

Death in Velvet

Rose Donovan

Chapter 1

"May I help you, miss?"

I ignored the question, running my finger against the silky tangerine suit. Though sceptical of the skirt's stitchwork, I admired its design. For good reason, too. I had already seen this copied suit elsewhere.

The rail-thin shopkeeper glared, her severe brown shingle swinging across her pale cheeks. Her pursed lips hid the angry carmine slash lining her mouth.

"Thank you," I sighed dreamily, ignoring the tinge of sarcasm in the shopkeeper's voice. "It's a smashing suit, but how much is it?"

Holding up her hands, the shopkeeper swept between me and the tangerine suit, defending it against possible defacement. "Perhaps you'd prefer to peruse the aisles of Woolworths for...something more suitable." She raked her eyes over my serviceable red frock, halting only at my shabby shoes for additional scrutiny.

I shook my head, fighting an urge to wipe her lipstick from her smug face. "I don't wish to purchase the suit, but I am curious about its provenance."

"Provenance?"

"Yes, as in who designed it?"

She sniffed. "All our designs are Madame Mathilde Lafitte's creations. From Paris, of course." She fluttered her arm in a semicircle around the shop, pointing to burgundy, sapphire, and emerald bias-cut silk gowns lining one wall whilst velvet gowns with daring V-cuts hung on the other.

"Well, I'm frightfully sorry, but that's simply impossible." My shoulders scrunched up in rising anger.

"Are you a designer, then?"

Her query wasn't a question at all. It was a challenge.

"No, but my best friend is, and I'm her seamstress. And I can detect a copy when I see it." I waved the sleeve of the tangerine suit at her. "The colour, cut, and design are all the same."

"Copy?" She arched her over-plucked eyebrows. "I know who you must be. You're one of those tawdry little seamstresses from House of Whats-it. You're trying for a bit of extortion, aren't you?"

I countered by lifting my own less-than-perfectly thin eyebrows. "Extortion?" My face must have been scarlet by now – it certainly felt hotter than Hades. "You're just a toffee-nosed cow, or even worse, someone wanting to join the ranks of toffee-nosed

cows. I wouldn't ever stoop so low as to take your money or your poorly plagiarised designs."

A few heads popped out from behind the curtains at the rear of the shop, gasping and giggling.

Grabbing my arm, the woman marched me towards the door. Her cloying sandalwood perfume and firm grip made me struggle, but the shopkeeper had apparently maintained her muscles by regularly accosting her customers. To make matters worse, I had an audience now, even if they were only the silly shop assistants peeking through a clothing rack.

"Let me go!" I jerked my arm. "I'll take this story to the newspapers. They'll be delighted to uncover a fashion scandal and extortion. Extortion of your clientele at these utterly ridiculous prices for copied frocks. And shoddy frocks at that. The stitching is second rate. No, I'm wrong – more like fifth rate."

The shopkeeper let my arm drop, whilst her mouth did the same. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but people had begun to gather outside the shop. The front bow window made the shop into a fishbowl, so it was scarcely surprising that pedestrians should notice any drama unfolding inside.

Now with an audience both inside and outside, I marched down the stone flag steps, only missing one along the way.

A woman with gooseberry eyes goggled, whilst a man leaned against a lamppost, pretending he was reading a newspaper. Over my shoulder, I saw the shopkeeper fling her head back and stalk off, right past her snickering minions.

Although my mother would undoubtedly have disapproved, I stuck out my tongue at the shop window.

Then I strode into the meandering West End crowd, feeling a mixture of triumph and foreboding.

I turned the corner of Ludgate Circus and yanked down the brim of my green felt hat, turning it from a fashion statement into a rather dated cloche. But gusts of wind would not defeat me, and neither would that dreadful shopkeeper. Even after walking two miles from Grosvenor Street, my mind played the horrid scene in a perpetual loop. Perhaps I had imagined the gowns were imitations. Perhaps the shopkeeper was right to show me the door?

I wrinkled my nose at the fluffy Pomeranian scuttling past me, and she responded

with a short yap, bounding after her light-footed elderly owner.

“Fina!”

I lifted my eyes and puffed on my fringe. Ruby Dove dashed up to me, as lively as the Pomeranian. She’d swept up her raven hair under a jaunty emerald beret, and not a strand was out of place. The circles under her eyes, a likely product of end-of-term late nights at Oxford, had vanished since I’d last seen her, and her cheeks glowed, complementing her favourite opal pinprick earrings and raspberry lipstick.

“It’s been only a month, but it seems like a year.” I squeezed her arm. “You look absolutely marvellous. What makeup are you wearing, and where can I purchase it?”

Ruby giggled. “You know they don’t carry makeup for my skin-tone. No, I owe my dewy complexion to rest and relaxation at my auntie’s, mixed with a dash of good news.”

At the words ‘good news’, I gulped. With dawning sense of dread, I realised I had to tell her about my troubling discovery in that blasted shop. After all, Ruby’s dress designs were fast becoming popular, and I was her seamstress, after all. But my news could wait, surely. Perhaps we’d discuss it after tea and a nibble...

“Tell me all about it over tea.” I pointed to the bustling Lyon’s Corner House where we had agreed to meet.

Harried waitresses held their trays high above their heads as customers thronged around them, chattering and clinking their spoons against their teacups. I inhaled the luscious smell of bread, sticky buns, and tea.

“There’s a table in the corner.” Ruby marched through the crowd of squawking children and a feisty barking terrier. A small child patted the dog, shrieked, and then wobbled backwards, right into my knee. The little blighter grabbed my leg and wiped her pastry-covered mouth on my frock, gleefully seeking my approval as she did so.

“Lizzie, darling, now don’t be afraid of the darling doggie,” admonished a sturdy woman, clearly little Lizzie Borden’s mother. I held my breath, waiting for an apology.

The woman just chewed her currant-bun in a slow, bovine manner. “I say —” Before I could finish, Ruby tugged me away. “It’s not worth it, Feens,” she hissed. “Besides, I have something that will remove the stain from your frock.”

Reluctantly, I followed Ruby to the corner table and plopped down. Despite myself, I grinned.

“What’s so funny?” she asked. “You looked like you were about to clobber that frightful child with your bag.”

“Oh, nothing. I was just remembering how many times you’ve had to remove various stains from my clothing. I’d be a positive walking nightmare without you. And not only because of your smashing laundering abilities.”

“What are you having, dearie?” The welcome wheeze of a waitress interrupted my reverie.

Her crisp, starched collar and apron strings were tighter than a whalebone corset. But her soft, wrinkled smile showed she hadn’t let the uniform – or the lunchtime bustle – drain away her good humour.

Ruby removed the grey jacket of her favourite suit and carefully arranged it on the back of her chair. “I’ll have tea and a biscuit.”

“Tea and a biscuit,” the waitress parroted.

I stared at Ruby. Was she on a slimming regime? Even when she’d claimed she’d gained a stone once over Christmas, I never detected any real change. Other than a happier Ruby.

“I’ll have a cream tea. With lashings of cream, please.”

“Right you are. Tea and a biscuit and a cream tea.”

“With lashings of cream, please,” I repeated.

The waitress finished scribbling and sailed towards the kitchen as if she were strolling through a sunny, quiet meadow.

“Aren’t you hungry? Are you slimming?” I asked.

“Pish.” Ruby waved a hand. “Slimming regimes are not for me...except that one Christmas. No, I’m far too excited to eat. But do tell me how you’ve been keeping after an entire month!”

Peering out of the window, I let my eyes rest on the blur of jostling bodies outside. I simply couldn’t stomach telling her about what I’d seen at the dress shop. Why spoil our tea and Ruby’s good mood? “I’m too hungry to remember – and I’m certain it’s tiresome compared to your news,” I said.

Ruby slipped her hand into her black clutch and removed a brown envelope. She slid it across the table, tapping it with a perfectly manicured finger.

“Go on. Read it.”

It was a cheque. For £87! Triple that amount would buy a house in London. Or, even more appealing, thousands of Melba chocolate bars. I unfolded the accompanying letter and read it aloud.

Dear Miss Dove:

Thank you for submitting your designs to the House of Lafitte. We've selected two items for inclusion in our new summer-autumn line. Though we are unable to fund travel, we'd be most honoured if you joined us for our private event on April 30th. If you are able to join us, please respond and we will forward the relevant details.

Yours sincerely,

*Yvonne Jourdain
Executive Partner
House of Lafitte*

I looked up from the letter and blinked, unable to take it in. Travel? A private event?
Ruby squeezed my hand. "Don't you see, Feens? We're going to Paris!"

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