

## Murder Most Deadly

Could today get any better, Maldini wondered, stepping from The Smugglers Inn into the foggy night air. For the first time in fuck knows how long, he had plenty of money in his pocket, even after six pints of HSD and a Cornish pasty, and the love of a beautiful woman. Okay, she was a little on the fruitcake side, but beggars can't be choosers. Life was just about as perfect as it could get.

He glanced upwards and felt the light patter of drizzle on his face. Hmm, by the looks on those dark clouds it might bloody well bucket down -- it was best not to dawdle.

Somewhat three sheets to the wind, he weaved his way across Fore Street, side-stepping out of the way of several people who tried to dodge him. He ducked into a narrow alley and was soon meandering up steep Cliff Street with its delightful fishermen's cottages huddled so close they seemed to meld into each other.

He paused to catch his breath. Maldini gulped down some cool, bracing sea air to revive his overindulged body and then continued towards hearth and home -- well, Bianca's hearth and home to be exact. But one day soon it would also be his. His devious, rather cunning plan to worm his way into Bianca's heart with his bedroom prowess had worked a treat, she was putty in his magical hands.

With each step he took, Maldini drew closer to Morwenna House. Now close enough that the drizzle-heavy mist no longer concealed his view, he stood gazing at the grim Victorian Gothic edifice resplendent with gables and the odd steeple here and there. It stood perched on the upper edge of the fishing village and always loomed over Trewenna as if haunting the village with its dark presence. The grey granite walls seemed to mimic the cliffs that sloped into the briny depths a mere stone's throw away from its doorstep.

Just the sight of the house often made his heart race -- why, he had no idea, but there was something otherworldly about the place. And just to make his heart race that bit quicker he noticed the usual clutter of carrion crows covering the roof.

Hmm, why were so many crows attracted to Morwenna House, he wondered?

Although the night was blacker than the Devil's arse, he could clearly make out the imposing oak front door with its impressive brass knocker that no longer awaited his deft touch to be let in -- he now had his own key.

Maldini stopped dead in his tracks. There it was again -- that same strange animal sound he sometimes heard whenever he visited Morwenna House. His already racing heart beat faster with a twinge of fear. He whirled around only to see the twinkling lights of Trewenna and hear the mournful clanging of bells from the boats in the harbour.

The sound of an animal's rasping growl drew closer to Maldini. Was it his imagination, or could he make out a furry creature, drooling fangs and feral glowing eyes lurking in the shadows. He blinked mist-soaked eyes to see nothing -- it had vanished. But, if his ears had not deceived him, there was the distinctive sound of claws scraping on a cobbled footpath. He shook his head to erase his irrational fear and laughed, though it was more a nervous titter.

It was probably those two morons, Topsy and Joey, Bianca's two handymen giving him a scare for a tease. Those two were always up to mischief, he mused and they had left the pub before him, giggling like girls. Yes, it had to be them. He would have a stern word with them later.

The wind dragged the scent of the sea to his nostrils and also brought with it the eerie howling of what sounded like a wolf.

Maldini's eyes rounded with irrational fear. Then he sniggered. "Bugger off you two!" A moment later, he scarpered for all he was worth towards Morwenna House and Bianca, before he got soaked to the skin. She was no doubt waiting for him to give her a good shagging, but was more than likely stewing over her unfinished fantasy novel about Cornish ghosts and folklore.

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Clutching a photograph of the love of her life, Bianca sat on the edge of her four-poster bed, glaring at his image. Oh how much she wanted to spit in his face. His red sequined stage costume taunted her with its garish twinkling stars and that same twinkle was evident in his dark brown eyes. Tears filled her eyes while her trembling fingers traced his face -- a face that she had often likened to a younger *Rowan Atkinson*. Her tears fell down her cheeks. The two-timing, money-grabbing bastard had broken her heart and for that he must suffer. They always suffer.

She sniffed back the tears and muttered, "So, lover boy, you think you can pull the wool over my eyes. Well, we'll see about that, you little twat."

Bianca glanced toward the open bay window and saw the voile curtains billow with a gentle breeze. She smiled listening to Joey's mischievous howling. That Joey was such a tease. She wandered over to the window and pulled back the voile curtain to see Maldini making his way hurriedly toward her home. The lonely sound of the harbour foghorn brought a faint smile to her angered features. Oh how she loved the eerie, plaintive boom. It reminded her of an old Cornish ghost story read to her by her Aunt Isabel -- the forlorn cries of fisherman's ghosts calling to their brethren echoed with the booming call of the foghorn. She would use that in her novel. Hurt mixed with anger filled her aching heart. She -- Bianca Isabel Penhale, would not let any man break her heart and get away with it -- never ever, never, ever again. After six glorious months of romantic bliss, or so she'd thought, she now knew the love of her life only wanted one thing -- her money and her home. His words of love and promise of fidelity were meaningless.

Oh how she wished she'd listened to her dearest, trusted friend and confidant -- Topsy. But Maldini had swept her off her feet with his smooth talk and sexual know how -- not to mention his use of magic to dazzle her. Now the little fucker had magicked away a prized family heirloom.

The sneaky little shit deserved his comeuppance. He wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last to know her wrath. She

crumpled the photograph up in her hand, spat on it and trampled it. She kicked the photo at a waste paper bin and smiled at her accuracy when it scored a goal.

*“What are you going to do about him?”* the ghostly voice in her head asked.

“Throw him out with not a penny to his name,” she said.

*“I know what I’d do ... let me tell you ... please let me show you,”* the spectral voice begged.

“Let it be a surprise ... Maldini loves surprises,” Bianca said.

She turned and made for the bedroom door but before leaving her room to see the love of her life, Bianca caught sight of her reflection in the dressing table’s vanity mirror. Yuck! She looked bloody awful with mascara streaks down her cheeks! She brushed her fingers through her long tousled dark hair and sighed.

“Woe is me. Woe is me.”

She shrugged and didn’t care how ghastly she looked. It wasn’t as if she was planning on entering a beauty contest. Her attention focused on the full bottle of fortified local mead on her dressing table. She licked her lips thinking she could do with a tipples of something strong to give her the courage for what she must now do. With that thought in mind, Bianca picked up the bottle, popped the cork and glugged away until it was empty. She smacked her lips. A lovely warmth settled in her tummy where moments before cold hate resided. Duly fortified, she tossed the bottle into the waste paper bin and strode over to the closed bedroom door.

Hearing the tread of her footsteps on the bare, varnished floorboards, Bianca glanced down to see her high heels. “Oh no, that just won’t do,” she muttered. “He’ll hear you coming a mile away.” She kicked off her red high-heeled shoes and had a sudden thought.

*“Those stilettos would make a nifty weapon, Bianca,”* her dark side uttered with glee.

“They’re my best ... no way am I spoiling them for him!” She kicked the shoes under the bed.

She stepped out of her bedroom without making a sound, giving little thought to the plethora of silver-framed family photos of bygone generations and paintings on the walls. The upstairs hallway was shrouded in shadows, dimly lit by a couple of wall-mounted antique electric lamps.

Bianca strode towards the stairway with a firmly set smile on her lips, more a sneer than a smile. A certain oil painting caught her eye as it so often did when passing it by. She gave a wink to Great Auntie Isabel. She paused to look at the image of the elderly, stern-faced, white-haired woman sitting at a circular table draped in black satin. The old girl was wearing a beautiful amethyst pendant around her neck.

*“You know what to do, Bianca?”* the voice said.

Bianca’s smile widened but only slightly. “Yes, I know what to do. Yes, Aunt Isabel, I know he’s got it coming, the philandering, swindling bastard, but I love him.” She gently touched the painting with a stuttering sigh, holding back the tears. She had cried enough for him.

That dark female voice, strong and forceful but echoing, spoke to her from beyond the veil, *“Love ... what does love have to do with it?”*

“Oh, Aunt Isabel, I know you’re right as always ... but I thought he was the one ... the one I could settle down with.” Bianca caressed the painting.

*“You be strong ... you’re a Penhale, never forget that. We Penhale’s are made of stern stuff,”* Aunt Isabel’s ghostly voice re-iterated, *“Be strong.”*

Yes she was most definitely a Penhale and proud of her ancient family, Bianca thought.

*“Well what are you dawdling for? Run along and do what has to be done,”* Aunt Isabel urged.

Yes, best not to dawdle any longer or Maldini might decide to want sex, Bianca thought. Then she might crumble and let him have his way. She blew the painting a kiss and said, “What would I do without you, Auntie?”

*“Oh you’d do fine, I have faith in you. Now run along and give Maldini the surprise of his life.”*

Bianca continued on her way. She paused on hearing the front door close and his familiar footsteps enter the kitchen. At the top of the stairs she hummed a cheerful tune and sang, “*It ain’t what you do it’s the way that you do it.*” The little ditty was a *Bananarama/Fun Boy Three* favourite of hers and always seemed an apt song to sing whenever the mood took her to do what must be done. Careful not to creak the old stairs, Bianca used the outer edges of each step.

On reaching the foot of the stairs she peered down the dimly-lit, slate-floored narrow hallway. At the far end of the hallway was the kitchen. The door was open and light from the room spilled out into the hallway, indicating the love of her life was in there awaiting her arrival.