

ENGLISH TRIFLE

A CULINARY MYSTERY

JOSI S. KILPACK



CHAPTER 1



Is it just me or does it feel like the staff wants us to leave?” Sadie Hoffmiller asked after the door of the sitting room shut behind them.

“It’s just you, Mom.” Breanna sat on one of the damask-covered settees and kicked out one leg so that she slumped into the seat. She managed to look perfectly bohemian in the elegant room. “They’re probably anxious to get back to their regular routine.”

“Hmmm, maybe,” Sadie replied, but she wasn’t convinced. If not for the fact that Breanna had a lot to deal with right now, Sadie would have tried to dissect the situation a little more; however, she could sense that with their departure only minutes away, her daughter was on overload. Sadie didn’t want to add to her stress.

Instead, she sat down across from Breanna as if being in the sitting room of an English estate was an everyday occurrence instead of an unforeseen shift in Breanna’s possible future. That Breanna hadn’t known Liam was heir apparent to an earldom when she fell in love with him hadn’t made the adjustment any easier, but it *had* become the reason they’d come to England in the first place. Liam’s father—William Everet Martin Jr., ninth Earl of Garnett—had been

ill for several months and Liam needed to see to some matters of the estate, necessitating he travel to England a week before Christmas. Sadie and Breanna had been invited to join him between Christmas and New Year's, while Breanna was out of school, in order to meet the earl and tour the country of Liam's birth. They'd spent one night at Southgate before leaving to see nearly everything else in England, returning only the night before last. Sadie couldn't imagine how they'd have thrown off the staff's routine when they'd been at the estate for such a short time. "It just seems to me that they're in a hurry for us to go back home."

"Well, they've got their hands full with the earl. I'm sure having guests—and foreign guests at that—is nothing more than an irritation."

Liam had had an extra week to adjust to his father's declining health, but admitted that he hadn't even recognized his father; he'd aged tremendously in the four years since Liam had seen him in person. Breanna suggested they forgo the sightseeing, but Liam assured them that the earl wouldn't want them to spend the week hovering when there was nothing any of them could do.

"Is Liam okay?" Sadie asked. She'd seen very little of him since their return to the estate. Once Liam's father passed on, Liam would inherit the title of earl, and the weight of the impending responsibility sat heavily on his shoulders now that the fun portion of the trip was over. He'd spent nearly every moment either at his father's bedside or in the library, poring over the history and accounts of the earldom, wanting to learn all he could before he returned to his other life in Portland, Oregon, where he supervised the bat exhibit at the Washington Park Zoo.

Breanna looked at her hands in her lap. She was wearing a T-shirt that said *Keep It Clean, Keep It Green*. "I don't know," she said

quietly. “He’s not sure when he’ll be able to come back home. If he could, I’m sure he’d stay here.”

Sadie wasn’t so sure he *couldn’t* stay—he was going to be an earl after all; why worry about something as inconsequential as his job? “It must be hard to leave with his dad still so sick,” Sadie said sympathetically. Both of Sadie’s parents were gone now, and losing them had been second in heartache only to her husband’s premature death almost twenty years ago. Nothing quite compared to losing people close to you even if, like Liam and his father, there had been half a world between you for most of your life.

Breanna let out a breath and nodded.

“And how about you?” Sadie asked, peering at her daughter in the hopes of reading her expression should she choose not to be forthcoming. “How do you feel about leaving?”

Breanna flicked her green eyes up to meet her mother’s, then stared back into her lap. She shrugged one shoulder like a thirteen-year-old girl, instead of a twenty-four-year-old woman facing the decision of a lifetime. Would she one day marry Liam and live the rest of her life as the Countess of Garnett? It was a subject she’d avoided talking about. For Breanna—earthy, easygoing, and hardworking—to consider living a life full of social functions, obligatory friendships, and a lifestyle disproportionate to that of her neighbors, would be difficult. Her world was nothing like this one. For a moment Sadie thought her daughter might be ready to discuss it now that the visit was almost behind them, but then Breanna’s face broke into a smile. “Let’s see,” she said, a tease in her voice. “How do I feel about leaving?” She tapped her chin with feigned consternation. “I simply can’t wait to eat a freaking Ho Ho.”

“A Ho Ho?” Sadie said, pulling back in pure disgust. “We’ve

been surrounded by the finest of English cuisine for the last week and you want a Ho Ho?"

"The very words *English cuisine* are pretty much an oxymoron. It's bland, it's weird—mushrooms for breakfast? Come on! They served pigeons for dinner at that one place in York, Mom. Can you honestly tell me that a Big Mac isn't screaming your name about now?"

"Those were Cornish hens," Sadie reprimanded. "And they were delicious. The rosemary sauce was nothing short of amazing."

Breanna waved her hand, as if unwilling to even consider the possibility. "Hostess and McDonald's are not multibillion dollar companies for no reason." Breanna smiled as if she'd won the argument. "Oh, I liked the English trifle from the other night—that was delicious."

Sadie couldn't help but smile at the memory. She made the layered dessert every Christmas, but had never had it with real lady-fingers and custard pudding made from scratch. "It was excellent, wasn't it?" She couldn't wait to go home and make it herself to see if she could match Mrs. Land's. Now that she'd actually had real English trifle, she knew what to shoot for.

Breanna nodded as the door opened. Sadie straightened in her chair, all things forgiven and all senses on alert because there was food on the tray! Scones, clotted cream, strawberry jam, and tea, to be exact—a cream tea, for which Devonshire was famous. The scones—pronounced so that *scone* rhymed with the word *gone*—were not the deep-fried American kind, rather they were like a sweet biscuit that fairly melted in your mouth. Grant, the butler, placed the tea tray on a small table. "Your final tea," he said as he righted the tea cups on the saucers. "As soon as you finish here, you'll be on your way to Heathrow. Your bags are being loaded as we speak."

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Aha, more proof that the staff was practically pushing them out the door. Their flight didn't leave until ten o'clock tonight—nearly seven hours from now—and it was only three hours to London. Why the rush? But she simply smiled at the man, watching his expression carefully.

"We can pour," Sadie said when he reached for the teapot. It felt funny to be waited on all the time and she took every opportunity to be self-sufficient. "And I hope the driver is okay to wait for a little while; we'd hate to rush." She thought she caught a flicker of irritation in Grant's expression, but he nodded his head and took a step backward toward the door, as professional as ever.

"Of course," he said. "I'll let the driver know he can turn off the engine."

Grant nodded once more when he reached the door, reminded them to ring the bell by the fireplace if they needed assistance, and then left the room. As soon as he was gone, Sadie leaned forward. "They weren't even going to shut off the engine," she said smugly. "They'd probably send us out there with Dixie cups and the scones wrapped in a napkin if they could."

"Mom, please," Breanna said, reaching for her scone. "Can we just enjoy these last few minutes?"

Oh, fine, Sadie said to herself. She was willing to put off nearly anything when there was food in need of savoring. She picked up, split, and jammed a scone before topping it with a dollop of clotted cream.

"Are you sure you want to bother with the scone at all?" Sadie asked, raising her eyebrows toward the treat in her daughter's hand. "Seeing as how these scones aren't loaded with trans fats or preservatives? I mean, they don't even have any artificial coloring, for goodness' sake."

“The scones,” Breanna said, pronouncing the word like an American, “I like. But that cream stuff is nasty.”

“That *cream* stuff is called clotted cream,” Sadie corrected as she put the halves of her scone back together, making a sandwich—which was how the English ate their scones. “And Devon is famous for it.”

Breanna looked up and lifted her eyebrows. “The very words *clotted cream* make my point: it even sounds gross. And talk about unhealthy—it’s like pure butterfat.”

“And what do you think butter is made of?” Sadie asked, but then she promptly ignored her daughter’s reply, putting up her hand to block any further complaints as she took her first bite, allowing the cool cream, sweet jam, and smooth scone to combine perfectly in her mouth. She chewed slowly and carefully, savoring every moment. When she opened her eyes, Breanna was grinning at her.

“You’re such a food junkie,” Breanna said.

“Agreed,” Sadie said before taking another bite.

It was several minutes before she finished a second scone, set down her cup of tea—peppermint, since she thought real tea tasted like wet socks—and let out a satisfied breath. “Our last tea in England,” she said sadly. “And I never did wrestle the scone recipe away from Mrs. Land.”

“Whatever,” Breanna said dismissively. “You’ll go home, spend two weeks baking scone recipes you find online and end up with a recipe that blows Mrs. Land’s out of the water. You can call them ‘Sadie’s Scrumptulicious Scones’ or ‘Scones to Die For’ or something like that.”

Sadie cocked her head and smiled at the compliment. “You know me too well.”

Breanna nodded and leaned back in her seat. She looked at her watch—a waterproof, multifunctioning black monstrosity that was as feminine as a chainsaw. “Where’s Liam?” she asked.

Sadie shrugged. He'd texted Breanna, telling them to wait for him in the sitting room, but that had been nearly fifteen minutes ago. Sadie eyed the two scones they'd left for him and wondered if he'd notice if she ate one. Would he even have time to eat both scones with the staff in such a hurry to be done with them? And yet, when she'd put on her jeans this morning she found them a bit harder to button up than they'd been when she had arrived. At fifty-six years old she no longer had the metabolism of her youth and needed to have limits. But it was so hard! And how often was she going to have a cream tea in Devonshire? Sadie gave in and grabbed a third scone. Breanna didn't seem to notice, so Sadie quickly prepared it and then savored every bite. When it was gone, the last scone called to her, but this time she ignored it. She couldn't eat *all* of Liam's scones.

In order to distract herself from that last baked confection, she reviewed all the amazing things they'd done and seen that week. She and Breanna had made a list on the airplane from the U.S. and had diligently sought out things from some of their favorite books and movies set in England. They'd toured Tintagel, the ruins of King Arthur's castle in Cornwall, Ascot where Eliza Doolittle attended the races in *My Fair Lady*, Alnwick Castle in Northumberland which was used as Hogwarts in the Harry Potter movies, and they even took the Jack the Ripper tour in London—creepy. Sadie felt sure they'd gotten everything on the list, but reviewed it in her mind one last time, mostly to keep herself from the final scone. Instantly, she sat up.

"We need to take a turn about the room," she said excitedly. She didn't wait for an answer, instead she moved to her daughter's side and pulled her to her feet.

"What?" Breanna asked, looking at her strangely as she stumbled to get her balance, nearly dropping the scone in her hand as she did so.

Sadie was already tugging her toward the perimeter of the room.

“Remember? It was on our list—taking a turn around the room like Miss Bingley and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*.” She waved her hand through the air in a regal fashion. “I’ll be Caroline Bingley and you can be Elizabeth—although with your bad attitude, maybe you should be Caroline.”

“I don’t remember us assigning characters when we put it on the list,” Breanna said before taking a bite of her scone.

Sadie gave her a dirty look, ignoring the commentary. Breanna shook her head but fell into step beside her mother, standing nearly five inches taller than Sadie thanks to the genetics she’d inherited from her birth parents. They walked slowly, scanning the collection of paintings and antique furniture on the interior wall as they made their way toward the far end of the long, narrow room. They’d been in this room twice before, but hadn’t inspected it too closely. It was only fitting that doing so should be part of their final moments at Southgate estate.

When they neared the far wall, they turned and found themselves looking out the window furthest from the door. It was one of three floor-to-ceiling windows covered in elaborate folds of the same fabric used on the settees she and Breanna had been sitting on earlier. It had rained off and on all week, and had just started to sprinkle again, giving the view of the garden a watery look. Breanna popped the last of her scone in her mouth.

“I wish we’d had more time to walk through the gardens,” Sadie said as they walked toward the window and she looked out upon the meticulously kept shrubs and bushes. “It’s too bad it was so wet.”

Breanna suddenly stopped, and since Sadie’s arm was linked through Breanna’s she was pulled to a stop as well, and none too gracefully either.

“Why are you being so difficult?” Sadie said, tugging on her daughter’s arm again.

Breanna didn’t respond. Instead she lifted a hand and pointed toward the curtain panel just to the right of the window.

The curtain was pushed out from the wall, nearly a foot. Poking out from beneath the folds of the heavy pleated fabric were the toes of two black leather shoes. A glass-fronted china cabinet, which stood between two of the windows, kept that particular curtain panel from being easily noticed. It was a perfect hiding place for whoever had chosen to do just that.

“Hello?” Sadie asked after several seconds of silence.

No response.

She and Breanna shared a look and Sadie felt annoyance rush through her at the idea that they were being spied upon. They’d have overheard her suspicions about the staff wanting them to leave. How embarrassing.

“Alright,” she said in her schoolteacher voice, directing her comments toward the shoes that hadn’t moved. “We can see you, so come out. Is that you, Liam?” Liam didn’t strike Sadie as the practical joker type, but it was the only explanation she could think of.

No answer. Not Liam.

Breanna took a step back, pulling her mother with her, and although Sadie’s chest prickled with apprehension, she refused to give into it. She pulled herself up to her full five and a half feet and raised her chin. “This isn’t funny,” she said. “So just make it easy on all of us and come out.”

Nothing.

Taking a deep breath, and ignoring a new tremor of fear, she took a few steps forward and in one motion pulled the drapes back in order to unmask their uninvited guest.

Sadie sucked in a breath and didn't move.

Breanna screamed before clamping both hands over her mouth.

The man impaled and subsequently pinned to the wall by what looked like a fireplace poker did nothing but stare at the floor with his face frozen in shocked horror, a blossom-shaped bloodstain on his chest.

Sadie's American English Trifle

- 1 yellow or white cake mix (can use pre-made pound or angel food cake), cut into cubes
- 1 package Danish dessert, raspberry or strawberry (can use Jell-O)
- 1 packet Bird's brand custard mix (can use a large box of vanilla pudding)
- 1-2 cups frozen strawberries, thawed (Shawn prefers raspberries)
- 2 bananas, sliced
- 1 cup whipping cream, whipped

A couple of hours before assembling the trifle, prepare the cake mix, the custard mix, and the Danish dessert according to the package directions and allow to cool properly.

In a trifle dish or glass bowl layer all ingredients in the following order—cake cubes, Danish dessert, custard, fruit, and bananas. A trifle dish will usually allow two layers; a glass casserole dish will only allow one. Top trifle with whipping cream and refrigerate until ready to serve. Don't layer trifle more than six hours before eating or cake will get soggy and bananas may brown. Serves 8.

*If using Jell-O instead of Danish dessert, allow time for Jell-O to set up in refrigerator before serving, about 4 hours.

*Bre's chocolate trifle: chocolate cake, chocolate pudding, and crushed Oreos instead of fruit. Yummy!

CHAPTER 2



Sadie stumbled backwards, grabbing Breanna's arm as she did so, and unable to catch her breath for what felt like several seconds. She stared at the man while her brain argued over what she was seeing.

A dead man?

No way. Not here.

That poker isn't there for decoration.

Once Sadie fully absorbed the sight before her, she began walking backward again—away from the man behind the curtain though she couldn't stop staring at him. The light in the room reflected off the brass handle of the poker, drawing attention to itself as if there were any way they wouldn't notice. She bumped into Breanna who was frozen in place, reminding Sadie that she wasn't alone. Breanna's wide eyes kicked in Sadie's motherly instincts, even if her curiosity didn't want to leave just yet, and she grabbed Breanna's arm.

"Come on," she said as she tugged Breanna toward the door. Breanna finally pulled her eyes away from the body and took her shaky hands away from her mouth as they dodged furniture on their way out of the room. The slamming of the door behind them echoed

off the marble floor and vaulted ceiling of the foyer. Sadie's heart was pumping in her chest as she and Breanna stumbled to a stop on the marble floor.

A *fireplace poker*? She asked in her mind as she scanned the huge area for help, feeling very small and vulnerable in the cavernous room. *Was it really a poker?*

Maybe she should go back in and take a second look, just to make sure. She shook away the thought. *What is wrong with you, Sadie Hoffmiller?* she demanded of herself. She had Breanna to take care of right now. *Focus, woman, focus!*

The holiday decorations that had seemed so festive and quaint during their stay now looked garish. The red ornaments on the two trees flanking the marble staircase, and the red leaves of the poinsettias spread throughout the room, reminded Sadie not of the holiday season that was coming to an end, but of the bloodstain on the chest of the man pinned to the sitting room wall. Deep red. Fresh. Her stomach tightened at the realization that the body hadn't been there—hadn't been dead—for long. She and Breanna had enjoyed their tea without any idea they were in the company of a corpse. How disgusting. The memory of their final tea was definitely ruined forever.

"Help!" Sadie yelled, though the word caught in her throat that had gone dry. She swallowed and tried again. "Someone?"

In the center of the foyer was a wide staircase that led to a landing before branching into two narrower staircases, leading to the upper east and west wings of the house where the bedrooms and family suites were located. A garland-wrapped balcony rimmed what could be seen of the second floor, but no one was on either level.

"Please," Sadie called. "Help us!"

The silence that echoed back was eerie and Sadie shivered as her

mind considered their options and her heart raced with adrenaline. Breanna's hand was still in hers and she didn't seem in any hurry to let go. Sadie gave her daughter's hand a squeeze, her way of assuring Breanna that everything was okay, just before Breanna leaned forward, bracing her free hand on her thigh. "I think I'm gonna be sick," she said.

Sadie immediately identified a nearby chair as somewhere Breanna could sit down, but with a dead man on the other side of the wall it seemed an unwise choice to stay so close—especially out in the open. She couldn't help but feel a little like Bambi and his mother in the meadow. Instead, Sadie put an arm around her daughter's waist and pulled her toward the far side of the staircase. "Come on," Sadie said. "Let's find a staff member."

On their first day at the estate she'd noticed that staff disappeared on the far side of the staircase and although there was a call button in nearly every room of the house, Sadie wasn't about to wait for them to come to her. She'd asked Liam for a full tour of the house when they first arrived, curious as to the setup of utility areas such as staff rooms, kitchen, and laundry facilities—but he'd said that in order to respect the privacy of the staff, he could only show the public areas. Though these weren't the circumstances Sadie would have chosen, she was eager to see the servant portion of the house all the same. And they'd certainly find someone to help them down there. She was sure of it.

Exactly as she'd suspected, on the far side of the stairway, beneath the stairs themselves and hidden behind one of the towering Christmas trees, was a door. It wasn't green, but all the same Sadie was pretty sure it was the proverbial green baize door that separated the servant area from the main house—all the Regency romance novels she'd read lately mentioned that door. Since beginning a new

relationship with a new man—Detective Pete Cunningham—she'd developed an odd hunger for the British romances where morality still held some merit but allowed room for a little passion all the same.

Sadie opened the door, leading Breanna and herself onto a cement landing at the top of a short flight of stairs. Centered at the base of the stairs was a set of swinging doors like the ones that divided a restaurant kitchen from the eating area. A narrow hallway separated the stairs from the door and small windows in the door showed a bright room on the other side, though the Plexiglas was too scratched to see much detail. It had to be the kitchen, and imagining that the cook was likely in the middle of preparing dinner, the kitchen seemed the obvious place to find someone to help them.

"Just a little further," Sadie urged Breanna, who was decidedly paler than she'd been when they left the sitting room.

Sadie helped Breanna down the stairs and pushed through the doors into what looked like a pantry for dishes. Shelves and shelves of glass-fronted cabinets held a wide variety of dishes, some ordinary and some quite elegant. A rolling ladder, similar to one in the library, allowed access to the higher items. Through another doorway opposite of where they stood, Sadie could see into a large kitchen, but what caught her attention was a small desk and chair tucked into one corner of the dish room. Sadie steered Breanna toward it, pulled the chair clear of the desk, and helped her sit down. Breanna leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands.

"Take deep breaths," Sadie said, brushing Breanna's long dark hair off of her neck while scanning the area for a bucket or bowl in case Breanna's shock got the best of her and she threw up.

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"I'm feeling better," Breanna said behind the veil of her hair, but her voice was weak, and Sadie wasn't going to take any chances.

She heard footsteps and when she looked up, Mrs. Land, the house-keeper and cook as far as Sadie could figure, appeared in the doorway of the dish room. Her penciled-in eyebrows lifted to the middle of her forehead. "What are you doing here?" she asked with alarm. "It's not allowed."

"Can you get me a bowl or something? She might be sick."

The woman paused for a moment before she disappeared, returning a moment later with a large silver bowl. She handed it to Sadie, who put it on the floor in front of Breanna. Another cook with Asian features joined Mrs. Land, her face equally shocked as she looked at the two of them. Both women wore what looked like black hospital scrubs covered with black aprons—rather clean and flour-free for two women obviously working in a kitchen—but Sadie's mind was still a whirl of thoughts and she was unable to distract herself from what had brought her here in the first place.

"There's a man in the sitting room," she said fast, trying to explain why they were there and why Breanna was suddenly weak in the knees.

"Um, a man?" Mrs. Land asked carefully, sounding confused, cluing Sadie in on the fact that she'd left out some rather pertinent information.

"He's dead!" Sadie spat out in order to make sure she said it. It was a surprise to hear that the words even worked on her tongue and she found herself questioning it all over again. Had he really been *dead*? Was it truly a poker stuck through his chest? Even though she knew the answers, it was quite another thing to really believe those answers.

Mrs. Land pulled back with a gasp when the words registered

with her, while the other woman's eyes went even wider and she put a hand to her mouth. "Who's dead?" Mrs. Land asked.

"The man in the sitting room. He's got a poker clear through his chest, pinning him to the wall. I think—" Sadie cut herself off as she realized she hadn't yet considered if she recognized the man. It took only a moment to realize she knew who he was. His name was John Henry, and he served as the earl's personal nurse. Sadie had seen very little of him since he was usually at the earl's bedside and Sadie hadn't spent much time there. However, regardless of how seldom their paths had crossed, realizing she knew who he was caused the room to tilt beneath her feet a little bit.

The two women continued to stare at her, but she was loathe to tell them the identity of the corpse who had been their coworker. Her neighbor, Anne, had been murdered only a few months ago and the shock of it still hadn't faded. She did not want to be the one responsible for announcing a similar situation for these women.

"Have you seen Liam? I need to find him. Someone needs to call the police." She couldn't believe that only four months after coming face-to-face with murder for the first time, she was facing it again. What were the chances?

Mrs. Land just stood there—as did the other cook. Then Mrs. Land seemed to shake herself out of it. She moved toward the door, then stopped when she was even with Sadie. She turned to face Sadie, who pulled back because Mrs. Land was so close. "Um," she glanced toward the other cook and spoke in a whisper. "Please don't let her follow me." Then she turned to the other woman. When she spoke, it was in the kind of tone Sadie would use to speak to a small child or a pet. Far too calm for the circumstances. "Stay here—the earl will be expecting his dinner at eight."

Even with his nurse dead in the sitting room? Sadie thought to

herself. *Can't they order pizza just this once? Can you have pizza delivered to an English estate? Do they even have pizza delivery in Devonshire?*

Mrs. Land pushed through the double doors while Sadie pulled her thoughts back to the situation.

"Wait!" Sadie called after her, realizing she'd just been left in charge. But Mrs. Land was gone.

With the doors swinging shut, Sadie looked at Breanna, who was still bent over and taking deep breaths. Breanna lifted her head to look at her mother. "I'm okay," she said, attempting to use the desk to stand. Sadie knew that Breanna's embarrassment of appearing so delicate was bothering her as much as anything.

Sadie hurried to her. "No, no, don't stand yet," she said, pushing her gently back into the chair. "Can you text Liam and tell him where to find us?"

Breanna nodded, and leaned forward again, digging her phone out of her pocket in the process and seemingly relieved to have something to do.

Sadie turned to face the other woman who continued to regard her with shock, tears forming in her almond-shaped eyes. Though she'd dropped her hand from her mouth, she looked pale beneath the light brown color of her skin. The two women stared at each other; Sadie tried to force a smile, though the muscles in her face resisted.

"Hi," she finally said after a few seconds had passed and she couldn't think of anything else to say. She put out her hand. "Um, I'm Sadie Hoffmiller, I don't believe we've met."

The woman remained silent, blinked once, then turned on her heel and began to run. Sadie paused a moment before taking off after the woman. On the left side of the large kitchen was a door, and

Sadie was navigating her way around the butcher-block table when she realized the other woman was headed toward it.

“Wait,” Sadie called out even as she questioned herself on why she was becoming involved. “Stop.”

The woman reached the door just as Sadie caught up with her and grabbed her arm. The woman’s hand was on the doorknob and she made a whimpering sound in her throat.

“Please, stay here,” Sadie pleaded in a breathless voice. She hadn’t yet recovered from the shock of finding the body and was in no condition to chase down the assistant cook. Mrs. Land’s words rung in her ears: *“Don’t let her follow me.”* Was it only *following* that was the problem? Was it alright if she left? Somehow, Sadie didn’t think so and the other woman’s desire to get out sent off yet more alarm bells in Sadie’s head. The police would be coming, they would need to talk to everyone. She tightened her grip on the woman’s arm. “Please wait for Mrs. Land to come back.”

“I can’t,” the woman said, her accent different from Mrs. Land’s or Grant’s, but still British. Sadie had learned during this trip that in England, a person’s speech not only revealed where they were from, but also what class they belonged to—but of course Sadie didn’t know how to decipher it. The woman’s dark eyes filled with tears as she looked at Sadie. She was a petite woman, trim and young. She wore a black scarf over her equally black hair. Devoid of makeup, her complexion was as flawless as any Sadie had ever seen. “He made me promise if something happened, I’d disappear.”

“He?” Sadie repeated. “He who?”

“Please,” the woman begged, openly crying as she tried to twist and pull her arm away; a sob broke through. “Please, I have to go.”

Sadie didn’t know what to do. “But—”

“Please,” the woman said again, and this time her voice was

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shaking, her eyes wild as tears streamed down her face. In that moment, sympathy overwhelmed sense. Sadie didn't know how this woman was connected to John Henry, but the absolute terror on her face made it impossible for Sadie to detain her. The woman looked surprised for the briefest moment when Sadie let go.

"My name is Sadie Hoffmiller," Sadie said again as the woman turned the knob and pulled the door open. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

The woman seemed even more surprised by that, but then her face fell. "No one can help me with this," she said before disappearing through the door.