

CHAPTER ONE

London, England
December 1889

“Much gladness! Much gladness!” the Oriental magician cried cheerfully, producing a glass bowl brimming with water and two bright goldfish from the sleeve of his brocade robe.

In an excess of excitement, Rhiannon Moore crumpled the Athenaeum Theatre’s programme between her gloved hands. On the stage, the magician handed the goldfish bowl to his assistant, then he began whirling around on stiffened legs, pulling yards of colourful ribbons from his mouth and flinging them towards the audience. Earlier in his performance, he had eaten fire, caused dancing devils to appear in smoke, produced cups of coffee from an apparently empty cauldron, made his female assistant appear in a glass cage suspended above the stage, and escaped a locked trunk submerged in a tank filled with water. In terms of remarkable effects, Wu Wang certainly lived up to his billing as the Most Astonishing Celestial Conjurer in the World.

Now if only the woman sitting next to her would stop spoiling her enjoyment of the spectacle by providing practical explanations for Wu Wang’s magic tricks!

“I believe he has concealed tightly wound coils of thin silk ribbon in his mouth, tucked into his cheek or beneath his tongue,” Lady Evangeline St. Claire murmured.

Rhiannon loved Lina to distraction, but the woman’s commentary was annoying in the extreme. She wished Lina might be stricken dumb, or, at the very least, take the hint that destroying the magician’s delightful illusions with cold-minded deduction was not fair — not fair at all!

“He might even have such a coil in his sleeve,” Lina went on, “raising a hand to his mouth to create the pretence of—”

Her patience at an end, Rhiannon nudged Lina with an ungentle elbow in the ribs and hissed emphatically, “Shhh!”

Lina gave her a sidelong glance of reproach, but Wu Wang — having extracted a final length of bright scarlet ribbon from his lips, which pooled on the stage floor like a splash of blood — was about to perform the death-defying climax of his act, the one the programme called “Execution at the Jade Dragon’s Order”. Rhiannon would tolerate no interruptions. With Lina subsided into sullen silence at last, she felt free to focus her attention back on the stage, where the magician was making his preparations. As Wu Wang apparently spoke no English apart from his signature phrase, “much gladness”, his pretty lady assistant translated the stream of sing-song gibberish that poured from his mouth.

“Since the magician Colleuw of Lorraine first penetrated the mystery of the bullet catch in the 1500s, many deaths have resulted from the performance of this magical conjuration, including that of Colleuw himself, who laid a curse upon it with his dying breath,” the translator chirped in lightly accented English. Like the magician, she was clad in a Chinese robe and loose trousers. Her black hair was fastened into two peach-shaped buns on the sides of her head, and her make-up was exaggerated, blue and yellow and scarlet over a pearl white base, making her resemble an Oriental doll. She continued, “Wu Wang most humbly requests that the ladies and gentlemen gathered here this evening remain in absolute silence during the commission of this deadly experiment. There is a possibility that he could lose his life tonight; he must concentrate his powers if he is to emerge unscathed. The slightest sound may have devastating consequences.”

The audience remained hushed, the atmosphere strained with suspense. Lina stirred beside her and seemed about to speak. Rhiannon gave her a sharp glance and another elbowing that made her close her mouth with a snap. Satisfied Lina was not going to spoil this part of Wu Wang's act, Rhiannon settled into her seat and prepared to be thrilled.

"It is well known in the Empire of the East," the assistant said, "that every lady and every gentleman, no matter how high or humble their station, has the ability to channel the magnetic currents that surround us. You have the power to control the ætheric forces that are suspended between Heaven and Earth. You control Life and Death. During the bullet catch, Wu Wang asks that everyone in this theatre lend him their assistance by concentrating on creating a mental-electrical shield surrounding him, strong as steel yet insubstantial as light itself, to prevent the bullet from penetrating his body."

A combination of newfangled electric arc lights and the more traditional limelights and gaslights glared brightly on the stage, making the colours of the painted backdrop and the performers' sumptuous costumes appear even richer. Rhiannon inhaled deeply, wondering whether she ought to take a whiff of the restorative vinaigrette she carried in her reticule. The air in the theatre was overheated and stuffy, redolent of cigar and cigarette smoke as well as viciously competing ladies' perfumes, gentlemen's colognes, and fragrant hair pomades. A big bronze incense burner on the stage added to the mélange of scents with puffs of tuberose-scented smoke that made her nose itch.

The last time she had been to the theatre was during her estrangement from Lina, and while the company had been unobjectionable, the experience had not been entirely pleasant due to the blue funk she had been suffering at the time. Rhiannon closed her eyes for a brief moment in thanksgiving. Thank God they had both come to their senses! She opened her eyes, ignoring the discomfort of perspiration trickling between her breasts — the temperature in the auditorium was stifling enough that three ladies in the Dress Circle had earlier swooned and been carried out to nearby refreshment rooms to be revived — and fixed her gaze on the stage, where the magician made a splendidly exotic sight.

In the Manchu fashion, Wu Wang's glossy black hair had been allowed to grow long from a patch on the crown of his head. This was plaited into a queue that hung down his back to his buttocks; the rest of his head was shaved clean. His plait twitched when he brandished a gun and showed a bullet to the audience, then a blue and white porcelain dish which, he explained through the translator, he would hold in front of his body to catch the death-dealing missile. A volunteer from the audience was called for, answered from the stalls by a stout, white-haired gentleman with a military bearing. The volunteer was brought onto the stage where he was exhorted to examine the bullet to his satisfaction. After some scrutiny, he declared it genuine, and was ushered back to his seat by the lady assistant.

Throughout Wu Wang's act, the orchestra had been playing a whimsical air with an Oriental flavour that reminded Rhiannon of Mssrs. Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *The Mikado*. Now the music turned darker, the violins taking precedence with a shivering vibrato that echoed sympathetically in her body. Rhiannon could feel tension mounting in the auditorium, heightened by the oppressive heat. Apprehension and the weight of her heavy green velvet dress were smothering her. She sat straighter in her seat, trying to swallow around the growing knot in her throat. Her mouth was dry. Her nerves were drawn tight as wires. She dared not look away. Reaching out blindly, seeking reassurance, she clung to Lina's hand.

Wu Wang stood on one side of the stage, holding the porcelain dish at arm's length between his hands, as if the fragile thing could ever make an adequate shield. A masked and robed male assistant was on the other side of the stage, taking ostentatious aim with

the gun that Wu Wang had loaded only seconds before. The orchestra music softened in volume but not intensity, the violins becoming a drone over which the reeds conversed in whispers of sound that rose trembling to a crescendo as the assistant pulled the trigger and—

Bang!

Crack!

There was a puff of white smoke. The porcelain dish shattered. Wu Wang staggered a couple of steps to the left, his slippered feet crunching on china shards.

The music faltered to a confused halt, punctuated by the flat blatting of a horn. Rhiannon screamed, as did many of the other women, the sound mingling with shocked masculine bellows. On the stage, Wu Wang looked puzzled. A crimson stain was rapidly spreading across the yellow brocade. Lifting a hand, he pushed a finger into the ragged, scorched hole in the front of his robe. His finger emerged red and dripping. Another woman screamed; the sound was shrill and sharp enough to hurt the eardrums. It was his lady assistant. She let out another shattering wail when Wu Wang collapsed to his knees.

“I’ve been shot,” Wu Wang said, breaking the shocked silence. “Close the curtain.” He spoke perfect English laced with a Scottish accent. Rhiannon could see a froth of bloody bubbles smeared across his mouth. Horrified, she gripped Lina’s hand more tightly as the curtain was hurriedly drawn across the stage, hiding the tragedy from view. The last glimpse she had of the gruesome spectacle was the lady assistant on the floor beside the fallen conjuror. The woman was crying in loud hysterical gulps, her hands clasped to her painted face.

The audience exploded in a buzz of conversation. Rhiannon heard the people around her speculating loudly. Almost all of them seemed convinced that Wu Wang had been a victim of the curse his assistant had mentioned.

After a long, patience straining moment, a gentleman in evening dress, whom Rhiannon presumed was the theatre manager, emerged onto the stage from the wings. The man was pale, his unhealthy waxen skin drawn tight over the bones of his face.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “please accept my apologies for the unfortunate interruption of Wu Wang’s performance.” He removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it across his sweaty brow. The curtain behind him billowed, ripples of disturbance flowing along its length. In an otherwise silent auditorium, the muffled sound of a man’s curse from backstage could be clearly heard. The manager flinched but went on resolutely, “We will be continuing the evening’s entertainment in a few moments, and beg your indulgence for the delay.”

He sketched a brief bow and went back into the wings. Following a cacophonous squawk, the musicians regained their composure as well as some semblance of proper tuning, and the orchestra began playing a sentimental parlour song. The manager’s place in front of the curtain was taken by a blonde young lady who had a bunch of pink roses thrust behind her ear. Her toilette showed signs of haste; there was a smear of lampblack beneath one eye, and the line of bright red pomade on her lower lip was crooked. She smoothed down her white ruffled skirts, smiled, and began to sing in a lilting soprano:

*“Slowly we glided with soft breezes blowing
Bright were the stars in the blue sky above...”*

Rhiannon turned to Lina, scarcely able to credit what she had just witnessed. The magic trick had gone terribly wrong! Was Wu Wang dead or merely wounded? But how could he have survived being shot in the chest? Why had he pretended not to speak English? A slew of questions threatening to flow out of her mouth in an uncontrolled gush, Rhiannon forced herself to pause. Lina’s handsome countenance bore such a fierce scowl, her dark brows nearly met over the bridge of her nose.

“What is it?” Rhiannon asked, concerned.

“I believe that some wickedness is afoot,” Lina muttered. She rose from her seat. “In fact, I am sure of it. Come, my dear. We must act at once before vital evidence is lost.”

“What is it?” Rhiannon repeated, although she rose and followed Lina’s tall form down the aisle. Gooseflesh rose on her arms, along with a bolt of freezing cold that lanced down her spine and caused her to shudder despite the auditorium’s heat. She could not get the image of Wu Wang’s bewildered expression out of her mind. Ignoring Rhiannon’s question, Lina marched to the metal pass-door almost hidden at the right side of the stage and slipped through it. Rhiannon stayed on her partner’s heels, unwilling to be left behind.

The backstage was a claustrophobic warren of tiny rooms, corridors, and oddly crowded spaces crammed with equipment, canvas sceneries, props, racks bristling with costumes, and other theatrical paraphernalia. Stacked cages of monkeys, small dogs, and budgerigars howled, barked, and shrieked. The newfangled electric lights had not been installed here; instead, hissing gas jet sconces on the flaking, green-painted walls provided light and added to the unrelenting, stifling heat. The contrast between the elegant front of the theatre and the chaotic, shambling backstage could not have been more pronounced.

Rhiannon brushed past a woman in flesh-coloured tights and a scandalously short skirt softening what smelled like tallow in an iron dish hooked over a gaslight’s flame. Rhiannon blinked. Was the woman about to fry up a late dinner or a fantastically early breakfast? But a table held small pots of dry pigments — zinc white, yellow ochre, and vermilion were among those she recognized — as well as mixing bowls. It seemed the woman was blending her own greasepaint. Lina did that at home every so often, sitting in the study with pots and jars and other supplies, a little Bunsen lamp sizzling at her elbow while she created cosmetics for her extensive disguise kit.

Lina moved with such confidence that no one questioned her at first, not even the liveried theatre assistants who were clustered together in groups, smoking cigarettes and chatting. Rhiannon recognized some of the performers in various states of dress and undress, including Miss Geraldine “Gerry” Burgoyne, a male impersonator who stood in the doorway of her dressing room looking very cool in shirtsleeves and trousers. A thin towel was looped around the woman’s neck, and a cheroot smouldered in the corner of her mouth. Geraldine’s gaze flickered over Lina briefly, lingering on Rhiannon as she walked past. Rhiannon flushed under that disconcertingly direct regard.

They penetrated deeper into the backstage area, towards the dressing rooms reserved for the principals. Rhiannon became conscious of glances being thrown her way, assessing her expensive gown, her emerald ear-bobs, the gold and opal Eros brooch, inherited from her late aunt, Lilybet Beaton and worn as a pendant on a collar of pearls around her neck. Lina’s own gown of violet velvet trimmed in black marten fur and her extravagant ruby parure were subjected to equal scrutiny. She was also aware of an undercurrent of fear, evidenced by the performers’ white, shocked faces, and the whispers on the edge of her hearing that repeated the word “cursed”.

Finally, as she and Lina were approaching the thickest knot of people hovering near an open door, the theatre manager stopped them with a polite bow.

“Madam,” he said to Lina, “pray excuse my insistence that you remain in the auditorium...for your safety’s sake, you understand. It is not prudent for you to—”

Lina interrupted him by handing the gentleman her calling card, taken from the beaded reticule hanging on her wrist. The diamond buckle clipped to the dark coils of her hair struck sparks from the light. It was ornamented with a curl of ostrich feathers dyed violet to match her gown. The feathers shivered with each small movement of her head.

"I presume you are the manager of this establishment, are you not?" she asked in her haughtiest tone.

The jewellery, the obvious costliness of Lina's gown, the title on the calling card, her regal bearing, and her cut-glass Oxford accent made the manager's spine straighten to its utmost rigidity. Rhiannon could almost read the man's mind, his thoughts were so transparently reflected on his face. Lina was Quality — of that fact, there was not the slightest shred of doubt. Rhiannon understood his dilemma. A person in his position could not afford to give offence to the leisured class, but on the other hand, he could not condone a vulgar curiosity seeker, no matter how privileged she might be.

"I am the Athenaeum's manager, Lady St. Claire," he replied, but he did not move from his position, continuing to block the narrow corridor.

"Have you summoned the police? Scotland Yard?" was Lina's next question.

He frowned. "Milady, that truly isn't necessary—"

She interrupted him again. "I assure you, Mr..." Her voice trailed off and she raised an inquiring eyebrow.

He answered without hesitation, "Algernon DeLille, milady. And I—"

"Mr. DeLille," Lina said, cutting him off a third time, "I assure you that the police must be called upon to begin an investigation without further delay."

Rhiannon wondered why Lina was so insistent. Surely Wu Wang's injury had been sustained accidentally! No other explanation seemed possible.

DeLille evidently thought so, too, for he wasted no time in objecting, "Wu Wang is dead, milady, in my opinion — and that of the theatre doctor, it must be stated — a most unfortunate misadventure whose blame rests entirely at the victim's door." His voice lowered. "Perhaps Wu Wang disturbed the spirits and has suffered for it. The trick is cursed, you know."

Lina's confidence remained unruffled. "Wu Wang's shooting was not the result of a curse, nor was it an accident," she declared.

The bald-faced pronouncement left DeLille gaping, but he soon rallied. "How can you be sure? I beg your pardon, but I should think a lady would concern herself more with what is proper in her sphere, rather than make rash statements—"

"I know how the trick is done, Mr. DeLille," Lina went on impatiently.

"What of it?" the man almost snapped. His hands were trembling slightly. Rhiannon realized that DeLille's temper was beginning to fray, and no wonder. Still, he collected himself and added, "I apologize, milady. As you can well imagine, the distressing event this evening has left none of us quite ourselves."

Waving away his apology with her programme, as if it was a pesky fly, Lina asked, "Will you summon the police, or shall I?"

The lines around his mouth deepened, but he remained polite. "I will not, milady, without sufficient reason to do so."

"Sufficient reason?" Lina's emerald-green gaze glittered.

Rhiannon's heart suddenly thumped against her ribcage, leaving her more breathless than before. She recognized Lina's expression, the way her features sharpened with keen interest, and knew very well what that look boded. The only female consulting detective in London — almost certainly the Continent, and possibly the world, as well — was on the scent of a crime. Rhiannon began to doubt her certainty that Wu Wang's death was an accident. Lina was rarely wrong about such matters.

"My good fellow," Lina continued coolly, "I may state with absolute certainty that if the gentleman was, indeed, shot and killed by a bullet during the performance of 'The Jade Dragon's Execution', as seems to be the case, then this was..." She paused for several nerve-wracking seconds. (*No doubt for dramatic effect*, Rhiannon thought wryly,

as Lina never could resist playing to an audience.) At last, she continued, “An act of wilful, deliberate murder.”

What little colour he had retained now drained from his face until DeLille seemed as white as his celluloid collar.

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