

# Lillian Holmes and the Leaping Man

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## Excerpt Lillian Holmes and the Leaping Man copyright 2013 Ciar Cullen

Part of her unwritten contract with Addie was that she would accept visitors, one a month. When she was younger, Lillian refused to be paraded like livestock at the balls the other girls lived for, and Addie had reluctantly agreed. But no amount of pleas could set her free from this duty.

No doubt it was the doing of the Jackal, as she called the solicitor Francis Pemberton. She'd heard Addie more than once arguing with him behind closed doors. The conversation never varied, though the last time had been the worst.

"Keep her behavior in check, find her a husband, or I will find one for her. If that doesn't stop her delusions, I assure you I won't hesitate to have her committed. You and your brother will then be out on the street, the house and the fortune reverting to the estate."

"She is coming around, sir. And if there were an heir? Would the estate—"

"As we know, there are no heirs. I tire of this battle and these visits. Fix it, or I will."

When the door slammed, Lillian had gone into the study to find Addie sobbing gently. She'd bent next to her and held her hand. "I will do better, I promise. You shall see. The Jackal will not be victorious."

"Oh, Lil, I worry for you."

Lillian shook off the memory of those difficult exchanges and tried hard to attend to the man droning on before her. Jonathan Aloysius Hoyt.

His finely cut features reminded Lillian of one of many dull portraits that graced the other homes in her fine neighborhood. Indeed, he would no doubt one day look down from a two-dimensional oil realm at his descendants carrying on their mundane existences in some well-

equipped mansion. She would have nothing to do with the creation of that brood, though. She owned a mansion and wanted for nothing, except perhaps a chance to visit England again.

*No, Lillian, for the first time. You have not been to London.* And she wanted the Jackal to go away forever.

This man bored her to tears. When he blinked, she stole a glance at the mantel clock, wondering how time could have grown so sluggish. I *must* get back to my investigation of the Leaping Man, she thought.

Could someone actually die of boredom? The man who flew with ease from a second-story balcony would not bore her, of that she was certain. He might slit her throat instead. Of course, he would end up imprisoned someday soon, as the result of her investigation. Still, she thought Hoyt should be imprisoned for his polite drone and total disregard for the interests of his would-be object of affection. No, Hoyt could not jump from a fire landing with grace and then have the audacity to chuckle at a witness.

Lillian paused. She reminded herself that while the Leaping Man was no doubt quite clever, he was also murderer, a most loathsome creature...but clever enough to break into the mayor's mansion without creating a stir, and quite handsome. Fingers of ice ran up her back as she pictured him. What if he had chosen *her* balcony instead of her neighbor's? He must be stopped, quickly.

Without looking up from her needlework, Addie cleared her throat to signal a call to manners. Lillian's heart was to be won, she was being reminded, and her pockets were to be loosened.

Hoyt leaned in slightly—a practiced move meant to make him seem earnest. It turned Lillian's stomach.

"I said, Miss Holmes, the blossoms are most lovely this year. Would you care to take a stroll with me in the Park? Saturday promises to be an exceptionally fine day."

She caught his fleeting glance at her bodice before he sat upright and waited for her response. Damnation, she should not have let her maid pick this dress for her! It always brought excessive attention from men.

"Mr. Hoyt, I do find that blossoms are rather the same from year to year, don't you? They are pink, white, or red, open or closed to a greater or lesser degree, and give off generally the same fragrance. I have no need to see them again this year for the sake of ensuring this remains so."

Hoyt arched an eyebrow in surprise. "I see. You would perhaps rather take in the fine exhibit of Austrian paintings that is quite popular with the ladies of Baltimore just now?"

"How happy I am for the ladies of Baltimore."

"The festival at the Park tonight? I understand it will be quite a spectacle."

Lillian watched the mantel clock openly now. Her anger built. She thought of Jonathan Aloysius Hoyt's fine words, and what it would be like to have a truthful earnest suitor ask her to attend such lovely events. One who had no knowledge of her fortune, one who actually sought

love and affection. One who had no knowledge of her circumstances. “Mr. Hoyt, your manners will surely secure you a fine wife one day. I suggest, however, that in the future you attend to the particulars of your dress before you call make any such attempt.”

Jonathan Aloysius Hoyt blinked and sat back. “Pardon?”

“You came directly here from a house of ill repute.”

“Lil! What would make you say such a thing?” Addie dropped her stitching, the color draining from her face.

“An only child with no mother...is that correct, Mr. Hoyt?”

“Well, yes, but your accusation—”

“You arrived at my door sporting several long flaxen hairs on your waistcoat, the grey clay of Fell’s Point upon your soles, and the smell of rather cheap eau de toilette on your person. You are used to having your needs met by women and are exasperated at my disinterest. Sir, you are so ordinary, I will not waste a page in my journal on our meeting. Another cup of tea before you go?”

He stared at her incredulous, a flush creeping from his starched collar to his sideburns. Lillian rose and straightened her dress with as much composure as she could feign, and Hoyt stood and motioned for Thomas to bring his hat. He fled immediately thereafter.

A twinge of guilt stabbed through Lillian at her relief to be rid of him. It wasn’t Mr. Hoyt’s fault. It was no one’s fault. She would be a spinster, and not because of this man’s flaws but her nature. No man would allow his wife to pursue criminals, to favor scientific pursuits over artistic ones, to resist bowing simply because of her gender. And a husband would not want his wife to soothe her nerves with medicine, even if she were determined to give it up. Soon.