

Prologue

I can't get the sight out of my mind—that of her standing over his body holding a knife, which was dripping blood on the floor. When she turned, her dress was drenched in blood.

She looked at me and said, "I didn't do this. Josiah, you've got to believe me."

I rushed over, feeling for a pulse. "He's still alive. Call an ambulance!"

How could such a nice evening go so wrong?

It all began with those stupid chairs.

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The squat, moustached man was perspiring heavily and mopped his neck with a crisp, monogrammed cotton handkerchief. He anxiously watched a dark-haired woman with patrician features turn over a Louis XV chair, which had been custom made for His Majesty's last mistress, Madame du Barry.

The chair had a sensuous medallion backrest and delicate fluted legs, sitting close to the ground and at an angle. The armless chair was designed with a voluptuous seat, short legs, and a sloped backrest. The sloped backrest accommodated mesdames and mademoiselles who fancied dresses with panniers, which allowed their dresses to expand three or even four feet in width at the hips, thus enabling court ladies to gracefully alight in their impossibly elaborate couture.

The young woman put on a jeweler's magnifying headlamp and meticulously scanned every square inch of the chair's bottom. "Uh-huh," she mumbled. "As I suspected."

The man grew increasingly nervous. "Qu'est-ce que c'est, Mademoiselle Asa?"

Asa threw off her headset and flipped the chair upright. "I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid this chair is a fake."

"That can't be!" exclaimed the curator of the museum. "Over a million US dollars was spent to purchase this chair. I had several experts authenticate it."

"You should get your fee back from them."

"Why should I believe you when other experts in eighteenth-century French furniture say this chair is one of the original twelve chairs made by Louis Delanois in 1769?"

"Because they are either lying or mistaken, but either way, the insurance company will not underwrite this chair after I submit my report."

"Mon Dieu! This you must not do."

"I am sorry, Monsieur Faucheux, but the proof is in the pudding."

Faucheux looked confused. "What does pudding have to do with this?"

Asa gave a ghost of a smile. "Let me explain. Do you agree that Louis Delanois was commissioned by King Louis XV to make twelve chairs for Madame du Barry?"

"Mais oui, Mademoiselle. Everyone knows that."

"We agree on this very important fact?"

"Certainement."

"Versailles is in possession of ten of the chairs, and a collector bought the other two chairs from the estate of André Meyer in 2001 so that accounts for all twelve." Asa shot a glance at the chair and looked up to meet the anxious stare of Monsieur Faucheux. "This is a fake. I can prove it. There are no tan lines for one thing. Wood from the eighteenth century would be more discolored. Also, its construction is too tight where two pieces of wood meet. The joints would be looser on a chair over two hundred years old."

"Simple conjecture on your part."

"Hmm," murmured Asa, not pleased at Monsieur Faucheux's stubbornness. She was not accustomed to having people, especially men, question her authority. "Sir, I recognize the handwriting on the label. It is the handwriting of a well-known forger. The label should be more distressed and faded. The forger has soaked it in tea to make the label look older. You can smell the lack of age on it. It doesn't smell musty."

Monsieur Faucheux wiped his forehead and patted his palms. His coloring was a bright cherry red.

"Would you please taste the medallion, Monsieur Faucheux?"

“You want me to eat the chair?”

“No, I want you to lick the wood. Please.”

Looking dubiously at Asa, Monsieur Faucheux bent over and did as requested. “It tastes like, um, candy, perhaps licorice?”

“That is the final proof. Black licorice has been melted and rubbed into the wood to give it an aged and tarnished look. It’s clever, but a dead giveaway. The chair is worth something as a fine reproduction, but far less than the money you paid for it. I’m very sorry.”

Asa closed her briefcase and picked up her jacket. “The insurance company will bill you for my time. My final report will be mailed to you. Don’t bother to see me out. I’ll find my way. Again, I’m very sorry to be the bearer of such bad news.”

She made her way out of the small inspection room, through the main gallery hall, and out onto the noisy street where she hailed a cab. Curators had been known to become violent, so she liked to make a quick exit when presenting bad news. After telling the cab driver to hurry to the airport, Asa called her employer and gave a report. She listened to new instructions that she was to fly to Lisbon and pick up a cache of diamonds.

“What is the origin of the diamonds?” Asa asked, listening intently to the answer. She didn’t like what she heard. “Sorry, I don’t move conflict diamonds. Get some other patsy.” She hung up.

Before putting the phone in her pocket, she looked for any calls or texts from her mother, Josiah Reynolds. Nothing. She hadn’t heard from her mother in two weeks. She had contacted Lady Elsmere, but neither she nor Charles had seen Josiah for several weeks either. When she finally got hold of Eunice Todd, her mother’s business partner, Eunice reassured her that Josiah was fine, and she would tell her mother Asa had called, but Eunice sounded tentative. Asa wondered if her mother was in the hospital and had told everyone not to alert her.

There was only one way to find out.

No time for sightseeing in Paris, France.

Asa was going home.

I knew Asa was calling. I didn't want to talk to her. Asa was like a drill sergeant. Nag. Nag. Nag.

Oh, wait a minute. That's me. A little chuckle there, but it was true. I was avoiding her.

It wasn't just Asa. I didn't want to talk to anyone.

Here's another truth. I was depressed. Not the average middle-age "how did I get to be so old?" depression, but a ripe, bruised, fruity depression that sucked the life out of a person breath after breath. I was struggling—staggering like a sailor on an all-night drinking binge, in fact—not physically, but mentally. Let me tell you how it is.

I was, I mean, I am becoming unhinged.

My name is Josiah Louise Reynolds. I own a farm in the Bluegrass and live in an iconic mid-century house called the Butterfly. I make my living by selling honey, so you can say I'm a beekeeper. I would say I'm a bee guardian. I love my bees, and in this upside-down world of pesticides and backyard grass deserts, I do all I can to protect them. They need me.

I also board horses, and I am a partner with Eunice Todd in an event/catering business.

I was finally in the black each month. My animals were fat and happy. Clients gave rave reviews on the web. The farm was in good shape.

Things should be hunky dory, right? So why was I becoming unhinged?

Because my life sucked.

I guess I never fully recovered from my husband Brannon leaving me. Brannon lied to me. Cheated on me. Stole from me. Abandoned me. The man I loved bellowed that he hated me in the parking lot of Keeneland Race Course. What had I done to deserve such loathing from a man I had slept with for over twenty years? What was my big crime? What?

And then there was that nutcase of a cop stalking and pulling me off a cliff and leaving me with this busted-up body.

It's a wonder I still get out of bed in the morning.

But I do.

I dutifully wash my face, comb my hair, and put on clean clothes. I feed my animals, check the horses in the pastures, pay my bills, take my pills, and clean the Butterfly. I smile at appropriate pauses during conversations until I no longer listen and miss all the social cues, causing people to think I'm an odd duck.

Well, maybe I am an odd duck.

It was one thing for me to know I was sinking. I certainly didn't want the world to see me fumble the ball as well, so I retired from life.

I told Eunice I was not up to the event/catering business any longer and wanted out. I was grateful when she agreed to take over all the details and rent the Butterfly from me when she had a booking, refusing to dissolve our partnership.

"You'll snap out of this funk. Everything from the past few years is just catching up with you."

I didn't believe her words of cheer, but I knew she needed the money we made from renting out the Butterfly, so I was willing to do what Eunice wanted.

But what about what I wanted?

It seemed all the people who kept me on an even keel were gone. Meriah Caldwell won her custody battle for Emmeline, so Matt, my best friend, had packed up and moved to California to be near his child.

Asa closed her office in London but had come no nearer than New York. She might as well have stayed in London.

Now that Officer Kelly was a homicide detective, he never brought hot chocolate and donuts to my stand at the farmers' market.

My buddy Detective Goetz had moved to Florida. He had not called nor written once. I guess he's still mad that I turned him down. I agree with him that it's best we don't communicate.

I hadn't heard from my former boyfriend—young hot Choctaw Jake—in years, but I think of him from time to time. Fondly.

Franklin moved in with his brother Hunter, and they spend their time working on Wickliffe Manor.

Hunter had decided to sell the family estate and was heartbroken over the decision, but he was close to bankruptcy. Having no choice in the matter, he girded up his loins, so to speak, and was working at a frantic pace to make his ancestral home fit to sell.

Consequently, I saw neither Franklin nor Hunter unless I hopped in my car and drove to Wickliffe Manor, but I rarely went. It was hard to think that an estate with such an illustrious history, bad and good, was going to be sold and most likely carved into tiny one-acre lots with cheap housing.

Oh, don't get me wrong. Young couples have to buy starter homes somewhere. And don't forget my late husband Brannon and I made quite a bit of money on a housing development we did ourselves, but dismantling Wickliffe Manor and its land didn't feel right.

God wasn't making any more Bluegrass. Once the land was bulldozed, it was gone forever.

Enough of my preaching. You know how I feel about children, littering, and development of the land. I could go on ad nauseam, but there was a knock on the door.

Eunice had booked the Butterfly for the weekend, so Baby, my English Mastiff, and I had taken up residence in Matt's bungalow, which is located on my property.

Since Baby hadn't bothered to raise his head from his mammoth paws, I realized he knew the person at the door, so I opened it.

"Here you are!" There stood my favorite grande dame, Lady Elsmere, aka June Webster, wearing a vintage sixties blue and gray plaid dress suit with a strand of pearls. An old-fashioned plastic rain cap, fastened under her chin, covered her silver hair. I glanced up into the sky for pending rain. Not a cloud was to be seen.

Peering about the cottage's tidy yard, I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Are you going to invite me in or keep me wobbling on my arthritic knees?"

I stepped out of the way as June shoved past me and promptly plopped down on Matt's couch.

"Where's Amelia?" I asked, referring to June's nurse and companion.

"I dispatched her on a little errand and scooted out the side door."

"Why? You could have called, and I would have come to see you."

"Would you have? I was under the impression you were absorbed in a little pity party."

"Why would you say that?"

June reached up and pinched my cheek as if I were a toddler. "Don't lie to me, Babycakes. I see all the telltale signs of a serious hissy fit. I've gone through several of them during my lifetime. I know what I see."

I started to tear up. "Oh, June. I don't know what's wrong. Everything upsets me. I'm confused and feel like bawling all the time."

"Every woman goes through this one time or another during her life."

"I just want to be left alone."

“Meaning you want me to go?”

“Well, actually, yes. I would like for you to leave, June.”

She gave me a smile reserved for small children and dinner guests who didn’t know which fork to use. “Not going to happen. You need to snap out of this funk.”

“Oh, here it comes—the lecture. ‘Just get on with it, Josiah. It’s mind over matter. You can be happy if you put your mind to it.’” I spouted in a syrupy voice, making air quotes as I spoke. “What a load of crap! If I could click my heels together three times and *snap* out of the blue meanies, don’t you think I would?”

“I agree.”

“You do? Then why did you tell me to snap out of it?”

“To make you angry. Nothing motivates people like anger.”

“It worked.”

“Good. Now get some shoes on and bring this slimy monster with you,” June said, nudging Baby with her Christian Louboutin shoe, which would have cost me a whole month’s pay.

Baby made a puffing noise and rolled onto his other side, ignoring June and her pointed shoe.

“He doesn’t like to be poked,” I mentioned before slipping on some rubber flip-flops.

“What do you feed that thing?”

“That thing has a name,” I said, huffing while trying to find a leash. I jerked my head up. “Oh, are you still trying to make me mad?”

June beamed a self-satisfied smile. “I’ll wait outside. Don’t forget to bring the dog.” With that, she slammed the screen door behind her.

I put on a clean shirt and brushed my hair. Lately, I brush my teeth, but not my red hair. I could see the day coming when I wouldn’t bother to brush my teeth either. Shaving my legs? Don’t even go there. I looked in the mirror and saw a woman teetering on the brink of just not giving a damn anymore. How did June keep it together all the time?

Heading outside, I called to Baby. “Come on, big boy. We’ve been summoned.”

Baby groaned, sleepily struggling to stand up on all fours. He glared at me as though saying, “I was having such a good dream. I had all the treats I desired, and you weren’t there telling me I couldn’t eat them all.” He trotted outside, making complaining noises all the way, with me following behind.

I searched for June and discovered her perched on the passenger seat in my beat-up golf cart. I didn’t see the Bentley and wondered how she got here, but pushed those thoughts aside, as I got in the driver’s seat while Baby jumped in the back, immediately sliding his gigantic head over June’s shoulder, wanting to be petted.

She laughed and reached up to stroke Baby’s nose. “You’re just a big baby, Baby.”

I reached for a towel in the back of the cart to wipe away the strands of drool hanging from Baby’s mouth. “Baby, sit down. You’re getting June all grimy.”

“Don’t worry, Josiah. I don’t care.”

“For a woman who doesn’t care about clothes, you sure have a lot of threads in your closet.”

Ignoring me, June suggested, “This cart is on its last legs. You better get it replaced.”

“Sandy Sloan shot it trying to kill me, and then Darius shot it trying to save me. I’m lucky Matt got it to run at all.”

“How is our deliciously beautiful Matt?”

I sighed. “Settling in. Meriah is being difficult about letting him see Emmeline.”

“Doesn’t he have a court order stating when he can visit?”

“Yes, but Meriah keeps making excuses when Matt comes to pick Emmeline up.”

“Like what?”

“She’ll say Emmeline has a temperature—stuff like that.” I fidgeted in my seat. “Can we talk about something else?”

“For instance?”

“How did you get over here? I don’t see a car.”

“I had Malcolm drop me off.”

“For what purpose?”

“All of a sudden I need a reason to see one of my dearest friends?”

I gave June a “look.”

June decided to fess up. “I got a telephone call less than an hour ago, so you and I are embarking on a mission of mercy.”

“Who called?”

“Rosie.”

“Oh, dear. What’s happening now?”

“That Neanderthal has locked her in and won’t let her out.”

“No way!”

“We should be going. The police should be there by now.” June gave me a hard look. “Doesn’t it make you feel better knowing Rosie is having such a hard time with that monster?”

“I know this is terrible, but it does. However, I strongly sympathize.”

“There is no better medicine for depression than helping someone else suffering from worse afflictions.”

“I feel guilty.”

“Don’t. It’s human nature.”

“What’s Baby for?”

“Baby is a deterrent. Gage is terrified of big dogs.”

“Then let’s go and save Rosie from the despicable troll at her gate.”

June licked her lips and smiled. “Misery loves company.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing. Just drive, mon amie. Just drive.”