

MURDER UNDER A BRIDAL MOON

A MONA MOON MYSTERY

BOOK TEN

CHAPTER ONE

“Ouch! You just stuck me with a pin, Violet,” Mona complained, standing in front of a mirror.

“Then hold still. I can’t do the alterations with you hopping about if you want this dress finished by your wedding date.”

“Can’t this wait until after breakfast?”

“NO! As soon as you finish breakfast, Dotty will sweep you away to your office, and I won’t see you again until tea time. I want to get this done.”

Mona sighed. “I wish Robert and I could just elope. This wedding nonsense is making me jumpy.”

“Mr. Deatherage explained why. It would be unseemly for a duke to rush off and get married by a justice of the peace causing rumors as to why the sudden elopement.” Blushing, Violet busied herself with pinning the hem of the white satin wedding dress.

Mona took in Violet’s meaning. “Well, what if I was in the family way? It would be nobody’s business but Robert’s and mine,” Mona huffed.

“Oh, Miss Mona, please don’t say such things. Your reputation must be protected if you are to succeed in His Grace’s world and be welcomed in society.”

“It’s a bunch of twaddle, if you ask me. Half the men I deal with have mistresses on the side, and everyone knows it including the wives. Nothing happens to the men, but let an adult woman express a healthy interest in sex, then everyone is shocked. Ridiculous.”

“I see. Then it is all right for me to . . .”

Mona swiftly twirled around. “Don’t you dare.”

Laughing, Violet said, "So, it's do as I say and not as I do?"

Mona grinned. "Precisely. I'm beginning to agree with your mother that you should be accompanied by a chaperone on your dates."

"You're a hypocrite, Miss Mona."

"Yes, I am."

Violet put in the last pin. "There." She stood back and studied her creation.

Mona looked in the mirror pleased that the gown accented her platinum hair, pale skin, and amber eyes. "It's a beautiful dress, Violet. Simple and elegant." She studied the white, satin gown with long sleeves and a V-shaped neckline, form fitting to the waist and then flared out from the hips.

Violet commented, "I'm happy with it. Glad that you are, too. I think it shows off your figure."

Mona turned to and fro in front of the floor-length mirror to admire the dress. "What type of veil have you picked out for me?"

"I'll bring several and let you choose. I think it should be one that can be attached to your tiara and trails to the floor." Violet began unfastening the pearl buttons.

"Sounds a little heavy to me."

"Since the tiara belonged to His Grace's mother, it would honor her and could be the *something borrowed*. Officially, it won't belong to you until the minister pronounces you husband and wife."

"Even then the family jewels won't belong to me as they are owned by the Brynelleth estate."

"Still, I think His Grace would be pleased that you wear something of his mother's."

Mona nodded. "I think you are right, missy. When did you get so smart?"

Violet blushed again before unlocking the bedroom door and calling for Mabelle, the upstairs maid.

“Yes, Violet?”

“Help me take this dress off, will you, Mabelle.”

Mabelle's eyes lit up. “It's such a beautiful wedding gown. You happy with it, Miss Mona?”

“Indeed, I am,” Mona said, putting a manicured hand on Mabelle's shoulder as she stepped out of the dress. She stood in her slip in front of the mirror studying her figure. Mona was still slender like a maiden which pleased her to no end. She had worried about consuming too many of Monsieur Bisailon's pastries. “Hand me my frock, please.”

“I can't wait for the wedding day,” Mabelle said, helping Mona get into her navy and white day outfit.

“You are coming to the reception?” Mona asked.

Mabelle looked as though she was going to swoon. “Wouldn't miss it for the world. Just think I am invited to the biggest social event of the decade. Me, a little nobody from Monkey's Eyebrow, Kentucky going to hobnob with the swells.”

“You're someone to us, Mabelle. The upstairs couldn't function without you,” Mona said.

“Thank you, Miss Mona. I take that to heart.”

“Mabelle, pick up the hem, will ya and help me.”

“Yes, Violet.”

They picked up the dress and took it to a bedroom where Violet stored her sewing machine. Together they placed the dress on a mannequin, spreading the dress hem on clean sheets placed on the floor. Then they covered the dress with another clean sheet.

“Thank you, Mabelle.”

“Anytime, Violet.”

“Now, not a word to anyone about the design of the dress. Outside of Miss Mona, only you have seen it.”

Mabelle pantomimed locking her lips and throwing away the key over her shoulder.

Violet patted her on the back, saying, “I’m starving. Let’s have breakfast. I understand Monsieur Bisailon is making French toast this morning.”

“I can’t, Violet. I’m helping Dora wash windows this morning. Gotta run.”

Violet protested, “You need to eat, Mabelle.”

“I did earlier, but you enjoy your breakfast. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, if you say so.” Violet headed downstairs having no idea she would find out later something dreadful.

CHAPTER TWO

Mona was spreading jam on her toast when Dotty strode into the breakfast nook and poured herself a cup of coffee. She was followed by Chloe, Mona’s white Standard Poodle.

“Good morning.”

Since Mona had a mouthful of food, she responded by giving a small wave. After taking a sip of orange juice, she said, “Good morning. You look mighty chipper, Dotty.”

“Most everyone has replied to your wedding invitations.” She placed a stack of telegrams and letters in front of Mona.

Chloe put her head in Mona’s lap, whining for a treat. She was rewarded with a piece of bacon smuggled under the table, as Mona pushed the telegrams and letters to one side so she could continue eating breakfast. “Who is coming?”

“Lady Alice and her husband will be here a week before the wedding.”

Mona gleefully clapped her hands. “Oh, good. I was hoping they would come early.”

"The President and Mrs. Roosevelt send their regrets, but Mrs. Roosevelt's cousin, Mrs. Longworth, is coming."

Mona nodded. "I never expected the President and the First Lady to attend. The invitation was sent out of politeness."

"The Prince of Wales declines as well, but has sent a wedding gift."

"What is it?"

"A silver framed picture of himself in his royal regalia with the inscription: 'Best wishes to Robert and Mona.'"

Mona rolled her eyes. "Thank goodness he is not coming. Robert will be relieved. There is too much drama with the Prince around."

"Viscountess Furness accepts. She hopes you will put her up during her stay."

Making a face, Mona said, "Don't these people ever spring for their own accommodations? She is Robert's friend. She can stay at his home."

"Mabel Dodge Luhan is coming with Aloha Wanderwell."

"I didn't know they were acquainted, but then Mabel knows everyone. I should have realized. Did you know that Aloha Wanderwell is the first woman to drive around the world?"

Dotty bit her lower lip before speaking. "Was it wise to invite Mrs. Wanderwell?"

Mona looked surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Well, there is a lot of scandal connected with her. Her husband was accused of being a German spy and arrested in the United States during the Great War. He started an affair with Aloha while he was still married and she was only seventeen. Then he was shot to death on his own yacht."

"I realize her life story raises some eyebrows, but so does mine. Remember, I have been accused of everything from being a Bolshevik to an atheist and then some other words one does not repeat in polite society."

"It doesn't help to associate with those who have a dark past. Birds of a feather—that kind of thing."

“Are you saying that your reputation is put at risk by me?”

“I’m saying that you should be careful.”

“Dotty, that ship sailed a long time ago. I choose my friends based on their merit. Aloha is my good friend. I don’t care what others think.”

Looking contrite, Dotty asked, “How did you meet her?”

Petting Chloe’s head, Mona said, “I encountered Aloha when she lectured in New York. It was right before I went to Mesopotamia. I was introduced by a mutual friend since we have the same interests, and we’ve corresponded ever since. She is a fascinating woman. You know she went to the Amazon looking for Percy Fawcett.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t find him, did she?”

“Gee, Dotty, when did you last go looking for a lost explorer in the uncharted jungle?”

Dotty held up her hand. “I get it. You admire this woman, but tell me—is her real name Aloha?”

“No, it’s Idris Welsh.” Mona pondered for a moment. “I haven’t spoken to her in some time. Not since the trial for her husband’s murderer. We have a lot to catch up on.”

“Well, they are both coming.” Dotty took a sip of coffee and put the cup down. “One more question.”

“Shoot, no pun intended.”

Dotty made a quick face. “I thought Harriet Fisher was the first woman to drive around the world.”

Mona laughed. “It was discovered that Fisher had someone else drive, so the luster dulled a bit, but she’s considered the first woman to circumnavigate the world in a car. Aloha gets the credit of being the first woman to *drive* around the world.” Mona wiped her mouth and folded her napkin. “Anyone else?”

“Belle Brezing sends her regrets.”

"I knew she wouldn't come, but I wanted to invite her anyway."

"This is what I'm talking about—inviting one of the nation's most notorious whores to your wedding. Thank goodness, she declined. The papers would have had a field day with that one."

"You should meet her, Dotty. She's a fascinating woman. Very well read and knows everyone and everything going on in town. She's a fountain of information—past and present."

"Thank you, but I'll pass. Miss Belle wants you to come see her soon. She wishes to give your wedding gift in person."

"How do you know?"

"She sent a telegram," Dotty replied, showing it to Mona.

Mona made a mental note. "Okay. I will visit her. Can you phone and see if I can visit soon?"

"Sure." Dotty made a note of the call and thumbed through her acceptance list. "A Mr. Zhang is coming. Who is he?"

"He was my landlord when I lived in the Chinatown section of New York City."

"He's Chinese?"

"Yes."

"I'll see if there is a hotel that will house Mr. Zhang during his stay."

Mona looked at Dotty in surprise. "Make a reservation for him at the Phoenix Hotel like everyone else. How many rooms have we booked?"

"Seven suites and thirty single rooms that can sleep two. You know they have a policy concerning non-white patrons."

"If the management gives you any guff, tell them that if they don't give my friend a nice room and treat him with the utmost courtesy, I will pull my business from them forever and give it to the Lafayette Hotel. Also, send Mr. Zhang a train ticket. I will pay for his trip and hotel. It's the least I can do, considering I used to borrow money from Mr. Zhang when I was broke. He was a good friend to me alone in the big city after my mother died. He rented me an awful apartment—more of a room with a kitchenette, but it was clean and the man

looked out for me. I never had to worry about my things being stolen—not that I had much.”

“Okay, but if the Phoenix protests, I’ll tell them to expect a nasty phone call from you or His Grace.”

“Noted. Let’s move on.”

“That’s it for the morning post. We should get the bulk of responses in the next several days.”

“Anything else?”

“Mr. Deatherage wants to see you.”

“I can meet Dexter at his office later today. Find out when Belle can see me please.”

“Will do, boss.” Dotty stuck a pencil behind her ear. “Oh, one more thing. Your Aunt Melanie and her new beau are here.”

“What!” Mona looked at her wristwatch. “It’s early, even for her. What does Melanie want?”

“Something about your wedding date. I’ve put them in the parlor.”

“Why couldn’t you tell them I wasn’t here?”

Dotty smirked. “You might as well get this over with. Just rip the bandage off.”

Mona folded her napkin and sat it on the table. “No matter how much it hurts?”

“They’re waiting. I’ll have tea sent in.”

“No, don’t. I just want to hear what Melanie wants and have them leave.”

Reluctantly, Mona rose and went to the parlor at the front of Moon Manor. Opening the double doors and with Chloe trotting close behind, Mona strode in. “Good morning, Melanie. Enzo. Trust you both are feeling well.”

A tall, well-built man with a pencil-thin mustache rose to his feet and kissed Mona’s hand. He was immaculately dressed in a pin-striped, double-breasted navy suit with a white linen handkerchief peeking from his left chest pocket. He smelled of expensive cologne and drugstore pomade. “Good morning,

Senorita. I am very well, thank you." He glanced at Chloe, who had planted herself by his legs and looked up at him expectantly.

"Please sit down, Enzo." Noticing the dog bothered him, Mona ordered, "Come here, Chloe. So sorry. She doesn't bite. Chloe just wanted a pet."

"Does she have to pant so loud?" Melanie complained. "She's drooling."

Irritated with her visitors, Mona rang a bell and when Samuel, the butler-in-training under Mr. Thomas, appeared, she said, "Please take Chloe to the kitchen and give her a treat."

Watching the dog leave with Samuel, Enzo took his seat next to Melanie, Mona's aunt, although they were only a few years apart in age. They had the same hair coloring with Melanie's being just a shade darker and the same pale skin, but that's where the similarities ended. Mona cared about her fellow man while Melanie cared about . . . well, Melanie.

Mona took a seat across from them. "You wanted to see me?"

Melanie pouted. "I've only had a few moments with you since your return from Brynelleth. Hardly a chance to talk."

"I've been busy."

"No doubt with your wedding plans, but you've butted into my life."

"Oh? How so?"

Melanie reached for Enzo's hand and clasped it. "I hated you for forcing me on that South American cruise, but then I met Enzo and everything changed. I'm so glad I went now."

"You didn't have a choice," Mona said dryly.

"Must you be so blunt? It's crude," Melanie sniffed, making a clicking sound with her teeth. "Anyway, Enzo and I have decided to get married."

"Congratulations," Mona said, not surprised that Melanie wanted to marry a gigolo she had dragged from Brazil.

“We thought it a good idea if we piggybacked onto your wedding and got married at the same time—a double wedding. It would save a lot of fuss and bother.”

“Not to mention money,” Mona quipped.

“Well, I’m sure money is not a concern for you.”

Mona rose. Unfortunately, she saw this coming. It was either work with Melanie or have her aunt start a shadow whispering campaign behind her back. The only way to deal with Melanie was to dangle money in front of her. “I’m sorry, Melanie, but my wedding day is reserved for Robert and me alone. However, if you two wish to be married next June, I’ll pay for the wedding—with a cap, of course.”

Melanie blinked. “June is so far away. I want to be married soon.”

“Go right ahead, but you may not share my wedding day with Robert.”

“I don’t see why not. Everyone will be here already—all my friends.”

“All the newspaper coverage. All the folderol. All the attention. The answer is no.”

“I think you’re horrid, Mona,” Melanie spat out.

“Very possibly I am, but Robert is a duke and you are . . . just you.”

“You wouldn’t dare treat me this way if your Uncle Manfred was still alive. My brother wouldn’t stand for it.”

Enzo turned to Melanie. “Dearest, did you not hear your niece say she’d pay for our wedding? We must rejoice. Don’t pooh-pooh such a gift.” He looked at Mona. “May we inquire as to the amount we may spend for our blessed day?”

“Two thousand.”

Melanie huffed, “You can’t put on a decent wedding for two thousand. What would our friends think?”

“Two thousand is a lot of money, Melanie,” Mona said. “More than many people make in a year. These days people have a quiet church wedding with a cake and punch for the reception. You do remember there is a Depression in the country, and men have been thrown out of work?”

"I don't see you having a small wedding like the common man."

"We are hosting Bluegrass charities on our wedding day and asking invitees to bring canned food to the reception, which will be distributed by various churches. Guests have been asked to give to their favorite charities and not purchase a wedding gift."

"Not from what I've seen as wedding gifts stacked in the ballroom."

"I have to agree that guests went a little overboard on the wedding gifts. Believe me, if Robert and I could elope, we would."

"Yeah, right." Melanie narrowed her eyes. "How about five thousand?"

Annoyed, Mona spat out, "How about you pay for your own wedding? You were given a huge stipend last year. Use that money."

"It's mostly gone."

"That's your problem then, Melanie. I told you the money would have to last a long while." Mona rubbed her temple as she was getting a headache. "What am I gonna do with you?"

"Ladies. Ladies. Let's compromise," Enzo said. "How about three thousand and we have the reception at Moon Manor with Miss Mona hosting?" He raised Melanie's clasped hand and kissed it. "What do you say, dearest?"

Melanie pressed her lips in disdain and whined, "If that's all my niece is willing to help us, I guess it is okay."

Mona stopped short of calling Melanie something rude and said instead, "I'll have Dexter Deatherage send over a contract, but you better read it carefully. I'm going to put stipulations in it."

"Can't we have the money now?" Melanie asked.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, I'm busy. See yourselves out," Mona said, walking out of the room. She ran into Samuel coming down the hallway. Pulling him aside, she said, "Samuel, make sure my guests leave the property before they steal the silver. Make sure your shirt is still on your back when they leave."

"Your aunt here?"

Mona nodded. "With her awful beau. Get rid of them."

"Leave it to me, Miss Mona. I'll make sure they depart with smiles on their faces."

"You are so good at telling people to go to hell without them realizing it. I'll leave my aunt in your capable hands."

"Yes, Miss Mona. I'll take care of those two," Samuel said, before going into the parlor.

As Mona headed for her office, she heard Samuel cry in a booming voice, "Put that silver candy dish down, please!"

Realizing that Samuel must have caught the two pilfering the silver, Mona gave a short laugh. She knew he would put those two grifters out on their ears soon enough, and she would be able to start her day.

That's what she thought, but it turned out differently.