

UP FROM  
*the*  
GRAVE



A BERDIE ELLIOTT LENTEN MYSTERY

*Marilyn Leach*

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Marilyn Leach

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## **Up From the Grave**

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Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

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## Dedication

To Andy and Lillie Harris whose generosity, support, and humor have opened the way for my appreciation of the English culture and proven English friends are family.



## Praise for Marilyn Leach

Praise for Berdie Elliott Mystery, *Candle for a Corpse*:

"This is an engaging mystery with likeable and interesting characters. I hope we'll be seeing more of Berdie and friends. ~ Liz Carey's Library

You will not be able to put the book down until you're finished. ~ Cindy Loven, *The Borrowed Book*.





# Prologue

In the dampness of the English spring night, the woods at the edge of Aidan Kirkwood could trick the imagination into believing something or someone moved amongst the ancient twisted trees and through the upstart arbors.

The man shivered and searched the wooded landscape. How long had he been walking? Pale light from a half moon fell across his facial features and exposed the sheen of his black satin dressing gown. A sharp pain on the sole of his foot woke him to the uneven woodland floor beneath his moist bed slippers. It wasn't until that moment he realized he still wore his nightclothes.

The black wooded recesses etched his own murky dilemma deeper into his consciousness.

"What am I doing?" The man lifted his mortified voice into the darkness.

In a silvery flash, he caught another glimpse of movement. It wasn't his frenzied vision playing games. It was definite movement. His wildly pulsing heart urged him forward to get a fuller view.

A shadowed figure emerged from the trees not more than a few yards away. Both men started, coming to an abrupt halt.

The figure was only an outline, but his widened eyes were just visible below his woodsman cap. Moonlight glinted off the edge of a pointed spade

hugged close to his side. A pungent odor of freshly upturned earth penetrated the night air. The stranger's eyes ran the full length of the night-clothed male.

The gulf of silence between them became an uneasy space.

"Why are you on this property, woodsman?" The man hoped his words weren't filled with the anxiety that gripped him.

"Why are ya about the wood in your bed clothes?" the stranger retorted.

The man swallowed hard. "Perhaps it's best if we agree to forget this chance meeting."

With an awkward vigilance, the woodsman's eyes stayed squarely upon the oddly clad male. "So be it." He stepped back into the black of the protective trees and moved on.

The man pulled his robe tighter. "Where am I now?" he questioned the darkness. He took several steps forward where he could just make out the edge of the wood. There it stood. The outline of an ancient edifice, a moonlight-edged church prevailed solidly against the night as if wearing a halo.

"God sees all." He placed his hands over his face. This was a dark night despite the moonlight, and he would never be able to erase the memory of it.

# 1

The jolly bell that hung on the door of the Copper Kettle Tea Shop sounded its farewell in Berdie Elliott's ear. None too soon, she stepped from the shop. Laden with white boxes stuffed with fresh, warm scones, she was attended by Lillie Foxworth who also balanced several full boxes in her arms.

"Step lively, Lillie, we need to get these to the vicarage as quickly as possible." She took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh aroma of the scones mingled with the refreshing spring air. She turned her bit-more-pudgy-than-lean body to stride up the High Street, and Lillie followed along.

"I do believe, Lillie, there's enough hot air in that tea shop to stir up gale force winds in the North Sea."

Lillie gave a quick grin. "And would you expect any different where people of a small village gather?"

"Not really I s'pose."

"I take it, then, you did hear comments made over tea about our parish council chairman."

"I did indeed."

"You were ear wiggling."

Berdie half grinned. "And you weren't? As I said, gales of hot air."

"Well, you must admit, Berdie, Grayson Webb is rather flash and glam."

"He's not flash. He's just progressive."

"Still, not always the best feature for a small

English village. Progressive means change and that's seldom welcomed."

Berdie's eyebrows, which she had delicately shaped just this morning, escalated above her glasses. "Who wouldn't welcome a small floral feature with a calming pond in the back garden of the church?"

"Oh the village loves the plan for the garden feature. It's all the ado Grayson has made of this mystery benefactor who's to appear at the ceremony that they don't like."

"What did you hear, Lillie? Or should I say overhear?"

"On one side, many think gifts to the church should be private. And then on the other side there's Dudley Horn who's set up a 'Guess the Benefactor' betting pool at the Upland Arms."

"Oh yes, he asked my Hugh if he'd like a go." Berdie couldn't help but smile.

"And did he?"

"He told Dudley he'd have five goes if the proceeds all went towards the church garden scheme. He suggested"—she lowered her voice to mimic her husband—"that way everyone in the pool could all attend the fête as surprise benefactors."

"Good show, Hugh."

"Grayson Webb may be causing a stir, but then who in Aidan Kirkwood doesn't own a very large spoon?"

"True enough."

Berdie exhaled and let the controversy swirling round the parish council chairman depart into the easy warmth of the afternoon.

She took in the shops and businesses that called this street home in Aidan Kirkwood and thought back

to only a year and a half ago when this was all new to her and her husband, Reverend Hugh Elliott. It was Hugh's first pastorate, having chosen to enter 'the Lord's army' upon retirement from Her Majesty's Royal Navy.

Now, the familiarity of this tidy road felt like the warming spring sun. The whole of the parish was in the midst of the Lenten season with a keen eye to the Easter celebration that followed. And Berdie was the hostess.

"You know, Lillie, I think I've discovered Vilette's recipe for her rhubarb sponge tartlets." Berdie gave a quick nod towards the tea shop now behind her.

"She's a bulldog concerning her recipes," Lillie declared. "How'd you do that?"

"I told her I had tried making some tartlets like hers with that fine almond flavor, but I added too much almond extract. 'No, no,' she said, 'never use almond extract.'" Berdie moved a short red-brown wisp of bobbed hair behind her ear. "So the next time I saw her, I told her that I used almond flour in the mix. 'Oh my,' Vilette said 'that had to make the tartlets quite dry.'"

"I don't remember you making these tartlets," Lillie challenged, her hazel-green eyes in a bit of a squint.

Berdie tipped her head and formed her lips into a coy smile. "But don't you see, that means she grinds her own almonds for the little cakes."

Lillie shook her head of dark natural curls. "But you don't like rhubarb tartlets. Indeed, you aren't that keen in the kitchen."

"That's not the point," Berdie countered impatiently.

“Now that is a feat!” Lillie teased. “Why yes, the former highly regarded investigative reporter from a large city newspaper has ferreted out the best rhubarb sponge tartlets recipe in the wee village, and she has no intention of ever making or eating them.” A quick laugh and Lillie’s thin tawny face all but lit up like a spring dawn. “Snap!” Lillie stopped dead still on the narrow walkway and focused on her friend of over twenty years. “Bernadine Abigail Elliott, you’re bored.”

“I should say not.” Berdie could feel the pink rise to her cheeks even while moving forward.

“You haven’t had any desperate crimes to solve in over a year and you’re bored!” An impish grin spread across Lillie’s attractive face. “Come on, Berdie. Admit it.”

Berdie halted. She spun round so quickly to face Lillie it sent her tortoiseshell glasses on a slight cascade down her nose. “I love working with Hugh in the church.”

“You do a fine job.”

Berdie adjusted the unruly spectacles with one hand while balancing the scones in the other. “And Aidan Kirkwood is a wonderful place to live despite the fact it can get a bit *close*.”

“Indeed!” Lillie tapped her fingers on the top box she held. “Go on then.”

Berdie pursed her lips. She looked her friend directly in the eye. “Well, I wouldn’t use the word bored. Maybe”—she searched for the right expression—“a bit rusty.”

“Wire wool. That works well on rust.” Young David Exton, the editor of the Kirkwood Times, zipped by with a quick nod to both the women. “See you later

at the fête," he quipped.

"Yes," Berdie called after him. Then she fastened her gaze again on Lillie. "And keep your voice down."

"A-ha!" Lillie shook her head again. "Your intuitive gift for sniffing out and fixing trouble needs a rigorous workout." Her dark thick lashes made her now wide eyes appear even larger. "Our talents are never allowed to go spare. I shouldn't wonder if something big is brewing. Yes indeed, but what?"

"Now you're being silly." Berdie recommitted herself to charging up the street. "First of all, my fine husband feels that involvement in crime solving distracts from my church duties."

"When has that stopped you before?" Lillie took several fast steps to keep astride her comrade.

"Secondly, the biggest thing that's going to happen is to successfully complete a simple welcome tea this afternoon along with a modest sod turning ceremony. Hardly a catastrophic agenda."

"Is that all you have to say on the matter?"

Berdie didn't respond. She simply redirected the conversation to a topic she knew to be close to Lillie's heart. "Is your handsome Loren coming to the festivities today?"

The jolly Lillie went quiet. A seldom seen tightening of the jaw loosened just enough to speak a stark. "One should think."

"Another interrupted dinner date last night, then?"

"Oh yes, another," Lillie answered abruptly. "Another lonely cab ride home, another egg and chips for one in front of the telly." She huffed. "It's been weeks since we've made it through an entire evening together without his mobile crying out for him to

return to work."

"He's a pathologist, Lillie. His work is demanding, and his hours are often higgledy-piggledy."

Berdie could see Lillie's frustration and at the same time felt the need to quickly get to the vicarage. She nudged Lillie's arm and began rapid steps forward. Lillie moved with her.

"How can the dead make so many demands on the living?" Lillie spewed the words. "If you please, a cold figure down in the lab seems preferable to a living one at his side."

"Stuff and nonsense."

"The saddest part is that when Loren asks me to dinner again, I'll go."

"I dare say."

Lillie lifted her chin. "Well maybe not this time. Maybe we'll just see."

Berdie glanced at the clock nestled near the roof line of The White Window Box, a gift and garden shop. Knowing the clock was accurate only seventy percent of the time at best, she hoped it was now fast. "Is that the correct time on the Window Box clock?"

Lillie peeked at her watch. "It looks as if it's seven minutes slow."

"My dear Lord have mercy," Berdie yelled. And both women doubled their speed.

They flew past the shops with their simple windows of displayed goods, where owners swept the walkways enveloped by the warm afternoon sun. Berdie and Lillie greeted the people who chatted in the office entries and treaded the walkway. Despite being in a mad dash, Berdie admired the fresh daffodil blooms that decorated the terraced homes along the way.

Finally, at the end of the High Street on the front end of a wooded area, Saint Aidan of the Wood Parish Church sat elegantly awaiting all who wished to enter. Like a large tree offering shade in the heat of the day, this building made of ancient stones held peace and restoration for the pilgrims of this mortal earth just as it had for eight hundred years.

The moment Berdie and Lillie entered the pathway towards the vicarage, just a hundred yards from the church itself, a voice from across the front garden swelled.

“Mrs. Elliott.”

Berdie stopped short causing Lillie to bump into her.

It was Ivy Butz. Her rotund figure moved quite quickly towards the two women. Her brown hair was banded by a pretty yellow ribbon that matched her pinny. And her usual jolly full-moon cheeks danced at the end of each corner of her upturned mouth. Not one of her six children was in tow this time round, but she held the elbow of Cherry Lawler and nearly tugged her along. Cherry’s twenty-two-year-old visage and attitude contrasted greatly to Ivy’s. The petite young woman’s body reluctantly bounced along with Mrs. Butz. Cherry’s lowered eyes peeked out from behind the blonde fringe of her pixie haircut, her lips set.

When they arrived at Berdie’s side, Ivy urged the young woman. “Now tell Mrs. Elliott the problem, Cherry. She’s ever so good at finding solutions.” Ivy glowed expectantly at Berdie.

“Thank you for your confidence, Ivy. I only hope I can help. What is it, Cherry?”

The young woman lifted her pointy chin. Her slender fingers twisted the long sleeve of her jumper.

"It's just that we have two extra guests from the Golden Season's Tour, and we just haven't an inch of room left at our bed and breakfast. That is to say, my Jeff said we can't possibly fit any more in unless they want to sleep standing up."

"I'll take them," Lilly offered energetically.

"Could you do?" Cherry brightened.

"The garret flat at Swallow Gate is available," Lillie offered. "It's very comfortable."

"That's brilliant!" Cherry smiled, but her eyes still held a sense of distress.

"Now go on," Ivy urged. "Tell the vicar's wife the other thing—you know."

Cherry Lawler's thin bottom lip began to quiver. "It's a bit personal."

Ivy flashed a not often seen frown towards Berdie. "My uncle Wilkie, Cherry's granddad, can be a daft old sort. And that's all I have to say on the matter. I'll see to the tea preparations, Mrs. Elliott." Ivy hijacked the scone boxes from Berdie. "Take good care of my cousin here." Ivy gave Cherry a pat. "I'll leave you to it."

"Yes, must get the women's chorus in form for the ceremonial performance." Lillie, choir director extraordinaire and understandingly discreet, excused herself as well.

"I don't mean to be a bother Mrs. Elliott." Cherry apologized and swallowed.

"Not a bother." Berdie put her hand on Cherry Lawler's arm. "Please, go on."

"It's just that, well, you know my grandfather."

Berdie nodded.

"He's against this whole church garden scheme."

Hugh had told Berdie about Wilkie Gordon's explosive reaction at the parish meeting where the

garden expansion was approved. Something about dismantling God's green earth as she recalled. "Yes, I've gotten word."

"He says that the money could be better spent on people in need, and the church is being irresponsible."

"Oh. Well, we do give generously to many charities and missions of course."

"Yes, Mrs. Elliott. We all know that. He knows that. But he insists the whole affair diminishes both the church and God's honor."

Berdie knitted her brow and shook her head. "That seems a bit extreme."

"Mrs. Elliott, I'm afraid he's going to do something daft, and it's creating a great deal of tension in our family."

Berdie noticed the moisture building in Cherry's generous eyes.

"How daft, exactly?" Berdie asked cautiously.

"Who can say? I've never seen him this angry before."

Berdie could see a silent plea in Cherry's face.

"I wish someone could help my grandfather see sense."

Berdie became instantly aware who 'someone' meant to Cherry Lawler. "Would you like my husband to have a word?"

Cherry wore relief like a lavish Easter bonnet. "Could he? Oh, that would be brilliant...and before the ceremony?"

"I'll give Hugh the message straight away. You have my word. I'm sure he'll be glad to help. He'll speak with your grandfather as soon as possible. Don't trouble yourself on the matter anymore."

"I'm grateful," Cherry tittered with relief. "I'll just

go catch Ivy up." With a decidedly lighter step, the young woman departed.

Berdie made haste for the church. She wondered why Wilkie Gordon was going on so. He had been the church gardener for several years but had quit the position just a few months before Berdie and Hugh arrived. It seemed, Berdie reasoned, he should be one who would delight in a water feature for the church garden. But she didn't have time to think about it now. She not only had to greet the Golden Season Tour guests who were to arrive soon and help service the tea for them; but she was also the greeter for the ceremony proceedings. Now she needed to have a quiet moment with her husband before the sod turning.

"And I'm already late," she announced to the warm sun.

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"Watch your step." Hugh Elliott assisted an elderly woman from Golden Season Tours down the large coach steps. "Welcome to Saint Aidan of the Woods Church."

Berdie eyed her tall husband. Even after twenty-seven years of marriage, he held a magnetism that pulled Berdie like an arrow to due north. His military bearing, a leftover from his former career, enhanced his clerical collar and couldn't hide his kind, keen interest in people. And then of course there was his rugged build, silvery hair, and striking blue eyes.

"Hugh, may I have a word?" Berdie asked.

"Of course, love. Can you first attend to our guest?" Hugh smiled, and Berdie recognized his lifted left eyebrow as his gentle reprimand for being late.

When the woman he was assisting reached the ground of the church garden, Berdie took the old dear by the elbow.

In a whisk of impatience, a man alighted from the coach and pushed through, nearly knocking the frail pensioner over. Berdie felt the woman's weight against her but caught the visitor in a firm grasp that held the woman steady as the fellow passenger moved across the garden towards the terrace near the woods.

"What a boor!" A woman wearing a broad orange hat voiced her annoyance.

"Sir!" Hugh's voice commanded respect that all could clearly hear.

The man stopped short and turned. "Pardon." He offered little penitence towards the woman Berdie had by the hand. Then, once again, he continued moving towards the back garden.

"Sir." Hugh made it sound more a command than a title. "Please attend to your meeting inside the church if you will. The tea on the terrace is still in the ready."

The man stopped and angled his body towards Hugh. With a sullen nod, he retrieved his steps and entered the front door of the church.

"I say"—fired the orange hat female—"so rude and all!"

Berdie made sure her little guest was steady. "Are you quite all right?"

The white head made an uneasy nod.

"I'm Mrs. Elliott, Reverend Elliott's wife."

"Here now, I'll see to her." Miss Orange Hat took the woman's arm. "Come along now dear." The vocal woman looked at Berdie. "Are we going to hear a sermon?" she asked baldly.

"Oh, no." Berdie grinned. "Mathew Reese, your