

TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS
MURDER AND MAYHEM

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Chapter One

December 5, 1950 Somewhere in Yorkshire, England

Basil Beaverton was in a foul mood as he turned off the highway onto a narrow rural road winding like a snake up and down the hills. It was a road to be taken seriously since it was barely wide enough to accommodate two cars driving in opposite directions. Basil hoped he would be lucky enough to avoid meeting another motorist and be forced to creep slowly forward to pass the other car.

Such an encounter required each vehicle to be moved onto the very edge of the road, then slowly pass one another with only inches to spare. A miscalculation could cause a

car to slide down into a narrow shallow ditch. Or worse, it was possible to become badly wedged in a bog and hopelessly stuck without a hope of powering your car free.

Several situations were common when mired down. There was the possibility of no traffic for hours which would have been a fortunate thing if you weren't in a ditch. Or, you are able to contact a garage in a nearby village and arrange for a tow truck to pull you out. Then you are left to wait not knowing when the truck would arrive. Chances of the tow truck arriving before midnight were only a hope.

Basil was relieved to pass through this treacherous stretch of the road unscathed. Now the way was straight and wider near the hamlet of Stream on Green. Basil's Jaguar quickly picked up speed, maybe a little faster than the road conditions warranted on a gray, drizzly day. A mile away from the hamlet was the first crossing of the stream for which the place was named.

Basil hadn't been relieved of his lousy mood, now he was also impatient to reach his destination, Cheatham Castle. Out of the gloom of the day he saw the upper beams of the bridge spanning the stream coming up. No need to slow down for the bridge, it was a straight run across to the other side. His car entered the bridge area between the supporting upper beams, unfortunately they were the only structures of the bridge still standing.

The car launched into open air, then arched downward as it ran out of momentum, landing nose first into the bank of the stream. It came to rest with the hood completely buried in the mud, leaving Basil staring through the shattered windshield into blackness.

He was slightly injured from the dive, his head was bleeding from striking the windshield when the Jaguar dove into the stream bank His chest was badly bruised from his collision with the steering wheel when the car came to an abrupt halt.

As the shock of the crash wore off, panic set in, and he

frantically pushed on the car door. It opened enough to allow Basil to slither through it to the muddy stream bed. He began to do an inventory of his working parts. No broken bones as far as he could tell, but his head and chest were throbbing with pain. He was about to sit down on a rock near the car when a man in working clothes and Wellingtons approached him.

"Are you bleedin' or anything?" he asked Basil as he looked him over.

Three outrageous elements of the current situation collided in Basil's brain. Their incendiary power combined to create an incomprehensible rage he was unable to stop from expressing itself.

"Why? why? aren't there warning signs posted? I was nearly killed! Do you work here?"

The force of this outburst alarmed the workman and he back-pedaled away from Basil. Then tripped and fell on his rump in the mud. He stood up and stared at the madman then he replied warily.

"There were signs up until last night. Someone stole them, probably some of the local lads. We have been debating whether we would put up signs again. It's quite an expense to us, and everyone in the area knows the bridge was washed away in the recent flooding.

"We didn't reckon on a stranger driving on this road. Now I can see it was a bad decision. Except for the little bit of blood on your forehead you look fine, I'd say the deep mud you landed in cushioned your fall."

Basil was staring at him, dumfounded over the lunatic explanation he had just heard.

"Are you people insane? No warning signs at the bridge because the locals knew it was destroyed, so you people took a chance a stranger wouldn't be using the road? I have never heard such nitwit thinking in my life! I'm not feeling lucky to land in soft mud as you have pointed out, it shouldn't have happened in the first place!"

The last part was screamed out as his voice went higher and higher. Now the worker instinctively retreated a few

yards away from Basil to protect himself from bodily harm at the hands of the raving maniac. He was also becoming angry over the insulting remarks being shouted out at him. What cheek! he thought to himself, the man has only a scratch or two., no need to be abusive.

By now there was a crowd of residents lined up on the other bank where a bridge had once existed. A policeman arrived at the accident scene, a little late, since he was forced to drive ten miles to the nearest crossing to get over to the accident scene. He inspected the car, then came over to the laborer to hear the details about a stupid driver crashing his car into the stream bed.

Basil sat down heavily on a rock to keep from falling over from the shock of the accident. Seeing blood on his forehead, the officer yelled over to the other bank where the crowd had gathered for the big show, to call for an ambulance. Then he turned his attention to the workman who gave him a highly biased account of the accident and Basil's rude remarks.

His story satisfied the policeman about the events at the accident scene and he only asked Basil for his identification and license. Wisely, he refrained from any more complaints about the embicility of the hamlet's counsel. He made this decision based upon the officer's rude behavior.

The policeman was less than sympathetic, his hostile attitude had been formed after hearing the wild, twisted account of things from the workman. Finally an ambulance showed up to carry Basil to the local medical clinic. He was examined, declared to be only slightly injured, and given some pain pills. Before he could leave the clinic they asked him to pay the bill. It was cleared up when a local observer at the bridge vouched for Basil's story.

Basil was quite drunk at the Boar's Hoof Pub when his cousin, Pen, short for Penelope, arrived to give him a lift to Cheatham Castle. Alcohol and pain pills are a mixture guaranteed to make you stark raving out of it. Pen sized him up, taking in the bandage on his injured forehead, his drunken state, the muddy, crumpled clothes, and burst out laughing. He had been expecting an understanding and

sympathetic relative eager to help him, not a cousin with her big mouth wide open guffawing.

She took him in hand and coaxed him into sitting down in her car by apologizing profusely for making fun of him. She didn't mean a word of it of course, but it got the job done. Pen had always considered Basil a stick with a high opinion of himself. He passed out while she drove along laughing loudly once she was sure he was unconscious. Pen only regretted not having a camera with her to record Basil's imitation of a drunk on his way to jail.

Pen was selfishly happy, something had happened to get her out of the "pile of stones" under the guise of a rescue mission for her cousin. She had been trapped with her mother who was chatting non-stop with her sister, Basil's mother. She was cheered up by the thought of fifty guests arriving in the next two days to celebrate the 500th year of the historic Cheatham Castle.

Many of the guests would be a wide variety of family relatives bound by blood ties to the Cheatham clan. In or-

der of importance were the inhabitants of the castle, all the way down to a sprinkling of third cousins. There would also be a number of well known important people. Cheatham Castle was guaranteed wide spread publicity of the week long pre- Christmas event.

Cheatham castle was an English land mark built on the site of a Roman fort. It was situated next to Hadrian's Wall built to protect the Roman army, and mark the end of civilization. This was near Scotland where the northern English tribes viciously and frequently attacked the Roman Army.

The wall marked the farthest point where reasonable protection from the wild hordes could be expected. If you wandered off into the hills past the wall, you no longer had any hope of help from the Romans. In other words, don't blame us if something dire happens should you wander beyond the Wall.

Cheathams presently living at the family home were Lord and Lady Cheatham, a widowed daughter, her three

children, and a son. A grand celebration of this magnitude hadn't been held at the castle since prior to World War II. Post war England was only five years removed from WWII. The country was struggling to recover from the world conflict which drained away the wealth of the kingdom. Industries had to be revived to get back to competitive commerce, a slow process since the vital functions were now owned and operated by the government. Civil service has never been known for vigorous forward looking efforts.

Many landed families like the Cheathams were flat broke. Taxes of all kinds were choking them, their revenue producing activities were in chaos, and they only knew how to be idle with servants, or in a war killing people. Some did get into politics but those opportunities weren't plentiful. In the case of the Cheathams their enterprising son, Neville, turned the castle into a tourist attraction.

They lived in one wing of the vast building, the rest was open to the public, for a fee, of course. The tourist business was small at present, but Neville had big ideas to con-

vert the castle into a high class hotel. He saw the 500 year anniversary event as their big chance to raise the capital they needed to go big time with a combination of a hotel and tourism.

His bash was costing a small fortune. Fifty guests being fed and entertained for a week in the grand old fashion complete with bird hunting, fox hunting, balls, and parties had a price tag you don't want to know. Raising the funds was Neville's responsibility which he attacked with enthusiasm. Making deals seemed to be in his blood and nothing defeated him for long.

He created a corporation to raise the money needed to hold the event. It was an eclectic mix of investors each representing an area needed for the project. For example, a large hotel in York was supplying uniformed domestics, cooks and all of the linens needed for 60 bedrooms. They owned 15% of the company and solved many of the operational details for Neville. He considered it to be well worth the stock ownership he had to give them.

Many merchant associations in Yorkshire saw the future potential of the image Cheatham Castle would be creating for the area. More money and help poured in from these sources and several villages provided needed maintenance people for a share.

In all, 40% of the corporation was owned by this mixed bunch. Neville was pleased, while the family was a little alarmed, until he explained the real estate and castle weren't an asset of the operating company.

Chapter Two

In the morning, Basil sat in a large solarium nursing a cup of coffee and feeling even worse than yesterday. His injuries hurt, in addition he now had a horrible hangover attacking him viciously. It had been created by the potent combination of booze and the powerful pain pills he had abused.

He didn't want to be here alone without his wife who refused to go to the event based upon an old family feud. Linda, his wife, was from the Chichester family who had clashed wills with the Cheathams over a property dispute. In court the Cheathams won the case, being awarded ownership of the real estate being contested in a court trial.

Establishing ownership went back through several centuries of old records and deeds causing some mitigating circumstances in favor of the Chichesters. Due to this less than clear situation, the court had recommended the Cheat-

hams, although not legally bound to do so, in all fairness, should pay a sum of money to the Chichesters. The Chethams reacted violently to this suggestion and told the court to bug out of their business. Not a pence ever, they declared.

. This hostile attitude sparked an on-going feud with each side looking for opportunities to hurt their enemy. Collusion, sneaky deals and bribery made things sort of fascinating to people who knew the families.

Pen had been looking around the castle for Basil mainly out of morbid curiosity to see what he looked like this morning. She had temporarily forgotten about the solarium tucked away from the main section of the castle. Pen found him there sitting alone and looking somewhat like a sea sick passenger on a ship. There was a pale green pallor along his jaw line melding into a stark white face, except for the dark circles under his eyes.

She walked in, waved, and greeted him.

"Good morning pale face as an American Indian would say. I won't ask how you feel, I can see the damage."

Basil came out of his half-stupor and gazed at his cousin.

"I would greet you Pen, but I don't feel like it."

"Fine attitude. I rescued you yesterday, remember?"

"Playing the noble rescuer doesn't suit you. I'm sure you drove over to pick me up out of screaming boredom."

"Close," she admitted. "I was stuck with our mothers chatting about nothing except the past."

She sat down at the table without asking and poured herself a cup of coffee. Basil wanted to be alone in his misery not forced to make conversation with his cousin. He decided to make the chat mildly unpleasant to drive her away. He knew she had a low opinion of him. His strikingly beautiful cousin had already been a famous model and now owned one of the most successful modeling agencies in London.

Her private life had been a different matter altogether. She made a series of bad choices in this area. The most visible wreckage of her life were three horrible marriages to men even a ten year old could of told her weren't going to give her anything but trouble.

In a breathtaking period of six years she was married and divorced, married and divorced, and married and divorced.

In order of appearance were a compulsive gambler, his unfitness would have been simple for the ten year old to spot. Pen finally refused to pay off his markers and listening to emotional begging for another chance.

Next came a sex addict, this was the shortest marriage, lasting less than a year. Pen was humiliated, and quickly became tired of bailing him out of jail for various bizarre adventures. She cut her losses and moved on with a badly damaged heart. All of his outward attributes as a clean cut, handsome man known for his impeccable manners had caused Pen to fall deeply in love with this image.

Her marriage blunders wouldn't have been a complete set without an alcoholic film star. She married a drunk who had years of experience in lying his way out of most of his drunken antics. His alcoholism was widely known, but Pen, unfortunately, met him when he had been sober for six months in a rehab program. He managed to use his

ducks, dodges, and lying, for a remarkable two years.

Most of his relapse binges had been during filming on location somewhere far away from Pen. Then one night she received the all-too-familiar phone call to come down and bail her drunken husband out of jail. She did so, vowing this was the last time, and telling Richard to sleep at a hotel, don't ever try to see her

Basil went to work to rid himself of Pen's company.

"Apparently you are doing quite well with your business, Pen. Your name, and your agency are frequently in the news to the extent even a stuffy barrister like me notices."

Pen picked up on his churlish move to get rid of her. She wasn't in the mood for verbal fencing with Basil.

"To save time, Basil, before I leave, which I was doing anyway, yes, my business is very healthy, and no, I'm not in any relationships. Oh yes, I know Richard is one of the invited guests, and I don't give a damn whether he will be here or not. Finally Basil, f---off!"

Chapter Three

Despite the cold, rainy weather, the invited guests began to arrive at a steady pace all day. Many of the people were present by tea time in the afternoon. In the vast dining hall it sounded like a busy bee hive as the guests talked to friends and relatives. In all, the buzz had a light note to it indicating most of them were delighted to be there. It was an honor to be a guest at this prestigious historic 500 year anniversary event for the famous castle.

Lord and Lady Cheatham welcomed their guests before tea was served and received polite, muted applause. They were all seated waiting to be served by the platoon of uniformed servants when there was a commotion out in the main entrance hall. It was Pen's ex husband, Richard Princeton, the film star, arriving to face a flurry of photographers and reporters all eager to cover his entrance. Neville was very pleased to have the press coverage of Princeton's grand entrance.

His entourage included his current wife who was a film actress with her own fame, and a fiery looking redhead. She wasn't an actress, but she was well known to the assembly being a daughter of the Cheathams. Olivia Cheatham was the youngest of the siblings and spent most of her time in London working as a model for Pen. A girl had to eat. At this time in England, the early 50's, families, for the most part, couldn't financially support grown children.

After tea time guests were busy settling in to their assigned quarters. Outdoors the stable hands were hard at work stabling the horses some guests had brought along for hunting and riding. A group of men was standing under the eaves of the stable roof having a great time drinking and talking about everything from horses to politics. Altogether, the guests represented a mixture of family, friends, celebrities. and some old enemies.

A noted arrival was the Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard John Livingston with his wife, and surprisingly, Elaine Marble the amateur sleuth. It was a shock since she had made an ass out of him in two famous murder cases. Miss

Marble had, in her signature fashion, insisted she had only helped the chief inspector with a few of her own observations.

In a way, these denials were more lethal to his reputation than if there had been an outright announcement by Miss Marble taking credit for solving the murder cases. The inspector could have then issued a statement to the public praising her work. Then, as part of his announcement, he could have pointed out how many London policemen, and their hard work, were required to gather all of the facts to successfully solve the case for Miss Marble. She would never fall into such a trap.

She answered a few questions for the media people then bowed out leaving the inspector at the center of the news conference. She sought out a servant to inquire if afternoon tea was still available, it was, and he ushered her into one of the sitting rooms. Before she could sit down, Lady Elizabeth Jones-Hysworth came over to greet her.

"Oh, Elaine it is so good to see you again. I'd heard you might come to the castle for the anniversary. Now I

hope we don't have a ghastly murder because you're here." Then she smiled at her own little joke. Miss Marble dressed as usual in a plain dark dress and a small hat with tiny flowers replied smiling.

"My dear Lady Elizabeth, it's nice to see you too. Chief Inspector Livingston graciously went out of his way to pick me up and drive me here."

Knowing, as nearly everybody did, of the humiliation he had suffered because of the murder cases, Lady Elizabeth was impressed with the inspector's gracious gesture. Six ladies sat at a table for tea trading the current gossip about mutual acquaintances. No one at the table soaked up more of every word spoken than Elaine Marble, for she was a compulsive snoop. Tea time lasted for over an hour mainly because of Miss Marble's subtle skill at prying information from the group, and sipping her four cups of tea.

Chapter Four

To kick off the first night of the event there was a formal banquet in the huge dining hall designed to serve a hundred guests with room to spare. Weeks of preparation restored the hall to its past condition when banquets were held for royalty from a number of countries, politicians and business tycoons. on a regular schedule. Many a big deal was created and agreed upon at these dinner parties.

Elaine Marble told everyone she wasn't attending the banquet, an early evening would suit her. When this news was spread around, it was interpreted to mean she couldn't afford expensive clothes. Eager volunteers came forward to offer her formal dresses from their wardrobes. These helpful ladies had been involved in some way in a murder investigation solved by her,

She declined all of these kind offers at first, then waited for some of them to absolutely refuse to take "no" for an

answer. Miss Marble then hesitated, and the game began to maneuver for a gown from Lady Devereux who was a devotee of fashion. The wife of a wealthy tycoon lent her diamond jewelry, another lady threw in a complete cosmetic make over. It's good to know the right people, she thought to herself.

Social connections were being renewed by the guests along with the awakening of old grudges, and some outright hatred situations. Miss Marble looked over the guests and thought to herself, it's a social occasion fraught with all kinds of potential for violence. This will be interesting. So the veteran sleuth started mingling with the guests asking seemingly innocent questions and eavesdropping on conversations. She had the remarkable gift of total recall which she had never revealed to anyone. Aah, the snooping has begun.

After the banquet many of the guests gathered in the main reception hall for after dinner drinks. Most of them were waiting for the dress ball to begin in the grand ballroom. Miss Marble had just joined a group when a page

gave her a message to take a phone call. She followed the page to a phone. "Hello?" she said, but there was no answer from the other end. How strange she thought.

As she hung up the receiver, there was a hissing noise very close to her ear, then a scream from a man a few feet behind her. Everyone was frozen in place staring at a man with an arrow lodged deeply in his throat with a portion of the bolt sticking out of the back of his neck. He was frantically trying to pull the arrow out, but he dropped to the floor. Blood was gushing from the wound, and the man quickly lost consciousness.

Several women standing near the stricken man screamed at the ghastly sight and another woman close by fainted. There was chaos as the group talked among themselves trying to learn what had happened since there had been no sound other than the man's scream. Then people began to push their way forward to see what had occurred. It became a disorganized mob running into each other in confusion.

Chief Inspector Livingston immediately took command of the murder scene and with the help of the house servants slowly moved the guests out of the main reception hall. Some of the guests resisted being forced out of the room but Livingston was adamant about clearing the area.

Several doctors in the crowd rushed to the aid of the fallen man. They could have taken their time reaching the victim, he was already dead. It was a most bizarre attack because the man was killed by a bolt from an ancient crossbow.

Neville looked on anxiously with his thoughts colliding with one another. Now he was guaranteed plenty of media exposure, but would it create a bad reputation for the castle in the minds of the public? He was extremely grateful they had invited the top inspector from Scotland Yard to the event. He had heard Livingston was a stickler for confidentiality during his investigations. Maybe the news of his presence there would help in squelching unfounded rumors so prevalent in sensational news events.

Livingston's rule meant not a word was to be spoken about the case by his policemen nor the witnesses they interrogated. He was not at all popular with the media and he could not be pressured by anyone to reveal anything about anything. Miss Marble was not exempt from this rule. She had offered to assist the inspector, but he politely put her off saying it was too early in the game to know what needed to be done.

Miss Marble decided to go around him using her masterful techniques of little hints, and answers from people who could be of help to her. Gossip was perhaps her most powerful tool to stir things up. She used it to force the person of interest to take some action. While she was knitting in a comfortable chair by the fireplace, or having tea, her staged drama would be in motion.

Miss Marble would now become chummy with the house servants. They were a valuable source of information, about what they had seen or heard about the guests. Often a servant would comment on something out of place in a guest's room meaning little to them,

but not to the amateur detective..

Basil Beaverton was the murdered man. Pen was surprised to hear it was her cousin. It was baffling to her why anyone would have strong enough feelings about the little sanctimonious stick to kill him. Insult him maybe, or laugh at him, but, unless there were secrets she was unaware of, she hadn't a clue about the killer. Neville insisted the pleasure of his guests, as tragic as Beaverton's death was, shouldn't be interrupted, and the ball would be held.

Many of the people were shocked at his announcement, but a drink or two settled their nerves. Then the inviting music coming from the ballroom, did the trick. After all, life is for the living isn't it? The effect of a champagne fountain going full blast in the center of the huge hall, a first class orchestra playing, and alcohol impairment, made the ball a great success. It was fully covered by the selected media people allowed in to record the event.

Through the night police procedures were being organized by Livingston. He found out very quickly this wasn't

London with all of the resources at hand to have forensics on the scene within the hour, or a pathologist well trained for murder scenes. What he had was a local constable who showed up riding a bicycle, and a frosty old doctor who went to bed early. He highly resented being roused out of bed late at night. The inspector would have to forget about having a forensic team of any kind.

Temporarily he improvised, the cranky doctor was persuaded to examine the body and issue a death certificate. Even that became a chore for him. Then he suddenly changed his mind and announced.

"I'm on the scene," the doctor said, "It's my duty to perform a thorough examination of the deceased to determine the cause of death."

It was a rather odd statement to make since the corpse had an arrow imbedded in his throat. Now the examination became painfully slow as he made copious notes about every aspect of Basil's remains. Livingston made the mistake of commenting on his lack of speed, and the doctor shouted at him.

"You were the one who called me for my help! Now that I'm here at the castle, I will take my time!"

Livingston spent the rest of the night contacting London for assistance and making arrangements to bring Scotland Yard operatives to the castle. Time was being lost in a murder case, and too much time could make clues vanish. By early morning he had promises for a forensic team and a pathologist to come up from London.

Chapter Five

Mercifully, the following day was clear and sunny, so outdoor events went off as planned. By late morning the sound of guns going off were heard at the castle. This was the bird hunting bunch blazing away at anything flying in the air.

Down at the stables the horsy set was taking care of their horses, fox hunting would be held the next day. There was excitement in the air, and inside the castle, bridge and billiards games were being organized. All of this activity helped to keep attention away from the murder investigation.

It was a quite a challenge to have 50 guests, and 40 others working at the castle, processed through routine police procedures. Local police officers from near by communities were checking identifications, backgrounds and locations in the castle at the time of the murder. Neville or-

ganized his office area to accommodate the chief inspector and the local policemen..

A huge tactical map of the main floor of Cheatham Castle was pinned up. Every person would be asked to show them on the map where they were at 9:14 PM on the night of the murder. Miss Marble was also organizing her plans to start poking around the castle.

She decided to begin in the card room where the bridge bunch would begin playing. She would sit quietly knitting and eaves-dropping on the players. Actually, she didn't knit. On her knitting needles there was always a strip of knitted material and she made the motions of knitting. It was a perfect blind for her to appear to be concentrating on her knitting, while she was listening closely to conversations.

Tea time was a favorite information gathering technique she relied on heavily. It was a habit for women to trade gossip while drinking tea and Miss Marble cleverly joined a different group each tea time. Her innocent seeming questions often yielded what she wanted to know from un-

suspecting tea drinkers. Women who knew her from past murder cases, many grateful to her, sang like canaries to every question she asked them.

General snooping was done by strolling hallways and listening at the doors of bedrooms. If it was the room of a particular person of interest, she would check the hallway, if it was clear, out came a small water glass. With the glass placed on the surface of the door, and her ear pressed to it, an echo chamber was created, and she could hear sounds. She used this technique on walls too.

This 500 Year event was a major challenge to her skills, oh, so many people to study and eliminate from her list. By late afternoon the police investigation was underway. Guests and employees were being brought into the office to indicate where they were at 9:14 PM. It was the time of Basil Beaverton's death. This part of the operation was less than 10 minutes long. It only required an individual to point out on the map where they were at the time of the killing.

Investigating the people who were actually present in the reception hall ,when the crossbow bolt (arrow) was fired was a logical beginning. There was a list of thirty people who were present in the hall, mostly guests, with a sprinkling of servants working at the castle..

An interviewing schedule was worked out to take place in the guests' rooms to keep the investigation as inconspicuous in the castle as possible. This careful planning was being undertaken so the grand event wouldn't be ruined by the specter of a lurking maniac loose in the castle. Neville quickly hired uniformed security guards to be stationed conspicuously around the area in an effort to provide an atmosphere of safety. Police orders were issued stating no one was allowed to leave the area.

Miss Marble now had a big job to stay informed about the police interviews. This was a situation which would require all of her snooping skills. She had already contacted an investigator in London to poke around about Basil Beaverton and any possible negative incidents with his legal clients. She told him Basil appeared to be an ultra conser-

vative man so he might not find any dirt from public records. Her other source of information about the murdered man would be the police as they progressed through their murder investigation.

Livingston had always fallen into her little traps in the past and she doubted he had changed much. She was miffed when the chief inspector didn't invite her to take a role working with him to solve the case. Although he had turned her down, she would speak to him again. and offer her services.

The Forensics team arrived late in the afternoon from London and went to work on their first sweep of the hall. Based on their measurements from the site of the body and the angle of the bolt, they found the spot where the killer must have stood. It was a small balcony adjacent to the staircase at the west end of the hall. They estimated the bolt had to have traveled approximately 30 feet. It would take a skilled archer to hit a victim in the neck from that distance. It narrowed the search considerably in their search for the killer, not many of the guests could be suspected of being well trained archers.

A crossbow is a powerful military weapon and it ushered in a simple method of shooting an arrow. It is fired from the shoulder like shooting a rifle. Loading it with an arrow was an easy move, the shooter merely had to pull the string back and lock it in place. Next an arrow is laid in place on the crossbow. Then it is aimed, and a trigger releases the bolt.

At an early point in its history, several European countries were calling for a ban on the use of the crossbow as being too inhumane. No such action took place, and it was used extensively in wars. Similar bans have been called for on other weapons, including the atomic bomb. Man has never invented a weapon he didn't use.

Finding the murder weapon was simple. Displays of weapons on the walls in the castle were searched. The crossbow was taken from an exhibit next to the fireplace on the second floor. There were recent minute marks around the supports the crossbow hung on, none of the other bows had signs of being disturbed.

Apparently it was removed, prepared for use, then it was

returned to its place by the killer. It seemed to be an impossible task to learn anything from a wooden crossbow as opposed to a gun. A pistol has a manufacturer, a make, model, and rifling grooves in the barrel to match to a bullet. No fingerprints were on the crossbow, it had been wiped clean.

Chapter Six

On the third day of the event, Livingston was sent a confidential report on Basil Beaverton. He read it immediately like someone getting the results of a horse race, feverishly looking for some obvious clue to the murderer. His team watched him while he read the report, when his expression changed only slightly to appear more somber than before, they knew it was back to work for them.

The profile of Basil Beaverton was exceedingly bland, it was difficult to believe he would do anything rash to upset anyone. In his law firm he was more like a clerk than a lawyer. Mostly he filed things with courts and government departments. He rarely had any personal contact with the firm's clients. It wasn't necessary, he only had to put case paperwork in proper order, fill out legal forms and sign them as the attorney of record.

His personal life was as predictable as his professional one. He lived a quiet family life with his wife. They had two daughters who were now married and caring for their own families. Neighbors who were interviewed had nothing to add except to say he was passionate about his rose garden. To one of the women he had interviewed the investigator jokingly said the possibility of jealousy over Basil's rose garden hardly added up to a motive for murder.

Interviews were now over, and Scotland Yard personnel in London were analyzing the information. Sifting through reports was a tedious business, you must stay awake and sharp while reading the most mundane, boring information repeated in every interview. Livingston then announced they would work fourteen hours a day until all of the reports had been studied.

Here it was, only a few weeks before the Christmas holiday, his agents would be missing the parties back in London. And how would they manage to do their gift shopping? The more rebellious minds in the inspector's group of agents killed Basil over and over.

Miss Marble heard from her source in London, and learned nothing more than Livingston knew. Drat! she thought to herself, I need something to give me a leg up on the inspector, but what? No important clues had been uncovered by snooping so far. She did hear a lot of dirt on a number of people which was an exciting part of being a snoop.

She decided to widen her search for information to the house servants, surely they'll know something juicy. Domestic snooping was more difficult for several reasons. One being prowling around at night to cover the kitchen help cooking food for the following morning. Another difficult task was tracking down house cleaning personnel who worked at all hours of the day and night.

She found a good source of inside gossip around the castle in the head housekeeper. Susan Brown loved to sneak around and listen in to other people's conversations. Having access to anywhere on the estate, and the keys to all of the castle doors, she was a find for Miss Marble. She was very impressed at meeting the famous sleuth and being

asked to join up with her to gather information.

Nancy Brown was a local and a member of the permanent staff at Cheatham Castle. She thought, Susan will lead me to the right person to crack this case before the inspector can get his facts together. Eager to please Miss Marble, she repeated some gossip picked up from a chamber maid.

"This might be something for you, it was told to me by one of the chambermaids. She overheard a conversation between Robby Devon and Lady Diana Guinness setting up a secret rendezvous tonight in the East garden at ten o'clock. She said they mentioned Mr. Beaverton's murder several times."

"I'll be at the East garden tonight Susan, this might be the clue to Basil's killer. Nice work, you could be credited for finding the parties responsible for the death of Basil Beaverton."

Susan was thrilled to be given such a compliment by Elaine Marble, super snoop.

At 9:55 she slipped out of a side door unseen, heading for the East garden. Near the entrance to the garden from the castle side she sat down on a bench hidden in a clump of bushes waiting for the couple to arrive. A little after ten, a man appeared on the garden path, followed quickly by a woman. Taking her hand, he walked briskly along obviously knowing where he was going.

Marble followed them staying close to the hedge for concealment. Near the back wall of the garden was a small greenhouse and an attached potting shed. The couple entered it. She reached the shed from the rear where there was no window. Sidling along the wall, she crept around the corner to a window and listened.

"Two days is too long between meetings." he said.

"Oh, I agree Robby, we must make a plan to be together every day. I have to see you."

Then they moved away from the window and their voices were fading. She did hear Basil's name mentioned several times in the mostly indistinct talking. Words caught here and there seemed to add up to the idea that attention

on the the murder case was a perfect screen for their activities.

This could be vital, she thought to herself. I have to get in closer so I can hear everything. Slowly she crept up to the rear door of the shed, and quietly opened it hoping it wouldn't squeak. Two steps into the room she tripped on a pile of clay pots. They made a loud noise as they broke under her as she fell.

Her flashlight was accidentally turned on by the force of the fall and flooded the shed with a bright light. Right in front of her was the couple in the nude, half rising up with astonished looks on their faces.

"What the hell?" he shouted and grabbed for his pants. Miss Marble wasn't as spry as she used to be. Frantically she shut off the flashlight then struggled to get upright. A strong hand gripped her arm and yanked her to her feet while he took her flashlight. She was blinded when the bright light was thrust within two inches of her face.

Lady Guinness was up now, and partly dressed, she pointed at the intruder,

"I know you! You're that old lady who is always snooping around everybody. Nosy old bitch, spying on us! I guess you get your kicks watching people have sex. How sick and disgusting."

Miss Marble was still in the grasp of Robby Devon.

"I should have you arrested, but since Diana and I aren't married to each other, I'll make a deal. Keep your mouth shut and I let you go, otherwise, I turn you in as a stalker. What'll it be?"

Marble's' eyes were wide open and she looked terrified.

"I promise never to ever say anything about tonight."

"You have a reputation to protect Miss Marble keep it in mind if you get tempted to open your big mouth."

She sort of stumbled back to her room in a daze. "This sort of thing isn't supposed to happen to me," she kept repeating out loud.

Chapter Seven

Livingston was becoming frustrated as the guests and employees were eliminated from the suspect list. Beavertons had a long history as bankers and lawyers in London. No one could recall any Beaverton being in the military service, sort of an oddity among the wealthy who typically went off to kill people without a second thought.

Their participation in wars was always confined to being members of advisory boards on the conduct of the war. It was a paper shuffling clan without any military heroes or black sheep causing family scandals. They all seemed to be cut from the same cloth, drab, boring people quietly amassing fortunes through an incisive understanding of the workings of red tape.

Many a big capital venture was orchestrated by Beavertons acting as bankers, lawyers and advisors, all participating in some phase of the same deal. Their reputation for

trustworthiness seemed to prevent anyone from raising questions regarding a possible conflict of interest.

By now, Miss Marble had cast her nets far and wide to find something out of the ordinary in the Beaverton family history. She received an anonymous telephone call from a man disguising his voice with a handkerchief over the receiver. She listened to her mysterious caller with great interest in the message. What the anonymous voice told her seemed to be the answer to the identity of Basil Beaverton's killer.

All she needed to do was verify several things to be sure of the authenticity of the caller's information. Marble felt the exultation she always experienced when the identity of a killer was about to be uncovered. She sought out the group of women at tea time which included Mrs. Dansbury a resident of the village mentioned by the anonymous caller. In no time at all she was conversing with Mrs. Dansbury over a second cup of tea.

Inspector Livingston had some information given to him from one of the experts he had brought in to assist him on technical matters. His report changed the entire focus of his investigation, and only the two of them knew what the man had discovered. He ordered the expert to keep his report a secret while he began looking for suspects.

With Neville's help, Miss Marble set up a meeting time for four in the afternoon to include all of the guests at the castle. Some of the people were slightly annoyed since the meeting would take up time they had reserved for other pursuits. The horsy set in particular was upset. They had just finished the fox hunt and they were tired, stiff, and sore after the vigorous chase to corner the fox. A hot bath had been the plan for most of them.

Miss Marble sat in a comfortable chair by the huge fireplace in the reception hall with her knitting on her lap. She thought it was nice touch, sort of her trademark image. People began gathering in the hall looking puzzled over the hastily announced meeting. Among the assembled guests feelings ranged from anger at being discommoded

to excitement about Miss Marble's probable solving of the murder of Basil Beaverton.

Neville made an introductory speech about the reason for the gathering.

"Miss Marble asked me to arrange for this gathering concerning the terrible murder committed two nights ago. She believes the mystery has been solved by information she has received from an anonymous source. What she was told was independently verified by a reliable person. Thank you for your patience. Here is Miss Marble."

With an air of quiet dignity the amateur sleuth began.

"I do apologize for disrupting the plans many of you had made for the day. I will be as brief as possible. This case at the beginning appeared to have no clues. The deceased, Basil Beaverton, was a very proper gentleman with a spotless reputation. Nothing in his background indicated past troubles with anyone. There was no evidence of a motive to kill him.

"This is a murder that might never have been solved without the information told to me by an anonymous call-

er. The motive arises from a tragic death fifty years ago in a family living in the same village as the Beavertons. A young girl told her parents she was pregnant, and named Percy Beaverton as the father of the unborn child.

"He was confronted by the family to discuss the situation and what he intended to do about it. Percy calmly told the father and mother he wouldn't do anything because how could he be sure the child was his? They were thunderstruck by this cold statement questioning the morals of their daughter.

"In a rage her father attacked Percy who easily defended himself being much bigger and stronger than his assailant. He left the house and cleared out of the village that very night leaving the girl to face the scandal alone.

"She told her parents Percy said they would be married and he had proposed to her before the announced pregnancy. Feeling as if the entire world was crumbling around her, Penelope Bentley threw herself over a cliff to be dashed on the rocks below.

"The Bentley family is a respected clan of strong convictions and this blot on them wouldn't be forgotten. Over the course of fifty years there have been attempts to kill male members of the Beaverton family. These attacks have never been successful in killing a male Beaverton, until now! I charge Percy Bentley IV with the murder of Basil Beaverton!"

There was a low rumbling of voices as they all turned to stare at Percy the fourth. The man went into a state of shock when Miss Marble accused him of being a murderer. He was a short, slight man who didn't appear strong enough to load a crossbow. When a local constable moved in to arrest him, he didn't resist, right now he was frozen in place.

Chapter Eight

Within an hour of Percy's arrest Inspector Livingston was told about Miss Marble's brilliant detective work to find the killer. Hearing this news, Livingston began to shake his head, he said to the agent who brought him the news.

"No, no, Percy Bentley had nothing to do with the killing. He must be released at once! Contact Neville and ask him to assemble the guests again, I'll be right there."

A grumpy, annoyed group of guests gathered again in the reception hall. Most of them didn't really care who did what to whom, they wanted to get on with their holiday. Miss Marble was annoyed when one of the Scotland Yard inspectors brought her back. She was certain the Chief Inspector was about make an ass of himself again.

Livingston appeared to be stifling a laugh as he entered the hall along with another man no one recognized. Miss

Marble became very alert, studying him, and wondering if she had seen him before. No, he was a stranger to her. The inspector stood in front of the group by the large fireplace and beckoned for the mystery man to come forward. He was an ordinary looking man of stocky build probably in his early fifties.

Livingston introduced him.

"Standing by me is Professor Jones, his field of study is medieval history. I asked him to examine the crossbow we believe to be the murder weapon. He studied the weapon carefully and tested it by shooting arrows from the small balcony where the killer must have stood. Measuring the exact distance from the balcony to the spot where Basil Beaverton fell, brought out a defect in the crossbow.

"More than likely due to atmospheric conditions over hundreds of years, the wood on the crossbow had warped. Professor Jones spent more time examining it and he found the warping caused the arrow to be 10 degrees off center when it reached its target. Given these conditions of which we are reasonably sure, and surmising the defect

was unknown to the killer, Basil wasn't his intended target.

"By measuring distances and checking the chart we had made of the hall, and where each guest was standing, the arrow was meant to kill Miss Marble."

She suddenly remembered the loud hissing noise passing by her ear the night of the murder. It gave her cold chills to realize someone wanted to kill her! Why, everyone loves and admires me, she thought to herself. Well, most everybody, except for -----and a parade of family and friends of killers she had sent to prison or the gallows, passed before her eyes.

Looking around the room she spotted four suspects without even trying. Chief Inspector Livingston came over to her. He said.

"It must be frightening to realize you have an enemy who hates you enough to murder you, Miss Marble. I have assigned two of my inspectors to guard you during your stay at the castle. Unfortunately, we can't let you leave the area, we need your help in identifying possible suspects. Don't worry my friend, you will be well guarded."

His words did very little to assuage her fears about being killed, since her experience with the police over the years hardly gave her much confidence she would be well protected. There is a killer on the loose, she thought to herself, no doubt there will be another attempt to murder me. I must take action to find the killer before he has another opportunity. to try again.

There was another grand ball tonight featuring several popular singers brought in for the party. Dignitaries, stars and noble people began to relax when the orchestra played a light dance number. Champagne was flowing freely in the large fountain and several bars set up in the ballroom were serving a crowd of people determined to have a good time.

Pen and Olivia were together and having a difficult time fending off the many men wanting to dance with them. They were outstanding beauties, Olivia a red head, and Pen with black hair and flashing green eyes. Her face was familiar to millions of people from her modeling pictures in magazines. In the ballroom, she kept her eyes off her

ex-husband, Richard Princeton. Pen had no wish to stir up bad feelings from the past and spoil her fun.

It was nearly 4 AM before the last guests left the ball room for their quarters. Highlights of the night were several arguments leading to a few punches thrown before they were subdued, a wife who poured a drink over her husband's head when he chose to dance with a young lovely for the fourth time. Domestic fights flared up but quickly stopped when the opponents realized they were at a grand event where such behavior was unseemly. It could wait for the bedroom. There were some rather common occurrences with drunks who had to be helped to their rooms.

Miss Marble was having trouble sleeping. Most frightening was a faceless murdering enemy at large in the castle waiting for another opportunity to kill her. Creeping, persistent terror gripped her at times and she had to fight these feelings or surely go mad. Contributing to this helpless feeling was her inability to reach her London contact who had always been there for her. What could have happened? , she anguished. Alone! Utterly alone!

When Miss Marble was successful in squelching her extreme fear, thoughts of the mistake she had made by accusing Percy Bentley IV of killing Basil flooded in. She was not accustomed to being wrong in murder cases, surely her reputation would be damaged by the false accusation she had made. Finding the killer would be tricky given the number of guests at the event, so many of them had ties to past murder investigations.

It would be a major challenge to find the killer in a group of people who had connections to families affected by her sleuthing work. Livingston was back to no progress. Professor Jones' discovery of the faulty crossbow had changed the nature of the search for the murderer. Now they knew who the intended victim was, which actually made the search for the killer more difficult.

So many guests present at the castle had expressed their bitter feelings toward Miss Marble some time in the past. There were sworn enemies present who had publicly denounced her and vowed revenge. Livingston was thinking about the problem of identifying her enemies. With Miss

Marble's assistance, he would have to develop a list of the guests who might have a motive for killing her. Tough, he thought to himself, but not impossible.

He couldn't keep more than three inspectors to continue on with the case, the rest of the agents were due back at Scotland Yard to continue their assignments in London. He would have to rely on support from the local area police forces to help with the search for the killer of Basil Beaverton.

It was very close to the holidays, and the three inspectors he left on extended duty at the castle weren't exactly overjoyed with this assignment.

Chapter Nine

Livingston threw out his prior work on the case. He did retain the pile of written statements given by people present when Basil Beaverton was killed. It seemed to be the only approach to a re-examination of the murder. Scotland Yard was lending a hand by studying the cases Miss Marble had solved over the years.

More than likely there was a clue in the histories of the murders pointing to suspects who hated Miss Marble enough to attempt to kill her. It could be a family member of the accused, a lover, or a friend, reacting violently to the verdict and enraged at the person responsible for the arrest. Miss Marble now had a personal interest in solving the case since her life was being threatened.

Scotland Yard provided a list of guests for her to study winnowed down to families and others who had been involved in her murder investigations. It was a logical first

step, and perhaps the amateur sleuth might spot some suspects in residence at the time of the killing. There was also a special list of guests who were not present in the reception hall. Their backgrounds and whereabouts at 9:14 PM that night were being investigated by one of the inspectors kept on duty at Cheatham Castle.

During the day Miss Marble was in Neville's office at a desk reserved for the investigation team. She was studying the guest list trying to match up names and families to her past murder cases. Several of the guests were almost automatically placed on her list, one such suspect was, Colonel Ogleby.

His son was convicted of murdering a man who was blackmailing him over an alleged act of cowardice on a combat mission. Two of his men were cornered in a building by the enemy and subsequently killed, while the son ran away from the action. It was never proven, nor could it be, since the blackmailer was silenced permanently.

Lt. Thomas Ogleby was never charged with cowardice. The colonel was enraged when the motive for the killing

was exposed to the public. Miss Marble was attacked in the media by the colonel claiming the cowardice claim was a figment of her imagination and a grab for publicity. He conveniently left out the fact his son was paying a blackmailer to keep him from exposing him. It is doubtful he would pay and then kill someone who wasn't a danger to him.

Lord Vickerson was the other fierce enemy of Miss Marble's, insisting his wife was wrongly accused of the murder of a young woman rumored to be his mistress. It was a conviction by a hair since the clinching testimony came from the murdered woman's sister.

Later, Vickerson was able to offer conclusive evidence, with the help of a few faithful friends, he had never been with the victim alone. A little late though, since Lady Vickerson took her own life in prison the day after being incarcerated. These men were dangerous, and over the years had sworn revenge on more than one occasion.

It was tea time, and Livingston came in to escort Miss Marble, acting as her bodyguard. They chatted as they

walked down the hall. When they were passing by a table the lamp set on it suddenly exploded into pieces. There was no sound, the inspector correctly guessed it was a bullet that had shattered the lamp.

"Get down!" he ordered. "It was a shot from a silenced gun."

Down on the floor he took out his revolver and aimed it in the direction of the shot. Another bullet hit the wall only a foot above Miss Marble's head as the inspector returned fire. His pistol roared like a cannon in the enclosed space of the hallway. There were no more bullets hitting things, but they stayed on the floor for protection.

One of his inspectors ran down the hallway coming from the direction of the shooting. Before Livingston could warn him, the attacker struck the inspector on the head with his weapon sending him sprawling. Then he disappeared. In minutes the hallway was full of police officers from the local area responding to the shots. Livingston quickly assembled them and gave orders to search the castle for the assailant.

In the cavernous castle it was relatively easy for the gunman to elude the searchers. Miss Marble was brought to her room protected by two policemen. She had decided to have tea in her quarters rather than in the drawing room. On orders, the two constables stationed themselves on either side of her door.

When the tea arrived, she slipped a slender flask out of the right arm of her dress and poured a liberal libation into the tea cup. Here was the secret reason she was always suggesting a tea break. Hidden in her sleeve, she could spike her tea with brandy unseen by the others. Sipping her tea in the comfort of a large chair, she thought about the close calls she was experiencing.

One choice was to retire from the sleuthing business which had provided her with luxurious living in the finest homes, free travel and meeting many prominent people. Miss Marble chose a murder case only if there were some substantial ancillary benefits to be had while investigating. All of the freeloading would be over though, leaving her alone in a small cottage situated in a dull village.

Working on her fourth cup of tea, she decided to see how this case came out before entertaining the idea of retiring. Living in immediate danger was new to her, if the killer wasn't found soon, then retiring from sleuthing might become a very attractive alternative.

Chapter Ten

In the gloom of the chamber illuminated with a single candle, four men sat at an ancient table holding a meeting. One of the men complained.

"Miss Marble would be gone by now if every phase of the plan had been carefully checked. It seems to me examining an ancient weapon for accuracy is so rudimentary a child would have thought of it."

"How come you didn't mention it when we were planning the killing? You have a mouth."

"Gentleman, it's already in the past, we need to discuss a new plan to eliminate the snoop."

"It seems to me our chances have been used up in the present setting. Now we have police swarming all over the castle, any suspicious act will create attention. I suggest a later time when she is home. A mere attempt to kill someone is soon forgotten by the public, things will cool down."

It takes a an actual murder to incite public excitement and keep the memory alive."

"I want to finish this here and now! Damn the waiting." a man said as he pounded the table. "I'm a munitions expert and I say a plastic bomb under her bed ought to take care of it. A bomb triggered by remote control so there won't be another blunder. What do you say?"

Huddled in the hidden room built centuries ago to escape capture by enemy forces over-running the castle, the conspirators debated the pros and cons of the two plans.

"I'm for the bomb attempt. I have perfect cover to plant the bomb under the bed, I think it will be foolproof."

A little more talk and they all agreed a plastic bomb was the surest way of ridding themselves of the interfering, snoopy old woman."

Boredom can be the hand maiden of creative thinking to the restless mind. Pen and Liv (Olivia) were certainly the perfect proof of this proposition. Restless and bored, they were prisoners of protocol.

In short, their families insisted on their presence at the castle for the entire week of the 500 year anniversary celebration.

Adding to their restlessness was a lack of attractive men to party with. Most of the men under fifty who were present at the castle, had trod on their toes while dancing on many occasions. It seemed the desirable males were now married leaving a less than desirable bunch of bachelors.

All of the men had a deserved respect for them. Many of them had experienced the humiliation of having these two young ladies loudly protesting, in the presence of others, their attempts to grope them. Not even a slight pat on the ass was ignored. At a time in the past there had been a number of young men to flirt with. Now just five years away from the end of World War II, young men were hard to find who weren't already married.

Pen came up with a creative idea.

"We are more familiar with most of the guests here than

the police or Miss Marble, how about doing some sleuthing on our own? We could study the roster of guests and pick out the most likely suspects, then trail them. Who knows what we might discover."

Liv was delighted with Pen's plan, it would certainly beat sitting around with no purpose.

They went to work grouping families and friends on a chart. Then in red pencil next to each family tree they wrote down the names of people they remembered who had been involved in a murder case solved by Miss Marble. Some of them stood out prominently because of the intense animosity they had openly expressed toward the amateur sleuth.

As the roster of names lengthened, they became unsettled about some people they had written down. From an inside view of the families on the chart, they looked at the names of several people they knew to be mentally ill. The general public wasn't aware they were unbalanced. It was a fact carefully concealed from the public to protect the good family name as much as for the afflicted relative,

On their list were the two men Miss Marble had picked out to be watched by the police. Pen and Liv had recognized several people, who to their knowledge, were not being considered by Scotland Yard. Their hatred of the amateur sleuth was kept from public view, but families familiar with the malcontents knew the whole story.

They visited Neville about their study of possible suspects present as guests in the castle. He recognized the names and congratulated them on remembering these people he had forgotten about. He said Livingston would be given the names to check out. They didn't mention their own plan to spy on the lesser known suspects, knowing Neville would have vehemently objected to their involvement in this dangerous game.

They had four suspects to investigate. Pen volunteered to spy on the two men on their list. As a precaution they wouldn't be seen together while they were trailing after their suspects. Pen had the more challenging task of trying to get a line on the men. She identified their personal interests as best she knew, then set off to spy.

Liv had no such problem since the women were distant relatives of theirs. Each of them would be easy to observe. One of the women was an avid bridge player and always spent her waking time at the bridge games in the card room. Her other suspect was more difficult because she was one of the horsy set. Liv was a good horsewoman but not overly enthusiastic about riding horseback in any kind of weather like Mrs. Ramsey.

She checked on Lady Witherspoon in the card room. Then set out to find Mrs. Ramsey, heading, naturally for the stables first. It was a chilly drizzly day with low clouds sailing along driven by a strong wind out of the north. Entering one of the stable buildings she found Mrs. Ramsey saddling up for a ride with a party of six other riders. Damn, she thought to herself, no choice but to saddle up too and head out to get wet.

At her locker in the stable she changed into a riding outfit complete with raingear to keep out at least some of the drizzle. She was quickly in the saddle and riding hard to catch up with Mrs. Ramsey and her party.

She found them riding along a familiar path in the woods.

Reining in her horse, Liv stayed one hundred yards behind them to watch Mrs. Ramsey. She could make them out in the gray mist, certain they couldn't see her in the woods. After an hour or so, two of the party broke off from the group, turned around, and headed in her direction. She rode slowly into a patch of underbrush to hide from the approaching riders, She recognized Mrs. Ramsey riding with Richard Princeton, Pen's ex husband.

What a surprise she thought. Following them slowly they took a path away from the stables. Now she was puzzled and curious about the relationship between the two riders. She had never heard any gossip about either of them, except for the actor's well known drinking escapades.

Hardly anyone, including Liv, knew Mrs. Ramsey nee Victoria Adamson was his boyhood love when they were living in a village in Wales. He, a poor boy, Victoria the daughter of a wealthy industrial tycoon with a large inter-

est in the community coal mine. When Victoria's family learned about the passionate affair with a boy not of her class, her parents took immediate action. Victoria was shipped off to London to be educated in the schools for the privileged.

Years went by before they were to meet again in London after Richard had become a successful actor. By this time she was married and a mother of four children. There was no affair because he was often away on movie locations and she was a wealthy man's wife.

They were brought together again by the 500 year anniversary event. It was an unexpected surprise when they looked at each other after so many years and felt their hearts skip a beat. Now the plotting game began as each of them thought of a way to be alone even for an hour or two.

Richard pushed a little and invited Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey to have cocktails with them before dinner. Jack Ramsey was puzzled by the invitation since the closest he had ever been to the film star was a movie screen.

He turned to Victoria for help.

"Richard Princeton is only the name of an actor to me. You have never mentioned him, how would you know him? Unless there has been a misunderstanding of some sort, he must know you from somewhere?"

"Oh, Jack," she replied appearing to be unimpressed by the invitation, "I must have mentioned him to you sometime during our marriage. I only knew of him when I was a young girl in Wales, His father worked for my father in the coal mines and Richard was given grounds work at our home in the summer.

"When I was alone and bored I talked to him on occasion to pass the time. I was shocked when he became a movie star because I didn't see any such potential in him."

"It might be interesting to have a drink with him, don't you think?"

"Oh, I suppose it could be fun to meet them. Anyway, I'll leave it up to you to decide. I could care less whether we go or not, after all, I haven't seen him in years."

Victoria replied coolly.

The Ramseys met for cocktails with Richard and his actress wife, Pauline Woodstock-Princeton. It was difficult for the ex-lovers to maintain a cordial, but indifferent attitude being so close to each other. Their spouses didn't detect anything unusual as they chatted, mostly about the movie business, as Jack fired questions at them. He was very curious about the film industry and his questioning was a perfect screen to take attention away from the lovers.

When the time was right, Richard changed the subject to horses.

"Jack, are you joining in the fox hunt tomorrow?"

"Oh no, Richard, I'm not a horse person, but Vikki is a rider. She brought her favorite hunter down for the fox hunt." Jack replied, then turned to Pauline. "Do you ride Mrs. Princeton?"

"Never rode a horse, I'm a little afraid of them."

Vikki glanced quickly at Richard and he knew the look was a reply to his plan, "I understand."

Riding deeper into the woods Liv knew where they were going since she was riding on her home ground. There was an old shack near the edge of their property and out of the way of the established paths in the woods. A member of the Cheatham family once remarked it seemed to be visited so often it should be named "Liaison Cottage",

At the shack, the couple dismounted and tethered their horses in the protection of a small lean-to attached to the main structure. Liv circled around to the rear of the shack, dismounted, and moved on foot to the rear of the building. Peeping through a low window she made out the outline of the couple in the dark room. After a fierce embrace they began to tear at each other's clothes, caught up in their urgent need for each other.

Liv was not into voyeurism and she quietly moved away from the window. She mounted her horse and thought to herself, I'm pretty sure I won't find out a damn thing about Basil Beaverton's murder here. I think we can rule out Mrs. Ramsey as a suspect.

When Liv returned to the castle she checked on Lady Witherspoon who was still playing bridge. Then she contacted Pen to meet her for a debriefing of the day's spying. Liv rather reluctantly told her about Mrs. Ramsey and Pen's ex having a assignation in the woods, not sure how she would react.

Pen took the news calmly, then said.

"It's like this Liv, I know he's a world famous movie star adored by millions of women in the world. I want you know I'm not one of them. It is hard to stay passionately in love with a man who pukes on your shoes, smashes dishes in a rage and actually passes out on top of you while trying to make pathetic love to you.

"Time and time again he promises never to drink again, then calls you early in the morning to come down and bail him out of jail. I don't know anything about Mrs. Ramsey or her ties to Richard and I just don't care. Is the picture clear Liv?"

"Absolutely." Liv replied quietly.

Pen went on to report on her two suspects.

“Peter Winslow is an avid billiards player and like your Lady Witherspoon he is easy to check on. Except for bathroom breaks, he is either watching or playing billiards. It's hard to tell if he is still as angry at Miss Marble as he was ten years ago. You know his father claimed the shooting was self defense but if you remember Harry Winston had really dispatched the victim with cyanide in his drink. It was Miss Marble who proved it was premeditated murder. I'll keep checking on him.”

“Rex Porter is a different matter. He is a complex man who has struck at his enemies viciously. I doubt if he ever lets go of any resentments. I had to stay alert to follow him, he was all over the castle talking to a number of other businessmen. He had a meeting with a group of people in a closed room that lasted nearly two hours. I left when he went to his room. I'll have to watch him again tomorrow.”

These two ladies playing amateur detective hadn't given a thought to being noticed by the wrong people. Openly moving around the castle and the stables brought them to

the attention of the assassination group. Basil Beaverton's cousins daily routine had been completely changed in the course of one day. It brought up the question of why?

Liv wasn't aware another rider had followed her out into the woods where she was hiding from the group ahead of her. Pen was also watched moving around the castle apparently doing nothing but watching Rex Porter.

Heading for the dining hall in the early evening Liv and Pen were quickly overwhelmed, tied up and gagged. Using the secret passageway where they held their meetings, the killers injected them with demerol. As soon as they were unconscious the four conspirators carried them outside to a waiting van. The weather hadn't changed at all and the van was soon out of sight in the gray gloom.

Chapter Eleven

It was a rather short ride for the kidnapppers. they drove for less than an hour to a barren spot where the moors began in Yorkshire. It's a strange land of low rounded hills with narrow gullies at the bottom, and devoid of trees. You can get lost on the moors where one hill looks identical to the next one or the one behind you, If it's rainy weather and you aren't carrying a compass, it's possible to wander in circles lost in the barren land.

The unconscious bodies of Liv and Pen had been brought onto the moors and deposited in a narrow gully surrounded by low hills in the featureless land. The kidnapping was motivated by a need to isolate Miss Marble from help so the bomb plot could be completed. Dumping the women who were now a threat with their amateur snooping should buy them a day or so before they were discovered, or found their way out. They couldn't take the chance of having Pen or Liv spot one of them around Miss

Marble's room when the bomb went off.

Miss Marble's list of suspects kept the chief inspector and his agents busy trying to gather information about them. Her list never seemed to go down as they eliminated people as suspects, because she kept adding new names as her memory became sharper. Livingston began to wonder if anyone would be left at the castle who hadn't been tied to her numerous murder cases spanning nearly twenty years.

Neville had to devise new diversions for the guests to keep their attention away from the murder investigation. He still couldn't predict what the long term effect of the killing would be on Cheatham Castle's image, if any. It might fade from people's memories if nothing more happened, he thought hopefully. Besides, after today they would only have two more days left before the guests went home.

Miss Marble was feeling somewhat isolated from her social life with two constables always with her. They were a constant reminder of the recent murder. By this time every-

one knew she was the intended victim. The more faint hearted friends of Miss Marble stayed away from close proximity to her, thus ensuring they wouldn't be in the line of fire.

Late in the afternoon of the following day Liv and Pen's mother began to wonder where her daughters might be. Neither of them was in their room and paging them in the castle to answer a phone call was also unsuccessful. Lady and Lord Cheatham became even more concerned when they checked and learned their cars were still parked on the grounds. They decided any further searching would be suspended until dinner time. If they weren't at dinner, it would be time to report them as missing to Chief Inspector Livingston.

Livingston and the entire police contingent at the castle were relieved to have a respite of a few hours while the guests had dinner. It was the one time when almost every guest was present. Consolidated into one body in the dining hall, only a few police were necessary for guard duty. Household help also had freedom from the demands of

guests at dinnertime. They inspected the guest rooms to be sure everything was in perfect order.

In Miss Marble's room a young maid was bustling around making her inspection. She was hurrying to make a quick exit because she still had three more rooms to check.. In her haste, she caught an earring on a sheet and it rolled under the bed. After cursing her bad luck, she got down on her knees to retrieve it.

There was more than her earring under the bed. A lumpy looking thing with a tiny red light blinking off and on was attached to the bed frame. Grabbing her earring, she wiggled out, and ran into the hallway. She looked around the area for help and spotted a young local police constable on duty by the stairwell.

Rushing up to him, she attempted to tell him what was wrong.

"Here! There! Over here!" she said urgently as she ran back toward Miss Marble's room. The young constable caught up with her.

"Slow down! Tell me what's wrong?"

She continued moving not answering him. They reached the room where the girl dove onto the floor and pointed under the bed. Following her lead the constable was down next to her and looked in the direction she was pointing.

He had enough training to know he was looking at a rather large plastic bomb with a blinking red light. He pulled the girl up, then ran for the hallway dragging her along by the arm. It dawned on him there was no help around and the bomb might go off.

Bravely, he re-entered the room, slid under the bed, and grabbed the bomb. He ran down the hallway to an exit door, and threw the bomb as hard as he could. Then he pushed the girl to the floor.

"Stay down!" he commanded.

Colonel Ogleby and Lord Vickerson had come up near the door when it opened. Out flew the plastic bomb nearly hitting Vickerson on the shoulder as it soared past him.

"Damn it!" Ogleby whispered to him. "I have to detonate it. We can't let the police find the bomb."

They rounded the corner next to the door for protection.

Ogleby took out a control device and pushed the button. There was a tremendous explosion, smoke and an orange ball of flame roiled outward near the building. It was powerful enough to cause the ground to shake violently where they stood. Part of the building was ripped away by the blast. In the hallway the constable and the girl were rocked back and forth from the bomb's force and a window blew in on them splattering them with glass shards.

After a few minutes the policeman stood up, then motioned for the girl to follow him. They ran down the hallway while police officers were running from the opposite direction. They nearly collided near the blast area. The constable yelled out to the group.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone out there. Whoever set off the bomb must have run away."

Flames began leap at them from two of the rooms.

There was pandemonium as men rushed around looking for fire extinguishers, there was only one in the hallway. They ripped open a maid's closet, grabbed the mop buckets, filled them, and started a line from the closet to the fire area. Buckets were passed, almost in a blur to the men inside the rooms battling the flames. More men had arrived from the outside of the building running through the large hole in the building.

Neville was crushed over this disaster coming so close to the end of the event. He was made of resilient stuff though and in no time at all he had the guests assembled in the reception hall. Smiling like it was a summer's day in June, he addressed his guests.

"We had a little accident with some of the fireworks we're using on the final night of the event. There was a minor problem, no one was injured, everything is under control."

He was looking at a group of people who were staring at him. With some effort Neville kept his cool. Gradually the guests relaxed and half-bought his explanation about an

explosion of impressive proportions being triggered by fireworks. When the people started back to their rooms, Neville dashed for the wing of the castle where the bomb exploded. He needed to see what had to be done, and to assess the damage to the building.

By the time he arrived at the scene, the fire had been extinguished, leaving one big soggy mess. Water was still trickling out of Miss Marble's room, inside was a black charred area nearly barren of anything but a wrecked bed frame. Miss Marble only had a glimpse of the burned out area before Livingston hustled her out to the reception hall. She was badly rattled by the close call, another ten minutes would have placed her in the room getting ready for bed.

Lady Cheatham arrived in the hall, very shaken by the explosion. As a resident of the castle, she knew the real story about the bomb, quite clearly it was meant to kill Miss Marble. She had Neville ready her sitting room for her guest, and ordered head of household to find new clothes for Miss Marble.

In the crisis mode while in danger, instinct gives you a choice, run or fight. It would be hard not to guess what the amateur sleuth's feet wanted to do, get the hell out of there. Livingston saw the panic in her eyes and knew nothing he could say would calm her down. Frankly he didn't blame her, they were up against a determined assassin or assassins.

He contacted a doctor to administer a sedative for Miss Marble as the only way to stop the physical terror phase of her condition. Dr. Pendleton was on the scene in minutes, checked the patient, and reached into his bag for a drug to put her out of it for a long time. A policeman volunteered to carry her to Lady Cheatham's bedroom suite. No VIP was ever guarded more closely than Miss Marble through the night.

Chapter Twelve

Neville was beginning to lose his confidence regarding the future of his hotel project. Now he was told by his mother, nearly hysterical, that Liv and Pen were missing since yesterday morning. Livingston was also in attendance when this news was announced. A search group would have to be formed immediately to find the two women. For starters there was another gathering of guests to ask if anyone had seen the missing pair. No luck though, they had vanished.

There were only three roads in this rural area, it made the search by vehicles simple. Almost the entire fox hunting contingent volunteered to search the woods and nearby environs on horseback. Two of the abductors were riding in the horse party feigning concern for the missing girls.

Cheatham castle probably hadn't experienced this much action since the last time it was attacked several centuries

before. Nearly every guest was gone from the castle as the search began, leaving the household workers to search the interior of the castle for the missing women.

Out on the moors, Liv and Pen regained consciousness the next morning. These two ladies had grown up in Yorkshire, even in their half drugged state they recognized the moors. Liv wiggled around to face Pen.

"Have you any clue who abducted us and dumped us out here? My head is spinning, I can see two of you."

"I can see three of you Liv, my head is a muddle. We'll damn well try hard to find out who pulled this little stunt. Since we're not dead, the killer or killers, wanted us out of the way for some reason."

"I guess our 'cloak and dagger act' didn't fool anyone. There must be another attempt to kill Miss Marble planned to happen soon. Let me go to work on this damned tape with my teeth and imitate a gnawing rat."

Liv shifted until she was at Pen's back where her hands were bound. She began to chew on the edge of the tape and pulling at it to loosen it. There was no banter going on

now, Liv, with short pauses to rest her aching jaw, kept at the task. It took thirty minutes of gnawing and tearing to loosen the tape enough for Pen to pull her hands free.

She then untied Liv who exclaimed.

"Lord, that adhesive tastes nasty, I sure wish I could rinse my mouth/ To think we make this stuff and let fumes out into the air for people to breathe it!"

Seeking shelter in a small cave they huddled together in the chill air waiting for their heads to clear. It was impossible at this moment to concentrate at all.

Several hours past before their heads were rid of the drug. A throbbing headache began as their heads cleared.

"I suppose we should be grateful to be alive at all."

Pen commented. "It may take awhile, but you and I should be able to figure a way out of here."

This morning was refreshing after the rain of the past two days, the sun was shining in a bright blue sky. Getting their bearings would have been difficult in the gray shroud of yesterday.

With their backs to the sun, they headed in a westerly direction assured of finding a road. It was not a pleasant trek, their heads were still buzzing from the drugs. In addition, they were cold, hungry and thirsty. Within an hour they were standing on a narrow road.

One of the search cars showed up in a matter of minutes to rescue the girls. By the time they arrived at the castle, most of the searchers were back. Their mother had mixed emotions about their daughters' safe return, joy at seeing them safe, and upset over the anxiety they had caused them.

Late in the afternoon Pen and Liv went to see Livingston at his request. Instead of the effusive greeting they had expected for being back safely at the castle, they were met with cold stares from Livingston and Neville. They sat down feeling a little annoyed by the cool reception, it seemed to them everyone was angry at them.

Before either of them could speak, Neville said,

"Are you both mad? I asked you to restrict your help to the names of the guests and what you knew about them.

This isn't some exciting game, we are dealing with a killer or killers who will eliminate anyone who interferes with their plans. Obviously you were spotted trailing someone rather conspicuously by a suspect and you needed to be stopped from any further snooping into their affairs."

"You are restricted to the castle. and no more interfering with our investigation." Livingston ordered. "We were forced to use our manpower to search for you. We only have one more day when all of the people who were here at the time of the murder are in one location. Most of today has been lost. Possibly when everyone has scattered to their respective homes, we may never find the killers."

The import of the inspector's statement was deeply felt by Liv and Pen.

They realized what an immature, stupid stunt their wild plan had been.

"What we did was the childish impulse of bored girls looking for some excitement. I'm so sorry for the damage we have done to your investigation, inspector."

"Pen has spoken for me as well, I regret acting so rashly." Liv said quietly.

They left the office, there wasn't anything left to say. After they had gone, Livingston said to Neville.

"I know we treated the girls rather roughly, and I suppose they deserved to know they had found two suspects who were overlooked. It was the only way to be certain their amateur sleuthing days are over."

Chapter Thirteen

Miss Marble, after a troubled night of bad dreams about murderers, had her breakfast and tea in the room graciously opened for her by Lady Cheatham. Encounters with a number of ladies she knew, and answering endless questions would be inevitable if she ventured out.

While eating her meal, she perused the list of guests again looking for anyone she might have missed, Most difficult were the children in families involved in a murder case who were now adults. Any one of them could be holding a secret grudge, it seemed impossible to gain any insight into this unknown group.

Never before had Miss Marble been so apprehensive or felt so helpless in a situation. She had been longing to go home, but the inspector insisted it was safer to remain at the castle guarded by the police. After the night before, she was seriously doubting their ability to keep her alive. It's

not supposed to be like this, she anguished to herself, Through all of the threats I've received, somehow I never thought these people would really act on them! Until now her life as an amateur sleuth had been exciting and rewarding, but now, real bullets were whizzing past her head.

To make this situation even more difficult was Livingston's polite "no" to her offer to help. She had always depended on the police to do the ground work, then with their information in hand, coupled with her snooping, the answer was usually rather simple.

There are too many suspects all in one place at the same time, she thought to herself, what will I do? I need to get out of here, my leaving would at least scatter the suspects, stuck here, its impossible to cover everybody. Maybe I should give up my hobby, so I don't add to the long list of people already after me for revenge.

One last chance to catch a killer or killers. It was the final night of the week long event. A Grand Ball would be held for the finale. Neville had planned the last night to

stay forever in the minds of the guests. They would talk about the anniversary bash, and the castle for a long time to come. His hotel was scheduled to open for business in ten days.

Chief Inspector Livingston was planning for the last night too, he was quite proud of the clever trap devised to catch the killers. Another group had been busy planning their final chance to assassinate Miss Marble. They were also pleased with their plan to rid themselves of the shrewd amateur sleuth forever.

Dinner in the dining hall was a colorful affair. The ladies were dressed in their finest dress clothes, the men looked elegant in formal attire, some sporting medals pinned on their left breast. Dining would take longer than other nights because several extra courses would be served as a surprise. While the dinner was underway, Scotland Yard agents and local police units were moving to their assigned places around the castle.

Miss Marble was dressed in the evening attire she had borrowed including the diamond jewelry. She appeared to be calm in the dining hall seated with some of her lady friends. Later the guests would be gathering in the reception hall socializing while waiting for the grand ball to begin.

Colonel Ogleby was up in the ceiling next to the main chandelier illuminating the hall below. There was an opening around the chandelier where the cables holding it were attached. He had a snipers rifle in his hands. Below him people were entering the hall, then standing around chatting.

Miss Marble would be easy to spot in her distinctively bright pink gown. He became excited when he saw her entering the hall from the stairs on the right side of the castle. He shifted around to align himself with her down below him. Now it was only a matter of a clear shot at her when there was an opening among the mingling guests. Out of the corner of his eye, he was astonished to see a woman in a pink gown entering the hall from the left hand stairs.

She was an exact twin to the other Miss Marble walking in from the other side. He became confused and flustered, who was who? As he tried to calm down, a third figure in a pink gown walked through the main entrance. He was wagging his head back and forth in confusion not sure who to shoot when he heard a footstep. Whirling around, he stared at the figure standing in the shadows. he recognized the person . He started to speak "What?

His head snapped back violently as a bullet smashed into his skull, death was instantaneous. It was a silent killing. The weapon had a silencer attached to it muffling the discharge of the pistol. The figure near the wall stepped forward and checked the colonel. Satisfied, he turned away from the lifeless body and left the loft.

It was a triangular trap set for Miss Marble timed to have three shots fired from three directions, one at a time. First shot to be followed by the second shot, if needed, followed by a last chance third shot. Lights throughout the first floor of the castle were wired to a timer to blacken the area as soon as the shooting was over.

Thus, allowing time for the killers to slip away unseen

Confusion set in by the appearance of three pink gowns all looking like the amateur sleuth. There was no first shot from the ceiling, to trigger the sequential assassination. By the time the other two snipers prepared to shoot at one of the figures the power shut off. There were screams and shouts when the place was plunged into blackness, but only for a minute, then the lights came back on.

The crowd noise stopped abruptly when the lights came back on. Seconds before the lights went out, another would-be killer was shot and his body dragged out of sight. Only one shooter had escaped death. Immediately the crowd's attention was diverted by the fireworks display Neville had arranged.

For thirty minutes or so the castle was full of ooohs and aaaahs while bombs were bursting in air. Then the ballroom was opened, as the last spark fell, to the music of a popular orchestra. It was a swell time for all, and no one except the police knew what had been going on around them. Neville nearly fainted from the deep relief he felt

when the last guest left the ballroom to turn in. He was extremely proud of how successful his plans worked out.

Miss Marble was never in any danger, she had remained upstairs in Lady Cheatham's bedroom suite with a constable protecting her. Multiple imitation Miss Marbles were played by Liv, Pen, and the shortest policeman in the group. It had been impossible to persuade the two women it was too dangerous to be decoys in the baited trap. Secretly, the inspector was pleased they were two of the Miss Marble look-alikes, he doubted three policemen trying to play women would have fooled the killers.

Before dawn, the bodies of the two shooters were quietly taken away to a village mortuary for an autopsy. Colonel Ogleby and Lord Vickerson were the murdered men, the police speculated that they were members of the assassination group. Why they were killed was a mystery. All of the evidence seemed to indicate there was at least another conspirator, or more, still to be apprehended,

Without any conclusive proof, the two dead men, for

now, were the only suspected members of the killer group. The case would be officially declared unsolved. Livingston and his men left the castle to return to London and their duties at Scotland Yard.

By the end of the next week a public statement was issued about the Cheatham Castle Conspiracy as it came to be called by the public. One reporter who was on assignment to cover the 500 Year Anniversary event had followed the murder of Basil Beaverton and subsequent happenings with keen insight.

His special report was printed in installments by the London newspaper he worked for with vivid pre-story announcements, "NOW IT WILL BE REVEALED". Police who had been at the castle marveled at the reporter's rather accurate account of the drama going on behind the scenes of the event.

It was written like a mystery novel over the course of six installments, the newspaper had to print extra copies to meet the demand of the readers closely following the suspenseful story.

In some places the reporter had to guess for lack of information, but his speculations were near the mark. Chief Inspector Livingston summoned the reporter to Scotland Yard for an interview, he was suspicious one of his agents had leaked inside information, for a price. The reporter adamantly denied bribing an officer for confidential reports. There was no evidence, nor any witnesses to support bringing charges against him. After all, he had only used Miss Marble's snooping techniques to pick up the gossip.

For now, the criminal event was shunted to the side for more pressing police business. Livingston was relieved to be able to drop the case without a "Miss Marble" ending where he appeared to be a fool. He was satisfied to quietly point out her glaring error in declaring Percy Bentley guilty of murdering Basil Beaverton. He did so whenever there was an appropriate time to interject the story.

Miss Marble was met by a group of friends when she arrived in her village. They were waiting for her in front of the gate leading to her cottage. She was pleased to see her neighbors had taken excellent care of her garden during

her absence. Vicar John Pleasance was holding a bottle of champagne to celebrate her homecoming. Others had baskets of food and waited to be invited into her cottage for the celebration..

It was a unique situation, she had been away many times, but no one attempted to kill her before. It was also the only occasion anyone knew of where she hadn't solved the case. Lastly, she had falsely accused the wrong person of murdering Basil Beaverton..

She invited the homecoming delegation into her house, then turned and waved at a parked car across the street holding a Scotland Yard agent who had driven her home from Cheatham Castle. Livingston insisted on having a law officer drive her home. He gave her his private phone number in case she was in danger. She had tried to protest but he pointed out policemen in her village weren't the best at spotting suspicious behavior. She thought about what he said and took the number.

Chapter Fourteen

Two conspirators were very much alive. They began the task of planning out another attempt to kill Miss Marble. A direct assault on her hadn't worked, mainly because the police were there at the castle in force and it restricted their movements. Something much more subtle was called for. They threw out several approaches as too obvious, there must be no mistakes.

If they decided to kill her at home, there was the risk of being caught in the act by a neighbor, or being seen leaving the cottage after the deed was done. Outdoors presented a wider range of choices, running her over, stabbing her, shooting her, drowning her. Then there was always the versatile poisoning, which could be performed in, or out of the house. Poisoning reduced the possibility of small things going wrong..

They were less emotional than the two who were killed at the castle. Miss Marble's mind was a powerful enemy to

be respected is how they saw it. There was hatred in their hearts for the woman, but tempered by the risk of the deadly game they were playing. It was decided each of them would visit Marble's village independently, then compare notes on their impressions.

A week later they had a meeting to discuss the results of their scouting trips to the village. After an hour of discussing what they had seen, their conclusions about an attempt to murder her in the village were the same. Primarily, knocking her off in the isolated village was too dangerous for them.

In a rural area the presence of strangers is always noticed by the villagers. So the chances of pulling off a killing without being seen were dicey. If there was a murder in the area, the police would soon know there had been outsiders in their midst. As opposed to London where it was difficult to find any reliable witnesses because of the crowded conditions, villagers could be depended upon to provide detailed descriptions of strangers.

It was clear to them they must strike in a place carefully planned out to kill their intended victim. In other words, a trap set by them on their own turf that would be foolproof. Ensnarement then was the course for the killers. They reached an agreement about their next attempt. They were approaching the Christmas season with all of its activities, and Cheatham Castle appeared to be the right setting to commit the perfect murder.

They went to work on their project, planning carefully for every step required to succeed. Bitter experience from their earlier attempts had taught them to check small details very closely.

At Cheatham Castle, Neville was a seemingly untiring worker preparing for the beginning of the Christmas season now only three days away. With a large investment in the castle venture, the hotel in York sent office staff to help Neville for the grand opening.

Twelve days of Christmas is an English tradition beginning with Christmas day and ending on January 6. It is a time for celebrations from fox hunting to weird contests

like swimming in the English Channel. The twelve days appear to have been a more meaningful holiday in medieval times.

Another major rowdy, comic tradition at Christmas time is the Panto, short for pantomime, but there are no mimes involved. No, it is a mad, stage play full of lampoons. Anyone was fair game for outrageous comedy.

A story is selected such as Cinderella, then distorted and joked about until it is difficult to remember what the story was about in the first place. It is rollicking fun with guest celebrities from stage, and film playing comic parts. Other popular stories becoming victims to this madness are, Mother Goose Aladdin and Humpty Dumpty.

Cheatham Castle was a big success in the English hotel industry. It was booked to full occupancy for the next three months and Neville was in his element as a hotelier host. International news about spectacular murders at the castle was a tremendous attraction for the public. Everyone wanted to see the notorious castle where it all happened.

The Twelve Days of Christmas would be a special time at Cheatham Castle.

During this holiday only invited guests would be staying there for various lengths of time ranging from two days to twelve days. Many celebrities would be guests, it provided prestigious exposure to be invited to the now world famous castle. There would be a wide range of people from varied backgrounds, business, the rich, titled family members, and the entertainment fields. It was rumored a royal prince might be staying there.

Caravans of trucks arrived at the castle day and night carrying provisions for the holiday. Neville had a crew of experienced hotel personnel overseeing the delivery and inventory of every item. Thievery was out of the question with these sharp eyed people, plus the many security guards Neville had hired to keep things under control.

Inspector Livingston traveled to the small village where Miss Marble lived to persuade her to come to the castle for the holiday. He told her not to worry, six of his agents

would be there with him to continue the investigation. He would solve the Basil Beaverton murder and the killing of two known enemies of the amateur sleuth, he promised.

She hesitated, and rightfully so, after her narrow escapes from violence at the castle. Occasionally, Miss Marble had nightmares about her harrowing experiences with faceless, shadowy people stalking her. Now, the inspector was asking her to go back to the castle, more than likely to aid his investigation.

It was somewhat like the goat tethered in the jungle to draw out a hungry lion. He was watching her reaction and trying on his most innocent face while Marble considered the offer. No, she couldn't go back there, her time would be spent looking over her shoulder. All of the luxuries the castle had to offer weren't equal to the possible danger of being a clay pigeon for crazed killers.

She told the inspector it was out of the question to ask her to be bait for killers. He protested vehemently about how crushed he was that she would think such a thing of

him. Bait indeed! Never! Livingston stood up abruptly, and stiffly wished her a merry Christmas. He donned his coat and hat, then left the house quickly.

Chapter Fifteen

After Livingston left, her phone rang, "hello?"

"Are you alone Miss Marble?"

"Yes, I haven't heard from you in awhile."

"I want you to accept the invitation to stay at Cheatham Castle. Before you protest, tell me if after all of our years of friendship, you trust me implicitly."

"No doubt about it, you have helped me many times and never asked to share the limelight with me."

The caller then asked her again if she was willing to attend the Christmas holiday at the castle. Marble said yes without hesitating after the caller had cleared the air.

"I ran across some information in the Bulls Tail Pub here in London I believe is worthy of some sleuthing. If it is authentic it will rock England. I don't want you to be in any more danger than you have been, so it's better if you don't know more than I've told you."

"At the pub I was approached by a gutter drunk I've known a long time. Some of his information is false, for old Teddy isn't above telling a lie when he needs money for whiskey. This could be false information and I don't want you wasting time investigating the wrong party. My reason for taking his story seriously happened when Teddy was shot on the street last night. He'll be all right though, he caught one in the shoulder. He's resting in a hospital so he'll be safe, at least for now. You may not recognize me at the castle, but you can be sure I will always be near by."

Pen and Liv were in London rehearsing for a Panto to be held over the holidays at Cheatham Castle. They volunteered to join the cast for some fun since, again, staying at the castle for the entire holiday was a command. Their appearances in the show would be limited to the three days it would play at the castle. Cinderella was the theme, Pen was given the role of the handsome prince, cross dressing is common in the shows, and Liv was playing a mean sister.

They were having a great time working and partying

with the celebrities in the cast. Some of the most famous entertainers in England would be "trodding the boards" with them. Creative people often have free spirited personalities leading to outrageous ad libbing. It made the rehearsals lively, and the parties unforgettable. Richard Princeton was a player in this Panto, but Pen was over him. He didn't dampen her good times at all.

They were part of the London scene and well known beautiful models, in this setting there were fascinating people to have fun with. Their life style was the reason they fought their families about staying at the castle far from London. Liv was five years younger than her more mature sister, she was strongly attracted to three men at the moment who were eager to be with her. It made Liv's life hectic trying to model, balance dinner dates and parties.

Pen laughed at Liv's wild life and never intruded with sane advice, since she had done the same things herself. Then she thought ruefully about her three disastrous marriages. She hoped Liv wouldn't make the same stupid mistakes she had to struggle through. Not that she was sitting

around like an old maid, she was in on the fun, but now more discerning in her choices of men.

These two lovely ladies hadn't forgotten about their adventures at the 500 year anniversary celebration. No, they were determined to snoop during the Christmas holiday at the castle, conveniently forgetting about Livingston's order to stay out of the investigation. Bringing the guilty to justice to get even for their kidnapping was a strong motivator. Unfortunately, they were young, bullet proof, and still had the short memories of the not-yet-fully mature.

Inspector Livingston was delighted to learn Miss Marble had changed her mind, he wanted her at the castle for the reason she suspected. The killers might try again. He had six agents to work with him, and his time for investigating was limited to the Twelve Days of Christmas. He wanted the trail to be as hot as possible.

Neville obliged Livingston again by permitting him to take over some of his office for a communications center. He was delighted to have Scotland Yard police on the

premises during the Christmas holiday. There were even more events scheduled than for the 500 year anniversary celebration. Security was a major consideration with so many important people staying at the castle.

Now deep into December, the weather was dominated by the North Sea climate and the unpredictable weather coming in from the English Channel. Days could quickly change from gray gloom to dazzling sunlight and back again. Miss Marble was driven to Cheatham Castle by the same Scotland Yard inspector who had ferried her home only a few days before. Livingston was doing all he could to protect her in the hopes he could avoid public criticism if something happened to her. The "target" arrived in time for afternoon tea.

Entering the cavernous entrance hall, she was greeted by Lady Cheatham holding a glass of sherry for her.

"It's rather brave of you to come back here after your terrible experiences. While you were away, in the hopes you would come back for the Christmas holiday, my sitting room has been equipped with intruder alarms on the

windows and the door. Locks have been replaced with burglar proof mechanisms. You will be guarded around the clock, but at a distance, so you can feel free to enjoy the holiday here."

Arms linked, they set off for tea time.

For the holiday there would be sixty guests staying at the castle at all times and fifty employees. With the staggered schedule of guests staying for varying lengths of time, in all, one hundred and fifty people would be staying at the castle at various times during the Twelve Days of Christmas.

For the hotel staff it was a prodigious task to keep everything moving smoothly throughout the holiday. The inspector had an awesome responsibility for the safety of the guests and trying to capture the killers. Looking at the big picture, even with an increased security presence of police and security guards, there was considerable room for things to go wrong.

Chapter Sixteen

Then here it was, Christmas Eve 6 PM. At this time of year sunset occurs around 3:30 PM so it was a night time scene. All of the guests were gathered in the entrance hall for the opening ceremony. The hall was festooned with evergreen bows on the walls and blazing with candles. Over the huge fireplace was a large wreath. Next to the left side stairs was a 30 foot spruce Christmas tree dazzling with ornaments and strings of white lights. There were candles in every window lighting up the castle from the outside. It would make Rockefeller Center in New York City appear almost comical in comparison.

Neville had indeed knocked himself out with the splendor of the castle. Lord Cheatham cut a ceremonial ribbon at the front entrance and a Scottish bagpipe band began their squealing music in the entrance hall. Livingston and his wife were standing with Miss Marble at their side near the fireplace.

As the pipers were piping, a missile nearly took the inspectors ear off as it whizzed by to impale itself on the wood paneled wall. It was a feathered dart more than likely meant for Miss Marble. He turned his body slightly to block anyone from seeing the dart then he removed it and slipped it into his pocket..

It wasn't over though, a second dart almost parted his hair as it went sailing by to impale itself in the wall. He made the same body maneuver and hid this missile too. In quiet desperation he took hold of Miss Marble's arm and began to pull her away from the target area. She looked around at him in surprise as he tugged at her sleeve.

Forced to move she stepped his way as a third dart lodged itself in her dress.on the other side away from Livingston. He saw it, but she didn't feel it piercing the cloth. allowing him time to snatch it away. Making this move while still holding Miss Marble's other arm made him appear to be having some sort of seizure.

She was quite alarmed thinking Livingston was undergoing an attack of some kind.

"What's wrong? she asked him anxiously looking up at his face."Are you in pain?"

"Oh no, Miss Marble, I'm fine, sort of lost my balance for a second there. I was trying to move you away from the draft coming from the doorway." he lied.

She looked at him suspiciously but the crowd began singing "God save the queen" to the high screaming notes of the bagpipes and she joined in with the others.

Livingston was in a fix. He couldn't cause a panic by arresting the Scottish bagpipe band en masse. He would have his men stop them outside of the castle for questioning. In the meantime, he was watching the pipers to see if any band member was trying to escape..

He glanced quickly at Miss Marble to see if she had noticed the dart attack. Her calm expression told him she was oblivious to the missiles.. Anthem over, he went immediately to the band leader to keep the pipers where they were until his agents showed up to help him. The leader was upset as he ordered the band to stay in their places since he had no idea why the inspector had stopped them.

He spoke quietly to the band leader about the attempted murder by darts coming from the direction of the bagpipe band. One of his agents appeared and Livingston sent him off to find the other Scotland Yard inspectors. The band members were becoming restless about the police activity.

Thinking quickly Livingston told the group.

"Nothing to worry about. You are being detained for a routine investigation, it seems some items have been stolen in the castle. You'll be released very soon."

Using a side entrance, the bagpipe band of twenty pipers, was crowded into Neville's office area for questioning.

As they were being assembled into an orderly line, one of the men ran through the door, It was the shortest escape in history as he bumped into two of Livingston's men on the other side of the door, who promptly handcuffed him. He looked at Livingston defiantly as he was pushed into a chair,

A policeman entered the office and handed the inspector a bagpipe, there was an extra pipe attached to it. This was

the blow pipe Hagus McGee had used to launch the darts at Miss Marble. The man hadn't said a word since his arrest. Livingston examined the pipe then asked Hagus,

"What motivated you to try to kill Miss Elaine Marble?"

McGee didn't answer the question. He remained silent sitting in the chair glaring at the inspector. After an hour of interrogation without any success, the prisoner was taken into custody by a local constable to be jailed. The chief inspector was frustrated, another suspect to be investigated, he thought to himself. He sent off the information on Hagus McGee to Scotland Yard to be researched.

Livingston was ruffled by this development because this man was never named as a suspect. This sort of thing couldn't be anticipated, and anymore out of the blue surprises had the potential of making him look inadequate for his job. Miss Marble's amateur sleuthing career was just too damned long to predict anything.

This most recent affair was less complex than the other

cases because they had their man quickly. There was no need to question nineteen other pipers, at least he could be grateful for that. Trying to organize an effective team of police to investigate the prior killings was difficult enough. A gang of new suspects would have delayed his search for the killer, or killers, and the trail was getting cold.

Neville's nerves were near the breaking point from all of the work he had done to make the holiday a big success, and now another murder attempt. Hopefully, the man the police had in custody would be the end of it.

Maybe he's been acting alone in all of the attempts on Miss Marble's life, he thought, trying to be optimistic.

Chapter Seventeen

Christmas day was all one could ask for, during the night there had been a light snowfall to complete the holiday scene. All of the fireplaces functioning in the castle had impressive fires to make things cozy. Hearty outdoor people were out tramping around the grounds, and the riders in the horsy set were cantering in the woods. Indoors, several choirs would be performing during the day and a dance band would be playing in the ball room. Food and drink were available at all times to be capped off with the evening Christmas banquet and the celebration in the ball room.

Livingston wasn't having a great Christmas day, his wife was though. He had to stay on duty because of the Miss Marble crisis. Instead of being the tool to draw out killers, she was causing more problems than he had before Christmas. London would be slow to send a report on Hagus McGee because of the holiday. His six agents were ex-

tremely angry for having to stay in Yorkshire instead of being home with family for the holiday.

It was definitely a day of many types of excitements, aside from gluttony and alcoholism, there were killers on the loose. Also a number of adulterous liaisons, (indoors and outdoors) were going on. Outdoors, there was extreme awkwardness when a number of couples on horseback had to ride in circles waiting for the remote cottage to be vacant.

None of the adulterous pairs wanted to be recognized, which led to interesting ducks and dodges on horseback in the woods. For some, they didn't stand a chance of remaining anonymous, if they were riding a horse everyone recognized, black or white or Arabian, etc.

Almost miraculously, no unsuspecting husbands or wives were around to see their errant partner with the wrong mate. Otherwise, Livingston would have had to spread his police group even thinner apprehending enraged partners.

One adventurous scarlet couple, namely, Richard Princeton and Mrs. Ramsey, became weary of circling around in the woods. They decided to canter off to find their own love nest. They plunged into the thicker area of the woods looking for their haven. After an hour of riding, they were about to give up when they spotted a wooden shack tucked away in a clump of trees. Excited about their find, they galloped over to inspect it.

They were dismounting when a gruff voice called out.

"You're trespassing on this property, mount up and get out of here!"

Turning around, they were staring at a shotgun held by a big man dressed in work clothes. Richard tried a bluff.

"We're guests at Cheatham Castle, not poachers, nor are we trespassers,"

"You're a trespasser alright. this is not Cheatham property, you're on the estate of Lord and Lady Chatterly. Now, mount up and leave!"

They obeyed the man and swung into the saddle without another word. As they were riding away, a woman's voice

came from the shack,

"Are they gone, Cecil?"

"Yes m'lady."

"Well then, get back in here!"

The lovers had to settle for the back seat of Mrs. Ramsey's Bentley.

Miss Marble was having a lovely holiday. She was unaware of the poison dart attempt to kill her. The idea was to have her staying at the castle to flush out killers and it wasn't working too well. She was doing her own snooping at tea times in the morning and the afternoon. Her contact from London somehow slipped a short note to her under her teacup, it was comforting to know an experienced investigator was protecting her.

Christmas day dinner was memorable. All of the traditional foods were served plus gourmet fare. Sixty guests in the dining hall were conversing, while waiters and their assistants flitted and fluttered around serving the dinner courses. They looked like honey bees working in the hive.

An assistant waiter was hustling along to serve Miss Marble a glass of sherry when he tripped over someone's foot. He went down, and the sherry was spilled onto the floor. When the liquid hit the carpet it combusted and burned right on through the carpet and the floor. It left a trail of holes down into a cellar below. Scrambling to his feet, the waiter was amazed to watch the liquid make holes on three levels of the castle.

He was about to turn and apologize profusely, but no one at the table appeared to have seen his fall or the spilling of the sherry. Greatly relieved, he fetched another sherry for Miss Marble who was chatting with Lady Cheatham without a care in the world.

When the waiter had tripped, another employee bussing tables was right next to him. It seems their feet became entangled in the narrow aisle between tables. Miss Marble's silent partner, wearing a mustache and a small goatee had tripped the waiter. In the kitchen area, feigning working, he had seen a man pour a liquid into the sherry glass before the waiter picked up the tray.

He couldn't drop what he was doing and follow the man who had poured something into the sherry without blowing his cover. It was more important to trip the waiter and spill the sherry to protect Miss Marble. He wished he had been able to get a look at the poisoner and maybe end the hunt for the killers right then. I'll catch them sooner or later, right now my first priority is Marble's safety, he thought to himself.

Chapter Eighteen

The day after Christmas, is called Boxing Day in England, more or less an extension of the holiday. No one is quite sure how Boxing Day began, but it apparently had greater meaning as a special day in medieval times. In modern day England it's just an excuse to keep on celebrating for another day.

On Boxing Day, a local constable assigned to help Livingston's murder investigation was inspecting the portion of the castle he guarded. He was down on the lower level of the castle checking a cellar area. In a dark corner of the room, a faint beam of light was shining through to the floor. This was something new, he had never seen any light anywhere in the cellar on prior inspections. He stood in the shaft of light, looking up, he saw a series of holes in the floors above him.

He called Livingston who was trying to balance his attention between the constable's call and Neville. The in-

spector waved off the hotelier and took the call. Minutes later he was down in the cellar looking up at the strange holes in the floors above. Up above him, a constable was peering down through the hole in the dining hall floor. He down to the cellar and described the damage.

“Sir, whatever the liquid was, it was so powerful it burned through the carpet, then burned its way down here—to the cellar floor.

Livingston used a flashlight to locate the spot where the burning had stopped. Right under the light shaft. was a burned area indented in the floor which had been strong enough to resist the collision with the high energy liquid. Routinely he took broken fragments of the stone floor to send off to Scotland Yard for chemical analysis.

Food service personnel were assembled in the dining hall for any information about the incident causing a hole to be burned into the floor. After five minutes or so, the assistant waiter who was carrying the glass of sherry nervously admitted he had spilled some wine.

Everyone was excused and the waiter made his statement to the police, including a physical demonstration from the time he picked up the glass in the kitchen until he fell. The waiter told them he tripped on someone's foot, thus causing the fall, but, no, he never saw the person whose foot tripped him up.

Livingston was now saddled with another case of attempted murder when he learned who the sherry was for Miss Marble. In addition, there seemed to be a new player, the mystery man who tripped the waiter, Was it done on purpose, or had the waiter merely made a clumsy stumble? He returned to his chart of suspects, murders and failed attempts to kill Miss Marble. He added the poisoning plot and the new mystery man.

He stared at the chart beginning with Basil Beaverton's murder then moving down in date order to all of the other criminal actions. On the side of the chart was a list of the suspects known to hate Miss Marble.

She had helped the police catch killers, and destroyed the lives of those close to the accused in the process. On

the list he added Hagus McGee, the piper in the bagpipe band, as the latest person trying to murder the amateur sleuth. Where will it all end? he anguished.

Chapter Nineteen

A clandestine meeting was being held in the secret chamber by the three killers to regroup after the latest fiasco involving the demise of Miss Marble.

"I thought the unexpected assassination attempt by the McGee fellow would divert attention from our plans. Instead we have someone watching Miss Marble's back other than the police. I'm sure the tripping incident which spilled our lethal concoction, was done deliberately by someone working undercover in the castle."

"Unless we catch this person in action we'll probably never know who is protecting her. I wonder if we should delay knocking her off for another time when there aren't at least twelve policemen around, and now an unknown protector as well."

One of the plotters jumped up from his chair.

"No! Her life ends here at the castle! This is no time to

stop our efforts, don't forget there are many events coming for another eight days. It's plenty of time to carefully plan a new approach to kill her. We just have to stay informed about police routines to select the best place and time to try again."

His co-conspirators agreed to the new plan. They too wanted to end it now. Organizing had its beginnings many months prior, ending with a unanimous agreement to use the huge 500 year anniversary celebration for the perfect cover. It should have ended then, and would have, except for overlooking one tiny detail. Checking the accuracy of a seven hundred year old crossbow.

They went on to lay out a number of alternative methods to be used to end Miss Marble's life. Such as ropes for hanging, knives to be thrown or used to stab her, pistols with silencers, silent sniper's rifles, drowning, They left out poisoning and bombing for now due to the absolute failure of these methods.

The newest plotter joining the group was all for frontal action. He proposed ramming the front entrance with an armored vehicle at tea time then proceed to open up with grenades, cannon fire and machine guns. When he finished describing this slaughter there was silence in the chamber. The other two stared at him in horror and they shook their heads violently to indicate their disapproval of the idea. Silently they were both thinking, we need to watch this mad man closely or we all might end up on the gallows.

After all of the excitement and dissipation during the Christmas and Boxing Day period, Miss Marble slept late. When arising, she called for a masseuse to straighten out the kinks in her body, a hair dresser, and a fingernail person. It was some of the little luxuries she had become accustomed to over the years as a guest of the wealthy.

Later, she went to see Livingston to get the latest news on the murder cases. Luckily, he saw her walking down the hall toward Neville's office. Scrambling around, he was able to hide his chart and notes on the two latest attempts to murder her.

No one except his police group and Neville knew anything about the two latest failed attacks.

Miss Marble entered the office looking rested and radiant from her morning pampering. In contrast, Livingston was a nervous, physical wreck with deep stress lines on his face and dark bags under his eyes. His smile of welcome to her was like the wan smile of a patient to the surgeon who would soon have their life in his, hopefully, skillful hands. She was startled by his appearance and inquired if he was ill? Bravely, he said,

"tish tosh."

He found it very difficult to discuss the latest news on the investigation and leave out the wild action since Christmas eve. His words were selected carefully and spoken slowly to Miss Marbles. She looked at him curiously, wondering if he had perhaps been celebrating the holiday with too much carousing and late nights. When he left out the recent happenings, there wasn't really anything to say about the investigation.

They had made no progress at all because they had been madly racing around trying to contain the latest murder attempts.

It was a short visit and Miss Marble left to have tea wondering why the inspector looked so worn out. From the little he had to say about their progress, obviously it isn't hard work on the investigation. She concluded her first reaction was probably correct, he was having a wild night life with plenty of alcohol.

Arriving for tea time she selected the group of women she would gossip with. Yes, she was back on the job snooping and prying information out of unsuspecting women. Or, it was what she thought about her clever ploys, but the truth was most of the people who knew her were aware of the snooping questions. Although there had been some women who had fed her false information on occasion as a prank, Marble usually knew it was a gag.

Two women eagerly told her about police activity in the dining hall. A waiter who was known by the ladies to spill

his guts about anything for a pound or two, told them about the meeting with the police. It had to do with an assistant waiter admitting to them he had tripped and spilled a glass of sherry at the Christmas dinner. He didn't know why it was important, but the police covered the floor where the waiter indicated he fell. Miss Marbles antenna quickly rose to its highest point as she listened to the ladies talking about the odd incident.

The information they had was sketchy but she knew police procedures, covering up an area meant it was important to an investigation. It was mystifying, but she knew it was significant for some reason and a glass of spilled wine was the clue. She waited, drinking tea with her group, until an appropriate amount of time passed for her to leave without arousing curiosity. Miss Marbles headed for the dining hall.

It was an excellent time to go since it was mid afternoon and the place was nearly empty. Except for Livingston who was standing behind her.

: "Good afternoon Miss Marble, what are you doing

here at this time of day?"

She was startled by his voice but she kept her cool composure as she replied.

"I was hoping to find a lovely lace shawl Lady Cheatham had lent me. I misplaced it somewhere, and I thought the dining hall might have been where I lost it. Careless of me inspector."

"Not like you at all to lose anything, I know how meticulous and organized you are." he said lightly. "You needn't bother the dining room staff, all found items are immediately turned into Neville's office. Shall we go see?"

Fuming inside at being seen by the inspector, she went with him to Neville's office. Of course there was no shawl to be recovered, it was the first alibi that came to mind. Neville was sympathetic about her loss and he offered to alert the hotel personnel to look for the shawl.

She had been temporarily thwarted, but certainly not defeated. Livingston was acting strangely, she thought, he isn't sharing information with me. Something is going on but he stone walled me twice, she thought to herself.

It was time to regroup and piece together what she knew.

Laying her knitting down on a chair, she heard a slight crackling noise coming from the ball of yarn. A tip of paper was showing through the outer part. She unraveled the top strands to reveal a small note. It read.

"It's time to talk, meet me in the billiard room at 10." She was greatly relieved to be contacted by her partner, especially after her odd meeting with Livingston. She was sure he had some important things to tell her. Now we can go to work on this case, she thought with satisfaction.

Chapter Twenty

It was December 30 before Livingston received an email from Scotland Yard in London about Hagus Mcgee the bagpiper. He had attempted to kill Miss Marble with poison darts. There was a lab analysis included in the report about the poison, it contained several snake venoms with a dash of the rare Spotted Belly Scorpion quick killer, and a liberal dose of sulpheric acid

Up to the present time, Hagus hadn't spoken a word to the police. A background report on the would-be killer revealed an old grudge going back twenty years. He and his brother had been pipers in the Highland Guards when they were quite young. Robby, the brother, was in love with a dancer in one of the music halls, and apparently she cared for him..

Robby had a rival for her affections, a British Army sergeant who had seen her first. When he came on the scene

the girl quickly dumped the sergeant and openly displayed her love for Robby. The sergeant fought for his girl with everything he had to offer, a nice cottage, a nest egg and his undying love. These endowments didn't come close to equaling her love for the young piper.

One morning, British Army headquarters was visited by Scotland Yard detectives who told them the sergeant had been murdered with a knife in an alley. The Provost Marshall office joined up with the detectives to find the murderer. Within a few days they learned about the lovers triangle.

The dancer swore Robby was with her at the music hall and later, she hesitated, in her bedroom. Hagus, his brother, swore he had been with him and they went to the music hall together. Employees at the music hall corroborated their stories. After questioning everybody, the army and the police came to the conclusion Robby was innocent.

Miss Marble was in London visiting, naturally, a wealthy family who invited her to stay for the theater season.

Reading about the case in the London newspapers, she contacted Scotland Yard and volunteered her services. No one ever enjoyed being assisted by Miss Marble, somehow she always solved the case and they appeared to be slow witted. They reluctantly accepted her help because it was a tough case and their progress was nil.

Within a week she was calling a meeting to discuss the case with the police and the McGee brothers. She recapped the salient facts of the case and how difficult it appeared on the surface of things. No suspects, and everyone had a solid alibi to prove their innocence. Only solid physical evidence would reveal the killer, since everyone stuck to their stories.

For added drama,(she was very good at it) she had brought a box with her. Now Miss Marble opened the box with a flourish to reveal a soldier's boot. She showed it around to the group. She explained to them.

"On the sole of this boot is the piece of evidence which reveals the murderer unequivocally."

Turning the boot over revealed a large blood stain on the sole of the boot.

"This blood stain is fresh and it has been matched to the boot print found in the pool of blood surrounding the victim. Hagus McGee hid this boot, it belongs to his brother, Robby, who is the murderer of Sergeant David Mills."

Robby McGee was hanged for the murder, and his brother Hagus, served five years in prison on obstruction of justice charges. Both brothers had damned Miss Marble to hell, and Hagus swore he would revenge the death of his brother at the hands of a meddling old biddy.

Livingston made arrangements to have two of his detectives escort Hagus to London on a charge of attempted murder. A return to prison life was certainly assured. The inspector tried to find some comfort in closing at least one murder case at Cheatham Castle.

He was also sent a lab analysis of the poison in the glass of sherry served up in the dining hall. The incredible potency of the concoction only indicated the perpetrator had an extensive knowledge of chemistry. Essentially it didn't

narrow the number of possible suspects though since a number of people could have learned a great deal about chemistry and poisons..

Miss Marble entered the billiard room in the castle promptly at 10 PM to meet her silent partner. The room was empty but it didn't bother her, she knew he would be arriving on time. She heard footsteps at the entrance, in walked a waiter with a tray .

"Good evening Elaine, I brought you a glass of sherry , but it only contains the wine."

"Well, what else would it be?" she asked.

"I see you don't know about the lethal glass of sherry a waiter was bringing for you the other night. I was in the kitchen near the bar area and I saw a man pour something into the sherry. Unfortunately, I didn't get a look at him.

"When the unknowing waiter picked up the tray, I followed him out into the dining hall. No matter who the 'doctored' sherry was for, I had to stop the waiter. I bumped into him, and stuck out my foot to trip him. Down he went and the sherry spilled onto the carpet.

"I watched the liquid fizzing, then it was gone through the rug. When I was able to look down from where it spilled I could see holes burned all the way to the cellar. His proximity to you convinced me the poisoned drink was meant for you."

Miss Marble became very agitated to hear how close she was to being poisoned.

"When I asked Livingston about the incident he wouldn't tell me what happened, or who was involved. I'm quite puzzled about his behavior toward me, the police haven't supplied any reports on their investigations. I don't understand it, you know how much I rely on their detecting."

"He 's hiding things for his own purposes, I think it's a cold blooded motive to keep you here as long as possible to flush out the killers. He's sure there will be another attempt, or more than one, by your enemies. We have to fight back by catching them ourselves. Here is a plan of action I put together for us to follow. Take it with you and study it, I'll be back in touch soon and remember,

I'm always close by protecting you."

He left abruptly

Returning to her suite, Miss Marble studied the plan and the role she needed to play in the game of cat and mouse. Only this was no game, knowing her partner was in the castle was the only thing keeping her from running away. His plan called for a number of things to be done every day, it gave her direction and a way to relieve the tension.

Chapter Twenty One

It was fox hunting day at Cheatham Castle, for the horsy set, ablaze with colorful red jackets and black, typically worn by the ladies in the hunting group. Liv was riding today even though she wasn't particularly fond of hunting. She and Pen were on the snoop again despite the warnings. They believed their superior knowledge of the castle and its property would be adequate for their protection. No more carelessness like the last time when they were abducted.

Today she was trailing after Rex Porter, a very ruthless man who was known to have publicly condemned Miss Marble. Riding with him was his niece, Pamela Porter, a lively young lady who had recently graduated from Cambridge. Her field of study was English literature and she was working on literature projects at the university..

Liv was mildly surprised when Rex and Pamela came over to see her. Familiarity in the past had never been

more than passing chit chat at social gatherings. Their interest in her didn't appear to be more than chit chat as usual, such as asking about her modeling career in London.. Pamela talked about her position at Cambridge and invited Liv to visit her at their townhouse in London sometime. .

The Cheatham fox hunting course was one of the most rugged in England with impediments such as ditches, fences, and streams to challenge the skill of the rider. The hunting horn sounded to signal the beginning of the hunt. Liv broke off from the Porters and was now absorbed in the hunt, riding somewhere in the middle of the pack.

Her horse was a natural hunter and there was no hesitation at jumping fences or leaping over ditches. Around her were some spills and horses balking at some barrier and dumping the rider onto the ground. Liv was confident she didn't have to worry about her hunter. She cleared a ditch and the reins came loose in her hands. Liv was powerless to stop her horse without the reins!

At a full gallop she came to the most difficult hedgerow, it was high and broad. She was terrified as her horse took the hedge at full gallop and cleared it in perfect form, but the rider didn't. When the horse landed on the other side, Liv was thrown over the horse's head.

This was the most challenging part of the course, the hedgerow was almost immediately followed by a stream to cross. When Liz was launched into the air, she was able to flip herself over to avoid driving her head into the ground. She went over, then momentarily found her balance, only to have her momentum push her face first into the stream. It was December, and the water was just above the freezing mark. She gasped deeply from the shock of the icy water, then she was submerged..

Liv was fighting to stand up, but the current was swift at this point of the stream. Rex Porter was the first horseman to arrive, he dismounted, and jumped into the icy water to rescue her. Or so it appeared, but when he reached her, his boot clamped down on her chest pinning her to the bottom of the stream. She fought with all of the strength nature

provides to stay alive. Attempts to wrest herself free by pushing at his boot were futile,

A sharp object pierced her hip, she grabbed it and stabbed it into his leg above the boot. Pain shot into Rex's leg, a reflex reaction caused his pressure on Liv's chest to be lifted momentarily. She came up out of the water fighting, it was too deep to kick him, but her hands on his throat caused him to lose his balance. The tables were now turned.

It was fortunate several riders came to their rescue. They pulled both of them out of the stream. Now free, Liv kicked Rex in the crotch sending him to the ground doubled up.

"You murdering bastard! Trying to drown me! I know it was you and that bitchy little niece of yours who cut my reins. Hold him" she ordered the two shocked riders, "I'm having you arrested at least for assault! Attempted murder, if I can make it stick."

Rex struggled to get free from the riders holding him.

"She's crazy. I did no such thing, I was saving her!"

"By standing on my chest? The bruises from your boot will be perfect evidence of your intent to kill me."

There were now ten riders gathered around them. Liv immediately repeated her testimony about Rex Porter's attempt to drown her. Porter's loud denials were maybe too loud (like those of a guilty person hoping shouting would somehow drown out the truth). He was taken into custody, tied up, then lifted onto his horse while Liv limped over to hers.

They locked Rex in a stall. pending the arrival of the police. Porter was loudly proclaiming his innocence and threatening to sue everybody in the UK for rude treatment and use of excessive force. Livingston was alerted, before he headed for the stables he looked at his chart of suspects and criminal acts. He had room for Rex Porter on the chart but only barely. Where, oh, where? will this nightmare case end? he wondered.

He wasn't too shocked to hear it was Rex Porter in custody knowing his vow of revenge against Miss Marble, but

why Liv? Then he remembered her messing around in police business, it seemed to him his warnings had been ignored. He squelched the flash of anger running through him toward her for complicating a complex case even more.

Liv's wits never deserted her, she refused the many offers to help her or to get a doctor, etc.. No way would she be at the stables when Livingston arrived to take charge. He missed her by a scant two minutes as she exited the stable at one end as he arrived at the other entrance. Two of his agents came into the stables right behind their chief.

He began to organize police to keep the other guests away from the area. There was one exception though, it was Pamela Porter who rode her horse into the stable. Staying in the saddle, she began to scream at Livingston to free her uncle immediately. The inspector wasn't intimidated, he ordered one of the constables to lead her and the horse out of the area.

In the meantime, Liv had Pen join her, she needed to warn her cousin about Livingston and to tell her about Rex Porter's attempt to kill her. When she finished her story about the cold blooded attempt to drown her, Pen added a positive note.

"It's one less killer we have to worry about. I don't think this is the end of it though, and I'm concerned about the Panto group arriving tomorrow, it's perfect cover for a killer. All of the action, noise and audience participation will be so loud you could shoot Miss Marble with a cannon and no one would notice."

"Are you sure we should go on snooping? It's a dangerous pastime Porter almost killed me today. Our snooping is upsetting people and we aren't making any friends." Pen replied.

"I'm all for continuing to watch the suspects. Let's get the doctor to examine you Liv for any internal injuries."

Miss Marbles had mixed emotions about the Rex Porter arrest. Very relieved Liv wasn't hurt in the attack, but happy to have one more dangerous suspect in custody. She had her own chart of the case mimicking Livingston's, and

she was running out of room too.. She wondered about the suspect her partner had in mind, so important, he wouldn't tell her who he suspected. Anyhow, it was tea time and she could relax, sometimes she would become so relaxed, after four cups or more, she could hardly move.

Chapter Twenty Two

Mrs. Livingston was concerned about the great stress her husband was experiencing over the many challenges he must face. She knew the signs which marked how tense he was, eyelid twitching, nervously licking his lips, putting his pipe in and out of his mouth. Years of practice had created a cool, confident demeanor in the face of adversity. Only a wife would see the secret signs about his true inner turmoil.

She knew more pressure was about to come his way when he was faced with a large cast of performers arriving today to set up the Panto show. Scotland Yard had been somewhat understanding about the need for tight security in the midst of a carnival atmosphere. Two detectives were traveling with the Panto cast undercover as stage workers and two more were due to arrive at the castle to beef up Livingston's squad.

Right now, he was interrogating .Rex Porter. It was a tough job to question him, he was smart, arrogant and mean. At the present moment he was taunting the inspector by answering every question he asked by countering with a question. Other times he wouldn't answer at all. on such issues as conspiracy with others to kill Miss Marble.

After many hours of verbal fencing, all the inspector had gleaned for his efforts was a certainty Rex wasn't part of the group who made the attempts on the amateur sleuth's life. Here was another situation where the assailant acted alone, which shed no light on the secret group who he was sure tried to poison her with the glass of sherry. He was still at the beginning of the Beaverton murder. case. No evidence, some suspicions, and little else to work with.

Miss Marble continued with her snooping techniques which hadn't been very helpful. so far. Her contact with Nancy Brown, head of household, gave her some inside gossip about some of the guests. One bit of information shared by Nancy had been uncomfortable, it was about the couple she had surprised in the potting shed. When she

brought it up, Marble quickly changed the subject. If the gossip had reached the ears of Lady Guinness and Robby Devon, she fervently hoped they didn't jump to the conclusion she had talked.. Visions of the disgrace she would suffer if Devon did go public about catching her spying on them, made her shudder.

Toward the end of their meeting, Nancy made a light remark about something she thought was interesting but not important. Miss Marble only smiled and nodded her head slightly at her as if to agree it was nothing.. She was thrilled to hear this bit of news, it could be the key to identifying the would-be killers. She felt better to have a bit of exclusive information the police didn't know. It was a new suspect to be entered on her investigation chart. All she had to do was sit back and observe.

Scotland Yard officials knew they had a potential disaster on their hands. Violence and more killing at the Cheatham Castle Christmas celebration with a large number of important guests in attendance couldn't be allowed to happen.

The solid image of police efficiency the Yard had with the public had to be maintained at all costs.

Independent of Chief Inspector Livingston, the commission drew up a defense plan of their own to be implemented by the inspector. Like it or not. He was contacted by a commissioner who was a good friend of his. The police commission sent him to discuss the crisis of keeping law and order for the rest of the Twelve Days of Christmas holiday at the castle.

Friend or not, Livingston knew he was there to discuss the investigation and the police protection plan. He would listen to the commissioner and agree to every order the commission had sent him. Probably this visit is mostly to review my plan, he thought to himself. In part, he was correct, procedures and dispositions were covered with only a suggestion or two from the commissioner. Then the direction of the discussion took a sharp turn to personnel assignments.

First of all, the commission had decided a retired British Intelligence colonel who was a guest at the castle, would be in over all command. Colonel Bill (Black Jack) Batton was notorious for his swift brutal style of espionage. He took brash gambles on his intuitive feelings for a situation with mixed results over the course of his career. Livingston maintained a sort of frozen slight smile through the entire meeting. He almost lost it when he heard this news.

The next stunner took the slight smile completely off his face when he was told Senior Inspector Moore was being assigned to the case. Moore and Livingston were rivals in the police force. Livingston had been promoted to chief inspector by a razor thin margin over Inspector Moore. They stayed away from each other except for police work that required their cooperation. The case and its large cast of good guys and bad guys just seemed to grow bigger by the day the commissioner reminded him.

It was too much for Livingston to take without a fight.

"Is the commission having serious doubts about my ability to be in charge of an investigation without help?"

Inspector Moore would be a hindrance to the investigation since he holds a serious grudge against me."

Peter, the commissioner bringing the disturbing news, wasn't surprised at his friend's reaction.

"John, they sent me because we're close friends and thought you would take the bad news better from me. They didn't seem to realize how hard it would be for both of us to accept their wimpy decision to throw anything into the breach to save their own skins."

John was pacing furiously in an effort to regain control of his emotions. His pipe was being popped in and out of his mouth while he walked around the office. During the intervals between the pipe thing, he nervously licked his lips, He looked like a man trying to make up his mind to smoke or not to smoke. Peter had anticipated this scenario, he came prepared with a plan to make the situation easier for John to do his work. Not to mention keeping his contact with Inspector Moore to a bare minimum.

The commissioner waved his hand at him to sit down.

Peter pulled a document from his pocket.

"You know I wouldn't leave you alone without trying to help. The papers in my hand are Moore's orders from the commission to take charge of the local police contingent and establish a communications center. I think this order coming from the commission, rather than you, will be accepted without any fuss from Moore. You will be able to continue your work with him out of the way."

Well now, Livingston thought, this could work out.

"Thank you Peter for your help, I know the commission didn't write the order for Moore. You did."

Peter smiled at his friend, tapped his shoulder, and left.

Chapter Twenty Three

In the morning a convoy of vehicles wound around the road leading to Cheatham Castle, then taking a secondary road at the castle to bring them to the rear of the building. Vans and trucks were being unloaded of odd, colorful, bizarre costumes and scenery. The Panto had arrived for their three day engagement for the guests at the castle.

The hustle of the crew pushing and carrying the contents for the entire Panto show, resembled the activity of a circus or a carnival. Each worker knew his job and automatically performed it effortlessly. Some of the players were moving around the loading platform checking on their costumes to the annoyance of the transportation crew.

At the entrance hall the players in the Panto were being greeted by Lord and Lady Cheatham while cameras of various sizes recorded the event. Some of the more famous performers were being pulled aside by the media for short

interviews. Pen and Liv were among the Cheatham family members welcoming the group. A short time ago they were in rehearsals in London for the Panto show, they had spent time with their actor friends in the cast.

Near the end of the greeting scene at the front entrance, a maroon Bentley arrived trying to weave through the many automobiles parked in the driveway. It was tough going squeezing through narrow spaces between cars. Several times the Bentley resorted to blasting the horn at drivers lounging around their expensive sedans. Making noise for attention didn't work well, mostly the drivers used crude language or made rude gestures and refused to move their cars.

Defeated, the Bentley was parked where it was blocked. A young man got out and opened the rear door. A gray haired man exited not looking very friendly. His steel blue eyes roamed around taking in the scene. He had deep scowl lines on his forehead, a sort of pickle nose and thin lips set in a grim line. They walked toward the front entrance with the young man out in front of the older man

making a path for him in and around the cars.

Something about the young man's actions gave the impression he wanted to move through the crowded area as fast as possible. On several occasions the older man with the belligerent manner headed toward one of the drivers only to be blocked by his young assistant.

Nearing the top of the steps two policemen came bustling down to the pair. They were escorted up the stairs without any more interference. Police uniforms have a way of making people become more considerate of others.

Standing on the landing was Livingston trying to look pleasant as his nemesis, Inspector Moore came up to him.

"Good morning Melvin." he said, "It's unfortunate you arrived at the same time as the Panto cast."

"Morning John, better police control over this mob of people would have made things run much smoother."

Livingston didn't respond to Moore's snide remark. He quietly brought them to Neville's office to go over the work assignments.

Moore introduced his assistant to Livingston. He was a ruddy faced man with quiet eyes and a pleasant manner, his name was Inspector Lewis Roberts. John thought to himself, I wonder how the young man keeps a good natured attitude while working for Moore. He could imagine the verbal abuse Roberts had to endure.

By noon, discussions about Moore's duties in the murder case were completed, and Roberts had brought in his superior's belongings. Next, there was a meeting with the local constabulary to size them up. Ages ranged from just out of the pimply stage, to a man who looked to be the last veteran survivor of the Boer War. Moore was placed in charge of this bunch of local police.

Moore made his assignments based upon the agility of his crew. Foot patrols in the castle and out on the grounds were naturally assigned to the quick. The sedentary officers, and the almost dead constables, were given entrance guard duties. He told them to call him at his office if they needed help. When his motley crew had left for their duty stations, Moore said to his assistant.

"My orders didn't mention my police group was a bunch of rural constables." he fumed "Livingston must have had something to do with this insult.. The commission will hear from me. Where are our living quarters Lewis?"

"We're assigned to a room in one of the wings of the castle."

Lewis led the way, every bend in the hallways led to more drab, undecorated surroundings. Moore said.

"Are you sure you know where our lodgings are?"

"Yes sir. I've already brought your personal belongings to our room."

Moore wondered about Lewis' using the word, "our" in mentioning the room. After a quite tiring hike in the vast building, they arrived at "their room" It was really going to be a shared occupancy by the two policemen.

Moore entered the cramped space containing two single beds nearly touching each other. It included a small sink and a mirror for their convenience. Lewis waited for the explosion which was sure to follow this ugly surprise.

Inspector Moore stared at the scene then bellowed.

"What in God's name is this supposed to be? Our penal institutions have cells better than this pig sty! Livingston! he must have arranged for this slum to humiliate me! Lead me back to his office, Lewis!"

He never got there. Nancy the head housekeeper happened to be making an inspection of the wing when she was startled to hear the bellow sounding like someone in great pain. She rushed to the location of the terrifying noise.

"What is wrong gentlemen, is there a fire?"

"No fire, dear lady, it was a shout of outrage at the squalor I'm supposed endure while doing my work. I'm Senior Inspector Melvin Moore of Scotland Yard assigned here to provide extra help for apprehending the killer or killers of Basil Beaverton. Do you know who assigned this, uh, room for us?"

"Why I believe it was Mr. Neville Cheatham who decided on the rooms for police personnel. Officers who have been here for awhile have nicer accommodations, but

they are also occupied by two officers. With the arrival of the Panto group we had to open this wing and clean it up for occupancy. Cheatham Castle has now, literally, been filled to the rafters as the saying goes." she left abruptly.

Inspector Moore knew when he was licked. To add to his discomfort, he learned bathroom and shower facilities were communal. When asked, Lewis told him where they were to be found, nearly a half a block from their room.

"Lewis, I need to use the facilities, do you know where my hemorrhoid cream is?"

"I believe you're sitting on it sir,"

Moore said nothing, he picked up the flattened tube of hemorrhoid cream, his shaving kit, and left the room. Lewis watched him leave with relief.

A day working for Moore was tough going at times. However, a day when things go awry was a challenging experience. Lewis had to try to remain calm while straining to follow the torrent of commands aimed at him. As a young policeman in the detective section of Scotland Yard, it was a valuable position to have on his personnel record.

In spite of the haughty attitude and impatience he had to endure working for Moore, Lewis was learning about good detective thinking and actions.

Chapter Twenty Four

Cinderella opened to loud raucous music accompanying many colorfully costumed characters chattering away to each other. When the music stopped a jester was on the edge of stage talking directly to the audience about the story and the set up. When he described the three wicked sisters persecuting poor Cinderella the audience responded with loud boos, hisses and a few catcalls. Liv and the other two wicked sisters stuck out their tongues and made faces in crude defiance of the audience.

Characters on stage began to play their parts with music played off and on to emphasize the antics of the players. The audience laughed, made rude comments and jeered at the players. Miss Marble and Lady Cheatham were sitting in the first row with several constables flanking them.

In the pandemonium going on in the show, no one could hear the rocket fired from a hand held launcher. At this

moment the amateur sleuth had just bent over to retrieve her knitting knocked to the floor by a spectator. The rocket missile whooshed by missing her by inches. It sped unseen through the room exiting through a window. One hundred yards or so away from the castle it exploded harmlessly in a field. The muffled explosion of the rocket was taken to be part of the Panto.

Her partner had been trailing after the party who launched the rocket. He came up on the man from behind and knocked the launcher loose to prevent the culprit from getting off another rocket. They fell to the floor wrestling one another, one to escape, the other to hold on to his adversary. An accomplice came on the scene to assist his partner and struck Marble's man on the head, The two men dragged him to a closet and locked him in.

On stage a disguised constable spotted a cow aiming a pistol at Miss Marble, and he tackled the bovine. They went down in a pile of arms and legs. it was two against one and the cow wrestled free of the jester. The audience roared with laughter at the spectacle, believing the

wrestling match between a cow and a jester was part of the show.

Lewis, who had been assigned to be in the show as a bunny rabbit, hopped after the cow causing the spectators to shout and applaud the clever antics. Backstage, Lewis was quickly discouraged from continuing his pursuit of the cow when a bullet grazed his ear, drawing blood.

He stopped to free himself from the rabbit suit which didn't allow him to walk, he could only hop along. By this time his assailants were gone. He charged around the hallways, but there were too many choices for him to be sure he was pursuing the cow in the right hallway.. He tried to raise Inspector Moore using a walkie talkie portable radio. Moore wasn't in the center, he was off on a wild chase with a an aged constable who called in an emergency and asked for back up.

When Moore arrived, the constable held his finger up for silence then crept along the wall to a door. Inside, he could see the shadow of a man furiously hacking away at some-

thing with a cleaver. Before dashing over, he studied the scene carefully, he saw it was a butcher hacking away at a quarter side of beef. Turning to the constable he said disgustedly.

"Are you blind, man? It's a butcher cutting up a side of beef,!"

The constable went forward carefully to get a closer look to satisfy himself the inspector was right about the butcher. Moore watched him creeping forward to take a look, he refrained from saying anything to the old man. Satisfied, he came back to the inspector,

"I guess I need to have my vision tested." he said sheepishly.

Moore hurried back to the office, in a short while he would be sorry he did. Within the next hour he had two more emergency calls from local policemen. One involved the body of a man reported to be floating in the castle moat. He personally supervised a team of constables to set up lights to find the body reported to be in the moat.

About a hundred yards from the castle bridge they spotted the floating body.

A raft was inflated, and the senior inspector, with two men rowing, went out to inspect the corpse. As the raft approached the floating "corpse" they found out it wasn't a body. Someone had lost an overcoat, now in its final resting place floating around in the moat. Moore was unsuccessful in his search for Constable Harris who had raised the alarm.

He returned to the communications center where a Scotland Yard detective was waiting for him.

"Inspector Walsh, who is under cover in the Panto, contacted me to tell me about the sound of a commotion backstage. The show is over, and he is guarding the only exit until he has assistance to enter the area."

Inspector Moore sent word for a constable to find Lewis, his assistant, who had been in the Panto disguised as a bunny rabbit.

Lewis couldn't be found which added to Moore's simmering anger over this farce of a police force. He and the Scotland Yard detective with two local constables converged on the Panto stage. They decided to enter the area in the dark to keep any suspects from getting around them and running away. Moore went forward silently to the rear of the stage.

A constable spotted a form hanging by a rope, taking no chances, he pulled out his pistol and emptied a clip into the form. This forced Moore to turn on all of the stage lights. With the stage ablaze in blinding light, he charged to the back stage. There was a woman's scream as Moore tripped over a couple laying on some pillows, obviously not discussing the weather.

Moore's momentum carried him headfirst onto the floor behind the stage. When he landed heavily on the floor. he broke his wrist trying to shield himself from a skull fracture. Hanging above him was a stage sand bag slowly emptying its contents out of the two bullet holes the constable had made in it. Rather poor marksmanship considering he

emptied a nine bullet clip within ten yards of his target. Moore slowly rolled away from the sand storm falling on his head.

His accidental fall gave the half dressed couple their opportunity to grab their clothes and flee. As he lay there waiting for the medical personnel staying at the castle to haul him away, his group of constables came up to him and gave their reports. The accounts were all about the same, nothing happened, no one was hurt, except Inspector Moore.

Lewis continued his search for the cow/assassins through a labyrinth of hallways until he reached the lower levels in the castle. He past a gigantic wine cellar almost empty these days, but there were some huge barrels of wine and a rack of dusty bottles. Fighting off the temptation to try a bottle or two of the wine, he pressed on, remembering it's what Inspector Moore would do.

Passageways became smaller and cave-like as he penetrated into the deepest level. Not much money was being

spent on electricity here, only a bare light bulb every fifty yards. It would have been completely dark a few months ago, then Neville decided to add this part of the castle to his tour business. He believed the dark, brooding area would add some drama for the tourists

There were a number of doors, all of them open and empty, he went on to the end of the walkway. On his way back he noticed an archway which had been sealed up with bricks. Lewis paused to inspect the arch, pushing and prodding at the bricks to see if any of them were loose.

Several of them yielded a little to the pressure of his hand, he pushed harder and a secret door silently swung open. Lewis held his revolver at the ready then cautiously stuck his head into the area. It was a small room furnished with a table and chairs. In the dim light cast by a single bulb he saw a man bound to a chair.

A glimpse of the bound man's face was a shock, Lewis recognized him immediately, untying him without any hesitation.

"Sir, have you been injured?" Lewis asked him.

"No, except for the large lump on my head." replied Miss Marble's partner. "It's quite a relief to be found, thank you so much. How did you know to look for me here?"

"It was by sheer chance." replied Lewis, "I'm from Scotland Yard, Inspector Lewis Roberts, sir. I was searching for two men who attempted to kill Miss Marble tonight during the excitement of the Panto performance.

"Another officer and myself foiled the attempt, but they got away, now I'm looking through the entire castle for them."

"It must be the same killers who also attempted to kill Miss Marble with a rocket. They missed and I was able to deflect the man's second try, but his accomplice knocked me out. If you hadn't come along by chance, I'm sure they intended to smuggle me out of here and dispose of me far away from Cheatham Castle."

When they reached the main floor he said to Lewis.

"My position here has been compromised so I must leave. They know who I am and they will kill me on sight

now that I've escaped with your help. I want to write a note to Miss Marble explaining the situation and to work with you to solve this seemingly complicated can of worms. Don't tell anyone about our encounter, including your superior, Moore. The irony of it all is, the answer is fairly simple."

Chapter Twenty Five

Lewis took the note addressed to Miss Marble and wished the man good luck. It was after midnight now so he tip-toed into the room he was sharing with Inspector Moore. When he sat down to remove his shoes, Moore sat up in bed.

"Where in God's name have you been? Constables searched the castle looking for you. I wasn't in on the hunt, as you can see I was injured falling off the Panto stage. My wrist is broken, the doctor wasn't finished until an hour ago. Give me your report, Lewis, and don't ever disappear again without contacting me, that's an order!"

Lewis didn't answer immediately, he had to be careful about what he said to Moore. In great detail he described the pursuit of the cow, hopping in his bunny rabbit costume. The reason he gave for not contacting him was the chase through the castle, he couldn't risk being heard by the assassins. It was barely passable for an excuse, but

Moore accepted his alibi without comment. Probably because he was still feeling the effects of the pain medication administered by the doctor in residence

Later the next day, Lewis contacted Miss Marble to give her the note and explain what had transpired in the secret room. He told her no one knew about his experience.. She opened the note from her partner. It read:

"I'm sure Lewis told you about my need to disappear." The note went on to outline his plan for solving the murder and apprehending the group of killers. It would take some patience and keen observing to carry it out,

She thanked him for the note and his help

"I need you to investigate the areas my partner wrote about. They are all crucial to a successful end to this nightmare I'm in.. Can you work for me and still satisfy the demands of your superior, Inspector Moore?"

" Yes I can do it. Your partner asked me to help you."

They devised a plan. Lewis' job was tough. He had to be extremely careful to watch others while keeping Inspector

Moore satisfied with his work for him. Not an impossible feat, but certainly a daunting one. They agreed the killers main focus would continue to be the Panto performances since Miss Marble was being so closely guarded by the police. Here was the arena where she would be in the open.

Weather changes had occurred again with a strong arctic front moving into England complete with rain mixed with sleet. Driving on the roads was nearly impossible as the ice began to form over nearly all of the island. At Cheatham Castle the three conspirators took advantage of the foul weather to meet in the tack room of the deserted stables. Their former meeting place couldn't be used, since it was no longer secret.

They were all savagely angry over the failure of their attempts to kill Miss Marble, particularly since her survival was accidental.. Their leader was extremely upset over the misses at the Panto show the night before. The rocket and pistol combination had been his idea. He couldn't blame the rocket miss on anyone, he launched it himself.

He was furious about Miss Marble's luck when she bent over to retrieve her knitting on the floor just before the rocket whizzed over her head. Clearly, if chance hadn't played into the attempt, the missile would have done the job. They were running out of time and ideas for a method to silence her for good.

The member who had the idea of using an armored vehicle in a frontal assault argued for his plan again, enumerating all of the past failures. He was allowed to rant and rave until there was foam on the sides of his mouth. Then the other two, being a majority, voted against the maniacal plan, again.

More ideas were put forth, drowning, strangling, shooting her, suffocation with a pillow, hanging, throw her off a tower. After all of their discussions about these proposed plans, in the end, there wasn't any dissention about the Panto show providing the most effective cover for their dastardly deed.

It had every possible element for drawing the attention of the audience to the antics on the stage, It was loud,

bawdy, the actors wore bizarre colorful costumes, and audience participation was an integral part of the production. It allowed for bold actions including murdering Miss Marble in plain sight of everyone.

New planning would require some time to set things up. After yesterday's failed attempts, they agreed the second Panto performance would be swarming with police. A day with no action might relax the security measures for the third and final Panto show.

Chapter Twenty Six

Livingston was reading the reports prepared by the police regarding the actions of the night before. He enjoyed thinking about the mishaps experienced by Inspector Moore. When he met with Moore today, he would tell him how upset he was about the inspector's misfortune. It would clearly be one of the most hypocritical bunch of lies ever told. He felt his little act of false commiseration was justified as a small offset for the outrageous disasters he had been experiencing for many days at Cheatham Castle.

They met in the dining room for lunch. Moore looked rough around the edges, his wrist was resting in a sling and there were several red contusions on his forehead from the fall off the stage. Livingston suppressed a smile when he saw Moore's physical condition. With a sympathetic tone in his voice, he launched into his brazen fabrications.

"Sorry you had such difficulties last night, your injuries look painful, Melvin. I understand you would prefer to

continue to work with me in spite of your injuries. I have made some switching in assignments so your duty station will be here in the office with your assistant Inspector Lewis Roberts. He will respond to calls for you .

"To have you safe and comfortable is my most important mission Melvin. I was in the chapel this morning asking for His help to protect you. Damned shame this happened on my watch. I'll do everything I can to make it up to you for my careless disregard for the safety of an older officer."

Moore stared at Livingston amazed at this unctuous performance which he knew was a grotesque sham.

"I know you're sincere John," he lied in return. "I'm grateful to you. Derelict in your duties! Nonsense!"

His smile was forced as he looked at his rival hoping the meeting was over, It was, since Livingston was having a hard time not smiling at Moore in his present uncomfortable condition.

It is doubtful any military commander preparing for a major battle was more diligent in planning than Livingston laying out his security strategy. He had a number of charts to cover the castle with the names of constables and inspectors for each level including all outdoor exits. Each group was brought in to be shown, one at a time, their duty station as marked on one of the charts.

Past screw ups were discussed and analyzed for the errors in judgment that caused the embarrassing incident. Names were excluded to protect the persons involved in the boneheaded decisions. Names or no names, those policemen in on the action caused by some fuzzy thinking were uncomfortable. Their eyes moved restlessly around looking for smirks or suppressed laughter.

Livingston had a confidential meeting with the director and the stage manager of the Panto production to go over the undercover agents included in the play. Only these two men in charge of the show knew who they were. One more agent was added to the cast for extra protection.

All of the security plans were smoothly executed by the police. Inspector Moore in the communication center was hardly bothered at all, only a few altercations involving guests under the influence-----of something. Not a single ripple of excitement spoiled the castle guests' evening. Finally, Livingston thought, peace throughout the castle.

There didn't seem to be a single outside disturbance to upset his plans. Neville was ecstatic over the seeming miracle of getting through the holiday without terrorizing the guests at the castle. Although he was effusive in his praise for Inspector John Livingston and the Scotland Yard police force, it seemed to him dumb luck was the real savior.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Miss Marble was of a like mind, with Neville's assessment of the police performance. She knew more than one attempt to murder her had been foiled by her partner. Tonight was the final Panto performance, the amateur sleuth had been working behind the scenes preparing for what was probably going to be the last desperate effort by the killers to have their revenge once and for all.

Pen and Liv were trailing the last two suspects who had motives to do harm to Miss Marble. They were also certain if another attempt was made, it would occur during the Cinderella farce. Their time to follow the suspects was limited to the daytime, in the evening, they would be acting in the show. Liv had the boring chore of keeping an eye on Mrs. Witherspoon who never seemed to be devoting time to anything but the bridge games. Her only challenge was to convince the guests she wasn't really watching anyone.

Liv wasn't a great fan of card games and bridge was her least favorite. She knew how to play bridge since it was one of the social graces demanding participation at least now and then. In the card room a new face signed up to be available for a game, a surprising one too. Only a few players had ever played a game of bridge with Liv and she gave them the impression it was an obligatory appearance.

Oh well, they doubted she would play for long. She was a Cheatham and they couldn't refuse to include her in the game. General Smythe, retired, was cleverly maneuvered into being her partner. It was probably a decent match up, Liv would have to pretend to be interested in the card game, and the general was of an age he would have a hard time remembering what was trump.

She had to make the act convincing, and on several occasions she kicked him viciously in the shins under the table to keep him alert. The good news was the position of the table afforded her an excellent view of Mrs. Witherspoon. Liv ordered a double scotch and dug in. She played for three hours, which turned out to be her endurance limit

before doing something like turning the table over and walking out.

Mrs. Witherspoon left her table once, probably a powder room break, since she returned within fifteen minutes. Liv left the room assured in her own mind she need not continue to watch Mrs. Witherspoon. She went off to spend the rest of the day with the young actor who was her final choice of the men pursuing her.

Pen followed Peter Winslow to the billiards room as usual. She thought it was remarkable some people can become obsessed with a single pastime to the exclusion of almost everything. Winslow obviously fit the description of a fanatic about billiards. He was a champion player holding a record of wins in billiards competitions.

She had an easier time staying inconspicuous than Liv. One of Neville's many alterations of the castle to accommodate hotel guests was a modern work out room with the front all glass. Pen put on her exercise clothes and climbed on a tread mill while watching the billiards room door.

For nearly two hours she was on and off the treadmill hoping Winslow would do something soon. Her legs were feeling like lead from the long work out, but it was necessary to watch Winslow. Well, she thought to herself, the exercise is good for me, but I hope he comes out before I look like a survivor from a famine.

At last, Peter Winslow came out of the billiard room. Pen followed him down the hallway staying far enough from him to exclude any suspicion he was being watched. Damn, she thought when he entered the mens room. It was the same thing he had done when she trailed him before, but this time she waited for him to exit the room. Pen was no expert on the bathroom time required by men, but he was in there for a long time.

She had been reasonably sure there was only one door to the mens room. Doubting herself, because of the long wait, Pen rounded the corner to the side of the room and studied it for an opening. Like many walls in the castle this one was paneled with beautiful oak wood. She ran her fingers

along the raised wood frame of the panels. Nothing felt out of place on the frames, so she stopped feeling the wood.

As she turned to leave, a thin slit in a panel looked out of place on the perfectly matched wood. Running her hand over the small opening one of her fingers was pricked by a piece of metal. Studying it, Pen recognized a small latch next to the crack in the panel. Pushing and pulling got her nowhere, but pressing down on it caused the panel to slide open enough to squeeze through the opening.

She entered the room and the panel closed quickly behind her plunging the area into complete blackness. Pen was brave enough but this kind of complete nothingness was terrifying. Turning back to the panel she tried desperately to push it open but it wouldn't budge at all.

With a mighty effort she managed to partly smother her terror. Her hands began to carefully feel the wall for anything like a switch or a door opening. Suddenly a single shaft of light hit the wall from below her. Luckily she was out of the area where it illuminated the wall area. Pen

ducked down to avoid creating a shadow for whoever had lit up the area.

It might not be helping her in any way but she was holding her breath waiting for the next move. A scraping sound from below her sounded like footsteps on a stairs. The shaft of light was enough illumination to see she was near a corner. Quietly Pen slipped over to the corner and curled up tightly hoping to be invisible.

Within seconds of her move to hide, a man came up from below and headed to the door panel. He didn't see her in the corner, but something felt different about the panel latch. Looking quickly around searching for anyone hiding in the room, Pen saw his face, it was Winslow. Her lungs felt like they would burst from holding her breath. Winslow turned back, then plunged the room into blackness before he exited through the panel.

When Winslow opened the panel door, Pen got a look at the latch that opened it. Letting her breath out and breathing in deeply felt wonderful. She stayed in place for about

thirty minutes in the blackness then made her way over to the panel. Feeling around, using her memory to guide her, Pen found the latch. When she was back in the hallway relief flooded through her.

Running as fast as she could down the hallway she reached the entrance hall, a much too public a place for Winslow to harm her. He had been surprised by the swift move and knew it was now impossible to catch her. She hadn't seen him hiding in the shadows.

He had recognized Pen when she ran past him in the hallway. Winslow was now sure she had been following him on other occasions. The situation needed his attention as soon as possible. Pen found Liv at a table in the grand ballroom with her new boyfriend having a drink. Without so much as a hello, Pen grabbed Liv by the arm and pulled her up protesting.

Leaning in close to her ear, Pen said.

"Shut up Liv! I need you with me right now! Winslow is after me, he's one of the group stalking Miss Marble.

I'll give you the details later, but right now I need to get to Livingston with this information. Got it?"

Liv got it. She quickly turned to her boyfriend.

"See you tonight."

He waved his hand at her, still in shock over this swift turn of events. We're acting in the Panto together, he thought, Liv will tell me tonight what has upset her cousin.

Neville and Livingston were in the office going over the events planned for the evening and the names of the hotel personnel who would be on duty. Pen didn't knock on Neville's door, she marched in with Liv. The men were startled by her rude entrance. Neville was annoyed at his sister's bad manners.

"Knocking first would have been nice, Pen."
he said sarcastically.

"My news is too important to worry about upsetting you, Neville."

Her serious expression convinced the men something important had transpired. Not bothering to sit down in the office, Pen told them about stumbling on to Winslow's

participation in the group. She described the stairs he had climbed to return to the main floor. Adding, she hadn't explored the area below for obvious reasons.

Livingston wasn't convinced Winslow was involved.

"I think you're reaching a dubious conclusion about him. I'm not saying he isn't suspect for his strange behavior but maybe there's another reason for going down into the basement area. Right now we need to explore the hidden door and what lies beyond it."

"I'm not aware of a hidden door in the castle and I've lived here all of my life." Neville replied. "Let's go."

Pen opened the panel easily this time. Entering the room with flashlights revealed it was a landing above a stairway. Looking down into blackness, Pen thought, I was lucky Winston came up when he did, or I would have stepped out into space. The stairs had no hand rails and the landing didn't have a safety railing. Neville and Livingston descended on the ladder leaving the women on the landing to act as lookouts.

It was a fair distance to travel on the stairs down to the floor. They estimated it was about a fifty foot climb down to the floor level. Flashing their lights around they saw some old barrels and what looked like a pile of round metal pieces. Neville looked closer at some of the metal junk, then he said to Livingston.

"It's true I've never been in this specially built room with such a high ceiling, but I read a history of the castle. The book mentioned they brewed their own beer until the fifteenth century. I'd say the pile of metal pieces over there is the dismantled brewing tower. Now I know why I could never find the brewery, it was walled up and sealed. From the outside you would never guess there was anything behind the hallway walls. Now I can have it restored for a tourist attraction."

A closer look around the old brewery room showed an area with signs it had been used recently. It was now empty but tracks and indentations made it clear to them some heavy items had been stored here. Probably weapons and explosives they speculated,

which explained why the police never found any physical evidence.

They wondered how old the secret entrance was and who built it. They doubted Winslow or anybody else would have a reason to come back to the area, however Livingston stationed a constable there. Up on the loft Pen and Liv were watching the men below them.

When they came up Pen said.

"I suppose you'll arrest Winslow now inspector."

"I can't arrest him, Pen, there's no evidence. All we can do is assign an agent to shadow him closely even if Winslow discovers there's a tail on him. We can't take the chance he might try to kill Miss Marble no matter the circumstances."

She didn't like it, but Pen knew he was right, dammit. Now the woman was to be guarded by an agent, her uneasiness was about Livingston using Miss Marble as bait to catch the killers. It was a dangerous and cold calculation. She tried to persuade the inspector it wasn't necessary to

use guards for herself and Liv. He turned her down.

It was a fascinating scenario:

1. Livingston had planned for the evening down to the last detail.

2. Unknown to him were Miss Marble's plans acting on her own with Lewis' confidential assistance.

...3. A desperate group of killers had laid out their last chance to murder the amateur sleuth. It was now or never.

All of this maneuvering was going to inter-play tonight.

Chapter Twenty Eight

It was louder and more raucous than ever, the crowd was showing their appreciation for an excellent Panto show loosely based on Cinderella. It had five film stars playing major roles, guaranteeing a filled to capacity house. A particular stand out for the ladies was film star Richard Princeton playing Cinderella, he was giving an outstanding performance in the role.

He had a natural talent for slap stick comedy and his interpretation of Cinderella was quite broad and vulgar. There was more crowd participation tonight, to make the last show memorable. Some crowd control was necessary when the more alcohol impaired spectators would attempt to go up on the stage in the spirit of things.

One particularly athletic drunk managed to elude the security guards and headed for a pretty young lady on the stage with his arms wide open to hug her. She didn't really

need any security guard protection. When he was about to touch her, she stepped aside like a toreador sending the would-be lover sprawling on the floor.

As he rose unsteadily to his feet, she booted him off the stage. to the loudest cheer ever heard in the castle. Helpless on the floor, a security guard quickly scooped him up, and half carried him out. On stage the veteran performers went on with their parts as if the incident had never occurred.

Miss Marble was seated with Lady Cheatham near the stage enjoying the antics and lampooning of well known people. They were close to the theater orchestra and the players on stage, so it was flooded with sound where they were sitting. .She and Lady Cheatham couldn't hear each other they had to make hand signals to communicate.

One of the sheep raised a hoof with a gun clutched in it. Turning the sheep's head to face Miss Marble, the killer turned the pistol in her direction. No one would hear a shot in the bedlam going on in the play and the audience noise.

Before the shooter could get off the round, Little Bo Peep stepped on the hoof sending the revolver skittering across the stage.

Little Bo Peep was a very strong young agent, known as Inspector Jones of Scotland Yard, He heaved the sheep upright, then head-locked the occupant of the suit and rushed him to the back stage exit. Two other agents came up to assist him in taking off the sheep suit to reveal Peter Winslow. He was in a rage and he spat at the police as he was cuffed.

Livingston suddenly appeared to take command. He gave orders for the agents to get back to their posts immediately, leaving Inspector Jones looking ridiculous as Little Bo Peep and holding a gun on his prisoner. As the Panto went on to a more unruly audience than usual, people were standing up and pushing toward the stage. Miss Marble and Lady Cheatham found themselves boxed in on both sides by people in the aisles and in the rows of seats. Someone set off a small smoke bomb on stage that engulfed the front rows.

Out of the smoke a face appeared before Miss Marble. It was someone in an outrageously wild red wig and heavy make up. This character's hands were moving toward her neck. Suddenly the face disappeared and they were being jostled in their seats as two people wrestled in the aisle. It stopped. In a few minutes the smoke curtain had dissipated while the show continued on.

A terrific wrestling match had ensued in the aisle, but the attacker got away from his opponent by kneeing him in the crotch. Before he could recover from the terrible pain he was suffering, the assailant was gone. Her partner had returned from London to provide protection. He was dressed as a cavalier, complete with sword, and saved her from being strangled to death.

Although he had told her about leaving the castle, he didn't say he wouldn't come back. He had returned secretly the day before knowing his partner would be in extreme peril on the last day of the Panto. He would leave her a note again adding more information to finish the case.

One of the constables was patrolling his assigned area in the castle when he found two dead men sprawled in the hallway. It was Peter Winslow and Inspector Jones. They had been shot in the back of the head and another bullet was fired into their backs to ensure they wouldn't live. It meant a member of the killer group wanted to silence Winslow to be sure he didn't reveal the names of his accomplices.

Livingston was called to report the double murder. The inspector took the news of a double killing in the castle badly. He had a conference with Inspector Moore to organize a methodical search of the premises and grounds for any clue leading to the assassin. Livingston led a team of constables into the lower level of the castle to probe for any sign that the perpetrator escaped through the area.

It was dawn before search efforts were stopped for lack of any clues. They would now have to set up an investigation by the book using all the available manpower.

Scotland Yard was extremely upset over this latest disaster and the need to report the murders to the Board of Commissioners

Inspector Moore was taking great pleasure watching Livingston desperately working to keep some sort of a lid on this mess. He knew it would be impossible to keep the murders a secret. Every guest at Cheatham Castle probably knew of the latest killings by breakfast time.

When Miss Marble heard the news about the murders of Winslow and Inspector Jones she wasn't surprised. Since Livingston had excluded her from the investigation there hadn't been much communication between them. Information she collected was withheld from the police. Lewis showed up at her room to share the information she had been waiting for, now she was ready.

She contacted Livingston, Moore and Neville to request a meeting with them as soon as possible to share some important information about the case. Within the hour Miss Marble was seated in Neville's office. She began:

"This case appears to be complex when viewed from the outside, but in fact, it is quite simple. It all began with the murder of Basil Beaverton during the 500 year anniversary celebration. As it turned out, the killers were attempting to kill me.

“A second attempt to kill me occurred a short time after the Beaverton murder in a hallway in the company of Inspector Livingston. The inspector engaged in a gun battle with the shooter who got away and I only sustained a few scratches from a shattered lamp. After the second attempt on my life I became involved in conducting my own investigation.

One of the many people who hold grudges against me for solving murders must hold malignant feelings festering like battery acid burning through metal. I will guess these dark forces have driven this person to the brink of either destroying me or themselves.

"Such a person would have no conscience over killing anyone who hampers their plot to murder me. I think that the two men murdered at the time of the 500 year anniversary

sary were members of the group formed to kill me. The two men, Colonel Ogleby and Lord Faversham were nearly fanatical in their hatred of me. They were probably becoming increasingly difficult to control, and the leader perceived them as a threat to a disciplined group adhering to orders. Rash action by either of them could have revealed the other group members.”

At this juncture, Miss Marble paused to sip her cup of tea, after all, she wasn't pressed for time. The group was silent watching her intently wondering what she would say next. Setting down her tea cup, she brought out the chart she had been using to keep track of the many attempts to kill her.

"Here is the history of this case in chronological order:
500 Year Anniversary:

1. Basil Beaverton murder with a crossbow meant for me
2. Attack in the hallway-- A set up for a diversion?
3. Timed explosive device in my room.
4. Attack in the Entrance hall-- Triangular trap with three shooters, resulting in the killing of Colonel Ogleby and Lord Victorson Plan to kill me failed.

Twelve Days of Christmas:

5. Poison dart attempt. Not a group attempt, killer caught.

6. Poisoning attempt in the Dining Hall

7. First Panto performance two attempts

A. Hand launched rocket missed.

B. Group killers disguised as a cow try to shoot me.

8. Third Panto performance attempts

A. Attempted strangling

B, Another shooting attempt by a sheep.

"Quite an impressive list of foiled plans to murder. On the face of it one might say I was extremely lucky. In some of the incidents it's true, .in others I had help from the Scotland Yard agents, the constables and an investigator who will remain anonymous at his request. He operated here at the castle undercover and kept me informed of the clues he was gathering.

"There are two members of the original group of plotters unaccounted for who were major players blocking investigators from learning about the operation."

At this point, Miss Marble walked over to the office door and called out.

"Alright Lewis, bring them in."

Lewis led two handcuffed ladies into the room. Most of the people at the meeting were astonished to see identical twins. One of them was Mrs. Witherspoon, the avid bridge player, the other was her twin sister Mrs, Plankton. Miss Marble introduced them to the people in the office.

"Mrs. Witherspoon was overlooked, seeming to spend almost all of her time in the card room. In reality, she was a member of the killing group. She only appeared to be in the card room playing bridge, because her identical twin sister was switching places with her and vice versa. They were free to move around the castle with one of them always in plain view playing cards.

"Our own Pen and Liv brought Mrs. Witherspoon to the attention of the police as a possible suspect. They knew about her declarations of intense hatred for me, from family gossip. Nearly thirty years ago Mrs. Witherspoon was

the key witness for the defense in the murder trial of her twin sister, Mrs. Plankton. She was accused of killing a young woman who was her husband's lover.

"Mrs. Witherspoon's alibi for her sister seemed to be unshakeable because of witnesses who claimed to have seen her in the company of her sister at a restaurant. It was a large dinner party of fourteen people having a lively time. Cleverly distracting attention, Mrs. Witherspoon was leaving the table and coming back quickly in another dress to pose as her sister.

"I questioned a ten year old girl at that time who had been at the dinner party.. She told me there was something odd about the sisters, because somehow they seemed to be wearing the same shoes with a large scratch on the heel. Mrs. Witherspoon had overlooked changing her shoes in her masquerade of being both sisters. Her alibi for her sister fell apart on the testimony of the little girl.

"This mistake put her sister in prison for murder. An informant told me Mrs. Plankton had been released from

prison last year. My investigator also told me she had been seen in Yorkshire. I believe the two sisters are part of the revenge group and poisoned the glass of wine in the dining room. I also accuse them of trying to strangle me at the Panto last night. Lewis found them and arrested them this morning for attempted murder.

Miss Marble paused at this point, she felt a thrill of victory flow through her. Now she came to the biggest shock of all, and it would be a stunner.

"There is one more member of this killing squad at large and that is their leader. My investigator provided a great deal of background information on this man, and I have gathered some of my own observations. This leader is the one I earlier described as a person harboring malevolent hatred toward me reaching a level of powerful murdering obsessions to destroy me beyond his control.

"I pooled information with the investigator concerning the various attempts to kill me, and the fact he was never around, with one exception, until after the police were in control of the situation.

"That man is Inspector John Livingston. Tracking his movements before and after the incidents fit together nicely. He attempted to divert our attention by staging an ambush in the hallway. Neither party ever hit anything, the gunman shot high over my head and Livingston fired into the wall of the hallway at least 5 yards in front of the other shooter. Then there was a chase, of course, and the gunman escaped.

"He was followed on numerous occasions by the investigator and the dates of his brief meetings were recorded. He met with Mr. Winslow, Mrs. Witherspoon and her sister, and the now deceased members of the group.

"Killing Winslow confirmed that Inspector Livingston was indeed the ringleader of this murderous bunch. One of my household informants learned a housekeeper witnessed the killing of Winslow and the constable last night. She told my informant what she saw, but was terrified to tell the police because she recognized Inspector Livingston. She was sure they wouldn't believe her, and then Livingston would kill her when she was alone.

"He thought his cover would be perfect to carry out his desire to kill me. He blamed me for the humiliation he suffered from his own mistakes on several murder cases. His pride would never let him accept the truth, so it was an open festering wound in his soul."

Inspector Moore gladly moved forward to arrest his long time rival, revenge is sweet. Before he could reach him, Livingston grabbed Miss Marble around the waist and put her in front of him as a human shield. He pointed his revolver at her temple as he backed toward the door.

"If the circumstances were a little different I'd off her right now, but I intend to get out of here alive. Keep your distance or it will be easy to pull the trigger"

Livingston reached the stairs and descended backward with Miss Marble in front of him. She was thinking, this isn't supposed to happen to me! The police continued to advance toward the inspector as he reached the landing.

"Stay away, or I swear I'll blow her brains out!"
he warned them.

Still back-pedaling, Livingston was in an awkward position, trying to watch the police in front, and feel for his direction behind him. His sense of direction wasn't all that good, and instead of going down the stairs to the entrance hall below him, he backed into the balcony area where the crossbow attempt had taken place.

The back of his legs hit the low balcony railing and he toppled backward onto the thirty foot Christmas tree. On his fall into the tree, he struck the eastern star ornament's pointed ray of light with his head, driving the point of the decoration into his ear, then on into his brain. He was killed instantly falling through the branches to the floor in a shower of decorations, tree branches and needles.

Badly shaken, Miss Marble immediately asked for a cup of tea. Within a day, everyone at the castle knew about Miss Marble's sensational sleuthing feat and the shocking news about Chief Inspector John Livingston being revealed as a ruthless murderer.

Inspector Melvin Moore was appointed Chief Inspector

of Scotland Yard. Inspector Lewis Roberts had mixed emotions thinking Moore was almost impossible now, but chief inspector? He shuddered to think of the difficult road ahead for his new assistant. Lewis might be a quiet man, but his mother didn't raise a fool. He talked up the prestige aspect of being Moore's assistant and the bait was taken by an ambitious policeman who had connections in the force.

Miss Marble quietly slipped away on a train to London to celebrate the victory with her partner. They had solved many murder cases together, she on the inside snooping, he gum shoeing for outside information. Her secret investigator was the legendary Admiral Ian Flint of British Navy Intelligence, retired, the nemesis of Nazi espionage legend Admiral Canaris.

He chose to remain anonymous but he couldn't resist continuing to use his detecting skills with Miss Marble. Or so the story goes-----

Chapter Twenty Nine

January 6 1951 Cheatham Castle

On January 5 the work crew who had decorated the castle with evergreen bows and Christmas trees arrived to take it all down. The branches and trees were heaped into a huge pile on the grounds near the castle.

On January 6 as the early darkness of winter descended, an ancient Christmas ceremony was performed. In every part of England the ceremony of burning the Christmas tree on the Twelfth Day of the holiday was being observed. At Cheatham Castle, all of the evergreens that had been so magnificent during the holidays were burned in a colossal fire. It was a hot incendiary kind of blaze fed by the pitch in the evergreens. Cheatham Castle guests crowded around with drinks in hand. They raised their glasses and gave a cheer for a merry Christmas season.