

DEMONS, WELL-SEASONED

 BOOK THREE 

THE SECRET SPICE CAFÉ

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“Demons are like obedient dogs; they come when they are called.”

— *Remy de Gourmont*

“If you see Rose Mary, tell her I'm coming home to stay
Tell her I'm tired of travelin', I just can't go on this way...”

~ *Fats Domino lyrics*

Prologue

September 26, 1934, Wednesday afternoon, Glasgow, Scotland

The rain was beastly. It blackened the sky. Like a serpent, it sprang from the pavements, coiled around potholes, and slithered along the road's perimeters. But when it hit the car windows, it fell like tears, the tears of the inconsolable, the tears the Queen hid in her heart.

They were almost there. The most arduous part of the journey, the five-hour train ride from Ballater, was over. They were only six miles from Clydebank, thereabouts, and that was a mercy.

She was exhausted already, and apprehensive about speaking in public for the first time. Not to a small gathering, moreover. She'd been told to expect an audience of two hundred thousand at least. That number had her clenching her gloved hand in her lap. Nerves and worry crawled and bumped around inside her in the same way the black Daimler limousine crawled and bumped over the drenched cobblestones and grooved steel tram tracks of Glasgow Road.

Her role was to maintain an air of serenity and confidence, so she kept her jitters to herself. It would be unthinkable to her to voice them aloud, which was just as well, as no one else shared her mood.

Certainly not today. Despite the wet gloom saturating the shoes and clothing of the endless thread of men, women, and children who stood four and five deep on both sides of the streets, their expressions were jubilant as they waved to the Royal motorcade going by. And George, sitting beside her, waved back proudly. As he should do. As he deserved to do.

He'd saved them all.

Granted, some of it was self-serving. The time after the war had been a turning point for their family. Had they ignored the hardships that had plagued the working classes, remained detached from the political unrest, the monarchy might not have survived. That possibility had factored into their actions, undoubtedly. Yet how many would be able to feed their children now, thanks to their King's tireless lobbying on behalf of the Welsh coal miners, the mill hands in Manchester, the shipbuilders in Newcastle, Liverpool, and Glasgow? His persistent, persuasive influence on legislators had compelled them to find a

solution, to find the money—more than three and a half million pounds—for the completion of ‘Hull No. 534.’

Through the rivulets on the glass, she surveyed the brick tenement buildings smudged black with soot. Although the whole route had been swept of debris in anticipation of their arrival, there was still a grimy feel to the area, a pall hanging in the surrounding atmosphere that had nothing to do with the inclement weather. The only businesses along the road that didn’t appear deteriorated were the public houses. There was one on every street, and even this early in the afternoon, they were packed with men. Mary could see them—faces pressed against the façade windows, or huddled outside under the dripping awnings—hoisting their pints in tribute as her procession drove past.

Glasgow lived or died on the dockyards. Its populace had suffered tremendous loss during the Depression, and by 1930, work was stalled on the ship which was to be Britain’s pride. Many were reduced to the breadline. And so, her husband did something as King rather unprecedented by previous generations of British Royalty: he stepped in. He’d used all the sway they held with politicians, unions, and bankers to get as many back to work as possible. After much lobbying, and a merger between the two giants, Cunard and White Star, as well as a massive loan, the shipbuilders were back at work, along with carpenters, tile and marble setters, fabric makers, mural artists and other craftsmen. The number employed in the construction, design, and outfitting of such a grand ocean liner totaled in the thousands, all of whom were ecstatic with their King George and Queen Mary, who’d rescued them from destitution.

Edward had taken part too. At least in this, he’d done his duty. In so many other ways, he shirked his responsibilities, and she and George were deeply disappointed in their eldest son.

‘David’—as his family called him—preferred to flit about, attending lavish balls and garden parties, carrying on with women, and in general exhibiting behavior unbecoming to a Prince. It had gotten so that he and his father were barely speaking.

And it hurt her. After they’d lost little Johnnie, her other children had become even that much more precious to her. Although maternal love was another emotion she did not find easy to communicate.

All she knew was that she didn't want more distance, didn't want this estrangement, not after all they'd endured together.

Now, David had taken up with that woman. That divorcée. An American, no less. Imagine it—imagine him thinking he could choose such a person. Didn't he understand who he was and what was required of him?

Why, she herself had been engaged to George's brother, Albert. Yet only six weeks later, Albert died of influenza. She'd been devastated, of course. Nevertheless, Albert's mother, Queen Victoria, had chosen her—Mary. It was Mary's responsibility—when the time came—to be Queen Consort, and it mattered not which of Victoria's sons ascended to the throne. A year after Albert's death, his younger brother proposed, and Mary accepted. There was no question that she would. George was to be King, and Mary's allegiance was to the crown, first and foremost.

Fortunately, she and George were well-suited. She glanced over at her husband with fondness as he smiled and waved to the multitude.

He was such a good king.

At the outbreak of the Great War, George carried out five visits to the national troops in Flanders, endeavoring to boost morale. During one of these, he was thrown from his horse. His pelvis was fractured, and he never fully recovered his health.

The smoking didn't help. Occasionally, when they were alone in their private quarters, she might sneak a cigarette or two herself. But in the close confines of the car, her nose wrinkled at the strong odor of tobacco. His habit was incessant, and it was killing him. They both knew it. The thought of where that would lead was only one more thing that made her sad.

It pained her to consider that David might not be a good replacement. He was being stubborn—intentionally so—in thumbing his nose at convention. He flaunted Mrs. Simpson, escorting her everywhere, buying her a vulgar amount of clothing and jewels. He was even pressuring them to allow her to attend their Silver Jubilee.

She would never permit that. Never. The very idea made her exhale a long, restless breath.

At the sound, the King turned his head in surprise. “Something amiss, May?”

‘May’ was the nickname only those closest to her used, and when George said it, it was always said with warmth. His affection for her was genuine, and that assuaged her. At least with him, she could believe she’d done things right. There was no censure coming from him, the kind of condemnation she felt coming from David every time he looked at her.

“Not at all,” she hastened to reassure. “I was just—”

Her words were cut off by one of George’s coughing fits. He reached for his handkerchief, his body jerking forcefully, and she leaned away to give him room. She didn’t dare touch him, not even to pat his back. He hated being coddled. Hence, though it troubled her to do so, she pretended to ignore his ill health, just as he did.

All of it was worrisome—her husband’s ailments, her son’s defiance, and what might happen to the Empire as a result. There were times, she could admit only to herself, when she grew impatient with it all, when she wished she could just go off somewhere on her own, someplace where there were no obligations to meet, no ceremonies to attend, and no decorum to be mustered.

But this was her life, the life for which she’d been chosen. She was good at it—excellent, in fact. She’d grown accustomed to putting her position as Queen before everything else. It would be impossible to change at this stage. Overall, it wasn’t so bad. She glanced at the throng outside again. Indeed, it could be far worse.

Her melancholy did not lessen.

The King’s flare-up eased just as they reached their destination. Simultaneously they craned their necks to read the sign hanging over the entranceway: *John Brown and Company, Limited. Engineering and Shipbuilding Works.*

They allowed themselves an exchange of brief, congratulatory smiles. For the time being, she pushed her concerns aside. Today their ship would get a name, a name she hugged to herself.

When their car crossed the gates, she was knocked for six by the view before them. Sprawled for miles were giant derricks and cantilever cranes, and piles of wooden planks that stood taller and wider

than ten men. There were enormous excavators and multi-wheeled transporters, dump trucks and concrete mixers, steel molds, air compressors, dredging apparatus, welding and sandblasting equipment, and so much more she couldn't possibly name. She hadn't thought about the meticulous engineering it took to build such colossal ships. The abundance of materials, the immensity of it all, awed her.

The rain pelted on as the driver slowed to a stop. Lining each side of the road, standing at attention, was the Clydebank Branch of the British Legion. A military band set up under a covered dais also stood, their musical instruments at the ready. Several lords, ladies, and other notables waited patiently in the damp to welcome the King and Queen.

The driver came around to open their door, and as soon as Mary stepped out, she was hit by the stench of the shipyard. It reeked even more than George's tobacco. The combination of chemicals used in welding, the anti-fouling paints with which the ship hulls were treated, and the sulfur wafting from the contaminated river made for an unpleasant perfume, to say the least. She wondered what it was like for the men who worked in this environment daily, although not by a glimmer did her discomfort show.

They were greeted straight away by Sir Percy Bates, who was the Chairman of Cunard White Star, and Sir Thomas Bell, the managing Director of John Brown and Company. Also Lady Bates, who curtsied and presented the Queen with a bouquet of lilies and purple asters.

The flower selections were by no means an accident. Purple was the hue that symbolized royalty, and the asters combined with the deep pink lilies complemented the Queen's outfit to perfection. For this occasion, to set off the King's naval uniform, Mary chose a coat of cobalt blue with a fox collar dyed to match. Her hat was a toque the shade of sapphires, and its velvet brim was anchored with diamonds that looked smart with her pearl-and-diamond earrings. Her ensemble was being admired by the ladies on the platform. She dipped her nose into the bouquet and let them look. The breezy fragrance of the blooms was a welcome respite from the fetid air, and her thanks were more heartfelt than Lady Bates might have thought.

The tendering of the flowers was Their Majesties' prearranged cue to proceed toward the lift which would take them up to the launch platform. As they did so, the band struck up 'Rule Britannia.'

When they reached the top, and walked across the enclosed stage to greet the spectators waiting below in the downpour, they were met by thousands and thousands of black umbrellas that stretched far and wide along the shoreline where the great ship stood waiting. They swelled in one great, dark wave when the crowd holding them let out a roaring cheer as their King and Queen came into view. Across the way, hundreds more workmen waved their caps in salute, clapping and whistling as they stood high upon the deck of Hull Number 534.

Everyone was hungry to see the ocean liner that was their salvation be christened and launched when the tide reached full, at precisely ten minutes past three that afternoon. They couldn't wait to learn the name she was to be given, a name that had been kept a closely-guarded secret. And, as it was typically the King who spoke in public or on the radio, they were also looking forward to hearing the voice of their Queen for the first time.

The King would address everyone first. The crowd hushed as he stood before the microphone. Though he read from sheets of paper, his words rang with emotion:

“...Today we come to the happy task of sending on her way the stateliest ship now in being...”

His statement wasn't hyperbole. The ship of which he spoke was one of the largest and most luxurious ever constructed at that point in time, hence the astronomic cost. It boasted two dozen boilers and four sets of turbines, generating one hundred and sixty thousand horsepower. It fueled four propellers that turned at a rate of two hundred revolutions per minute. Its technological innovations and speed were unparalleled for the day. And it would have rusted into oblivion, nothing more than a lost dream to those who had designed her.

Yet, as happy as they were, those there to celebrate that day couldn't know what a legend their sovereign craft was destined to be. Only five weeks earlier, Hitler had named himself Leader of Germany. He would come to despise this particular ship, to do everything he could to see her destroyed. And she would defeat him at every turn.

King George would be gone before that day came. He'd never know by what magnitude his mediation would affect world history, or that his wife—his dear Mary—would live to see the ship he'd rescued help vanquish a tyrant.

The King continued, "During those years when work upon her was suspended, we grieved for what the suspension meant to thousands of our people. Now we rejoice that with the help of my government it has been possible to lift that cloud and complete this ship. It has been the nation's will that she should be completed, and today we can send her forth, no longer a number on the books, but a ship with a name, in the world, alive with beauty, energy, and strength."

He moved aside, and then it was Mary's turn, the moment for which everyone in the Empire had waited, the moment they hoped would usher in a new era of prosperity. She stepped forward and, with a sterling silver filigree scissor designed just for the occasion, severed a cord that broke a bottle of Australian wine across the side of the hull. A photographer from the press was soaked in the process, a mishap that had onlookers grinning.

But all went silent, holding in their collective breaths, as Her Majesty pressed the launching button that would start the liner on its way into the river.

"I am happy," she said into the microphone, "to name this ship the *Queen Mary*—"

The noise from the crowd at the reveal nearly drowned out the rest of the Queen's words—

"I wish success to her and to all who sail in her."

Every eye shifted to the bank. The newly-named *Queen Mary* moved with a sloshing sound, her long hull soared down the slipway, as though she too, had been longing for this day. Bulky lengths of chain, thicker than the laborers' biceps, clanked and scraped as they unfurled, holding her, steadying her, helping to break the momentum of her propulsion into the water. The cheers were thunderous when the great ship freed herself from the confines of the ramp. Her bow hit the river last, raising a wave which inundated everyone on the southern shore, another soaking that brought forth laughter.

The *Queen* was afloat in the Clyde.

And as Mary watched the vessel glide along the water, glistening with raindrops and sea spray, she thought of what her husband had said to describe it, and once more was swamped with sorrow.

It wasn't her habit to dream of things that could never be, nor to make wishes that could never come true. Yet in that singular instant, she knew she would never be as 'alive with beauty, energy, and strength.' Not in the same way her namesake would. She'd never have the adventures her ship would have, never travel across oceans and continents at will, like those who would sail aboard, going somewhere, doing something with their lives. She was bound to her nation until death relieved her of her post. She had made a promise and she would keep it.

Even so, she whispered a prayer right then—too softly for anyone else to hear—that when she left this world, somehow, some way, a small piece of her soul might attach itself forever to the magnificent ocean liner that bore her name.



At the exact time Queen Mary of Teck christened her ship—not one second later or earlier—a child was born more than four thousand miles away, just north of the French Quarter in New Orleans, in a grand colonial country home on Bayou St. John.

Here the time was six hours earlier than it was in Clydebank, just ten past nine in the morning. The weather was warm, the humidity thick enough to slice with a Cajun skinning knife. The scents of the marshland were peppery and ripe, and the water wasn't tainted by shipyard waste. The bayou thrummed with life, slow-moving though it was. The fish and crustaceans swam in languid circles under the surface, making themselves an easy mark for the water snakes and alligators that lay in wait, hidden in the murkiness of the duckweed and hyacinths. The river turtles were a nuisance only to the insects, as they snacked solely on algae, mayflies, beetle larvae and the like. Along the marsh's edge, in the surrounding foliage of cypress and tupelo trees, muskrats, raccoons, nutria, and other marine mammals scuttled and hid, trying to keep themselves from ending up a bigger creature's breakfast, while at the same time searching for a meal of their own.

On the bank of the water, the white-columned manor was built in a style that kept hot summers in mind; the ground floor was enclosed with pastel walls of soft brick. The hipped roof was double-pitched and the *brique-entre-poteaux* design offered structural support, as well as insulation. The doors were positioned across from one another to keep cool air moving, and extended galleries on both the bottom and top levels of the house kept the sun off the walls and offered outdoor breezeways. An opulent Venetian-style fountain bubbled in the center of the circular drive, birds chirping happily in its dancing spray. Lush gardens boasted sultry-scented magnolias, cerulean-blue irises, camellias as plump and pink as a young woman's lips, and climbing white roses as old as the bayou itself.

The house was fitted with shutters to provide relief from the Louisiana sun, and in the bedroom where the baby had been born, they were shut tight to keep out lizards and prying eyes. But a determined mosquito could always slip in through the slats. That morning, they hovered over the laboring woman's bed and crooned for blood.

They got it. The evidence of a birth gone wrong stained the bed linens red and spattered the elegant Persian carpet. It soaked the towels the midwife had tried to stave it with, covered her apron, smeared across her palms, and made dark crescents under her fingernails. Its tangy, metallic essence infused the air, clashing with the aroma of spiced catfish and eggs the cook had been frying up before the pains started. They came too early and too fast, as though Èrzulie Dantòr had made it happen, had wanted the child to arrive that day. And when the infant girl was brought forth, like so much else in the room, she was marked. But not with the blood of life.

Her mother knew two things: she wouldn't live to see her baby's second day on this earth, and the white man who thought he was the baby's father wouldn't want her.

The young mother's name was Philomène. She was beautiful and she was Creole and she was the mistress of the man who believed her to be carrying his child. After she was gone, there would no one to protect the little one from his wickedness.

The midwife, Celeste, stood at the end of the birthing bed, quaking with grief and nausea as she watched Philomène cradle her whimpering newborn in tremulous arms. Celeste was young too. She'd

tried everything she knew, but her experience was limited, and what they'd done had been done in secret and in haste. When it came down to it, the only choice she had was to save the mother or save the baby. It could not be both. Philomène had wanted her child—a child born of true love—to live.

She gulped back tears. “What can I do, Philomène? Please tell me what to do.”

Philomène struggled to form words through lips gone dry and chapped. This would be her only chance to speak to her little girl.

“You’re wonderful,” she told her. Though weak and short of breath, she made a valiant effort to keep her voice soothing, filled with love, just on the infinitesimal chance her daughter might remember it one day. “Don’t believe...anybody who tells you different. I love you. And your Daddy...your real Daddy...he loved you too.”

She tried to swallow over her parched throat, raised her eyes to the midwife, and Celeste could see acceptance in them through the pain. “Take her to the mambo, and tell her...tell her everything. The mambo will know what to do. Go now, Celeste.”

Celeste squeezed her eyes shut. “Philomène. I can’t leave you.”

“There’s nothing you can do for me. You should both be gone. Please. Before he gets back.”

Her arms felt too empty the moment Celeste took her daughter from her. Inside, she felt too hollow, too light. She began to shiver as the sensation of warmth pulsing from her womb and onto her thighs grew slower, dimmer. As she felt the pain fading, felt herself floating, one detail she’d forgotten caught.

“Wait.” Her words were slurred now, almost inaudible in her final plea. “Rosemary. Tie some around her neck...keep the bad spirits away.”

When Philomène went silent, Celeste burst into tears. She beheld the infant in her arms and knew that this child—this little orphan girl who’d been baptized in blood—would need more than an herb to protect her from harm.