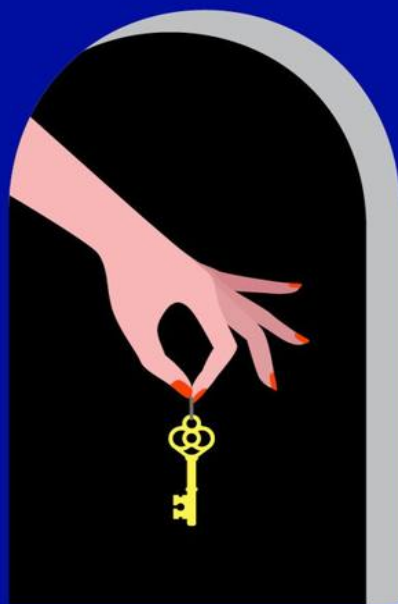


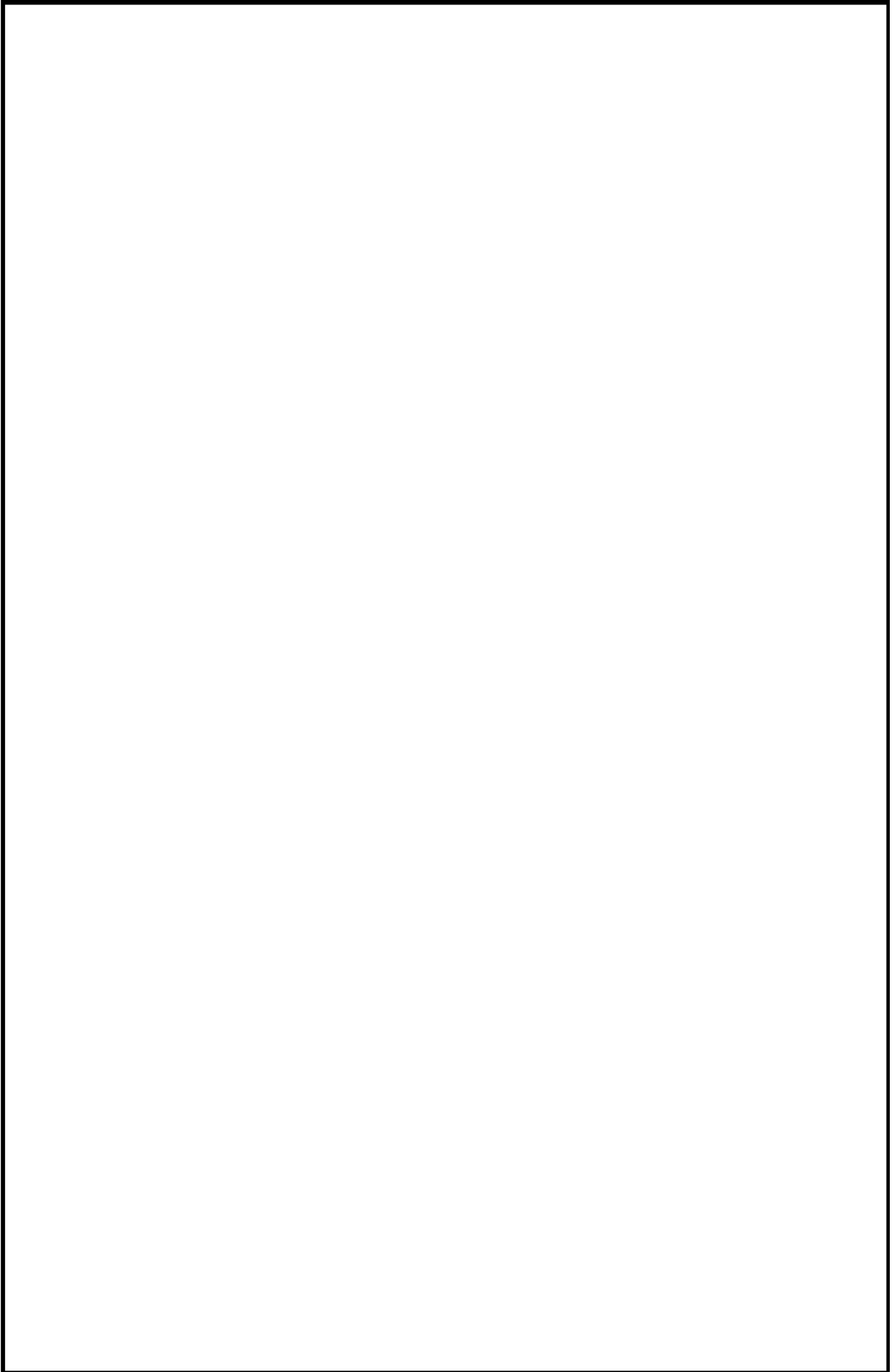
THE MYSTERY GUEST

A Maid Novel

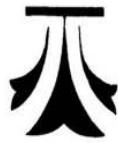


NITA PROSE

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of **THE MAID**



THE
MYSTERY
GUEST



A Maid Novel

NITA PROSE



Ballantine Books
New York

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PROLOGUE



My gran once told me a story about a maid, a rat, and a spoon. It went like this:

There once was a maid who worked for wealthy landowners in a castle. She cleaned for them. She cooked for them. She waited on them hand and foot.

One day, as the maid served her masters a nourishing stew, Her Ladyship noted with a sniff of disdain that she was missing her silver spoon. The maid was certain she had placed the spoon by Her Ladyship's bowl, but when she looked, she saw with her own eyes that the spoon had disappeared.

The maid apologized profusely, but this failed to placate Her Ladyship, nor did it placate His Lordship, who in that moment seethed and raged, accusing the maid of being little more than a petty thief and of stealing their silver.

The maid was frog-marched out of the castle, but not before the stew she had made from scratch was thrown onto her white apron, leaving a shameful blot that could never be removed.

Many years after His Lordship and Her Ladyship died, long after our poor, disgraced maid had moved on, builders who had known her were hired to renovate the castle. When they lifted the dining

room floor, they uncovered a nest containing the mummified body of a rat, and beside it, a single silver spoon.

CHAPTER I



My beloved grandmother, a.k.a. my gran, worked her whole life as a maid. I have followed in her footsteps. It's a figure of speech. I could not literally follow in her footsteps because she has none, not anymore. She died just over four years ago, when I was twenty-five years old (ergo, a quarter of a century), and even before that, her walking days came to an abrupt end when she suddenly fell ill, much to my dismay.

The point is: she is dead. Gone, but not forgotten, never forgotten. Now my feet follow a proverbial trail all their own, and yet I owe a debt of gratitude to my dearly departed gran, for it is she who made me who I am.

Gran taught me everything I know, such as how to polish silver, how to read books and people, and how to make a proper cup of tea. It is because of Gran that I have advanced in my career as a maid at the Regency Grand Hotel, a five-star boutique hotel that prides itself on sophisticated elegance and proper decorum for the modern age. Believe me when I say I started at the bottom and worked my way up to this illustrious position. Like every maid who has ever walked through the gleaming revolving doors of the Regency Grand, I began as a Maid-in-Training. Now, however, if you step closer and read my name tag—aptly placed above my heart—you will see in large block letters:

MOLLY

which is my name, and in delicate serif script underneath it:

Head Maid

Let me tell you, it's no mean feat to climb the corporate ladder in a five-star boutique hotel. But I can say with great pride that I have held this lofty position for going on three and a half years, proving that I am no fly-by-night, but as Mr. Snow, hotel manager, recently said about me in an all-staff meeting, "Molly is an employee who sustains an attitude of gratitude."

I've always struggled with understanding the true meaning behind people's words, but I've gotten a lot better at reading people, even strangers, which is why I know what you're thinking. You think my job is lowly, that it's a position meriting shame, not pride. Far be it from me to tell you what to think, but IMHO (meaning: In My Humble Opinion), you are dead wrong.

My apologies. That came out a bit gruff. When Gran was alive, she'd counsel me on tone and advise me when I'd likely offended. But here's the interesting thing: she's dead, yet I still hear her voice in my head. Isn't it interesting how a person can be as present after death as they were in real life? It's something I ponder with frequency these days.

Treat others the way you wish to be treated.

We're all the same in different ways.

Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end.

I thank goodness I still hear Gran's voice, because today has not been a good day. It has, in fact, been the worst day I've had in approximately four years, and Gran's words of wisdom are providing strength for me to face the current "situation." When I say "situation," I don't mean according to the dictionary definition, denoting "circumstance" or "state of affairs," but as hotel manager Mr. Snow uses the term to suggest "a problem of epic proportions with limited solutions."

I won't sugarcoat what is truly an epic catastrophe: this morning, a famous man dropped dead on our tearoom floor. My good friend Angela, head barmaid at the Social, our hotel pub and grill, summarized the

“situation” this way: “Molly, a massive bag of shite just hit the whirling fan.” Because I like Angela so much, I forgive her use of PPP—Perfectly Polished Profanity. I also forgive that Angela has an unhealthy obsession with true crime, which might explain why she seemed oddly excited about a Very Important Person dropping dead right inside our hotel.

Today was supposed to be a special day at the Regency Grand. Today was the day that world-renowned, bestselling, and award-winning author J. D. Grimthorpe, master of mystery with over twenty novels to his name, was set to make a big important announcement in our recently restored Grand Tearoom.

Everything was going splendidly early this morning. Mr. Snow had put me in charge of the tea, and while that’s mostly because he has yet to hire special-event staff to handle tearoom functions, I knew how proud it would make Gran to see me acquiring new professional responsibilities, though of course Gran can’t *actually* see me, because she is dead.

Today, I arrived early for my shift and neatly arranged the elegant new room, setting the tea service for fifty-five guests (give or take none), who were bestowed VIP entry passes. The VIPs included numerous LAMBS—Ladies Auxiliary Mystery Book Society members—who had booked rooms on the fourth floor of the hotel days ahead of the event. For weeks, the whispers and conjecture echoed throughout the hotel: Why would J. D. Grimthorpe, a reclusive and fiercely private writer, suddenly want to make a public announcement? Was it just to publicize a new book? Or was he about to announce he’d written his last?

As it turns out, he most definitely has written his last, though I believe this fact was as much a surprise to him as it was to everyone who watched him collapse on the herringbone-patterned floor of the tearoom forty-seven minutes ago.

Moments before he walked onstage, the VIP mystery fans, literary pundits, and reporters were abuzz with anticipation. The room was a cacophonous din of chatter and the high-pitched tinkle of silver cutlery as guests refilled their teacups and popped the last of their finger sandwiches into their mouths. The second J. D. Grimthorpe entered, silence fell. The author stood at the podium, a spindly but imposing figure, cue cards in hand. All eyes watched him as he cleared his throat a couple of times.

“Tea,” he said into the microphone, gesturing for a cup, and thank goodness I’d been informed of his teetotaling ways and had asked the kitchen to prepare a cart to his precise specifications—with honey, not sugar. Lily, my Maid-in-Training, who I’d put in charge of all of Mr. Grimthorpe’s tea carts during his stay, jumped into action posthaste. With shaking hands, she poured the famous author a cup and raced it to the stage.

“That won’t do,” he said as he took the cup from her, stepped down from the stage, and went to the tea cart himself. He removed the silver lid of the honey pot, spooned in two enormous globs of glowing yellow honey, then stirred the whole cup with the honey pot spoon, which made a dull clank as it grazed the cup’s edges. Lily, who had rushed forward with the intent to serve him, was at a loss as to what to do next.

The whole room watched as Mr. Grimthorpe held his cup forth, took a long sip, then swallowed and sighed. “A bitter man requires extra honey,” he explained, which elicited muffled laughter from the crowd.

Mr. Grimthorpe’s irritability has long been a hallmark of his fame, and ironically, the worse he behaves, the more books he seems to sell. Who can forget that infamous moment, which went viral on YouTube a few years ago, when a rabid fan (a recently retired heart surgeon), approached the author and said, “I want to try my hand at a novel. Can you help me?”

“I can,” Mr. Grimthorpe replied. “Right after you lend me your scalpel. I want to try my hand at heart surgery.”

I thought of that video this morning as Mr. Grimthorpe smiled his serpentine smile, then sauntered back onto the stage, where he gulped a few more deep drafts from his sweetened teacup, then placed it on the podium in front of him and looked out at his adoring crowd. He picked up his cue cards, drew a labored breath, and at last began to speak as he teetered from side to side ever so slightly.

“I’m sure you’re all wondering why I’ve called you here today,” he said. “As you know, I prefer to pen words rather than speak them. My privacy has long been my refuge, my personal history a source of mystery. But I find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to make certain revelations to you, my fans and followers, at this critical juncture in my long and storied career—pun intended.”

He stopped for a moment, expecting laughter, which followed on cue. I shivered as his piercing eyes surveyed the room, looking for what or for whom, I do not know.

“You see,” he continued, “I’ve been keeping a secret, one that will no doubt surprise you.”

He stopped abruptly. He put one long-fingered hand to his collar in a futile attempt to loosen it. “What I’m trying to say is...” he croaked, but no other words would leave his throat. His mouth opened and closed, and he suddenly seemed very unsteady, swaying more dramatically from side to side in front of the podium. All I could think about was a goldfish I’d once seen jump from its bowl and lie gaping and apoplectic on a pet store floor.

Mr. Grimthorpe clutched his teacup once again and sipped. Then before anyone could prevent it, he suddenly toppled over, plummeting off the stage and into the crowd, where he fell directly on top of Lily, my most unlucky Maid-in-Training. Together, they landed with a dramatic crash on the floor as the porcelain teacup broke into innumerable razor-edged shards and the spoon on the saucer clattered flatly against the herringbone-patterned floor.

For a moment, silence prevailed. No one could quite believe what had happened before their very eyes. Then suddenly, panic ensued as everyone—superfans and guests, porters and pundits—rushed to the front of the room.

Mr. Snow, hotel manager, was crouched on Mr. Grimthorpe’s left, tapping him on the shoulder. “Mr. Grimthorpe! Mr. Grimthorpe!” he said over and over. Ms. Serena Sharpe, Mr. Grimthorpe’s personal secretary, was on his right, putting two fingers to the writer’s neck. Lily, my Maid-in-Training, was desperately trying to wriggle her way out from under the author. I reached an arm out to assist her and she grabbed my hand. I drew her to me, tucking her in by my side.

“Space! Step back!” Mr. Grimthorpe’s personal secretary yelled as fans and VIPs jostled.

“Call emergency services! Immediately!” Mr. Snow demanded in a most authoritative voice. Waiters and guests, bellhops and receptionists ran off in all directions.

I was close enough to the “situation” to hear what Ms. Serena Sharpe said as she released her fingers from Mr. Grimthorpe’s neck:

“I’m afraid it’s too late. He’s dead.”

CHAPTER 2



I am standing in Mr. Snow's office, holding a fresh cup of tea. My hands are unsteady; my heart is racing. The floor under my feet tilts like I'm in a fun house, which I most definitely am not.

The tea is not for me. It's for Lily Finch, who I hired three weeks ago—Lily, who is petite and quiet, with jet-black, shoulder-length hair and skittish eyes, and who at the moment trembles in Mr. Snow's maroon leather office chair, tears streaming down her face. It takes me back, truly it does, to a time when I sat all by myself in the chair Lily sits in now, trembling as I waited for others to decide my fate.

It happened approximately four years ago. I was cleaning a penthouse suite on the fourth floor when I stumbled across a guest who I thought was sleeping deeply, but even the deepest sleepers do not give up breathing entirely. A quick check of Mr. Black's pulse revealed that he was in fact dead—*very* dead—in his hotel room bed. And while from that moment on I did my utmost to deal with this most unusual "situation," all fingers suddenly pointed at me as the murderess. Many in my midst—including the police and an alarming number of my co-workers—assumed that I had murdered Mr. Black.

I am a cleaner, not a killer. I did *not* murder Mr. Black—in cold blood or lukewarm, for that matter. I was wrongly accused. But, with the help of some very good eggs, I was exonerated. Still, the experience most certainly took its toll. It underscored just how hazardous a maid's work

can be. It's not the backbreaking labor, the demanding guests, or the cleaning chemicals that present the greatest danger. It's the assumption that maids are delinquents, murderers, and thieves: the maid is always to blame. I truly thought Mr. Black's demise was the beginning of the end for me, but everything turned out just fine, as Gran always predicted it would.

Now, in Mr. Snow's office, I lock eyes with Lily and when I do, I feel her fear like an electric current traveling straight into my heart. Who could blame her for being afraid? Not me. Who on earth actually thinks they'll show up for work one day to host a world-famous author only to have him die in a room filled to capacity with adoring fans and shutter-clicking press? And what poor, hapless maid could ever imagine she'd not only serve the writer upon the moment of his death but also serve *as* his deathbed?

Poor Lily. Poor, poor girl.

You are not alone. You will always have me—Gran's words echo in my head as they always do. If only Lily could hear them.

"A good cup of tea will cure all ills," I say, passing Lily the cup I'm cradling in my hands.

She takes it, but she does not speak. This is not unusual for Lily. She has trouble using her words, but lately, she's been much better at expressing herself, at least with me. She's come so far since her job interview, executed by me and Mr. Snow. It went so poorly that Mr. Snow's eyes grew two sizes behind his tortoiseshell glasses when I announced, "Lily Finch is our strongest candidate for the job."

"But she barely spoke through the entire interview!" Mr. Snow said. "She couldn't come up with an answer when I asked her to outline her best qualities. Molly, why in the world would you choose her?"

"May I remind you, Mr. Snow," I said, "that overweening confidence is not the primary quality to consider when hiring a maid. You may recall that a certain former hotel employee had confidence in spades but turned out to be a very bad egg indeed. Do you not remember?"

Mr. Snow nodded oh so subtly, but the good news is I can read him much better now than I could when I first started as a maid at the Regency Grand Hotel seven and a half years ago. This little nod suggested willingness to defer the final decision about Lily to me.

“Ms. Finch is most definitely quiet,” I said. “But since when has loquaciousness been a key skill for a maid? ‘Loose lips sink ships.’ Isn’t that what you always say, Mr. Snow? Lily needs training—which I intend to provide—but I can tell she’s a worker bee. She has everything it takes to become a valued member of the hive.”

“Very well, Molly,” Mr. Snow said, though his pursed mouth suggested he was not entirely convinced.

In the few weeks that I’ve been training Lily, she’s made tremendous progress as a maid. Just the other day, when we encountered our lovely repeat guests Mr. and Mrs. Chen outside their penthouse suite, Lily actually spoke. She used her words in the presence of guests for the very first time.

“Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Chen,” she said, her soft voice like wind chimes. “It is lovely to see you. Molly and I have left your rooms in what I hope is a state of perfection.”

I smiled from ear to ear. What a joy it was to hear her after so much meaningful silence between us. Day after day, we’d worked side by side. I showed her every task—how to make a bed with crisply cut hospital corners; how to polish a faucet to a high shine; how to plump a pillow to maximum fullness—and wordlessly, she followed my lead. Her work was flawless, and I told her so.

“You have the knack, Lily,” I said more than once.

Apart from having a maid’s keen eye for details, Lily is also discreet. She moves about the hotel’s interior, cleaning and buffing, shining and detailing with stealth-like invisibility. She may be quiet—enigmatic even—but make no mistake: Lily is a gifted maid.

Now, sitting in Mr. Snow’s office chair, she places her untouched teacup on his desk and worries her hands in her lap. I feel faint as I look at her. All I can see is myself in that chair. I’ve been here before, and I don’t want to be here again.

How did it come to this?

—

This morning was sunny and bright when I left our two-bedroom apartment at 7:00 A.M. For two reasons, it was not an ordinary morning.

First, today was the day that international bestselling author J. D. Grimthorpe would be making his big announcement during a press conference at the hotel. Second, my boyfriend, Juan Manuel, whom I've been living with in domestic bliss for over three years and whom I've worked with at the hotel for even longer, has been away. He's been gone for three whole days, visiting his family in Mexico, and I must say, absence does not grow fondness in this particular case. More accurately, it grows fungus. Ergo, I miss him terribly.

This is Juan Manuel's first trip home in many years, a trip we've been diligently saving for. Oh, how I wanted to travel alongside my beloved—a trip together, a true adventure—but alas, it was not to be: Juan is in Mexico, and I'm stuck here. For the first time since my gran's death, I'm alone in our two-bedroom apartment. Never mind. All will be well. I'm just glad Juan's seeing his family, and especially his mother, who has missed him for many years as I miss him right now.

Even though he'll be gone only two weeks, I cannot wait until he returns. Life is just better with Juan in it. He texted me this morning before I left for work:

Today will be amazing! IMHO, there's nothing to worry about. Te amo.

I'll admit that his declaration of love elicited a pleasing butterfly sensation in my belly, but his use of acronyms was as consternating as ever.

FYI, I texted back, I have no idea what you mean.

I mean I love you.

I understand that part.

In My Humble Opinion, you are incredible, and today will be spectacular, he concluded.

Though I'd desperately wanted to go to Mexico with Juan, duty called, or rather Mr. Snow called, and it instantly became clear I would not be going anywhere.

"Are you familiar with the writer J. D. Grimthorpe?" Mr. Snow asked me on the phone a few weeks ago.

"Indeed I am," I replied, leaving it at that.

"His personal secretary just requested the Regency Grand for an exclusive VIP event during which Mr. Grimthorpe intends to make a very important announcement. And...he's requested the Grand Tearoom."

Mr. Snow's breathless excitement traveled right through the phone. This news was serendipitous. When we were rocked by the scandal of Mr. Black's murder, Mr. Snow had the brilliant idea of attracting fresh clientele by returning an old storeroom off the lobby of the hotel to its former glory as a museum-quality example of an Art Deco tearoom. The renovation was nearing completion, and the hotel needed a VIP event to launch it publicly. This was perfect! And even better, Mr. Snow wanted me and my staff to oversee the special event. I told Juan immediately.

"When opportunity knocks, answer the door," he said. "We'll cancel our trip and go another time."

I couldn't bear the thought. "*Mi amor*," I said. "You go without me. We'll go together another time."

"Really?" he replied. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Mind?" I said. "I insist. We can't keep your mother waiting a minute longer."

He wrapped me in a close embrace, then planted kisses all over my face. "One for every day I'll be away," he said. "And a few extras just because. You're sure you'll be okay without me?"

"Of course I will," I said. "What on earth could go wrong?"

And so, Juan got on his plane a few days ago, while I stayed behind and kept myself busy with advance preparations for the Grimthorpe announcement.

This morning, I set out for the momentous occasion with a jittery spring in my step. I was excited and nervous at the same time. As I rounded the last corner downtown, the hotel came into view.

There she was, the Regency Grand, sublimely timeless amongst an urban eyesore of crass neon billboards and stout, modern office blocks. Red carpet graced the short flight of stairs to the hotel's majestic portico. Dazzling brass railings framed the entrance leading to gleaming revolving doors. The lobby was teeming with chatty guests, luggage in tow, as well as reporters and podcasters lugging equipment through the revolving front doors in preparation for the morning's marquee event.

Halfway up the steps on the landing in front of the portico stood Mr. Preston, the Regency Grand's long-serving doorman, dressed in his stately cap and long greatcoat adorned with hotel crests. "Good morning, Molly,"

Mr. Preston said as I met him beside his doorman's podium. "Big day today."

"Yes, it is," I replied. "But we're ready for it. Have you seen the tearoom? It's magnificent."

"It is," he replied. "Listen, Molly. I was thinking that just because Juan Manuel is away, it doesn't mean you and I can't get together for our usual Sunday dinner. No point in both of us eating alone. Besides, there's something I've been meaning to speak to you about."

"Sunday dinner sounds nice," I replied. "But let's see how the week goes. It's bound to be a busy one without Juan Manuel around, and I can't promise I'll be up to cooking without him."

Mr. Preston nodded and smiled. "Understood," he said. "I know how hard you work, and I certainly don't want to trouble you."

Sunday dinner with Mr. Preston has been a tradition for several years, and once a week we dine together at the cozy kitchen table in our apartment. The three of us always mark the moment with a toast to another workweek done and dusted. The meals are simple, but as we eat, we regale one another with stories of the week's odd encounters—and let it be noted that at the Regency Grand, odd encounters are frequent occurrences. In fact, just last Sunday, I entertained Juan and Mr. Preston by describing in full Technicolor Room 404, which Lily and I had cleaned earlier that day.

"It was so filled with detritus, boxes, and file folders," I said, "that it looked like a rat's nest. Whoever's occupying that room is hoarding Regency Grand shampoo. There were hundreds of miniature bottles."

"Who needs that many to shower?" Juan Manuel asked.

"The bottles weren't even in the shower," I said. "They were on top of the minibar beside a bunch of snack foods and a big jar of peanut butter sitting open with a stainless-steel spoon sticking out the top."

Mr. Preston and Juan broke out laughing and mimed a toast with bubbly in the form of miniature Regency Grand shampoo bottles.

I leave my memory and look at Mr. Preston now, standing on the red-carpeted stairs. There's more gray in his hair, more lines in his face, but he still manages to do his job so well. I've always had a soft spot for this man. He's been exceptionally kind to me through the years, and he knew my gran. Long ago, before I was even a glint in my mother's eye, Mr. Preston