

Maisie Lemmon turned the small mirror on the wall around and perused herself. Curly brown hair was tidily up in a bun, and her feathered hat sat at a jaunty angle on her head. Round cheeks had a healthy pink glow and her full lips smiled back at her. A frown momentarily crossed her face as she noticed a piece of lettuce stuck between her teeth. That would never do. Not if she wanted to create a good impression. And she did.

After removing the offending greenery, she sighed once before turning the mirror back round to face the wall. For good measure, she draped it with a piece of floral cloth and hung a wreath of dill on the nail. Then she closed the cupboard door.

Any witch worth her salt knew that mirrors were dangerous things.

Her mother and grandmother would have a fit if they knew she had brought such a thing into the house, but they weren't here and Maisie had always been a little self-conscious of her looks. She knew she wasn't ugly, but neither was she beautiful and willowy with pale skin and perfectly formed calves. Instead, she was plain, plump, and a little clumsy, so if the mirror gave her a boost of confidence, she didn't see much harm in it. She did make sure, however, that its potential powers were well contained. One never knew who might utilise it to spy on her, or trap her in an endless maze of reflections.

Grabbing her large floral tapestry bag, she opened the door to the small cottage and almost fell over the ginger tom stretched out on the front step.

"Goodness, Aly, what are you doing there?"

The cat meowed and stretched.

"Well, I don't care how warm it is. I could be sprawled out on the gravel right now. It wouldn't do to turn up at his door with a bloody nose."

The cat looked at her with lidded eyes before curling back up. Maisie carefully

stepped over him, pulling the door shut behind her, and walked briskly down the garden path, edged with overgrown bushes and a plethora of flowers and herbs. She stopped to pick a few leaves of lemon verbena, which she rubbed on her neck and over her wrists. Lifting her hand to her nose, she sniffed and nodded. She opened the rickety wooden gate and carefully shut it behind her before continuing up the lane through the wood towards the village.

Myrtleberry Dell was a quaint collection of houses and shops set back from the main road leading from the capital in the north to the port in the south. Travellers would occasionally stop at the inn or break their journey with a visit to the tearooms, but most of the cars sped past without ever sampling the charms on offer in the village. However, all that was changing.

The self-proclaimed mayor of the village, Aberforth Flores, was an entrepreneur who was keen to entice more people to visit and stay, preferably with an open purse or wallet. To that end he had created several local legends of highwaymen and their nefarious deeds, as well as a few ghosts. According to his internet searches, people loved visiting haunted buildings or sites with some obscure historical significance.

Now the old oak on the village green had been upgraded to a hanging tree used to despatch offenders for an assortment of crimes. The inn was said to have welcomed minor royalty many years back. Aberforth himself hinted of a liaison with a local girl and a minor prince in his family tree, who could not be named to protect the monarchy. The story was very popular. Aberforth would pose for pictures in front of his house, his face in profile to better capture his nose, which bore an uncanny likeness to the current

reigning sovereign.

The fictitious ghosts included a grey lady searching for her dead child, a soldier shot for desertion, and a headless horseman seen galloping across the green on a vital errand that was never completed. All three had supposedly obliged visitors in the recent past with a visitation, increasing the hopes of the gullible that they, to, would be the next lucky people. All of them left slightly disappointed and a few pounds poorer.

Since he also owned a large souvenir shop in a prime spot opposite the village green, Aberforth's motives were viewed as being slightly mercenary. The rest of the residents had shrugged and returned to their own business, happy to let him take charge as long as it didn't interfere with their lives. However, they grudgingly admitted over a pint of ale in The Grizzled Wizard that his antics had benefited them all financially. Several local businesses had even concocted their own stories, eager to cash in on the influx of unsuspecting tourists.

The mayor had once braved the wrath of Maisie's mother by suggesting she might have a stall in the village to sell her potions from. Needless to say, once he had recovered from the tongue-lashing he received, he had been quick to apologise and retreat, never to darken her door again. Since her mother's death, Maisie had noticed him watching her with speculation, but he had never plucked up the courage to approach her outright.

She would give him short shrift if he tried.

As the village Hedge Witch, Maisie lived on the parish boundary in the same cottage as her forebears. Unlike many other small settlements, Myrtleberry Dell could boast of retaining their own spell-caster since the mists of time. Maisie was respected for the long traditions she represented, and was often consulted for issues regarding love, decisions,

and cures for warts and other mild inconveniences. As she walked through the village, the residents lifted their hats or nod their heads politely. Occasionally, someone would apologetically stop her to ask her opinion on everything from the right way to prepare a posset, to whether a red hat was better than a blue one.

No matter what duty sent Maisie abroad, she always had a smile and sufficient time for them all.

After accepting a brace of pheasants from Edmund Wheatly as payment for a potion for his insomnia, Maisie was finally able to make her way up towards the Big House.

Boasting three storeys and built on a small hill, it was clearly visible from all aspects of the village. It had once belonged to a wealthy landowner, a distant descendent of the Torrington family who were Viscounts nearby. He had added a gatehouse to the manor and would hold court in the large room that doubled as a ballroom for parties. The oldest residents still talked of Christmases at the house when the entire village had been invited up for mulled wine and cakes.

Unfortunately, the lord's progeny had frittered away their inheritance, and the house had to be sold to pay off their debts. It had belonged briefly to a singer in a heavy metal band, who had died one night from an overdose after partying too hard. The house had lain empty for a while afterwards, but was now owned by a reclusive alchemist who had bought the property outright.

He had hired a gardener and a housekeeper, but neither of them saw him while they were at work as he kept to his rooms and was not to be disturbed.

Despite various attempts by the villagers, the gentleman had refused to share anything of his life with them when he occasionally encountered them in shops or on the street,

although, as is often the case, rumours flourished despite his reticence. Lacking any informed information, the stories included a scorned lover, an unnamed scandal, a broken heart, and a dark mysterious past leading to his self-induced exile from modern society. There had even been a brief mention of vampires, which had been thoroughly squashed when he had been spotted walking across a nearby field while the bright spring sun shone unobstructed above.

Maisie had never met him, but from the plethora of tall tales winging their way around the village, Maisie had deduced that he was quiet, methodical, scientifically minded and dogged. All qualities which she lacked. It made him the perfect partner for her mission.

Passing by the small stream running through the outskirts of the village, Maisie easily spotted Malachi Bell, the local postman. With a shock of bright red hair and a face covered in freckles, he was hard to miss, even when he was half-hidden by a weeping willow.

She noticed he was hurriedly stuffing something into his bag and wondered if a parcel had fallen out again. Now and then she would advise him to get a new one, but he always refused, saying that he felt attached to the old one and would feel wrong with a shiny new satchel. Thinking of her collected treasures at home, Maisie could understand his reasons. She waved to him and walked across the little bridge to intercept him.

“Good morning,” she called. “How are you feeling today?”

Malachi’s face seemed much redder than usual, and he wiped his brow with a tatty handkerchief as she approached.

“I’m well. Thank you, Mistress Lemmon,” he replied.

Maisie could see the beads of sweat forming on his brow. Although it was a lovely day, there was still a slight chill to the breeze blowing across the water. She wondered if his old complaint had returned.

“Are you sure?” she asked. She moved closer and glanced around to make sure they were alone. “I’m happy to make more of the tonic for your...” her eyes dipped down. “... troubles.”

“Oh, no, no. That won’t be necessary.” He swallowed.

She put a hand on his forehead. “You feel hot and you’re flushed. I really think you need one of my tonics. Pop by early tomorrow, and I’ll have one made up for you.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Think nothing of it. If you get a chance to bake one of those gorgeous lemon drizzle cakes, I’d love to have some.”

Maisie was very flexible when dealing with her customers. Those who didn’t have money to pay for her potions would often gift her with food or labour instead. She wasn’t wealthy, but neither was she living in abject poverty, and that suited her just fine.

“I’d be glad to,” Malachi said. He glanced at his watch. “Goodness, look at the time! I must get on. Lots of mail to deliver!”

He picked up his bag, and after fixing it to his bicycle, hurried away.

Maisie finally reached the tall iron gates in the fence surrounding the Big House. Thankfully, they were open, and she walked straight through. She had never been troubled with iron, like many witches were rumoured to be, but she didn’t like to push her

luck too far. There was always a first time for everything.

As she made her way up the wide driveway, her gaze roved over the closely cropped lawn and perfectly straight flower beds. Bushes were neatly trimmed and the roses devoid of deadheads. Her fingers twitched. She suppressed the urge to fling leaves across the grass and sow dandelions between the evenly spaced shrubberies.

Maisie was more of a casual gardener. Some may even have said chaotic. Her own garden was a riot of colours and scents crammed together. She was happy to let her plants choose where they wanted to grow instead of imposing her will on them. In her mind, there was no such thing as a weed. All plants had their uses for those who had the skills and aptitude. In fact, some of the best medicines could be distilled from the leaves, roots, and flowers of the most lowly of plants.

Finally reaching the door, she looked with surprise at the large notice attached to it.

*Wilfred H Pepper.*

*No hawkers, peddlers, or tinkers.*

*Deliveries may be left on the rear doorstep.*

*Go away.*

Maisie blinked. “How strange,” she muttered. With a shrug, she grasped the large knocker and banged it loudly three times.