The ART of a LIE

'Completely gripping'
Jennie Godfrey

'I loved it'
Elly Griffiths

LAURA
SHEPHERD-ROBINSON

'An absolute treat of a historical novel' **Janice Hallett**

The ART *of a* LIE

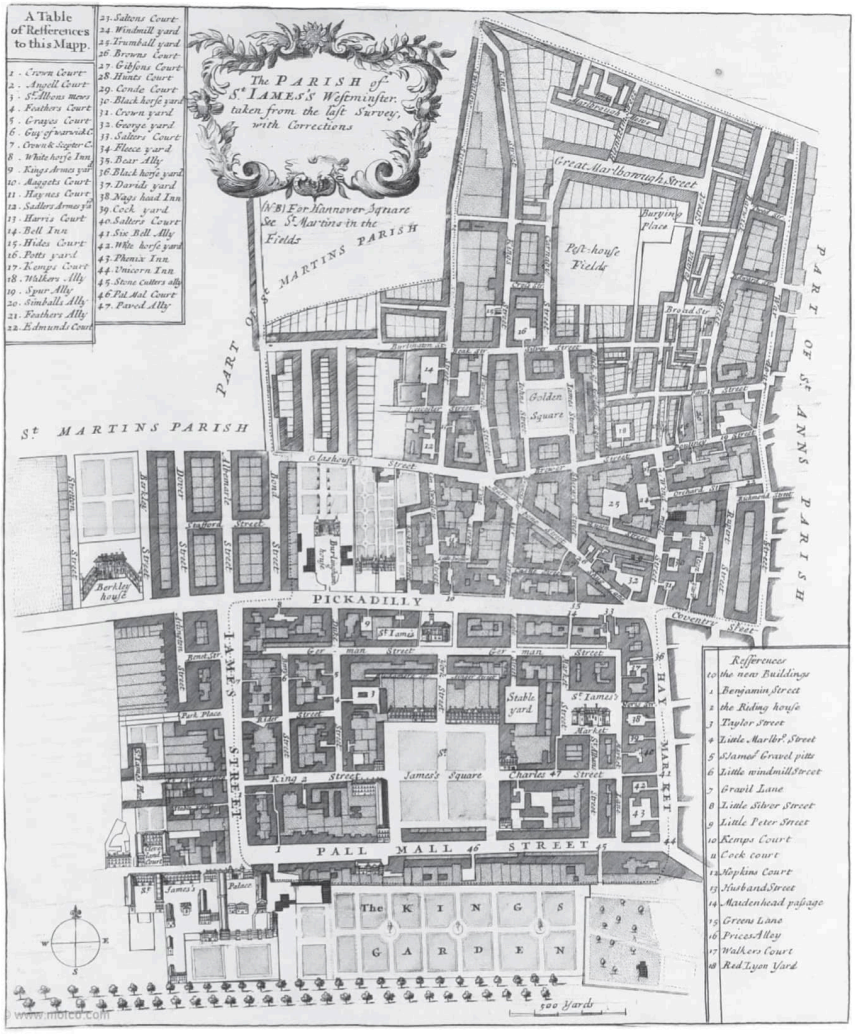
LAURA
SHEPHERD-ROBINSON

MANTLE

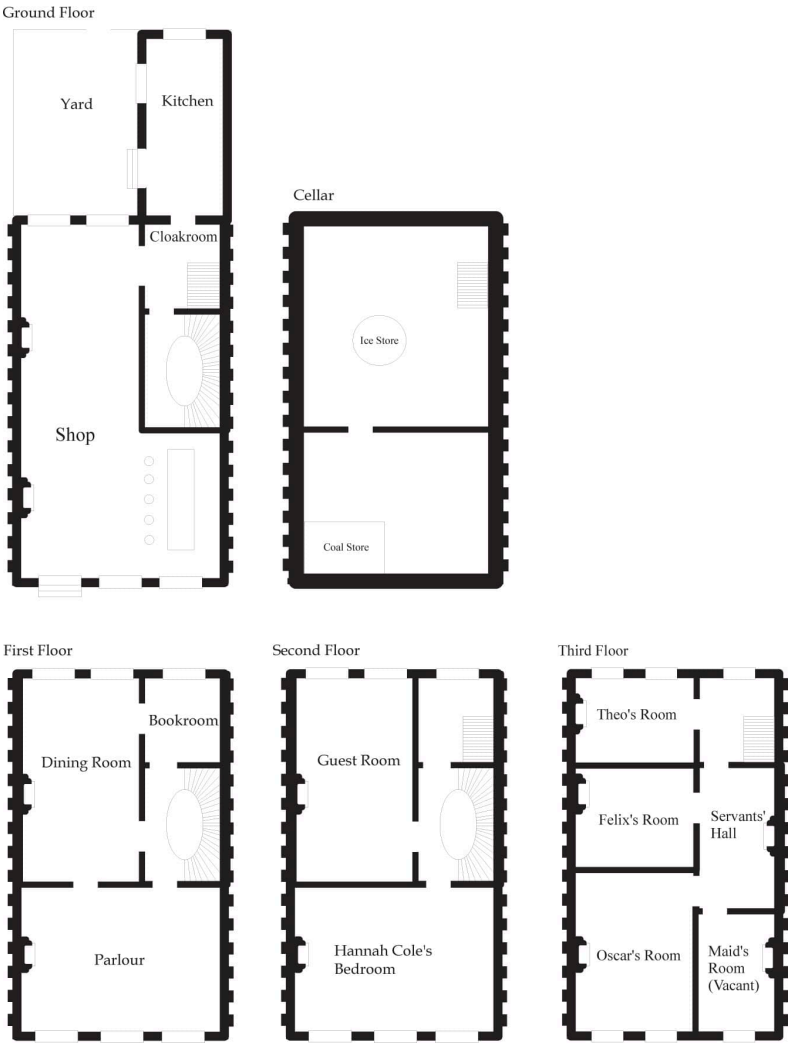
For Billy,
who stole the buttons

Contents

Parish of St James's, Westminster



Hannah Cole's House and Shop



PART ONE

The Mirror

A lover, when he is admitted to cards, ought to be solemnly silent, and observe the motions of his mistress. He must laugh when she laughs, sigh when she sighs. In short, he should be the shadow of her mind. A lady, in the presence of her lover, should never want a looking-glass; as a beau, in the presence of his looking-glass, never wants a mistress.

Henry Fielding, *Love in Several Masques*, 1728

Chapter One

Nine times out of ten, when a customer walks into the Punchbowl and Pineapple, I can guess what will tempt them. It is the confectioner's principal art, anticipating wants and needs – and people betray their desires in countless small ways. For a young lady taut with nerves, dressed to make a house-call, I suggest a pretty basket of French macaroons to impress her friends. For a young buck in the first flush of love, seeking a gift for his mistress, I propose a *petits puits d'amour* (the name and oval shape might make him smile, though I act oblivious to any indelicate connotations). For an older gentleman – picture one crimson from hunting and port – a rich plum cake spiced with cinnamon and mace. For a widow in mittens, a box of scented violet wafers – or if she is bent with the rheumatism, bergamot chips. For a little boy with a cough, I prescribe a *guimauve*: a soft cake of honey whipped with the sap of the marsh mallow plant. And for his governess, a sweet syllabub, to be eaten at one of my tables, while she ponders how life's misfortunes brought her here.

That day, the fifteenth of June 1749, I was watching a gentleman in the mirror behind my counter. He'd just strolled in, escaping the bustle of Piccadilly, remarkably unsullied by the dust and heat of the day outside. His finger hovered over my golden nests of spun sugar, each filled with marchpane eggs and topped with a sugar-work bird – a new creation I'd put my hand to whilst the shop had been closed for mourning. Like my birds, he was a colourful creature – his coat a smoke-blue silk with silver embroidery at the collar and cuffs, a topaz pin in his cream cravat, and a plump meringue of a periwig beneath a smoke-blue hat adorned with a peacock

feather. The patina of the mirror speckled his tawny skin, the warp of the glass distorting one golden-brown eye.

Not a sugar nest, I thought, not unless he was looking for a present for his wife – and he had taken a stool at my counter, which suggested he intended to eat. An apricot tart, I decided. Refined, yet unadventurous, like most of my customers.

To my surprise, he pointed to a silver tureen, where half a dozen glass goblets of ice shavings nestled amidst larger shards of ice. 'Is that a Persian sherbet?' he said. 'I haven't had one in years.'

'Perfect for the weather, sir,' Theo said.

I could imagine how she'd be looking at him. Fifteen years old, and men still a mystery she presumed delightful. 'The goods are behind the counter,' I'd sometimes remind her. 'Not in front of it.'

'I'll do it,' I said, turning. 'Go see to the balancing pan.'

'Yes, Mrs C.' Theo gave me a pert look, and threaded her way, hips swaying, to the door at the back of the shop.

Undistorted by the mirror, the gentleman appeared slightly familiar, though I couldn't quite place him. Perhaps from church? A carriage moved on the street outside, and a shaft of sunlight gilded his face, revealing a few delicate lines of age around the eyes and mouth. He put up a hand to shield his gaze, signet ring flashing.

I poured a syrup of rosewater over one of the goblets of ice, adding a scatter of dried rose petals and ground Turkey pistachios. The gentleman handed over the coins and while I weighed them, he plunged in with his spoon.

'Your girl wasn't wrong,' he said, after a moment. 'That's perfection right there.'

I inclined my head at the compliment. 'Most find the flavours too exotic.'

He grinned. 'Round here they still say that about a peppercorn.'

He'd get no warm words from me, a widow of nearly thirty. Yet I was still pondering the mystery of where I had seen him before. Once I'd secreted the

coins in my money-drawer, my curiosity got the better of me. ‘Do I know you, sir?’

His smile faded. ‘We’ve not been introduced, but I attended your husband’s memorial service. William Devereux is my name. My condolences, Mrs Cole. Jonas was a general, a true force. I can hardly believe that he’s gone.’

People think it’s what you want to hear. To know that the man you loved mattered. That his qualities were recognised, that he is remembered. How could they know that every morning when I awoke, I put my shoulder to the grindstone of forgetting? Here in the shop, I could pretend that none of it had happened. That Jonas was out on parish business, or had popped upstairs to fetch a spool of ribbon or a clean apron. It brought me a measure of peace, just for an hour or two, until some well-meaning customer like Mr Devereux brought it all back. The punch in the gut, the sick wave of fear for my own future.

Mr Devereux was watching me with evident concern. ‘I have something for you,’ he said, holding out a folded piece of paper. I found myself gazing at an official-looking document with a stamp and a seal.

‘I advise gentlemen on the prudent investment of their money,’ he explained. ‘Jonas was a client of mine. Acting upon my counsel, your husband placed ten pounds with the Culross Iron and Coal Company. I am pleased to say that this is the dividend from the first quarter.’ He smiled and handed me a silver crown.

‘Ten pounds?’ I said, knowing nothing of this investment, trying to keep the eagerness from my tone. ‘Is it possible to redeem that money now?’

‘Not for the moment, I’m afraid. But all being well, you can expect to see around five or six shillings every quarter, with the stock becoming redeemable in nine months’ time.’

Five shillings was still five shillings. Every penny mattered now. Since reopening the shop after Jonas’s murder, everything had proved a struggle. Summer was always the worst time of our year – the nobility and gentry

having fled the swelter of the city for Bath and Tunbridge Wells – and widowhood had brought new challenges to my trade.

'I'd only known Jonas a few months,' Devereux went on. 'We met by chance in the bank and got to talking. It led to a fledgling friendship. We drank together sometimes – at the Running Horse or the Star and Garter.' He sighed. 'Are they any closer to finding the villains responsible?'

I shook my head rather bleakly, and Devereux had the good grace to look away, rattling his spoon against his glass to scrape up the last of the syrup. 'Delicious,' he pronounced. 'Though it's iced cream that I truly dream of in this weather.'

Grateful for this rather clumsy effort to change the subject, I studied him quizzically. 'Iced cream, sir?'

'My mother used to make it when I was a boy. She was raised in Italy, and it is a great delicacy over there. Mother used to flavour the cream with peach or elderflower and then it was frozen almost solid. I used to think it was like biting into a snowball – though snow never tasted so good.'

His words intrigued me. Even before Jonas's death, I'd been convinced that our shop required innovation if we were to stand out from our competitors. Now my need to entice new customers through the door was rather more pressing.

'Do you know how it is done?' I asked. 'Freezing cream, I mean?' I had never seen, nor heard of frozen liquids other than water.

'I am afraid I only ever enjoyed the end result,' Devereux said. 'Many years later I tried it again, on the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. But it was sold from a pail, so I saw none of the preparation.'

A woman in a wide yellow hat approached the counter and I noticed her steal a second glance at Mr Devereux. 'What is that?' she asked, pointing.

'A simple pound cake, madam,' I said, 'but filled with a Seville orange cream. It's like a burst of sunshine in your mouth.'

Her lip quivered. 'I'll take six of those almond wafers.'

I turned to box up her purchase, and Devereux met my eye in the mirror. 'Too exotic,' he mouthed.

I was still frowning at his presumption when Theo returned. ‘Mr Brunsden is come to settle his bill.’ She set down a tray of lemon jellies and smiled at Mr Devereux.

Restraining a sigh, I excused myself. As I passed through the shop, my little jewel-box of gilt-edged mirrors and pistachio panelling, I exchanged a few words with my regular customers. Entering the hot, sweet hell of my kitchen, I found Oscar sweating over the pastry table, stamping out almond hearts. Not quite trusting Theo with the shop’s money yet, I told Oscar to watch the counter and to send in Felix to take the goods down to the cellar. Then I smoothed my apron, and walked out into the yard.

Roger Brunsden was resting upon his cane in the shade of the old vine that had colonised my back wall and those of the neighbouring yards. His boys trooped in and out of the alley, grunting under the weight of sacks of flour and salt, sugar loaves wrapped in blue paper, boxes of dried figs and currants.

He greeted me with an elaborate bow, then handed me his bill. ‘That time again, I am afraid, Mrs Cole.’

Brunsden had the manners of a marquis and the accent of a Thameside stevedore. Sweat crawled from beneath his periwig, staining his cravat yellow with some kind of scalp oil. His pink, piggish eyes, fringed by bristling white lashes, travelled over my purple gown.

‘Black was rather too sombre for my customers,’ I said, regretting it immediately. I didn’t owe Roger Brunsden or anyone else an explanation.

‘Not for me to judge,’ he replied, unsmiling.

I studied his bill. ‘But this is more than a usual month,’ I cried. ‘We only reopened two weeks ago.’

‘The price of sugar isn’t what it was,’ he said. ‘Nor the price of wheat.’

I didn’t believe his excuses, not for a moment. He just didn’t like women in trade – and was seeking to take advantage of my lack of experience with the books. Nor was he the only one. Between him, the fruiterer and the egg-man, I’d be lucky to break even that month. ‘Give me five minutes with a paring

knife,' I'd exclaimed to Oscar in frustration, 'and I'll pit their stony hearts like Morello cherries!'

Reluctantly, I parted with my coins and returned to the shop. Mr Devereux had gone, and Oscar glanced pointedly at a gentleman of middling years who was sitting in his place at my counter. Fearing he'd also come to collect on a bill, I slowed my pace.

His broad shoulders were hunched, his giant body contorted awkwardly upon the stool, one tree trunk of a leg stuck out to the side as if it was injured. His clothes were very fine – burgundy silk, a good French lace – but rather dishevelled in the wearing, his cravat and wig askew, his coat misbuttoned. The intensity of his gaze suggested a fierce curiosity about the world, whilst the imperious jut of his long chin (which nearly met his long, curved nose) and the curl of one great fist upon the counter, implied a determination to leave his stamp upon it.

He turned as I approached. 'Mrs Hannah Cole?' he said. 'My name is Henry Fielding, the Chief Magistrate of Westminster. I'd like to talk to you about your husband's murder.'

Chapter Two

We sat in my parlour, Mr Fielding taking Jonas's elbow chair. Theo brought up a tray of refreshments from the shop and I poured myself a bowl of tea, trying to still the rattle of the pot. Why was Fielding here and not the constable who'd come before? What had he learned?

His eyes travelled over my furnishings – the imitation Persian carpet, the mahogany card table with its silver-plated tea caddy, the japanned cabinet of our best china – coming to a rest on the shelf of books next to his chair. 'I commend your taste, madam.'

'I have always admired your novels, sir,' I said, feeling my cheeks colour. '*Tom Jones* is my favourite one yet.'

'Alas,' he said, 'my new calling as Bow Street magistrate leaves me little time to write at present. But on the rare occasions that I do pick up my pen, I find I have plentiful inspiration for human wickedness. And all good stories start from there, do they not?'

I nodded uncertainly. 'Please, tell me why you are here. Have you caught the villains who killed Jonas?'

He smiled sympathetically at the catch in my voice. 'I'm afraid not, madam. But I am here to tell you that I intend to redouble Bow Street's efforts. To that end, I am taking personal charge of the case.'

A pulse throbbed in my temple and I took a moment to compose myself. 'I am glad of it, sir.'

He paused to take a bite of his Piccadilly Puff, washing it down with a generous gulp of green walnut wine. It is a favourite choice of the sybarite: the silken sweetness of the custard, the crunching layers of puff paste, the dusky depths of the spices mingling with the sourness of lemon. I might have

guessed that Mr Fielding was a man who struggled to keep his appetites in check, even if I hadn't read the more unkind stories about him in the newspapers. His appearance bespoke his pleasures: his prominent belly, his beveined cheeks, and his gouty foot. A magistrate was not so very different from a novelist, I reflected. They both held the fate of the principal characters in their hands.

Fielding dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. 'If you feel able to, Mrs Cole, I would like to revisit the events surrounding your husband's murder. I want to make certain that I have all the details correct.' From his coat pocket, he produced a bundle of documents.

I sighed. The story was simple enough and I had told it many times. 'On the night of the twenty-sixth of March, Jonas went to meet some friends at the Running Horse in Mayfair. I am told he left the tavern at around ten o'clock, but he never returned home. I reported him missing the following morning. My apprentices and I spent two days scouring the streets and visiting the hospitals. Then your constable called at the shop.' I drew a breath. 'He said that Jonas's body had washed up on a Wapping beach. That he'd been attacked and robbed in the street, beaten severely about the head, and probably died of his injuries before he was thrown into the river.'

'It says here that Jonas told you he was intending to visit a friend later that night, after the tavern?'

'That's right,' I said. 'The constable thought it might have been someone who lived near Whitehall or the abbey – because of their proximity to the river. Jonas had a lot of friends in that part of town, but I don't know all of their names. He was often out late.'

Mr Fielding adopted a grimace of compassion. 'It passes, madam,' he said. 'The first time my memories of my late wife brought me more consolation than despair, that was the moment I knew I would endure.'

He gazed at the portrait hanging over the fireplace: Mr and Mrs Jonas Cole, dressed in their best. My husband had found the artist at a little studio in Leicester Fields. It was the new thing, someone had told him, for a rising man to have his portrait painted. The artist had captured his prominent jaw

and nose, his heavy dark brows. But not the energetic light in his eyes, nor the force of his will. I had protested the entire endeavour, for I'd feared we'd look ridiculous and I'd had a fondness for the Dutch oil that had hung there since my grandfather's day. It had depicted a platter of oysters, a bowl of olives, and a peeled lemon. Two flies crawled along the edge of the platter, and Jonas had said they made him feel sick.

'It's supposed to look real,' I'd told him. 'Life has flies, Jonas.'

Now they swarmed.

'Your children must have also brought you consolation,' I said. *And your money*, but I didn't say that.

Fielding inclined his head. 'But you are still young, madam. In time—'

'No,' I said, rather too fiercely. 'I will never marry again.'

He smiled. 'Perhaps one day you will feel differently. I know I did.' He leafed through his documents. 'I understand several items were missing from your husband's body? Hence the presumption of a robbery?'

Presumption. What did he mean by that? 'That's right. Jonas's purse-strings were cut, and his watch and ring were missing.'

'The watch was engraved with a double-headed eagle. Is that right?'

'The Russian imperial crest,' I said. 'Tsar Peter gave it to my grandfather during his Great Embassy to London.'

Fielding raised an eyebrow. 'It is a sad truth that due to Bow Street's limited resources, not all crimes receive the diligence they deserve – especially where there are no witnesses to the act in question. But due to your husband's prominent position on the parish committee, and the consequent interest of the newspapers in his murder, my constables gave this matter their utmost attention. Given the distinctive appearance of your husband's pocket watch, they circulated a description to various jewellers, pawnshops and other places where stolen goods are sold – as well as to our informants in the thieving gangs. Despite Bow Street's offer of a substantial reward, nobody credible has come forward to claim it.'

'Does the noise bother you, sir?' I asked, springing up from the sofa,

pointing to the three large windows that overlooked Piccadilly. ‘I don’t like to leave them open, but it gets so hot.’

‘Not in the least, Mrs Cole. Please sit down. Now, my visit to you today has been prompted by a curious matter that has lately come to light.’

I frowned. ‘A curious matter, sir?’

‘As is required by probate, your husband’s executor recently submitted a preliminary valuation of his estate to the Prerogative Court.’

‘His cousin, Daniel,’ I said.

‘Quite so. I was surprised to learn that as well as this property and its contents, your husband had over fifteen hundred pounds deposited with Messrs Campbell and Bruce, a banking house on the Strand.’

I stared at him. ‘That cannot be true. Our life savings amount to less than two hundred pounds.’

‘So you did not know?’

Wondering why Daniel had said nothing of this to me, I shook my head mutely.

‘Could the money have come from your shop?’

‘No,’ I replied, faintly. ‘Our takings are ten pounds a week at most. Less in the summer. After the shop and household expenses, only a pound or two is left.’

I confess my heart had soared at the thought of all that money. As his nearest male relative, Daniel was Jonas’s principal heir, but under the terms of his will and my marriage contract, I was entitled to a third of his estate, as well as this house and shop which had belonged to my father. All my financial problems solved. My debts cleared. The business safe. But where *had* it come from? What else had Jonas been hiding from me?

Mr Fielding was silent, perhaps waiting for me to come up with an explanation. When none was forthcoming, he pressed on: ‘Our fruitless endeavours to find the watch, combined with this large and unexplained fortune, have led me to consider the possibility that your husband’s murder might not have been the result of a street robbery after all. That the watch