

Chapter 10

Belinda slept poorly that night as a million questions swirled in her mind. Charles had claimed not to have seen Madam since she had taken up residence in the cottage, yet the video evidence revealed he must have had some contact with her; otherwise, how did he come to be in possession of the keys? Did he know that Madam Perrot was absent and in Bath at the time he visited? And how long had he been in contact with her? To have given him the keys, she must have trusted him. Was he telling the truth when he said he'd only seen the woman once? And if that were the case, it was highly unlikely that she would have given him keys on her first casual meeting. And his description of her, roses, and violets. An old biddy, he called her. None of it made sense. She would talk to Hazel in the morning and convince her she must have Charles play opposite her as Jack Worthing. That way, they could gauge his closeness with Madam Perrot. Pleased that she had a plan of action, she settled down under the duvet, but sleep still alluded her, and the whole mystery began again to endlessly unwind in her mind.

"Don't tell him we have the video of him at Kryme cottage," said Belinda, as she and Hazel approached the vicarage. "I want to get his reaction when he meets Madam Perrot. If he doesn't recognise her, it confirms that this Mrs Perrot has murdered the real Madam Malefic and taken her place." She knocked on the door.

"Alright," said Hazel, "but I'm still not keen on him playing Jack. Couldn't we try asking Quentin again?"

Charles opened the door. He looked less like a vicar than a sportsman fresh from a game of golf.

"Good morning," said Belinda, feeling a rush of pleasure at the sight of him. Silently she wished he would be playing another scene in *The Importance*, one with Gwendolyn, a role she felt she was suited for. "We've come on a mission. Madam Malefic is holding auditions for a play and poetry reading, we're performing, and we would like you to join us."

Charles smiled a welcome. "Yes, I saw that. But what makes you think I can act?"

"What makes you think we can," said Hazel.

Charles's smile broadened as he turned to her. "I'm sure the critics will be at your feet, but I don't think the public is ready to see me performing before them."

"Nonsense," said Hazel, "you do that every Sunday."

Belinda felt that Hazel wasn't helping, and Charles was about to refuse the request, so decided to use subterfuge and lie. "It's for a charity, so I think you should reconsider."

"Oh, charity? Which one?"

"Um...er...the 'save the hairy nosed wombats', isn't that so, Hazel?"

Hazel looked blank. "And you be playing opposite Hazel in the handbag scene from *The Importance*," said Belinda, hoping that would sweeten the deal. It did.

Charles's eyes lit up, and he gazed at Hazel. "Well, that's another matter entirely. I'm sure we will need to have many hours rehearsing. Hazel can be my inspiration. And we mustn't forget the wombats with hairy noses."

Miss Atkins and Muriel staggered under a quantity of bags containing theatrical costumes, hats, props, and music sheets. Most of the public who had been chosen to perform in the reading afternoon were present and gathered in individual groups discussing their work or declaiming

verses loudly to a disinterested assembly. Belinda, Hazel, and Charles entered the rehearsal room.

The black figure of Madam Perrot was rehearsing two effete late teenage males. "Now then," said Madam in a voice riddled with confidence, "I am reinstating 'the Gribsby episode,' deleted by Oscar Wilde, which involves the arrival of a solicitor to arrest Algernon, who is posing as the fictitious Ernest, for unpaid bills. I have made specific alterations to the text. We will do the scene again, this time with less sibilance and more machismo. I will read Jack's lines again. Commence!"

The taller of the two men spoke, "Mister Ernest Worthing?"

His chubby associate replied, "Yes."

"Of B Four, The Albany?"

"Yes, that is my address."

"I am very sorry, Mister Worthing, but we have a writ of attachment for twenty days against you for a quantity of lace, seven hundred and sixty two pounds."

"What perfect nonsense!"

Madam took her cue. "Kindly allow me to see this bill, Mister Gribsby. I am bound to say I never saw such reckless extravagance in all my life. Seven hundred and sixty two pounds for lace! How grossly materialistic!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Belinda and Hazel. "Keep rehearsing boys, and remember, machismo!" She lifted the skirt of her long, black lace-covered dress and made her way across the room. "I hope you've got your lines down, Miss Whitby, and I see you have brought along your Jack Worthing." Madam extended her hand to Charles, "How do you do, I'm Madam Malefic.

Belinda looked at Charles to gauge his reaction. He frowned, ran his eyes over the creature in black that stood before him. "Err...Madam?"

"Madam, may I introduce St Mathew's vicar in Abbey Combe, the reverend Charles Mead."

Madam Perrot acknowledged him with a faint nod and a curl of the lip, which she intended as a smile. She turned to Belinda. "It would be a great help if you could assist Miss Atkins and Muriel with the costumes and props. I doubt their ability. And Miss Whitby, please begin your rehearsal. You have your scripts?" Without waiting for a reply, she returned to the two youths. "I've never seen that woman before," said Charles excitedly, "she's not the woman who introduced herself to me as Madam Malefic. Totally different woman."

"Thank you," said Belinda, "you've confirmed our suspicions. And she didn't recognise you either. I'll explain it all later."

Hazel took his arm and led him to a quiet corner of the room. "I don't understand," said Charles, "what's going on?"

"Murder," said Hazel, "but let's get this bloody rehearsal out of the way and we can explain everything."

Belinda joined Muriel and began to sort through bags of costumes.

Hazel glanced at her script. "Found?" She sat down on a worn chaise longue. "Found?" she sneered, dropping character. "Don't pull my leg –"

Charles, still bewildered from meeting the substitute Madam Malefic, dropped his script in exasperation. "Stop ad libbing." Hazel selected an anachronistic nineteen-twenties Cloche hat, which was to be an indication of her future costume. "Shut up and let's get on with it. I'm getting a chill."

Charles scowled at her, lifted his script, and read, "The late Mr Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman, etc., etc., etc., found me and gave me the name of Worthing, etc., etc. etc., It is a seaside resort."

Hazel tried to hide a yawn but failed, giving Charles a fairly substantial view of the passage to her larynx. "And where did this bloke find you?" she slurred.

"In a handbag."

Hazel knew that somehow she had to take the curse off her next line. "Edith Evans owns that, and everyone's tried to force it out of her steely grasp. Business? A bit of business?" She looked around and called to Belinda. "Can you bring me a bag of some sort?" Belinda sorted through the props and selected a large paper carrier bag, which bore the name of a fashionable Bond Street boutique. "Will this do?" She handed it to Hazel, who inspected it. "It'll do. I want her to speculate on the possibility of a baby fitting into her handbag. "Found?" she muttered as she proceeded to open the bag. But what met her eye caused her to freeze.

A large carving knife.

Covered in dried blood.

"Shit," said Lady Bracknell.