

AN UNEXPECTED INHERITANCE

It was a bright, well- dressed morning in early May, and the Swifts were in the middle of a funeral.

The House looked very fine. The lawns had been swept clean of leaves, the hedge maze had been trimmed, and the statues had been scrubbed behind the ears. The Family had spent the morning practising their eulogies in front of a mirror, and now they walked in slow procession through the cemetery, faces professionally grim.

According to Arch- Aunt Schadenfreude, a funeral ought to look like a wedding upside down. The Swifts had done their best to honour her wishes. The path to Aunt Schadenfreude's grave frothed with flowers, and the trees dripped black ribbon. Cook had even baked a sombre cake with black icing, set on a table just to the left of the headstone. To the right, a gramophone coughed out a melancholy tune.

Shenanigan Swift was carrying the front end of the coffin. She was considerably shorter than the other pallbearers. At the back, her eldest sister Felicity gangled and her Uncle Maelstrom loomed, and although Shenanigan was doing her best to keep the coffin steady, it still tilted forward at a worrying angle. Phenomena, ahead of the procession and guiding her sisters through the cemetery like an air- traffic controller, shot her a wary look. Shenanigan tried to think herself taller, with limited success.

They wound between the graves like black floss through crooked teeth. Shenanigan read the names of her late family as they trudged past:

Calamitous Swift

1598–1652

Adjective

Causing, or fraught with, disaster

and

Godwottery Swift

1733– 1790

Noun

i. Overly elaborate gardening or garden design

ii. Old- fashioned and affected language

She shifted the weight of the coffin, and it lurched alarmingly. Felicity hissed, so Shenanigan wobbled it again, just to annoy her. Her hand left a smear on the expensive, highly polished wood. Her aunt wouldn't have liked that – Aunt Schadenfreude believed you should spend more on a coffin than you would on a house, since you spent more time dead than alive – but then Aunt Schadenfreude wouldn't have liked a lot of things. Like the scuffs on Shenanigan's shoes, or the

twigs in her hair, or the thoughts in her head.

To her right, Shenanigan read:

Faultress Swift
1860– 1889
Noun
A female offender or criminal

Shenanigan probably would have got on with her.

They halted before the grave, and there was a flurry of confusion as each Swift lowered the coffin at a different speed. Maelstrom tried to set his end down slowly, with dignity, but Felicity was a bit too fast, and Shenanigan was still thinking about being a *faultress* and not paying attention.

‘Shenanigan,’ Felicity hissed again, ‘can you please—’

The thing inside the coffin let out a yowl.

Felicity cried out and dropped her side. With a dull *thunk*, the head- end of the coffin hit the grass, teetered, and tipped over into the grave, the lid flying off as it went. Shenanigan leapt out of its path and straight into the black- frosted cake, her outstretched palms scooping up damp, vanilla- scented handfuls.

There was silence, but for the gramophone’s wheeze.
The Swifts peered cautiously into the grave.

The coffin lay wide open, revealing a gleam of black silk warming in the sun. Of course, there was no one in it – only John the Cat, who blinked sleepily, gave a luxuriant stretch, and trotted off in the direction of the woods. Shenanigan licked cake off her hands.

‘Well,’ called a voice behind them. ‘That was an appalling rehearsal, I must say.’

The troupe turned guiltily towards Aunt Schadenfreude, perched on Vile’s Monument. She had her walking stick in one hand and her opera glasses in the other, and she was peering through these at the mess they’d made of her final resting place.

‘It’ll be alright on the night, Auntie!’ Uncle Maelstrom rolled his shoulders, his joints creaking like an old ship. He picked Shenanigan up with one hand, dodged her attempt to smear icing into his beard, and set her on her feet, grinning.

‘Alright on the *morning* – you’re burying me at eleven.’ Aunt Schadenfreude grumbled towards them, tightening the thick iron collar round her throat. ‘You are to have me in the ground by twelve, finish crying by half past, then head back to the House for a lunch you will all be too distraught to eat at a quarter to one. *That* is the schedule. You do not fill me with confidence, Maelstrom.’

Aunt Schadenfreude’s life was highly organized. She expected her death to be the same. Since she would not be around to oversee her own funeral, she’d had the Family rehearse the ceremony every month for as long as Shenanigan could remember. They had never managed to get everything right.

‘Shenanigan, Felicity, try to keep the coffin level next time. It looked like you were carrying me downhill.’

‘It’s *hard*, though, when Uncle Maelstrom’s so much taller than us!’ whined Felicity.

‘Given the average rate of adolescent growth, we should be a bit taller by the time Aunt Schadenfreude dies,’ Phenomena pointed out. She dabbed at the splattered icing on her lab coat. ‘That should balance things.’

‘Rank optimism!’ snorted Aunt Schadenfreude. ‘I could drop dead before you grow another inch. Felicity, the decorations will do, I suppose. A few more bows. As for Shenanigan . . .’

Shenanigan paused in her licking.

‘I’m assuming you put John in there?’

Shenanigan shrugged. ‘Cats like boxes.’

‘Could you please wait until I’m *in* my grave before you desecrate it?’

This remark seemed very unfair to Shenanigan, who thought she’d improved a great deal. Last month, she’d got the coffin stuck in the front door and the whole Family had to limbo their way in and out of the House for several days.

Her aunt’s sour expression mirrored her own. ‘Well, you can’t help your name, I suppose,’ she sighed. ‘We shall break for lunch. We still have to clean this up before tomorrow.’ With this dismissal, they trooped back to the House. Shenanigan ran a hand over the headstones they passed, reading the names. *Rubric. Catharsis. Endeavour. Ilk.*

You can’t help your name.

She shook off the irritation that came with Aunt Schadenfreude’s well-worn phrase. Nothing could annoy her today.

Today was the day before tomorrow, and *tomorrow* she was going to steal her Family’s fortune.

‘Watch where you’re *going*,’ Felicity snapped, as Shenanigan leapfrogged over a gravestone and into her path. ‘How do you always manage to get underfoot?’

‘Maybe ’cause your feet are so massive. Hard to avoid them, really.’

‘My feet aren’t massive! You’re just small. It’s like trying to keep an eye on an ant.’ Shenanigan started making clicking sounds, and Felicity recoiled.

‘Ugh, you’re so *weird*,’ she groaned. She used her much longer legs to stalk away from Shenanigan.

‘You shouldn’t antagonize her, you know.’

Phenomena adjusted her glasses and gave Shenanigan a knowing look. Phenomena was a scientist, so all her looks were knowing. ‘Don’t forget what happened to your catapult.’

‘Never,’ said Shenanigan. She’d *tried* to explain that she hadn’t been aiming at Felicity at all, but neither Schadenfreude nor Felicity had listened. Now the Siegemaster was ashes in Cook’s furnace and Shenanigan had sworn her revenge. For starters, when she found the treasure, she would not be giving Felicity any of it.

As they drew close to the House, Shenanigan noticed two unusual things. The first was that there was a car in the driveway: sleek, low- slung, bottle- green, with a nose like a barracuda. It was pointing at the front door as if it was holding it hostage. The second was that Cook was coming towards them at a dead sprint. She had a smear of oil on one cheek – she must have been working on her motorbike – and her arms and legs pumped furiously. She skidded to a stop in a shower of gravel.

‘She’s here,’ she panted.

Shenanigan gave a whoop of excitement and raced off in the direction of the House, leaving her Family in the dust.

As she ran she mentally went through the contents of the pack she kept ready on the roof. She had rope, a torch, lock picks, a trowel, paper and pencils, a letter opener, binoculars, a packet of biscuits, and a bottle of water in case she became trapped somewhere in the House. Her relatives would probably come better prepared. She wondered if Phenomena had bothered to build the metal detector she’d asked for.

At first, in the gloom of the hall, Shenanigan could only see a pair of white-gloved hands. When her eyes adjusted, she could make out the rest of the woman. She was almost as pale as her gloves, with skin like an apple that had been left in the fruit bowl for one too many days, dull and loose- looking. It made it difficult to guess her age. She was wearing a tweed suit, and had frizzy hair of a doubtful colour, inexpertly pinned back. As she turned towards Shenanigan, her little round glasses flashed.

‘Matriarch!’ she intoned. ‘The time has come again! We – oh.’

She blinked at Shenanigan, who, remembering her manners, was walking towards her with her palm outstretched. The woman took one look at Shenanigan’s hands, covered in cake and grave dirt, and put both of her own behind her back as if she was being offered a dead rat.

In the awkward pause that followed, the rest of Shenanigan’s family caught up. Uncle Maelstrom sailed in under a pile of what must have been the woman’s luggage: two battered suitcases of the kind people call ‘valises’, a hatbox, and several long leather tubes lashed together. Shenanigan’s mind immediately ran riot over what could be in those tubes. *Telescopes? Stolen art?* She had recently read about a very long wooden instrument called a didgeridoo that was played in Australia. Maybe their guest was Australian?

When the woman spoke again, it was very clear she was not Australian. She had an accent that came from an English university and a voice that was used to libraries.

‘Ah, there you are, Matriarch,’ she said with some relief, nodding to Aunt Schadenfreude. ‘And Maelstrom too I see! The time has come again! Once more, we gather—’

'*Inheritance*,' Aunt Schadenfreude interrupted. 'You were supposed to arrive tomorrow.'

Inheritance's nodding increased in speed and enthusiasm. 'Yes, yes, *but*, as I said in my letter, we have a matter of *great* importance to discuss—'

'I did not,' said Aunt Schadenfreude, with the tone of someone who found excuses personally offensive, 'receive a letter.'

'Oh.' Inheritance stilled. 'But . . . I sent it a week ago, with the rest of the invitations.'

The Family all groaned in understanding. Aunt Schadenfreude distrusted anyone in a uniform, be they police officers, soldiers, members of a marching band, sales assistants, schoolchildren, firefighters, or chefs. Postal workers were no exception. The only one permitted near the House was a local postie named Suleiman, and he'd had the u for the past two weeks.

'Well, I suppose you're here now,' allowed Aunt Schadenfreude, 'and there's little we can do. Girls, this is your Aunt Inheritance. Inheritance, these are the girls: Felicity, Phenomena, and Shenanigan, in order of descending age and rising inconvenience.'

'Pleased to, ah, meet you,' Inheritance said. This was a lie, Shenanigan knew. A lie is a mischievous thing with a life of its own, and no matter how hard you try to keep it hidden, it will surface on your face, or through your hands, or in the way you shift from one leg to another. Shenanigan had always been good at spotting them, and this one was hovering just underneath her aunt's left eye. Though she had been waiting for Inheritance's arrival for weeks, something about her made Shenanigan take an instant dislike – maybe it was her watery eyes, or her white gloves, or the way she was looking at Shenanigan as if she was something she'd found going mouldy in the back of a cupboard.

'And you're important?' Shenanigan asked doubtfully. She heard Maelstrom swallow a chuckle. Aunt Inheritance drew herself up. 'I *am*,' she said, 'the *Archivist*. It's my job – no, my *calling* –' her white hands uttered to her chest, and her eyes grew glassy with emotion – 'my *duty*, my – my *privilege*, to record the lives of the Swifts for posterity. I keep our Family history, I chronicle our legacy, I maintain our customs—'

Aunt Schadenfreude cleared her throat.

'Speaking of which, Inheritance, if you could get on with it. Briefly, mind,' she warned, seeming to sense another speech.

'Yes. I have an experiment waiting in my lab, and it's very time- sensitive,' said Phenomena.

'And I need to figure out what to wear tomorrow,' added Felicity.

'And I need my lunch,' said Aunt Schadenfreude.

Aunt Inheritance looked scandalized. ‘Schadenfreude, this is Phenomena’s and Shenanigan’s first time! Tradition is everything!’

‘Well, tradition doesn’t have a mushroom omelette waiting for it in the kitchen.’

Aunt Inheritance’s mouth puckered in disapproval. For a moment she looked as if she wanted to scold Aunt Schadenfreude but had wisely realized she might not survive the experience.

‘The time has come again,’ she intoned through gritted teeth. *‘Once more, we gather.* I, Inheritance Swift, Archivist, having consulted my books, and interpreted the signs, and checked everyone’s availability, hereby call the Swift Family Reunion. We return to the House of our House, to strengthen our bonds, to keep the peace between us, and to search for our lost fortune – as we have done for decades hitherto, and will do for decades hence, for as long as our names are spoken. Matriarch Schadenfreude, are we welcome?’

‘Hm? Oh, I suppose so.’

‘Then it is done!’ Inheritance threw her arms wide.

‘The Reunion is officially underway!’