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Weekly



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PRETTY IS AS PRETTY DOES, *by M.A. Blume*

Iris Stone did not want to kill her maid, but after an hour of wrestling with The Problem, no other option seemed viable. She sank into the mountain of pillows on her canopy bed and replayed the facts in her mind, desperate to find another solution.

The Problem had started two weeks ago, when Iris returned to Chicago after spending a month in Sarasota. Her dear hus-

band, Arnold, insisted she allow him to manage things after their Prairie Avenue mansion was destroyed by fire. Now they resided on the tenth floor of a Gold Coast apartment building, complete with every convenience 1916 could offer. Dear Arnold had even overseen hiring new staff, when the old retainers resigned *en masse* following the second fire at the mansion.

Iris was still getting used to their new home, a showplace of modern opulence. From the private elevator lobby to the ice box, no comfort or convenience had been ignored. She didn't like to complain, especially after all her sweet husband had done to ensure her comfort. Yet, if the apartment was state of the art, the servants were a state of chaos.

It was a blessing she didn't yet know the staff well. Imagine if her old groom had been the one trampled in the stables instead of that new fellow. Or if young Thomas, who'd grown up on her father's estate, had chauffeured the motor when it plowed into the side of a building. But yesterday...she shuddered to think about it.

Iris relished assisting the chef on her at-home days, adding the finishing touches to the tea tray delicacies. But when her apron went missing, the portly chef sugar-dusted the lemon cakes, then popped one into his mustachioed mouth. Minutes later he collapsed on the white tile floor. The poor nearsighted man had mixed rat poison into the sugar sifter.

This morning, clarity arrived along with her breakfast tray. Three deaths among the staff in as many weeks, all coinciding with her return to their new home. With dread in her heart, Iris

concluded the culprit must be none other than her maid, poor Eunice Gelch.

Iris suspected the good Lord had used leftover parts when he assembled the maid's too-high forehead, too-close eyes, and too-long chin. Her fish-like lips and crooked teeth made even true joy appear a sneer, and when she laughed, which was infrequently (thank goodness), she wheezed like an asthmatic with consumption.

Yet her sausage fingers created stunningly intricate coiffeurs, and her stitchwork was delicate as gossamer. She kept Iris's clothes in perfect order and was on hand with whatever might be required, usually five minutes before Iris knew she'd need it.

Other servants were never kind to Eunice, either at home or abroad. In Sarasota, the maid had found a snake in her bed on more than one occasion. Since their return, she'd heard the vicious taunts and jibes the other servants directed at her maid. Iris reasoned the cruelty must have become too much to bear. Poor Eunice had finally lost her mind.

Iris didn't fear for her own safety. Eunice had been devoted to her since the sad, unfortunate day they'd met. She truly was a gem, a comfort in so many ways. But the scandal if anyone discovered her maid was killing people...even dear Arnold might be cross with her.

Simply discharging the maid wouldn't solve the problem. Iris was renown for her style, which could only be achieved with the talents of a superior servant like Eunice. What reason could she give for releasing such a treasure from her employ?

Iris couldn't very well write the true explanation in a letter of recommendation. "While Eunice Gelch is absolute perfection in all areas of toilette, her tendency to murder other staff members has made it impossible for her to continue in our service." No, if she dismissed Eunice without giving the true reason, someone else would engage such a perfect maid, and the killings might start again.

The more Iris considered The Problem, the more resolved she became. Honestly, it was the humane thing to do, like putting a mad dog out of its misery. Resolved to the unpleasant task, Iris made an extra effort to be kind to the maid when she arrived to help her dress.

"Good Morning, Eunice." By rights Iris should have called the maid by her last name, but Gelch sounded slightly vulgar to her ear. She slid from the four-poster bed and settled behind her dressing table to begin the ritual of hair brushing and braiding.

As she did every morning, Iris inspected her face in the mirror, ever vigilant for the first lines to appear. Thankfully, her porcelain complexion looked the same as it had five years ago, when she'd been dear Arnold's seventeen-year-old bride.

"I've pressed the rose-and-grey dress, Madam."

Iris sighed in frustration. That was the perfect dress for the Benevolence Society Luncheon today. How would she get along without Eunice?

She remembered her cousin, Elliott Frank, would be escorting her and a smile returned to her face. Darling Elliott was so

clever. He would find a solution that didn't include disposing of a perfectly good maid.

“When Mr. Frank arrives, have the new butler—what's his name?—have him notify me immediately.”

“Bulschick, Madam.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The new butler. His name is Bulschick.”

* * * *

Elliott Frank tapped his foot on the inlaid tile floor of the gilded elevator as it lifted him to his cousin's apartment. Attending a Benevolence Society Luncheon was the last thing he had time for today. One of the discreet issues he sometimes dealt with for the Navy had arisen, and required his full attention. National security was of no importance to his mother where family were concerned.

“I don't want Iris attending alone,” she'd whispered across their box at the opera last night. “We need to protect her, or that Arnold of hers will embarrass her again.”

Elliott knew Arnold Stone guarded every dime of his wife's fortune like a jealous lover, but the man had never denied her anything. There were no rumors of any business troubles, so money shouldn't be an issue. “How is he embarrassing her?”

His mother held her fan up, hiding their conversation from curious lorgnettes. “Lately Iris had been backing out of her commitments. She canceled three dresses at Madam Celeste's, and abandoned the Visiting Nurses Committee all together, pleading a lack of time.”

“And you think Arnold Stone is behind it all?”

“I’m not certain, but Iris did mention that he thought she was doing too much. If you are with her, he can’t say she was taken advantage of.” His mother had snapped her fan closed, attention back on the stage. Elliott understood he had no choice.

So here he was in the Stone’s living room, resigned to a wasted afternoon. Elliott had a soft spot for his cousin, younger than him by five years. She didn’t have an unkind bone in her body, but she also didn’t have the sense God gave a goat. Elliott wished ‘dear Arnold’ would pay more attention to his wife, instead of dedicating all his energies to building what he annoyingly called, “his empire.”

“Darling Elliott, how lovely to see you.” Iris glided into the room, her chestnut hair arranged in an intricately braided coiffeur that perfectly set off her heart-shaped face and China-blue eyes. Elliott sometimes forgot how truly beautiful she was.

“Shall we go down? I’ve had Bulschick call us a taxi. We have no chauffeur because...you know.”

“I’m sorry, Iris. What am I supposed to know?” he asked.

“Oh, my goodness. Haven’t you heard?”

Elliott groaned inwardly. If Iris had a fault, it was an addiction to gossip. As the elevator descended, she began her tale.

“Let me see, where to begin. It all started when I returned...no, it might go back to when our place on Prairie burned and Dear Arnold hired the new staff. The tragedies only began when poor Eunice and I returned. First it was the groom, then the chauffer. I didn’t witness those, thank goodness. My riding jacket was stained so I had to change and my watch

stopped so I wasn't in the motor. But yesterday I misplaced my apron, my very favorite apron, mind you, with embroidery..."

Elliott tried to pay attention, he honestly did. But Iris's stories tended to ricochet from one tangent to the next. He lost the thread midway through the apron description. Luckily, he'd become adept over the years at feigning interest during boring military briefings. He put that talent into play, nodding and smiling at Iris, while he turned his thoughts to the issue plaguing his Navy superiors.

When the taxicab arrived at the gilded revolving doors of the Palmer House Hotel, Elliott realized Iris had stopped speaking, and was looking at him with concern. "So you see, it's really the only solution. You agree, don't you?"

Elliott felt a pinch of guilt. Iris never looked troubled. Lost, yes. Confused, certainly. But not worried. He wished he'd paid more attention. Then again, he couldn't imagine Iris being worried about anything terribly serious.

"I'm sure whatever you do will be for the best."

A beaming smile broke across her face. "Well, that's settled. I was worried, but if you agree, then it must be the right thing to do."

Elliott offered his arm and they ascended the stairs to luncheon. Worry nagged at the back of his mind, and he almost asked Iris to explain exactly what he'd just approved. But it was too late, they'd reached the ballroom and Iris was already scanning the fray of well-meaning women.

"Oh, look, there's Lily Warwick. I must offer my sympathy—widowed so young, and with two small boys."

Once escorted into a room on the arm of a suitable man, ladies of the Benevolence Society had no further need of gentlemen. While Iris made the social rounds, Elliott kept to the edges. He did his best to stop her from volunteering too much time or money to the cause, wary of his mother's warning. On their way home, she enthused over the charity.

"It's important I do some good, Elliott. Especially now, to balance out...you know." She nodded with what he presumed was a conspiratorial look. "Will you come in for tea? I think dear Arnold will be home, so perhaps it's best if we don't discuss The Problem with him."

"Errr, yes." Elliott cursed his inattention. He'd definitely missed something important.

When the elevator doors opened on to the foyer of the apartment, Elliott heard raised voices from the living room.

"I don't care if it's easiest. It's too much like the other. Think of something else." Arnold Stone loomed over the stocky butler, who was seated on the couch in a marked lack of deference. When Iris and Elliott entered, Bulschick made a hasty retreat.

"Dear Arnold." Iris kissed her husband and sat behind the teapot.

Fifteen years older than his wife, Arnold Stone still retained the dashing good looks of his youth, with a smile that could charm the birds from the trees. For the first time, Elliott noticed a slight softening around the middle and at the jawline. *Sic transit*, he thought.

“Hello, my dear.” Arnold kissed his wife’s hand absently and nodded a greeting to Elliott.

“Whyever are you berating Bulschick?” asked Iris.

“Oh, er...dinner. We had chops again. I don’t want the same thing too often.”

“I’ll make a note, dear. You see darling Elliott is here for tea. He escorted me to the Benevolence luncheon.”

“Now, Iris, what did we talk about?” Crumbs spewed from Arnold’s mouth across the table. “These people take advantage of you. It was the same with Rose.”

Elliott followed Iris’s gaze. On a corner etagere, a framed image of an exceptionally handsome woman, dressed in the height of fashion from a decade ago, sat in pride of place. Elliott presumed it was the first Mrs. Stone.

Arnold’s handsome face contorted into a grimace for just a moment. “You push yourself and our generosity too much, my dear.”

“Don’t worry, Stone,” Elliott said. “A reasonable contribution and supervising the floral committee, that’s it.”

“It’s not about the money.” Arnold sat back in his chair and smiled at his wife. “At least you don’t fall for every sob story that comes your way. I’ll give you credit for that, Iris.”

Elliott suspected this was another reference to the first Mrs. Stone, but didn’t ask.

“We must be a part of the gala. Everyone is,” said Iris.

“My darling, I’m only thinking of you,” said Arnold, his words clipped. “I’m convinced you worked too hard last year and that’s why you lost...”

A stricken look crossed Iris's face. Arnold cut off whatever he was about to say and sighed. "I suppose you'll do what you like and never mind the consequences." He filled a plate with sandwiches and picked up a small dish of chocolates before leaving them.

Elliott rose, intending to give Stone a lesson in manners, but Iris forestalled him. "Don't bother too much about dear Arnold. After our last disappointment, the doctors said...it's been a difficult year. I'm sure all marriages have growing pains like this."

"Does it bother you he keeps that portrait of Rose?"

"No, not especially. I do wish he hadn't taken my favorite chocolates, though."

* * * *

After drinking the requisite cup of tea, Elliott walked from Astor Street to his home in Lincoln Park. The day had turned warm, a hint of summer after a brutal winter. Elliott smiled as he walked, letting the cares of his cousin and the Navy fade away. His contentment evaporated when he spied a shadow lurking in the parkway beside his building. Senses on high alert, he slowed his steps.

"Got a minute?" Detective Walter Bassett stepped on to the sidewalk, hands deep in his coat pockets.

Elliott smiled at his college roommate. "Good God, you look like a man who needs a drink." He led the way to the top floor of his three-flat.

Bassett was never the cheeriest of fellows, but today he looked positively hang-dog. His wiry dark hair exploded in all

directions, and trouble haunted his wide brown eyes. He threw his coat on the table, and paced Elliott's front room.

"Walter, what's wrong? Are you in trouble?"

"Am *I* in trouble?" The detective laughed, a short bark that cracked like lightning. He shook his head and sank into the deep leather chair by the fireplace. "I gotta ask you a question and you're not gonna like it."

In the years since they'd graduated, Elliott had often served as a sounding board for Walter's cases. Today seemed different.

"Tell me about the woman you were with this afternoon," said Walter.

"How do you know where I was this afternoon? Are you having me followed?"

"Following *you*? No. We were following the woman you were with."

"My cousin, Iris?"

"She's your cousin?" Bassett's voice rose as high as his deep baritone would allow. "Okay, tell me about your cousin, Iris Stone."

Elliott knew better than to refuse. He'd find out soon enough why Walter needed to know about Iris. "She's the second Mrs. Stone, of course. Arnold met her in New York, when he was finalizing some business deal with her father. He wooed her and wed her in three months, then brought his child bride and her fortune back to Chicago."

Bassett whistled. "Nice work, if you can get it."

“Actually, he dotes on her.” Elliott recalled Arnold’s behavior at tea. “At least, he used to. Today was less than his usual charming self.”

“Anybody from that first marriage upset there’s a new Mrs. Stone?”

Elliott shook his head. “Nope. Arnold Stone has no other family, no previous children. Why?”

The orange light of the setting sun slashed across Detective Bassett’s face. He leaned back out of the glare. “Three servants in the Stone household have died in less than a month. The deaths coincide with your cousin’s return to the city.” As Walter relayed details of the deaths, a sinking feeling filled the pit of Elliott’s stomach. He desperately tried to recall Iris’s rambling story, the groom, the chauffeur, the chef. Was that The Problem she’d been so worried about?

“Elliott, I don’t know how else to say this. Is there anything I ought to know about your cousin? Is she...all right?”

“Careful, Walter. I’m especially fond of little Iris.”

“So tell me why I shouldn’t suspect her.”

Elliott poured himself a drink and took a long swallow. “If I were looking at just the facts, there’s no reason not to suspect her. Except I know there’s no meanness, or craziness, in her.”

Bassett allowed a wry smile. “The chief might not clear her on just your say-so.”

“Fair enough,” said Elliott. “What’s your next step?”

“Same as always. Start questioning the household, see what’s what.”

Elliott switched on the electric light, dispelling the darkness that had enveloped them. "Mind if I tag along?"

"Sure, but we can wait until tomorrow." Walter stretched out his long legs. "I'll have that drink now."

* * * *

Elliott met Bassett at the grand entrance to the Stone's apartment building late in the afternoon the following day.

"I'll start with the staff," Bassett said. He often charmed information, and sometimes a date, from pretty housemaids. "Does your cousin have a personal maid?"

"She does."

"What's she like?"

Elliot smiled. "Prepare to be stunned."

"Excellent." Bassett rubbed his hands in anticipation.

The elevator doors opened and Elliott led Bassett into the wood-paneled foyer. Through the living room doors he saw Iris's maid dusting the corner shelf. Elliott cleared his throat and she turned around.

Detective Bassett actually reeled back when he saw Eunice Gelch. To his credit, he recovered quickly and smiled his broadest smile. Elliott made the introductions.

"I'm afraid Mr. and Mrs. Stone are both out, sir," said Eunice.

"In that case, I wonder if you could you spare us a few minutes?" Bassett asked, offering her a chair.

"It's not appropriate for us to speak in here." Eunice turned on her heel and clomped from the living room, through the dining room to the kitchen.

Bassett punched Elliott in the arm, harder than necessary, for misleading him about the maid. Elliott shrugged and smiled, eager to watch Bassett try to charm the Gelch.

He pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen. Modern appliances in gleaming chrome rested on the butcher-block counter tops. Next to the double-basin ceramic sink, iron rails of the fire escape cast shadows through the back door window.

“Won’t you sit down?” Bassett tossed his hat on the Formica table in the dining nook.

“What is this about?” Eunice stood beside the table, hands clenched together in front of her apron. “I’m not sure it’s proper for me to speak to you without my employer present.”

Bassett smiled and rested his hands on the table. “I’ve been asked to look into these accidents, make sure the household is safe. I hope you can help with that.”

“What can I do for you?” Eunice plopped into the chair across from Bassett, her back ramrod straight.

“How long have you worked for Mrs. Stone?”

“Four years.”

“And before that?”

“I was a dressmaker.”

“Employed where?” Bassett prodded without any sign of impatience. Elliott knew his friend was an expert at the slow extraction game.

“I visited my clients’ homes,” she said. Then a look that could almost be described as happiness crossed her face. “I almost opened my own shop, but lost my funding.”

Bassett nodded in sympathy. “Bankers don’t like making loans to women.”

“My funding was private. My patroness died.” She brushed away a spec of dust on her apron front. “What is the purpose of these questions?”

Bassett leaned forward, as if letting her into a secret. “Something isn’t quite right about these accidents, don’t you think?”

Elliot had seen him play this card before. Every maid enjoyed a bit of gossip.

“I’m not sure what you mean, sir.”

“For instance, what can you tell me about Chalmers, the groom? I’ve heard he had a bit of a reputation. And I’ve yet to meet a chef without a temper.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Apparently, every maid enjoyed a bit of gossip except this one. Bassett changed tactics. “It’s quite a difference, moving from a Prairie Avenue greystone to this apartment.”

“That house was a wedding gift from Mr. Stone,” the maid coughed, her voice softening. “Mrs. Stone had several disappointments trying to start a family. After the last one four months ago, the doctor advised her not to try any longer. This apartment better suits their needs.”

Bassett jotted in his notebook. “How was Mrs. Stone after the last, um...disappointment? Did she start behaving any differently?”

“I couldn’t say. Sir.” Eunice crossed her arms over her chest and practically spat out the last word.

Elliott could almost hear the door slam shut. That was all they'd get out of the maid.

Bassett rose and retrieved his hat. "Thank you, Miss Gelch. You've been very helpful. You can return to your duties. We'll see ourselves out."

Eunice shot up from the table and left, the swinging door swooshing back and forth in her wake.

"Well, that was a goldmine of information," said Bassett.

Elliott stared out the window, tugging at his ear. "Yes. Yes, it was."

"I was joking, Elliott."

"If you say so," Elliott smiled. "You're the detective."

"I'm going to take a look around."

"I'll join you in a bit," Elliott replied, replaying the interview in his mind.

He was alone for only a minute before the back door crashed open and the squat butler backed into the kitchen, a box of groceries in his arms.

"Hey, what're you...oh, you're the cousin. French, right?" Bulschick dropped the box on the table and pulled at the front of his exceptionally ill-fitting frock coat.

"It's Frank, actually. Elliott Frank."

Bulschick shrugged and began unpacking the groceries.

This butler was unlike any Elliott had ever encountered. "Is this the sort of household you're used to?"

"I'm very good at my job. Mr. Stone won't be disappointed."

"Nor will Mrs. Stone, I'm sure," said Elliott.

The butler coughed, or maybe laughed, Elliott couldn't tell.

"I don't guess she'll be complaining about much," Bulschick agreed. "Which, by the way, she ain't home."

"Yes, so Miss Gelch said. That's alright. It was the servants Detective Bassett really wanted to speak with."

A can clanged to the floor and rolled to Elliott's feet. He picked it up and handed it to the butler. "They've got you doing the marketing, eh?"

"Uh, yeah. And...I've forgotten the milk." Bulschick flew out the door, shoes clattering down the metal stairs.

Elliott tossed the small tin from one hand to another, a thought teasing the edges of his brain. He shook his head, unable to grasp what was bothering him. He set the tin on the counter, surprised to notice it was a new container of rat poison. Why would a brand-new apartment on the tenth floor need so much poison? Before he could posit a theory, a long string of curse words exploded through the house.

At a run, he met Bassett in the hall. They rounded the corner of the living room to see Arnold Stone throw something into the console table drawer and slam it shut.

"Everything all right, Stone?" asked Elliott.

"What?" Arnold whirled around. When he recognized Elliott, his charming smile returned and the red flush on his cheeks faded. "Sorry, Elliott. A man sometimes needs to let off some steam after a busy day. Forgive me."

Elliott wasn't convinced it was business that upset Arnold, but decided not to pursue the question. "Arnold, allow me to present my good friend, Detective Walter Bassett."

Arnold extended his hand and all his charm to Bassett. “Collecting for the widows and orphans, Detective? I’m afraid charity endeavors are my wife’s prevue, and she isn’t home at the moment.”

“This isn’t a social call, Mr. Stone. It’s about the deaths of your staff.”

Stone sat in one of the low club chairs and grabbed a handful of chocolates. “Most distressing, certainly. Did someone raise concerns about my household? It’s unfortunate, but accidents do happen.”

“It’s my job to investigate any death by causes other than natural. I understand you organized the move to this apartment.”

“Yes, I’ve had a busy couple of months, settling the house fire, buying this apartment, replacing the staff all while Iris was recovering out of town. On top of all that, I still had my business to run.”

Bassett smiled, meeting charm with charm. “Of course, I appreciate how trying it all must have been. Which agency did you use to replace your staff?”

“I’m afraid I don’t remember. Once the butler was hired, he engaged the others. Except my wife’s maid, of course.”

Bassett persisted. “From which agency did you hire your butler?”

Stone offered the chocolate dish to Bassett and Elliott. When they refused he popped another in his mouth. “I’m afraid I’d have to go back through my files, which are in my office

downtown. I'll have my secretary look for that information and send it to you at the detective bureau."

Bassett flipped his notebook closed. "Mr. Stone, you don't seem concerned that three people in your employ have died."

"They were servants, detective. The circumstances are unfortunate, but these accidents are not my fault." Stone checked his wristwatch. "I don't want to seem unhelpful, but is this going to take much longer? I'm attending the opera tonight."

"The opera?" said Elliott. "I didn't take you and Iris for Wagnerians."

"Iris isn't going," Stone said. "It's business. Closing a big deal soon."

Trust Stone to turn a social engagement into a board room. "I'll be there tonight, too. Whose box will you be in?" asked Elliott.

"Daniel Warwick, if you must know. I'm afraid I can't offer you any more of my time, gentlemen. If you need any further information, please contact my secretary. No need to bother Iris or the staff with these questions." He shook hands and left them alone.

Bassett stared after Stone. "What do you make of all that?"

"Curiouser and curiouser," said Elliott. He opened the console drawer and found the pride-of-place photo of the first Mrs. Stone. Elliott set it back on the shelf. "If he's not the one keeping it on display, who is?" he asked.

Bassett ignored the question. He slapped his notebook against his thigh. "Someone isn't telling us everything."

"Which one? The maid, the butler, or Stone?"

“The butler? Where’s he?” asked Bassett.

Elliott relayed his conversation with Mr. Bulschick.

“Bulschick? What kind of name is that?”

“Search me,” said Elliott. “If it were mine, I’d change it.”

* * * *

One can’t be a mystery to one’s maid, and vice versa. Iris knew if she left any chocolate in her pot of evening cocoa, Eunice would finish it before retiring. And why not? Why shouldn’t the poor woman be allowed a small treat?

The packets Dr. Watkins prescribed after the last disappointment were still in Iris’s dressing table. Dear Arnold had been wonderfully understanding, so she hadn’t needed the sleeping powders. But she’d kept them.

It was a matter of moments to pour herself a cup of chocolate, then stir all the packets of medicine into the pot. By the time Eunice finished hanging Iris’s evening clothes, the deed was done. Iris watched in the mirror while pudgy fingers released her hair from its braids and pins, then began brushing it out in long, relaxing strokes.

“You’re really quite amazing, Eunice.”

“Why...thank you, Madam.” A ruddy flush covered the maid’s face. She picked up the tray with the chocolate pot. “Will that be all?”

Tears welling in her eyes, Iris turned away from the best maid she’d ever had. “Yes, thank you, Eunice. That will be all.”

“Good night, Madam.”

Eunice closed Iris's bedroom door and lifted the lid of the pot. Almost three-quarters full tonight. She poked her head around the corner of the living room and spied Bulschick refilling Iris's chocolates. The silver dish clattered to the table when he caught sight of the maid.

"Every time I turn around, I see your ugly face," he said. "What are you doing in here?"

"Only my duties," said Eunice, trying to move past him.

The butler's bulging eyes shot to the tray in her hands. "Oh-ho, I know your trick. Lady high and mighty drinks one cup and you scarf the rest."

"It shouldn't go to waste," mumbled Eunice.

"I'm surprised your face doesn't curdle it." He lurched for the tray, causing some of the precious chocolate to spill from the pot across Eunice's hand.

"Careful! That cocoa is worth a month's pay." She shook the droplets off then wiped her hand on her apron.

"Then it's too good for you." Bulschick successfully pulled the tray from her grasp and marched triumphantly from the room. Under the dining room archway, he called back over his shoulder, "If you want some chocolate, have one of those."

Eunice scowled at his retreating back. But she didn't touch Iris's chocolates.

* * * *

The next morning, Iris rang the bell a third time, unsurprised when there was no answer. She prolonged the moment as long as possible before "discovering" her maid was dead. In the meantime, she practiced looking shocked in her hand mir-

ror. When her door clicked open, Iris's expression turned to stunned disbelief.

"My apologies, Madam. There's been a bit of a contretemps this morning."

Iris jackknifed straight up, the hand mirror thudding to the floor.

Eunice backed into the room and set the breakfast tray on the bed. She fluffed the pillows, and drew the curtains, just like any normal morning. "It's a lovely day, but unfortunately your butler died in the night."

Iris gaped. She tried to speak, but no words came out.

"The police are expected shortly. I've pressed your navy stripe. Will there be anything else?"

"N-n-no." Iris cleared her throat. "No, thank you, Eunice. Er...how are you feeling today?"

"I'm very well, thank you." The maid closed the door behind her.

Iris poured her coffee and wondered if she had enough servants left to send one to fetch Elliott.

As it turned out, Detective Bassett had been on Elliott's doorstep before the milk truck. "The butler is dead," said Bassett. "Get yourself dressed and come with me." Never at his best in the morning, Elliott grumbled, but complied.

Sergeant Baxter met them at the door. "You ain't gonna believe this one, boss."

"Why? How'd he die?" asked Bassett.

"It ain't the how. It's the who." Baxter swung open the kitchen door.

“What in the name of my sainted Aunt Sally is he doing here?” cried the detective.

Elliott was confused. “What do you mean? That’s the butler, Bulschick.”

“The hell it is. That’s Mickey Bulster, an enforcer for Dion O’Banion.”

Bassett tipped his hat back and stared at the dead gangster. The chocolate pot lay on its side, the dregs spilled on the table.

While Bassett conferred with his sergeant, Elliott checked the tin of rat poison in the cupboard. A quick shake confirmed a significant quantity was missing. He leaned down by the pot and sniffed. “No smell of almonds.”

“Then it’s not cyanide,” said Bassett. “Right now, I don’t care how he died. Why was he working here? I want to talk to Arnold Stone and I want to talk to him now.”

The man of the house was not at home, having supped after the opera and stayed at his club. “Fine. I’ll talk to Mrs. Stone. Elliott, stay out.”

Elliott wandered into the living room, wishing he’d had time for a cup of coffee. Miraculously, the maid appeared with coffee and sweet rolls.

“You’re a treasure, Miss Gelch. However did you manage?”

“I used the neighbor’s kitchen.” She set down the tray and tripped over her own feet, knocking the shelf of family photos. Elliott helped replace the frames, including the photograph of Rose Stone that Arnold had thrown into the console drawer.

“I’ll take that, sir.” She gently wiped his fingerprint smears from the glass before setting it in the center of the top shelf.

“Rose Stone certainly had style,” said Elliott, one of those faint thoughts in his brain coming into focus. “I’d swear Iris’s hair is often arranged with that same intricate braiding.”

The observation hung in the air between them.

“It’s exactly the same, sir.”

“How does a seamstress learn hairdressing skills?”

“From my sister. She was the late Mrs. Stone’s maid.”

Elliott cursed his own stupidity. “Rose Stone was your patroness, wasn’t she?”

Eunice nodded. “Yes. Until she and my sister died.”

“They both died?”

“Mr. Stone had arranged an intimate 30th birthday dinner for himself and Mrs. Rose. But he was delayed in New York, so my sister shared the meal. They both contracted food poisoning.”

Elliott hadn’t known how Rose Stone died. “I’m sorry—about your sister and your shop. I gather Mr. Stone wasn’t interested in investing?”

“No, sir. In fact, somehow most of my private clients were persuaded to use other dressmakers. I found work scrubbing floors at the hospital. It was there I met your cousin, after she lost the second baby. I heard her crying one night, and brushed her hair to calm her.”

Elliott saw a depth of intelligence in the maid’s mud-brown eyes. “She took you on based on just that?”

“We found we were compatible, sir,” she said. “And she seemed like a woman who needed looking after.”

A horrible, preposterous theory began to form in Elliott’s mind. “I’m very fond of my cousin, Miss Gelch.”

“As am I. She deserves a long and happy life.” The maid refilled his coffee and left.

Elliott tried to recall Iris’s ramblings in the taxi. Would a maid as perfect as Eunice Gelch allow a stain on Iris’s habit? Leave her watch unwound? Misplace her favorite apron? As he fit this information to his new theory, a scream to shatter glass sent him running to Iris’s room.

Elliott skidded around the corner and shot an accusing look at Bassett, who stood helplessly over a sobbing Iris.

“It’s true, I did it,” she wailed.

“What exactly did you do, Iris?” asked Elliott.

“I k-k-k-illed the butler. And he wasn’t even a butler!”

Elliott crouched next to her. “Calm down and tell me what happened.”

“I can explain, sir,” Eunice appeared in the doorway. “Mrs. Stone wanted to dispose of some medicine. I suggested she pour it into the chocolate pot. Before I could dispose of it down the drain, Mr. Bulschick must have drunk it.”

Bassett turned slowly to face the maid. “You’re saying it’s another accident?”

“But, you didn’t...Eunice...” Iris hiccupped through her tears.

“Give me strength,” said Bassett. “Let’s have this again. From the beginning.”

Elliott left them and walked down the hall, slotting this new piece of information into the puzzle. He sat in the living room, waiting for the elevator doors to ping open. In a bet with himself, he guessed a wait of ten, maybe fifteen minutes at the most. Actually, it only took five minutes before Arnold Stone burst into the room.

“I saw the policeman in the lobby. What is it? Is it Iris?”

Elliott stopped him from barging into the crime scene. “Iris is fine. It’s your butler.”

“I shouldn’t have stayed away. Oh, my darling...wait, my butler, you say?”

“Yes,” Elliott watched him process this information.

“I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t either. But I think I’m beginning to. Incidentally, did you know buttlings was not Mr. Bulschick’s primary profession?”

“What? What are you implying? If you’re suggesting—”

Elliott cut off the sputtering outrage. “Enough. I want the truth this time. How did you come to employ that man?”

Stone chewed on his lip, then smiled at Elliott with a conspiratorial wink. “You got me, Frank. I guess I have to come clean, confess everything.”

Elliott tried to hide his surprise. “It would be easier, and more honorable, if you would.”

“Well, between us men, you know how it is. I promised I’d take care of everything, but Iris was due back and I hadn’t done much about servants. So I called my club. This Bulschick guy shows up, says the club recommended him.”

“You’re confessing to hiring a butler with no references is that it?”

“I was desperate,” said Stone. “How did he...uh, what happened?”

Elliott repeated the maid’s account, mystified to see Arnold’s expression brighten as he did. Bassett was right—something didn’t smell right. Elliott crossed his arms and studied the ever-so charming Arnold Stone. The pieces fit together, but the picture they made was almost impossible to believe.

“I’m sure they’ll go easy on Iris,” said Arnold. “Of course, murder is murder, even if it is accidental.”

Elliott glared at Stone. “If I were you, I’d call a lawyer.”

“Certainly, nothing but the best for my darling girl.”

Elliott stared through the charm, not finding any sign of concern for his wife in Arnold Stone. If his suspicions were correct, Iris would need more protection than Eunice Gelch’s watchful eye could provide. “Don’t leave, Stone. I’m sure the detective will want to talk to you.”

Stone nodded and smiled coldly. “Since I wasn’t here, I don’t know what help I’ll be.”

A satisfied smile broke across Arnold Stone’s face after Elliott left. That buffoon Bulschick had managed to kill three people instead of Iris. Served him right, dying from filching the good chocolate. Just as well not to have a witness. If Iris were hanged for murder, or even went to prison, his problem would be solved.

He sighed contentedly and folded his hands behind his head, plans for the future falling neatly into place. Lily War-

wick was the perfect choice for the next Mrs. Stone. She was young and had proven capable of a wife's one stinkin' job. Smiling at the prospect of the sons who would inherit his empire, he grabbed a handful of Iris's chocolates and popped them into his mouth. Strange, they'd never tasted like almonds before.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. A. Blume turned her love affair with mysteries into a fully committed relationship when the pandemic abruptly ended her career in theater marketing. A lifelong Chicagoan, she loves a great day on the lake as much as an elegantly crafted locked-room mystery.