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Malice at Marigold Lane

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Introduction

Every village has its secrets, and Marigold Lane is no exception. Tucked away in the tranquil heart of the English countryside, it's a postcard-perfect haven, boasting winding lanes edged by tangled hedgerows, rose-clad cottages, and a bakery whose scent of warm bread is a daily comfort. It's here, craving both escape and a new chapter, that Amelia Harper finds herself one crisp spring morning, the handle of her battered suitcase digging into her palm, and the hopes of a fresh start fluttering in her chest.

Amelia is no stranger to new beginnings—or to baking. Her reputation as a talented, if somewhat unconventional, baker preceded her even before she set foot on Marigold Lane, much to the curiosity of the village's tightly-knit community. With a quietly guarded manner and eyes that miss nothing, she quickly becomes the subject of tea-time gossip and neighborly speculation. Few suspect the aches and anxieties that chased her here, or the secrets she guards as closely as her family scone recipe.

Marigold Lane itself is a tapestry of vibrant personalities—the ever-nosy Mrs. Palfrey whose teapot never seems to run dry, the stoic Constable Townsend with a penchant for understatements, the ambitious vicar with clandestine dreams, and a host of amiable (and not-so-amiable) villagers, each with their own quirks and ambitions. The bake-off is the highlight of the social calendar, a fierce but friendly contest where rivalries simmer as richly as the preserves.

Yet, beneath this calm surface, little tensions ripple. Quiet glances exchanged beneath bunting, whispered warnings half-heard through cottage walls, and the persistent feeling that something—or someone—is out of place. Amelia, eager to fit in yet wary of exposure, tries to focus on her pastries and possibilities, but finds herself increasingly entangled in the village's tangled web of relationships.

It is in this atmosphere of warmth tinged with watchfulness that our mystery unfolds. When a celebratory event turns deadly, Amelia's fresh start threatens to unravel. Faced with suspicion and the gnawing fear of accusation, she is forced to rely on her wits, her newfound friendships, and the skills honed in kitchens and harder places. Alongside the indomitable Mrs. Palfrey and the ever-watchful Constable Townsend, she embarks on a quest not just to prove her innocence—but to protect the fragile peace of her new home.

Welcome to Marigold Lane, where the scones are sweet, the tea is strong, and every neighbor has something to hide. Here, friendship is forged in crisis, secrets crumb as easily as a shortbread biscuit, and danger sometimes lurks behind the gentlest of

smiles. Draw up a chair, pour yourself a cup, and join Amelia as she navigates the twists and turns that lie ahead.

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CHAPTER ONE: The New Baker on the Lane

The scent of freshly baked sourdough, warm and yeasty, was the first thing Amelia Harper truly registered as she stepped off the morning bus onto the quaint, cobbled main street of Marigold Lane. It was a comforting aroma, a familiar promise, far removed from the stale anxieties that had shadowed her journey from the city. The bus, a rather ancient contraption smelling faintly of diesel and damp wool, wheezed away in a puff of exhaust, leaving her standing alone with her rather too-heavy suitcase and a burgeoning sense of anticipation.

Marigold Lane was exactly as the online pictures had promised, perhaps even more charming in person. Cottages, painted in pastel shades of rose and periwinkle, huddled together like old friends, their windows framed by climbing roses already budding with promise. Window boxes overflowed with vibrant pansies and cheerful daffodils, hinting at the village's famed spring festival and, more importantly, its annual bake-off.

Amelia clutched the crumpled address in her hand: "The Old Mill House Bakery." It was to be her new home, her new business, and, she fervently hoped, her new beginning. She'd sunk nearly every penny she had into the lease, a gamble perhaps, but one she felt in her bones was worth taking. The village was small, tight-knit, and brimming with the kind of sleepy charm that seemed custom-made for healing old wounds. Or at least, for baking them into submission.

Her eyes scanned the immediate vicinity, searching for the tell-tale sign of a bakery. A few doors down, nestled between a decidedly ramshackle antique shop and a vibrant florist, stood a sturdy stone building with a freshly painted sign swinging gently above its entrance. "The Old Mill House Bakery," it read, in elegant, flowing script. A pang of excitement, almost forgotten in recent months, fluttered in her chest.

She hauled her suitcase towards the bakery, the wheels protesting loudly against the uneven stones. As she approached, the door of the antique shop creaked open, and a small, spry woman with spectacles perched on her nose peered out, her gaze fixed intently on Amelia. This, Amelia suspected, was her first official Marigold Lane welcome. The woman offered a quick, discerning nod, a silent acknowledgment that Amelia had been duly noted.

"Morning, dearie," the woman chirped, her voice surprisingly strong. "You must be the new baker, then. Amelia, isn't it? Mrs. Higgins, owner of 'Timeless Trinkets,' at your service. Though, mind you, I'm hardly ever at service when there's a good gossip to be had." She winked, an expression that seemed to crinkle every line around her eyes.

Amelia managed a polite smile, her cheeks warming slightly. "Yes, that's me. Amelia Harper. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Higgins." She wondered how long it had taken for news of her arrival to circulate. Probably before her bus even left the last town.

Mrs. Higgins, however, didn't wait for an answer. "The village has been buzzing, you know. New blood! And a baker, no less. Just in time for the Marigold Lane Spring Bake-Off. Are you entering?" Her eyes twinkled with an almost childlike glee.

The bake-off. Right. Amelia had seen the posters online, a cheerfully competitive event that seemed to consume the village every spring. "I hadn't quite thought about it," Amelia admitted truthfully. "I've just arrived, after all."

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Higgins scoffed good-naturedly. "It's tradition! And this year, well, it's going to be particularly... interesting." She paused, her gaze flicking conspiratorially towards the florist shop next door. "There's a certain rivalry simmering, you see. Between poor old Reginald Butterfield and Fiona Crumble. Been going on for years. This year's prize is rather significant, too."

Amelia raised an eyebrow. "Significant?"

"Oh, very. A rather impressive trophy, certainly, but also the honour of having your recipe featured in the Marigold Lane Community Cookbook. And, of course, the bragging rights. Reginald and Fiona take their baking very seriously." Mrs. Higgins leaned in slightly. "Too seriously, some might say."

Before Amelia could inquire further about the simmering rivalry or the mysterious significance of the prize, a figure emerged from the florist shop, pruning shears in hand and a rather formidable scowl on her face. She was a woman of ample proportions, with tightly curled grey hair and a floral apron that looked as if it had seen many battles.

"Morning, Fiona," Mrs. Higgins sang out, clearly enjoying the theatricality of the moment. "Our new baker has arrived! This is Amelia."

Fiona Crumble's eyes, a steely blue, narrowed slightly as they swept over Amelia, lingering on her slightly travel-worn clothes and the suitcase. It was not a welcoming gaze. "A new baker, you say?" Her voice was surprisingly deep, like gravel being shifted. "Well, I do hope she knows her way around a proper scone. We have high standards here in Marigold Lane."

Amelia felt a familiar prickle of irritation. She'd faced far worse than a frosty reception from a rival baker, but Fiona Crumble's dismissive tone was grating. "I assure you, I

know my way around a scone, Mrs. Crumble,” Amelia replied, her voice calm but firm. “And quite a few other baked goods besides.”

Fiona merely grunted, a sound that could have meant anything from acknowledgment to outright contempt, and then retreated back into her shop, leaving Amelia with the faint scent of damp earth and unspoken challenge.

“Don’t mind Fiona,” Mrs. Higgins whispered, though not quietly enough to be unheard if Fiona had chosen to listen. “She’s all bark and no bite, mostly. Just very protective of her reputation. Especially where the bake-off is concerned.”

Amelia managed another strained smile. She had come to Marigold Lane for peace, for a quiet place to heal and rebuild. A baking competition and simmering rivalries were not exactly what she had envisioned. Still, she thought, as she finally reached the front door of The Old Mill House Bakery, at least the air here smelled of flour and possibility, a much better scent than regret. Unlocking the door, she stepped inside, eager to explore her new domain and, perhaps, to avoid further unwelcome introductions. Little did she know, the quiet calm of Marigold Lane was about to be shattered, and the bake-off would be far more "interesting" than Mrs. Higgins could have ever predicted.

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