

*The*  
BACHELOR  
GIRL'S  
*Guide to*  
MURDER

RACHEL McMILLAN



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## THE BACHELOR GIRL'S GUIDE TO MURDER

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## JEMIMA,

*Your father and I have decided that, after giving you several opportunities to prove you are pursuing a proper course for a lady of your station and background, we can no longer financially support your endeavors.*

*While we applaud your dedication to your job at Spenser's, we think it is high time you settled down. Your father and I have long tired of presenting you with eligible suitors, only to have you dismiss them to follow Merinda Herringford around like a bee to honey. We have long felt, and expressed, that she is not fit company for a lady of your potential.\**

*As we seem to be making no headway in securing you a future worthy of your breeding, we can only keep you in our prayers and hope that soon you will see the error of your ways, return to your upbringing, and recognize that a lady of your not inconsiderable age (honestly, Jemima, four-and-twenty is hardly the age to be gallivanting about Toronto unwed) should be making prudent strides toward securing a husband.*

*Please see the enclosed pamphlet suggesting appropriate activities for young ladies who are, as you should be, in pursuit of a proper husband...*

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\* The word *potential* was always used liberally by Jemima's teachers at the Susanna Moodie School for Promising Young Ladies.

To the Ladies of St. James Parish

Hone your domestic skills, enjoy the company of other young Christian women, and even increase your potential of meeting your future husband.

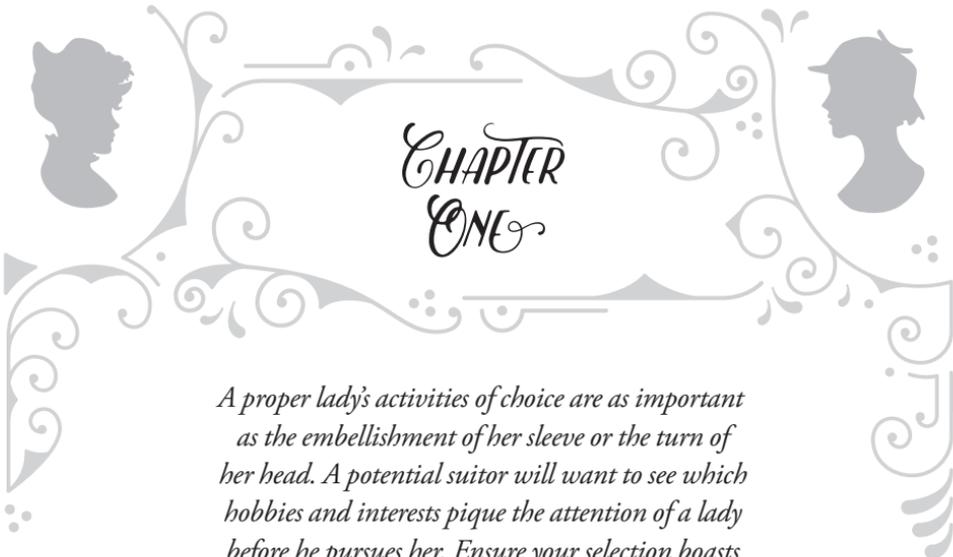
Sunday: After-service box social

Tuesday: Sewing Circle for the benefit of the heathen children of India. Bring your needles and thread.

Wednesday: Visiting the invalids and shut-ins

Thursday: Crokinole

Saturday: Harvest Dance. Please see Hyacinth for raffle tickets.



## CHAPTER ONE

*A proper lady's activities of choice are as important as the embellishment of her sleeve or the turn of her head. A potential suitor will want to see which hobbies and interests pique the attention of a lady before he pursues her. Ensure your selection boasts fine company, creative accomplishment and, in relevant cases, healthy and wholesome competition.*

*Dorothea Fairfax's Handbook to Bachelor Girlhood*

*Toronto, September 1910*

A murder scene is no place for a proper lady.” Merinda Herringford tilted her chin defiantly and stared at Constable Jasper Forth with an icy eye. “Then it’s a good thing I’m not a proper lady.”

Merinda had just declared, rather crassly, that it was “about time for a good murder.” And Jasper, powerless under the stare of her bright cat eyes, had had little say in the matter. She’d trailed so closely behind him as he’d set toward the Elgin Theatre that she’d scuffed the polished heels of his shoes.

Jem Watts swatted the constable playfully on the shoulder. “Yes, Jasper, it’s a good thing she’s no proper lady.”

“I’d get in hot water if they knew I brought the two of you down here.” He swallowed. “What was I thinking?”

“You were thinking it’s about time the police sought out someone as clever as me. And a woman to boot!” Merinda lifted her skirt,

which was already an inch or two higher than respectability and fashion allowed, and stepped to the opposite side of the corpse. “She was strangled.”

“The rope burns would indicate strangulation, yes.”

“But there was no struggle. Look at her arms. Free of bruises.”

The constable had doubtless reached the same conclusion, but he grinned as he watched Merinda. “You’re a smart egg.” He narrowed his eyes. “For a woman.”

Jem peered at the corpse more closely as Merinda flashed a glower at Jasper. She was surprised that the body failed to inspire more horror. The white contours of the young woman’s face, the flames of her bright red hair, the freckles sprinkling her nose and cheeks, the mouth drawn wide, round, and unsuspectingly calm... Why, she might have been sleeping, though her translucent skin and the blue-green veins in her upturned arms said differently.

“I wonder who would do such a horrid thing,” Jem said, muffling her voice with a raised handkerchief. “She can’t be more than seventeen.”

“There’s no smell of decay yet, Jem.” Merinda spoke without moving her gaze from the body. “You can put your kerchief away.”

“Maybe they’re her smelling salts,” said Jasper gently.

“I don’t need smelling salts!” protested Jem.

“What was she doing here, anyway?” Merinda swooped down. “She’s not dressed the part.”

The girl’s homespun dress, apron, and rubber-soled boots were out of place in the foyer of the grand theatre where she had been discovered. True, her red-gold hair seemed a fit for the luminous interior of the theatre, but the rest of her was oddly mismatched.

“Name’s Fiona Byrne. She was from Corktown,” Jasper supplied, “in the employ of Tertius Montague, a member of his house staff.”

“Really?” said Merinda.

“When Jones and I first got here, Montague was identifying the body.”

Merinda’s eyes widened. Tertius Montague, mayor of Toronto,

was known to be a benevolent mogul. His thumbprint brushed half a dozen philanthropic enterprises, from hospitals to affordable housing in St. John's Ward, the poorest part of the city. A regular King Midas. Recently, he had decided to invest in the cultural expansion of Toronto, and the Elgin Theatre—a modern and beautiful space like those in New York and Chicago—was his latest addition.

But he was most familiar to Jem and Merinda as the creator of the Morality Squad, a band of plainclothes detectives who rumbled through the city arresting women suspected of incorrigibility or vagrancy. Lately, an offense as slight as a short hem or loitering after dark\* could merit an arrest.

Montague was using his Morality Squad as a weapon against the immigrant women of Toronto—it was his trump card to move up in the polls for his reelection campaign. He vowed to return the city to “Toronto the Good” of the previous century. Montague was neck-and-neck in the polls with the reformer Horace Milbrook, but he had the backing—and the deep pockets—of Thaddeus Spenser, owner of Toronto's largest department retail chain.

Merinda sniffed. “That Tertius Montague could actually identify or name one of the many scullery maids in his employ is impressive. You're sure he's not the murderer?”

“It's too early to ascertain. He's at Station One for questioning.”

Jem was still gaping at the woman in endless slumber splayed on the red carpet. She had an almost angelic stillness about her. “Surely it's time to move the body to the morgue.”

“Oh, Jem, posh!” said Merinda. “If we removed the body to the morgue, we couldn't investigate the circumstances of the corpse in its surroundings. Search for clues!” Merinda dug into her vest pocket for a small magnifying glass and held it up against the hair of the deceased. It caught a prism of light from the theatre's modern fluorescent lighting scheme. Then she moved it slightly away to a small pile of ash.

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\* For *loitering*, read “waiting past dark at a streetcar stop.”

“Morbid!” sighed Jem, following Merinda’s gaze. “Someone smoking beside a dead body!”

“A left-handed person,” added Merinda, stepping to the right and standing poised, mimicking lighting a cigar and holding it to her lips.

“The mortician will be here in a few minutes, Jem,” Jasper said. “The police have finished their work here.”

“Pish. The police miss everything obvious,” Merinda said. “They probably even think this is the crime scene, when it must be clear to the greatest simpleton that she can’t have been murdered here.”

Jem and Jasper were silent.

“Oh, come,” said Merinda. “What are the odds of her arms falling so neatly aligned with the line of her waist?”

Jasper looked at Merinda brightly. “Yes. Of course. Her arms are equally balanced on either side. No human could naturally fall into that position.”

Merinda nodded. “So she was laid here. But why not hide the body? Conceal the murder? And there—feel her coat.”

“It’s damp,” Jasper said. “I noticed when we were looking for identification.”

“But it’s not raining,” Merinda crouched by the body and held up one of the girl’s ivory hands.

“Maybe she was shoved in clothes just from the laundry,” said Jem tentatively.

“Does she smell like she came from the laundry?” Merinda said. “Look here, Jasper!”

Jasper leaned in. The girl’s fingernails had the slightest coating of dust. Merinda was about to expound on another theory when Jasper said, “Shhh!” and raised his hand.

They froze.

Jasper put a finger to his mouth and pushed them gently from the foyer, through the side of the auditorium, and to the backstage door at Victoria Street. He clicked it shut behind them as loud male voices broke the silence they’d left behind. It sounded like police talk.

“You two scurry,” he said.

Merinda grabbed at Jasper's elbow and pulled tightly. "Please, Jasper, let me back in. I haven't finished investigating."

"No," Jasper said. "It'll be the end of my career if the sergeant finds out you were at the scene at all."

Merinda sighed. "Is Fiona...is the body going to the morgue now for an autopsy?"

"Yes, there will be an autopsy."

"And you'll keep us posted? You'll let us know what the autopsy shows?"

"Merinda, your excitement is indecent," Jem said. "A girl is dead."

"Shush, Jem! There's finally adventure at our fingertips, and I won't let it slip away." Merinda turned to the constable. "Jasper?" she entreated.

"Yes, yes. I'll loop you two in. Now, scurry!"



Ray DeLuca excelled at being at the right place at the wrong time. Today he was following Skip McCoy, the *Hogtown Herald's*\* sometimes photographer and all-around jack-of-all-trades, unaware the impromptu adventure would result in a corpse.

Skip had told him he knew a secret way up to the Winter Garden, the theatre atop the gilded Elgin Theatre, still several weeks away from its public opening. Later that night, the Elgin would be the scene of Montague's mayoral election rally. Everyone, including Montague's wealthy ally, Thaddeus Spenser, would be in attendance. Skip and Ray would kill a few hours, maybe find a diner nearby before staking out the crowd.

"Tertius Montague put some of his own money into the new theatre." Skip jumped up and wrestled with the ladder attached to the

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\* Canada's largest city acquired the moniker *Hogtown* in the previous century, borne of the sprawling stockyards of the Wm. Davies Company, one of the largest meatpackers in the country.

fire escape so it came clanking down with a thud. “Thaddeus Spenser contributed.”

Ray looked left and right. Victoria Street was fairly empty for a sunny Saturday afternoon. He let ruddy-haired Skip get a head start and then pulled himself up after him, holding tightly to the handrails. A few flights and Skip opened the unlocked door.

Inside, Ray took off his bowler and muffed at his matted hair. Skip snaked a lit match along the brick wall until he found the lever and yanked so that the electric lights fizzled and sputtered before they slowly lit. Their footsteps echoed in the cavernous backstage area, still in disarray. The workers must have had the morning off. Above, ropes and pulleys crisscrossed and drooped. In front, a black fire scrim barricaded them.

Ray maneuvered around piles of lumber and tarps to get nearer to Skip. “So you took me back here to see ropes and lanterns?” Ray replaced his hat, reached into his pocket, retrieved his father’s pocket watch, and spun it around his finger.

“No, wait.” Skip approached the fire scrim and Ray watched him peer around it. “All clear!” He motioned Ray over.

Ray followed and they stepped out onto the stage. Whatever lever Skip had pulled not only lit behind the curtain but the entirety of this garden-in-progress. Ray held his hand to his forehead.

It was a fairyland in the making. Even now, when it was just a phantom of soon-to-be-beauty, the leaves winding from the rafters and the painted vines and scalloped flora adorning the pillars and walls presaged its grandeur. Hundreds of painted twigs, birds, and fairy lanterns hung from real beech branches.

“How did you know this was up here?”

“I heard it around,” Skip said vaguely.

“What are you doing here, Ray?” A man’s voice came from the top of the grand staircase, the flights that wound down to the Elgin Theatre.

The voice was familiar to Ray. It was his brother-in-law. “Tony?”

“I asked what you’re doing here.”

"On a story." He threw a look at Skip.

"There's a corpse in the foyer," Tony said. "Pretty freckled girl with red hair almost as bright as the carpet."

Ray's eyes widened and Skip gasped.

"Did you put it there?" Ray asked lightly.

"Very funny."

"Then why are you here?"

Tony's face was in shadow. "Business for Montague."

"Let's go," said Skip. "If there's a girl dead downstairs we don't want to be found here."

Ray wanted to press further to determine what Tony's business was, but he heard footsteps—probably the police—ascending the staircase from below.

Ray and Skip exited the way they'd come in, agreeing on a time to meet later that evening.

Ray made his way to the streetcar stop and hopped on, tossing a coin at the driver, making his way to the back as the winking sunlight spread like an outstretched hand over the wide glass panes. His mind was full of a new story idea—one that McCormick, editor of the *Hogtown Herald*, hadn't even signed off on yet. St. Joseph's Home for Working Men: living conditions subsidized by Tertius Montague and Thaddeus Spenser.

The streetcar rambled on, a zigzag of telephone cables and wires overhead and a spark of wheels against the tracks underneath. To the sides the trenches were gutted, every street dug up, repaved, tracks hammered at a frantic pace, carriages squealing and almost colliding with automobiles.

Ray hopped off north of Elizabeth Street where St. Joseph's interrupted the sloping cottages and slanted houses of the Ward. Inside, light shone murkily through filmy windows and cracks snaked up the moldy wallpaper, exposing water-stained cement underneath.

He was greeted by a woman with strings of greasy gray hair falling over a pasty face. He flashed her a full-on smile and spoke in Italian, playing the part of the workingman. She handed him a ratty blanket

and listed off the rules of the establishment, not seeming to care whether he understood English or not as she walked him to the common bunkroom. She didn't mention the fact that he had no belongings with him. He would learn later, watching men come in and out with nothing but the clothes on their backs, that this was customary.

"You're free to do as you like, but curfew is eleven and you must leave by eight the next morning. Eight, you understand?" She held up eight fingers. "Don't use the stove or the radiator or dry your socks there and never, ever entertain female company. Some of the men try to pass their *sisters* and *cousins* by me"—she turned to look at him pointedly—"but I know better."

He was left to settle in. As this required little more than flopping on his bed and removing his hat, he took the time to explore his surroundings. He peered through the window. The gated courtyard was more prison-like than Ray had anticipated. But prison or not, it was a place for men new to the country to spend a few nights, hoping there wasn't a long list for an empty bed and hoping they could secure a job the next morning to pay for bed and board.

Not long after, men shuffled in after their morning shift. It was a veritable Tower of Babel: All manner of languages sewed a tapestry of Yiddish, Italian, Chinese, and a few Nordic dialects. Ray creased open his journal, scribbling a few thoughts for his upcoming article. But despite all he saw around him, he had trouble focusing on anything other than the corpse at the theatre. Why would anyone murder someone there the same day as Montague's first campaign party—unless that was the reason for the murder in the first place?

Turning down his wrinkled blanket to mark his spot, he grabbed his coat and set out to meet Skip again.



Jem wanted to take the streetcar from the theatre back to the residence she and Merinda shared at King Street, but Merinda was in no

mood for the stifling crowds of the trolley. Assuring Jem that the fresh evening air would do their minds some good, Merinda set a frantic pace, straining ahead, her rapid stride made easier by the shortened length of her skirt.

Too short. The Morality Squad would write her a ticket if she wasn't careful.

For her part, Jem was dressed with decorum and decency and couldn't help but lag behind. In addition, Merinda's figure was far more lithe, with a boyish flatness of angles and lines, whereas Jem's soft, feminine curves filled out daysuits well but were not ideal for racing down to the West End at the speed of streetcars.

Autumn had rustled in with evenings as crisp as russet apples and skies a tangy cerulean blue. But the clear, bright days of September were all but behind them. Currently, showers threatened to burst from the low-hanging clouds, and the prospect of long, gloomy nights broken only by the flickering light of tallow candles stretched before them. The church bells of St. Andrews and St. James mixed with the whip of the wind in an eerie musical contest.

Finally, breathless and blistered, Merinda and Jem ascended the steps to their lodging. Merinda slid the key in the lock and opened the door while wriggling out of her coat. She tossed the coat on the floor, ignoring the glare it inspired from their landlady, Mrs. Malone, and stomped over the Persian rug in the front sitting room, bellowing for her Turkish coffee.

And thus they sat, causing Mrs. Malone to wonder loudly from the kitchen why two girls on the wrong side of twenty were oblivious to Toronto's numerous options for perfecting one's domestic skills and meeting appropriate young men. Especially when said girls were of such good breeding and high pedigree.

Mrs. Malone was not alone in her puzzlement. Jem wondered that too, constantly. Merinda was the most productively useless person she had ever met. Hardly ever gainfully employed, she spent hours in medical study at the university laboratory—despite the fact that

she'd abandoned her plans to practice medicine. And she followed Jasper around like a dog promised a bone whenever there was a whiff of mystery in the air.

They kept their heads above the tide of impropriety—barely—thanks to Merinda's family's fortune and the watchful eye of Mrs. Malone. Jem felt the lack of romantic prospects more acutely. She had exchanged her parent's social circle for Merinda's odd moods, temper, and the air of constant excitement that followed them, especially when in the vicinity of a problem overseen by Jasper Forth. Merinda was so competitive in the company of the opposite sex that men had little choice but to cower. And she was oblivious to the way said police constable looked at her.

Back in university, the pair had been far more interested in the disappearance of a stolen watch or the conveniently circulating answers to a test than the realms of social and cordial respectability. Now they sat on either side of their hearth, another mystery buzzing at their fingertips, reliant on Jem's employment at Spenser's Department Store and Merinda's father's liberal allowance. Adrift on some urban island, marooned from respectable society.

Merinda couldn't have cared less. "Do you really think that Tertius Montague is the murderer? It seems too easy."

But Jem's mind was far away. "Do you ever wonder about security? About the future?" She thought about white picket fences and matching dishes from the Spenser's catalogue.

"Je-mi-ma!" Merinda said. "Do you think Montague is the murderer?"

"I wonder if we should go to one of those church socials," Jem said dreamily. "They have crokinole!"

"Cracker jacks, Jem! Sometimes I wonder if we are even having the same conversation. What about those hemp boys? The out-of-work sailors who work in the pullies? They could have used one of the ropes to strangle the girl."

"Silly sailors! Does it not bother you that my parents just dropped me like a hot poker?" She extracted the letter and pamphlet that had

arrived in the morning's mail and waved them like a flag in front of her companion. "We have nothing to show for this mystery nonsense but a letter from the police congratulating you on a job well done...*for a woman!*"

"My dearest Jemima, do not be concerned about your future security. You know that I will always share whatever I have with you. Anything...from muffins to murder. Speaking of which...*Mrs. Malone! Where is my Turkish coffee?*" A tray and a pot and strainer materialized. "Thank you!" Her eyes lit. "Now, where were we?"

"You were going to find some form of useful employment," Jem said, reaching for a cup, "and we were both going to pursue appropriate feminine activity."

"Oh, absolutely not! We're going to Tertius Montague's election rally, of course. It's been in the papers for weeks—he's giving a speech, and everyone who matters in Toronto is invited, including your esteemed employer, Mr. Thaddeus Spenser. I suppose the police will let poor Montague out of questioning long enough to attend his own fund-raiser. He'll want to use it to clear his name." She jumped up, pacing on the Persian rug. "I'm going to need you to be my outside ears and eyes. I'll go inside, of course. I am much better prepared to mingle with the higher echelons of society."

"You have the worst manners of anyone I have ever met!"

Merinda bounded from the room. "Trousers, vests, and bowlers, Jemima!"