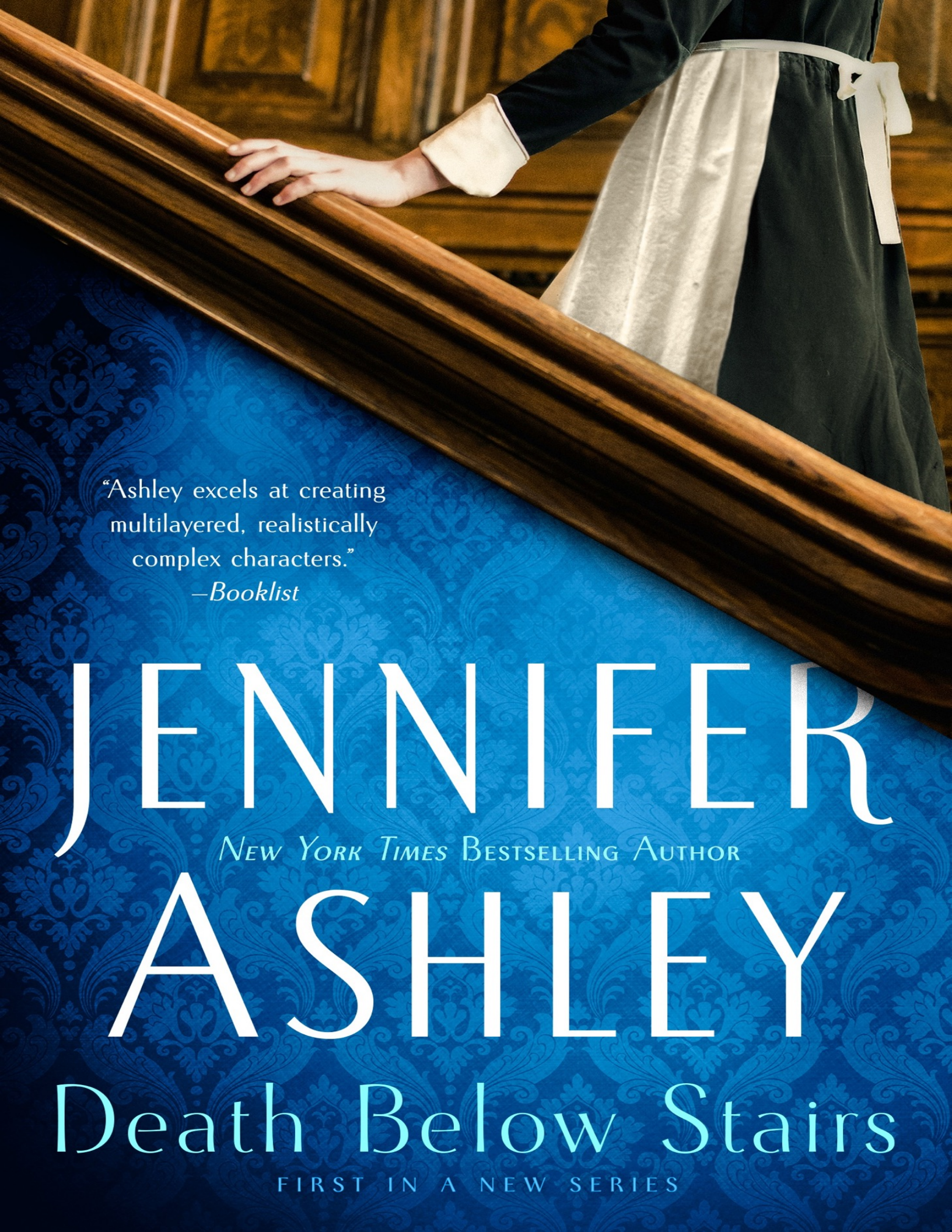


A woman in a dark dress and white apron is leaning on a wooden staircase railing. The background is a blue patterned wallpaper.

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DEATH
BELOW
STAIRS



Jennifer Ashley

Berkley Prime Crime
New York



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME

Published by Berkley

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ashley, Jennifer, author.

Title: Death below stairs / Jennifer Ashley.

Description: First edition. | New York : Berkeley Prime Crime, 2018. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017012873 (print) | LCCN 2017018380 (eBook) | ISBN

9780399585524 (eBook) | ISBN 9780399585517 (trade paperback)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Mystery fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3601.S547 (ebook) | LCC PS3601.S547 D43 2018 (print) |

DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017012873>

First Edition: January 2018

Cover art: *Woman on stairs* by Elisabeth Ansley/Trevillion; *Wallpaper* by Reinhold Leitner/Shutterstock

Cover design by Emily Osborne

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Version_1

Contents

[Praise for Jennifer Ashley.](#)

[Also by Jennifer Ashley.](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[*Author's Note*](#)

[*Excerpt from Scandal Above Stairs*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

1



London, March 1881

I had not been long at my post in Mount Street, Mayfair, when my employer's sister came to some calamity.

I must say I was not shocked that such a thing happened, because when a woman takes on the dress and bad habits of a man, she cannot be surprised at the disapprobation of others when she is found out. Lady Cynthia's difficulties, however, turned out to be only the beginning of a vast tangle and a long, dangerous business.

But I am ahead of myself. I am a cook, one of the finest in London if I do say it, and also one of the youngest to be made head cook in a lavish household. I worked some time in the winter at a house in Richmond, and it was a good position, but the family desired to sell up and move to the Lake District, and I was loath to leave the environs of London for my own rather private reasons.

Back went my name on the books, and the agency at last wrote to my new lodgings in Tottenham Court Road to say they had found a place that might suit. Taking their letter with me, I went along to the house of one Lord Rankin in Mount Street, descending from the omnibus at South Audley Street and walking the rest of the way.

I expected to speak to the housekeeper, but upon arrival, the butler, a tall, handsome specimen who rather preened himself, took me up the stairs to

meet the lady of the house in her small study.

She was Lady Rankin, wife of the prodigiously wealthy baron who owned this abode. The baron's wealth came not from the fact that he was an aristocrat, the butler, Mr. Davis, had already confided in me—the estate had been nearly bankrupt when Lord Rankin had inherited it. Rather, Lord Rankin was a deft dabbler in the City and had earned money by wise investment long before the cousin who'd held the title had died, conveniently childless.

When I first beheld Lady Rankin, I was surprised she'd asked for me, because she seemed too frail to hold up her head, let alone conduct an interview with a new cook.

"Mrs. Holloway, ma'am," Mr. Davis said. He ushered me in, bowed, and withdrew.

The study in which I found myself was small and overtly feminine. The walls were covered in yellow moiré; the curtains at the windows were white lace. Framed mirrors and paintings of gardens and picturesque country lanes adorned the walls. A delicate, gilt-legged table from the last century reposed in the middle of the room, with an equally graceful chair behind it. A scroll-backed chaise covered with shawls sat near the desk.

Lady Rankin was in the act of rising from the chaise as we entered, as though she had grown weary waiting for me and retired to it. She moved listlessly to the chair behind her desk, sat upon it, and pulled a paper in front of her with a languid hand.

"Mrs. Holloway?" she asked.

Mr. Davis had just announced me, so there was no doubt who I was, but I nodded. Lady Rankin looked me over. I remained standing in the exact center of the carpet in my second-best frock, a brown wool jacket buttoned to my throat, and my second-best hat of light brown straw perching on my thick coil of dark hair.

Lady Rankin's garment was white, filmy, and high necked, its bodice lined with seed pearls. Her hair was pale gold, her cheeks thin and bloodless.

She could hardly be thirty summers, but rather than being childlike, she was ethereal, as though a gust of wind could puff her away.

She glanced at whatever paper was in front of her—presumably a letter from my agency—and then over the desk at me. Her eyes were a very light blue and, in contrast to her angel-like appearance, were rather hard.

“You are very young,” she observed. Her voice was light, as thin as her bones.

“I am nearly thirty,” I answered stiffly.

When a person thought of a cook, they pictured an older woman who was either a shrew in the kitchen or kindhearted and a bit slow. The truth was that cooks came in all ages, shapes, and temperaments. I happened to be nine and twenty, plump and brown haired, and kind enough, I hoped, but I brooked no nonsense.

“I meant for a cook,” Lady Rankin said. “Our last cook was nearly eighty. She is . . . gone. Living with her daughter.” She added the last quickly, as though fearing I’d take *gone* to mean to heaven.

I had no idea how Lady Rankin wished me to answer this information, so I said, “I assure you, my lady, I have been quite well trained.”

“Yes.” Lady Rankin lifted the letter. The single page seemed too heavy for her, so she let it fall. “The agency sings your praises, as do your references. Well, you will find this an easy place. Charles—Lord Rankin—wishes his supper on the table when he arrives home from the City at eight. Davis will tell you his lordship’s favorite dishes. There will be three at table this evening, Lord Rankin, myself, and my . . . sister.”

Her thin lip curled the slightest bit as she pronounced this last. I thought nothing of it at the time and only gave her another nod.

Lady Rankin slumped back into her chair as though the speech had taken the last of her strength. She waved a limp hand at me. “Go on, then. Davis and Mrs. Bowen will explain things to you.”

I curtsied politely and took my leave. I wondered if I shouldn’t summon Lady Rankin’s maid to assist her to bed but left the room before I did anything so presumptuous.

• • •

The kitchen below was to my liking. It was nowhere near as modern and large as the one I'd left in Richmond, but I found it comfortable and what I was used to.

This house was a double town house—that is, instead of having a staircase hall on one side and all the rooms on the other, it had rooms on both sides of a middle hall. Possibly two houses had been purchased and knocked into one at some time and the second staircase walled off for use by the staff.

Below stairs, we had a large servants' hall, which lay across a passage from the kitchen. In the servants' hall was a long table where the staff could take meals as well as a row of bells that would ring when someone above stairs pulled a cord to summon the servant he or she wished. Along the passage from the kitchen and servants' hall was a larder, and beyond that a laundry room, and then a room for folding clean linens, the housekeeper's parlor, and the butler's pantry, which included the wine cellar. Mr. Davis showed me over each, as proud as though he owned the house himself.

The kitchen was a wide, square room with windows that gave onto the street above. Two dressers full of dishes lined the white-painted walls, and a hanging rack of gleaming copper pans dangled above the stove. A thick-legged table squatted in the middle of the floor, one long enough on which to prepare several dishes at once, with space at the end for an assistant to sit and shell peas or do whatever I needed done.

The kitchen's range was neatly fitted into what had been a large fireplace, the stove high enough that I wouldn't have to stoop or kneel to cook. I'd had to kneel on hard stones at one house—where I hadn't stayed long—and it had taken some time for my knees and back to recover.

Here I could stand and use the hot plates, which were able to accommodate five pots at once, with the fire below behind a thick metal door. The fire could be stoked without disturbing the ovens to either side of it—one oven had racks that could be moved so several things could be baked

at the same time, and the other spacious oven could have air pumped through it to aid roasting.

I was pleased with the stove, which was quite new, likely requested by the wealthy lordship who liked his meal served precisely when he arrived home. I could bake bread in one oven while roasting a large joint of meat in the other, with all my pots going above. The greatest challenge to a cook is to have every dish ready and hot at the same time so none come to the table colder than any other. To aid this, a shelf above the stove that ran the length of it could keep finished food in warmth while the rest of the meal was completed.

Beyond the kitchen was a scullery with a door that led to the outside stairs, which ran up to the street. The sink was in the scullery so that dirty water and entrails from fish and fowl could be kept well away from the rest of my food. The larder, a long room lined with shelves and with a flagstone floor, looked well stocked, though I'd determine that for myself. From a cursory glance, I saw bags of flour, jars of barley and other grains, dried herbs hanging from the beams, spices in tinned copper jars with labels on them, and crates of vegetables and fruit pushed back against the coolest walls.

The kitchen itself was fairly dark, as most kitchens were, despite the high windows, so we would have to burn lamps all the time, but otherwise, I was satisfied.

The staff to run this lofty house in Mayfair wasn't as large as I'd expect, but they seemed a diligent lot. I had an assistant, a rather pretty girl of about seventeen who seemed genial enough—she reminded me of myself at that age. Whether her assistance would be useful remained to be seen. Four footmen appeared and disappeared from the servants' hall, as did half a dozen maids.

Mrs. Bowen, the housekeeper, was thin and birdlike, and I did not know her. This surprised me, because when you are in service in London, you come to know those in the great houses, or at least *of* them. However, I'd

never heard of Mrs. Bowen, which either meant she'd not been in London long or hadn't long been a housekeeper.

I was disturbed a bit by her very thin figure, because I preferred to work with those who enjoyed eating. Mrs. Bowen looked as though she took no more than a biscuit every day, and then only a digestive. On the other hand, I'd known a spindly man who could eat an entire platter of pork and potatoes followed by a hearty dose of steak and kidney pie and never had to loosen his clothing.

Mr. Davis, whom I soon put down as a friendly old gossip, gave me a book with notes from the last cook on what the master preferred for his dinners. I was pleased to find the dishes uncomplicated but not so dull that any chophouse could have provided them. I could do well here.

I carefully unpacked my knives, including a brand-new, sharp carver, took my apron from my valise, and started right in.

The young assistant, a bit unhappy that I wanted her help immediately, was soon chatting freely with me while she measured out flour and butter for my brioche. She gave her name as Sinead.

She pronounced it *Shin-aide* and gave me a hopeful look. I thought it a beautiful name, conjuring mists over the green Irish land—a place I'd never been—but this was London, and a cook's kitchen was no place for an Irish nymph.

"It's quite lovely," I said as I cut butter into the flour. "But I'm sorry, my girl, we can't be having *Sinead*. People get wrong ideas. You must have a plain English name. What did the last cook call you?"

Sinead let out a sigh, her dreams of romance dashed. "Ellen," she said, resigned. I saw by her expression that she disliked the name immensely.

I studied her dark brown hair, blue eyes, and pale skin in some sympathy. Again, she reminded me of myself—poised on the edge of life and believing wonderful things would happen to her. Alas, I'd found out only too soon the bitter truth. Sinead's prettiness would likely bring her trouble, well I knew, and life was apt to dash her hopes again and again.

“Ellen,” I repeated, trying to sound cheerful. “A nice, solid name, but not too dull. Now, then, Ellen, I’ll need eggs. Large and whole, nothing cracked.”

Sinead gave me a long-suffering curtsy and scuttled for the larder.

“She’s got her head in the clouds,” Mrs. Bowen said as she passed by the kitchen door. “Last cook took a strap to her.” She sounded vastly disapproving of the last cook, which made me begin to warm to Mrs. Bowen.

“Is that why the cook was dismissed?” I already didn’t think much of this elderly cook, free with a strap, whoever she was. Sinead’s only crime, I could see so far, was having dreams.

“No.” Mrs. Bowen’s answer was short, clipped. She ducked away before she could tell me anything more interesting.

I continued with my bread. Brioche was a favorite of mine—a bread dough made rich with eggs and butter, subtly sweet. It was a fine accompaniment to any meal but also could be served as pudding in a pinch. A little cinnamon and stiff cream or a berry sauce poured over it was as grand as anything served in a posh hotel.

It was as I began beating the flour and eggs into the milk and sugar that I met Lady Rankin’s sister. I heard a loud banging and scrabbling noise from the scullery, as though someone had fallen into it down the stairs. Pans clattered to the floor, and then a personage in a black suit burst through the scullery door into the kitchen, boot heels scraping on the flagstones, and collapsed onto a chair at the kitchen table.

I caught up my bowl of dough before it could be upset, looked at the intruder, and then looked again.

This person wore black trousers; a waistcoat of watered silk in a dark shade of green, with a shining watch fob dangling from its pocket; a smooth frock coat and loose cravat; a long and rather dusty greatcoat; a pair of thick leather gloves; and boots that poked muddy toes from under the trousers. The low-crowned hat that went with the ensemble had been tossed onto the table.

Above this male attire was the head and face of a woman, a rather pretty woman at that. She’d done her fair hair in a low bun at the base of her neck,

slicking it straight back from a fine-boned face. The light color of her hair, her high cheekbones, and light blue, almost colorless eyes were so like Lady Rankin's, that for a moment, I stared, dumbfounded, believing I was seeing my mistress transformed. This lady was a bit older though, with the beginnings of lines about her eyes, and a manner far more robust than Lady Rankin's.

“Oh Lord,” the woman announced, throwing her body back in the chair and letting her arms dangle to the floor. “I think I’ve killed someone.”

2



As I stared in alarm at the young woman, she looked up at me, fixed me with a gaze that was as surprised as mine, and demanded, “Who the devil are *you*?”

“I am Mrs. Holloway.” I curtsied as best I could with my hands around my dough bowl. “The new cook.”

“New? What happened to the last one? Nasty old Mrs. Cowles. Why did they give her the boot?”

Since I had no idea, I could not answer. “Has something happened?”

The lady shoved the chair from the table and banged to her feet, her color rising. “Good God, yes. Where the devil is everyone? What if I’ve killed him?”

“Killed whom?” I asked, holding on to my patience. I’d already decided that the ladies of this family were prone to drama—one played the delicate creature, the other something from a music hall stage.

“Chap outside. I was driving a rig, a new one, and he jumped out in front of me. Come and see.”

I looked at my dough, which could become lumpy if I left it at this stage, but the young lady was genuinely agitated, and the entirety of the staff seemed to have disappeared. I shook out my hands, wiped them with a thick towel, laid the towel over the dough bowl, and nodded at her to lead me to the scene of the problem.

Fog shrouded the street onto which we emerged from the scullery stairs, Lady Cynthia—for that was Lady Rankin’s sister’s name—insisting we exit