

INTO THE CLOUDS

Marilyn Leach

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Dedication

In memory of my wonderful friend and fellow literature devotee, Suzy Fulgham, whose unflagging support kept me looking forward to hopes realized.
You shall be missed.

Praise

[Marilyn's writing] has a wonderfully authentic feel...Move over Agatha Christie. The twenty-first century has Marilyn Leach." ~ Amanda Cabot

Prologue

The moon reflected a lovely gold off the sea.

"You're just lunar light," the woman chided the large orb. "But I've got the real thing." She ran her thumb over the gold band that now decorated her left ring finger and inhaled the salty sea air. The light played itself across the water and onto the polished mahogany boat deck where she stood.

The past three nights, illumination from the Madeira coastline had been in view when they took the boat out. But tonight they went further out to sea.

She turned her gaze upward. "Which one of you is my fortuitous star?" she asked the silvery glowing dots that danced across the dark expanse of night.

Morgan, her husband of five days, was below board making things ready for another evening toast to their love.

After their refreshing paddle in the ocean, and for her it was no more than that, they would come aboard and go below to a bottle of champagne. Two flutes, each with three fresh strawberries, would host the bubbly chilling in a bucket of ice. A piece of rich chocolate would sit next to her flute, just as it had every night of their honeymoon so far.

"And then," the woman said out loud, "and then, well."

"And then what, Livy, my love?" Morgan's

unmistakable voice sounded nearby. "And just who are you talking to?" He came from behind, embraced her around her waist, and placed a peck upon her cheek.

She turned to face the man who had swept into her heart. "Just when I thought life had no more love in it, you came along."

Morgan smiled. "Why don't you go ahead and jump in, darling."

She removed her voile beach cover-up, which revealed a white bathing suit that hugged her slender, middle-aged body. She stepped down the swim ladder on the boat's edge and then thrust herself into the black depths. The cold water covered her completely. For one quick moment, she felt a sense of fear, an overwhelming awareness of being at the mercy of the ocean. The air in her lungs, along with a few solid kicks, brought her to the surface where she took two large gulps of air. Goose pimples popped on her exposed skin, the coolness of night assaulting her. She wiped the water from her face. "The water's cold tonight," her chattering lips warned her spouse, who still stood at the boat's rail.

"Is it? Yes, I thought perhaps it would be." His voice held little surprise.

"In, then."

Morgan's face was just visible, his handsome features chiseled by moonlight. But there was something suddenly very different; emotionless, drained of any warmth. It made the freezing night ocean feel tepid.

"Liv," he said flatly, "you are a lovely woman. Distinct, steady, yet underneath so very vulnerable, but a lovely woman." He retracted the swim ladder. Then

he turned away from her, as if it were a eulogy to a corpse.

Liv caught her breath as she paddled. "What?" She called after him. "Morgan? Stop teasing and get in." She blinked, closed her eyes, and tipped her head to one side to drain out the water that must be distorting his words. When she reopened her eyes, he was no longer in sight. "Darling?" As the word escaped her lips, she heard the boat's engine start. She tipped her head again, to empty the wet from her other ear, and shook it.

Water at the boat's stern began to swirl. The sound of a motor became an actual roar, as if it were a lion announcing its ascendancy.

"Morgan?" she yelled.

The word was drowned by the noise of the fully revved engine that thrust the luxurious *Island Flower* forward. Like a torpedo shot from its port, the craft flew into the dark.

The wake created by the departure slammed salty wetness into her eyes and mouth. She choked and tried to move from the surge. A sense of panic charged her entire being, an electrical storm. Her mind churned like the displaced waters. *Where's he going? Why's he doing this? Oh, what's happening?*

"I'm in the middle of a dream." She wheezed. The icy wetness kept her cognizant that this was, indeed, happening in real time.

The boat had vanished.

The man who pledged to be faithful forever had just abandoned her in the depths of a black sea with no hope of survival.

Internal turmoil overwhelmed her like the sea in which she now struggled. The more the reality of it

slapped her in the face, the less she was able to maintain herself afloat. "Help," she screamed. Her survival instinct rose above the bitter disbelief. She fought to keep her hands and legs churning, paddling, churning. How long? Five minutes? More?

Her teeth chattered uncontrollably. The salt of her distressed tears now mingled with the briny liquid that held her captive. Her arms flailed as every muscle in her body tensed. The cold bit into her like a feeding shark.

Her stamina sapped by shock, she succumbed to the anguish of emotional destruction and waning body strength. Water laid its cold fingers along the edge of her nostrils.

She reared her head heavenward where one low star shone brighter than the others. "My fortuitous star." Her chin sank. She couldn't feel her legs. She weakly breathed. "He said he loved me," barely eked through her numbed lips as the cloak of darkness embraced her. "He said he loved me."

1

Berdie Elliott could hear it clearly. Despite the beehive-like activity that filled the nave of ancient St. Aidan of the Wood Parish Church, an unmistakable *swoosh* of the video chat's "doorbell" emanated from the computer in the sacristy. "Hugh," Berdie called above the din to her husband, who was vicar of this flock. "It's Nick." Excusing her path through balloon-toting youth, choir members, and strewn banners, she managed her way into the pastoral room.

Depositing herself in the chair at Hugh's desk, where the laptop was opened, she smoothed an errant tress of her dyed, red-brown bob and perused the screen. "How did Hugh say this worked?" Excitement raced through her at the anticipation of seeing and speaking with their son, who was abroad serving as a naval officer. This software almost made it feel as if he was actually in England, in their midst. "I believe I click on this."

The system went down.

"No," Berdie yelled at the computer. She knitted her brows, pulled her tortoiseshell glasses down her nose a bit, and started clicking on whatever presented itself as something clickable. "Silly thing. You appalling, silly thing." Berdie raised her voice. "Nick, love, can you hear me?"

"Berdie?" Hugh was next to her. "Oh, dear," he muttered viewing the empty screen. "We've lost him."

"Well, silly thing." Disappointment and genuine frustration filled her.

"Not a problem, love." Hugh put his hand on her shoulder. "And it's not a silly thing. It's a very handy thing if you know how to operate it properly."

"Yes, well." Berdie sighed.

"Bunch up, then." Hugh gave Berdie's shoulder a little nudge.

She rose from the chair, and Hugh planted himself in it.

"We'll have him back in no time." Hugh's fingers began to dance on the touchpad.

Even now, Berdie felt a light flutter as she watched him work. This handsome man with his silver hair and blue eyes had asked her to marry him nearly thirty years ago, and she had never regretted saying yes. She rested her hand on his capable shoulder. "You need to go through with me how this works, Hugh."

"Again."

"I wasn't paying proper attention the first time. All the preparations for Ascension Sunday took my concentration."

And hadn't they just? Had the specially ordered eco balloons arrived? Were enough ingredients purchased for the lemonade? Had the altar guild finish the banners? Was the village band well-rehearsed?

"Indeed. Well, it's only hours away, now." Hugh spoke as he watched the screen. "Our Ascension Sunday procession will be an uplifting time for our entire community. All the planning and work will have been worth every minute." He made a final tap on the touchpad. "Here we are."

Nothing happened.

Berdie hoped to see something that resembled her

fair-haired Nick with his lovely blue eyes, like his father, and that admirable smile. But there was no Nick in sight.

“He must have left his computer,” Hugh offered in explanation. He took Berdie’s hand. “We’ll try again later.”

Berdie nodded. And she vowed she would pay proper attention to operational procedures. In her former career as an investigative journalist, she was quite technologically savvy. But having followed her husband into the church upon his distinguished retirement from the Royal Navy, she hadn’t the time or opportunity to sharpen her skills. It seemed as you learned to master one program or gadget, another new one came along.

“We’d best re-enter the fray.” Hugh’s tone conveyed a slight disappointment that their son’s call was missed. He ran a finger round his clerical collar and exited the room.

Berdie pondered how precious was the time when they were all under the same roof: she, Hugh, Nick, and Clare. Both children were abroad.

But now, there was another family of sorts. And they were in the adjoining room going about the business of getting all in order for the great Ascension Sunday procession and concert that would take place tomorrow immediately following the morning service.

As Berdie re-entered the nave, she spied Lillie Foxworth, her best friend, who was St. Aidan’s accomplished choirmaster.

“No, like this, Linden.” Lillie directed the somewhat gangly Mr. Linden Davies, who was bent over the sheet music on a music stand.

While the choir chatted, he rubbed his forehead as

if trying to decipher secret code. “Yes, I think I see,” the man said with little confidence. Though not yet thirty years old, his light blond hairline was ebbing to high tide, giving him more and more forehead to rub.

When Saint Matthew Church in Mistcome Green called Lillie for a recommendation to fill their choirmaster position, she proposed Linden Davies, her voice student of the past eight months. He was the only one with any amount of willingness to take on the task.

While slender Lillie tapped a rhythmic finger along the sheet music, her short brunette hair in soft curls, danced with the tempo.

Mr. Davies metrically nodded—in complete counterpoint to Lillie’s pace. Quite a grand leap from student to director. Tomorrow’s fete featured a combined choir that included the little group from St. Matthew. It seemed Linden’s success was inextricably entangled with Lillie’s own. And Lillie was investing herself as if it were a royal performance.

An earsplitting *screech* shot across the nave.

Berdie smacked her hands to her ears and scrunched her nose.

Hugh and Edsel Butz were by the audio system. Edsel twisted knobs on the mobile unit. The second generation owner of Butz and Sons Electrics was proud to be named after his grandfather, an American who served in England during WWII. At last Edsel unplugged something that halted the unholy wail.

Hugh lifted his masculine hand and grinned. “Sorry about that. I shouldn’t wonder if some lovelorn poultry may be racing to our door.”

Ripples of laughter danced across the nave.

There had not been an Ascension procession at St.

Aidan's in fifty years, and her husband wanted everything just right, especially the aging sound system. When Hugh originally suggested reviving the celebration, the parish council thought it a wonderful idea. Without hesitation, they gave themselves to the work of bringing it about.

Cherry Lawler swished by Berdie, pin cushion in hand. "We're just putting the final stitches on the last banner. Come look when you can." She smiled. "It is lovely."

"Yes, indeed, I will." Berdie knew very little about needlework, but as the vicar's wife, she was expected to approve. Although in the two and a half years that Hugh had shepherded this parish, Berdie had learned a great deal about what was expected of her by the small community, there seemed much more to learn.

"A penny for them."

She turned to find Lillie's love interest at her side. "Some might say my thoughts are worth far more than pence." Berdie smiled. "So they let you escape from the morgue, then."

Dr. Loren Meredith, a staff pathologist with Timsley Hospital, cleared his throat. He lifted a corner of his mouth into a diplomatic grin, as his warm brown eyes narrowed. "I see Lillie's told you how unavailable I've been of late."

"Of late?" Berdie questioned.

"Oh, dear. Am I going to get a fair hearing on this?"

Berdie nodded.

"I needn't tell you that Timsley, as modest and relaxed as it is, is burgeoning and frenzied."

"Yes, that's a given." From market town ho-hum to explosive is what the *Kirkwood Gazette* said about

growth in Timsley—the whole area, really.

“And?”

“And our pathology department hasn’t grown with it. I don’t suppose Lillie has told you that due to cuts, we’ve lost two staff members at the lab?”

“Have you?”

“I thought perhaps she hadn’t. I don’t mind telling you I’m dancing faster than a cat on a hot grill.”

“I say. That’s terribly cruel. Cats shouldn’t be anywhere near heat appliances.” The well-dressed woman, here to see the vicar, wrinkled her aging forehead. “I should hope neither of you are involved.”

“What?” Berdie tried to stay cordial. “Oh, my, no. It’s just an expression.” This was exactly how rumors buzzed into life in a small village. “Rest assured, no one is harming cats, are they, Dr. Meredith?”

Loren nodded. “Nothing remotely like that happening here, madam.” His dark, shoulder-length hair, fastened at the nape of his neck, wafted with his movement.

“I should think there are expressions far more suitable that do not involve cats and hot cookware.” She straightened. “One of great wisdom has said, ‘If man and cat were to combine, man would elevate and the cat would descend’.”

The white-haired gentleman with the woman put his hand on her arm. “Come along, my love. I’m sure these kind people have no ill wishes toward felines.” He offered Loren a polite smile. “Please excuse us.” The couple moved in Hugh’s direction.

“That was a bit odd.” Berdie murmured.

“That edged on lunacy,” Loren corrected. “Who are they?”

“No idea.”

"That old fellow would appear to be someone of rank."

"Is he?"

"His tie colors, old school. Stobbworth Hall, if I'm not mistaken?"

The couple cornered Hugh.

"Moneyed, I shouldn't wonder." The doctor ran a finger over his own non-school tie.

"What do you suppose they want with Hugh?"

"A cat blessing?"

Berdie put a hand on her hip and eyed the smiling doctor. "I think there's someone here who awaits your inspiring company."

Loren chuckled. "A tiger stripe?" He laid his gaze squarely on Lillie. "I'm off, then." He moved along to his lovely woman.

Loren was not the only one to observe Lillie. The old school gentleman watched as Loren grasped Lillie's hand and placed a quick peck on her cheek. The fellow lifted an arched brow, frowned, and turned quickly back to the conversation with Hugh.

Curious though she was, Berdie directed her attention to the balloon brigade. "Don't overfill that balloon," she called across the lively church nave to thirteen-year-old Milton Butz.

He haphazardly filled the red swollen sphere with helium gas and placed it on his lips. The barrel-chested teen grinned. "Yes, Mrs. Elliott. Overfill remedied," Milton squeaked in that annoying high-pitched tone that comes from a helium gas inhalation.

Kevin McDermott, his ever-present school chum, howled with laughter, which only goaded Milton into a full rendition of "Rule Britannia."

"That's enough," Ivy Butz, Milton's mom, said.

“Out with the pair of you. Go on now.”

The boys made for the door, the ample Ivy behind them.

Martha Butz, Milton’s twin, tied a string to a full balloon. “I apologize for my brother,” she said in a rather aggravated tone. “He’s such a child.”

Berdie smiled, stepped to the helium gas tank, and took up a balloon.

“Mrs. Elliott, there’s someone wants to see you,” Ivy trumpeted from the door where the boys had just exited.

Of course, someone wanted to see her. How many times in a day didn’t someone in a small English village want to see the vicar’s wife? How many times in the course of parish life did someone come knocking at an inopportune time? Berdie worked at knotting the end of the red, biodegradable balloon she had just filled. “Who is it?” she called against the laughter of several church youths who tied ribbons to the festive balloons.

Ivy shrugged her shoulders.

“Tell them to come back after the Ascension Fete,” Berdie directed.

Ivy nodded and ducked out the door.

Berdie passed her balloon to Martha, placed another empty balloon over the nozzle, and turned the handle that instantly shaped the red droop into a vibrant orb.

Then, Ivy backed into the church from the door and nearly stumbled.

A wiry young woman with ginger hair burst in. It appeared that whomever this woman was who had asked to see Berdie would not be denied. “Mrs. Berdie Elliott,” the anxious woman spoke loudly and

examined the church inhabitants one after another. A flushed face, eyes large with anxiety, and gasps for breath indicated that this was not a casual call.

At that same moment, the balloon Berdie absently filled exploded. The blast bounced round the stone nave sending shrieks skyward and bodies downward.

The choir, who had been practicing, came to an abrupt halt.

"Mrs. Elliott, you've *got* to help me." Above the complete silence came the terrified scream of the stranger. The woman's untamed bristly hair was a stark contrast against her milky skin and wild pale eyes.

"Of course. I'm glad to be of help." Berdie pushed the breathless words out. Her fifty-something-year-old heart beat like hummingbird wings, more from the balloon burst than anything else. Still, being called out in the midst of the congregation was a bit discomfoting. "Let's find a quiet corner." Berdie approached the woman.

Hugh was already at the stranger's side. "Can I offer some assistance?" he asked in a calming voice.

"It's Mrs. Elliott I want."

"Sacristy," Hugh said. He gently took the young woman by the elbow, and with Berdie on her other side, they proceeded to the solace of the tranquil room.

Hugh seated the stranger in a comfortable overstuffed chair near the hearth where a bouquet of fresh garden flowers occupied the space normally reserved for fires in the colder months. Berdie eased her more-pudgy-than-lean body into a chair near the woman while Hugh remained on his feet.

"No disrespect to you, Vicar, but it's your wife I want to see," the somewhat calmed woman explained.

"I want her to work for hire."

"Hire?" Berdie asked with a sharp tone.

"What do you mean, Mrs.?" Hugh questioned.

"It's Miss Norman, Harriett Norman. And what I mean is, I want her"—she jabbed her finger toward Berdie—"to find my sister."

"Where is your sister?" Hugh questioned.

"For heaven's sake." Harriett flared. "If I knew that I wouldn't be here, would I?"

Hugh fumbled for words.

"Miss Norman, your sister is missing and you want to hire me," Berdie reiterated.

The woman looked from Hugh to Berdie, her brow knit. "Isn't that what I've just said?"

"Hire me for what, exactly?"

The woman scowled. "What do you think? To boil my morning egg? To *find* my sister, of course. Word's about that you're a dead good detective, and I want to hire you."

Berdie nearly laughed when she saw the shock that registered on Hugh's face. If the woman hadn't been so edgy, Berdie would have broken into a hearty chuckle.

"My wife is not for hire, especially for investigative work," Hugh said firmly.

The woman turned her gaze to Berdie. "Don't you want to help me?"

"Of course," Berdie assured, "but am I the best person for the job?"

Hugh's shoulders tightened. "This sounds like a police matter to me." He pulled a mobile from his pocket.

There was a light rap at the nearly-closed door, and Lillie Foxworth unapologetically burst into the

room. "Hugh, Edsel needs..." Lillie stopped abruptly. Inquisitive delight shone in her face. "Sorry for interrupting," Lillie said with only a mild hint of apology. Her hazel-green eyes burrowed into Berdie's. *What's going on?* she mouthed.

"She's not for hire," Harriett responded.

"Sorry?" Lillie's inquisitiveness turned to amusement.

"Constable Goodnight? Vicar here," Hugh spoke into the mobile phone.

"The police were no help," Harriett nearly screamed.

Berdie placed her hand on the woman's arm. "You've spoken to them, then?" she asked in a calm voice.

The woman stomped a foot. "And what little good it did."

Lillie put her hand over her mouth and sat. The choir-director robe that draped over her slim body made her appear almost angelic. There was a twinkle in Lillie's eyes, and her hand covered a grin.

"Miss Harriett Norman is with me." Hugh paused. "I'll ask." Hugh put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Do you live in Mistcome Green, Miss Norman?"

"And what if I do?" The woman frowned and eyed Hugh as if trying to decide if this vicar could be trusted.

Hugh went to a corner of the sacristy and continued the phone conversation.

"My husband wants only what's best for you, Miss Norman." Berdie looked reassuringly into the large, pale eyes.

"What about what's best for my sister?" Harriett pushed her hand into her skirt pocket and retrieved a