

Dear Lance

Maggie Hoppel

Candles: check. Wine: check. Flowers: check, and I know they're his favorite because his grandma gave him a piece of her lilac bush before she died, and from what I could see from my binoculars it's the best-kept thing in his front yard.

"Please, I have a family," whimpers Mr. Galton. His gag must've slipped off. "Please just untie me. I'm begging you."

"Hush! You're ruining the mood," I say back.

Tonight, I confess the first degree murder of 26 people over the last 3 years.

Everything has to be perfect.

After all, I hear Lance coming now, recording equipment jangling on his backpack.

I hope he thinks I'm pretty. Did I remember lip gloss? What color, again? I thought I brought the pink but ... wait. Knife in hand, I approach Mr. Galton. I reach in his pocket and rummage for a second. There it is.

"Thanks for holding that for me," I say. Tears and snot are streaming down his face as I reapply the gloss and smack my lips.

"Step away from Stephen Galton," says a calm, rumbling voice from behind me.

I swoon as I turn around. I've admired those green eyes from his TV interviews forever, but this is the first time they've landed on me.

Google the love of my life. He's on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Audible, you name it. His show is called *UNMASKED: The Lady Killer of Evergreen City*—and that, of course, is me. He's an independent investigative journalist, and he's been on my trail since the beginning. Some people think he's crazy, but I think he's a visionary. And not bad on the eyes, either.

"Hi, Lance," I say. "Sorry I set your grandma on fire."

He doesn't bat an eye, but I know he remembers the picture of her I sent on Valentine's Day, with the flesh melting off her bones like maple syrup on the side of a pancake. And the box of cherry truffles.

He reaches in his pocket for his phone, but doesn't pull it out. He's started recording, then.

“You need to untie Stephen, and...” Lance trails off. He wrinkles his nose. “Is that wine?”

“Have some. I brought two glasses for a reason,” I say.

Lance opens his mouth to say no. He scans my display on the bridge: a little table with a red checkered tablecloth, the candles and flowers, the hysterical, middle aged father of 2 tied up on the railing. He’s computing. I see it written on his face. I want to kiss the tip of his nose and maybe stab him with a letter opener.

“Will you answer my questions if I drink with you?” he asks.

I consider this. He knows my face now, of course, but the mystery of me is part of the reason he’s here right now. Answers kill the magic. And I was rather hoping he’d visit me in jail.

Still, with the light of the candles reflecting off his eyes, and the stars and the river blurring the distant horizon, I find the ambiance of the night has an effect on me, too.

I pour us each a glass. “You get three questions,” I say.

“Five,” he replies.

“Three.”

“Fine, but this better not be poisoned.” Lance takes a drink.

I gesture for him to sit at the table, but instead he leans over the railing and stares out into the water. Thinking. Breathing in the scent of the lilacs, his grandma’s favorite flower, and the scent of me.

Question one: “Tell me about Phillip Bethany,” he says.

Technically not a question, but I’ll roll with it.

Phillip Bethany was the first person I ever killed. He worked at the bank I used at the time, and had this basket of Dum-Dums he gave to little kids when they came in. Why did I kill him? I don’t know. He was there, and I needed to cash a check, and suddenly it was like all the voices in the world were going to break my brain in two if I didn’t silence one. I had a Dum-Dum afterwards. A purple one.

Lance chews the inside of his cheek as I recount the story, interjecting with the occasional “mhhh.”

“How does no one know anything about you?” he asks next.

Oh, this one's easy. "Like anything, covering up a murder is just a skill that you build over time," I say. "I studied past killers and I know our police department like the back of my hand. I couldn't afford to get caught, that would mean the end of your podcast. And I know how much you love your career."

"This is about me?"

"Was that your third question?"

Lance mulls it over. Then he nods.

This is it. In the whirlpool night, with the music of Stephen Galton's soft sobs in the background and a bottle of wine in my hand, this is when I tell Lance our love story for the very first time. We'll have a scrapbook of this moment in twenty years. I have to think of how I want to phrase it.

I'll start with Arlene, maybe. I set her on fire before I knew Lance. She was the quintessential murder victim: old, rich, and lonely, with a grandson who lived out of state and funneled the family's money into his lackluster podcasting career. I wish they bottled the smell of burning flesh like floral perfumes. I wouldn't rub it on my wrists, but maybe it would be alright as one of those plug-in air fresheners.

That murder set a grief-stricken Lance about investigating me for the first time. I'd heard loads of other podcasts about myself. Some suspected I was on the inside of the Evergreen PD, others swore I was from out of town. But *UNMASKED* was the first to confirm I'm a woman. Lance talked about me with such obsession in his tone. It was electric and safe and messy and obvious. He wanted me more than anyone ever had in my whole life.

If I could do it over, I'd kill his grandma again and again to keep him here, next to me, just like this.

Lance didn't do as well with this story. He kept drinking his wine. I liked the way it drew my eyes to his mouth, but he wasn't listening so much.

"Don't you understand, Lance?" I say finally. "I love you. This is the end of the podcast. I can't keep killing to help you with it anymore, because I want to be with you. Galton got ordained for his best friend's second wedding last year. After he marries us, he'll be my final victim."

Lance blinks.

"So this is the end," he says.

He glances between Galton and me. Me, in the LBD I stole from my roommate. Me, the who to his dunnit. Me, who loves him more than anyone ever has in his whole life.

I wait.

A pair of handcuffs bite my wrists, and an officer pulls me away from him. I hadn't even heard his shoes on the metal walkway behind me. Not like Lance. When Lance was next to me, he eclipsed the whole world. And he knew it. He knew all along.

"I warned you," Lance mouths silently. His smile is intoxicating as they wrestle me into the squad car.

He'll publish this recording to the podcast later, and I'll probably still listen to it. He'll brag about how he kept me talking, wine in hand, as the police prowled the bridge all along. Maybe he'll be a witness in my trial.

I was outfoxed.

How dare he. How dare he throw away everything I have to offer like it's nothing. I've killed three years' worth of innocent people for him! What other woman would do that for the one she loves? Spotify says I'm in the top 1% of listeners for his podcast!

But, as soon as the anger wells up within me, it's gone, and there's something else in its place. Heat in my cheeks. Butterflies in my stomach.

I was outfoxed. He beat me.

It was almost better than being married by Galton. He took my script and wadded it up and set it on fire just like I did his grandma.

Am I crazy, or is this kinda hot?

I don't listen to my Miranda rights as the officer rattles them off. As the cop car pulls away, I lean my head against the window, smiling dreamily into the night. I'm already thinking of what kind of chocolates I'll send him next Valentine's day, and what I'll put in my love letter since he doesn't have any more living family members.

Dear Lance, I'll say. Maybe that's it. Maybe I'll scrawl it all over the paper until it's just a puddle of black pen ink. I hope they let me have a pen where I'm going.

Dear Lance, I'll write, love, the Lady Killer of Evergreen City.