hastings, just around the coast from here. Somehow she was faintly satisfied with Caesar coming. Rome had been the center of the world then. England had been proud to be part of that Empire. But William's invasion still rankled, which was silly, since it was the best part of a thousand years ago! But it was the last time England had been conquered, and it annoyed her.

King Philip of Spain's armada would probably have landed here too, if the wind had not destroyed it. And Napoleon Bonaparte. Only he went to Russia instead, which had proved to be a bad idea.

Was this a bad idea, too? Arrogant, stupid, the result of a fevered imagination? But how could she possibly turn back? She would look like a complete fool! To be disliked was bad enough. To be despised as well—or worse, pitied—would be unendurable.

Looking out of the carriage window as the sky darkened and the already lowering sun was smeared with gray, she could not imagine why anyone would choose to be here if they did not have to. Except Maude, of course! She thought these flat, wide spaces and wind-ragging skies were beautiful with their banners of cloud, marsh grasses, and air that always smelled of salt.

Perhaps she did not remember it frozen solid, or so shrouded in fog that you could not make out your hand in front of your face! That was exactly what would be useful now, some dreadful weather, so she could not return to St. Mary in the Marsh for several days. She had undertaken a very big task, and the more she thought of it the bigger it seemed, and the more hopeless. It was in a way a comfort that she could not turn back, or she might have. She had no idea what these people were like, and not a shred of authority to back up what she was intending to do. Or to try. It might have been better after all if Charlotte were here. She had meddled so often surely she had acquired a knack for it by now?

But she wasn't here. Grandmama would have to make the best of it by herself. Forward regardless. She had intelligence and determination, which might be enough. Oh—and right on her side as well, of course. It was monstrous that Maude Barrington should have been

murdered, if she had been? But whatever the truth of that, they had still turned her away and at Christmas. That in itself was an unforgivable offense, and on Maude's behalf, she felt it to the core.

The distance was covered far too quickly. It was only a handful of miles, forty minutes' journey at a brisk trot, far less as the crow flew. Every lane seemed to double back on itself as if to circumnavigate each field and cross every ditch twice. The sky had cleared again and the light was long and low, making the shivering grass bright and casting networks of shadow through the bare trees when the carriage drove into the tiny village of Snave. There was really only one big house. The rest seemed to be cottages and farm buildings. Why, heaven's name would anyone choose to live here? It was no more than a widening in the road.

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and waited with pounding heart for the coachman to open the door for her. A dozen times she had rehearsed what she was going to say, and now when she needed it, it had gone completely out of her mind.

Outside in the driveway the wind was like a knife-edge and she found herself rocking on her feet in the strength of it. She grasped onto her cloak to keep it from flying away, and stamped up to the front door, leaning heavily on her stick. The coachman pulled on the doorbell for her, and stood back to wait.

It was answered almost immediately. Someone must have seen the carriage arrive. An extremely ordinary-looking butler spoke to her civilly enough.

"Good afternoon," she replied. "I am Mrs. Mariah Ellison. Mr. Joshua Fielding, with whom Miss Barrington was staying, is my son-in-law." The exact nature of their relationship could be explained later, if necessary. "I am afraid I have extremely distressing news to bring to the family, the sort of thing that can really only be told in person."

He looked alarmed. "Oh, dear. Please do come in, Mrs. Ellison." He opened the door wide for her and backed away a little.

"Thank you," she accepted. "May I ask you the favor of a little warmth and refreshment for my coachman also, and perhaps water for the horses, and at least in the meantime, shelter from this rather cutting wind?"

"Of course! Of course! Do you ..." He swallowed. "Do you have Miss Barrington with you?"

"No, indeed not," she replied, following him inside after a brief glance behind her to make certain that the coachman had heard, and would drive around to the stables and make himself known.

Inside the hall she could not help but glance around. It was not a house of London fashion, nevertheless it was well furnished and extremely comfortable. The floor was very old oak, stained dark with possibly centuries of use. The walls were paneled, but lighter, and hung with many paintings, mercifully not the usual portraits of generations of forebears with expressions sour enough to turn the milk. Instead they were glowing still lifes of fruit and flowers, and one or two pastoral scenes with enormous skies and restful cows. At least someone had had very good taste. It was also blessedly warm.

"The family is all together, ma'am," the butler continued gravely. "Would you perhaps prefer to tell Mrs. Harcourt this news in private? She is Miss Barrington's elder sister."

"Thank you. She will know best how to inform the rest of the family."

The butler thereupon led her to a doorway off to the side. He opened it to show her into a very agreeable room, lighting the lamps for her and poking up a fire, which had almost gone out. He placed a couple of pieces of coal on it judiciously, then excused himself and left. He did not offer her tea. Perhaps he was too alarmed at the news, even though he did not yet know what it was. Judging by his manner, he expected a disgrace rather than a tragedy—which in itself was interesting.

She stood by the fire, trying to warm herself. Her heart was still thumping and she had difficulty keeping her breath steady.

The door opened and a woman of great beauty came in, closing it behind her. She was perhaps sixty, with auburn hair softening to rather more gold than copper, and the clear, fair skin that so often goes with such coloring. Her features were refined, her eyes large and blue. Her mouth was perfectly shaped. She bore little resemblance to Maude. It was not easy to think of them as sisters. No one would have called Maude beautiful. What had made her face so attractive was intelligence, and a capacity for feeling and imagination, a soul of inner joy. There was no echo of such things in this woman's face. In fact she looked afraid, and angry. Her clothes were up to the moment in fashion, and perfectly cut with the obligatory high shoulders and high crowned sleeves.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Ellison," she said with cool politeness. "I am Bedelia Harcourt. My butler tells me that you have driven all the way from St. Mary in the Marsh with unfortunate news about my sister. I hope she has not"—she hesitated delicately—"embarrassed you?"

Grandmama felt a fury of emotion rise up inside her so violently she was overwhelmed by it, almost giddy. She wanted to rage at the woman, even slap her perfect face. However, that would be absurd and the last way to detect anything. She was quite sure Pitt would not have been so ... so amateur!

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Harcourt." She controlled herself with a greater effort than she had ever exercised over her temper before. "But the news I have is very bad indeed. That is why I came personally rather than have anyone write a letter to you." She watched intently to see if there were the slightest betraying foreknowledge in Bedelia's face, and saw nothing. "I am afraid Miss Barrington passed away in her sleep last night. I am so very sorry." That at least was sincere. She was amazed how sorry she was.

Bedelia stared at her as if the words had no meaning that she could grasp. "Passed away?" she repeated. She put her hand up to her mouth. "Maude? But she never even said she was ill! I should have known! Oh, how terrible. How very terrible."

"I am sorry," Grandmama said yet again. "The maid knocked on my door. I was in the same part of the house. I went to her immediately, but Miss Barrington must have died early in the night. She was ... quite cold. We called a doctor, naturally."

"Oh, dear." Bedelia stepped backward and almost folded up into the chair behind her. It was a collapse, and yet it was oddly graceful. "Poor Maude. How I wish she had said something. She was too ... too reticent ... too brave."

Grandmama remembered Bedelia's letter to Joshua saying that she would not have Maude in the house because they had other important guests, and she found it extremely difficult not to remind her of that. But to do so would make an enemy of her, and then gaining any knowledge would be impossible. Really, this detecting required greater sacrifices than she had foreseen.

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